

ON PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ASIAN CANADIAN
LITERATURE

TEACHER, DETECTIVE, WITNESS, ACTIVIST:
ON PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ASIAN CANADIAN
LITERATURE

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(English & Cultural Studies)

JULY 2014
HAMILTON, ON

TITLE: Teacher, Detective, Witness, Activist: On Pedagogy and Social Justice in
Asian Canadian Literature

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 231.

Abstract

Teacher, Detective, Witness, Activist: On Pedagogy and Social Justice in Asian Canadian Literature undertakes a critical consideration of the relationship between pedagogy, social justice, and Asian Canadian literature. The project argues for a recognition of Asian Canadian literature as a creative site concerned with social justice that also productively and problematically becomes a tool in the pursuit of justice in literature classrooms of Canadian universities. The dissertation engages with the politics of reading and, by extension, of teaching social justice in the literature classroom through analyses of six high-profile, canonical works of Asian Canadian literature: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998), Madeleine Thien's *Certainty* (2006), Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), and Rita Wong's *forage* (2007). These texts are in many ways about the reproduction of national, colonial, and neo-colonial pedagogies, a reproduction of teachings informing subject formation and citizenship from which higher education is not exempt. The dissertation analyzes the texts' treatment of familial and national reproduction, and the narrative temporalities this treatment invokes, in order to think through the political and social reproduction that occurs in classrooms of Canadian post-secondary education. This project raises a number of questions: Do literature instructors engage their students as investigators in the pursuit of justice? And, if so, what type of justice do we seek to reproduce in doing so? What happens when instructors engage students in the work of witnessing fictional testaments of historical trauma, albeit indirectly, as readers? How might we acknowledge and work through the resistance to learning that traumatic testimony can invoke? And finally, might it be productive to think of the work that literature instructors do as a form of activism? Can social justice be conceived of as a pedagogical project that unfolds in the literature classroom?

Acknowledgments

This project owes much to many people.

Thank you to my supervisor, Don Goellnicht, who mentors people, not students; whose expertise and keen questioning were invaluable; and whose kindness and dry wit helped me muster motivation and direction when my project took on new and often errant directions. Thank you to my readers, Daniel Coleman and Nadine Attewell, for asking such hard questions, many of which I'm only now beginning to be able to answer. These are the best questions, really—those that push you in new directions long after a project has concluded. Thank you to Lily Cho, the project's external examiner, whose work I have admired since my MA, and whom I was so fortunate to have at my defense.

I have benefitted so much from the work of colleagues at McMaster and beyond. Thank you to Christine Kim and Chris Lee for organizing the Asian Canadian Studies Graduate Student Workshop, and to all of the scholars, artists, and activists whose involvement in and support of such initiatives taught me so much over the years, including Jason Kim, Larissa Lai, Kirsten McAllister, Roy Miki, and Rita Wong. Thank you to Amber Dean, Jessie Forsyth, Jocelyn Sakal Froese, and Matthew Zantingh for sharing their time with me as I wandered through my own tangled thoughts, and for never failing to offer generous feedback and suggestions. I am lucky to have had the opportunity to work closely with and learn from Farah Moosa, Malissa Phung, Vinh Nguyen, and Y-Dang Troeung, all of whom are incredible scholars doing fascinating work. Thank you to Sarah D'Adamo, Nandini Thiyagarajan, and Danielle Wong for their support the day of the defense.

I am deeply appreciative of the kindness of friends and supporters, including Erin Aspenlieder, Melissa Carroll, Matthew Dorrell, Amy Gullage, Nick Holm, Pamela Ingleton, Eva Lane, Jackie Langille, Simon Orpana, Jocelyn Sakal Froese, Emily West, Peter Walmsley, Matthew Zantingh, and Gena Zuroski Jenkins, each of whom talked shop with me at different stages of my PhD, listened to me rail against the dissertation, and reminded me that I could do it. There was so much railing.

I could not have completed my PhD without the deep kindness, hilarious wit, and sheer brilliance of my family. Thank you to Crystal and Mark Guay, who are smarter than I and brimful of generosity. I owe Nelda and Chuck Kabesh my deep love of reading and inquiring; they brought me to this stage in my life, one actively and lovingly, the other with a good dose of Kabesh surliness, and I am grateful for both. It was my Mom's constant support and generous heart that gave me the strength to stay; thank you. Peter Seppanen, thank you for working so hard to be such a great part of my life. Erik Kabesh, thank you for being brilliant, loud,

and hilarious; for looking out for me still; and for always being someone I can look up to.

Finally, to Paul Meixner, my partner in life and laughter, thank you. Your ready smile, your peaceful approach to challenge, and your uncanny ability to listen wholeheartedly has taught me so much about who I want to be.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ~ Why Now.....	1-21
CHAPTER 1 ~ Reading for Justice: Investigating Narrative Desire in Joy Kogawa's <i>Obasan</i> , Kerri Sakamoto's <i>The Electrical Field</i> , and SKY Lee's <i>Disappearing Moon Café</i>	22-86
CHAPTER 2 ~ The Work of Inheritance: Genealogies of Trauma and Loss in Madeleine Thien's <i>Certainty</i> and Ruth Ozeki's <i>A Tale for the Time Being</i>	87-145
CHAPTER 3 ~ Reading Queasy: From Risk to Encounter in Rita Wong's <i>forage</i>	146-212
CONCLUSION ~ On the Conditions of Higher Education.....	213-218
WORKS CITED.....	219-231

Introduction: Why Now

In the opening pages of *A Tale for the Time Being*, Nao, whose name consistently puns on “now” in Ruth Ozeki’s magical realist novel, directly addresses her reader. “Do you know what a time being is?” (3), she asks, and she promptly answers her own question: “A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me” (4). When I consider the time in which I have written this dissertation, I am recalled to the present of Canadian race politics in which the project is situated, and attempts to intervene. We live in an age where easy apologies from governments for historical wrongdoing threaten to figure historical injustices and ongoing racisms as closed chapters in the inevitable march of linear, democratic progress in Canada. The formal apology issued to the Chinese community in British Columbia by the B.C. government only one month prior to the writing of this Introduction, on May 15, 2014, as well as the scandal that preceded it, make plain to me that engagement with and contestation of national and normative pedagogies is a pressing matter. In fact, the apology, which was originally planned for 2013, was delayed for a year as a result of the scandal sparked by the publication of the leaked Liberal government’s “Multicultural Strategic Outreach Plan,” which identified government apology for “historical wrongs” as one of three “quick wins” (3) the party could achieve in their goal to “target” (2) ethnic communities, “particularly Chinese” (1) in its political campaigning. Roy Miki has argued that the passing of the Japanese Canadian redress agreement in the House of Commons in 1988 revolved around a

performance of apology, whereby Japanese Canadians were positioned as “redressed,” or “in metaphoric terms, dressed anew . . . in the garment of citizenship” (*Broken* 197). “In the process,” Miki writes, “the nation to which the redressed subject belongs is redeemed” (197). We can read in Miki’s analysis a recognition of the “quick win” gained by government via apology, one that stands in stark contrast to the long years of work by members of the Japanese Canadian community to win redress, and the even longer history of racism and injustice that compelled it. Furthermore, as the case of the B.C. government’s apology to the province’s Chinese community shows, government recognition of historical injustice can function as an easy and expedient response to, and dismissal of, not only histories of racism in Canada, but also ongoing race politics. This project, then, marks an attempt to attend to the time being of national, colonial, and neo-colonial pedagogies of race and exploitation.

Teacher, Detective, Witness, Activist: On Pedagogy and Social Justice in Asian Canadian Literature undertakes a critical consideration of the relationship between pedagogy, social justice, and Asian Canadian literature, motivated in part by the temporal logic of the public pedagogies of apology described above, which seek to isolate race, racism, and injustice from the present. I take the B.C. government’s apology to the Chinese community as my point of departure because it brings into sharp relief the critical need for an attention to social justice as a pedagogical project, and one that is not without the twinned risk of appropriation and exploitation. I am interested in Asian Canadian literature as a

creative site concerned with social justice that also productively and problematically becomes a tool in the pursuit of justice in literature classrooms of Canadian universities. For this reason, this project engages with the politics of reading and, by extension, of teaching social justice in the literature classroom through analyses of six high-profile, canonical works of Asian Canadian literature: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998), Madeleine Thien's *Certainty* (2006), Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), and Rita Wong's *forage* (2007).¹ These texts take up issues of social justice in a sustained manner, but they employ different pedagogical strategies in the way they position readers to respond to these issues. Each of the texts that I study in this project is well-known for its engagement with social justice, and one of the key considerations of this project is the attention these texts bring to bear on questions of how systemic inequities are reproduced—taught, and learned—through national histories, colonial governments, and neo-colonial economies. These texts are in many ways about the circulation of national, colonial, and neo-colonial pedagogies, a circulation of teachings informing subject formation and citizenship from which higher education is not exempt. This, and their canonicity, make these

¹ This project focuses on works by authors of Chinese and Japanese descent living in Canada, a limited focus that does not reflect a belief that Asian Canadian studies should be dominated by the study of East Asian diasporas, but instead reflects the exigencies of this particular project. The choice of literature under study was driven by the project's interest in pedagogy and higher education; the project therefore engages with high-profile texts in Canada that play a pedagogical role in the public sphere as well as in university classrooms. While *A Tale for the Time Being* was published only one year ago, based on the attention it has gained I anticipate its addition to literature curricula in university courses in both Canada and the United States.

texts a valuable and complex site for a consideration of the politics of teaching and learning from Asian Canadian literature. One of the primary questions this dissertation seeks to engage is how social justice emerges as a pedagogical project in the literature classroom.

The example of the government apology with which I opened this introduction also proves an important starting point to this dissertation because it highlights the way in which the signifier “Asian Canadian” and its corollaries—in this case, Chinese Canadian—operate as what Miki recognizes as a “double-edged site” (“Altered States” 53), or a fraught space in which collective formations can be localized and out of which political resistance might be enacted, but also where such collectivity can be appropriated as signifier of a stable, timeless identity. In this regard, the B.C. government’s apology to the Chinese community in British Columbia raises complex questions. Who does the apology address? Can those who were subject to the province’s explicitly and implicitly anti-Chinese legislation be deemed coextensive with Chinese Canadians living in B.C. today?² This is not only a question of whether or not apology can redress injustices experienced by a previous generation. It also raises questions about how “Chinese Canadian” or even “Asian Canadian” is defined. The introduction of a points system to Canada’s immigration policy in 1967, the growth of Asian economies post-WWII, and the transfer of sovereignty over

² Provincial law barred people of Chinese descent from voting in British Columbia until 1947, and it was not until the late 1950s that the majority of discriminatory laws that explicitly and implicitly targeted the Chinese were removed from provincial and federal statutes in Canada (Li, Peter S. 90).

Hong Kong from the United Kingdom back to China in 1997 means that the Chinese population in Canada contains a range of internal difference. As Lily Cho puts it, “there are crucial differences between the Chinese communities born of railway workers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and those of wealthy transnational capitalists from Hong Kong who migrated in the late twentieth century out of anxiety over the return of Hong Kong to China” (*Eating Chinese* 11). Kandice Chuh similarly emphasizes that the ways in which people of Asian descent self-identify in the United States has changed with changing perceptions of Asian countries: “no longer are Asian nations perceived . . . primarily as sources of labor and raw materials for ‘Western’ capitalism. Rather, some are recognized exporters of capital and are influential nodes in the multilateral trajectories of transnational capitalism” (7). And, as Aihwa Ong’s work on flexible citizenship makes clear, members of a wealthy Chinese transnational elite who reside in North America do not necessarily seek citizenship in or identification with Canada or the United States.

Of course, Asian Canadian studies as a field is no less fraught than the category “Asian Canadian.” Miki writes:

If the arrival of Asian Canadian as a legitimate field of academic study works to establish ‘the domain of the sayable,’ then it also functions as a process through which an entity such as Asian Canadian takes on a social and cultural identity and accrues value as a discursive category, in other words, as a sphere of public knowledge. The danger resides in the conclusion that such an identity has a stable point of reference and is not the outcome of the constitutive process and thus a representation that is always subject to change and negotiation. (*In Flux* 92-93)

Christopher Lee attributes the “lateness” of Asian Canadian studies (a field that is “late” to institutions of higher education in Canada in comparison to the establishment of Asian American studies journals and departments in the U.S.) to the need for a critical attention to the formative, changing grounds out of which the field of Asian Canadian studies, and “Asian Canadian” as a category, are articulated. For Lee, the “lateness” of Asian Canadian studies is not so much a problem as it is a product of a complex affective relationship to institutionalization that seeks to constantly defer the fulfillment of its desire: “what becomes clear here,” he writes, “is the illusoriness of the very desire, on the part of Asian Canadian Studies, to finally coincide with its own object” (4).

If the category of “Asian Canadian” is always provisional, and if Asian Canadian studies as an academic field must be wary of its arrival as an identifiable and indentifying field—as a field by which scholars are interpellated and through which we interpellate others as racialized subjects—then, as Lee posits, its project must be “a reversal of a the logic of ‘being on time’ whereby an academic discipline ‘catches up’ to its object of study” (4). This dissertation attempts to contribute to this self-reflexive project by attending to the “time being” of Asian Canadian studies as a critical discourse always in process. In many ways it seeks not to “catch up,” but to slow down. For this reason, a genealogical approach to history, as well as thinking about time, or as Chapter 2 proposes, “loitering” in the present, proves central to the dissertation and its

analysis of the intersection of social justice and pedagogy in Asian Canadian literature.

This introduction first clarifies the contribution a pedagogical framing brings to the study of social justice and Asian Canadian literature, and elucidates the reasoning behind my choice to frame an analysis of social justice in the literature via reflections on classroom practices. Answering the question, “why pedagogy?” or “why the classroom?” also means attending to the current concerns of Asian Canadian literary studies, and so here the introduction will also situate the project in the field. I will then address how thinking about genealogy and time—two threads that run through each of the chapters—are valuable analytical tools for considering the types of pedagogical projects in which the texts under discussion might engage readers, or, as may be the case, for which readers make use of the texts. Finally, I conclude by sketching a brief introduction to each of the chapters of the dissertation.

I. On Pedagogy and Social Justice in Asian Canadian Literature

That this project is concerned with Asian Canadian literature’s engagement with pedagogy and social justice raises an important question: Why talk about desks and enrolment spots in higher education, and not seats in parliament or sit-ins at protest sites? The answer in part lies in the current focus in Asian Canadian literary studies on thinking through and resisting systems of oppression that reproduce systemic inequities, a process that requires thoughtful consideration of complicity and the complexities of being complicit in systems of

domination that are not only national, but supra-national. In a piece that maps the development of her creative writing out of and beyond the identity politics and anti-racist activism of the 80s and 90s, Larissa Lai draws the contours of current critical investments in Asian Canadian literature. She identifies three ways in which activists, fiction writers, and scholars have sought to think and act beyond the limitations of identity politics: by considering intersectionality in the construction of revisionist histories, by refusing to locate one's work exclusively in frames of the nation state and national histories, and by considering one's own privilege and complicity in systems that reproduce inequalities. Lai writes that her response to "these problems at a creative level" is a project that that she "envision[s] herself working on for some time to come, perhaps even for the rest of [her] life" (170). This project, she writes, is "a fictive history of the present for people like me to make sense of the world" (170). "By 'like me,'" she writes, "I mean people who come from histories of travel and migration, people who are caught in various, often contradictory, positions with regards to the politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, the body etc., people who are somehow marked as 'other,' as different, whether that is through race, or a way of moving through space, or a way of speaking" (170). Here we might see Lai describing a project that attempts, to borrow from Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn, to move "beyond autoethnography" by "moving away from questions of 'authenticity,' essentialist identity politics, and a view of a cultural group that is static, rather than evolving" (4-5). Miki describes "the beyond of identity politics" in a similar way, as a

critical movement arising out of the recognition that “identity formations are always being interrupted by shifting spaces and times, forcing further recognitions that transform further states” (“Global Drift” 153). Chuh makes similar claims about the future of Asian American studies: “‘Oppression,’ ‘marginalization,’ and ‘resistance,’ keywords in dominant narratives of Asian American studies, are terms that each require redefinition within [a] globalized context, as ‘by whom’ and ‘against what’ are questions that are increasingly difficult to answer with certitude” (7).

Globalization complicates nationally-framed approaches to literature, and transnational capitalism implicates subjects in complex economies of governance that render new levels of complexity in analyses of political resistance and social justice. Put simply, complicity complicates. Smaro Kamboureli writes, “how to move beyond autoethnography means coming to terms with complicity as an integral element of the autoethnographic mode” (“The Politics of the Beyond” 39). Lai’s description of her creative work suggests that she agrees; she states that in writing for “people like me” she also means “people who have a certain amount of privilege, and therefore a certain measure of social responsibility” (170-171). Lai’s investment in the recognition and re-imagination of subjugated histories is certainly not hers alone, and her desire to locate in differential and intersecting subject positions nodes of complicity and privilege is a primary concern of much of the recent literature of Asian Canada, as the analyses of *Certainty*, *A Tale for the Time Being*, and *forage* show in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation.

