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Negotiating the Abject: Body and Identity in Hiromi Goto's "Stinky Girl"

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Abstract

In Japanese-Canadian writer Hiromi Goto's short story "Stinky Girl", the concept of the abject body underpins the stinky girl's journey in understanding her racial identity. This essay focuses on the representations and roots of the abjection, as well as how the abject body enables resistance against racial discrimination. I contend that the stinky girl's abject body is exemplified by her derogatory perception of herself, which is intimately entangled with animal imagery. Her experience of abjection stems both from historical racial discrimination and its lingering effects. Through a combined mental and corporeal resistance, the stinky girl not only liberates herself from abjection but also reconstructs her racial subjectivity.

Key words: Hiromi Goto; Asian Canadian literature; *Stinky Girl*; the Abject Body; Julia Krsiteva

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hiromi Goto's "Stinky Girl", a short story from her celebrated collection *Hopeful Monsters: Stories* (2004), narrates the daily life and inner world of an unnamed thirty-three-year-old woman of color (her term) who identifies herself as a stinky girl. The complicated interplay of bodily autonomy, internalized racism, and the politics of identity in this work has inspired a wide range of critical interpretations, from postcolonial readings to feminist analyses. For instance, with a focus on feminist thought, Libe García Zarranz (2017) believes that the body of the stinky girl is a "phantom" and that there exists "an intriguing connection between material objects and bodies" (pp. 38-41). Concentrating on reading strategies and the function of the unnamed narrator, Liben (2001) examines how Goto's "writing of racialized identity both advocates and challenges the notion of criticism as a conversation between friends" (p. 99). In contrast, Liu Zhen (2022) shifts attention to the interpersonal domain and investigates the dysfunctional familial relationship in "Stinky Girl" by focusing on "the inevitable translation in transnational homes" (p. 9).

In an interview with Debbie Notkin, Goto straightforwardly asserts that she "actively defined [herself] as a feminist writer and a Japanese Canadian writer" ("Cross-cultural", 2002, p.17). Her vigorous interest in the female body is further eloquently articulated in her poem "The Body Politic" (1994), in which she explores "the commingled effects of racialization and sexualization - the imposition of racial and sexual identities that serve mainly to reinforce the dominant culture's belief in its own normality" (Pearson, 2007, p.75). The theme of the body can also be found in "Stinky Girl", where the body of the protagonist, namely, the stinky girl, stands at the center of the literary stage. In this essay, I would contend that in Hiromi Goto's "Stinky Girl", the stinky girl continues deepening her investigation into her racial identity even as she experiences abjection. By vividly portraying the psychological condition of the stinky girl, "Stinky Girl" exposes how racial discrimination contributes to the abjection of the body in Canada during the 1970s. Moreover, as a challenge to persisting forms of racial discrimination in the then Canada, "Stinky Girl" reveals the protagonist's coping method throughout her difficult yet successful journey from the abject to the subject, demonstrating Goto's efforts to build a richer and more inclusive Canadian literary world.

2. THE "STINKY RAT": REPRESENTATIONS OF THE STINKY GIRL'S ABJECT BODY

2.1 The Concept of Abjection and Its Embodiment in "STINKY Girl"

The notion of the abject was first introduced by Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror*. According to Kristeva (1982), the abject is not "an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire" (p. 1). Rather, it "has only one quality of the object - that of being opposed to I" (Kristeva, 1982, p.1). The abjection is caused by "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). In Hiromi Goto's "Stinky Girl", the stinky girl's abject body manifests itself in the self-evaluation of her own body, especially the body odor.

The stinky girl's perception of her body comes in an analogical way. Frustrated by such repetitive and reductive descriptions of her body as fat, big, and tall all around, she becomes obsessed with comparing herself to a rat, "an apt figure for horror and the target of so much hatred and loathing" (Burt, 2005, p.9). The supposed attention to her bodily detail is abandoned in favor of the graphic description of a well-fed rat with "a sharp-whiskered nose, beady black eyes, and an unsavoury disposition. Grubby hands with dirty fingernails, perhaps, and a waxy tail" (Goto, 2004, p.36). Her fixation on the human-animal comparison may result from her anxiety about her body odor. For one thing, the image of a rat is likely to conjure up an unmistakable stench in the reader's imagination. For another thing, there is a common tendency to associate a person's physique with their bodily scent, as observed by the stinky girl, that "people generally believe that fatties secrete all sorts of noxious substances from their bodies" (Goto, 2004, p.35). The "noxious substances from their bodies", according to the eminent British anthropologist Mary Douglas, fall into the category of dangerous marginal matter that is discharged from the body's orifices and traverses the boundary of the body (1966, p.21).

