

Risk and Traumatic Community in Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*

Keywords: risk, trauma, scientific knowledge and ordinary life

This paper examines how a traumatic community is constructed in Madeleine Thien's *Certainty* not only among families and friends, but also transnationally through its immigrant characters' lines of flight and (re)collections of memories. The "most important puzzle" (Troeng) in *Certainty* should be the sudden death by illness of the second-generation protagonist Gail, leaving the novel on two generations' traumas and reconstructions without a post-generation center or author. For Y-Dang Troeng, Gail's death is "a physiological manifestation of the affects that have been transmitted to her from her father--affects that not only influence and shape the direction of Gail's life, but that actually physiologically 'imprint' themselves on Gail in a manner that has fatal consequences." Tania Aguilay-Way, on the other hand, finds in Gail "an explicitly diasporic register" in "the search for a secure science" and regards the novel as "a crucial site for enacting the collaborative modes of knowledge-making that are necessary for grappling with contemporary experiences of globality." For me, Gail's death, much like the death by cancer of her father's childhood friend, Ani, is a common risk element in ordinary life. In the novel risk elements in ordinary life intersect with historical traumas not so much to confirm knowledge-making, as to form an affective network of empathy that helps put risk and trauma in perspective of each other. Marking Gail's death in the year 2000, the novel, I argue, **both** traces World War II's post-colonial consequences through the first-generation characters' codes of silences and lines of flight (to Melbourne, Hong Kong, Vancouver, Jakarta and the village of Ysbrechtum in Netherlands) **and** its global ramifications in the professional and emotional life of the second-generation Gail. Just as the first-generation characters find comfort in their circles of friends and connect different cities through their migration, Gail expands the network by going abroad for both professional and emotional reasons.

Trauma, risk factors and ordinary life, in this context, function to make empathy possible in the novel's transnational affective network, when Gail helps to decode a WW II POW William Sullivan's diary, when she goes to meet Sipke, widower of her father's first lover, and when she makes oral documentaries on both historical traumas (war memorials) and daily occurrences (Tuberculosis, accidents, rescuing beluga whale, a marathon game). With its fluid images of a running child, pieces of maps, flight, thread and swimming city as well as Gail as its empty center, the novel keeps this affective network dynamic and open, finding meanings in fluidity and

confirming “certainty” in the characters’ “letting go.”

Works Cited

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