Kamboureli notes that “according to its dictionary definition, [complicity] signifies being an accomplice in something that is at best wrongful, at worst criminal” (39). For this reason, complicity can “[denote] a sense of anxiety and guilt” (39), but she also draws attention to the way in which “naming complicity can be productive” or can “generate a certain productive agency” (40) and remarks that “we can spot complicity, but there is no guarantee that we can move beyond it” (40). Indeed, as Lai’s article shows, moving beyond the contingencies of history may even be undesirable. Rather than trying to deny complicity, or, as Kamboureli warns against, “employ[ing] complicity as a trope of rehearsal” (43) or as a “strategy designed to foreclose disapproval of our critical discourse by others” (39), Lai poses complicity as a source of social responsibility, and therefore of action.

Australian scholar Fiona Probyn-Rapsey writes that complicity “is loaded with the meaning of the *bad act* to which it refers” (161). However, Probyn-Rapsey, like Kamboureli and Lai, notes that “awareness of complicity can enhance ideas of responsibility and accountability. Complicity highlights the individual’s *proximity* to ‘the problem’ (such as colonialism), rather than separation from it” (161). For academics, thinking about proximity, complicity, and privilege inevitably (though not exclusively) involves thinking about the work we do as researchers and teachers, and how that work is situated in larger social structures. For this reason, Miki suggests that “the term pedagogy be approached as broader than the institutional confines of our teaching and research, and that it

encompasses a movement back and forth between their confines and the social and cultural variables of multiply formed subjects who are embedded in local/global networks” (“Globalization, [Canadian] Culture, and Critical Pedagogy” 96). This project engages with pedagogy in both this broader sense and its local articulation in higher education. It recognizes in the works of fiction it discusses a pedagogical engagement with historical injustice, anti-Asian racism, imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism, and turns to the literature to gain insight into how readers are positioned to learn from and about history and justice. However, because I recognize students, myself included, as co-learners with whom I, as a graduate student and literature instructor, am very proximate, I recognize the classroom as a significant site for intervention in the political systems upon which my subject positioning, personal mobility, and privileges are contingent.

The short answer to “why the classroom?” might therefore be deceptively straightforward: because it is one of the primary spaces to which literature scholars are proximate. Thinking about teaching and learning in the classroom has the potential, as Miki explains, to increase attention to “the pedagogical scenes of our practices . . . whether in the classroom or in our research and writing, or in our social and cultural relations with each other” (“Globalization” 97). Furthermore, because the classroom is one of the primary sites of action that literature instructors inhabit, and because it is a political space that is located in and contingent on systems of social and political relations and norms, the classroom

becomes one site in which scholars can intervene in these “local/global” systems. Miki writes that “the question for critical pedagogy becomes ‘what are we doing when we do what we do? . . . [which] in turn implicates the *how*, the *why*, and the *where*” (96-97). Although the texts I study in this dissertation do not themselves focus on the classroom, the classroom is, for myself and for many literary critics, one of the primary sites where social justice is pursued.

II. On Genealogy and Time

Along with, and connected to, the pedagogical frame that the project brings to its study of Asian Canadian literature, this dissertation employs a close-reading analysis that attends closely to the troping of genealogy and time in the literature. In response to what she describes as the “severely diminished presence of the aesthetic in late twentieth century literary analysis” (3), Sue-Im Lee advocates “a renewed emphasis on formal analysis and close reading . . . motivated by a desire to rediscover the critical power of the aesthetic in the contemporary theoretical and artistic landscape” (4). Lee, however, is not only responding to a generalized state of literary analysis, she is also responding to a debate in Asian American studies about the role formal literary analysis might play in attending to the complexities of the field.³ Colleen Lye writes that among many critics in Asian American studies, “a tradition of criticism dominated by

³ I draw on the fields of Asian American and Asian Canadian studies in this introduction because, as Eleanor Ty and Donald Goellnicht assert, “Asian subjects who reside in the United States and in Canada face many of the same issues regarding identity, multiple cultural allegiances, marginalization vis-à-vis mainstream society, historical exclusion, and postcolonial and/or diasporic and /or transnational subjectivity” (2); as a result, Asian American studies has much to say to Asian Canadian studies, and vice-versa.

political prescriptiveness is held to account for a constricted imagination of Asian American literature's potential power" (93), and Viet Thanh Nguyen has called out "the way critics have tended to read this literature . . . as cultural works that demonstrate resistance or accommodation to the racist, sexist, and capitalist exploitation of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans" (3). Nguyen argues that in many works, "resistance and accommodation are actually limited, polarizing options that do not sufficiently demonstrate the *flexible strategies* often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations" (4, original emphasis), and that such limited, polarizing reading practices are symptomatic of an "ideological rigidity in the criticism itself" (5). Chapter 1 of this dissertation queries how this "ideological rigidity" can inform pedagogies in classrooms of Canadian institutions of higher education, but the entire project, and the close readings it performs, issue from a recognition that, even as literary genres, conventions, and devices can quietly encode problematic normative ideological projects, the writers of Asian Canadian literature also work in and through these aesthetic sites to actively negotiate complex ethical problems.

Much of the close reading of literary devices, generic genealogies, and generic conventions that this dissertation performs attends to the relationship between form and temporality in the literature. I recognize in each of the texts under study a genealogical approach to history and time that the texts' authors articulate through and in opposition to the literary and generic traditions in which they work. Each chapter of the project focuses on a figure central to the genre or

form in which she is placed: Chapter 1 analyzes the figure of the detective in the untraditional detective fictions of Joy Kogawa, Kerri Sakamoto, and SKY Lee; Chapter 2 analyzes the figure of the witness in the trauma fictions of Madeleine Thien and Ruth Ozeki; and Chapter 3 analyzes the figure of the activist-poet in Rita Wong's collection of poetry. In all of these texts, these central characters are also figured as genealogists: each concerns herself with the mapping of kinship ties. The genealogist figures in the six texts that this project discusses all deploy what Foucault recognizes as a genealogical approach to history, which "opposes itself to the search for origins" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 77) and attends to "what we feel is without history— . . . sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" (76). Naomi in *Obasan*, Asako in *The Electrical Field*, and Kae in *Disappearing Moon Café*, for example, all attend to the putatively a-historical domestic sphere to unearth and reclaim histories marginalized and silenced by nationalism, colonialism, and their systemic racisms. And in *Certainty* and *A Tale for the Time Being*, Gail and Ruth encounter traumatic histories of mass violence that are under threat of erasure, or that prove inarticulate. In all of the texts discussed in the project, the women's genealogical efforts proliferate origins and points of connection, allyship, and shared intimacy; this is perhaps most palpable in *forage*, the only collection of poetry discussed in the dissertation, where the form's history of experimentation with and escape from narrative temporality allows the speaker to map affective connections across time and geography amongst past and present activists, subversive writers, renegade farmers, and critical scientists.

The genealogist figures of these texts therefore work to produce narratives that counter what Neta Gordon calls conservative genealogy, which, she argues, is “defined by its appeal to stability; many of its other characteristic features, such as its supposed continuity and/or imperviousness to mere worldly influence, derive from the central conservative fiction that the family plot is stable” (166). These figures—Naomi in *Obasan*, Asako in *The Electrical Field*, Kae in *Disappearing Moon Café*, Gail in *Certainty*, Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being*, and the unnamed speaker of *forage*—show that the “family plot” is, indeed, not stable. Their counter-genealogies of state and nation powerfully trace both the reproduction of systemic racism and how that reproduction of systematized oppression and exploitation manifests in the supposedly private realm of the family, altering community structures and foreclosing futures.

What my analysis of these genealogist figures shows is that their interventions in history and genealogy are at once interventions in how we conceive of time. Here I have drawn from Lily Cho’s important work on time, agency, and subject formation in Asian Canadian literature as a model for my methodological approach to thinking about temporality in the literature.⁴ Cho works out of theories of melancholia to articulate linkages between temporality and political action. Similarly, in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 respectively, I draw from theories of reproduction and genealogy, trauma and witnessing, and modes of address and encounter to consider how the narratives of Asian Canadian literature

⁴ I am thinking here of Cho’s “Future Perfect Loss: Richard Fung’s *Sea in the Blood*.” *Screen* 49.4 (Winter 2008): 426-439. Print.

work to situate readers in time and in history. And, like Cho, I turn to close readings of the literature itself to theorize narrative temporality. However, while Cho's work focuses on how narratives like Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood* invoke uncertain, nascent futures, my readings of *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, *Disappearing Moon Café*, *Certainty*, *A Tale for the Time Being*, and *forage* reveal a preoccupation with the present, and in particular, with what in Chapter 2 I call the genealogical present. One of the central arguments of the dissertation is that these texts attempt to loiter in these long, and multiply, historically inflected nows (to echo Nao in *A Tale*), and that they present to readers a vision of the present that is radically contingent and therefore as something to which one must attend carefully. Each chapter reflects on how a consideration of the narrative temporalities of the texts might inform the presents of our classroom encounters. bell hooks writes that "any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged" (*Teaching to Transgress* 8). Acknowledging presence—and the present conditions of the classroom—also must involve acknowledging pasts.

III. What Comes Next

This dissertation comprises three chapters. Chapter 1, "Reading for Justice: Investigating Narrative Desire in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*" attends to the adaptation of detective-fiction tropes in these historical fictions of Asian Canadian literature. These three novels are well known for their interventions in traditional historiography in general and in Canadian history in

particular. Donald Goellnicht's article "Minority History as Metafiction: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*" is one of the most well-known and oft-cited examples of this important approach to these texts.⁵ However, little attention has been paid to these works as adaptations of the detective fiction genre. Vikki Visvis, for example, briefly refers to the murder mystery genre in her analysis of *The Electrical Field*,⁶ but there appears to be no attempt in either Asian Canadian or Asian American studies at mounting a sustained analysis of how Kogawa, Sakamoto, or Lee draws on the conventions of the genre in their historical novels. This chapter is therefore unique in its attention to what I see as Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee's intentional and repeated nods to the genre of detective fiction. In particular, I trace the figuration of the protagonists of these novels to the spinster detectives of the "whodunit" tradition of detective fiction, and make the case for reading these novels' engagement with the detective fiction genre as a self-conscious engagement with modern conceptualizations of justice. More precisely, this chapter reads these detective figures as bringing the intimate methodologies of the genealogist to both their own family history and to the history of the Canadian nation-state and shows that these genealogical methods work in productive tension with the detective fiction genre, and, more generally, with the modern concept of justice, and national justice, the genre promotes—a concept of justice

⁵ That these novels represent serious challenges to the authority of history is commonly accepted by literary critics, but not without contestation. For an example of criticism that pushes back against such readings, see Kanefsky, Rachelle. "Debunking a Postmodern Conception of History: A Defense of Humanist Values in the Novels of Joy Kogawa." *Canadian Literature* 148 (1996): 11-36. Print.

⁶ See Visvis p. 75.

that renders narrative and justice commensurate. In the concluding section of this chapter, I consider how this tension might inform how instructors and students read for social justice in the literature classroom.

Chapter 2 is titled “The Work of Inheritance: Genealogies of Trauma and Loss in Madeleine Thien’s *Certainty* and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*.” Similar to the previous chapter, Chapter 2 attends to the ways in which the authors of the novels figure their protagonists as genealogists. In *Certainty* and *A Tale for the Time Being*, however, the genealogist figures of the texts are at once artists and witnesses: Gail is a radio documentarian and Ruth is a novelist. Both attend to histories of personal trauma and mass violence in their artistic labours; as a result, these novels might be considered works of trauma fiction and *Künstlerromanee*. Drawing on the theorization of trauma and witnessing in relation to pedagogy by scholars like Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, Marianne Hirsch, and Deborah Britzman, I consider how the confluence of these genres in *Certainty* and *A Tale* works to structure the act of witnessing as what Simon calls a “work of inheritance.” I argue that these two novels locate the work of inheritance not in an attention to the past, but in an attention to, and indeed, even in a lingering in a genealogical present. Unique narrative structures in these novels—a sustained deployment of *mise en abyme* in *A Tale* and a figuration of past and future losses as imminent in *Certainty*—functions to locate readers in presents in which pasts linger, and in which both the novels’ protagonists and readers must linger, too.

Like Chapter 1, Chapter 2 concludes by circling back to the classroom: it advocates for reflecting on the present of our classroom practices, and the pasts that inform, historicize, and politicize such pedagogical engagements. It calls for a consideration of the reader and therefore both the literature instructor and student as witness, and asks how we learn from, and are resistant to learning from, encounters with fictional testimonies of historical trauma. Chapters 1 and 2, then, are framed quite literally by pedagogical concerns: they begin and end with reference to the classroom. However, the third and final chapter of the dissertation deviates from this structure, and this is in part in response to the unique nature of the text with which it engages. This final chapter, “Reading Queasy: From Risk to Encounter in Rita Wong’s *forage*,” is unique in the project in its engagement with a collection of poetry, rather than with novels. Part of my intent in the chapter is to communicate and engage the diffuse, networked structure of Wong’s poetry and to examine her intensive deployment of intertextuality as a genealogical modality—or more precisely, as a kinship map.

However, Chapter 3 proves more diffuse, networked, and self-consciously non-linear than the preceding chapters primarily because it marks a writing process that I adopted in order to signal the non-linear, non-progressive, and often associative work of learning texts like Wong’s can invoke. The chapter begins with a reflection on my own experience teaching poems from Wong’s collection, and then uses this reflection on teaching as an entryway into a self-conscious attempt to mobilize reflective writing as form of exploratory learning about and

from Wong's poems in its second section. The chapter therefore begins by drawing on the field of ecocriticism and theories of risk to reflect on how discourses of ecological and food system collapse function to position readers and learners in a progressive, European concept of time, and then moves to close readings of *forage* in order to apprehend the radically non-progressive temporality invoked by Wong in her collection, and how this temporal schema positions readers as in multiple and changing encounters with the text and its social and political investments. Christine Kim recognizes in Wong's earlier collection of poetry, *monkeypuzzle*, a "poetics of social justice" ("Rita Wong's *monkeypuzzle*" 59). I draw on Kim's interpretation of Wong's poetic practice to explore the text as an articulation of what I call a "poetics of encounter." In particular, the chapter explores the differential encounters Wong maps between subjects (and places) differently affected by and through their investments and imbrication in systems that facilitate the racialization of labour, unethical resource extraction, and the appropriation of Indigenous land.

Chapter 1, then, focuses on the figure of the detective-genealogist; it queries the extent to which the literature, and the instructors that teach it, position readers as investigators in a search for justice. Chapter 2 attends to the figure of the artist-witness, and considers the pedagogical work involved in the positioning of readers as witnesses themselves. Chapter 3 rotates around the unnamed speaker of *forage*, and her role as a poet, activist, and pedagogue. This chapter weighs the risks involved in addressing students as subjects of risk in the classroom. Each of

these chapters represents my attempt to both attend carefully to an analysis of Asian Canadian literature, and to how such analyses might bear on my own classroom experiences. This project raises a number of questions: Do literature instructors engage their students as investigators in the pursuit of justice? And, if so, what type of justice do we seek to reproduce in doing so? What happens when instructors engage students in the work of witnessing fictional testaments of historical trauma, albeit indirectly, as readers? How might we acknowledge and work through the resistance to learning that traumatic testimony can invoke? And finally, might it be productive to think of the work that literature instructors do as a form of activism? Can social justice be conceived of as a pedagogical project that unfolds in the literature classroom?

Chapter 1

Reading for Justice: Investigating Narrative Desire in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon*

Café

When I teach Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998), my students emerge from the novel confused and irritated. Understandably so, for Sakamoto cleverly omits necessary details of the Japanese Canadian internment

—Monica Chiu, “Intimate Details” (61)

I used literary monsters to convey the truth. And because there was a truth, it never occurred to me that there would be an argument with students

They were adverse to using these creatures as a means to critique their society and to accepting my demand that everything, including the monster, is political. Simply put, they wanted to play, escape, and enjoy.

—Deborah Britzman, *Novel Education* (115)

This chapter begins with the introduction of a rather odd cast of characters: confused, irritated, and intractable students, not to mention a few monsters added to the mix by critical pedagogy theorist Deborah Britzman. If these two epigraphs describe a teaching nightmare, it is in all likelihood one familiar to literary scholars, and if not to *all* literary scholars, then at least to those invested in critical pedagogy and social justice. Instructors, and perhaps literature instructors in particular, seem a rather desirous group. Like all teachers, we long to excite in our students a spark of comprehension. But, perhaps unlike all teachers, we also long to *undo* comprehension; we seek to destabilize the ideological groundwork upon

which students tread, and defamiliarize the social structures and institutions in which they work and live.

Monica Chiu's article "Intimate Details: Scrutiny and Evidentiary Photographs in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*" opens with a glimpse into this world of desire. The lines quoted in the first epigraph of this chapter in fact open Chiu's article, and while Chiu makes no explicit judgement on her students' confused reaction, I wonder if her description of their confusion and irritation speaks to a particular teacherly desire left unfulfilled. Chiu's argument certainly suggests that she finds something lacking in her students' response to the text, for after quick reference to their confused state, she moves right into her assertion that the "*Electrical Field* makes investigators out of its readers They are charged with answering why Japanese Canadians were interned and pressed to discover for themselves camp conditions, locations, and effects" (62). It is as though Chiu can soften her disappointment in her students' reaction by assuring herself that their mystification is, of course, intended. According to Chiu, readers are not supposed to "get it"; they are, however, supposed to amend that ignorance of their own accord. But whence comes this confidence in her students, and in readers in general? Do confusion and incomplete knowledge make investigators of us all, under all circumstances? Or, perhaps more to the point: Why is it safe to assume—in a piece of literary scholarship, at least—that an unsolved mystery transforms readers into ethical subjects?