2.2 Naming, Self-Perception, and the Marginalized Identity

In the same vein, the boundaries between humans and animals are purposely blurred by the stinky girl through the use of analogical nicknames. The resultant in-between state echoes the central attribute of the abject: ambiguity. Besides, as Julia Kristeva (1982) maintains,

> the abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder. (pp. 12-13)

Fully aware of the omniscient presence of her animal-like body odor, the stinky girl has gone to great lengths to hide her smell, a signature of her abject body. Nevertheless, she realizes that she has become a disruptor of public order since people shun away from her with "a certain look people cannot control when they smell an awful stink" (Goto, 2004, p.42). Their curling lips and wrinkling noses herald the onset of the abjection, exacerbating her sense of alienation while she wanders the mall, a feeling that has already been accentuated by her self-naming.

It is interesting to note that throughout the story, the stinky girl refuses to tell the reader her real name. While plainly displaying her sibling's real name without shame, she calls herself by several different names. Diverse as they are, most of them are derogatory in nature, demonstrating that she is intensely concerned about the shape, size, and smell of her body, none of which meet her own standards of satisfaction. The first name that appears in the text is "a mall rat", and the second one is "a stinky girl". The third name, "a fat girl", is equally explicit as the first two names since the word "fat" carries a rude, harsh, and offensive tone. Names have "long been used to carry meaning, to embody thematic associations" (Fowler, 2012, p.216). Considering the indistinct line between animals and humans manifested in the first name, the belittling pseudonyms not only signal the stinky girl's low self-esteem and self-worth, but also exemplify the result of the abjection of her body.

3. THE "LAWFULLY TOLERATED": ORIGINS AND CAUSES FOR THE ABJECT

3.1 Goto's Self-Recognition of Race and her Body Writing

Acknowledging that she lives "well aware of race," Hiromi Goto (1998), in her essay "Alien Texts, Alien Seductions: The Context of Colour Full Writing," vividly writes about the notion of alienation and the situation of the racialized Other in Canada (p. 264). Her emphasis on racial identity is similarly apparent in her interview with Debbie Notkin, during which she recounts her experiences growing up as a Japanese immigrant in 1970s Canada. According to Goto, "racism is internalized", and she "didn't have the language to begin decoding racism" (1998, p.18). More importantly, Goto (1998) made a fleeting mention of her body, stating that all she "could do was feel the effects in [her] body" (p. 18). As Sandra R. G. Almeida (2009) observes, "the abject diasporic body" is "a recurrent image in Goto's work" (p. 55). This image finds expression in "Stinky Girl", in which the stinky girl is caught between the pressures of Western culture and her abject body, bearing the unhealed scars of racialization.

The cause of the abject is exposed by the dynamics between the stinky girl and food.

3.2 Racial Identity and Marginalized Experience in the Imagery of Food

In a personal letter to Lisa Harris, Goto comments that "food is dear to [her], both physically, literally and symbolically" (as cited in Harris, 2008, p.48). In "Stinky Girl", food also holds a significant, if not conspicuous, place in the stinky girl's life. Although she claims in a firm tone that she has no eating disorder, her attention is often riveted by food. In the first paragraph of the story, the stinky girl mentions the smell of yeast and liver, both of which are common components in Western and Asian food cultures. Besides, all her elder sisters, Cherry, Ginger, and Sushi, are named after words in the lexical field of food, and the name "Sushi" particularly denotes a famous Asian traditional delicacy, which may serve as a constant reminder of her racial identity because of its familial associations. Her racial awareness, as it relates to food, first emerges in the final sentence of the story's opening part. It is noteworthy that there exists a semi-parallel structure in the final three sentences of the story's opening section.

The first sentence is "perhaps I am misleading, calling myself a mall rat", which introduces "the most tender morsels of garbage flesh" used to feed the imaginary rat (Goto, 2004, p.36). With nearly the same grammatical pattern as the first, the second sentence reads, "perhaps I mislead you, calling myself a stinky girl" (Goto, 2004, p.37). What follows are several explanatory paragraphs about her opinion on obesity, a disease caused "by eating too much", and her family situation, including the food names of her siblings (Stunkard, 2002, p.183). In contrast to the first two declarative statements, the final sentence shows an overt racial awareness by posing a rhetorical question, "Did I mention I am also coloured?" (Goto, 2004, p.38).

