Identity in Second - Generation Asian Short Stories in Postmodern, Post-National Canada

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EIDESSTATTLICHE ERKLÄRUNG

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Introduction

There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada. Those qualities are what make us the first post national state –
Justin Trudeau (The Guardian 2017: online)

“So yes, she is in some ways indecisive, but her hybridity of culture gives her an additional vantage point” (Li, Strike the Wok, 67). This is what the young writer protagonist of Iris Li’s short story ”Snaps - A Satire” has to say, when her editor implies that her novel does not yet have the cultural conflict her audience/readers will expect/want of a Chinese Canadian immigrant writer (ibid). The irony of this anecdote, of course, lies in the fact that the writer is a Chinese Canadian woman writing about a Chinese Canadian character and thereby representing the Chinese Canadian voice as she sees it. A character written by a Chinese Canadian author likely represents best how to accurately represent a Chinese Canadian voice. The novel’s protagonist, however, does not meet the editor’s expectations of what this entails. In the end, the author and the editor are not able to reach common ground about what qualifies as “being distinctively Chinese” (ibid).

In this paper I will examine the way the identities of characters like the one in Li’s short story are constructed and the way these identities reflect a distinctive Asian Canadian voice. As seen by the excerpt from Iris Li’s short story, the character composition cannot be broken down to one defining aspect, but is rather the result of multiple influences. Therefore, the question of how to analyse a character who is influenced by many aspects arises. A key concept that can be used in order to do so is the concept of “liminality”. I refer to Thomassen’s definition of the term in his book Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between (2014). This definition argues that liminality can be distinguished from hybridity by the fact that it is more positive and does not imply any forms of hierarchy (Thomassen 1). Brandt also highlights that liminality not only is a key concept for postmodernity, as it enables “a dynamic exchange within social and cultural practice (Pratt 34)” but is also essential when discussing Canada on the whole, as the country itself covers many aspects, which can be classified as liminal (Brandt, “The Canadian Cultural Imaginary and Its Liminal Aesthetics” 1, 2).
It is the aim of this thesis to demonstrate that the stories I am analysing have protagonists with liminal identities. Furthermore, I shall show how these liminal identities are compositions of various liminal instances within the stories. In fact, the stories are multi-faceted and allow the depiction of characters who are complex and focus on their identities. I will furthermore argue that the genre of the short story plays a very prominent role as it is able to mark a turning point for characters by showing a moment of change in their behaviour because they grow and discover themselves as well as others, especially their relatives.

The reason I specifically want to examine short stories is that this genre provides a structure that allows an observation of various degrees of liminality. Nischik points towards Achilles and Bergmann who even call the short story “the liminal genre par excellence” and adds that when it comes to the “themes and structures” (Nischik, *The English Short Story in Canada*, 120), there is certainly a liminal dimension to the genre, as they often examine points in characters’ lives, where liminality and a changing of states play an important role. (120, 121). With regards to the stories I chose to examine, I decided to pick stories by second-generation Asian Canadian immigrants focusing on topics connected to the identity of their protagonists. These stories include Madeleine Thien’s “A Map of the City” (Thien, *Simple Receipes*), Gein Wong’s “Hole in the Wall” (Wong, *Strike the Wok*), Iris Li’s “Snaps – a Satire” (Li, *Strike the Wok*) and last but not least, Paul Yee’s “Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter” (Yee, *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter*). The criteria for picking stories for the analysis were that they first of all had to include an Asian second-generation protagonist and secondly, the plot of each story had to be different from the other ones in order to be able to increase the number of findings.

Furthermore, I shall also look for the differences between American and Canadian immigrant literature by focusing on the cultural theories of the ‘American melting pot’ and the ‘Canadian mosaic’, as these models suggest different ways of coming to terms with identity. In addition to this, I will analyse the various themes the individual stories portray (family relations, language barriers, spatial differences) and how they help to shape the protagonists. Another important point is to investigate the position of immigrant literature in Canada, and to look into the most common denominators and challenges that second-generation immigrant writers face.
For a more in-depth analysis of the individual stories I will refer to theories of ‘multiculturalism’, as depicted in On the Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender by Himani Bannerji, The Nature of Cultural Identity by Marion W. Lustig and Jolene Koester. In particular, I am interested in the themes of family, home, language and identity, which are recurring themes in the stories. These themes are key when it comes to defining the protagonists’ identities. Overall, I want to show how the different elements of storytelling contribute to a liminal identity of the main characters and how the short stories contribute to a better understanding of Canadian second-generation immigrant literature. After that, I shall present my results in the conclusion.

1. Of Mosaics and Melting Pots - Immigration in Canada

First of all, it is important to provide an overview of the concept of immigration in a Canadian context as this paper aims to specifically explore Canada as setting for the stories’ plots and the stories “A Map of the City”, “Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter” and “Hole in the Wall” include confrontations and conversations between first- and second-generation immigrants. In these short stories the subject of immigration and immigration conditions for Asians then and now are subjects of discussion. Overall, one has to note that numerous scholars compare the Canadian approach to immigration to its American counterpart, using the expressions ‘mosaic’ and ‘melting pot’. Therefore, this chapter shall examine both concepts using the metaphor of the American ‘melting pot’ in order to be able to define the ‘mosaic’ by outlining the differences between these two concepts and also provide a historical overview of how the Canadian mosaic came to exist. Overall, this investigation of the mosaic concept shall aid in the understanding of Canadian literary texts.

As for the comparison between the American melting pot and the Canadian mosaic, According to Marger, the melting pot is supposed to create an American hybrid culture but rather encourages conformity to Anglo-Protestant values in the sense that immigrants are expected to learn how to speak English and to generally adapt to the dominant culture (Marger, Race and Ethnic Relations 472). Bannerji links the melting pot’s existence to America’s independence war from the United Kingdom and speaks about the Americanisation of the immigrants’ respective cultures (Bannerji, The Dark
The Canadian mosaic on the other hand, should be seen as a symbol for multiculturalism, where diverse ethnicities coexist within a larger framework (Marger 472). It is also highlighted by Morris that the development of Canada’s national identity is very different from the classic national identity as it has developed out of “[…] a fluid understanding of shared participation in a national project […]” (Morris, “From “Stalwart Peasant“ to Canadian Citizen: Immigrant Identity in Early Twentieth –Century Canadian Fiction.“ 52). With that respect, Bannerji also brings to attention that differences between the Canadian and the US-American concept of multiculturalism, mainly exist due to a difference in historical development, such as America’s stronger tendency towards nationalist policies as a result of the country’s struggle for independence and Canada’s “state initiated” policy of multiculturalism (Bannerji 16). It is also important to note that the mosaic changed over time, which is implied by Ernst and Glaser who state that “cross-border structures, which can all the more easily be sustained by advanced media technology, ultimately challenge older models of the Canadian mosaic.” (Ernst, Glaser “Introduction” 13).

However, Canada’s cultural mosaic has not existed forever. In fact, today, Canada has a reputation of being a country that is generally open when it comes to forging bonds with other cultures and accepting immigrants, with theorists such as Mackey calling Canada’s current image ‘contradictory’ to the previous approach to immigration (Mackey, House of Difference 64). The new image, which has also resulted in the creation of the metaphor of the Canadian mosaic can be observed in a statement from prime minister Justin Trudeau in response to America’s 2017 Muslim immigration ban issued by president Donald Trump “We understand that as Canadians we are almost all immigrants, and that no one should be excluded on the basis of their ethnicity or nationality” (Khan online 1). But how did the Canadian mosaic come to be?

Regarding the beginnings of the history of immigration to Canada, Marsh notes that the first groups of people were largely from Great Britain and arrived in the nineteenth century. Marsh furthermore emphasises that after this first arrival, the diversity among immigrants started to grow strongly in the twentieth century, when first people from Europe (around 1960) and then people from all over the world (starting in 1980) arrived at Canada’s shores (Marsh, The Canadian Encyclopedia 793). It is furthermore highlighted by Marsh that Canadian groups who do not belong to the
founding European groups are generally classified as ‘Ethnic groups’, which also includes the indigenous population who have largely suffered from alienation from the mainstream cultural context (Marsh 793).

Rahim explains that the very first official Canadian immigration act was issued in 1869 and stressed an ‘open door policy’, however, the act was not without its problems, as it favoured European, rich, able-bodied people. Immigration was especially difficult for Chinese people who had a restriction act imposed on them, which was in place until 1947 (Rahim, *Canadian Immigration and South Asian Immigrants*, 41, 42). With respect to that, Ember et al. stress that the first Chinese immigrant workers were brought into the country during the building of the railway system and mainly worked on that project. However, after this project had been finalised, Chinese immigrants had to pay an extra tax that increased regularly in order to be able to enter the country (Ember et al, *Encyclopedia of Diasporas* 646). Rahim furthermore stresses that the first World War also created problems for people from enemy countries wanting to immigrate to Canada as well as individuals from these enemy countries who had already been living in the country by the time the war started. “Many were even kept in prison camps or deported from Canada.” (Rahim 42, 43). In addition to this, Morris highlights that this first immigration act, which had been enforced in order to compensate for large scale emigration taking place until 1901 created a cultural mosaic, which was a lot more hierarchical than the one that is known today (Morris 53). And as a result of this, Morris stresses that “Canada was seen by its elites as essentially Anglo-British in identity …” (ibid).

According to Day, the beginning of Canada’s policy of multiculturalism was installed after the Second World War, in 1947, when a new immigration policy focussing on an increase in population with an emphasis on “‘productive immigration measures’” was issued (Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* 166). Ernst and Glaser also add that the government made a lot of effort to work towards “the implementation of multilingualism and multiculturalism as the new model of integration immigrants” in the late sixties. (Ernst, Glaser 8). The results of this policy and the multicultural approach to immigration are highlighted by Ulanowicz, who primarily points out the fact that Canadian immigrants are not only allowed to preserve their language, traditions and religion, but even are actively encouraged by the
government to do so, since the government for example funds schools run by different religions (Ulanowicz, *Second-Generation Memory and Contemporary Children’s Literature* 151).

As it can be seen, the government played a key role in fundamentally changing Canada’s image; a view that is also supported by Bannerji who stresses that due to state regulations, multiculturalism has an influence on “actual mundane granting/funding, in electoral policies and outcomes, in ethnic cultural fairs and religious celebrations, in court legal defences” (Bannerji 27). All of these efforts combined then led to an immigration-friendly image. With that in mind, Bannerji is also critical of this official multiculturalism stating that multiculturalism needs to run deeper than merely addressing visible traits of cultures, as exploring subject matters that go deeper such as religious disposition might lead to problems after all (Bannerji 79).

All in all, the concepts of the melting pot and the mosaic symbolise two different approaches when it comes to immigration. This however is not the only point in which the USA and Canada differ from each other; Ulanowicz suggests that there is also a big difference when it comes to literature. Overall, Ulanowicz distinguishes general American literature from Canadian literature and states that while American literature rather focuses on individualism, Canadian writing emphasises interpersonal connections (Ulanowicz 146). This is certainly true for the stories that have been selected for the analysis part of this thesis as the protagonists' identities are not only influenced by their internal lives but are also interconnected with the relationships the characters have with others. As for the analysis of stories where conversations between first- and second-generation immigrants are concerned, it is important to know about the history of immigration and the problems first-generation immigrants have had to face. This will then help to understand the different experiences the characters in the stories have and how these experiences influence their interpersonal relationships. All of these aspects are important for the analysis of second-generation Asian-Canadian short stories.
2. Asian Canadian Immigrant Writing – A Journey into the Diversity of Canadian Literature

After exploring Canada’s mosaic in contrast to America’s melting pot, it is now necessary to take a closer look at actual literary discourse with its variety of themes. In order to be able to analyse the selected stories with respect to themes, which are connected to second-generation identity it is important to provide the basic outlines of Canada’s history of immigrant writing. This history will now be examined in more detail in order to discover features, which are relevant for the analysis.

First of all, people who belong to the group of Asian Canadians are, as Ty and Verduyn explain of “Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Pakistani, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, etc.” descent (Ty and Verduyn, “Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography” 15). They furthermore highlight that the term ‘Asian Canadian’ started being used in the 1970s and above all has gained “theoretical importance” (Ty and Verduyn 12). As already mentioned in the first chapter, pre- second World War immigration acts were particularly harsh on these immigrants and Ty and Verduyn state that also Canadian immigrants from various other Asian countries were faced with a world view that regarded the white population as superior (5). Marta Dvorak adds that South Asian literary production started gaining influence in Canadian literature “when Ondaatje won three Governor-General’s Awards for poetry and fiction in the 1970s.” (Dvorak, “Fiction” 173).

As for the current state of immigrant literature, Löschnigg notes that recently there have been a lot of efforts made to encourage diversity in relation to the country’s policy of multiculturalism (Löschnigg, “Immigration and Integration in North America”, 51). Lai highlights that a lot of Canadian immigrant writing is devoted to explorations, journeys as well as comparisons between the old home with the new one (Lai, “Autoethnography Otherwise” 57).

Marta Dvorak notes that the tremendous influence of immigrants on literature by pointing out that a big part of the entirety of the Canadian literary corpus has been created by immigrants from first- and second-generation origins (Dvorak 173). As a result of this, the interest in these stories is very strong and there are various outlets for second generation immigrant writers to get published in Canada, such as in the Rice paper magazine, which is an Asian-Canadian art magazine publishing works and
interviews from Canadian artists and artists from other countries and has operated since 1994. Additionally, the magazine focuses on publicity for events hosted by the Asian-Canadian artistic community (*Ricepaper* online 2). Another example is the short story collection *Strike the Wok* by Lien Chao and Jim Wong-Chu, which provides various stories by Chinese-Canadian first- and second-generation immigrants including Iris Li’s “Snaps – A Satire” and Gein Wong’s “Hole in the Wall,” which are included in the analysis part.

With regards to the importance of the short story for Asian-Canadian writings, Rocio G Davis talks about the use of the short story cycle in his work *Transcultural Reinventions* and states that

> […] Asian American and Asian Canadian writers appropriate the short-story cycle, a form with deep roots in the oral tradition and literatures of the world, as a tool for both self-representation and empowerment. (Davis 4)

This is also true for the stories in the analysis as they are largely concerned with forms of self-representation, as the relationships the characters have with each other and the way they evolve throughout the stories are essential for their identities.

### 2.1. First- and Second-Generation Writing – Travelling from Themes of Exclusion to the Mainstream

After learning about the history of immigrant writing, it is now time to learn more about the themes. Therefore, this chapter will provide insight into Canadian first-generation immigrant writing themes, which are continued in second-generation writing. It will also provide an outlook on works, which are currently being published. As most of the works in the analysis part have Chinese-Canadian protagonists, with the exception of Madeleine Thien’s “Map of the City,” this chapter shall also examine Chinese-Canadian themes in more detail.

Overall, the themes are as diverse as the body of Canadian first-generation writers itself. As for Chinese Canadian literature, Chao and Wong-Chu highlight that “The publication of Inalienable Rice signalled the birth of Chinese – Canadian literature.” (Chao, Wong-Chu X). It is highlighted by Davis that “[…] Asian Canadian and Asian American literature shows a disproportionately high concern with identity
politics and nationalism, with ethnic differences and similarities [...]” (Davis, Transcultural Reinventions 2), rather than with stylistic choices.

