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Asian Canadian Literature: Diasporic Interventions in the Work of SKY Lee, Joy Kogawa, Hiromi Goto, and Fred Wah

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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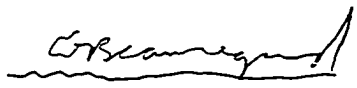

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that literary texts by SKY Lee, Joy Kogawa, Hiromi Goto, and Fred Wah function as diasporic interventions in the ongoing process of remembering a "racist past" in order to secure or contest a "multicultural present" in Canada. It draws on the complementary insights of diaspora theory, Asian American cultural criticism, and Canadian literary criticism in order to question representations of race and racism in the critical record surrounding these four writers and, more generally, in certain existing models of Canadian multicultural literary criticism. The dissertation reads texts by Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah under the rubric *Asian Canadian literature*, which functions not as a stable marker of identity but rather as a historically specific marker of panethnic coalitional politics dating from the 1970s. Reading these texts as Asian Canadian literature enables one to track their distinct yet complementary attempts to address the impact of histories of exclusion on subjects variously racialized as "Asian" in Canada. Their diasporic interventions in the process of remembering these histories foreground the historical and ongoing effects of racialization and racist exclusion. This dissertation accordingly discusses literary representations of the history of Chinese immigration to Canada, the internment of Japanese Canadians, and the effects of racialization on diasporic subjects living on the prairies and in the interior of British Columbia. These literary representations do not function as simple correctives to an inaccurate or

incomplete existing historical record. They instead intervene in the cultural politics of the ongoing process of remembering histories of anti-Asian racism in Canada. This dissertation suggests that the critical record surrounding the literary representations put forward by these four writers—and, by extension, other existing critical attempts to discuss "cultural difference" in Canadian literature—has to date addressed the history of anti-Asian racism in Canada in an uneven manner. The diasporic interventions addressed in this dissertation require literary critics to rethink the role of race and racism in this critical record and in certain existing forms of Canadian multicultural literary criticism.

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My first thanks go to my supervisory committee for their support during the process of writing this dissertation. I'd especially like to thank Stephen Slemon, whose intellectual engagement and marvellous sense of curiosity have propelled this project forward and showed me, with great generosity, the benefits of participating in an extended academic exchange.

Many people have read and commented upon previous drafts of this manuscript. For their help and insight, I'd like to thank Margery Fee, Donald Goellnicht, Tseen Khoo, Kyo Maclear, Joel Martineau, Mari Sasano, Joanne Saul, Caroline Sin, and Heather Smyth.

Over the past four years, I have presented parts of this dissertation at a number of panels and conferences, including: *Immigrant Literature*, a panel at the Central New York Conference on Language and Literature, SUNY Cortland, 15 October 1995; *Culture and Continuity on the Pacific Rim*, an ASPAC conference, University of Alberta, 22 June 1996; *Asian-Canadian Writing*, an ACCUTE panel, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1 June 1997; *Commonwealth in Canada*, a CACLALS conference, Wilfrid Laurier University, 8 November 1997; *Diversity, Writing, and Social Critique*, University of British Columbia, 25 April 1998; *The Migrating Subject*, a joint ACCUTE and CACLALS panel, University of Ottawa, 28 May 1998; *Asian Canadian Literature and Its Theoretical Crossroads*, an AAAS panel, Philadelphia, 1 April 1999; and *Canadian Fictions*, an ACCUTE panel, Université de Sherbrooke, 3 June 1999. Audience members at all these events graciously listened to my work, and I have greatly benefitted from their questions and responses.

I would also like to thank my students at the University of Alberta and the University of Guelph, who have helped shape the ways I think about Asian Canadian literature and why it might matter.

Joy Kogawa, Fred Wah, and Roy Miki kindly granted permission to reproduce some of their poems in this dissertation, while Hiromi Goto generously passed along some work that had not yet appeared in print. Likewise, Heather Zwicker, Apollo Amoko, and Donald Goellnicht passed along important critical work in progress that substantially adds to the critical record surrounding the texts I discuss. These acts of generosity helped make this dissertation better than what it might otherwise have been.

Financial support from the University of Alberta and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada enabled me to complete this project and is gratefully acknowledged.

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Introduction: Diasporic Interventions

Canada is in the midst of a profound demographic change. A 1997 *Time* magazine article announces that "for the first time in Canadian history, census figures show that the country's European-born immigrants are outnumbered by those born elsewhere—largely in Asia" (Spaeth 31). Utilizing crude yet persistent categories, an accompanying line graph entitled "East vs. West" charts the fall of "Europe" and the rise of "Asia" in the percentage of immigrants to Canada (Spaeth 34). The *Time* magazine article celebrates this change in the constituency of "Canada" through a triumphalist account of Pacific Rim capitalism. In this account, Vancouver "has always faced across the Pacific, toward Asia's faraway and profitable din" (Spaeth 34); with the arrival of recent Asian immigrants, Vancouver has become "Asia's newest capital city, a vibrant gemstone in the coronet of dynamism that encircles the Pacific Rim" (Spaeth 30).

As the *Time* magazine article makes clear, new economic and demographic formations are changing long-held notions of Vancouver and Canada. Yet behind the triumphalist rhetoric so characteristic of business news lies a long history—dating from the 1850s to the present—of exploitation and exclusion, perseverance and resistance. This dissertation investigates the reworking and rethinking of this history in Asian Canadian literary texts by SKY

Lee, Joy Kogawa, Hiromi Goto, and Fred Wah. I have chosen these texts because each one offers distinct yet complementary ways of rethinking the impact of histories of exclusion on subjects variously racialized as "Asian" in Canada. This dissertation accordingly focuses on literary representations of Chinese immigration to Canada, the internment of Japanese Canadians, and the effects of racialization on diasporic subjects living on the prairies or in the interior of British Columbia. These literary representations do not function as simple correctives to an inaccurate or incomplete existing historical record. Instead, I argue that these representations intervene in the cultural politics of the process of remembering histories of anti-Asian racism in Canada.

The principle argument of this dissertation is that literary texts by Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah function as diasporic interventions in the ongoing process of remembering a "racist past" in order to secure or contest a "multicultural present" in Canada. *Diasporic interventions* consist of diverse attempts to represent histories of displacement and conditions of attempted and actual exclusion in Canada. These interventions are diasporic to the extent that they entail identifying with a dispersed collectivity linked by a distant homeland. Yet these interventions are also informed by various commitments to challenging forms of exclusion in Canada. In this sense, diasporic interventions investigate differing forms of collective belonging in diasporas *and* in nations. These forms of collective belonging, which Akeel Bilgrami calls *commitments of identity*, are chosen neither freely nor openly, but rather in response to specific historical

pressures that condition available choices. As Bilgrami insists, commitments of identity cannot be attributed to some general or ahistorical "human need" (830); they instead must be situated in relation to their "historical and functional determination" (831). Indeed, the literary texts I discuss in this dissertation insist that differing forms of collective identification are enmeshed in the histories that have enabled their emergence.

In this dissertation, I attempt to track various diasporic histories of exclusion in Canada and the forms of collective identification that have emerged in their wake. Yet while literary texts by Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah consistently point to these histories of exclusion, the critical record surrounding these texts—and, more generally, other existing critical attempts to discuss "cultural difference" in Canadian literature—has to date addressed histories of anti-Asian racism in Canada in an uneven manner. I suggest that the diasporic interventions discussed in this dissertation require literary critics to rethink the role of "race" and racism in the critical record surrounding these texts and, more generally, in Canadian multicultural literary criticism. In short, these diasporic interventions require literary critics to rethink how, and toward what ends, we imagine a "multicultural present" in Canada.

I have grouped texts by Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah under the rubric *Asian Canadian literature*, which functions not as a stable marker of identity but rather as a historically specific marker of panethnic coalitional politics dating from the 1970s. More specifically, I wish to tie these texts to a particular history of

community-based activism and the ongoing work of organizations such as the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop (ACWW). Jim Wong-Chu traces the origins of the ACWW to the late 1960s and the formation of the Asian Canadian Coalition at the University of British Columbia, where, following a visit by a "radicalized Asian American professor," students "began the process of re-examining their history and identity" ("Brief History" 1).[1] The 1970s witnessed the formation of the Powell Street Revue (a Japanese Canadian group) and the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop, with the two organizations working together to produce in 1979 the landmark collection *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese & Japanese Canadian Anthology*. Later that same year, the ACWW was established, with members including Paul Yee, Sean Gunn, SKY Lee, Rick Shiomi, and Jim Wong-Chu (Wong-Chu, "Brief History" 1). The organization remains active today, producing a newsletter called *Rice Paper* (1994-), hosting workshops and events, and assisting writers in developing manuscripts and finding publishers.

As a critical category, *Asian Canadian literature* has a distinct yet rather unstable relationship with literary writing by Canadians of East Asian ancestry. To understand this unstable relationship—and indeed to get a sense of the historically shifting parameters of the term *Asian Canadian literature*—one has to

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[1] Karin Lee notes that "Ron Tanaka, a professor of English visiting UBC from Berkeley formed the Wakayama group to discuss Asian-Canadian identity and the concept of 'community'" (25).

turn to early moments in the Asian American literary movement in the US, where the term *Asian American literature* came to signify literary writing by Americans of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino ancestry. A clear example of this configuration appears in *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), the influential and controversial anthology edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, which states in its Preface that "[Asian-American] means Filipino-, Chinese-, and Japanese-Americans, American born and raised . . ." (Chin et al. vii). In the foundational monograph *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context* (1982), Elaine Kim expands this frame (and deflects its anti-immigrant chauvinism) by defining the scope of her investigation as "writings in English by Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent" (xi).

Meanwhile, two early and important collections of writing appeared in Canada: *Inalienable Rice* (1979) and a special issue of *West Coast Review* called "The Asian-Canadian and the Arts" (1981), each of which presents slightly different configurations from their Asian American counterparts. In the Introduction to *Inalienable Rice*, the editors write that "we will use the term Asian Canadian to mean Chinese and Japanese Canadians. This is for convenience rather than an attempt to define the work or exclude other groups for any ideological reason" (Chu et al. viii). The Preface to "The Asian-Canadian and the Arts" makes no such defining moves, but the contents of the issue show a heavy emphasis on Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian writers and artists, with

some South Asian writers and a European Canadian composer and photographer added to the mix. In short, early usage of the terms *Asian American* and *Asian Canadian* varied, but not considerably. In each case, the terms included Americans and Canadians of Chinese and Japanese descent, and it stretched (especially in the US context) to include "other" Asian ethnicities as well. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, "East Asian Canadians"—and especially Chinese Canadians and Japanese Canadians—thus came to occupy a central, although not absolutely exclusive, position in usage of the term *Asian Canadian*.

Scholars in Asian American Studies have become increasingly aware of the inadequacies of such formulations to represent the increasingly heterogeneous nature of post-1965 Asian American communities.[2] One response has been to try to be more "inclusive" by devoting chapters in monographs or sections in anthologies to "other" Asian American ethnic groups.[3] Attempts to be more "inclusive" have also been characterized by a shift from the

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[2] See, for instance, Lowe "Heterogeneity"; Kim Foreword; Lim "Assaying"; and Koshy. Note that 1965 is the year US immigration policy abolished nationality quotas, a move that opened up immigration from Asia and radically transformed the composition of Asian American communities.

[3] A recent collection of essays thus begins with chapters on "Chinese American Literature," "Filipino American Literature," and "Japanese American Literature" before providing chapters on "Korean American Literature," "South Asian American Literature," and "Vietnamese American Literature"; see Cheung *Interethnic Companion*.

category *Asian American literature* to the plural form *Asian American literatures*,[4] but such a move has been critiqued on the grounds that pluralist inclusion may mask the fact that Chinese American and Japanese American history and culture remain the unacknowledged center of this ostensibly newly configured notion of "Asian America."[5]

Despite the important and ongoing influence of the Asian American movement on the development of Asian Canadian literature, the situation in Canada is clearly not interchangeable with that in the US. The project of analyzing the historical and social circumstances that distinguish the Asian American movement and the events taking place in Canada could easily take the scope of an entire dissertation or a book-length study.[6] I do not have the space to provide such an extended discussion, but I would like to draw attention to two important factors that distinguish the US and Canada: differing institutional

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[4] For this kind of move, see Lim "Assaying."

[5] Rey Chow has made a similar point regarding the rethinking of "Chineseness" in diaspora studies: "the problem of Chineseness is, one suspects, not likely to be resolved simply by way of the act of pluralizing" ("Introduction" 24).

[6] Such an extended study is urgently needed, but it has yet to appear publicly; for important existing accounts of the history of the Asian Canadian movement, see Wong-Chu "Ten Years"; Lai and Lum; Karin Lee; and Goellnicht "Long Labor." More general information can be found in the essays collected in *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (1990) and *Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity & Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver* (1991); see Paul Wong *Yellow Peril*; and Tsang, respectively. Goellnicht's work on the history of Asian Canadian literature *as an academic discipline* has helped shape much of my subsequent discussion.

histories and modalities, and the relatively prominent place of South Asians in Canadian literature.

Many existing accounts of the history of Asian Canadian literature and culture point out the absence of an equivalent to US Ethnic Studies programs in Canadian universities, and assert that this absence has had profound implications for the development of Asian Canadian studies.[7] For example, Anthony Chan writes in a 1984 essay that "Asian American Studies programmes and centres from Seattle to San Diego on the west coast and other cities provided the literary atmosphere and financial stability conducive for research and writing. In Canada, there has never been a single ethnic studies programme for research or writing" (70). Paul Wong, while not naming Asian American

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[7] *Ethnic Studies programs* in the US typically are interdisciplinary academic programs that bring together historians, social scientists, and literary and cultural critics. The prototype for such a program is perhaps the one at the University of California, Berkeley, which includes programs on Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies, and Native American Studies. The history of such programs in the US—dating back to the 1968-69 Third World Liberation Front strikes at San Francisco State College and UC Berkeley—is more complicated than I can address here. For the purpose of my discussion, I wish to emphasize that such programs have historically come out of the efforts of highly politicized community activists and students, and that such programs are generally committed to an interdisciplinary understanding of the history and culture of racialized communities in the US. As of 1998, there were Ethnic Studies programs at some 250 universities, colleges, and high schools in the US (Dong). For more information on the student strikes, see Dong; and Umemoto. For an extended and controversial discussion of the Asian American movement, see Wei, who associates it closely with the civil rights movement. For a scathing review of Wei's book, see Louie, who insists that "it was the black liberation movement [and not the civil rights movement] that exerted the greatest impact on the Asian American movement" (156).

Studies programs *per se*, makes the following assertion in his introductory essay to *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (1990): "Despite what we are taught to believe in Canada, it is appalling how far behind the United States and the United Kingdom we are in the development of 'minority programs'" ("Yellow Peril" 7). Likewise, Donald Goellnicht writes in an unpublished 1999 essay that:

> The delayed development of Asian Canadian literature as a coherent field of study is due in part, I believe, to the absence of Ethnic Studies programs in Canadian universities. . . . There has never been an Ethnic Studies program at a Canadian university; that is, a program devoted to the study of racialized minorities within Canada, as distinct from Caribbean Studies or Asian Studies, which treat societies at a geographical distance from Canada. ("Long Labor" 18-19)

I will address the narrow accuracy of these statements shortly. But before I do so, I want to follow through on Goellnicht's argument, which is the most extended and considered of the three I have quoted above. Goellnicht writes that "the absence of Asian Canadian Studies programs has robbed Asian Canadian literary studies of a necessary stage of their development, the stage of interdisciplinarity that challenges conventional disciplinary boundaries and forces the academy to rethink the ways it organizes knowledge"; he goes on to assert that, in the absence of interdisciplinarity (which he calls a "stage," but which I would instead consider a particular academic formation), "the study of Asian Canadian literature has begun in English departments, which have been

notoriously conservative and resistant to change" ("Long Labor" 20).

The narrow accuracy of referring to the absence of Ethnic Studies programs in Canada is open to contestation—proving an *absence* is always more difficult than arguing for a *presence*—especially regarding academic programs such as the newly established Asia-Canada Program at Simon Fraser University.[8] But while it is possible to quarrel with the narrow accuracy of the

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[8] The Asia-Canada Program is currently a minor offered in the Department of Humanities at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia. It should not be confused with a precise Canadian equivalent of an Asian American program; it instead appears to be closer in line with an Asian Studies program that has been slightly recalibrated to address (in some of its courses) Asian Canadian concerns. The SFU Calendar describes the program as follows:

> The Asia-Canada program offers students the opportunity to investigate the connections between contemporary Canadian society and culture, and that of a variety of Asian countries. Part of the program is a study of one or more Asian languages. The goal of this minor program is to introduce students to the economic, social and cultural connections between Asian countries and Canada. (Simon Fraser University "Department of Humanities")

While the official calendar description of the program makes no mention of Asian Canadian concerns, it is intriguing to note that the Asia-Canada Program Student Union inserts them into their description of the program:

> The Asia-Canada Program at Simon Fraser University is currently a minor program that deals uniquely with issues concerning the relations between respective Asian countries and Canada, *as well as the Asian Canadian community in general.* (Simon Fraser University "Asia-Canada Program Student Union"; emphasis mine)

Here the students have grabbed onto "Asian Canadian" aspects of the Program—covered in courses such as ASC 101 "Introduction to Asia-Canada Studies I" and ASC 301 "Asia-Canada Identities: Experiences and Perspectives"—and reoriented the focus of the Program accordingly. This move

statements I've quoted above, it is to my mind more urgent to follow up on Goellnicht's provocative assessment of the implications of the institutional modalities of Asian Canadian literature as an academic discipline. How have these institutional modalities affected the development of critical discussions of Asian Canadian literature? What does it mean to study Asian Canadian literature in English departments—and not Ethnic Studies or Asian Canadian Studies programs? How does Asian Canadian literature relate to the institutional formation of "Can Lit"? How do the contestative aspects of interdisciplinarity emerge (if they do at all) in such a context? These are extremely complex questions, and I do not presume to provide easy answers to them. For now, I simply want to emphasize the need to track the *cultural politics* of the knowledge being produced around "Asian Canadian" subjects. I will return to various aspects of institutional modalities throughout this dissertation: later in the Introduction, I turn to the specific ways "cultural difference" has been configured in certain discussions of Canadian multicultural literary criticism; in Chapter One, I ask what it might mean to read Asian Canadian literature as "Can Lit's obscene supplement"; and in Chapter Two, I discuss criticism on Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* as a particular site in which the contradictions of Canadian multicultural

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is instructive on a number of levels: it shows clear student interest in Asian Canadian concerns, and it reminds us that institutional formations are always, to some degree, being contested and reshaped by their participants. The directions in which the Asia-Canada Program develops are obviously of tremendous concern to scholars working on Asian Canadian topics.

literary criticism are laid bare.

A second factor that distinguishes the development of Asian Canadian literature and Asian American literature is the relatively prominent place of South Asian Canadians in contemporary Canadian literature, with heavyweights such as Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, and others regularly winning major literary awards and international recognition. By contrast, as Goellnicht points out, "South Asian American writers have been one of the last Asian ethnic groups to gain critical attention" ("Long Labor" 15). The relative prominence of South Asian Canadian writing is evident in the Second Edition of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1997), which contains an entry on "South Asian-Canadian literature" but (curiously) no entry on "East Asian-Canadian literature" or "Asian Canadian literature," suggesting that the institutional status of the former may be more secure than that of the latter two, at least in certain critical circles.[9] Moreover, as Goellnicht astutely observes,

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[9] See Benson and Toye. On the other hand, the critical choices made by the editors of *The Oxford Companion* have been met with immediate criticism. In an editorial entitled "Canadian Literature?" (1998), Eva-Marie Kröller writes:

> The most conspicuous absence [in the 1997 *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*], considering the extraordinary quality and success of Asian-Canadian writing in recent years, is that of a comprehensive separate entry on the subject. The piece on "South-Asian Canadian literature" is useful but much too limited in scope to do justice to the subject. (The imbalance becomes particularly clear if this entry is compared to the five double-columns on Ukrainian-Canadian literature, one of the very few pieces in the *Companion* to treat a particular type of ethnic writing with some seriousness). (10)

"Canadian literary institutions—publishing, universities, etc.—already had by the late 60s a designation for the kind of literature being produced by South Asian Canadians and its field of study: Commonwealth literature" ("Long Labor" 14)—as well as the field of postcolonial studies that has partially superceded it. Once again, institutional histories have had an important influence, this time with the presence in Canada—and the relative absence in the United States—of "Commonwealth literature" as a field of study affecting the academic study of literature by South Asian Canadians and South Asian Americans.

Due to these particular institutional histories in Canada, I strongly suspect that any simple folding of South Asian Canadian histories and literatures into a generalized "Asian Canadian literature" (encompassing writing by East Asian and South Asian Canadians) is highly improbable at this point or in the foreseeable future. (There are exceptions to this general observation, which I will discuss near the end of Chapter Three.) It is worth noting that recent critical articles continue to use the term *Asian Canadian* to discuss the work of East Asian Canadians—even as the term itself is called into question;[10] and a recently

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[10] See Miki "Asiancy"; and Maclear "Plots." In a 1995 article, Miki provides the following important caveat:

> The term "Asian Canadian" is . . . tentative and provisional, at least at this moment in Canadian cultural history. Many Canadians of Asian ancestry, if asked, would not relate to the generalization of commonalities implied, and would perhaps react negatively to such an alignment of communities from diverse source countries. Nevertheless, the term has assumed more theoretical importance among writers and cultural workers of Asian ancestry as a means of forging alliances necessary to develop a politics of

completed dissertation on Asian Canadian and Asian Australian literature focuses on writers of East Asian descent.[11]

The category *Asian Canadian literature*, even without addressing the complexities of South Asian Canadian history and culture, nevertheless yokes together a dense tangle of what Homi Bhabha has called interweavings of history ("Introduction" 5) that shaped and continue to shape the subjects who began migrating to the North American continent in the 1850s: different ethnic identifications, languages, generations, class positions, locations in Canada, genders and sexualities all complicate the category's putative homogeneity. And there is another risk: to use the term to characterize racialized "Others" in Canada risks trafficking in a form of orientalism: marking, labelling, and studying one group, while leaving those in culturally hegemonic groups with the unmarked and unqualified status of "Canadians."

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cultural difference. ("Asiancy" 149n3)

[11] See Khoo, who justifies her choice as follows:

> The demarcation between South and East Asian texts and communities is useful because each of these groups comes from contrasting political and cultural sites. South Asian literature and history generally engages more directly with postcolonial discourses and the social legacies of colonialism. For South and East Asian authors in Western nations, however, experiences of racialisation or alienation are common tropes. The potential for coalitions between these groups to expose and interrogate inequalities and various forms of exclusion in Canada and Australia is significant. The increasing numbers of anti-racist groups and the implementation of their initiatives on a community level confirm the efficacy of group mobilisation for political ends. (10)

In the face of all these problems, critics may be tempted to forego using the term *Asian Canadian literature*. Indeed, one critic has recently called "Asian Canadian writing" one of the "masterly watchwords" that need to be rethought in contemporary literary studies;[12] while another critic has asked: "Does this term [Asian Canadian] have a strong enough base in social, political, and cultural activism to make it worth using at all?"[13] In this dissertation, I use the term *Asian Canadian literature* to foreground the ongoing need to recognize and challenge the various forms of racialization and racism that have characterized the history of Asians in Canada. By *racialization*, I mean, following Robert Miles, "a representational process whereby social significance is attached to certain biological (usually phenotypical) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated a distinct collectivity" (74); by *racism*, I mean, following David Theo Goldberg, an attempt to promote

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[12] Scott McFarlane makes this comment as an aside in a review of *Pacific Windows: The Collected Poems of Roy K. Kiyooka*, where he writes: "Of late, to describe an author's work with reference to their racial or ethnic background has become a hegemonic practice in literary circles. Masterly watchwords such as 'Asian Canadian writing' will have to be rethought in order to encounter the complexity of cultural exchanges represented in *Pacific Windows*" ("Beguiled" 154).

[13] Donald Goellnicht asks this question near the end of his essay on what he calls "the protracted birth of Asian Canadian literature as an academic discipline"; see "Long Labor" 21. One useful answer he gives to this question is that "[t]he term has validity only if it can be made to work for the benefit of Asian Canadians by performing as a sign under which forces fighting racism, classism, sexism, colonialism, can find some form of solidarity for the purposes of resistance to the dominant hegemony" ("Long Labor" 22).

the exclusion of, or actually exclude, people on the basis of racialized categories (98). It is important to stress here that "[r]acism is not a singular transhistorical expression but transforms in relation to significant changes in the field of discourse" (Goldberg 40). Faced with specific histories of racialization and their racist effects, critics have a number of choices: they can make a liberal move and discount categories such as "race" as "morally irrelevant";[14] they can relentlessly deconstruct the foundations upon which the categories rest; or they can take a neopragmatist turn and view the categories in terms of their socio-historical effects. In this dissertation, I argue for the critical potential of the third choice. In this sense, I am influenced by Goldberg's critique of liberal humanism's failure to take the category of "race" seriously,[15] and by Goldberg's insistence on the need to formulate strategies of resistance that may risk recirculating the very categories that have marked and continue to mark certain groups as "Other."[16] Such a risk is necessary, Goldberg argues, to vigorously

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[14] Goldberg glosses this term as follows: "A morally irrelevant difference between persons is one they cannot help, for which they thus cannot be held responsible" (6). As I will soon make clear, Goldberg is highly critical of what he calls "contemporary moral theorists in the liberal tradition traced back to Hobbes, Locke, and Kant" (5).

[15] See Goldberg's *Racist Culture* for a wide-ranging critique of liberal nonracialism and an argument for a neopragmatist antiracism.

[16] As an aside, I wish to point out that critics such as Rey Chow have warned against the risk of reinscribing social categories in the name of challenging them. Chow draws on the work of de Certeau to argue for the need to formulate what she calls, in the subtitle of *Writing Diaspora* (1993), "tactics of intervention in contemporary cultural studies." For Chow, "intervention cannot

challenge the forms of racialization and racist exclusion that have characterized modern social formations.

The literary texts I discuss in this dissertation explicitly address this history and effects of anti-Asian racism in Canada. Asian Canadians and would-be Asian immigrants to Canada were certainly not the only racialized groups to suffer forms of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and violence in Canada, but the policies directed towards them are among the most unabashedly racist in Canadian history. As sociologist Peter Li writes in an oft-quoted assertion: "Aside from the indigenous people, no other racial or ethnic group had experienced such harsh treatment in Canada as the Chinese" (*Chinese in Canada* 1).[17] Various forms of labour exploitation in the mining, forestry, railroad

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simply be thought of in terms of the creation of new 'fields.' Instead, it is necessary to think *primarily* in terms of borders—of borders, that is, as *para-sites* that never take over a field in its entirety but erode it slowly and *tactically*" (*Writing Diaspora* 16). To ignore such a risk, writes Chow, is to participate in a project that may be "informed by a *strategic* attitude which repeats what [it] seeks to overthrow" (*Writing Diaspora* 17). The category of *Asian Canadian literature* appears to be "strategic," in the sense that it proposes a literary "field." Yet it also can be "tactical" to the extent that it engages with the very "borders" that have characterized "Canada" both as a nation and as a nation-state. It is this tactical approach I wish to pursue in the ensuing chapters.

[17] The subsequent discussion of anti-Chinese racism is drawn from the work of Peter Li; see *Chinese in Canada* 23-40. While Li's condensed account is clearly and forcefully argued, one may rightly object to the critical usefulness of his attempt to rank different forms of racism. The issues raised by the history of anti-Chinese racism and in the subsequent discussion of anti-Japanese racism are of course more complicated than one-paragraph summaries can allow. In subsequent chapters, I return to the issues raised by the history of anti-Asian racism to expand on points relevant to my argument.

construction, and canning industries faced Chinese migrant workers in Canada from the late nineteenth century onward. Moreover, the Chinese were faced with numerous forms of legislative control, including disenfranchisement and restriction of their right to acquire Crown land and enter various professions, including law and pharmacy (*Chinese in Canada* 28). Most notorious are the various forms of restriction on Chinese immigration to Canada, beginning with the first of a series of federal "head taxes" in 1885 (the year Chinese labour helped complete the Canadian Pacific Railway) and culminating with the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, which resulted in the *de facto* exclusion of Chinese immigrants for twenty three years until it was repealed in 1947. This well-documented and vigorously discussed history is complicated by the question of how Chinese Canadians and Chinese immigrants resisted these forms of discrimination and exclusion. I return to this question in Chapter One, where I discuss SKY Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and its engagement with the history of Chinese immigration to Canada.

One can also easily document the severity of the racist treatment of Japanese Canadians and Japanese immigrants to Canada. Large-scale Japanese overseas migration began in 1885, in response to capitalist need for labour in the Hawaiian plantation system (Adachi 9), and soon Japanese migrant labour began arriving in British Columbia in the wake of restrictions on Chinese immigration. But while the Canadian federal government passed numerous forms of anti-Chinese legislation in the late nineteenth century, Britain had official

ties with Japan, and, as a result, "Canada was bound by imperial policy to disallow British Columbia's efforts to enact anti-Oriental legislation concerned with the prohibition of employment and immigration"—at least against the Japanese (Adachi 41). Popular anti-Japanese racism nonetheless reached a flashpoint in the Vancouver Riot of September 7, 1907, which emerged out of a massive anti-Asiatic parade, and which led to the first concrete restriction of Japanese immigration to Canada in the form of the so-called "Gentleman's Agreement" between Canada and Japan (Adachi 81).[18] After this point, the Japanese Canadian community faced numerous restrictions on employment, including the systematic stripping away of their fishing licenses in the 1920s (Adachi 142). These restrictions pale, however, next to the violence of the state-directed internment of 1942, which involved the dispossession, dispersal, and the attempted and actual deportation of Japanese Canadians. The last of the many restrictions imposed on Japanese Canadians during this time was officially ended in 1949, but the effects on the now-scattered community have continued up to the present. Once again, this history has been thoroughly documented and frequently discussed. I return to its implications in Chapter Two, where I

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[18] The "gentleman's agreement" of 1908 came as a result of the five-week Lemieux mission to Japan, whose purpose was "to have Japan voluntarily restrict immigration"; it resulted in Japan voluntarily agreeing to "restrict the number of passports issued to male labourers and domestic servants to an annual maximum of 400" (Adachi 81). It is important to note that this quota "only applied to domestic and agricultural workers"; as Adachi points out, "[t]he agreement did not therefore set a blanket quota of 400 on all immigrants, but only applied to two special classes" (81).

discuss Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* and its engagement with the history of the internment.

I wish to emphasize that while anti-Asian racism in Canada was most overtly expressed in public policy and personal action in the period between 1885 and 1949, the implications of this history continue to reverberate in later representations of Asian Canadians and perceptions of their place in Canada. The infamous "W5" incident of 1979 and the controversy surrounding "monster homes" in Vancouver in the late 1980s are two relatively recent examples of resurgent white nativism. In the W5 incident, the CTV television program W5 represented "Chinese" faces as "foreign" students "taking educational opportunities away from white Canadians and unduly benefitting from taxpayer-subsidized public education" (Li, *Chinese in Canada* 2nd ed. 145);[19] while the "monster house" controversy—a much more complex phenomenon—illustrates "how a negative racial image of the Chinese is being socially constructed in the contemporary context, and how the Chinese are being stigmatized as wealthy foreigners who have little regard for the aesthetic values and traditional life-style of Canada" (Li, *Chinese in Canada* 2nd ed. 148).[20] Later chapters in this

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[19] For more information on the "W5" incident—and the highly mobilized "W5 movement" the Chinese Canadian community in Toronto and elsewhere organized in response to it—see Kwan.

[20] The "monster house" phenomenon is far more complex than a capsule summary can address. It might productively be considered as a key instance in what Aihwa Ong calls "the Asian face of globalization": "The influx of Pacific Rim capital to the West," writes Ong, "induced anxiety and ambivalence in the social

dissertation address contemporary articulations of anti-Asian racism in Canada. In Chapter Three, I read Hiromi Goto's poetry and her novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* in terms of their engagement with discourses (such as the "geisha stereotype") that position Japanese Canadian women as racialized and gendered Others; and, in Chapter Four, I discuss Fred Wah's poetry and his "biotext" *Diamond Grill* in terms of their engagement with the effects of racialization in the interior of British Columbia in the 1950s.

Forms of racism in Canada have both shifted and persisted, even after Canadian immigration policy in 1967 explicitly moved away from overt forms of exclusion (in the form of geographical quotas) to an ostensibly "colour-blind" point system.[21] As Frances Henry and Carol Tator assert in a 1994 essay,

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imaginaries of the Euroamerican world" (*Flexible Citizenship* 173). For discussions of "monster house" discourse as an expression of such anxiety, see Cavell; Ong, *Flexible Citizenship* 102-03; and especially Mitchell.

[21] See Jakubowski for an extended discussion of "the process through which racism comes to be manifested in Canadian immigration law, policies and practices" (10). Jakubowski argues: "The number and location of immigration offices outside of Canada and the discretion awarded to immigration officers in determining adaptability suggests that immigration, to some degree, is still being 'controlled'" (21). And see Arat-Koc for an analysis of gender and race in Canadian immigration policy from the 1960s to the present. Arat-Koc argues: "Even though changes in Canadian immigration policy in the 1960s have been heralded as 'liberalization' by some observers, a gender/race/class analysis of developments in immigration and settlement since the 1960s reveals that women immigrants, and especially working-class women of colour, have been disadvantaged in their chances of their entry into Canada as well as in the status and conditions they have experienced once they have entered Canada"; "the subordination of women of colour has continued, while gaining new meanings and dimensions under a 'liberalized' immigration system, because this 'liberalization' has largely consisted of 'rationalization' of immigration criteria

"fundamental racial inequality persists and continues to affect the lives and life chances of people of colour in Canada" (2). Many scholarly accounts have addressed this persistence.[22] Of these accounts, Henry's and Tator's discussion of what they call *democratic racism* provides a concise and useful way of understanding contemporary articulations of racism in Canada. For Henry and Tator, "democratic racism" entails:

> the retention of racist beliefs and behaviors within the context of a "democratic" society. The obfuscation and justificatory arguments of democratic racism are deployed to demonstrate continuing faith in the principles of an egalitarian society while at the very same time undermining and sabotaging these very same ideals. (5)

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based on labour market principles" (229).

[22] Notable attempts to theorize racism in contemporary Canada include the essays collected in *Racial Oppression in Canada*, which attempt to shift the focus away from culturalist explanations of racism toward a political economy of race and its differential effects on differently racialized subjects; the essays collected in *Returning the Gaze*, which put forward a "politicized notion of representation rather than the liberal notion of visibility which structures the discursive practices of multiculturalism and ethnic and race relations" (Bannerji, "Returning" xv); and the essays collected in *Scratching the Surface*, which attempt, in the words of one of its editors, to synthesize Canadian anti-racist feminist thought, and account for critical discussions right up the late 1990s; see Bolaria and Li; Bannerji *Returning*; and Dua and Robertson, respectively.

At this point, I would also like to draw attention to Etienne Balibar's rigorous and indispensable work on "neo-racism." Balibar asserts that "*racism is not receding, but progressing* in the contemporary world" (Preface 9); he attempts to track that progression through the notion of *differentialist racism* and its appeals to culture, and not race, in promulgating forms of exclusion. See Balibar "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?"

In other words, Henry and Tator point to the process of suturing over a glaring contradiction in Canada: a belief that Canada is open, just, and egalitarian in the face of ongoing forms of racist exclusion. "Democratic racism" and its attendant justificatory arguments permit these "seemingly contradictory ideologies" to coexist (4)—and thereby legitimize the status quo (9).

It is not my intention here to propose a comprehensive account of historical and ongoing forms of racism in Canada. Nor do I wish to present an explicitly deconstructive approach to racism in Canada (such as Christopher Bracken's work on state racism in the Indian Act and the textual contradictions informing discourses of "the potlatch" on the north west coast of British Columbia), or a broadly cultural studies approach to the constitution of racialized subjectivities (such as Rinaldo Walcott's work on the constitution of blackness in Canada across a variety of cultural forms).[23] I instead wish to track, over the course of this dissertation, diasporic interventions in the process of remembering this history of anti-Asian racism in Canada.

But before I turn to the histories of racism addressed in texts by Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah, I would like to map out some of the intellectual terrain upon which I am conducting my investigation. I start with the key term *diaspora* and the ways it is being configured in cultural theory and especially in the emerging field of diaspora theory. I then turn to the rather different way diaspora

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[23] For these important texts, both of which significantly reorient Canadian literary studies, see Bracken; and Walcott.

has been considered in Asian American cultural criticism, and the problems posed by the incorporation of Asian Canadian texts in an Asian American frame. Finally, I turn to contemporary Canadian literary criticism and the particular challenges posed by pluralist formulations of "cultural difference." My goal here is to bring the diverse fields of diaspora theory, Asian American cultural criticism, and Canadian literary criticism into conversation with one another. In doing so, I wish to suggest that reading diasporic interventions involves reading between disciplinary formations, not in an *ad hoc* form of "interdisciplinarity," but in a genuine search for the theoretical tools needed to understand the work performed by texts written by Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah—and the cultural politics of the knowledge being produced in the critical record surrounding these texts.

I

In this dissertation, the notion of *diaspora* is closely tied to a theoretical model of the *nation* and the emergence of forms of collective identification that extend beyond national borders. In this sense, I wish to suggest that diasporic identification may be thought of as a rearticulation of nationalist identification and not a complete break from it. For instance, Benedict Anderson has recently returned to his enormously influential theory of nations as "imagined communities" to address the emergence of what he calls "long-distance

nationalism"—or what I would call nationalism expressed in diaspora.[24] And Arjun Appadurai, in his meditation on "patriotism and its futures," underlines the increasing spread of nationalisms beyond territorialized boundaries:

> the nationalist genie, never perfectly contained in the bottle of the territorial state, is now itself diasporic. Carried in the repertoires of increasingly mobile populations of refugees, tourists, guest workers, transnational intellectuals, scientists, and illegal aliens, it is increasingly unrestrained by ideas of spatial boundary and territorial sovereignty. (160-61)

It is important to note that Appadurai does not simply announce the end of "patriotism." He instead argues that it has moved away from a form of "monopatriotism" toward what he calls "complex, nonterritorial, postnational forms of allegiance" (166). The challenge, he insists, is to find a language to

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[24] For Anderson, the nation as an "imagined community" has specific roots in modernity and, more precisely, in the rise of what he calls print-capitalism, which "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (*Imagined Communities* 36). Mechanically reproduced print-languages, Anderson argues, "laid the bases for national consciousness" in the sense that "fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed . . . the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (*Imagined Communities* 44). Anderson later modified his theory to address the role of long-distance transportation, along with print-capitalist communications, to prepare the grounds for nationalist movements (*Spectre* 62). Crucially, he emphasizes that the form of nationalism has changed under the pressures of "the transnationalization of advanced capitalism and the steepening economic stratification of the global economy" (*Spectre* 67). He observes: "what one can call long-distance nationalism is visibly emerging" (*Spectre* 73).

address these reconstituted forms of allegiance.