The intersection of race and culinary imagery is further illustrated through the continuation of the rhetorical question in the next paragraph. In it, the stinky girl proclaims that "not that [she] would rather be a stinky, fat, white girl. Perhaps, mauve or plum. Plum ... now that's a colour!" (Goto, 2004, p.45). In addition to describing a color, "plum" is also the name of a fruit. The frequent juxtaposition of food and racial identities inevitably forces the reader to ponder their relationship.

In fact, food is "a locus for historically constructed identity, ethnic or nationalist" (Holtzman, 2006, p.363). Through its consumption and presentation, food "communicates class, ethnic group, lifestyle affiliation, and other social positions" (Anderson, 2005, p.124). Notably, the relationship between food and identity often intersects with ideas of race. To be more specific, "while race is often popularly understood as a function of skin color and other physical attributes ... the tendency to equate racial features with gastronomic expressions is so persistent that a person's race is commonsensically equated with what he or she ingests" (Ku, Manalansan, & Mannur, 2013, pp. 1-2). The act of eating, similar to wearing traditional dress or speaking a native language, is a continual way of asserting one's cultural identity (Kittler & Sucher, 2001, p.4). In "Stinky Girl", however, there is a lack of specific Asian food except for the name Sushi. Neither is there any description of the stinky girl's dining scene. Later in the story, the stinky girl leaves home for the mall to buy a box of cigars for her mother. Even in the large shopping area, food items bearing specific, concrete names are predominantly associated with Western cuisine. For example, offerings such as "fake and real potatos [sic] French fried into greasy sticks" and "trendy Café au lait and iced coffees" evoke recognizable culinary traditions tied to the West. In contrast, Chinese food, despite its status as an integral part of Asian culinary culture, is referred to only by the generalized term "stand-in-line", leaving its rich diversity and distinctive flavors unacknowledged in the naming (Goto, 2004, p.47).

3.3 Excluded Space and the Metaphor of HER "Abject Body"

A similar pattern can be observed in the newly established children's play areas, where typical Western food such as "Coke-flavoured pop made out of syrup" is the only type in sight (Goto, 2004, p.49). What goes along with the lack of specific Asian food in the mall is the stinky girl's alienation due to her body odor. On the surface, there appears to be no connection between these facts, and their simultaneous occurrence may initially seem coincidental. However, a closer examination reveals the opposite holds true.

As Turner believes, "we have bodies, but we are also, in a specific sense, bodies" (1996, p.41). In addition, "the entire adaptation of the human body has been molded by the need to acquire, prepare, and consume food" (Farb & Armelagos, 1980, p.15). Furthermore, "human beings mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat, or more precisely—but it amounts to the same thing—by defining the otherness, the difference of others" (Fischler, 1988, p.280). In this case, the absence of specific Asian food within an otherwise highly diversified mall may be regarded as a symbolic representation of the stinky girl's abject body caused by the lingering effects of historical racial discrimination in Canada.

Building upon Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, Judith Butler extends this theoretical framework to the dynamics between white and non-white bodies in *Bodies That Matter* and "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia". Butler argues that the abjection "designates a degraded or cast-out status within the terms of sociality" (2003, p.242). The stinky girl appears to be isolated no matter where she is.

She lacks friends and social companions, and her presence in the mall is characterized by a conspicuous separation from others because of her body odor. The avoidance has become so commonplace that the stinky girl is amazed by a receptionist in the mall who "does not curl her nose in disgust from the stench that permeates from [her] being" (Goto, 2004, p.49). "'Race' itself—is given a particular character by the process of abjection that constitutes it as a byproduct of white subjectivity, presenting it once again as a source of defilement, 'a contagion', that acts as a condition of white subjectivity by becoming the other from which it distances itself" (Ewara, 2021, p.36). The estrangement from others in a macro social context shows the abjection of the stinky girl.