Andrew Pedakis and Imre Szeman also emphasize that Judy Fong Bates would write about stories focusing on isolation “of living as the only Chinese family in small-town Ontario in the middle of the twentieth century, before the changes to the Immigration Act in 1967.” (Pendakis, Szeman, “Cultural Studies in Canada: Past, Present and Future.” 570). This perspective is very different from the postmodern stories in the analysis but is still relevant as in Gein Wong’s “Hole in the Wall” – the parents experience a similar situation when first coming to Canada.

Regarding the background and themes of Canadian second generation immigrant literature, Palmer brings to light that these authors are more familiar with the country than their parents as they experienced the Canadian school system and were more exposed to the culture and as a result developed a desire to assimilate. The resulting generation conflict between children and parents is often depicted in fictional literature (Palmer, “Social Adjustment of Immigrants to Canada: 1940-1975” 67). Marsh furthermore lists discrimination, protests and pride in ethic roots as second-generation writing themes (Marsh: 794) These elements that stray away from stories that are only focused on ethnic origins can definitely be found in the stories in the analysis, as they are very focused on interpersonal relationships and conflicts, which are created due to different points of view on identity.

3. A Second Generation Story without an Identity Crisis in Iris Li’s – Snaps – A Satire

So far, I have laid out the theory of this thesis. Now, I shall analyse four concrete postmodern Asian Canadian second-generation short stories with regards to liminal instances in order to explore the identities of the protagonists. The first story in this analysis part is Iris Li’s “Snaps – A Satire”. It tells the story of a female Chinese-Canadian second-generation born author who seeks to write a complex character who is not defined by stereotypes. Her efforts to stray from the norm not appreciated by her white editor who is convinced that he knows enough about Chinese culture in order to tell the author about a plot that could potentially by sold to a paying readership. He would rather have her write a story containing a lot of stereotypes about Chinese
immigrants as he thinks that readers will be able to digest that kind of story more easily. In the end, their conversation fails to reach a common ground as both parties expect the character to be two entirely different things; a fully fleshed character vs. a caricature of things known to be ‘typically Chinese’ (Li 67).

“Snaps – A Satire” is quite different from the other ones in this thesis. This is, for example, due to the satirical tone in which the characters, more specifically the editor, are presented. But above all, it stands out because of its meta-referential tone; it is a story about two characters discussing what makes an interesting character for a story. This provides a good setting for creating conversations about identity. In fact, the story talks about identity much more directly than the others do, which is shown through the conversation the writer has with the editor. The story also does not elaborate on whether or not the author or her character are second-generation immigrants. This works very well with the message of the story: that identity is not something that has to be explicitly stated in order to exist. There are hints that author and character might be of Chinese-Canadian descent, which are presented to the reader as the conversation between author and editor goes on but it is never explicitly stated. It is, however, still important to focus on this story as it creates room for new and relevant discussions about approaching Asian-Canadian writing, such as whether or not some of the particular details of Chinese-Canadian upbringing need to be explicitly mentioned in the story. In addition to this, Iris Li, the author of the story is a second-generation immigrant who was born in Edmonton, Calgary (Chao, Wong – Chu 246). However, more importantly, when it comes to analysing this story, it is essential to ask the question whether or not a conversation about identity can happen if both parties in this conversation have relatively fixed points of view, which are on the opposite side of the spectrum. In this story, liminality is primarily shown by the character design the author presents. Especially due to the meta-referential nature of the story, the concept can be found on both levels of the story. It is the aim of this chapter to explore this notion and show how the two different parties present opposing views on Chinese identity and how it should affect the character the author wants to write about. Secondly, it is important to analyse the way these different ends of the spectrum are presented in opposition to each other as the way both parties argue their cases creates their unresolvable conflict.
3.1. The Author and the Dynamic Character

The first of these parties consists of the author who seeks to write about a character she has created, and longs for more creative freedom with regards to character design and storyline. This, of course, does not resonate well with the editor and she is therefore forced to defend her decisions and ideas throughout the conversation. This is made clear right from the beginning, as the first statement she utters when being asked whether she has a figure of authority she has to battle is “Sir, my novel is about resisting recognized and general statements of cultural identity… It’s about finding a new way to express identity.” (Li 66). This first exchange is still quite polite and formal compared to the argument at the end, but it already positions the characters in opposition to each other because of their different viewpoints. Additionally, this section illustrates that the author clearly knows what she wants and that she is not willing to let the editor interfere with her original idea. She furthermore highlights that there is more to the spectrum of her story telling than just Chinese-Canadian characters who struggle in-between identities but are perfectly comfortable with the way they are (ibid). This acceptance of identity and the liminal position of the character furthermore do not align with the stereotypical character the editor has in mind. This is also highlighted when she continues to outline her character by describing her traits, which also have a more individualistic touch than the editor is used to seeing in characters of Chinese descent. “She’s a lonely bugger with an obsession with online personals, tea nomenclature and chronic nose picking.” (ibid). This, as well as the mention of her character identifying as bisexual (ibid) works perfectly with her idea of a character who is not defined by cultural stereotypes, which audiences have come to expect. The author is aware that identity is something that is composed out of various different factors, one of them being the way someone identifies sexually and other factors being experiences, hobbies and habits, which also cause differences between people. Moreover, the author is aware of the stereotypes the editor wants her to conform to in her writing and already clarifies that she is not interested in doing so, right at the beginning of the story. “My main character, Marina, isn’t some Chinese maiden debating whether or not she should tell her Caucasian boyfriend not to spill soy sauce all over his food.” (ibid). This furthermore displays that the author is also not interested in writing a character who is right in the middle of a
severe identity crisis due to being of Asian Canadian descent but would rather write a different story, which is nevertheless about a character with Chinese Canadian origins. This point of view is relevant when it becomes evident to her that despite all her efforts she is not able to reach the editor, who expresses his thoughts about the character by stating “you submit in this epic about a loser with few cultural definers.” (67). She, in turn, shows her desperation and frustration by telling the editor

But what you don’t see is that culture is a given in my novel. Marina’s culture is already effectively part of her character, it imbues all her actions, it makes her think twice about all her decisions. So yes, she is in some ways indecisive, but her hybridity of culture gives her an additional vantage point. She’s able to decipher between the nonsense from both cultures, distill what she likes into her personality, and live her life rather harmoniously if not somewhat blandly. For example, she speaks Mandarin but not as well as she would like. So what? She accepts it, moves on. (ibid)

This passage first of all shows that the author’s arguments appear to be much more structured and thought out than the one the editor presents. The carefully worded character description moreover showcases that the author is bound to stick to her idea and wants to defend it, as she has the character she wants to write about clearly mapped out. Through presenting examples she is able to show that the elements that define Marina’s culture the editor wants to see, are already quite visible when it comes to her position as a character in the story and consequently, her actions. Despite the fact that this example the reader also perceives Marina to be a character who is very stable in her decisions and the way she lives her life. But at the same time, the passage also represents a sense of being in-between, which is however is not seen as threatening as the character is able to live happily. This hybridity of Marina’s identity is also interconnected with liminality. Thomassen explains that “liminality has come to stand for cultural hybridity” (Thomassen 8) He overall also stresses the positivity that goes hand in hand with liminality and cultural hybridity as he states that this approach dismisses “assumed or imposed hierarchy.” (8) The author also sees hybridity as something positive as the knowledge Marina possesses as Chinese-Canadian about two cultures, instead of just one, is a positive attribute to her life in the sense that it is helpful rather than disruptive. As a result of this explanation, the character of the author is seen as being aware of the fact that identity also exists on the subconscious level,
following people wherever they go, having an impact on their lives at all time. Thereby she also implies that the discussion of identity within the story is not necessary as the character is already aware of the fact that her life is influenced by it. This is supported by Lustig and Koester who state that cultural identities are essential for a person’s life and continue that “[w]hen a component of your identity becomes important, your experiences are filtered through that portion of your identity.” (Lustig, Koester 5). As a result of cultural identity being so important, “most experiences are interpreted or “framed” by cultural membership (Lustig, Koester 6). The positive relationship Marina has with her cultural identity helps her do all the things she does without having to question these aspects in such a drastic way that would result in an identity crisis. Moreover, the author also tells him that she disapproves of his point of view by drawing attention to the fact that his view of Chinese culture is fundamentally flawed due to his focus on everything that is foreign “All Chinese writing must be filtered through this filthy sieve of exoticism.” (Li 68). The author furthermore presents a very confident and self-aware character who will not easily become insecure when faced with the kind of strict Chinese authority figure the editor suggested in the beginning (Li 66). Instead, she has learned to live with her shortcomings, which include not being completely fluent in Mandarin, as these elements of her character may not be ideal but still remain an intricate part of her identity. This acceptance of the character’s position in-between her wish to speak the language in a more proficient manner also reinforces the author’s optimistic outlook on liminality. In fact, she celebrates and highlights what makes her character different (67). As a result, she can write about a variety of different subjects and situations the character encounters and sees through a lens that is among other things, influenced by cultural identity without a crisis questioning this influence having a disruptive impact on her life. This character description can of course not be aligned with what the editor has in mind as it strays too far from individual character traits, which can easily be marked as being influenced by certain aspects of Chinese culture.

As for the meta-level of the story, the author, just like the character she envisions can be seen as the more dynamic part in this story, constantly making an effort to convince the editor of her ideas while simultaneously trying to understand the motives behind his actions. This can be seen by her well-thought out description of her character, which is the result of a deeper understanding of cultural identity. The active
character traits of the author can also be observed with regards to the way the conversation is held, as the author’s attempts to create a constructive conversation is also shown when she tries to find common ground with the editor by asking him about the source of his knowledge about Chinese superstitions by telling him, “You’re quite knowledgeable about these things.” (Li 67). This effort to connect to the conversation partner by showing interest in him also presents the author’s ability to make an effort to empathize with the editor; an ability that he unfortunately largely lacks as he keeps on refusing to acknowledge that he has to at least try to understand her point of view. However, even she has to resign in the end as she fails to form a bridge between herself and the editor, which can also be seen in her final outburst, where she still tries to create a connection between herself and the editor by saying: “Sometimes we are not as different as you would like us to be, I tolerate the fact that you might not understand the notion yet but try to look beyond the boundaries, eh?” (ibit). In this instance she is admittedly already quite agitated due to the fact that the editor has blocked each and every point she has been trying to make throughout the conversation, but yet she is still looking for ways to expand his mind as she is not willing to accept his point of view despite him often trying to enforce his perception on her. Furthermore, this part of the conversation also shows that the author is aware of the vast liminal space between herself and the editor, where both of them could discover things they have in common if both ventured into unknown territory. This ability to perceive the liminal space also correlates with her motives, which in return are largely guided by her awareness of liminal positions.

3.2. The Editor and the Commercialized Stereotype

Opposed to this, there is the editor who has two primary motives that impact his behaviour. First of all, there is his reliance on his narrow view of what is supposed to define Chinese culture and then, his primary motive, which is revealed later on, to make profit. This first motive manifests in the fact that he cannot recognize anything that does not conform to the way of presenting a character with Chinese roots, which is known to him. “But the main character is Chinese and nothing in the book makes her distinctively Chinese.” (Li 67). This shows that he is in need of specific markers, which indicate her ethnic roots to him. However, as he examines the character, he is not able to detect any
of them. “No cringing when her mainland relatives slurp their noodles in an Italian restaurant. No delicious tingling when she receives a cheongsam in the mail.” (ibid). This list of things the character is supposed to do or feel throughout the course of the story is the exact opposite of the author’s ideas and aligns more with the type of character description she explicitly told him she wanted to avoid in her story (66). Also, this take on what makes a Chinese character Chinese is problematic for the conversation as he merely lists individual things he has picked up about Chinese culture along the way and assumes that these things need to apply to a character in order for them to be visibly Chinese. As a result of this approach, the editor’s perception of the ‘other’ is very narrow and extremely exclusive and anything that does not fit these criteria therefore does not belong to this group. He is also not able to list conclusive prove for his statements and can only list one source - “My girlfriend is from Taiwan. Taught me a lot about these things.” (67). This furthermore shows that the things he has learned from the in comparison limited sources of his girlfriend what he largely believes to matter the most when it comes to understanding the entire culture and that each Chinese person in Canada lives like that. However, what he fails to realise is the fact that these single facts about the Chinese ‘way of life’ do not provide him with the complete knowledge about the culture, which again provides a contrast to the author who is able to look beyond the surface and has a broader understanding of culture. More importantly, he also does not understand that this reliance on cultural stereotypes, which make a character easily recognisable, does not leave space for individual characters to be distinctively different from each other. Thus, he is also not able to engage in a productive conversation that could lead to a resolution of the conflict between himself and the author. The contradicting points of view become more obvious as the conversation becomes more intense and both parties become increasingly annoyed with their opposite’s point of view and try everything in their power to contradict each other’s statements.

“‘To me, she’s conflicted about her, as you say, hybridity’
‘Existential.’
‘Inhibited due to racial tension.’
‘Self-posessed.’
‘A social miscreant who lacks consistency.’
‘Delightfully individualistic’” (Li 68)
In this quick conversation, the author and the editor go back and forth about what the character’s behaviour and habits are supposed to mean. The short statements made by both characters represent the urgency the author and the editor feel when it comes to wanting to reach their goal of convincing the other one of their point. The dialogue also shows that despite the fact that the author has already clearly stated the nature of her character and the role that culture plays in her novel, she still has to fight in order to be able to write this book as the editor does not want to listen to her. The single word sentences furthermore show that both characters are already annoyed with the whole situation and do no longer feel like politely outlining their points in a detailed manner. The author’s outburst that follows further reinforces the failure of the conversation. On a meta-level, this can be seen as a discussion about interpreting characters in stories when it comes to the reasons behind their motives. Here, one can also see the editor’s tight focus on cultural conflict, as he tries to counter each one of the author’s arguments with statements addressing the character’s potentially troubled cultural identity. The dialogue also gives way to the interpretation of the editor as stagnant character. The fact that the author wrote the character in the first place is not able to convince him, which is telling of his position. He also devalues the character by calling her a ‘social miscreant’, which also depicts his unwillingness to accept a character he has previously never encountered. He also applies the knowledge he has gained from the stories about stereotypical characters when he analyses the character the author presents to him, which of course does not work with the story the author longs to write. Moreover, the terms he uses also signify his short temper and complete disinterest in the information the author has to offer. It is furthermore also noteworthy that he automatically argues that a character that has hybridity is in a conflicting position. By arguing like this, he also states that he cannot accept a character with a positive liminal identity and that a state where a character is in-between two positions always has to result in crisis. This notion again reinforces his belief that there is only one type of story to write about Chinese Canadian characters, which is a story containing a severe identity crisis.

