

“One Small Way”: Racism, Redress, and Reconciliation in Canadian Women's Fiction,  
1980-2000

by

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY  
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“When we look at the uncaring in our planet, here is evidence that relationships can be rehabilitated, the formerly despised can be embraced.

The dream that writers who are presently among the despised of the world, can come and write their stories here, fills me with even more hope.

Racism is a present tragedy in the world, as it has been in the past. Here is one small way that we can say in Canada, that racism can be overcome.” (Joy Kogawa, [www.kogawahouse.com](http://www.kogawahouse.com))

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## Abstract

Canada's Multiculturalism Act insists that Canada embraces its ethnic and racial diversity. At the same time, the broader discourse of multiculturalism tends to figure Canada as a tolerant but essentially white nation that accommodates minority cultures. In an attempt to expand established arguments about the ways in which the ideology and practice of official multiculturalism elides our history of racism and violence and perpetuates racist myths and stereotypes, this dissertation examines the depiction of a civil, multicultural nation in women's fiction produced during Canada's multicultural period of the 1980s and 1990s. With an eye to understanding the particular challenges that women who have been subject to racially-motivated violence and discrimination face in relating their experience, it considers the innovative ways in which fiction by Joy Kogawa, Anne Michaels, Eden Robinson, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Rau Badami, and Catherine Bush grapples with the effects of systemic racism. While these writers explore the gendered trauma of women who have been subjected to racism, they do not depict their protagonists primarily as victims. Instead, they show these women forging innovative strategies to overcome trauma and victimization, and their silencing and debilitating effects.

In exploring the merits of those strategies to understand how they might help us to grapple with the legacy of systemic racism and of the multicultural discourse that has sometimes masked racism in this country, I argue that literature can foster empathy in its readers, while demanding that we acknowledge our complicity with a social and political system that has frequently been racist, exclusionary, and even violent. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the strategies for overcoming the traumatic effects of racism employed by these authors not only challenge conceptions of Canada as a civil, nonracist society, but also offer ways of extending our understanding of Canadian civility and diversity. In doing so, I suggest that Canadian literature can offer its readers the opportunity to accept responsibility for the abuses of our collective past and conceive of a more accepting, equal society.

## **List of Abbreviations Used**

A.I.M.	American Indian Movement
GSA	Graduate Students' Association
IRS	Indian Residential Schools
LGBT	Lesbian / Gay / Bisexual / Transgendered
MS	Motor Ship
MV	Motor Vessel
NJCC	National Japanese Canadian League
TRC	Truth & Reconciliation Commission



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## **Chapter 1:**

### **Introduction**

Violence and trauma are pervasive and persistent. Their effects tend to be chronic and debilitating. The traumas that are the result of systemic racism can be particularly devastating, not only for the individual subject, but for entire ethnic communities and, indeed, for the nation of which they are a part. In Canada the discourses of civility, benevolence, and tolerance that are central to both the ideology and the practice of official multiculturalism have meant that the history of systemic racism in this country was not widely or officially recognized until very recently. As such, and because multiculturalism has come to represent Canadian progressiveness for many Canadians, it has sometimes engendered complacency and has stood in the way of anti-racist activity in this country (Coleman 8). Needless to say, then, that the traumas wrought by systemic racism are very much alive in Canada today. As the authors of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission website suggest, “The cumulative impact of residential schools is a legacy of unresolved trauma passed from generation to generation and has had a profound effect on the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians” ([www.trc.ca](http://www.trc.ca)). In attempting to understand how we might usefully grapple with the “legacy of unresolved trauma” caused or abetted by Canadian governmental policies and practices, this dissertation looks to literature published during what is sometimes called the “multicultural stage” of Canadian writing, the 1980s and 1990s (Kamboureli, *Making a Difference* xxvii). Though literature cannot end the suffering of Japanese-Canadian interned during World War II, for example, it can foster

a critical discourse that challenges the “injunction to forget the brutal elements of our racial history” (Coleman 8), it offers a positive and inventive response to the realities of racism. With these things in mind, this dissertation considers how fiction by Joy Kogawa, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Rau Badami, Eden Robinson, Anne Michaels, and Catherine Bush develops innovative and empowering responses to the traumas of racism.

## 1. Trauma, Literature and Popular Culture

Trauma has been exhaustively explored in popular media, and especially in film; more often than not, a character is either motivated or debilitated by earlier events from which s/he has not yet fully recovered. Although this thesis is not an examination of trauma in film, the ubiquitousness of the trope and the popularity of the genre make film a useful place to begin.

Atom Egoyan’s 1997 film *The Sweet Hereafter*<sup>1</sup> tells of a community in mourning after a bus accident kills fourteen children. At the end of the film, Nicole, a teenager who becomes a paraplegic as a result of the accident, tells a fatal lie in court, preventing the parents of the children killed or injured in the crash from receiving compensation in a lawsuit. In his 2006 essay on the film, Slavoj Žižek describes Nicole’s lie as an act of defiance and self-assertion. Before the accident, Nicole was trapped in an incestuous sexual relationship with her father. Žižek argues that Nicole’s lie allows her to speak out against both her father and the community that fostered an environment in which the incest was possible. He remarks that the unspoken rules of a community often necessitate the transgression of the very rules society sets out. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, this transgression, or, as Žižek puts it, this “self-distance of the dominant culture, the unwritten rules that tell us how and when to violate the explicit rules of this culture”

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<sup>1</sup> Although *The Sweet Hereafter* was produced by the American company Fine Line Features, it was written and directed by Canadian Atom Egoyan. It is set in British Columbia and features a primarily Canadian cast.

(178), is enacted in the incestuous relationship between Nicole and her father. A society that places a taboo on incest also, implicitly, fosters the possibility for the transgression of that same taboo. Žižek asks, “Is Nicole’s act not the gesture of asserting her distance from both poles, the larger society as well as the ‘sweet hereafter’ of the traumatized community and its secret rules?” (178). In other words, Nicole’s lie distances her at once from her father, from the community that allowed their incestuous relationship to take place, and implicitly, from the society that formulates the prohibition on father-daughter incest while simultaneously allowing it to happen. The traumatic event of the bus accident, then, is potentially enabling in creating the circumstances in which Nicole can articulate this “NO! to her father” and “NO! to the community” (177). Žižek’s analysis of the film suggests that it is possible to formulate a liberating response to trauma, and it is equally possible that trauma—despite its origins in profound pain—can be a catalyst to a liberating event.

When we consider responses to the traumas of racism, it is useful to begin by examining responses to loss and trauma more generally. In Sigmund Freud’s study “Mourning and Melancholia,” he points out that melancholia “is, on the one hand, like mourning, a reaction to the real loss of a loved object; but over and above this, it is marked by a determinant which is absent in normal mourning, or which, if it is present, transforms the latter into pathological mourning” (587). Melancholy “expresses itself in the form of self reproaches” (587) that are, in fact, “reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego” (586). The self-destructive nature of a melancholic reaction to loss is anger turned inward: reproaches against a loved one that turn into abjection and self-reproach. This distinction between melancholia and mourning is particularly useful to my study of Canadian fiction, because the fictional subjects of my study are mourners, and not melancholics.

Sam Durrant draws on Freud's notion of the "work of mourning" in his examination of postcolonial narratives. Durrant argues that Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia is untenable in this field, because postcolonial narrative is necessarily a work of inconsolable mourning—mourning without closure. Durrant depicts Europe's history of racism as one that forecloses upon the humanity of non-white subjects, arguing that "their existence has to be denied in order for the European to retain a sense of his own subjectivity," and that "this denial is not a simple forgetting that occurred at a particular point in history ... but a *foreclosure* of the very possibility of the other's humanity" (5, emphasis in original).

In a Canadian context, the attempt to foreclose upon the humanity of others, and literature's potential to enable forgiveness, are chronicled in fiction. And while fiction about the real circumstances in which this denial of humanity has occurred are not erasures, setting-to-rights, or disavowals, its insistence on the conditions in which subjectivity has been denied to certain ethnic, racial, and religious groups serves two functions: first, it is a chronicle of a history that, itself, resists historiography, for how can one write the history of people whose humanity has been foreclosed upon? As Gayatri Spivak puts it, "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (28); as long as the subaltern remains subaltern, she does not possess the conditions necessary to speak for herself. Similarly, a people that has been constituted as subaltern cannot produce an account of its own history; that history itself continues to be disavowed as a condition of the foreclosure. To write about the events that constitute this foreclosure, then, is to write against the foreclosure itself. Second, fiction about real conditions of racism is an assertion that, despite being subjected to the traumas of racism, the writer and her characters do not constitute themselves as only, or even primarily, as victims. It is for this reason that I insist that the subjects of these fictions are mourners, rather than melancholics, but Durrant's insistence on the

interminable nature of mourning in postcolonial fiction is useful, for even while Kogawa, Michaels, Mukherjee, Badami, Bush, and Robinson refuse to depict the victims of racism as irreparably victimized, they remind us that the conditions under which racism has been allowed to flourish must not be forgotten.

Of course, here in Canada, the relationship between trauma and literature did not begin with official multiculturalism. The examination of trauma and victimhood has a long-standing tradition in studies of Canadian literature. In her foundational 1972 critical text, *Survival*, Margaret Atwood posits the Canadian identity as one defined by victimhood. “Let us suppose,” she writes, “for the sake of argument, that Canada as a whole is a victim, or an ‘oppressed minority,’ or ‘exploited’” (35). Atwood then identifies four “Victim Positions;” the final, and putatively most desirable position being “To be a creative non-victim” (38). Admittedly, there are problems with Atwood’s supposition. More than a decade ago, Roy Miki identified Atwood’s thesis as “a methodological tool for constructing an anglocentric history with Canada as victim of American imperialism” (*Broken Entries* 101). Miki goes on to problematize Atwood’s “privileging of the author’s own subject position as ‘English Canadian’ reader, [banishing] ‘racialized’ Canadians from the public space, [denying] them ‘identity’ in her text of nationhood” (101). Furthermore, the notion that we are all an “oppressed minority” elides the real suffering that members of groups who have experienced the traumas of violence and racism experience. However, while we must be aware of the dangers of Atwood’s approach, her notion of the “creative non-victim” is a fertile point of entry into the works of Canadian writers who, although they write of traumatic and painful histories, craft dextrously resilient characters who refuse to remain victimized by racism and violence. Although, as Durrant insists, the work of

mourning is not complete, the subjects of the fictions that I study actively seek restitution, reconciliation, and recovery.

## **2. Racism and Redress in Canada and Beyond**

In 2009, Julie McGonegal pointed out that:

although the first redress settlement was achieved in Canada over two decades ago, in the form of an apology and compensation for the internment of Japanese Canadians, it is really only now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that the politics of redress and reconciliation has become a persistent and distinguishing feature of national discourse in Canada and elsewhere around the world. (*Imagining Justice* x)

And 2008, in particular, was a watershed year for racial redress in Canada. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's June 2008 apology to Canada's aboriginal victims of the Residential School system led to the establishment of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), whose mandate is "to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools (IRS)" and to "document the truth of survivors, their families, communities and anyone personally affected by the IRS experience" (TRC Website). The Canadian TRC is one of many such global commissions, and it highlights the function of narrative in the resolution of trauma. In its focus on documentation and dissemination of information, the TRC posits narrative and storytelling as a potentially revolutionary course in dealing with the traumas inflicted by the Residential School system. Currently, Residential School survivors can record their memories using the TRC's Memory Book. The TRC hopes to use these documents as a record of official history, as a method of transmitting personal narratives within aboriginal communities, and as a healing tool for the survivors:

By gathering together all of these stories, the TRC hopes to create a full and accurate public historical record regarding the operation of the schools, the experiences of the children who attended them, and the impact they had on future generations ... People have been telling stories in various ways for thousands of years. Some people tell a story to teach and inform the younger generation; others will share a story to help heal the wounds of the past and move forward. (www.trc.ca)

However, in 2008, Prime Minister Harper also addressed the 1914 Komagata Maru incident, in which as many as 376 Indian passengers<sup>2</sup> aboard the Komagata Maru were bound for Canada, but were not allowed to disembark in Vancouver, and were eventually turned away from Canadian shores. Here, Prime Minister Harper fell short of an apology, merely expressing his regret. In 2009, an Indo-Canadian group rejected a \$2.5-million government grant to commemorate the event, demanding instead a formal apology. Sahib Thind, President of the Professor Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation, called for an apology in the House of Commons as “the final solution” (qtd. in Bhamra) to the Komatagata Maru incident. The government’s offer of a grant for “the creation of monuments and commemorative plaques” (Bhamra) denotes an official and formal acknowledgement of the event; why, then, is a formal apology necessary? What work is done by an apology that is not effected by the creation of monuments and memorials?<sup>3</sup> And why is the substitution of expressions of regret insufficient?

For Charles Taylor, recognition is essential to overcoming oppression. “The struggle for recognition,” he writes, “can find only one satisfactory solution, and that is a regime of reciprocal recognition among equals” (112). Apology can serve to recognize the injury, and

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<sup>2</sup> The exact number of passengers aboard the Komagata Maru remains a subject of debate.

<sup>3</sup> McGonegal argues convincingly that the Canadian Liberal Party’s “[systematic refusal] to apologize ... was clearly an attempt to avoid litigation” (xii) while they were in power. It is likely that the Conservatives have been similarly motivated in their cautious approach to apology and expression of regret.



therefore enable the recognition of equality advocated by Taylor as essential.<sup>4</sup> And for Sara Ahmed, apology is necessary because, unlike regret, it names the subject that has committed the injury. According to Ahmed:

The substitution of an apology with regret works powerfully; this is a doing that does what it does by negation. Regret becomes an alternative for responsibility and for reparation; it functions as a sign of an injury, without naming a subject that can be called upon to bear witness, to pay back an unpayable debt, or to compensate for what cannot be compensated. (119)

In other words, an apology assumes responsibility, and implicitly functions in the place of payment for “an unpayable debt.” It is a political action, strategically calculated to function as payment, even when, as in the case of the victims of Residential Schools, monetary settlements are also offered. Where monetary settlements cannot sufficiently compensate victims for the depth of their injury, apology is calculated to stand in place of repayment for an unpayable debt and to perpetually acknowledge the depth of the injury, whereas regret simply denotes the injury or the debt itself, without compensation, responsibility, or the potential for resolution. And, by perpetually acknowledging the depth of the injury, apology can function to memorialize the suffering of the injured party. This memorialization, as we shall see in Joy Kogawa’s novels and in my discussion of public memorials in my Conclusion, is important to those who are attempting to overcome the debilitating effects of the injury. Conversely, regret, in failing to acknowledge the injury, and failing, therefore, to memorialize the incident, can contribute to its erasure from public memory. Even when regret is accompanied by a financial gesture, as in the

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<sup>4</sup> However, Kelly Oliver takes issue with Taylor’s insistence on the importance of recognition, suggesting that this reciprocal recognition is not possible in the context of racial hegemony, because the dominant group does not accept other groups as its equal. She argues that recognition that is “conferred on others by the dominant group ... merely repeats the dynamic of hierarchies, privilege and domination” (9). Oliver’s understanding of recognition as complicit in the politics of “hierarchies, privilege and domination” opposes Charles Taylor’s understanding of recognition as a “vital human need” (99).

case of the Komagata Maru incident, the act may yet be regarded as insufficient. Most significantly, regret that lacks an expression of shame, also, by implication, lacks a witness, for “shame requires an identification with the other who, as witness, returns to the subject itself” (Ahmed 106). Or, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, shame “becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject” (106). According to Agamben, shame is comprised of “a double movement, which is both subjectification, and desubjectification” (106). Regret that lacks an expression of shame, therefore, not only deprives the injured party of a witness, it also fails to acknowledge the disordered, desubjectified state of the individual who has committed the offence.

In *Testimony*, Dori Laub emphasizes the importance of witnessing as necessary to the traumatized subject’s recovery:

Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (58)

In order to move past the traumatic event, the survivor must relate his/her story to a witness. This relationship between the survivor and the witness is essential, for testimonies require “an empathetic listener, or ... an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (68, emphasis in original). The therapeutic process of testifying is “a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history, and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event*” (69, emphasis in original) in order to overcome it, and it is through this act of testimony that “the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness” (85). The act of testifying to one’s trauma requires a listener to bear

witness to it, for without this testimony, without a listener to hear it, the story itself becomes distorted in the mind of the survivor, “so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events” (79). To tell the story, to formulate a narrative, is necessary for the survivor to recover. Furthermore, the act of narrativizing is closely related to fictionalization: the organization of memories into a narrative structure. Kelly Oliver articulates the ethical responsibility at the heart of witnessing in her term “response-ability.” She defines witnessing as the “ability to respond to, and address, others” and that response-ability, or “the ability to respond [...] is its founding possibility” (15). Often, furthermore, testimony and recovery can only take place if the story, once told, is met by an apology that adequately expresses the shame that, itself, “requires a witness: even if a subject feels shame when it is alone, it is the imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to itself” (Ahmed 105).<sup>5</sup>

These acts of documenting and recording, apologizing and testifying, and expressing regret all represent varyingly successful attempts to recover from trauma. Not surprisingly, tropes of speech and silence have been important in contemporary efforts to understand trauma, suffering and healing. Elaine Scarry, for instance, writes that “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it” (4). In Canada, too, literary studies on trauma—and particularly on Joy Kogawa’s 1981 novel *Obasan*—have tended to depict silence as debilitating, and speech as empowering (Davidson, Fujita, Howells). However, the tropes of silence and speech are not the sole way of approaching issues of trauma and resolution. As Žižek’s comments on Egoyan’s film indicate, some responses to trauma can be surprising and

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<sup>5</sup> Outside of Canada, issues of racism, redress, apology and forgiveness have also been much discussed. For instance, in post-Apartheid South Africa, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela considers the complex nature of forgiveness. She writes:

Although forgiveness is often regarded as an expression of weakness, the decision to forgive can paradoxically elevate a victim to the position of strength as the one who holds the key to the perpetrator’s wish. ... And the victim retains that privileged status as long as he or she stays the moral course, refusing to sink to the level of evil that was done to her or him ... Forgiving may appear to condone the offense, thus further disempowering the victim. But forgiveness does not overlook the deed: it rises above it. (117)

subversive. For example, in his study of humour and race in Britain, Michael Ross examines the relationship of power structures to humour; Ross observes that “humour at times tends to reinforce social hegemony and at other times to subvert it” (22), suggesting that humour can be both an agent of the structures of racism, and a response to racism that can potentially rob it of its power to harm. In other words, humour can at once forward a racist agenda by ridiculing its objects, or, conversely, disempower the structures of racism through derision and disavowal.

Just as humour can potentially be both resistant to and complicit with racist agendas, other responses can also perform a deeply ambivalent function. For instance, witnessing, the articulation of one’s perception of oneself as victimized, can also prove limiting or even debilitating. Wendy Brown warns that:

Politicized identity, premised on exclusion and fuelled by the humiliation and suffering imposed by its historically structured impotence in the context of a discourse of sovereign individuals, is as likely to seek generalized political paralysis, to feast on generalized political impotence, as it is to seek its own or collective liberation. (404)

That is to say, while the politicized identity insists on the recognition of both difference and the exclusion, abuses and violence that are often the response to difference, an identity formation that insists on the importance of these injuries or “wounded attachments” (391), as Brown terms them, can be paralysing rather than empowering. Similarly, Madelaine Hron borrows the term “zeroism” from Ross Chambers’ studies on AIDS pathographies in her examination of immigrant literature “wherein the only marker of [the protagonists’] agency and identity is the suffering somatically represented by bodily pain. Problematically, their heroism is not determined by the actions they perform, but rather the suffering that they endure” (116-17). The

desire to represent suffering as heroic valorizes victimization, potentially robbing the victimized of subjecthood and agency.

The potential responses to racism are countless; as Ross, Brown, Hron and others have shown, some are enabling, while others tend instead to reinscribe the hegemonic structures that produced the racist conditions. Where, then, do we position literary fiction on the subject of real, lived traumas in this spectrum of responses to the traumatic racist and often-violent events these fictions describe? Does literature itself possess the potential for healing and reconciliation?

The Multiculturalism Act includes, in its preamble, the provision that “the Constitution of Canada recognizes the importance of preserving and enhancing the multicultural heritage of Canadians” (Multiculturalism Act). From the mid-1980s until the terrorist attacks of September 2001, literature that explored and queried what it means to “[preserve] and [enhance] the multicultural heritage of Canadians” flourished. Necessarily, many of these works also sought to examine the history of racism, thereby querying the Act’s assumptions that Canada was already, prior to the drafting of the legislation, multicultural, and, by implication, anti-racist. Often, these texts drew on popular criticisms of the Act and the assumptions about multiculturalism and alterity that are its heart. As Kit Dobson points out:

The Multiculturalism Act has been critiqued in numerous ways, for instance for defining Canada as a pluralistic society, all the while actively subordinating ‘other’ cultures to the twin linguistic—and by extension cultural—hegemonies of English and French (as defined by the Official Languages Act), and for essentializing people’s cultures of origins as coming from ‘outside’ Canada. (*Transnational* 73)

Like Dobson, Kamboureli argues that, during this period, multiculturalism was already “more often than not out of joint with daily reality, if not with itself, while institutional attempts to implement change consistent with racial and ethnic equality often became synonymous with tokenism” (xii). Thus, while the literary period in Canada ranging from the early 1980s to the first years of the twenty-first century is characterised by an interest in multiculturalism, it is also marked by a suspicion of and resistance to legislating official multiculturalism, as the Multiculturalism Act and its precursory legislation are often seen as attempts to enshrine racism and an insistence on difference and otherness.

My arguments relating to official multiculturalism in this dissertation relate to the *ideology* and *practice* of multiculturalism, and not the *policy* or *legislation*. In other words, I discuss the ways in which Canadians have engaged with the legislation and official policy of multiculturalism: how it is lived and interpreted in Canadian bureaucracy, media, literature, and society. An examination of the legislative documents that instituted official multiculturalism in Canada, however, reveal, that its practice differs in many ways from the ideals enshrined in the legislation. It is important to note that, in his 1971 *Announcement of Implementation of Policy of Multiculturalism within Bilingual Framework*, for instance, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau declared that “although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other” (8545). And, although many critics of the 1988 Multiculturalism Act and its precursory legislation have claimed that official multiculturalism attempts to essentialize minority cultures as static, unchanging, and marginal in relation to a hegemonic white Canadian culture, Trudeau commented that an “individual’s freedom would be hampered if he were locked for life within a particular cultural compartment by the accident of birth or language” (8545). His statement suggests that, in its inception,

multiculturalism was not conceived as either static or limiting, but dynamic and adaptable. The 1988 Act, furthermore, emphasizes ideals of cultural exchange; the legislation seeks to “promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins” and “encourage and promote exchanges and cooperation among the diverse communities of Canada” (Multiculturalism Act). However, despite these laudable aims, an admission of Canada’s complicity in acts of racism, violence, and exclusion are notably missing in both legislative documents. The Multiculturalism Act aims to “assist ethno-cultural minority communities to conduct activities with a view to overcoming any discriminatory barrier and, in particular, discrimination based on race or national or ethnic origin” ( Multiculturalism Act) without acknowledging the Canadian government’s history of discrimination, dispossession, and exclusion.

With these things in mind, my consideration of the ways in which Canadian fiction represents racism, trauma and the potential for reconciliation necessarily reflects back upon itself, and demands an investigation of fiction’s potential to affect the very real and troubling, fraught and difficult historical and social circumstances these texts describe. In other words, what can fiction do? Can fiction about racism affect racist behaviours, or enable healing? Derek Attridge argues that fiction has the potential to deeply affect readers, and to recast the familiar. Literature is singular, he writes, when “we are able to receive its uniqueness as a creative contribution to our own thinking and feeling” (70). It has the potential to “[redeploy] the resources of culture” and “[introduce] new perspectives and relationships which can be understood as the implementation of new codes and norms” (73). By extension, I aim to demonstrate in discussing the traumas of racism that literature has the potential to reconfigure the reader’s assumptions not only about race and ethnicity, but also about potentially empowering

responses to this trauma. In this approach, I follow Julie McGonegal, who argues that “literary activity and forgiveness share a capacity to mediate between individual and collective realms, to cross the divide between private and public spaces” (*Imagining Justice* 12). She argues that reading is uniquely able to facilitate forgiveness because:

reading is a listening and imaginative projection into the mind of the author and the interpretive community that surrounds the reader’s act of interpretation. Reading’s paradox of sociability creates a unique space for the potential of forgiveness, one that benefits from the openness made possible by its privacy... as well as from the intersubjectivity that reading necessitates. (12)

Literature can, therefore, facilitate forgiveness because, though reading is a solitary activity, it enables, and even requires intersubjectivity, empathy, and the ability to encounter otherness as “a creative contribution to our own thinking and feeling,” as Attridge puts it. Of course, it would be erroneous to claim that literature’s power to affect change is all-encompassing. Attridge himself cautions against this formulation, arguing that “Literature may be a cultural product, but it is never simply contained by culture” (6); thus he warns against an “instrumentalist” approach to literature that “[treats] a text... as a means to a predetermined end” (7). Likewise, Suzanne Keen “[finds] the case for altruism stemming from novel reading inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated in favor of the beneficial effects of novel reading.” (vii)

With these words of caution in mind, I want to cautiously consider the ways in which literature cultivates openness, empathy, and is capable of altering the way an imaginative and attentive reader perceives the world, and therefore how s/he behaves within it. Following Daniel Coleman and Sherene Razack, I argue that in Canada, an attentiveness to the crimes and abuses in our collective past can lead us towards a more responsible future. And as readers of Canadian fiction,



we can learn not only the ways in which we have failed to truly accommodate difference in the past, but also what we need to become in order to foster a critically multicultural and accepting society.

### **3. Reading, Mourning, and Recovering in Canada: What Can CanLit Do?**

In her analysis of Mavis Gallant's fiction, Karen E. Smythe identifies a therapeutic relationship between elegiac fiction and the reader. Within this relationship, "the text is the authoritative analyst and produces stories for the reader, the receptive analysand who must reconstruct and interpret the elegies by working through them" (27-28). Therefore, according to Smythe, "the reader/analysand uses the text of story/self for the purpose of self-interpretation" (28). This relationship between reader and text is productive because it "assists the reader to heighten awareness *of* and to grieve *for* communal and/or personal loss" (28). While this therapeutic theory of reading is useful in allowing us to consider how literature can affect readers positively, I argue that fiction has the potential to do more than enable individual mourning, or the mourning for an individual subject. Smythe argues furthermore that "fiction-elegy such as [Alice] Munro's" invites the reader to "[contribute] to the production of meaning" (110). She refers to the reader's contribution to the production of meaning as an "empathetic exchange" in which "the reader reconstructs self and story in the experience of reading" (110). Once again, this theory is helpful in understanding the relationship between a text and the way in which the reader reads him/herself after the textual encounter, but what Smythe's argument does not take into account is an apprehension not only of the self, but of the other, as well. According to Attridge, literature is singular in part because it "involves the shifting of ingrained modes of understanding in order to take into account of that which was systematically excluded by them"

(123). The literary works that I examine are singular in their ability to not only depict the process through which grief shifts “ingrained modes of understanding” ethnicity, race, and racism, but because, through their depiction of the grief’s capacity to change perceived categories of belonging and exclusion, these texts also challenge the reader to reconsider these categories. Attridge writes:

It is in the acknowledgement of the other person’s uniqueness, and therefore the impossibility of finding general rules or schema to account fully for him or her, that one can be said to encounter the other as other—in the same moment that those rules and schema shift, however momentarily, to take into account of the now no longer other. (33)

In a different context but similar vein, Jo-Ann Episkenew writes that indigenous literature generates an empathetic response in its readers, and that this empathy “has the potential to create a groundswell of support for social-justice initiatives to improve the lot of Indigenous people”

(191). And in his study of aboriginal literature written in Canada, Sam McKegney asks:

How can a novel that intentionally diverges from the testimonial paradigm, and as such cannot aid in the acquisition of retribution and restitution within the existing legal framework, generate emancipatory and empowering political effects beyond the individual healing of its author? And how can these effects be understood and discussed in non-hypothetical terms? (“From Trickster Poetics” 81)

McKegney turns to Gerald Vizenor and Tomson Highway to formulate his answer, arguing that “By attacking the ideological and systemic underpinnings of the discourse that has framed and is framing governmental and some tribal response to the social, political, economic, and spiritual consequences of residential schooling” (85), Highway’s fiction is positioned to subvert the ideological structures that enabled the systematic racism resulting in the abuses associated with

the residential school system. Considered more broadly, literature in general can be capable of evoking an empathetic readerly response that can challenge assumptions and produce the conditions necessary for personal healing, and for social change.

#### **4. Race and Gender in Canadian Literature**

I have focused my discussion on Canadian fiction written by women; this gender- and genre-based focus has necessitated the exclusion of several texts.<sup>6</sup> However, the topic of racism and trauma in Canadian literature is too vast to be encompassed in a single study, and I quickly discovered the necessity of setting parameters for my work. In excluding poetry and drama, I was able to establish a more unified critical approach to the works—a critical vocabulary to deal with the genre of fiction. I chose fiction over poetry and drama because, like the non-fictional narratives of healing described by Felman and Laub, documented by Freud, or recorded by the TRC, prose fiction is structured through narrative.

My decision to consider exclusively the works of women writers was informed by the discovery that, in the literature of each of the authors in my study, race and gender are bound up together in significant ways. In recent decades, feminists have tended to point out the importance of considering race alongside gender; Ernesto Laclau points out that gender and race are depicted such that the neutral and marked terms are constructed oppositionally: “‘Woman’ and ‘black’ are thus ‘marks’ (i.e. marked terms) in contrast to the unmarked terms of ‘man’ and ‘white’” (33). Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes that these “marked terms” themselves are relational, arguing that:

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<sup>6</sup> This list includes George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls*, Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, Rohinton Mistry’s *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Marie Clements’s *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, and many other texts.

gender and race are *relational* terms: they foreground a relationship (and often a hierarchy) between races and gender. To define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes that our consciousness of being women has nothing to do with race, class, nation, or sexuality, just with gender. (“Introduction” 12)

Race and gender are certainly relational in the fictions I have considered in this dissertation, just as these terms are relational within the historical, social and political contexts in which these texts were produced. In Kogawa’s fiction, for example, the protagonists must come to terms with culturally-based gender roles from both within and without the Japanese-Canadian community that complicate their attempts to achieve recognition of the racism that they have faced. For instance, Naomi must address her (and Obasan’s) role as a caregiver to ailing family and community members, while her brother Stephen experiences greater mobility and freedom because, as a male, he is not expected to fulfil these duties. Eden Robinson’s female characters discover that their gender often makes them more susceptible to racially-based violence than the men and boys in their community: in a memorable passage of *Monkey Beach*, for example, the novel’s protagonist Lisamarie and her cousin Erica are subjected to the threat of sexual violence by a group of white men who shout racially- and sexually- based threats at the young girls from a passing truck. Anita Rau Badami’s highly representative Indo-Canadian and Indian characters are almost all female; these women are defined primarily by their relationship to their families, and in the context of their ethnic and racial identities. Bharati Mukherjee’s Mrs. Bhava reflects that, unlike the men who have lost spouses in the Air India bombing, she is “comparatively lucky” (186) in not being expected to remarry after the accident. Within each of these texts, the protagonist’s attempt to formulate an emancipatory response to racism is complicated by the pressure to conform to gender roles that are themselves subject to racial and ethnic forces.

In “Cartographies of Violence: Women, Memory, and the Subject(s) of the ‘Internment’,” Mona Oikawa comments on the way in which gender roles were subject to racist assumptions during the Japanese-Canadian Internment. She argues that the Internment was a project that entailed the spacialization of “Racializing, gendering, and classing processes” (80). In other words, not only race, but social class and gender became the focus of political action that dispossessed Japanese-Canadians, relocating them inland from the BC coast. According to Oikawa, “Japanese-Canadian masculinities were produced in relation to white masculinities. Japanese-Canadian women were constructed in relation to white women. Japanese-Canadian men and women were constructed in relation to each other” (80). Oikawa describes the efforts to separate men from women and children at Hastings Park, and, later, in the internment camps—a removal that brings into focus the “gendered presumption that women must care for children” (84). “Gender,” Oikawa insists, “was always a critical discourse during the Internment” (85).

Similarly, Joanne Episkew points out that gender was an equally important discourse within the Indian Residential School system. A gender-based curriculum was enforced, in which boys learned trades, while girls underwent a domestic education, “thereby applying the same gendered division that was the norm for the colonizer culture” (48). These gendered roles were modelled after “European patriarchal conventions and [their] subsequent privileging of the masculine was very damaging to Indian students and future generations of Indian people” (48). Within both the Indian Residential Schools and the Japanese Canadian internment camps, gender was constructed based on a European model. This assumption of universal and patriarchal gender roles forms a significant part of the racist projects undertaken by the Canadian government. Assumptions based on gender roles and the value of men’s and women’s labour also underlie the disparities in compensation received by Air India bombing victims. In *The*

*Sorrow and the Terror*, Blaise and Mukherjee argue that “Canadian courts are genderist in toting up reimbursable suffering. The loss of a well-employed husband rings up a dramatically higher figure than the loss of an underemployed wife” (103). The politics of restitution remind us of the uncomfortable intersections between race and gender politics.

It is significant that feminist theorists have long explored issues of women’s silence, or their alienation from language, more generally. Protagonists such as Kogawa’s Naomi and Robinson’s Lisamarie therefore encounter the dilemma of either telling a painful story, or remaining silent on the subject. Virginia Woolf, for instance, argues that the woman writer of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was at odds with language because “the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a women’s use” (37). Annie Leclerc wrote, “It is our silence and the triumphant sound of your voice that authorized the theft of our labour, the rape of our bodies, and all our silent slavery, our silent martyrdom” (76). Luce Irigaray reasoned that because woman “is indefinitely other in herself ... ‘she’ goes off in all directions [in language] and ... ‘he’ is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning” (“This Sex” 103). She calls for woman to “feel the need to get free of fabric, reveal her nakedness, her destitution of language, explode in the face of them all, words too” (*Speculum* 143). And Dale Spender writes, “In a society where women are devalued it is not surprising that their language should be devalued” (10). She argues that women’s access to language is limited because “language is primarily the product of male effort and ... historically—and currently—men have held greater ‘rights’ to language” (12). Investigations into women’s alienation from language are emblematic of much of the feminist linguistic investigations of the 1970s and 1980s; thus the tropes of silence and speech, and testimony in the texts I investigate in this dissertation are significant.

However, while much feminist thought of the 1970s and 1980s explored ideas of women's silence, it is important to consider dissident and more recent voices on the topic, as well, particularly in relation to postcolonial and multicultural studies. For instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty challenges Western feminists' "assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions" ("Under Western Eyes" 336-37). And while Deborah Cameron acknowledges in 1990 that "the idea of 'silence' recurs in women's writing" (*Feminist Critique* 3), in 2006, she identifies a more recent (but equally sexist) trend: "The idea that women are good communicators—sensitive, supportive, empathetic and expressive—while men are inarticulate and clumsy by comparison has become a part of our collective cultural wisdom" (*On Language* 134). Issues regarding women's access to language—and particularly with regards to non-white, non-Western women's access to language—are fraught. With this in mind, I explore how women writers use literature to investigate the complex issues of bearing witness to the effects of systemic racism in Canada.

In Chapter Two, I examine the depiction of personal and communal trauma in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, *Itsuka*, and *Emily Kato*. In these novels, Kogawa portrays the inseparability of the mental, physical and communal trauma that is the result of the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II. Although many critics have read *Obasan* in particular in light of a trauma that is represented by silence and resolved through speech, I argue that speech itself is not what allows the characters to overcome the traumas they face. Instead, the characters are healed by reconstituting their community and communal history as a way of combating the project of Forgetting (to borrow Durrant's term) and the attempted foreclosure of Japanese-Canadians' humanity. In Kogawa's work, individual healing is dependent on the reconstitution

of the Japanese-Canadian community's ability to remember its own history. Kogawa's novels are populated by diseased and wounded bodies because emotional wounds often manifest themselves as physical ailments; the fragmented, post-internment Japanese-Canadian community is itself figured as a wounded body. Not surprisingly, therefore, individual psychic damage can only be addressed when the wounds of the community are also attended to. By figuring the Japanese-Canadian community as an ailing body, Kogawa suggests that healing can only be achieved when the community defies the dispersal policy, re-establishing the social and political ties among its members.

In Chapter Two, I consider how silence is theorized by Elaine Scarry, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. In particular, I discuss Felman and Laub's insistence on the importance of testimony as a way of finally comprehending the devastating traumatic event. In Chapter Three, I draw on Kelly Oliver's discussion of Felman and Laub's work to develop a theory of witnessing. Drawing on Laub's accounts of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, Oliver argues that witnessing comprises both an account based on historical facts, and testimony relating to that which cannot be empirically proven, but "what you believe through faith" (18). Furthermore, Oliver identifies an ethical responsibility at the heart of witnessing: the responsibility to respond, and to enable response. This notion of an ethical bond between the person who testifies and the one who hears the testimony intersects with Sara Ahmed's argument that emotion leaves a trace, "so not only do I have an impression of others, but they leave me with an impression; they impress me, and impress upon me" (6). This mutually transformative, affective relationship of witnessing is central to my analysis of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*. This novel charts the difficulties of bearing witness to the Holocaust—particularly from the point of view of the Canadian children of Holocaust survivors. Ben, the narrator-protagonist of the



second half of the novel, did not directly experience the traumas of the event, but he is nonetheless tasked with the duty of bearing witness to it. I argue that Michaels's novel is a meditation on not only "poetic knowing" (Michaels qtd. in Bentley), but on the affective bonds at the heart of witnessing. *Fugitive Pieces* challenges the notion that certain modes of witnessing (such as historiography) transmit testimony more effectively than others, emphasizing the ethical bond between the giver and the receiver of testimony. I argue that the novel posits that the affective bond creates witnesses and allows the testimony to be shared. It is through a sense of ethical responsibility and emotional attachment that listeners become witnesses in order to in turn bear witness to the experiences of Holocaust survivors and victims.

In Chapter Four, I consider violence and humour as subversive modes of coping with racism and its effects. In particular, I examine the transmission of trauma within a community in Eden Robinson's short story "Queen of the North" and her novel *Monkey Beach*. I argue that Robinson explores the potential for dark humour to help heal a community that still bears the legacies of colonialist violence, and explore the lasting effects of this violence: its legacy in Robinson's fiction is that it is transmitted from character to character. This violence and humour is often deployed as a response to the traumatic events in the community's past—events such as sexual abuse, and the residential school system, all of which are rooted in the Canadian government's systematic attempts to eradicate aboriginal culture and impose settler-culture norms—with mixed results. Robinson's fiction is fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity: violence and humour seem to have the potential to both empower a subject and to turn against it in surprising and debilitating ways. Violence, like belligerent humour, can seem to empower, even while it isolates the character who engages in violence or malicious laughter. In the end, however, it is humour that has the greatest potential to heal, for humour, when it is shared within

a community, can at once rob a traumatic event of its power through derision and unite the members of that community in a shared laughter.

While chapters Two, Three and Four of my dissertation look at fictional characters' personal strategies for coping with violence and trauma, Chapter Five considers literature's role in coping with the traumas of racially-motivated violence. This chapter entails an examination of the often-fraught literary depictions of the Indo-Canadian community, particularly leading up to and following the bombing of Air India Flight 182. I argue that fiction about the Air India tragedy can, with varying degrees of success, counter limiting and confining constructions of race as static and essentialist by depicting individual characters whose actions, while informed by ethnic and cultural norms, are highly individualized and personal. Bharati Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief," unlike Anita Rau Badami's novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*<sup>7</sup> and Mukherjee and Clark Blaise's non-fictional *The Sorrow and the Terror*, represents the necessity of considering Air India 182 as both a Canadian tragedy and the culmination of global tensions.

Unlike the writers I study in Chapters Two, Three and Four, Badami, Mukherjee, and Blaise do not primarily discuss racism exerted by a white, European culture on ethnic and racial minorities, but instead, the racisms that emerge within the Indian diaspora following the Partition of India. Whereas Badami's novel and Blaise and Mukherjee's non-fictional text attempt to convey the import of Air India 182 on the Indo-Canadian community, or on the Canadian community at large, Mukherjee's fictional account of the individual experience of loss and grief embodies literature's tendency to invite "readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and take on their experiences" (Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* 5). Mukherjee

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<sup>7</sup> Badami's novel was published in 2006; however, I include it in my discussions first, because it treats a historical event—the Air India bombing of 1985—that falls within my historical framework, and second because, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Five, it provides fruitful thematic counterpoints to Mukherjee's short story.

issues this invitation through the depiction of grief and its role in defining the interstices within the Indo-Canadian ethnic identity. She problematizes certain Western assumptions that the management of grief, like grief itself, is universal, by depicting an eastern mode of mourning that is at odds with the Western mode. Ultimately, however, though it may be informed by cultural practices, the experience of mourning is, as Žižek's analysis of *The Sweet Hereafter* reveals, intensely personal, as is the experience of cultural interstitiality. Mukherjee's protagonist must establish her own method for dealing with loss, and her own position within Canadian and Indo-Canadian ethnicity.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I briefly examine Canadian literature's thematic movement from multicultural to transnational literature in relation to Catherine Bush's 2000 novel *The Rules of Engagement*. While the authors I examine in Chapters Two through Five write from the perspective of a member of a racial or ethnic community that has been subjected to racism and violence, Bush considers how Canadians (both those who have been directly affected by racism, and those who have not) should respond to racial and ethnic violence on the international stage. In this chapter, I consider how literature represents the politics of intervention political intervention in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Bush's protagonist Arcadia Hearne studies global war from the safe and vicarious distance of a research centre in London. However, she is unable to act, either directly, to prevent violence, or indirectly, as a witness to the conflicts she studies. Drawing on Sherene Razack's examination of the myths of Canadian peacekeeping and Daniel Coleman's conception of Canadian civility, I argue that Bush illustrates the ethical imperative for readers to act on behalf global others because of our domestic history of racist violence by presenting a protagonist who is, herself, finally compelled to take action, but only as a result of her own personal history. *The Rules of Engagement* is not, I argue, a call

for large-scale political or military intervention, but rather, a call for individual actions that benefit and protect others. Bush's novel demonstrates that pure altruism may not be possible, but that even personally motivated action can affect important and necessary social change.