The emerging field of "diaspora theory" is a key site in this search for such a critical language. In a broad sense, cultural critics working in diaspora theory[25] attempt to come to terms with the cultural politics of varied and complex histories of dislocation and migration—and the shifting forms of collective identification that emerge out of such histories.[26] While Anderson and Appadurai discuss nationalisms in diaspora, critics working in diaspora theory frequently discuss diasporic identification as a reconfigured form of nationalism. For example, Ien Ang defines "the idea of diaspora" as:

> the (imagined) condition of a 'people' dispersed throughout the world, by

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[25] Here I am thinking of critics such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Ien Ang, Rey Chow, Lisa Lowe, Vijay Mishra, R. Radhakrishnan, Homi Bhabha, Aihwa Ong, James Clifford, and Gayatri Spivak.

[26] This shared project notwithstanding, it is worth noting the perhaps obvious point that critics working in diaspora theory investigate different diasporic histories with different methodological investments. Rey Chow, for instance, discusses what she calls "the lures of diaspora" to mount a scathing critique of the role of Chinese diasporic intellectuals in "the West"; Ien Ang draws upon the specificities of a Peranakan Chinese diaspora to ask what it means to "not speak Chinese"; and Aihwa Ong addresses the question of what she calls "flexible citizenship" amongst overseas Chinese to critique exploitive post-Fordist labour practices of "flexible accumulation"; see Chow *Writing Diaspora*; Ang "On Not Speaking Chinese"; and Ong "On the Edge of Empires." All three of these critics investigate (parts of) the Chinese diaspora, but they ask different questions and make significantly different arguments in their work. And the differences here would be even greater if compared with scholarship coming out of other diasporic histories, such as Paul Gilroy's work on the black Atlantic or Vijay Mishra's work on the old and new Indian diasporas; see Gilroy *Black Atlantic*; and Mishra "Diasporic Imaginary." What connects these diverse yet related projects is a question to which I will return shortly.

> force or by choice. Diasporas are transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original 'homeland.' ("On Not Speaking Chinese" 5)

Ang here utilizes Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" to describe diasporic formations. Likewise, Stuart Hall has noted that the term diaspora is "used as a way of conjuring up a kind of imagined community that would cut across the configurations of cultural nationalism" ("Subjects" 298). Both Ang and Hall imply that diasporic identification may be thought of as an imagined transnational community that draws upon tropes of nationalism to define its boundaries. As such, theoretical models of diaspora and nation are enmeshed and not separate in a clear-cut manner.

I would also like to draw attention to Ang's use of "or" and "and/or" conjunctions in her definition of diaspora, not to quarrel with it, but to draw out some of its implications. For Ang, diaspora includes dispersal by force *or* by choice; it includes groups sustained by real *and/or* imagined ties to a homeland. Clearly she is leaving her theoretical options open at this point, in the sense that she does not limit the notion of diaspora to dispersals caused by violent and forced removal: the slave trade and the resultant black Atlantic, the forced removal of indigenous peoples, and so on. But while leaving her options open, Ang's broad definition of diaspora runs the risk of flattening out crucial

differences in class and geo-political location, especially if critical discussions of diaspora locate resistant epistemologies in the (unacknowledged) class privilege of "the diasporic intellectual."[27]

Ang clearly considers the notion of diaspora to have a kind of liberatory potential. She emphasizes the potential of diasporas to "unsettle essentialist and totalizing conceptions of 'national culture' or 'national identity' and to disrupt their presumption of static roots in geography and history" ("On Not Speaking Chinese" 16). While such a point may seem like a truism, Ang complicates it with a discussion of how the "multiperspectival *productivity*" of diasporic positions needs to be theorized along the lines of Bhabha's notion of a "third space of hybridity," and not merely accounted for in models of "biculturality" or "double consciousness" ("On Not Speaking Chinese" 16). Moreover, Ang tries to work between "categorical 'ethnicity'" and "facile forms of postmodernist nomadology" in order to develop "a postmodern (rather than modern) notion of ethnicity," which she defines as follows: "This postmodern ethnicity can no longer be experienced as naturally based upon tradition and ancestry; rather, it is experienced as a provisional and partial site of identity which must be constantly

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[27] On this point, see Aijaz Ahmad's trenchant critique of the figure of "the migrant intellectual." Ahmad emphasizes that "the migrant in question comes from a *nation* which is subordinated in the imperialist system of intra-state relationships but, simultaneously, from the *class*, more often than not, which is the dominant class within that nation" (12-13); what results is a form of discourse that "submerges the class question and speaks of migrancy as an ontological condition, more or less" (13).

(re)invented and (re)negotiated" ("On Not Speaking Chinese" 18). As such, Ang insists that it is not only the boundaries of the nation that are subject to revision in diasporic formations; the boundaries of ethnicity—and, in this case, the notion of "Chineseness"—also come under careful scrutiny. For Ang, neither ethnicity nor "Chineseness" can signal a clear, unproblematic return to "roots" (i.e. "China"); they instead must be considered in light of their provisionality and historical contingency.[28]

Ang's work here risks glorifying diasporas as *necessarily* subversive formations that call into question *necessarily* oppressive nationalisms and ethnicities. Such a narrative of diasporic liberation risks trivializing the often violent histories of displacement that have led to diasporas, as well as the reactionary and chauvinistic nature of certain diaspora discourses. Other critics working in diaspora theory have insistently pointed to such problems. Vijay Mishra, for example, has underlined the highly compromised nature of the term diaspora in light of Zionism and its resultant displacement of Palestinians; he has also discussed the substantial risk of returning to ethnic absolutism in racially

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[28] In an important discussion of modern Chinese transnationalism, Donald Nonini and Aihwa Ong also work to "decenter the Middle Kingdom as the ultimate analytical reference for an understanding of diaspora Chinese." Nonini and Ong write:

> by providing a systematic view of modernities in the Asia Pacific—modernities constituted out of the multiple conflicts, exploitations, and embraces between and among Asians, Europeans, and North Americans over the past century—we ground Chinese transnationalism in the geopolitical context of late-twentieth-century Asian modernity. (12)

exclusionary notions of a "homeland."[29] And Aihwa Ong has discussed contemporary expressions of what she calls diasporan-Chinese chauvinism, discourses of blood kinship, and reified "Confucian values" used to regulate newly affluent Chinese diasporic populations.[30] Stuart Hall presents the matter succinctly when he qualifies the critical potential of the term "diaspora" with a warning that it "has been the site of some of the most closed narratives of identity known to human beings" ("Subjects" 298).[31]

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[29] Mishra writes:

> In a very significant manner, . . . the model of the Jewish diaspora is now contaminated by the diasporization of the Palestinians in Israel and by the Zionist belief that a homeland can be artificially reconstructed without adequate regard to intervening history. . . . We need to keep the Palestinian situation in mind in any theorization of diasporas even as we use the typology of the Jewish diaspora to situate and critique the imaginary construction of a homeland as the central *mythomoteur* of diaspora histories. (425)

Note also Mishra's identification of the reactionary potential of diasporas in his discussion of "racist narratives of homelands":

> diasporas very often construct racist fictions of purity as a kind of jouissance, a joy, a pleasure around which anti-miscegenation narratives of homelands are constructed against the reality of the homelands themselves. Racist narratives of homelands are therefore part of the dynamics of diasporas . . . . (423)

[30] See Ong's discussion of these points in *Flexible Citizenship* 55-83. As Ong dryly observes later in her monograph: "That Confucian philosophy puts traders at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy and regards their singular pursuit of wealth as the very antithesis of Confucian values has not been an obstacle to business-news images of capitalists as reborn Confucians" (145).

[31] Or, as James Clifford states: "The political and cultural valence of diasporic subversions is never guaranteed" (312).

For Ang, it is crucial to investigate how invocations of diasporic identities shape a "politics of identity," specifically the identity of "being Chinese" in diaspora. The act of invoking a diasporic "Chinese" identity, Ang argues, cannot rely on stressing "the particular" for its own sake; nor is it a means of obtaining a liberal recognition of "plural" Chinese identities ("Differential Politics" 21). Rather, the point is to make a strategic, performative move, which for Ang involves identifying as a "Chinese" woman who "cannot speak Chinese" in order to enable a process of questioning what "Chineseness" might mean at different conjunctures, in different contexts ("Differential Politics" 22). As such, Ang is *not* arguing for a liberal politics of inclusion, but rather is attempting a more wholesale critique of cultural identity formation and its effects.[32]

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[32] As an aside, it is worth noting that Ang's critical commentary on feminism and multiculturalism has also been informed by a suspicion of the politics of "inclusion." Ang insists, for instance, on the need to stop thinking of feminism as a "nation" which "other" women are "invited" to join, and she thereby tries to move away from a politics of inclusion to what she calls a politics of partiality ("I'm a Feminist" 72-73). And she interrogates the terms on which the "Asian" woman (a category she problematizes) is accepted in Australian multicultural discourse, writing that "processes of othering have been transformed in the multicultural era: racially and ethnically marked people are no longer othered today through simple mechanisms of rejection and exclusion, but through an ambivalent and apparently contradictory process of *inclusion by virtue of othering*" ("Curse" 37). Ang reads an Australian state poster that features "a visibly 'Asian' woman" and the words: "Come and join our family" ("Curse" 37). Ang suggests that such a poster is significant for feminizing (and thereby rendering "acceptable") the ideal-typical "Asian" migrant, and for putting forward a kind of "benevolent inclusiveness" ("Curse" 46) that characterizes Australian multiculturalism. Such forms of representation and their attendant liberal pluralist assumptions are thus consistently critiqued in Ang's work; accordingly for Ang—and here I concur with her argument—questions of diasporic identification cannot be resolved through appeals to "inclusion" that do

I wish to conclude my discussion of diaspora theory by suggesting that the routes through which critics arrive at this attempted wholesale critique may be as important as the critique itself. Clifford asks: "How do [diaspora discourses] attain comparative scope while remaining rooted/routed in specific, discrepant histories?" (302). In other words, what is the basis of comparative studies of diasporas? A recurring characteristic of diaspora theory is the tension between the need to investigate historically specific diasporas and the desire to link the implications of those diasporic histories to the concerns of contemporary cultural theory. Ang's work provides a clear example, in the sense that it attempts to work through the specific historical pressures faced by the Peranakan Chinese diaspora while at the same time attempting to formulate a notion of "postmodern ethnicity" that draws heavily on the work of Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha,[33] who themselves are drawing conclusions from different diasporic histories.[34]

My argument here is that diaspora theory's attempts to address various

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not at the same time interrogate the terms on which such inclusion takes place. I will return to this point throughout this dissertation.

[33] The "provisional" nature of "postmodern ethnicity" in Ang's work sounds remarkably similar to the way Hall discusses cultural identity as "a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" ("Cultural Identity" 392); and, as I mentioned above, Ang directly cites Bhabha's notion of a "third space."

[34] Hall in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" is writing out of the history of the black Caribbean diaspora in Britain, while Bhabha writes out of the history of the Parsees, and, more generally, the South Asian diaspora in the West. Hall is certainly easier to "pinpoint" in this respect, simply because his work tends to address material histories more directly than Bhabha's.

histories of dislocation and migration have been characterized by consistent appeals to what one might call its own "imaginary homeland"—by which I mean the domain of cultural theory, whose vocabulary and concerns (over "hybridity," "postmodern ethnicity," and so on) have informed the arguments diaspora theory has put forward. The parallel I want to suggest is this: while diasporic imaginaries are characterized by an ongoing process of trying to connect present locations with imagined homelands (that is, with attempts to connect a "here" and a "there"), diaspora theory—at the level of its methodology—attempts to connect material histories with cultural theory.[35]

But before I elaborate on this point, I wish to clarify my use of terms such

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[35] In pointing out this connection, I want to stress that I am *not* calling for a return to some putatively "non-theoretical" consideration of diasporic histories. Nor am I making the opposite move and calling for a kind of "theoretical" position that somehow transcends base questions of culture and history. As Rey Chow has pointed out, "cultural" and "theoretical" concerns are deeply intertwined, with every "theoretical" position coming from a "cultural" location, and every "cultural" position coming from a "theoretical" one (*Ethics* xv). The issue, then, is not to attempt to separate them, or to argue for the priority of one over the other. Rather, as Chow argues, the issue is how the unstable relation between "theory" and "culture" has resulted in shifts in and consolidations of institutional formations, with, for example, US proponents of "high theory" recently denouncing "cultural studies" as positivist garbage, and scholars in area studies declaring that (in the age of multiculturalism) "theory" is unnecessary in studying "local" cultures. In this first instance, proponents of "high theory" try to retain their privileged "radical" position in the US academy, a position challenged by the emergence of "cultural studies," while in the second instance, scholars in area studies attempt to cloak conservative Orientalist scholarship in the robes of multicultural particularism—what Chow scathingly calls endowing "retrograde positions with the glorious *multiculturalist* aura of defending non-Western traditions" (*Ethics* 10). Needless to say, Chow is critical of both of these moves, and she insists on "a type of theoretical intervention that continues to critique the legitimating structures inherent in the production of knowledge" (*Ethics* 12).

as "imaginary homeland" and "diasporic imaginary." *Imaginary homeland* is a term used by Salman Rushdie in a 1982 essay, where he describes the process through which writers who are "exiles or emigrants or expatriates" work to retrieve something that is lost: "our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (10). Rushdie's term has since been picked up and used by cultural critics such as Vijay Mishra, who uses it to assert that "imaginary homelands are constructed from the space of distance to compensate for a loss occasioned by an unspeakable trauma" (423-24). Mishra's use of psychoanalytic terminology is significant given his attempt to theorize a diasporic *imaginary*, a term he draws from Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. For Mishra, a *diasporic imaginary* is "a particular condition of displacement and disaggregation; it is a theoretical template through which we can understand what is becoming a defining feature of the late modern world" (442). In this dissertation, my use of the term *imaginary* (in the context of a *diasporic imaginary* or a *national imaginary*) is not Lacanian in a strict sense; I am not, in other words, using it in distinction from Lacanian notions of the "symbolic" and the "real." I am instead drawing from the work of Arjun Appadurai, who refers to "the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations" (31). Appadurai argues for the importance of "the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern

subjectivity" (3); for Appadurai, the work of the imagination "is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern" (4). It is precisely this *contested* aspect that I wish to underline: diasporic imaginaries and national imaginaries function as heterogeneous and uneven terrains on which collective notions of a diaspora or a nation are formulated and contested. I might add that such an understanding of the term *imaginary* has influenced subsequent work in cultural theory, perhaps most notably Rob Wilson's and Wimal Dissanayake's use of the term *transnational imaginary* in their Introduction to the important collection of essays *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (1996).[36]

So how then might we read the particular tension I suggest informs diaspora theory—namely, its attempts to connect material histories with the concerns of cultural theory? Such attempts bring with them both productive and potentially disabling consequences. On a fundamental level, it seems to me that such attempts are productive to the extent that they enable comparative analysis

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[36] Wilson and Dissanayake write: "What we would variously track as the 'transnational imaginary' comprises the *as-yet-unfigured* horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence" ("Introduction" 6). Like Appadurai, Wilson and Dissanayake neither name nor cite Lacan in their use of *imaginary*; the term, it seems, has travelled and become part of a critical shorthand to account for the formation and contestation of various collective imaginings.

and the situating of specific diasporic histories in broader transnational contexts. From a critical perspective, however, one would want to question the terms on which links are made between material histories and cultural theory. To what extent do these terms limit the participants to academics (however diasporic or minoritized) who are situated in First World universities, and frame the discussion around the discourses of the various "posts"—the postmodern, the postcolonial, the postnational, and so on? Following Spivak, it is crucial to note the many voices (aboriginal and subaltern) that are excluded from such discussions of diaspora, and the problematic status of a "global" theory that emerges out of First World institutions.[37]

But, perhaps most significantly, the juggling act taking place in diaspora theory—that is to say, its attempts to make arguments out of specific diasporic histories while at the same time connecting them to other diasporic histories—may speak directly to a key disciplinary challenge facing contemporary literary critics: how do we go about charting material histories, making theoretical statements, and doing textual analysis? In short, how do we respond to what has been called "the challenge of cultural studies" to English departments?[38] I don't presume to answer this very complex question, but I would like to suggest that understanding the questions raised by the relation

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[37] See Spivak "Diasporas" for further discussion of this important point.

[38] I have taken this phrase from the title of a conference held at Simon Fraser University in March 1995.

between diaspora theory and its "imaginary homeland" of cultural theory may help us come to terms with "where we are headed" in literary studies at this moment.

II

It is equally clear, however, that the "we" I have invoked here is hardly a homogenous formation. In the context of discussing diasporic interventions in Asian Canadian literature, it seems crucial to investigate the specific contours of debates happening not only in diaspora theory, but also in Asian American Studies, an interdisciplinary formation that has had, as I suggested above, a significant influence on the way writers and critics have configured Asian Canadian literature. I want to suggest in this section that discussions in Asian American Studies have taken a rather different turn, in which the benefits of a critical commitment to questions of diaspora have been vigorously debated. At this moment in history, Asian American stakes in questions of diaspora may be particularly high in light of what Arif Dirlik identifies as the recent "enthusiasm over Asian Americans as Rim people" ("Asians" 3). Dirlik argues that precisely because Asian Americans are interpellated as diasporic players in an emerging "Pacific economic formation," they may therefore be in a key position to contest or reformulate it ("Asians" 18); they may also be positioned to rethink the forms of diasporic identification that accompany notions of "Asia/Pacific." On a more

ominous note, Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini write that Asian Americans will be "one of the first targets of misplaced antagonisms toward the new Asia"—and the forms of "flexible citizenship" that characterize modern Chinese transnationalism ("Toward" 329). "There is," Ong and Nonini emphasize, "every reason for concern" ("Toward" 329). In light of such predictions, debates over questions of diaspora in Asian American Studies have addressed the very place of Asian Americans in both the US and the contemporary global order.

From around 1995 onward,[39] scholars in Asian American cultural criticism have argued about a problem specific to Asian American Studies: whether to "go diasporic" and situate discussions of Asian American culture in an explicitly transnational frame, or to "claim America" and situate the cultural narratives of Asian Americans squarely in the context of US history and present-day social formations. A key article in this debate is Sau-ling Wong's "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads" (1995). Wong distinguishes between a *diasporic perspective*, which "emphasizes Asian Americans as one element in the global scattering of peoples of Asian origin" (2), and a *domestic perspective*, which "stresses the status of Asian Americans as an ethnic/racial minority within the national boundaries of the United States" (2). Wong acknowledges the strengths of a diasporic

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[39] Certainly discussions of diaspora took place in Asian American Studies before the mid-1990s. I am trying here, however, to identify a moment in these ongoing discussions in which questions of diaspora and nationalism crystallized into an extended (and heated) scholarly exchange.

perspective—it can account for the role of American foreign policy in shaping global patterns of migration, and it can deal with the complexities of multiple migrations and dispersals—but she ultimately argues *against* what she calls the "denationalization" of Asian American cultural criticism into a form of diaspora studies. "Denationalization," according to Wong, fetishizes mobility and risks trafficking in class-blind investigations of diasporic migrations; moreover, she argues, it involves returning to a descent-based politics in which *ethnically* defined diasporic groups (as opposed to *panethnically* defined "Asian American" communities) would be the object of investigation.[40] In short, Wong resists "denationalization" because she argues it would jeopardize what she values most in Asian American Studies: what she calls "coalitions of Asian American and other racial/ethnic minorities within the U.S." (18).

Wong's argument about "denationalization" thus insists on the need to carefully consider the ethical implications of "going diasporic" for critics

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[40] Wong elaborates on this point as follows:

> What I am arguing is that the loosely held and fluctuating collectivity called 'Asian Americans' will dissolve back into its descent-defined constituents as soon as one leaves American national borders behind. Thus one might study the Chinese diaspora, or the Indian diaspora, and so on. . . . But the idea of an 'Asian diaspora' would be so inclusive as to be politically ungrounded (in fact ungroundable, given the vastly different interests and conflicted histories of Asian peoples), while the idea of an 'Asian American diaspora' is simply quite meaningless. ("Denationalization" 17-18).

For a well-known, extended discussion of the notion of Asian American panethnicity, see Espiritu.

committed to representing the interests of minoritized groups. Nevertheless, Wong's argument raises several further questions: Who sets the terms of these US-based coalitions she refers to? Why can't coalitions work in a diasporic context? And why should "denationalization" be considered an either/or question? Not surprisingly, other Asian American cultural critics have contested the terms of Wong's argument and the conclusions she draws. While I don't presume to fully rehearse the complexities of this debate, I want to mention some of the polemical and conciliatory responses to Wong's article. Shirley Lim, for instance, critiques the tendency to appropriate "difference" into an increasingly flexible US identity, and she tries to use "the discourse of diasporas" ("Immigration" 297) to step out of this economy of appropriation; and Susan Koshy denounces Wong's call for a return to a US-centred frame of reference by insisting that "it is often impossible fully to understand and respond to the local without a comprehension of global forces and institutions" (341).[41]

So, on the one hand, Wong warns against an easy fetishization of "diaspora" and calls for a focus on "domestic" concerns; on the other hand, Lim and Koshy insist that a "diasporic" perspective is necessary to critique

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[41] Koshy's claim is derived from the work of Arif Dirlik, who makes this familiar yet eloquent claim in "The Global in the Local"; see 41. And to complicate matters, Dirlik, in his contribution to the Asian American debate in "Asians on the Rim," refers rather sympathetically to Wong's desire to privilege "domestic" concerns; see 17.

contemporary social formations.[42] In contrast to such polemics, an article by King-Kok Cheung entitled "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies" (1997) attempts to reconcile these often conflicting positions. Cheung addresses the paradigm shift in Asian American Studies from cultural nationalism to diaspora, and she gently distances herself from both Wong's and Lim's positions by writing:

> I believe that we can both 'claim America' . . . and use our transnational consciousness to critique the polity, whether of an Asian country, Canada, the United States, or Asian America. Individuals may feel empowered by an ethnic American identity, by a diasporic identity, or by both, but the field of Asian American literary studies can certainly afford to incorporate these divergent perspectives. ("Re-viewing" 9)

The question of "incorporat[ing] . . . divergent perspectives" is one to which I'll

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[42] Ruth Hsu makes a similar point when she argues: "For the most part, the theorizing of Asian American ethnic identity has yet to take into account the ways in which it functions as part of an emerging global material reality, or more specifically, how it serves the international deployment of labor and resources by transnational capital" (41). "Given that government and business seem to be casting an ever more lustful eye at the Asia/Pacific regions," writes Hsu, "one question that critics could explore has to do with the ways in which Asian American ethnicity is being re-written so as to fit master narratives that are also adjusting to the new Asia/Pacific frontier" (42). Significantly, Hsu suggests that this important line of criticism could "take its cue" from the work of Ang and Stratton in Australia (41). To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time a critic working in an "Asian American" frame acknowledges and draws upon the important theoretical work coming out of Australia. One hopes that cross-over and critical acknowledgement of this kind takes place with greater regularity in the future.

return shortly. But first I want to point out that Cheung's conciliatory position is one that she has assumed in previous debates in Asian American cultural criticism. A notable example is Cheung's refusal to buy into the apparent incommensurability of feminist and cultural nationalist politics in the controversy surrounding the reception of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* by the so-called *Aiiieeeee!* group—that is, Frank Chin and his supporters. Cheung's contribution to the debate asks "Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" In much the same way that Cheung answers "no" to having to choose between feminism and heroism, she answers "no" to the choice between "going diasporic" and "claiming the nation": she responds to the earlier debate by urging "mutual empathy between men and women" ("Woman Warrior" 241), while she responds to the present debate by insisting on the need "to make room for reciprocal critique and multiple commitments" ("Re-viewing" 10). It is no surprise, then, that Cheung intellectually situates herself "somewhere between advocates of diverse feminisms, between those of feminism and cultural nationalism, and between those of ethnicity and race" (*Articulate Silences* 22).

There is something quite comforting and commonsensical about the way Cheung manages these debates, and I think she is absolutely right to steer the discussion away from either/or dichotomies. As Cheung herself writes: "The painstaking path taken shuns any either/or binarism, whether in the dubious opposition of East and West, of ethnicity and feminism, or of assimilation and

ethnocentrism" (*Articulate Silences* 170). Cheung's conciliatory tone, however, must be considered in relation to the consequences of her faith in the ability of Asian American literary studies to "incorporate" differences. The most immediate consequence, as Koshy has pointed out, involves the increasing strain with which Asian American Studies attempts to manage within a panethnic formation the rapidly changing composition of the constituency it purports to represent. A second consequence, and one I'd like to elaborate upon, involves the way in which Cheung attempts to incorporate "Canada" into her work while at the same time limiting her observations on nationalism to the notion of "claiming America" and its US-specific focus. One example of this disjuncture occurs when Cheung moves directly from a discussion of Joy Kogawa to the theme of what Elaine Kim calls "claiming an American, as opposed to Asian, identity" ("Re-viewing" 6). What's lost in this transition (and indeed in Cheung's larger project of incorporating differences) is Kogawa's complex engagement with forms of Canadian nationalism, an issue I will discuss at length in Chapter Two. Where in Cheung's model is the possibility of "claiming Canada"?

In short, I believe that there is very little possibility of "claiming Canada" in an Asian American context. The reasons for this are as complex as the genesis of the Asian American movement in the late 1960s, and, although I cannot outline its history here, I would like to emphasize the desire of its participants to assert a place for Asian Americans in the US body politic. Such a nationally specific project may be open to appropriation in other contexts such as

Canada—indeed, this is what was taking place in the community-based Asian Canadian literary movement in Vancouver in the 1970s. But something different has occurred in Asian American literary studies, where critics have appropriated an Asian Canadian text (Kogawa's *Obasan*) without significantly changing the US-centred frame in which they are working. For example, at the outset of *Articulate Silences* (1993), Cheung writes: "In this book I use the term 'Asian American' to refer to North American writers of Asian descent. Asians in the United States and Canada have had parallel experiences" (xv). Once again, Cheung is absolutely right to draw attention to historical parallels, especially regarding key issues such as immigration restriction and key historical events such as the internment of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans during the Second World War. I want to suggest, however, that describing experiences as "parallel" becomes a problem when scholarship coming from the US side of the border receives firmer institutional backing and carries greater academic capital.[43] The risk posed by "incorporating" Asian Canadian history and culture into a (temporarily) expanded "Asian American" frame is that scholars may forego the difficult task of providing a detailed analysis of the historical pressures, exclusions, and racial formations that distinguish nations—and the national literatures that engage with these histories.

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[43] The pertinent point here is that, in the current market of "academic exchange," scholarship coming from a US address necessarily carries greater value than Canadian scholarship, regardless of the degree of sensitivity with which it reads texts by Asian Canadians.

Cheung is certainly not alone in defining "Asian American" in such a broad way. In a similar defining move at the outset of *Reading Asian American Literature* (1993), Sau-ling Wong writes: "In the majority of cases in this book, the *American* in *Asian American* refers to the United States, but it must be stretched to mean 'North American' in reference to Canadian writer Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*" (16). As Wong points out, the "political understanding and literary artistry" of *Obasan* has made it "too good to pass up"; as a result, "[t]he practice of including Kogawa in the Asian American roster is standard in the field" (16). Wong is correct to point out the fact that the incorporation of Kogawa's work has become "standard" in Asian American literary studies, but such acknowledgement does little to address the contradictions raised by this "standard" practice. The incorporation of Kogawa within an Asian American frame seems at odds with Wong's subsequently stated desire to privilege coalitions "within the U.S." ("Denationalization" 18). Such an apparent contradiction in the work of a critic as fine as Wong points to some of the unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) difficulties posed by reading Kogawa's work in an Asian American frame.

III

The uneasy place of Asian Canadian texts in Asian American Studies is an important problem, but it is not to my mind the most crucial issue facing critics of Asian Canadian literature. Instead, I feel the most pressing concern is the

potential normalizing of "cultural difference" in Canadian literary criticism. I am using the word "normalizing" here in the sense suggested by Lorraine Weir in "Normalizing the Subject: Linda Hutcheon and the English-Canadian Postmodern" (1991), where she undertakes a critique of the reinscription of "communitarian values" in Hutcheon's postmodern theory.[44] My purpose here, however, differs from Weir's, in the sense that I am not especially concerned with the "domestication" of postmodern theory for Canadian consumption. I am instead concerned with the forms of cultural pluralism that have characterized certain forms of Canadian multicultural literary criticism. The point I wish to stress is that these discussions are *not* ignoring questions of "cultural difference"; they are instead addressing these questions in ways that may close down critical investigations of the historical and ongoing significance of "race" and racism in Canada. Critical discussions of Kogawa's *Obasan* are an important example of this phenomenon, which I will discuss at length in Chapter Two. But here I wish to address more generally some of the implications of cultural pluralism in contemporary Canadian literary studies.

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[44] In her critique of Hutcheon, Weir writes:

> Subjecting Canadian as well as international modernism to a normalizing influence, domesticating deviance and inscribing it within her postmodern paradigm, Hutcheon converts danger into safety, the marginalized into the mainstream, the non-referential into the referential. Presenting a classically "anti-modern, pro-postmodern" position, Hutcheon undertakes what Robert Kroetsch has called a "righting of the culture" which returns it to its long-held values, its code of civility, and privileging of clarity, good taste, and "standard English." (181)

In hindsight, the anthology *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (1990) appeared at a key moment in discussions of "cultural difference" in Canadian literary studies: it was published shortly after the passing of Bill C-93, commonly referred to as the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, and it attempted to address the relation between the *Act* and contemporary Canadian fiction. Since that time, *Other Solitudes* has circulated widely as an anthology and as a model for "multicultural" literary scholarship in Canada. At present, it is being recognized by critics as "the first in a series of books and studies on racial and ethnic minority writing that appeared throughout the 1990s" (Verduyn, Introduction 10) and "the first anthology of ethnic writing to have a broad critical and pedagogical impact" (Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies* 162).

But in its structure and editorial apparatus, *Other Solitudes* works to normalize (in the sense suggested by Weir) the cultural differences it represents. Structurally, it places the "multicultural" writers side by side, and concludes with a section entitled "The First and Founding Nations Respond." In doing so, the anthology usefully interjects the question of aboriginality, represented by the figure of Tomson Highway—and it thereby brings to the fore questions elided in the *Act* itself.[45] But, more problematically, it provides a privileged place of

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[45] As many commentators have pointed out, the "Interpretation" section of Bill C-93 states that the implementation of the *Act* does not pertain to "any institution of the Council or government of the Northwest Territories or the Yukon Territory" or "any Indian band, band council or any body established to perform a governmental function in relation to an Indian band or other group of aboriginal people" (qtd. in Hutcheon and Richmond 370-71). For discussion of this point,

commentary to representatives of the "Founding Nations" (Jacques Godbout and Robertson Davies, respectively), and it thereby grants representatives from positions of relative cultural privilege the authority to comment upon the "multiculturalism" in their midst.

The complex contradictions raised by the structure of the anthology—which include placing the "multicultural" writers side by side, interjecting the question of aboriginality, and granting representatives of the "Founding Nations" a privileged place of commentary—are, however, considerably flattened in its editorial apparatus. As Smaro Kamboureli has convincingly argued, the editorial strategies of *Other Solitudes* "endorse the sedative politics of the Canadian state's appropriation of ethnicity, and they construct ethnicity as a normative identity" (*Scandalous Bodies* 162).[46] Co-editor Marion Richmond concludes her one-page Preface by observing: "As Margaret Atwood wrote in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, 'we are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here.' This awareness is a fundamental part of the Canadian sensibility" (n.p.). In a liberal inclusivist gesture, Richmond overlooks a form of difference (in Atwood's quotation, being an "immigrant" is something "we" all share) and recuperates a form of uncritical nationalism grounded in what

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see Kamboureli, "Technology" 210-11.

[46] For an important critical discussion of *Other Solitudes* and Hutcheon's use of the term "ethnicity," see Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies* 162-74; for an extended review essay of the anthology, see Irvine.

Richmond calls "the Canadian sensibility."[47] A more nuanced—yet perhaps more troubling—take on "cultural difference" appears in co-editor Linda Hutcheon's 16-page Introduction. If Richmond's Preface overlooks a form of cultural difference, Hutcheon's Introduction normalizes discourses of "race" in its studiously "balanced" assessment of Canadian history. For instance, Hutcheon sets what she calls Canada's status as "a tolerant, welcoming nation" against its "equally compelling history of intolerance" (11). By doing so, Hutcheon ends up balancing the "equation" in a way that may impede (and not enable) a critical investigation of Canadian history. "Canada does not have an unblemished past with regard to racism" (7), writes Hutcheon, who follows up this backhanded acknowledgement of racism with an assurance that "I do not mean to suggest . . . that all Canadians are racist" (9). In the great care it takes not to offend any of its (white?) readers, the Introduction to *Other Solitudes* "normalizes" the subject of racism in the precise sense suggested by Weir.[48]

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[47] The quotation from Atwood, and the flattening of difference it implies, is a source of outrage to Fred Wah, who returns to it repeatedly in his essays and his biotext *Diamond Grill*, where he writes:

> Another chip on my shoulder is the appropriation of the immigrant identity. I see it all over the place. Even one of the country's best-known writers has said We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here. Can't these people from *central* leave anything to itself? Why deny the immigrant his or her real world? Why be in such a rush to dilute? (125)

I will return to Wah's work in detail in Chapter Four.

[48] I wish to emphasize that Hutcheon, to her credit, has shown a remarkable willingness to engage with a variety of theoretical and cultural issues,

The configurations of "cultural difference" in *Other Solitudes* are not unique to that anthology. They instead are part of a Canadian literary studies version of what Spivak has called monumentalizing "the margins,"[49] which in this

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ranging from the postmodern, the postcolonial, multiculturalism, and ethnicity. Perhaps more than any other contemporary Canadian literary critic, she has brought considerable energy to these undeniably relevant issues. Precisely because her work has circulated so widely, the questions she raises and the theoretical commitments she makes deserve careful attention. The problems I have identified in her Introduction to *Other Solitudes* are not unique to that essay. In her contribution to the Second Edition of *Literary History of Canada* (1990), for instance, Hutcheon writes that:

> Canadians have traditionally prided themselves on their multiculturalism, their ethnic "mosaic" that allowed cultural diversity. But this liberal concept of a mosaic could turn into a tyrannical model as well; as the fiction revealed, it demanded that one retain one's ethnic roots *and* become a Canadian too . . . . And arrival in liberal-thinking Canada did not always mean a total escape from racial prejudice. ("Novel" 77)

In the name of displacing a certain form of liberal self-congratulation over the status of "multiculturalism" in Canada, Hutcheon actually reinscribes it through the curious assumption put forward in the final sentence quoted here that arrival in Canada *would* somehow be a "total escape from racial prejudice." Even a cursory glance at the history of Asian immigration to Canada—which I have briefly discussed earlier, and to which I will return in subsequent chapters—makes Hutcheon's observation questionable to say the least.

[49] Spivak uses this expression to critique the domestication of the distinction between North and South in US multicultural discourse (*Critique* 170): she insists on the need to avoid "conflating the problems of ethnic domination in the United States with the problem of exploitation across the international division of labor" (*Critique* 168). Spivak's point could usefully be reconsidered in relation to Canadian multicultural discourse, which to my mind largely sidesteps (and does not appropriate) the problem of the international division of labour. When was the last time someone claimed a "Third World" identity in the name of Canadian multicultural politics? My concern here with the conflation of ethnicized and racialized difference in Canada does not address the problem identified by Spivak. But I should hope that the process of reading between nation and diaspora would open up space for the kind of criticism she so

case entails eliding hierarchies of "race" in an attempt to claim "the margins." One of the most striking examples I have come across appears in an essay by Janice Kulyk Keefer entitled "'Coming Across Bones': Historiographic Ethnofiction" (1995), which examines what Winfried Siemerling euphemistically calls "the thorny relationship between ethnicity and race" (21). In this essay, Kulyk Keefer is determined to find points of solidarity across "difference" through her self-identification as an "ethnic" subject. She writes: "I want to be able to say to a black Canadian, 'because your ancestors were enslaved, and mine enserfed, because your ancestral homeland was under imperial domination, as was mine, your historical experience speaks to me, as mine can speak to you'" (99). Kulyk Keefer can mobilize these parallels through what I view as an evacuation of historical differences and an attempt to dismiss the *ongoing* significance of "race" in Canada. Tellingly, she refers sympathetically to *Other Solitudes*, praising the fact that in the anthology "race and ethnicity are presented as equal partners in the dance of difference" (91).[50]

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trenchantly demands.

[50] As should be clear, I am unconvinced by the critical potential of Kulyk Keefer's trope. For a brief critique, see Beauregard "Dance of Difference?," where I refer to S.P. Mohanty's formulation as a more theoretically sound alternative. Mohanty writes:

> It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences; but could we afford to leave untheorized the question of how our differences are intertwined and, indeed, hierarchically organized? (66; qtd. in Beauregard, "Dance of Difference?" 141).

The forms of cultural pluralism found in *Other Solitudes* and Kulyk Keefer's essay rest on an attempt to evacuate violent histories in the name of recognizing (and not merely suppressing) "cultural difference." As analytic positions, such configurations of "cultural difference" strike me as inadequate to address the contemporary cultural politics of "race" in Canada. A notable recent event at which conflicting notions of "race" collided is the Writing Thru Race conference, which was held in Vancouver in 1994. The implications of this conference are more numerous and varied than I can address here,[51] but a crucial point I wish to emphasize is the fact that organizers of the conference explicitly rejected cultural pluralism as a means of addressing the implications of "race" in Canada. A "Mid-Stream Report" presented to the Writers' Union of Canada by Roy Miki, then-Chair of the Racial Minority Writers' Committee,

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Indeed, this very question of hierarchical organization is what I find missing in Kulyk Keefer's account.

[51] The Writing Thru Race conference (June 30-July 3, 1994) brought together First Nations writers and writers of colour "to address the pressing issue of 'race' as it intersects with all aspects of the literary arts, including creative writing, critical reception, institutionalization, publishing, and theory" (Miki, "Writing" 5). The conference policy limited enrollment to First Nations writers and writers of colour, and thus explicitly rejected a liberal model of "inclusion." This policy led to spectacular denunciations of the conference by *Globe and Mail* columnists Robert Fulford and Michael Valpy, which in turn led to numerous other newspaper editorials and news stories. Promised federal government support of $22,500 for the conference was withdrawn (largely due to pressure from Reform MP Jan Brown), but the conference went ahead with funds generated in a last-minute fundraising campaign. For a discussion of the conference rationale and objectives, see Miki "Writing." For insightful discussions of the cultural politics of this event, see Miki, *Broken Entries* 144-51; McFarlane "Haunt"; Maclear "Race"; Brand; Mookerjea; and Hryniuk.

expresses this rejection as follows:

> In the emerging conflicts over cultural identities, the earlier assimilationist model (read here "nationalism") and the liberal model of pluralism (read here "multiculturalism") are no longer adequate to address the diverse contexts of historical and current racial inequalities and injustices. (qtd. in Mookerjea 121)

Indeed, as Scott McFarlane puts it: "The exclusionary policy of Writing Thru Race insisted that political leadership in anti-racist politics could only emerge by abandoning multicultural inclusionary paradigms" ("Haunt" 28).