The final nail in the coffin is when the editor clumsily tries to change the subject after the author’s outburst and tells her “Let’s talk about your author photograph. You’re quite big for an Asian girl. Can you slim down for the retake?” (Li 69). By telling her, does he does not only insult her because of her weight as previously
discussed but he forces yet another stereotype on her, namely that Asian women should be thin and frail. In addition to this, this personal attack shows how the editor cannot help himself but try to force the author into the narrow stereotypical vision of Chinese culture he has come to possess, and thinks that only a thin-bodied Asian woman is presentable to his clients. This final sentence of the story shows that he as a character is unable to develop due to him being driven by his wish for money and him being unable to look beyond the stereotypes he holds. Overall, the editor’s perceptions and statements he makes to constantly devalue the author’s statements and him trying to influence her relationship with her cultural identity could very well have the potential destabilize her opinions if she had not had such a fixed, confident state of identity. Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester state that many people do turn to “preconceived ideas […] that were obtained from parents, their community, the mass media, and others.” (Lustig, Koester: 4). As a result of this, they state that “[c]onsequently, some individuals may unquestioningly accept the prevailing stereotypes held by others and may internalize common stereotypes of their own culture themselves.” (Lustig, Koester 4). The author, however, does not give up as she is secure in her own cultural identity and furthermore understands that a complex character is in need of opportunities to grow in order to function within a story.

Her ability to write any story she would like to write is compromised by the editor’s strict regulations, and to further enforce these, he tells her the following: “Our readers buy books from writers like you to escape. To read about characters unlike themselves and yet still be able to grasp the struggles they face.” (Li 68). This statement shows the editor’s second big motive: the financial success of his publications. He claims to know what the customer wants to buy and dismisses anything that does not fit the description as he is afraid that stories unknown to his readership will not sell. In this instance, he also narrows down the market for the author’s works considerably by telling her that her work needs to contain enough elements which are going to be foreign to the readers – but only so many that they can still easily understand it, which, in turn, limits her capacity to tell stories that deviate from this model. As a result, this puts the author into a position where she cannot pursue any of her goals and she is instead limited to a strict set of stereotypes, which are recognisable by a non-Chinese readership. Therefore, the reliance on the various stereotypes, which
are listed by the editor and could potentially result in financial success, might come at the price of a genuine, authentic character portrayal and resulting storylines. The Marina character the author has already envisioned is a character who seems to be full of potential for interesting contexts to tell stories. The stereotypes on the other hand function as mere plot devices and might on their own not be able to create a fully fleshed out character the reader is able to sympathize with. In addition to this, the editor contradicts himself when he first says that he wants the author to be part of a new, progressive literary movement “We thought we were being daring and onto a new genre of writing that would explode into a renaissance of CanLit.” (Li 67) and then proceeds to make a lot of statements, which showcase that he would rather have more stories, which follow the same patterns that he and his readership already know in order to make sure that he is going to profit from the piece the author ends up releasing. His insistence on financial profit also reveals the desperate state he is in due to the failure of previous endeavours where he actually used to embrace ideas that were more innovative. “We had an Asian Canadian writer who wrote a collection of short stories about – get this – drug addicts in Vancouver’s East Hastings district.” (ibid). This reveals that he actually used to trust writers’ ideas more than he does now. However, the condition of his trust is financial profit. “Did a shitload of publicity and promotion. Book sales – sobbingly dismal.” (ibid). All things considered, the new approach of relying on old character tropes audiences are already familiar with, as safe as it seems, is still counterproductive to his goal of creating a renaissance as in order to start such a movement, which could also be profitable, he is in desperate need stories of new stories, which will attract a wider readership and align with his goals, which are to discover “the bone truth, the little quirky details.” (ibid). Ironically, the Marina character does represent a character with many quirks and is in many ways a more honest portrayal, as her story includes multiple elements connected to her life. However, she does not represent the security of financial profit the editor would like to have ensured due to his previous financial losses. On top of that, his new, stricter approach is also not good for business as his unwillingness to work towards a compromise destroys his professional relationship with the author.

In addition to this, the way the character of the editor interacts with the author in the conversation is very telling of the story’s satirical nature, which can of course also
be seen in the title, “Snaps – A Satire.” The editor does not only want the author to write a stereotypical caricature but by telling her to do so, he also becomes a character who could be described like this. His inability to let her state her point, his obsession with Asian stereotypes and his isolated bits of knowledge about Chinese culture as well as his stubborn determination to make profit, no matter what, turn him into a static character. As a result, he cannot understand the author’s desire to write a story about a dynamic one, no matter how hard she tries to state her point. That he is meant to represent passivity is also shown in his very first statement:

Do you have problems with your mother? No, no, let’s say an authority figure. A person of a backward, archaic time who effectively subsumes your already confused identity under the blanket statements and power traps of aha leftover patriarchal authority. (Li 66)

This statement is very direct, and addresses the author instead of the character she is trying to present. In a moment of failed self-awareness he manages to describe his very own position in the author’s life: he is in a way an authority figure, as he is the editor, and he has trouble with thinking progressively, as he is almost entirely reliant on stereotypes. In addition to this, he also constantly tries to influence her view on what the identity of her character should be, and also refuses to accept anything that makes the character different from all the other ones he has ever read about. The only difference is that he does not intimidate the author, as she, in many ways like the character she wants to write about, is not a passive, stereotypical character in the middle of an identity crisis and therefore feels secure in her position. Not only does she not give in to his wishes but she actively makes an effort to challenge him. Ironically, this battle between the stereotype and the fully fleshed out character can be observed on two levels; while the editor constantly interrupts the writer, listing the different kinds of stereotypes he wants to have in the story- almost like a check list -, the writer, who is Chinese-Canadian herself, constantly defies the stereotypes by representing the character she longs to write about. The author, on the other hand, tries to outline his flawed thought process to him and knows that the editor wants her to write about characters, which oppose her philosophy, which angers her.

Fuck you. What you want from me are caricatures … The trampy whore of a cousin who rebels against her uptight upbringing and subsequently got into a car crash because she drove while hitching up her skirt to make it shorter, lost control of the wheel, crashed into a parked car,
The profanity at the beginning shows that the author is no longer interested in keeping up a polite appearance but also that the editor’s comments have come to affect her on a personal level. The fact that the editor does not clearly distinguish between her and her character and insists on the character needing to fit into his knowledge of stereotypical Chinese character arcs have come to annoy her. Additionally, the character and story she chooses to describe in order to illustrate her point, represents an archetype that is the polar opposite from Marina’s story. On top of that, she deliberately chose a character and a story that are quite ridiculous. These details are also telling of what she thinks about the editor’s opinion about her character. The cousin character ironically also fits with the type of story the editor implies he wants at the beginning, when he clumsily attempts to question the author about her mother and possible authority figures connected to Chinese culture as she tries to rebel against her upbringing and is held down. All in all, this display of anger represents a clear breaking point for the author as she does not only choose to stray from her previous choice of using polite language but to some extend also ridicules the editor’s wishes. Unfortunately for her, this moment of anger and honesty does not reach the editor at all, as the stagnant nature of his character prevails and he reacts to this outburst by merely stating “Brilliant. Make that into a story.” (ibid). While ignoring the anger and seriousness the author displays, he is only focused on the story she presents as it fits the set of criteria he wants her to write by. This ignorant behaviour showcases his selfish nature as he is by now clearly aware of what the author does not want to write about but he still insists on her doing it as he is only interested in making financial profit.

All in all, the editor is mainly guided by his wish to make profit, which in his opinion is only possible if the author conforms to his corpus of narrow knowledge of Chinese culture. In fact, his reliance on tropes such as “[…] the white boyfriend oddity, connecting modern Chinese Canadian life to mythic China, preparing for great Chinese feasts.” (Li 67) prevent him from envisioning this new, different character who can have a storyline with a different content from the one he and his clients are used to reading about. These aspects also make him a very passive character who cannot empathise with the writer and therefore leads to the failure of any attempt to gain common ground. As a result, the character of the editor remains on his side of the
spectrum and refuses to enter a liminal position, which ultimately results in the author’s angry outburst and the subsequent breakdown of the conversation.

In the end, the story depicts the importance of the author being conscious of stereotypes, which might influence people’s perception of second-generation stories. She has decided not to cater to this perception of Chinese protagonists as it is very limited and excludes many other ways of storytelling and character design and is offended when she realises that according to the editor, the only way to write her book is to conform to his perception of Chinese characters. The conversation between the two characters fails because they represent two completely different ends of the spectrum. In the end, when examining the editor’s motives, one has to state that stereotypes are not inherently bad, as human beings do need them in order to classify various issues. They do however present a stepping-stone if one attempts to tell the story of a complex character. Additionally, the editor does not utilize his knowledge in a way that could potentially benefit the author, but is only concerned with his financial gain and, therefore, his stereotypical character description does not serve a goal that could be aligned with the author’s ideas in any way. The author in this story does not just want her character to be one massive stereotype and seeks to write a character who has an identity beyond just a bunch of stereotypes attributed to them by someone who is not even involved in the actual writing process. This knowledge is one of the main messages this short story conveys; it suggests that it is much more interesting to have different types of characters with different kinds of stories in Chinese-Canadian literature rather than just one and the same character with a limited number of variations and tropes all over again. In fact, a character, written only in order to be sold to audiences who are expecting just another stereotype, who can easily be interchanged for another character with a different name, would be detrimental to the future of Chinese-Canadian literature, as it would result in a stagnation of the movement, and many authors would be excluded from writing innovative stories. This perspective is also threatening to characters in liminal positions, as these spaces can be quite different, depending on the character; this of course provides individual, complex characters that do not lend themselves as material for stories centred on stereotypical characters. Another message of this story is that to reach common ground from where a decision that works for both parties can be reached, it is necessary for both parties to be in a
liminal state, as it is difficult for two opposite ends of the spectrum to be aligned with each other.

4. Growing Up and Growing Apart in Madeleine Thien’s “A Map of The City”

The second story of this analysis is “A Map of The City”. It tells the story of Miriam, the daughter of Indonesian immigrants, who are struggling to make a living in Canada. Over the course of the story, the family starts drifting apart further and further as a result of different identities, which are in this story most prominently shown through the characters’ memories and attitudes towards their surroundings but also how these events change and shape Miriam’s identity. The story is told from Miriam’s point of view as she reflects about her relationship with her parents as well as her own life choices from the perspective of an adult woman. As Miriam is a child in her flashbacks, she reflects on this time of her life from a different position and can examine events in more detail, which helps her solidify her current position.

Overall, there is a strong focus on oppositions throughout the story, which also highlight Miriam’s growth as a character throughout the story and how events in her past influenced her to become the character she is at the end of the story. These oppositions are also important for the liminal positions Miriam assumes throughout the story as they can also be used in order to define her stages of character development. Since the title of the story is “A Map of The City”, a lot of the liminality depicted in the story is of a spatial nature. It is the aim of this chapter to examine how Miriam’s development of identity is depicted through the liminal position in her quest for freedom, her position between the parents’ different attitudes towards their Canadian home as well as the positions of the characters with regards to the surroundings they consider to be their home and how Miriam in the end manages to find her peace in freedom and is able to move on due to her character development.

4.1. The Search for Freedom as a Means of Personal Development

A key factor that needs to be analysed when it comes to this character development is Miriam’s perception of her place within her family as well as her relationship with her physical surroundings. Both of these aspects underlie drastic changes as the story progresses. As these changes take place, another key theme of the story emerges -
Miriam’s quest for freedom. Throughout the entire story, Miriam’s growth as character is accompanied by her search for freedom and the consequences of this quest. This longing for freedom can however not be examined on its own, as Miriam is an active character who actively reacts to the events unfolding around her. Furthermore, the search for freedom represents a rather turbulent liminal period in Miriam’s life as she moves in-between the confined life with her parents and her ultimate goal of being free in order to move on. Therefore, the following chapter will examine this quest for freedom together with its origins, liminality and results.

First of all, one has to realise that this quest for freedom does not begin right away. In fact, when she is young, Miriam spends a lot of time with her father and feels fairly content with her status quo. “I was six years old then, and I dreamed commercials. In my mind, my father was the owner of an exciting retail outlet.” (Thien 164). This segment of the story provides some insight into Miriam’s close relationship with her father and also proves a sharp contrast to the family’s situation in the years to come and how this change cannot go without reaction from either of the characters. It also shows that as long as the family home is intact, Miriam feels comfortable in her family’s presence and that she is inspired by the work the father is doing. Furthermore, at this point in her life, Miriam actually looks up to her father and considers him to be a successful business owner, which also provides a sharp contrast to the way she will see him in the future. Instead, she feels happy working with him “When my father made a sale, he let me deliver the receipt and change to customers, which I did proudly.” (Thien 163). This pride is an important part of her identity at this young age as she feels so proud and content that her later quest for freedom seems very unlike her. However, this pride is one of the aspects of Miriam’s feelings towards her father, which starts changing as the years move on and the feeling changes and turns into a suspicion of having disappointed the father. “I needed to ask him, Have I disappointed you? … We had failed each other in so many unintended ways […]” (Thien 166). This turn from pride to disappointment changes the way Miriam sees her father “So I kept my distance and thought from time to time how things might have turned out differently.” (ibid), which is a strong contrast to the little girl who would stand by her father holding his hand (Thien 165). These two segments also show how the changing relationship ultimately resulted in Miriam’s wish to distance herself from the family and look for
freedom. The groundwork for the tensions in the family that dominate their lives throughout the rest of the story and cause Miriam to look for space as the story progresses is laid when it becomes more and more evident that the father’s business efforts do not bare any fruits. “After the furniture store closed so many years before, my parents declared bankruptcy.” (Thien 190). This event in the story changes the characters – the once hopeful father does not see a point in trying to make a living in Canada anymore and it is revealed that he has actually never believed it to be possible anyhow. “My father once told me that when he came to Canada, his luck had run out.” (Thien 192). This revelation provides a contrast to the way he used to approach from Miriam’s perspective. As a result of this statement, the father also starts distancing himself from the family “Our apartment became a silent place. My parents chose not to speak, rather than risk an argument that would shatter their fragile peace.” (ibid). The section describes a very delicate family situation for a young child to be in and the logical conclusion is that the comfort she used to feel during her time with her father in the furniture store is now a thing of the past.

This turn of events then finally results in Miriam’s wish for freedom: “I longed to be free of them. Some nights, I climbed out my window, inched my way to the fire escape.” (ibid). This moment in the story provides the reader with not only Miriam’s wish for a life without her parents’ troubles but also her first actual, physical effort to escape, illustrated by her climbing out of her window, escaping her parent’s house as if it was some sort of prison she wants to leave. This also shows that she at this point enters a new liminal space; she is in-between her parents’ home and the outside world; in-between the oppressing mood inside the apartment and the carefree adventures outside. However, given her age at this point, she cannot just yet leave her parents’ home for good and therefore has to escape to the streets for brief moments in time before having to climb back into her room. This search for space away from the confinements of her parents’ problems in their apartment also continues when Miriam gets older and keeps on looking for excitement and freedom.