Trauma and its effects are an ubiquitous trope in literature, as in film, television, theatre, and other arenas. The traumatic effects of racist violence are particularly persistent and difficult to overcome. The authors that I study, however, have developed in their fictions innovative strategies for overcoming racism's lasting effects; they craft characters who, despite painful experiences, do not see themselves as only or even primarily victims. Furthermore, these novels and shorts stories, written during Canada's multicultural period at the end of the last century, challenge the problematic assumptions of the Multiculturalism Act: that Canada is not a racist nation, and that multiculturalism is necessarily a static and backward-gazing expression of non-white, non-Anglophone<sup>8</sup>, and non-Christian ethnicity.

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<sup>8</sup> Although official multiculturalism emerged out of official bilingualism in Trudeau's 1971 *Announcement of Implementation of Policy of Multiculturalism within Bilingual Framework*, which emphasized equality between French and English Canadians, and the 1988 Multiculturalism Act emphasizes the "acquisition, retention and use of all languages that contribute to the multicultural heritage of Canada," discrimination based on language has proliferated in Canada.

## Chapter 2:

### “A Culture of Funerals”: Responses to the Dispersal Policy in Joy Kogawa’s

#### *Obasan, Itsuka, and Emily Kato*

For many readers of Canadian fiction, Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* is emblematic of the violence and trauma of the internment of Canadian citizens during World War II, as well as the subsequent redress movement that culminated in an official apology by then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, and monetary settlements in 1988. Indeed, the novel itself played a major role in the Japanese-Canadian redress movement, as sections of *Obasan* were read before the Canadian House of Commons in 1988, “on the day on which the agreement [on financial settlements for the Japanese Canadian community] was announced” (Goellnicht 306). In light of the novel’s relationship to the history of the Japanese-Canadian Internment and redress movement, it is tempting to consider *Obasan* as the narrative of a trauma that has been substantially resolved: Arnold Davidson, Gayle K. Fujita and Coral Ann Howells, for instance, see the novel’s conclusion as triumphant. However, many others argue that to adopt a resolutionary reading of the novel is to do further violence to the Japanese-Canadian community, for whom many of the traumas of Canada’s enforced internment and dispersal policies are still very much alive. And Kogawa seems to agree; since the initial 1981 publication of *Obasan*, she has written two sequels: *Itsuka* (1992), reimagined as *Emily Kato* (2005)<sup>9</sup>; these sequels, as well as the role that *Obasan* has played in the redress movement, are emblematic of the novel’s significance with regards to Canada’s multicultural project. Smaro Kamboureli has remarked that “Canada is in a

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<sup>9</sup> *Emily Kato* is a rewriting of *Itsuka*. While many elements of the narrative and structure remain the same, characters and events have been significantly altered for the 2005 novel.

state of continual progress, in a state of constant re-vision” (*Making a Difference* xxvii), and that the way in which we understand ethnicity is subject to particular reconsideration. Kogawa’s sequels to *Obasan*, too, represent progress and revision—both in the sense that Kogawa revises and expands upon her own literary project, and that novel’s bears a close relationship to relationship to the status of Japanese-Canadians in Canada and their quest for redress. Kogawa’s fictions have been important in revising Canada’s official stance on the Internment, and on the rights of those Canadians affected by it.

However, it is important to remember that even after the Canadian government acknowledged the wrongfulness of dispossessing and forcibly removing Japanese-Canadians from BC’s coast during World War II, and offered compensation to those affected, the past wrong is not erased by apology or compensation. In the sequels to *Obasan*, the violence of the internment is neither resolved nor forgiven, and Kogawa’s protagonist Naomi Nakane is not healed. However, while undertaking a resolutionary reading of Kogawa’s work is unquestionably problematic, it is equally unsettling to constitute the traumas of the novels’ Japanese-Canadian characters as never-ending, never-resolved, never-healed. How, then, do we read Kogawa’s handling of the violence perpetuated by officially-sanctioned racism?

For Gerry Turcotte, *Obasan* “is a text that produces a sense of the uncanny within and without its narrative, by ‘re-animating’ a history of oppression that forces many Canadians to confront their own suppressed and violent history” (78). The sense that the novel is uncanny in its ability to complicate our conception of Canada’s familiar and comfortable history as a non-violent, non-racist society is particularly relevant in a post-9/11 context. The mistreatment

suffered by Maher Arar<sup>10</sup> and Omar Khadr<sup>11</sup> problematize the notion that 9/11 and the War on Terror are essentially American problems, and that Canada is not involved in the detention of prisoners without charges, or the rendition and torture of suspects. Like *Obasan*, they haunt our conception of what it is to be Canadian, and how we respond to racial and ethnic difference, particularly in times of crisis.

In *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, Sherene Razack explores the exclusion of Muslims from Western law and society during the “War on Terror”—a suspension of rights that has been widely seen to be “in the interests of national security” (*Casting Out* 9). Razack observes that “race thinking becomes embedded in law and bureaucracy so that the suspension of rights appears not as a violence but as the law itself. Violence against the racialized Other comes to be understood as necessary in order for civilization to flourish” (9). Like the Japanese-Canadian Internment, security measures that primarily target Muslims and visible minorities are enshrined in law in the name of national security, and in the perceived necessity to preserve our vulnerable citizens from racialized and potentially violent Others. It is difficult to ignore the parallels between Canada’s Japanese-Canadian Internment policy in the middle of the twentieth century, and the suspension of rights for Muslims in North America at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And, in fact, Kogawa had this parallel in mind when she wrote her 2005 novel, *Emily Kato*, which ends in an appeal to avoid subjecting Muslims to the same treatment as Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. *Obasan*, *Itsuka*, and *Emily Kato* are novels about healing: they depict individuals, families and communities to forge innovative ways to recover from the traumas and dislocations of the

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<sup>10</sup> The Canadian man held without charges in America in 2002, and then subsequently deported to Syria, where he was tortured. Canada and Syria have since both declared Arar to be innocent of the charges of terrorism for which he was imprisoned and deported.

<sup>11</sup> The Canadian teenager held in Guantano Bay on terrorist charges, beginning in 2002

Internment. But they are also novels that enjoin us to remember and avoid the perils of “race thinking.”

### **1. Past Recall, Past Pain**

Many critics in the field of contemporary trauma studies draw on Freud’s theory that trauma causes the sufferer to experience the event repetitively. For instance, Cathy Caruth discusses at length the repetitive nature of the mind’s response to violence, defining trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later as repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (*Unclaimed* 91). Similarly, in their study of the testimony of Holocaust survivors, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub discuss the “unassimilated nature” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4) of the traumatic experience; Felman writes that “testimony seems to be comprised of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, [...] events in excess of our frames of reference” (5). Dori Laub further argues that “[t]he victim’s narrative [...] does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence” (57).

In an extension of this insistence on the mind’s inability to assimilate or understand a violent or painful experience, critics agree that the legacy of trauma is silence: “*the breakage of the word*” (Felman 25). Elaine Scarry writes that “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it” (4). However, it is precisely the experience of describing violence in language and speech (testimony) that enables the traumatized individual to finally understand his/her experience of suffering. “The wound gives access to the darkness which the language



had to go through” (28), Felman writes. For this reason, Felman and Laub explore the testimony of Holocaust survivors as a means of comprehending the devastating event of the Holocaust itself.

In the field of Canadian literature, these themes of the incomprehensible and recurring nature of trauma, and of suffering’s ability to enforce silence upon its victims, are frequently sounded in the criticism of Joy Kogawa’s 1981 novel *Obasan*, which tells the story of the enforced internment of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. And indeed, Naomi Nakane, the protagonist of all three novels, is deeply affected by the repetitive, unassimilated nature of racism and its traumatic legacy. Throughout *Obasan*, Naomi continually rebuffs her activist Aunt Emily’s attempts to rouse her to action. The novel’s protagonist instead maintains a determined silence throughout the novel. She reflects,

People who talk a lot about victimization make me uncomfortable. It’s as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind. From my years of teaching I know it’s the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain.  
(36)

Naomi, like her brother Stephen, is one of these children who “say nothing.” Instead, she attempts to forget: “If it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past pain” (48).

Of course, as Caruth, Scarry, Felman, Laub and others remind us, a traumatic past is seldom “past recall” for long, and it is almost never “past pain.” Indeed, despite her frequent assertions that she does not want to remember her painful past, Naomi is propelled throughout the novel, apparently against her will, from one painful childhood memory to the next. Thus, the reader learns of her early childhood in Vancouver, where she suffers sexual abuse at the hands of a white neighbour, the disappearance of her mother, her separation from her father, her

community, and her family during her initial internment in Slocan, the death of her father, a second removal to Granton, and several other, painful episodes in her childhood. Many of these childhood memories that Naomi would prefer not to recall seem to come to light as the result of Aunt Emily's relentless barrage of paperwork. "Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon," Naomi wonders, "cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn't enough, is it?" (214). Immediately after this reflection, the adult Naomi is propelled into the painful memory of forced labour on a sugar beet farm in southern Alberta.

And so, we must ask: what is the benefit of Aunt Emily's assault on Naomi's determined repression of these childhood memories? Is Naomi cured by therapeutic retelling and remembering? Or is she simply trapped within the "the repetition at the heart of catastrophe" (Caruth, *Unclaimed 2*)? The novel's end is ambiguous at best; in the final pages, after hearing of her mother's death as a result of the bombing of Nagasaki, Naomi dreams of:

a small child [...] with a wound on her knee. The wound on her knee is on the back of her skull, large and moist. A double wound. The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell. I apply a thick bandage but nothing can soak up the seepage. (267)

This is hardly a dream of healing and redemption. And, indeed, if Naomi is not healed by her journey into repetition and memory, by Aunt Emily's insistence that she relive childhood hurt, we must consider the effectiveness of Aunt Emily's crusade. Certainly, the resolution of trauma has been the subject of much *Obasan* criticism. Many scholars have focused on the recuperative possibilities of speech, suggesting that the "talking cure" might be employed to overcome the debilitating effects of racism. In his book-length study on *Obasan*, for instance, Arnold

Davidson argues that Naomi's attempts to establish a protective silence are ineffectual, for "silence does not protect" (*Writing* 35). Silence, he argues, "[does] not work for Naomi" or her family (74); it transforms her into a damaged, "almost autistic" (76) adult. The obvious solution? Speech. This focus on speech and narrative and their healing potential represents an elaboration of Elaine Scarry's examination of physical pain "and its ability to destroy language" (54). Although Scarry is referring explicitly to physical pain and the difficulty of finding words to adequately communicate the sensation and experience, we can see how psychological pain is similarly resistant to language; to speak one's pain, then, is to use language to transcend the primacy of pain. This approach—to consider speech as the antidote to the debilitating silence that is the result of trauma—is particularly tempting in light of Western feminism's claims that, historically, women have been silent, "or rather, *silenced*, for it is not just that women do not speak: often they are explicitly *prevented* from speaking, either by social taboos and restrictions or by the more general tyrannies of custom and practice" (Cameron 4). A reading of *Obasan* that interprets the novel as Naomi's journey from repressive and debilitating silence to enabling and liberating speech is potentially satisfying from a multicultural and a feminist perspective. As I discussed in my Introduction, feminist studies have frequently stressed women's silence as a result of oppressive patriarchal systems, and, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued, silence is the condition of subalternity. Speech, therefore, suggests a triumph over racist and sexist hegemonic systems that demand silence from women and racial minorities.

If this is, in fact, a novel that attempts to resolve the silencing effects of trauma through speech, we can assume that the most vocal character in the novel—Naomi's Aunt Emily—represents the realm of recuperative possibility. And, indeed, Aunt Emily's activism on behalf of the dispossessed Japanese-Canadian community offers very positive possibilities within the

novel itself; Aunt Emily seems to understand, as Naomi cannot, the relationship between their respective, individual suffering and that of their community. Like Cathy Caruth, who argues that “history is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or generation” (*Unclaimed* 71), Aunt Emily is apparently able to recognize the importance of a shared history of suffering to the Japanese-Canadian community as a whole. And it is the package of letters and documents that Aunt Emily sends to Naomi that seems to open avenues of memory and of speech for the protagonist. However, it is not possible to view Aunt Emily as a purely positive alternative to the silence embodied by Naomi and by Obasan. Early in the novel, Naomi questions the effectiveness of Aunt Emily, “a crusader, a little old gray-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes” (33), reflecting that “Like Cupid, she aimed for the heart. But the heart was not there” (43). Roy Miki argues that, “as attractive as Aunt Emily may appear because of her incessant discourse on racism, injustice, citizenship, and democracy, her subject position is futile, [her words] finally leading nowhere” (*Broken Entries* 140). Emily does not achieve the redress she seeks at the end of *Obasan*; her barrage of words does not appear to have found a listener within the Canadian government.<sup>12</sup> Although *Obasan* ends with an “Excerpt from the Memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada, April 1946” (272), a document calling for the Canadian government to withdraw the Orders-in-Council for the deportation and internment of Japanese-Canadians, these restrictions were not lifted until 1949, and, at the time of *Obasan*’s publication, Japanese-Canadians still had not received redress for their losses.

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, we can argue that Aunt Emily’s activism performs a therapeutic function for her, and that, even though she is unable to obtain the official redress she seeks, the act of seeking redress, of making her loss and her community’s public, is a healing strategy. However, her activism does not achieve its explicit goal in the novel, apparently falling on deaf ears. Furthermore, Emily’s activism does not benefit Naomi, or facilitate her healing—at least not in *Obasan*.

Building on the work of scholars who have understood Obasan to valorize speech over silence,<sup>13</sup> King-Kok Cheung identifies several kinds of silence in the novel: “oppressive, inhibitive, protective, stoic and attentive” (26). While some silences, such as the oppressive silence Old Man Gower enforces, which “[disrupts Naomi’s] bond with her mother” (5), are destructive forces, others, such as Obasan’s wordless attentiveness, can be, depending on the circumstance, positive and enabling, or crippling and “especially binding” (151). Cheung’s arguments, furthermore, remind us that tropes of silence and speech are not universal, and that “‘women’ and ‘men’ are not homogenous groups: class, ethnic, and cultural divisions are important too, and the speech of middle-class Europeans cannot simply be generalized to all groups of women” (Cameron 24). To view the motifs of silence and speech in the novel solely in terms of Western feminism or trauma studies is to ignore the ethnic and cultural complexities of the novel. While the ability to bear witness to one’s trauma, to testify to a sympathetic listener, is undoubtedly therapeutically important, both to individuals and within communities of survivors, as we shall see in Chapter Three, the impulse to consider speech as enabling and silence as debilitating is reductive and ethnically biased. Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out that the impulse to understand men and women as homogenous groups leads to a generalizing impulse in terms of Third World Difference:

An analysis of ‘sexual difference’ in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I call the ‘Third World Difference’—that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Gayle K. Fujita argues that once Naomi’s complicated “issues are untangled, she clearly chooses speaking over silence” (40). Likewise, Coral Ann Howells focuses on the possibilities for healing to be found in knowledge; “through her knowledge of the past,” Howells argues, Naomi can find “the power of healing her own fragmented psyche” (*Private and Fictional* 125).

countries. And it is in the production of this ‘Third World Difference’ that Western feminisms appropriate and ‘colonize’ the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries. (335)

By extension, in the Canadian context we can understand this impulse to extend to a limited and reductive understanding of “Multicultural Difference,” and of the behaviours of, for instance, Japanese-Canadian women, and their relationships to silence.

In addition, while Aunt Emily is an undeniably positive figure, whose vocal crusade for justice and redress is represented sympathetically, she is also the absent family member whom Naomi rarely sees during her childhood. At one point, Naomi tells the reader, “it is twelve years before we see Aunt Emily again” (*Obasan* 118). When Emily arrives in Granton in 1952, she is “almost a stranger to [Naomi]” (*Emily Kato* 20). This absence is, of course, an eloquent textual marker of the fragmented community and family that is the result of Canada’s racist wartime and post-war policies; however, Aunt Emily’s continued absence throughout much of the text is a marker of her ineffectiveness, especially when read alongside Naomi’s brother Stephen’s own determined and silent absence, his “perpetual flight” (198) and *Obasan*’s quiet but dependable presence,. While much of this novel is about silence and the recuperative powers of speech, persistent speech and sound, we are reminded, do little to reform either community or family. At the end of the novel, Aunt Emily remains a relatively isolated individual, living far from her family, a casualty of the racism that fragments her community. In fact, Emily’s absence functions as a marker of the wounds that continue to afflict Naomi’s sense of family and community.

If the novel does not offer us a tidy journey from traumatized silence into productive speech, what does it offer? Eva C. Karpinski argues that *Obasan* offers a positive response to the racism it depicts precisely in its refusal to allow the wounds inflicted on the Japanese-Canadian community to heal. Instead, Karpinski argues, the novel “[remains], like a true heroine, an embattled contestatory site of different narratives of the nation’s history” (47). The novel’s resistance to resolution and healing, then, is positive in that it continually foregrounds the political, reminding the reader of the ongoing legacy of institutionalized racism. And Karpinsky is not alone in criticizing other critics’ readings of *Obasan* as “resolutionary (not revolutionary)” (Miki, “Asiancy” 143). However, these readings, in resisting resolution, can tend to depict victims of the internment as irreparably victimized, suffering from wounds that cannot be allowed to heal.

*Obasan* contains fictionalized versions of letters written by Japanese-Canadian activist Muriel Kitagawa (Miki, *Redress* 200-201), and can therefore be seen as a part of the process of obtaining redress, and of the ongoing project to reinscribe an episode of Canadian history that has been suppressed, in part by the Canadian government’s decades-long refusal to apologize or offer compensation. However, we must consider the implications of Miki’s and Karpinski’s revolutionary reading of *Obasan*, and its necessary resistance to closure. What does it mean to refuse to allow wounds to heal? Kogawa herself, near the end of *Obasan* writes, “The body of grief is not fit for human habitation. [...] The song of mourning is not a lifelong song” (270). While Kogawa’s work marks the injury inflicted upon Japanese Canadians, it emphasizes the necessity for healing. Naomi, her family, and her sense of a Japanese Canadian community are figured as wounded, but Kogawa does not advocate an insistence on the injury, but rather, a quest for health and wholeness.

The importance of stability and a sense of belonging is most clearly figured in Obasan herself, and her husband Usamu. Obasan and Uncle are constantly at the centre of a mobile, unstable, and almost non-existent Japanese-Canadian community depicted in Kogawa's first novel. Obasan refuses to be separated from Stephen and Naomi, telling Emily that the children's mother "entrusted them to her and they're her kids now until [their mother returns] and she won't part with them" (117). Obasan's silent act of kindness to the young mother on the train to Slocan reflects a communal sense of sharing or togetherness, even in difficult times; her own generosity inspires another passenger to commit a similar act of kindness. When they reach Slocan, Obasan, Stephen and Naomi discover that their home is to be "just a two-roomed log hut at the base of the mountain [...] shabby and sagging with weeds" (126). Nonetheless, Obasan, Uncle and the other Japanese-Canadians interned at the ghost town begin building a community in Slocan. Nakayama-sensei verbally transforms the makeshift hut into a home specially tailored to their Japanese-Canadian communities: "'Chairs just to fit,' Sensei says pulling up the wooden boxes. 'A small house for small people'" (130). The reconstituted family shares this small home with Nomura-obasan, silently accommodating the elderly woman's needs, even emptying her bed-pan and guiding her to the outhouse. And, "within days" of Uncle's arrival to Slocan, "everything changes" (147). Uncle and Obasan transform the shack into a home with wallpaper and furnishings, and, in the spring, "a rock garden in the front yard with a tiny stream and a waterfall winding around the base to a small pool" (149). The forest surrounding their Slocan home becomes a veritable supermarket under Uncle's guidance, providing food for the family. Soon, Slocan, too, is changed: "the community flourishes with stores, crafts, gardens and home-grown enterprise [...]. The ghost town is alive and kicking" (175). In addition to the stores and home-grown enterprise, a school is established for the Japanese-Canadian children, and the new



inhabitants of Slocan build a public bathhouse, one of many community meeting-places. Naomi reflects that, in the bathhouse, “We are one flesh, one family, washing each other” (176). The community of Slocan becomes “Edenic” (Cheung 137), “a quiet and pleasant holiday” (149).

Of course, the town is an internment camp, and not a holiday destination. During their stay there, Naomi and Stephen face violence, racism, and deep personal losses. However, that which is positive about the community of Slocan is made positive by the community members themselves: Nakayama-sensei, who verbally configures furniture made to fit them, Uncle, who helps to find delicious and familiar foods in the forest, Obasan, who accommodates the needs of the children as well as Nomura-obasan, and many others, who help to foster a sense of belonging and togetherness in places like the community bathhouse. As Turcotte puts it, “despite being forced to live invisibly in various ghost towns, the Japanese Canadians bring life, not death, to them” (84). And while the family endures tremendous losses, Uncle and Obasan remain firmly planted at the centre of Naomi’s and Stephen’s fractured, unstable family—a dependable, though silent presence.

Cheung points out that Obasan’s silence on the subject of Naomi’s mother’s disappearance is meant to protect the children; however, “A point comes when such silence, as a form of enforced innocence, infantilises” (144). Despite Naomi’s questioning, Obasan refuses for many years to disclose Grandma Kato’s account of the blast at Nagasaki that disfigures and eventually kills Naomi’s mother. Although Naomi finally accepts her aunt’s silence on the subject of her mother, its effects are devastating:

her internal questioning persists and develops into a sense of betrayal, a lack of self esteem, a fear of the past, and a victim’s acceptance of biological extinction for Naomi is uncomfortable

that she and Aunt Emily are unmarried and that Obasan gave birth to two stillborn infants.  
(Fujita 33)

Eventually, however, Naomi does learn of her mother's fate. Significantly, it is following Uncle's death that she and Stephen finally learn the truth; the Japanese-Canadian community, dispersed and fragmented, has become what Emily describes as "a culture of funerals" (*Emily Kato* 186). At funerals, Naomi tells us, Japanese-Canadians become "the togetherness people again [...]. We would find comfort in our busy belonging" (79). Sharing the secret of her sister-in-law's death with her foster children is not an act that Obasan undertakes alone. Following Uncle's funeral, a tiny fragment of Naomi's family and the community she once knew, including Obasan and Naomi, Stephen, Emily and Nakayama-sensei, assembles in Obasan's living room to read Grandma Kato's letter together. The healing that Naomi begins to experience at the end of the novel, the decision not to let the "song of mourning" be "a lifelong song" (*Obasan* 270), takes place within a community; the sorrow is shared by those who have assembled in Obasan's Granton home. But, as we have seen, Naomi's recovery is not complete; it is not enough to break the silence and learn her mother's fate. At the end of the novel, Naomi is as isolated as ever—and this is where Kogawa begins her sequels.

## **2. Riddles and Paradoxes: Japanese-Canadian Ethnic Identity**

In *Obasan* and its sequels, racism is frequently expressed as a function of common good that is necessary for the preservation of Canadian society and the safety of its members. Donald Goellnicht argues that *Obasan* is a literary response to the historical production of the "Official racism [that] was blatant in Canada" (*Obasan* 35). He writes:

The *raison d'être* for this novel stems from the perception that the official reason for the evacuation, internment, and dispersal of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War was a fabrication constructed by a paranoid majority and a complicitous government who masked their racism in claims that persons of Japanese origin posed a military threat to Canada (although not a single charge of treason was laid against a Japanese Canadian during the war). (290)

In the novel, Japanese-Canadians are reconfigured as “Japs” and “the enemy” (89), and their internment, repatriation to Japan, and the seizure of their property are represented as measures of “national security” (218). The Canadian government’s racist agenda robbed Japanese-Canadians not only of their sense of national belonging within Canada, but of the comforts of diaspora and community. The Japanese-Canadian community is divided and dispersed by systemic racism, as its members are configured as ‘other’ and, simultaneously, are expected to participate in a nationwide project of configuring Japanese-Canadians as simply Japanese, alien and potentially dangerous. Kit Dobson identifies this racist attitude as symptomatic of Canada’s multicultural policies following the Multiculturalism Act. He writes, “The multicultural model is often criticized for the ways in which it encodes diverse subjects with monolithic labels, imposing a theoretical unity on ethno-cultural groups that it proceeds to consolidate through nation-building projects,” and that “These processes, in turn, reinforce the normativity of unmarked, white Canadians” (*Transnational* 93-94). The Canadian government’s impulse to project white, Anglophone Canadians and communities as normative is not confined to the past, or to events like the Internment; as Dobson points out, this activity continues into the multicultural period of the 1980s—the period in which Kogawa is writing. And in a twenty-first century context, exclusionary racist policies are “under-pinned by the idea that modern, enlightened secular

peoples must protect themselves from pre-modern, religious peoples whose loyalty to tribe and community reigns over their commitment to the rule of law” (Razack, *Casting Out* 9-10).

Kogawa’s novels, then, position themselves in opposition to both the overtly racist politics of the Internment, as well as to the more subtle racism of the end of the twentieth century, where even discourses of multiculturalism and diversity can be deployed to reinscribe the normativity of white, Anglophone Canadians, and the presumed aberrance of those who have been marked racially and culturally Other and dangerous.

Himani Bannerji contributes to our understanding of diversity’s complicity in the same hegemonic structures that enable officially-sanctioned racism; “Conceived as discourse,” she writes, “diversity is not a simple descriptive affair. As a centrepiece of a discourse of power and as a device for social management of inequality, it is simultaneously interpretive or meaning-making and actively practical. It creates and mediates practices, both conceptual and actual, of power—of ruling or governing” (547-48). During the Second World War, the discourse of diversity was deployed to depict Japanese-Canadians as opposing mainstream Canadian culture, in a very literal sense, as Japanese-Canadians were described as enemies to Canadian safety. And this discursive work of diversity in managing Japanese-Canadian identity does not end with the war. Just as the Japanese-Canadian community was dismantled by the racist paranoia infecting World War II Canada (and, indeed, the entire world), the Japanese-Canadian ethnic identity is, itself, dislocated and fractured, reconstituted as opposition: Japanese *or* Canadian, but never Japanese-Canadian<sup>14</sup>. Naomi and Stephen are caught in a double-bind created by this racist rhetoric of belonging and alterity: as *Japanese-Canadians*, they are at once implicated as enemies, aliens and “dirty yellow Japs” (*Emily Kato* 27). In *Slocan*, Stephen and Naomi are

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<sup>14</sup> These oppositional identities are not particular to Canada; the violently adversarial nature of war requires citizens to take sides, to choose one camp or another.

taunted by their white neighbours, who throw stones and call Stephen a “gimpy Jap” (*Obasan* 167). As Japanese-*Canadians*, however, they celebrate the World War II Allied victory: “the war was over and *we* had won” (183, emphasis mine).

Naomi, Stephen and Obasan are caught within a system that demands that they participate in the same racist behaviours that target them. Stephen and Naomi play the Yellow Peril game, which “[reduces people] to a set of binary signifiers, with the side representing the Japanese as ‘weak and small’ [...] pawns” (Visvis, *Beyond* 177). Obasan has “spent her lifetime treasuring” this game (*Emily Kato* 100), despite its obviously racist agenda. She, like Stephen, is caught within a system that demands that she identify simultaneously as a Canadian (someone who reviles the simultaneously dangerous and weak “yellow pawns” in the game) and as Japanese (alien and dangerous). Stephen amplifies this paradoxical sense of belonging and not-belonging; he becomes “a victim who adopts the role of victimizer” when he attacks and mutilates the butterflies behind their home in Slocan, “ultimately rationalizing his actions by relying on the condemning discourse that has been applied to his own people by government agencies: ‘they’re bad’” (Visvis, *Beyond* 203). Stephen continually reproduces the abuses inflicted on him and his family during the internment.

As a consequence of racist wartime paranoia, gender roles among Japanese-Canadians were disassociated from their traditional roots and recast. Mona Oikawa points out that, in Hastings Park and in the Internment camps, men were separated from women, children and the elderly; “The gendered presumption that women must care for children was used by white politicians and administrators, and were [sic] actualized through the removal of men from the sites where these activities took place” (84). Naomi is subjected to these gendered assumptions in the novels. In Vancouver, before the internment, Naomi participates in family activities with

her female relatives, such as bathing with her grandmother, that she associates with her Japanese ethnicity. During and after the internment, she, like Obasan, is forced to accept a gendered caregiver role. In *Obasan*, Emily writes in her journal that the men in the camps:

are luckier than the women. It's true that they're forced to work on the roads, but at least they're fed, and they have no children to look after. Of course the fathers are worried but it's the women who are burdened with all the responsibility of keeping what's left of the family together. (109)

I am not arguing that it was atypical for Japanese or Japanese-Canadian women to take on caregiver roles within the family. Rather, following Oikawa, I argue that the Internment ossified gender roles for Japanese-Canadians, and, in doing so, fragmented families in order to deploy men to perform physical labour away from women, children, and the elderly, and that in fixing these gender roles, it became increasingly difficult for women like Naomi to achieve the mobility of men like Stephen after the Internment. In *Itsuka* and *Emily Kato*, Stephen forces Naomi to assume this gendered role by refusing to take part in caring for Obasan, now elderly and dying. Naomi, who, like Aunt Emily, has avoided the role of caregiver by not marrying or having children, is, like the women in Hastings Park, forced to accept this gendered role as a result of Stephen's absence. When he refuses to return to Granton despite Obasan's and Naomi's repeated requests, Naomi reflects, "It's Stephen from whom I have learned most how not to be. He would not stay. I would not leave" (*Emily Kato* 104). When Obasan finally dies, still praising her adopted son in her final days, Naomi bitterly comments that she "did not deserve that long last loneliness" (106).

Stephen is able to achieve this mobility, which isolates him from his family and results in Obasan's "long last loneliness," by unambiguously rejecting Japanese culture, and internalizing

the racist value system that identifies the white body as more beautiful than the Japanese body. In *Itsuka*, for instance, he rejects Marion Makino's adolescent advances in favour of blond, blue-eyed and devoutly Mennonite Tina Regehr; Marion, he says, "is nowhere near as pretty as Tina. Narrow slanted Japanese eyes" (32). Naomi, however, is apparently more ambivalent in her attitudes towards (white) Canada. Stephen's schoolmates taunt him, calling him "bad and [...] a Jap" (*Obasan* 76). When Naomi questions her father about these racist attacks, her father tells her simply, "We're Canadian" (76)—an assertion that Emily repeats throughout the three novels—though Naomi recognizes that she and Stephen are trapped within the often racist and paranoid rhetoric that surrounds and attempts to define their Japanese-Canadian ethnicity. "It's a riddle, Stephen tells me. We are both the enemy and not the enemy" (76). This "riddle" is the paradox that at once asks Japanese-Canadians to put aside their Japanese ethnicity, culture and heritage in order to become Canadian, to celebrate "our" victory over the Yellow Peril, while at the same time denying members of that community access to belonging through a barrage of exclusionary racist rhetoric.

In a letter to her sister and Naomi's mother, Emily expresses frustration at being caught in this dual position as simultaneously other and not-other-enough: "In one breath we are damned for being 'inassimilable' and the next there's fear that we'll assimilate" (94). Although she relentlessly identifies herself and other Japanese-Canadians as "Canadian citizen[s]" (34), she too recognizes the powerful and persistent racism at work in the government's and white Canadians' desire to categorize her and her community as persons of "Japanese race" (34). In *Emily Kato*, she tells her niece:

Well, we're Canadians, of course. But we're also Japanese, like it or not. We're Japanese hyphen Canadians. We're somewhere in the hyphen. It wasn't our choice. Heaven knows it

wasn't our choice. We didn't want to be Japanese and we weren't allowed to be Canadians.

We tried to blow the Japanese side of ourselves to bits. (109)

The violent image of racial self-loathing in Emily's acknowledgement (that to desire to be simply Canadian) evokes the violence of the nuclear blast with which the Allied forces annihilated Nagasaki at the end of World War II, and which eventually leads to the deaths of Naomi's mother and grandmother. The image also suggests the violent consequences of the mistrust and racism that led to the internment and dispersal policies that destroyed Vancouver's Japanese-Canadian community. It evokes an image of the physical violence done to the body in a battle zone, and implies that wartime Japanese-Canadians were literally at conflict with themselves, the "Canadian side" blowing the "Japanese side" to bits. Early in *Emily Kato*, Emily asks Naomi to consider whether a Japanese-Canadian community exists, and Naomi reflects, "I couldn't imagine a Canada not being around, but a Japanese-Canadian community? It seemed to me as thin as air" (10); in a sense, this community has itself been "blown to bits." Interestingly, however, in *Itsuka* and *Emily Kato*, Emily struggles with the idea that Japanese-Canadians themselves are partially complicit in the destruction of their community. The desire to "be Canadian" in the face of so much paranoia, racism and mistrust manifests itself as a rejection of Japanese culture in many Japanese-Canadians—including the Makino sisters or "Mak Duo"<sup>15</sup>: "Like Stephen, they hate everything Japanese" (*Itsuka* 32). The "Mak duo" resist a "Japanesy" name for their baby sister (32), and insist instead on the name of a white Canadian icon: "Anne, [...] spelled with an 'e,' like 'Anne of Green Gables'" (32)—although, interestingly, Anne becomes Baby Anna when her *issei*<sup>16</sup> parents find it difficult to pronounce "Anne." And, "As it is, the *issei* all call her 'Annu-chan' anyway" (33). In essence, Anna's name is one that, despite

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<sup>15</sup> In *Emily Kato*, Marion and Suzy Makino (the "Mak Duo") become Kim (Kimiko) Makino.

<sup>16</sup> First-generation Japanese-Canadians



her sisters' efforts, exists within the hyphen: neither fully Canadian like Anna's iconic would-be namesake, nor fully Japanese, despite the addition of –“chan,” Anna/Annu-chan's name is wholly Japanese-Canadian.

In the figure of Nikki Kagama, however, Kogawa most clearly indicts those members of the Japanese-Canadian community who, even as they are racialized and positioned as potential enemies and not-Canadians, participate in this same project of othering, inflicting a destructive influence on the community itself. In this project, Nikki represents what Smaro Kamboureli has termed a “sedative politics, a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic difference, but only in a constrained fashion, in order to manage” ethnic minorities (*Scandalous Bodies* 82). In *Itsuka*, Kagami is President of the Toronto Japanese Canadian League<sup>17</sup>. She betrays the Japanese-Canadian community by participating in the perpetuation of paranoid, racist rhetoric when she sides with Dr. Clive Stinson and against Emily and other members of Toronto's Japanese-Canadian community on the issue of individual compensation. As Emily and Stinson debate the issue of the internment in a Toronto café while Kagami and Naomi look on, Stinson tells Emily, “I've talked to a number of your people—people Nikki knows—and they tell me it was a good thing. Fundamentally it was right” (*Itsuka* 220). Later, he goes further, implicating Nikki as well: “there were a sizeable number—Nikki says it was a majority—that were loyal to the enemy” (222). Stinson deftly reminds Emily that she is a member of a visible minority (“your people”) that has been subjected to the will of the majority in a perversion of a sense of common good: “THE lie” (*Emily Kato* 227), the “unendurable word” (*Itsuka* 220) that Japanese-Canadians are “traitors” and “would have turned against Canada” (220). What's more, he reminds her of the complicity of members of the Japanese-Canadian community—Nikki and the “people [she] knows”—in order to belong, to claim that Canadianness that has been denied to

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<sup>17</sup> In *Emily Kato* she is the League's secretary and the apparent second-in-command to the president, Peter Kubo.

them because they are, in the eyes of men like Stinson, Japanese and not Japanese-Canadian. His racist and paranoid rhetoric, like that of the Canadian government, “not only misrepresents the identity of Japanese-Canadians, positioning them as one-dimensional cultural subjects; the oppositional structure of racist discourse also prevents the possibility of representing hybrid identities” (Visvis, *Beyond* 176).

Stinson firmly situates Nikki on the Canadian side of the hyphen, within the kind of multiculturalism that is tolerated “only insofar as it guarantees assimilation” (Kamboureli *Scandalous Bodies* 82), and Emily, Naomi, other advocates for individual compensation, as well as would-be wartime traitors, on the Japanese side. By participating in Stinson’s racism, Nikki positions herself as a member of the normative community that “must be protected from those who threaten the social order (Razack, *Casting Out* 13); in doing so, she emphasizes Emily and Naomi’s racial difference in an attempt to exclude them from the policy-making that is designed to protect the normative majority from the political process. Razack points out that “those most often evicted from political community are racialized” and that “such evictions make possible the production of white identities” (*Casting Out* 7). Nikki is able to align herself with white normativity by overtly racializing and excluding others such as Emily and Naomi.

Although Kagama is, like Emily, an advocate for redress, she operates in a manner that excludes other Japanese-Canadians. Instead, she attempts to placate white Canadian officials like Stinson, condemning Emily’s activism as “militant” (167). She meets privately with the Minister of Multiculturalism, refusing to allow Emily and other members of the National Japanese Canadian League (NJCL) to participate. She describes Canada as a country that “always puts the group ahead of the individual” (216); of course, the “group” to which she refers is the white majority, and not the group of “militant” Japanese-Canadians that seeks individual

redress and a collective process to obtain restitution and an official apology. By differentiating herself from them and by acting independently on the issue of address, Kagami associates herself instead with government and with the non-Japanese-Canadian “group.” In essence, she rejects the Japanese-Canadian community, represented by members of the NJCL, in favour of a sense of general belonging. Like Stephen, she wants to be Canadian, and not Japanese-Canadian.

In opposition to Nikki Kagami, Kogawa creates a character who deliberately elides identification with any single ethnic group. In *Itsuka*, he is “Father Cedric, free-roaming, French Canadian, post-modern priest” (4), the illegitimate son of a young Métis mother and a Catholic priest: people of no community. In *Emily Kato*, he is Cedric Avakian, the “Heinz 57” (127) son of a Japanese-Haida mother and an Armenian father, adopted by his birth mother’s own adoptive parents; his adoptive mother was “a Jew who lost her name and became a Christian” (130). Cedric is no longer a parish priest. Instead, he has become a newspaper reporter, and has dropped his adoptive parents’ name (Stott). “I made my choice,” he tells Naomi; “I’m not English—I know that for sure, and so does everyone else. So? To be Armenian?” (130). Unlike Nikki Kagami, whose desire to be accepted to the majority culture leads her to commit acts of racism against the Japanese-Canadian community, Cedric seems anxious *not* to belong: to the Catholic church, to his adoptive family, or to English Canada. Interestingly, he expresses his chosen ethnicity in the form of a question: “To be Armenian?” His question implies fluidity, the ability to simply change allegiances, to move from one cultural group to another. It implies that he can choose his ethnicity, while ignoring the issue of race. Unlike those Japanese-Canadians who “[try] to blow the Japanese side of [themselves] to bits,” however, Cedric manages to retain aspects from each of his cultural component parts. In particular, he treasures a Japanese-Haida rattle: his “Japanese connection” (127). Nonetheless, Cedric expresses ambivalence about his

complex ethnicity: “I’ve tried all five identities at different times. It gets confusing. It must be easier when you have just one” (128).

Chelva Kanaganayakam considers the ambivalence of the term “hyphenation” and its uses in literary and cultural discourse, pointing out that we can consider the “hyphen as a state of limbo and indeterminacy or as a site of empowerment [...]. The term is useful in that it acknowledges heterogeneity, but it also refuses to grant a sense of stable location” (2). In other words, Cedric’s acceptance of a hyphenated racial identity, as well as his acknowledgement of its inherent complications and difficulties, situates him within this state of limbo between indeterminacy and empowerment. He is able to embrace multiple ethnicities, navigating a variety of cultural practices and representations, but he is unable to claim a stable sense of self, of location, or of community. In this sense, Cedric embodies both the possibilities and the dangers inherent in Canada’s Multiculturalism Policy: in embracing the ethnic hyphen, he can, unlike Stephen or Nikki Kagami, identify himself within several ethnic and cultural groups simultaneously. However, at the same time, he cannot achieve that sense of “stable location” (2) that is accorded to white, Anglophone, un-hyphenated Canadians.

Naomi recognizes the potential drawbacks of Cedric’s hyphenated identity. As she considers his ethnicity, she reflects, “To my eyes, Cedric did not look Japanese in the least. He could be Latin American or Mediterranean or from somewhere in the Middle East, perhaps” (128), confirming his assertion that “everyone else” knows that he is not English. Like Naomi and like Stephen, who, as an adult, “has made himself altogether unfamiliar with speaking Japanese” (*Obasan* 253), Cedric finds his body marked by race, “overdetermined from without” (Fanon). His decision to embrace his mixed ethnicity, then, is not altogether a choice. He is marked not-English by his racialized appearance, his bold features, “wide-set dark eyes, thick

eyebrows, [...] dominant nose” (*Emily Kato* 128). His decision to embrace his Armenian heritage is, at least in part, informed by the race communicated by his body. Like the Japanese-Canadians in Kogawa’s novels who must wear “the hair shirt of ethnicity” (247), Cedric’s conscious decision to communicate that which he has chosen as his dominant ethnicity is communicated less ambiguously by his body, by the racial markers on his physical self. Although Cedric’s unfixed and ambivalent attitude towards his ethnicity—which he expresses as ‘identity’ (128)—seems to imply that, for him, to ‘belong,’ to embrace Englishness and whiteness and a position within the ethnic and cultural majority is possible, his racialized body already communicates the ethnicity that he expresses as choice. He differs radically from Nikki Kagami in that he does not attempt to disassociate himself from any minority ethnic group in a racist attempt to belong to the white majority. However, like Stephen, he seems to believe that ethnicity is fluid, and that he can choose to belong (or not belong) to any ethnic group. Like Stephen and Naomi, and like Nikki Kagami, Cedric is bound by the riddles and paradoxes of ethnicity and the rhetoric of belonging. Both Cedric and Nikki frame our sense of the problems inherent in Canadian multiculturalism; if, indeed, as Kamboureli claims, “The unity of Canadian identity is a cultural myth, a myth that can be sustained only by eclipsing the identities of others” (*Making a Difference* xxvii), then the unity of a Japanese-Canadian identity, too is a myth—one that, while it empowers some members of its community, excludes and disenfranchises others.

### **3. Bodies at War**

Cedric uses language to frame his ethnicity as a choice: he ignores the racial markers that already define him, ‘choosing’ instead to be Armenian. Cedric’s ‘choice’ illustrates the ways in which language is employed in each of the three novels to obscure or distort a visible or tangible reality.