In the wake of Writing Thru Race—and what Miki has called "the deathly silence from academia" (*Broken Entries* 151) in response to it—Canadian literary critics need to move beyond a pluralist notion of "inclusion" as a theoretical model for making sense of the changes taking place in Canada. I acknowledge that gesturing to the "beyond" is easier than actually moving there. I don't claim to have a simple solution to the problem of moving "beyond pluralism," but I can identify a number of points that may enable discussions to move forward. My first point is the need to acknowledge that merely discussing "cultural difference" or writing by "ethnic" or racialized writers does not in and of itself constitute politically progressive scholarship. As Kamboureli writes regarding Bill C-93, "acknowledgement of ethnic difference does not eliminate the problems of the representation of otherness" ("Technology" 214). The issue at stake here is not merely "acknowledgement" or liberal "inclusion" in Canadian literary studies; it is

instead a question of *how* "cultural difference" is discussed. A second and related point (drawn from the work of Goldberg) is that discussions of racism in modernity that consider it to be an aberration from an otherwise tolerant norm risk trafficking in a form of nonracialism that denies, and does not confront, the role of "race" in structuring modern social identities. And my third point is that "history" and the way it is remembered and configured plays a crucial role in developing anti-racist (as opposed to nonracialist) critical reading strategies.

Jonathan Kertzer has recently and usefully stated that "[t]he project posed by current theory . . . is not to magnanimously accept cultural differences but to reconceptualize their encounter" (29). As I argue throughout this dissertation, these encounters are consistently marked by forms of violence. But while models of cultural pluralism are unable to address these forms of violence, Canadian literary criticism has long been obsessed with violence as a trope, if not a condition of historical encounter. Northrop Frye's well-known discussion of "the garrison mentality" in the Conclusion to the First Edition of *Literary History of Canada* (1965) hints at the way "a closely knit and beleaguered society" responds to "a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" (830)—and the forms of social conservatism that emerge from such situation.[52] Margaret Atwood, in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972),

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[52] As Frye writes: "The garrison mentality is that of its officers: it can tolerate only the conservative idealism of its ruling class, which for Canada means the moral and propertied middle class" (838).

presents her well-known (and heavily critiqued) notion of "survival" as an expression of "hanging on, staying alive" (33) in a hostile environment, and argues that this characteristic—and the rather undifferentiated form of "victimhood" that accompanies it—defines Canadian culture and "holds the country together" (31). And John Moss, in *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* (1977), despite taking great pains to distance himself from the heavily criticized "thematics" of Atwood's study,[53] discusses violence as "a pronounced characteristic of even our most lyrical writing, seemingly born out of the inevitable clash between two orders of reality in the Canadian experience; the wilderness and the garden, the garrison and the surrounding environment, the old and the new, the imported and the indigenous—there is no end to the possible pairings" (22).

There is much to take issue with in these formulations, and indeed Canadian literary critics have forged careers out of unpacking their implications and pointing out their shortcomings. But my point here is that the forms of violence identified by Frye, Atwood, and Moss could productively be reconsidered in relation to their highly uneven effects on Canadians—and not as a means of defining (and hence consolidating) a putatively homogeneous "Canadian identity." Indeed, such work is being done in Canadian literary

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[53] Moss writes in the book's Preface: "This is not a thematic study" (6), a point he returns to again: "This is not, repeat *not*, the declaration of a single theme in Canadian literature" (12).

studies by critics as diverse as Christopher Bracken and Rinaldo Walcott. Canadian literary studies is at a moment, as Christl Verduyn observes, in which "[c]oncerns around race, ethnicity, and cultural production are circulating and intensifying" ("Introduction: Pulling Together" 4). The challenge is to make the most of this intensifying critical concern. In this dissertation, I attempt to do so by following the traces of violence in Canadian history in relation to their uneven effects on Asian immigrants and Asian Canadians—and the particular ways such histories of violence are represented and reconsidered in contemporary Asian Canadian literature. Diasporic interventions into these histories of violence require critics to work toward critical alternatives to the forms of cultural pluralism so prominent in discussions of Canadian "cultural difference" in Canadian literary studies in the 1990s.

IV

This dissertation brings together the theoretical implications of diaspora theory, Asian American cultural criticism, and Canadian literary criticism in order to read Asian Canadian literary texts by SKY Lee, Joy Kogawa, Hiromi Goto, and Fred Wah. I have brought these three fields of inquiry together in order to highlight their complementary insights: the diaspora theory I discussed above considers diasporic identification as a reconfigured form of nationalism (Ang, Hall); the Asian American cultural criticism I discussed provides a crucial ethical compass

in considering the implications of a critical commitment to a diasporic perspective (Wong)—even if it is unable to reconcile the appropriation of Asian Canadian texts in an Asian American frame; and Canadian literary criticism's long-standing concern with forms of violence could be recalibrated to account for the uneven effects of violence on differently racialized subjects in order to help advance discussions of cultural difference in Canada—and not be content with cultural pluralism as an explanatory model.

The central argument I make in this dissertation is that the Asian Canadian literary texts I discuss function as diasporic interventions in the ongoing process of remembering a "racist past" in order to secure or contest a "multicultural present" in Canada. These interventions vary considerably depending on the histories they address and the forms of collective identification they assert. Such modes of collective identification are chosen neither freely nor openly, but rather in response to historical pressures that delimit without determining available choices. The individual chapters of this dissertation discuss the differing diasporic interventions in Asian Canadian literary texts. These chapters appear in a cumulative order, beginning with a focus on the history of Chinese immigration to Canada (in Chapter One) and the history of the internment of Japanese Canadians (in Chapter Two). In these two opening chapters, I am concerned with literary reworkings of these histories, and the cultural politics of the knowledge being produced around them. From here I turn to the differing yet related forms of collective identification narrated in Asian

Canadian literary texts. I discuss the critical nationalism put forward in Joy Kogawa's accounts of the internment (in Chapter Two), the critical diasporic identification narrated in Hiromi Goto's reworkings of received culture in diaspora (in Chapter Three), and the critical diasporic poetics developed over the course of Fred Wah's lengthy writing career (in Chapter Four). In each case, I trace the particular historical pressures addressed in these literary texts and the forms of collective identification that these texts put forward in response to these pressures.

"Chapter One: Asian Canadian Immigrant Acts" asks what it means to read Asian Canadian literature reading Asian Canadian history. It sets up the chapters that follow by working through the theoretical assumptions informing emerging critical discussions of Asian Canadian literature. It specifically takes issue with the "coming to voice" narrative put forward in Lien Chao's criticism, and it suggests that Lisa Lowe's notion of "immigrant acts" provides a more nuanced way to begin reading Asian Canadian literature in relation to the contradictory histories of exclusion that have structured the lives of Asian immigrants and Asian Canadians. What is at stake here is an understanding of the historical pressures that shape available modes of identification. But the key issue is not merely the manner in which Asian immigrants and Asian Canadians were *acted upon*; it is instead the question of historical agency and the possibility of resistance in the face of historical exclusion. I argue that SKY Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* grounds questions of agency and resistance in specific

moments in Chinese Canadian history, and it performs the important pedagogical work of teaching its readers to connect these diverse moments. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and the "immigrant acts" it narrates thus provide an important contribution to the ongoing process of rethinking the representation of history in Asian Canadian literature.

The ensuing chapters draw upon the implications of Chapter One by discussing Asian Canadian texts in the context of the histories they address. These chapters push my argument forward by discussing differing diasporic interventions in the process of remembering these histories. "Chapter Two: Joy Kogawa's Critical Nationalism" asserts that the history of the internment, especially the attempted and actual deportation of Japanese Canadians during and immediately following the Second World War, made diasporic identification with Japan as a "motherland" a highly troubled possibility for Japanese Canadians. The history of the internment instead generated conflicting nationalisms, including those expressed in the writings of Muriel Kitagawa, Koichiro Miyazaki, and, later, Joy Kogawa. This chapter concentrates on Kogawa's critical nationalism, which in *Obasan* entails presenting nationalist identification as a conflicted critical strategy that cannot be reduced to an apolitical universalism or an uncritical nationalism. But ultimately, I suggest that the *reception* of *Obasan* rather than its textual strategies may be a crucial site in which to investigate the cultural politics of the knowledge produced around the history of the internment. I argue that while critical discussions of *Obasan* have

relentlessly rehearsed and condemned the internment and its aftermath, they have often presented that history in ways that limit a serious contemporary investigation of the history of racism in Canada. As such, Kogawa criticism functions as an example of a larger trend in Canadian literary criticism: it manages, and does not merely suppress, a "racist past" in order to attempt to secure a "multicultural present."

"Chapter Three: Hiromi Goto and the Politics of Writing Back" functions as a hinge in this dissertation: it argues that Goto's novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* both "writes back" to texts including Kogawa's *Obasan* (which I discuss in Chapter Two) and points toward the critical diasporic poetics developed by Fred Wah (whose work I discuss in Chapter Four). In Chapter Three, I suggest that the notion of "writing back" developed and debated in postcolonial theory could usefully be reconsidered as a strategy of critical diasporic identification. For Goto, this critical diasporic identification entails reworking the orientalizing discourses that position her as a gendered and racialized subject in Canada; it also entails "writing back" to forms of received culture, including Japanese myths, folk tales, and literary antecedents such as *Obasan*. But, I argue, Goto's interventions in the realm of diasporic culture are closely enmeshed with her attempts to contest and rework the boundaries of the Canadian national imaginary. This chapter concludes by suggesting that the cultural politics of "writing back" are not reducible to the textual dynamics and narrative strategies of Goto's work. Instead, it considers Goto as part of an emerging "Calgary

scene" of Asian Canadian writers who have collectively addressed the politics of being a "prairie Asian" in the 1990s.

"Chapter Four: Fred Wah Moving Through the Hyphen" builds upon my discussion of Goto's critical diasporic identification in Chapter Three in order to address the contours of what I call Wah's critical diasporic poetics. In this chapter, I argue that Wah presents subjects as both located and in motion, calling into question the production of "Chineseness" and "whiteness" and their complex points of intersection. I suggest that Wah's long-standing concern with "place" and motion has enabled him to address diasporic histories—and to develop a critical diasporic poetics—with considerable insight. This chapter discusses a wide range of Wah's writings in order to investigate the varied implications of "moving through the hyphen," the condition of impurity Wah moves through with relish. In his poetry collection *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, Wah represents the multiple displacements experienced by the figure of his father, while in *Diamond Grill*, which Wah describes as a "biotext," he charts movements in and out of the intensely localized space of the Diamond Grill cafe in the interior of British Columbia in the 1950s.

Chapter Four ends with a discussion of Wah's *Diamond Grill* and the possibility of moving through available spaces in the face of historical restrictions. In this sense, Wah's text functions as a metonym for the dissertation as a whole: the Asian Canadian texts I discuss intervene in the process of remembering Canadian history with intellectual energy and ethical

groundedness, setting the historical and ongoing forms of restriction they address against the possibility—and even the pleasure—of moving through them.

Chapter One: Asian Canadian Immigrant Acts[1]

In a poem entitled "old chinese cemetery," Jim Wong-Chu dramatizes the process of "searching for scraps/ of memory":

> I walk
> on earth
> above the bones
> of a multitude
> of golden mountain men
> searching for scraps
> of memory
>
> like a child unloved
> his face pressed hard
> against the wet window
>
> peering in
> for a desperate moment
> I touch my past (21)[2]

Wong-Chu's poem connects the movement of an "I" figure walking on earth with the image of a child pressing his face against a wet window. By linking motion

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[1] A version of this chapter has been published as "The Emergence of 'Asian Canadian Literature': Can Lit's Obscene Supplement?" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 67 (1999): 53-75.

[2] The version of "old chinese cemetery" I have quoted here appears in Wong-Chu's collection of poetry *Chinatown Ghosts* (1986). One should note that an earlier version of the poem appeared in *Inalienable Rice* (1979); see 8. Indeed, Wong-Chu's search for scraps of memory and a way to make sense of the past is wholly consistent with the other material, both literary and historical, collected in the anthology. I have quoted the *Chinatown Ghosts* version because it strips away all punctuation to generate a sparser, more powerful effect.

and (obscured) vision, the poem dramatizes the urgent yet difficult task of touching a personal and collective "past." Wong-Chu thereby attempts to rethink history through literary writing, a process Lien Chao describes as "going back through the silent data of the archives and rewriting the existing history" ("Constituting" 339). Wong-Chu, like the vast majority of the writers discussed in this dissertation, is not an historian;[3] neither are the majority of his readers. Yet somehow history *matters* to Wong-Chu and the other Asian Canadian writers I discuss. *How then might critics read Asian Canadian writers reading the history of Asian Canadians and Asian immigrants to Canada?* This question animates this chapter. In focusing on the implications of reading history in Asian Canadian literature, this chapter sets up the remaining chapters of this dissertation, which will turn to diasporic interventions in the process of remembering a "racist past" in Canada.

I

The mid-1990s were an important time in the history of criticism on Asian Canadian literature: with a handful of exceptions, it marked the first time a number of literary and cultural critics attempted to shift the critical focus away from formalist readings of single texts toward considerations of how Asian

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[3] One exception is Paul Yee, whose contribution to *Inalienable Rice* I discuss briefly below.

Canadian texts are in the process of becoming a field of critical investigation.[4] One of the encouraging features of this emerging body of criticism is its willingness to read Asian Canadian texts in the context of the histories they address. Some of the most historically grounded criticism on Asian Canadian literature has been written by Lien Chao, who has produced a dissertation on Chinese Canadian literature, an important article on the role of anthologies in the development of this literature, and a ground-breaking critical monograph on Chinese Canadian writing—the first such critical study to be published.[5] Chao's article "Anthologizing the Collective" (1995), for example, historicizes the emergence of Chinese Canadian literature by discussing Royal Commission

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[4] For the mid-1990s criticism I am referring to, see Miki "Asiancy"; Rita Wong "Jumping"; Maclear "Plots"; and Chao "Anthologizing." Three early exceptions that predate the 1990s criticism by a decade include Anthony Chan's "Born Again Asian" (1984), Jim Wong-Chu's "Ten Years of Asian Canadian Literary Arts in Vancouver" (1984), and a paragraph-long discussion of "Asian Canadian literature" in the entry on "Ethnic Literature" in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (1985); see Chan; Wong-Chu "Ten Years"; and Palmer and Rasporich. It is worth noting the varied locations in which the mid-1990s critical discussions took place: Miki's article appeared in the proceedings of an Asian American Studies conference; Chao's appeared in "Writing Ethnicity," a special issue of the academic Canadian literature journal *Essays on Canadian Writing*; Wong's appeared in a collection published by Sister Vision, a small feminist press that focuses on the work of women of colour; and Maclear's appeared in *This Magazine*, a news and culture magazine. Asian Canadian literature is thus being discussed in Canadian and US locations, feminist and "mainstream" academic publishing, and literary journals and more broadly cultural magazines. My goal in this chapter (and indeed in this dissertation) is to build on these important emerging discussions.

[5] For these texts, see Chao "Beyond Silence"; Chao "Anthologizing"; and Chao *Beyond Silence*. Note that Chao's monograph is a slightly revised version of her dissertation.

documents, the role of Chinese-English phrasebooks in the late nineteenth century, the early literary work of the Eaton sisters, and the organization in Vancouver in the 1970s of what would later become the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop. Precisely because Chao's criticism is so historically grounded, I'd like to investigate the theoretical consequences of her primary thesis: namely, that the appearance of Chinese Canadian literature signals a "coming to voice" of a formerly silenced and marginalized group in Canada. This thesis is not unique to Chao's work, but Chao has presented it most often and most fully.[6]

In "Anthologizing the Collective," Chao succinctly articulates the importance of a "coming to voice" narrative when she rightly argues that an anthology of Asian Canadian writing "opens a forum for Asian Canadians to question the lack of representation of their experiences in Canadian history and literature" (153-54), and that, through such a forum, Chinese Canadian writers can "transform the historical silence of the community into a voice of resistance" (148). Chao puts forward a similar critical narrative in her monograph *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English* (1997), whose title and central thesis address "the historical transition experienced by Chinese Canadians from

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[6] Note for instance Ron Hatch's discussion of what he calls "the silence of *gum san*" in Chinese Canadian writing. Hatch claims that "[w]hen the young people in the late 1960s and 1970s began to write, they felt that they needed to break the silence imposed by the elders of the community" (172). Hatch attempts neither to justify this claim nor to investigate the fact that historical causes of silence in Chinese Canadian communities extend well beyond the impact of "elders in the community." In this respect, Chao is a much more careful critic than Hatch; as such, I feel it is Chao's work that deserves attention.

a collective silence to a voice in the official discourse" (17). The strength of Chao's monograph is its insistence that "silence in mainstream discourse is not equivalent to muteness or passivity but a resultant [*sic*] of political and economic exploitations" (188); its weakness, however, lies in its inability to scrutinize the uncertain political valency of "voice" in a multicultural context, a thorny issue I will address shortly.

My argument in this chapter is that a critical reading of Asian Canadian literature—however historicized—that considers it in the context of a "coming to voice" narrative preempts the task of investigating the terms on which certain texts are admitted into the circuits of Canadian publishing, reviewing, teaching, and so on.[7] In short, what does it mean to "come to voice"? For Chao, a "coming to voice" narrative is enmeshed with an implied "additive" approach to canonicity. She ends one article by stating: "The Chinese Canadian community viewed from its women's perspective *adds a missing part* to Canadian literature and discourse, challenging existing androcentric human experience in modernity" ("As Agents" 229; emphasis mine), while she concludes another article as follows: "Instead of building railways, Chinese Canadian writers continue the

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[7] One might extend this point to consider the potential containment of "cultural difference" in more specific academic formations. Miki has done so in a recent essay entitled "What's a Racialized Text Like You Doing in a Place Like This?" (1998), where he makes the following point: "Unreflective liberal gestures toward 'cultural' and 'post-colonial' studies . . . can all too easily become a vehicle for disciplinary management, in fact stabilizing existing structures by confining critiques of race discourses to curricular sites and protecting the institutional boundaries from the threat of transformation" (*Broken Entries* 174).

'epic struggles' on the contemporary cultural frontier *to help build a multivocal Canadian literature*" ("Anthologizing" 166; emphasis mine). In this way, Chao rescripts a "coming to voice" narrative as the building of a multivocal, multicultural literature *without contesting the terms on which such a literature is emerging*. The problem I wish to identify with Chao's critical narrative is not its accuracy in a narrow sense but rather its failure to consider the potential containment of cultural difference in a Canadian "multicultural" context.

So how might this containment work? One analytic model is offered by Australian cultural critic Ghassan Hage and his work on the function of "practical tolerance" in a multicultural society. Hage argues that "multicultural tolerance should be understood as a mode of spatial management of cultural difference" (19); it is "the practice of accepting and positioning the Other in the dominant's sphere of influence according to their value (for the dominant)" (32). One example of this management of difference is the notion of "enrichment" that frequently appears in multicultural discourse. Hage responds to this notion by questioning who is being enriched—and at whose expense. In its broad contours, Hage's argument helps sharpen an investigation of the critical narratives with which critics explain the emergence of Asian Canadian literature. We would do well to ask ourselves how Asian Canadian literature is framed, contained, and managed as a field of inquiry. How is its value configured, and whose interests does it serve? How is it, in the words of Scott McFarlane, being

discursively and institutionally "interned"?[8]

Hage's critique of "practical tolerance" opens up room for asking such questions, yet it poses an equally significant problem: that of *agency*. If difference is contained and managed within multicultural structures of governmentality, where is the space for resistance? One means of theorizing resistance to monolithic structures of governmentality is to take a post-structuralist turn, and emphasize the gaps and fissures that necessarily constitute a discursive field. The work of Homi Bhabha is exemplary in this regard, in the sense that it offers a way to address ambivalent narratives of nation. Bhabha's work provides a model for critics to consider how diasporic subjects, those positioned in interstitial spaces, are intervening in the already contradictory realm of "national culture" and producing work that does not merely add, in a pluralist manner, excluded histories—on this point, Bhabha's work explicitly differs from Chao's implied "additive" approach—but instead subjects the very contours of the nation to what he calls newly configured "international"

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[8] McFarlane discusses the notion of "internment" in relation to the packaging of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, a text I will discuss in Chapter Two. The use of pathos on the cover of the 1983 Penguin edition, he argues, "inscribes the victimization of Japanese Canadians as their value" ("Covering" 406), which in turn can be managed and contained in discourses of "Canada" as a fallen yet redeemable nation. He concludes by emphasizing "the need to develop narratives which do not inscribe Japanese Canadians as already interned and already internable" ("Covering" 408). While some readers may take exception to McFarlane's locution (i.e., using the term "internment" to describe literary critical practices), his essay usefully insists on the need to rethink the significance of the emergence of Asian Canadian literature as a field.

connections.[9] Of particular significance is Bhabha's attempt to connect "Derridean supplementarity in *writing*"[10] to "the nation's narrative address"; for Bhabha, "[t]he supplementary strategy suggests that adding 'to' need not 'add up' but may disturb the calculation" ("DissemiNation" 305). Bhabha concludes this argument by reading Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*—and specifically the character Gibreel Farishta—in relation to:

> the repetition or return of the margin of the postcolonial migrant to alienate the holism of history. The postcolonial space is now 'supplementary' to

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[9] See Bhabha, "Introduction" 5-6 for an elaboration of this point and a discussion of what he calls "a radical revision in the concept of human community itself" ("Introduction" 6).

[10] At this point, Bhabha is drawing from Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, which is perhaps Derrida's most extended discussion of what he terms "that dangerous supplement"; see Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 141-64. A particularly clear discussion of supplementarity appears in Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," where he writes:

> One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified. (289)

Translator Alan Bass usefully glosses the "double sense of supplement" as "to supply something which is missing, or to supply something additional" (339n12). Derrida's argument here is part of a larger meditation on the methodology of "the human sciences," especially "structural ethnology"; for the purpose of my argument, I would simply like to emphasize that Derrida's notion of the supplement is one that gets taken up and reconfigured in Bhabha's work on the nation and (as I will soon discuss) Žižek's work on ideology.

> the metropolitan centre; it stands in a subaltern, adjunct relation that doesn't aggrandise the *presence* of the west but redraws its frontiers in the menacing, agonistic boundary of cultural difference that never quite adds up, always less than one nation and double. ("DissemiNation" 318)

Bhabha's great enabling move is to stage the deconstructive notion of supplementarity in the context of postcolonial migrancy and the disturbance of narratives of nation.[11] It seems to me that much of the most engaging Asian Canadian cultural work likewise makes visible the very fissures that constitute narratives of nation: Hiromi Goto's novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), which I discuss in Chapter Three, narrates the story of Naoe, an energetic elderly Japanese Canadian woman who sets out to inscribe her name on the icy roads of Canada and to participate in the heretofore white, hyper-masculinized domain

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[11] It's worth noting, however, that some five years before the publication of "DissemiNation" Sneja Gunew had made a similar—if less elaborated—move in a fine, prescient essay entitled "Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins?" (1985). In her discussion of "migrant writing" in Australia, Gunew writes:

> as Jacques Derrida has pointed out in *Of Grammatology*, the problem with supplements is that (metaphorically speaking) they tend to take over, in so far as they point to a lack or absence with the plenitude, in this case of the theory/territory of Australian writing. If something requires an addendum, then it was incomplete from the beginning, and the supplement ends up supplanting the original and redefining our notions of what constitutes the original. (164)

Gunew insists on the need to investigate how "Other" voices are positioned in "Australian culture" and yet still able to assert a form of agency to transform these positions.

of the Calgary Stampede; and Jin-me Yoon's *Souvenirs of the Self* (1991) uses a series of postcards as visual art to engage with the highly ambivalent "place" a body racialized as "Asian" and gendered as "female" occupies in the landscape of Banff, a landscape that stands in metonymically for the nation. Goto and Yoon both actively renegotiate their location in racialized and gendered representations of Canadian national culture, and refuse to accept the Canadian nation as a "finished product" from which they are inevitably excluded.[12]

Attempting to make visible the fissures of national narratives is certainly appealing as a subversive strategy, yet as with all strategies, it risks consolidating what it presumes to take apart. In order to pursue this point, I'd like to return to the notion of supplementarity, and reconsider it in relation to Slavoj Žižek's work on ideology. In *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), and especially in a section of that book called "The inherent transgression," Žižek makes a compelling and troubling argument about ideology by insisting that it consolidates itself not through expected conformity to its imperatives, but rather through regulated transgression, through what he calls an "obscene supplement" (26-27). A memorable example Žižek gives to illustrate this point is the Robert Altman movie *MASH*, in which American military doctors in Korea endlessly complain and criticize the war—while nevertheless doing their assigned jobs

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[12] I have discussed the contrasting yet complementary strategies of Goto's and Yoon's work in relation to discourses of tourism and the Canadian national imaginary; see Beauregard "Travelling Stereotypes."

perfectly. Žižek argues that "the cliché which regards *MASH* as an anti-militarist film, depicting the horrors of the meaningless military slaughter which can be endured only through a healthy measure of cynicism, practical jokes, laughing at pompous official rituals, and so on, misses the point—this very distance *is* ideology" (20). In short, for Žižek the critical attitudes expressed by the characters in *MASH* are ultimately *not* subversive, but rather function as a regulated transgression that is actually necessary for US military ideology to operate smoothly. "Power is always-already its own transgression," writes Žižek; "if it is to function, it has to rely on a kind of obscene supplement" (26-27). Later in *The Plague of Fantasies*, he returns to and expands on this point:

> Power thus relies on an obscene supplement—that is to say, the obscene 'nightly' law (superego) necessarily accompanies, as its shadowy double, the 'public' Law. As for the status of this obscene supplement, one should avoid both traps and neither glorify it as subversive nor dismiss it as a false transgression which stabilizes the power edifice (like the ritualized carnivals which temporarily suspend power relations), but insist on its *undecidable* character. Obscene unwritten rules sustain Power as long as they remain in the shadows; the moment they are publicly recognized, the edifice of Power is thrown into disarray. (73)

Characteristically, Žižek builds his argument cumulatively, returning to certain points (such as Power, resistance, and supplementarity) in order to reconsider them or to sketch them in more detail. The key point here is Žižek's insistence

on the *undecidability* of the obscene supplement: unlike Bhabha, he refuses to grant it a necessarily "subversive" quality, and unlike Hage, he refuses to consider it as thoroughly "regulated."

II

These complex and often conflicting explanatory models of resistance raise crucial questions regarding the way we read the emergence of Asian Canadian literature as a field. Does Asian Canadian literature and its voices of dissent "disturb the calculation" of the Canadian national imaginary? Or does it function as a regulated transgression given prominence precisely in order to reinscribe the putative "openness" of Canada's "multicultural" identity? To shift these concerns to the realm of literary production: does Asian Canadian literature participate in an ongoing critique of "Canada" as it has been narrated in Canadian literary history? Or does it consolidate the flexibility, and hence the continued relevance, of Canadian literary nationalism? Does Asian Canadian literature function as "Can lit's obscene supplement"? If so, how precisely might it function? I pose these questions as genuine ones with no simple answers. As I mentioned above, Žižek's mode of analysis is both compelling and troubling: compelling because it refuses to reduce the complex workings of ideology to clear-cut oppositional politics, and troubling because such a refusal makes resistance seem nearly impossible. Again, where is the space for agency?

Or, more specifically, where is the space for what Miki has evocatively called *asiancy*?[13] What kinds of critical practice can address the specific complexities of "Asian Canadian literature" as it circulates in critical discussions at the present moment? Much of my discussion in this chapter thus far has dealt with issues—of coming to voice, containing difference, and disturbing narratives of nation—that could apply to the position of any so-called "minority discourse" in relation to a national literature in a multicultural context. What questions and challenges are specific to Asian Canadian literature and the ways it attempts to read Asian Canadian history?

My sense is that the critical methodology put forward by Asian American cultural critic Lisa Lowe in her important recent study *Immigrant Acts* (1996) can help us answer this question. Lowe's methodology offers critics a way to address the exclusions and violent hierarchies that characterize Asian Canadian history while at the same time recognizing that out of these exclusions and

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[13] Miki uses the term *asiancy* in the title, but not the text, of his article, and as such he provides no simple gloss for it. Through it, Miki attempts to work toward a speaking position that cannot be contained in the literary critical practices that have framed discussions of Kogawa's *Obasan* and the packaging of the anthology *Many-Mouthed Birds*. While his insistence on the need for "a renewed belief in the viability of agency" (148) is trenchant, and his reading of the concluding document in *Obasan* is brilliant, his reliance on a putatively self-evident "insider"/ "outsider" split at an early point in his argument (136) strikes me as inadequate to deal with the heterogeneities that characterize cultural groups, whose boundaries may be more complicated than a binary split may allow. As Miki himself writes later in his essay, a "one-dimensional oppositional positioning is hardly an adequate basis for new cultural forms which can represent the localized subjectivities of writers of color" (138). A revised and somewhat expanded version of "Asiancy" appears in *Broken Entries* 101-24.

hierarchies may emerge cultural products that work toward representing alternative social formations. At the core of Lowe's project is an engagement with history and the specific contradictions posed by exclusionary immigration policies. Lowe argues in the Preface to her monograph that "[u]nderstanding Asian immigration to the United States is fundamental to understanding the racialized foundations of both the emergence of the United States as a nation and the development of American capitalism" (ix). It is important to note, however, that Lowe's project does not simply map out how Asian immigrants were acted upon; it instead puts forward a compelling case for theorizing agency and resistance. In explaining the title of her book, Lowe writes that:

> 'Immigrant acts' names the *agency* of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans: the *acts* of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, as well as the politicized cultural work that emerges from dislocation and disidentification. Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have not only been 'subject to' immigration exclusion and restriction but have also been 'subjects of' the immigration process and are agents of political change, cultural expression, and social transformation. (9)

Lowe is of course writing from an Asian American position, and much of what she argues is specific to US racial formations and US colonial and neo-colonial interventions in the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. I believe, however, that despite the national specificity of Lowe's project, its critical methodology is open to redeployment in other social contexts. Lowe's

methodology challenges us to understand, for instance, the history of how Canadian capital has exploited so-called "cheap" Asian labour, and how Canadian immigration policies have attempted to exclude bodies variously racialized as "Asian." It is crucial to note the contradiction at work here between exclusionary state policies and the needs of capital. As Peter Li points out with respect to Chinese immigrants and Chinese Canadians, "[t]he Chinese were considered useful to the development of western Canada but were not desirable citizens"; the structural contradiction, Li writes, lies between the need to rely on "a racialized labour force for capital accumulation, at a time when the shortage of white workers rendered industrial expansion difficult," and the "subsequent public outcry against oriental labour and the response of the state through policies of racism and exclusion" (*Chinese in Canada* 12). Lowe argues that it is out of such a structural contradiction that resistance can occur. The critical task, then, is to recognize the complex ways Asian Canadian writers and cultural critics are working through these contradictions and rewriting these histories of attempted yet not absolute exclusion.

As I argue throughout this dissertation, a commitment to addressing historical exclusions has characterized much Asian Canadian cultural work from the late 1970s through to the present. The early collection *Inalienable Rice*, for instance, is notable for two things: its realization that historical and literary concerns are closely interrelated in Asian Canadian culture, a position that would gain increasing sophistication in the subsequent writing of Joy Kogawa, SKY

Lee, and Fred Wah; and its commitment to critiquing historical elisions and insisting on the historical agency of Chinese Canadians and Japanese Canadians. As Paul Yee writes in his contribution to the anthology:

> In the histories of British Columbia, a few lines have been reserved for the "cheap labour" supplied by the Chinese as a token recognition of their role. The glory has gone to the so-called leaders of the day, the Dunsmuirs and the Onderdonks, the men who built a province on the backs of the Chinese workers. (9)

Yee may well have been referring here to Pierre Berton's *The Last Spike* (1971), an epic narrative that attempts to marginalize the role Chinese Canadians played in building the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) while at the same time recuperating the ostensibly "lost" figure of Andrew Onderdonk, the man who in 1879 acquired the contract to build some 127 miles of the CPR in British Columbia (Bennett Lee 4). As Bennett Lee has forcefully asserted: "The official history [of the Chinese in Canada] has been myopic with a vengeance" (7). An example of this myopia is the focus of Berton's popular history: out of the cast of forty-five "Major Characters" he lists at the outset of his narrative, there is not a single Chinese or Chinese Canadian, and out of the 540 pages of text, some 16 actually address the role these labourers played. One might ask, paraphrasing F.R. Scott, "Where are the coolies in your story, Pierre?"[14] Moreover, Berton

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[14] F.R. Scott's famous opening line from the poem "All the Spikes But the Last" reads "Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?"; it was directed, of

introduces Onderdonk as a man shut out from "the immortality of a place name":

> the connoisseur of place names will search in vain on mountain, village, park, avenue, subdivision, plaque, or swamp for any reference to *the man who built the railway* between Eagle Pass and Port Moody through some of the most difficult country in the world. There is not so much as an alleyway named for Andrew Onderdonk. (232; emphasis mine)

In this infamous passage, critiqued in *Inalienable Rice* by Bennett Lee (7) and Paul Yee (9), Berton "rescues" the figure of Onderdonk by burying the significance of Chinese and Chinese Canadian labour in building the railway that attempted to unify the Canadian nation-state geographically and, in narratives such as Berton's, imaginatively as well.

A number of historians, including W. Peter Ward, have presented very different views of the racial formations that structured the Canadian nation-state at the end of the nineteenth century. Ward's *White Canada Forever* (1978), for instance, puts forward a key argument for the primacy of "race" as an organizing category in Canada from the 1850s to the 1940s, and it meticulously traces anti-Oriental attitudes, actions and policies. Yet once again, the contributors to *Inalienable Rice* point out the problem with such a methodology. Bennett Lee writes that "[t]he most basic deficiency of attempts to tell the early history of the

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course, at E.J. Pratt in response to his epic poem *Towards the Last Spike* (1952); see Scott; and Pratt. It is worth noting here the perhaps obvious point that critiques of racism and labour exploitation in Canada have a much longer and more complex history than I am able to address in the scope of this chapter.

Chinese in British Columbia is that these histories have been concerned almost exclusively with *white reactions* to the Chinese and hardly ever with the Chinese themselves" (6).[15]

III

It is this concern with agency and resistance, with the *asiancy* of Asian Canadian cultural work, that leads me to SKY Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. SKY Lee (a.k.a. Sharon Lee)[16] has been active as a visual artist, a writer, and an editor since the 1970s. She produced an early visual art series called "Iron Chinks";[17] three illustrations that appeared in *Inalienable Rice* (1979);[18] a raw and

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[15] It should be noted that Ward's arguments and assumptions—especially his assertion that class divisions in British Columbia between 1870 and 1930 were not as clear as divisions based on race ("Class and Race" 28)—have also generated hostile responses from Marxist scholars such as Rennie Warburton, who critiques Ward's "predilection for individualist and idealist explanations over structural and materialist ones" (83). For a heated exchange over this issue, see Ward "Class and Race"; Warburton "Race and Class"; and Ward "Race and Class."

[16] In her contribution to the oral history collection *Jin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women* (1992), Lee explains her name as follows: "My pen name is Sky Lee. It's my actual name, not a pseudonym—Sharon Kwan Ying Lee—my initials" ("Sharon Lee" 96-97). Note that she has published work under a variety of spellings of her name, including Sky Lee, SKY Lee, and S.K.Y. Lee. While noting the shifting authorial signature is perhaps instructive, I refer to Lee as SKY Lee, which is the spelling used in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.

[17] In *Jin Guo*, Lee describes this series as follows:

> "Iron Chinks" was actually the engraved name on a fish-cleaning machine.

moving short story called "Broken Teeth" that appeared in "The Asian-Canadian and the Arts" special issue of *West Coast Review* (1981);[19] and she co-edited a feminist collection called *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures* (1990).[20] Since that time, Lee has published *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990), a celebrated novel that is widely considered to be the first Chinese Canadian novel, but might more precisely considered to be, as Rita Wong points out, "the first novel in Canada that explicitly attempts to express a Chinese Canadian woman's viewpoint" ("Pressuring" 3);[21] an uneven collection of short stories

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> Chinese Canadian workers used to do really menial, hard labour in fish factories. I guess the capitalists tried to eliminate what little work the Chinese had by developing this automatic "Iron Chink" fish-cleaning machine, right? . . . I used this title for my series because I saw all kinds of symbolism in it. But basically, my series was portraits of my family, combined with writing about my experiences growing up. ("Sharon Lee" 96)

While Lee assesses "Iron Chinks" as technically "just crappy," she views it as "the first time people had valid comments to make about my work" ("Sharon Lee" 96). Perhaps equally significant is its integration of written text, which points ahead to her subsequent career as a writer.

[18] For these illustrations, see *Inalienable Rice* 8, 12, 26. Lee has also illustrated Paul Yee's *Teach Me How to Fly, Skyfighter.*

[19] See Sky Lee "Broken Teeth." This story also appears unmodified as the lead story in *Bellydancer* (1994).

[20] For this text, see Sky Lee et al. Note that Lee contributed two short essays to the text, which grew out of a conference held in Vancouver in November 1988.

[21] Earlier novels by Chinese Canadians that are known at this point include the many novels written by Winnifred Eaton, a daughter of a Chinese mother and an English father who adopted the fake Japanese-sounding name of Onoto Watanna and made a career out of writing "best-selling Japanese romances"

called *Bellydancer* (1994);[22] and a fine essay detailing the cultural politics of

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(Doyle 55) and other popular novels from 1899 on into the 1920s (see Ling; and Doyle for discussions of Winnifred Eaton's career in comparison to that of her sister Edith Eaton, who wrote stories and several powerful essays under the name Sui Sin Far); and also two novels by recently appointed Governor General Adrienne Clarkson published in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Clarkson *Lover*; and Clarkson *Hunger*). With the exception of the volumes of criticism being produced on Edith Eaton (most notably Annette White-Parks's fine work *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography*), very little scholarship has appeared on this aspect of Asian Canadian literary history; see White-Parks.

[22] *Bellydancer* functions as an important limit case for the kind of historical engagement I am arguing takes place in the Asian Canadian texts I discuss in this dissertation. In an interview, Lee describes *Bellydancer* as "very different from *Disappearing Moon*" (Sky Lee, "Is There a Mind" 394); she goes on to predict (correctly, it turns out) that "[i]t's not going to fall under a category very easily, it's not going to be kind of like a popularized novel like *Disappearing Moon* because of the content and, I guess, the spontaneity of the voices" ("Is There a Mind" 395). In a short review of the collection, I noted that "[i]t is heartening to see Lee take chances and not simply rework existing concerns and strategies into a formula for 'Chinese Canadian fiction'" (Beauregard, "Warming" 115). I would add, however, that the "spontaneity of the voices" identified by Lee often strikes me as painful overreach, notably evident in Lee's use of what one might call "hillbilly discourse" in "Bellydancer: Level One":

> Now, Seni Biln, you're always the prettiest girl we've ever seen. Isn't she, Paw? You'll always be a very special girl to us. . . . 'Member, Paw, that time when Ernest and Edgar had to go and hide out in them Ghostkeeper Hills for three months, after Ern made such a mess out of ol' Mrs. Oddy's boy? Damn, was that ol' shit *upppset*. (27)

Elsewhere, Lee's dialogue is marred by unapologetic flakiness. In "Pompeii," for instance, Lee writes: "'Don't call me Lulu,' I say fiercely. 'My Name is Dance of the Eternal Spirit'" (74). It's difficult to imagine many readers continuing past this line. While Lee brings a lighter touch to other stories, and attempts to connect them in a rather ambitious manner, I remain convinced, as I wrote in my review, that "*Bellydancer* remains an uneven collection lacking the focus and consistency which made *Disappearing Moon Cafe* a great novel" (Beauregard, "Warming" 115).