It is to this mystery of reproduction that I hope to attend in this chapter, though I sidestep the traditional literary-analysis “whodunit”—in other words, this chapter does not confine itself to the question of which technical and structural devices are responsible for the production of certain forms of reader response. Instead, I have chosen to begin with a discussion of Chiu’s article because it provides the opportunity for a sort of meta-analysis: this chapter analyzes the technical and structural devices that might contribute to a particular effect on readers *and* considers the scholarly and teacherly desire for the reproduction of a particular type of reading subject. Chiu’s article is a useful starting point for this type of analysis because she provides a formula for this reproduction. In Chiu’s interpretation of *The Electrical Field*, the novel’s incomplete historical picture of Japanese Canadian internment frustrates readers; these two factors—frustration and incomplete evidence—function to turn readers into detectives, compelling them to seek out their own answers to the text’s incomplete story, and to uncover and resolve the injustices to which the novel can only gesture.

Chiu’s argument is alluringly logical; in fact, it has the ring of common sense to it. First the novel excites our interest in a mystery, it then refuses to resolve that mystery, and so, finally, we take the culminating step: we go out and try to solve that mystery ourselves. But what makes this sequence of events so logical? Mystery fiction is a genre well known for its so-called “immediacy”; one of the defining features of the genre, as W.H. Auden describes it, will ring true for many readers of detective fiction: “I forget the story as soon as I have finished it,

and have no wish to read it again. If, as sometimes happens, I start reading one and find after a few pages that I have read it before, I cannot go on" (15). Why should we assume that novels like *The Electrical Field* will linger in readers' minds? Even if we agree with Chiu that Sakamoto's text leaves much unresolved, why does she assume that this necessarily provokes readers to seek out a resolution beyond the text? And why are Chiu's readers, like myself, so willing to agree with her on this point; why is her argument so easily creditable? What makes the series of events she describes—the discovery of an injustice, and the subsequent search for "truth" or the story behind that injustice—so logical, so common-sensical?

This chapter queries the ties that bind the detective-fiction genre both to narratives of historical injustice in Asian Canadian literature *and* the interpretation of this literature. It reconsiders the desire to see students and readers of literature as receivers of ethical truths, and to see literature itself—especially Asian Canadian historical fiction—as a vehicle for the ethical conversion of national subjects in particular. This reconsideration of the function and role of Asian Canadian literature raises questions about how supposedly “minor” literatures are received in Canada. Lily Cho recognizes that literary criticism in Canada often reads the “trenchant critiques of Canadianness embedded within” so-called minority literatures as part and parcel of a Canadian identity thought of as “capacious enough for these critiques” (“Diasporic Citizenship” 93). She responds to this critical practice with the compelling assertion that “[w]hether or not Asian

Canadian or Native Canadian literature qualifies as CanLit is not the critical question” (97). According to Cho, the critical issue is not how minority literature relates to the Canadian nation, but how it relates to both the majority and other minority communities. “Asian Canadian literature, for example,” she writes, “relates as minor literature to Canadian literature not because it is less important, valuable, or illuminating, but because it cannot be divorced from the long histories of racialization that mark Asian Canadian communities as being in the minority in relation to a dominant culture” (98). While Asian Canadian literature cannot be divorced from racial politics specific to Canada, the literature expresses “a desire to be considered *both* within and without the nation” (93). Literatures that occupy a marginal status in relation to the largely white, normative centre of CanLit defy modes of reading that rest on a majority-minority binary, and instead ask us to attend to the differential relationships between histories of racialization and minoritization.

Like Cho, I am concerned about reading and pedagogical practices that place the historical fictions of Asian Canadian literature in an exclusive dialogue with Canadian history. In part, I am also responding to Guy Beauregard’s call in “After *Obasan*: Kogawa Criticism and Its Futures” to attend to “how and towards what ends we discuss and teach texts that foreground the historical and ongoing production of racialized subjectivities in Canada” (n. page), and ask toward what end are the historical fictions of Asian Canadian literature taught in Canadian universities. Beauregard, following Roy Miki and Scott Toguri McFarlane, draws

on Smaro Kambourelli's work to call out the "sedative politics"⁷ (n. page) of Kogawa criticism that reduces Japanese Canadian internment to an unfortunate episode in Canada's multicultural history. In a previous publication,⁸ I have attempted to show the ways in which *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field* uncannily disrupt such an anachronistic understanding of multiculturalism in Canada as somehow always already a part of Canadian identity and history. In this chapter, however, I want to refocus attention on the question posed by Beauregard of "how and towards what ends" we engage with the historical fictions of Asian Canadian literature as histories of Canadian racisms; in particular, I am concerned with the conflation between a certain type of reading and justice, which suggests that the act of reading—the puzzling together of the "whodunit" narrative behind an injustice—constitutes justice in and of itself. This chapter therefore questions the current critical desire to link the historical fictions of Asian Canadian literature to social justice projects in general, and to the transformation of their readers into detectives in pursuit of justice more specifically.

This chapter therefore attempts a metaliterary analysis of the work of story-telling that critics and pedagogues bring to questions of justice and social justice. In particular, this chapter looks at three works of Asian Canadian literature that self-consciously bring questions of justice and narration to the fore:

⁷ In *Scandalous Bodies*, Kambourelli defines "sedative politics" as "a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them" (82), and recognizes the Multiculturalism Act as promulgating such a politics: "It pays tribute to diversity and suggests ways of celebrating it, thus responding to the clarion call of ethnic communities for recognition. Yet it does so without disturbing the conventional articulation of the Canadian dominant society" (82).

⁸ See Kabesh, "A Haunted House of Fiction."

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*. Each of these novels frames its engagement with historical injustice and state racism in Canada with the conventions of the detective fiction genre, and, as a result, emphasizes the tension between justice-seeking projects on the one hand, and the work of investigation and narration on the other. Chiu's description of her classroom experience when teaching *The Electrical Field* presents an interesting tableau with which to begin an inquiry into these tensions, populated as it is by three key figures: an amateur detective/storyteller, a frustrated and confused reader, and, finally, a desirous literature teacher who labours to remedy that confusion. This chapter examines each figure in turn. First, it considers the detective types found in each of the three novels and how these types might be taken up by readers as models for desirable and undesirable interpretive practices; second, it turns to the origins of detective fiction as a genre and the concomitant rise of biopower in order to question critical approaches to the literature that seek to read these novels as primarily didactic in intent; and, finally, it concludes with a consideration of how such scholarly and critical concerns are brought into the classroom.

At base, this chapter queries the definition of justice that detective fiction participates in producing, and ultimately questions the investment in this definition of justice by both Asian Canadian writers and their critics. I argue that the seemingly self-evident relationship between the detective-fiction genre, on the one hand, and Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee's literary representations of the search

for justice, on the other, requires further examination. A closer look at the history of detective fiction reveals that the genre and the concept of justice it reflects and reproduces arise out of the same historical moment as does the modern management of human life via biopolitics. By critically engaging with a popular form that has the modern definition of justice at its heart, *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café* ask readers—which, importantly, includes researchers and pedagogues—to query the ideological underpinnings of the very concept of justice we might seek to promulgate in our scholarship and in the classroom.

I. Reading for Justice: Detective Fiction's Origins and the Mystified Reader

Does it matter *who* dies in detective fiction?

—Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (12)

Gill Plain's barbed rhetorical question is a response to the tendency of writers of detective fiction, and by extension, their detectives and readers, to "scrutinize the corpse-as-text, seeking clues to facilitate a reading of the crime, while the material reality of the corpse decomposes beneath their narrative indifference" (12). *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café* assert that it *does* matter who dies in detective fiction, and that it does matter whose stories get told, and whose are suppressed. However, the choice made by Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee to assert this message through a genre that has historically proven indifferent to its victims raises the question: why invoke the

detective fiction genre at all? In the following pages I seek to place the unconventional detective fictions of Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee in conversation with their generic antecedents in order to lay the groundwork for an understanding of current critical responses to the literature that seek to read these texts as models for social justice activism and the investigative, interpretive work of reading history that such activism requires. Thinking about the history of detective fiction and Asian Canadian literature together brings our focus to the question of what narrative might have to do with modern concepts of justice.

Detective fiction as a genre is notoriously conservative. Critics and theorists tend to agree on this point, no matter their theoretical and political leanings. In an example of some early commentary on the genre, which was characteristically concerned with separating "good" detective fiction from "bad," W.H. Auden notes that "[t]he job of the detective is to restore the state of grace in which the aesthetic and the ethical are as one" (21). In this view of the genre, "good" detective fiction works its charm on readers through the narration of a rupture in a common moral code or ethics and the subsequent resolution of this rupture. The pleasure of reading detective fiction, or the addiction, as Auden puts it, lies in this disruption-resolution structure; in fact, detective fiction becomes all the more compelling for the way in which this pleasure principle operates both at the level of plot and structure. Robin Winks makes a similar point. Although writing almost forty years later, when criticism surrounding detective fiction was typically concerned with remedying the "low-culture" status of the genre, Winks

points out that "detective fiction insists that there *must* be some explanation" (5, original emphasis); the genre thereby offers both resolution and a consolation for modern readers living in an age of proliferating uncertainties. More recently, John Scaggs, whose critical history of the genre, *Crime Fiction*, appeared in 2005, argues that "mystery and detective fiction, like organized sports, maintains and disseminates the ideology of 'instant morality' because it rarely, if ever, questions the community code of conduct" (44). Scaggs also carefully points to the particular "community" that the whodunit's implicit, unquestionable code of conduct protects: "In the case of mystery and detective fiction," he asserts, "it is the home-owning bourgeois reading public whose interest it is to see the dominant social order of which they are a part maintained, and their stake in it protected" (45).

For Auden, Winks, and Scaggs, the point of reference for their diagnoses of the genre as inherently conservative—in terms of content, form, and, finally, readership—is the "classic" detective story, or the whodunit, wherein the role of the detective is that of a guarantor: his or her presence in the whodunit offers a guarantee to the reader that a particular social order will be restored by its conclusion, and while the detective may not act as moral judge, he or she ensures that any behaviour counter to that social order's moral code will be "found out." It is this restorative function of the whodunit that has resulted in its conservative label, but I wish to focus more closely on the conflation of narrative and justice that the "resolutionary" plot structure of the whodunit achieves. I borrow the term

“resolutionary” from Roy Miki, who in 1998 argued that the literary criticism surrounding Kogawa’s *Obasan* engaged with the novel through “a resolutionary (not revolutionary) aesthetics” (*Broken* 115). Miki castigates critics who read the novel’s conclusion as both narrative closure and psychological healing, and who see this closure achieved through a laudable movement from silence to speech.⁹ In 2014, it seems that such resolutionary readings have become outdated, but I wonder if the historical detective fictions of Asian Canadian literature—*Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café*—have now come to stand in for justice in Canadian Literature classrooms, as texts that narratologically and emblematically reveal the “dark side” of the nation, and of multiculturalism in particular. Such a conflation of narrative and justice is problematically bound to a historically-specific concept of justice, one that is tightly tied to the detective-fiction genre. In the following pages I turn to the history of the genre to emphasize how detective fiction, by narrative sleight of hand, pushes justice out of its narratological frame and retrains readers’ eyes onto narrative itself—onto the narrative sequencing of “whodunit.” Detective fiction, we will see, is problematically tied to interpretative practices that conflate narrative with justice.

Critics agree that a desire for justice—for righting wrongs, and correcting injustices—is not what drives crime literature. Take, for example, Bran Nicol,

⁹ For the landmark essay that problematizes the scholarly privileging of speech over silence in *Obasan*, see King-Kok Cheung’s “Attentive Silence: *Obasan*.” *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.

Patricia Pulham, and Eugene McNulty's attention to the historical context out of which crime fiction has grown:

The ubiquity of crime fiction and film shows that criminality is something people habitually *consume*, and have done for centuries. Watching imaginary crime is as much a staple of our cultural diet as stories of love and courtship. This continual immersion in crime complements and contradicts the 'encounters' with crime we continually have via the news media, where criminality is similarly ubiquitous but even more real (albeit just as framed and constructed as fiction). All this leads to a key question: why is it in the last two centuries that the fascination with crime has driven cultural production?
(2)

A key question, indeed. Why the modern preoccupation with crime and its narration?

Nicol, McNulty, and Pulham point out that the moment when “crime becomes central to popular modes of narrative coincide[s] loosely with the advent of modernity, that is, the 300 years stretching from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century” (2). Crime fiction in various forms becomes popular—even ubiquitous—just as modern life begins to reorganize around the management of large populations in the eighteenth century. According to Ian A. Bell, a preoccupation with crime marked much of the literature of the century, and was in many ways dissociable from contemporary concerns with population control, urbanization, and industrialization. Crime was therefore a focus of both “low,” popular literary forms and “high art.” Broadides, the gothic novel, sensation fiction, and *The Newgate Calendar* (which was a series of popular publications purporting to depict the true biographies of Newgate Prison's condemned criminals) all focused intently on criminality. But crime was also the focus of

works by well-respected, well-educated writers like Daniel Defoe and Tom Fielding.¹⁰ This diverse body of literature was marked by its tendency to focus on the life and mind of the criminal, rather than the investigation of a crime. These texts also highlighted the punishment of the criminal, whether it be a public punishment, like hanging, or a more personal punishment where a criminal escapes formal justice but either repents for his or her “vice” or is punished by circumstance (Bell 10).

By the late nineteenth century this would change. In 1868, Wilkie Collins published *The Moonstone*, a novel which bears the undeniable hallmarks of modern detective fiction: a double-narrative plot structure that alternated between the narration of a past mystery and its current investigation; the introduction of no less than two detectives (one amateur, the other professional); and a focus on the investigation of a crime, rather than on a criminal and his or her punishment. In fact, criminality and justice recede almost entirely from the text; the novel concludes with the revelation that there was, in truth, no crime, but a series of unfortunate events, and that, as a result, there is no one person to be brought to justice. As Bell points out, then, while “[t]he literature of the eighteenth century is suffused with crime, . . . [it] handles it in a wholly different way from that of the nineteenth and twentieth” (7). By the nineteenth century readers could begin to expect the regular appearance of professional or amateur detectives in their crime fictions. But they could also feel confident in finding a relatively fixed narrative

¹⁰ See Bell, pp. 7-10.

structure between the covers of any detective fiction: the double narrative of the whodunit that alternates between the “past” of the crime and the “present” of its investigation, as well as its remarkable conclusion, where the text closes not with the punishment of a criminal, but with the resolution of criminality into narrative.

Bell traces the concatenation of literatures dealing with crime into an identifiable crime fiction genre to the emergence of a “reliable system of policing” and “the detection of criminals on [a] routine basis” (7) in the nineteenth century. Dorothy Sayers' appraisal of the origins of the genre puts it more baldly still. She explains that “the detective story had to wait for its full development for the establishment of an effective police organization in the Anglo-Saxon countries” (56), and Robin Woods adds to this line of thinking the observation that “as the uniformed policeman became a figure of justice and control in English society, the fictional detective arrived in literature as a corresponding symbol of order” (15). Where there are detectives, it seems, fiction about detectives is sure to follow, and the history of policing in the part of the world most often named detective fiction's country of birth—England—bears this correlation out. In London, Robert Peel's Metropolitan Police force was not established until 1828, and its detective force did not appear until mid-century (Woods 15). Before 1828, policing in England was both “privatized” (Bell 7) and “haphazard” (Woods 15). Detective fiction as we know it today simply could not exist until policing came under the systematic purview of the state, and with it, the position of the police detective.

Attributing the rise of detective fiction to the appearance of real-life detectives does not provide an answer, however, to the other defining characteristics of modern crime fiction: the shift in focus from criminal to the story of a crime, and a conclusion marked not by punishment but by resolution—or, the solving of a mystery. Just as the arrival of the detective figure was integral to the solidification of detective fiction, so too was the excommunication of justice or punishment from the narrative space of the genre. Crime fiction, and detective fiction specifically, is characterized by the solving of a crime or mystery. In the nineteenth century, it is as if this process of resolution becomes so effective that it sweeps the concern for punishment and reaction against criminality exhibited in eighteenth-century crime writing right out of the genre's narrative scope. Indeed, the genre pulls the reader's interpretative powers away from an analysis of how power structures might operate in the biopolitical age out of which detective fiction has grown, and instead focuses attention on the revelation of how a crime was committed, thereby transforming injustice into narrative.