Throughout Kogawa's fiction, "language proves unreliable in so many ways that it produces a general effect of deterritorialization" (Turcotte 79); while Cedric attempts to take advantage of this deterritorialization in order to control how others interpret his ethnicity, for Naomi, it represents a dangerous instability. Its potential to be deployed in harmful and destructive ways results in Naomi's mistrust of language and its ability to adequately communicate her experiences, and more particularly, her suffering and her losses:

All of Aunt Emily's words, all her papers, are like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity, scaly claws hard at work. But what good they do, I do not know—those little black typewritten words—rain words, cloud droppings. They do not touch us where we are planted here in Alberta, our roots clawing the sudden air. The words are not flesh. (*Obasan* 208)

For Naomi, words are not adequate to ease the traumas that she figures as physical suffering—drought, thirst and sudden, painful uprooting. The "rain words" are merely a poor substitute for real—actual, tangible—water. Language is ineffective because it is "not flesh." When Naomi recalls her first days in Alberta, labouring on a beet farm—a memory that she "cannot bear" (214)—her inability to recount these painful memories is once again expressed as physical inability: "I cannot tell about this time, Aunt Emily. The body will not tell" (217). Naomi visualizes the memory of suffering and abuse not as narrative, but as a physical remembering: violence and sexual abuse "[damage] her in very bodily ways, and it is her body that remembers" (Grice 93). The imagery Kogawa uses to describe memory and narration becomes particularly visceral when Naomi begins to describe her experiences in Granton:

Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn't

enough, is it? It's your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the anaesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over Aunt Em? (214)

Naomi transforms her aunt into a sadistic surgeon who operates without anaesthetic, excising memory. Interestingly, however, Naomi apparently recognizes the therapeutic value of this operation; Emily is not a torturer or an executioner, but a surgeon, a doctor, and the operation, however painful, is apparently curative. For medical procedures are, at least in their goal and intention, not simply exercises in sadism, but beneficial procedures meant to bring about healing, and to end (or at least alleviate) suffering.

Throughout the three novels, Kogawa repeatedly uses her characters' bodies to communicate that which language is incapable of expressing—or that which the characters themselves are incapable of expressing through language. The body thus becomes a vehicle of communication, developing its own language and imparting meanings that cannot be framed in words. Indeed, as Cecily Devereux has pointed out, "*Obasan* is articulated in terms of the body. [... The] past is figured as a body" (236). Not surprisingly, therefore, the Japanese-Canadian bodies in *Obasan*, as well as *Itsuka* and *Emily Kato*, are frequently sites of illness and injury. In the final chapters of *Obasan*, Naomi learns that her mother has been disfigured by the nuclear blast in Nagasaki, her body horribly marked by war, and her injuries reflect, in a horrifically amplified sense, the psychological injuries that Naomi has sustained, as well as the injury to and fragmentation of the body of her family and her community. In *Itsuka* and *Emily Kato*, "Obasan's refrain" (*Emily Kato* 186)—"Everyone someday dies"—is a perpetual reminder of the fragility of the human body, and Obasan's slow, final illness isolates Naomi in her role of caregiver. And in *Emily Kato*, Emily's illness teaches Naomi:

that grey hair can turn rapidly white; that the plastic colostomy bag can leak and stain bedsheets, and the smell is horrible; that the area surrounding the little opening, the stoma to the left just below the waist, can be red and sore. (255)

In essence, Naomi learns that her Aunt Emily, despite her relentless activism, is as fragile and subject to illness and decay as Obasan, who did not pursue redress for the Japanese-Canadian community, and who instead “lived in stone” (*Obasan* 33).

In *Itsuka*, Naomi’s own body is racked by a violent stomach affliction that is apparently rooted in her ‘unspeakable’ experience on the Granton beet farm. A stranger who once “cornered a girl behind the curling rink and fondled her” (25) approaches Naomi as she labours in the field. Naomi’s reaction to this unwelcome intrusion is sudden and humiliating. As she walks away from the stranger and towards Uncle and Obasan, “dizziness and pain roll through [her]” (26).

I have soiled myself. I’m mortified. I’m half crawling and I change direction and stumble towards the irrigation ditch bridge. Uncle with his bow-legged rolling gait comes running across the field to where I lie, hiding under the bridge in the mud where the stranger can’t see. (26)

Kogawa obliquely attributes this stomach ailment to the psychological effects of sexual violation, or more generally, to an apprehension about sexuality. The initial attack is apparently brought about by a brief but frightening contact with a man known to be a sexual predator and takes place during a period of intense hardship, the memory of which Naomi “cannot bear” (*Obasan* 214). The paralyzing illness pursues Naomi into adulthood. Father Cedric’s “touch, [...] light, perhaps brotherly embrace” (a first embrace, early in their relationship) engenders a physical reaction that is “altogether inappropriate” (*Itsuka* 110). She flees his apartment, and



compares the incident to “the time I asked Tina about her body and she fixed her beautiful blue eyes on the floor as if down there, beneath our feet, was some vile thing too heinous to mention” (111). She returns to her own apartment, where she falls asleep, only to awaken to:

The old stress response. The buzz of the heat bugs from the fields—the beet fields—the magnetic fields. [...] The sudden nauseous pain extends from somewhere around my navel and across my abdomen. I bend double as I attempt to ride the tide, my mind reeling backwards as it does in its efforts to find the source, the cause, the spark. (112)

Naomi’s illness appears to be a terrified reaction to sex, or even to physical proximity to another person. It is also linked to the intolerable labour in the beet fields and to her separation from her mother: Aunt Emily tells Naomi that she “became sickly after Mother disappeared” (112), indicating that physical illness is not only a psychosomatic response to sex, following Naomi’s experiences of sexual violation, but a physical manifestation of emotional and psychological traumas, more generally. It is, therefore, an indirect physical reaction to the traumas of the war that took her mother from her, and the internment and dispersal policies that sent her to Granton and the beet fields. But, in depicting Naomi’s first experience of this debilitating illness as a response of her sexual violation, Kogawa implicitly connects sexual violation—the stranger in the field—and racism—the Canadian government’s wartime policies that fractured the Japanese-Canadian community.

In *Emily Kato*, this connection is more definite. In this novel, it is Anna Makino and not Naomi who suffers from a debilitating stomach ailment unambiguously linked to both racism and sexual abuse. As a child, Baby Anna Makino is sexually abused by Brother Leroy Sage, the fundamentalist Christian missionary. Years later, after a prolonged departure, Brother Leroy

returns to Granton and, like the stranger in Naomi's story, approaches Anna as she and her family are labouring in the sugar beet field. After a struggle that Anna does not remember,

Brother Leroy was gone, and she was on the ground on the hard clods of earth, pain and dizziness rolling through her. She lay faint and retching in the heat, unable to stop from soiling herself. She heard animal sounds coming from her faraway body. A voice called for her father. (60)

As an adult, Anna continues to suffer from this violent stomach ailment. After Naomi and Anna's sister Kimiko have nursed Anna through an attack during a meeting of several members of the Toronto Japanese-Canadian community, Kimiko tells Naomi that "it's been like this all [Anna's] life [...]. The attack comes and then it passes" (172). Brother Leroy justifies the sexual abuse he inflicts on Anna by employing racist rhetoric to suggest that Anna is an object, less-than-human, a "gift" intended for his personal enjoyment. The effects of this abuse are lasting and debilitating; not only is Anna afflicted with a physical ailment, she internalizes Leroy's racism, learning to despise the racial markers that Leroy uses to justify his abuse. In *Emily Kato*, she expresses revulsion at her racialized body: "You know, of all the people in the world, the Japanese are the most *ooglee*, don't you think? I mean—look at me!" (*Emily Kato* 55). However, as Kamboureli points out, "even when the racialized body repudiates its racialization, it cannot relinquish what it has already absorbed" (*Scandalous Bodies* 185). Despite Anna's desire to erase the markers of race on her body, she finds that she is indelibly marked with both her race, and with the racism that she has absorbed through non-Japanese-Canadian attitudes towards Japanese-Canadians.

The relationship between sexual abuse and racism provides the reader with additional insight to the much-discussed Old Man Gower episode in *Obasan*, in which Naomi, a young

child still living with her family in Vancouver, is sexually abused by a white neighbour. In his discussion of Naomi's childhood abuse by her neighbour Old Man Gower, Arnold Davidson examines Naomi's "complicity" (*Writing* 44) in her abuse. Kogawa writes, "I go to seek Old Man Gower in his hideaway. I clamber unbidden onto his lap. His hands are frightening and pleasurable. In the centre of my body is a rift" (*Obasan* 69). This rift that Naomi imagines also serves to separate her from her mother; following the abuse, she begins to imagine herself "a parasite on [her mother's] body, no longer of her mind" (69). Davidson writes, "Naomi desperately denies abuse by claiming that she has consented to whatever was done to her" (44). Naomi's sense of complicity, her silence on the subject of abuse, Davidson implies, compounds the damage inflicted by the abuse itself.

Julie Tharp identifies the source of Naomi's illness as the disappearance of her mother, pointing out that "In *Obasan*, Naomi has expressly connected the feelings of safety provided by her mother with her belly" (215). If, however, we consider this incident as part of a motif within the three novels that connects sexual abuse to the abuses of racism<sup>18</sup>, then we must also see Naomi's sense of complicity in her sexual abuse to include a sense of complicity in the racism that leads to the internment and dispersal policies. It is important to note that Old Man Gower is a white Canadian. In addition, he seems to be complicit in the seizure of Japanese-Canadians' property: one night, Naomi awakens and is frightened to discover that Old Man Gower is in her home, talking to her father:

"I'll keep them for you, Mark. Sure thing." Old Man Gower's voice is unlike the low gurgling sound I am used to when he talks to me alone. "The piano. Books. Garden tools. What else?"

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<sup>18</sup> I think that Kogawa's rewriting of the episode from *Itsuka* to *Emily Kato* is more explicitly related to sexual abuse invites us to do so.

Although I am in the room, he acts as if I am not here. He seems more powerful than Father, larger and more at home even though this is our house. He sounds as if he is trying to comfort my father, but there is a falseness in the tone. The voice is too sure—too strong. (74)

Of course, the Nakanes' possessions are never returned to them; thus, it seems likely that Old Man Gower profits directly from the internment by retaining the objects entrusted to him. Naomi remains marked by "old Man Gower's invasion of both her body and of the family house" (Kamboureli *Scandalous Bodies* 204), and this double violation extends over both "racial and power borders" (203). To sexually violate her therefore means to inscribe upon her a reminder of the racial hegemony that leads to her loss of home, of family, of community, and of power.

Furthermore, when we consider Naomi, Stephen, Anna Makino and the other Japanese-Canadian characters' rejection of all that which marks them as ethnically Japanese—the desire to "blow themselves to bits," as Emily puts it-- Naomi's sense of complicity in the racism and violence against the Japanese-Canadian community becomes clear. Since "white bourgeois respectability depended on the pathologizing of Japanese Canadians" (Oikawa 80), to be respectable in the midst of white bourgeois Canada is to reproduce this rhetoric of pathology. We have already seen how Stephen Nakane, Anna Makino, and Nikki Kagami in particular, participate in this racist project. But Naomi, who early recognizes the paradox of belonging and not-belonging to white Canadian culture (Stephen's "riddle"), is more ambivalent. Although she reflects that "Anna looks spectacular" (58), her admiration stems in part because Anna has been more successful than her siblings in assimilating white Canadian culture: she is "the tallest of the bunch, the smartest, the most good-looking. Where did she come from?" (56). Naomi's

question here points to Anna's apparent cultural difference: she is not like the rest of her family, who retain visible and significant vestiges of their Japanese heritage. Her physical stature and her academic success within the Canadian school system (like Stephen's), in particular, denote her ability to navigate white Canadian culture more successfully than either her siblings or Naomi. Naomi is caught in a double-bind: she neither rejects that which is Japanese, nor is she able to fully embrace it. Her sense of complicity in her abuse, therefore, can be read as a sense of guilt over an assumed complicity in the racism that has performed a "cultural lobotomy" (55) on her community. Kogawa describes Naomi's illness in *Itsuka* as "a body at war, the soldiers so confused they keep out friends and welcome foes" (113). Naomi's "riddle"—to be at once *Japanese* and *Canadian*, but never allowed to be *Japanese-Canadian*, to live "somewhere in the hyphen," as Emily puts it—produces this condition of confusion, of a body at war with itself and with its friends. For this reason, Naomi welcomes Old Man Gower's invasive hands and retreats from Cedric's embrace. She reproduces within herself the racism, violence and isolation that are at the root of both Old Man Gower's sexual abuse, and the dispersal policy that separates her from family and friends.

The abuse that Naomi suffers at the hands of Old Man Gower isolates her; it is at least partially responsible for her resistance to physical intimacy with either Hank Unrau, earlier in *Itsuka* and *Emily Kato*, or later, Cedric. As we have seen, the abuse also heightens her sense of separation from her mother. In addition, by enshrouding the event in silence, Naomi further isolates herself, as she is unable to communicate her shame or her suffering. This silence is partly an act of self-protection—"If I speak, I will split open and spill out. To be whole and safe I must hide in the foliage, odourless as a newborn fawn" (*Obasan* 68)—and partly the result of Old Man Gower's coercion. "'Sh', Mr. Gower says. One finger is on his lips and the other hand

on my mouth” (68). He at once invites Naomi to emulate him by placing a finger on his own lips, inviting her to be complicit in the abuse, and compels her silence by covering her mouth with his other hand. The finger to the lips conceals the reality of the situation: that she cannot cry out because he is physically silencing her. The gesture, however, compels her to see herself as a participant in, and not a victim of, the abuse. It masks his own control of the situation, effectively concealing the other hand that covers, maintains a silence, forcing Naomi to assume a complicit role in the silence which he has, in reality, enforced without her consent. Naomi is, of course, no more complicit in the silence than she is in the abuse—but she is made to believe that she is. Similarly, she, like Stephen and Anna Makino, is not responsible for the racism enacted against the Japanese-Canadian community, though they are made to feel that they are. The rhetoric of belonging, of nationhood, that invites them to celebrate “our” World War II victory is the virtual finger over the mouth of this community. The “lie” (68) that Old Man Gower tells Naomi—that he must bring her into his home to tend to her wounded knee—is echoed by “THE lie” (*Emily Kato* 227) in *Itsuka* and *Emily Kato*: that Japanese-Canadians are traitors to Canada, and are therefore responsible for their own imprisonment. The resulting feelings of complicity and guilt are effective weapons in maintaining the dispersal policy that fractured and fragmented the Japanese-Canadian community. Each character’s ambivalence about that community, about things “too Japanese,” isolates them from one another, and prevents them from reforming the community that has been dispersed and destroyed.

#### **4. Reclaiming the Body, Obtaining Redress**

Kogawa uses images of racialized bodies that are disabled by illness, age and infirmity to illustrate the damage inflicted on the body of the Japanese-Canadian community. Not

surprisingly, therefore, personal healing, both physical and emotional, is closely tied to the reestablishment of the Japanese-Canadian community. In *Itsuka*, the connection between communal and personal healing is most evident: Naomi arrives in Toronto, wounded, silent, and firmly resistant to Emily's attempts to engage her in the community's activism<sup>19</sup>. It is in this version of the text that the important relationship between personal and communal healing is most evident: Naomi remains isolated and traumatised until she can finally engage in activism and establish relationships with other Japanese- Canadians.

Roy Miki writes that, for the *nisei*<sup>20</sup> in Canada, the dispersal policy and destruction of the Japanese-Canadian community force it to adopt "diminished forms" of its former, unified existence, resulting in a "'club' mentality" ("Asiancy" 141) characterized by the appearance of assimilation with white majority culture. *Niseis*, he argues, continue to meet and to share personal and cultural experiences, but only in private, and in small groups. *Sanseis*<sup>21</sup>, on the other hand, affected by a "weakening of community-based values," are "moulded by the dynamics of dispersal, the community in fragments, the language disappearing—and the more open road of assimilation" (141). In other words, the effects of the dispersal policy continue to expand, as the Japanese-Canadian community continues to suffer from its effects. Individual Japanese-Canadians, particularly *sanseis* such as Naomi, feel isolated from one another. In Kogawa's novels, this fragmentation of community and the disappearance of a sense of shared experience and culture is, as we have seen, connected to the racist rhetoric of belonging to Canadian culture. It becomes increasingly difficult to identify oneself as Japanese-Canadian; to be "Japanese" is to be the enemy, and to be "Canadian" is to belong, to repudiate images of

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<sup>19</sup> In *Emily Kato*, Naomi happily reconnects with old friends from Granton, Slocan and Vancouver, and attends Japanese-Canadian League meetings.

<sup>20</sup> Second-generation Japanese-Canadians

<sup>21</sup> Third-generation Japanese-Canadians

Japaneseness as dangerous and alien. However, since the personal traumas that Naomi and other Japanese Canadian characters in the novel experience are the result of the same racism and violence that result in the dispersal policy, it is only by addressing the root cause of both personal trauma and the destruction of community that either can be overcome. In other words, in order to achieve personal healing, Naomi must work towards healing her community.

In both *Itsuka* and *Emily Kato*, Emily convinces Naomi to participate in a communal visit to the hospital, delivering “Memories” and “Japanese food” (121) to elderly *isseis* who have been hospitalized for end-of-life care. In *Itsuka*, Naomi, Emily, Mrs. Makino, Anna Makino and her husband Brian visit Mr. Kagamihara, Nikki Kagami’s elderly uncle.<sup>22</sup> Naomi and Emily recognize that Mr. Kagamihara (whose name has been shortened to Kagami) has not received the care he requires, because the *issei* “never complain” (124). During their visit, Emily and the others inquire about his health, and bring him a tape-recorded message from Nakayama-sensei, who “was with [them] in [their] early years, [...] then in the crowded halls of the mountain internment camp of Slocan” (124). They bring the Japanese food for which the *isseis* are “starved” (121) in the Canadian hospitals. Like Obasan in her later years, Mr. Kagami and the other recipients of these visits have been severed from their community; the hospitals are not adapted to caring for the Japanese-Canadian bodies that are housed there. The Western food, wheelchairs labelled with truncated names (“Kagami” instead of “Kagamihara”) and the doctors and nurses who cannot speak Japanese and who do not understand *issei* reserve set these racialized bodies adrift. These community visits to the hospitals are an attempt to reclaim these bodies. Their attentiveness to the health of those who never complain, their gifts of familiar food and memories represent an act of repatriation: returning a racialized and isolated body to its cultural community.

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<sup>22</sup> In *Emily Kato*, the elderly patient is Mr. Makino.



Kogawa's Toronto Japanese-Canadian community is, as Emily says, a "culture of funerals" (130) as well as a culture of hospitals. At Mr. Kagami's funeral, Naomi expresses a sense of comfort and belonging that echoes that which she experiences in Hawaii: in both places, she notices that her height matches those of the other Japanese-Canadians (or Japanese-Americans) around her. "Normally at any public event my view of the room is someone's broad back, but here at this short people's gathering, I can see clear up to the front of the church" (130), she reflects. At the funeral, she feels "as if [she] should know every stranger here by name" (130): she feels at home, surrounded by faces that are, if not known, at least familiar. It is by reclaiming and repatriating the Japanese-Canadian bodies in the novel—those that are healthy, as well as those that are elderly, unwell, or even dead, that the Japanese-Canadian community begins to reform, and that its individual members begin to heal. There is, however, something deeply disturbing in configuring the Japanese-Canadian community as one of hospitals and funerals; it suggests an underlying illness that threatens the community. To be a culture of illness and death is to be unwell, dying, and not whole or healthy.

In addition, Naomi does not begin the novel with a sense of the comfort that community can offer. In the first chapter of *Itsuka*, Naomi compares herself to a "rodeo calf" (5), "lassoed" (4) by her new life in Toronto and her relationship with Father Cedric. Over the next several chapters, Kogawa offers her readers a glimpse of Naomi's stunted life on the Alberta prairies, where she sees herself as "a transplant" and "a traitor" (43). After Obasan's lingering illness (which Naomi must bear alone) and death, Emily abruptly orders her niece to quit her teaching job, and arranges a trip for both of them to Japan, then Hawaii. It is in Hawaii that Naomi feels comfortable and at home for the first time. She discovers that, "Unlike us crippled bonsai in Canada, [Hawaii's *niseis* have] retained community here" (85). Naomi reveals that in Hawaii

she is “able to eat Japanese food and speak English” (86); she does not feel bound by a riddle or a paradox. Instead, she discovers that a unified Japanese-American identity is possible. While in Hawaii, Naomi dreams of a tiny man, “who loves” but who is “no one recognizable” (86). However, she chooses not to stay in a “room where love lurks,” but instead to “venture on” and face the “infinitesimal” (86). Like Emily, who comments that “If belonging was all that mattered in life [...] she’d move to Hawaii in a flash” (85), she recognizes that she cannot stay in this comfortable, safe, Japanese-American community; instead, she returns home to Canada and to her own fragmented, dispersed and minoritized Japanese-Canadian community.

Naomi’s dream-epiphany, however, does not mean that she is able to immediately embrace her aunt’s insistent efforts to reform their community and to claim redress for Canada’s internment and dispersal policies. In an effort to compel Naomi to “meet people” (93), Emily brings her reluctant niece to a Toronto JC League meeting. Not surprisingly, Naomi feels like an intruder there. “I’d dearly love to turn around and leave,” the narrator tells us, “but she’s hooked her arm in mine and she’s pulling me in” (93-94). However, her sense of alienation and her desire to isolate herself gradually give way to a nascent communal spirit that she first experiences at the office of the multicultural magazine *Bridge*, which becomes “a haven” (99) for her. Naomi begins to feel a kinship with the *Bridge* staffers: Eugenia, Morty, and especially Father Cedric. Gradually, she begins to accept her role in restoring the Japanese-Canadian community, bridging the gaps left between its individual members and isolated ‘clubs’ by the dispersal policy. First, she attends a NJCL redress meeting at Anna Makino’s home. This meeting is, in part a reaction to Nikki Kagami’s redress efforts, wherein “Her meetings are closed, her talks are secret” (147). Unlike Emily, Anna, Cedric, and the other NJCL members, Kagami’s efforts exclude other members of the Japanese-Canadian community, mirroring the

unilateral decision-making process that resulted in the internment and dispersal policies.

Kagami's efforts are an extension of the Canadian government's ongoing project to divide the Japanese-Canadian community, as she transforms redress into "a painfully divisive community matter" (210).

Conversely, Emily and the members of her camp seek a cooperative process, wherein redress is itself a part of the process of reforming the fractured community. It is the "magician at work" that Naomi imagines to be responsible for "bringing Japanese Canadians back" (156). However, at this initial NJCL meeting at Anna Makino's home, Naomi is still unsure about her own commitment to the redress movement; she is "not a true believer in redress" or "a true believer in anything much" (154). Later, she is "cowed" (168) to discover that she has become inextricably involved in the "militant" (167) movement that counters Nikki Kagami's unilateral redress movement. It is not until she faces Stephen's determination to avoid any involvement with Emily's efforts that she is stirred into action. "This is the man who never once condescended to visit and comfort the old woman who worshipped him. This is the man who would not stoop and lend his name to help his community" (185-86), she reflects. She recognizes in Stephen's apathy the connection between a personal commitment to family (in his neglect of Obasan) and political commitment (in his rejection of the redress movement). In other words, his desire to isolate himself, both personally and politically, emblemizes the continued legacy of the dispersal policy. Stephen, like the *sansei* Miki describes, chooses assimilation into the white majority culture, ignoring both his sister's and his community's need for healing. Naomi, however, becomes active in the NJCL's attempt to attain redress and restitution for all Japanese-Canadians, effectively becoming a part of the reformation of the Japanese-Canadian community. By the end of the novel, Naomi is marching with other Japanese-Canadians in Ottawa, proud of

her participation in “a rally, a reunion, a brave little dream” (260). Naomi’s reconnection with other Japanese-Canadians is emblematic of the Canadian Japanese-Canadian community’s attempts in the novel to cooperate to achieve a common political goal, and to regain the sense of togetherness that was destroyed by the internment and dispersal policies through their efforts to obtain redress from the Canadian government.

Naomi’s recovery is not only a physical and emotional healing; in order to become physically whole once again, Naomi must also regain a sense of community and belonging, as well as a sense that she and other Japanese-Canadians have obtained justice and political restitution. In the chapter that follows the account of Mr. Kagami’s funeral, Kogawa writes of Naomi’s and Cedric’s “fairytale afternoon” (135) in the Ontario forest. And although the next day, her body is once again rocked by the stomach ailment, Naomi recognizes that her body is in the process of healing: “the pain, the nausea, is creeping away and my body is calming” (139). Finally, near the novel’s end, Naomi has healed enough to be able to experience sexual contact with Cedric, “As casually as breath, [...] safely, softly” (207).

In the final chapter, Naomi, who has attended Prime Minister Mulroney’s Parliamentary apology, reflects, “I am whole. I am as complete as when I was a very young child” (276). “I feel I’ve just had a tumour removed,” (276), one attendee comments, while another compares the apology to “a vaccine” (276). The apology, a political act obtained through relentless communal lobbying, is described as a remedy for physical ailments. Likewise, Naomi’s own physical/emotional trauma has apparently been healed by her community’s political success. And the community itself regains a sense of health and togetherness through redress. Since the initial internment and dispersal policies aimed at dismantling Vancouver’s Japanese-Canadian community caused personal traumas that manifest themselves both physically and emotionally, it

is not surprising that personal healing can only occur as the Japanese-Canadian community works together to obtain an apology and redress by the Canadian government. Roy Miki writes that following the internment,

the disintegration of community did not erase all of its traces, but forged that allegiance, now removed from that geocultural place on the West Coast, back into familial ties, local community organizations [...]. In other words, though the community bond was broken, community ties continued in diminished forms. (“Asiancy” 141)

It is this bond, these community ties that Naomi discovers in *Itsuka*; she overcomes her initial resistance to her involvement in the redress movement—her “self-denial, self-effacement, passivity, [...] fear of politics” (“Asiancy” 141)—and embrace her role within this reformed Japanese-Canadian community before she can experience personal healing and wholeness. And the community itself must recover its sense of wholeness, growing beyond the “diminished forms” in which it has been forced to retreat before its individual members can recover their own sense of belonging. The apology and monetary redress are important not only because they address past wrongs and injuries, but also “for the sake of rerouting the future” (McGonegal, “Future” 66): redress allows members of the Japanese-Canadian community to heal and to imagine a future that can overcome the traumas of the past. The health of the body of the community is tied to the health of the individual bodies of its members, and both are tied to the apology and monetary redress that acknowledge the wrongness of the political act that initially wounded a community and its members.

## 5. Resisting Resolution

Like *Obasan*, *Itsuka* has a double-ending: first, the Japanese-Canadian community's triumph as it finally receives redress from the Canadian government, and second, an official document acknowledging that "the forced removal and internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II and their deportation and expulsion following the war, was unjust" (280). *Emily Kato* ends differently: although Naomi and other Japanese-Canadians witness the government's apology here too, the narrative does not close in Ottawa. Kogawa appends an additional chapter in which the narrator speaks of the sixteen years that follow the 1988 apology. Emily and other *isseis* and *niseis*, including Mrs. Makino and Emily's friend Dan, have died. The narrator speaks from an explicitly post-9/11 perspective: "Hatred continues. Racism remains. But the work of love is deeper, brighter, better" (*Emily Kato* 272). Kogawa compares the internment to Canadian and American attitudes towards Muslims living in North America; "government interventions in the past against Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians must not be revisited on Muslim citizens today," she writes (272). It is only after this additional chapter that Kogawa appends the government document: the same Acknowledgement that closed *Itsuka*. Once again, Kogawa resists closure, and refuses to allow the offence to be forgotten. Her inclusion of this document serves to memorialize the injury; this memorialization, like Sara Ahmed's understanding of apology, both "functions as a sign of an injury ... to pay back an unpayable debt, or to compensate for what cannot be compensated" (119). In addressing other, recent racist events, Kogawa implies that the Internment must not be forgotten because racism continues to exist, and to affect Canadians.

As a reader, I must ask: why *Emily Kato*? Why rewrite *Itsuka*? The major characters and themes remain the same. Both novels end on a note of joy and hope: Naomi is healed and whole

in a way that she is not at the end of *Obasan*. Japanese-Canadians have obtained an official apology and monetary redress. The effects of the dispersal policy appear to be ending as the Japanese-Canadian community has overcome much of the fragmentation and divisiveness that plague it throughout the three novels. By rewriting the novel, republishing it under a different title and adding a final chapter that warns obliquely of the possibility that Canada may reproduce the fear and alienation of the internment in post-9/11 North America, Kogawa seems to be resisting the closure and the sense of fulfillment that she apparently affords her characters at the end of *Itsuka*. This resistance to closure is compounded when we consider Kogawa's decision to append government documents to the ends of each of her three novels. It is not possible to consider the fictional lives of her characters as concluded. By including these government documents, Kogawa reminds us that the effects of the internment and dispersal policies are very real, and that they continue to reverberate in the lives of Canadians today. Furthermore, her allusion to post-9/11 politics at the end of *Emily Kato* makes it impossible to conclude that, as a nation, we are no longer inclined to victimize racialized minorities by denying their rights and evicting them from established judicial processes. She thereby thwarts "revolutionary" (Miki "Asiancy" 143) readings of her work. Moreover, she challenges our conception of the past as peaceful and accepting, demanding that we "connect the everyday official story of Canada as a kinder, gentler land, with the wilful forgetting past and present practices of domination" (Razack, "Making Canada White" 184). The inclusion of political documents reminds the readers that the novel itself is a political act: one that speaks out against the racism enacted against Japanese-Canadians. Although communal political action helps to reform a fragmented community and heal its members in the novel, Kogawa's resistance to closure remains revolutionary, and while Naomi herself has experienced a renewed sense of hope and wholeness, the facts of the

internment remain, as “nothing has happened to change the social and political contexts of Naomi’s experiences” (144).<sup>23</sup>

Kogawa’s novels narrate an individual story of loss and redemption; more than that, however, they remind the reader of the political realities in which her narrative is based. By writing and rewriting, by weaving a fictional narrative with historical, political documents, and by reminding the reader of the ways in which history has repeated itself, Kogawa avoids the kind of resolutionary approach to both her narrative and to the historical realities in which her fiction is based by resisting narrative closure: she appends government documents that remind the reader that the political-historical events of the novel are neither fictional, nor entirely resolved (particularly in the case of *Obasan*), and by publishing, then rewriting a sequel. However, Kogawa does not allow her characters to remain traumatized and victimized by their individual and collective pasts. In this chapter, I have shown how, through community involvement and cooperative political action, Naomi and the other characters in Kogawa’s novels can emerge healed and whole, though Kogawa reminds her readers that the traumas of the internment and dispersal policies are neither erased nor obliterated. Her novels therefore testify both to the power of healing and redemption, to the importance of community in addressing individual traumas that result from racism, and to the importance of keeping the injustices of the Internment alive in Canadian public memory. In the next chapter, I will probe this notion of resolution and personal and communal healing further, showing how the affective bond at the heart of witnessing is essential in allowing both communities and individuals to come to terms with the traumas born of systemic racism.

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<sup>23</sup> While Julie McGonegal argues that forgiveness is figured as liberating and empowering in *Obasan*, she also acknowledges that for Naomi, “the benefits of mourning, as well as its attendant possibilities in the form of closure and healing, may be overrated given that no amount of remembering can provide an adequate or equivalent return to the past” (“Future” 61).



## Chapter 3:

### Empathy and Witnessing in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*

In June 1939, the MS St Louis, a vessel carrying more than nine hundred German Jewish refugees, was turned away from Cuba with most of its passengers still aboard. Only two days' journey from Halifax, the St Louis requested entry into Canada. Its request was denied, despite appeals to the Canadian government. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, however, remained adamant in his refusal, declaring that the St Louis and its passengers were “not a Canadian problem” (Abella 204). Most of the refugees, having already been turned away from the United States, as well as Cuba, returned to Europe, “where many would die in the gas chambers of the Third Reich” (Abella 204).

The question of what is and what is not a “Canadian problem” is not confined to our responsibility for refugee claims or international conflicts—an issue that I will discuss at greater length in Chapter Six and in my Conclusion. As I've already demonstrated, the attempt to define a normative Canadian identity that excludes potentially threatening outsiders was at the heart of the Japanese-Canadian internment: in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Aunt Emily's insistence that “What this country did to us, it did to itself” (35) represents her struggle to demonstrate that redress for the Japanese-Canadian internment *is* a Canadian problem in the face of the state's attempt to designate Japanese-Canadians as threatening foreigners. Indeed, this question—of what, exactly, constitutes a *Canadian* problem is at the heart of this dissertation, and recurs in each of the texts that I study, including Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*.

More than fifty years after the St Louis was turned away from Canadian shores, Anne Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces* considers whether or not the Holocaust and its legacies are a Canadian problem. Unlike Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, *Itsuka*, and *Emily Kato*, Michaels' novel examines a traumatic event that occurred outside of Canada, but her protagonists—Jakob Beer, the Polish-born Jewish immigrant, and Ben, who is born in Canada to Jewish immigrant parents—are both Canadian. This novel explores what it is to be Canadian and a member of the Jewish diaspora, to negotiate loss and trauma that occurred outside of Canada but that are remembered and often relived within Canada. In addition, it explores what it means to share memories intergenerationally, within and among families, and across cultures. In this sense, it echoes Smaro Kamboureli's argument that "who we are as Canadians is contingent upon how we move from one context to another, how we cross the thresholds of memories, how we embrace or, for that matter, keep away the differences we encounter, how we negotiate our histories in the context of other histories" (*Making a Difference* xxx).

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman writes, "Oftentimes, contemporary works of art use testimony as the subject of their drama and the medium of their literal transmission" (5). This is true of *Fugitive Pieces*, a book that is about its characters' struggle to testify to the traumas they have endured, and which presents their narratives as highly personal and partial testimonies, attempts to "bea[r] witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape [them], a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker" (15).

*Fugitive Pieces* has two parts: the narrator-protagonist of the first part is Jakob Beer, a Holocaust survivor who eventually emigrates to Canada. The narrator of the second part is Ben, the Canadian-born son of Holocaust survivors, who struggles to bear witness for his parents and for Jakob. The novel's second half examines the difficulties of testifying to events that one has not directly witnessed, while at the same time emphasizing the personal, social, and cultural work of bearing witness. Quoting Michaels, D.M.R. Bentley calls the novel "an exercise in 'poetic knowing,' an epistemological mode that Michaels carefully distinguishes from mere knowledge" (Bentley). Here, "poetic knowing" is imagined in part as a challenge to "Adorno's 1955 pronouncement that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'" (Bentley, Adorno qtd. in Bentley). Asked to comment on the aestheticism of her prose, Michaels has said that "All writing is about time that is lost, a desire to retrieve experience, whether biographical or fictional. We are, at the very least, retrieving experience from silence" (Gorjup). We can understand "poetic knowing," then, to inhabit the space between memory and creativity, or fact and invention, in which the writer "retriev[es] experience from silence." Although that which has been forgotten or erased from history cannot be replaced or restored, "poetic knowing" offers the opportunity to substitute these losses with new knowledge and new understanding.

This mode of witnessing is certainly a powerful one for some characters in the novel—most notably, Jakob. However, the novel offers other modes of witnessing, in addition to "poetic knowing." Ben, who, because he was born in Canada after the Holocaust, is the character who most obviously and most painfully finds himself unable to "*possess or own* the truth" (Felman 15); he discovers that witnessing does not necessarily mean being the bearer of direct testimony. In other words, witnessing does not have to entail speaking one's own experiences, or that which one has experienced directly. For Ben, bearing witness comes to mean "testifying to that which

cannot be seen” (Oliver 16), but “what you believe through faith” (18). Bearing witness comes to mean accepting the deeply subjective, affective, and interpersonal experience of sharing histories. This is a novel that challenges the primacy of certain modes of testimony, while at the same time emphasizing the direct, affective interpersonal nature of witnessing through sharing stories and experiences.

Drawing on the work of Dina Wardi, Marita Grimwood points out that “a high proportion of contemporary Jewish family memoirists are women” (9), in part because “in Jewish families the role of taking care of emotional problems within the family is generally a feminine role” (Wardi qtd. in Grimwood 9). Likewise, Kelly Oliver contends that women are more attuned to “changes in affective energy or mood” (14), and that this attentiveness enables “response-ability” (15) a word Oliver uses to suggest the ability and the ethical responsibility to listen to and address others, and which she associates with the ability to elicit testimony from another. Despite the essentialism at the heart of Oliver’s argument, the notion that women are more attuned to affective energies is useful in understanding the female characters in *Fugitive Pieces*. Susan Gubar, for instance, has suggested that the women in the novel “play supporting roles as sacrificial muses or nurturing helpmates. To this extent, the book may be thought to reinstate a feminine secondariness” (250). Gubar further comments, however, that

To the extent that Michaels's female characters become repositories of memories not their own and thus bearers of the conscience memory lends consciousness, they represent the connection between posttraumatic mourning, healing retrospection facilitated by witnesses of witnesses, and highly conventional forms of feminine caregiving. (267)

As Gubar's discussion of femininity and "consciousness" in *Fugitive Pieces* suggests, the affective relationship at the centre of the transmission of testimony is essential in Michaels' work. And, indeed, it is the male protagonists' relationships with the women in the novel that enable them to become effective witnesses. Through intimacy and the ability to empathize with others, they learn to bear witness to events that they experience directly and to those that they do not. As Oliver puts it, "love is the responsibility to become attuned to our responses to the world and other people" (20).

Oliver takes up Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's study of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors and describes the tension inherent in "The double meaning of witnessing—*eyewitness testimony* based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can't be seen, on the other" (16). She associates the former with "historical facts," and the latter with "psychoanalytic truth" (16), thereby emphasizing the subjective nature of witnessing. She places the idea of witnessing, and the ethical responsibility that is, she argues, at the heart of this activity, in opposition to the desire for recognition.

Oliver argues that "oppression and subordination affect their victims at the level of their sense of themselves as subjects" (8), and that witnessing restores subjectivity, in that those who witness can "take up a position as speaking subjects" (7). She argues that response-ability and address-ability—the ability to enable response, and to address the other—are the conditions of subjectivity and witnessing: "Subjectivity is founded on the ability to respond to, and address, others—what I am calling witnessing. Insofar as subjectivity is made possible by the ability to respond, response-ability is its founding possibility" (15). Subjectivity, Oliver argues, is central to witnessing. She identifies an "ethical obligation at the heart of subjectivity," one that is formulated by "the ethical obligation to respond and to enable response-ability from others" (15).

Her insistence that there is an ethical obligation “inherent in the process of witnessing” (15) adds another dimension to the relationship that Laub has identified as existing between the witness and the person listening to (or reading) the testimony. Laub writes that “Testimonies are not monologues.... The witnesses are talking to *somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for a long time” (70-71), and that furthermore, this *somebody* is necessary to both the witness and to the story that s/he has to tell; “The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of actual events” (79). In Laub’s conception, the listener enables the survivor to “[reclaim] his position as witness” (85) because the act of listening confirms the reality of the survivor’s tale. Oliver amplifies the ethical dimension of this exchange and foregrounds the significance of reciprocity when she suggests that if individual subjectivity “is made possible by the ability to respond” (15), then the listener (or the reader) is necessarily also a witness engaging in a dialogue with the survivor. Oliver’s insistence on “response-ability” as the founding possibility of subjectivity supposes an ethical obligation between subjects who, through this dialogue, both bear the burden and the possibility of witnessing. In other words, to attend to someone else’s testimony is to bear the ethical responsibility to bear witness to that testimony. The listener becomes a sharer in the testimony, and must bear the burden of sharing it, in turn. Oliver writes that a “circulation of affective and psychic energies ... sustain[s] the process of witnessing,” and that “Witnessing is the heart of the circulation of energy that connects us, obligates us, to each other” (20). This circulation of affective energy in *Fugitive Pieces* enables the characters to bear witness to each others’ testimonies, and, in turn, to bear those testimonies themselves. Just as the characters in Kogawa’s fictions find that they must address the injuries inflicted upon the body of the community, as well as on their individual bodies and psyches, Ben, like Jakob, discovers that in

order to bear witness, he must assume the role of witness within his family and also within a community of survivors. By foregrounding the affective relationship and the ethical bond at the heart of witnessing, Michaels implicates the reader in this bond, forging an affective relationship between the reader and the subject matter, and thus helping to foster his / her ethical responsibility to respond to the testimony s/he reads. Michaels reminds us that, in Jewish tradition, “forefathers are referred to as ‘we,’ not ‘they,’” and that “This encourages empathy and a responsibility to the past but, more importantly, it collapses time” (159). Crucially, Michaels calls for a collapsing of the distance between reader and subject matter, evoking a sense of empathy and responsibility through her writing.

### **1. Jakob**

Many critics of Michaels’ novel have taken issue with the novel’s deeply poetic prose. Meira Cook, for instance, argues that “Michaels’ lush, poetic discourse jars uneasily with the horrors she is narrating and so contributes to our discomfort as readers” (16). And Stephen Henighan has argued that *Fugitive Pieces* provides “an interpretive scheme for ignoring the unraveling of surrounding reality” (155). For Henighan, the novel fails to realistically render either the atrocities of the Holocaust or the particularities of Canadian culture. He laments that although this is a Canadian novel set partly in Toronto “at a time when Toronto’s streets are filling up with homeless people, it depicts the city in terms of its *geology*” (147). For Henighan, the novel’s particular attention to geology ignores the particularities of contemporary life in Toronto. (Consider, for example, Jakob’s reflection that to look back on recent history “was impossible, absurd,” but to “go back millennia—ah! That was... nothing” (30)). Henighan also complains that the parts of the novel that are set in Canada do not do engage with twentieth-century

Canadian life. Indeed, while the Jews of Zakyntos are discussed at length, the MS St Louis is never mentioned in the novel.

Although I agree with Henighan that the absence of contemporary Canadian events is jarring, it is important to note that the failure to consider the political and the social is not Michaels's failure, but her characters'. For much of the novel, Jakob and Ben grapple with their inability to engage with the present world, and cast their gaze obsessively into the distant past, instead. That does not mean, however, that the contemporary moment is absent from the novel. The Canadian historical event that Michaels writes about at greatest length is the flooding of the Humber River—not emphasizing its impact on the residents, but foregrounding its geological effects: “In the bank, four wooden knobs, evenly spaced: excavate an inch or two and the legs of a chair will emerge. A few feet downriver; a dinner plate—perhaps with the ever-popular blue willow pattern—sticks out of the bank horizontally like a shelf” (202). This passage in particular evokes the geological landscape of Toronto via small physical details that are sometimes richly sensual, sometimes visceral and disturbing. The passage in which the geology of the Humber River is evoked, for instance, demonstrates the lasting importance of physical detail that evokes everyday life and, simultaneously, the lasting effect of particular historical moments on landscape and memory alike. When Michaels describes “the Humber's distinctive sediment, laid down in October 1954” (202), she is not describing geography that is devoid of human presence, but rather one that eloquently evokes the ordinariness of everyday life and the domestic space in the cutlery-studded landscape. At the same time, these objects embedded in the soil attest to the catastrophe that changed both human life, and the landscape itself: the flooding of the Humber River.