Disappearing Moon Cafe's reception.[23]

This last essay provides a useful starting point for a discussion of Lee's treatment of *history* in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. She writes:

> [In writing *Disappearing Moon Cafe*,] I wanted to trace a trajectory that was not only genealogical or chronological, but also a process of self-discovery as one moves away from a place of ignorance to a place of awareness. This was an understanding that could only be arrived at through a sense of history and place which I had to find or reinvent because it was not always readily available to me. ("*Disappearing*" 13)

This "sense of history and place" that Lee had to "find or reinvent" strikes me as a crucial part of her project in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Again, it is important to note that Lee is not an historian—like many of her readers, she has to make do with the tools at hand.

My argument is that *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is significant as a "theoretically informed and informing" contribution to the ongoing process of rethinking the representation of history in Asian Canadian literature. Here I am drawing on the work of Donald Goellnicht, who in an essay entitled "Blurring Boundaries" (1997) attempts "to read Asian American texts [specifically Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Kogawa's *Obasan*, Cha's *Dictée*, and Trinh's *Woman, Native, Other*] as theoretically informed and informing rather than as

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[23] For this essay, see S.K.Y. Lee "*Disappearing*."

transparently referential human documents over which we place a grid of sophisticated Euro-American theory in order to extract meaning" (340).[24] Likewise, I wish to approach *Disappearing Moon Cafe* as a theoretically informed narrative whose structure requires its readers to participate in the process of making connections between discrete historical moments stretching from the 1890s to the 1980s. As one reviewer pointed out, Lee, like the character Wong Gwei Chang, "is collecting the bones of her family's history, but rather than attempting to assemble them into distinct skeletons, she leaves it for the reader to connect them, while she handles and rubs each one individually in brief vignettes that switch from character to character" (Mostow 175-76). The precise significance of this readerly process is an issue to which I will return near the end of this chapter.

Reconstructing certain episodes in Chinese Canadian history was at the heart of Lee's fictional enterprise from the outset of her research for the novel. In an interview, Lee describes researching the Janet Smith episode in British Columbia history but not having "anywhere to go with it until years later," when

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[24] While Goellnicht's essay productively attempts to challenge the hegemony of "Euro-American theory," it is worth noting as an aside that its incorporation of *Obasan* as an "Asian American" text—despite paying attention to the "Canadian" specificities of Kogawa's novel—reinscribes the particular hegemony of that field. See the Introduction of this dissertation for my discussion of this point in relation to criticism by King-Kok Cheung and Sau-ling Wong.

she was able to exchange ideas in the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop.[25] The Janet Smith episode concerns the mysterious death of a young white woman in the upscale Shaughnessy neighbourhood of Vancouver in 1924; her death led to extensive debate in the British Columbia Legislature "whether to ban the employment of White women and 'Oriental' men as domestic servants in the same household" (Kerwin 83). As Scott Kerwin astutely observes, the proposed "Janet Smith Bill" (officially called "*An Act to Amend the 'Women's and Girls' Protection Act*" [Kerwin 95n47]) was:

> the product of larger intellectual and political forces at work in the province. Its goal of "protecting" White women was infused with complex meanings about race and nation that intimate the sexual dimensions of racism in 1920s British Columbia. (83)

In taking up this historical episode, Lee addresses white anxieties over miscegenation and the prospect of a "mongrelized" British Columbia[26]—as well

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[25] In the interview, Lee says:

> after I graduate from university I started doing the research [for *Disappearing Moon Cafe*], and I wanted to focus on this murder case, the Janice Smith [*sic*; i.e. Janet Smith] murder case. But I didn't have anywhere to go with it until years later, and again through the Asian-Canadian Writers Workshop [*sic*]—when we started exchanging ideas—I developed the venue for this murder story. ("Is There a Mind" 387)

[26] Kerwin presents a compelling and highly readable account of the Janet Smith episode. On the anxiety over "mongrelization," Kerwin writes:

> The bill's goal of "protecting" White women meant protecting their ability to produce White babies, to ensure the reproduction of a "White British

as the problem of addressing the question of agency and the ways the Chinese community in Vancouver mobilized itself to resist the proposed legislation. As such, Lee's use of the Janet Smith episode is *not* a "red herring," as one reviewer remarked.[27] It instead might be considered to be a crucial metonym for Lee's fictional project: reconstructing particular historical moments from available sources while narrating the historical agency of Chinese Canadians.

Lee carefully sets the action of her novel just after key moments in Chinese Canadian history, and, by doing so, she engages with the problem of narrating a history of resistance in the face of labour exploitation and various forms of legislated exclusion. The novel's opening narrative moment, for example, is 1892, which is significant as the period following the completion of the CPR in 1885 and the institution of the first of a series of federal head taxes directed at prospective Chinese immigrants that same year. Lee's narrative begins with the story of Wong Gwei Chang as a young man struggling through

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> Columbia." The bill attempted to combat miscegenation in the province by keeping young White women and Asian men apart, thereby preventing British Columbia from being "mongrelized" at an individual level. The debate over the Janet Smith Bill, therefore, became a debate over how British Columbia's history was unfolding and what its identity would ultimately be. (84)

I might add that the complexities of the Janet Smith episode and Lee's treatment of it could warrant a chapter of its own; and the intersections of "race" and "nation" in British Columbia in the 1920s could easily merit a book-length study. Both of these projects remain outside the scope of this chapter.

[27] Mostow makes this remark in what is otherwise a fine review of Lee's novel; see Mostow 176.

the interior of British Columbia, searching for the bones of the Chinese labourers who died building the CPR in order to help send them back to China for a proper burial. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* thus presents a literal search for the material, bodily traces of those who built the railway—the Chinese labourers whose presence is marginalized, as I mentioned above, in popular histories such as Berton's *The Last Spike*. In response to these elisions, Lee addresses the problem of how to collect and assemble skeletons and lives from scattered and shattered pieces of bone.

It is significant that Gwei Chang cannot collect the bones by himself; it is only with the help of Kelora Chen, a Native and Chinese woman he meets in the mountains, that he can overcome his hunger, thirst, and exhaustion, and begin to find a "place" in the wilderness. At this early point, Lee's narrative risks positioning Kelora as an agent of what Terry Goldie has called "indigenization": "the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous . . . through writing about humans who are truly indigenous, the Indians, Inuit, Maori, and Aborigines" (13). What happens, however, when members of an historically excluded group (in this case Chinese Canadians) use the trope of indigenization to assert a place in Canada? Lee's portrayal of Kelora raises precisely this question, and it does so with an awareness of the stereotypes that fix the cultural borders of "Chinese" and "Native": when Gwei Chang and Kelora first meet, they blurt out stereotypes of each other ("But you're a wild injun," he tells her; "You look hungry, chinaman" she responds [3]), leading Gwei Chang to realize that "the very qualities he had

assigned so thoughtlessly to her, . . . she was watching for in him" (3-4).[28] Even in minority-minority encounters, the shadow of whiteness and its attendant racist stereotypes of Natives and Chinese follow Lee's characters. Nevertheless, Gwei Chang plunges into a sexual relationship with Kelora with the same impulsiveness that he plunges into the rolling waters of a river—and with the same resulting energy vaulting through his body (8-9). And together with Kelora—and her father Chen Gwok Fai—Gwei Chang is able to collect the bones of the Chinese CPR workers and deliver them to the bone house in Victoria.

The narrative of *Disappearing Moon Cafe* quickly jumps to other historical moments, but the one I'd like to discuss is 1924. At this point, the location of the narrative action has shifted from the interior of British Columbia to the Disappearing Moon Cafe of the novel's title, a restaurant located in the racially segregated urban geography of Vancouver's Chinatown; the actors have shifted from Gwei Chang and Kelora to Mui Lan, her son Choy Fuk, and her daughter-in-law Fong Mei, on whom Mui Lan puts intense pressure to produce a male child. What has happened? Lee asks us to consider this question by pointedly setting the action in 1924, a year after the federal government passed the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act, commonly known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which, with very few exceptions, prevented Chinese immigration to Canada until it was

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[28] Intriguingly, Native writer Lee Maracle takes on the cross-perceptions and interactions of Native and Chinese characters in her story "Yin Chin," whose title is taken directly from the Chinese-accented version of "injun" blurted out by Wong Gwei Chang; see Maracle.

repealed in 1947.[29] It is well known that the Chinese Immigration Act, as well as the preceding series of infamous federal head taxes (which began immediately following the 1885 completion of the CPR and escalated up to $500 by 1903) are the only examples of Canadian immigration legislation that explicitly targeted and excluded a single, racially defined group. What are less known are the complex ways Chinese Canadians responded to the pressures generated by such legislation, and this is where *Disappearing Moon Cafe* becomes a key text in Chinese Canadian cultural history: it narrates the conflicting desires of Chinese Canadians, especially the women, during the period of exclusion; and, through the incest that ensues, it makes a powerful case for the destructive effects such legislation had on a community, and the complex ways characters in that community were complicit with and resistant to racist and sexist imperatives.

Crucial to the narrative complications is Gwei Chang's decision to abandon Kelora in favour of what he later calls a "real wife from China" (233). Racist notions of purity here inform what Foucault might call the biopolitical regulation of "the Chinese family" in Canada.[30] Gwei Chang is later haunted by

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[29] Ward writes that with the Chinese Immigration Act, entry to Canada was restricted to representatives of the Chinese government and their staffs, Chinese children born in Canada, students coming to university or college, and some merchants (*White Canada Forever* 133). "During the next quarter-century," Ward writes, "only a handful of Chinese crept through the narrowest of cracks that remained" (*White Canada Forever* 134).

[30] I am drawing here from Ong's *Flexible Citizenship*, especially her use of Foucault's notion of "various regimes of truth and power" to analyze "the institutional contexts and webs of power within which Chinese subjects (re)locate

his decision to leave Kelora, and there is considerable suffering along the way, especially as a result of the alleged, feared, and actual incest that follows. Graham Huggan makes the important point that incest in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* "is a reaction to intolerable outside pressures; it spreads within a marginalized community that is forced back on its own resources" (40). Clearly the novel supports such a reading, particularly in light of its observation that "[s]ince 1923 the Chinese Exclusion Act had taken its heavy toll. The rapidly diminishing chinese-canadian community had withdrawn into itself, ripe for incest" (147). I would add, however, that the incest that complicates the lives of the Wong family results from a deadly mix of an exclusionary immigration policy, generalized forms of white racism that insist (often violently) on the demarcation of "Chinatown" as a racially bounded space,[31] and the forms of biopolitical regulation enforced by characters such as Gwei Chang, Mui Lan, and later Fong Mei, who at various points in the narrative attempt to uphold the Wong family line at all costs. By presenting the insularity as to some degree *consensual*, as something to which the women in the Wong family have at some level agreed, Lee presents the biopolitical regulation not as a form of top-down domination but rather as a form of hegemony, in Gramsci's sense of *domination by consent*.

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and (re)align themselves as they traverse global space" (113). Ong draws particular attention to regimes of Chinese kinship and family, which are utterly relevant to understanding the cultural politics of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.

[31] For a well-known diachronic discussion of racial geography in Vancouver's Chinatown, see Kay Anderson.

And by scripting an element of consent into the narrative, Lee creates a space from which to dissent: to resist white racism *and* the imperatives to extend the patriarchal line in a racially "pure" "Chinese family."[32]

At the heart of such dissent is Kae Ying, who narrates the novel in 1986, and her aunt Suzie, whose name, Rita Wong has pointed out, blankly parodies the heroine of the 1961 film *The World of Suzie Wong* ("Pressuring" 13). Suzie is the first woman in the Wong family to utterly refuse to conform to social norms, and, in pursuing her unwittingly incestuous relationship with Morgan Wong, she pays dearly for her transgressions: her baby dies in a violent, botched delivery; she suffers a mental breakdown; and she dies in 1951 at the age of seventeen. In many respects—particularly in her own relationship with Morgan—Kae functions as Suzie's double, with several key differences in her life: she is able to have her baby, whose birth initiates her part of the narrative; she can reconstruct a history of the Wong family, and thereby situate her life in relation to the women who preceded her; and she is able to pursue an implied lesbian relationship with Hermia Chow in Hong Kong, a relationship that is never represented in the novel but nonetheless occupies a key position near the end of Kae's narrative. It seems to me that the narrative action that involves Kae in 1986 offers a moment of utopian diasporic wish-fulfilment, in which a socially empowered Chinese Canadian woman can renounce her professional status as a research

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[32] The punchline, of course, is that the Wong family in Canada, from the outset, is *not* "pure" but part Native. See Fee for a discussion of this point.

investment analyst, write a family history, and enter a same-sex relationship outside of Canada. And so while Gwei Chang in the Epilogue can only dream of what he left behind when he abandoned Kelora in favour of a "real wife" and a legitimate family,[33] Kae can and does pursue her own desires.

Such a reading of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, however, risks flattening its narrative into a simple teleology in which succeeding generations become progressively more empowered. The ambivalence of Kae's decision to join Hermia in Hong Kong suggests something more complex is taking place. In a novel so focused upon narrating a space for Chinese Canadians in *Canada*, such a resolution points toward the ambivalence of "progress" by asking *where is the space in Canada for Kae's and Hermia's same-sex relationship*? The resolution to Lee's novel simultaneously points toward the particular forms diasporic mobility may assume in the late twentieth century. As Asian American cultural critic Susan Koshy observed in the mid-1990s:

> What we see appearing are global networks that do not conform to earlier models of departure from Asia and settlement in America that occurred

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[33] I should emphasize here that Gwei Chang's dreaming at the end of the novel is *not* just an expression of his longing for Kelora's "Indian simplicity," as one critic would have it (see Brandt 133). It is instead part of the novel's larger meditation on the prohibition of miscegenation and the biopolitical regulation of "the Chinese family" in Canada. By contrast, Fee has written a much more sensitive discussion of the cultural politics of what she calls "the Asian Metis" in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, and the way Lee tackles "the issue of the taboos against incest and miscegenation that define the roles and assure the misery of most of her characters, both male and female" (2).

> within a vastly different geopolitical economy. For instance, China's impending takeover of Hong Kong has led to the dispersal of capital and family connections across a number of sites in Canada, Britain, Australia and the U.S., with the possibility of return or realignment pending an uncertain political future. (336)

The possibility of "return" or "realignment" in the face of the insecure political future of Hong Kong in the late 1980s makes the utopian aspects of the implied narrative action highly provisional and far from "settled." As a result, the implied "resolution" of Kae's narrative may be, in Miki's terms, more clearly part of a *revolutionary* aesthetic than a *resolutionary* one, in the sense that it opens up problems of location and desire instead of resolving them.[34]

Disappearing Moon Cafe is thus less a teleology than an attempt to work through the specificities of individual historical moments while at the same time making bold, sweeping connections between them. It is worth noting that attempts to make such connections—and the problems involved in doing so—are not unique to Lee's narrative; as Stephen Slemon has pointed out, the debate over historical specificity has been one of the central debates in colonial discourse theory, which asks "what happens when a model of 'colonial discourse' is carried beyond its scattered moments of archaeological research and is taken up as a general structure of oppression [i.e. 'colonialism']"

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[34] See Miki, "Asiancy" 143-44 for a discussion of these terms in relation to critical interpretations of *Obasan*'s conclusion.

("Scramble" 22). The problem raised in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*—how to link discrete historical moments to a larger concept of "Chinese Canadian history"—is thus closely related to other postcolonial investigations of history, collectivity, and resistance.

What seems particularly significant about reading *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is that the process of connecting individual historical moments is one in which we as readers are invited to participate: we too are asked to try to make sense of the narrative by trying to collect the bones that remain. Such a process necessitates a kind of interdisciplinary research—involving history, legal studies, cultural geography, and literary studies—that Lisa Chalykoff has suggested could help unsettle "an artificial sense of mastery and a subsequent complacency" (n.p.) that may result from the comfort of being located in a single academic discipline. But most of all, the process of reading *Disappearing Moon Cafe* requires critics to rethink the critical narratives we use to explain its engagement with history: is *Disappearing Moon Cafe* part of a "coming to voice"? Or are there other narratives we might draw upon to explain the work Lee's novel performs?

IV

At the beginning of this chapter, I posed the question: *How might critics read Asian Canadian writers reading the history of Asian Canadians and Asian*

immigrants to Canada? I wish to suggest that paying close attention to what Lowe has cleverly called *immigrant acts* can help us think through histories of resistance to forms of exclusion without relying on an implied narrative of progress in a "coming to voice" narrative. *Asian Canadian immigrant acts* consist of individual and collective acts of resistance to the historical and ongoing forms of exclusion that characterize Canada's state policies, the acts of its citizens, and the contours of its national imaginary. Engaging with these acts of resistance is especially urgent given the rather rapid way some recent criticism attempts to dismiss contemporary Asian Canadian literary portrayals of histories of exclusion in Canadian labour markets and the racialized urban geographies of Chinatowns. Maria Ng's article "Chop Suey Writing" (1998), for instance, situates its sensible call for "a wider and more inclusive representation of Chinese Canadian lives" (184) in a rather dismissive discussion of Sui Sin Far, Wayson Choy, and Judy Fong Bates. "Recent Chinese Canadian writers [such as Choy and Bates] present a more complex world of immigrant experience [than Sui Sin Far]," writes Ng, "but this world is still riddled with the stereotypical images of Chinese laundries and chop suey on the menu of Good Luck Cafés" (184). Ng's position deserves a more thorough discussion than I can provide here. I wish to suggest, however, that considering fictionalized representations of localized spaces (such as laundromats and restaurants) to be in and of themselves "stereotypical" is ahistorical, implicitly classist, and overtly dismissive of the creative ways texts such as *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and *Diamond Grill*

(both centred on the "café" culture Ng disparages) engage with stereotypical representations and the often hazardous consequences of crossing racialized spaces.[35]

It is perhaps telling that Ng engages with neither *Disappearing Moon Cafe* nor *Diamond Grill* in her attack on "Chop Suey Writing." As I have argued above, Lee's novel works through the very problem of reconstructing forms of agency in a history of exclusion. It does so by bringing Kae's narrative moment (1986) into focus by connecting it to a broad family history. As such, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* functions as a theoretically informed model for its readers, who themselves are encouraged to participate in the task of connecting specific historical moments in order to make the bolder claims needed to address broader social processes of racialization and racist exclusion. In an oft-quoted passage near the end of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Hermia asks Kae:

> Do you mean that individuals must gather their identity from all the generations that touch them—past and future, no matter how slightly? Do you mean that an individual is not an individual at all, but a series of

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[35] It is ahistorical to the extent that it mentions but does not engage with the histories of restrictions and split labour markets that have forced Chinese immigrants and Chinese Canadians into such "stereotypical" occupations (on this point, see Li, *Chinese in Canada* 43-55); and it is implicitly classist to the extent that it coincides precisely with Ong's description of "affluent Asian newcomers" to North America: "As extremely class-conscious subjects, they are offended by the popular American image of the Chinese as railroad and laundry workers" (*Flexible Citizenship* 101). In Ng's article, one senses (along with a necessary critique of racist stereotypes) a barely concealed resentment at being somehow connected with working-class Chinese immigrants and Chinese Canadians.

> individuals—some of whom come before her, some after her? Do you think that this story isn't a story of several generations, but of one individual thinking collectively? (189)

The challenge is for critics to train ourselves to read such immigrant acts—the individual and collective acts of resistance that Lee narrates against the exclusions and structural contradictions of the Canadian nation-state.

In this chapter, I have attempted to lay out some of the debates concerning the reading of history in Asian Canadian literary texts. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation build upon this chapter by turning to various diasporic interventions in the process of rethinking histories of anti-Asian racism in Canada. In these chapter, I pay particular attention to forms of collective identification and the ways they are constituted in response to (and not outside of) the historical pressures that enable their emergence. As such, the chapters that follow do not simply leave behind the problem of how to read Asian Canadian writers reading Asian Canadian history; they instead reframe this problem to discuss the historical constitution of the differing collectivities imagined so compellingly in Asian Canadian literary texts.

Chapter Two: Joy Kogawa's Critical Nationalism

In Chapter One, I asked how critics might read Asian Canadian history through Asian Canadian literary texts. The key point I emphasized was the need to read Asian Canadian literature in relation to the contradictory histories of exclusion that have structured the lives of Asian immigrants and Asian Canadians. I presented the history of Chinese immigration to Canada as a key instance of such a contradictory history of exclusion, and read SKY Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* as an important literary response to that history. Drawing on Asian American cultural critic Lisa Lowe, I named *Asian Canadian immigrant acts* as an enabling frame through which to read acts of resistance to a history of attempted but not absolute exclusion.

This chapter extends and reframes the questions I addressed in Chapter One. It extends my concern with reading Asian Canadian history in Asian Canadian literary texts by discussing literary representations of the internment of Japanese Canadians. But it reframes the questions I ask by turning to the differing forms of collective identification that have emerged in response to this history. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the work of Joy Kogawa, including her celebrated first novel *Obasan* (1981). Kogawa situates the question of collective identification in the context of the intense historical pressures generated by white racism and the Canadian state during the internment,

dispossession, dispersal, and the attempted and actual deportation of Japanese Canadians during and immediately following the Second World War. My argument here is that Kogawa's work intervenes in the process of remembering this history by emphasizing the dangers of diasporic identification at a moment in which the Vancouver *Daily Province* reported (as Kogawa quotes): "Everything is being done to give the Japanese an opportunity to return to their homeland" (*Obasan* 184).[1] When the Canadian state attempted to deport (and actually deported) thousands of Japanese Canadians (here identified as "Japanese"), the possibility of "going diasporic" as a mode of identification becomes profoundly troubled, in the sense that to make such a commitment (to Japan as a "motherland") would play directly into the hands of racist Canadian individuals and the state. If a form of diasporic identification becomes troubled, *Obasan*'s intervention takes the form of a critical nationalism that draws its source from the Canadian nationalism put forward time and again by Nisei activist and writer Muriel Kitagawa.

In order to address the contours of Kogawa's critical nationalism, and to explicate its relation to the work of Kitagawa, I have structured this chapter in three parts. I first examine how during the internment Japanese Canadian

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[1] As I will discuss below, this stated desire to give Japanese Canadians an "opportunity to return to their homeland" generated alarm and vigorous response in Japanese Canadian newspapers such as the *New Canadian* and *Nisei Affairs*; the Vancouver *Province* quotation above, for instance, appeared in a story on the front page of the *New Canadian* on 22 August 1945.

writers Muriel Kitagawa and Koichiro Miyazaki present strikingly differing forms of nationalist identification in their memoirs, letters, newspaper articles, and unpublished manuscripts. I then turn from these writings to Kogawa's poetry, essays, and her novels *Obasan* and *Itsuka*. In the third section of this chapter, I examine the mass of critical writing that deals with *Obasan* in order to return to a point I made in the Introduction concerning the attempted symbolic management of racism in contemporary Canadian literary criticism.

I

The internment of Japanese Canadians and its aftermath have become what Scott McFarlane calls "arguably the most documented instance of ethnic civil rights abuse in Canadian history" ("Covering" 401). Of the numerous historical accounts of the internment, perhaps the most thorough and polemical is Ann Sunahara's *The Politics of Racism* (1981), which was the first book-length history to discuss government documents made available after a thirty year ban on access (Miki, "Introduction" 33). Sunahara uses these government documents "to strip away the mask of wartime rhetoric and examine from the perspective of federal government policy the seven years [1942-49] in which Japanese Canadians were exiled in their own country" (Sunahara 3). Her basic argument is as follows:

> The documents demonstrate that each order-in-council under the War

> Measures Act that affected Japanese Canadians—uprooting, confinement, dispossession, deportation and dispersal—was motivated by political considerations rooted in racist traditions accepted, and indeed encouraged, by persons within the government of the day. The documents also show that at no point in the entire seven years of their exile were Japanese Canadians ever a threat to national security. (Sunahara 3)

Using the historical evidence assembled by Sunahara and others, the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) worked tirelessly in the 1980s to obtain redress for the losses sustained during these seven years. On September 22, 1988, the NAJC and the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney signed a negotiated redress settlement with the following provisions: "a government acknowledgement of the injustices done to Japanese Canadians during the Second World War; a $21,000 payment to each survivor; $12 million to the Japanese Canadian community, to be administered by the NAJC, for educational, social, and cultural activities and programs; and $24 million for a jointly funded Canadian Race Relations Foundation to foster racial harmony and help fight racism" (Omatsu 19-20).

Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, a number of key works on Japanese Canadian cultural history were published. Among these are Joy Kogawa's novels *Obasan* and *Itsuka*; accounts of the redress settlement by Roy

Miki and Cassandra Kobayashi, Maryka Omatsu, and Audrey Kobayashi;[2] and editions of writing by Japanese Canadians during the internment and its aftermath. The latter works include Muriel Kitagawa's *This is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings by Japanese Canadians, 1941-1948* (1985), edited by Roy Miki; and *Stone Voices: Wartime Writings by Japanese Canadian Issei* (1991), translated and edited by Keibo Oiwa. It is to these two works that I would like to turn.

The writings of Muriel Kitagawa are crucial examples of Japanese Canadian resistance to the racist imperatives of the Canadian state. She wrote both privately and publicly during the war and immediately afterward. In *This is My Own*, the "private" writings include the series of letters she wrote in 1942 to her brother Wes Fujiwara in Toronto, letters that Miki calls "dramatic, impassioned documents from the time in which the living words, the descriptions and statements, were set down—sometimes frantically—in the heat of the turmoil" ("Introduction" 33); they also include numerous manuscripts on Japanese Canadian history that Kitagawa wrote but never published. Her "public" writings include the many columns and letters she wrote for newspapers including *Nisei Affairs* and especially the *New Canadian*. The latter started publishing in 1938 and thereby provided a widely distributed, English-language paper for Nisei like Kitagawa to express their views (Miki, "Introduction" 31). In

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[2] For these accounts, see Miki and Kobayashi; Omatsu; and Kobayashi.

an unpublished manuscript that Miki dates c.1947, Kitagawa describes the function of the *New Canadian* during the war: "it was the only link between us and the events that swept away the troubled pattern of our lives into confusion" ("[Story]" 6).[3]

Kitagawa's writings are significant for the ways they express resistance through the language of Canadian nationalist identification. In order to pursue this point, I want to focus upon two related federal government policies that were directed at Japanese Canadians and vigorously denounced by Kitagawa in her writings: the policies of "repatriation" (in effect, deportation) and "dispersal" (in effect, forced relocation east of the Rocky Mountains). As Miki explains, the related policies began with the so-called "repatriation" survey, which attempted to pressure Japanese Canadians who were still in British Columbia in 1945 to leave Canada:

Though the government advertised the "repatriation" survey as a voluntary

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[3] In this untitled manuscript (which Miki calls "The Story of the Japanese in Canada"), Kitagawa writes:

> At the time of Godesberg and Munich, and after the start of the war in Manchuria, we started a little weekly paper called the "New Canadian," which became a voice crying out in the wilderness, and during the war....that is 1941 onwards, it was the only link between us and the events that swept away the troubled pattern of our lives in confusion..... (6; ellipses in original)

Note that a considerably modified version of this passage appears in *This is My Own* 244; here and elsewhere in *This is My Own*, Miki made changes to Kitagawa's writings, something he openly acknowledges in the "Editor's Note."

> decision on the part of Japanese Canadians, clearly the so-called "choice" offered was weighted in favour of expulsion to Japan. Those signing to go to Japan were allowed to stay in B.C. until they left, and they were offered free passage plus a resettlement allowance. East of the Rockies they were on their own. ("Introduction" 47)

Two Notices issued by the Department of Labour on 12 March 1945 announced the policies of the "voluntary repatriation" and "dispersal" of Japanese Canadians.[4] Along with the so-called "Loyalty Tribunal" (a commission proposed by Prime Minister King "to examine the background, loyalties and attitudes of all persons of Japanese race in Canada to ascertain those who are not fit persons to be allowed to remain here" [qtd. in Miki, "Introduction" 47, 50]), these Notices pressured Japanese Canadians to agree to "go back" to Japan, a place many of them had never seen. As Miki writes: "The Japanese Canadians who had been confined in detention centres in the interior of B.C. for three years were spiritually broken and disillusioned, and a shocking 10,000 initially agreed to expulsion to Japan. Many of them signed only to stay in B.C., being led to assume by the RCMP officers that they could change their minds later" ("Introduction" 51). Despite wide-scale public protest over the proposal of an even larger-scale

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[4] The two notices are entitled "To All Persons of Japanese Racial Origin Having Reference to Making Application for Voluntary Repatriation to Japan" and "To All Persons of Japanese Racial Origin Now Resident in British Columbia." They appeared on page 8 of the *New Canadian* on 17 March 1945, sandwiching a story with the headline "Loyalty Probe Also Proposed." Reprinted versions of the Notices can be found in Miki, "Introduction" 48, 49.

deportation policy, the Canadian state in 1946 ultimately sent nearly 4000 Japanese Canadians to war-torn Japan (Miki, "Introduction" 52).

But while many Japanese Canadians in British Columbia "agreed" (at least initially) to be "repatriated," Kitagawa—who by that time had relocated to Toronto—openly refused. She wrote an open letter entitled "Canada is Our Choice," which appeared in the *New Canadian* on 23 June 1945, and which was addressed to Mr. Pickersgill, Commissioner of Japanese Placement. In the letter, Kitagawa condemns the fact that "[e]very effort and devious method tries to persuade us that Canada is no place for us, that we would be better off in Japan" (2). She then makes a characteristically passionate assertion of her commitment to Canada: "We chose Canada long before you ever thought to ask us to choose. We chose Canada then, and we choose Canada now, with our eyes wide open to the probable consequences of our choice" (2).[5] In an untitled manuscript, Kitagawa glosses what she meant by this: "because we chose Canada knowing that our choice entailed further hardships, further discrimination, we were better Canadians than [Mr. Pickersgill, the one responsible for the repatriation plans] who was only born Canadian, who had no choice to make" ("[Story]" 14).[6]

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[5] Kitagawa's letter was signed by "Mr. and Mrs. E. Kitagawa, Toronto"; a reprinted version appears in *This is My Own* 204-05.

[6] A slightly altered version of this passage appears in *This is My Own* 247.

Meanwhile, stories and editorials on "voluntary repatriation" filled the *New Canadian* in March and April 1945.[7] Included among these articles are alarming quotations from politicians and public officials in British Columbia. In an unsigned 28 April 1945 article called "Repatriate All—Anscomb," Municipal Minister H. Anscomb of the British Columbia government is quoted as saying: "As far as I am concerned the Japanese in British Columbia are going back to their homeland and we will provide the boats to take them there" (1). In the face of such statements, editorials continued to assert a place for Japanese Canadians in Canada. An unsigned editorial called "'Expulsion'?," which appeared in the first issue of *Nisei Affairs* on 20 July 1945, asserted that "there are several thousand Japanese Canadians who are determined to be recognized as full and loyal Canadian citizens, and all the race-baiters and race-haters cannot alter the fact that they are CANADIANS" (2). At this point in history, many Japanese Canadian writers and activists (and not just Kitagawa as an isolated individual) were taking on the urgent question of deportation and asserting their own forms of critical nationalism.

In the fall of 1945, after the sudden end of the war in August, the federal government attempted to make binding the signatures of Japanese Canadians on the "repatriation" survey; brutal conditions of starvation in Japan, however, forced the federal government to wait until 1946 to deport Japanese Canadians

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[7] Such editorials include "The Return to Japan" (14 April 1945) and "Basis for the Future" (21 April 1945); see "Return"; and "Basis."

(Sunahara 124-25). At this crucial juncture, Kitagawa intervened again with an article called "Deportation is a Violation of Human Rights," which appeared in the *New Canadian* on 3 November 1945. Here Kitagawa contests the very terms under which Japanese Canadians signed for "repatriation":

> The racists can argue that the evacuees signed "voluntarily," but they have overlooked the causes of their signing. Mr. Pickersgill can protest that there was no "coercion." But the fact remains, Ottawa took mean advantage of the war-induced tensions in the ghost towns [where Japanese Canadians were interned in British Columbia]. (2)

Kitagawa emphasizes that "[t]his proposed 'deportation' is a monstrous violation of the Rights of Man," and she polemically concludes: "A boat chartered by Ottawa to deport these 10,000 souls is no better than the freight trains used by the Nazis. Only the degree of brutality differs" (2).[8]

In the meantime, the federal government was faced with the impending expiration of the War Measures Act and, with it, the opportunity to deport Japanese Canadians (Sunahara 125). Complex legislative manoeuvring enabled the federal government to by-pass criticism by the CCF and the press, and, on 15 December 1945, Mackenzie King's cabinet (and not parliament)

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[8] "Deportation is a Violation of Human Rights" was published in a regular column called "Hello There!" signed by "t.m.k." (i.e. Tsukiye Muriel Kitagawa). A slightly modified version of this article appears in *This is My Own* 205-07. Note that the Bibliography of *This is My Own* lists this article as appearing on 3 November 1946, which is a typographic error—the actual date is 3 November 1945.

approved orders-in-council to deport four classes of Japanese Canadians (Sunahara 127).[9] Sunahara points out that "Japanese Canadians, it appeared, were to be deported against the will of parliament" (128). By this point, however, organizations including the Japanese Canadian Committee for Democracy in Toronto and the Cooperative Committee on Japanese Canadians had mobilized considerable resistance to the deportation orders, and managed to challenge their legality in the Supreme Court. Lawyers for the Japanese Canadians argued that "the deportation of citizens was contrary to the accepted principles of international law and had been declared a 'crime against humanity' by the United Nations" (Sunahara 138). By January and February 1946, a large-scale anti-deportation campaign "produced the strongest outburst of spontaneous public reaction in the long career of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, an outburst King knew better than to ignore" (Sunahara 139). Ultimately, the Canadian state deported some 3,965 Japanese Canadians, 51% of whom were Canadian-born (Sunahara 143, 197n48).

Perhaps Kitagawa's most powerful piece of writing is "This is My Own, My Native Land!," an unpublished essay Miki dates c.1946-47—in other words, from around the moment in history that the Canadian state was deporting Japanese

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[9] These four classes are as follows: 1) all Japanese aliens who had signed for repatriation or had been interned at Angler; 2) all naturalized Japanese Canadians who had not revoked their repatriation requests before 2 September 1945; 3) all Nisei who did not revoke repatriation requests before actual deportation; 4) wives and minor children of the above (Sunahara 127).

Canadians.[10] In this essay, Kitagawa addresses the question of citizenship and her own place in the body politic of Canada. She narrates the story of herself as a twelve year old being asked to memorize a Canto from Sir Walter Scott's "The Lay of the Last Minstrel":

> Breathes there the man with soul so dead,
> Who never to himself hath said:
> This is my own, my native land!
>
> Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned
> As home his footsteps he hath turned
> From wandering on a foreign strand?

Kitagawa writes: "It was a breathless moment, and being only twelve I didn't know what to do with it. But from that moment those lines haunted me." From that point in her essay, she works through the question of belonging, with the line "This is my own, my native land!" repeated and questioned in light of the fact that, as Kitagawa writes, "I had identified myself with Canada; bitter or sweet, my tag was '*Canadian.*'" When she cries out, "*Is* this my own, my native land?," she replies with utter conviction:

> *Well, it is.* My Canadian birth certificate wasn't enough; my record....in a very small way.....as a fighter for TRUE Canadian democracy wasn't enough to prevent all that happened to me, because racially I am *not* Caucasian. I have to have something better than that. I have to have a deeper faith in Canada, a greater hope for Canada. My daily life, my

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[10] "This is My Own, My Native Land!" is reprinted with minor changes in *This is My Own* 286-88.

future must be an integral part of Canada. (ellipses in original)

The power of this passage lies in Kitagawa's uncompromising condemnation of racism coupled with her insistence that Canada nonetheless remains her nation. The nationalism that she puts forward is highly critical of the actions of the Canadian state, but, precisely because these actions involved a state-directed attempt to physically remove Japanese Canadians from the nation-space of Canada, she must assert her place in Canada even more insistently.

The impact of Kitagawa's convictions has continued to resonate far beyond the distribution of the newspapers in which she wrote. As I discuss in the next section of this chapter, Kogawa incorporated and modified much of Kitagawa's writing in *Obasan*, and, through Kogawa's novel, Kitagawa's words have reached thousands of contemporary readers, many of whom are unaware of Kogawa's sources. One such reader evidently is former Minister of State for Multiculturalism Gerry Weiner, who issued a press statement on 22 September 1988, the day the federal government and the NAJC signed the redress agreement. In this press statement, Weiner quotes the very passage I discussed above in the modified form it appears in *Obasan*.[11] The words "*I am Canadian*"—which appeared first in Kitagawa's essay "This is My Own, My Native Land!" and then in Kogawa's novel *Obasan*—are singled out by Weiner as "[t]he key to our negotiations," in the sense that "[t]he Canadian Government

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[11] See Miki and Kobayashi 150-51 for a reprinted copy of the press statement.

of the time committed unfair, discriminatory acts against loyal Canadians" (qtd. in Miki and Kobayashi 150-51). Kitagawa's acts of resistance thus indirectly set the terms for a redress settlement some 40 years after she wrote her letters, columns, and essays.

A very different set of nationalist commitments appears in the Japanese writings of Koichiro Miyazaki, whose memoir and diary are translated in the English-language collection *Stone Voices: Wartime Writings of Japanese Canadian Issei*. Miyazaki was the principal of a Japanese language school and—like Kitagawa—a journalist in Vancouver. Unlike Kitagawa, however, Miyazaki was a Japanese nationalist who disobeyed Canadian government orders to leave the West Coast; he was subsequently arrested and detained for two and a half years in the Petawawa and Angler prison camps in Ontario (Oiwa, Introduction 27). Keibo Oiwa writes in his Introduction to *Stone Voices* that "[d]uring, and just after the war, the main source of embarrassment for many Japanese Canadians were the *ganbari-ya* ["diehards"], those who refused to comply with government orders" (17). Miyazaki is clearly an example of such a *ganbari-ya*. What emerges in his memoir and diary is defiance expressed in the terms of right-wing Japanese nationalism, a nationalism that nevertheless enables him to critique pointedly the actions of the Canadian state.