In occupying the position of the so-called "stinky girl", she cultivates an acute consciousness of the ways her racial identity mediates every social encounter, particularly within the commercialized environment of the mall, a space where white subjectivity was in its full swing but actively structures the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Although the country where the stinky girl lives is never explicitly mentioned in the short story, certain details indicate that it is Canada. For instance, the mall is portrayed as "a cold country where much of the year is sub-zero in temperature", and there is "Hudson's Bay department store", which belongs to a well-known Canadian retailer, the Hudson's Bay Company (Goto, 2004, p.45). Moreover, the country is described as "a modern colonized country", which fits Canada's profile as a developed nation with a colonial past (Goto, 2004, p.45). In addition, the author, Hiromi Goto, is a Japanese-Canadian whose "literary fiction traces the lives of Japanese Canadian women—through migration, across generations" (n. d.). These clues indicate that the stinky girl is probably living in Canada.

In 1936, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in the case of "Christie v. York Corporation" that private businesses had the right to refuse service on the basis of race. This precedent remained legally valid in the 1960s and 1970s. This indicates that even if federal or provincial laws did not explicitly support racial segregation, private places such as shopping malls, restaurants, and hotels could still legally refuse service to non-white customers. In this light, the stinky girl's predicament in the mall functions as a microcosmic allusion to the incident, suggesting that Canada's much-vaunted politics of diversity and inclusion remain far from fully realized in the 1970s. In her interior monologue, she even merges her body odor and skin color, remarking with a hint of sarcasm: "most of the merchants had convened to try to put an end to my forays" into the mall and "I could have been evicted for being coloured but at this present time in history, and in this geographical location, I am lawfully tolerated" (Goto, 2004, p.47). From her account, it can be inferred that the mall used to be a place of racial segregation where the otherized bodies, like the stinky girl's, were considered a contagious threat. Therefore, the stinky girl's allusion to the Christie v. York Corporation case is further supported.

What the merchants truly sought to avoid was not so much the smell of her "colored" body, but rather her racial identity that unsettled their own sense of self. In their view, people of color are permitted only to exist in a state of abjection, rather than to flourish as autonomous subjects. "These forms of racialized subjection through abjection might limit the likelihood that abjected peoples of color might enter the spaces and places of power that are controlled by whites whose sense of self requires their distance" (Ewara, 2021, p.40). Pungently condemning the mall's prohibition against people of color, the stinky girl points out the unpalatable fact that "some are meant to be merely tolerated while others are sought out to be idolized, glorified, even to wipe their dainty asses" (Goto, 2004, p.47). The "some" here refers to those who are "neither objects nor subjects of their environment; rather, they exist as abjects, along the fluid line of demarcation, undecidedly both inside and outside, precariously inerasable yet vulnerable" (Chow, 2002, p.148). Counted as the "some" that that Canadian society now lawfully tolerates, the stinky girl struggles with her abject body both psychologically and physically.

4. ARTICULATING THE "TOUGHNESS": THE ABJECT BODY IN REVOLT

4.1 The Stinky Girl's Racial Self-Awareness

As identified by Beauregard, "negotiating cultural identities is for Goto an urgent means of resisting external definition" (1995, p.47). Under the broad term of cultural identity, racial identity is one of the identity constructs most closely associated with the inclusive concept, and it is one of the most frequently studied cultural identities (Worrell, 2019, p.1). In "Stinky Girl", the stinky girl negotiates her racial identity by reflecting on issues of race and by responding to her body's abjection, undergoing a spiritual transformation centered on her experience of body odor.

In her self-reflective narration, the stinky girl asserts her strength of character with striking candor and declares that she is "not one who gives in easily to the woes of this world. Sighing is an expression of defeat, or at least weakness, which reveals a lack of worldly toughness or a certain get-up-and-go attitude" (Goto, 2004, p.44). Her perseverance is reinforced by a sharp intellect, especially in relation to her understanding of racial identity. She draws attention to how essential cleverness is for a "fat coloured rat girl" and admits that she is "blessed

with a certain higher intelligence, a certain sensitivity which enables [her] to more than endure the trials of this existence" (Goto, 2004, p.45). Taking into account the inextricable link between race and body in this context, the phrase "the woes of this world" may indicate the consequences of color discrimination, while "the trials of this existence" may refer to the challenges associated with her abject body.