Furthermore, the description of the flooded Humber and its geological effects on the landscape enables Michaels to demonstrate the degree to which the Holocaust continues to resonate in Canada. When a neighbor attempts to warn Ben's parents of the impending flood, Ben's father reacts with rage and anxiety; he "slammed the door in [his neighbour's] face" and "paced, washing his hands in the air with rage" (245). Like the Toronto landscape, which remains permanently marked by items lost in the flood, Ben's father is so marked by the terror and loss he experiences during the Holocaust that he is unable to recognize the goodwill that motivates his neighbour's warning, reacting with fear and anger, and eventually, barricading himself and his family on the flooded home's roof, where they must be rescued. By preceding this episode with the description of the cutlery-studded landscape, Michaels evokes a kind of sympathetic identification in her readers who might recognize the ordinariness of the lives marked by this catastrophe.

Michaels has defended her lyrical, metaphor-laden prose, arguing "that poetic prose can do many things, one of which is to bring the reader in very close to the emotional weight of the scene" (Tihanyi). Here, she suggests that what is most important to her is not rendering a historically accurate account of history, but capturing the deeply subjective and affective experience of the individual who experiences these events. While I agree with Henighan that Michaels's representation of the Holocaust is often "disquietingly lush" (147), I find that, in her evocations of the affective bonds between survivors and witnesses, Michaels achieves the emotional intensity she strives for. This "emotional weight," however, is sometimes achieved at the expense of a fully realized rendering of the historical events Michaels narrates, resulting in aporias that critics like Henighan and Cook find unsettling. But, in both sections of the novel, the elisions of historical events and Canadian particularity signal both Jakob's and Ben's difficulty

in effectively bearing witness. However, as I noted above, the failure to engage with contemporary Toronto is not Michaels's, but her characters, and they must grapple with their inability to recognize the significance of the world around them throughout the novel.

Furthermore, though the novel does not render a clear historical sense of Canada immediately following World War II, *Fugitive Pieces* participates in the “cultural and political climate [of the] mid-1980s and the mid-1990s,” a period in Canada that was, according to Kamboureli, “intensely characterized by the specific manifestations of the trait that Canadians want to believe is peculiar to them, anxiety about identity” (*Making a Difference* xxii). For Michaels does express this anxiety in her depiction of Jakob and Athos as recent immigrants to Canada. As a child, newly arrived in Toronto, Jakob is terrified by an encounter with a heavily-accented butcher; in reply to Jakob's request for fish, the butcher ostensibly says, “We have suspicions” (94). Jakob flees, seeking out Athos's protection. After confronting the butcher, Athos laughingly explains, “He was saying ‘chickens’ not ‘suspicions’” (95). For Jakob, the Holocaust survivor, Toronto's immigrant-rich culture, signaled here through the Butcher's accented English, is transformed into a terrifying experience—one that he interprets through the lens of the terror that he experienced fleeing Europe.

And, while Henighan and others have argued that Michaels's lyrical prose is problematic, and results in a novel that does not engage with contemporary Canadian life, others have defended the novel's poetic language. For Merle Williams and Stefan Polatinsky, the novel is “*poethical*” (6). “The *poethics* of writing,” they contend, “mobilizes itself in order to bear witness, impossibly, to that which escapes historical representation” (6, emphasis in original). The novel's tone and language, in this view, do not downplay the massive traumas of the Holocaust, but instead, gesture to its significance in terms of its unrepresentability. The novel's

*poethics* remind us, as do Scarry and Caruth, that trauma escapes representation, and represents itself through silence and aporia. For Marita Grimwood, these aporias are evident in Jakob Beer's "failure to 'witness' his family's catastrophe visually" (117). A small child, Jakob is hiding "behind the wallpaper in the cupboard" (Michaels 6) when the soldiers murder his parents and kidnap his sister. As a result, he "did not witness the most important events of [his] life" (17). He "[witnesses] in sound" (Grimwood 118), but is not an eyewitness. He experiences his mother's death as the sound of buttons falling on the floor: "She kept her buttons in a chipped saucer. I heard the rim of the saucer in circles on the floor. I heard the spray of buttons, little white teeth" (Michaels 7). This image—buttons as little white teeth—recurs throughout the novel, a symbol of the repetitive experience of remembering and re-experiencing a traumatic event. It is, indeed, a poetic metaphor, but in describing buttons as teeth, Michaels evokes a grotesquely violent image: human teeth, and not buttons, spraying on the floor. It emphasizes the horror of witnessing blindly, of having to imagine that which cannot be seen, as sounds take on a meaning more terrible than the banal objects that are their source. The buttons become *the mother's* teeth, violently knocked out. In its microscopic focus, this single image becomes the locus of Jakob's inability to see what has happened to his family, and his simultaneous inability *not* to hear their deaths. According to Dalia Kandiyoti, this experience of witnessing in sound is "paradigmatic of the hidden or very young child survivor, who, unlike adult survivors of atrocities, cannot bear witness in the same way and always has to imagine the invisible" (301). Because he cannot testify "in the juridical sense of bearing witness to what you know through firsthand knowledge as an eyewitness" (Oliver 18), Jakob's ability to bear witness to his parents' deaths and his sister's disappearance is compromised by his young age and by his inability to see the events. His experience of witnessing is characterized by aporias and fragmentation. As such,

his experiences correspond to our understanding of trauma as isolating and unsharable; Elaine Scarry writes, “Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4), and Cathy Caruth argues that the traumatic event “is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its *possession* of the one who experiences it” (“Introduction” 4, emphasis in original). Jakob, who experiences the loss of his family in a fragmented fashion—he witnesses in sound, but not visually, and he witnesses to his parents’ deaths, but not Bella’s, for she is taken by the soldiers—emblemizes our understanding of what it is to experience trauma. “To be traumatized,” Caruth writes, “is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event” (“Introduction” 4 – 5). Jakob is, indeed, possessed by the event of the Holocaust. “Every moment is two moments” for Jakob; “Alex’s hairbrush propped on the sink; Bella’s brush” (140). His first marriage is haunted by the loss of his family, and by the aporias inherent in the experience of bearing witness to a trauma.

These aporias are most apparent in Michaels’s representation of Bella’s fate. Jakob does not know what becomes of his sister because he does not see the soldiers who enter his home and take her away; his ability to bear witness to her disappearance is therefore compromised. It is therefore significant that his savior, Athos Roussos is, in essence, a professional witness. Athos is a geologist excavating the ancient Polish city of Biskupin; his job is to tell the story of a lost city, to read its fate in the rock and the soil, and then to communicate that story in writing. Jakob, fleeing his home after his parents’ death and his sister’s disappearance, hides in mud, and then, like a “Bog-boy, [he] surfaced into the miry streets of the drowned city” (5), startling Athos, who is working nearby. Together, they flee Poland, Jakob hiding under Athos’ clothes as the two journey to Athos’ home on the island of Zakynthos. Michaels describes them as nested

“Russian dolls. [Jakob] inside Athos, Bella inside [Jakob]” (14). This maternal image feminizes both Athos and Jakob, each carrying another, fetus-like, inside. But Athos is more than a surrogate mother; he is also a diseased body, “[complaining] that he was ill” (13) when they meet guards along the road to Greece. His performance is visceral, deeply convincing: “He didn’t just complain. He whimpered, he moaned. He insisted on describing his symptoms in detail. Until, disgusted and annoyed, they waved us on” (13). Jakob describes himself in these moments as “a blister tight with fear” (13). In this escape strategy, Athos and Jakob redeploy the Nazi language of abjection in order to render Jakob invisible and Athos distasteful. As Julia Kristeva points out, the abject refers to the disintegration of the barrier between subject and object, or between self and other: the abject is “What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). This dissolution of borders allows Athos to subsume Jakob into his own body as an illness, a blister, and also to deploy the risk of contagion, of further disintegration of barriers—between the sick and the healthy—against the guards, allowing Jakob and Athos to arrive safely at Zakynthos. Furthermore, by figuratively subsuming Jakob into his own body, and communicating his presence as bodily distress (complaining of illness and pain), Athos makes this act of rescue an intensely physical experience, one that is literally borne upon his body. This physical proximity, and the self-abjection inherent in carrying a person like a disease upon his body illustrate the degree to which the empathetic relationship in the novel is experienced through embodiment and physical sensation. Jakob becomes a blister, a sore, a parasite—physical images that eloquently evoke the deepening bond between him and his godfather.

Once they arrive at their destination, Jakob hides, learning about the war and the Holocaust only when Athos or his few trusted acquaintances bring him news. He is profoundly

isolated on Zakynthos, and immobilized by fear and grief. “While [Athos] was away,” Michaels writes, “[Jakob] barely moved, frozen with listening. If anyone climbed the hill, [he] hid in a sea chest, a box with a high curved lid; and each time less of [him] emerged” (31). At the same time, however, she reminds us that, despite his fears, his losses, and his cloistered existence, he is relatively free from the horrors of the Holocaust:

While I hid in the radiant light of Athos’ island, thousands suffocated in darkness. While I hid in the luxury of a room, thousands were stuffed into baking stoves, sewers, garbage bins. [...] I didn’t know that while I was on Zakynthos, a Jew could be purchased for a quart of brandy, perhaps four pounds of sugar, cigarettes. I didn’t know that in Athens, they were being rounded up in “Freedom Square.” [...] While Athos taught me about anabatic and katabatic winds, Arctic smoke, and the spectre of Bröcken, I didn’t know that Jews were being hanged by their thumbs in public squares. I didn’t know that when there were too many for the ovens, corpses were being burned in open pits, flames ladled in human fat. I didn’t know that while I listened to stories of explorers in the clean places of the world (snow-covered, salt-stung) and slept in a clean place, men were untangling limbs, the flesh of friends and neighbours, wives and daughters, coming off in their hands. (45-46)

Here, Michaels signals the aporias between what Jakob knows and learns from his hiding place in Athos’s home, and what he later learns about the deaths of other Jews in Europe. The repetition of “while I hid” and “I didn’t know” emphasize Jakob’s sense not only of the magnitude of these events, but also of his very limited awareness of these atrocities at the time they were committed. By stressing the extent to which Jakob exists in physical and social isolation, Michaels begs question about how he eventually come to know about the “baking

stoves, sewers, garbage bins,” the ovens, and the open pits? Is he told by Athos, or by Athos’s friends Daphne and Kostas in Athens? Does he read newspapers or history textbooks after the war? Jakob’s silence on the topic of the mode of transmission of this information how he comes by this information intensifies our awareness of the relationship between the novel and the reader; although Jakob does not specify how he learned of these atrocities, the reader is reminded that s/he is learning them through literature, through the medium of a fictionalized witness who nonetheless recounts historical truths. The novel, itself, is a medium of testimony. Significantly, it is a novel that is populated by writers who are consumed by a need to finish one another’s work: Jakob completes Athos’s book, *Bearing False Witness*. Ben travels to Greece to find, and presumably, to complete Jakob’s journals. Michaels’s novel underscores the importance of communal and affective bonds in the transmission of testimony by crafting a community of writers who must complete one another’s stories.

During this period of isolation in which Jakob is not aware of the brutal realities of the Holocaust, he is not entirely alone; he is protected by Athos. In a novel that stresses the importance of affective bonds in the transmission of testimony, it is significant that Jakob’s “koumbaros” (14), or godfather, “is a geologist and an archaeologist, someone who digs the earth in order to find traces of the past” (Hillger 30). When Jakob first emerges from the mud of Biskupin, Athos is excavating the waterlogged city, essentially serving as a witness to its existence, and preventing the artifacts from disintegrating, thereby preserving it from oblivion:

His job was to solve the preservation problems of the waterlogged structures. Soon after Athos made the decision to take me home with him, Biskupin was overrun by soldiers. We learned this after the war. They burned records and relics. They demolished the

ancient fortifications and houses that had withstood millennia. Then they shot five of Athos's colleagues in the surrounding forest. The others were sent to Dachau.

And that is one of the reasons Athos believed we saved each other. (51)

Jakob's arrival keeps Athos alive, but it also allows him to continue bearing witness to the existence of the Stone and Iron Age city and its inhabitants. After the war, Athos and Jakob emigrate to Toronto, and Athos "burrowed in his room to work on his book, *Bearing False Witness*, which he somehow knew he would never finish, a debt left unpaid to his colleagues at Biskupin" (103). This aptly titled project represents Athos's failed attempt to bear witness for Biskupin and its inhabitants, but also for his own murdered colleagues, and for history itself, which has been obliterated by the Nazi war machine. Athos, however, is unable to complete the book in his lifetime, despite the fact that his attempts to do so "[grow] to take all his strength" (118) and cause a depression that distances him from Jakob. In the end, Jakob, with the assistance of his friend Maurice Salman, takes on "the seemingly unending task of completing Athos's book" (120). Jakob's task, however, differs from Athos's. His is a gift of love, his attempt to "honour Athos's lessons, especially one: to make love necessary" (121). In Oliver's terms, Jakob's work is one of literal response-ability: he makes possible Athos's response to history and Nazi anti-historiography, to Athos's Biskupin colleagues, and to Biskupin itself. Athos's mode of witnessing is his historiography. Jakob's is poetry, storytelling and narrative—which he achieves through affect and the inhabiting of another's story (Athos's, his parents' and his sister's).

Maurice Salman is Jakob's "one lasting friend" (112), and it is he who helps Jakob to complete his *koumbaros's* work. Michaels writes that "Maurice's companionship saved [Jakob]"



from the loneliness and despair of his task. Michaels describes the importance not only of Maurice's friendship to Jakob, but of his friendship with Maurice's wife Irena:

Often Irena would cook for us while we discussed the seemingly unending task of completing Athos's book, *Bearing False Witness*. Sometimes I would look into the kitchen and see her reading a cookbook while she stood over the stove, her long yellow braid over her shoulder like a scarf, and I would have to look away from emotion. Such an ordinary sight, a woman stirring a pot. (120)

Irena is frequently depicted in the domestic space, most often preparing food. Michaels does not attribute any direct dialogue to Irena; she is effectively mute throughout the novel. She and Maurice have two children whom Jakob loves, "as [he] would have loved Bella's children" (174). Irena is the best example of Susan Gubar's argument that the novel's women play "supporting roles as sacrificial muses or nurturing helpmates" (250); however, in doing so, Irena, like Michaela and Naomi, underscores the importance of affective bonds. In the first half of the novel, she represents the idealized, feminine domesticity that Jakob longs for. Maurice, Irena, and their children both comfort Jakob, and remind him that his connections to the domestic space, to family, and to the comfort of intimacy between generations within a family have been severed. Michaels emphasizes both Jakob's longing for this sense of connection between generations, and his isolation: "When they were very young I crouched down to Yosha and Tomas and held their frail, bony shoulders, hoping to remember my father's touch" (174). However, his relationship with the children does not provide Jakob with a sense of connection to his own family. Although his friendship with Maurice allows Jakob to complete Athos's work, and though Maurice's family reminds Jakob of the importance of family bonds, these relationships cannot fully enable Jakob's ability to bear the testimony of his family, or his loss.

Despite his friendships with Athos and Maurice Salman, Jakob remains relatively isolated, and is silent on the topic of his own losses. His first, failed marriage, to Alex, the “blue-blood Marxist” (132), is studded with his silences on the topic of his past and his family. Rather than enable Jakob’s testimonies, “Alex wants to explode [him], set fire to everything. She wants [him] to begin again” (144). Her injunction to “Turn on the lights!” when she finds her husband sitting in their darkened apartment, consumed by “a story eating its way to the surface” (144), is met with both gratitude and frustration:

The moment I’d spent half my day gnawing through misery to reach vanishes under a bulb. ... She never understands, thinks, certainly, that she’s doing me some good, returning me to the world, snatching me from the jaws of despair, rescuing me.

And she is.

But each time a memory or story slinks away, it takes more of me with it. (144)

Alex’s failure to enable Jakob’s testimonies is compounded by Jakob’s failure to bring forth the memories that “slink away.” His reflection that “it’s I who have abandoned her” (145) calls to mind the mutual responsibility at the heart of response-ability. Neither enables a response in the other. What’s more, the affective bonds between Jakob and Alex are tenuous at best. While he is married to Alex, Jakob is unable to bear witness to his traumas, in part because, without a loving relationship, he is unable to transmit his testimonies, or those of the people he has loved. Alex does not invite the transmission of testimony. Instead, she focuses insistently on the present, commenting, “I get more than enough history at home” (136).

As the affective distance between Jakob and Alex grows, however, Michaels emphasizes the bond between Jakob and his sister, Bella. She writes that Jakob “can hear the tapping now,

lying next to Alex” (146)—a tapping that is at once the memory of “Bella tapping on the wall between [their] two rooms, a code [they] invented” (146) as children, and the tapping on the membrane between the living and the dead. For although Athos is haunted by the uncertainty of Bella’s fate, secretly writing letters until the end of his lifetime, trying to find Jakob’s lost sister, Jakob himself finds his godfather’s “search for Bella [...] painfully innocent” (117). Jakob is certain of his sister’s death before he even finds Athos. His communion with Bella is not rooted in the uncertainty of her fate, but in a sense of deep connectedness, of familiar affection, and of responsibility for the dead.

Susan Gubar writes that “empathic relationships between the living and the dead” in the novel are essential to transforming “gender definitions for survivors” (263), allowing Jakob to identify with his sister in a manner that is not emasculating, and that enables his heterosexual relationships. Of course, his relationship to Bella emphasizes the emotional distance between Jakob and Alex. It is not the catalyst for the unraveling of their relationship, but Jakob’s attentiveness to Bella’s coded communication through the wall, while his wife lies next to him in bed, reminds us of Alex’s inability to hear that sound, or to attend to Jakob’s traumatic past. In contrast, we are presented with “his connectedness to his dead sister, a feminine presence essential to his identity that he can reach through his relationships with women” (263). However, his marriage to Michaela both intensifies, and is, in turn, sustained by his identification with Bella. Michaela, who comes to Jakob late in his life, is a presence that enables him to write, to witness, and to experience the familial affective bonds that he yearns for. Paradoxically, in associating Michaela with Bella, Michaela emphasizes their tendency to affirm life for Jakob: he realizes that his closeness with Bella exists so that “when [he’s] close enough, she can push [him] back into the world” (170). Jakob reflects,

Listening to Michaela read, I remember how Bella read poetry; how the yearning in her voice reached me as a child, though I didn't understand the feeling. I realize, half a century after her death, that though my sister never felt herself moving in a man's hands, she must have already loved so deeply, so secretly, that she knew something about the other half of her soul. This is one of Michaela's blessings. (191)

And though Jakob dreams of Bella sitting on the edge of Michaela's bed, and asking Michaela "to describe the feel of the bedcover under her bare legs, 'because you see, just now I am without a body'" (182), "there is no tinge of death in Michaela's skin" (181). Though his empathetic attachment to his sister is intensified by his relationship to Michaela, his love for both his sister and his wife tend, at this moment in the novel, to draw him toward life. In fact, Michaels emphasizes Jakob's deep attentiveness to Michaela's body, his sense of her as a physical and embodied presence, just as it is Bella's disembodiment that "pushes Jakob back in the world," where he marvels at Michaela, and at being "saved by such a small body" (183). Michaels' claim that Jakob "imagines that faith can reside in the flesh" (Tihanyi) illustrates the significance of the physical, sexual, and sensual aspects of Jakob's second marriage, in that it acts as a vehicle to faith, to emotional salvation, and to an intensely empathetic connection between Michaela and Jakob. Jakob's loving relationship with Michaela allows him to testify to the loss of other beloved family members—most particularly, Bella. Jakob compensates for Bella's absence, which he experiences in his dream and elsewhere in the novel as disembodiment, through an intensely sensual, physical relationship with Michaela. Because he is able to make room in their marriage for his memories of Bella, he is able to bear witness, not only to her death, but to his love for her, as well. Through Michaela, Michaels demonstrates that loving, intimate relationships in the present enable one to testify to the losses and traumas of the past.

Furthermore, Jakob's marriage to Michaela enhances his "poetic knowing," his mode of testimony. For although Jakob has been writing poetry since his childhood in Greece, it is in the final pages of the first section of the novel that Michaels emphasizes the relationship between writing, empathy and intimacy and loving, and between testimony and affect: "Each morning I write these words for you all. For Bella and Athos, for Maurice and Irena, for Michaela. Here on Idhra, in this summer of 1992, I try to set down the past in the cramped space of a prayer" (191). Coral Ann Howells argues that Jakob's relationship with Michaela enables his poetry: "Jakob is finally free to write his life, through 'reading Michaela'" (*Where Are the Voices* 113). And Donna Coffey points out that, just as "Jakob's true ritual for Athos is ... the completion of Athos's book *Bearing False Witness*," his "true ritual of mourning for his parents is writing his poems; he dedicates *Groundwork* to Bella and his parents, and his notebooks center on his memories of Bella" (35). Certainly, writing is, for Jakob, an act of mourning, memorialization, and testimony. But his writing does more than bear witness for others; Grimwood contends that "Jakob's vocation as a poet and translator is a traumatized one. It is as if, through writing, he can finally bear witness to himself" (125). By showing how Jakob comes to testimony through writing, and through poetry in particular, Michaels reminds us of literature's potential to enable testimony, and of the reader's position within the transmission of that testimony. As Part I of the novel closes, the reader is drawn into the reciprocal relationship between the individual who bears witness and the one who hears the testimony. Despite the criticisms of Meira Cook and others, the novel's lyrical nature reminds us that its protagonist, Jakob, is a poet, and that poetry is, for him, an exercise in witnessing, testifying, and memorializing the dead—and that, as readers we are now the bearers of this testimony. But if Jakob witnesses through poetry and language, he comes to poetry through empathy, and through his relationships with Athos, Bella

and Michaela. They enable his testimony; their empathy, and his, allows him to testify on their behalf, as well as on his own.

## **2. Ben**

Part I of the novel ends with Jakob's celebration of his relationship with Michaela, and the hope that they will have a child. In the second half, however, we learn that Jakob and Michaela have died soon after their marriage. The second half of the novel focuses on Ben, the Canadian-born son of Holocaust survivors. Ben is an academic and a biographer whose fervent admiration of Jakob Beers leads him on a search for the poet's missing notebooks. But, unlike Jakob, who finds freedom in translation and immigration, Ben struggles with the dilemmas that these topics pose. Though Canadian-born himself, he "learned not to bring school friends home" (219), conscious of the comparative strangeness of his house and family, "worried that [their] furniture was old and strange," and "ashamed by [his] mother's caution and need as she hovered" (219). Whereas, despite moments of alienation, fear, and loneliness, Jakob experiences the exuberance and freedom of a newcomer and an immigrant, Ben perceives his home and his immigrant parents as strange and aberrant. His discomfort and shame are suggestive of his general alienation from a Canadian society that has not experienced the catastrophic event of the Holocaust at home.

Part II of the novel "roughly parallels" the first; it "represents variations on a theme, played out in the next generation for whom Canada is 'home ground'" (Howells, *Where Are the Voices* 109). As such, it queries what it means to be the child of survivors, to bear testimony that is not one's own, and also what it means to be Jewish-Canadian: to witness the Holocaust from

the distance of a generation and a continent away. At the same time, however, it explores the limits of certain modes of witnessing, complicating Ben's desire to emulate Jakob by relying on a feminine muse of sorts to enable his testimony.

For Barbara L. Estrin, the novel valorizes adoption as a relationship that places itself in opposition to the Nazis' fetishization of blood ties. While her analysis is productive in our understanding of the adoptive bond between Athos and Jakob, and Ben's adoption of Jakob as a kind of idealized surrogate father, her claim that Ben imaginatively "turns his biological father into the psychological equivalent of a Nazi tormenter" (285) is problematic. Certainly, Ben's relationship with his father is a difficult one. Ben recounts several painful childhood memories, such as his father's insistence that Ben eat a rotten apple. Ben's father, still tormented by the memory of hunger as he fled the Holocaust, is enraged to discover that Ben has thrown the apple away: "And you throw away food? You—my son—you throw away food?" (218). He forces the apple into Ben's mouth. "Struggling, sobbing, [Ben] ate" (218). This painful episode has lasting, traumatic results; years later, Ben is "haunted by pathetic carton scraps" (218) of discarded, leftover food. However, it is a grotesque overstatement to claim that Ben transforms his father into a Nazi torturer in the relation of this event. Rather, Ben's relationship with his father, illustrated through episodes such as this one, tends to emphasize the second generation's difficult task in testifying to their parents' trauma. Adrienne Kertzer writes,

Even when postmemory writers proceed to challenge this second-generation convention of a childhood that cannot compete with the trauma of their parents' lives, they begin with the pattern in which the children, no matter how little they know about the details of their parents' past, know at least this much. (214)

Ben is unable to fully bear his parents' testimony, or to adequately act as a witness, because of his awareness that the painful memories of his own childhood "cannot compete" with the traumas of his parents' past. Ben's parents are "experts in secrets" (252), and he hears only "disjointed stories" (217) of their past, but he is, nonetheless, aware of his father's torturous relationship with food. Simultaneously, he is aware that he has not experienced this "lifelong dilemma of hunger that plagued [his father] so long" (256), and this awareness emphasizes his affective distance from his father. He finds himself, therefore, unable to bear witness, to enable response-ability.

His wife, Naomi, however, invites Ben's parents' confidence with apparent effortlessness. Michaels writes, "that [Ben's] mother took Naomi into her heart chafed [him], a jealousy that grew intense" (247). He reads the confidence between the women "as insinuation, manipulation, a play for power" (248). Ben's jealousy at this intimacy is intensified when he learns of a sister and a brother killed in the Holocaust not from his parents, but from Naomi. Although Ben recognizes this confidence as a testimony that would eventually reach him, a "truth [that] would eventually be passed on" (252), he nonetheless "blamed her" (253) for accepting this testimony in his stead. He "picked fights with her over anything. Over saying kaddish for [his] parents" (242). Donna Coffey writes that "Kaddish connects not only son and father, but the mourner and all of the previous generations of Jews. [...] Yet Ben's inability to say kaddish for his parents, and his anger at Naomi for doing so, manifest the severing of the continuity of generations as a result of the Shoah" (35).

Susan Gubar argues that Ben's jealousy of Naomi is mirrored by his jealousy of Jakob, and of the bond that he perceives between his wife and the poet:



Ben's enviousness of Jacob [sic] screens a more primal jealousy of the intimacy Naomi has achieved with his parents, an empathic relationship at odds with his own embarrassment at their overprotectiveness and paranoia. Ben sees in Jacob and in Naomi the receptivity of which his upbringing deprived him. (267)

In other words, his hostility stems from the recognition that Naomi and Jakob enable response-ability in others, that they are connected to the “continuity of generations,” while he is trapped outside this community of witnesses, this network of people who receive and transmit each others’ testimonies. In recognizing response-ability in others, he is forced to acknowledge its failure in himself.

Ben’s inability to take part in the transmission of testimonies holds a professional, as well as a personal significance. Like Athos, he is a professional witness: a professor and a historian, he acknowledges that, from a young age, his “fascination wasn’t archaeology or even forensics. It was biography” (221). This interest is significant for a man who acknowledges that “There was no energy of a narrative in [his] family” (204). He turns to a study of literature, history and biography as a substitute for his family’s history. Just as she enables the personal testimonies of others, Naomi functions as an assistant to Ben’s academic pursuits, providing him with the “culinary correlative” (212) to his research:

While I travelled across Russia in leg-irons, Naomi carefully placed ivory potatoes, cooked until they crumbled at the touch of a fork, into chilled vermillion borscht. While I fell to my knees with hunger in the snow at Tobol’sk, Naomi sliced thick slabs of stone-heavy bread. (212)

Ben describes these scholarly projects as embodied experiences: he does not read about hunger or leg-irons, he experiences them viscerally, through a vicarious physicality enabled by Naomi's "culinary correlatives." Significantly, Ben is deeply attuned to the simultaneously physical and spiritual nature of abjection. In describing Ben's father's deeply ambivalent relationship with food, Michaels writes, "The spirit is most evident at the point of extreme bodily humiliation" (214). This claim echoes Kristeva's argument that a dissolution of boundaries—between the body and the spirit—is at the heart of abjection. In contrast, Ben's mother is described as "a sensualist of proportions you, Jakob Beer, could never even estimate" (230). Ben and his mother form a complicit relationship founded upon these sensual pleasures; on long car trips, for instance, his "mother's arm would appear over the front seat, A roll of candy dangling from her hand" (215). It is unsurprising, therefore, that Ben's marriage should be characterized by a similar emphasis on physical, sensual communion. Naomi literally "nourished Ben's research" (212), providing him with the bodily stimulus that allows him to experience his research tangibly, sensually, physically. Through their insistent embodiment, Naomi and Michaela, in particular, take on the role of muse or helpmate to the novel's male protagonists. And, furthermore, by associating Naomi with the bodily pursuit of eating and, more particularly, with nourishing Ben in his intellectual pursuit, Michaels does seem to support Hélène Cixous's assessment of "the solidarity of logocentrism and phallogentrism" (92): Ben is the writer, the intellectual, and the academic authority, while Naomi supports his pursuits by seeing to his physical needs. Through the character of Petra, however, Michaels disrupts the binaries of male/female, spiritual/embodied, and artist/muse.

Ben's obsession with biography, his adoption of Jakob as an idealized father-figure, and his jealousy of Naomi lead him to Greece to research Jakob after the latter's death. There, he

meets Petra, an American tourist. The novel's descriptions of Petra associate her simultaneously with Bella and Michaela; the repeated references to her hair, "a sleek curve of water" (274), "[dripping] after her swim" (275), "black hair slashed on the sheets" (275), "still damp in its thickness" (276) recall Jakob's loving references to his sister's hair. These references recur when Jakob meets Michaela, and emphasize her connection to Bella. Jakob experiences "paralysis in the cave [Michaela's] hair makes" (180), recalling Bella's "magnificent hair like black syrup, thick and luxurious" (6). As we have seen, his relationship with Michaela intensifies his bond to his sister; his sensuous encounters with her enable him to remember his sister, and to testify to her experiences through his poetry. By associating Petra with both Bella and Michaela, however, Michaels illustrates the limitations inherent in a quest to channel testimony and empathy through contact with the female body.

Ben arrives in Idhra to search for Jakob's notebooks, which were lost after Jakob's and Michaela's sudden deaths. Considering the "poems from those few years with Michaela," Ben reflects: "Your words and your life are no longer separate, after *decades of hiding in your skin*" (267, emphasis in original). Just as he recognizes Naomi's ability to enable response in his parents, he recognizes Michaela's importance in Jakob's writing. The depiction of Petra as an avatar for both Bella and Michaela demonstrates Ben's desire to likewise enable response, to testify through the medium of a sexual relationship. His search for Jakob's journals is punctuated by his encounters with Petra—encounters that range from the intensely sensual ("I loved to watch her taste food from my plate or drink from my glass. I wanted to tell her everything I knew about literature and storms, to whisper into her hair until she fell asleep" (277)) to the brutal and almost violent ("I pounded myself into her until I hurt us both" (279)). But it is in this relationship that the shortcomings of Ben's approach, and the limitations of his

understanding of the importance of empathy in response-ability, become clear. Ben attempts to channel Bella through Petra, as he assumes that Jakob has done through Michaela. He overlooks the empathetic nature of that relationship, and sees Petra, Michaela, Alex, and his own wife Naomi, as passive vessels through which he can channel history and biography. Although his search for Jakob's journal is concurrent with his relationship with Petra, he does not see her as a participant in his quest, but rather, a sexual accessory, and a physical, rather than intellectual partner.

Ben's search for Jakob's journals recalls Athos's careful preservation of the waterlogged wood of Biskupin; he "[excavates] gently... an archaeologist examining one square inch at a time" (261). But while Ben's careful, archaeological search turns up nothing, it is Petra's "rampage," in which she "pillaged every room" (283), that finally uncovers Jakob's missing journals. When Ben discovers Petra's disordered search of the house, he "sprang up, held her wrists" (281). In attempting to restrain Petra physically, Ben reveals the failure of his project to channel Michaela and Bella and, by implication, Jakob, through Petra. Although Michaels describes Petra's "perfect nakedness, while she desecrated what had been for years so lovingly preserved" (281), it is clear that this apparent physical perfection is borne by a disordered body (or mind), one that does not respect the order of the archaeologically preserved house, or of Ben's attempts to settle Petra's body within it. In his focus on Petra's physical perfection, he desubjectifies her, in the hopes that she will act as a medium to Jakob, allowing Ben to channel the poet through her. But Petra's rampage stands in marked contrast to Naomi's "culinary correlatives," whose very correlation to Ben's research denote their ordered nature. Naomi's cooking is the physical, embodied, and immanent correlative to Ben's intellectual, academic labour. Ben's failure as a witness is his assumption that physicality and embodiment are the

means to achieve the communion that he recognizes as necessary to enable the testimony of others. He misrecognizes the empathetic nature of Jakob's relationship with Michaela, noting only its physical manifestations: "All the while with one hand touching Michaela somewhere, on her shoulder or forearm, or holding her hand. Your eyes with us, your body with her" (208). He sees only the bodily change in Naomi after her encounter with Jakob: "my wife's transformation was invisible yet obvious. Your conversation had wrought a change in her body" (208). He therefore seeks in Petra and Naomi the "feminine secondariness" of the "sacrificial muses or nurturing helpmates" (250) that Gubar describes, hoping that they will inspire creativity in him, and enable communion with Jakob Beer. His willingness to understand Michaela and Petra as secondary to his own and Jakob's literary and academic accomplishments recalls Annie Leclerc's indictment of men, who, by ascribing only limited roles to women, effectively deny them access to language and meaningful communication; she writes, "once you had silenced us, you could do whatever you wanted with us, turn us into a maid, goddess, plaything, mother hen, *femme fatale*. The only thing you could insistently demand is our silence" (76).

However, when Ben recognizes Petra's disordered state, and simultaneously, his own inability to contain her "perfect" embodiment, he begins to recognize the potential inherent in an empathetic, rather than a purely physical relationship. He reads Jakob's journals "randomly" (284), rather than with the methodical excavations of a historian and archaeologist. He then recognizes in Naomi the potential to witness, to produce testimony and memory:

Naomi, who I've known for eight years—I can't tell you what her wrists look like, or the knot of bone of her ankle, or how her hair grows at the back of her neck, but I can tell you her mood almost before she enters the room. I can tell you what she likes to eat, how she

holds a glass, what she would make of a certain painting or a headline. I know what she makes of her memories. I know what she remembers. I know her memories. (285)

Like Jakob, Ben is able to bear witness as a result of empathetic, loving contact with his wife. The novel's second half problematizes the desire to see women as passive muses, enabling testimony through pure embodiment. Ben's discovery, at the novel's end, is that in order to bear witness, he must take up his position within a community and a family of empathetic witnesses, sensitive to the memories of each of its members. He learns that, in order to bear witness, he must be willing to become "a *medium of the testimony*" (Felman 24, emphasis in original), in the sense that he must take on the emotional responsibility for the events and the people for whom he becomes a witness. He comes to testimony through love, and through the understanding of the ethics of love, discovering that "Love is the *responsibility* to become attuned to our responses to the world and other people" (Oliver 20, emphasis added).

### **3. Conclusion: Transmitting Testimony**

*Fugitive Pieces* is a novel that insists upon the importance of witnessing; it valorizes empathetic ties between family members and between generations of survivors. Significantly, however, both of the novel's protagonists are childless, and therefore unable to perpetuate this process of intergenerational witnessing. Jakob and Michaela die before their child is born, and even before Jakob learns that his wife is pregnant. It is Ben and Petra who intercept Michaela's note—

If she's a girl: Bella

If he's a boy, Bela (279)

—undiscovered by Jakob before his and Michaela's deaths. While Ben returns to Naomi at the end of the novel, the couple has no children; as Coffey points out, "Naomi's preoccupation with lullabies is painfully ironic as she herself remains childless" (29). Intergenerational transmission of testimony seems impossible. The affective bonds formed outside one's immediate family, therefore, become increasingly significant. Athos's adoption of Jakob saves the lives of both; Naomi's relationship with Ben's mother ensures that Ben will become a bearer of the testimony that she and Ben's father are unable to share directly with him. And Ben's adoption of Jakob as a surrogate father of sorts enables him to understand the importance of love and empathy within his own family. The novel asks, "How can one man take on the memories of even one other man, let alone five or ten or a thousand or ten thousand; how can they be sanctified each?" (52). The answer to this question lies in Ben's image of his parents at the novel's end:

My mother stands behind my father and his head leans against her. As he eats, she strokes his hair. Like a miraculous circuit, each draws strength from the other.

I see that I must give what I need most. (294)

Ben at last becomes a witness, a medium of his parents' and Jakob's testimony, through his wife Naomi. And, while poetry is evoked as Jakob's most empowering mode of testifying, he comes to poetry and to "poetic knowing" through his savior and caregiver Athos Roussos, and through his wife Michaela.

The reader, too, becomes a witness through the medium of the novel. Ben's ultimately successful search for Jakob's journal in Part II of the novel invites us to interpret Part I, written in the first person by Jakob and containing his testimony and his poetry, as this missing journal, and Part II, as Ben's own account of the search. Interestingly, however, there is no noticeable

shift in tone between Parts I and II; the narrative voice and the poetic quality of the prose are largely uniform throughout the novel. Such is the empathetic identification between characters.

Whether or not we agree with Henighan's argument that Michaels' prose obscures both the horrific realities of the historical subject matter and fails to do justice to the novel's Toronto setting, we are consciously aware that these gaps in the narrative are a result of the narrator's struggle to bear witness to his traumatic past, as when Jakob acknowledges that he "can go back millennia" but that it is "impossible" (30) for him to fully engage with the realities of contemporary Toronto (30). As the novel traces the process by which Jakob and Ben learn to let their personal and familiar histories inform and enrich their everyday lives, it cultivates an empathetic approach to history: when, for example, Michaels reminds readers that it is a Jewish tradition to refer to forebears "as 'we,' not 'they'" in order to "encoura[ge] empathy and a responsibility to the past" (159), she asks us to perform this act of identification—with her characters, as well as with all the victims of the Holocaust, including the passengers of the MS St Louis. Thus, Michaels reminds us that literature about the Holocaust functions simultaneously as the subject and the medium of testimony. As such, we, as readers, are reminded of deeply intimate nature of witnessing, and of transmitting testimony. By making us witnesses to the Holocaust through the medium of Canadian literature, Michaels is participating late-twentieth century Canadian Literature's project "to recognize those Canada had forgotten" (Kamboureli, *Making a Difference* xiv). Although the MS St Louis and its passengers are not explicitly evoked in this novel, Michaels demonstrates that literature can have an important role in the transmission of testimonies that ought not be forgotten.



## Chapter 4:

### **Blood and Black Humour: Subversive Strategies for Overcoming Violence in Eden Robinson's "Queen of the North" and *Monkey Beach***

Violence is ubiquitous in Eden Robinson's novels and short stories. In particular, Robinson's short story "Queen of the North" and her novel *Monkey Beach* are concerned with violence and its lasting effects. However, they are also darkly funny texts, whose humour is often closely linked to violence. Drawing on Kristina Fagan's understanding of Aboriginal humour as a culturally specific strategy for dealing with taboo topics, I argue that Robinson's humour draws from Aboriginal traditions, as well as Western and popular culture sources. Humour—like violence—is a complex, and often ambivalent strategy for coping with trauma. Robinson exploits the tension inherent in humour, depicting laughter that is often threatening or humiliating. Even when she employs humour that underscores the tensions between her characters, however, she uses this laughter to reaffirm the social bonds of the members of communities affected by violence.

"Queen of the North" and *Monkey Beach* are set in the Haisla village of Kitamaat, British Columbia; both texts are centrally concerned with the perpetuation and legacy of violence born of the systemic racism that led, among other things, to the creation of the residential school system. In fact, the novel elaborates the tale of sexual abuse begun in "Queen of the North." In the short story, the protagonist, nicknamed Karaoke, is a young Haisla woman who has been sexually abused by her uncle Josh. The novel's protagonist is Lisamarie Hill, Karaoke's boyfriend's sister; she must come to terms with the far-reaching effects of Karaoke's trauma.

Lisa, however, must also bear the burden of her particular cultural gift, a sort of second-sight, in which the mythic creatures from her Ma-ma-oo's (grandmother's) tales appear to warn her of impending loss or danger. However, while both narratives demonstrate the destructive potential of violence within the protagonists' shared community, they also emphasize the power of humour to either empower or demean a subject. Through both violence and humour, Lisa and Karaoke aim to empower themselves and dismantle the violence they face—though their efforts yield mixed results: humour, like violence, can deride its object and rob it of its power, but, as Karaoke and Lisa discover, both their violent actions and their aggressive humour can turn upon them in unexpected and debilitating ways.

Many theorists on comedy agree that a major function of humour is to establish and maintain social order and norms. As William F. Fry puts it, “peck order is one of the important elements of humour” (114). Henri Bergson comments, “In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently correct our neighbour” (148). Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque laughter adds another element to our understanding of the social function of humour. He emphasizes the play between derision and renewal: the subject of the laughter is simultaneously derided, inverted, turned “inside out” (11) and reaffirmed, renewed, reasserted. Similarly, Bergson argues that humour is a corrective that “makes us ... endeavour to appear what we ought to be” (71). In other words, humour simultaneously aims to correct and to reaffirm: it points to a deviation of the normative order, while at the same time reaffirming the primacy of that order. For, as Bergson points out, laughter is a “*social gesture*” (73, emphasis in original) that “stand[s] in need of an echo” (64). In other words, the jokester does not laugh alone: s/he needs the echoing laughter of auditors (or readers). Laughter is a social activity that reasserts the importance of the social group as it derides deviance and transgression. In Eden

Robinson's work, ridicule is deployed as a powerful strategy against threats to social order and community. However, unlike Bakhtinian humour, which re-establishes the existing social order once the laughter stops, the humour in *Monkey Beach* and "Queen of the North" is designed to repair the existing social order, to counteract the devastating consequences of that which it mocks. The laughter in Eden Robinson is aimed at repairing and renewing a community, rather than reasserting social order.