I was waitressing then, working odd jobs. Every night my girlfriends and I stayed late in the bar, lighting cigarettes, throwing shots of vodka straight back. Men came and went; it was nothing. Some nights, we dropped our clothes on the sand and swam in the ocean. Bitterly cold, it shocked us sober. Other times, I drove along the coast, the sky blacked out. I’d park and watch the big green trees rolling back and forth in the wind and the sight would make me fleetingly happy. Legs stretched out, I would lie back on the roof of my car and listen to the sound of my clothes flapping. (Thien 173)
This part presents one of the many oppositions that can be seen throughout the story. Here, Miriam is seen as a young woman, venturing out into the city as opposed to the girl spending time with her father in the furniture store and being trapped in the parents’ apartment during their fights over money and the future of the family. The wide spatial surroundings showcase Miriam’s need for room and freedom and stand in opposition to the happiness she used to feel while working with her father in the small store. The image of the car is also used twice in the story. In one moment of the story, Miriam remembers how she used to drive through the city with her parents. “My parents and I would drive across the city, going nowhere in particular, all of us bundled into the Buick.” (178). In this passage, the image of the car is also present and is used by Miriam in order to explore the city but this time, Miriam is on her own, trying to expand her mind and sits behind the wheel herself rather than sitting in the back and letting the parents take control. The image of the ocean is used in a similar way as it also symbolises nearly endless space as opposed to the confined to the confined spaces the parents live in. Miriam’s fleeting jobs as well as her unwillingness to settle down also display her longing for a life that is different to her parents’ lives would rather look for job security. She is also able to make friends to spend her time with, which is another opposition to her parents’ isolated, mundane lives. Furthermore, Miriam is also influenced by her wish for freedom when she meets her future husband, Will, a man whose features she describes as “[...]everything laid out, plain and simple.” This also shows her wish for a relationship that is different from the complicated, fragile one that her parents had, that drove her to look for freedom in the first place. With him, she also continues her search for adventure, all while still feeling safe and secure in the relationship. “I held on for dear life. He turned around, mouthing ‘Okay?’” (Thien 175). Moreover, at first, Will does neither question nor judge her relationship with her parents (“He forgave all my inabilities.” (Thien 162)), which lets her enjoy the moment and look for more adventures.

The theme of freedom is once again explicitly used in the story when Miriam explains that she is in some ways happy that her father ended up leaving. “In some ways, by leaving, he gave my mother and me our freedom. We moved on with our lives while he remained in the background.” (Thien 177f.). This shows that Miriam is aware of the fact that the constant longing of the father to move backwards has prevented the
rest of the family from being free to move forward. The opposing positions of the father moving backward to Indonesia and Miriam and the mother moving forward in Canada will be examined in more detail in sub-chapter 4.2.

As it can be seen, Miriam’s search for freedom is an intricate part of her character development. However, there are also some factors within this quest, which are self-destructive and counterproductive. In fact, throughout her quest, she has to face many problems, which eventually lead her to a place in her life that she can use as vantage point for moving on. First of all, there is the issue that Miriam is on the one hand happy within the city of Vancouver; a place that is familiar to her but on the other hand also seeks for excitement and new spots. As a result, these two mindsets start disrupting each other as Miriam is not able to balance them at first. This problematic aspect of her quest can for instance be observed when she despite trying to look for new things, she is still haunted by old memories of her parents “In the years after I left home, I used to glimpse my parents in unexpected places.” (161). This shows that the familiarity of the city and her family do to some extend hinder her quest for freedom as she is forced to look for even more open spaces.

The self-destructive effects of Miriam’s search for freedom also affects her relationship with others, as her desire for freedom also creates distance between herself and people she does not wish to be free of. For example, her relationship with Will suffers once they get married and their sole focus is not on her search for freedom anymore. “But then Will and I got married, and when I thought about my own future, the possibility of children, I saw how the tables had turned.” (Thien 162). In this instance, she realizes that her search for freedom does to some degree limit her ability to form genuine connections. As her quest for freedom is primarily dominated by her wish to distance herself from her family and the pain the relationship of their parents has caused them and also her, it is difficult for her to start a family herself.

The relationship also suffers in a moment where she does not want to talk about her father to her husband when he confronts her about her situation and tries to offer some advice by saying “’At some point you’re going to have to deal with this. You can’t pretend he doesn’t exist.’ ‘This is not something I want to talk about with you.’” (Thien 208). In this moment, Will wants her to realize the fact that she needs to confront her problems with her father. She, on the other hand, not only dismisses this idea but
also the thought of talking to him about her problems. In this instance, she tries to keep her two worlds separate and does not like the idea of the problems she has with her family invading her life with Will, which is something she created herself and wants to have control over. The intrusion of her old problems into her new life is too much for her to cope with as her quest for freedom has led her to this point and still, her past does not let go of her. Additionally, Will’s suggestion is the exact opposite of the way she has chosen to live her life so far, which is by searching for freedom and distancing herself from her parents and the memories connected to them. This then strains the otherwise healthy relationship with Will as her worlds start merging more and more. In this instance, as the two opposite poles of the life she used to live with her parents and the new one with Will start moving closer together, Miriam is clueless about what to do in the situation as she realises that despite the fact that her search for freedom has led her to this point where she might want to think that she is at the opposite side of the spectrum where she can move forward and explore life with Will, she is thrust back into the liminal position she still does not feel comfortable in. The strain put on the relationship affects it so deeply that she and Will temporarily separate, which leads her to blame herself even more “I recognized my own selfishness … the parts of Will and my family I had never recognized, the loss that seemed to unresolvable.” (214). The relationship does however survive as Miriam in the end realises the fact that her quest for freedom comes at the price of distancing herself from others:

I told him that it used to be that I would wake thinking of my father, his life as it was then, him alone in his apartment, living from hand to mouth. I would think of him and yet I could not bring myself to bring myself to go to him. I can see now how my father and I were the same. Waiting until the breaking point. Then for him, pills and alcohol one night, an act that made all the worlds fall silent. (225)

This passage, which can be located in the end of the story is key for Miriam’s character development. Following Will’s advice, Miriam finally decides to speak out about the way she feels about her father and thus does not only save her relationship with her husband but is also able to openly address her similarities to her father, which is important for her identity. In fact, in this instance of the story, similarities are foregrounded, which is uncommon for this piece as so many other aspects of this story stresses oppositions; especially between Miriam and her father. The mournful mood of this segment highlights the current state both of these characters are in and depicts how
despite and at the same time, because of their similarities, they are not able to come together as these similarities present painful aspects in the story. First of all, there is the fact that both of them tried to venture to physical places they feel comfortable in; Miriam by exploring Vancouver and its surroundings and the father by leaving Canada for Indonesia. Secondly, this wish for freedom also happens on an emotional level for both characters, which in turn can be very painful, as they end up creating distance between themselves and their loved ones; for the father, this happens when he moves back to Indonesia, prioritising his freedom from the problems in Canada over the proximity of his family and Miriam starts having relationship problems with Will when she feels trapped by her father’s sudden return. As a result, Miriam finds herself waking up in her home, being alone and thinks about how her father is alone as well. The overwhelming pain that stems from this realisation then prevents her from visiting her father as he and his journey represent the same pain. Realising these similarities, Miriam thinks of her father’s bleak present life as a prediction for her own future. She sees how troubled he is as she realises that his reckless quest for freedom did not only destroy the family but also himself. In this moment, Miriam choses a different path for her personal search for freedom as she realises that her relationship with Will has the potential of contributing to a future for her that is different from the present state of her father. As a result of this revelation, Miriam can then see that she misses Will who inspired her to confront this part of her identity in the first place and is able to convince him to come back when she confesses these things to him. In fact, when her father is submitted to intensive care, Miriam realizes that the relationship with Will is not only a way to escape her parents but can also provide comfort in times where she needs it and that she also values his judgement after all. “If only Will were here.” (Thien 221).

As it can be seen, Miriam’s quest for freedom does at times have, as Horakowa puts it, a melancholic character, which is associated with spatial liminality (Horakowa 164). However, Miriam’s determination, which is a character trait that has influenced her actions ever since the start of her search for freedom and her presence in a at times lonely and depressing state of spatial liminality does not leave her and she manages to keep on fighting for her own path in life, which she is able to accomplish by reflecting on her parents’ mistakes and then applying this knowledge to her own life.
In the end, however, she does return to her old street. This decision is very unlike the Miriam who has been fighting and running for the majority of the story trying to explore as many different places as possible. This return to her roots also showcases the fact that she has in the end managed to gain her freedom and therefore, returning to the old store is not painful anymore. She now has the freedom to move into a future that is free from negativity.

4.2. The Immigrant and the Emigrant
As mentioned, Miriam’s parents are very influential on her view on life as they provide two different perspectives, which Miriam gets to know over the course of the story, and over time learns to question, evaluate and adapt them to her own life. These perspectives provide a spectrum with two different poles with the mother representing the immigrant perspective by trying to connect to Canada and the father representing the emigrant perspective, as he is still largely tied to Indonesia. As already showcased, Miriam on the one hand feels very much at home in Canada, which correlates more with the mother’s perspective but she on the other hand also has self-destructive tendencies in her identity, which are more associated with her father’s behaviour. This again highlights her liminal identity, being in-between her parents. However, she is also isolated from both parents, which also represents a liminal part in her identity as for a big part of the story, there is a major focus on Miriam’s position between her parents’ position, which represents the past and the future. This chapter will showcase these different degrees of liminality and the different positions connected to them in more detail in order to be able to showcase the development of Miriam’s liminal identity throughout the story.

First of all, there is the father who is not able to reach the immigrant position by being disconnected from the new country, which eventually also leads to a distance between himself and his family. Consequently, the father also ends up becoming more isolated from Miriam. “My father was not present at our wedding.” (Thien 177). The narrative of the father who cannot let go of the old country and ultimately distances himself from the people in his family who are able to live in present Canada is also present in Thien’s short story “Simple Recipes” where the father mainly tries to hold on to his past memories by cooking traditional meals for the children who resent that,
which leads to a violent outbreak where the father physically assaults the son who actively voices his disinterest in his father’s ancestral roots while the daughter watches in shock and is thus also alienated from the father. The father in “A Map of the City” does not become physically aggressive, he becomes distant by giving up on his new life in Canada after the store fails and voices this desperation by saying “‘What do you want me to do?’” (183). This exemplifies his emigrant position; although physically already being in the new country, he is still disconnected on an emotional level. This disconnection then makes it difficult for him to be able to make a living in Canada and as a result, he refuses to fight for it. “In their difficult times, at the first mention of money, my father would shut down, close his eyes and ears.” (191). It is the same passive disposition that eventually leads him to leave, as he is not able to enter the immigrant position and cannot join his wife in their new life (195).

As far as the mother is concerned, she represents the position of the immigrant who is determined to make a living in her new home. As a result of her disposition to make the new life work, her answer the hopelessness of the father is “‘Go back to school. Do something for yourself, make yourself employable.’” (183). Horakowa also highlights this part in Thien’s story. This and the fact that the mother tells the father the directions during Sunday drives and is the one who can still earn money after the family loses the furniture store showcase a gender reversed telling of the immigrant story, as normally, the father tends to retain these roles. (Horakowa 159). Indeed, the mother manages to fill these positions in a way that positions her to be able to make a living on her own, as opposed to the father who does not manage to find his place -- neither in Canada, nor back in Indonesia --, which ultimately leads to his isolation and subsequent downfall. The switching of these roles between the parents also does not go unnoticed by the father who is suspicious when the mother manages to get a raise at work; “What did he do that for, promote you? In Indonesia you couldn’t hold down a job. Here, a promotion. I don’t understand.” (184). In this moment, the father feels threatened and uneasy due to the mother’s professional success. While he keeps on failing, she manages to adapt to life in Canada. Once the family starts running into money troubles she also proves to be more efficient than the father who keeps on losing one job after the other. “My mother took on a second job in order to support us.” The fact that the mother is holding the map, the mother also actively choses to try to find her way in
these new surroundings while the father despite the fact that he is on the driver seat, remains confused by the streets and has to fully trust in the mother to lead the way. She is also more active than the father, urging him to make business decisions “‘We better sell now,’ she said, her voice low. Beside me, my father ate quietly, bowl held in one hand, his chopsticks lifted slowly.” (182). This passage once again highlights the active behaviour of the mother while the father remains passive, drawn into himself. The relationship between him and the mother worsens when their financial situation becomes increasingly bleak.

He told my mother over and over that it had always been her decision to leave Indonesia, and never his. She had separated him from the country he loved. My father once told me that when he came to Canada, his luck had run out. Everything he touched turned bitter. He looked around at our apartment, the old, sagging couches and plastic runners, and blamed himself. (Thien: 192)

In this moment, the father is angry due to the situation the family is in and does not know who is to blame. At first, he blames the mother for even being in Canada. Then himself, for not being able to provide for his family, as the gender roles expect him to do. In another moment he however turns around and puts the blame for their lack of wealth on the mother again. “‘I’m doing the best I can,’ my father said. ‘Your mother, she wants everything. Do you see that? She wants everything.’” (185). This again presents a case where the father misdirects his anger and frustrations against the mother who through the entire affair never complains and also keeps up work when the father has long given up. Even when the father comes back from his failed attempt to start living in Indonesia again, the mother is still in Canada, making a living “‘She’s fine. She’s working hard as usual.’” (205). The mother thus manages to stay in Canada and Miriam also reflects on the situation by thinking that now that the father is gone, she and the mother are free to carry on with their lives; which presents a situation where she is aware of the fact that after everything, she is in some ways similar to her mother. (Thien 177, 178). Miriam and her mother are also both driven by their will to be able to actively influence their future and do not resort to stagnation like the father does. In fact, for the mother, an escape from Canada is out of the question “Once here, my mother did not look back. She worked herself to the bone but set her sights on the future.” (201). However there, is also distance between Miriam and her mother, as both of these characters see their home in a different light, which can be attributed to their
respective statuses as first- and second-generation immigrant, as their familiarity with their surroundings differ from each other.

4.3. Home Is Where Familiarity Is

After having examined the theme of freedom and the parents’ positions, one of the conclusions that arises is the fact that a lot of the differences between the characters in this story can be understood when examining the way they relate to their physical surroundings more closely. Based on the knowledge gathered from the previous two sub-chapters, it can be said that the characters in this story have very difficult, at times ambivalent relationships with their physical surroundings. Since the story is heavily focused on belonging, it is important to raise the question of how the characters throughout the story discover places they belong in. A large deciding factor that plays a role with respect to that, is the degree of familiarity the characters associate with these places. Therefore, after having examined the spatial dimensions in the story with regards to their meanings in connection to the search for freedom and progress and regress, it is now time to look at the places the characters consider to be familiar and as a result of that, their home.

First of all, there is the father. The relationship between Miriam and her father is very central throughout the whole story and the places these two characters consider to be their home constitute a great deal of conflict between them. A large part of the story is centred on the repercussions of the father’s failed attempt to make a living in Canada, which also has an impact on the way he comes to see the country. However, in the first instance where the father comes into contact with the Canadian public the reader is presented with, shows the father actually being willing to forego familiarity in order to try to form a relationship with his customers at the furniture store.