In his diary, Miyazaki records the effects of the numbing routine in the prison camps, and his attempts to remain "truly Japanese." In late April and early May of 1942, he describes holding a worship ceremony of *Tencho-setsu*

(the Emperor's birthday), singing *Kimigayo* (the Japanese national anthem), reading Basho, composing haiku, and doing sumo wrestling (55-56). These actions seem almost stereotypically "Japanese," and indeed they purposefully are. In August 1942, Miyazaki writes: "life here [in Angler] seems empty but it is worthwhile because I believe that step by step I am climbing the hill to make myself truly Japanese" (65). Miyazaki's nationalism involves not only performing "Japanese" acts, but also identifying with "Japan" as a "native country." A key moment in his diary occurs on 10 May 1942, when he writes:

> After supper I walked around the track many times and I suddenly remembered the sky of my native country. The clouds were immobile over the birch woods; this cloud, that cloud, each one somehow brought me back to my country. (56)

Miyazaki also narrates his life in terms of the sacrifices he has made for his "people." On 7 March 1944, he recalls the day he was detained: "My memory of that day is still very vivid: my determination to sacrifice my own freedom and family life for the love of my country and the pride of my people" (84).

Miyazaki's form of Japanese nationalism led him to endorse wholeheartedly Japanese military expansion. But it also allowed him to formulate pointed critiques of the Canadian state. Referring to Slocan (where his wife was detained), he writes:

> Do the authorities still insist that this is to protect Japanese Canadians? Wouldn't it be better under the banner of 'persecution.' Even in wartime,

how can they justify treating civilians and especially women and children, with such cruelty? When the big Japanese victory comes, the people doing this will have to answer for their actions. (72)

Miyazaki was also able to situate the internment in a longer history of racism in Canada. He writes: "I read Canadian history and I'm learning a lot. I found out how Canada was built over four centuries by sacrificing native Indians. I was surprised that even in Canada there have been so many wars and struggles. That makes the theory of a democratic and peaceful Canada look hypocritical" (81). Here Miyazaki's nationalism intersects (however briefly) with Kitagawa's: both writers are acutely aware of the hypocrisy of the Canadian state. But while an awareness of this hypocrisy leads Kitagawa to assert her place in the Canadian nation even more forcefully, this awareness reinforces Miyazaki's commitment to Japan.

My point in comparing the forms of nationalist identification in the writings of Kitagawa and Miyazaki is not to label Kitagawa's (Canadian) commitments as "good" and Miyazaki's (Japanese) commitments as "bad"; nor is it to explain their differences according to "generational differences," with Kitagawa the Nisei identifying with Canada, and Miyazaki the Issei identifying with Japan. Rather, I am trying to name the specific forms of coercion promulgated by the Canadian state—in this context, the attempted wholesale deportation of Japanese Canadians and the imprisonment of Japanese Canadian dissidents—that produced the conditions out of which Japanese Canadians could express their

commitments. In other words, while Kitagawa and Miyazaki expressed their dissent in very different ways, their expression cannot be read as free "choices" available to all Japanese Canadians at that moment in history. Kitagawa's insistent assertion "*I am Canadian*" only makes sense in the context of Nisei activism in the late 1930s and the profound commitments made at that time to gain the franchise and a place in Canada's putative "democracy";[12] her questioning of the category "Canadian" and its racist exclusions comes, of course, from the explicit restrictions and exclusions directed at Japanese Canadians. Miyazaki's Japanese nationalism, on the other hand, must be contextualized in relation to Japanese military activity in Russia, Korea, Manchuria, and beyond, as well as in the way the Canadian state explicitly labelled him "Japanese" (not "Japanese Canadian") and *by definition* "disloyal." Miyazaki's numerous attempts to make himself more "purely Japanese" arise out of a physical condition—imprisonment in Angler—that clearly circumscribed his rights in Canada. The historical determination I am trying to name here is not simply a form of top-down domination; it is rather a set of intense historical pressures that generated particular options, out of which Japanese Canadian subjects expressed their commitments of identity.

II

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[12] See Miki, "Introduction" 29-31 for a discussion of the Nisei attempt to argue their case for the franchise in Ottawa in the late 1930s.

Now I would like to turn to Joy Kogawa's writings to investigate how they too situate questions of collective identification in relation to such historical pressures. My goal here is not to provide yet another extended close reading of *Obasan*, a novel that has already generated immense amounts of critical commentary. I will discuss the significance of Kogawa criticism in the next section. But first I wish to address a number of Kogawa's works, including her poetry, fiction, and essays, in order to discuss how she engages with questions of "cultural difference," histories of racialization, and forms of critical nationalism.

Kogawa's first published book of poetry is *The Splintered Moon* (1967), a slim 12-page chapbook, but her next collection, *A Choice of Dreams* (1974), is more substantial and to my mind unjustly ignored by nearly all critics of *Obasan*. In hindsight, *A Choice of Dreams* appears to be a kind of turning point in Kogawa's writing career, for while some of the poems have the abstract quality of those in *The Splintered Moon*, others are more direct in addressing issues of cultural difference and the impact of the internment. The first section of the book is called "About Japan," and it chronicles a trip to Japan and the "rummaging" Kogawa does upon her return to Canada. Historical memory is crucial here, especially in the poem "Hiroshima Exit":

> The Atomic Bomb Memorial Building:
> A curiosity shop filled with
> Remnants of clothing, radiation sickness,
> Fleshless faces, tourists muttering
> "Well, they started it."
> Words jingle down
> "They didn't think about us in Pearl Harbor"

They? Us? (*Choice* 33)

Here Kogawa pulls attention to the pronominal split between "they" and "us" to question its implications. Without naming the category of "race," Kogawa asks her readers to think about what defines and distinguishes these groupings—and the effects these groupings might have. Kogawa concludes the poem with these lines:

> I step outside
> And close softly the door
> Believing, believing
> That outside this store
> Is another door (*Choice* 33)

By stepping "outside," the narrative "I" hopes to find her way outside the racialized logic expressed within. The way "Hiroshima Exit" draws attention to the door (and expresses hope that there is another one through which to pass) gently prefigures the importance of doors—or, more precisely, the process of moving *through* doors—in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*, a text I will discuss at length in Chapter Four.

The poem "Early Morning Stage" is the second last poem in the series "About Japan," and it marks a transition from being in Japan to being in Ottawa. Here we see Kogawa claiming a kind of agency in the process of remembering the past:

> I remember that corner of Tokyo
> But now I open my eyes
> To a suburban white walled house in Ottawa
> Early morning and a long silence
> As if the curtain has just gone up

Or down and something electrifying has just happened
Or is about to happen and the day has just begun
Or ended. It is up to me to decide
. . . (*Choice* 49)

Clearly what's at stake here is the "choice of dreams" identified in the title of Kogawa's collection of poetry: when the narrative "I" opens her eyes to "a suburban white walled house in Ottawa," she stares unflinchingly at her present location. The "or" clauses are crucial here, acting as hinges that connect what has just happened with what potentially may happen in the future. "The mail truck crunches by" (*Choice* 49) at the end of "Early Morning Stage," raising the question of what messages (historical and otherwise) it may be carrying. These messages become more explicit in the final poem in the series, "Trunk in the Attic," where Kogawa writes:

Rummaging through the old metal trunk in
The attic above the church hall in Coaldale, Alberta—
The trunk which travelled with us
Through the World War 2 evacuation of Japanese
From the West Coast . . . (*Choice* 50)

Kogawa thus begins the process of rummaging and historical recovery that led to the writing of *Obasan*. She addresses this process in "What Do I Remember of the Evacuation," where the title becomes a recurring question that concludes on a highly ambivalent note:

And I remember the puzzle of Lorraine Life
Who said "Don't insult me" when I
Proudly wrote my name in Japanese
And Tim flew the Union Jack
When the war was over but Lorraine
And her friends spat on us anyway

And I prayed to the God who loves
All the children in his sight
That I might be white. (*Choice* 55)

Here identifying with "Canada" as part of the British Empire is not enough to escape being spat upon. The narrator's expressed desire to be "white" is something Kogawa has stated about herself in interviews.[13] I view this desire to be simultaneously a capitulation to assimilationist desires and a recognition of the violent consequences of being racialized as "Japanese" in Canada in the 1940s and beyond, a recognition that is clear on the micro level of the allegorically named Lorraine Life spitting on the narrator and Tim, and on the macro level of being interned in the interior of British Columbia. The question of how to identify as "Canadian" in the face of such pressures is one to which Kogawa returns with increasing sophistication in *Obasan*.

But before I turn to *Obasan*, I wish to examine a series of poems Kogawa published in "The Asian-Canadian and the Arts," a special issue of *West Coast Review* that appeared in 1981.[14] These poems are perhaps Kogawa's strongest; they are certainly her most distilled and ironic poetic statements on the

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[13] Kogawa has stated that "in the very first years when I was publishing I was like the other people of my generation—I had virtually no consciousness, except in a negative sense, of Japaneseness. I would see myself as white" ("Heart-of-the-Matter Questions" 20). And again: "Almost all my life I would have done anything to be white, I just wanted it so desperately" (Interview with Magdalene Redekop 97).

[14] These poems are also reprinted as part of the series "Road Building as Pick Axe" in Kogawa's *Woman in the Woods*; see 65-67.

internment and its aftermath. In "found poem," Kogawa addresses the dispossession of a Japanese Canadian:

> uazusu shoji
> who was wounded
> while fighting with the princess pats
> in w.w.1
> had purchased nineteen acres of land
> under the soldiers' settlement act
> and established a chicken farm
>
> his nineteen acres
> a two-storied house
> four chicken houses
> an electric incubator
> and 2,500 fowls
> were sold for $1,492.59
>
> after certain deductions
> for taxes and sundries were made
> mr. shoji received a cheque
> for $39.32 (10)

The ironic, bitter punchline to this poem names the material effects of the racism of the Canadian state, and, as such, it asks its readers to think about Canada's racist history in terms of how it affected the individual Japanese Canadian citizens who received paltry compensation for having their property sold off against their will. Kogawa generates a similar effect in "The Day After" in order to push her readers to rethink the place of Japanese Canadians in Canada:

> the day after Sato sensei
> received the Order of Canada he
> told some former pupils in Ottawa
> the honour he received
> was their honour, their glory
> their achievement

and one former pupil remembered
the time Sensei met the Emperor
and was given a rice cake—
how he brought it back to Vancouver
took it to a baker and
had it crushed into powder
so that each pupil might
receive a tiny bit

and someone suggested
he take the Order of Canada medal
and grind it to bits
to share with them (10)

The bitterness of the final stanza works brilliantly, in the sense that "sharing" the honour and glory of being recognized by the Canadian state involves crushing the medal to bits. Such ambivalence—wanting to partake in the recognition, and wanting to crush the symbol of it—hints at the complexity of Kogawa's position vis-à-vis "Canada" and Canadian nationalism. She brings that position into clear focus in the poem "May 3, 1981":

watching the flapping
green ferry flag on the
way to Victoria, the
white dogwood flower
centred by a yellow dot

a small yellow dot
in a B.C. ferry boat

today a headline
in the Vancouver Daily Province:
Western Canada Hatred
Due To Racism

ah my British
British Columbia my
first brief home (9)

Here Kogawa cannot but read present ongoing forms of racism in terms of her personal past in the province: being uprooted as a young child and being forced to leave the only place she had known as "home." The powerful cadence of the final stanza, with its pointed emphasis on the "British" in "British Columbia" and the loss of a "first brief home," makes "May 3, 1981" and the other poems in *West Coast Review* a high-water mark in Kogawa's poetry: clear images and an economical use of language make powerful use of poetic language to address the very concerns she would continue to explore in *Obasan*.

In the context of my argument, Kogawa's first novel *Obasan* (1981) is important for the way it addresses questions of nationalism by building upon and modifying the work that preceded it, especially the work of Muriel Kitagawa. It is well known that while writing *Obasan* Kogawa drew upon and incorporated the Kitagawa writings that she uncovered at what was then called the Public Archives of Canada. In an important essay called "The Japanese-Canadian Dilemma" (1985), Kogawa writes about encountering the "dear unrelenting ghost" of Kitagawa:

> When I first read her material, I was gripped. I carried her papers through the halls of the Archives, holding back the tears, facing the corners where no one could see me. Sometimes, around midnight, I would sit alone in the huge rooms of tables and let the floodgates loose. (32)

The emotional connection Kogawa felt through the process of reading Kitagawa's work becomes, in Kogawa's essay, closely tied to the form of

nationalism Kitagawa expressed. "Whatever else Muriel did or didn't do," writes Kogawa, "she did not fail to love Canada and Canadians. There was no other country for her" ("Japanese-Canadian Dilemma" 32). Indeed, in "Go East!," Kitagawa wrote (as Kogawa quotes) "we could not conceive of ourselves as anything but Canadian" ("Japanese-Canadian Dilemma" 32).[15] Kogawa herself has expressed a similar position in interviews. For instance, when an interviewer asked her "What about your links with Japan?," Kogawa responds unequivocally: "My commitment is to Canada" (Interview with Jeanne Delbaere 464).

And certainly what emerges in *Obasan* is a form of critical nationalism that draws its source from the nationalism put forward time and again by Kitagawa. Thus, *Obasan* narrates the relentless drive for redress pursued in the novel by Emily Kato, a character who insistently asserts her "place" in Canada in a way modelled after the figure of Kitagawa herself. In one of Emily's manuscripts, the narrator Naomi finds "a statement underlined and circled in red: *I am Canadian.*

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[15] Kitagawa's statement appears as a dramatic, hand-written addition to the conclusion of a draft version of "Go East!" held in the National Archives; it does *not* appear in the manuscript version in the National Archives, nor in the version that appears in *This is My Own* 252-68. The concluding paragraph reads as follows:

> As for our future: it is here in Canada for better or for worse. We are about the only racial group that had to choose our allegiance under such stress and strain, under duress. Hardships, obstacles, persecutions tend to crystallize the instinctive loyalty, when it is thus threatened. For most nisei, even for the bitterest ones, there really was no choice at all, because whatever the provocation, we could not conceive of ourselves as anything but Canadian. (34)

The circle was drawn so hard the paper was torn" (*Obasan* 39). The very material on which Emily asserts her nationalist identification rips under the pressure of the assertiveness with which she needs to express it.

It is important to note, however, that Emily's voice is not interchangeable with Kitagawa's. As Scott McFarlane writes, "Aunt Emily greatly varies from Muriel Kitagawa" ("Covering" 406), in the sense that "Aunt Emily's writing functions primarily in the private sector as a *passive* record of past events rather than as an *active* narrative of opposition to the internment"; as such, Aunt Emily is a 'domesticated' version of Kitagawa" ("Covering" 407). While McFarlane astutely observes that Emily's writings in *Obasan* are much more "private" than many of the letters and articles Kitagawa published in the 1940s, surely it is worth noting that Emily as a fictional character continues her fight for redress beyond 1974, which is the year Kitagawa died.

But the more relevant point is that Emily's voice cannot stand in for the multiple discourses that constitute Kogawa's novel. As Frank Davey has noted, "[t]here are considerable difficulties . . . with any reading that would reduce *Obasan* to Emily's activist, positivist, Nisei position" ("This Land" 104), in the sense that such a reading would ignore the prominence of Aya Obasan as the novel's title character, Naomi's skepticism about Emily's clear-cut vision of "truth," and the role of the multiple discourses that frame the novel. These discourses include the biblical epigraph, the disclaimer/acknowledgements signed "Joy Kogawa," the much-discussed proem, and the "Excerpt from the

Memorandum" that appears at the end of the novel. The novel, in other words, consists of competing and often conflicting discourses that may provide an opportunity to rethink how Kogawa might be "claiming the nation." Kogawa writes in one of *Obasan*'s most famous passages:

> Where do any of us come from in this cold country? Oh Canada, whether it is admitted or not, we come from you we come from you. From the same soil, the slugs and slime and bogs and twigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. (226)

Naomi's unspoken outburst comes in response to a neighbour's patronizing reference to "our Japanese," and it presents a form of nationalism that makes an impassioned plea for a "place" in Canada while critiquing the violence inflicted by the Canadian state on those it plucks out like weeds. There are, however, conflicting elements in this passage (and in the novel as a whole) that cannot be glossed over in our understanding of the form of critical nationalism that appears in *Obasan*: while Naomi insists that "we come from you we come from you," she acknowledges that "[Aya] Obasan . . . does not come from this clamorous climate" (226); while the Canadian state makes perceived identification with "Japan" grounds for deportation, Naomi desperately tries to reconnect with her mother in Japan; and while Naomi attempts to assert a "place" in the Canadian national imaginary, her efforts are consistently informed by an awareness of the profound epistemological and historiographic difficulties concerning

representation and social change.[16]

Yet another issue that complicates the form of nationalism narrated in *Obasan* is Kogawa's repeated tendency to universalize the suffering of Japanese Canadians as part of "the human condition," and to consider Canada to be a "land just like any other land." Indeed, in the essay "Is There a Just Cause?" (1984), Kogawa writes: "Inadequacy is a universal experience and we are all broken and incomplete like jig saw puzzles" (20). Similarly, in the proceedings of a conference held in 1988, Kogawa writes: "We just sort of stumble to the right, and we stumble to the left, and we struggle, and that's what it means to be part of the human condition" ("From the Bottom" 97). How do we read the tension between Kogawa's desire to universalize suffering and her

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[16] For an important and somewhat acrimonious debate over the nature of this issue, see Goellnicht "Minority History"; and Kanefsky. For Goellnicht, a "major point in Kogawa's fiction" is that "her text [i.e. *Obasan*] problematizes the very act of reconstructing history by comparing it to the process of writing fiction" ("Minority History" 287-88). Goellnicht refuses, however, to slide into relativism: "while language is not representational, does not reflect empirical reality . . . , it can shape reality on both personal and socio-political levels" ("Minority History" 299). Thus, in *Obasan*, while Naomi is aware that "the truth for me is more murky, shadowy, and grey," she is also urged into action ("Minority History" 302). Kanefsky's article, which was published seven years after Goellnicht's article and openly attacks his work, argues that "antiessentialist implications are evident in Kogawa's writing only to demonstrate their practical futility" (15). Thus, for Kanefsky, *Itsuka*'s march to singular truth (which I discuss below) is viewed as a reaffirmation of liberal humanism as a means of political change and historical agency. But ultimately, Kanefsky's "debunking" of "a Postmodern conception of history" (as the title of her article would have it) rests on what I consider to be a lazy intellectual move: conflating a critical interrogation of discourse and the construction of "history" with an easy-to-attack relativism, in which "history" is just a "subjective construct" (11).

desire to situate it in specific historical contexts? How does Kogawa's particular form of Christian humanism relate to the forms of critical nationalism put forward in her literary writing? Does her attempt to universalize suffering enable or invalidate the political project of narrating the internment and its aftermath?

It is perhaps not surprising that critics have disagreed about how to answer such questions. In an unpublished MA thesis, Caroline Sin examines the question of "resistance" in *Obasan* "in the context of its Christian humanist framework," and, more specifically, in the context of how "the universalizing gestures that are made throughout the novel . . . can be politicized as tools for resistance" (13). In contrast, Frank Davey reads what he sees as *Obasan*'s tacit acceptance of "the human condition" as politically disabling. He reads the "Oh Canada" passage I quoted and discussed above as making a "claim to membership in universal humanity" ("This Land" 108), and he argues that *Obasan* "is a novel that . . . implicitly accepts the injustices done to Japanese Canadians during 1940-7 as part of the 'human condition' its universalizing strategies have constructed" ("This Land" 112). While I think that Davey is right to draw attention to Kogawa's Christian humanism, it seems to me that the novel raises all kinds of contradictions and disruptions that can't be so smoothly glossed over. For while Naomi may try to explain the internment and its aftermath as part of a universal human suffering, the very weight of history bears down upon her explanations and clamors for attention. Davey may claim that "Canada, as *Obasan* expresses it, is 'a land like every land'" ("Return to History"

30), but I believe it is perhaps more productive to think of the novel in terms of its competing discourses, the sum of which presents "claiming the nation" as a conflicted and considered critical strategy that can be reduced neither to an apolitical universalism nor to an uncritical nationalism.

Kogawa's second novel *Itsuka* (1992/93), on the other hand, poses a different set of problems.[17] In tracking Naomi's involvement in the redress movement of the 1980s, the novel addresses the ways a scattered community can come together and mobilize itself politically. Naomi reports her Aunt Emily's speech:

> We're pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, she says, scattered across the country. The scars, the marks of our separation, remain. But the picture grows clearer, our wholeness starts to form, when even a few of us, in our brokenness, come together. (161)

I will return shortly to some of the implications of Kogawa's appeal to "wholeness." But before I do so, I wish to stress that despite the abundant flaws in *Itsuka*'s narrative,[18] Kogawa's novel generates considerable energy in

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[17] *Itsuka* was first published in 1992; following a series of hostile reviews, Kogawa revised the novel, which was then reissued as a Penguin paperback in 1993. A detailed analysis of the two editions would be very useful to track the genealogy of the text, but such analysis is outside the scope of this chapter. Note that the references I make to *Itsuka* are drawn from the revised edition.

[18] Perhaps most glaring is the rather lumpy integration of a romance between Naomi and Father Cedric, which includes the requisite "walk in the woods" after which, Kogawa writes: "Nothing will ever be the same again" (135).

narrating the process of a community coming together. "People have come out from their suburban homes, their white neighborhoods, their highrises and, like Min, their little rooms," writes Kogawa. "They've come stumbling out of the highways and byways, the dusty attics and the railway stations of the mind, eager to hear the latest word" (203). In this passage, Kogawa returns to the catalogue of images she utilized in *A Choice of Dreams*. But while in poems such as "Early Morning Stage" the narrative "I" was a lone figure opening her eyes to "a suburban white walled house in Ottawa," in *Itsuka* the narrator Naomi bears witness to a collective political mobilization.

A problem posed by *Itsuka*, however, is that the narrative conclusion (in which Japanese Canadians obtain redress for the internment and its aftermath) becomes a triumphalist assertion of "wholeness" and "belonging" that works against the interrogatory potential of the critical nationalism Kogawa had developed in *Obasan*. Naomi responds to the redress settlement by stating: "I am whole. I am as complete as when I was a very young child" (276). As Kogawa writes, "to be Canadian means what it hasn't meant before. Reconciliation. Liberation. Belongingness. Home" (277)—all through recognition by the Canadian state. Apollo Amoko observes that "this resolution has the paradoxical effect of normalizing a progressivist and triumphant official nationalism" (n.p.). Indeed, as Heather Zwicker has convincingly argued, *Itsuka*

eschews the forms of critical nationalism put forward in *Obasan*.[19] Zwicker writes that "while *Itsuka* overtly criticizes official multiculturalism at the level of dialogue, it does not question its ideological struts; consequently, its critique of nationalist common sense is far less profound than that of *Obasan*. Whereas the earlier novel resists closure, *Itsuka* imposes happy endings on all of its stories, cast in a Christian context that works against political urgency" (19-20).

But is the ending of *Itsuka* as happy as it appears? Like *Obasan*, *Itsuka* ends with a document, this time an "Acknowledgement" from the Canadian federal government. This concluding document states that "the excesses of the past are condemned and . . . the principles of justice and equality in Canada are reaffirmed" (n.p.). What's at stake here is a particular way of reading Canadian history, in which a recognition of a "racist past" (here identified as "excesses of the past") is scripted into a narrative that reaffirms "the principles of justice and

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[19] In one of the few serious critical discussions of *Itsuka*, Zwicker differentiates *Obasan* and *Itsuka* by situating them in differing moments of Canadian multiculturalism, a move that is both useful and urgently needed given the present state of Kogawa criticism (which I will turn to shortly). Zwicker argues that:

> *Obasan* responds to early state multiculturalism's elision of race by making internment visible to a nation that had tried to forget it. Although it became part of a political struggle, its political work consists of asking questions about commonsensical notions like silence and speech, past and present: it queries the struts of nationalist common sense. *Itsuka*, on the other hand, gets caught up with the excited lip service paid [to] race in the 1980s; piggybacking on Mulroney's exuberant promises, it collapses its critical distance from official national discourse as it is recirculated as multicultural policy. (21)

equality in Canada." This narrative of recognition (of racism *in the past*) and reaffirmation (of Canada as a nation *in the present*) continues to be rehearsed in critical discussions of Kogawa's texts. And, as I emphasize in the next section, these critical discussions are therefore an important site in which to investigate the cultural politics of the knowledge that continues to be produced around the internment.[20]

III

While most Asian Canadian texts have to date received limited critical attention, Kogawa's *Obasan* has seen a huge volume of criticism follow in its wake. At the

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[20] As an aside, I wish to point out that Kogawa's latest novel *The Rain Ascends* (1995) departs from the history of the internment and the redress movement of the 1980s. But despite its apparent move away from Japanese Canadian history, *The Rain Ascends* reads like an attempt to rework the style and structure of *Obasan* in order to focus on a daughter's need to forgive a pedophile father. Kogawa partially succeeds in recapturing the ethical need to *speak* that animated *Obasan*, and she certainly moves away from the triumphalist narrative of *Itsuka*, but *The Rain Ascends* is nevertheless marred by New Age platitudes (such as Mercy and Abundance) and a certain poetic lumpiness (especially in the Prologue) that makes it read at times like an unintentional parody of *Obasan*. I suspect that the apparent movement away from Japanese Canadian history in *The Rain Ascends* will lead to scant critical attention in a literary establishment that loves to love *Obasan*. But Kogawa's decision to use white characters deserves attention, *not* simply because she "should" be writing from the perspective of Japanese Canadian characters, but rather because it attempts to make "race" neutral in the novel's focus on forgiveness. The use of what one might call "white drag" in *The Rain Ascends*, and its relation to the intensely personal nature of the subject matter addressed in the novel, deserves discussion that is outside the scope of this chapter.

time of this writing, I know of some forty-four articles or book chapters published on *Obasan*. And, perhaps even more significantly, *Obasan* has helped shape the ways literary critics are addressing questions of "history" and "cultural difference" in Canada. For example, the entry on contemporary Canadian novels ("Novels in English 1983 to 1996") in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1997) refers to *Obasan* in its opening and closing paragraphs to frame its discussion of the numerous texts published in the period.[21]

In response to this phenomenon, I wish to ask what this remarkable degree of attention might mean. In asking this question, I am building upon important existing research by critics including Scott McFarlane, Roy Miki, David Palumbo-Liu, and Sau-ling Wong.[22] Miki's essays, for example, consistently

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[21] For this entry, see Heble. What makes the attention directed at *Obasan* even more noteworthy is the fact that Kogawa's novel was not even published during the historical period under discussion (1983 to 1996).

[22] McFarlane and Miki have questioned the politics of *Obasan*'s reception, while Wong has written a thorough and convincing discussion of what she calls "the Amy Tan phenomenon." Palumbo-Liu makes the following important point regarding the formation of "ethnic literary canons" in the US:

> certain 'texts' deemed worthy of representing the 'ethnic experience' are set forth, yet the critical and pedagogical discourses that convey these texts into the classroom and present them to students and readers in general may very well mimic and reproduce the ideological underpinnings of the dominant canon, adding 'material' to it after a necessary hermeneutic operation elides contradiction and smooths over the rough grain of history and politics, that is, those very things that have constructed the 'ethnic" in the United States. (Introduction 2; qtd. in Miki, *Broken Entries* 179n2)

For these discussions, see McFarlane "Covering"; Miki "Asiancy"; Miki *Broken*

question the incorporation and institutionalization of texts by writers of colour (including *Obasan*) in Canadian literary criticism. "What's a racialized text like you doing in a place like this?" Miki asks in the title of one of his essays. My goal in this section is to build upon this kind of interrogatory criticism. In doing so, I wish to explicitly tie this section back to my discussion of Canadian literary criticism in the Introduction. At that point, I argued that certain forms of Canadian multicultural literary criticism "normalize" cultural difference by closing down critical investigations of the historical and ongoing significance of "race" in Canada. Here I am suggesting that Kogawa criticism is a key metonym for the contradictions and elisions that characterize cultural pluralist accounts of "difference" in Canadian literary studies. In this section, I discuss how these contradictions and elisions work, and thereby foreground the cultural politics of the knowledge being produced around *Obasan* and the history of the internment.

Why have critics focused so intently on *Obasan*? One "simple" answer to this question is that Kogawa's novel combines charged political content and a moving personal narrative with uncommonly fine use of language that often verges on the "poetic." The attention that critics have lavished on *Obasan*, this explanation goes, is a function of its formal greatness: the density of its poetic language, the depth of its haunting symbols, and so on. A second "simple" explanation is that the novel engages with questions of historiography at a

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Entries; Sau-ling Wong "Sugar Sisterhood"; and Palumbo-Liu Introduction.

moment in which literary critics were also trying to sort through such issues. Kogawa's engagement with the internment and its aftermath thus became part of larger debates on the reconstruction of "history," the knowability of the past, and the connections between historical and literary narratives.

While these "simple" explanations can certainly help us to figure out why *Obasan* might matter to contemporary critics, I wish to take a slightly different tack. I suggest that many critics have written on *Obasan* because it offers them a golden opportunity to reconsider assumptions about "Canada" in the name of a multiculturally correct focus on "cultural diversity." With greater regularity than Uncle Isamu visiting the coulee with Naomi, literary critics revisit *Obasan*, mourning something that has been lost. Making sense of this ongoing act of mourning—and the contradictions within it—may be the most interesting contemporary problem facing Kogawa criticism. I argue that while critical discussions of *Obasan* have relentlessly rehearsed and condemned a specific moment in Canadian history—namely, the internment and its aftermath—they have often presented that history in ways that limit a serious contemporary investigation of the history of racism in Canada.

Donna Bennett's influential article "English Canada's Postcolonial Complexities" (1993-94) makes a brief yet significant mention of Kogawa's first novel: "*Obasan* dramatizes the error made by a Canadian wartime government that resulted in the internment or relocation of *Canadians*, and shows the reader how that error arose from the persistent misperception of Japanese-Canadians

as Japanese" (192). Bennett is of course right to draw attention to the question of nationality and how Kogawa emphasizes the "Canadianness" of Japanese Canadians. Her description of the Canadian state's actions as an "error," however, strikes me as a crucial misreading of Canadian history and the role of "race" in the Canadian national imaginary. Calling the internment, dispossession, dispersal, and deportation of Japanese Canadians an "error" suggests that these policies were somehow the result of mistaken judgement—a "misperception," as Bennett puts it—instead of calling attention to the historical depth of the racialized logic that underwrote the actions of the Canadian state.

Bennett is not alone in configuring the internment as a mistake in judgement. B.A. St. Andrews (1986), for instance, refers to Japanese Canadians as "those victimized by racial misunderstandings" (31), an assertion that suggests that had there been better "understanding" at that point in history, the internment would presumably not have occurred. Erika Gottlieb (1986), in a much more extensive reading of *Obasan*, similarly claims that "Canada fell victim to the hysteria—fear, greed, the need for a scapegoat—it was fighting against" (43). In each of these cases, critics configure the internment as an irrational aberration in Canadian history, one that can safely be explained as an "error," or a "misunderstanding," or a result of wartime pressures on the Canadian state. What gets left behind in such critical accounts is, in short, the history of anti-Japanese racism in Canada, a history that extends far beyond the narrow and tumultuous window of 1942-49. Restrictions on immigration, the franchise, and

the ability to enter or remain in certain professions are only the most obvious forms of racism that shaped Canada and the subjectivities of Japanese Canadians from the late nineteenth century onward.[23] To consider the accumulated weight of this history to be an "error" is to trivialize its effects.

A second point in Kogawa criticism I'd like to draw attention to involves focusing on perceived "generational differences" in the Japanese Canadian community. One effect of this discourse is to locate social conflict in the realm of "generational differences" and *not in the structural contradictions of racialization*. For instance, Mason Harris's baldly titled article "Broken Generations in 'Obasan'" (1990) both universalizes the workings of "immigrant communities" and essentializes the particularities of Japanese Canadians. Harris writes:

> In all immigrant communities the first, second, and third generations represent crucial stages in adjustment to the adopted culture. The importance of these generations in the Japanese Canadian community is indicated by the fact that they are given special names: *Issei* (immigrants from Japan), *Nisei* (the first generation born in Canada), and *Sansei* (the children of the *Nisei*). ("Broken Generations" 41)

The temptation here is to dismiss Harris's explanatory frame as bad sociology that rests on an imprecise knowledge of Japanese: to claim that "generations"

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[23] Miki addresses precisely this issue in an essay called "Unclassified Subjects: Question Marking 'Japanese Canadian' Identity"; see *Broken Entries* 181-204.

are of particular importance to Japanese Canadians because Japanese has the words *Issei*, *Nisei*, and *Sansei* is tantamount to saying that "generations" are important to English speakers because English distinguishes between *first generation*, *second generation*, and *third generation*. As Harris himself acknowledges, his argument draws heavily on Ken Adachi's *The Enemy that Never Was* (1976), an important general history of Japanese Canadians that nevertheless tends to essentialize "generational differences" in undifferentiated references to "the Nisei" and their "conflict" with "the Issei."[24]

For Harris, the notion of "generations" accounts for not only the particular

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[24] In the chapter entitled "Generations," Adachi frequently refers to members of the Japanese Canadian community on the basis of undifferentiated references to their generation, references that appear in the form of assertions that "the Nisei were . . ." or "the Nisei felt . . ." (158). Harris provides the following summary of Adachi's argument:

> In his comprehensive history of the Japanese Canadian community, Ken Adachi describes the conflicts between Issei and Nisei generations. These conflicts are characteristic of any immigrant culture, but made sharper for Japanese Canadians by the conservatism of the Issei community and its rejection of the *mores* of western culture. Like many first-generation immigrants, the Issei sought a dignified accommodation with the surrounding society, *but without joining it or altering their way of life*. ("Broken Generations" 42; emphasis mine)

I have many problems with this account, but the one I'd like to emphasize is the benighted characterization of "the Issei" as autonomous liberal subjects able to "choose" whether to "join" the "surrounding society" or to "alter" their "way of life." I would suggest, by contrast, that the very subjectivities of the Issei were constituted by and against the various forms of violence and outright exclusion directed against them (such as the 1907 Vancouver Riot and the subsequent so-called Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan, which severely curtailed immigration from Japan to Canada).

history narrated in *Obasan*, but also the more general category he identifies as "autobiographical narratives by Asian-North American women" ("Joy Kogawa" 148). Harris writes:

> The most obvious feature that the novels of Kogawa, [SKY] Lee, and [Amy] Tan have in common is an intense concentration on the relation between mother and daughter as the focal point for conflicts between the values of the old and new worlds. . . . The central problem is a failure of communication between the generations caused by the imposition, especially on females, of old-world moral constraints that suppress the truth of both personal experience and family history, as opposed to the determination of the novel-writing daughter to liberate herself in the present while recapturing the family past—and exposing its secrets in the process . . . . ("Joy Kogawa" 148)

Here Harris stages the notion of "generational differences" alongside the discourse of being "caught between worlds," especially, in this case, in relation to what Harris calls the "old-world moral constraints" that affect the lives of the female characters. Framing the "conflicts" in *Obasan* (and more generally in Asian Canadian literature) as a matter of a "failure to communicate" between the "generations" functions, I think, as a kind of critical dead end in which "constraints" are located in "old world" morality. In such accounts, the structural forms of racism addressed in Lee's and Kogawa's fiction are at best

obfuscated—and at worst elided.[25]

The point I wish to make here is not simply that critics such as Bennett, Harris, and the others I've just discussed are all "wrong." Despite the theoretical or methodological disagreements I have with them, I think it is too simple to dismiss their criticism outright. My point is instead that such criticism serves the function of attempting to symbolically manage the implications of a particular moment in Canadian history *by remembering it in a particular way*—in this case, remembering the internment as an "error" or as a "conflict between the generations." As such, critical discussions of *Obasan* share a great deal with ongoing debates over "commemorating" and "remembering" colonial histories in a postcolonial era. A particularly valuable debate about "historical memory" is occurring over what Lisa Yoneyama calls "Japanese amnesia" about the violence of its colonial past. Yoneyama argues that while examples of this "amnesia" (over, for instance, Japanese military atrocities in the Rape of Nanjing) are easy to locate in the pronouncements of Japanese politicians and in the policies of the Japanese Ministry of Education, a significant shift has occurred in how "the past" is remembered:

> Contrary to the common perception, the hegemonic process within the production of Japan's national history is moving beyond what we currently

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[25] The problems posed by Tan's work merit an extended discussion that is outside the scope of this chapter. For an intelligent discussion of these problems, see Sau-ling Wong "Sugar Sisterhood."

> see as reprehensible—that is, beyond amnesia—to a point where those in power are contriving to "come to terms with the past" (Adorno 1986), through at least partially acknowledging the nation's past misconduct and inscribing it onto the official memoryscape. Yet, as Theodor Adorno wrote, the coming to terms with the past (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) "does not imply a serious working through of the past, the breaking of its spell through an act of clear consciousness. It suggests, rather, wishing to turn the page and, if possible, wiping it from memory" . . . . (Yoneyama 504-05)

In the case of contemporary Japan, the key issues at stake revolve around "coming to terms" with a history of military aggression. "To secure political and economic stability in the adjacent Asian and Pacific region," writes Yoneyama, "it has become necessary for the government to incorporate memories of Japan's colonial and military atrocities into national history, but in a manner that does not threaten the present order of knowledge" (513).

The implications of Yoneyama's research have been succinctly discussed by Kyo Maclear, who writes that "it may be time to move with and beyond reductive dualisms which take as their focus organized forms of social remembering and forgetting . . . and begin to look as well at how dominant strategies of remembrance may seek to incorporate rather than openly suppress surplus memories of loss and trauma" ("Beclouded Visions" 143). The key issue here, emphasizes Maclear, is that "while commemorative inscriptions may be

seen to litter our everyday lives, the mere presence of these inscriptions offers no guarantee of *how* and *towards what ends* collective remembering will be enacted" ("Beclouded Visions" 203).

Critical discussions of *Obasan* fall precisely within this larger problematic of "historical memory": the sheer volume of criticism that has appeared makes it clear that literary critics are not "suppressing" a racist past; they are instead rehearsing that past while expressing an undoubtably sincere form of regret over it. Coral Ann Howells, for instance, refers to the "tragic history" (93) of Japanese Canadians, whom she refers to as "vanished peoples" (87). Such an account does more than express regret: it also forecloses forms of Japanese Canadian agency by assuming their *disappearance*. This tone of regret is implicated in a form of white guilt that may, in the words of Scott McFarlane, work to situate "Japanese Canadian culture" as "a sign for a violated *Canadian culture and past*" ("Covering" 407-08), and situate "Canada" in a narrative of "an already fallen yet redeemable nation" ("Covering" 408). By discussing *Obasan* and the history of the internment, literary critics demonstrate not only their own sensitivity, but also the Canadian literary establishment's sensitivity to racism in Canada's past.