"Tragedy is my topic. Comedy is my strategy," Thomas King has famously said (qtd. in Davidson, *Border Crossings* 3). King's assessment of his own work highlights a prevalent theme in the analysis of humour in Aboriginal literature: laughter as a survival tactic. Similarly, in *Indi'n Humour*, Kenneth Lincoln quotes Paula Gunn Allen, who describes Native humour as "the best and sharpest weapon we've always had against the ravages of conquest and assimilation" (7).<sup>24</sup> Kristina Fagan, however, cautions against a limiting and reductive reading of Aboriginal humour as merely a tactic to overcome trauma ("Teasing" 24). She argues that Aboriginal writers use storytelling, and humorous narratives in particular, in order "to explore the connections between the traumatic past and troubles in the present" ("Weesageechak" 204), but while she acknowledges the function of storytelling within the therapeutic process, she cautions against a universalizing application of trauma theory to Aboriginal writing: "When we consider that Aboriginal societies have their own distinct traditions of storytelling, it makes sense to consider that Aboriginal people may express the connections between past and present in ways that differ from Western therapeutic models" (205-06). Fagan emphasizes the potentially corrective and enabling function of humour, as it allows the victim of violence to bear witness to his/her suffering in a culturally acceptable manner. I agree with Fagan that much of the humour

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<sup>24</sup> Lincoln's study emphasizes the survival strategy at work within Aboriginal humour. He writes, "Humor not only mediates tragedies with a sense of continuance and survival, but helps to reverse statistics that bracket Indians as the poorest of the poor, the most invisible of American minorities" (55).

in Robinson's fiction is culturally specific. However, Robinson's humour, like her use of the supernatural, draws on a variety of traditions and sources, ranging from Haisla culture, to the European Gothic tradition, to popular culture. Fagan's investigations into Aboriginal humour, read alongside Western theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Henry Bergson and Mikhail Bakhtin, offer us insight into the many silences and ellipses within Robinson's work. Indeed, many of Robinson's characters, including Lisamarie Hill, are often unwilling or unable to offer a clear and direct narrative of the violence that they have suffered, and resort to indirect testimonies and humour to report their trauma. However, the humour that Robinson's characters deploy against the legacy of violence is, itself, born of this violence, and can sometimes yield painful and dangerous results. This chapter considers how Robinson deftly exploits this tension between the threat of social exclusion that is implicit when one is the object of humour,<sup>25</sup> and the promise of inclusion and group cohesion through a shared laughter. At the same time, it considers how humour and violence often aim to achieve similar results.

Throughout *Monkey Beach*, Lisa contends with two spectres that her community, for the most part, is eager to suppress: the spiritual side of their Haisla heritage, which Lisa encounters in the form of a series of encounters with ghosts, tree spirits and b'gwus (sasquatches), and the history of cultural violence that is rooted in abuses inflicted within the residential school system—a history that culminates in her brother Jimmy's disappearance. As Avery F. Gordon reminds us, “the ghostly haunt gives notice that something is missing—that what appears to be invisible or in the shadows is announcing itself, however symptomatically” (15). The spectres in *Monkey Beach*, then—Haisla spirituality and residential schools, as well as the actual ghosts that populate the novel—insistently announce themselves to the reader, even as they are pushed to

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<sup>25</sup> By the “object of humour”, I mean the butt of the joke. To be the object of humour is to be excluded from participating in the laughter.

the margins of the community of Kitamaat by characters who would prefer to ignore their presence and import. Lisa's desire to overturn a communal unwillingness to address the roots of cultural loss and suffering manifests itself in her response to both her community's violent history and its spiritual manifestations. She develops a variety of tactical responses to the violence she encounters within her community. These responses determine the degree to which she is able to either participate or not participate in further violent acts, such as retribution, self-defence, or defence of others. For instance, Lisa learns the power of black humour, and the value of her connection to the spectral figures of Haisla mythology that many people within her community choose to ignore or disbelieve.

### **1. "Have you ever seen her fight?"**

Early in the novel, Lisa learns that her brother is missing and presumed drowned. Before setting out in her speedboat to try and find him, Lisa reflects, "God, let this be an accident" (39).

Clearly, her hope that his disappearance is "an accident" demonstrates her understanding of the pervasiveness of violence in her community, as well as her resistance to the idea that Jimmy is caught up within this cycle: Josh, the captain of the missing fishing vessel, suffered abuses within the residential school system. He recapitulated this sexual violence by molesting Karaoke, and now, Jimmy has apparently sought violent retribution for that abuse. Lisa's resistance to the repetitive and self-proliferating nature of this legacy of violence, however, does not mean that she is exempt from its effects. But whereas in "Queen of the North," Robinson represents Karaoke's violent episodes as breaks in the narrative that interrupt the story of Karaoke's sexual abuse, emphasizing their random and destructive nature, in *Monkey Beach*, Lisa's temper links her to her Uncle Mick and implicitly, to his history of activism. Mick's

involvement in violence is often the result of his American Indian Movement (A.I.M.) activism, or his attempts to protect his friends and family members; similarly, Lisa deploys violent behaviour in (often misguided) attempts to defend her family or herself. Karaoke, however, lashes out violently, often without aim or purpose.

But while Karaoke and Lisa share a predilection for violence, Karaoke is a fighter, and Lisa, like her uncle Mick, is often described as a warrior. “Queen of the North” and *Monkey Beach* implicitly challenge the reader to consider whether Lisa’s approach to this communal legacy of trauma is more empowering than Karaoke’s. For example, “Queen of the North” is punctuated by scenes in which Karaoke drunkenly fights other girls. In one instance, she and “five chug buddies” (188) brutalize another girl under the bleachers during a hockey game. Another time, she is “too sloshed to let go” (199) of her opponent’s hair. And in the penultimate episode of the short story, retold from Lisa’s perspective in *Monkey Beach*, Karaoke is pummelled by a group of girls in the schoolyard. In *Monkey Beach*, Lisa comments to Jimmy, “I don’t know what you see in Karaoke. Have you ever seen her fight?” (348). Despite the fact that Lisa, too, sometimes acts violently, especially as a child—in one scene, she sinks her teeth into a childhood bully’s buttock, drawing blood—she is later repelled by Karaoke’s tendency towards physical aggression. Moreover, she voices her misgivings to her brother who, until he dates Karaoke, manages to avoid direct contact with the violence that other members of the community find themselves involved in. Jimmy is an excellent student and an Olympic swimming hopeful. Like his parents, he is apparently able to sidestep the more violent elements within his community.

The novel’s ambivalent attitude towards Lisa’s role as a “warrior” is perhaps most clearly shown in an episode in which Lisa defends her cousin Erica, who is being harassed by a carload

of young white men yelling racialized sexual threats. The men in the car threaten to grab Lisa and “teach [her] a lesson” (251) when a passerby intervenes. “Babydoll,” he tells Lisa, “Take it from someone who knows—that temper of yours is gonna get you killed one day” (251). While we admire Lisa’s bravery, we wonder if her aunt Trudy is right when she tells Lisa that the men “could have killed [her]” and “would have said [she] was asking for it and got off scot-free” (255). She warns her niece, “you’re a mouthy Indian, and everyone thinks we’re born sluts” (255). Lisa, however, is unconvinced; she points out that “there were tons of witnesses” (255) to the event. The reader is left to ponder who is right: Trudy, whose experiences with the residential school system have left her jaded and wary, or Lisa, whose parents escaped the “rez schools,” and whose upbringing has led her to stand up for her loved ones, allowing her to feel relatively safe in doing so.

Despite her sense of relative security, however, Lisa, like Karaoke, cannot escape her community’s legacy of violence. Soon after defending Erica and avoiding a potential attack by the men in the pickup truck, Lisa is raped by Cheese, a childhood friend. Lisa comments that the assault “has the feeling of a dream, as if it didn’t happen to me” (258). Although this feeling of disconnection and disorientation is produced by the drug that Cheese slips into Lisa’s drink, the language also reflects Lisa’s disbelief, and the disjunction between her sense of safety and privilege—a sense that leads her to fearlessly act out in defence of her cousin or herself—and the very real threat of violence that exists both within and outside of her community. Lisa’s rape is rendered in a dreamlike register that seems to challenge the reality of these violent events. This sense of unreality recurs throughout the novel, often during particularly violent or unsettling episodes. It signals a difficulty in directly addressing violence and loss—a difficulty that is frequently, though imperfectly, resolved through dark humour.

## 2. The Feeling of a Dream

In a dreamlike sequence in the novel's final pages, Robinson describes Jimmy and Josh's final moments aboard the *Queen of the North*:

The waves have washed the blood from the oar tip but he can see the dents in the wood where he hit Josh—first on the hand as Josh gripped the side and screamed, trying to put one leg in the seiner as Jimmy kicked and hit him. For what he did to Karaoke, Josh deserved to die. (369)

Robinson ends this episode with Josh, either dead or unconscious from a final blow to the head, drifting away in his yellow life vest, the *Queen of the North* sinking into the Pacific, and Jimmy, the one-time Olympic swimming hopeful, swimming for shore, “executing the strokes he’s trained all his life to perfect” (370). However, this sequence appears alongside the other dreamy and otherworldly episodes at the novel's end; in fact, it may be dreamt or imagined by Lisa, who has just regained consciousness after cutting her hand to appease the mysterious spirit voices in the forest who promise to help her in exchange for meat. Although this passage may imply that Jimmy's act ends at least some of the novel's cycle of violence—both because he kills Josh, preventing him from committing further sexual violence in the community, and because, after this act of violent retribution, Jimmy apparently dies before reaching shore—the dreamlike register of the novel's end signals the ambiguous nature of this sequence. The reader is unable to determine which moments at the novel's end are Lisa's dreams, which are legitimate spiritual visions, and which are events that are simply related by the narrator.

Robinson also produces a dreamlike atmosphere when, earlier in the novel, a hard-partying Lisa, who has moved to Vancouver following Ma-ma-oo's death, is confronted by the



spectral manifestation of her cousin Tab. “You almost got killed last night, you know that?” (302) Tab tells Lisa; however, it seems that Tab herself did not escape this fate. Lisa is shocked when the package of cigarettes she tosses her cousin passes through Tab’s body and lands on the pavement. “Wake up and smell the piss, dearie,” Tab tells Lisa. “I just got bumped off by a couple of boozehound rednecks and I’m pretty fucking angry at you right now” (301). Strangely, however, it appears that Tab may not be dead: two days later, Tab’s mother Trudy insists, “She phoned two days ago” (305). “It was just a dream” (305), Lisa concludes. The reader is left to ponder whether the spectral Tab is a spiritual manifestation who appears to warn Lisa of the danger in which her lifestyle has placed her, or, as Lisa concludes, a dream or hallucination. Robinson further complicates this ambiguity by placing Lisa’s friend Pooch’s death at approximately the same time that Lisa sees Tab’s “ghost.” The deliberate confusion, then, points to the real threat of violence that Lisa, Tab and Pooch—like Karaoke and Jimmy—face. Lisa’s rape and Tab’s intervention are rendered in an ambiguous and dreamlike way; these episodes signal Lisa’s uncertainty towards what she previously considered her own safe and sheltered position with regards to the perpetuation of violence in the narrative.

However, these dreamlike episodes may signal more than Lisa’s belief that she is relatively safe. After she is raped, Lisa refuses to report the attack, even to her close friends and family. She goes into the forest to burn the clothes that she wore during the assault, and when the mysterious voices in the forest offer Lisa retribution, whispering, “We can hurt him for you” (261), she responds by denying that the voices are real: “It’s your overactive imagination, I told myself. No one’s in the trees. You are alone” (262). Lisa’s disorientation during the rape, which borders on denial—“as if it didn’t happen to me”—and her silence afterward contribute to what Fagan has identified as a “cultural prohibition against speaking about trauma”

(“Weesageechak” 222) in Robinson’s novel.<sup>26</sup> Fagan argues that Lisa “gradually [internalizes]” this prohibition, and “even becomes part of the silencing of other members of her community” (222). Robinson’s Kitamaat is, indeed, a community that does not openly talk about its own traumas; for instance, when Lisa asks her mother about a lost Haisla village community along BC’s coast, Gladys refuses to answer her daughter’s questions: “‘They just died,’ she said, her lips thinning” (100).

Fagan and Kit Dobson differ on the significance of the ubiquitous silences in Robinson’s work. Dobson interprets “the novel’s silences [as] the result of Lisa’s youth” (“Indigeneity” 61) and as a manifestation of the novel’s tendency to “remove[e] the cultural specificity of the text and pus[h] it towards a more universal register” (62). Dobson argues that Robinson is careful to deflect attempts to read her fiction as representative of Haisla culture. He suggests that we can read Lisa’s response to trauma in terms of Cathy Caruth’s assessment of the traumatic experience as “not fully assimilated as it occurs” and thus as something that “simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (*Unclaimed* 5). Fagan, on the other hand, asserts that a reluctance to openly discuss difficult or unpleasant topics is common in many Aboriginal communities. Fagan acknowledges that Robinson’s work is often characterized by her characters’ avoidance of topics directly related to the community’s history of violence and trauma, but points out that these topics are nonetheless broached indirectly and through such tactics as humour. While the novel’s many silences recall Elaine Scarry’s assertion that pain “actively destroys” language (4), Fagan’s approach offers us a way of interpreting Robinson’s characters’ responses to violence as informed by culturally particular modes of behaviour. Lisa’s response to her own rape, her characterization of the assault as “a dream,” and her subsequent refusal to report her attack

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<sup>26</sup> Lisa’s denial also signals those common responses to trauma documented by non-Aboriginal theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Elaine Scarry: denial and silence.

contribute to our understanding of the prohibition against speaking of trauma that Fagan has identified. However, we must use caution when we consider Fagan's approach in order to avoid perpetuating the stereotype of the taciturn Native. In addition, to read Lisa's silence as being exclusively informed by Aboriginal tradition is to ignore Robinson's insistence that her characters inhabit a world that is shaped by both First Nations and European traditions. While Dobson argues that Robinson's self-conscious "resistance to representing the intricacies of Haisla life" ("Indigeneity" 56)<sup>27</sup> is such that Lisa's silence appears to be "universal" rather than culturally specific, and Fagan claims that the silences are directly informed by a particularly Aboriginal mode of responding to trauma, I argue that we are meant to read Lisa's silence as simultaneously informed by both traditions. To read Lisa exclusively through the lens of "Aboriginal" behaviours is reductive. Laura Moss suggests why this might be:

when a story is read primarily through the author's identity and then related to the author's ethnic community, the emphasis is often on the text as a kind of documentary of diasporic life rather than as fiction. The author is read more as a cultural informant than as an artist. ("Fractals" 21)

Indeed, to ignore the degree to which Lisa is informed by popular, non-Aboriginal culture, as well as by Haisla culture, is to ignore the complexities of Robinson's novel, and the degree to which Robinson strategically exploits the tensions between cultural specificity and mainstream culture.

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<sup>27</sup> Dobson argues that Robinson is caught within a "persistent "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation" wherein

if she does act as a representative of her community, she can be damned for doing so ... if she doesn't maintain her cultural specificity, her absorption into the colonial nation-state may take place through the process of voiding the resistant ethics and aesthetics that such specificity might be said to represent. (56) Like Dobson, I argue that there is a tension in Robinson's writing between cultural specificity and a more "universal" register. However, I argue that this tension is deliberate, and that Robinson is self-consciously drawing on a variety of traditions and influences, while Dobson suggests that she is caught between two positions: the Native informant and the mainstream Canadian writer.

As both Dobson and Fagan point out, silence on the topic of trauma and suffering is ubiquitous in Robinson's work. Like Fagan, Sam McKegney positions the silence surrounding the topic of trauma within a tradition of Aboriginal storytelling and narrative. In his work on residential school narratives, McKegney argues that published accounts of the abuses of the residential school system are

haunted by the absence of other stories. They exist in the shadow of a far greater number of tales of perpetual disillusion, unhealed pain, and ongoing fragmentation of indigenous identity, tales that have remained either untold or hidden from the literary community within obscure sociological, political, and academic archives. ("Unraveling" 130)

Although McKegney points out that the residential school system itself is to blame for this dearth of narratives, as "the overwhelming majority of former residential school students have never been able to achieve stable indigenous identities much less write about them" ("Unraveling" 130), Fagan suggests that at least part of the reason for this lack is that, within Aboriginal communities, witnessing "may be seen as ethically wrong if it is destructive to community harmony" ("Weesageechak 209). Considered together, McKegney's and Fagan's research identifies a resistance to openly testifying to the traumas within Aboriginal communities. Fagan posits "storytelling and humour" ("Weesageechak" 210) as solutions to the problem of wanting to broach difficult topics while facing a community prohibition against discussing them; however, Robinson also uses a dreamlike register to indirectly address these topics. The novel's surreal, dreamlike episodes, therefore, signal Lisa's conflicted position as witness: she cannot directly address the violence and trauma within her community, and must therefore relate it as though it is a dream or hallucination. In the final section of this chapter, I suggest that Lisa's ambivalent position as a witness to the violence within her community is, if not resolved, then at

least mediated by humour, for if Lisa, her family, and her friends are unable to directly relate their experiences, they can at least acknowledge violence and trauma by treating it with humour.

### **3. Masters of the Psych-Out**

Although many characters in *Monkey Beach* express their ambivalence about the authenticity of spiritual experiences, Lisa and other members of her family are attracted to the tales of Haisla spiritual figures. Jimmy, like his father Al, enjoys hearing sensational and “gory” (8) versions of b’gwus stories. When Ma-ma-oo protests, “You’re telling it wrong” (8), Al replies that it is “just a story” (8). And though Lisa, like her brother, prefers their father’s more gruesome versions to Ma-ma-oo’s putatively more accurate tales, she nonetheless turns Jimmy’s penchant for the sensational against him. She dons a carved mask and waits in Jimmy’s closet for her brother and his friends to return. As she waits, “it occurred to [her] that [she] might be making a mistake” (168). These misgivings reflect Lisa’s acknowledgement of the potential power of the mask, and of the b’gwus tales her family tells. Lisa’s joke is enormously successful: “Jimmy’s expression of horror, his complete and utter terror, was beyond anything I’d expected” (168). Despite her misgivings and acknowledgement of the power inherent in the mask and the legend it embodies, she triumphantly enjoys the success of her prank.

Later in the novel, Cheese identifies this power of intimidation as a typically Haisla defence tactic:

We’re masters of the psych-out. When the Haida or Tsimshians paddled down the channel, they knew they were coming into the territory of the greatest shamen who ever lived. [...] Here we are, this little group stuck in the middle of all our mortal enemies.

They didn't cream us because they were spooked, man. [...] You've got to put on a good show. That's all witchcraft ever was. (221)

Cheese identifies the “psych-out” as a survival strategy and an alternative to violence. He simultaneously downplays the authenticity of spirituality or “witchcraft” as an essential element of the strategy of self-defence through intimidation. He depicts Haisla survival as an elaborate joke on neighbouring “mortal enemies.” Although Lisa does not subscribe to his wholesale dismissal of witchcraft as inauthentic, she does learn humour’s potential as a defensive strategy. Lisa, like Karaoke in “Queen of the North,” turns to humour as a means to empower herself. However, Vikki Visvis points out that Karaoke’s “motives are certainly belligerent” (“Beyond” 49); as we shall see, her laughter is not meant to be shared by Josh, who is the object of the aggressive joke. In *Monkey Beach*, too, the humour is most frequently one-sided and belligerent. Initially, Lisa finds herself the butt of the joke, but she learns to manipulate dark humour to her own advantage.

Mirjam Hirsch argues that “Contemporary Native authors skilfully employ subversive humour as an artistic strategy both to heal from and to understand historical and personal trauma and to fight the adversity they face” (104). We can consider Josh and Trudy’s friends’ joke in this vein: “how many priests does it take to change a lightbulb? [...] Three. One to screw it, one to beat it for being screwed and one to tell the lawyers that no screwing took place” (*Monkey Beach* 310). While the joke is not meant to be funny, it does possess “community building and cathartic effects” (Bowers 249) that are empowering for Josh, Trudy, and their friends who have experienced the abusive residential school system. However, Fagan points out that while

Virtually all of the scholarly writing on humour in Aboriginal literature examines the ways in which Aboriginal writers use humour to subvert white society and counter

stereotypes... to read Aboriginal humour only in terms of its relationship to white society is limiting. (“Teasing” 24)

In other words, not all humour is a healing strategy, nor is all Native humour generated by historical or contemporary trauma inflicted by white society. Furthermore, this view of humour as a survival strategy in Native literature can be limiting, as it “suggests that Native people need only to survive, not to be fulfilled, happy, or powerful” (Fagan, *Laughing* 4). In addition, humour can take on an aggressive, rather than a redemptive, or even self-defensive function. Fagan goes on to point out that, in Robinson’s fiction, humour often explores “the aggression and exclusion that can be involved in teasing” (“Teasing” 40). And in fact, in *Monkey Beach* and “Queen of the North,” much of the humour is aggressive, or even violent and dangerous. Robinson deploys a dark humour that does not invite laughter; instead, it often seeks to forge a sense of connectedness, an acknowledgement of shared trauma, by stating in an apparently humorous way that which frequently remains unspoken.

In “Queen of the North,” for example, Karaoke uses humour as a surprisingly effective solution to the trauma and violence she suffers. Karaoke positions herself within the cycle of abuse in order to end her own sexual abuse.<sup>28</sup> When she learns that her uncle was abused by Father Archibald, a priest at Josh’s residential school, she leaves him an accusatory note—“It was yours so I killed it” (213). The note is accompanied by a clot of menstrual blood and an altered photo of young Josh and the abusive priest (Karaoke’s face is pasted over Josh’s, and Josh’s, over Father Archibald’s). By manipulating the photograph of Josh and his abuser, and by addressing her uncle as “Father Archibald,” Karaoke positions her own victimization within a system of abuse that began in the residential school system. She articulates a shared victim

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<sup>28</sup> As Nancy Van Styvendale puts it, she “must put herself within [...] the position of Josh as a young boy and, in effect *speak through his voice*, thereby naming not only her own, but also her Uncle’s victimization” (98).

status with her uncle, forcing him to recognize himself simultaneously as abuser and as victim, and thereby ends the cycle of abuse. In essence, she is able to assume a position of agency within her own abuse by actively configuring her position within it.

When Karaoke realizes the success of her actions, she “felt light and giddy,” (213), and gleefully prays at the breakfast table, in Josh’s presence, to reinforce the success of her tactics.<sup>29</sup> Karaoke turns a deeply disturbing subject—sexual abuse—into laughter at her abuser’s expense. In doing so, she inverts the reader’s expectations about potential sources of humour and expected responses to sexual abuse. Josh, like the reader, does not foresee laughter as the outcome of the abuse. His reaction—to “[back] away and [close] the door” (212) of her bedroom and leave the breakfast table during Karaoke’s prayer—demonstrates discomfort, repulsion or even shame. Of course, this is the response that Karaoke hopes to elicit; the laughter is hers alone, while Josh is meant to feel that humiliation that Bergson describes as being at the core of humour and, as Bergson puts it, correct his behaviour “if not in his will, at least in his deed” (148). Essentially, by treating a subject that is not inherently funny with humour—by inverting the situation, and offering an unexpected reaction—Karaoke orchestrates the reaction in Josh that most readers feel in response to the abuse itself: discomfort, or even repugnance. And by orchestrating this response, by locating laughter “even in the darkest moments” (Lane 161), Karaoke puts an end to the sexual abuse, and she establishes that she does not see herself as only or primarily a victim.

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<sup>29</sup> Richard J. Lane writes that

the laughter or “black humour” of Robinson’s *Traplins* is difficult to acknowledge, because the stories themselves chart the lives of characters who suffer abuse in its various physical and psychological manifestations. The self-reflexive laughter generated by certain incidents, comments, or play upon words within the stories is indicative of a mode and strategy of self-survival, alongside the recognition that even in the darkest moment the creative mind can still interject and intercede via subversive counter-discourse. (161)

His assessment illustrates the degree to which Karaoke’s joke or prank is not intended to illicit the laughter of her readers, though she herself laughs; her mirth as an aggressive strategy, and an alternative to violence in stopping the abuse.



While Karaoke's joke allows her to establish a sense of control, its success is limited. Although I do not entirely agree with Visvis's assertion that Karaoke's "tendentious joke is not situated as effective; in fact, it is an unsuccessful method of therapeutic empowerment" ("Beyond" 39), Visvis's position is useful in analyzing the growing sphere of influence that violence and abuse continues to exert in Robinson's texts. For although Karaoke empowers herself, she is unable to prevent the effects of that abusive relationship from affecting her boyfriend Jimmy, who intercepts the missive intended for Josh. Faced with the knowledge of Karaoke's abuse, Jimmy obtains a position on Josh's fishing seiner (the eponymous *Queen of the North*). Although the short story ends ambiguously, as Karaoke watches the fishing boat with both Josh and Jimmy aboard disappear into the Pacific, *Monkey Beach* picks up the tale, recounting Lisa's search for her brother, lost at sea during this first voyage aboard the fishing vessel.

#### **4. T'Sonoqua and Screwy Ruby: Spirituality and Marginalization**

Throughout *Monkey Beach*, much of the dark humour is connected to supernatural manifestations. Like its representations of violence, however, the novel's treatment of Haisla spirituality is often fraught. Robinson begins her novel with the call of crows, which seem to be urging Lisa to search for her missing brother at the bottom of the ocean: "Six crows sit in our greengage tree. Half-awake, I hear them speak to me in Haisla. *La'es*, they say, *La'es*, *la'es*" (1). The reader receives a partial translation for the Haisla word; it means "go down to the bottom of the ocean" and "something else, but [Lisa] can't remember what" (1). We soon learn that Lisa's brother Jimmy is missing "Somewhere in the seas between [Kitamaat] and Namu" (5); the crows' calls, then, suggest the unsettling possibility that Jimmy has drowned. And

although Lisa's mother Gladys interprets the crows' calls as "Clearly a sign, Lisa, [...] that you need Prozac" (3), Ma-ma-oo tells Lisa that she has, in fact, inherited her gift from her mother. Gladys's gift, however, "makes people nervous" (153), prompting her to ignore and conceal it. And when Lisa asserts her grandmother's knowledge of and belief in this traditional belief system, her father dismisses Ma-ma-oo as a reliable source of cultural knowledge, telling his children, "Your grandmother thinks the people on TV are real" (10). Later, Lisa's spiritual visions prompt her parents to send her to see a psychiatrist; her mother's apparently light-hearted comment about Prozac thus alludes uncomfortably to delusion and mental illness. Robinson thereby introduces cultural spirituality and a matrilineal knowledge base and immediately illustrates the desire of some members of the tradition—most notably, Lisa's mother—to disavow their position within that knowledge base. As numerous critics have noted, b'gwus and ghosts are simultaneously aligned with Haisla cultural particularity and with popular culture. As such, these mythical creatures help to depict Lisa simultaneously as a contemporary North American, influenced, as most of her readers are, by twentieth-century popular culture, and Haisla—living within a Haisla community and informed by Haisla traditions.

However, Lisa's ability to connect with the otherworldly figures from her grandmother's stories does not afford her a privileged position within the Haisla community of Kitamaat; like her mother, she occupies an uncomfortable position in her community, and she is made strange by her spiritual connections: "Freaky's here! Talking to fucking ghosts" (319), an intoxicated partygoer calls to her late in the novel. Although her ability to see b'gwus and tree spirits represents a connection to culturally-based knowledge via her Ma-ma-oo, it also threatens to exile her to the fringes of her community. Interestingly, Lisa herself articulates the link between a close connection to Haisla mythology and a peripheral role within her contemporary Haisla

community when, for a school project, she compares the Haisla figure of T'sonoqua with Screwy Ruby, the marginalized madwoman of Kitamaat (337). Earlier in the novel, Lisa approaches Screwy Ruby, asking, "Are you really a witch? ... Do you ever see things?" (189). She describes the little man who appears to her to Screwy Ruby, expecting, perhaps, confirmation of a legitimate spiritual experience by a "witch" marginalized, not for mental illness and antisocial behaviour, but for her access to the spiritual realm. Instead, however, Ruby taunts Lisa, calling her a "bad girl" (189). Lisa's school project later confirms her initial impulse to associate Haisla spirituality with a marginalized position in the community; she now associates Ruby with a figure who "pretends to be an old woman" (337) in order to capture her human prey. She signals at once the pretence that is necessary to survival within a community: T'Sonoqua, like Lisa's mother, must hide their connection to the spiritual realm to avoid being ostracized by the community. At the same time, the T'Sonoqua myth emphasizes the threat that is perceived to be at the root of this deception. T'Sonoqua is a nightmarish figure for whom "human flesh is the ultimate delicacy and young flesh is especially sweet" (337). Lisa and her mother are not cannibals, of course, but they, too, are implicitly figured as threatening, for their access to the spiritual realm associates them with death and injury.

Rob Appleford points to the opening scene of the novel in his discussion of Lisa's thematic connections to the mythic figures in the text. He writes: "Lisamarie acknowledges that the word *La'es* means 'something else' which she has forgotten, an admission all the more troubling because cultural loss is remembered and confessed" (92). This cultural loss is rendered more troubling because it signals Lisa's inability to correctly interpret the spiritual-cultural signs which are transmitted to her throughout the text, most frequently (as in this case) as otherworldly messages about loss and danger. These signs therefore serve at once to remind Lisa of

unravelling cultural connections, of her own sense of strangeness within her community, and of the sense of loss, grief and trauma with which they are aligned. Lisa is unable to interpret the various dreams and spiritual messages<sup>30</sup>. The otherworldly components in the novel thereby serve to at once bind Lisa to her cultural identity and to remind her of her limited access to cultural signs and markers. They remind us that she is caught between cultural transmission and cultural loss.

Perhaps the most striking connection between Haisla spirituality and loss in the novel is the little red-haired man who repeatedly appears to Lisa before a traumatic event. She first encounters him as she examines the body of a mutilated dog. Later, he haunts her bedroom before painful and dangerous events such as the arrival of a tidal wave and the deaths of her Uncle Mick and Ma-ma-oo. Throughout the novel, Lisa greets his arrival with fear and suspicion. The night before Uncle Mick dies, the little red-haired man “[does] a tap dance on [Lisa’s] dresser” (132):

“You little bastard,” I whispered.

He popped into the air behind me. I didn’t know he was there until he touched my shoulder with a cold, wet hand. When I spun around to smack him, he stared at me with wide, sad eyes. Even after he disappeared, I could feel where his hand had touched me, and I knew he’d been trying to comfort me. (132)

When Lisa and her father discover Mick’s body, which has been submerged and mutilated by hungry seals, Lisa is tormented by her failure to interpret the little man’s warnings. Later, she is unable to interpret the otherworldly message that she receives before her Ma-ma-oo dies in a house fire. Throughout the novel, her response to these spiritual warnings is fraught with

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<sup>30</sup> Coral Ann Howells argues that her failure to interpret these messages is “because much of her Native Heritage is cut off from her, and she does not understand Haisla” (“Towards a Recognition” 155).

ambivalence. “Get out of here, you goddamned little bastard!” (234) she screams when the little man comes to warn her of her Ma-ma-oo’s impending heart attack. When she learns of her grandmother’s stroke, however, she is shocked by the unexpected news: “Until that moment, I had never appreciated the little man. This is, I thought, what it’s like for everyone else. Hello, it’s bad news. Bam. I couldn’t grasp it; my head wouldn’t wrap around it” (283).

Although Robinson describes the little man as a “leprechaun” (132) and a “troll” (234), Lisa learns early in the novel that he is also a tree spirit, a figure of Haisla mythology. When she asks her grandmother what it means that she has seen the tree spirit, Ma-ma-oo replies, “Guess you’re going to make canoes” (153); although she “helps Lisamarie to mediate between what others see and what she can access” (Andrews, “Native Canadian Gothic” 14), her own ability to interpret the spirit world is, like Lisa’s, imperfect. Lisa laughs at her grandmother’s explanation, and the latter says, “No one makes them any more [...]. Easier to go out and buy a boat. Old ways don’t matter much now. Just hold you back” (*Monkey Beach* 153). The tree spirit is thereby associated at once with traditional Haisla beliefs and contemporary, European-influenced modes of living. He is both a Haisla tree spirit and a leprechaun, and “is described in ways that cross cultural borders” (Dobson, “Indigeneity” 61). He appears to Lisa, but not to help her make canoes. Instead, he remains associated with moments of loss and trauma in the novel.

Haisla spirits are not the only supernatural creatures that are associated with loss and sorrow in the novel. Lisa’s parents, apparently concerned by her ability to see spirits, send her to a psychiatrist, Mrs. Jenkins. Lisa “[tries] not to focus on” the creature that has attached itself to Mrs. Jenkins and “[whispers] in her ear” (272). Although this creature is never actually named, it is apparently an incubus—a monster that Robinson imports from European mythology and associates with a white character. This passage in the novel signals the degree to which

Robinson draws from a variety of traditions, and the importance she assigns to these spiritual creatures, regardless of their cultural source. She includes not only references to Haisla spirituality into her novel, but incubi and leprechauns from European traditions, as well as popular culture references such as Ouija boards and “New Age, sounds-of-the-humpback-whale music” (*Monkey Beach* 212). And Robinson makes it decidedly difficult for the reader to establish a spiritual hierarchy, so to speak. Robinson does not, of course, suggest that a Ouija board has the spiritual power or cultural significance of the Land of the Dead, but she does underscore the difficulty of differentiating a legitimate spiritual experience from the playful substance of pop cultural supernatural representations. Furthermore, by blurring the distinction between Aboriginal, European, and popular spirituality, Robinson foregrounds popular culture’s problematic tendency to appropriate Aboriginal figures. For instance, in her long explanatory passage on b’gwus, she adds, “His Web site is [www.sasquatch.com](http://www.sasquatch.com)” (317).<sup>31</sup> These wry references to North American popular spirituality perform a function similar to what Kristina Fagan terms “hybrid humour” (*Laughing* 56), which is used to deal with the “uncertainties and indeterminacies of ‘being Native’” (56). Although Fagan applies the term to “writers of mixed background” (56), it is useful to consider this concept in relation to modern aboriginality, whose subjects are as likely as any non-Native Canadian to recognize the sense of frivolity that is often associated with contemporary pop-spirituality. This humour is particularly barbed, because often this pop-spirituality derives from a non-Native appropriation of Native traditions and cultural figures such as b’gwus, who is repackaged to sell computer repair services online. The humour that arises from references to a sasquatch website, and the novel’s slippery boundaries between traditional Haisla knowledge and popular modern spirituality “both [reflect] and [relieve]

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, this website is not dedicated to the sasquatch, but to a computer service based in California; this “error” in the novel further suggests an indissoluble connection between aboriginal mythology, popular culture, and a market that appropriates and exploits popularized mythologies to sell a variety of commodities.

tensions around the contentious and difficult issue of Native identity” (56). In this case, these tensions often centre on representations of Native spirituality, the legitimacy of Native spiritual experience, and its appropriation by mass culture and popular spirituality. The juxtaposition of pop-spirituality and Haisla mythology thereby recalls a scene in “The Queen of the North,” in which a white man culturally and sexually exploits Karaoke, who is making fry bread in a fundraising booth at a powwow in East Vancouver. Despite Karaoke’s protests that the bannock is sold out and she is tired, the man pays a hundred dollars for another batch of fry bread. He watches Karaoke so intently as she works that she becomes “suddenly aware of how far [her] shirt dipped and how short [her] cutoffs were” (208). Before he leaves, he asks a favour: “‘Would you—’ he blushed harder, ‘shake your hair out of that baseball cap?’” (209). The man admits that he is “on vacation” (208), suggesting that his attendance at the community event is an exercise in cultural tourism. He eagerly enquires whether Karaoke is “Indian” (207), and his intense attention to her signals his sexually and culturally exploitative motives.

Robinson’s reference to [www.sasquatch.com](http://www.sasquatch.com) in *Monkey Beach* suggests that similarly exploitative motives are behind the commercial, pop-culture appropriation of sasquatch / *b’gwus*. Sasquatch’s presence in the text signals the slipperiness of representations of Aboriginal spirituality as a result of this pattern of cultural appropriation and fetishization of Native myths and figures. Robinson’s inclusion of these objects of dubious (or at least ambivalent) authenticity connotes the problem of locating an “authentic” modern, Aboriginal spiritual experience. Her juxtaposition of Haisla spiritual figures alongside the trappings of new-age spirituality are characteristic of a tendency that Jennifer Andrews, Kit Dobson, and others have noted in Robinson’s writing: a strategy that “shies away from embracing an uncritically or stereotypically ‘Native’ perspective” (Dobson, “Indigeneity” 60).

In addition to complicating the reader's attempts to differentiate between authentic Haisla spiritual experiences and cultural appropriation and commodification, Robinson's juxtapositions are humorous in much the same way that Iroquois visual artist Bill Powless's work humorously interrogates the stereotypes of Aboriginals "by surrounding [them] with jarring symbols of popular culture" (Ryan, *Trickster Shift* 55). Powless's "Indian Summer," for instance, "recalls and then wickedly subverts the romanticized and highly conventionalized depictions of the 'Naked Savage/Noble Warrior'" (Ryan, "Postmodern Parody" 60), resituating the familiar figure on a beach, eating a Popsicle, and wearing a Speedo and an umbrella hat. Like Robinson's fiction, Powless's artwork blends consumerist imagery with Native stereotypes to interrogate, through humour, popular conceptions of modern Aboriginality. And, also like Robinson's fiction, Powless's art communicates a sense of the opportunity inherent in cultural mixture. Finally, the mixed spiritual references in the novel serve to remind the reader of some characters' resistant attitudes towards spirituality in the novel; the reader's reaction to New Age music mirrors that of Lisa's community to her ability to speak to ghosts or see tree spirits.

Nowhere is this blurring between bogus and authentic spiritual manifestations more evident than in the passage in which Lisa and her friends Frank, Pooch and Cheese resort to questioning a Ouija board in order to try to find Lisa's missing cat. The spirits, however, are decidedly uncooperative. The game board's answers to their questions are both playful and aggressive, pointed and oblique: Pooch asks, "are you listening to me?" and the "pointer [moves] to 'No.'" (230). He asks, "Who's there? Who's with us?" and the game replies, "G-u-e-s-s" (230). It spells out the words "Josh" and "bed" (231); Pooch, the reader later discovers, is also a victim of Josh's sexual abuse; Pooch eventually commits suicide as a result. Finally, when Lisa asks where her missing cat is, the board spells "worm meat" (231-32). "That's the problem with



the dead,” Pooch says, “They have such a fucked-up sense of humour” (232). There are two ways to interpret this passage: first, that for at least part of the game, the children are controlling the pointer, enabling them to give voice to a secret that is never allowed to be openly stated. This reading is supported by the passage following Pooch’s funeral, when Karaoke tells Frank and Lisa, “We all know why he did it” (319). Frank, however, tells her to “Shut up” (319), preventing her from explicitly stating the cause of Pooch’s suicide. The references to “Josh” and “bed,” then, are potentially a way for Pooch or the others to give voice to the unspeakable knowledge that they share: that Josh is molesting children in Kitamaat. Like Josh, Trudy and their friends, the children may be speaking the unspeakable, reasserting bonds of kinship by acknowledging a secret that they cannot openly discuss.

Alternately, we can view this episode as another authentic manifestation of the spirits that populate the novel. In this case, the dead—if that is indeed who controlled the Ouija board—are indulging in a distinctly malevolent laughter, both revealing and withholding information. The abuse is known, but it is not openly stated. The Ouija board, by spelling out “Josh” and “bed,” tauntingly and malevolently partakes in this game of simultaneously saying and not saying: it names the abuser and the likely site of the abuse, but it does not overtly describe the act. The supernatural jokester taunts Pooch with an allusion to his secret trauma. Unlike Karaoke’s joke, which ends her abuse, this joke pokes fun at the abused, not the abuser. Pooch does not achieve his moment of triumphant laughter. Robinson cunningly avoids revealing whether or not the children are agents in this game: are they the source of the information, using dark humour to share a secret, or are they the butt of an otherworldly joke? Once again, ambiguity is key; Robinson at once implies that the shared joke might be a strategy to overcoming the ongoing abuse, while at the same time suggesting that the sexual violence is so deeply embedded within

the community that it has rooted itself within its spiritual mythology. Just as we are unsure whether Josh and Jimmy's disappearance signals an end to at least a portion of the violence that has perpetuated itself within the community, we cannot be certain whether the children are able to develop a strategy to cope with the sexual abuse through subversion and elision. Robinson at once suggests that there may be ways out of the cycle of systemic violence, while reasserting the power of violence to embed itself within the social and even spiritual fabric of the community.

Elsewhere in the novel, in her interactions with the little man whose visits often precede episodes of loss or suffering, Lisa discovers how uncomfortable it can be to be the object of a supernatural joke, and barred from sharing in the laughter. The tree spirit / leprechaun's night-time performances range from malicious—"When he was in a mean mood, he did a jerky little dance and pretended to poke at my eyes" (27)—to benignly entertaining—"He did a tap dance on my dresser" (132). Nonetheless, Lisa is not able to share in the humour: in the first instance, she is frightened by his mean-spirited joking, and in the latter, she already knows that his visits portend death, loss, danger and suffering. By preceding episodes such as Mick's death or the disappearance of Lisa's cat with the performances of a little man that, in other contexts, would be entertaining or even amusing, Robinson foregrounds the relationship between loss, dark humour, and the novel's supernatural manifestations.

Although Lisa is never able to participate in the dark humour that these situations afford, she nevertheless learns the power of belligerent humour. Lisa achieves a momentary triumph over her cousin Erica's exclusive group of friends by alluding to Erica's "accident on the zipper," and calling her cousin "Pissy Missy" (170). Though the joke momentarily deflects Erica's teasing, its effects are less positive in the long term, as Lisa's schoolmates respond to her cruel humour by alienating her: "If I'd had head lice, scabies, worms and measles, I couldn't

have been more unpopular” (171). Although Lisa is momentarily triumphant, her aggressive teasing results in her exclusion from Erica’s circle; she learns that humour can be at once empowering and profoundly harmful. However, Lisa’s lesson about the potential power of acerbic humour is a valuable one as later, when Erica is threatened by a truckload of young white men who assault her with racialized sexual threats, Lisa springs to her cousin’s defence. “Looky, looky,” she calls to them, “The dickless wonder can speak. I thought guys like you just grunted” (250). Once again, Lisa deploys ridicule as a weapon. However, like the spirit who moves the Ouija board pointer, and the little red man poking at Lisa’s eyes, Lisa, now the jokester, excludes the men—the object of her joke—from joining the laughter. And although she succeeds in drawing the men’s attention from her cousin, Lisa places herself in a potentially dangerous situation. Lisa becomes the object of the men’s aggression until a passerby intervenes to defuse the situation. Aggressive humour, Lisa learns, empowers—but only momentarily. It cannot prevent exclusion or further violence. Although Lisa now participates in the humour, she is still laughing alone, in a sense. Her joke, like Karaoke’s, has a corrective aim, but it does not reaffirm a social order because it is not shared with members of her community or her family. However, as we shall see, Robinson’s dark humour is most empowering for her characters when there is a shared laughter, and a sense that community and family relationships, and even the relationships between the living and the dead, are renewed and reaffirmed.