That afternoon, I watched my father read the newspaper, cover to cover, retaining names and news for casual conversation. ‘Trudeau,’ he said to one customer, then shrugged his shoulders, or ‘Billy Bennett,’ or ‘Tatcherism’, the word hanging disturbingly in the air. (Thien 170)

In these moments Miriam observes her father’s efforts at trying to relate to his customers. These first attempts to make conversation also show the father’s desperation to become a part of this new life he and his wife have chosen for their family. However, these efforts are doomed to be futile as the father is only able to recount single names he
has studied in conversations and lacks the contextual knowledge that is attached to them. Still, he does try to become more involved but his attempts are nevertheless clumsy. This can be seen by the tone of the conversation, which is above all uncomfortable, which might stem from the fact that the father chose names and terms associated with controversial political topics, which of course are difficult to talk about in a light conversation. At this stage, he also does not want to talk to Miriam about the life he left behind, telling her that he only misses Indonesian fruit when she asks him whether he actually misses his old country he merely answers, “I only miss the fruit… The country, I’ve almost forgotten.” (171). This dismissal of his former home also showcases his willingness to turn his back on familiar, known territory and become a part of this new world, which is implied is at this point more familiar to him. However, after his failed business attempts, he decides to move back to his former home country showing that he is not able to let go of the past after all, as it can be seen in chapter 4.2. This shows that not only Miriam but also her father are dealing with spaces of liminality throughout the story. He struggles between his old and his new home, trying to find familiarity and success in his new home but when those attempts do not bare any fruit, he gives up and goes back to Indonesia. This difference is also one of the reasons why he and his daughter come to see the world they are living so differently. Todd explains that “The first-generation immigrants often have the most difficulty … adjusting … and therefore may feel the cultural transitions as a loss of identity.” (Todd, English Ministry Crisis in Chinese Canadian Churches 47). This is definitely the case for the father who increasingly feels lost in Canada, comparing it to Indonesia. “My father was suspicious of Canadian highways, the very ease of crossing such a country.” (Thien 180). In this instance, he is struggling to come to terms with the differences between Canada, the country that is still a mystery to him and the familiarity he left behind in Indonesia. He finds the memories and familiarity of Indonesia comforting and cannot find any reminders of these times in Canada. This moment of feeling lost also finds representation in the title, as the map of the city is meant to be a tool for people who might feel lost. However, the father does not utilize this item. He does not make an effort to make himself more familiar with the city, which coincides with his emigrant position. He remains in a position that does not offer a possibility to move forward. “The country that loomed so large in his imagination finally drew him back. Despite
family, despite our hold on him, in the end, the place won.” (198). Here, Miriam sees how tight the grip that Indonesia has over is. The country is here even depicted as if it really had an agenda on its own. Miriam also realizes that the father’s familiarity with Indonesia is so big that there is no space for Canada, for the father, which is why he ends up leaving. The tragedy of the father’s fate in the story becomes even more evident when he leaves Indonesia for Canada a second time. This shows that also a change of location cannot help him with his problems. His failed attempt at gaining freedom from his depressing life in Canada ultimately results in him moving back and forth between two countries he tries to escape. In addition to this, the father’s actions are also fruitless due to his inability to handle money correctly ”’I managed to borrow money while I was away. But it ran out when I was in Indonesia.’” (206). This also depicts his struggle of trying to leave his position as constant emigrant as he is unable to live in the old home and can also not adapt to the new one.

In addition to this, the father’s search for freedom is also different from Miriam’s as there is always something that seems to hold him back and even in moments where his actions are so reckless that he pushes away his family, he still fails at gaining happiness; be it the memories of Indonesia or the physical spaces he has chosen to confine himself in; the furniture store, the family’s apartment or the apartment he later on owns. This insistence on being locked in later leads to serious consequences when his health worsens. “Until he lost consciousness and fell, cutting his forehead. He was on the floor eleven hours before someone found him.” (221). This shows that the isolation that he chose for himself ultimately leads to him being so completely alone that he ends up being so disconnected that when he is in need of assistance during this emergency, there is no one there to even miss him. This moment represents his complete isolation from all the other characters in the story.

In contrast to this, the mother does make use of the map and becomes the one telling the father the directions. This metaphor of the navigator is then even taken further when it is revealed that the mother, despite sharing the first-generation immigrant status with the father, is able to make a living in Canada after the father leaves for Indonesia. She has managed to become familiar with her new home, which also represents her immigrant position.
However, there are some ways in which the mother is similar to the father, which creates connection between them but at the same time isolates them from Miriam. “Despite the violence and the political tension, my parents missed Indonesia. It came out in small ways,” (179) and thus, to some degree, she is also distanced from her daughter “At home, they spoke Indonesian and Chinese to each other, but never to me.” (ibid). This is largely the result of the shared memories of the parents of a country that still means a lot to them, whereas their daughter only knows it from snippets of their stories. The struggle they face as they are confronted with their new life in Canada is also an element in their lives Miriam cannot connect to. Miriam only knows life in Canada and the small details her parents share with her about their old lives are not powerful enough to evoke the same feelings of displacement within her. “My mother told me that irian, a Biak word, means ‘place of volcano’ and that jaya, an Indonesian word, means success’. But those were the only Indonesian words I learned.” (ibid).

Miriam’s own connections to places that are familiar to her are as already discussed, ambivalent. While living in a city she knows at times comforts her, she also feels uneasy when it comes to having memories associated with her home and thereby her parents “How can it be that this street is exactly the way I remember it?” (173). Despite this ambivalence, she still remains the one who feels the most at home in the city and can in the end claim it for herself. This is also foreshadowed when she reflects on her childhood by thinking “I was the only one of us born in Canada, so I prided myself on knowing Vancouver better than my parents did – the streets, Rupert, Renfrew, Nanaimo, Victoria.” (178). This comfort in the city is something that Miriam manages to hold on to after the end of the self-destructive part of her search for freedom. Indeed, being a second-generation immigrant, Miriam does not feel the sadness and loss her parents do when thinking about Indonesia. In fact, her connection to the country is as distanced as the one she shares with her parents and at first, she uses the country in order to gain more insight about them; “When I was younger, I used to study all the details of Indonesia… As if I could understand my father and myself by knowing this […]” (214). This also showcases that Miriam does not have the same direct connection to Indonesia her parents have, as the country is familiar to them.

In the end of the story, Miriam sees her parents together again, at the hospital. She however choses to leave them behind. This distance between daughter and parents,
even though it is very painful, eventually helps Miriam to find her own way, realizing “I finally saw them for what they were. Nothing at all, the aftermath of a memory.” (223). By realizing that her parents are a memory of the past, she can finally venture into a world where she can attain the freedom she always wanted. In this ambivalent moment that is painful due to the condition the father is in but freeing for Miriam who can finally let go of the ghosts of the past, Miriam manages to get hold of her own identity and can find salvation in her disconnect by forging her own path, while her parents become a memory, remaining in the background rather than a constant thought of guilt that controls every single one of her actions. When Miriam and Will go back to where the family’s store used to be located but they cannot seem to find it. This time, however, Miriam is not lonely or plagued by the feeling of having disappointed a loved one and feels confident. “But still I walked in the direction he had gone, at home in this place, though every landmark had disappeared.” (227). Miriam cannot find the store anymore and yet she keeps on walking, confident in her connection to the city she calls home. She is able to walk confidently within this city because the whole of it has become her home; her sense of home is not just limited to the confinement of a car, a furniture store or a small apartment; the whole city is where she chooses to live her life. In this instance, her quest for freedom has finally succeeded as she has learned from her father’s errors of choosing a way to freedom that is too destructive and she is able to move on into a future with Will by her side. Her relationship with Will has been secured as the topic of Miriam refusing to address her relationship with her father in front of Will no longer bares potential for conflict that could have the potential of separating them again. In addition to this, the new emptiness of the street also provides her with the ability to finally carry on and stop seeing ghosts. In the end, she is still shaped by her past but these but her learning experience has also made her different from her father and now she can venture safely and confidently move on with her life. She is now able to find her own way in the city that has become her home and can do so without looking back. The familiarity with the city is again comforting to her and she can live her life there without having the first generation immigrant – or emigrant status of her parents and therefore is not torn between Indonesia and Canada.

All in all, despite the fact that the relationship with her father has drastically suffered over the course of the story, there is still a second chance for them as the
father’s survival and the mother’s revelation offer new possibilities for the family. Miriam herself has been able to find her own path – through her initial somewhat misguided and at times self-destructive search for freedom, which has led her to a place where she no longer needs the physical map of the city her parents rely on; she has decided to live her own life. Just as the title “A Map of the City,” her identity is shown through the places she has been to and the struggles she had to face, the places she has visited and the experiences that have influenced her. Even though throughout the story Miriam’s life choices ended up fully disconnecting her from her mother and father, she can be happy. The city has become part of her and now, she is able to move in it with confidence. Also, Miriam’s liminal identity is still a part of her; especially with regards to her parents, as she shares traits with both her parents. However, it is due to her own choices that she is bound to venture into a future that is happier than theirs.

On the whole, Miriam’s Asian-Canadian identity is different from those of other characters when it comes to the fact that she is much more bound to the city she lives in. However, her interpersonal relationships also bare importance, as Will also accompanies her in her journey into the future. All in all, Miriam’s liminal identity is more directed towards her present life in Canada and not so much connected to the past her parents left behind. In the end, Miriam sees her parents as symbols of a painful past they are still strongly connected to. She however actively choses to fight and forge her very own path, which has the potential to guide her into the future – Miriam, in contrast to her father, can move on and has a positive liminal identity that equips her with the drive to move on and she thus manages to be different from her father whose fate is still bleak.

5. Language Barriers Creating Differences in Self – Identification in Gein Wong’s “Hole in the Wall”

The next story that shall be analysed is “A hole in the Wall” by Gein Wong. It features a narrator who feels distanced from his parents because of the fact that he did not learn their parents’ mother tongues and eventually learns that they chose not to teach him how to speak it due to the racism they had to face, which is told to him by his mother in the end as she decides to open up to him in a vulnerable moment. Overall, the story focuses on themes such as generation gaps and loss of identity.
The identity of the protagonist of this story also heavily focuses on interpersonal connections based on shared context, which in this story is heavily dominated by language barriers but also by aspects linked to language such as the passing on of stories and memories between generations. In addition to this, the story connects language to privilege as the parents think that the children will not have to face discrimination due to their inability to speak Mandarin.

Liminality is mostly explored at the end of the story, when the conversation between narrator and mother takes place, as it gives the narrator space to move in. The aim of this chapter is to show how the identity of the narrator is influenced by his inability to speak his parents’ first language and the missing context resulting from this language barrier and how efforts from the narrator and the parents in the end form a more positive relationship between these characters as well as a more positive outlook on the narrator’s own identity.

5.1. Language and Memories as Connecting Elements Between Generations
One of the strongest elements in this story regarding the move towards this more positive outlook on the narrator’s identity is the connection he shares; or rather wants to share, with his parents. The story depicts the issues the narrator has due to him not being able to speak his parents’ language and therefore, this first chapter will serve to illustrate how language and memories withheld from him by the parents at first distance him from his family and thereby his ethnic roots and eventually contribute to his identity.

The first thing that needs to be looked at more closely when analysing this story is the most central aspect of the plot, which is the way the narrator feels about his inability to speak his parents’ language. The first sentence of the story already tells the reader a lot about this matter. “I don’t speak Cantonese.” (Wong 137). The fact that the narrator has this opening statement, already tells the reader that he is very bothered by not being able to speak Cantonese. He does not give out his name or anything else; in this very first sentence the reader already learns about his main problem and the impact it has on his identity. Therefore, language is the focus of the analysis and how the narrator relates to it when analysing this character. When it comes to his ethnic roots, one also learns that the narrator is a second-generation immigrant as he explains the
following: “My parents never told me how they were treated when they first immigrated to Ottawa in the 1960s.” (139). The narrator is also aware of the fact that the parents decided to withhold other information from him, besides the ability to speak Mandarin. This is illustrated when he describes a feeling of emptiness; “Most of the time, there is an emptiness.” (137). This emptiness is very understandable, as language is a big creator of contexts in order to explain things. Furthermore, the emptiness also results from his lack of knowledge of the language and the aspects connected to it that the parents by not teaching him Cantonese also withheld from him. This confused and empty nature resulting from not being able to speak Cantonese is also highlighted by Dan Cui who argue that language is essential for “the development of the self, that is, of one’s identification.” (Dan Cui, Revisiting Multiculturalism in Canada, 217). This is certainly true for the narrator who only identifies himself as a person who is unable to speak Cantonese and is constantly reminded of this fact, which in turn creates a sense of displacement within his own family for him as he is unsure of how to relate to the parents. This is also showcased by the fact that he is able to list a variety of instances where he feels excluded from the parents’ lives, which are also mentioned in the beginning of the story

I feel empty when my parents are watching a Chinese movie with no English subtitles. I feel empty when I’m waiting for my parents to translate the menu in a Chinese restaurant. I feel empty when I hear my grandmother’s voice on the telephone and I can’t say a single word she understands. Every Chinese New Year my father would dial that long distance call… I would hear the elation in my grandmother’s voice, but that’s all I could hear. My grandmother’s words bounced off my ears, were deflected into the atmosphere. (Wong 137)

The overall tone of the passage is a very melancholic one as the narrator again is unable to find positive attributes for describing himself and his emotions and once again centres his identity around the fact that he is not able to speak Cantonese. The repetitive use of the phrase “I feel empty,” (ibid) reinforces this feeling and provides the impression that this emotional state is not of a fleeting nature but accompanies the narrator wherever he goes. Also, the incidents he refers to in order to describe the moments when he feels this emptiness are marked by a distance between himself and the parents. This reinforces the melancholy of being alone; even when being with close family. Language is here again used as an obstacle on the way to finding connection with the parents. The distance between parents and child is also highlighted by the fact
that in all of the situations mentioned, the narrator is forced into the role of an observer, while the parents are engaged in a row of actions that require knowledge of Cantonese. Also, language is seen as being ineffective as the grandmother tries to speak to the narrator but the words bare no meaning, which is highlighted by the fact that he describes that the words physically cannot reach him. This ineffectiveness is also reflected by the fact that the narrator is not able to make sense out of a movie or a menu in a restaurant when there is no English translation. As it is later revealed, the parents chose to consciously shield their children from discrimination by not teaching them their language. The result of this decision is however also harmful to the narrator, who does not understand their reasons for doing so, and cannot comprehend their decision making process as there is no reason he can think about to explain this decision (ibid).

The emptiness is thus even stronger, as the parents’ motives behind their decision are unknown to the narrator. Furthermore, most of the situations where he encounters the language differences between himself and the parents are connected to occasions and events that are deeply personal and emotional to people. They include potential moments of forming bonds such as sharing a connection to family members who live far away, watching a movie with the parents or sharing a meal with the family. Naturally, the parents do not intend to inflict pain on him. However, the various contexts that the narrator does not have a connection to are important for the development of a cultural identity and the fact that the narrator cannot experience this development is a hurtful experience. Koester and Lustig explain the formation of cultural identity in the following way: Having ‘cultural identity’ means having a “membership in a particular culture, and it involves learning about and accepting the traditions, heritage, language, religions, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns and social structures of a culture.” (Lustig and Koester 3). This shows that this membership is an important part in a young person’s life, as it includes essential connections human beings need in order to thrive. It also shows the many ways in which Wong’s narrator is excluded from this process. Language constitutes a core part of these practices, as it creates thinking patterns within people, which are then applied to situations.