Certainly the state of Kogawa criticism is far more conflicted and multiply situated than my admittedly polemical argument suggests: various poststructuralist positions clash with humanist ones, and materialist critics question the terms of engagement put forward in literary formalist analysis. And I also want to emphasize that discussions of Kogawa's novel are taking place not

only in Canadian literary criticism: Asian American discussions of *Obasan*, as well as discussions taking place in Europe and Japan, pose questions that are not reducible to the problematic of "redeeming" the Canadian nation.[26]

My point, however, is that critical discussions of *Obasan* and the internment of Japanese Canadians may be a sign of the times, in which various hegemonic discourses have, in the words of Yoneyama, moved away from active suppression of racist histories to "contain and domesticate unreconciled discourses on the nation's past" (501). Of course, one might ask how thoroughly such discourses can actually be contained, and how we might begin to read the "supplement" that escapes. Kogawa criticism thus functions as one of the clearest and most pressing instances of the problematic I sketched out in the Introduction and Chapter One: does it (to return to the words of Homi Bhabha) "disturb the calculation" of the Canadian national imaginary and the way we remember "the past"? Or does it rehearse a moment in Canadian history to demonstrate that we have "moved on"? I wish to conclude this chapter by suggesting that the contradictions and elisions at work in Kogawa criticism make

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[26] Some of these problems have been addressed by Miki in a lengthy note discussing the history of the critical reception of *Obasan*. Miki writes:

> The now canonic status of *Obasan* in Asian American literature courses . . . has resulted in the erasure of the differences that "nationalisms" make; in an act of institutional appropriation by US academics, the site-specific formation of the Japanese Canadian subject (as one effect, say, of the Canadian-based War Measures Act which allowed for more severe violations in Canada) tends to become another version of the "Asian American" example. (*Broken Entries* 155n15)

it a crucial site to investigate the role literary scholarship plays in remembering a "racist past" in order to secure or contest ways to imagine a "multicultural present."[27]

[27] Miki articulates this problematic slightly differently: "*Obasan* remains—and will remain—a key text in the on-going struggle to resist misinterpretation in institutional incorporations of 'raced' texts" (*Broken Entries* 144).

Chapter Three: Hiromi Goto and the Politics of Writing Back[1]

In Chapter Two, I argued that Joy Kogawa drew from the writings of Muriel Kitagawa to present a form of critical nationalism that emerged out of the history of the internment. I emphasized that the possibility of a diasporic identification (toward Japan as a "motherland") was profoundly interrupted by the state-directed attempt to deport Japanese Canadians during and immediately following the Second World War. In its stead, Kogawa presents in *Obasan* a form of critical nationalism that simultaneously asserts a "place" in Canada and critiques the actions of the Canadian state.

In this chapter, I turn to the work of Hiromi Goto and the ways it reworks such expressions of nationalist identification. I argue that Goto's work, especially her novel *Chorus of Mushrooms*, presents a form of critical diasporic identification through the process of "writing back" to forms of received culture in diaspora and the various discourses that attempt to position her as a racialized subject in Canada. As such, Goto's writings consistently rework (and do not merely appeal to) the contours of "Japaneseness" on the prairies. But crucially, this form of critical diasporic identification is not a complete break from the forms

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[1] A version of this chapter has been published as "Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* and the Politics of Writing Diaspora." *West Coast Line* 29.3 (1995-96): 47-62.

of nationalist identification found in the work of Kogawa. Instead, Goto's interventions in the realm of diasporic culture are closely enmeshed in her attempts to contest and rework the boundaries of the Canadian national imaginary. As Mari Sasano asserts: "*Chorus of Mushrooms* writes Japanese Canadians into the national script by putting into question the concept of cultural fixity and purity rather than by simply inserting oneself into the official discourse of citizenship and nation" (47). Goto's diasporic interventions not only attempt to rework forms of received culture in diaspora; they also insistently question the "place" of subjects variously racialized as "Asian" in Canada. As such, Goto's work functions as an important hinge in my dissertation: it draws upon and reformulates Kogawa's critical nationalism (which I discussed in Chapter Two) while pointing ahead to Wah's critical diasporic poetics (which I discuss in Chapter Four).

I approach Goto's work by discussing how, in the theoretical language suggested by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Goto "writes back" to Japanese folk tales, myths, and Kogawa's *Obasan*, a novel that is not the "centre" in postcolonial terms, but remains the canonical centre of the emerging field of Asian Canadian literature. I begin this chapter by reviewing the often heated debates in postcolonial theory over the nature of "writing back"—debates that are central to understanding Goto's critical diasporic identification. I then turn to Goto's poetry and fiction to discuss how she "writes back" to forms of received culture. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Goto is "writing back," not primarily to

English texts of Empire, but to what Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge call "a multiplicity of centres" (403), which in this case consist of the various orientalizing discourses in Canada that attempt to position her as a racialized and gendered subject, the received forms of "Japanese tradition" out of which she negotiates an identity in diaspora, and the Asian Canadian literary works—specifically *Obasan*—that preceded her novel. I conclude this chapter by underlining the importance of the particular context out of which Goto is writing—what I call the Asian Canadian "Calgary scene" in the 1990s—and its implications for rethinking the boundaries of Asian Canadian literature as an emerging field, as well as the exigencies of being a "prairie Asian" in the 1990s.

I

Recent debates in postcolonial theory regarding the process of "writing back" are directly relevant to the way Goto reworks notions of "received culture" in diaspora. The process of "writing back" is of course not an exclusively postcolonial concern—Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality" and Derrida's and Butler's discussions of "iteration" have circulated widely in cultural theory as ways to discuss the relation between texts without resorting to models of influence or appealing to the agency of autonomous individual subjects.[2] Since

[2] For these discussions, see Kristeva; Derrida "Signature"; and Butler.

the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* in 1989, however, critics have grappled with the question of "writing back" as a particular feature of postcolonial writing. The Conclusion to *The Empire Writes Back* formulates this phenomenon as follows:

> . . . it has been the project of post-colonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from its position within and between two worlds; to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in its colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world. Thus the rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record is a vital and inescapable task at the heart of the post-colonial enterprise. These subversive manoeuvres, rather than the construction of *essentially* national or geographical alternatives, are the characteristic features of the post-colonial text. Post-colonial literatures/cultures are constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 196)

The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* here argue against the possibility of a nativist recuperation of pre-colonial culture, and instead put forward the notion of "counter-discourse" (a term borrowed from Richard Terdiman) as a way of understanding the work postcolonial texts perform.

It is well known that *The Empire Writes Back* generated immediate

controversy, mostly for the sweeping canvas it claims as "post-colonial,"[3] but also for its emphasis on counter-discourse as a characteristically postcolonial strategy. In response to this emphasis, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge refer to counter-discourse as a "somewhat depoliticized category," and they point out the danger of reducing the postcolonial to "a purely textual phenomenon" in which "[p]olitical insurgency is replaced by discursive radicalism" (401). Mishra and Hodge also question the terms of counter-discursive practice by discussing the different intertexts a narrow focus on "writing back" may not be able to address. The example they give is the role of intertexts from Bombay cinema in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*:

> At the very moment that the narrative is invaded by an intertext from a different centre—the centre and centrality of the Bombay commercial cinema, India's pre-eminent cultural form—the focus shifts from a fixed centre and its satellite system to a multiplicity of centres in the culture itself. (403)

Mishra and Hodge thus critique *The Empire Writes Back* by charging that its focus on the impact of European discourses and the ways postcolonial texts engage with them effectively brackets off opportunities to investigate the role of alternative discourses, traditions, and epistemologies. This point is crucial in my

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[3] Here critics refer time and again to the opening two pages of *The Empire Writes Back*, where the authors write: "We use the term 'post-colonial' . . . to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2).

subsequent discussion of Goto's writing.

But while Mishra and Hodge quite rightly quarrel with some of the positions expressed in *The Empire Writes Back*, I sense that they would find substantial points of agreement with the arguments put forward in individual articles by postcolonial scholars Helen Tiffin and Stephen Slemon in the period leading up to and immediately following the appearance of *The Empire Writes Back* in 1989. In these articles, Tiffin and Slemon emphasize that counter-discursive strategies are part of an ongoing process that can take many forms;[4] Tiffin addresses the important role of alternative resistant epistemologies;[5] and both Tiffin and Slemon repeatedly underline the need for postcolonial critics to address the material conditions in which discourses have their effects. For instance, in their Introduction to *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing* (1989), Slemon and Tiffin discuss how critical practice in "dominant forms of Anglo-American post-structuralist theory" have been characterized by "a wholesale retreat from geography and history into a domain of pure 'textuality' in which the principle of indeterminacy smothers the possibility of social or political

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[4] See for example Tiffin's assertion that "[t]he operation of post-colonial counter-discourse is dynamic, not static" ("Post-Colonial Literatures" 18); and Slemon's insistence that "[i]n the context of post-colonial writing, . . . certain literary texts inhabit the site of allegorical figuration in order to 'read' and contest the social 'text' of colonialism, and the ways in which they perform this counter-discursive activity are inherently differential and diverse" ("Monuments" 11).

[5] See for example Tiffin's discussion of counter-discourse in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where she emphasizes its forms of cultural reclamation based on Ibo ontology and epistemology ("Post-Colonialism" 174-75).

'significance' for literature" (x). Needless to say, they find this retreat to be wholly disabling in a search for a resistant postcolonial critical practice. Slemon expands on this point in "Modernism's Last Post" (1990), where he charts the intersections and divergences of postmodern and postcolonial critical practices. "Western postmodernist readings can so overvalue the anti-referential or deconstructive energetics of postcolonial texts that they efface the important recuperative work that is also going on within them" (7), writes Slemon. By contrast:

> an *interested* post-colonial critical practice would want to allow for the positive production of oppositional truth-claims in these texts. It would retain for post-colonial writing, that is, a mimetic or referential purchase to textuality, and it would recognize in this referential drive the operations of a crucial strategy for survival in marginalized social groups. (5)

In naming this "crucial strategy," Slemon identifies a contradiction—or at least a tension—at the heart of postcolonial criticism: it would "draw on post-structuralism's suspension of the referent in order to read the social 'text' of colonialist power and at the same time would reinstall the referent in the service of colonized and post-colonized societies" (5). One might add that such a contradiction or tension also applies to discussions of postcolonial counter-discursive strategies, which privilege "textuality" and the process of rewriting texts while at the same time attempting to locate this process in material

practices including education and scholarly criticism.[6]

I return to these debates and discussions from the late 1980s and early 1990s in order to reconsider what "writing back" might mean in postcolonial criticism. Can it address what Slemon calls a "wide pluralizing of origins" ("Magic Realism" 17)?[7] Can it engage with what Mishra and Hodge call a "multiplicity of centres"? My sense is that writing coming out of East Asian diasporic contexts can help critics work through such problems. To date, postcolonial scholars have shown what I find to be surprisingly limited interest in East Asia and East Asian diasporas. This apparent lack of interest may be a result of particular institutional genealogies of postcolonial studies, including the (ongoing) transition from Commonwealth Literature to postcolonial studies in locations such as

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[6] For an example of this point, see Tiffin's discussion of the ways Samuel Selvon and J.M. Coetzee "write back" to *Robinson Crusoe*:

> Neither writer is simply "writing back" to an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds. . . . But the function of such a canonical text at the colonial periphery also becomes an important part of material imperial practice, in that, through educational and critical institutions, it continually displays and repeats for the other, the original capture of his/her alterity and the processes of its annihilation, marginalization, or naturalisation as if this were axiomatic, culturally ungrounded, "universal", natural.
>
> Selvon and Coetzee take up the complex discursive field surrounding *Robinson Crusoe* and unlock these apparent closures. ("Post-Colonial Literatures" 23).

[7] As Slemon writes regarding the work of Jack Hodgins, a "wide pluralizing of origins annihilates the privileging or monumentalizing of any one of them and suggests that the 'shreds and fragments' that come down from them in distorted form are our real historical legacy" ("Magic Realism" 17).

Australia and Canada. This particular genealogy has resulted in postcolonial critics paying closer attention to the history and writing of, say, the Indian subcontinent or the Caribbean than to the history and writing of East Asia. Meanwhile, postwar scholarship, especially in the United States, has tended to bracket off "East Asia" in a form of area studies fundamentally at odds with the anti-orientalist commitments (or at the very least the anti-orientalist aspirations) of postcolonial studies.

There are of course important exceptions to this general trend: Masao Miyoshi and Rey Chow, while often sharply critical of postcolonial studies,[8] attempt to situate Japan and Hong Kong (respectively) in the aftermath of colonial histories.[9] Critical interventions such as those by Miyoshi and Chow act as important correctives to the particular blindspots (especially those concerning

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[8] See for example Miyoshi's scathing indictment of postcolonial studies in the conclusion to "A Borderless World?," where he critiques the political economy of transnational corporate practices. Miyoshi writes: "We might even be masking a secret nostalgia as we devote our scholarly attention to 'postcoloniality,' a condition in history that is safely distant and inert, instead of seeking alternatives in this age after the supposed end of history" (97-98). While I do not agree with Miyoshi's conclusion here, I find the sense of outrage he brings to contemporary cultural theory utterly trenchant; on this point, see especially "Sites of Resistance in the Global Economy."

[9] See Miyoshi, *Off Center* 37-61 for an ambitious discussion of "the Japanese prose narrative—and the Western novel—in the context of the world history of colonialism" (*Off Center* 3); Chow "Between Colonizers" for a discussion of the peculiar postcolonial position of Hong Kong; and Chow "King Kong" for a discussion of Hong Kong's colonial history (especially the First Opium War) and the complex realignment of interests in the period leading up to the 1 July 1997 "handover."

East Asia and East Asian diasporas) in postcolonial studies as we know it. But I wish to stress here that paying attention to East Asia and East Asian diasporic histories in postcolonial studies should *not* simply be a matter of "adding" these particular histories to an already-established postcolonial frame. More productively, it might instead enable a rethinking of precisely what "writing back" might mean as a resistant strategy. In Chow's discussion of Hong Kong and Chinese diasporic intellectuals, for example, the "centre" that needs to be written back to is not, at this particular moment, the English literary canon; it is instead the dual hegemony of First World Orientalist practices *and* the forms of Chinese nativism that would dismiss Hong Kong culture as hopelessly corrupted by "Western" influence. As such, the notion of "writing back" to such hegemonies is crucial, *but it cannot be limited to a single perceived "imperial centre."* Chow's work thus provides what I consider to be an important model for performing the kind of scholarship called for in Mishra's and Hodge's critique of *The Empire Writes Back* while at the same time reformulating a notion of the postcolonial in light of East Asian and East Asian diasporic histories.

II

For Goto, diasporic interventions cannot simply consist of "writing back" to the English literary canon. They instead involve "writing back" to a wide range of discourses that position her as a racialized and gendered subject in Canada.

Goto writes in a poem called "The Body Politic" (1994): "If I don't address my colour,/ It is addressed for me in ways I find intolerable" (219). She thereby takes up a position on racialization that is quite similar to the neopragmatic position on "race" I discussed in the Introduction: precisely because racialization and racism have intolerable *effects*, they must be challenged in relation to those effects and not merely discounted as biologically empty or morally irrelevant.[10]

In *monkeypuzzle* (1998), Rita Wong presents a useful set of strategies to challenge the effects of racialization:

> the problem of being perceived through confucius & the joy luck club.
> Is connie chung pragmatic-looking? The equation that connie does not
> equal me does not equal suzy wong.
>
> The door is not locked, though stiff to open. (40)

For Wong, the door of stereotypical representation is neither locked nor wide open: the stiffness she faces in opening it up (to critical analysis) is perhaps best addressed with a combination of humour and outrage:

> meanwhile the western gaze frames
> cardboard dolls in cardboard boxes
> miss saigon's grandmother is spanking mad
> suzy wong's aunties have had enough of this crap (44)

By invoking "miss saigon's grandmother" and "suzy wong's aunties," Wong points towards the kind of critical mass needed to resist the long history of orientalizing discourses that have tried to frame the Asian female body as a

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[10] Or as the character Muriel puts it in *Chorus of Mushrooms*: "People talk race this ethnic that. It's easy to be theoretical if the words are coming from a face that has little or no pigmentation" (89-90).

passive object of desire.

For Goto, such discourses are part of an historically shifting yet persistent feminization of "Japan" and "Japanese women" in the West. Traise Yamamoto has recently discussed this process of feminization as follows: "'the Japanese woman' as an ideological construction of the West in general, and of the United States in particular, has consistently depended on variations, but not displacement, of the geisha stereotype" (23-24). In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, a young Muriel Tonkatsu receives Valentine's Day cards with a "press-out Oriental-type girl in some sort of pseudo-kimono with wooden sandals on backwards and her with her hair cut straight across in bangs and a bun and chopsticks in her hair" (62). Thus interpellated, Muriel can only say "Thank you"—and burn the cards when she gets home.

Goto thereby addresses the persistence of the geisha stereotype and, like Rita Wong, she challenges it with humour, outrage, and a view to asserting a form of sexual agency. In the poem "The Reversible Skin" (1994), for instance, Goto juxtaposes her own position as a desiring subject against a dialogue between Madame Butterfly and B.F. Pinkerton, characters in Puccini's infamous opera:

> Madame Butterfly: My name is, how you say? Fly Butter.
> B.F. Pinkerton: What? Fly Butter?
> [*Madame Butterfly makes flapping hand movements in a Pseudo Oriental graceful fashion.*]
> B.F. Pinkerton: Huh! Huh! Huh! Haaaaaa. You funny little thing, you. You must mean butterfly!
> [*She hobbles about in a mincing fashion, peers from behind a*

bush. Her motions are like a bird's with arthritis.]

[. . .]

B.F. Pinkerton: We'll have none of that here any more. We'll have none of that cow towing and such. C'mere, you funny little thing, you.
[*B.F. Pinkerton clasps Madame Butterfly behind her neck and pulls her toward him in a rough and manly gesture[.] Classic pose of exposed vulnerable neck, naval lips descending.*]

I want something. (8-9)

The final line quoted here situates the question of desire at the forefront of Goto's attempt to "address" the legacy of Madame Butterfly. "To work against dominant codes is an act of desire," writes Goto, "but if I say/ I want/ you fill in the rest" (11).

The narrator in Goto's "The Body Politic" reframes the problem of desire in terms of the "TV costume" foisted upon her:

People want to dress me up in
ke-mo-nees and garter belts.
They want to hear about
Zen and Buddhism and ritual
Harry Carrie.
They want to squeal over tiny slices of raw fish
And finish off with exotic Oriental sex,
whatever that is.
I rather I wasn't dressed in your TV costume.
Let's stand together, naked,
and see who blushes first. (219)

At issue here is not just the costume she wears but also the form and content of what she writes:

People ask me what I do

and I say, oh, I do a little writing.
Do you write poetry too? someone will ask,
and I say, yeah, a little bit.
OH! Please make up a haiku for us, we'd love to hear a haiku from you.
Uh—I don't—
Oh, don't be shy! You Japanese are so clever with haiku! (220)

The narrator's interlocutors are most interested in the writer's work when it fits their notion of what is culturally appropriate for a "Japanese" writer. The obvious point here is that the "authenticity" of a haiku depends on a false conflation of the writer's Japanese Canadian identity with a Japanese one: the writer is addressed and positioned as "you Japanese." But instead of merely correcting the interlocutors' "mistake," Goto's narrator subverts their restrictive expectations by producing a haiku full of pauses, false starts, and the declaration:

When I speak English
I make up words I like more
Than the ones I learned! (220)

As such, the ironic haiku expresses the writer's desire to rework received words, stories, and forms; it expresses a desire to reshape forms of received culture and the ways they are read upon her body.

Such concerns are pushed much further in Goto's novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), a regional winner of the 1995 Commonwealth Writers Prize best-first-book award and a co-winner of the 1995 Canada-Japan Book award. *Chorus of Mushrooms* interweaves myths, folk legends, and fictional antecedents into a story of Japanese Canadians living on a mushroom farm in southern Alberta. By interweaving these disparate elements into a single

narrative, Goto focuses attention on the process of "writing back." The characters in the novel recurrently tell each other stories, and through them Goto actively manipulates and revises Japanese oral traditions into what she calls in the "Acknowledgements" a "departure from historical 'fact' into the realms of the contemporary folk legend" (n.p.). Specifically, Goto manipulates oral myths and folk legends that have been textualized in Juliet Piggot's and Richard Dorson's English-language collections (to which Goto refers at the end of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as "Texts that influenced the writing of this novel" [221]). It is important to note here that Goto is not purporting to draw from and reproduce "pure" oral forms (as if such a thing could be possible), and that the important influence on Goto of oral antecedents may not have been possible without their English-language textualized forms. By explicitly adopting and adapting "impure" myths and legends, Goto refuses imperatives to recite received forms of "Japanese culture"; she instead moves through the more difficult terrain of rethinking the contours of "writing back" in a diasporic context.

Certainly *Chorus of Mushrooms* is not the first Asian Canadian or Asian American text to manipulate folk sources. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), a monumental text in Asian American literature, plays freely with the Chinese story of Fa Mu Lan, making it, according to Sau-ling Wong, "recognizable only in bare outline to a reader conversant with traditional Chinese culture" ("Autobiography" 252-53). Kingston's revisions are perhaps most noteworthy on account of the charges of distortion and inauthenticity that

followed. Wong's "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?" provides an excellent overview of the controversy surrounding *The Woman Warrior*, and concludes that the assumption of "authentic" Chinese culture that informs several critiques of Kingston's work merely imposes another set of constraints on Chinese American writers. For Wong, such charges "belittle the difficulty and urgency of the imaginative enterprise so necessary to the American-born generation: to make sense of Chinese and American culture from its own viewpoint (however hybrid and laughable to 'outsiders'), to articulate its own reality, and to strengthen its precarious purchase on the task of self-fashioning" (271). Despite their different national and ethnic locations, and despite the markedly different historical moments at which they began publishing their work, Goto and Kingston share the characteristically diasporic problem of not having access to "authentic" traditional culture. The pertinent issue here is how Goto's manipulations allow her to participate (however partially) in the thorny "task of self-fashioning," not as an autonomous liberal subject, but as an historical agent able to rework her relation to forms of received culture.

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Goto "writes back" to forms of received culture by revising two myths (the creation story of "Izanami and Izanagi" and the heroic deeds of "Issun-Boshi") and two folk legends ("Uba-Sute Yama," the story of a mountain where elderly people are abandoned, and "Yamanba" or "Yama-Uba," a tale of a female mountain muse). All four tales are told by the character Naoe, an energetic Japanese immigrant who describes herself as "the best old woman

you're going to find for many years to come!" (111). She tells the first two stories ("Izanami and Izanagi" and "Uba-Sute Yama") to her granddaughter Muriel, whom she renames Murasaki after the celebrated author of *Tale of Genji*; the third story ("Issun-Boshi") to herself; and the fourth one ("Yamanba") to a truck driver whom she names Tengu after a folk figure renowned for its long red nose. The shifting contexts of Naoe's storytelling show her moving away from the constraints of the family and the farm house towards changing her life according to the feminist politics articulated in the refashioned versions of the tales.

The creation myth of "Izanami and Izanagi" is, appropriately, the first story Naoe tells Murasaki in their "bed of tales" (29). Goto borrows a skeleton of a plot from Piggott's text: a brother and sister descend on a rainbow to an oily primeval place where they create the world. In Goto's version, however, the female Izanami is clearly the leader: she initiates the journey down the rainbow and ends up doing all the creating. Her brother's single contribution—"Let there be light!" (31)—ironically echoes Christian creation and is quickly and wryly criticized by his sister as a violation of "good taste and understated beauty" (31). Equally playfully, Goto replaces Izanagi's phallic spear (which he uses in Piggott's version to create the islands of Japan) with Izanami's *fingers*: she "dipped her fingers in the cool blue water and flung the droplets back into the water" in order to create islands (31-32). Goto's revisions problematize the "source" of creation by displacing the privileged role of the phallus with the ambiguity of fingers, with their potential for crossing borders of sexuality dividing auto/alloerotic,

homo/heterosexual, and male/female. Goto also reworks the borders between teller and listener. Murasaki asks her grandmother: "Is this a story you heard when you were little?" Naoe replies: "Child, this is not the story I learned, but it's the story I tell. It is the nature of words to change with the telling. They are changing in your mind even as I speak" (32). Naoe's understanding of how stories change makes it clear that her telling is not intended to be an authoritative replacement of an "original" tale: even her revisions are subject to further revision, particularly from an active listener who acts as a partner in the telling.

Murasaki's role in shaping Naoe's stories becomes increasingly active in the folk legend of "Uba-Sute Yama," which is named after a mountain where elderly people are abandoned. The story begins in a reasonably conventional manner: a woman is approaching her sixtieth birthday and she wishes to see her sister before she is abandoned to die. Goto's revisions become progressively surreal and humorous, with the woman asking her sister for a home perm, and the two of them eventually "flopping backwards on the springy moss" to enjoy smoking a package of Mild Sevens and nibbling on a Meiji chocolate bar (67). By the end of the story, Murasaki exclaims:

> Good gracious me and my tits! Where in mackerel did that story come from? I can't tell where Obāchan [i.e. Naoe] ends and I begin, or if I made the whole thing up or if it was all Obāchan. (68)

In "Uba-Sute Yama," layers of retelling rapidly obscure the source of the story

and challenge the static roles of teller and listener. Naoe/Murasaki, the co-tellers, reject the disposal of an elderly woman by punningly transforming "Uba-Sute Yama" from "a place where people are abandoned" into "a place of abandonment!" (68). By shifting the focus of the narrative from a passive, negative event ("being abandoned") to a conscious act of cutting loose and having fun ("abandonment!"), they set the stage for Naoe to leave the confines of the chair in which she has sat since her arrival in Canada twenty years earlier.

Naoe's next story is told not to Murasaki, but rather to herself, which suggests a gradual move away from the "bed of tales" and the confines of the family and house. Naoe retells with a feminist twist the myth of "Issun-Boshi," which according to Piggot literally means "Little One Inch" (92). Piggott's version narrates the heroic deeds of Issun-Boshi: he vanquishes two fearsome *oni*, finds a magic hammer that allows him to grow to a normal human size, marries a nameless woman, and takes care of his parents. Goto's tale, by contrast, *names* the woman Miwa and, in a move similar to her revision of "Izanami and Izanagi," makes *her* the one who uses the magic hammer. Goto also parodies Issun-Boshi's patronizing chivalry ("Unhand the maiden or you'll have me to deal with!" [71], he warns the *oni*), and, rather than letting his chivalry stand as proof of his "love," she links it to his subsequent arrogance and cruelty. Issun-Boshi's heroism soon becomes callousness: he tears into Miwa in what he believes is suitably manly sex, and he ridicules and disowns his parents. In Goto's tale, Miwa refuses to accept Issun-Boshi's abuse: she once again uses the hammer

to reduce him back to finger size, and deals him a decidedly unheroic death by squashing him on the *tatami.*

The first three stories told by Naoe generate their impact for readers familiar with the myths and folk tales by retaining a recognizable plot from Dorson's and Piggott's texts, and then manipulating specific details in order to comment upon the patriarchal restrictions tacitly endorsed in the received versions. Her fourth story ("Yamanba," a tale of a woman mountain muse) is different because it departs almost entirely from the text anthologized by Dorson. Different versions of "Yama-Uba" tales, according to Dorson, portray the woman in radically different ways. While Dorson provides an example of "the stupid-ogre type" [*sic*], other versions "show the *yama-uba* in a favorable light, making thread from vines to weave cloth, acting as midwife . . . , and killing troublesome wild boars" (83). Goto's *yamanba* figure does none of these things, but nonetheless functions as a positive figure who rehabilitates a polluted, post-apocalyptic world.

This very act of rehabilitation acquires significance as a response to the atomic holocaust at the heart of Kogawa's *Obasan.* Accordingly, I'd like to turn now to the question of how we might read *Chorus of Mushrooms* in relation to its celebrated fictional antecedent. There are obvious points of connection between *Obasan* and *Chorus of Mushrooms.* Much of the action in the two novels takes place in rural communities in southern Alberta, with a beet farm near the town of Granton in *Obasan* becoming a mushroom farm near the town of Nanton in

Chorus of Mushrooms. Both novels focus on multiple generations of Japanese Canadian women, with the youngest women (Naomi Nakane in *Obasan* and Muriel Tonkatsu in *Chorus of Mushrooms*) acting as narrators, and their mothers being largely absent. The older women form a compelling pair, with Goto's incessantly talking and increasingly mobile Naoe functioning as an assertive and noisy response to Kogawa's apparently silent and housebound Aya Obasan.[11] Early in her life, however, Aya Obasan has a real interest in story-telling and, like Naoe, she begins her stories with the words "Mukashi, mukashi, o-o mukashi," which Kogawa glosses as "In ancient times, in ancient times, in very very ancient times" (54).

A key point that emerges in *Obasan* is the connection between the breakdown of storytelling and repeated acts of sexual abuse. Old Man Gower, a neighbour of the Nakane family in Vancouver, uses the false promise of a story to attract the attention of young Naomi. "Would you like me to tell you a story?" he asks her. There is, however, no story forthcoming, only sexual abuse:

> His hands are large and demanding. He caresses my head as if I were a small animal. My short black hair straight across my forehead like a broom is blown aside as he puts his mouth on my face. (62-63)

Gower goes on to abuse Naomi repeatedly, and in Kogawa's bitter allegory he

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[11] In Kogawa criticism, silence as subversion is a key trope which has been developed most fully by Gayle Fujita and King-Kok Cheung; see Fujita; and Cheung, *Articulate Silences* 126-67.

assumes possession of the Nakane property when the Nakanes are forced to move to the interior of British Columbia. The imbrication of sexual abuse and the abuse of storytelling leads Naomi later in her life to doubt whether through "story-telling we can extricate ourselves from our foolish ways" (199).

As my discussion of Kogawa in Chapter Two should make clear, *Obasan* is obviously more complicated than a simple breakdown of storytelling. But my point here is that *Chorus of Mushrooms* dramatically extends and reconfigures the connection between storytelling and sexuality put forth in *Obasan*. Put simply, there is lots of sex in Goto's novel: sex in bathtubs, sex on futons, sex in mushroom farms, sex with others, sex with oneself. The very title of the novel refers to Naoe's orgasm in a building where mushrooms grow: she strips naked and allows "moisture [to filter] into her body" (84) before lying in the peat water masturbating to the "Murmur murmur forming humming earth tipping under body swelling growing resound and the SLAM of breath knocked from lungs, beyond the painful register of human sound, the unheard chorus of mushrooms" (86). Here and elsewhere Goto emphasizes what might be called the rehabilitation of sexuality. As such, *Chorus of Mushrooms* does not simply rework "tradition" as something received from the past; it instead attempts to claim a form of sexual agency *in the present*. Crucially, Goto explicitly links the rehabilitation of sexuality to the process of storytelling. This connection is echoed throughout the novel, but it is most obvious in the italicized parts of *Chorus of Mushrooms*, where the narrator tells a story to her lover. By not naming or explicitly

gendering the lover, Goto refuses to "fix" the erotics of storytelling into straight or same-sex paradigms.

Such a refusal also takes the form of numerous destabilized or multiple identities in the novel. Acts of renaming are especially prominent in this regard. For instance, Naoe renames herself Purple, and eventually becomes known as the Purple Mask, a celebrated mystery bullrider at the Calgary Stampede (about which I'll have more to say shortly); the emphatically Canadianized Keiko refers to herself as Kay; and Muriel is renamed Murasaki (the author of *The Tale of Genji*, and a homonym for the Japanese word for "purple") by Naoe, signalling the coming together of grandmother and granddaughter as "translations" of themselves. More problematic is the renaming of the Vietnamese immigrant workers on the Tonkatsus' mushroom farm. "Help me think up some nicknames for these people," Keiko says to a young Muriel, "their real names are too hard to pronounce and no one will be able to remember them" (34). Goto thus complicates the process of renaming by narrating not only how her Japanese Canadian characters have had their names and identities split, but also how they have participated in the process of splitting the identities of immigrants less privileged than themselves.[12]

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[12] In a related scene, Naoe recalls her time in the Japanese colony of Manshu (Manchuria), where her then-husband Makoto designed the bridges across which the Japanese army came and slaughtered the Chinese. Goto thus eschews a simple victim stance and instead works through the ways her characters are implicated in colonial histories and their aftermath.

The most significant example of renaming in *Chorus of Mushrooms* is the family name "Tonkatsu." Upon coming to Canada, Keiko and her husband Sam (whose name echoes that of Uncle Isamu in *Obasan*) vowed to "put Japan behind [them] and fit more smoothly with the crowd" (207); as a result, they forgot how to speak Japanese. "Tonkatsu," literally meaning "breaded deep fried pork cutlets" [!] (208), was the only Japanese word Sam could remember, so he chose it as a new family name. The father's agency in determining a collective "family" identity has patriarchal implications that need the acute critical skills Goto deploys in revising the myths and folk legends. The choice of "Tonkatsu" as a new name is nevertheless hilarious, and brilliantly appropriate, for it locates the family's identity outside culturally "pure" markers. As Sam explains to Murasaki, "*tonkatsu* isn't really a purely Japanese word. *Ton*, meaning pork, is Japanese, but *katsu* is adopted from 'cutlet,' and I don't know the origins of that word" (209). Through the "impurity" of a Japanese-English hybrid, Goto names an identity in diaspora, one that is both playful and memorable.

The various hybrid and otherwise destabilized identities in Goto's narrative are closely enmeshed with a decidedly postmodern and apparently optimistic representation of "resistance" in the novel. For example, the punchline near the end of the narrative—Naoe's annual habit of participating in the Calgary Stampede—features Naoe taking up the role of the Purple Mask, sneaking past security, and finding a "moment of such sweet purity" (219) while riding a bull. In a previously published article on *Chorus of Mushrooms*, I read Naoe's act as "a

moment of Barthesian pleasure which is, in Barthes' words, 'outside any imaginable finality'"; "Naoe," I concluded, "is momentarily outside the ideological constraints imposed by hegemonic groups" (Beauregard, "Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*" 60). I now think my previous reading of the Calgary Stampede scene dramatically oversimplifies its implications by glossing over the significant degree of ambivalence in Naoe's act. As one of my students at the University of Alberta astutely pointed out, Naoe may be able to infiltrate the heretofore white male domain of the Stampede, *but she still has to wear a mask while doing so.*[13] As such, Goto's narrative does not shy away from the restrictive terms on which Naoe can participate in this stereotypically "Albertan" cultural event. The narrative of "resistance" put forward in the novel thereby consists of working within and around the restrictions scripted in cultural events such as the Stampede without ever accepting these restrictions as a given.

This ongoing act of working within and around such restrictions deserves careful attention. One critic who has done so is Mari Sasano, who discusses Naoe's act in relation to what Bhabha calls "the principle of avenging repetition" ("DissemiNation" 319; qtd. in Sasano 51):

> [Naoe] re-enacts a performance—that of bullriding—that is understood to be 100% pure beef-loving Alberta, but in doing so, she reveals that it is also reproducible by someone like her who is considered 0% Albertan. By

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[13] Stephen Horyn made this point in English 376 in the Winter term of 1997.

> taking bullriding over from the cowboys, she puts into question the idea that cultural differences separate immigrants from 'real' Canadians. Because she participates in an approved Canadian tradition, she cannot be disapproved of, but the fact that she is not the typically imagined bullrider pushes the boundaries of what a rodeo star is. Naoe has beaten the Albertan redneck at his own game. By becoming the Purple Mask, she is not only a rodeo star, but also a successful inhabitant of her environment, no problem. She has infiltrated the ranks. While furiously not white Canadian, she fully embraces and occupies aspects of that culture that please her. (51)

What Sasano eloquently names here is the process through which Naoe can infiltrate and disrupt narratives of nation. "Entering in means that the centre is neither sealed nor exclusive," writes Sasano. "Membership changes, and as it does, the norm is altered" (52).

As such, Goto's novel does more than intervene in diasporic identification and the versions of received culture that inform it. It instead asks its readers to reconsider the ways that diasporic interventions are closely enmeshed with the process of contesting and reworking the boundaries of the Canadian national imaginary. When Naoe leaves the chair in which she's sat since her arrival to Canada twenty years earlier, she vows: "I'll scrape my heel into the black ice on the highway and inscribe my name across this country" (108). And her participation in the Calgary Stampede makes the effects of her inscription both

allusive and explicit:

> A funnel forms from where we [the bull and Naoe] spin and spreads outward with dust and howling. . . . We spin tighter, tighter, an infinite source of wind and dust. The roaring howl of dust devil turned tornado. The wind we churn flings cowboy hats to Winnipeg, Victoria, Montreal, as far as Charlottetown. Weather patterns will be affected for the next five years and no one will know the reason. (218-19)

At this key moment in the narrative, the effects of Naoe's performance spread over a vast space—from Victoria in the west to Charlottetown in the east—that is nevertheless bounded by the borders of the Canadian nation-state. Goto takes the borders of the Canadian nation as the object of her intervention, not by merely inserting herself within them, but by calling into question the perceived place of bodies racialized as "Asian" in Canada.[14]

III

[14] I have made a similar point in an article discussing Goto's fiction and Jin-me Yoon's visual art; see Beauregard "Travelling Stereotypes." In addition, it's worth pointing out that Goto explicitly addresses questions of "national culture" elsewhere, perhaps most notably in the short story "Canadian Culture 201" (1996), which sets a series of mock "exam questions" on Canadian culture against a road story involving two Japanese Canadian sisters driving across the country. Through Goto's characteristic humour (the sisters pass through places such as Balgonie, Saskatchewan), the story asks its readers to consider their assumptions about who participates in a "traditional travel story" (80)—and what it means to "enact and (re)configure Canadian Culture" (86).

As I have discussed above, Goto's diasporic interventions insist on the intersection (and not the clear-cut separation) of nationalist and diasporic modes of identification. The textual dynamics of Goto's writings can help her readers rethink the way "writing back" functions in relation to a "multiplicity of centres" in an East Asian diasporic frame. These "centres" include the orientalizing discourses that position Goto as a racialized and gendered subject in Canada, the forms of received culture she reworks in diaspora, and the Asian Canadian literary antecedents she responds to and rewrites. In each case, however, Goto does not write as a putatively free-floating diasporic subject. She instead integrates her critical diasporic identification with an ongoing attempt to reconfigure the boundaries of the Canadian nation—and the effects those boundaries have on subjects racialized as "Asian."