Woods notes that the nineteenth century marked a “new kind of fictional story that hid the criminal rather than exhibiting him” (15). “Older crime texts,” he argues, “like older policing methods, depended on the prominent display of the criminal: his final confession, his dying words, and, very often, a woodcut of his body dangling at the end of a rope” (16). Woods convincingly shows that early crime fiction participated in the disciplinary power of the state. He notes that the

fictional display of a punished criminal “served the state as well as the publisher” (16) and concludes that “[t]he disappearance of the public justice system from the detective story mirrors the disappearance of what Foucault calls the ‘Spectacle of the Scaffold’”(19). Woods limits his analysis of the relationship between detective fiction and the state to a reading of *Discipline and Punish*, and attributes the disappearance of public punishment from the genre to the same cause Foucault identifies for its disappearance from Western societies at large: the “new desire to distance the public from punishment” (Woods 19). But the disappearance of scenes of punishment and justice from crime fiction is indicative of a broader societal change. Punishment is made absent from the crime fiction text just as biopower arrives on the scene and hides its own mechanisms of surveillance and control.

In “Society Must Be Defended,” the lecture wherein he first introduces the term “biopower,” Foucault muses, “It is as though power, which used to have sovereignty as its modality or organizing schema, found itself unable to govern the economic and political body of a society that was undergoing both a demographic explosion and industrialization” (249). Unlike the disciplinary power that grew to prominence in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, which took “man-as-body,” or, the individual, as its object (242), the biopower that emerged out of the late eighteenth century is characterized by technologies that take entire populations as objects of management and control, and, therefore, by technologies that also systematize, organize and naturalize the classification of

individuals into types and categories amenable to this mode of oversight. The criminal justice system is a prime example of this paradoxical or contradictory exercise of power, which interpellates subjects as both sovereign individuals and generalizable types and manages criminal behaviour endemic to certain social conditions by punishing the individual. This means that, as Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish*, the police “must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only by the extreme limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with” (213). “Police power,” he continues, “must bear ‘over everything’: it is not however the totality of the state nor of the kingdom as visible and invisible body of the monarch; it is the dust of events, action, behaviour, opinions—‘everything that happens’” (213). The police at once deal with an entire social body--and its presumed universal traits—and the particulars of and exceptions to this universality. The analysis of the details, excesses, variations and deviations found in everyday life becomes the means by which to establish norms for a larger population.

Crime fiction as we know it today is both a product of and (perhaps anxious) response to this diffuse and yet panoptic operation of power, made manifest not in the attention the genre pays to the details of everyday life per se, but in the way in which it normalizes panoptic surveillance as a form of disciplinary control, wherein deviance is at once defined in and deterred by the knowability of all aspects of human behaviour. The criminal and his or her punishment recedes then from crime fiction just as the modern world begins to re-

envision discipline, and along with it, its concept of justice. The genre therefore participates in shifting the popular definition of justice from the reaction or response to a crime, and towards making crime knowable—that is, towards “solving” crime by resolving its causes, contexts, and conditions into a stable narrative. As a result, the modern crime fiction genre with which readers are so familiar today concerns itself with justice *only* insofar as “getting the story straight” might be considered a form of justice. If it figures justice at all, it does so as revelation and resolution—as a *making known* and *knowable*—rather than as punishment or as analysis of how the operation of power might reproduce injustice. Indeed, identifying “whodunit” in modern crime fiction becomes secondary as the reality of diffuse power structures make stories of individual criminals seem all the less likely, and even less palatable, to the modern reading subject. A criminal may not be caught in these narratives, but a stable story of the crime is uncovered.

This figuration of justice as narrative, as the unveiling of secret crimes and hidden histories is, of course, problematic; it carries the potential to shift readers’ focus from explicit encounters with power to an encounter with narrative. As such, it echoes the anxiety surrounding literary studies more broadly that literature and social change are irreparably divided; that theory does not easily translate into practice; that reading, even at its most “active” in the analytical sense, might remain a largely passive endeavour. Ajay Heble paraphrases Lennard Davis’ fears in this regard: “Do texts in an English class . . . become ‘sites of resistance’ or

arenas for dialogue, such that we don't bother to act in the real world?" (Heble 10). Heble, echoing Davis, raises the daunting possibility that "the very act of reading inhibits social change because we allow our consideration and analysis of the transformation that characters undergo (from blindness to insight, from self-deception to self-revelation, and so forth) to become a kind of surrogate for any form of external change" (10).¹¹ In many ways, this fear or anxiety surrounding reader response is only heightened in a field such as Asian Canadian literature, a so-called "minority" literature wherein racism, oppression and assimilation are prime concerns. *Obasan* in particular has proven a lightning rod for debates surrounding the purpose and efficacy of reading practices in response to ethnic and minoritized literatures, and Miki has noted the potential "surrogate" function the novel invokes, especially in White, mainstream audiences: "*Obasan* . . . can be read as a 'Canadian' story of an individual who achieves self presence, and therefore liberation from racialization, through aesthetic transcendence" (*Broken Entries* 140). The "resolutionary" function of the modern definition of justice-as-narrative is therefore more than cause for concern amongst literature critics and professors.

Defining justice as narrative revelation explicitly or implicitly in the classroom might have undesired effects on students and readers. Reading narratives that engage with historical injustice without consideration for the

¹¹ The passage Heble paraphrases here comes from Davis' *Resisting the Novel*: "And the fact that within novels most protagonists undergo a dramatic change by the end of the novel—usually moving from innocence to experience or imprudence to prudence—provides a false surrogate example of change that might satisfy any external need or desire for change" (Davis 19).

myriad ways in which such narratives might provoke, theorize, or strategize for future change is frightfully limiting; frightful, too, is the fact that such a definition of justice is in no way limited to genre fiction. Nicol, McNulty, and Pulham write that “a feature of the second half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries is that the conventions, motifs, and themes of crime genres appear to have reached such a degree of popularity that they have ‘spilled out’ into other kinds of writing and cinema” (4). I insist that this spillage does not stop at textual boundaries; instead, crime fiction as a genre has spilled right out of fictional frames and into everyday life. Lauren Berlant defines genre as that which “provide[s] an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art” (n. page). Berlant’s is a robust conceptualization of genres that exceeds their classic definition as “essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” (Jameson 106, original emphasis). For Berlant, a genre is not simply a clustering of conventions or a set of precedents that regulate what can and cannot happen in a particular text; when applied more broadly to everyday life, a genre is similarly not something that sets formal or stylistic standards to which people must conform. Much as narratives live beyond their material instantiations as both products and producers of particular cultural, social or ideological expectations, genres too have active lives beyond the world of text. However, a genre is not a “metanarrative” that seeks to organize and give order to unruly histories and

events. But we also cannot rightly conflate genres with narratives, either, for genres are reproducible and repeatable; they can encompass or articulate a wide range of diverse stories.

Berlant's use of the term "genre" is valuable because it captures both how genres operate off the page in everyday life and how they record and encode ways of *feeling* about that everyday life. Genres are significant because whether we encounter generic conventions in literature or in life, according to Berlant, these conventions signal to us how we can *expect to feel* as certain events unfold. The repetition of genre teaches readers not exactly *what* to expect (it does not give readers the gift of foreknowledge or prophecy); instead, genre allows readers to anticipate certain affective responses. Raymond Williams's discussion of structures of feeling is useful here. Williams argues that "forms and conventions in art and literature [are] inalienable elements of a social material process" (133). Genre and its conventions are not merely after-effects of particular social formations, like the justice system, for example, or the modern police force, but instead constitute their own social formation, which, according to Williams, "may in turn be seen as the articulation of . . . structures of feeling" (133). In other words, genres articulate a way of feeling about certain social formations; they at once record *and* codify affective responses to modes of social organization. Genres are therefore productive; one key characteristic of a genre is that it is *reproducible*. Genres codify how people can or should expect to feel about a particular social formation or institution, which is a key point, because, in effect, genres powerfully

reproduce specific, perhaps canonized, affective responses to the social conditions, institutions and values with which they engage. Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee's intervention in the detective-fiction genre, however, proves a powerful challenge to the genre's valuation of knowledge as tantamount to justice, and to our anticipation of consolation with the resolutionary conclusion typical to the genre.

What is fascinating about Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee's novels is that in each, the protagonist ultimately proves unable or unwilling to resolve mystery into coherent narratives of justice; instead, these novels actually deepen criminal mysteries and narrative uncertainties. When we look at the particular affective structure evoked by crime fiction, we can see that as a genre it holds a powerful sway over how people understand and interact with the modern justice system, and how they conceive of criminality and justice more broadly. As discussed above, crime fiction, as a literary and filmic genre, teaches readers to expect resolution, restoration, and consolation. The novels of Asian Canadian literature discussed here are intriguing for the way in which they enact a contradiction between an expectation of how one will feel, and how one actually ends up feeling. Readers do not feel the same way in response to the conclusions of these Asian Canadian texts as they might about a conclusion of an Agatha Christie novel. In *Obasan*, for example, while Naomi's narrative closes with her return to the scene of the opening pages of the novel—a plot structure that suggests resolution in its circularity—the novel itself does not end here. Instead, as Miki

points out, “the heightened moment is followed by a matter-of-fact document asking the government not to deport Japanese Canadians, signed by three white men,” and he further suggests that this document, and the voice it gives to its White, male signatories, implies that “silence still haunts in the absence of a Japanese Canadian name on this political document” (*Broken Entries* 116).

Whether we read this closing document in precisely the same line as Miki does or not, we can certainly agree that it haunts the resolution that Naomi’s narrative appears to suggest. Structurally, the document re-opens the narrative that Naomi seems to have closed just a page before. Whereas Naomi’s narrative appears to resolve back into silence, the document re-positions that resolution as a stuttering stop, or as an echo of a narrative that cannot quite conclude itself. Its sudden appearance at the close of the novel is, without a doubt, mystifying; it is the only document out of many included in the novel that appears without supplementary interpretation, either from Aunt Emily or Naomi herself. How are readers supposed to read this uncharacteristically un-captioned addendum?

The conclusions of Sakamoto’s and Lee’s novels are similarly inconclusive and, if at all possible, even more mystifying in their irresolution. *The Electrical Field* closes with a certain amount of individual or personal resolution in the development of Asako’s character. In the closing chapter, blossoming sakura remind Asako of the apple orchard at the camp in which her family was interned; while Mr. Fujioka, the sakura trees’ owner, is insistent that she recognize that the trees she sees before her are sakura and not apple, Asako

refuses his literal reading of past and present: “I couldn’t care less what he claimed,” she tells herself, “I knew what I knew” (296). This concluding chapter also offers readers a scene of familial reconciliation, with Stum, Angel (Stum’s girlfriend), and Asako taking a trip together to the chick factory where Stum and Angel work. Outside the factory, Stum attends to his sister with care, “tuck[ing]” a jacket to Asako’s neck as she stands outside, and “lead[ing]” her back to the warmth of the building (302). On the very last page of the novel, the otherwise serious, frigid Asako finds herself making a joke; in so doing, she happily surprises herself, Stum, and Angel, and perhaps even the reader. So, with this concluding chapter, Asako appears more able to acknowledge her own conflicted memories of internment as forms of historical truth; she appears to have mended, in part, her relationship with her brother; and, finally, she may even be on the way to becoming more personable, caring, and open.

But the setting and subject matter against which this evidence of personal “mending” is set only functions to undermine such a narrative of closure. Indeed, the last chapter of the novel is utterly mystifying to a reader who has been attuned to questions of racism and history in the novel thus far; suddenly, in the novel’s final pages, Sakamoto turns her readers’ attention to the subjects of gender, sexuality, and difference. Just as a monstrous, damaged Asako seems “on the mend,” Sakamoto shows Stum and Angel engaged in the monstrous work of chick sexing, with Stum declaring, rather ominously, “You have to watch for them” (304)—“them” being those chicks that are “both male and female in one”

(304). The concluding sentences of the novel—“Girls here, boys there. It was simple, really” (305)—are anything but simple. They are jarring, confusing, and destabilizing. The reader is left with a monstrous image of the surveillance and policing of gender and sexual norms, a conclusion which re-opens the issues of surveillance and enforced socialization of biological difference which the history of internment speaks to, and in which Asako herself seemed invested, as she watched her neighbourhood from her living room window.¹²

The conclusion of *Disappearing Moon Café* is equally confusing, for it offers not one, but many conclusions. The story of incest buried at the centre of the Wong family history concludes not with personal redemption or development, but with suicide. The penultimate chapter of the novel is titled “The Suicide”; it recounts the loss of Suzie’s baby due to malpractice during birth and the bleakness of her life thereafter:

I would sit down to rest, not because I felt tired—my mind kept journeying on and on, up a squalid hillside—but my body felt limp, drained of feeling. So I would just sit on the sofa, and the light would change subtly around me. Every day. (284)

The final chapter of the text, the “Epilogue,” returns to the perspective that opened the novel in its Prologue: that of Gwei Chang. Like *Obasan*, *Disappearing Moon Café* ends where it began, with Gwei Chang, though at the novel’s

¹² Marlene Goldman points out that *The Electrical Field* closes by “self-consciously circl[ing] back to the image of yellow chicks that plays such a central role in *Obasan*” (382) and is thus “haunted by... the promise of adult whiteness” (383). Goldman adds: “In addition to highlighting the problem of assimilation, the conclusion’s reference to the ‘invisible mark’ [of the chicks’ reproductive organs] underscores the overarching context of racialization, specifically, the way that the ‘mark’ (yellow skin and slanted eyes, for instance) functions in the process of racialization as a sign that supposedly designates an essential nature” (383).

conclusion we find Gwei Chang is on his deathbed. He returns to memories of his once-lover, Kelora Chen, whom he abandoned, and his unacknowledged son by Kelora, Ting An. While the final pages of the novel are devoted to Gwei Chang's symbolic acknowledgment of the wrongs he has done to both her and Ting An, and to the Chinese community in Vancouver more broadly, Gwei Chang's death and his personal contrition cannot erase the heartache and tragedy that have comprised the previous three-hundred pages of the novel. Gwei Chang may pass away with the close of the novel, but the family tree at its opening does not allow readers to forget that his lineage and his choices deeply impress the future. Finally, hidden between these two scenes of death and irresolution is an escape, of a sort. Kae, the narrator and presumed author of the text that we are reading, is asked by Hermia Chow, "Would you rather live a great novel or write one" (289)? Kae responds, "I'd rather live one" (289), and with that, she disappears from the narrative. Presumably, she leaves with her son for Hong Kong, to begin a new life with Hermia. But *we do not know* for sure—and this is key, because Kae literally writes herself out of the narrative. A new mystery opens up for readers to contemplate: What will happen to Kae? What new branch of the family tree is Kae embarking on? Or, has she written herself and her son into a new family tree?

Not only do the conclusions of these novels disrupt a desire for resolution, so too does the structure of their plots. Donald Goellnicht convincingly argues that *Obasan* is a work of historiographic metafiction, and shows that the novel "problematizes the very act of reconstructing history by comparing it to the

process of writing fiction” (“Minority History as Metafiction” 287-288). *The Electrical Field* and *Disappearing Moon Café* make for less likely candidates as historiographic metafictions, for missing from their narratives are self-conscious references to formal, traditional historical artifacts, like the government documents and personal correspondence found in *Obasan*. It might be possible to read *Disappearing Moon Café* as an historiographical encounter with the Janet Smith case. This is the murder mystery that seems at once tangential to the family drama of the novel, but sits at its very narrative centre; furthermore, at the close of the novel, Gwei Chang returns to his memories of his involvement in the case. *The Electrical Field*, however, makes no explicit reference to historical record, and instead engages with Japanese Canadian internment primarily through memory. Regardless, each of these three novels achieves the destabilization of interpretive authority that Goellnicht recognizes as a significant effect of historiographic metafiction, and this destabilization is achieved in large part through the authors’ manipulation of the double-plot structure characteristic of the detective-fiction genre.

Perhaps one of the most cited works on detective fiction, Tsvetan Todorov's structural analysis of the genre makes plain why detective fiction, and crime fiction more broadly, carries enormous appeal to both postmodern writers and readers. In “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” Todorov argues that “[a]t the base of the whodunit, we find a duality” (44). Detective fiction, he shows, “contains not one, but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the

investigation” (44). That the first story—the story of the crime—is “in fact the story of an absence” (46) is what makes the form so appealing to writers of historical fiction grappling with both the structural and political challenges of articulating an unspoken past. For, as Carl D. Malmgren explains, “[t]he double-plot structure of mystery fiction helps to explain the subgenre’s orientation towards the past A murder initiates the mystery novel, but the novel is at pains to reconstruct the events leading up to that murder” (122). Writers like Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee turn to the structural conventions of detective fiction in order to tackle an absent, elided past as precisely that: as ever-present, and yet, somehow, made absent. The supposedly strict confines of the whodunit’s plot structure, then, actually prove freeing for writers of historical fiction. Todorov claims that in detective fiction, the “first story,” or the story of the crime, “cannot be immediately present in the book” (46), and it is this structural imperative, dictated not by Todorov but by decades of generic convention, that allows the writers of Asian Canadian literature to shine a light on a darkened history—on a story filed away in a dark cupboard in Canada’s past—while casting that same light onto the systemic racism that put it there.¹³ Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee, then, engage with historical injustice via a genre that both shares a common-sense

¹³ For further discussion of the double-plot structure of detective fiction and its narrative function, see the work of Laura Marcus, Peter Huhn, and John Scaggs. Marcus recognizes detective fictions as “metaliterary stories” that are “paradigmatic of literary narrative itself” (245); Huhn argues that detective fiction “thematizes narrativity” due to its self-conscious concern with “authoring and deciphering plots” (451); and Scaggs remarks that “postmodern appropriations of the genre” make use of its metaliterary structure to highlight “the impossibility of what has always been central to the genre: the process of interpretation itself” (4).

affinity with the pursuit of justice, while at the same time deferring the culmination of that pursuit. And significantly, this deferment—the deferment of the knowing of the “crime,” which Todorov states is basic to detective fiction as a genre—is at once a shaping of the genre’s affect.