When Lisa takes a rubbing of a gravestone in the old Kitamaat graveyard, she realizes that the strange marking on the stone—“the number 100 and a backwards F” (140)—spells “Fool” backwards. Ma-ma-oo explains that “in the land of the dead everything is backwards” (140). The unsettling joke simultaneously mocks the dead, who can read and recognize the message, and the living, who cannot. The doubleness of the joke recalls Bakhtin’s theory of the

medieval carnival: carnival laughter is “universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants” (11). The inscription on the gravestone is intended as the living’s joke on the dead; however, the backwards lettering mocks the living and the dead at once. In addition, carnivalesque “laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time, mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (12).

Not all humour in *Monkey Beach* is antagonistic, however, and it frequently does not serve the Bakhtinian function of restoring social order once the laughter stops. Much of the laughter stems from the sense of a shared past: surprising behaviours and unexpected connections. For instance, Mick tells his niece of her parents’ first date; Lisa responds incredulously to the tale of her mother Gladys, whom she has “never seen ... even tipsy” getting “royally pissed” (97) and making innumerable snow angels in the front yard of Al and Mick’s parents’ home. Later, Lisa deploys her knowledge of this humorous story in order to defuse tensions over Jimmy’s decision to date Karaoke. When Gladys obliquely expresses her disapproval of the match, Al replies, “You weren’t exactly an angel yourself” (334), allowing Lisa to interject, “Maybe a snow angel” (335). The humour stems from Lisa’s parents’ surprise at Lisa’s knowledge of the event, and also from an implied sense of kinship between Gladys and Karaoke. Unlike the malicious joke-telling elsewhere in the novel—a humour that “is entwined with and implicated in violence and ridicule” (Fagan, “Teasing” 41)—this jesting contributes to “community-building” as the shared laughter “creates a sense of warm closeness” (43) within a family.

*Monkey Beach* offers its readers an ambiguous ending: the final pages are dreamlike, and relate Lisa’s interactions with her dead grandparents, uncle Mick and brother Jimmy. At the novel’s end, Robinson once again explores these tensions between the potential of humour to be

at once exclusionary and to reaffirm the social structure. Lisa, it seems, is once again the butt of a dangerous supernatural joke. She cuts her hand as an offering to the mysterious voices in the forest surrounding Monkey Beach; they hint at a promise to help her in exchange. Instead, they leave her weakened and offer her no insight into her brother's disappearance. When she demands the help they promised, "They snigger" (369) and demand more blood. This type of laughter—sniggering—carries distinctly antagonistic and exclusionary overtones. The object of a snigger—in this case, Lisa—is not allowed to share in the humour. Instead, she is excluded or even, as Bergson argues, humiliated. Lisa has been tricked: the spirits will offer no knowledge, only laughter at her expense. She stumbles, weakened and disoriented, to her boat and nearly drowns. In a dreamlike episode, however, Jimmy himself appears to her, pushing her back to the surface of the water. Back on the beach, Lisa meets the spirits of her Ma-ma-oo and Ba-ba-oo (grandparents) and her Uncle Mick. Ba-ba-oo, or Sherman—a man Lisa has never known in life—sings a mock-military song in which words have an apparently salacious meaning: "Asshole" becomes "A soldier," "To piss," "two pistols" and "my cunt," "my country" (368). Sherman's song is a telling one: in life, he was a soldier. After sustaining devastating injuries in the Second World War, he was effectively abandoned by his country:

When he came home, he couldn't get a job or get the money he thought he should get from Veterans Affairs because they said Indian Affairs was taking care of him. Indian Affairs said if he wanted to get the same benefits as a white vet, he should move off the reserve and give up his status. (81)

Here, the joke is on the auditor, who is invited to be shocked at the song's apparent salaciousness, and to laugh at his or her mistake. Sherman's song, a vulgar parody of a military tune, derides the military and nation that have failed and neglected him. The various branches of

the Canadian government refuse to acknowledge him as simultaneously a Canadian soldier and a Native Canadian. However, throughout the novel, Sherman's military career is related with pride; Ma-ma-oo tells Lisa, "Your ba-ba-oo was a fighter too. Second war. I was so proud of him" (173). Sherman himself is associated with the novel's other "warriors:" Mick and Lisa. All three meet in the land of the dead, and this episode, as well as the humour therein, tends to reaffirm Sherman's, Mick's and Lisa's positions as warriors, even as the lewd song derides the military institution that refuses to recognize Sherman as a Haisla soldier. Once again, laughter unites the members of this family, even though most of them are dead, and it is unclear whether Lisa will recover from near-drowning. As Appleford points out, the novel ends ambivalently. The speedboat that Lisa hears in the final line of the novel could signal her rescue, or it could be a modernized reference to the canoe that, in Haisla mythology, transports the spirits to the Land of the Dead. *Monkey Beach* resists the kinds of conclusions that would allow the reader to determine whether Lisa and Jimmy have successfully contributed to ending the cycle of systemic violence in Kitamaat. Robinson offers her characters strategies for overcoming or coping with this violence, but by emphasizing the ambiguous or ambivalent results produced by these subversive strategies, she underscores violence's tenacious nature, and its tendency to perpetuation.

In Eden Robinson's fiction, humour is often both powerful and dangerous, and her fictions are perhaps at their most interesting when she exploits this tension between humour's sometimes belligerent, even humiliating potential, and its power to unite members of a community in shared laughter. In addition, Robinson draws on a variety of cultural sources, frustrating our desire to

read her as either a Native informant, or a mainstream writer. As such, her fictional strategies are both surprising and subversive.

## Chapter 5:

### Mapping Ethnicity, Managing Grief: Mourning Air India 182

Following Prime Minister Harper's June 2008 apology to the survivors of Indian residential schools, and his more ambiguous expressions in August 2008 of regret over the 1914 Komagata Maru, Canadians are very much aware of the implications of systemic racism and of the symbolic and political value of governmental apology and redress. In *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*, Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee discuss Prime Minister Mulroney's telephone condolences to India's President Rajiv Gandhi following the Air India disaster, and argue that these condolences were sadly misplaced, as most of the passengers of Air India Flight 182's passengers were, in fact, Canadian citizens. I begin with this governmental gaffe because it points to the shifting nature of Indo-Canadian ethnicity, which is key to my analysis of three texts that explore emergent ethnic divisions within Indo-Canadian and transnational Indian communities in the years leading up to and following the Air India bombing.

This chapter considers how Anita Rau Badami's novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*, Bharati Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief," and Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee's *The Sorrow and the Terror*, a non-fiction account of the Air India tragedy, depict the relationship of the individual experience of mourning to a sense of shared loss, outrage, and sorrow. This chapter also examines how mourning affects the way in which interstitial ethnicity is formulated and represented.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the texts that I have discussed up to this point, Badami's

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<sup>32</sup> Stuart Hall's insistence that identity is "subject to a radical historicization, and ... constantly in the process of change and transformation" (17), and that "identities are constructed through, not outside, difference" (17) is at the



novel and Mukherjee's short story do not foreground racism by white, Anglophone Canadians or a Canadian government that assumes a white, Anglophone, and hegemonic stance in relation to ethnic, racial, and cultural minorities; instead, they consider how ethnic differences within the post-Partition Indian diaspora have become increasingly polarized. And while each of these works explores how the individual response to loss realigns political and ethnic awareness, complicating our attempts to identify a stable Indo-Canadian ethnicity in the face of post-Indian Partition nationalisms, hostilities and alliances, I foreground the ways in which the depiction of the individual, singular experience of grieving conveys the significance of a tragedy that is shared both within the Indo-Canadian community and by Canadians and the Indian diaspora more generally.

### **1. Accounting for the Other: Literature and Witnessing**

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that “the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interests, or cultural value are negotiated” in the “moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural difference” (2, emphasis in original, 1). As such, it not surprising that recent literature by South Asian-Canadian writers emphasizes the interstitiality of Indo-Canadian identities, suggesting that they are transitional, articulated as neither fully Indian nor Canadian, but (dis)located within an ethnic space that is neither clearly defined nor yet recognized by the nation—Canada—that purports to embrace difference. However, we often fail to consider the degree to which these emerging in-between cultural, social, ethnic and political spaces are constituted through grief and acts of mourning.

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heart of my use of the term “interstitial” here. Like Hall, I see ethnic identity as being constructed at “the point of *suture*, between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’” (19).

When we examine these shifting and interstitial identities represented in literature, we often search for the reflection and manifestation of our world in fiction, without also considering literature's potential to not only record and interpret, but also to reconfigure our responses to the events, places, and people that form their subject.

Martha Nussbaum describes the literary imagination as “an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (*Poetic Justice* xvi). Despite her warning that “the literary imagination has to contend against the deep prejudices of many human beings and institutions and will not always prevail” (xviii), Nussbaum's optimistic understanding of how literature can change our perceptions and allow us to understand and sympathize with the experiences of others is a powerful argument in favour of literature's potential to help us to respond creatively and constructively to an experience and a perspective that was previously foreign and strange.

Many other critics have been deeply skeptical of the notion that literature can affect positive social change. Derek Attridge, for instance, argues that literature can change the way we perceive difference, but that its “effects are not predictable enough to serve a political or moral program” (4). And for Suzanne Keen, “the evidence for a relationship between narrative empathy and the prosocial motivation of actual readers does not support the grand claims made on behalf of empathy” (145). In fact, Keen argues that, while empathy is a demonstrable and scientifically measurable phenomenon, and that readers readily empathize with fictional characters, these readers are not only unlikely to undertake “prosocial” action, they may even be less likely to act in a compassionate and positive manner as a result of their reading experiences. Specifically, she contends that “an over-aroused empathic response that creates personal distress (self-oriented and aversive) causes a turning-away” (4) from the suffering of the other. In other

words, responding empathetically to a fictional character may even deter a reader from engaging in political or social action if the emotions that the novel or short story elicits become too overwhelming. It is true that literature about racism and violence can be difficult, or even painful to read. But protagonists such as Mukherjee's Shaila Bhave do not engage in celebrated victimization of "zeroism" (116) or self-destructive celebration of victimization that Madelaine Hron warns us about. Instead, Bhave actively resists programs and people who would identify her only or primarily as a victim and insists on the utter particularity of her own grief. Although Mukherjee, herself, generalizes by crafting an allegorical character who is representative of the ideology of official multiculturalism in Canada, she does so strategically: by underscoring the extent to which the Indo-Canadians in the story are generalized by the well-intentioned government official, Judith Templeton, Mukherjee insists on the particularity of trauma and aptly demonstrates literature's ability to testify to that trauma in a manner that generates both empathy and critical awareness

Obviously, the quality of the fiction we read has a bearing on the effectiveness of the empathetic response it encourages. Keen warns that many readers of middlebrow fiction value texts that encourage empathy in the form of character identification, which emphasizes "the universality of human emotional responses ... sometimes undervaluing real differences among people of diverse cultures" (ix). For Dominick LaCapra, however, empathy need not take the form of this kind of reductive and ethnocentric identification:

Empathy as a component of historical understanding has not been a prominent concern for about a century both because it is incompatible with a scientific idea of knowledge exclusively as objectification of the other and because it has been conflated with identification, hence seen as a substitute for, rather than a complement and supplement to,

critical procedures of inquiry (or even to social and political action). ... I would distinguish desirable empathy from identification and link it to the recognition of the alterity of the other as other, thus combining it with possible critical distance and judgment (whether positive or negative). (198)

He argues, furthermore, that “empathy, including acting acknowledgement of otherness, is crucial for responsive historical understanding” (199). LaCapra’s conception of empathy as being able to account for otherness in the field of historical study dovetails with Attridge’s argument that literature allows us to account for otherness. Literature, for Attridge, can result in “an encounter with alterity, which is to say the shifting and opening-up of settled modes” (27). For Attridge, literature can make an understanding of otherness possible. I argue that literature—well-wrought poetry or, in this case, fiction—can foster empathy, even as it teaches us to mentally and emotionally accommodate alterity. Unlike literature that is reductively allegorical<sup>33</sup>, literary fiction that depicts highly particularized individual characters who do not act in a culturally prescribed manner can result in an empathetic response that does not overwhelm us, or make us want to turn away from the source of so much overpowering emotion.

However, while I maintain that literature has the power to change us, I do not claim that reading literature has the capacity to change the world. As I will argue further in Chapter Six, the kind of accommodations and action that literature asks us to make are modest. Literature simply asks us to understand people differently, and to accommodate new or unfamiliar points of view and attitudes. Mukherjee’s short story, for instance, asks its readers not to expect individuals to behave in a culturally informed manner; it encourages us to recognize the individuality of those whom we have been encouraged to understand racially or culturally.

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<sup>33</sup> I am not arguing that all allegory is reductive, or that allegory cannot elicit an empathetic response. I will argue, however, that literature, whether it is allegorical or not, is more likely to elicit an empathetic response if the characters are complex and highly individualized, rather than representative “types.”

In this chapter, I consider three texts that attempt to offer their readers insight into both the lives of the victims, and the motivations of those who were responsible for, or at least sympathetic to, the Air India bombing. Although Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call* and Blaise and Mukherjee's *The Sorrow and the Terror* represent deeply affective accounts of the tragedy, it is Mukherjee's "Management of Grief" that most successfully speaks to the process through which grief shifts "ingrained modes of understanding" (Attridge 123) of ethnic similarity or difference. Through its depiction of the capacity of grief to change the way one understands categories of belonging and exclusion, this short story also challenges the reader to reconsider these categories. Attridge writes:

It is in the acknowledgement of the other person's uniqueness, and therefore the impossibility of finding general rules or schema to account fully for him or her, that one can be said to encounter the other as other—in the same moment that those rules and schema shift, however momentarily, to take into account of the now no longer other. (33)

Attridge's comments recall Dori Laub's and Kelly Oliver's insistence on the importance of witnessing, and the ethical bond between the person who testifies and the person who hears the testimony. As I discussed briefly in my introduction and at greater length in Chapter Three, witnessing is only possible when the listener can enable response-ability, in Oliver's terms—that is, the ability to elicit testimony from others. Shoshana Felman argues that the truth is not available to the person who bears witness; enabling response-ability, then, is an essential component of helping the traumatized individual to overcome the effects of that trauma through testimony. Attridge's statement, however, points to the effects of receiving literature as testimony: in his configuration, the reader is transformed by the testimony. Just as the person who listens to the testimony of the other enables his/her transformation, literature itself, as a

medium of that testimony, is uniquely positioned to enable the transformation of the reader-as-witness, but only if the reader is prepared to undergo the conceptual shifts that literature can facilitate. That is to say, fiction can successfully engage the reader's sympathies, and even shift his/her conception of those lives that are so different from his/her own—but only, as Nussbaum points out, when the reader is receptive to the testimony embodied within the fiction. Nussbaum writes that “an ethics of impartial respect for human dignity will fail to engage real human beings unless they are made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to their participation” (*Poetic Justice* xvi); her assessment of literature's potential, like Attridge's, suggests that literary fiction can be a medium of testimony, but only if the reader is prepared to imaginatively engage with the text. This transformative potential is particularly in evidence in Mukherjee's short story, and, to a lesser degree, in Badami's novel and Blaise and Mukherjee's non-fictional account. In effect, by showing how grief brings about a changed understanding of one's own relationship to the ethnic or cultural other, Mukherjee's story simultaneously causes the reader to experience his/her own “creative re-imagination” (Attridge 67) of the categories of exclusion and inclusion, and in the process, to formulate a critical understanding of both his/her conception of the categories by which s/he defines this “other,” as well as the characters' understanding of the criteria by which these categories are formulated.

Sam Durrant, however, complicates our understanding of the process of witnessing in a postcolonial context. He reminds us of the relationship of mourning to history within the framework of postcolonialism. He writes:

melancholic rituals accrue a wider political significance and thus need to be reinterpreted as modes of collective mourning. To put it another way, their immoderate grief needs to

be recognized as a precisely proportionate response to history, a way of bearing witness to losses that exceed the proportions of the individual subject. (10-11)

Durrant situates the individual act of mourning within a community whose history has been suppressed or foreclosed upon, arguing that “the work of mourning is addressed to a community that has yet to be formed, [and] thus constitutes itself as an infinite address” (114). This work of mourning, therefore, addresses both the grieving individual, and the community’s grief.

Mukherjee’s protagonist forces us to consider both the individual work of mourning, and the ongoing constitution of historical grief and loss.

Anita Rau Badami’s novel also addresses both the individual in mourning and the community’s response to loss. More generally, Badami writes of the Air India bombing in the context of diaspora and Canadian multiculturalism. And *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*, like Badami’s earlier novels *Tamarind Mem* and *The Hero’s Walk*, explores these themes through the relationships between the characters who remain in India and those who emigrate to Canada. In a review of Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*, Paulomi Chakraborty comments that Leela, the only one of the novel’s three female protagonists who is not a Sikh, “represents the non-Sikh Indians in Canada; specifically, arriving in Trudeau’s Canada in 1967, she is the prototype of the immigrant during Canada’s turn to a policy of multiculturalism” (“Disasters”). Chakraborty’s review signals the degree to which Badami’s work focuses on the community at the expense of the individual. Leela is a representative figure in the novel, like Badami’s other protagonists Nimmo and Sharanjeet; the latter’s name, for instance, is tellingly transformed to Bibi-ji, a term that means “wife”— “and that,” Badami tells us, “is what she was” (40). And if Leela represents the non-Sikh Indian immigrant, Bibi-ji represents the successful Sikh immigrant, and Nimmo, the Sikh living in post-Partition India. Significantly, Badami chooses

female figures as her cultural representatives. Each of these women is defined primarily by her relationship to her family: Bibi-ji is “the respected wife of a respected man” (40), and a matriarch of Vancouver’s Indo-Canadian community. Bibi-ji’s niece Nimmo is the daughter of parents killed in post-Partition violence, and now a mother and wife fearful for her family’s safety. And Leela is the “half-and-half” (74) daughter of a white mother and Indian father, and the mother of two children who “fit in okay” (387) in Vancouver.

It is important to note that *Can You hear the Nightbird Call* was published in 2006, and falls, therefore, outside of Canada’s multicultural period of the 1980s and 1990s; however, I include it in my discussion because the ways in which this novel falls short of producing well-wrought and complex characters capable of producing an empathetic readerly response enables us to more clearly understand how Mukherjee’s dynamic and often surprising characters enable us to experience the singular encounter with literature described by Attridge.

## **2. Representation and Belonging: Allegory in Badami**

Badami’s choice to tell the story of events leading up to the Air India bombing from the point of view of three representative women is an interesting one because, defined as they are by their family and communal relationships, these women are strategically placed to demonstrate the significance of grief. This novel tells the story of loss: the loss of loved ones as a result of ethnically-based violence. And if Badami chooses representative women, rather than highly particularized characters, the story she tells is the story of a community and a diaspora: by depicting highly representative protagonists, Badami implies that the story of virtually all Indo-Canadian women can be read, allegorically, in the story of her female characters. This novel is of the kind that led Frederic Jameson to conclude that third-world texts—and we can expand the



term third-world, in this context to include post-colonial texts, and texts written explicitly within the frameworks of the Indian diaspora—“necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (69, emphasis in original). I would like to respond to Jameson’s claim by first arguing that third-world (or post-colonial) literature is not necessarily allegorical; as we shall see in my discussion of Mukherjee’s short story, the protagonists of stories that explicitly engage in contentious post-colonial or diasporic issues need not be construed as representatives of their nations or cultures. Furthermore, I do not make the claim that allegory is necessarily a reductive or limiting form of literature.<sup>34</sup> The argument that I wish to make is that an allegorical novel or short story that attempts to represent entire cultures and sub-cultures in individual representative characters fails to engage our readerly empathy in a meaningful manner. Characters that behave in a way that is almost entirely culturally informed are predictable and flat or unsurprising. Furthermore, these texts’ attempts to engage the empathy of their readers risk resulting the paralyzing, overwhelming emotional reaction that Suzanne Keen identifies as a risk of readerly empathy. When we are asked to feel and respond to the sorrow of an entire racial or cultural group, how can we feel other than beleaguered and overwhelmed?

*Can You Hear the Nightbird Call* is, above all, a *bildungsroman* of the Indo-Canadian community. Badami depicts Vancouver’s Indo-Canadian community as nascent, beginning with

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<sup>34</sup> Laura Moss’s argues that both allegory and ambiguity have been used to outwit censorship, and that “open-ended narrative ambiguity” can be seen “as a kind of literary indeterminacy that sustains discussion of unresolved/irresolvable political and moral issues” (“Hesitating” 139). Allegory, like ambiguity, is a strategy that can be deployed against repressive regimes that attempt to censor literature and other cultural expressions. It is therefore not surprising that much post-colonial literature should be allegorical, considering the brutal repression that exists in many colonial regimes. But allegory can often be fraught with ambiguity and complexity, and can, like ambiguous literature, “[sustain] discussion of unresolved/irresolvable political and moral issues.”

a narrative of failed immigration aboard the Komagata Maru, and ending with the redefinition of community and belonging through both individual grief and shared mourning.

Stuart Hall's conception of diaspora as defined "not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" (119-20) is useful in understanding Badami's representation of Vancouver's Indo-Canadian community and its relationship to the Indian diaspora. Badami depicts this community as nascent; in the first section of the novel, named for Bibi-ji, the eponymous protagonist begins life in Canada as the wife of "Pa-ji, unchallenged owner—no, *proprietor*; that sounded grander—of East India Foods and Groceries, 2034 Main Street" (37). In 1951, Bibi-ji surveys Main Street and reflects that there were "more Sikhs [in Abbotford and Duncan] than here in Vancouver" (49). She and Pa-ji become the self-designated ambassadors to this evolving community, welcoming and assisting newcomers such as Leela Bhat. Early in the novel, Pa-ji celebrates the Sikh diaspora in the Delhi Junction Café. The walls of his restaurant feature a veritable cultural pastiche: maps of Canada and India hang alongside pictures of Nehru, Marilyn Monroe, Gandhi, and Clark Gable, and are set amongst "clocks displaying the time in India, Pakistan (East and West), Vancouver, England, New York, Melbourne and Singapore" (60). Symbolically, the café represents a Canadian multicultural ideal, in which culture is not characterized by what Neil Bissondath calls an "obsessively backward gaze" (111), engaging only in a static conception of essential culture, but instead, incorporating elements of that culture with contemporary, popular culture from the homeland and the country of adoption. Sikh devotional imagery, maps of the old homeland and the new, images of Indian political figures, Hollywood and Bollywood coexist with no apparent rank or hierarchy. At the same time, the clocks display a global awareness of the Sikh diaspora, a source of pride for Pa-ji, an exuberant allegorical representation of Trudeau-era Canadian

multiculturalism, who is “pleased ... to be reminded that Sikhs were scattered all over the world” (60). However, both Bibi-ji and Pa-ji “felt a deep affection for [the new immigrants], even when they are not from Punjab” (61).

In contrast, Leela—a half-German, half-Indian immigrant to Canada, and the only character in the novel who embarks upon the ill-fated Air India flight—is situated uncomfortably between cultures. She is an outcast in her childhood home, where her grandmother calls her “Half-breed” and “Worse than an untouchable” (82). Her cousins liken her to the mythical Trishanku, who is “condemned to hang upside down between worlds, unable to do anything other than wait for the universe to end” (77). And, indeed, Badami foreshadows Leela’s fate in this comparison, for Leela dies in the air, “one and a half hours away from the Heathrow airport... literally between worlds” (392), attempting to return to India for the first time since her emigration to Canada. Significantly, Leela’s body is never recovered; Badami leaves her “in-between” character suspended in the air above the Atlantic Ocean, caught between worlds; although her body would, of course, fall into the waters of the Atlantic following the explosion, Badami does not track her descent into the water.

Throughout the novel, Leela attempts to find a place for herself and establish a stable cultural and personal identity, first in India, where she is haunted by notions of cultural purity, then in Trudeau-era Canada, where she must formulate new categories of belonging and exclusion. In India, her marriage to Balachandra “Balu” Bhat allies her to a family of “purebred Hindu Brahmins, untainted either racially or in their religion” (99), who accept her without question, and without troublesome reference to her German mother, or to Leela’s tellingly grey eyes. In India, as a married woman, she is able to enjoy the privilege that she associates with racial purity. Immediately on her arrival in Canada, however, she is offended when a driver calls

her and her family “fucking Chinese drivers” (108). Leela is not affronted by the racism behind the insult; instead, she takes issue with the misrecognition, asking, “Do we *look* Chinese?” (109). Leela’s cultivated appreciation for cultural purity is destabilized by 1960s Canadian multiculturalism—an increasingly multicultural society, but one in which the white, Anglophone majority continues to assert its cultural hegemony and its inherent racism, in which all differences are seen as homogenous. Leela responds to this destabilization by developing a new system of belonging and exclusion. Her insistent cataloging of people as “one of us” and “not one of us” relies not only on racial and ethnic categories, but socio-economic factors, and codes of behaviour.

When she first arrives in Canada, her perception of her own cultural identity is unsettled. Whereas her marriage in India had previously allowed her “to perceive herself as one of the Well-Known Bhats from Bangalore,” she is humbled to discover that, in Vancouver, she is now “a Minority lumped together with an assortment of other Minorities” (137). Leela is unable to rely on the stable identity markers that, during her childhood, mark her as ethnically inferior, “a half-and-half hovering on the outskirts of their family’s circle of love,” and that during her early marriage, elevate her to “Mrs. Bhat, the wife of Balachandra Bhat, daughter-in-law (the only one) of the famous Gundoor Bhats” (74). Finally, as she is leaving Canada on her ill-fated trip to India, she draws on these categories to classify other passengers in the Vancouver airport. A well-dressed man whose ethnicity is not specified is described as “One of Us,” while a woman smelling “of sweat and heavy perfume” is “Definitely not One of Us” (388). Leela bases her assessments not on ethnic signifiers, but on social codes of conduct. The reader, who shares (or is limited to) Leela’s perspective and who is now familiar with Leela’s schema, is thus encouraged to recognize that the “obstreperous” (388) turbaned man who causes a commotion in

Vancouver airport when his bag is checked is “Not One of Us.” While readers who are familiar with the investigation of the bombing of Air India 182 will recognize that the man is likely a fictional representation of the mysterious “man of medium height and medium build ... [wearing] a good grey suit” (Blaise and Mukherjee 27) who convinced an airline clerk to interline a bag onto Air India Flight 182—most likely the bag that exploded mid-flight—, readers who are unfamiliar with accounts of the event will nonetheless recognize the significance of this passenger who is behaving, according to Leela’s categories, as “Not One of Us.” This assessment relies on notions of polite behaviour, and what Blaise and Mukherjee identify as the characteristically Canadian “myth of instinctive goodness” and the “bedrock certainty of ‘it can’t happen here’” (203). This certainty also seems to be at the heart of Badami’s harried airport clerk’s decision to eventually check the baggage. In other words, although he is behaving badly, the man’s appearance and deportment are Western enough to disarm airport and airline officials. Badami thereby underscores the deeply problematic nature of Leela’s categorization. For, as Blaise and Mukherjee remind us, the terrorists, like the victims of the Air India bombing, were not foreign, but distinctly Canadian. They were “One of Us.”

Interestingly, although in Badami’s novel, the man’s behaviour signals to readers his relative alterity (he does not conform to the codes of polite behavior that Leela herself values), Leela does not come to this conclusion. In fact, she reacts only to the man’s situation as it relates to her travel plans: “if he was getting all sorts of concessions regarding baggage, she would insist on getting the same treatment” (388). His behaviour, although bothersome, is not obtrusive enough to warrant symbolic exclusion in Leela’s eyes; however, the reader, drawing in part on Leela’s own categories of behaviour, is made uneasy by his obstreperousness. That he is likely the terrorist responsible for the bombing unsettles the reader’s underlying assumption that

violence is committed by someone who is identifiably an outsider, since Leela herself does not single him out as an outsider. By deciding to follow the man's lead and demand "the same treatment" (388), Leela signals the very Canadianness of the terrorists, and the troublesome and ambivalent nature of ethnic and national categorization.

### **3. Owing Our Tragedies: Indian Events and Canadian Problems**

In *The Sorrow and the Terror*, Blaise and Mukherjee identify a Canadian impulse to designate the 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182 as "an Indian event" rather than as "a Canadian problem" (ix). They contend that "*Canada, as a nation, though hugely sympathetic to human distress, seemed to distance itself from guilt by viewing this incident as 'their' rather than 'our' tragedy*" (174, emphasis in original). Despite the fact that the airline was Indian, and the plane bound for India, a huge majority of the flight's three hundred and twenty-nine victims were Canadian citizens. Nonetheless, then-Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney offered "misplaced condolences" to Indian Prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. According to Blaise and Mukherjee, this "failure to acknowledge the victims of the crash as Canadians" represents "the enduring political grief of Air India 182" (203). The authors' divisive rhetoric of "us" and "them," "ours" and "theirs" abounds in this text, but it is characteristic of Canadian literary accounts of the Air India tragedy and the racial tensions and violence leading up to the event. Blaise and Mukherjee explain these escalating tensions by arguing that racial tensions imported from India gained greater significance in Canada's Indo-Canadian communities than they might have held even in India. In their "Portrait of a Canadian Terrorist" (Part V, Chapter 1), they argue that unskilled Sikh immigrants do not enter Canada as Khalistani terrorists, but rather that "their politics were developed entirely in Canada" (176): their isolation, limited English, poor

job prospects, and general lack of “contact with mainstream society” (177) make these new Canadians “time-bombs, ripe for conversion” (177). These are Canadian terrorists, insist Blaise and Mukherjee, and they blame their presence and politics both on the immigration policies that admitted “thousands of uneducated, ill-equipped and technologically unemployable young men” (175) to Canada between 1969 and 1973 and, more generally, on the multicultural policies that encourage “resistant diversity” and the proliferation of “linguistic or ethnic ghettos” (199, 176). Like Blaise and Mukherjee, I agree that Canada’s Multiculturalism Policy has contributed to racially-motivated violence like the Air India tragedy, but unlike them, I think that it is important to recognize the transnational nature of events like this one. Certainly, the static and isolating immigration policies in Canada helped to politicize these Khalistani terrorists, but their actions were motivated by waves of racially-based, post-Partition violence.

This refusal to acknowledge Indo-Canadians as Canadians represents one of the significant failures of Canada’s multicultural policy. However, at the same time, Blaise and Mukherjee fail to acknowledge that, in targeting an Air India plane, the terrorists themselves were not targeting Canadian citizens, but India and Indians, or, at the very least, diasporic and Canadian Indians whose cosmopolitan lifestyles were threatening or problematic to fundamentalist attitudes. The polarity between cosmopolitanism and fundamentalist nationalism is significant in the context of studies of Indo-Canadian literature. In his study of fiction by M.G. Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath and Rohinton Mistry, Martin Genetch challenges familiar constructions of the Canadian literary canon, emphasizing “the pluralism that lies at the heart of Canadian multiculturalism” (x-xi). “The treatment of ‘here,’” Genetch writes, “is concerned with the immigrant’s attitude towards Canadian multiculturalism, while ‘there’ corresponds to a working through past experiences in the country of origin” (x). This critical focus on both the

“here” and the “there” highlights the problematic nature of Blaise and Mukherjee’s emphasis on the Canadianness of the Air India bombing. The immigrant is rarely politicized exclusively “here” (that is to say, in Canada, or within other immigrant societies); in fact, Air India 182 should serve as a reminder of the transnational nature of diaspora, and diasporic politics. The political import of the attack was its response to events in India: Operation Blue Star, the anti-Sikh riots following Indira Gandhi’s assassination, and India’s refusal to recognize a separate state of Khalistan. While Blaise and Mukherjee identify Canada’s failure to acknowledge its non-white citizens, they do not recognize the transnational and interstitial nature of the Indo-Canadian community. This tension between the simultaneously national and transnational nature of the event reminds us that an act of terrorism or hate does not, as Sara Ahmed argues, “reside positively in a single sign or body” (59). Instead, “Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement” (44). It is impossible to designate the Air India bombing as exclusively a Canadian, Indian or even transnational event. Instead, we must consider it as an effect of the circulation of hate, and of the instability of signifiers of difference and displacement.

#### **4. Immigration, Diaspora, and Racialization**

Whereas Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee describe immigrants as politicized by the alienation that they understand to be born of Canadian multicultural policy, Anita Rau Badami depicts mourning as a politicizing, racializing force. Following Pa-ji’s death at the Golden Temple in Amritsar during Operation Blue Star, and the deaths of her niece Nimmo’s husband and children during anti-Sikh riots in India, Bibi-ji’s attitude towards Sikh nationalism and Indian ethnicity changes drastically. Having emigrated before Indian independence, she is



perplexed by the ethnic tensions accompanying Partition; she “found it hard to believe that people who have lived as neighbours and friends for so many years could suddenly become enemies just because of a line drawn on a paper map in a government office” (51). Initially, both Bibi-ji and Pa-ji are intensely suspicious of Sikh nationalism. Bibi-ji, who harbours “a deep-rooted suspicion of anyone who wanted to divide up countries” (251), refers to Dr. Randhawa, the Sikh nationalist who visits Vancouver, as an “Idiot” (257). However, following Pa-ji’s death, Bibi-ji, who had previously befriended Leela and other Hindu members of her Vancouver community, fails to warn her friend of the rumours she has heard about Leela’s flight to India. Although she speculates that the vague warnings she has heard regarding Air India flights may refer to “sabotage” (383), she concludes, “it was none of her business what happened to the Bhats” (383). If grief has not politicized Bibi-ji outright, it has at least caused her to reconsider her categories of inclusion.

Similarly, Bibi-ji’s grandnephew and foster child Jasbeer is also politicized through grief; however, for Jasbeer, mourning is brought about by the traumatic experience of emigration. In this, he represents those aspects of Canadian multiculturalism of which Neil Bissondath is deeply wary. In *Selling Illusions*, Bissondath writes:

Imported Old World feuds—ethnic, religious and political hatreds that have simmered for centuries in lands both hot and cold—frequently override loyalties to the new country. [...] And multiculturalism, in encouraging the wholesale retention of the past, has done nothing to address what is a serious—and has at times been a violent—problem. In stressing the differences between groups, [...] the policy has instead aided in a hardening of hatreds. (124)

While Jasbeer does not arrive in Canada with “imported Old World feuds,” he is nonetheless described as particularly susceptible to fundamentalism and Sikh nationalism. As a young child in India, he is described by his mother Nimmo as “too sensitive, he took things too seriously” (163). When he is transplanted from his parents’ home in New Delhi to Bibi-ji’s house in Vancouver, he becomes “angry” and “destructive” (192). When Jasbeer meets Dr. Randhawa, whose Sikh nationalistic sentiment repels Pa-ji and Bibi-ji, he is captivated: “Dr. Randhawa’s diatribe of conquest and betrayal and revenge appealed to him” (253). Jasbeer is politicized because his grief makes him susceptible to racializing, politicizing rhetoric that appeals to his desire to belong—particularly because, as a young immigrant far from his family, he feels alone and alienated.

Badami uses Jasbeer and Preethi, Leela’s daughter, to illustrate opposite trajectories of race-thinking (that is, considering individuals and situations from a highly racialized point of view—one in which conceptions of race are the ethically, politically, and morally determining factor) and politicization. In the final section of the novel, Jasbeer writes a letter to Preethi, his childhood friend, in which he expresses his disillusionment with the violent, pro-Khalistani movement in India. Jasbeer reflects that, as a result of his actions on behalf of the movement, he “*had become a monster*” (397, italics in original). He ends his letter by expressing his sorrow upon seeing Preethi’s mother’s name among the lists of Air India 182 victims. His expression of sympathy, however, is met with indifference, or even anger, by Preethi, who is mourning her mother. Although Jasbeer has apparently been depoliticized, and this change enables him to sympathize with Preethi’s sorrow, she is not prepared to forgive him, or to forget that her mother’s death is the result of the fundamentalist politicization that had transformed Jasbeer into a “monster.” She “begins to tear up the page, into tiny pieces. Then, page by page, she tears up

the remainder of the letter and finally the envelope. She gets to her feet, walks over to the edge of the sea and tosses in a handful of paper” (398). Preethi’s reaction reminds us that entrenched political positions are extremely difficult to overcome. Despite Sarah Ahmed’s insistence on the importance and the power of apology, it is clear that the wounds inflicted through racism and ethnic violence are not easily healed.

Although Badami draws our attention to the complexities of race-thinking and categories of belonging in the years leading up to and following the bombing of Air India 182, she does not challenge or complicate our conception of the categories of belonging she depicts. Bibi-ji, the symbolic matriarch of Vancouver’s South Asian community, remains alone, embittered and in deep mourning at the novel’s end. Leela perishes aboard the doomed flight, her categories of belonging unchallenged. Jasbeer is disillusioned by the Khalistani movement, but abandons Canada to return to his mother; Nimmo herself has lost her husband and two of her three children. In the final moments of the novel, Jasbeer approaches her home, leaving the reader to imagine that they must mourn their lost family members together, but without providing a sense of the affect and ambivalence of that shared grief. And Preethi, who has lost her mother aboard the Air India flight is, if not politicized, then at least deeply angry and isolated in her sorrow. Badami’s characters are highly representative, which invites the reader to see them allegorically. However, while the novel operates effectively on this allegorical level, it fails to resonate on a personal level; her characters are too representative to invite meaningful engagement with the reader. As such, the novel fails to attain the literary singularity that Attridge describes. He writes that works of literature operate “less as objects than as events,” because “events ... can be repeated over and over again and yet never seem exactly the same” (2)<sup>35</sup>. Literature, he argues, is

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<sup>35</sup> Attridge does not condemn allegory as a de-facto limiting mode of literature; however, the uncomplicated allegorical reading of Badami’s characters as highly representational figures within the Indian diaspora limits the

singular because it offers innumerable possibilities; each reader experiences a work of literature differently, and an individual reader experiences something different in each reading. However, in crafting such a highly allegorical text, Badami does not allow for a wide range of experiences; her novel is experienced more as an object than an event, to borrow Attridge's terms. She leaves the reader with the sense that a community has been torn asunder in its grief without conveying the significance and import of the individual act of mourning.

##### **5. The “Lives of Distant Others”** (Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* xvi)

Bharati Mukherjee is not alone in her criticism of Canadian Multicultural Policy. For example, Neil Bissoondath writes that:

the changes wrought by immigration and radically different circumstances must be recognized, assimilated, and accepted. [...] It is a reality multiculturalism, with its obsessively backward gaze, fails to recognize. Immigration is essentially about renewal. It is unjust, to individuals and to the communities from which they emerge, to require it to be about stasis. To do so is to legitimize marginalization; it is to turn ethnic communities into museums of exoticism. (111)

Bissoondath's assessment of Canadian multiculturalism as potentially marginalizing and divisive echoes aspects of Mukherjee's arguments on the topic. In her Introduction to her first collection of short stories, *Darkness* (1985), she criticizes Canada's "opposition to the whole concept of cultural assimilation" (2), arguing that it allows "the aloofness of expatriation" to proliferate, while the United States promotes "the exuberance of immigration" (3). Sherry Morton-Mollo comments that, in many of Mukherjee's texts, the immigrant experience of the American melting

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reader's ability to experience the text as an event, since the text frequently resists dissonant or alternate readings of its characters.

pot or “fusion chamber” is a far more positive experience than the Canadian “cultural mosaic” as the “*fusion chamber* becomes the locus where the receiving culture is simultaneously affected and effected in new and transmutational ways” (35, emphasis in original). In other words, Mukherjee is deeply suspicious of cultural purity and those immigrants who “artificially over many generations hang on to an identity [they] claim is stable rather than mutable” (Mukherjee qtd. in Gabriel 134). She advocates an acculturation process that changes not only the immigrant and his/her culture, but at the same time alters the receiving culture as well.

Given Mukherjee’s deep misgivings about cultural purity, one would not expect to find unproblematic notions of essentialist cultural or ethnic identity in her writing. However, in both “The Management of Grief,” and in *The Sorrow and the Terror*, the Irish residents of Cork (the nearest landfall to the Air India 182 crash site) engaged in the recovery and relief efforts following the Air India bombing, and the Indo-Canadian families affected by the tragedy, are depicted as experiencing a deep, empathetic connection. Of course, Blaise and Mukherjee are not alone in drawing parallels between India and Ireland. Several literary critics have suggested similarities between these two postcolonial nations. For example, Julia Wright argues that “key anti-imperial Irish writers identified India and Ireland as bound by sympathy because of their shared oppression” (17). In their non-fictional account of the tragedy, Mukherjee and Blaise exploit this tendency to depict essential connectedness between Irish and Indian peoples in order to offer a deeply sympathetic but essentialist and romantic vision of the Irish people who helped Air India victims’ families to cope with their grief.

Both *The Sorrow and the Terror* and “The Management of Grief” use Cork residents’ generous donations of the flowers from their rose gardens to illustrate the sense of cultural understanding between Indo-Canadians and Irish during a time of mourning. For example,

Blaise and Mukherjee write of the Laurences, who ask a Cork resident for permission to pluck a rose in remembrance of their daughters Krithika and Shyamala:

And the owner and her neighbours told the Laurences to take not one, not a bunch, but gardensful. In spite of the horror, these were radiant times. Thank God the plane went down off Ireland, the Laurences said. The Irish were sincere people. Anywhere else, in London or Toronto or Delhi, for instance, the grief would have been unbearable. (79)

Here the authors stress the sense of kinship that evolves based partly on a sense of shared cultural traits. The experience of shared grief intensifies this connection, while a similar empathy between Indo-Canadians and (implicitly, white) Canadians is made impossible by the cold bureaucracy exhibited by the Canadian officials depicted in the book. Blaise and Mukherjee document the anger and frustration of the victims' families who arrived in Ireland to find the Canadian officials cold, inaccessible, or even invisible. They contend that the mourners met with a warmer and therefore more sympathetic response from the local Irish population, who served as recovery specialists, nurses, and counselors to the victims' families. They suggest that the mourners recognized cultural similarities: "Like them, the Irish were family people, emotional and god-fearing" (73).

These cultural portraits function in the text as a practical example of the failures of Canadian multiculturalism—a policy that insists on the preservation of difference, but fails to produce, in practical terms, a system that meets the needs of cultural groups in the context of a tragedy. Essentially, Blaise and Mukherjee suggest that white Canadian correctness prevents the development of sympathy between the two groups at a moment of shared crisis. By relying on notions of cultural particularity (white Canadians are unfeeling, but Indo-Canadians and Irish people are warm and sympathetic), Blaise and Mukherjee reaffirm cultural stereotypes, rather

than depict what Attridge calls a “creative re-imagination” (67) of otherness, or an encounter with people and experiences that are unfamiliar. Blaise and Mukherjee do not invite us to reconsider our understanding of these ethnic groups, or to encounter otherness in a way that shifts our mode of understanding unfamiliar experiences or perspectives. In contrast, Mukherjee’s fictional account of the Air India tragedy, “The Management of Grief,” focuses on the individual experience of mourning, and the ways in which it departs from universal or culturally particular expressions of grief. As such, it communicates the singular experience of sorrow and loss much more effectively.