But I also wish to suggest that Goto's work is significant for more than just its textual dynamics and its narrative strategies: Goto also participates in an important community of writers working in a particular geographical location and at a particular historical moment—what one might refer to in shorthand as the Asian Canadian "Calgary scene" in the 1990s. The emergence of this scene—and the strong complementarity of its writers' works—requires critics of Asian Canadian literature to rethink the contours of the field. To reframe a question posed by Stuart Hall: when and where is "Asian Canadian"?[15]

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[15] Hall poses his question in the title and the opening paragraph of his fine essay "When was 'the Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit" (1996), where

To begin to answer this question, I wish to turn to a scene in Kogawa's *Itsuka* (1992/1993), where the character Naomi considers her place in the fictional Alberta town of Granton. She thinks:

> . . . I can't see myself as part of Granton at all. I'm a transplant. Not a genuine prairie rose. I'm part city slicker, part traitor. Even if I stood still for a hundred years on Main Street, there'd be no Granton roots under my feet. (43)

In the context of Kogawa's novel, Naomi's reluctance to identify as part of the prairie town is thoroughly understandable given the violent circumstances under which the Canadian state forced her to relocate there in the 1940s. Moreover, Naomi's thoughts about not belonging in Granton help Kogawa generate

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he presents the following series of questions:

> When was 'the post-colonial'? What should be included and excluded from its frame? Where is the invisible line between it and its 'others' (colonialism, neo-colonialism, Third World, imperialism), in relation to whose termination it ceaselessly, but without final supersession, marks itself? (242)

Hall goes on to state that "[t]he main purpose of this paper is to explore the interrogation marks which have begun to cluster thick and fast around the question of 'the post-colonial' and the notion of post-colonial times" (242). While Hall's piece functions as a direct and timely response to the numerous critiques of the term "post-colonial" that were appearing in the mid-1990s, the implications of his questions concerning the boundaries of postcolonial times and postcolonial studies resonate deeply with the emerging field of Asian Canadian literature, a term that is also starting to attract its share of critical skepticism. I have discussed some of the implications of these issues in the Introduction and Chapter One. Here I am more narrowly concerned with the historical and geographical "locations" of Asian Canadian literature—and how the "Calgary scene" in the 1990s can help critics rethink them.

credibility for Naomi's subsequent decision to move to Toronto and eventually become involved the Redress movement. But while Naomi's position makes sense in a post-internment, pre-Redress moment in Japanese Canadian history, it also raises a key question about the place of Japanese Canadians in particular, and Asian Canadians in general, on the prairies. What would it mean to be a "prairie Asian"?

This question has been at the forefront of the Asian Canadian literary activity coming out of Calgary in the 1990s. Through individual writing projects, the small literary magazine *absinthe*, and events such as the "Prairie Asians" literary tour of Alberta in 1997,[16] Asian Canadian writers in Calgary have investigated the social and historical circumstances of arriving and *being* on the prairies. As the editorial collective of *absinthe* writes in a piece called "Asians on the Prairie" (1998):

> The prairie asian project began in 1997 when a few of us began talking about the various constructions of "asian-ness" in the canadian and diasporic context. Many of us who trace our asian trajectories through a history of colonization and immigration look to east and south asia as places of ancestry, but we also look to and from the canadian prairies as a

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[16] The Prairie Asians reading tour was to be "a series of intermittent readings occurring through Western Canada from May to October, 1997. . . . Prairie Asians counters the historic invisibility of Asian-Canadians in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba" ("Prairie Asians"). Note that the tour ended up being entirely focused on Alberta (see "Asians on the Prairie").

> place of home and personal and familial history. We figured it was worth taking our sense of "situatedness," of *being* prairie asians, to places in alberta where "prairie" and "asian" could meet. ("Asians" 3)

A "print version of the Prairie Asians tour" ("Asians" 3) was published as a special issue of *absinthe*,[17] which complements a similar if somewhat more diffuse special issue of *Prairie Fire* called "Asia Pacific Authors on the Prairies."[18] Meanwhile, literary writing by present or former members of the Calgary community—writing that had up until that time mostly appeared in small literary journals or chapbooks—began to appear in book form: Ashok Mathur's novel *Once Upon an Elephant*, Tamai Kobayashi's collection of stories *Exile and the Heart: Lesbian Fiction*, and Rita Wong's collection of poetry *monkeypuzzle* all appeared in 1998. This literary activity has resulted in a kind of critical mass that raises a number of issues. One such issue concerns the question of panethnicity, which I raised in the Introduction in terms of the place of South Asian writing in an "Asian Canadian" frame. While the concerns of South Asian and East Asian writing in other parts of Canada have rarely intersected in

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[17] This issue offers a cross-section of previously published material and work-in-progress from Larissa Lai, Fred Wah, Rita Wong, Tamai Kobayashi, Ashok Mathur, Hiromi Goto, Mark Nakada, and Rajinderpal Pal. See *absinthe* 10.1 (1998).

[18] This special issue does not have a foreword or introduction to frame its concerns. In addition to writing from present or former members of the Calgary community (including Goto, Lai, Mathur, Wah, and Wong), it includes work by Roy Kiyooka, Roy Miki, Clarisse Foster, and Naomi Guilbert. See *Prairie Fire* 18.4 (1997).

obvious ways, the Calgary literary scene suggests a strong complementarity, especially in the work of Ashok Mathur, Hiromi Goto, and Larissa Lai.[19]

A second issue raised by the writing coming out of the Calgary scene is how critics might situate this writing in relation to the Asian Canadian literary activity that preceded it. In its concern with ethnicity and racialization, in its concern with history and historiography, and in its attempt to assert a "place" in Canada, Asian Canadian writing coming out of Calgary in the 1990s clearly shares a great deal with Asian Canadian writing published in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But, unlike that earlier wave, writers in the Calgary scene are working with an awareness of Asian Canadian literary antecedents. This distinction is not hard-and-fast—as I discussed in Chapter Two, Kogawa wrote *Obasan* with a clear awareness of the work of Muriel Kitagawa—but in the 1990s writers could find Asian Canadian literary works not only in the National Archives of Canada but also on the shelves of their local bookstore. As I discussed above, the presence of Asian Canadian literary antecedents such as *Obasan* has enabled writers such as Goto to enter into a complex literary dialogue about the meaning of being a "prairie Asian" in the 1990s.

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[19] See for instance Luo for a discussion of the similar narrative strategies and concerns in Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* and Lai's *When Fox is a Thousand*. Similarly, see Khoo's observation: "Leaving behind more straightforward and traditional immigrant narratives of juxtaposing homeland and new society, works like those of Lai and especially her contemporary, Japanese-Canadian author Hiromi Goto, form novel renditions of Canadian identities through their use of Canadian social and cultural space" (251).

So when and where is "Asian Canadian"? Answering this question is obviously an ongoing process, and it will require literary critics to be sensitive to the different geographies Asian Canadian texts traverse and the different histories they trace. The next chapter of this dissertation partly takes up this challenge by discussing the work of Fred Wah, a highly accomplished poet whose critical diasporic poetics tries to make sense of the paths through which Asian Canadian subjects have migrated and been displaced to and around Canada. In reading Wah, I wish to extend the focus on the forms of critical diasporic identification I discussed in the work of Goto: reading Wah's diasporic interventions entails considering the ways in which he presents subjects as both in place and in motion, calling into question the constitution of "Chineseness" and "whiteness" and their complex points of intersection.

Chapter Four: Fred Wah Moving through the Hyphen

In the previous chapter, I read Hiromi Goto's novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* as an attempt to rework (and not merely appeal to) the contours of "Japaneseness" in Canada. Through the process of "writing back" to various forms of received culture, Goto puts forward a critical diasporic identification that differs markedly from the forms of critical nationalism narrated in the work of Joy Kogawa. Goto nevertheless takes on the boundaries of the Canadian nation: Naoe's participation in the Calgary Stampede disturbs weather patterns across the west-east axis of the Canadian nation-state, from Victoria to Charlottetown. In short, I argued that reading Goto's diasporic interventions entails reconsidering the dual process of rethinking the form of received culture in diaspora *and* reworking the boundaries of the Canadian national imaginary.

The work of Fred Wah pushes this concern with a critical diasporic identification further through an extended and ongoing attempt to formulate what I call a critical diasporic poetics. For Wah, this poetics entails coming to terms with a language to engage with the historical pressures that have constituted forms of "Chineseness" and "whiteness" in Canada. In this respect, Wah's work is related to yet different from the sweeping historical narrative put forward in SKY Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, which I discussed in Chapter One. Both Lee and Wah are concerned with the constitution of "Chineseness" in

intensely localized spaces, including Vancouver's Chinatown and the Diamond Grill cafe in Nelson, B.C. Moreover, Lee and Wah address the question of cultural "in-betweenness" and the potential offered by writing from what Wah calls a "not 'pure'" position.[1] However, Wah has long expressed a considerable distrust of what he calls "the tyranny of prose" (*Diamond Grill* n.p.), and his ongoing formulation of a critical diasporic *poetics* distinguishes him from Lee—and even from Kogawa and Goto, who write poetry but have made their most dramatic marks in fiction. Wah is best known as an accomplished poet with a career dating back to his involvement in the *TISH* group in Vancouver in the early 1960s. Since that time he has published some 18 books and chapbooks, one of which (*Waiting for Saskatchewan*) won the Governor General's Award for poetry. But Wah has also been active as an editor, a literary critic, and a cultural theorist, and his long-standing involvement in these "other" fields of writing—an involvement that is more complex than these simple categories will allow—also distinguishes him from the other writers I discuss in this dissertation.

In this chapter, I attempt, in the words of Roy Miki, to "trace the paths"[2] of the critical diasporic poetics developed by Wah over the course of his lengthy

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[1] The notion of a "not 'pure' position" appears repeatedly in Wah's work; see *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* n.p.; *Waiting* 43; and the epigraph of *Diamond Grill* n.p. Wah provides an extended discussion of the implications of this notion in "Half-Bred Poetics," an essay I discuss at length later in this chapter.

[2] I have taken this phrase from the title of a collection of essays on bpNichol, *Tracing the Paths: Reading≠Writing the Martyrology*.

writing career. I begin with a discussion of Wah's early poetry, which does not address questions of "Chineseness" or "race" in any obvious ways but nonetheless develops strategies to address questions of "place" and motion. I then turn to Wah's "theoretical" writings, a category that is hardly secure in its distinction from his "poetic" writings. Here I pay particular attention to Wah's series of "poetics" essays, which lay out Wah's ongoing formulation of theories of language, genre, ethnicity, and "race." Finally, I turn to the series of texts in which Wah explicitly addresses the discourses and histories that have constituted "Chineseness" in Canada: *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* (1981), *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* (1982), *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985), and *Diamond Grill* (1996). In particular, I discuss how *Waiting for Saskatchewan* works toward a poetic language to represent the multiple displacements experienced by the figure of Wah's father; and how *Diamond Grill*, as an extension of the "Elite" series in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, charts movements in and out of the intensely localized space of the Diamond Grill cafe in Nelson, B.C. in the 1950s. In his later writings, Wah draws upon and recalibrates his longstanding interest in "place" and motion to intervene in the process of remembering the histories of displacement and exclusion that have shaped the contours of "Chineseness" in Canada. I suggest that "moving through the hyphen" becomes for Wah an attempt to address the production of "Chineseness" in Canada while representing the agency of subjects to move through the historical effects of racialization.

I

In critical discussions of Asian Canadian literature, it is always easier to focus on writing that explicitly addresses the histories and experiences of subjects racialized as "Asian" in Canada. Certainly my dissertation has followed the easy route in this regard, focusing on literary writing that explicitly thematizes the production of "cultural difference." When it comes to reading the work of Fred Wah, the temptation is to pass over the substantial body of writing Wah had produced before he turned to the figure of his father and questions of "Chineseness" in *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* and the texts that followed it. But, as Sneja Gunew observes in a recent essay, a key question facing cultural critics is "how to set up interpretive strategies that move beyond the thematization of cultural difference" ("Operatic Karaoke" 257).[3] Reading Wah's early poetry provides one way to address this pressing question.

It is not my intention to provide a thorough overview of Wah's long writing

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[3] Gunew makes this point in reference to the work of Evelyn Lau, whom she (rightly) identifies as "an enigma in a Canadian and North American west-coast context where Asian-American and Asian-Canadian ethnic or diasporic canons are being hastily assembled with a great deal of relish" ("Operatic Karaoke" 256). For Gunew, reading Lau in terms of an "acoustic" as opposed to a "visual" register allows critics to sidestep the "pitfalls of identity politics" in favour of "the open and speaking (singing) voice that exceeds the meanings of normativity that have been attached to it" ("Operatic Karaoke" 261).

career.[4] Instead, my argument in this section is that Wah's ongoing experiments with different poetic forms to situate himself in relation to an intensely localized "place" have provided him with what he has called a set of tools with which to effectively intervene, in his later poems, in the cultural politics of remembering histories of displacement and racialization. Indeed, it is this notion of "place" that Wah, his critics, and his interlocutors in interviews have consistently named and attempted to theorize. As bpNichol flatly stated about Wah in a 1978 interview: "I don't know anyone else who has such a strong sense of place—period" (Wah, "Conversation with Fred Wah" 44). Frank Davey (a fellow member of the *TISH* group and one of the first critics to comment on Wah) made the following statement in 1974: "The concept which dominates Wah's writing is that the geographic and human particulars which immediately surround a man not only contain all place and all history but together form a place that is for that man the true centre of the cosmos" ("Fred Wah" 258). In a one-page statement entitled "From in Here . . . ," which was written in 1976 and which appears in *Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek* (1980), Wah builds on this observation with an allusive (and oft-quoted) discussion of "place":

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[4] Such an overview has already been written by Charlene Diehl-Jones, whose lucid account functions as a generous guide to readers working their way through Wah's work; see Diehl-Jones. My only significant quarrel with this fine piece of scholarship is the relatively little weight Diehl-Jones assigns to Wah's series of "poetics" essays. I address the implications of these essays later in this chapter. See also Derkson for a compelling discussion of the Canadian critical contexts in which Wah's work has been read.

> Writing has a lot to do with "place," the spiritual and spatial localities of the writer. I see things from *where* I am, my view point, and I measure and imagine a world from there. Oaxaca, Vancouver, the Kootenay River a thousand years ago or today, my father's father's birthplace, become "local" to me and compound to make up a picture of a world I am a native of. Writing is sometimes remembering this image, and sometimes it has to make it up. (126)

Wah thereby theorizes himself as a perceiving subject in relation to an accumulated and sedimented history of "place." Charlene Diehl-Jones makes a similar point with great elegance: "Fred Wah's poetics place a strong emphasis on the specifics of place and, as his work develops, on the specifics of the responding subject, who is located both spatially in a landscape and temporally along a continuum, cultural and familial" (345). But what links "a thousand years ago" and "today"? And what links "Oaxaca, Vancouver, the Kootenay River," and Wah's "father's father's birthplace"? I want to suggest that such questions are fundamental to addressing the problematics of diaspora: what connects a "there" and a "here"? A "then" and a "now"? For Wah, the histories he alludes to and the places he perceives are never self-evident; they are instead constituted in the complex processes of memory and making it up—what Wah would later call the process of "faking it."

Wah's first published book of poetry, *Lardeau* (1965), is marked by some fairly conventional lyrics, but flashes of brilliance appear in the poem entitled

"from MOUNTAIN," where he writes:

> Mountain full of creeks ravines of rock
> and pasture meadow snow white ridges humps of granite
> ice springs trails twigs stumps sticks leaves moss
> shit of bear deer balls rabbit shit (n.p.)

This passage would later appear as part of a series of poems in *Mountain* (1967), and then in *Among* (1972) and in *Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek* (1980), making it an early example of Wah working in "cumulative performances": adapting and reshaping his work in a process of ongoing revision. The density and specificity of this passage is striking. Diehl-Jones notes that "the clutter of nouns and noun phrases shows the ranging eye, looking, counting, adding" (376). Indeed, Wah's use of an additive style attempts to generate a non-hierarchical view of the world around him. Such a view emphasizes Wah's presence *among* the things that constitute the natural world, to use the lowly preposition Wah would use as the title of a subsequent book of poetry. But this view also involves the reader in making sense of these details and the relation between the things being catalogued. Wah would continue to use this additive style over the course of his writing career, perhaps most notably in the opening lines of *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, but also—more obliquely—in the extensive roving descriptions that characterize *Diamond Grill*. I will discuss these two key texts at length later in this chapter.

The use of prepositions to mark Wah's relation to the world characterizes much of his early poetry. The opening of "Cruise" in *Earth* (1974), for instance,

works as statement of purpose in this regard: ". . . so I told myself I would go out wandering not over the world but in the world" (n.p.; ellipses in original). This wandering—which we see in Wah's later *utaniki*, or poetic diaries—becomes complicated by the forced dislocations he addresses in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. But Wah's early poetry nevertheless addresses questions of *relation* with precision. In an untitled 17-part prose poem from *Earth*, Wah writes:

> The idea of it. Pictures form and the topography
> gets carried around in a head. Sometimes the feet
> find out what a trick the mind is. A necessary
> disguise for what the heart expects. But the Abney
> Rule and Compass are equivalently off. And so we move
> in on the new territory only to trip and fall over our
> imaginations, get lost. (n.p.)

The collision of prepositions at the beginning of the second last line, where readers "trip and fall" over the combination "in on," complicates what it means to enter "new territory"—and what role the imagination plays in this process.

Wah's early poetry also effectively draws on colloquial speech. A memorable example appears at the outset of *Tree* (1972):

> I don't want any of this tree poetry
> shit from you. You don't know what a
> fuckin tree is. If ya think its only
> in yer head yer full a shit. Trees is
> trees and the only thing they're good
> for is lumber so don't give me any crap
> about them bein sumpin else. . . . (n.p.)

This poem is entitled "Don't Cut Me Down," and Wah's use of colloquial speech here indeed "cuts down" the high seriousness of his poetic endeavor while at the

same time underlining the different class interests that conflict in anti-logging activism. The poems in *Tree* work precisely because of their multivocal nature: taken collectively, they refuse to speak from a single secure position. As Wah writes in a memorable phrase: "this is a hard language to work out/ the images keep interrupting the talking" (n.p.).

Pictograms from the Interior of B.C. (1975), as many critics have noted, marks a turning point in Wah's career. Unlike his earlier books, it generated considerable critical interest that shaped the contours of Wah criticism well into the 1980s.[5] In *Pictograms*, Wah sets poetry against pictographs—Native rock paintings from the British Columbia interior, reproductions of which were collected and published by John Corner. As readers, we are faced with the "pictographs" on the left-hand pages and Wah's poetry on the right-hand pages; we are asked to navigate between the visual and the textual, between picture and sound. Moreover, *Pictograms* asks us to think about Wah's own role as a "reader" of the pictographs. As Steve McCaffery observes, Wah "[aligns] himself against the pictographic texts to seek, not a meaning, but rather to contextualize himself as reader in such a way that an initial text may be responded to and that response (or reading) gauged in the composition of words" (88). The process of

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[5] The criticism I am referring to here includes an extended review by Steve McCaffery, a pair of interviews with Wah in *Open Letter* in 1978, and subsequent articles by Kamboureli (1984) and Banting (1986); see McCaffery; Wah "Conversation"; Wah "Mrs. Richard's Grey Cat"; Kamboureli "Fred Wah"; and Banting.

"contextualizing" himself against other texts has characterized many of Wah's subsequent books, most notably *Owners Manual* (1981), *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (1987), and *Alley Alley Home Free* (1992), in which Wah develops poetic practices that mix theoretical and critical discourses.

The theoretical implications of *Pictograms* have intersected rather neatly with Canadian literary scholars' increased interest in theorizing the role of language, speech, and interpretation. It's not my intention here to excavate the history of this intersection, which would entail historicizing the rise of "theory" in Canadian literary criticism in the 1980s. Instead, I wish to observe that the interviews and the criticism on *Pictograms* for the most part focus on the theoretical implications of "dialogical play"[6] without addressing the implications of *cross-cultural* interpretation—for Wah is indeed reading/writing across cultures—which to my mind is *not* just a theoretical issue concerning "language," "speech," and so on in some abstract sense, but rather emerges as a result of an ongoing history of colonization. Wah writing in the mid-1970s and early criticism

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[6] I have taken this phrase from an article by Pamela Banting, who situates her reading of *Pictograms* in relation to an earlier reading by Smaro Kamboureli:

> Smaro Kamboureli's essay on Wah's poetry has already outlined its dialogical play in terms of the 'conversation' between pictograph and pictogram, and between the processes of reading and writing. There are several other dialogues going on within the pictograms themselves, namely, the dialogues inherent in inner speech between thought and language, between speech and writing, and the proprioceptive dialogue between the body and its experiences. (18)

on Wah published in the 1980s perhaps did not yet have a poetic or critical language to address this history in a critical manner,[7] but it is precisely Wah's engagement with histories of cross-cultural contact (and all their violent asymmetries) that would make his later books increasingly important.

Wah's books after *Pictograms* branch out in several directions, one of which is Wah's obsessive search for a language to represent the figure of his father, a search that begins in earnest with *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* and continues with the texts that emerged out of it. But before I discuss this series of

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[7] By this I do not mean to suggest that "cross-cultural" issues are not present in Wah's early poetry, because clearly they are. Note for example "The Smile" from *Lardeau* (1965), which is notable for the explicitly sexist male gaze that attempts to frame the body of an exoticized Native woman:

> a trading-post
> of red mud
> & the good-looking Navajo girl
> against it
> stands in the morning sunlight
> to let me see her figure's length
> stretch
> in her velvet blouse
> how
> to beguile my looks
> at her hand-woven shoulder-blanket
> which is for sale
> but she sort of smiles too (n.p.)

One could argue, however, that Wah's attempt to situate himself as a perceiving subject "among" the world that surrounds him would work to undermine the very logic that positions the "Navajo girl" as Woman/Native/Other. In other words, the very poetics Wah develops allows him to work toward a more critical position on gender and race—and, as he writes in *Diamond Grill*, the implications of being "not the target but the gun" (138).

texts, I wish to outline some of the other directions Wah's poetry has taken after 1975. While *Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek* (1980) brings together poems from Wah's often difficult-to-find earlier books,[8] it also points to directions he would later take. A key concern here is a poetics of *motion*, which is evident in a previously unpublished poem entitled "How to Be Something":

> dream about it
> get the head back
> into the body into
> remembering
> skin
> imprint of shape
> into inside
> and look at what you do to yourself
> doing to yourself
> say "mmmm"
> remembering
> don't move
> let yourself be caught
> catch
> move
> very fast
> as fast as you can
> as you can (125)

As the "How to" title might suggest, this poem would later appear in *Owners Manual* (1981), a short and playful "owner's manual" for our bodies.[9] What I like

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[8] While it is undeniably important to have a readily available edition of Wah's selected poetry, *Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek*'s poor-quality paper and relatively narrow pages make some of the reprinted poems (especially those from *Pictograms*) considerably less impressive than their original form.

[9] Wah says in an interview with Pamela Banting: "*Owners Manual* is a book that deals with the body. The owner is yourself. I got the title from the same book you've got on your kitchen table, the owner's manual to your Toyota. I'm kind of humourously interested in the fact that we've got these wonderful

about "How to Be Something" is the energy with which it expresses many of the concerns Wah would address with *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* and beyond: the role of memory, the proprioceptive process of writing the body, the need to refuse stasis. The final lines "move/ very fast/ as fast as you can/ as you can" convey in capsule form the essence of Wah's poetics of motion: they convey the breathlessness of *refusing to stand still.*

This refusal becomes crucial in *Waiting for Saskatchewan* and *Diamond Grill.* But it also plays an important role in the series of *utaniki*, or poetic diaries, that Wah produced in the 1980s. In this series, which includes *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* (1982) and *Limestone Lakes Utaniki* (1989), Wah uses the *utaniki* form to trace his travels and push the boundaries of how to represent these travels. *Limestone Lakes*, for example, is a beautiful chapbook designed by Peter Bartl, and it is much more effective in this form than in the reprinted version that appears in the more readily available *So Far* (1991).[10] The chapbook version of *Limestone Lakes* consists of loose pages that are placed in a sequence named after days of the week. *Limestone Lakes* thereby asks its readers to consider where the sequence begins and—building on the

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owner's manuals for our cars but not for our bodies" (Wah, "Interview with Fred Wah." Interview with Pamela Banting 17).

[10] Reading the version of *Limestone Lakes* that appears in *So Far* is a considerably flatter experience: there are no visuals and nothing is "unbound." As a result, the open-ended seriality of the chapbook version is fixed, and the readerly experience of roaming through the poems is cut short.

implications of *Pictograms*—how the visual and textual elements relate to one another. The "spread of place" is a key concern for Wah, who catalogues his surroundings in "Sunday":

> Tents set up on a small pond-filled bench
> and we start to feel the spread of place,
> dewed grass, boots, flashlights,
>
> bite of air in the nose. (n.p.)

Wah's poetic voice here tries to come to terms with a language to address the complexity of his relationship to a "place"—and the difficulties involved in the act of naming and mapping. In "Monday," Wah writes:

> But the problem with naming is number,
> you can't look at, let alone count, all of it.
> Like right now after lunch someone yaps "get the maps" and I think of the
> maps folded up in my pack
> and how I never really use them for the specific, just an overview
> (imaginary mostly). (n.p.)

As Wah recognizes, maps (or any form of representation, for that matter) can never wholly represent "it"; they can provide only a partial, imaginary perspective from which Wah can make sense of the "world" in/on which he travels.

The other main direction Wah's poetry has taken since *Pictograms* is toward the theoretical/critical barrage of words that comprise the series of poems in *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (1987) and *Alley Alley Home Free* (1992). Wah describes the Music at the Heart of Thinking series (which continues into *Alley Alley Home Free*) as "a series of improvisations on translations of and critical writing about contemporary texts and ideas" (Preface n.p.); it deliberately blurs

the boundaries between "critical" and "creative" writing, between "theory" and "poetry."[11] Wah acknowledges the difficulties involved in reading such improvisations—"I'm wary of any attempt to make it easy," he writes in the Notes to *Music*—but he is committed to the creative and disorienting potential of improvisational unpredictability.[12] In the oft-quoted Preface to *Music*, Wah writes about seeing a movie about the Shao Lin monks in China, one of whom

> would practice his tai chi while drunk so he could learn how to be imbalanced in the execution of his moves without falling over. In real battle his opponents were confused by his unpredictability. I've tried to use the same method in these pieces, *sans* booze of course. (Preface n.p.)

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[11] It may accordingly function as a rather pointed response to a review of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* written by Donna Bennett, who concludes her detailed, eight-page review with the following statement: "Readers can only hope that Wah will continue writing in this open manner on subjects as important as this one, leaving his theory, interesting and important as it is, to his essays" (120).

[12] In "One Makes (the) Difference," a kind of preface to *Alley Alley Home Free*, Wah elaborates on the notion of *not understanding*:

> To say: "I don't understand what this means," is, at least, to recognize that "this" means. The problem is that meaning is not a totality of sameness and predictability. Within each word, each sentence, meaning has slipped a little out of sight and all we have are traces, shadows, still warm ashes. The meaning available from language goes beyond the actual instance of this word, that word. A text is a place where a labyrinth of continually revealing meanings are available, a place that offers more possibility than we can be sure we know, sometimes more than we want to know. It isn't a container, static and apparent. Rather, it is noisy, frequently illegible. (5)

Music at the Heart of Thinking 1, for example, reads as follows:

> Don't think thinking without heart no such separation within the acting body takes a step without all of it the self propelled into doing the thing (say, for example, the horse) and on the earth as well picking up the whole circuit feet first feel the waves tidal and even outside to moon and sun it's okay to notate only one of those things without knowing fixed anyway some heart sits in the arms of (*Music* n.p.)

This poem, like many others in the series, functions as what Ed Dyck has astutely called a "tumble" (198), pulling its readers down the page, resisting meaning and closure in any conventional sense. Such tumbles would serve Wah well in the "Elite" series in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, which also works to develop a form of prose poetry. But in the Music at the Heart of Thinking series, these tumbles perform the work of *estrangement*. Wah cites this Russian Formalist concept in the Preface to *Music*, and he returns to it frequently in his more conventional theoretical essays, which I'd now like to discuss.

II

At risk of simplifying a complex body of work, I would like to suggest that Wah's critical writings can be roughly divided into two categories. The first consists of explicitly "literary critical" discussions of individual poets, including Daphne

Marlatt, Sharon Thesen, George Bowering, and Leonard Cohen.[13] The second consists of a perhaps more generatively theoretical series of essays whose titles all riff on the term "poetic." This series reads, as Wah might say, as a cumulative performance, and it deserves careful attention as an ongoing expression of Wah's theories of language, genre, subjectivity, ethnicity, and "race." To date, Wah has published six essays in the series, which to my mind establishes him as a serious reader and theorist of contemporary writing. As such, he is unique among the writers I discuss in this dissertation, in the sense that he has access to—and he is able to manipulate—various "academic" modes of expression. And precisely because Wah works with and between a wide range of forms (critical, theoretical, poetic), he is able to disrupt attempts by a predominantly white academic establishment to treat him and his texts as passive objects of consumption. To return to a point I made in Chapter One, Wah's writings therefore have the potential to "blur the boundaries" (in the words of Donald Goellnicht) between a "theoretically informed" white academic establishment and the texts produced by people of colour. Wah's writings intervene in such a division of labour by studiously attempting to disrupt an easy consumption of literary texts.

As I mentioned above, Wah frequently draws from the work of Russian Formalism. Most noteworthy is a 1917 statement by critic Viktor Shklovsky: "The

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[13] For these essays, see (respectively) Wah Introduction; Wah "Subjective"; Wah "Bowering's Lines"; and Wah "Cohen's *Noos*."

technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (qtd. in Wah, "Making Strange Poetics" 213). In "Making Strange Poetics" (1985), Wah provides a lucid theoretical discussion of how "making strange" may work as a "compositional stance" (220), especially in relation to the long poem. Perhaps more significant is the second essay in the series, "Making Stranger Poetics" (1991), which marks an important turning point for Wah: it builds upon "Making Strange" (Wah calls it "a restatement and extension" of the earlier essay ["Making Stranger Poetics" 49]) and then turns, however briefly, to issues of ethnicity and race. Wah writes: "recent margins of the native and ethnic are also standing on the outside, creating, or trying to. People of colour, particularly women, are vocalizing their need for languages which are their own" ("Making Stranger Poetics" 57). Intriguingly, Wah refers to a group of "Asian-Canadian writers"—and he includes himself in this category. Wah writes: "Asian-Canadian writers such as Jim Wong-Chu, Sky Lee, Roy Miki, Gerry Shikatani and myself, seek to redress and rewrite the apple of John A. MacDonald's eye. Too bad his 'apple' hasn't windfallen and rotted sooner" ("Making Stranger Poetics" 57). Through a characteristically acerbic swipe at Canadian nationalism and its attendant exclusions, Wah expresses increased interest in—and self-identification with—questions of ethnicity and race, questions he addresses more fully in his subsequent essays.

Perhaps the strongest of these subsequent essays is "A Poetics of Ethnicity" (1992), which overlaps at times with "Making Stranger Poetics" but emerges as a more sustained look at cultural "otherness" expressed through what Wah calls an "alienethnic poetics" ("Poetics of Ethnicity" 99). Here and elsewhere, Wah uses the term "poetics" in a particular way: "not in the theoretical sense of the study of or theory about literature, but in its practical and applied sense, as the tools designed or located by writers and artists to initiate movement and change" ("Poetics of Ethnicity" 99). The particular change Wah envisions here involves linking "ethnic" with "ethic": "To write (or live) ethnically," writes Wah, "is also to write (or live) ethically, in pursuit of right value, right place, right home, otherness" ("Poetics of Ethnicity" 103). For Wah, the pursuit of such ethical value can never be found in specious appeals to "unity"—especially "national unity"—but instead must be located in a poetics of "necessary estrangement." The "alienethnic poetics" Wah wishes to pursue therefore entails incorporating "tactics of refusal" instead of "an alignment with mainstream and traditional strategies" ("Poetics of Ethnicity" 99). If such pronouncements sound rather prescriptive, Wah concludes his essay by leaving open other possibilities:

> the ethnopoetics toolbox isn't even only "ethnic," at least in the sense of racial. These tools are shared, it seems, by writers who are marginalized, invisible, experimental, political, in short, in need of any tool that might imagine, as the poet George Oppen believed, the unacknowledged world. ("Poetics of Ethnicity" 108)

As such, Wah casts his net rather widely, and thereby emphasizes his interest, as he puts it in an earlier essay, in ending "with a bridge rather than a box" ("Making Stranger Poetics" 55).

"Poetics of the Potent" (1995) reads like an older essay than the 1995 publication date would suggest—it does not, for instance, quote any text published after 1992—and it is perhaps most significant for the precise recap it provides of Wah's three previous "poetics" essays.[14] Wah pushes further ahead in "Half-Bred Poetics" (1996), in which he works through a wide range of postcolonial theory in order to theorize the *hyphen* "as a crucial location for working at the ambivalences in hybridity" ("Half-Bred Poetics" 60). As the language here suggests, Wah draws heavily from the work of Homi Bhabha in this essay. In doing so, Wah attempts to recalibrate his ongoing theories of "making strange" in relation to what he calls "the assumptions and confusions of identity I feel compelled to 'reconfigure'" ("Half-Bred Poetics" 60). The site of this reconfiguration is for Wah the hyphen, a term he returns to and works through repeatedly. "The hyphen, even when it is notated, is often silent and transparent," writes Wah. "I'd like to make the noise surrounding it more audible, the pigment of its skin more visible" ("Half-Bred Poetics" 60). As such, Wah wishes to accord the hyphen what he earlier called the "noisy, frequently illegible" nature of a text ("One" 5). In each case, Wah is emphatically *not*

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[14] For this recap, see Wah, "Poetics of the Potent" 78-80.

interested in clarity or harmony, but rather in the disruptive uses of dissonance through which to question fundamental assumptions about representation and identity.

Equally significantly, Wah attempts to theorize the hyphen as a space through which to pass—and not settle. "A primary strategy for the hyphen, as part of this *trans* (levitational) poetics," writes Wah, "is to locate and indicate the blank space, both to preserve and perpetuate the passage position as well as to problematize it so that it doesn't become static" ("Half-Bred Poetics" 64). It's crucial to note that such concerns are long-standing ones for Wah, dating back to the roving descriptions of *Mountain*. Indeed, as George Bowering put it in a memorable phrase from 1980, "Wah has always been impatient with ideas & images of stasis" (18). This impatience is expressed with particular glee (as I discussed above) in the final lines of "How to Be Something," where Wah writes: "move/ very fast/ as fast as you can/ as you can" (125). But while Wah's concern with "the passage position" in "Half-Bred Poetics" is clearly not new, it is noteworthy as an attempt to adapt an ongoing concern to the question of cultural identity. Such an adaptation gains increasing sophistication in the series of texts I discuss in the following section, especially in *Diamond Grill*, where Wah narrates the mundane yet profoundly significant act of *moving through the hyphen*.

"Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic" (1997-98) is the latest in Wah's series of "poetics" essays, and, while it doesn't immediately appear to be

as significant as "Half-Bred Poetics," it nevertheless shows Wah reconsidering what his ongoing concern with "making strange" might mean for differently positioned racialized writers. Intriguingly, Wah questions the *necessary* value of an alienethnic poetics. Wah has long been aware of the pitfalls that would result when techniques of "making strange" become "accepted and stylized" ("Making Strange Poetics" 220).[15] But in "Speak My Language," Wah reconsiders this point in terms of the challenges faced by racialized writers. Specifically, the process of reading the poetry of Métis writer Marilyn Dumont and the particular formal choices she makes causes Wah to pause and reconsider what it means to "race the lyric." Wah asks: "Could it be, for Dumont, that even the recent avant garde poetics are as complicit in the hegemonic designs of form as are the more conventional?" ("Speak My Language" 82). Wah goes on to conclude (productively, I think) that "a racialized lyric, caught in the hinges of inherited poetic forms, might adopt an ambiguous regard to both lyric interference and lyric convention in order to recuperate, even, the agency of linguistic choice" ("Speak My Language" 83). In other words, "interference" and "convention" do not in and of themselves constitute what Wah calls a "socially informed poetic"

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[15] Wah quotes Victor Burgin's observations on the use of "ostranenie" (i.e. making strange) in photography: "in practice the devices of 'ostranenie' tended to become reified, to become seen as intrinsically 'correct,' at which point they slid into mannerism" (qtd. in "Making Strange Poetics" 220). But while Wah acknowledges this position of critique, he does not at this stage directly engage with its implications. The fact that he revisits this position in "Speak My Language" is both welcome and continuing evidence of Wah rethinking his theories of various "poetics."

("Speak My Language" 72); rather, racialized writers may have to work between the two in order to question the constitution of their subjectivities.

Finally, it's worth noting the range of brief yet enticing readings of contemporary Asian Canadian writing Wah provides in his "poetics" essays: he champions Jam. Ismail, calling her "[o]ne of the most inventive and playful writers I know of in the prose poem" ("Speak My Language" 77); he slams the work of Evelyn Lau, calling her use of the prose poem "a kind of avant-garde makeup" ("Speak My Language" 76); and he works through his own conflicted and sometimes hostile responses to Joy Kogawa, whom he considers to "operate within a colonized and inherited formal awareness" ("Poetics of Ethnicity" 99). These are strong words indeed. But while Wah reads Kogawa's "cross-coding [i.e. glossing] of Japanese terms" in *Obasan* to be "an apology to the master" ("Half-Bred Poetics" 62-3) (and at odds, I would add, with a disruptive alienethnic poetics Wah would typically favour), he also acknowledges that "these glosses are frequently the result of editorial advice or insistence and so it is the publishing industry that is assaultive, that seeks to appropriate or melt such difference into a consumable item" ("Half-Bred Poetics" 63). Here Wah draws on Roy Miki's essay "Asiancy" (he quotes it in a subsequent note) and its attempt to discuss Asian Canadian literature in terms of the politics of its reception. From this point, Wah is able to observe that "[s]ocial and cultural production has, in recent years, appropriated the figure of the racialized writer as a measure of containment and control" ("Speak My Language" 72). As such,

Wah continues to reconsider his assumptions and recast his theoretical positions to grapple with the social and political implications of contemporary writing and its reception.

III

In this section, I wish to turn to the question of Wah's diasporic interventions in the series of texts that grew out of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, most notably *Waiting for Saskatchewan* and *Diamond Grill.* In stark contrast to the critical nationalism narrated in the work of Joy Kogawa (through which she attempts to assert a "place" in the Canadian nation), Wah's work makes no direct pleas to national "belonging." It instead situates questions of collective identification in the very problem of Wah's father's home and location.[16] Wah's critical diasporic poetics draws upon and recalibrates the poetic concerns—of place, location, movement, and perception—he had developed over the course of his writing career. I am therefore reading *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* and the texts that followed *not* as a break from Wah's previous work but rather as a productive rearticulation of long-standing concerns to address the problematics of racialized

[16] I have taken this phrase from the subtitle of Radhakrishnan's collection of essays, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*, where he theorizes "the diasporic location" as "the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one's place of origin with that of one's present home" (xiii).

cultural identity in Canada.

Breathin' My Name with a Sigh appeared in successive Coach House Manuscript Editions in 1978 and 1979 before being published in the more readily available Talonbooks edition in 1981. It is generally recognized as the start of Wah's obsessive search for the figure of his father—and a poetic language to represent this search. As Wah states in the Preface to the Talonbooks edition: "This is a book of remembering" (n.p.). It is also a book that led to numerous other productive directions in Wah's writing. "When *[Breathin' My Name with a Sigh]* was published, my sense was that it was just going to continue," Wah said in a 1984 interview. "Later, certain tendrils, or new roots started shooting out from that long poem as serials in themselves . . . . So now I have this root system spreading out" ("Interview with Fred Wah," Interview with Meaghan Baxter et al. 46).[17] Indeed, this "root system" strikes me as the most significant characteristic of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*: despite many fine poems (some of which I discuss below), it is perhaps best thought of as a transitional work to the breathtaking precision of *Waiting for Saskatchewan*.

A beautifully designed self-published edition of *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*

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[17] In the context of the interview, Wah refers to the "Fish Series" (which later become the Pickerel series in *So Far*) as "one of half a dozen different tendrils that have sprouted out of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*" ("Interview with Fred Wah," Interview with Meaghan Baxter et al. 46).