4.2 Rejecting Abjection: Historical Context and Bodily Reflection

Beyond the sober understanding of the racial problem, she is firmly resolved to heed the lessons embedded in the previous generation's experiences by vowing that she "mustn't fall into the pit of baseness" (Goto, 2004, p.47). In this context, "the pit of baseness" denotes the accepted and even internalized inferiority and self-deprecation that is caused by historical racial discrimination, which underlies the presence of abject bodies. In the 20th century, Canada enforced racialized immigration policies for many years. For example, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 almost completely banned Chinese immigrants until it was repealed in 1947. Additionally, the government imposed restrictive measures targeting immigrants from South Asia, Japan, and other non-European countries. It was not until the introduction of the points-based immigration system in 1967 that these policies were completely abolished, eliminating the obvious racial and ethnic barriers. Prior to this reform, it was widely believed that "any considerable Oriental immigration would ... be certain to give rise to social and economic problems ..." (House of Commons, May 1, 1947, as cited in Kelley & Trebilcock, 1998, p.312). Against this historical backdrop, the stinky girl's determination to confront the remnants of racial discrimination takes on greater significance.

Her critical reflection on racial oppression lays the foundation for the ensuing rebellion of her abject body. Witnessing how people of color often respond with meekness and passivity to racial discrimination, the stinky girl voices her discontent and acts out her rebellion through her abject body. In the new children's play area, she inspects the playing children and silently classifies them into three types: "fat children, skinny children, coloured children", revealing her association of body and race once again (Goto, 2004, p.50). The fact that the children are portrayed as "gulping from tubs of simulated Coke while waiting for their microwave-heated pizzas" highlights the lack of Asian food and points to the erasure of Asian culture (Goto, 2004, p.51).

Unwilling to accept the widespread silence in the face of blatant injustice against non-whites, the stinky girl employs her abject body as a weapon and interprets her body odor from a thought-provoking angle. Defying her physical and symbolic marginalization, she chooses to step into the "epicentre of humanity" by venturing into the playground's labyrinth of tubes alongside the children (Goto, 2004, p.51). Her abject body becomes the center of the hollow tubes, and it is inside the tubes that she smells herself for the first time, leading to a sudden epiphany.

4.3 The Awakening of Bodily Agency

As she realizes that her odor is less a smell than a sound emanating from her skin, she raises a powerful critique of racial prejudice: those who discriminate are "unable to bear hearing such unearthly sounds", and thus "they transmute it into stench" (Goto, 2004, p.53). The spiritual transformation demonstrates that she has progressed from her abject body with body odor to her subject body with the body's sound. The stinky girl's body, which once represented abjectness, has now become the source of connection, salvation, and joy, as she plays and laughs with the children behind her. This transformation showcases a redefinition and empowerment of both the body and identity, as well as the marginalized position of culture. No longer merely enduring passively, she now uses her own voice to influence and lead others. Just as Huber proposes, "Goto provides a model for the openness that comes with definition by the corporeal, an acknowledging of what is happening corporeally, bodily, on a daily basis as opposed to self definition by vague and abstract concepts like nation and sexuality" (2011, p.137). The lasting inner struggles that she had carried for so long over her body odor have finally come to an end. Her incredible joy marks the success of her rebellion, that is, finding pride in her authenticity and a sense of belonging in her own skin. During the stinky girl's coming-of-age, waves of activism advocating for people of color surged across Canada. She transforms the scent of her body into its own voice, turning her abject body into a subject body. In doing so, she joins these movements, reclaiming agency and integrating herself into the broader struggle for recognition and justice.

5. CONCLUSION

In Hiromi Goto's "Stinky Girl", the stinky girl's journey of exploring her racial identity unfolds through the experience of her abject body, which embodies the social stigma she faces. The ambiguous boundary between humans and animals, illustrated both in her meticulous depiction of an imaginary rat and in her act of self-naming, stands as a metaphor for her abject body. At the root of this abjection lies the legacy of racial discrimination in Canada during the 1970s and its enduring impact on people of color. As an everyday sign entwined with the human body and racial identity, food grabs the attention of the stinky girl. The profound lack of specific Asian food and the great abundance of typical Western food indicate her sense of alienation and, on a broader scale, reflect the marginalization of people of color. Besides, the repelling smell of her body is living

proof of the abjection in a racialized context, where people of color are merely lawfully tolerated rather than enthusiastically embraced. The lasting inner struggles over her body, or rather, her racial identity, stop when she launches a rebellion through her critical thinking on the racial issues and her active centralization of the body at the playground. The stinky girl's odyssey from the abject to the subject not only summarizes the detrimental influence of racial discrimination on the cognition of the human body, but also reveals Goto's grave concern about the continuing problem of racial discrimination in Canada that prides itself on diversity.

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