Additionally, by not being able to learn Cantonese the narrator is not able to learn about his ancestry as he and his grandmother cannot talk to each other. In addition to this, the language barrier keeps him from watching Chinese movies with his parents,
which can also contain references and information about cultural practices. The fact that these contexts do not exist for the narrator leaves him feeling even emptier as he does not have his parents to share these things with. The result is a displacement where he is unable to identify with the parents, which in turn impacts his psychological well-being. This theory of the formation of cultural identity also reveals that the parents, in contrast to their children, are members of Chinese culture. In fact, the parents’ connection to their old home is still very strong, as they not only make an effort to stay in contact with their family living in China but also frequent Chinese restaurants and watch movies in their native language. The father also reads “the Chinese newspaper” (Wong 138) and has medicine imported from China (Wong 140). The connection to the native language is essential and Francis et al. write that so-called “heritage programs” (Francis et al.: 552) were installed in Canada in order to protect the native languages of immigrants for “moral and psychological value” (Francis et al, Journeys: A History of Canada, 552). They, however, also stress that it is necessary for integration purposes for immigrants to learn English and mention that people from Greece, Portugal and China have been successful when it comes to holding on to their original languages (ibid). Francis et al. furthermore stress that the most prominent trend seems to be that original mother languages of immigrants are getting lost (ibid). This is what also happens to the narrator and his sister who are second-generation immigrants who do not have access to their parents’ native language. As a result, they also do not have access to the same types of media their parents use, which is seen by the sister’s interests, which are all of Western origin and in English. This can be seen in an instant where she talks to the narrator “…in between putting on a John Lennon record on the record player and turning on the TV to watch a Green Hornet rerun,” (Wong 139). This of course presents a strong contrast to the parents and their activities, which tend to involve activities and items linked to their Chinese heritage.

Regarding the limited knowledge the narrator receives about the parents’ lives when they first came to Canada before the mother reveals the truth is also not enough to bridge the gap between parents and children. “They would only say things that were not directly painful, for example the Chinese food was really bad, and they had known all the Chinese people living in Ottawa (because there were so few at the time).” (ibid). Even though these aspects are also memories the parents have from their early years in
the new country do not help the children to understand the reasons for their behaviour. The narrator also realises this in retrospect, and as it is seen by the mother’s emotional confession at the end, it is difficult for her and her husband to talk about the racism they had to experience. This constitutes another reason why to choose not to reveal the painful details to their children.

As it can be seen, the fact that the family in Gein Wong’s story lacks shared memories connected to cultural identity is detrimental for their lives. However, in the end, as the mother opens up to the narrator, one can finally begin to understand the motivations behind her actions, which then also leads to an increased amount of insight and understanding on the narrator’s part. The context created through memoires can, however, also not have the effect that it brings generations more closely together. This is notion is also explored in Sky Lee’s short story “Broken Teeth” in which a Chinese Canadian first-generation immigrant mother is not able to reach her daughter, even when she tells her about a traumatic childhood experience that she has never told her about before but the daughter still resents the mother. In contrast to Gein Wong’s narrator, Lee’s first-person narrator does not show any interest in the Chinese heritage that the mother seeks to install in her by instructing her to care about a distant relative from China she has never met before. “[S]he watched me. So for her satisfaction, I wrinkled up my nose and blurted out a polite ‘yech.’ And that was all the response she would see from me.” (Lee, Bellydancer, 9). This ending is quite unfortunate for the mother, as she has once again failed to reach her daughter despite having revealed such a big, traumatic experience. The story overall shows two different poles – the first-generation mother who wants her daughter to pay more attention to her Chinese roots by constantly reminding her of her duties to the family and on the other side of the spectrum, the second-generation daughter who rejects these efforts based on the fact that she is unable to form a connection with the past her mother left behind when moving to Canada. In fact, the story showcases a child with a mindset that is quite different from the narrator in “A Hole in the Wall,” as this narrator seeks to learn more about the Chinese past, which is withheld from him by his parents, which in turn helps him to find a connection to the mother in the end. In addition to this, the mother in Wong’s story is also different from the one in “Broken Teeth,” as she does not want to burden her children with the weight of being discriminated against she had to carry, and
is willing to let her guard down in order to connect to her son instead of trying to make him feel guilty. The end of “Broken Teeth” showcases the other side of the coin, namely that for an honest conversation to take place, both parties need to be willing to understand each other. As the daughter is not interested in Chinese culture and the mother cannot find a way to move forward, they still remain on opposite sides of the spectrum and the story of the mother, however moving it may be, does not alter the daughter’s perspective in any way. In contrast to this, Gein Wong’s narrator is able to step into a more liminal position in-between the sister’s dismissal of the father’s behaviour and the context the parents share. He actively tries to resolve his inner conflict, which is the result of not having the same language and memories his parents have by seeking out the mother and listening to her stories. “I heard every word.” (Wong:140) This sentence may sound fairly ordinary but it contains a pivotal moment regarding the character development of the narrator. He is still not able to speak the language of his parents and still does not share all their memories but by actively listening to the mother he enters a liminal position between the understanding that language and memories offer and his previous ignorance.

5.2. Ignorance as Saviour from Ignorance?
This ignorance is the second big part of the story that needs to be examined in more detail. First of all, there is the ignorance the parents had to face when they first came to Canada and how their first-generation immigrant experience had led them to the decision to give their children a chance of a better second-generation immigrant experience. This however results in various misunderstandings between parents and children throughout the story, thereby making the children ignorant to their parents’ point of view, which in turn then has a negative effect on the family dynamics due to various misunderstandings. This chapter shall explore ignorance in this story; the ignorance that was directed against the parents when they first came to Canada and the ignorance that has an impact on the narrators’ identity in the sense that it alienates him from his parents.

The first display of ignorance in the story is when an argument between the father and a neighbour attracts the narrator’s attention and causes confusion for him, as he is not able to understand the father’s motives. The father’s outraged outcry to the
neighbour’s remarks implying racial discrimination (“I’ve been here for fifteen years!” (Wong 138)) do not cause hurt or outrage for the children based on the fact that they do not share the same painful memories of immigration the parents had to make. Therefore, the outrage the father feels when he punches the wall in a display of anger over the neighbour’s insensitive behaviour comes as a shock to the narrator. At the same time, there is the relation between the neighbour’s and the narrator’s ignorance; one being the result of the other. Looking back at the situation, the narrator feels guilt about the ignorance he displayed towards his parents’ actions as he remembers this situation with the words that “[t]he clues were so subtle.” (Wong 137). This guilt also does nothing to better his already vulnerable mental state caused by the distance between himself and the parents. The ignorance in this situation that the father experiences from the election helper’s side, is the something that he wants to shield his children from. This can be seen when looking at the conversation between the father and the election helper the narrator observes.

Just like many other elements in the story, the narrator who looks back at the incident presents this conversation. Overall, this behaviour gives the encounter a very hostile atmosphere and leads to the father losing his patience. This ignorance is shown by the man using broken English to talk to the father despite the fact that the father is perfectly able to speak the language. Despite the fact that the narrator does not comment on the emotional context, one can still grasp it. When the faced with this ignorant behaviour the man displays, the father first manages to keep his composure. However, after the father showcases that he is able to use correct grammar and the man resorts to using even more broken English and even pointing at things, the father loses his temper “[B]y the time he set foot to our front door, my father was slamming it in his face” (Wong:138). This angry behaviour is understandable from the reader’s point of view and also the narrator realises the reasons behind the father’s display of anger that by the time the situation takes place the son is too shocked by the father’s reaction to focus on anything else. “It was never thought he was capable of doing.” (ibid). The
discrimination is also indicated when it is revealed that the family is very isolated from everyone else in their neighbourhood. “I never actually knew who was leaving – the people who lived in these houses never talked to us or knew my parents (139). This display of isolation is also telling when it comes to the parents’ connection to their native country, which is stronger than the one to Canada due to their bad experiences there. This, of course, also creates space between parents and children, as they do not have any connections to China. Also, the fact that after fifteen years in Canada the father still has to experience ignorant, racist behaviour presents a strong motive for his decision to shield the children from aspects, which might cause hostility from people so that they do not have the same experiences.

The ignorance of the narrator in this situation is brought up again later-on as in another moment of the story, the narrator’s sister even tells him that the father “shouldn’t throw a temper tantrum, he should just learn to speak normally.” (ibid). This furthermore proves that the children do not know what has happened to their parents in their first years in Canada and also shows that she believes that the father’s rage is something that is unjustified and his fault. As mentioned in 5.1., the sister also lacks the shared context. The results of that become evident when she jumps to this conclusion she presents to the narrator. Due to his own position, which is marked by a similar level of ignorance with regards to the parents’ behaviour, the narrator accepts this point of view. The narrator even mentions that what his sister says is gospel to him “I believed anything that my sister said. She was eight years older than me and I thought that her words were born from the wisdom of the world.” (ibid). In this instance, the sister also becomes his primal guide, which is essential due to the fact that he also starts seeing the father through her eyes as it seems logical to him to assume her point of view, as her explanation of the father’s behaviour seems very rational to him. “After that day, I started thinking of my father in the same light.” (ibid). At this point, the parents, who traditionally are the role models of children are replaced by the sister. As a result, the narrator feels alienated from the parents, who, unlike the sister, do not provide obvious reasons for their behaviour. In this moment, the narrator’s own parents become the ‘other’ in his life as he in not able to understand their language and actions.

As a result of this, the narrator decides to confide in the sister rather than in the parents and remains in an ignorant position, which is primarily the result of the fact that
the parents do not offer an alternative perspective to the sister’s perception of the father’s actions but through their silence rather encourage the ignorance in order to save them from going through situations similar to the one the father had to experience when being confronted with the ignorant election helper. The big reveal only comes later when the narrator is able to put the ignorance aside and finally talks to his mother about what life was like for her and his father and she decides to tell him the truth. “All my parents wanted was for me to fit in.” (140). This then finally results in the narrator and the mother being able to see eye to eye and find a way to speak to each other.

5.3. Finding a Common Language
Overall, this story depicts various misunderstandings between the children and the parents, which are very disruptive for the family dynamics and separate the second generation from the first generation. There is, however, also a handful of events where the narrator and the parents, more specifically the mother, are able to find a way to see eye-to-eye with both parties being willing to let down their guards, which ultimately leads to shared context.

First of all, the narrator lays the groundwork for the conversation with the mother at the end of the story by displaying an interest in his Chinese heritage, which is shown by his appreciation for Chinese medical practices. “I would help my dad rub some Chinese medicine into his hand. I loved that Chinese medicine, it was perfect for bruises, or muscle strains, or any bodily aches.” (ibid). In this instance, it is shown that the narrator is not only interested in the medicine but also spends time with the father despite his sister’s words. This interest in Chinese medicine also brings him closer to his father and ends up being the reason why he decides to open up and tell the narrator details related to it about his family history.

You would mix a light brown powder with an odorous liquid the colour of soil. My father had brought a lot of this medicine over when he came to Canada, and he told me that some of my grandfather’s friends used to climb the mountains in Hong Kong to gather plants and roots needed to make it. He always told me not to worry, there would be enough medicine for my grandchildren. (ibid)

These descriptions provide the narrator with a glimpse of the father’s memories, which he needs to form a context, which then helps him to form a positive relationship with his parent. The loving and detailed manner in which he recounts his father’s story about
the medicine shows that the fact that the father chose to share this part of his memories with him is significant to the narrator. The effect this part of the story has on the narrator is important for his cultural identity as he is able to learn about a part of family history. In addition to this, his interest in Chinese medicine provides a connection to a part of memorabilia the parents have held on to ever since coming to Canada and he is able to appreciate the medicine for its practical purpose and does not have to have a knowledge of Cantonese or his parents’ immigration story in order to be able to appreciate it for what it is and also cherishes it as part of his parents’ past they are able to share with him. Unlike the previous stories they told him about the small mishaps when they first arrived to Canada, this story provides more emotional context for their child, as it is one that does not only contain knowledge about a small part of family history but is also told in a manner that does not need the censorship that the parents use when telling their immigration story.

Another point that displays the narrator’s urgency to know about his parents’ past experiences in Canada, is the regret the narrator feels about not being able to speak Cantonese; “By the time I was cognizant of what was lost, Cantonese no longer felt like a language I could claim as mine.” (Wong 137). This regret, however negative it might be, also contributes to his identity and his wish to know why the language was withheld from him. If the narrator did not feel regret about not being able to speak his parents’ first language and was content with just speaking English, he would not have started asking all these questions. Also, the narrator senses that there is more to the parents’ immigration story than they initially revealed and tries to ask questions. Despite the mother’s first response being, “‘Things are better now, you don’t have to worry so much, why do you want to know about those times.’” (Wong 140), which of course reflects her agenda of wanting to spare her child from knowing all these things and also from feeling the exclusion and hostility she and the father had to experience first-hand. All these things display an urgent need to know about the truth about the entire affair as the narrator does not only this reveal for connection to the parents but also for his own identity, as it is also dependent on the connection to the parents. The narrator is also able to realize this

I wanted to hear about how my father had to go for hundreds of job interviews before somebody finally hired him, and how he enrolled in accent adjustment classes. I needed to know that outside the supermarket, people threw eggs at my mother and told her to leave “our country” and
This passage of the story presents a very detailed description of the way the parents were treated during their early days in Canada recounted by the narrator. This part of the story presents another flashback as he obviously does have detailed knowledge of what the parents have had to experience during their beginning in Canada. The overall tone of the passage is an urgent one as he explains the necessity of being aware of what happened. The detailed manner in which he recounts the stories also underlines that he had to hear the stories, no matter how painful they are. The effect of this passage is that the narrator here realizes that in order to move forward into the future, he also needs to be aware of the past. As a result, he needs to know about the parents’ experiences as new Chinese Canadians in a very detailed manner in order to position himself as Canadian citizen of Chinese descent. Also, history presents an important part of identity, therefore, the narrator needs to fill the void. The narrator also needs to know about the harsh treatment the parents received in order to be able to understand the father’s outraged reaction to the election helper. This section also reveals how the father had to change his accent in order to receive employment, which presents a strong reason why he did not want the children to learn the language in the first place, as the language presented such a big stepping stone for him in his professional life.