Berlant’s definition of genre recognizes it as a structure for affect. When we consider detective fiction’s double-plot structure in this light, we can see that the genre does not only defer the story of the crime that operates as an unsettling absence at its heart. Instead, the detective fiction genre also defers the fulfilment of the reader’s desire to know that crime (until a text’s conclusion), and, significant to the discussion of the three novels this chapter undertakes, the genre also *indefinitely* defers readers’ desire for justice. That the affective structure of detective fiction is this deferment of a desire for justice is significant because it points up what Kandice Chuh, drawing on Jacques Derrida, calls “the *(im)possibility of justice*, where ‘justice’ refers to a state as yet unexperienced and unrepresentable, one that can only connotatively be implied” (8). Justice, she writes, “is understood here not as the achievement of a determinate end, but rather an endless project of searching out the knowledge and material apparatuses that extinguish some (Other) life ways and that hoard economic and social opportunities only for some” (8). The “here” to which Chuh refers is the field of Asian American studies. Chuh argues that “the overarching purpose of Asian American studies has been and continues to be the pursuit of this *(im)possibility*” (8). Christopher Lee’s assessment of Asian Canadian studies identifies a similar

affective structure at work; he recognizes in the field “the illusoriness of the very desire, on the part of Asian Canadian Studies, to finally coincide with its object” (4), which is to say that Asian Canadian studies as a field must contend with, and perhaps embrace, a reluctant desire to define itself, and to reach a stable relationship between “Asian Canadian studies” and “Asian Canadian.”

What does it mean to think of a desire for justice as a reluctant one?¹⁴

Chuh states that Asian American studies is dedicated to “the pursuit of an as yet unrealized state of justice by tracing, arguing, and critiquing, and by alternatively imagining the conditions that inscribe its (im)possibility” (8). In this vision of justice, seeking out a singular identity or a stable historical record proves inimical to the work of seeking justice that is not yet possible and that “is not an achievement of a determinate end, but rather . . . an endless project” (8). It is not so much that justice cannot be achieved, but that it can never be finished, complete. A reluctant desire for justice, then, is at once a reluctant desire for knowledge, or, to phrase the problematic in terms of the detective fiction genre, it is a reluctant desire to know the crime of the story, and, to borrow from Christopher Lee, for this knowledge to “finally coincide with its object,” justice. I turn now, then, to figures in Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee’s novels that I recognize as reluctant investigators of historical injustice. I suggest that in positioning the primary investigator figures of their novels as reluctant, Kogawa, Sakamoto, and

¹⁴ I thank Daniel Coleman for posing this question to me, a question which has allowed me to think through how justice is conceived in the Kogawa, Lee, and Sakamoto’s novels.

Lee dramatize that reading for justice must always be a reluctant desire, a desire that is reluctant to achieve its own fulfillment.

II. The Spinster Detectives of Asian Canadian Literature

“But you’re a spinster,” he says, darting a grin at the
class. More gasps from the girls.
“Spinster?” I grimace, and have an urge to throttle him.
“What does the word mean?”

—Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (8)

The most readily recognizable detective figures in *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café* are not their main characters. Aunt Emily in *Obasan*, Yano in *The Electrical Field*, and Morgan in *Disappearing Moon Café* each carry out investigations through traditional methods like archival research and interviews, and each actively seeks clues to past mysteries and “cover ups”; in short, each of these characters is determined to unveil the particular historical injustices their families have been subject to. Aunt Emily investigates the internment of Japanese Canadians in WWII, and tirelessly works to bring to light the criminality of internment as an act not of patriotic defense, but of state-sponsored racism. Yano is much like Aunt Emily, though he carries out his investigation alone rather than among a community of nisei; he analyzes documents and newspapers, and even conducts interviews, in a way, for Asako informs the reader that “[o]ver and over he’d ask [her] about the camps Badger her with where this, when that, and how long” (5). Morgan also devotes much of his life to investigating both his family history, and to uncovering the

history of anti-Chinese racism in Canada. When the reader first encounters Morgan, he is at a library working to solve the murder of Janet Smith, a real-life, unsolved case dating from 1920s Vancouver that Lee incorporates into her work of fiction. Each of these three characters are recognizable as investigator types for their active investigations; perhaps more significant, these characters are tirelessly dedicated to seeing a particular historical truth come to light. The characters that I identify as the primary detective figures in these novels, however, prove ambivalent defenders of justice. In fact, the three female protagonists that I recognize as detectives in the tradition of the whodunit in *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café* can all be described as reluctant investigators. Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee all cast their female protagonists in the tradition of the spinster detective; against these reluctant spinster detectives each author casts as foil the detective figures described above who, in contrast, resemble the detectives of the hard-boiled tradition.

Spinster detectives are associated with the whodunit subgenre of detective fiction, which critics tend to recognize as a largely British or Western-European invention traditionally set in an isolated, discrete setting, like a country manor house, a boat, or a train, and invested as a whole in White middle-class privilege. In opposition to the whodunit, the hard-boiled detective novel is recognized as a distinctly American product more concerned with corruption and the (mal)functionings of modern, urban society than with the order, predictability, and knowability of the closed and often rural communities of the whodunit. Its

concern with the vagaries of modern, urban life and its diffuse, rather than centralized setting are suggestive of a departure from the conservatism of the whodunit, and therefore the spinster detective. Peter Huhn, for example, argues that the hard-boiled detective novel tends to unmoor meaning where the whodunit fixes it. While the whodunit positions the detective as a removed, objective, and scientific observer of a crime who is invariably capable of reading meaning into mystery and discovering the truth behind lies, Huhn shows how the involvement of the all-too human, hot-headed detective of the hard-boiled tradition makes the process of reading and discovery much less certain. He explains:

Here, interpretation, as practiced by the private eye, is presented as an interaction between the reading subject and the object (the text) in which neither side remains a stable entity. The detective's reading activities affect the text (the mystery he investigates) as he in turn is affected by it. The first story, of crime and criminal, keeps changing in the course of its reconstruction in the second story. (460)

The hard-boiled detective novel defers what John Scaggs calls the "instant morality" (44) of the whodunit, as the ethical or moral code by which the crime is understood as such is subject to change in the very process of its investigation.

However, Maureen T. Reddy's analysis of hard-boiled detective fiction shows that, despite the genre's performance of the dialectical relationship between text and reader, it is no less moralizing than its supposedly more conservative cousin. "Hard-boiled ideology," she argues, "is an exaggerated version . . . of mainstream American ideology, particularly as that ideology was propounded in the years between the world wars" (*Traces* 9). Despite this, many critics insist upon the marginal status of the hard-boiled detective. Reddy points to John G.

Cawelti's 1976 analysis of genre fiction as one example of this tendency, but even recent scholarly work tends to uncritically echo the earlier, more conservative criticism on the subject. In her introduction to *Race and Religion in the Postcolonial British Detective Story*, for example, Julie H. Kim blandly states that “[d]etective fiction is, of necessity, about the Other. A typical mystery comprises no fewer than *three* others: victim, detective, and culprit” (1). According to Kim, this is “especially” true of hard-boiled detectives, who are “outsiders, even outcasts” of the communities they work to protect (1).

Reddy's analysis of the genre renders straight-forward readings of the politics of hard-boiled detective fiction, such as Kim's, untenable. Reddy writes: “When we consider race as a central component of the hard-boiled formula,”—and here we might add gender and sexuality, as they are equally relevant to a discussion of the genre's ideological foundations—“we see that the detective is in fact not set apart from society but instead embodies its most deeply held but often inchoate beliefs” (*Traces* 10). The hyper-masculine, heterosexual, White detectives of works by Chandler, Hammett, and their descendants embody a type of individualism that refuses recognition of contingency. Even Charlie Chan, a Chinese-American detective character created by Earl Derr Biggers in the first quarter of the twentieth century, was cast in the “model minority” stereotype, and as such, as Elaine Kim shows, functioned as “a non-threatening, non-competitive, asexual ally of the white man, usually contrasted with a parade of Asians in secondary roles as cowardly servants and vicious gangsters” (18). While Charlie

Chan has, as Betsy Huang claims, “become a veritable American popular culture icon,” he does so as a “transparent figuration of racist white fantasies of the Asian” (51). Furthermore, Huang remarks that Charlie Chan resembles more the “genteel British sleuths exemplified by Agatha Christie’s creations” than the hard-boiled detectives of the American tradition, who “simultaneously enforce and break laws, inducing reverence because they defy rather than defer to institutions of law and the police” (53). According to Huang, “Earl Derr Bigger’s smart, polite, deferential, proverb-spouting sleuth” (51) represents a “domestication” of his racial difference (53).¹⁵

Huang also emphasizes that in American detective fiction, the White, heteronormative masculinity that the hard-boiled detective embodies was often defined against the “cultural-spatial threat” (53) of Chinatown, which is figured as a site of “moral degeneracy” (60), as well as against the figure of the Asian criminal. “Like the model minority,” Huang writes, “the criminal is also the product of literary cultivation. Representations of Asian American ‘bad subjects’ . . . consolidated largely around models of criminality that emerged from the genre of American crime fiction, in which the genre’s predominantly white authorship and readership fashioned some of the most enduring images of Asian

¹⁵ Yunte Huang’s work on Charlie Chan offers a more recuperative perspective on the detective. In *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and his Rendezvous with American History*, Huang emphasizes that “to many Asian Americans, [Charlie Chan] remains a pernicious example of a racist stereotype, a Yellow Uncle Tom, if you will; the type of Chinaman, passive and unsavory, who conveys himself in broken English” (xvi). However, Huang asserts that “as a ubiquitous cultural icon, whose influence on the twentieth century remains virtually unexamined, Charlie Chan does not yield easily to ideological reduction” (xvi), and ultimately argues that “Charlie Chan, America’s most identifiable Chinaman, epitomizes both the racist heritage and the creative genius of the nation’s culture” (xx).

criminality” (49). But, as Scaggs puts it, in the American hard-boiled tradition, “[t]he private eye answers to nobody but him- or herself” (60), and so as a genre tends to reproduce an ethos of hyper-individualism that disavows the existence of systemic racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. This ethos of hyper-individualism, which stresses independence, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency and recasts these traits as a desirable masculinity, smoothes over any structural inequities embedded in the society in which the hard-boiled detective works, and denies any advantage the private dick—and I do think that term fitting here—might have reaped from them. While the hard-boiled detective is cast as “a loner, an alienated individual who exists outside or beyond the socio-economic order of family, friends, work, and home” (Scaggs 59), he (or, later, she) becomes central in the reader’s eye: the hard-boiled detective is both positioned at the centre of the text as its customary first-person narrator, and further comes to stand in for the supposedly average individual, embattled by a modern, urbanized and increasingly difficult-to-read world. Meaning and interpretation certainly become contingent in the hard-boiled detective novel; subject positions, however, do not.

In *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café*, Aunt Emily, Yano, and Morgan each resemble the “the all-too human, hot-headed” detective figures of the hard-boiled tradition. In so doing, it is possible that all three authors are attempting to intervene in detective fiction’s racist representations of Asians in North America, for in each novel, it is undeniable that the stereotypes of the model minority and criminal Asian are exploded. In

Disappearing Moon Café in particular, Lee engages with what Viet Thanh Nguyen recognizes as an ongoing figuration of Chinatowns since the late nineteenth century as “a geographic and cultural body that is separate from the civil body of the city and as a site where the individual body may degenerate physically and morally” (97). Huang cites the American hard-boiled detective fiction genre as playing a primary role in the establishment of this negative figuration of Chinatowns; she asserts that Hammett “standardized” “Orientalist figurations of the Chinese and Chinatown” (50), and points to Roman Polanski’s 1974 neo-noir, hard-boiled detective film, *Chinatown*, as the primary cultural site through which “Chinatown achieved its mythic luster—and sinister patina—in the American popular imagination” (53). However, while Huang’s analysis contends with how Asian American detective fiction has intervened in the genre’s White normativity, I am concerned here with how Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee draw on the hard-boiled detective figure—and distort or play with that figure—to question a particular interpretive mode and its definition of justice.

In *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café* Aunt Emily, Yano, and Morgan all occupy socially marginalized positions as Japanese and Chinese Canadians; they are racial minorities in Canada and are themselves victims of racism and racialization. Like the conventional hard-boiled detective, all three are cast as loners. Aunt Emily is unmarried and is free from family ties to travel when and where her activism and research take her. Yano is married, but Sakamoto portrays him as a lonely, awkward man, married to a Japanese woman

who is having an affair with her boss, a White man. Finally, Morgan is also unmarried, lives alone, and, later in *Disappearing Moon Café*, is depicted as an anti-social, self-destructive alcoholic. Finally, each of these characters is determined in their dedication to correcting historical injustice. Each, then, is certainly “hard-boiled”: they are all assertive, if not aggressive, bold and daring loners operating from social and political margins to unmask modern ideological narratives as fictions of corrupt governments and White supremacy. However, each, in his or her own way, is invested in a particular set of investigative practices that are portrayed by Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee as problematically aggressive, self-destructive, or both.

In *Obasan*, Aunt Emily is figured primarily as aggressive in her pursuit of justice, and significantly, this pursuit of justice is defined as a project of narrative unveiling. Naomi remarks that, “[a]ll her life . . . Aunt Emily toiled to tell of the lives of the Nisei in Canada in her effort to make familiar, *to make knowable*, the treacherous yellow peril that lived in the minds of the racially prejudiced” (43, emphasis added). As many critics note, Kogawa problematizes Aunt Emily’s life-long commitment to make knowable the injustices of racism through the association of Emily’s research and activism with metaphors of warfare. Emily is described as a “crusading” (32) “word warrior” (33) and “a small tank of a woman with a Winston Churchill stoop” (34). The letters and documents she sends to Naomi are “the army, the navy, the air force of letters” (33), and Naomi internally comments that “[t]alking to Aunt Emily is sometimes

like walking through a minefield” (36). The unease Naomi feels in response to Emily’s crusade is not so much a result of her commitment to activism, but her commitment to a type of activism that promulgates a singular narrative as remedy to historical injustice, for, as Naomi notes, “her testimony is to the light that shines in the lives of the Nisei, in their desperation to prove themselves Canadian The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey” (33). Kogawa peppers her descriptions of Emily with military metaphors not to cause readers to discredit her dedication to justice, but to problematize her single-minded association of justice with the revelation of a singular, correct, and coherent historical narrative.

In *The Electrical Field* and *Disappearing Moon Café*, Yano and Morgan are represented both as threatening and as self-destructive. Yano, for example, is repeatedly called “kamikaze” by Stum,¹⁶ and Kae shortens Morgan’s full name not to “Morg,” but to “Morgue” (89). The female protagonists of both novels are sexually attracted to these men, but they are also repulsed and scared by them. To sixteen-year-old Kae, Morgan is “a heroic man, with an upturned collar and a burning cigarette” (94), but she also sees him as “a haunted man” (87). By the close of the novel, the reader realizes that the image of Morgan as the haunted, masculine type who “sleuth[s] in the university librarinth” (87) so that he can “make ‘a killing’ by naming the person who had committed the most spectacular, unsolved scandal-page murder in Vancouver” (94) is in part a cover for somebody deeply hurt by the suicide of a lover and loss of a child, the betrayal of an entire

¹⁶ See pp. 21, 86, 197, 256.

family, his abandonment by his father, and the racism he sees around him and recognizes as dramatically impacting his family's past. And, as is the case with Emily and Naomi, and Yano and Asako, it is Morgan's persistent "sleuthing" that starts Kae on her quest to know more about her family history. However, while Kae seeks to create new ties and new futures out of what she learns of her family's past, Morgan seems trapped by his need to unveil their family secrets. Near the close of the novel, Kae describes how running away at seventeen to meet a chronically drunk Morgan in New York changed her relationship to their family's past: "I don't know how much of Morgan I found left in the stewed carcass I met, but at the end of my quest I found somebody else in my place. Somebody who was more enduring than I, more inquisitive, even when the truth stung" (217).

So it is the female protagonists of each of these novels, and the reluctant investigations they undertake that *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café* favour. Indeed, it is possible that their relative reluctance—relative to the dedication of Emily, Yano, and Morgan—is tied up in the approach they take to the past. As unlikely as it may seem at first glance, Naomi, Asako, and Kae all resemble in key ways the figure of the spinster detective of the whodunit tradition of detective fiction, a figure that critics agree deploys a unique investigative methodology in her investigations. One of the reasons the spinster detective proves an important figure for Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee is because she allows these authors to articulate particular forms of

otherness traditionally located on the margins of racial and sexual normativity. Carla T. Kungl remarks that the recuperation of the “spinster-character” in Victorian-era detective fiction is a “powerful way women writers used detective fiction as an avenue through which to discuss issues of importance to women” (83). But it is not this subversive centring of otherwise marginalized subjectivities that makes Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee’s intervention in the detective-fiction genre so compelling. Instead, it is the type of investigation that this subject position affords them, and, in turn, the genealogical reading of history—both familial and political—that results. In figuring their protagonists as both traditional detective figures investigating a crime *and* as genealogists researching their family histories, Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee make plain that questions of justice are inalienably intimate and personal affairs.

