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诺纳德·苏克尼克小说中  
身份的后现代叙事

Postmodernist Narratives of Identity  
in Ronald Sukenick's Fiction

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**PhD Dissertation**

**Postmodernist Narratives of Identity  
in Ronald Sukenick's Fiction**

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## Abstract in English

Ronald Sukenick's first novel, *Up*, appeared in 1968. Since then, Sukenick has dedicated his remaining forty years of life to literature. And his efforts extend to almost every aspect of literature. He is a novelist, critic, theoretician, editor and educator.

First of all, as a novelist, Sukenick has published nine novels, three collections of short stories and more than seventy short stories, which have brought him such awards as the American Book Award in 1988 and 1999 and the Morton Zabel Award in 2003. Sukenick is also among the most articulate theoreticians in the 1960s and 1970s. His exploration into the innovations of fiction is collected in three books: *Narralogues: Truth in Fiction*, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* and *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure*. He has also contributed more than seventy critical articles to different literary journals.

Sukenick's "antenna" also extends to fiction publishing. In 1974, he set up a small publishing house—the Fiction Collective from which many innovative writers have benefited. In 1977, with the help of the University of Colorado, Sukenick founded the *American Book Review*, a literary journal dedicated to reviewing innovative writers whose books were ignored by such established journals as *New York Review of Books*. In 1989, Sukenick became the editor of *Black Ice* magazine and has helped to launch *Black Ice* Books—series of innovative novels.

Sukenick believes that he writes in a particular period of history, in which he is faced with dual crises: identity crisis and the crisis of fiction. The dual crises are expressed clearly in three questions asked at the very beginning of his novel *Mosaic Man*: "Where's the story? What's the word? Are you a Jew?" First, Sukenick believes that Jewish people are faced with identity crisis, especially when the Holocaust and Cold War have smashed the base on which they construct their identities. However, Sukenick also understands that identity crisis is not the problem faced only by Jewish people, it troubles all human beings. Thus, all through his writing career, Sukenick

has been working hard to seek the answers to the following questions: “How could one assume the arrogance of individual identity after all those identities exxed off the surface of the planet since the year of my birth, 1932, the year Hitler assumed power? How could one even presume to be a person after all that, or even a human?” In other words, with what tenable attitude may one confront the difficult circumstances of contemporary American life and avail oneself of the good possible in it? So in most of his novels, Sukenick explores the themes of identity crisis and identity pursuit both as a Jew and as a man.

Second, Sukenick is keenly aware of the crisis of fiction. The genre of fiction was well-defined in the 19th century. In the 20th century, however, many writers begin to rebel against the traditional structures imposed by this form. John Barth, in 1967, made the statement of “the literature of exhaustion”, which indicates the crisis of fiction in the 1950s and 1960s. Sukenick is among the strongest voices in declaring the death of the novel. In his viewpoint, fiction constitutes a way of looking at the world. With the changes of the world, the old paradigms of traditional novels are called into question and the new circumstances demand new paradigms. Faced with the crisis of fiction, Sukenick has been making arduous efforts in opening up a new space by experimenting on narratives.

Taking the dual crises and Sukenick’s efforts to deal with these crises into consideration, this dissertation—**POSTMODERNIST NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY IN RONALD SUKENICK’S FICTION** for the first time in China makes a rather systematic study of the novels of Ronald Sukenick. The dissertation explores Sukenick’s novels from the following two aspects: the themes of identity crisis and identity construction, and the crisis of fiction and Sukenick’s innovations in narratives. It focuses on three laws Sukenick employs to deal with the dual crises: the Surviving Law, the Entropy Law and the Mosaic Law.

The dissertation falls into six chapters.

The **Introduction** gives an overall picture of Ronald Sukenick’s literary career. Just as the title of one of his novels suggests, Sukenick himself is a “mosaic man” of literature: he is a novelist, theoretician, critic, editor, publisher and educator. His

efforts extend to almost every aspect of literature.

However, it is unfortunate that Sukenick has never drawn broad attention in the United States and in China. Then, the dissertation explores the factors that lead to the marginalization of Sukenick by reviewing the status quo of Sukenick research abroad and in China. The rather limited amount of research, the narrow research perspectives and the lack of holistic research all indicate that the research into Ronald Sukenick is far from being matchable to his achievements in literature. So this dissertation endeavors to make a comprehensive study of Ronald Sukenick from a perspective seldom touched upon—postmodernist narratives of identity in Ronald Sukenick's fiction.