Mukherjee’s characters do not assume that cultural similarities facilitate sympathetic interpersonal communication. Although the Irish are depicted sympathetically in the short story, Mukherjee does not portray Indians and Irish as culturally analogous in “The Management of Grief.” Like the Laurences in Blaise and Mukerherjee’s non-fictional account, the fictional Dr Ranganathan in “The Management of Grief” throws roses in the sea for his lost loved ones. Unlike the Laurences, however, he does not ask permission. Instead, “He tore the roses off creepers in somebody’s garden. He didn’t ask anyone if he could pluck the roses, but now there’s been an article in the local papers. When you see an Indian person, it says, please give him or her flowers” (181). Although the Irish people in the short story are depicted as sympathetic figures, they fail to acknowledge the personal nature of the act and instead ascribe cultural significance to it, assuming that all Indians will want to offer roses to the sea. Significantly, the story’s protagonist Shaila Bhave does not. She has “other things to float: [her son’s] pocket calculator; a half-painted model B-52” (182): items of particular significance to herself, and to her family. Here Mukherjee emphasizes individual acts of mourning, which take varied and unexpected forms. The result, ironically, is that her fictional characters, are more

fully realized than the non-fictional figures depicted in *The Sorrow and the Terror*, whose behaviour is often represented as being culturally, rather than individually particular.

However, despite the individuality of her Indo-Canadian characters, Mukherjee does not render her white Canadian character with equal particularity. The fictional Judith Templeton is, like the Canadian officials described in *The Sorrow and the Terror*, the well-meaning but culturally inept government official assigned to assist the families of the Air India bombing victims. Judith is the locus of Mukherjee's criticism of Canadian bureaucracy and lack of cultural sensitivity; as a result, she is not, like Shaila Bhave, a highly individualized character. However, unlike Badami's characters, who all function allegorically, Judith, a highly representational figure of white Canadian bureaucracy, serves as a counterpoint to the individualized experiences of Shaila and the story's other characters. She recruits Shaila as a cultural interpreter. Shaila, who has lost her family in the tragedy, is thereby forced to face her recently-acquired hostility towards Sikhs—a kind of race-thinking formed as a result of her grief. Although Shaila “[remembers] a time when we all trusted each other in this new country,” she “[stiffens] now at the sight of beards and turbans” (189). In her reaction, Shaila resembles the very real Venu/Vern Thampi, whose reaction to Sikhs after the Air India tragedy is chronicled in *The Sorrow and the Terror*. Mr Thampi lost his wife Vijaya/Viji aboard Air India 182; as a result, he experienced emergent race-thinking following the bombing. Mr Thampi says that although he “[knows] there are good Sikhs,” he now feels “not too thrilled to see a turbaned head” (132) after the tragedy. However, unlike Mr. Thampi, Mukherjee's fictional character is forced to confront her own emergent conceptions of ethnic and cultural belonging by meeting the Sikh couple and sharing intensely personal experience of mourning, despite Shaila's conviction that they “will not open up to a Hindu woman” (189).



Shaila and the couple begin conversing in Hindi, and Shaila reflects that they would be insulted if she were to present herself as a translator, for “There are thousands of Punjabi-speakers, Sikhs, in Toronto to do a better job” (190). So, instead, she tells them that she, too, has lost her family in the crash. This disclosure transforms Shaila from an agent of government bureaucracy, a translator of languages and customs, to a fellow mourner. As such, it admits her into the couple’s confidence. They react with sympathy and affect: the woman’s “eyes immediately fill with tears” and her husband “mutters a few words which sound like a blessing. ‘God provides and God takes away’” (190). Shaila does not translate Judith Templeton’s request; instead of functioning as a bureaucratic agent, she allows herself to empathize, and to engage with them on a deeply personal and highly individualized level. However, when Shaila presses Judith’s request that the couple sign the papers that would provide them with financial assistance, the man ends the meeting abruptly: “‘Enough talk,’ he says” (191). While her loss allows her an entry into the couple’s confidence, her alliance with a bureaucratic agenda effectively closes communication between Shaila and the couple. Indeed, as Shaila suspected, languages and cultures prove a barrier to understanding, but whereas Shaila expected that ethnic differences would divide them, it is her own facility with governmental language and bureaucratic customs impede a meaningful connection.

Throughout this interaction, Judith Templeton is oblivious to the possibility of ethnic and cultural barriers between Shaila and the elderly Sikh couple. In requesting Shaila’s assistance with the couple, the white Canadian official either fails to recognize that the bombing is the culmination of tensions between Hindus and Sikh extremists, or that Shaila is Hindu and the elderly couple is Sikh. She imagines that all ethnic differences are, essentially, the same; in this assumption, she embodies what Smaro Kamboureli has termed a “sedative politics, a politics that

attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a constrained fashion” (*Scandalous Bodies* 82). Her request represents her interpretation of Shaila Bhave as a racialized body essentially interchangeable with other, similarly racialized bodies. As Naava Smolash points out, “Racialization shapes how human bodies are perceived, and ... inscribes meaning on the human body, marks the body with a particular value” (747). Judith values Shaila because, as a body racialized as Indo-Canadian or simply Indian, Shaila can, Judith believes, give her access to other Indians—that is, Judith sees Shaila as what Gayatri Spivak terms a Native informant.

However, Judith fails to recognize the ethnic nuances (to say nothing of Shaila’s personal suffering, or the pain that a visit to other victims’ families might cause her) within the Indian diaspora. She lacks the sensitivity to understand that this visit might be difficult for Shaila and the elderly Sikh couple because she cannot understand the complexity of Sikh-Hindu tensions that have led to the very event (the Air India bombing) that Judith has been assigned to “manage” for the Canadian government.

Judith Templeton, in her single-minded adherence to bureaucracy and her stereotypical Western pop-psychology understanding of the processes of mourning and communication, signals the incompatibility of literature and the realm of political economy and public administration. Nussbaum posits:

Literature expresses, in its ways of speaking, a sense of life that is incompatible with the vision of the world embodied in the texts of political economy; and engagement with it forms the imagination and the desires in a manner that subverts that science’s norm of rationality. (*Poetic Justice* 1)

Mukherjee’s Judith Templeton represents the extremes of rationality embodied not only in Canadian political economy, but in the bureaucratic system that attempts to regulate cultural

expression and ethnicity. Judith admits to Shaila that she lacks “the right human touch” (178) to be able to communicate with the very people she has been appointed to help. Her inability to conceive of ways of mourning that are culturally informed by a non-Western society, yet at the same time, deeply and intimately personal, signals her inability to creatively re-imagine (to borrow Attridge’s term) people that she sees as strange: racially and culturally other. In Judith Templeton, Mukherjee signals what she sees as the failures of multiculturalism enshrined in the Canadian bureaucratic system. These failures include the inability to encounter difference with a willingness to change, to imagine different modes of behaving, or reacting. Nussbaum believes that “literature must be studied because it’s a vehicle for preserving and transmitting the experience of those distant from us in space, time, or circumstance” (Robbins 201), but that readers must be willing and prepared to engage creatively in the lives of others. Judith represents those who are unwilling or unable to engage and to empathize with the lives of others, and the point at which even literature can fall short of effecting change within the individual sensibility. In Judith, Mukherjee is at her most allegorical. Although Judith’s flatness is a counterpoint to the other nuanced characters in the text, she is essentially an allegorical locus for Mukherjee’s misgivings about official multiculturalism. In Judith Templeton, Mukherjee comes closest to crafting the national allegory that Frederick Jameson sees as an inferior third-world literary production, but in this short story, “official” Canadian multiculturalism and its failure to adequately accommodate alterity, is the national allegorically represented by a single character. Judith Templeton is an overtly allegorical character, representing “official” Canadian multiculturalism and the self-consciously ‘tolerant’ multicultural discourse that celebrates diversity without engaging more difficult questions about cultural difference and structural racism.

Judith's lack of particularity is evident in her inability to experience or recognize emotions that are not informed by slick Western clichés. Her flatness as a character is furthermore signaled by her failure to empathize. Judith's well-meaning gesture in seeking out Shaila's help, and her reaction to the elderly couple's sorrow, demonstrate that she can express sympathy, but not empathy: she cannot share Shaila Bhave's or the elderly Sikh couple's grief, and is therefore unable to forge any meaningful connection with them. This distance is most clearly expressed in her reflection that Shaila "is coping very well" ("Management" 178); she attributes Shaila's calm demeanor to strength and acceptance, whereas Shaila recognizes that her calm is "not peace, just a deadening quiet" (174). In addition, Shaila tries to explain that her behavior will not help her to liaise with other mourners because, as she puts it, "By the standards of the people you call hysterical, I am behaving very oddly and very badly" (178). Throughout the short story, Judith Templeton fails to understand "the eastern mode of [grief] management" (Bowen 51), characterized by the elderly Sikh couple's "*parents' duty to hope*" (192, italics in original). She comments impatiently on what she terms "their stubbornness and ignorance" (191) in persisting to hope that their sons will return home, whereas Shaila reflects, "*In our culture, it is a parent's duty to hope*" (192, italics in original). Shaila tellingly articulates a sense of shared cultural experience—*our* culture—following the meeting with the couple, and identifies their resistance to sign the government documents as a cultural reaction to grief. Of course, the couple's mourning process is culturally informed, much like Shaila's hope that her boys, both "good swimmers," have settled on one of "many microscopic islets scattered around" the coast of Ireland (181). However, it is also an intensely personal experience, marked by the "stubborn, peasant's message" that Shaila reads in the old man's eyes: "*I have protected this woman as best I can. She is the only person I have left. Give me or take from me what you will,*"

*but I will not sign for it. I will not pretend that I accept*” (191, italics in original). Judith fails to understand the elderly couple’s mourning process, their “*duty to hope*” (192). She is impatient with what she considers “stubbornness and ignorance” (191) in persisting to hope that their sons will return home. She cannot appreciate the highly individual experience of mourning, or the cultural particularities informing correct expressions of sorrow because she assumes that the Western mode of mourning, with its documented stages, is universal. She wrongly interprets Shaila’s calm demeanour as a Western mode of grief management, terminating in acceptance, instead of recognizing Shaila’s behaviour for what it is: an intensely personal experience that is not governed by Eastern or Western norms regarding correct behaviour in a crisis. In her assumption that this method of managing grief, with its prescriptive stages, is universal, even in a Western context, Judith is clearly a character type, rather than a fully realized character. Readers—Western or not—are likely to be skeptical of her facile assumptions regarding the universality of accepted behaviors following the death of a loved one. Judith’s lack of empathy, imagination, or critical awareness limits both her understanding of Shaila, and our ability to understand her as a fully developed character like the others in the story. However, while Mukherjee invites us to read Judith Templeton allegorically as a figure representing the failures of official multiculturalism, the highly individualized methods of mourning her other characters undertake block our attempts to read the story as a whole as allegory. In crafting a single strategically allegorical character in opposition to a variety of complex characters, Mukherjee challenges us to understand both the challenges and the opportunities that her Indo-Canadian characters face as they attempt to develop a method of coping with their sorrow that is informed by both eastern and Western modes of managing grief, while at the same time, enabling them to cope with their loss in a highly individual and particular manner. Laura Moss writes:

It is always a challenge when dealing with literature arising out of politically fraught spaces with a history of violence, pain, and oppression to be at once respectful of the context out of which the work emerges, to read with that context in mind, and at the same time not to let the context overdetermine readings of the literature. (“Hesitating Readers” 130)

By juxtaposing the allegorical figure of Judith Templeton against her complex and often unpredictable characters, Mukherjee remind us that official multiculturalism’s failure to acknowledge or accommodate either cultural or individual difference does not elide or erase that difference. Just as our readings should not be overdetermined by a reductive understanding of the social or political climate in which they were produced, our understanding of an individual’s ability to negotiate his/her own modes of behavior in a narrow or even prescriptive multicultural policy cannot be constrained by the limits of that policy.

Thus, Shaila cannot communicate her experience to Judith, who does not understand a method of mourning that is not informed by Western cultural norms. Ironically, though, Shaila commands a language of polished, polite expressions that comfort Judith. Shaila, a self-confessed “well brought up woman” (184), is fluent in this polite language of carefully tailored responses and polite evasions, and of a ready acquiescence to requests for assistance. This is also the language of official transactions with government representatives. It is this ease with forms of courtesy that causes Shaila to become Judith Templeton’s “confidante, ...one of the few whose grief has not sprung bizarre obsessions” (188). (The reader suspects, however, that the highly lyrical passage in which Shaila converses with and even holds the hand of her husband Vikram in a Himalayan temple months after the tragedy would qualify as a “bizarre obsession” to Judith Templeton.) To Judith, Shaila’s reaction to grief signals a culturally interstitial

position, and one that Judith can exploit to her own bureaucratic ends; Judith's imaginative failure in interpreting Shaila's grief as a recognizable Western mode of mourning is debilitating to Shaila, who is not able to move beyond the "terrible calm" (178) until she breaks free of Judith's influence. This failure to recognize the truth in Shaila's assertion that "we must all grieve in our own way" (178) not only causes Judith to misrecognize Shaila's deep suffering, but also locks Shaila into an emotionally paralysing pattern of behaviour.

Shaila's grief is what leads her to become Judith's cultural interpreter, inhabiting the interstice between other mourners and the Canadian beurocracy. As an interpreter, however, her access to both of these spheres is limited. She is employed to manage others' grief—a task that she can only fulfill with limited success. Although she experiences a moment of deep empathy with the elderly Sikh couple, all meaningful communication between them ends when she reintroduces the topic of government assistance. And Shaila shares no meaningful connection with Judith. Shaila may be Judith's confidante, but Judith is not hers. While Judith's "institutional expressions of concern," as Deborah Bowen terms them (50), form a common language through which she and Shaila can communicate on a surface level, these expressions are "inadequately translatable" (50). They lock Shaila into the limiting role as interpreter, and she must unlearn them in order to manage her own grief.

Of course, it is not only Shaila's command of polite expression that attracts Judith to her; Judith seeks her out because Shaila is bereaved, mourning the loss of her family; for this reason, she is offered the post of interpreter. And, in fact, the experience of mourning is what tends to open the many cultural and social interstices that Shaila inhabits as she struggles for a way to express, or even to fully experience, her sorrow. Whereas, in her home, in the days and hours following the bombing, she experiences only a "terrible calm" (178), the journey to India that

she takes after the tragedy opens a spiritual space that is at once worldly and otherworldly; “in an abandoned temple in a tiny Himalayan village,” (186), Vikram appears to her:

He is squatting next to a scrawny *sadhu* in moth-eaten robes. Vikram wears the vanilla suit he wore last time I hugged him. The *sadhu* tosses petals on a butter-fed flame, reciting Sanskrit mantras and sweeps his face of flies. My husband takes my hands in his. (186)

In this passage, Vikram is both embodied—he takes Shaila’s hand—and disembodied—he is not seen by the *sadhu*, or by Shaila’s mother, who are also in the temple. Vikram and Shaila converse, but Mukherjee’s decision to report their dialogue using italics, rather than within quotation marks, denotes its otherworldliness. And this meeting signals to Shaila another departure, for following her encounter with Vikram, she acknowledges that “in a few days I shall be leaving” (187). This encounter between the living and the dead, set in a space that straddles both worlds, seems to impart to Shaila a sense of agency; after this exchange, she abruptly demands that Judith “Let [her] out [of the car] at the subway” (192). She recognizes that she is empowered by her recognition of Judith Templeton’s codes of polite behaviour, for “it would not be like her to disobey” Shaila’s command (192). The Canadian official asks Shaila, “Is there anything I said? Anything I did?” and although Shaila reflects, “I could answer her in half a dozen ways” (192), she does not. She instead walks away wordlessly, choosing to abandon the language of polite and restrained forms and partial acknowledgements of grief, for, as Bowen points out, “Words will not do” because they are “*Judith’s* mode of managing grief” (55, emphasis in original). Judith’s mistake is in assuming the universality of this mode, and failing to account for the personal and individual nature of Shaila’s and the elderly Sikh couple’s mourning process. Shaila, however, is not behaving according to any universal norms regulating



mourning. Instead, she is caught between grieving in a manner that is culturally acceptable to other Indians—those that she imagines “do not see [her] as a model” (178)—and white Canadians like Judith, who are said to be governed by “the stages to pass through” (188), and the result of this limbo is emotional paralysis. “I have my Valium” (179), Shaila reflects.

Throughout “The Management of Grief,” Mukherjee places her grieving protagonist in a series of transitional spaces and situations; each of these positions is formulated as a result of her sorrow, and against prescriptive notions of ethnicity, culture, and the expected behaviours of a “well brought up woman” who is mourning her loss. Mukherjee simultaneously emphasizes Shaila’s interstitiality, and signals both its possibilities and its deep ambivalences. Whereas, as we have seen, Shaila feels emotionally paralysed at the beginning of the story, by the end, she is able to exploit the relative ambiguity of her cultural and social interstices in order to formulate her own mode of managing her grief: one that is at once informed by the Western and Eastern modes of grief management, but that fails to conform to them. At the same time, her interstitiality means that Shaila cannot fully participate in either method of grief management: she thinks of herself as “a freak” (178) as a result of behaviour that is, for both members of the South Asian community and Judith Templeton, “very [odd]” (178). And her ability to negotiate both the language of government bureaucracy and the grief of a culture characterized by a *duty to hope* means that she can fully participate in neither: she is unable to help either Judith or the Sikh couple. Like Joy Kogawa’s Cedric Avakian, who experiences his hyphenated ethnic identity as simultaneously “a state of limbo and indeterminacy [and] a site of empowerment” (Kanaganayakam 2), Shaila finds herself in a fraught position. By emphasizing Shaila’s interstitiality, Mukherjee effectively challenges the inviolability of apparently separate modes of

cultural conduct, reconfiguring our understanding of the apparently discrete nature of cultural communities and ethnically-informed behaviours such as mourning.

Throughout this short story, Shaila is frequently physically situated in interstitial spaces: in the open doorway to her home when her neighbour Kusum delivers the news of the doomed flight, for instance, or seated upon the “carpeted stairs” (175) of her home as others from her community gather to collect news, speak to reporters and share their shock and their grief. In these early passages, Shaila is immobilized by her grief; her house is filled with well-meaning neighbours and friends, but she, herself, experiences a “deadening quiet” of inaction, immobility; she reflects that “Sound can reach me, but my body is tensed, ready to scream” (174). She is caught, paralysed, between the bustle of post-tragedy activity that has centred on her home, and the imagined voices of her family, lost aboard the doomed flight. “I hear my boys and Vikram cry, ‘Mommy, Shaila!’” Mukherjee writes, “and their screams insulate me, like headphones” (174). Her grief insulates her, isolating her both from her family, whom she has lost, and her community in which she is not able to fully participate, or even to mourn in a socially acceptable fashion. “No one who has ever known me would think of me reacting this way,” (178) she reflects. “I am a freak” (178).

All through the narrative, Shaila continues to find herself suspended between her past with a family, whom she is not able to fully mourn, and a future that she cannot yet begin to imagine. As the story progresses, these in-between spaces begin to admit more mobility. For instance, at the water’s edge in Ireland, she hopes her family will find their way to one of the “many microscopic islets” Dr Ranganathan describes. She is caught between grief and hope, but she is no longer insulated or immobilized. She walks out into the water, and considers, “I could settle into the water, and my husband would take my hand and the boys would slap water in my

face just to see me scream” (180). At this moment, she is either indulging in the fantasy that she has not come to the sea to face her husband and sons’ deaths, but instead to vacation with them, or, perhaps, considering suicide in order to join them. Although neither option is a positive solution to Shaila’s grief, they do denote an opening to new possibilities. Whereas earlier in the story, she was paralysed and insulated, she has now discovered a limited sense of mobility, and the ability to consider the options that she recognizes are available to her. At this point in the story, she begins to admit options and the possibility for change. Later, for instance, at the customs desk at the airport, she breaks the code of the “well brought up woman” (184) to curse at a customs official who will not release the coffins containing Kusum’s family. These transitional spaces speak to Shaila’s emotional and social position within the short story: as a widow, she is neither married nor unmarried, but caught in-between. The death of her husband and sons has robbed her of her role as wife and mother. But she is not fully single, either, for unlike the widowers, such as Dr Ranganathan, she is not eligible to remarry; her widowhood marks her as “unlucky” (186). Ironically, however, she is simultaneously regarded as “comparatively lucky” (186) by the widowers who “cannot resist the call of custom” (185)—the custom to remarry, despite their unwillingness to do so. Her widowhood, and her exclusion from married life, leaves her, in Dr Ranganathan’s eyes, free to mourn her lost family, and free from the pressures to begin anew. His reaction signals the possibilities inherent in Shaila’s situation.

When she leaves Judith’s car at the subway station, Shaila is beginning to explore these new possibilities. Despite Judith’s plea to “talk about it” (192), Shaila does not share her otherworldly experience with Judith, and offers no explanation for her abrupt departure. She simply refuses to engage in their unproductive relationship any longer. Her decision clearly opens new possibilities to her. She ends the story without a clear sense of direction, and does

“not know which direction I will take” (194). But if she is unclear about her path, she is not immobilized, as she was at the beginning of the story; in the final line, she “[starts] walking” (194).

Following this passage, there is no direct dialogue in the short story, and Mukherjee ends with Shaila apparently acting on her family’s vague injunctions to “Complete what we have started” (192) and to “*Go, be brave*” (194, italics in original). The vagueness of these directions seems to be the point; there is no prescribed method of grief, no clear directions for Shaila to follow. “I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take,” Shaila thinks in the final paragraph of the story. She has sold her house and “[taken] a small apartment downtown” (192). She is “looking for a charity to support” (192). This sense of openness is important to our understanding of Mukherjee’s conception of the management of grief as a highly individual process—one that cannot be classed into Judith Templeton’s categories of “rejection, depression, acceptance, reconstruction” (188). Despite Shaila’s initial discomfort at discovering that the elderly couple whom Judith Templeton has taken her to meet is Sikh, the three mourners share an understanding that is born of an acknowledgement of shared grief, and not, as Judith naively expects, through a shared ethnicity.

In addition, these lyrical passages in the short story recall Bhabha’s identification of the “borderline existence” of literary moments of transition and uncertainty, inhabited by “a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive ‘image’ at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world” (13). For Bhabha, transitory, in-between spaces are spaces of possibility, as well as moments of estrangement, where one is aware of negotiating different/competing cultural or racial codes. These are also productive moments of self-estrangement where the negotiation of cultural and racial difference is made plain. In

Mukherjee's story, these interstices are complicated and ambivalent. Certainly, cultural, special, and even spiritual interstices enable Shaila to forge strategies of mourning that are not narrowly culturally prescribed. But, as we have seen, they are also difficult spaces in which, absent clear norms and customs, Shaila must find new ways to cope with her grief, to remember her family, and to plan a life for herself without them. The story's end signals the sense of possibility that Shaila has achieved in recognizing that she is no longer constrained by static ethnic, social, or racial signifiers. Liberated from the status of a "well brought up woman" (184), a wife, the exemplary Indo-Canadian woman that attracted Judith, the Hindu woman who, Shaila feared, would repel the Sikh couple, Shaila is now able to explore possibility: travel in India; obtain an apartment; support a charity. Her experience of mourning has taught her the value, as well as the potential danger of these interstices. Of course, it would be reductive to argue that the short story unproblematically depicts loss and mourning as positive and enabling experiences, or privileges cultural and ethnic interstices. It is important to recall, for instance, that even as Shaila travels, finds an apartment, and selects a charity to support, she is still a woman mourning the loss of her family. And scholars have been suspicious of uncritical celebrations of hybridity; Jacqueline Lo, for instance, uses the term "happy hybridity" to criticize "a concept of unbounded culture" that is "so overdetermined and amorphous as to be emptied of any radical potential or direction" (153), or in which there is "no sense of self-reflexivity of its own conditions of production, no awareness of either the tensions or contradictions of history" (154). It is not my intent to depict Shaila as aimlessly happy or directionless at the story's end, but to illustrate the possibilities that she exploits to her own advantage when she discovers the mobility and potential for independent choice within her position as a widowed Indo-Canadian woman: a position that is necessarily, and often uncomfortably, interstitial. But whereas at the beginning of the story

Shaila experiences this interstitiality as limiting, or even paralyzing, by the story's end, she is able to navigate these spaces, and embraces the possibilities for change that they can represent.

In the Preface to *Trans. Can. Lit.*, Smaro Kamboureli observes that “literature functions as a sphere of public debates, but is never fully harmonized with them;” she describes literature as at once “Complicit and compliant” and “purposefully defiant and joyfully insolent” (viii). And in her essay in the same collection, Diana Brydon considers what “literary citizenship” means, suggesting that “it implies several things: the responsibilities of the literary scholar to her subject, her profession, her national and global situatedness, and her students” (11). Like Attridge, Kamboureli and Brydon consider literature's complex relationship with “public debates” and “national and global situatedness,” and its potential to affect change. Attridge writes that literature's “singularity, even if it is produced by nothing more than a slight recasting of the familiar and thus the general, is irreducible” (29). At the same time, both Kamboureli and Attridge emphasize literature's “insolent” nature, its irreducibility, and its motile and shifting interpretive possibilities. Like the interstitial spaces that Mukherjee's protagonist Shaila Bhava inhabits and exploits, literature is unstable and ambivalent, offering both possibility, and instability. An encounter with literary otherness<sup>36</sup> connotes the need to re-evaluate and reconsider the fundamental assumptions on which the reader relies before this encounter. Through her depiction of individual acts of mourning, Mukherjee achieves this singularity. While other accounts of this event, such as Mukherjee and Blaise's non-fiction study, or Anita Rau Badami's novel, are deeply affective and sympathetic, it is the fictional account of singular and individual grief that causes readers to reconsider our ingrained modes of understanding race,

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<sup>36</sup> I do not mean an encounter with cultural or racial alterity within literature, but rather, following Attridge, “otherness” as “that which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving” (19).

culture, and the putative stability of those terms, and how they inform—or, alternately, fail to adequately inform—behaviors in Canada, and in the world today.

## Chapter 6:

### **In Praise of the Moral Grey Area: Catherine Bush's *The Rules of Engagement***

In *Transnational Canadas*, Kit Dobson argues that the multicultural literatures of the 1980s and '90s have given way to a literary tradition that, in seeking to dismantle the ethnocentrism of earlier writing, has "become conjoined with the world of globalization" (x). Dobson's identification of Canadian literature's increasingly transnational focus in the new millennium reflects our heightened sense of the local import of global politics in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a growing awareness of the threat of international and domestic terrorism. Canadians, along with the rest of the world, are reminded that the political instabilities of other nations have consequences in and, sometimes, can trace their provenance to, North America.

This realization has affected the way that we travel and how we accommodate travelers to Canada. Visitors and immigrants face increased scrutiny—scrutiny that, in its frequent targeting of non-white travelers, has heightened our awareness of the racist implications of attempting to identify and categorize potential terrorists. In previous chapters, I have discussed Canada's failure to accommodate would-be immigrants and refugees on the Komagata Maru and the MS St Louis. In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper expressed his regret over Canada's decision to refuse the Komagata Maru entry to Canada in 1914. In 2011, the MS St Louis was memorialized in Halifax. Since then, other ships carrying asylum seekers have arrived in Canada's ports. Most recently, in August 2010, the MV Sun Sea arrived in Vancouver, where the 492 refugee claimants aboard the ship were immediately subject to intense scrutiny. News



media suggested the migrants, who had traveled from Sri Lanka, were linked to the Tamil Tigers, who are fighting an ongoing battle for independence in that country. The passengers of the Sun Sea were detained in provincial jails (Carigg and Lazaruk) while Canadian authorities investigated alleged ties to the Tigers. The Sun Sea and its passengers' refugee claims are relevant here insofar as they are emblematic of the serious dilemma that Canadians face in the new millennium: to what degree are we responsible to protect and shelter refugees, or to act on behalf of other nations, other groups, and individuals outside Canada's borders? Our legal responsibilities to refugee claimants are clearly defined: "Canada is bound by its international obligations not to send any refugees back to persecution. The story of each claimant must therefore be heard and examined on an individual basis" (The Canadian Council for Refugees). However, as public discussions of the Sun Sea and Ocean Lady—another cargo ship carrying Tamil refugees, which reached Canada in October 2009—passengers indicates, many Canadians are anxious about the difficulty of distinguishing refugees from terrorists.

In her analysis of Canada's reception of the Komagata Maru, the Ocean Lady, and "two lifeboats carrying 155 Sri Lankan Tamils who were rescued off the coast of Newfoundland in 1986" (Mann 192), Alexandra Mann considers whether "the idea of the refugee is in fact being eroded and replaced by the *illegal immigrant*" (192). Mann observes that the passengers of the Komagata Maru "were criminalized due to their race," while "in 1986 and 2009<sup>37</sup> the discussions about security and criminality were focused on fears about terrorism" (201). Mann's study provides us a fruitful entry into considerations of Bush's novel, for it invites us to critically consider how discourses of security, criminality, and terrorism affect our responses to humanitarian crises and refugee claimants. It prompts us to consider how we are to react when

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<sup>37</sup> The dates on which the Sri Lankan refugees arrived on board the lifeboats and the Ocean Lady, respectively.

our obligation to offer refuge and our imperative to protect ourselves and other groups and nations from violence and terror are perceived to come into conflict.

In this chapter, I will consider Catherine Bush's response to transnationalism and Canada's global responsibilities in her novel *The Rules of Engagement*. Unlike the writers I discussed in my earlier chapters, Bush is not writing as a member of a minority group affected by systemic racism, but she does share Razack, Coleman and Kamboureli's interest in the implications of myths of Cdn benevolence and tolerance. Instead, Bush compels us to consider issues of race, ethnicity and nationality on the global stage, and Canada's response to racially and ethnically motivated violence outside our borders. In my reading of Bush's novel, I once again consider a protagonist who struggles to overcome a traumatic event—though, in this case, the event is not the result of racism. However, Bush's protagonist, like the others that I have examined, develops a positive response to trauma; her strategy is to turn her interest in violence and trauma (born of personal experience) into helping others to overcome the effects of racist violence.

### **1. Literature and the Public Sphere**

Thus far, I have discussed humour, violence, and other potentially subversive strategies to overcoming violence. These tactics, I argued, can be enabling, or they can turn upon themselves, inflicting further suffering on the already-traumatized individual. And, as Wendy Brown, Michael Ross, and others have pointed out, some strategies to combat racism can also be used as tools to reinforce the hegemonic structures that support exclusion, discrimination, and violence. In this chapter, I will draw on Daniel Coleman's and Sherene Razack's work to show how

Canadian civility, and our longstanding and much-celebrated commitment to international peacekeeping, can be similarly double-edged, offering both the potential to guide our own citizens as well as people living outside our borders away from racism and violence, or supporting violent, racist actions at home and abroad. But before suggesting how Catherine Bush's novel critically engages with the idea of Canadians as peculiarly peaceful, civil, and benign people, I want to first return to Martha Nussbaum, who writes that "one may be told about people in one's own society and yet keep that knowledge at a distance," but "literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through these self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and respond to many things that may be difficult to confront" (*Poetic Justice* 5-6). While Nussbaum's argument resonates for all the books considered in this dissertation, it is perhaps most applicable to *Rules of Engagement*, a text that is very much concerned with "cut[ting] through" the "self-protective stratagems" that prevent its protagonist and its audience from engaging with the suffering of people in the developing world.

## **2. Local Belonging, Global Consequences**

For Catherine Bush, the personal is inextricable from the political. Personal considerations lend import to political choices. As such, Kwame Anthony Appiah's argument that cosmopolitanism, or a sense of global citizenship, need not eschew personal, affective nationalisms is useful for an analysis of Bush's novel. Appiah acknowledges the powerful nature of patriotism and a sense of belonging based on an affective allegiance to a community or a nation. He writes:

We cosmopolitans *can* be patriots, loving our homelands (not only the states where we were born but the states where we grew up and where we live). Our loyalty to

humankind—so vast, so abstract, a unity—does not deprive us of the capacity to care for people closer by; the notion of a global citizenship can have a real and practical meaning.

(“Cosmopolitan” 26-27)

Appiah’s suggestion that nationalist sentiment is not incompatible with transnational responsibility and cosmopolitanism is written in response to Nussbaum’s claims that “compassion begins with the local. But if our moral natures and our emotional natures are to live in any sort of harmony we must find devices through which to extend our strong emotions and our ability to imagine the situation of others to the world of human life as a whole”

(“Introduction” xiii).

Furthermore, Appiah writes:

Everyone knows you cannot have face-to-face relations with six billion people. But you cannot have face-to-face relations with ten million or a million or a hundred thousand people (with your fellow Swazis or Swahilis or Swedes) either; and we humans have long had practice in identifying, in nations, cities, and towns, with groups on this grander scale. (*Ethics* 216-17)

Just as the impossibility of knowing each person with whom we share fellow national sentiment does not preclude the import and potency of that sentiment, neither should our awareness of the scale of the globe and our distance from other people and other nations prevent us from harboring compassion for and a sense of responsibility for those who live far away. For Nussbaum and Appiah, we are morally obligated to concern ourselves with the lives of people who are far from us, and not just those to whom we feel close because of a sense of community belonging or national sentiment. However, both argue that this cosmopolitan conscientiousness

and global citizenship are only made possible when compassion is formed at the local and national level.

Benedict Anderson has argued that people have tended to imagine themselves as belonging to a community of others who share the same language, and whose governments have settled upon “certain print-vernaculars as languages-of-state” (84). For Anderson, these imagined communities are formed linguistically and lexicographically; written language is the basis of nationalist sentiment. We understand ourselves to belong to a particular community in large part as a result of our sense that we share the same language, written laws, and literature. If we are to consider, as Anderson does, literature as a fundamental component of the apparatus that produces a sense of nationalism and belonging, we must also consider how literature that asks us to adopt a more cosmopolitan view functions within the context of nationalism and transnationalism. Appiah and Nussbaum attest to the affective power of nationalism or ethnic nationalism—the sense that we belong to a particular and local group of people who are similar to us. At the same time, they also call on us to exercise our sense of civic nationalism (the sense that we belong to a community based on shared democratic values) or cosmopolitanism (the idea that we are responsible to those whom we see as Other, and who do not live within our local, imagined communities), which can be nurtured and informed by “our familiar strong emotions toward family, city, and country” (Nussbaum *Poetic Justice* xii). Benedict Anderson argues that this sense of belonging, or of nationalism “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Anderson emphasizes literature’s role and “the central importance of print-capitalism” (18) in fostering these imagined communities.

Literature can help us to understand the relationship between nationalist and personal sentiment on the one hand, and compassion for others, and our global obligations, on the other.

In *The Rules of Engagement*, Bush's protagonist Arcadia Hearne attempts to understand interpersonal violence in the context of national and global warfare. Arcadia flees Toronto when two young men fight a duel over her, and she eventually becomes the associate director for the Centre for Contemporary War Studies in London. There, she is a researcher and a writer, examining the mechanisms of war and violence from a safe distance. Throughout the novel, even while she engages in matters of global importance, such as the perils faced by refugees, Arcadia is motivated primarily by personal concerns. Far from condemning this preoccupation with the personal, however, *The Rules of Engagement* suggests that personally-motivated action need not necessarily be selfish or injurious. Instead, the novel depicts the personal, the local, and the global as interlocking spheres of concern, and advocates political engagement, even when that engagement is personally, or, occasionally, selfishly motivated. The novel invites us to grapple with our conception of the limits of our spheres of influence and responsibility.

### **3. Compromised Circumstances**

In his study of *The Rules of Engagement*, Ben Authers is critical of the novel's "conceptual collapse between the personal and political" (782). Specifically, he cites its tendency to "[consume] the Other's experience and pain" in order to "to construct Canadian compassion or to enable Arcadia's personal and political epiphany" (784). He warns, "There is a danger in too readily personalizing the political, too easily analogizing military conflict with conflicts of the heart, or forming foreign policy from a monologic conception of values and national

beneficence” (797). Although Authers’s argument is compelling, his warning is both idealistic and somewhat myopic in scope. He condemns an overtly personal motivation in pursuing political action, but he does not propose an alternative course of action and he does not “[advocate] inaction as an alternative” (797). I agree with Authers that Arcadia’s motives are often problematic. However, I choose to view her moral imperfections with a kind of cynical optimism. While Arcadia is often misguided or even selfish, her choices ultimately promote the safety and wellbeing of others, even though they are not entirely motivated out of a regard for those she helps. Bush suggests that pure altruism and political action without personal motivation are unrealistic, even impossible. Bush encourages us to be critical of Arcadia—particularly in her more selfish and solipsistic moments. But ultimately, Arcadia does undertake meaningful action, even though her motives are never purely altruistic. The suggestion is that one can affect positive change even in compromised circumstances,

Throughout the novel, Arcadia Hearne frequently justifies her decision to distance herself from the subject of her work. “I don’t need to go to Bosnia” (71), she tells a war correspondent who encourages her to visit the conflict zone. “I don’t see what’s to be gained by becoming a spectator of atrocity” (72). “A witness” (72), the war correspondent counters. Arcadia remains unpersuaded, arguing that witnessing war is both unnecessary and unsafe: “The work I do is perfectly valid. I’m a theorist. I hardly need to race around the globe. Besides, I value safety” (27). However, despite her own unwillingness to engage personally, as a direct witness to the wars she studies, Arcadia is intensely preoccupied with the politics of intervention. She considers the potentially paralyzing ramifications of distanced observation, and the moral imperative for active engagement. She tells Amir Barmour, near the beginning of their romantic relationship:

Sometimes I'd like to believe ... that being informed, that knowledge is an end in itself, that one is justified simply in knowing what's going on in the world. Of course we spend a lot of time in intervention studies thinking about how one determines appropriate spheres of action. For individuals. For countries. Where to act, and when, and how. In an age of global vision and moral opinion. When we're all these global voyeurs, and know so much. Too much possibly. When we're all these global voyeurs, really, watching endless television clips of atrocities—how are we to make sure we don't all collapse into utter passivity? (110)

Here, she rejects the notion that witnessing is a positive response to violence and conflict. She indicts those of us who obtain our information about wars from news media as “global voyeurs,” rather than witnesses. Arcadia does not offer an alternative mode of witnessing, suggesting that she cannot conceive of witnessing as meaningful and necessary. She does not understand the value of the witness as an “empathetic listener, or ... an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (Laub 68, emphasis in original). That said, her indictment of voyeurism is apt in the context of Dori Laub's analysis of witnessing, for the news media that Arcadia discusses does not enable dialogue between the subject of the news and the spectators. As I argued in my discussion of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, witnessing constitutes both an ethical engagement and an empathetic exchange, in which the listener enables a response from the individual who testifies to his/her trauma. Voyeurs are not witnesses, because they watch from a removed position, and are not addressable. In her reiteration of Arcadia's resistance to the idea of personally traveling to conflict zones, Bush stresses her protagonist's failure to conceive of the dialectical nature of witnessing. Despite her misgivings about the potentially paralyzing results of passive



observation, Arcadia remains, until the very end of the novel, a passive observer. In fact, the above passage, in which she discusses the implications of global voyeurism, also describes her own reaction to her personal experience of violence.

As an undergraduate student in Toronto, Arcadia watches a duel fought between her boyfriend, Evan Biederman, and her lover, Neil Laurier. Despite learning of their plan to duel, Arcadia does nothing to stop the confrontation. Instead, she hides herself in the park where the duel is to be fought and watches the violence unfold. She considers intervening, but reflects, “some part of me, some convulsive part of me, wanted to test [Neil], to wait and see exactly what he was going to do.” She wonders, “Was he—*was he*—acting out of love?” (284). Her motivation for witnessing the incident is to determine its significance in relation to her personal relationship with her lover. Thus, she does not emerge from her hiding place until after Evan has fired his pistol and wounded Neil.

Arcadia’s question—was Neil acting out of love?—signals the danger inherent in acting (or, conversely, choosing not to act) out of personal interest. Her uncertainty about the depth of Neil’s affection, the question implies, leads her to choose observation over intervention. The duel becomes emblematic, in a twisted sense, of Arcadia’s research, and her desire to understand conflict, but from a distance, and without compromising herself in order to understand warring factions’ motivations and the impact of their actions. Throughout the novel, Arcadia expresses her ambivalence about the possibility of intervening in foreign conflicts. She advocates academic engagement, writing, “*Before we can talk about intervention, we need to provide a context for possible intervention. To discuss the conditions of contemporary war, in other words*” (80, emphasis in original). Later, she argues that “*Given that you can’t act everywhere, do everything, just as you can’t intervene in all conflicts, you have to determine zones of*

*responsibility*” (190, emphasis in original). However, she does not, over the course of the novel, succeed in identifying the parameters for engagement, or in determining where, when, and how intervention is justified. Bush invites us to recognize Arcadia’s limitations and shortcomings, and to engage and assume responsibility in ways that her protagonist does not.

In *Dark Threats & White Knights*, Sherene Razack explores the vexed issue of international political engagement—deciding when and how Canadians should intervene as global peacekeepers. In doing so, she foregrounds Roméo Dallaire’s sorrow and frustration at his own inability to persuade Canada and the international community to intervene and prevent the genocide in Rwanda:

Traumatized by his inability to prevent the genocide in Rwanda, and made into a national icon representing our collective frailty and middle-power incapacity to act against the amorphous ‘evil’ of the Third World, General Dallaire nonetheless insists that we find a way to act morally and help those who need our help. (*Dark Threats* 153)

Although Razack discusses the racist implications of peacekeeping intervention as “contemporary civilizing practices and the enactment of violence ‘for their own good’” (*Dark Threats* 64), she argues that “staying at home at a moment of crisis like the Rwandan genocide, the refusal to supply UN troops to General Dallaire, is in my view, immoral” (164). She cautions, furthermore, against engaging with only an academic understanding of the nature of the conflict: “We can do very little good if we go equipped with nothing beyond information from an encyclopedia” (164). Like Arcadia Hearne, Razack understands the difficulty in choosing when and how to intervene in a conflict. However, unlike Bush’s protagonist, Razack readily acknowledges the moral imperative to intervene, and to prevent death and violence. Arcadia is

trapped within her own position as a researcher and observer, but not a direct witness. Her academic and perhaps even solipsistic insistence on studying, observing, and researching before (or perhaps instead of) acting is cast into relief in the context of her decision to observe the duel, rather than intervene.