Kungl’s feminist reading of the spinster detective shows that, historically, spinster detectives have occupied a subversive positionality in relation to the communities they investigate, and to which they always only partially belong. According to Kungl, spinsters in literature have represented a “source of anxiety because they harbored the possibility of unsanctioned social and sexual activity” (86-87). The threatening position of the unmarried woman allowed women writers of the Victorian era to cast the spinster detective as “successful, daring, and unusual, the exact opposite of what society had deemed ‘old maids’ to be” (83).¹⁷

¹⁷ This description could apply to Aunt Emily, and arguably suits Emily better than it does her niece. But I am interested her less in the character traits of Emily and Naomi, and more in the *method* they bring to bear on thinking about, and learning from, the past.

According to Kungl, then, writers of detective fiction of the Victorian era and the interwar period drew on this at once anxious and empowering position to “complicate the gender constructs of their society” (83). I recognize Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee’s female protagonists as reluctant spinster detectives who repurpose this marginalized sexual and social positionality to navigate long histories of racism, loss, and kinship in which they find themselves entangled. For, as we will see, the spinster moniker often has had less to do with marriage status and more to do with the perceived deviancy of a woman’s sexuality, and the unsettling insights her feminine knowledge of the intimate affords her. Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee all redeploy the characteristic traits of the spinster detective—her sexual otherness, her “feminine” knowledge of the domestic sphere, and her attention to the private lives of others—to engage their protagonists and readers in an interpretive practice embedded in intimacy and genealogy.

In *Obasan*, Kogawa is careful to draw attention to her protagonist-detective’s spinster status early in her novel. “‘Are you going to get married, Miss Nakane?’” (6), asks one of Naomi’s students in only the second chapter of the novel, and Kogawa is careful here to inform her readers: “Every year the question is asked at least once” (6). The same inquiring student quickly concludes: “you’re a spinster . . . an old maid” (8). In *The Electrical Field*, Sakamoto similarly underscores her protagonist’s unmarried status, and repeatedly draws the readers’ attention to Asako’s repressed sexuality. Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field* also more explicitly takes up the conventions of the whodunit in its setting. As I have

shown in a previous publication, the setting of the novel conforms to the standard of the classic whodunit, with its isolated location and the confinement of the suspects and clues involved in the investigation of a crime to that location.¹⁸ Sakamoto's protagonist-detective, Asako, also more explicitly resembles her generic forebear. Like Miss Marple, whom critics agree "is not portrayed very kindly by Christie" (Kungl 113), Asako is not exactly a likeable character. Miss Marple is known for "eavesdropping and spying"; "her two hobbies"—bird watching and gardening—are "simply excuses" for Marple's busybody surveillance of the private lives of those around her (Kungl 113). The very first line of Asako's first-person narrative in *The Electrical Field* resonates with the busybody reputation of the famous Miss Marple: "I happened to be dusting the front window-ledge," explains Asako, "when I saw her running across the grassy strip of the electrical field" (1). It does not take long for the reader to recognize Asako's claim to "happen to be dusting" as the excuse that it is. Like Miss Marple, Asako is a gardener, but her favourite pastime seems to be standing at her

¹⁸ See Kabesh, "A Haunted House," 80-82. Carl D. Malmgren argues that the whodunit "presupposes a centered world" that is "at once orderly, stable, resistant to change, and relatively free of contingency. This world exists apart from the 'modern' world, isolated from the inroads of time" (119). I have argued that in *The Electrical Field*, Sakamoto draws on this convention to create the setting for her novel, Asako's neighbourhood, which seems untouched by the passing of time, and is rarely visited by outsiders ("A Haunted House," 81). The plot of the novel steps outside of this limited space only for visits to the crime scene at Mackenzie Hill, and for a visit to Asako's brother's workplace at the close of the novel, after the mystery of who killed the Yano family is officially solved. *Obasan's* setting is in some ways even more limited: the present of the text occurs almost exclusively within Naomi's Obasan's house, with the exceptions of the opening and closing scenes of the novel, and the scene in which we meet Naomi as a teacher at an elementary school in Cecil, Alberta. In both novels, all of the clues required to solve their mysteries can be found within these isolated settings, as is the case with the traditional whodunit. In *Disappearing Moon Café*, the setting is much more varied, but most of the text centres on Vancouver's Chinatown.

front window, where she intently watches her neighbours, taking note of their habits and deviances, and speculating on all that she cannot see. Like Miss Marple, too, whose literary reputation is that of “an acidic spinster” (Plain 30), Asako is characterized as a sexless spinster: her period stops at the age of fourteen (151), and her sexual and romantic encounters appear to be limited to her memory of her brother, and to one brief encounter with her neighbour, Yano. She is also undeniably acidic. She describes her ill father not as a person, but as a source of malodour, an odour that, “after all these years, [she]’d never grown used to” (4). She describes her neighbour, Yano, as a “wild, crazy man in the middle of [her] placid afternoon” (4). She easily dismisses her brother, Stum, as almost a caricature: “He and his lopsided cheeks and his tiny eyes, and his legs that met from the tops to their knees, so you’d hear the *vim vim* of his trousers as he walked” (6-7), and she interacts with him strictly via accusations—“What are you doing with that? . . . You snagged them”—and orders—“Go check on Papa . . . See if he wants dessert” (6). Next, we see Asako slap her young neighbour, even as she admits to herself that it was “[a]s if I’d been waiting for an excuse for some time” (8) to perform her aggression. Within the first fifteen pages of the novel, then, the reader encounters all the hallmarks of the Miss Marple busybody tradition, except, perhaps, in an exaggerated, monstrous form.

It may be argued that the appearance of female detective figures in both *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field* simply reflects the resemblance each of these novels bears to the other—both, of course, deal with Japanese Canadian

internment, and given the public profile of Kogawa's earlier and foundational novelistic engagement with internment, Sakamoto could not help but reference it in her later work on the subject. That Asako is childless and unmarried, as is Naomi in *Obasan*, suggests that Sakamoto is deliberately invoking what Kogawa grimly calls the "crone prone syndrome" (8), which Christina Tourino argues is representative in *Obasan* of "the total disruption of Japanese culture and physical reproduction" caused by the internment of Japanese Canadians, the dispersal of family members, and their displacement from their homes and cultural centres even after the war had concluded (135). According to Tourino, Naomi's anxiety about both cultural and biological reproduction makes it clear that "the childlessness of the women in *Obasan* is not the result of a celebrated and free choice but is related to trauma" (135); it is figured as a direct result of the Canadian government's racist wartime and post-war policy. Goellnicht has shown that Canadian policy in regards to people of Japanese descent "brought precisely the result the government anticipated": the dispersal and disruption of established Japanese Canadian communities in Canada, and the desire to assimilate into the dominant culture to avoid further persecution ("Minority History as Metafiction" 289). Marlene Goldman points out that in *Obasan*, both Naomi and her brother are childless, as well as her Aunt Emily, and suggests that this causes Naomi to "[recognize] that her entire bloodline will likely disappear" (*Rewriting Apocalypse* 147). But in both *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field*, childlessness and symbols of failed reproduction—of which there are many in both novels that are

also associated with growing into “Whiteness”—may operate equally as signifiers of fears about a loss of culture.

Tourino remarks that while texts written by or featuring men of colour might “narrate anxiety about assimilation and its interference in ethnic patriarchy, women’s texts often present female protagonists unwilling or unable to procreate” (135). In *Disappearing Moon Café*, the trope of failed reproduction resurfaces in Suzanne, whose infant daughter dies shortly after her birth due to the malpractice of her White doctor. But we meet Kae, Lee’s detective-protagonist, directly after she has given birth to her son. In some ways, Lee’s detective-protagonist does not fit the mould of the spinster detective as well as Kogawa and Sakamoto’s. She is not the busybody that Asako is, but neither is Kogawa’s Naomi. Kae, however, is as much an investigator as Naomi and Asako are; in fact, all three, however reluctantly, seek answers to family secrets. Furthermore, Kae is definitely not a spinster, at least not in the limited sense of the term. However, while Kae does not conform to the standard depiction of the spinster detective, she does fulfill what might be considered the ideological or counter-ideological role the spinster detective takes up in the genre. Kungl demonstrates that the “asexual status” that we associate with the word spinster was in fact “‘thrust’ upon” spinsters of the Victorian era, and notes that this status actually “gave them freedoms other women could not have, including the potential of being sexually active beyond the boundaries of respectability” (86). Kungl also explains that “by the 1920s, the definition [of the spinster] had changed”; it no longer exclusively described

unmarried women, but also came to describe women who were seen to not have active sexual relationships with men, a distinction which, as Kungl points out, “blurred the lines between the definitions of lesbian and spinster” (86). The spinster detective, then, stands in for sexual and personal freedoms not quite sayable in conventional discourse. As Kungl explains, “[w]hether spinsters actually indulged in sexually ‘deviant’ behavior, with men or with other women, was not as important as the symbolic implications of spinsterhood” (86). The spinster female detective, then, has historically created a space in the genre of detective fiction to suggest a deviant, subversive but never quite articulate otherness.

If we understand spinsterhood in this deeper sense—in terms of the accretion of its meanings over time, and the fears surrounding female sexuality that undergird them—it becomes clear that Kae in fact fulfills the ideological function of the spinster detective, for Kae represents many threats to conventional, normative standards of female sexuality. Lee takes pains to give her readers insight into Kae’s sexual and personal life. Indeed, much as is the case in *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field*, the first introduction we have to the novel’s protagonist is one that highlights her supposed failure at fulfilling and performing the normative standards of her gender. We meet Kae as she recalls in detail the birth of her son. Rather than describe his birth in terms of traditional narratives of wonder, joy, or fulfillment, Kae complains that she was “tricked” into believing pregnancy was desirable because she wanted “to be so damn perfect all the time”

(27). Only a few pages into Kae's narrative, then, we have the narrator baldly explaining that her pregnancy was in part the result of the desire to adequately perform her gender. As Kae takes us back to her youth, we learn more that undermines her apparently conventional position as a heterosexual, married mother. First, we learn of her sexual and romantic attachment to her uncle, Morgan. Second, Kae develops a relationship with Hermia Chow when at university, and the end of Kae's narrative in the novel marks her decision to leave her husband and take her son to Hong Kong to start a new life with Hermia.

In her discussion of Miss Marple, Kungl explains that, "Like most female detectives, she can also 'read' household clues" (113). The example Kungl cites of this reading of the domestic is a short story wherein Miss Marple realizes that "the 'hundreds and thousands' in part of a letter referred not to an amount of money but to the candies sprinkled on top of the dessert trifle" (113). This uniquely feminine or domestic knowledge proves to be the key to solving the mystery, because it was through the candies that the killer "introduced arsenic to the victim" (113). In *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field* and *Disappearing Moon Café*, the feminine knowledge or perspective the detective-protagonists bring to bear on familial and national histories may not be "domestic" in the sense described by Kungl in that these women do not bring a knowledge of baking, cooking or childrearing to their investigations. However, they *do* bring a form of cultural training often directed at women to their detective work, a training which is perhaps best described by Kae in *Disappearing Moon Café* for the frank, direct

voice that Lee attributes to her. The very first thing we hear from Kae is both a statement of the type of training she has received as a woman of a Chinese family, and a criticism of that training: “I’m so very disappointed,” she begins, and the following sentence tells us by what: “I’ve been brought up to believe in kinship, or those with whom we share” (25). “All my life,” she explains, “I have been faithfully told, and I have also respectfully remembered” (25). All her life Kae has been asked to remember her family history—who descended from whom, who had babies and who “didn’t ever marry or multiply” (26). As a result, she has “come to expect the ceremonies and assemblies that come with families. At funerals, full-month parties, graduations, it was easy to see an inevitable logic underlining life, a crisp beginning and a well-penned conclusion, nice and neat” (26). Kae lays bare the expectation in patriarchal societies that women be historians and record-keepers of the intimate, the private, and the domestic. And while the realm of the intimate is recognized in Kae’s family as being of momentous, symbolic value, this supposedly feminine concern is also easily renamed gossiping, spying, and conniving, both in Lee’s novel and in patriarchal societies in general. Seen from this perspective, Miss Marple’s “busybody” habits, and, similarly, Asako’s desire to see into the private lives of her neighbours take on a new dimension. We must ask: are these women not gifted with a particular form of seeing?

It is precisely a “belief in kinship, or those with whom we share” (Lee 25) that gives Kae—and, arguably, Naomi and Asako—a unique perspective of the

past. Note that Kae's definition of kinship is not one of strict biological relation; instead, it might encompass "those with whom we share" a history, a past, a loss, or even a story. Contained within this conceptualization of kinship, then, are the seeds of potential intimacies and alternative genealogies. While at the beginning of the novel Kae states that she is disappointed in kinship, because it cannot reduce family history and identity into a medicinal, corrective "herbal pill" that would bring her enlightenment (25), this disappointment is ultimately offset by what her attention to "the intricate complexities of a family of chinese roots" (25) gives her. For while the official, conservative genealogy of the Wong family proves inadequate and incomplete in so many ways, Kae's investigation of the "complexities" behind that family tree is what ultimately allows her to recognize the potential for the creation of meaningful relations outside of the traditional bounds of heterosexual marriage, the reproductive duties of a daughter to her family and its future, and biological kinship ties. With the close of the novel, Kae is able to leave for Hong Kong and begin a new life with her presumed lover, Hermia Chow.

The unique perspective Kae brings to her family's past, and with it, to Canadian history in part arises out of the cultural training she has received as a daughter of a family invested as deeply as the Wong family is in maintaining lines of descent. Kae transforms the Wong family's patriarchal, conservative concern

with lineage into something completely different.¹⁹ She takes the supposedly feminine, busybody attention to the private and personal lives of others characteristic of the spinster detective and applies it to her investigation of past wrongs of historical, national injustices. The result is a mode of investigation—of reading, let’s say—that is genealogical. This mode of reading history is not historical per se; it is, as Foucault shows, more limited than its historical cousin, and this seeming limitation is what in fact provides genealogy its unique scope:

genealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 76)

¹⁹ It is important to note that even the traditional family tree that prefaces *Disappearing Moon Café*, with its straight lines of descent and appearance of transparent legibility, proves incomplete and opaque. This is not simply because it omits the story behind the family tree that Kae’s narrative provides in full, but also because it marks what Neta Gordon describes as an “act of authorial interpretation” (173). Significantly, the family tree “accurately” records the biological relationships between various family members. It makes legible, then, the otherwise concealed incest and miscegenation in the Wong family history. From this perspective, the family tree offers objective, scientific truth in counterpoint to the lies and concealment surrounding biological kinship in the Wong family. However, as Gordon points out, one relationship in the family tree is not recorded faithfully, at least not in the biological sense. Kelora appears on the chart as the direct descendent of “Shi’atko” and Chen Gwok Fai, but a careful reading of the novel’s prologue reveals that the schematic rendering of Kelora’s origins does not hold to the same biological logic coding the rest of the Wong family tree. The Prologue reveals that “Shi’atko” is not a person, but a tribe from the interior of what is now British Columbia. And Kelora is not the biological daughter of Chen Gwok Fai, but of a white man. The family tree thus can only offer what Gordon points out is a “clumsy, premature authority” (173)—an authority which is drawn from the apparent transparency of the genealogical tree, but also from its own history as that which, in recording biological ties, in turn codes binding legal and economic ties in patriarchal societies. This authority is “subsequently called into question” (Gordon 173), not only by counter-narrative offered in the novel’s Prologue, but by Kae’s own unique perspective that she brings to her re-telling of the Wong family history.

The mode of seeing or reading that Kae brings to her investigations is at once restrained in its focus on the minutiae of her family's past, and freeing in its focus on these highly subjective, personal and intimate "restraints." The genealogical investigation Kae takes up is not a simple mapping of family relations, or what Neta Gordon calls "conservative genealogy." "Conservative genealogy," Gordon explains, "is defined by its appeal to stability; many of its other characteristic features, such as its supposed continuity and/or imperviousness to mere worldly influence, derive from the central conservative fiction that the family plot is stable" (166). When Kae declares that she is "so very disappointed" in kinship (25), it is to this conservative definition of kinship and genealogy she is referring.