Moreover, they also show that the narrator is entering a liminal position in-between the previous ignorance and the truth about the parents’ immigration story. This position is on the one hand difficult to be in as there is a level of uncertainty as the narrator does not know the total truth yet, but on the other hand, this position is a vantage point from where he can try to start a conversation with the parents. He needs to be aware of the past in order to begin his journey into the future in order to become the person the parents want him to be. Finally, in the conclusion of the story, the narrator’s mother then tells him stories from when they first arrived in Canada and slowly but surely starts recounting these events in her mother tongue;

After the first few stories, she began including a few Cantonese words in her sentences. I didn’t stop her, I just held her hand. Soon Cantonese words were filling her stories. I kept looking into her eyes, hoping to catch her gaze. Now her entire stories were in Cantonese. It didn’t matter though. I heard every word. (ibid)
The overall tone of this passage is very emotional as the mother finally tells the narrator everything about her past, without holding back. This part of the story also offers the second story of a parent that has not been censored, which provides insight for the narrator. In fact, in the end, the mother is finally able to speak freely and provide her own context while the narrator just sits with her, holds her hand and listens. This section of the story offers the conclusion that in the end, mother and child are finally able to connect in a way they have never been able to before. The retelling of the painful first encounters the parents had to deal with when they first arrived in Canada is not easy for the mother but she still carries on talking. The narrator still does not know the language the mother is using to describe these events, but the last sentence is very telling with regards to the importance of this events. To the narrator, it is important that the mother is finally able to confide in him and more importantly, that he is finally able to understand the intentions of his parents when they decided not to teach him their native language. This display of trust from the mother helps him understand her better and for an emotional connection. The emotions the mother has started displaying is what ends up connecting the two characters to each other. This is also shown by the fact that he just holds her hand and patiently pays attention to the stories in order to not stop the mother from opening up to him. Thereby, the reveal has a cathartic effect on the mother as she is finally able to speak freely without having to censor the painful details of her immigration story. Furthermore, as painful as this part of the story is, it plays an essential part in bringing these two generations together through their knowledge of past events, thereby creating a better understanding between them showcasing that memories; even if they are painful, are important in order to find a common understanding. The story takes this notion one step further by implying that now that the narrator has finally earned the trust of the mother, the fact that he is unable to speak Cantonese is not that important anymore, as the fact that they are finally able to talk openly is more important than the language they do it in.

Another point that arises from this final interaction is the fact that it once again enforces a position of liminality for the narrator. This time, this is done even more strongly than previously, as he now finally is in possession of the context that he used to look for during his whole life. By now, knowing about the things that caused a lot of his parents’ actions he is now also able to understand his own position much better – a
second-generation immigrant who due to time progressing and also due to his parents’ influence did not have to make their painful experiences and can now connect better to their previous lives. Through the mother’s stories he is finally able to leave the position of ignorance for good and move towards more understanding despite the language barrier between mother and child.

In conclusion, this story again offers a distanced relationship between the first-generation immigrant parents and the second-generation immigrant children based on a different set of memories, which have shaped the characters’ actions and decisions, which is thematically quite similar to Madeleine Thien’s “Map of the City”. Both of these stories focus strongly on the differences between children and parents, which has been created by the focus on language differences as well as the way the characters view events based on the experiences they have made in life. These instances do, however, also create understanding between the narrator and the mother in the end, thus creating a full circle narrative, which shows that the things that separate the second-generation narrator from the parent are also the things that connect them. The story furthermore shows the power of language, shared experiences and values. The positive resolution in the end lays the groundwork for future conversations due to the fact that the narrator is willing to be patient with the parents.

6. Fitting in by Being Different in Paul Yee’s “Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter!”

After having analysed short stories with adult protagonists I shall now focus on one that features a child protagonist. Paul Yee’s short story “Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter!” tells the story of a young girl called Sharon Fong whose second-generation immigrant status causes her to feel alone among her first-generation immigrant peers and due to that, she resents her Chinese roots. In the end of the story, however, she manages to come to terms with her roots as she meets an old man who does not only assist her in learning how to fly a kite but also helps her connect with Chinese first-generation immigrants by telling her about how kite-flying became an escape from the struggles he had to face during the ban on Chinese immigrants. The story is the title story of Yee’s short story collection, carrying the same name. The short story collection also contains four other stories, which are all from the perspective of the children in the story “Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter”.
This story is mainly concerned with the protagonist Sharon who has difficulties with finding her place within her family and her peers. The story raises the question of how a character as young as Sharon decides on aspects, which make the other characters either more Chinese or Canadian and how she experiences positions of liminality. Because of that, the descriptions depict how she is often torn in-between contrasting feelings regarding her position in her school class and how her peers’ and family’s actions sometimes seem confusing to her. Also, there is a strong focus on the Other when it comes to specific group structures Sharon observes and she also constantly compares herself to these groups, which results in her having a negative self-image, which is primarily based on a lack of confidence. It is the aim of this chapter to show how Sharon’s identity is shown through her perspective and how she relates to her peers and to the adults around her and how the fact that her perspective is that of a child is shown throughout the story and how her point of view is altered throughout the story.

This story is told through the third person perspective of Sharon and the reader experiences her thoughts and feelings. This makes the story quite different from the other ones in this analysis as they use a first-person perspective. The mode of narration of the story helps express Sharon’s thoughts better as she has very carefully constructed her image to the outside world and therefore also provide necessary context. Overall, the story shows Sharon’s transformation of her opinion on her Chinese heritage from a negative perspective into a positive one. At the beginning of the story, she feels rather negatively about Chinese things; especially her first - generation immigrant peers. “The big problem was that almost everybody in her class was Chinese” (Yee 4). This statement already indicates that Sharon does not see herself on equal footing with the other children, which is then elaborated on. This then makes this statement more drastic as Sharon’s position as an outsider is even more evident. A lot of this negativity is primarily based on differences concerning the mother languages of the children “Sharon hated it when Samson and the immigrant children used Chinese. They spoke too fast and used words she didn’t know.” (3). This insecurity about not having the same level of proficiency the others do puts her into an uncomfortable situation, as she does not know the content of the conversations the others are having. This situation also reinforces her liminal position as she knows how to speak Chinese but does not see herself on equal footing with her comrades. As a result of this, she perceives the other
children to be hostile against her. “Sometimes she was sure they were laughing and talking about her.” (3,4). Sharon’s lack of self-confidence is also reflected in this thinking pattern as she immediately associates the other children’s chats with hostility against her. Sharon does however actively try to improve her situation “So now she tried to ignore them.” (4). By doing that she of course also does not help the situation as the distance she creates between herself and her peers further reinforces the perceived hostility and the insecurity on her part. This shows that according to her, the differences between herself and people whom she perceives to be more Chinese than she is primarily lie in aspects, which are either bewildering or unsettling to her, such as her questioning of the lunch first generation immigrant children bring to school on the one hand, and inability to speak perfect Chinese on the other hand. These factors result in Sharon being trapped in an odd liminal position she does not feel comfortable in. One of Sharon’s ways of responding to this internal conflict of being the only second-generation immigrant among a group of first-generation immigrants and defending her position is to focus on individuality. This is primarily shown by Sharon’s awareness of the fact that she does look a lot like the Other but attempts to try to differentiate herself from them by focusing on details, which can also be visually observed. “Sharon realised that she looked just like another Chinese, but she was determined to show everyone that she was different.” (5). This willingness to go above and beyond in order to have control over how she presents herself to the outside world shows a girl who is able to act by herself, which showcases a character who is capable of further development. However, her initial attempts to be different, to establish herself in order to be seen as someone who is confident are only limited to things she does for everyone to physically notice. “She spoke up frequently in class, and played hockey on the Dragons team every day after school.” (ibid). Just like the tactic to ignore her peers when she assumes they are talking about her behind her back, this displays yet another technique Sharon uses in order to protect herself from the outside influence of the other children she perceives to be negative. This also shows some kind of awareness of the fact that being Chinese means more than looking like it but her understanding of her crisis is still limited, which creates problems. In fact, in contrast to this determination to show that she is different from her peers, Sharon cannot help but feeling that she also feels uncomfortable with being different, specifically due to her biggest insecurity,
which is the fact that she is not able to speak Chinese as well as the other children. In addition to the problem of Sharon not being able to speak and understand Chinese perfectly, there is also the problem that she and her family recently had to move, which caused her to be surrounded by these new, first-generation immigrant peers in the first place. This change contributes to her insecurity as she used to venture in a place where she did not feel insecure. According to Roger Dais, Sharon’s move resulted in “a closing of spaces” (Davis, Transcultural Reinventions, 189) from a bigger home to a smaller one (Davis: 189). This narrow space is however also reflected in her social life as in her old home, Sharon was able to enjoy the company of people similar to her as she reflects about her life before the family had to move “Sharon had known other Chinese kids… But they had been like her, Canadian-born and English-speaking.” (Yee 4). In this situation, Sharon was not in a liminal position in-between the children who do not have Chinese ancestors at all and the ones who do and are of first – generation descent. Now, Sharon only has one friend to confide in; Christine (Yee:8,9). This further shows how Sharon tends to primarily define herself by comparing herself to others and looking for group structures. The comfort of the similarity between herself and the other kids also resulted in friendship “They would tell jokes, fool around and act just like their white friends.” (ibid). This shows how Sharon is unconsciously aware of the fact that back in her old home used to be in the in – group, wondering about the peculiarities about the first-generation immigrant children’s habits and behaviours. The fact that Sharon now belongs to an out – group and is in a position where she is constantly reminded of that angers her “She could feel her resentment about immigrants rise up inside her as she stared angrily at the ceiling.” (Yee 11). This again display the confinement that Sharon feels; this time, framed by the spatial setting of her own room as she stares at the ceiling like a prisoner who longs to be somewhere else but is unable to change his situation in any way and can only resort to feeling bitter about the entire affair. Sharon again has a childish mindset and does not contemplate the situation on the whole, but instead again directs her anger against a group she is used to comparing herself against. A major part of this resentment is of course based on the misdirected anger she feels due to her difficulties relating to them but there are also particular details about the other children’s behaviour that angers her “It really embarrassed Sharon when they spoke Chinese in front of Chris, or anyone who wasn’t Chinese.” (Yee 8).
Sharon also sees her as part of one specific group – the group of second – generation immigrants, or rather as Canadian and does not want to be part of the group of first generation immigrants and would rather prefer them to adapt to her way of living. This embarrassment however also manifests itself due to the perceived dominance and confidence of the in-group surrounding Samson. Since this boy appears to be the group leader, a lot of Sharon’s anger is mainly projected on Samson who does not feel the insecurities she feels and therefore, she feels mocked by him, which is why she also turns to lash out and tells him “‘Why don’t you speak English? This is Canada, you know.’” (Yee 9). This insecurity about not being able to speak the language first generation immigrants speak is also addressed in Gein Wong’s “Hole in the Wall”, where the narrator also feels excluded due to not being able to speak his parents’ first language at all. And also when his sister suggests that the father should just try to behave differently by neglecting his reasons for doing the things he does (Wong 139).

This displays a similar level of ignorance and a character failing to relate to another one based on language problems. The additional problem Sharon has is the fact that she focuses a lot of time and energy on other’s perceptions of her opposed to trying to work on her internal conflicts, which are the very source of her problems. Also, the fact that she keeps on comparing herself to other people increases her insecure position.

Samson was the one who made her feel most like an outsider. He could play hockey and speak up as well as Sharon could. Sharon could hear that his English wasn’t absolutely perfect, but Samson was more than happy with it. (Yee11)

Here, she is again focused on comparing herself to Samson by listing their similarities and their difference in language proficiency, which is of course the biggest factor that bothers her. In this moment, she also does not manage to uphold the image highlighting the ways in which she is different from her peers, which she has carefully constructed for self-protection. Her attempts to only be focused on the ways she can be different from the other children cannot prevail in this situation, as she realises that she and Samson actually do have a lot in common. The description embodies a presence that causes Sharon to feel very insecure, as Samson is able to compete with her on many levels and thereby threatens her wish to be different from her peers. Samson is different from the other ones in many of the same ways she is but on top of that, he is respected by them. This again puts him above her, which she does not take well. In addition to this, Samson possesses the self-confidence that Sharon lacks. “Mostly, it was Samson’s
being so comfortable, so relaxed about being Chinese that bothered her.” (Yee 11). Sharon’s envy of Samson also contributes to her distancing herself from him as she does not have the same attitude. The irony in this lies in the fact that “Who Set the Fire?” (Yee, *Teach Me to Fly*, Sykfighter), which is the second story of this collection is about Samson’s perspective and provides more insight into his life and shows that he also has to cope with insecurities related to his cultural identity. “Samson wished his parents could speak better English. They read Chinese newspaper and listened to the Chinese radio station at home.” (Yee 36,37). This shows that both children have problems relating to their Chinese roots and their relatives. However, both of them present a more confident image of themselves to the outside world and thus create problems, which could be avoided if they knew they had similar issues to deal with.

Sharon’s problems are however not just with her peers alone. Her problems with her insecurities about the Chinese language also extend to Chinatown in Vancouver, where she and are family live (Yee 3).

Sharon would never have admitted it aloud, but she disliked Chinatown. Everyone shopping there spoke Chinese, and at the top of their lungs, it seemed. She was never sure what was being said. The storekeepers set bins of fruits and vegetables out on the sidewalk, and it was hard to move quickly through the crowds. Being surrounded by Chinese people made Sharon uncomfortable because she did not feel very Chinese herself. She did not feel that she belonged here at all. (ibid)

This part of the story shows that what is already intimidating for Sharon on a small scale with just talking to Samson and her peers but also extends to her feelings towards the entirety of Chinatown. The vibrant and busy atmosphere seems intimidating to her as she is not able to fully comprehend what is going on due to the language differences, which causes her to feel claustrophobic in Chinatown. In addition to the crowdy, confusing streets, Sharon is also bothered by the thought that the people around her might be more Chinese than she is, which distances her from them as they seem much more comfortable being there than she is as she feels displaced in Chinatown. As a result, she is unable to connect to the other people in Chinatown just like she cannot make that connection with her peers and feels uncomfortable in the streets as the Chinese words she hears are a constant reminder of her inability to fully understand them. She feels like an outsider in a massive group of people who all seem to have a bigger connection to each other than to her. On top of that, Sharon is again too proud to
openly admit that she feels uncomfortable in the proximity of this large group of Chinese speakers, which again makes it difficult for her to address these feelings in a more positive way. This isolation from first generation immigrants is also addressed by Todd who emphasises that people of Chinese origins who were born in Canada “often wish to shed an exclusive Chinese identity.” (Todd 47). This is also true for Sharon who feels alienated from her family due to her roots.

Her problems relating to people of Chinese descent do not only have an impact on her relationship with her school comrades and the way she perceives Chinatown but also influence they way she sees her grandfather “Yeh-yeh had spent most of his life in Canada, and understood English better than he spoke it. It was almost the same situation with Sharon’s Chinese.” (Yee 12). This shows that the grandfather and Sharon represent two opposite poles on the spectrum and just like her peers, he seems much more connected to his Chinese roots to Sharon, which is why she has trouble finding topics to talk to him about. “The two of them sat for a while, without saying anything.” (Yee 12). Dan Cui argues that “People use language to define the boundaries of communities, nations and ethnic solidarity, a sense of ‘we-ness’

Dan Cui argues that “People use language to define the boundaries of communities, nations and ethnic solidarity, a sense of ‘we-ness’”. (Cui 217). The same is true for Sharon; she uses her proficiency level in the Chinese language in order to highlight the differences between herself and her peers, herself and the people talking to each other in Chinatown and even uses it to explain the differences between her and her grandfather.

Furthermore, an incident where she once saw a cockroach in his home when he wanted to offer her some food to eat estranges her even more from him as well as other Chinese people (Yee 12) as from this point onwards she starts believing that this insect in her grandfather’s apartment can be found in many more apartments all over Chinatown and does not want to take food he offers anymore. “She wondered if the other old men hanging around Chinatown lived like that and shuddered.” (Yee 12, 13). As a child, born and raised in Canada, she has trouble relating to the way her grandfather lives and even shows this by not taking any of the food he offers her as his living standards are very different from her and she is not able to understand why he has been able to get used to living with cockroaches and connects that to his Chinese heritage. This generation gap between granddaughter and grandfather is very visible in this story as the age differences are very big and also, the lives and experiences of both
parties are very different from each other, which creates even bigger trouble for these characters to reach each other.