(1982) was one of the first roots to shoot out of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*,[18] but *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985) most fully realized its implications. *Waiting for Saskatchewan* brings together previously published (and new) poems in the "Breathin' My Name with a Sigh" series, a slightly modified version of *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, and two new series of poems, "Elite" and "This Dendrite Map," all to stunning effect. My argument is that *Waiting for Saskatchewan* works toward a critical diasporic poetics that charts the multiple displacements—both "international" and "local"—experienced by the figure of Wah's father. In tracing these displacements, Wah refuses to write in the "purity" of received genres, and instead configures his diasporic interventions as a problem of writing *between*

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[18] The self-published edition of *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* deserves extended commentary on its own right. Produced in Kyoto, it is a little book bound by string with striking blue Japanese paper covers. The cleanness of its design (most notably its layout and its use of blank space) generates a different reading experience from the version reprinted in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. The self-published edition works *across* the page, with the italicized and dated "prose" entries on the left-hand pages and the non-italicized "poetic" entries on the right-hand pages; it also, unlike the version in *Waiting*, uses slightly different font sizes for the two. In this way, the layout (like that in *Pictograms*) sets up a conversation across the page, enabling its readers to choose which direction to read—down? across? This choice does not come up with the version in *Waiting*, which, by contrast, arranges the "prose" and "poetic" sections vertically, with a single corresponding pair on each page. As Diehl-Jones observes, this spatial arrangement of the text "considerably shifts the reading experience" (431n4). I hasten to add that the version in *Waiting* (which cleans up a number of typos in the self-published edition) is not nearly as much an abomination as the reprinted parts of *Pictograms* that appear in *Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek*. Finally, it is worth noting the extremely limited distribution of the self-published edition: it appeared in an edition of 300 copies, of which only ten were for sale. The many issues raised by the nature of the publishing and distribution of Wah's work deserve extended future critical attention that remains outside the scope of this chapter.

genres. Particularly notable in this regard is the prose poetry he develops in the "Elite" series and, in turn, in *Diamond Grill*.

Wah begins *Waiting for Saskatchewan* with a collision of nouns in the opening lines of an untitled poem:

> Waiting for saskatchewan
> and the origins grandparents countries places converged
> europe asia railroads carpenters nailed grain elevators (3)

This poem had earlier appeared (somewhat buried) near the end of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, but here Wah foregrounds it to lay out some key concerns he would explore throughout the collection. As Lien Chao observes, Wah's use of noun parallels in these opening lines positions them "as equal entries in the line" (*Beyond Silence* 132). Moreover, as I discussed above with regards to Wah's statement "From in Here . . .," the paratactic style and the absence of connecting words make the relation between the nouns an open question. To reframe a question I asked earlier: What connects "origins grandparents countries places" or "europe asia railroads carpenters"? In what "place"—and out of what histories—might "europe asia railroads carpenters" come into contact? And how might one represent such contact? Such are the complex questions Wah raises right at the outset of *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, questions he pursues in the restless search for form that characterizes the entire collection.

The "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail" series, for instance, mixes poetry and prose to trace a journey to Japan and China. Wah characterizes the series as a *utaniki*, which (as I discussed above) is a form Wah would continue to explore in

Limestone Lakes and the other *utaniki* collected in *So Far*. Like *Limestone Lakes*, "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail" presents stripped down descriptions of the world in/on which Wah travels.[19] But what distinguishes the "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail" series is the way it charts sightings of the figure of Wah's father. As such, it pulls on the "father" poems that appear before it in the "Breathin' My Name with a Sigh" series while pointing ahead to the rest of the collection.

Wah opens the "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail" series with the image of his father kicking open the kitchen door in the Diamond Grill cafe:

> You never did the "horse" like I do now but walked
> straight down the aisle of the Diamond Grill
> and kicked the kitchen door with such a slap
> all the way up to the soda fountain
> I know it's you. (31)

Wah would later use this very image—of kicking open the doors and thereby *moving through them*—to great effect in *Diamond Grill*; he would also incorporate as an epigraph the following poem:

> You were part Chinese I tell them.
>
> They look at me. I'm pulling their leg.
>
> So I'm Chinese too and that's why my name is Wah.
>
> They don't really believe me. That's o.k.

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[19] For instance, while Wah writes of "the danger of focussing on the particular," he provides this sharply observed description of the Kimi Ryokan in Tokyo: "the very narrow stairs at Kimi stones set into the large hardwood floorboards shine like tile the blueprint and architecture of our six mat room here" (36).

When you're not "pure" you just make it up. (43)[20]

In this way, "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail" accumulates an inventory of images and concerns (including the need to "make it up") that Wah would continue to draw upon in his subsequent writing. But equally significant is the form of prose poetry Wah develops to chart the sightings of his father:

> About a year after you died I saw you. You were alone in a car and passed me going the other way. You didn't look at me. Over the past fifteen years this has happened maybe once or twice a year. I'll catch a glimpse of you on a street corner, disappearing through a doorway, or gesturing to someone in the booth of a Chinese cafe. What always gives you away is your haircut, your walk, or the flash in your eyes. You haven't seemed to notice me or ever said anything to me. In China your appearances were overwhelming. (44)
>
> [. . .]
>
> During the trip I saw you often and, curiously, moreso as we went north. Near the Yellow River you looked so relaxed as you leaned out the window of a truck being loaded with red bricks, enjoying your cigarette. I recognized your stocky frame as you bent to plant your fist of rice shoots in a field just outside Zhengzhou. Whether you were pushing your bike up a hill in the late afternoon in Taiyuan or walking briskly along the street in the coal-mining town of Shensi it was always your black crew-cut hair which most stood out. (45)

Such prose entries work cumulatively, with the "overwhelming" sightings leading to the meeting at the caves near Datong, where the figure of Wah's father brushes his arm: "I could see it was intentional and our eyes met for an instant as you turned and glanced over the head of the baby boy you were carrying. Though you didn't say anything your face still talked to me" (46). From this

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[20] I have reproduced this poem with double spacing because it appears as such in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*.

powerful moment of contact, Wah pushes the bounds of syntax to rethink the very notion of "connection" across space and time:

> When they plant the rice they bend their backs over and fall into the sky of the water they look at all day long look for extension out to other geographical scenes roots and fist down in the mud dream of green large human connection a terrain to give colour to the water and the place table it (47)
>
> [. . .]
>
> You might have been this guy in Huhhot—one room, one rooster—or is my skin bone brown so singular and contained in China eyes deep within the common view connected so that I see what you saw sometimes just to stand in the doorway with creosote eyes imprint death (too, maybe) but certainly to experience any complete person living there is always a mirror how alone can one be? (51)

Here Wah points toward the complexity of cross-cultural connection, of looking for "extension out to other geographical scenes," of searching for a "common view connected so that I see what you saw." The question Wah poses at the end of the second passage I've quoted—"how alone can one be?"—insists that such connection is far from assured yet desperately required.

The form of prose poetry found in "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail" becomes further developed in the "Elite (pronounced ee-light)" series, the shortest and, to my mind, the most powerful section in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. Here Wah recasts his longstanding concern with "motion" into the histories of the multiple displacements experienced by the figure of his father: from Canada to China back to Canada, with the violence of being incarcerated by Canadian immigration officials on his return; and the constant moving around from one cafe

to another, from one Western Canadian town to another. Wah narrates these displacements in a breathless run-on style of prose poetry. Elite 9 reads:

> When you returned from China via Victoria on Hong Kong Island and they put you in jail in Victoria on Vancouver Island because your birth certificate had been lost in the Medicine Hat City Hall fire and your parents couldn't prove you were born in Canada until they found your baptism records in the church or in the spring of 1948 when we moved to Nelson from Trail during the floods while Mao chased Chiang Kai-shek from the mainland to offshore Taiwan and the Generalissimo's picture hung in our house and on a wall above some plants and goldfish in the Chinese Nationalist League house down on Lake Street or when you arrived in China in 1916 only four years old unable to speak Chinese and later in the roaring twenties when each time Grampa gambled away your boat passage so you didn't get back to Canada until 1930 languageless again with anger locked up in the immigration cells on Juan de Fuca Strait or when your heart crashed so young at 54 as you fell from mom's arms to the dance floor did you see islands? (69)

Wah brilliantly integrates formal and thematic concerns in order to generate a vivid sense of the many upheavals his father underwent; he also contextualizes his father's displacements in relation to the violent effects of Canadian state policy, especially the incarceration of those racialized as "Chinese" during the Exclusion period (1923-1947). But, perhaps most significantly, Wah opens up—without resolving—questions of location and agency. By posing the question "did you see islands?" at the end of the long run-on sentence, Wah asks whether his father saw the social spaces he inhabited (and the two Victorias through which he passed) as bounded and isolated, or whether he was able to connect them, however provisionally.[21]

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[21] For Wah himself, this search for connection is ongoing and difficult. The opening sentence of Elite 8 reads: "I try to 'place' you and the hand or head

But although Wah grounds his concern with the effects of displacement in a search for a form of agency—here a sense of connection or solidarity—he never answers the question. We instead head into another run-on sentence in Elite 10, which narrates the multiple moves Wah's father made from cafe to cafe, business to business, and house to house. Here the displacements are not "international," but rather "local," and closely linked, as Chao points out, to the structural discrimination Chinese Canadians faced in the workplace. In her reading of Elite 10, Chao writes: "The part of the job market that is open to the Chinese is exclusively self-employment in the service industry: restaurants, cleaners, cafés, and motels. The unbroken one-sentence poem provides the reader with a linguistic opportunity to share the family's persistent search for a better opportunity . . . " (*Beyond Silence* 138-39). Wah's poem thus addresses the impact forms of structural racism had on the economic opportunities of Chinese Canadians during the Exclusion period and beyond. As Peter Li writes, "[t]he restriction on citizenship rights, together with the antagonism of white workers, placed the Chinese at a disadvantage in the labour market and jeopardized their ability to earn a living" (*Chinese in Canada* 43). Li goes on to argue:

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can't, try to get you into my mountains for example but your China youth and the images of place for you before you were twenty are imbued with the green around Canton rice fields, humid Hong Kong masses—I can't imagine what your image of the world was, where you were in it (were you always going home to Swift Current, were you ever at home, anywhere)" (68).

> There is little doubt that discrimination and exclusion provided the structural conditions for the emergence of ethnic business among the Chinese . . . . But their success in small businesses also reflects their ability to overcome resource limitations and market barriers by developing those cultural elements that could assist them in their entrepreneurial ventures. (*Chinese in Canada* 52)

Li here does not provide a "culturalist" explanation that seeks to understand the ability of Chinese Canadians to survive in relation to some putatively "Chinese" traits;[22] rather, he attempts to come to terms with the strategies through which Chinese Canadians could assert a form of agency in the face of exclusions in the job market.

This very concern with agency in the face of exclusion and displacement is crucial to Elite 10, which concludes: "finally the Holmes Motel in Cranbrook in the early sixties where that was the end of the deals the cafes the houses the driving the building the running right through it, for you, that was it" (71). The finality of this sentence packs an enormous emotional impact that hinges on the pun at the end—"that was it" refers to the end of Wah's father's life and also "the driving the building the running" that characterized it. In other words, by referring to the displacements and moves, both violent and voluntary, as being "it," Wah

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[22] Li rejects "culturalist" explanations in his assertion that "the key to understanding the Chinese in Canada lies in the structure of Canadian society rather than in a traditional culture supposedly brought over from China" (*Chinese in Canada* 4-5).

charts out a critical diasporic poetics that links "international" and "local" migrations; such a diasporic poetics historicizes his father's movements in relation to structural restrictions he faced (being incarcerated in Victoria, being forced to find self-employment in a variety of small businesses) as well as in relation to the connections and forms of solidarity he might possibly have made.

Diamond Grill (1996), if anything, pushes these concerns further by extending over of the course of an entire book the stylistic and thematic implications of the "Elite" series.[23] My argument is that *Diamond Grill* stages its diasporic interventions as the process of *moving through the hyphen*, a term he theorizes (as I discussed above) in "Half-Bred Poetics." While in the "Elite"

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[23] The genre of *Diamond Grill* deserves careful, extended commentary, and, while such a discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter, I'd like to provide a few comments. The back cover of *Diamond Grill* refers to the book as Wah's "first published prose work," but this designation hardly does justice to the form of prose poetry Wah develops here. *Diamond Grill* is divided into little sections, 132 in all, which provide Wah with considerable narrative flexibility without locking him into a linear narrative. Wah describes the book in the Acknowledgements as a "biotext," which is a term he had used some four years earlier in Music at the Heart of Thinking Eighty-Seven (in *Alley Alley Home Free*) and in "A Poetics of Ethnicity," where he refers to Music at the Heart of Thinking Ninety as "a posed biotext in response to some a [*sic*] ancestral ghosts" (105). In his discussion of such concerns with Ashok Mathur, Wah says: "I'm using the term 'biotext' as a hedge against the kind of writing I do in Diamond Grill being hijacked by ready-made generic expectations, the cachet exuded, at least for me, by [the terms 'autobiography' and 'life writing']. As I neared finishing with the text, however, I felt I needed to call the hedge a hedge and so I tinted it as 'biofiction.' For this book, that feels like a happier term, compositionally, since it indicates the possible brush with certain narrative tropes" ("Interview with Fred Wah on *Diamond Grill*" n.p.). Wah goes on to refer back to the notion of drunken tai chi he had developed in *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, and indeed it is the process of improvisational unpredictability that he tries to develop through the blurring of received generic categories.

series Wah works with a broad canvas, addressing a wide range of "international" and "local" displacements, in *Diamond Grill* he charts movements in and out of the intensely localized space of the Diamond Grill in Nelson, B.C. in the 1950s. *Diamond Grill* is both compact and remarkably kinetic, bringing together a profound sense of locatedness and a search for a language to address the agency of characters to move through available spaces.

Finding a starting point in a discussion of *Diamond Grill* is difficult given the multivocal and richly theoretical nature of the text.[24] Indeed, as Wah writes in the opening section of the book: "The journal journey tilts tight-fisted through the gutter of the book, avoiding a place to start—or end. Maps don't have beginnings, just edges. Some frayed and hazy margin of possibility, absence, gap" (1). But despite Wah's commitment to working on some "margin of possibility," he opens and closes the text with the images of doors—or, more precisely, moving through doors, an image he returns to repeatedly throughout

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[24] The multivocal nature of *Diamond Grill* deserves particular attention: the text consists of a variety of distinct voices and modes of textuality, including an academic footnote citing Mary Louise Pratt (68-70), a Head Tax Certificate with sarcastic and subversive answers filled in (130), a local history of Cabri (28), poetry by detained Chinese immigrants to Canada (22-23), an article from the *Nelson Daily News* (95), a promotional brochure (135), interviews with various family members, numerous recipes, window signs, and so on. The modes of textuality put forth are, in other words, anything but monologic. As such, Wah can *textually* challenge notions of a "homogeneous identity"—as well as received forms of "culture" and "history." Discourses of identity are multiple and multiply situated. Like Goto, Wah refuses an oppositional politics of identity grounded in fixed identities—or fixed locations. He instead works through the more complex process of narrating how characters move through and against various restrictions, a concern I address in the remainder of this chapter.

the text. The first prose poetry section opens with a description of the "two large swinging wooden doors" that lead into the kitchen of the Diamond Grill, a cafe operated by Fred Wah Sr. in Nelson, B.C. in the 1950s. These doors become remarkable due to the energy and glee with which the narrator, Fred Jr., moves through them: "I pick up an order and turn, back through the doors, whap! My foot registers more than its own imprint, starts to read the stain of memory" (1). Wah thus begins a process of what he calls "heterocellular recovery," grounding the process of recovery in the sensations of the body. The closing section of the book pulls its readers back to the image of the doors by narrating Fred Sr. opening the back door of the cafe in the early morning, unlocking the deadbolt and the padlock, jarring open the door, which "clangs and rattles a noisy hyphen between the muffled winter outside and the silence of the warm and waiting kitchen inside" (176). By the time readers reach this point in the text, the mundane yet increasingly heroic act of opening the door to the cafe resonates deeply with the movements and crossings that characterize everyday life for Fred Sr.—both the forms of violence he faces and the acts of resistance (often characterized by "faking it") he is able to perform.

In other words, moving through the doors becomes for Wah an attempt to theorize a form of historical agency, in which subjects (particularly Fred Sr.) work within and against the historical pressures that constitute their subjectivities. Wah thereby scrutinizes and questions the constitution of "Chineseness" and "whiteness," as well as the very act of being a "Chinese businessman" in the

interior of British Columbia in the 1950s. In each case, characters in *Diamond Grill* do not freely "choose" their identities, but instead improvise and move through available spaces.

A number of passages in *Diamond Grill* bring such concerns into sharp focus. In one instance, Fred Jr. is interpellated as a "Chink":

> Until Mary McNutter calls me a Chink I'm not one. That's in elementary school. Later, I don't have to be because I don't look like one. But just then, I'm stunned. I've never thought about it. After that I start to listen, and watch. Some people are different. You can see it. Or hear it.
>
> The old Chinamen have always been friends with my dad's. They give us kids candy. I go fishing down by the boat-houses with one of them. He's a nice man, shiny brown knuckles, baits my hook, shows me how to catch mudsuckers, shows me how to row a boat. We're walking up the hill with our catch of suckers and some kids start chinky, chinky Chinaman and I figure I'd better not be caught with him anymore.
>
> I become as white as I can, which, considering I'm mostly Scandinavian, is pretty easy for me. Not for my dad and some of my cousins though. They're stuck, I think, with how they look. I only have the name to contend with. (98)

As Ashok Mathur points out, Wah adapts Althusser's notion of interpellation to narrate the way Fred Jr. is "hailed" as a "Chink" (Wah, "Interview with Fred Wah

on *Diamond Grill* n.p.).[25] But what really makes this and other passages stand out is the unflinching honesty with which Wah narrates Fred Jr.'s subsequent capitulation to the pressures of "whiteness": to avoid the "old Chinamen" (identified as such by the taunts), or to play on the team against the Chinese kids who immigrated to Canada after 1949 because "they were foreign and I was white enough to be on the winning team" (53). In each case, Wah addresses the

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[25] Miki addresses similar concerns at the outset of his fine essay "Can I See Your ID?," where he cites Judith Butler: "it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible." Miki builds on Butler through the following poem:

> For example:
> dirty jap
> are you a jap?
> The japs are coming
> a jap is a jap
> no japs from the rockies to the seas
> jap oranges
>
> or nip:
> short for nipponese
> slant for "hamburger" (winnipeg, c1950s)
> slang for intercourse south of the 49th
>
> qualification:
> this entry manifests
> the site-specific memory
> of a finite subject and
> cannot be transposed
> without disrupting the
> cross draft of nation (85)

Indeed, this notion of *disruption* in the face of the unpredictable consequences of racist interpellation (as a jap, as a Chink) propels Miki's and Wah's investigations of the social constitutions of their subjectivities.

process through which Fred Jr. capitulates to what he calls "the racism within me that makes and consumes that neutral (white) version of myself, that allows me the sad privilege of being, in this white white world, not the target but the gun" (138).[26]

Yet Fred Jr. is never completely able to secure this "neutral (white) version" of himself. Despite his attempt to identify himself as "Canadian," his elementary school teacher tells him to put "Chinese" in the blank after "Racial Origin" on a form he has to fill out. When he starts "getting serious" with a white girl in Nelson, her father, a local lumber baron, tells him to stop coming around—"I don't want my daughter marrying a Chinaman" (39). And the apparent disjunction between Wah's name and his face necessitates repeated explanation. In each case, "the hyphen always seems to demand negotiation" (137). "Identity is never pure, never sure," Wah tells Ashok Mathur. "Thanks to Mary McNutter I not only know who she thinks I am but I know immediately the

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[26] Wah addresses the notion of complicity and self-policing throughout *Diamond Grill*. In one passage, Wah writes:

> . . . that same girl who isn't allowed to bear my children does complain once about my garlic breath. I tell her she's nuts, I can't smell a thing and all she has to do is eat some garlic each night for supper and everything'll be cool.
>
> Tonight I cook some lai foon with vegetables in a black bean and garlic sauce. I turn the fan on over the stove to take the smell out—just in case someone drops by. (47)

In this passage, Wah narrates the contradictory and uneven process through which Fred Jr. both tells his girlfriend off *and* internalizes the imperative to hide the smells and traces of "difference."

space she has cleared for both of us is exclusive, surprising, and volatile" (Wah, "Interview with Fred Wah on *Diamond Grill*" n.p.).

This volatility characterizes Fred Sr.'s life, both in the large sense of not belonging precisely to either the Chinese or the white communities, and in the more mundane sense of everyday negotiations that he has to make. In one instance, Fred Jr. recalls "a sunny winter Sunday in East Trail in 1946" when he "[turns] into a smart-aleck and [yells] out something jerky like get that stupid bus out of the way" to a bus driver who had honked his horn. At home, Fred Jr. faces the anger of his father:

> . . . I get a good talking to about how I can't fool around out there when my father's a business man, a Chinese business man, and I'd better not talk back like I did today, to anyone, particularly when they're white, because it all comes down on him, my father, and our family has to be careful in this town . . . . (101)

From this passage, in which Fred Jr. gets told in no uncertain terms his father's and his family's precarious "place" in East Trail, Wah jumps to the everyday dialogue and "play-by-play commentary" that Fred Sr. performs while working in the Diamond Grill:

> Hi there Bob, what're you gonna have this morning?
>
> Shit, those lazy guys on night shift again, didn't fill the ketchup last night.
>
> Look at old Gilchrist, shoveling his own sidewalk. Why doesn't he

leave it for the hired help?

Jeezus christ, here comes Ed Bentall. He looks like hell. Been out all night again, gambling upstairs at the Percolator Club. I bet he lost a bundle. Just before Christmas too.

Hiya Ed, wanna coffee?

Yeah, and get me pack of Export 'A' Freddy.

Comin' right up. Here ya go. Alley oop! (103)

Here and elsewhere in *Diamond Grill*, Wah puts forward the kind of precisely rendered rhythms of everyday speech he had developed as far back as *Tree*. This speech, I want to emphasize, is not just a form of "relief" from the seriousness of the passage that preceded it. Rather, it is part of one and the same process: Fred Sr.'s ongoing negotiation of his "place" in the interior of B.C.

Diamond Grill is filled with examples of such juxtaposed passages. Later in the text, for instance, Wah moves from a description of Fred Sr. "walking home on a snowy night over the old bridge across the Columbia in Trail with the money bag under his overcoat and his hand on the pistol in his pocket. Alone" (144) to an account of the playful way Fred Sr. serves up a bowl of soft ice cream to a stunned Walter Wait in the Diamond Grill (145). To accomplish the latter stunt, Fred Sr. has to get the ice cream from Walter Wait's own newsstand up the street, it being the only place in Nelson with a soft ice cream machine in the early 1950s. Moving under pressure, Fred Sr. refines the art of "faking it."

The clearest and most memorable example of what Wah calls "faking it" is

Fred Sr.'s initiation speech at the Lions Club, with the pressure of being "the only Chinaman at an all-white dinner meeting." Wah narrates the way Fred Sr. seeks the approval of the "Baker Street nickel millionaires" in the audience:

> there he is . . . thanking these guys for inviting him to join their club, thanking them for making Nelson such a wonderful place to live and raise his family, and thanking them for this meal with the wonderful *sloup*, . . . when he hears himself say *sloup* for soup he stops suddenly and looks out at the expected embarrassed and patronizing smiles from the crowd. Then he does what he has learned to do so well in such instances, he turns it into a joke, a kind of self put-down that he knows these white guys like to hear: he bluffs that Chinamen call soup *sloup* because, as you all know, the Chinese make their cafe soup from the slop water they wash their underwear and socks in, and besides, it's just like when you hear me eating my soup, Chinamen like to slurp and make a lot of noise. That's a compliment to the cook! (66)

What makes this passage remarkable is the painful yet improvisational nature of Fred Sr.'s speech, which recirculates the grimmest of racist stereotypes (the slop for soup and so on) yet ends with that resilient exclamation mark, punctuating Fred Sr.'s recovery. In this sense, this passage works as a metonym for the entire text, which consistently addresses the pressures that necessitate improvisational responses that mix, in unpredictable ways, modes of compliance and resistance.

There is, as Wah makes clear, a certain pleasure in these acts of "faking it," of making it through a situation in social circumstances well beyond the control of any individual. This pleasure, in turn, takes the form of the palpable exuberance Fred Jr. feels over the cafe's modernity—the deluxe milk shake mixer, the horseshoe-shaped counters with their polished chrome, the diamond-shaped booths, the stainless steel soda fountain at the front, and all the details that get repeated time and again in the roving descriptions of what Fred Jr. proudly calls "the most modern, up-to-date restaurant in the interior of B.C." (25). And of course nothing can surpass the pleasure Fred Jr. feels when he kicks through the doors to the kitchen, or works the secret latch in the door near the soda fountain. For those racialized as Chinese, movement in and around the cafe is deeply circumscribed by the pressure of merely *being* in Nelson in the 1950s, but Wah works hard to underline the pleasure his characters find in their possible moves. As such, *Diamond Grill* sets restriction against possibility, the large metal grill of the back door against the act of opening it.

If, as I suggested above, it is difficult to find a starting point to discuss a text as theoretically sophisticated as *Diamond Grill*, it is even more difficult to find a point with which to end. In my reading of *Diamond Grill*, I have tried to work through the text's accumulation of details: its focus on moving through doors, working through and against the violence of racialization, and "faking it" through language. It would be reductive to say that *Diamond Grill* is "about" migration, or diaspora, or racialized identity, in the sense that the static verb "is" cannot

convey the energy and precision with which Wah moves through such concerns. Instead, I want to suggest that *Diamond Grill* addresses such concerns through an act of compression, emphasizing the physical boundaries of the cafe, its hierarchical organization,[27] and the various movements in and through it. The Diamond Grill does not simply stand for "Canada" or "Chineseness"; it instead functions as a localized node in the movements performed by the text's characters. These movements are neither free nor wholly determined by structural restrictions, but rather function as an unpredictable mix of complicity and resistance to received notions of "whiteness" and "Chineseness" in the interior of B.C. in the 1950s. Wah's diasporic interventions thereby consist of carefully tracing how these characters move within and against the pressures that constitute their subjectivities. By representing the ways Fred Sr. moves through the doors, clanging and rattling a noisy hyphen along the way, Wah requires his readers to rethink the process of remembering the effects of historical restrictions on subjects racialized as Chinese as well as the exuberant moments of pleasure generated in the act of moving through them.

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[27] I think here of the stairs leading to the basement, where Fred Jr. comes across Wing Bo, the nephew of the dishwasher who sits under a single light bulb peeling potatoes (118). The class boundaries are here signalled through the ability to move up and down the stairs—as well as, of course, the ability to move in and out of the cafe as a worker or customer.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that literary texts by SKY Lee, Joy Kogawa, Hiromi Goto, and Fred Wah function as diasporic interventions in the ongoing process of remembering a history of anti-Asian racism in Canada. These diasporic interventions respond to the historical pressures that have shaped and continue to shape Asian Canadian subjectivities: various restrictions on immigration, citizenship, and access to labour markets have indelibly marked the lives of Asian Canadians and Asian immigrants to Canada. Yet, as many commentators have stressed, Asian Canadians have not merely been acted upon: they have also engaged with the effects of these restrictions and asserted a form of agency in the face of attempted and actual exclusion. Following Lisa Lowe, I have named this process of engagement *Asian Canadian immigrant acts*, and—taking SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* as my example—I have argued that the literary texts I've discussed function as what Donald Goellnicht has called a "theoretically informed and informing" attempt to rethink the representation of Asian Canadian history in literary texts.

In the Introduction, I suggested that the process of understanding the work performed by Asian Canadian literature could be enabled by the complementary insights of three critical fields: diaspora theory, Asian American cultural criticism, and Canadian literary criticism. The diaspora theory I

discussed in the Introduction theorizes diasporic identification as a reconfigured form of nationalism, which suggests that diasporic interventions may also be invested in reworking the terms of national belonging; the heated debates over "going diasporic" and "claiming the nation" in Asian American cultural criticism suggest the need for scholars to consider carefully the ethical stakes in making a commitment to a diasporic perspective; and a long-standing interest in violence in Canadian literary criticism, when recalibrated to account for its highly uneven effects on differently racialized subjects, can help critics rethink the forms of cultural pluralism that have characterized (and to my mind hindered) discussions of Canadian multicultural literary criticism.

The complementary insights and points of intersection of diaspora theory, Asian American cultural criticism, and Canadian literary criticism have animated the act of researching and writing this dissertation. I wish to state here, however, that my primary point of intervention is Canadian literary studies. I am especially concerned with the representation of "race" and racism in the critical record surrounding the literary texts I've discussed and, more generally, the configuration of "cultural difference" in Canadian multicultural literary criticism. Crucially, as I have stressed, contemporary Canadian literary studies is *not* ignoring questions of "cultural difference"; it is instead increasingly becoming marked by what Roy Miki accurately calls "an escalating cultural capital for texts of colour and for academic studies of such texts" (*Broken Entries* 168). Following Miki, I wish to suggest that critical investigations of "cultural difference"

in Canadian literary studies must ask what this increased cultural capital might mean.

The general point I wish to stress here has been succinctly made by David Palumbo-Liu: "simply being read does not guarantee that the potentially contestive aspects of [minority] novels are recognized or debated," he writes. "On the contrary, texts can be read in ways that reconfigure potentially contestive elements as homogeneous correlates to dominant paradigms of subjectivity" ("Model Minority Discourse" 466n26). Palumbo-Liu coins the term *model minority discourse* to describe a particular contemporary mode of ideological containment. "Model minority discourse" is effective precisely because "it achieves its force from the fact that it appears, by dint of mobilizing 'ethnic dilemmas,' to be contestatory" ("Model Minority Discourse" 398). In other words, questions of "ethnicity" and "race" are *not* buried in "model minority discourse"; they are instead recast in a narrative of "self-healing" that provides "a blueprint for the deliverance of minority subjects from collective history to a reified individualism" ("Model Minority Discourse" 415).

In Canadian multicultural literary criticism, "model minority discourse" takes a related yet somewhat different form: the narrative of "self-healing" identified by Palumbo-Liu takes place at the level of the nation itself. The critical discussions of *Obasan* I discussed in Chapter Two, for instance, attempt to situate "Canada" in a narrative of what Scott McFarlane has called "an already fallen yet redeemable nation" ("Covering" 408). The process of redeeming

Canada as a nation requires revisiting (and not merely suppressing) a "racist past" (such as the exclusion of Chinese immigrants, or the internment of Japanese Canadians) in order to attempt to secure a "multicultural present" *that incorporates "cultural difference" on its own terms.*

This incorporation has taken two distinct forms in Canadian multicultural literary criticism. The first is a liberal inclusivist model that overlooks "difference." An example of this model is the Preface to *Other Solitudes*, which reiterates Atwood's assertion that "we are all immigrants to this place even if we are born here"—and insists that such an "awareness" is "a fundamental part of the Canadian sensibility" (Richmond n.p.). In this first model, "cultural difference" is something "we all share," while awareness of this "cultural difference" is what defines "the Canadian sensibility." The second model, in turn, recognizes "cultural difference" by flattening its implications. An example of this second model is the Introduction to *Other Solitudes*, which openly discusses "cultural difference" while normalizing (in the precise sense suggested by Weir) the subject of "race" in Canada. This second model has had a considerable influence on critical discussions of Asian Canadian literature. Certain critical discussions of *Obasan*, for example, configure the internment of Japanese Canadians as an aberration from an otherwise tolerant Canadian norm—and thereby normalize the subject of anti-Japanese racism in Canada. In short, these two models of configuring "cultural difference" attempt to secure a "multicultural present" either by eliding—or by incorporating—"difference" on its

own terms.

By contrast, I wish to suggest that the diasporic interventions in the work of Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah require literary critics to rethink several fundamental assumptions of the incorporative logic of these two models of Canadian multicultural literary criticism. First, these diasporic interventions contest the assumption that "cultural difference" is reducible to an expression of "the many" (cultures) "in one" (nation). It is imperative to recognize, as Arjun Appadurai puts it, that "the nation-state is by no means the only game in town as far as translocal loyalties are concerned" (165) while at the same time recognizing the continued need to challenge forms of exclusion in Canada. Gayatri Spivak has recently exhorted her readers to "rethink globality away from the U.S. melting pot" (*Critique* 402). While I deeply admire Spivak's commitment to developing a form of transnational cultural studies—and thereby refuse, in her words, to conflate "the problem of the ethnic domination in the United States with the problem of exploitation across the international division of labor" (*Critique* 168)—I am suggesting something more modest: critics working in Canadian literary studies need to track the constitution of "cultural difference" without assuming it to be a subset (or a defining feature) of an all-encompassing Canadian national imaginary.

Second, these diasporic interventions, precisely because they situate the constitution of "cultural difference" in the often violent histories that have enabled their emergence, require literary critics to rethink critical models that elide or

normalize the role of "race" in these histories. Here I would like to refer back to the work of Akeel Bilgrami, who insists that "commitments of identity" are chosen neither freely nor openly, but rather in response to specific historical pressures; and the work of David Theo Goldberg, who insists that racism must be considered in terms of its effects. The literary texts I have discussed in this dissertation make it clear that "cultural difference" is *not* a form of "diversity" that simply exists; they instead insistently return to the histories (and the historical pressures) out of which racialized identities have emerged in Canada. Moreover, these texts revisit these histories with a view to challenging their effects, particularly the uneven yet persistent ways in which subjects variously racialized as "Asian" in Canada have been differentiated and excluded.

The literary texts I have discussed in this dissertation are notable for their commitment to tracking these histories of exclusion and representing the differing forms of collective identification that have emerged in response to them. In the face of the attempted and actual deportation of Japanese Canadians in the 1940s, Joy Kogawa follows Muriel Kitagawa by asserting a form of critical nationalism; in the face of discourses that present Japanese Canadian women as racialized and gendered Others in Canada, Hiromi Goto narrates a critical diasporic identification by "writing back" to forms of received culture in diaspora; and in the face of the histories of displacement experienced by the figure of his father during and immediately following the exclusion period, Fred Wah reworks his longstanding concern with "place" and motion to develop a critical diasporic

poetics.

Literary texts by Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah trace different histories, traverse different geographies, and represent different collectivities. They are joined, however, by a commitment to understanding the constitution and effects of anti-Asian racism in Canada's state policies, the acts of its citizens, and the contours of its national imaginary. This shared commitment leads me to believe that the category *Asian Canadian literature* has value, not as a self-evident marker of a stable identity, but as a particular critical position that foregrounds the effects of anti-Asian racism in Canadian history and intervenes in the process of representing this history. Literary texts by Lee, Kogawa, Goto, and Wah do not simply stand in for the complex heterogeneity of writing by Canadians of East Asian ancestry; these texts instead put forward what I consider to be the strongest diasporic interventions in rethinking the impact of histories of exclusion on subjects variously racialized as "Asian" in Canada.

Such diasporic interventions are especially urgent given the intense circulation of recent discourses on the perceived place of Asian Canadians and Asian immigrants to Canada. As I am writing the Conclusion to this dissertation, debates are raging over the fate of the would-be refugee claimants from the Fujian province of the PRC who arrived on the coast of British Columbia in a series of ships in July and August 1999. As Glenn Deer has observed: "During the late summer and fall of 1999, the mobility of overseas 'Asians' has certainly been a preoccupation of the mass media" (n.p.). This media preoccupation has

often been characterized by resurgent forms of Yellow Peril discourse and white nativism. Following the appearance of the second ship of refugee claimants on 11 August 1999, the Victoria *Times Colonist* ran a series of strident front-page headlines: "A New Wave of Migrants to B.C." (12 August 1999), "Migrant Invasion" (13 August 1999), "Waves of Boat People" (14 August 1999), culminating with the stark "Go Home" (15 August 1999)—the latter reporting a reader poll in which 97% of respondents wanted the government to immediately deport the would-be refugee claimants. The opening line of "Go Home" read: "Go home. By plane. By boat. Just go" (A1). During the same four-day period, the *Times Colonist* framed a pair of letters to the editor under the heading "Invasion of the Boat People" (13 August 1999), and concluded an editorial entitled "Beefing up Coast Defences" (14 August 1999) by demanding that the federal government "give us the ships and planes needed to keep the Asian tide off our rocks" (A15).

Meanwhile, debate was heating up in the letters to the editors of newspapers across Canada. While the *Times Colonist* articles were notable for their unabashed use of Yellow Peril tropes (of invasions, waves, tides, and so on), many letters to the editor asserted white nativist claims to Canada. A bald expression of such nativist claims appeared in a letter in the *Globe and Mail* on 14 August 1999. The letter was signed by "Ian V. Macdonald, Ottawa," who claimed that "the rise of Canada into nationhood is attributable to the racial and cultural cohesiveness of the British and French settlers," and warned against "the

hazards of permitting uncontrolled entry of visible minorities" (D11). As Roy Miki has put it: "It's that old 'yellow peril blues' tuning its fork again" ("Can I See Your ID?" 88).

What is at stake here is not just the breathtakingly unselfconscious racism expressed by writers such as Ian V. Macdonald; it is instead a deep (and deeply historical) sense of crisis over the prospect of "them" ("visible minorities") invading "us" ("British and French settlers")—with the "us" assuming a proprietorial control over Canada as a nation. This very formulation rests on a racialized split, a division between "them" and "us," that may have no basis in biological fact but continues to have profound effects on how Canada is imagined as a nation—and who is assumed to belong. The split between "us" and "them" recalls, with increasing urgency, Kogawa's poem "Hiroshima Exit" (1974), which I discussed in Chapter Two. In this poem, Kogawa recounts a conversation she overheard in the Atomic Bomb Memorial Building in Hiroshima:

> "Well, they started it."
> Words jingle down
> "They didn't think about us in Pearl Harbor"
> They? Us? (*Choice* 33)

The pronominal distinction between "they" and "us"—and the implied racialized split that underwrites it—leads Kogawa to hope, at the end of the poem, that there is another door through which to pass; it leads the character Naoe, in Goto's novel *Chorus of Mushrooms*, to infiltrate the heretofore white male domain of the Calgary Stampede; and it leads Fred Jr. in Wah's biotext *Diamond*

Grill to gleefully and repeatedly kick open the doors separating the kitchen from the seating area of the Diamond Grill cafe.

The persistence of anti-Asian racism in contemporary imaginings of Canada as a nation necessitates a critical understanding of the attempted and actual exclusions that have characterized Canadian history. But it also necessitates an understanding of the acts of resistance to these forms of exclusion and the need to intervene in the process of remembering histories of racism in Canada. The literary texts I have discussed in this dissertation critically examine the history of Asian Canadians and Asian immigrants to Canada. At their best, they move through histories of exclusion with insight and energy, sometimes faking it and sometimes brashly kicking open the doors. In doing so, these texts not only resist the effects of historical and ongoing forms of white nativism; they also help their readers imagine the multiple and changing collectivities that are emerging in their wake.

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