In *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field*, Naomi and Asako also bring a genealogical perspective to their reading of history—both national and familial. Naomi's genealogical investigation is founded quite literally on the intimate and the domestic—those realms that are often felt "to be without history" (Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 76). Naomi's search into her family's past, and into the history of the internment of Japanese Canadians, takes place entirely within the domestic bounds of her Obasan's home. All of the official and unofficial documents Naomi unearths there are housed in this domestic space, from her Uncle Isamu's government-issued identity card, which is found in the attic (24), to the letters and documents Aunt Emily mails to Naomi, including the letter from Grandma Kato that, at the close of the novel, finally dispels the mystery of the disappearance of Naomi's mother from her life. This literal

domestic research is also literally intimate, for Obasan's house is also deeply connected to her body in the novel. Naomi describes all the minutiae and clutter in the house as "a link" in Obasan's "lifeline" (15). "Every short stub pencil, every cornflake box stuffed with paper bags and old letters," she explains, "rest in the corners like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory" (15-16). The intimate, private realm of the body and the materiality of domestic life are here as one, such that the two cannot be divided, so much so that Naomi remarks, "The house is now her blood and bones" (16). The adult Naomi of the present of the novel is never depicted outside of Obasan's house, except for when she visits the coulee at the opening and close of the novel, and when she first learns of her Uncle's death at her school in Cecil, Alberta. That Kogawa chooses to restrict Naomi's investigation to this deeply intimate, domestic space is telling of the genealogical project Naomi must conduct in order to learn more about how internment affected her family, and just what happened to her mother.

Like Naomi's investigation in *Obasan*, Asako's investigation in *The Electrical Field* is double: she labours to know more about the disappearance of the Yano family and her role in it, but also reflects on her own past, and in particular on the death of her brother, Eiji, during internment. Like Naomi, then, Asako must investigate the deeply personal. She must examine her own memories of her brother's death—of "her hands on Eiji's neck . . . too tight" as they swam, she holding on to her brother "as a drowning person does, drowning another"

(183). Similarly, she must interrogate her own role in the disappearance and murder of the Yano family by Yano:

Did I tell him? Did I know he'd bought a gun from Canadian Tire? Had I seen him take it from his trunk, or put it in? Had I seen him lead Tam and Kimi to his navy Pontiac that afternoon? . . . What had I seen? What did I know? What had I done? (238)

This deeply intimate and profoundly introspective investigation into Asako's own memories, perception, and role in the deaths of those around her is not simply suggestive either of Asako's misplaced guilt surrounding these losses, or of the internalized racism and sense of shame to be "nihonjin" that Yano argues is particular to people of Japanese ancestry who lived through internment (229). While Sakamoto certainly engages with the intersections of shame and guilt with racism and trauma, this intensely intimate investigation is also a genealogy—not of Asako's family, per se, but of racism in Canada.

Vikki Visvis notes that though *The Electrical Field* borrows from the conventions of detective fiction, "the identity of the murderer is never actually in doubt in the novel" (75). Instead, "the mystery, particularly toward the close of the novel, focuses on how and why the murders were committed," and the "question of motivation is never definitively answered" (75). In order to understand why Yano killed his wife and children, and himself, Asako must reconsider the impact of internment on its survivors, including herself. While the professional detective of the text, Detective Rossi, searches for the origins of the crime in the days directly preceding it—in his repeated interviews with Asako, he attempts to ascertain just what Yano knew of his wife's affair and when he

learned of it; he tries to piece together Yano's purchase of a gun in the days before the murders and whom he spoke with last, and so on—Asako's genealogical investigation "opposes itself to the search for origins" (Foucault, Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 77), just as genealogical research into one's biological roots has the potential to result not in a narrowing down of one's origins, but in a proliferation of antecedents, births, and new beginnings. Asako's genealogical investigation into the suicide and murders of Yano and his family turns up multiple lines of relation between the family's tragedy and racism, both in the past and in the present. It also turns up multiple "suspects": Asako suspects herself responsible for sharing with Yano the details of his wife's affair; Sachi claims responsibility for her and Tam's surveillance of secret rendezvous between Tam's mother and her White lover at the very spot where Yano would later commit the murders; and, finally, Asako's reconsideration of her feelings of guilt and shame surrounding her brother's death under unhealthy, unsanitary conditions at an internment camp traces racism's past and ongoing as further "suspects" in the case, which in turn implicates lineages of race and racism in Canada, particularly anti-Asian racism.

The spinster detectives of *Obasan*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Disappearing Moon Café* each prove incredibly productive and *reproductive*, then. Not only do these figures produce a re-telling of Canadian history and their own family pasts, they also conjure a genealogical perspective of history that proliferates meanings, possibilities, and connections where a traditional history or

genealogy would work in the opposite direction. And it seems to me, too, that there is a connection between this fecundity and the reluctance readers recognize in Naomi, Asako, and Kae's approach to history, for if there is a reluctance evidenced in these women, it is a reluctance to reduce history, and their relationship to it, to a perfectly known, and finished, quantity. In all three novels, the intertwining of personal and political narratives is never quite untangled, so that in each, the refusal to resolve into personal narratives of psychological development is at once a refusal to resolve histories of racism into singular narratives of justice, and vice-versa. A *feeling* of resolution is thwarted in these novels, even when the mystery is solved and the criminal "found out." In *Obasan*, Naomi finally learns of what happened to her mother and the full involvement of the state in fueling the White majority's expression of anti-Japanese racism during World War II, but the "solution" of these mysteries is not mirrored by the structure of the text itself. In *The Electrical Field*, Yano is revealed as the murderer, but what series of social, systemic, and personal factors may have laid the groundwork for such violence, and for Asako's own mutilated self-image, remain less clear. And, in *Disappearing Moon Café*, hidden stories of miscegenation and incest are brought to light, but three alternate and textually simultaneous conclusions to these mysteries defy any easy interpretation of who or what might be to blame for Suzie's suicide, Wong Ting An's alcoholism, Morgan's apparent self-destruction, and Kae's deeply ingrained desire to properly perform the roles demanded by normative standards of gender, family, and class.

III. Conclusion: The Desirous Teacher

But I also see the recent emphasis on the hermeneutics of suspicion, like many corrective measures, as a pendulum swing that can lose something important when it abandons the hermeneutics of affirmation.

—Daniel Coleman, *In Bed with the World* (35)

In the introduction to this chapter, I promised a consideration of three figures I believe are key in the analysis of justice, detective fiction, and Asian Canadian literature I have set out here: the spinster detective, the mystified reader, and the desirous literature instructor. Chiu figures the confused reader and the detective figure as one and the same, or, at the very least, she considers the first to be born of the latter. But, as a careful reading of the detective figures of these Asian Canadian texts has shown, these figures bring a unique, genealogical perspective to bear on histories of injustice, a perspective that proliferates origins, causes, and suspects in such a way that also proliferates potential futures. This incredible narrative fecundity not only defies expectations and hopes for closure, it also chafes uneasily against the confines of a genre that recapitulates a biopolitical definition of justice as narrative in and of itself, as the ordering of moments, events, and happenstance into cause and effect, motive and crime, progenitor and inheritor. I don't think I can agree with Chiu, then, that the unresolved narratives of historical injustice rendered in Sakamoto's novel, as well as in Kogawa and Lee's, transform readerly confusion into investigative zeal. But I do understand her desire to idealize reader response to the literature of Asian

Canada in this way; isn't a desire for transformation one that many teachers harbour? However, it was an unease with this desire that has motivated me to write this chapter. Indeed, the research question that has driven this inquiry is: What forms of justice do critical pedagogues and literary scholars hope to reproduce in their classrooms? And, more broadly, why might we consider teaching a reproductive act in the first place, and why have I grown uneasy with this reproductive power?

Asako has proven a compelling model for me in my pursuit of these inquiries, though at first glance she seems an unlikely one. Her flaws, it seems, are many: Sakamoto herself acknowledges that her protagonist may not be a "likeable character"; this because, as Sakamoto explains, "people who go through difficult circumstances are not necessarily likeable" ("Surviving History" 140). Asako's "unlikeability" is largely due to her unreliability: she is an unreliable narrator, and undoubtedly an unreliable detective. As Sachi, Asako's young neighbour says to her, "sometimes you forget" (46). It is this forgetfulness, this unreliability that makes Asako a frustrating protagonist and amateur detective, but also figures in Asako's monstrosity, upon which so many critics, and even Asako herself, remark. Coral Ann Howells sees in Asako an "imag[e] of monstrosity" (125), while Marlene Goldman argues that Asako "turns against" herself and internalizes "the hatred of [her] oppressors" such that she recognizes in herself a "monstrous [creature] responsible for [her] loss and deserving of punishment" ("A Dangerous Circuit" 370). These readings are borne out by the novel itself, as

Asako calls herself “a monster,” saying, “that was what I was, what I’d always been. I could not stop” (239). Asako’s “grotesque” (Visvis 78) body certainly appears monstrous, and Sakamoto clearly links this monstrous physicality to the re-surfacing of repressed racial traumas. As Britzman explains, monstrous figures in literature “set the stage for encountering something terribly real and literally terrible: the inhumanity of the state apparatus, class inequality, racism, and genocide” (*Novel Education* 114). The identification of Asako as monstrous, as a locus of repressed racism, trauma, violence, and guilt, requires that she be the object of her own inquiry. As a result, she is highly reflective—at times painfully so—but also at times willfully blind, even recalcitrant in her investigation of both her neighbours’ disappearance and her own past. Asako must investigate and uncover that which she already knows; she must analyze herself intimately in order to live comfortably—ethically—with the narrative that she makes of the murder of the Yano family. Ultimately, she must lay bare her desire to read the world in a particular way, and to leave parts of that world illegible, mute.

Significantly, Britzman correlates monstrous figures in literature to *teachers* of literature, each of whom, Britzman implies, harbour “a kernel of the monstrous” in their attempt to control and limit “the literary and its excess” (115). It is this will to control that is perhaps most monstrous about Asako. That she attempts to manage what is knowable and unknowable makes her a compelling figure for literary critics to consider in light of their own work and teaching. Asako, the monstrous self-critic, therefore remains for me an important figure in a

consideration of how I might approach the historical fictions of Asian Canadian literature—both in my own scholarship and in the classroom. Her process of reflection is key because it results not in Asako “coming to voice,” or learning to “[w]rite the vision and make it plain” (Kogawa 32), a tenet to which Aunt Emily ascribes in *Obasan*. Instead, much like Naomi does in *Obasan*, Asako learns to recognize the limits of her own discourse and inquiry, and to understand and acknowledge why those limits work for her, in a particular time, and in a particular place. Are instructors as aware of the discursive and disciplinary limits they bring to their pedagogical engagements with literature? Some may be; perhaps many are, but without a sustained practice of scholarly engagement with the pedagogy of Asian Canadian literature, the “so whats”—to borrow a phrase often invoked by instructors helping students construct thesis statements—of engaging Asian Canadian literature in the classroom can become so seemingly self-evident as to be taken for granted.

Britzman’s conceptualization of what might be “monstrous” about teaching does not work to pathologize certain teacherly practices; instead, it defines an approach to teaching literature that sees the literature pedagogue’s role as teacher of unerring hermeneutical suspicion. Early in her teaching career, Britzman developed a curriculum for a course titled “Monsters in Literature,” wherein she hoped literary monsters “would set the stage for encountering something terribly real and literally terrible: the inhumanity of the state apparatus, class inequality, racism and genocide” (114). “This was a very depressing

curriculum,” she admits, but explains that her “rationalization for trading in such affect [was] what [she] thought of as replacing [student] denial of false consciousness with [her] depressing truth” (115). And the result of this collision of teacherly desire and student confusion, or perhaps resistance, is telling.

Britzman writes: “Students were missing, as was the teacher” (114). In a sense, Britzman’s desire to see works of literature as deliverers of justice—of particular truths, of the true, though depressing, reality behind our everyday lives—evacuated the classroom of relationships between people—between students and other students, students and text, and students and teacher—and replaced it with a single narrative. I find this intriguing, for Britzman identifies her error not in bringing politics into the classroom, or in delivering supposedly negative affect to a captive audience, but in reducing literature to disenchantment and removing relationality from the act of reading and learning.

As Britzman points out, literature is excessive, and its very “excess” (115) is what makes it enchanting: it is always saying more than it lets on; it speaks elliptically, slyly; it gestures but refuses to lay bare; it says without quite saying; in short, it is incantatory; it calls the unfamiliar out of the familiar; it invokes meaning seemingly new and not-quite possible. This, I believe, is why scholars and teachers specialize in literary studies: because fiction and literature, through metaphor, plot, and affect, finds a way to say that which is not sayable, to speak of that for which there are no words, to push the limits of discourse. I say this not in defense of literature, or of the Humanities more broadly, from results-

driven university administrations, but in defense of literature *from myself*. I work, in part, in a graduate-student culture that sees literature as critique; a culture where the confession that “I don’t know how to say anything nice about books anymore (even the ones I really like)” (*English Grad Student Shaming* n. page) comes as a surprise to no one studying literature at the graduate level, even if it may cause dismay. David LeiWei Li writes of the limits of such a politics of reading, which positions literature as purveyor of truth and therefore risks limiting that “truth” to the literature:

while I recognize the inevitable political nature of all forms of representation, I do not believe that the symbolic struggle over image and identity in the aesthetic realm can necessarily substitute for the real struggle over social resource and justice. Literary studies is not electoral politics, grassroots organizing, or social movements. It is, rather, the cultural practice of testing boundaries, critiquing existing social arrangements, and imagining more emancipatory relations. As such, literary criticism is indispensable yet limited, a textual exercise of border crossing whose effectiveness outside the classroom and the academy should not be exaggerated. (15-16)

Significantly, Li, like Britzman, emphasizes relationality in his figuration of the classroom as a site for thinking through social justice.

In Chiu’s article, literature is seen as instigator of emancipatory actions, but the action Chiu sees her students embarking on is singular and specific, a road that will somehow bring them to “discover for themselves camp conditions, locations, and effects” (62). For Chiu, then, the line between detective and reader is blurred, a blurring which evidences a desire for the reproduction of a student-reader in search of a stably defined conception of justice. Perhaps this teacherly desire comes out of what Daniel Coleman calls “the pendulum swing” from

depoliticized, evaluative interpretative practices to current literary scholarship which seeks to locate texts in cultural, historical, and social politics, and to consider how a text's "often unspoken assumptions shape us into 'subjects' of our cultural circumstances" (*In Bed with the Word* 34). Building on Ricoeur's work, Coleman advocates "combin[ing] suspicion with a hermeneutics of affirmation" (60) in a relationship to reading that sees interpretation not as criticism, but as discernment. For Coleman, discernment in reading is "the process of liberating or sorting out what has been enclosed, what has been encircled by inheritance or patrimony" (61). Naomi, Asako, and Kae each assume a discerning "posture"²⁰ in their genealogical investigations; they acknowledge and question social processes of reproduction—of racism, sexism, exclusion, and, especially in *The Electrical Field* and *Disappearing Moon Café*, homophobia—while seeking liberation from such patrimony, in part by sifting through the fullness of their particular historical and familial inheritances. They affirm the validity of the counter-narratives they produce, but are reluctant—and productively so—to designate these narratives as authoritative in and of themselves, or as complete. I wonder, then, if we might do well by turning a teacherly desire for a particular type of student-reader inward: might we consider what type of pedagogue, or what type of pedagogy, we wish to bring to our scholarly and teacherly engagements with Asian Canadian literature, and what sort of scholarly inheritances we pass on to students, often in unspoken ways? I suggest that we might productively blur the line between the reluctant

²⁰ This is Coleman's language. See Coleman, *In Bed with the Word*, 42-63.

reading practices of the detective-genealogists of Asian Canadian literature and the pedagogical practices of literature instructors. I have turned to Asako for the particularly productive reflective practices she brings to her investigation, but each of the detective-genealogists of the novels in this chapter proves to be a thought-provoking model for teaching around the intersections of literature, history, and social justice.

Viet Nguyen argues that “it is unclear if there is a consensus regarding . . . what is meant by equality” (7-8); so, too, is it difficult to define what scholars and pedagogues mean by social justice and critical pedagogy. The historical fictions of Asian Canadian literature and their engagement with the detective-fiction genre make difficult any conceptualization of justice as narrative, as the simple embedding of injustice in a narrative of its historical, chronological origins. These novels do a lot towards troubling how narrative encounters with historical injustice might be told, and how their unstable telling might provoke changes in perspective and perhaps even ideology that could prevent their future repetition, or provoke action for change. But these texts are also important because they warn that the making-known of injustice and its roots, its causes, may not be enough. These novelistic engagements with historical injustice and its telling serve, in a way, as warnings to critics who desire that complex, multiply-inflected narratives stand in for subversion, anti-assimilationist politics, and a suspicious critical discourse, a pedagogical stance that seeks to evaluate and read these texts exclusively as invocations and ready enactments of justice. Instead, I

believe that the novels of Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Lee present to us the “(im)possibility” (Chuh 8) of justice. They encourage readers to act on a desire for justice—to re-imagine untold histories and silenced pasts, for example—but to be always reluctant to see that desire coincide with its object.