And it is her father's reaction to Arcadia's passivity that eventually drives her to action—though, in this case, the action is simply fleeing Toronto for the “idyll” (11) of a London flat with a garden. Before she leaves, Arcadia spends several days prone on her bedroom floor, and it is apparently her father's reaction to the duel that propels her away from Toronto, and toward the “blank slate” and “*Terra nullius*” (38) of London: “His anger shocked me more, its explosiveness something I've never seen let loose in him. Anger or fear? *Two men fought over you? Two men fought over you with guns? You should have told someone. Why—why didn't you do everything you could to stop them?*” (295, emphasis in original). Faced with her father's angry (or fearful) reaction to her passivity, Arcadia flees to London in an attempt to escape the repercussions of the violence in which she is so deeply implicated. .

Arcadia's actions are destructive, not because they are malicious, but because she cannot resolve herself to intervene in order to prevent violence. Razack's discussion of Hannah Arendt's assessment of Nazi “thoughtlessness” is useful here: “For Arendt, Eichmann was ‘thoughtless’ and it is this ‘thoughtlessness’ or inability to make a moral judgment, and his emotional remoteness from the horror, that is conveyed in the phrase ‘the banality of evil’” (*Dark Threats* 159). While I certainly do not equate Arcadia's passivity with the “thoughtless” actions of a man who was responsible for the mass deportation of Jews to the death camps in Nazi Germany, I do find Razack's analysis of Arendt's work useful in understanding Arcadia's unwillingness to act and her apparent lack of empathy. As an antidote to this disastrous

thoughtlessness, Razack demands that we “[think] critically about national mythologies” (*Dark Threats* 163). She invites us to recognize the power and seductiveness of the myth of Canadian benevolence, and to consider the ways in which we fail to live up to this standard, or ways in which this myth is limiting and potentially even destructive. I agree with Razack, but I also argue that something more is needed to combat thoughtlessness: empathy. As I attempted to demonstrate in my analysis of witnessing in Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*, empathy is forged when one becomes personally invested in the emotional state of the other. This personalization occurs when we have something at stake, when we are motivated, not by pure altruism, but by our own desires, needs, and emotions. That is why I foreground the possibilities of action that is, at its root, personally motivated.

Throughout the novel, the reader is struck not only by Arcadia’s passivity, but also by her lack of empathy. For instance, during a surreptitious outing with Neil, Arcadia unexpectedly encounters her sister Lux in a convenience store. Arcadia, preoccupied by her own distress at being discovered in the company of her lover, demonstrates curiosity, but little concern, over Lux’s obvious distress at the meeting:

Her face blanched. I had no idea what she was doing there. Was there someone ... outside waiting for her? Was she alone? Had she been out all night? Did she smoke, was she out buying cigarettes? Manic questions sluiced through me. I had no sense at all of her private life. Was she making a bid to escape the family home, out looking for an apartment? ...

We have never spoken of that moment. (228)

Interestingly, this passage precedes one in which Lux confesses to Arcadia that she was detained and threatened by militants while attempting to deliver money and equipment to musicians in Mozambique who were left destitute after that country's civil war. Arcadia recognizes that her sister is "not fearless" (228), but she fails to express empathy or even concern for her.

She does, however, become intensely interested in Neil's fate, and what she perceives to be her role in the sequence of events leading to his death. Although Neil dies in a car accident years after the duel, the news of his death leads Arcadia to conclude that "One way or another we'd killed him—not directly, no, but indirectly. The link may not have been causal, but it was consequential" (261). Arcadia's desire to accept responsibility for her role in the chain of events leading to Neil's death marks her awareness of individual responsibility in the context of events outside her immediate and individual sphere of influence—in essence, it represents her emergent awareness of global connectedness, and an emergence from passive observation. This awareness leads, in part, to her decision to deliver a passport to the sister of a Somali refugee in Nairobi. Arcadia first meets Basra, a Somali refugee, in London, after Lux persuades her sister to deliver money and documents that will allow Basra to flee to Toronto. In one sense, Arcadia's decision to deliver the illegal passport to Basra's sister demonstrates the selfless desire to take definitive—and potentially dangerous—action on behalf of someone else, a refugee whom she has never even met. On the other hand, the juxtaposition in the novel of the episode in which Arcadia fails to express concern or demonstrate empathy for her sister is telling. Although Arcadia is finally willing to engage directly in the conflicts that she studies, by delivering illegal documents to refugees, she remains primarily motivated by, and concerned with, matters that affect her personally and directly. She has moved towards empathy, but remains at the end of the novel a flawed individual who still cannot enable her sister's testimony, because she lacks the

compassion and awareness to inquire about Lux's distress, even though she recognizes that her sister is unhappy.

In fact, throughout the novel, and particularly when she considers Basra's plight, Arcadia recognizes the ambivalence of her motivations, repeatedly wondering, "Do I believe in pure altruism, pure selfishness?" (34). As a result of her initial encounter with Basra, Arcadia meets Amir Barmour, with whom she becomes sexually and romantically involved. However, when Arcadia learns that Amir has been forging passports for refugees, and has involved Arcadia in this activity by having her unknowingly deliver these documents, she flees London and returns to Toronto. There, she attempts to find Basra, reflecting that "In some sense, I thought I owed it to her, although I wondered if this was simply selfishness masking itself as altruism" (187). As she comes closer to finding the young women, Arcadia promises herself that she will first attempt to help Basra, and "Then, and only then, would I ask about Amir" (205). Ultimately, however, she does not ask about him. Her personal curiosity and sexual jealousy are, apparently, subsumed by her desire to help Basra and her sister. However, it is important to note that her personal interests have led Arcadia to Basra, ultimately putting her in the position to deliver the passport.

In her exploration of the relationship between personal motivation and altruism, or, more generally, a sense of one's responsibility to others, Catherine Bush creates a striking contrast between Arcadia and her father. Although T. F. Rigelhof argues that "Benedict Hearne ... teaches his children to intellectualize danger [and] Arcadia is an apt pupil" (220-21), Arcadia's father provides a deeply personal rationale for his work. Arcadia's father is a nuclear engineer. He tells his daughter that "his ultimate test when doing a risk assessment in a nuclear power plant was *would I let you or Anne [Arcadia's and Lux's mother] or Lux in there? It's the emotional test. And if I'm convinced that you'll be safe, it's safe*" (183, emphasis in original).

Benedict Hearne deploys his familial attachments to further of his professional goals. His assurances, however, do not prevent Arcadia from worrying about her childhood exposure to nuclear radiation as a result of her father's work.

The reader, like Arcadia, is made to feel uncomfortable by Benedict's revelation, particularly in the context of the risks that his work represents to his family. As a child, Lux is afraid of "dying in a radioactive fire" (176). As an adult, Arcadia stares at herself in the mirror, "peering at [her] skin as if it would turn suddenly translucent and reveal whatever traces there were of the risks that [their father had exposed them] to" (184). Interestingly, in a novel that is primarily about violence and war, discussions of complicity and responsibility are most explicitly discussed in relation to nuclear power. Following the nuclear power plant disaster at Chernobyl, Arcadia asks her father, "*Don't you feel guilty?*" (179), but Benedict sidesteps the issue of accountability, replying, "Given that I have a particular knowledge and expertise, it's my responsibility not to run away but to ascertain the best possible way to use it" (180). Arcadia, however, is aware of the deep irony at the heart of the desire to find the "best possible way" to use nuclear technology; although he works to develop nuclear power and render it safe, she knows that these technologies are used to make weapons:

He believed in the exporting of Canadian nuclear technology, that by sending our knowledge out beyond our borders, we were helping other, smaller nations achieve economic independence and energy self-sufficiency. ... He downplayed the risk—not the risk, the fact, as I pointed out ... —that our heavy-water reactors were being used in certain countries eager for another sort of power, to process weapons fuel. We were not innocents. We could even be called collaborators. (183)

Catherine Bush uses Benedict Hearne's willful blindness to his role in arming other nations with nuclear weapons to emphasize Arcadia's unwillingness to articulate a meaningful strategy of engagement. Just as her father cannot admit to complicity in the manufacture of nuclear weaponry, Arcadia cannot acknowledge her own, or Canada's (or Britain's) responsibility to intervene in conflict. Bush thereby illustrates the paradoxical construction of Canadian innocence: by constituting themselves as innocent, Arcadia and her father imply that they are unimplicated in the traumas they observe from a safe distance (in this case, global conflict and nuclear disaster). Trauma, in this context, is not a Canadian problem. However, as Razack points out, this innocence, or the "story of Northern goodness and heroism" (*Dark Threats* 8) is used to construe Canadians as peacekeepers on the global stage. Within this narrative, Canadians are obligated to intervene in global conflict precisely because they are innocent. Put differently, "By means of this conflation of whiteness with civility, whiteness has been naturalized as the norm for English Canadian cultural identity" (Coleman 5), and this white civility embodies the requirement for Canadians to extend a "charitable welcome to 'foreigners' and other less-fortunate people" (6). The role as peacekeepers is perceived to be "a necessary part of the civilizing process" (Razack, *Dark Threats* 8). In other words, by constituting oneself as innocent, one is absolved from the obligation to intervene and is simultaneously compelled to intervene, as part of the civilizing process. Of course, both branches of this paradox are steeped in the racist assumptions inherent in the notion of white civility, and the civilizing practices of peacekeeping.

Razack's critical examination of Canadian peacekeeping and Coleman's discussion of civility are useful to our understanding of the ending of Bush's novel, where the reader learns that Benedict Hearne has developed terminal cancer. He insists, however, "that his cancer is



unrelated to his line of work” (296). His refusal to recognize the relationship between his work and his cancer, or between his work and global nuclear armament, however, is contrasted by Arcadia’s dawning awareness of the complex nature of complicity and accountability. Her willingness to accept responsibility for Neil’s eventual death, and her acknowledgement that she, Neil, and Evan “had all been twisted and reshaped by the duel” (291) ultimately leads her to travel to a dangerous conflict zone in order to deliver documents to refugees. In the end, Arcadia, unlike her father, begins to recognize the interconnected spheres of influence: the personal and the political, the local and the global.

As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, Sherene Razack acknowledges the vexed problem of deciding where to intervene. However, unlike Arcadia, she insists that intervention is ethically necessary. She writes that, in moments of global crisis, “we must go, but *how* we go is critical” (*Dark Threats* 164). For Razack, *how we go* is related to an acknowledgement of our responsibility for the crises themselves. She asks that we first consider “that we share the blame of what is happening” in conflict zones (165). Just as Arcadia challenges her father to acknowledge his responsibility for nuclear disasters outside of Canada, the novel challenges Canadians to acknowledge our own responsibility for conflicts outside of our borders. Indeed, it is Arcadia’s own awareness that she is implicated in Basra’s flight that leads her to agree to deliver the documents to Basra’s sister. In the end, it is her understanding of the inextricable connection between her personal motivations and her responsibility to Basra and her sister.

Although the reader recognizes that Arcadia remains a deeply ambivalent character, particularly in her inability to empathize with Basra or her sister Lux, we are invited to recognize that she still possess the potential to affect positive change. And Arcadia is not alone in possessing this potential, despite adulterated motives. For instance, when Amir defends his role

in altering and delivering passports to refugees by telling Arcadia, “someone helped me, I’ll help someone,” she retorts by pointing out, “*You* make money off them”— to which Amir stipulates, though he insists that he receives “Not very much money,” and asks Arcadia to “think of this as my private act of intervention” (145). This novel does not seek to establish that purely altruistic engagement is necessary, or perhaps even possible. Instead, Bush suggests that even action that is, to one degree or another, personally motivated can be positive, and even necessary.

#### **4. Canada and Arcadia**

In his analysis of *The Rules of Engagement*, John Clement Ball argues in favour of an allegorical reading of the novel, particularly in light of Canada’s role in post-9-11 global conflicts. Ball discusses Bush’s depiction as “a compromised but useable symbol of the [Canadian] national identity” (194) in the novel. In fact, Arcadia acknowledges the value of a Canadian passport, since “traveling as a Canadian is perhaps the easiest way to find safe passage. In a crisis, everyone wants to be one of us” (154). And, in agreeing to deliver the forged passport to Basra’s sister, she exploits the myth of Canadians as benevolent, peaceful, and law-abiding. She relies, furthermore, on this myth in order to enter conflict zones in order to avoid suspicion; she reflects that her decision to travel to Africa will be unsurprising to her boss and her colleagues because “it was never more than a matter of time: I was bound to take a trip like this one day” (299). Essentially, Arcadia recognizes that her former solipsism, as well as the nature of her research, will defray suspicion, thereby enabling her to deliver the documents to the refugees.

As allegory, these assumptions suggest that Canada, too, has been neutral, and has so far avoided meaningful engagement in global conflicts, but that we should and can bank on our

reputation for peaceful benevolence in order to take meaningful and effective action. In other words, Bush seems to be suggesting that Canada, like Arcadia, has spent enough time “thinking about how one determines appropriate spheres of action. . . . Where to act, and when, and how” (110), and that, furthermore, certain compromises may be in order, even compromises that may reach outside the previously understood limits of law and morality. For example, Amir reminds Arcadia of this when he tells her that “it is *not* a crime, if you are a genuine refugee, to travel on false documents. According to the Geneva Convention” (142). In other words, illicit action is not necessarily immoral or even illegal.

Of course, this kind of reasoning has risks. By compromising legal and moral standards, we could, potentially, fall subject to the kind of “greater good” justifications that have been used, for example, to depict refugees as terrorists and criminals from whom Canadian citizens need protection. However, an allegorical reading of *The Rules of Engagement* suggests that Canada has taken shelter in rationalized, solipsistic neutrality for too long. Bush’s novel can be read as a call to action for Canadians: action beyond our borders, and in defense of people at risk around the globe. However it is, as Arcadia points out throughout the novel, difficult to determine what represents meaningful and effective action. Many Canadians, for instance, oppose Canada’s ongoing military engagement in Afghanistan. Others are critical of Canada’s failure to intervene in the current crisis in Syria. While I agree with Ball that Bush invites an allegorical reading of the novel, challenging us to consider Canada’s role in the world, it is clear that *The Rules of Engagement* does not suggest a national policy of engagement, emphasizing instead the importance of individual action. While it challenges us to critically question Canada’s political, military and humanitarian responsibilities, it principally challenges us to take individual action, and to make accommodations within our own lives. Ultimately, Arcadia uses her profession to

help one individual. The novel does not call for large-scale prosocial action, but for personal and manageable change. This action, the novel implies, must be achieved through empathy, and a personal recognition of the suffering of others, rather than rational and academic assessment of the risks and benefits of engaging in global conflicts.

Samantha Powers has pointed out that:

Despite broad public consensus that genocide should “never again” be allowed, and a good deal of triumphalism about the ascent of liberal democratic values, the last decade of the twentieth century was one of the most deadly in the grimmest century on record...

Genocide occurred *after* the Cold War; *after* the growth of human rights groups; *after* the advent of technology that allowed for instant communication; *after* the erection of the Holocaust Museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C. (503, emphasis in original)

Clearly, we have failed at a national and an international level to prevent ongoing genocides.

Faced with the knowledge that state governments and international organizations like the United Nations have been unable to prevent large-scale death, torture, and suffering, it is tempting to take refuge in distance, or to use excuse our own inaction by pointing out that compassion, liberal values, and widespread knowledge of developing humanitarian crises across the globe cannot avert war or genocide. And, furthermore, it is equally tempting to conclude that, however effectively literature engages our compassion and empathy, it cannot bring about real-world change, even though it may change individual readers’ perceptions of the world and people within it. Indeed, Powers writes that “Despite media coverage, American policy makers, journalists, and citizens are extremely slow to muster the imagination needed to reckon with evil” (xvii), and that, furthermore, “American political leaders interpret society-wide silence as

an indicator of indifference” (xviii), and, as a result, do not respond to genocide. The same conclusions may be drawn about Canada. In short, whether we are aware of developing humanitarian crises or not, the twentieth century has demonstrated that we are unlikely to be able to motivate our governments to intervene. Catherine Bush writes critically about these failures in an effort to *engage* her audience, to provoke them “to muster the imagination” needed to reckon with the pernicious consequences of Canadian myths of innocence and benevolence that condone inaction and affirm powerlessness. Like the other novels I have discussed, *The Rules of Engagement* represents a counterpoint to the helpless inactivity that might result from an awareness from our individual powerlessness. One compassionate reader may not be able to prevent war or genocide, the novel suggests, but positive, individual action is still possible.

This individual action that the novel suggests is both possible and essential draws on Canadians’ desire to see ourselves as belonging to an essentially benevolent and “civil” society—a concept that the Daniel Coleman discusses at length. However, Coleman’s analysis of the construction of Canadian civility in literature posits an “allegory of manly maturation [that] functions to shore up British normativity by producing and reinforcing the image of White civility, a civility demonstrated by muscular Christian, gentlemanly, fair treatment of ‘strangers’” (169). Razack, too, discusses the representation of Canada as a civil nation, and, like Coleman, points out that this civility tends to deny the personhood of others:

A Canadian today knows herself or himself as someone who comes from the nicest place on earth, as someone from a peacekeeping nation, and as a modest, self-deprecating individual who is able to gently teach the Third World Others about civility. So deep is this sense of self that it becomes inconceivable to imagine that Third World Others have any sort of personhood. (*Dark Threats* 9)

Razack does not suggest that this is an accurate representation of Canadians, but it is, she argues, a powerful nationalist myth with dangerous implications. Razack, furthermore, argues that Canada's role as a global peacekeeper entails "the making of racially dominant masculinities and nations through violence directed at bodies of colour" (63). In other words, we have become accustomed to envisioning Canada as a masculine presence, either at home, in its civil and gentlemanly acceptance of ethnic others, or abroad, as a necessarily forceful and masculine peacekeeping force. Bush, however, suggests that there is potentially a more productive and respectful possibility for global intervention than either violence or the "civil incorporation of non-British people into the body of the nation, even as [these people are detained] at the nation's margins" (Coleman 171). This possibility for global action that is not racist, violent, or exclusionary lies within an empathetic acknowledgement, both of the dangerous and painful circumstances of global conflict (and, our complicity in the circumstances leading to these conflicts), and of our own history of racism and violence, both within Canada and outside our borders. Just as Arcadia's personal experience of violence eventually compels her to intervene (in however limited a manner) in global conflicts, Canada's history of colonialism and colonial violence puts us in a particular position to intervene in violence around the globe.

To pursue this reasoning further, Canada's particular history of systemic racism compels us, as members of a transnational community, to protect victims of racially-motivated violence outside of Canada. In particular, Canada's recent efforts to make amends for the Indian Residential School System, the Japanese-Canadian Internment, and other instances of systemic racism (though, as in the case of the Air India tragedy, many of these attempts at reconciliation continue to be seen by many as insufficient) indicate that Canada is moving away from a position of complicity with racist violence, and towards efforts at resolution and reconciliation. However,

it is important to note that often, we are not always entirely successful in this regard. Our response to the arrival of the Sun Sea and the Ocean Lady, for instance, bore significant similarities to our response to the Komagata Maru; within a year, the Canadian government expresses regret for turning away one vessel, and shores up our borders to prevent more refugees from arriving in the next. This suggests a need to understand official expressions of regret in the context of “Canada’s relationship to the discourses of globalization” (Dobson, *Transnational* xi). In mapping our discursive relationships, we must also be aware of our own history, and of our own, domestic human rights failures. Coleman’s conception of “wry civility” is useful in envisioning our responsibility with relation to the global stage:

The onus falls to cultural critics and scholars, therefore, to dismantle these narratives by means of a critical or wry civility which knows that civility itself has a contaminated, compromised history, but which nonetheless affirms that its basic elements as formulated in Canada—peace, order, and good government—are worth having and maintaining. Wry civility remains aware that civil ideals have been partially and unevenly pursued in the past and that we are in the present as likely to be blind to similar exclusions and unevennesses as were past Canadians. (239)

Wry civility would enable us to acknowledge our own history of racism—and the racism that persists within our communities—while, at the same time, accepting the responsibility to end racism, and to take meaningful action on the global stage. Wry civility should compel us, for example, to abide by international laws calling for the humane treatment of refugees. Beyond that, it should compel us to critically consider the “uneven” and “compromised” action (and inaction) licensed by those ideals before harnessing what is positive within them. Like Coleman, Bush suggests that it is incumbent on individuals to begin this project, by thinking critically

about the limits and possibilities of Canadian civility and benevolence while acting compassionately on behalf of others within our personal sphere of influence.

As our national literature attempts to apprehend issues of transnational importance, several texts, including *The Rules of Engagement*, call for a global political engagement. Even when large-scale intervention is not within our reach, the novel suggests, individual action is possible. And, while Derek Attridge, Martha Nussbaum, and others argue that literature can transform the individual's mode of understanding the world, the example of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*—a novel that played a role in the Japanese-Canadian redress movement of the 1980s—indicates that literature also has the potential to shape national policy and law. Although, as Smaro Kamboureli points out, literature is never fully harmonized within the sphere of public debate, it can, nonetheless, function as a call to action, illustrating Canada's shortcomings in ethical intervention, both domestically, and on the global stage.



## **Chapter 7:**

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated that fiction written by women in late-twentieth century Canada offers many examples of characters who face systemic racism and violence, but who nonetheless develop empowering and sometimes subversive or unconventional strategies to overcome that traumatic experience. In considering those strategies at some length, I have tried to demonstrate that political action that is personally motivated can be positive and effective. With this focus on the value of personally-motivated action in mind, I would like to conclude my discussion by briefly reflecting on my own personal motivations to undertake a project on literature, multiculturalism, and systemic racism.

In 2004, while preparing PhD applications, I worked as a secretary for the Graduate Students' Association of the University of Alberta (the GSA). At the GSA, I met graduate students from faculties and departments across campus. I assisted them with a variety of administrative tasks, including preparing and sending funding proposals. Some of the students who frequented the office were affiliated with the Cross Cancer Institute. These students were applying for funding to research potential cures and treatments for cancer. I was humbled. I wondered, what right to government funding did I have, in order to study literature? What right, when that funding might support a cure for cancer, instead?

While I was working for the GSA, I met Junaid Bin Jahangir, a PhD candidate in the Department of Economics. Junaid was—and is—a devout, practicing Muslim. He is also gay, and an advocate for the rights of other gay Muslims. In January 2010, *The Edmonton Journal* published an article on Junaid's activism and his fight to be recognized as a gay Muslim man; as

a result, his efforts and his personal life were suddenly subjected to some very public discussion. Recently, in “Post Lime-Light Reflection,” Junaid discussed his experience “in the limelight,” and commented on the difference between academic and personal engagement:

The *Edmonton Journal* story on my personal life brought me into limelight in ways beyond my initial expectations. Much of my work till then was from the perspective of a dispassionate researcher. Whether in my writings or in the workshops conducted in Pakistan, I stayed away from revealing my inner most self to anyone, for those matters are usually private and shared with only those who matter most in one’s life. I was, however, always convinced that with my work I could affect effect [sic] some change.

(Jahangir)

Junaid acknowledges that, in his struggle to persuade members of the Muslim clergy to be “moved by the plight of the damned,” as he puts it, a dispassionate approach as a researcher and academic has not always proved effective, leading him to appeal to individuals on a personal level and, finally, to share his own experiences with the *Edmonton Journal* reporter. But in exposing his personal life so publicly, Junaid was taken aback by the degree to which he attracted negative public attention. After agreeing to speak with the *Journal*, as well as a reporter from OMNI TV, about his personal experiences, Junaid reflects that, despite the opposition that he continues to face, both from within and without the Muslim and LGBT communities, he “remain[s] determined enough to continue” with his work. He writes:

I may not have gained victory on a large scale as I had romantically thought, but on a smaller scale I have noted that some persons have found a measure of hope and courage through my written words. [...] It is at this inter-personal level, I believe that change is being simmered and

despite my restlessness on wanting a whole-scale change I have come to learn that epic scenes of victory are best left for creative directors and their movies. (Jahangir)

What is striking about Junaid's insight is the sense of balance that he has established between a personal and an academic engagement with an issue that is so tremendously important to him, particularly in light of the ways in which sharing his personal story has brought so much public commentary. Junaid chooses to engage opponents on two fronts: academically, by participating in a written debate on the topic of homosexuality and the Muslim faith; and personally, by sharing his own narrative with the public. In addition, he emphasizes the power of creative works to affect "whole-scale change," or at least to allow us to envision the possibility for such change, even in the highly fictionalized and romanticized realm of popular film. Although Junaid explicitly references film—"creative directors and their movies"—his insights should, I think, serve as a reminder of how indispensable studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences are—indispensable because academic engagement does impact the lives that we lead, or at the very least, the possibilities we can imagine for ourselves. Indispensable also, because the humanities, and the study of literature in particular, tend to privilege personal narratives—of the narrator, the speaker, the poet, the author. And these narratives, these creative works, whether fictional or not, are immensely powerful in changing our perception of the world.

My friendship with Junaid renewed my interest in Canadian literature and encouraged me to pursue a study of texts that engage with difficult topics such as violence, racism, and trauma. I believed then, and I continue to believe, that literature has a particular potential to change the way that we understand our world and to therefore change this world for the better. In changing the way we understand difference, fiction can change the way we react to it. By allowing us to

mentally accommodate those whom we perceive as different from us, literature offers us the potential to change our behaviours for the better.

I am, of course, not alone in positing literature as an agent of social change, nor do I claim that Canadian literature that draws on contemporary social and political problems is a product exclusively of the 1980s, 1990s, and early new millennium. In Dorothy Livesay's 1936-37 poem "Invitation to Silence," the speaker exhorts poets to "Sit still and be quiet just a minute, just a minute—" (47). Livesay denounces the "corrupted" words of "befuddled poets and prophets," encouraging us instead to listen to "the sound of men steadily loading the wagon / Swiftly intense and throbbing as it nears the barn" and to the "Silent cry behind this labourer: / 'Wheat! Wheat! And no one to buy or eat / And yet we have heard that children cry and starve in the street'" (47). The apparent opposition between the putative emptiness of language and poetry on one hand, and the eloquent suffering of labourers during the Great Depression on the other, places Livesay's own poem in a vexed position. Like Adorno's axiom—that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarous—Livesay's poem problematizes the apparent disjuncture between poetic expression and real, lived suffering. Although Livesay is among the most venerated poets within the institutionalized and canonized framework of Canadian Literature, it is important to remember that, at the moment she wrote this poem, she identified herself not nationally, but internationally, as a member of the international socialist movement, and that her concerns, evidenced by her poetry and activism of this period, are principally political in nature. As Dorothy Livesay and many other writers demonstrate over and over again, dealing with trauma through literature is not particular to the multicultural period of the late twentieth century. Nor is dealing with racism and its legacies in literature exclusively the provenance of this period. In 1957, for instance, "All the Spikes But the Last," F.R. Scott's poetic response to E.J. Pratt's

*Toward the Last Spike*, asks, "Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned? / Where are the thousands from China who swung their picks with bare hands at forty below?"(98). Scott's question probes not only the racist labour practices of the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, but also the racism inherent in Pratt's elision of the Chinese workers who built the railway under dangerous and desperate working conditions. Scott's poem, like Tomson Highway's plays or Tom King's novels, Rohinton Mistry's short stories or George Elliott Clarke's plays and poems, also demonstrates that it is not only women writing fiction in Canada who examine racism through literature. And, of course, if we cast our gaze outside of Canada, it becomes clear that writing about racism is not solely a Canadian preoccupation. Thus, I return now to some of the questions that I asked as I began this project: What is particular about Canadian fiction in the late twentieth century? How are women writing in Canada engaging with the politics of the Multiculturalism Act in order to discuss the effects of systemic racism on individual subjects?

Texts written in the last two decades of the twentieth century-- the period framed in Canada by the Canadian government's first efforts to institutionalize and legislate multiculturalism within what would eventually become the Multiculturalism Act, and the terrorist attacks of 9-11-- changed the way the world saw race, ethnicity, and nationalism. In 2000, towards the end of what we may call Canada's multicultural period, Himmani Bannerji wrote, "In the context of making the Canadian nation, unity is posited in terms of diversity, with pictures of many facial types, languages and cultures—"together we are . . ." (548). This apparently paradoxical statement illustrates the ways in which Canada, in the 1980s and 1990s, sought to counter "The various attempts over time to define Canada as a cohesive nation, to invent a homogenous Canadian identity—an identity minus the identities of the Aboriginal

people, and later the identities of new immigrants” (Kamboureli, *Making a Difference* xxvi). The 1988 Multiculturalism Act asserted that multiculturalism was already an essential fact of Canadian identity: this legislation is described as “[preserving] and [enhancing] multiculturalism in Canada” by “[recognizing] and [promoting] that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity” (The Canadian Multiculturalism Act). The Act articulated the assumption that multiculturalism was *already* an essential part of the fabric of Canadian culture, thereby eliding the specter of a repressive, white, English-speaking hegemonic Canadian cultural presence. However, critics such as Eva Mackey have argued that the state’s attempts to “institutionalize various forms of difference” constitute an attempt to “[control] access to power and simultaneously [legitimate] the power of the state” (50), and that official multiculturalism is, in essence, “a mode of managing internal differences” (50). And Himani Bannerji writes:

This language of diversity is a coping mechanism for dealing with an actually conflicting heterogeneity, seeking to incorporate it into an ideological binary which is predicated upon the existence of a homogeneous national, that is, a Canadian cultural self with its multiple and different others. (548)

The notion of a binary culture, comprised of a “homogenous national” and “multiple and different others” implies that the homogenous culture is dominant, while the multiple and different others are subordinate. The language of the Multiculturalism Act, therefore, serves to veil three components of the political and cultural circumstances in which this legislation was created: first, the repressive, white, Anglo culture that had been promoted since colonization as the essential Canadian culture; second, the Act’s function as a generative document that “created” an officially multicultural Canadian society; and third, the state’s ongoing attempts to

control and manage diversity precisely through the generative mechanism of official multiculturalism. While “multicultural” literature flourished in Canada from the 1980s onward, many writers have sought to draw our attention to the limitations and potential dangers of institutionalized multiculturalism as an expression of Canadian identity. Just as women’s writing that tackles racism is notably fraught in its treatment of silence and testimony, Canadian literature and criticism of the last thirty years is frequently ambivalent on the value and function of multiculturalism in Canada. My research has sought to tease out these tensions, to explore how fiction functions strategically as a tool and, sometimes, a weapon against racism and sexism in Canada.

However, even as the writers I study seek to problematize the politics of officially-sanctioned multiculturalism, they write of individual subjects: protagonists who have been personally affected by systemic racisms. But within each of the fictions that I study, these protagonists have resisted victimization. The authors in my study craft characters who construct unique and frequently subversive strategies to cope with trauma, both at the individual and communal level. These fictions depict individuals and communities who have faced large-scale racism—events that challenge the notion that Canada is, and has been, an accepting and egalitarian multicultural society—but who nonetheless refuse to accept the disempowering position of victims, seeking instead redress for their communities, and personal healing. The texts that I have studied simultaneously chronicle the pervasively debilitating effects of violence and racism, while refusing to construct their protagonists as solely, or even principally, victims. Moreover, in describing the events of systemic racism, whose effects reverberated throughout Canada’s multicultural period of the 1980s and 1990s, these writers challenge the assumptions

underlying Canada's Multiculturalism Policy: assumptions that Canada is not a racist society, and that non-white, non-Anglophone ethnicities and cultures are stable, static, and peripheral.

In January 2011 at Halifax's Pier 21—the point at which thousands of new Canadians entered the country in the twentieth century—architect Daniel Libeskind unveiled a monument to the passengers of the MS St Louis, the ship carrying Jewish refugees in World War II that was turned away from Canadian shores. The memorial sculpture is aptly called the *Wheel of Consequence*: a name that calls on Canadians to acknowledge our responsibility for the St Louis passengers who eventually perished in Nazi extermination camps. This memorial, created more than seventy years after the St Louis's voyage, invites us to query the function of memorialization, and the importance of marking and remembering traumatic events. Bernie Farber, CEO of the Canadian Jewish Congress, comments that “The St Louis is not a moment frozen in historical time but is rather a part of the continuum of human experience and must be owned by all of us if its memory is to have any value today” (“Libeskind Memorial”). Farber's comments remind us that history is not comprised of discrete events, and that incidents in the past are relevant to how we react to situations that we face in the present—situations like, for example, the 2010 arrival of Sri Lankan refugees aboard the MS Sun Sea. Memorialization, in its insistence on the continuous nature of history and on the lasting consequences of our actions, can help us to determine how we act in the present.

In 2006, a group of writers and researchers collectively known as the Cultural Memory Group and comprised of Christine Bold, Sly Castaldi, Ric Knowles, Jodie McConnell and Lisa Schincariol published *Remembering Women Murdered by Men: Memorials Across Canada*. In their introduction, they write:



astonishingly often, these monuments are simply not seen. City councils tuck them into marginal locations, funding bodies shunt them to the bottom of their agendas, plaque-writers dedicate them in codes that wedge between silences. Memorials protesting a central scandal of our society occupy the most tentative positions in our public space.

(14)

In addition to the relative invisibility of these monuments to murdered women, access to the resources necessary to build them in the first place is limited for the groups most affected by violence and femicide. As the Cultural Memory Group puts it, “Women are more vulnerable [to violence] than men, women in poverty more than middle-class women, women of colour more than white women. The very groups most subject to attack are those with least access to the resources needed for public memory-making” (15). The Cultural Memory Group has documented those memorials that are often virtually invisible within their respective environments—much like the murdered women themselves—as well as the struggles of the groups and individuals who seek to memorialize their subjects. In addition, this project represents an important component of the process of publicly and collectively acknowledging and mourning these women’s deaths. These memorials can function in the place of payment for what Sarah Ahmed calls “an unpayable debt” (119). Furthermore, the Cultural Memory Group’s acknowledgement of the imperative to “remember responsibly” reminds us of the moral implications of memorializing loss; the Group’s aim to “keep the memory of women murdered and the challenges facing their memorializers firmly in view” (23) insists that memorializing (like postcolonial mourning, as construed by Sam Durrant) is, necessarily, an ongoing process. This process entails simultaneously recognizing and honouring the individuals that have died and, in the case of the Cultural Memory Group, those who work to create the memorials. These

memorials are dependent upon the creation of an affective relationship between the individuals memorialized, those who memorialize them, and those of us who serve as witnesses to both the loss and the process of memorialization itself.

This process can also be effective in publicly acknowledging the traumas and suffering of individuals who have survived acts of violence, repression, and exploitation. In *Shattered Subjects*, Suzette Henke considers Freud's paradigm of the talking cure—"a psycho-analytic working-through of repressed memories brought to the surface and abreacted through the use of language and free association" (xi)—and wonders whether the analyst is necessary to this process. Henke concludes that "scriptotherapy," or "the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (xii), is a powerful method for overcoming psychological trauma. Indeed, it is tempting to consider novels such as *Obasan*, *Itsuka* and *Emily Kato*, *Fugitive Pieces*, *Monkey Beach*, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, and *The Rules of Engagement*, or short stories such as "Queen of the North" and "The Management of Grief," as a kind of fictional scriptotherapy, since they feature protagonists who are traumatized, but who develop innovative strategies to overcome trauma's effects. But as I demonstrated in Chapter Two, it is problematic, or even dangerous, to view writing about events of racism through a resolutionary lens, since the effects of widespread racism are persistent, and can still be felt, many years after the event itself. But there are other reasons for resisting a resolutionary reading of narratives that discuss systemic racism and trauma: notably, to read a major racist event as resolved is potentially to relegate it to history, to events that have been overcome, and that no longer matter. Sherene Razack demonstrates powerfully in *Dark Threats & White Knights* that it is important that we collectively remember the darker and more painful

actions of our national past.<sup>38</sup> More specifically, Razack is critical of our desire to think of ourselves as “a peacekeeping nation, and as ... modest, self-deprecating individual[s] who [are] able to gently teach Third World Others about civility” (9). She insists that, in addition to memorializing General Roméo Dallaire’s efforts to prevent the Rwandan genocide, and his “work with children traumatized by war” (8), we must also remember events such as the Somali Affair, in which members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment tortured and humiliated Somali detainees, shot two Somalis in the back, and eventually, tortured and killed sixteen-year-old Shidane Arone. Like Daniel Coleman, Razack demands that we not mythologize ourselves as a civil nation, thereby wiping violent, racist, and discriminatory events from our collective memories. Memorialization is important, not only in marking these events from our past, but also in teaching us how to avoid making similar mistakes in the future.

Judith Butler argues against the idea that “grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing” (22). Instead, she writes, mourning “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order ... by bringing to the fore relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (22). Public memorialization, therefore, can be politicizing by reminding us that we are ethically responsible to one another, and to those individuals and events that we memorialize. By foregrounding our mutual dependency, and our ethical responsibility to one another, we can attempt to prevent future abuses of the sort that have led to the traumatic events of our past: those that we grieve through public memorials. And literature about events of systemic racism in Canada therefore serves an important memorializing, as well as therapeutic, function. Martha

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<sup>38</sup> Although I emphasize the importance of memorialization and collective remembering, I recognize that there is frequently a tension between the need to remember communally, and a desire to forget, individually, as a strategy for coping with the effects of racism. I have explored this tension in Chapter One, where I discuss Naomi’s urge to forget, and Aunt Emily’s injunction to remember in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*.

Nussbaum has argued powerfully that literature “has the potential to make a decisive contribution to our public life” (*Poetic* 2)—that it can “steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy makers in measuring the quality of life near and far” (3), and Diana Brydon calls for further study of Canadian literature that considers the “function of myths around this field, perhaps especially myths of Canadian innocence, deference, and goodwill” (“Metamorphoses” 5). I argue that literature can also lead us, collectively, to remember. This dissertation has explored how literature can accomplish the function of testifying to trauma. Many individuals and organizations recognize the ability of literature to record lived acts of violence and suffering, and to forge affective bonds between the subject of the text and the reader (or, as Kelly Oliver puts it, to enable response-ability). For instance, in 2009, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton published *Honouring Our Voices*,” a collection of poetry, prose and drawing by the women who access the organization’s services. The Elizabeth Fry Society’s mission is to “foster the dignity and worth of all women and girls who are or are at risk of becoming criminalized” ([www.efryedmonton.ab.ca](http://www.efryedmonton.ab.ca)). As such, the Society’s clients are among the most vulnerable members of society—women who are seldom publicly recognized, memorialized, or celebrated. *Honouring Our Voices* is comprised of four sections (plus an Introduction): “Pain,” “Hope,” Awareness,” and “Courage.” Within each section, the poems, narratives, paintings and drawings of Elizabeth Fry clients are juxtaposed with information and statistics on women who have been or are at risk of becoming criminalized. The effect of this juxtaposition is that the statistics on crime and victimization become intensely personalized, and the reader is confronted not only by the facts of marginalization, victimization, and risk, but also by the intensely personal narratives and artistic productions of the women who are the subjects of these facts and statistics. Additionally, the structure of the publication, beginning with “Pain,”

a series of works acknowledging the women's suffering, is succeeded by stories, poems, drawings, paintings, and letters of "Hope," "Awareness," and "Courage." *Honouring Our Voices* simultaneously requires the reader to recognize the conditions under which these women have been victimized, and to see that they possess the means to overcome their victimization.

By publishing these women's work, the Society represents them as speaking subjects who are in a position to articulate their own stories, and who, furthermore, are agents in overcoming the conditions of their own victimization. In "A Letter to Me," for instance, the anonymous author addresses "Past Me," and promises "that you will get through this, and you will be a stronger Cree woman because of it" (14). In addressing herself, the author is simultaneously taking up the position of victim, survivor, and benevolent helper. *Honouring Our Voices* represents a tangible, real-life example of literature's potential to record trauma, suffering, loss, and violence, and to overcome their debilitating effects. Although some of the contributions in *Honouring Our Voices* do not meet the standards we have come to associate with literary fiction and poetry, and would therefore not stand up to the intense scrutiny of a dissertation-length critical examination, I felt that it was important to include them in this project, both because many of the poems and short prose selections are, themselves, evidence of promising writing talent, but also because, as life-writing by women struggling to overcome traumas, they bridge the conceptual gap between the tangible memorials examined by the Collective Memory Group, and the literary fictions about systemic racism that I have examined in this dissertation.

In *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, Julie McGonegal writes that her "idea of forgiveness and reconciliation is rooted in expectation and

hope—hope in their<sup>39</sup> possibilities for and pledge to the future” (8). She argues, furthermore, that “Writing and reading are compatible with the acts of forgiveness and reconciling to the extent that they are (or can be) impelled by a deep longing to undergo an alienating medium—print, language, culture—in order to reach toward the presence of the other” (11). I find McGonegal’s arguments compelling, particularly in their impulse to connect the medium of print with the experience of alterity. McGonegal, like Attridge and Nussbaum, posits that literature is capable of allowing us to begin to understand those whom we perceive to be other.

McGonegal’s work, furthermore, is hopeful in conceiving of literature as a potential medium of postcolonial forgiveness. Although political acts such as public apology and memorialization are important in reconciliation, I believe that artistic productions, and literature in particular, are uniquely capable of simultaneously recording injury—of personalizing history, in a sense, and providing an affective context for the events of our past—and, by enabling readers to “reach toward the presence of the other,” as McGonegal puts it, to achieve redress, reconciliation, and forgiveness. I believe that this process is important collectively, as a nation, even for authors and readers who have been neither victims or perpetrators of racism and trauma. Like Mark Sanders, who calls for intellectuals to consider the degree to which they have been complicit in South African apartheid, I argue that in Canada, too, literature “calls upon the reader to assume responsibility for an other in the name of a generalized foldedness<sup>40</sup> in human being” (17). In other words, literature asks us—all of us, whether or not we have been directly implicated in systemic racism as either victim or perpetrator—to join in assuming responsibility for those who have suffered under racist policies and acts. Although I firmly believe that, collectively and nationally, we should fight to remember a wide range of traumatic events including the Japanese-

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<sup>39</sup> (forgiveness and reconciliation’s)

<sup>40</sup> Sanders describes complicity as being “at one with the basic foldedness of being, of human being, self and other. Such foldedness ... is the condition of all particular affiliations, loyalties and commitments” (10).

Canadian internment, the turning away of the MS St Louis, the Indian Residential School System, the Air India bombing, and our failures to accommodate refugees, or to act compassionately as peacekeepers in areas such as Somalia—events that are painful, shameful, and uncomfortable, and that do not fit within our national mythology as a peaceful, accommodating nation—I am hopeful that, though we must not forget, we can forgive and be forgiven.

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