I begin with one “exploratory” chapter that constitutes Chapter One of this book, which establishes a theoretical context for this dissertation. **Chapter One**, entitled “Identity and Identity Study in the Postmodernist Contexts,” focuses on the definition of identity, the related theories of identity, and identity in postmodernist narratives. Identity, as one of the most fundamental concepts of human experience, refuses a simple definition. Moreover, the definition is perplexed since identity has been the subject of such different disciplines as philosophy, psychology, and sociology, which offer definitions from different angles. By briefly tracing the historical development of identity theories, the dissertation puts forward a tentative definition which emphasizes three characteristics of identity: identity is not being but becoming; all identities are social constructions; identity is only conceivable in and through differences.

Although identity is a term with a long history, it may have become a problem only in modern times with the emergence of large-scale society and the decline of traditional group life. The developments of individualism, capitalism, and urbanization brought about by modernization greatly change the society and in turn fundamentally transform the formation of identity. Three changes are noteworthy: the rise of the self-conscious identity, the other-directed orientation of identity, and the divided identity. These changes show that the problem of identity in modernist

contexts is how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable. However, the problem of identity in postmodernist contexts is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep options open. The economic, technological and cultural changes in the postmodern era result in a condition of identity destabilization, fragmentation and pluralisation.

The second section of this chapter under the title of “Identity in Postmodernist Narratives” connects identity with narratives. In fact, narrative practice lies at the heart of identity construction. The process of identity construction is closely connected with the way we tell our life-story. There is a parallel between the narrative composition of identity and the narrative composition of fiction. Moreover, self-definition and identity construction in cultural, theological, and political contexts have been common themes in literature. A brief review of identity narratives in American literature is then made, with emphasis on postmodernist narratives of identity, to highlight the necessity of research into Sukenick’s postmodernist narratives of identity.

Postmodern and Jewish, Sukenick is keenly aware of identity crisis and the crisis of postmodernist narratives. Faced with the dual crises, Ronald Sukenick has made unremitting endeavors to seek a way out. After a careful study of his writing, I summarize three laws he employs in dealing with the dual crises: namely, the Surviving Law, the Entropy Law and the Mosaic Law. The next three chapters are individual studies of identity themes in Sukenick’s novels and his postmodernist way of narrating identity.

**Chapter Two** “The Surviving Law: Assimilation or Dissimilation” is divided into two aspects: Surviving Law of identity and the Surviving Law of postmodernist narratives. The first section is devoted to the Surviving Law of Identity in the novels of *Up* and *Down and In: Life in the Underground*. The post-World War II era, especially the 1960s in the United States has witnessed a series of political, economic, social, and cultural changes, which leave America in unrest and turmoil. Bereft of traditional sources of meaning, people have difficulties in redefining themselves in the changes, thus a state or condition of disorientation and role confusion occurs. This is

especially the case for American minorities. People are pushed into identity crisis. How to survive the changed society and gain a sense of security is a question before individuals. The Surviving Law of Identity refers to the strategies and ways of identity formation and construction, which are critical to their survival. In the crisis of identity, the individual characters develop idiosyncratic approaches to the question of self-definition. Basically, they can choose to assimilate or dissimilate into the mainstream American society.

Assimilation refers to the ability to identify with and feel at home in the American mainstream society. Assimilation is a process through which individuals are gradually steered into the mainstream way of life. Assimilation is also a process through which individuals discard various traditions and values which are not the mainstream, and adopt those of the mainstream. To achieve this purpose, one can “invent” or “sell out” one’s identity. By inventing one’s identity, especially according to the popular media images, one can identify with the majority and get assimilated into the mainstream. “Selling out” identity, another way of assimilation, refers to the compromising of one's integrity, morality, or principles in exchange for money, success or other personal gains so as to be accepted by the mainstream society.

However, in order to keep one’s uniqueness, and to fight against conformism, one can also choose to dissimilate into the mainstream society and stay in a marginalized position. Sukenick mentions three ways of refusing to get assimilated into the mainstream society: retreating into the ivory tower, staying in dreams and hallucination, and writing experimental novels. Assimilation and dissimilation are hard choices to make as assimilation means sacrificing one’s uniqueness, while dissimilation means the marginal position. Usually individuals have to struggle between assimilation and dissimilation. The struggle is best expressed by the subterranean artists in the Greenwich Village in America. And the struggle is recorded by Ronald Sukenick in his American-Book-Award novel *Down and In: Life in the Underground*.

In the 20th century, people are faced with identity crisis, the fiction has to fight



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