However, in an interesting turn of events, Sharon, who can barely relate to children her age or her own grandfather finds a friend in Skyfighter, a first-generation immigrant her grandfather's age whom she asks for advice when she is desperate to win a kite-flying challenge against Samson. This shows that this man is different from the others, which manages to capture Sharon’s interest. Moreover, when her father tells her about the kite flying battles in ancient China, is the first time, Sharon shows interest in a piece something coming from China due to being excited by it without feeling threatened by it. “The kite – fighters coated their lines with tiny bits of glass and sand and then tried to cut each other’s kites loose in the wind. That’s exactly what I’d like to do to Samson!” (16). As her interest is awakened due to this conversation, Sharon decides to go and ask Skyfighter for advice carefully reminding “[…] herself not to scream or jump at the sight of any insect.” (17). This of course again reflects her feelings regarding first – generation immigrant men her grandfather’s age and shows that despite her interest in Skyfighter’s knowledge about kite-flying she is still weary of him as a result of her negative experience of seeing a cockroach in her grandfather’s apartment. Interestingly enough, Sharon is not the only one harbouring prejudices; Skyfighter also expresses some negative feelings towards second-generation immigrant children when he realises that Sharon is not able to speak proper Chinese and utters the words “You salmon-cans are like that – shiny on the outside, but nothing on the inside!” (20) In this instance, the fact that Sharon is a child who has never been exposed to the term and only proceeds to think “’She also wondered what salmon cans had to do with her.’” (ibid) saves the encounter from failing.

In fact, both parties manage to quickly forget about each other’s reservation when they become aware of their common interest in kite flying. “’Wow,’ she breathed. It’s beautiful! Why don’t you fix it up and take it out?’” (21). Furthermore, Sharon’s question inspires Skyfighter to tell her his life story, which fascinates Sharon. His stories are vivid and full of small details, such as the materials he used to build his kites and how this hobby helped him to keep an optimistic mind - set despite the agony of not being able to bring his wife to Canada (21). This story also provides Sharon with some insight into the difficult lives of many first – generation immigrants before the
restrictions on Asian immigration were loosened. On top of that, Sharon is so enthusiastic about the stories Skyfighter has to tell that she is able to focus on this moment instead of being afraid due to her previous negative experiences “Sharon had completely forgotten about the cockroaches and her grandfather” (22). The knowledge Skyfighter shares with her therefore functions as a connector in-between generations. Of course, her thinking pattern is still the one of a child and therefore she is not able to grasp the entirety of Skyfighter’s stories. This can be seen in an instant where Sharon compares Skyfighter’s boss turning off the lights in his bunk-house, which showcases the harsh working conditions he and other first generation immigrants had to live with, to her mother turning off the light when she still wants to watch TV. (ibid) However, their common passion for kite flying connects them and they are able to bridge the generation gap and still become friends. In fact, Skyfighter ends up becoming Sharon’s mentor figure; not only is he the one who is able to help her with her kite flying challenge but he is also the one she is able to understand when it comes to surface level identity, as she comes to realise through his stories that feelings can have a tremendous impact on identity. Moreover, she also feels inspired by his stories and connection to Canada, which she also elaborates on in a conversation with Christina “ ‘Why didn’t he go home to his wife?’ ‘My grandfather said that Skyfighter believed that Canada was his home,’” Sharon answered, “ ‘and by the time the laws were changed, his wife had died.’” (27). This shows that Sharon is finally able to empathize with a first generation character in this story through his stories and their shared connection to Canada. Sharon’s understanding and opinion of what it means to be Chinese has changed; she is no longer faced with things that she is unable to relate to but has found a way to relate to her peers after all. This empathy also leads to a potentially better relationship with her grandfather “When they reached the street, Sharon said thank you and goodbye to Yeh-yeh, and hugged him tightly too. ‘(24). This shows that the conversation Sharon was able to have with Skyfighter has influenced her in a very positive way. Having been able to talk to one first-generation immigrant her grandfather’s age without constantly feeling insecure due to her inability to speak perfect Chinese, also inspired her to be kinder to her grandfather. Moreover, Sharon’s attitude towards people in Chinatown has also changed and she is able to view them in a more positive light.
Now she wondered why it had taken such a long time for her to discover this feeling. She felt bad for having thought so little of Yeh-yeh. As usual, Pender Street was crowded with Chinese shoppers, who were weighed down with plastic bags crammed with fresh vegetables and groceries. Sharon peered into many passing faces, and guessed that every one probably had stories as interesting as Skyfighter’s to tell. (26)

The atmosphere in this section of the story is much more positive compared to the first section of the story where Sharon was still plagued by feelings of insecurity due to the fact that the people in the streets speak fluent Chinese. Now, despite the fact that Sharon is walking along the very same streets she used to feel so lost and insecure in before the meeting with Skyfighter, she feels entirely different towards the people she encounters. Her previous insecurity and resentment have turned into curiosity as she now is no longer afraid of the fact that she might not understand the people surrounding her, or better yet, does not foreground that aspect. Instead, she wants to know more about their lives. The effect this passage has on her is in many ways an effect of freedom. She is now free to encounter other Chinese-Canadians more confidently and free from prejudice and is even keen to do so. Sitting in Skyfighter’s apartment while talking to him about kite flying and learning about his past has influenced Sharon to also be eager to learn about the stories of other people she walks past in Chinatown. This moment of transition from a small space to a larger one; both – in a physical and a psychological sense helps Sharon to become more open towards other people.

But more importantly, she has found a way to let go of her misdirected aggression as the kite-flying experience as well as getting to know Skyfighter has given her a better level of self-confidence. “But she didn’t feel like fighting. She had nothing to prove to Samson anymore. She was just happy watching her kite pull into the clouds.” (31). Because of this newly acquired internal peace, she is now able to coexist along her peers without feeling the need to be aggressive, competitive or distant. This is showcased by the way she and Samson are suddenly able to talk without fighting, which is also the result of her successful interaction with Skyfighter. “Sharon remembered Skyfighter’s gentle voice and good humour. He had been more than willing to share his kites.” (ibid). Here one can see that Sharon has also internalized the way that Skyfighter treated her during her visit and is now willing to apply this knowledge in her other conversations. In addition to the successful conversation, Skyfighter has also provided
Sharon with his knowledge kite-flying, which has not only earned her the respect from her comrades but has also created a topic through which she is able to communicate with them on a friendly basis. “A good friend. He’s been making kites for the last sixty years. ‘Wow! Sixty years!’ Samson looked impressed. Then he added, ‘You want to try flying mine?’” (32). As it can be seen, Sharon’s attempt at making friendly conversation also resonates well with Samson, who is now also able to be friendly to her, not only due to his newly found respect for her due to her knowledge and expertise when it comes to kite flying, but also as a result of Sharon’s new, friendly behavior towards him. As for Sharon herself, she has realised that proficiency in the Chinese language is not the only way to be able to have a conversation with Samson, the kite-flying and listening to Skyfighter’s stories which have brought Sharon closer to her roots have also created a basis for her to interact with her peers without having to worry about feeling less Chinese than they are. This feeling is also represented by the way she feels about the kite Skyfighter gave to her.

And now she knew it was because the kite and its story were finally Chinese things that made real sense to her. Skyfighter’s kite was made in Canada, not brought from China dumped on her with a note saying, “This is good for you because it is Chinese.” No, the kite and its story were a hundred times better than Chinese school and telling fast jokes in Cantonese. (Yee 31)

This passage is located in the end of the story and finally provides a resolution to Sharon’s problems. The emotional, optimistic tone and the positioning of context relating to China and Canada represents the emotional state Sharon is in. Her realisation of having found something Chinese she can relate to is also accompanied by the happy mood she feels from having flown her kite for the very first time. This realisation that Sharon has also shows that she has gained a vantage point from which she can be confident by finally relating to something that is Chinese in her eyes, letting go of her internal conflict and thus feeling more comfortable in her position of liminal identity as she has found a connector between her Chinese heritage and her Canadian home. Her childish perspective can once again be seen as the connection between the kite and China are all she needs to escape her crisis, whereas the protagonists of the other stories that have been examined needed more complex methods in order to connect to their surroundings. Sharon herself does not. She feels that she is not an outsider anymore as she has finally found something Chinese she is able to understand and that is what she needs to be more self confident than before. The language aspect becomes thus less all-
encompassing and with the kite and the knowledge about kite flying she obtained from Skyfighter, Sharon is able to view her place within her peer group from a more positive perspective. Her situation is not hopeless anymore and she can now move forward without constantly having to think about how the language differences will forever make her feel like an outsider. Admittedly, learning to speak a language such as a Chinese dialect on the same level a native speaker is able to, can be a complex and time consuming endeavour and easily evoke the feeling of hopelessness. Sharon, as second-generation immigrant child also used to be especially conflicted because of this feeling of hopelessness, as she is surrounded by people who seem to have completely mastered the language completely every day of her life as this difference is also very obvious and caused a feeling alienation within Sharon. Thus, it is even more important for her perception of herself and her relation to others that she has found another way to relate to her peers by learning about kite flying and receiving her very own kite. The kite is also important by itself, as the particularities that Sharon highlights make it very special to herself but she can also use it in order to have kite-flying battles with Samson and the other children. Thus, she can be part of the group, while still being different.

In conclusion, the story showcases an identity conflict from a child’s perspective, which primarily focuses on the strangeness of being in a liminal position that is so different from her peers and family. Her moment of transition happens when she visits Skyfighter and gets to learn about his past. This moment also provides Sharon with a possibility to feel more positive about her own identity, as she is able to take her knowledge about the fact that Skyfighter had some interesting stories to tell and could even become a friend out into the streets of Chinatown. As a result of this transition, the end provides a resolution to this conflict with Sharon being able to perceive her liminal position in a more positive light due to her interaction and connection with Skyfighter. She is still different from her first-generation immigrant peers but does not feel the need to compete with them anymore. Just like the kite she received, she is also connected to China and Canada and due to its existence, she manages to view her origins in a more positive light. The knowledge she has gained from the interaction has furthermore helped her to have less hostile relationships with her peers, which now provides new opportunities for her in the future. Of course, her perspective is still limited due to her age and she largely relies on feelings and has difficulty when it comes to analysing the
change of heart she experiences when it comes to her relationship with first-generation immigrants as well as her own, second-generation immigrant experience. However, the results remain the same; Sharon is now free to live her life without feeling prejudiced or intimidated by other Chinese Canadians due to a positive shift in her perception of her own identity.
Conclusion
The aim of this paper was to gain insight into the way the identities of the second-generation Asian generation characters in selected postmodern short stories have been constructed using the concept of liminality. In order to gain more insight into how to answer this question, the Canadian mosaic and its relations to identity and multiculturalism have been explored along with a history of Canadian immigrants. The analysis has shown that the Canadian mosaic is reflected in the stories, as the Asian and the Canadian part of the protagonists’ identities reflect an interplay of both sides.

In addition to this, the short story as well as literary themes for Asian first- and second-generation authors have been discussed. The short stories have been explored with regards to themes and elements relating to identity, such as interpersonal relationships, spatial relations, generation conflicts as well as language barriers.

It was discovered that the definition of a positive liminal identity of the protagonists that does not result in crisis is first of all, heavily focused on interpersonal relationships. In fact, one can go even further and state that these relationships present the basis of the formation of the identities of the characters that have been analysed. First of all, these relationships provide a possibility to define the characters when examining the differences between them. In fact, the stories are largely centred on relationships, where difference is something that is at focus. These relationships are the ones of e.g. older and younger characters with first-and second-generation backgrounds, two characters who do not share the same racial background or characters who define themselves through the differences they spot between themselves and others, such as different levels of language proficiency. Moreover, a success of these relationships can generally be attributed to shared experiences and common context. In fact, all the stories showcase the theme of ‘identity crisis’. This theme also influences interpersonal relationships between characters, as they are often accompanied by some kind of misunderstanding with regards to matters concerning identity. These instances of miscommunication are based on various subjects. For example, there is the family lacking shared context due to the parents’ various encounters with hostile behaviour due to their Chinese heritage in Gein Wong’s “Hole in the Wall” or the fragile father-daughter relationship in Madelien Thien’s “Map of the City”, the problems Sharon has
relating to her peers and grandfather in Paul Yee’s “Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter!” or the failed attempt to reach common ground in Iris Li’s “Snaps – A Satire”.

Spatial relations are influential too, as transitions also mark moments of liminality. The relationships the characters have with the spaces surrounding them also shape their identities. The most striking example of this can be seen in “A Map of the City”, where Miriam is able to form a close connection with her surroundings that allows her to move forward in life. Spatial relations are however also important in the other stories. Sharon learns to be more accepting of Chinatown and its people, Gein Wong’s narrator is able to connect to the way his parents see their spatial surroundings through the mother’s stories and the Iris Li’s author speaks about how her character can navigate within her surroundings efficiently due to her Chinese-Canadian roots.

Another point that has to be addressed is the fact that the identity of the characters is also shaped by other defining elements, which are more specific to each individual one. These traits are then in turn also influenced by their cultural identities and help to guide and shape their decisions. These various aspects influencing identity are traits such as Miriam’s love for her city and her husband, the young author’s interest in writing complex characters focusing on topics such as sexuality, habits, ticks and individualism, Gein Wong’s narrator’s interest in Chinese medicine or Sharon’s enthusiasm for kite-flying and Skyfighter’s stories. These elements are also important as they help to shape the characters into interesting individual characters, instead of copies of each other.

The analysis shows that all the protagonists of the stories I analysed are active characters, capable of development, which is showcased by the way their perception of themselves changes when they are faced with different kinds of inside- and outside influences. As a result, they can also make an impact on their surroundings and even shape their internal processes to some extend. This is showcased by Miriam deciding to make her own living and venture out into the city and make it her home and being focused on the future, Gein Wong’s narrator choosing to confront the mother, hear her out and relate to her to the best of his abilities, thereby bridging the language barrier, the author by trying to convince the editor and by sticking to her ideals and Sharon by seeking out Skyfighter, listening to his stories and applying the knowledge gained from
this conversation in order to have less a hostile relationship with her peers and an improved connection to her grandfather.

In summation, the characters are able to navigate in-between their inside- and outside influences, their interpersonal relationships and their own decisions and their Asian and Canadian cultural identities. The stories also depict characters who navigate in-between their ancestors’ past lives and are able to find their respective ways into the future due to their own knowledge, experiences and present lives. Thus, they are in a state of transition, which is also marked by the liminality of their identities. Therefore, my answer to the question regarding the depiction of the identities of these characters is the fact that this liminality can be found in all the aspects of the stories, which then on the whole form the stories themselves but also the identity of their protagonists. This liminality is also found in the genre of the short story itself and is crucial for understanding the development of the protagonist of each story that has been analysed.

I have shown in this thesis that the Asian Canadian second-generation characters in the stories I analysed do indeed have liminal identities and that these identities are the result of various liminal factors related to the characters.
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