Chapter 2

The Work of Inheritance: Genealogies of Trauma & Loss in Madeleine

Thien's *Certainty* and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*²¹

Preamble

This chapter is difficult to write. Not shocking news, perhaps; writers struggle to write. But this chapter seems especially difficult. Susannah Radstone offers some insight into why this might be so:

though there is much that remains to be debated concerning every aspect of trauma analysis, the open debate of trauma analysis' grounding theories . . . are hindered by the nature of the materials itself and the context . . . within which it is discussed. Criticism and debate can easily appear callous, or even unethical, in a context where an audience is being asked to bear witness to unspeakable sufferings. (22)

This is a chapter about trauma and witnessing. I've written a number of introductions to this chapter. One introduction seems always to birth another; caveats, theoretical frameworks and disclaimers proliferate in each and I never seem able to arrive at, well, my point. It's not just that my scholarly introductions, and introductions to introductions, "appear callous," it's that they patently are—they are unfeeling, even as they talk about feelings (ie., affect); they are supremely logical, even as they talk about the challenge to one's sense of coherence that witnessing can provoke. Each day, when I sit down at my laptop to

²¹ Portions of this chapter previously appeared in Kabesh, Lisa. "Grieving Time: The Recollection and Reproduction of Loss in Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*." SCL 36.2 (2011): 220-236. Print.

re-read what I had written the day before, yes, I find my writing callous, and dishonest. And so I stop writing; bits of text followed by blank pages abound.

What stops me each time is my resistance to drawing on academic discourse when I feel it so inadequate to the task. Radstone all but laments the stopper trauma theory's deep ethical awareness can place on its further study. She calls for a critical engagement with trauma studies as a field, with its history and its assumptions, but her acknowledgment of the reluctance to question the field's own foundations is passing. Which is too bad, really, because it offers an insight the rest of her distinctly scientifically-distant article does not. Scholars are reluctant to question trauma studies' origins and investments, she tells us, for fear of appearing callous. But what if it is not the critical thrust of such questioning that prevents it? What if it is the nature of the academic discourse such questioning seems to require, that makes people reluctant to speak? Does academic discourse and its associations with objectivity make it an ill-fit even for academics to inquire into the stakes of a field that explores shock, pain, wounding, and rupture? What happens in academic writing when form does not reflect content?

Sharon Rosenberg struggled with this ill fit in her thoughtful work. She writes:

What I am grappling with . . . is the disjuncture I perceive between the experiences I have undergone (and witnessed) in encounters with remnants and representations of trauma and the version of those encounters that are rendered in publicly circulating texts, in which the demands of scholarly distance tend to prevail. (248)

Rosenburg is saying this: encountering trauma, even through texts and traces, or perhaps even through the absence of traces, is shocking. And she is asking this: what happens when writing about trauma, when scholarship on trauma, does not acknowledge this shock? What might happen to scholars working in a field where their own responses to trauma must be made marginal, even pushed right off the page? She asks,

if trauma is a radical disruption to the familiar understanding, and constitutes a (new) ignorance amongst us, then are we not faced with the inexorable question: how is a field to think (about) itself when its condition of possibility, what brings it into existence, is a demand of (a new) ignorance or a loss of what can be counted on as ‘knowledge’? (249)

In other words, what happens to a field when it risks becoming inured to the terrible challenge to knowledge its subject of analysis invokes?²²

The shock of witnessing, and the unmooring of meaning it can provoke in survivors of trauma, is something I wish to hold close in the writing of this chapter. There is a terror in witnessing, and that terror must be respected. And there is loss, too, for after the terror subsides we are bereft, bereft of the means of way-making; witnessing can quite literally leave you lost. Donald Goellnicht has suggested that a witness’s response to “bodily memory, the sensory experiences of suffering” recounted in testimony creates an important node of “empathetic identification with others” that “may be able to take individuals out of their isolated experience” (“Ethnic Literature’s Hot” 216). Becoming inured to the shock of witnessing, or to its affective, physiological pull, is deeply problematic.

²² Thank you to Amber Dean for discussing Rosenberg’s work with me, and for this particular insight into trauma studies.

The marginalizing of the affective and material dimensions of bearing witness—that is, the literal act of pushing one’s affective responses to traumatic testimony to the margins of scholarship—risks rendering the subject of testimony, to borrow from Goellnicht, “an ethnographic object of study,” an analytic move that Goellnicht reminds us occurs “too often [among] readers of ethnic literature” (216).

I am not saying that scholars studying trauma and loss need constantly re-inhabit the paralysis of trauma. I am not suggesting that “we” must always look, always attend to trauma, without shield, protection, or filter. I am not promoting unqualified, thoughtless empathy. But I do want to earmark the experience of trauma, as it were. I want to hold terror, loss, and despair close at hand so that I can respect it, so that I can respect testifiers, witnesses, listeners, and students, who, through the literature we study together, also feel the unsettling pull of the testimonial address.

While working with and through trauma, I want to be able to respect others’, and my own, responses to it. Radstone notes that trauma theory “emphasises intersubjectivity and the role of the listener or witness in the bringing to consciousness of previously unassimilated memory” (13). Trauma theory consistently emphasizes the role relationality bears on meaning-making and on subject formation. Knowledge is fashioned through the inter-relational act of testimony, where a witness testifies to an event, and a listener attends to that testimony. This is key: meaning does not inhere in witnessing, a priori to its

articulation as testimony; instead, meaning is made through the giving of, and listening to, testimony. Testimony is also not collaborative, per se: it does not result in a product created and co-authored by witness and listener somehow made corporate. Roger I. Simon elaborates on the inter-relational but uneven aspect of testimony and remembrance in his discussion of the Hebrew word, *zakhor*, which, “[i]n its most literal sense, . . . is translated into English as both an imperative and an obligation: ‘remember’” (“The Paradoxical Practice” 10). Simon explains that “*zakhor* is composed of the activities of listening and reading (studying), of speaking and writing (teaching), and of repeating one’s lessons, finding new questions to pursue, and *hence not foreclosing one’s relation to others* (keeping/preserving)” (11, my emphasis). Put simply, remembrance and testimony are not stable, fixed texts; remembrance, and thoughtful remembrance, can only be practiced in relationships with others.

Chapter 1 examined the adaptation of detective-fiction tropes by Asian Canadian novelists and so explored the figuration of the protagonists of these novels as detective-genealogists. These genealogist figures were shown to be family genealogists of both their own families and the Canadian nation-state. Their genealogical methodologies proved to be at odds with the detective fiction genre, and, more generally, with a modern concept of justice, and national justice in particular—one that renders narrative and justice commensurate. This chapter turns again to genealogist figures in Asian Canadian literature, but it focuses on genealogists that are figured primarily not as detectives, but as witnesses. In the

two novels this chapter explores, these witnesses are also figured as artists, and so these novels might be considered works of trauma fiction and *Künstlerromanee*, though re-imagined *Künstlerromanee*. What is significant about this confluence of genres and concerns in this literature is the emphasis it places on the practices of remembrance delineated by Simon—on listening, teaching, and questioning, and, most importantly, on the deeply inter-relational nature of each. To put it bluntly, these novels show that testimony and remembrance always require an other. The two novels I discuss in this chapter also pause where Rosenberg does: at the moment of testimony, a moment that literary criticism in trauma studies tends to pass quickly by, perhaps in its haste to answer the ever-present “so what” of academic inquiry and the futures such “so whats” can promise.

In what follows I do not embed my experience of witnessing or studying trauma, as Rosenberg does, in my analysis. For this reason, this chapter is open to the same criticism I directed at Radstone’s article: that the academic analysis conducted within it distances the shock of trauma and perhaps even dangerously normalizes that scholarly distancing.²³ However, this chapter expressly seeks to engage with the experience of bearing witness to a trauma that is not one’s own, as Rosenberg’s article does, but from a different perspective. Whereas Rosenberg engages with the experience of the scholar-as-witness by lingering in a reflection on her own experience, this chapter, as a piece of literary criticism, attempts to engage with, and linger in, the experience of witnessing testimony through the

²³ I am thankful to Daniel Coleman for drawing my attention to this concern.

artist-witnesses of Thien and Ozeki's novels. Lingering in an analysis of these artist-witness figures affords an engagement with how these novels frame the act of witnessing a story that is not one's own, and how, in and by this experience, individuals are implicated differently, not just by virtue of individual personalities, but by virtue of the histories that condition how one arrives, and what one brings in arriving at different testimonies of traumatic histories.²⁴ *Certainty* and *A Tale for the Time Being*, and the artist-protagonists they present to us, loiter in testimony; they loiter in the inter-relational act of giving and receiving testimony's "difficult 'gift,'" as Simon terms it ("Remembering Otherwise" 7). In so doing, these novels explore a radical conception of the present. In this radical present of testimony, a time of learning, and of a resistance to learning, opens up. This chapter explores time, learning, and not-learning in Madeleine Thien's *Certainty* and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*.

I. The Work of Inheritance: Witnessing as Reproductive Labour

Old Jiko says that nowadays we young Japanese people are heiwaboke. I don't know how to translate it, but basically it means that we're spaced out and careless because we don't understand about war. She says we think Japan is a peaceful nation, because we were born after the war ended and peace is all we can remember, and we like it that way, but actually our whole lives are shaped by the war and the past and we should understand that.

—Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (180)

She believes in the present moment, that a decision made now can shift the balance, that every act realigns the past. Imagine it this way, she had told

²⁴ I owe thanks to Nadine Attewell for this wording, and for pushing to me to more clearly articulate throughout this chapter that the command of testimony, to paraphrase Simon ("Remembering Otherwise" 9), is experienced differently by different people, as it is mediated through their own histories, and through their proximity to the trauma recounted in testimony.

Matthew. It is like walking across a vast field as the sun rises, burns, and slowly falls. The shadows around us change depending on which direction we walk, what steps we choose to take.

—Madeleine Thien, *Certainty* (137)

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Jiko urges her great-granddaughter to understand that present-day Japan, as peaceful as it may seem to sixteen-year-old Nao's eyes, is "shaped by" war, suggesting that Nao's present-day peace bears the contours of war and mass violence. Jiko's harsh words—calling Japanese *heiwaboke* or peace-addled²⁵—marks a stern call for remembrance. In *Certainty*, Clara's urging to her future husband, Matthew, to "realign" his present with his past, is also a call for memory. She tells Matthew to leave in search of his past; "Come back," she says, "only if you intend to stay" (137). In *A Tale for the Time Being* and *Certainty*, both women appeal to memory and a particular form of remembrance that seeks to connect violent pasts to relatively tranquil presents. Such admonishments and appeals are not new to trauma literature, but these novels are particularly significant for their exploration of what it is to "remember" a past that is not one's own; both, too, explore what it means to bear witness to another's trauma through strange narrative and temporal structures. These novels do not offer model witnesses to us, per se. Instead, they create diffuse narrative threads that are also at once deeply affiliative. These narratives create presents that do not result from their pasts, but instead are comprised of pasts—the present

²⁵ In a footnote, Ruth (the author or the protagonist—it is not clear) gives the formal definition that Nao cannot provide: "stupefied with peace; lit. 'peace' + 'addled'" (180).

of each text seems a condensation of myriad pasts, a sort of narrative deepening that is something more than the postmodern disruption and deconstruction of linearity. I argue that in *A Tale* and *Certainty*, Ozeki and Thien present their readers a radical vision of temporality: they craft in narrative what I call the “genealogical present.”

Roger I. Simon writes: “While some may naively think that others should put their past differences behind them in the search for a workable peace, others are wise enough to recognize that the task of working for social transformation is not to forget the past, but to remember it otherwise” (“Remembering Otherwise” 9). For Simon, in order that remembrance might involve deep, reflexive learning, it must be a “remembering otherwise.” Remembering otherwise is a form of remembrance based in practices not sanctioned by official histories and other pedagogies of state and nation; it is a critical remembrance that acknowledges ties between past and an ever-changing present. Remembering otherwise is a practice that seeks to acknowledge that past violence (physical, psychical, political, discursive, and symbolic) is antecedent to—indeed, cedes—the present, and that these pasts, even if unacknowledged, have the terrible power to foreclose futures.

Simon’s work on remembrance resonates not just with Jiko’s words, quoted above, but with the broader approach that I recognize at work in Thien and Ozeki’s novelistic engagement with histories of violence and their remembrance. Simon’s attention to the complex lineages between past structures of violence and the foreclosure of potential futures speaks to a genealogical approach to history,

the same approach that I argue structures and enlivens Thien and Ozeki's narratives. This genealogical mode of inquiry and meaning-making is an approach through which, to quote Simon, "it is possible to trace the social grammars that structure confrontations with difference" ("Remembering Otherwise" 9). This method of genealogical tracing is Foucauldian, wherein "to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors . . . that give birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 81). Genealogical practice—proposed by Simon through scholarly inquiry and explored by Thien and Ozeki through narrative—is structurally non-linear and a-singular; but it is so—diffuse and multiple, in its "proper dispersion"—in order that it might attend to the myriad, lateral, and unexpected means by which power reproduces itself, by which structures that distribute sites of inclusion and exclusion, positions of security and vulnerability, and relations of dominance and oppression, are reproduced. In its attention to the dispersed yet affiliative lines of historical descent, remembering otherwise is a fundamentally genealogical project. For this reason, Simon terms it a "work of inheritance" (9). For Simon, remembering otherwise is at once an intentional labour and a "difficult gift" (7), one that testimony attempts to "bestow" on the witness (9). Both novels seek to remember otherwise the pasts of such presents through the genealogical labour of tracing biological and political lines of descent.

A Tale and *Certainty* both engage with the history of the Second World War in the Pacific theatre and with wartime atrocities committed there. Significantly, both novels trace unseen or shrouded histories of systemic violence through the intimate methodologies of the family genealogist, and thereby make plain the imbrication of the public and the private in such histories of trauma and loss. In *Certainty*, however, Thien's engagement with the challenge of witnessing in the *absence* of testimony dramatizes the challenge involved in attempting to witness in the face of suppressive and repressive remembrance practices; *Certainty* also engages with the passing down—the inheritance—of silenced histories of trauma and systemic violence.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" offers insight into the difficult negotiation of family histories in Thien's novel. Hirsch distinguishes memory from postmemory thus: memory belongs to a survivor or direct witness of trauma, while postmemory belongs to the children of survivors who have not directly experienced or witnessed the trauma of their parents. In this way, postmemory is an inheritance of sorts. Unasked for, it is handed down from parent to child. Hirsch's conceptualization of postmemory is robust: "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events" ("Mourning" 22). Note that Hirsch describes postmemory as an *experience* of living, as it were, in the shadow of a traumatic past; it is memory only insofar as parents transmit postmemory "so deeply and so affectively as to

seem to constitute memories in their own right” (“The Generation of Postmemory” 106). Hirsch continues: “Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (107). Because it is not mediated by a direct witnessing of the past, but by its manifestation in an ongoing present, postmemory is an inherently active, creative, and reproductive process of remembrance.

In *Certainty*, two characters must actively engage with the traces of a previous generation’s traumatic experiences: the first is Gail, whose father survived the Japanese occupation of North Borneo during World War II, and witnessed his own father’s murder; and the second is Kathleen, a woman whom Gail interviews about her father’s journal, written during the years he spent in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Hong Kong. Thien places these characters in a unique position: their claim to memory, even in the form of postmemory, is hindered by the fact that they do not have access to the “stories and images” (“The Generation of Postmemory” 106) that Hirsch identifies as so foundational in the transmission of postmemory. Instead, both Kathleen and Gail must negotiate the absence of such stories and images—they must negotiate the marked silence surrounding a difficult past. Neither has access to a narrative articulated in either words or photographs; instead, their fathers hand down a memory of violence to their daughters, a memory that is inarticulate and goes unarticulated, but that shapes their children’s lives nonetheless.

Thien insists on the reality of this inarticulate inheritance through an engagement with Gail and Kathleen's memories of their fathers. Despite her and her father's inability to decipher the code in which he wrote his journal as a Japanese POW, Kathleen retains a strong, embodied memory of the journal, and of her father's response to it. She remembers "the way the diary smelled and the sound it made when [her] father opened it" (Thien 203). She recalls that it "literally creaked" (203) and with minute detail can recollect the day he set to work trying to decode it, how he "became confused" and how, as he wrote out a row of numbers, she had focused on his "scarred hand, a strange hollow in the index finger where he told her a bullet had passed too close" (204). Kathleen is impacted not by how "deeply and affectively"—to recall Hirsch's language—her father relates through stories and images his memories of torture and starvation in Hong Kong, but by how deeply and affectively he is *cut off* from those memories. The silencing of those memories affects Kathleen just as deeply and just as viscerally as their articulation might, and this is key, because regardless of whether or not her father's memories are recounted in narrative form, his dehumanizing, terrifying experiences in a POW camp shape the life he can share with his daughter. Gail, when interviewing Kathleen about the journal, asks, "And if the code is broken. Can you put into words the thing that you hope to find?" (204). Kathleen does not respond to the question directly, at least not at first. She explains: "He drank He drank himself into oblivion. In his worst moments, he couldn't even recognize us. There was so much violence in our lives. In the

end, it was his drinking that drove my brother away, that broke my family apart” (204).

Like Kathleen, Gail also grows up dominated by a narrative of trauma and loss that preceded her birth. Again, she mediates a narrative that is not told, that in this instance is willfully withheld. Matthew, Gail’s father, never reveals the details of his past to his daughter. However, Thien privileges the reader with the testimony that he refuses to share with Gail. An entire chapter is devoted exclusively to Matthew’s past; told in the third-person, the chapter nonetheless offers a deeply intimate view of Matthew’s long encounter with loss and trauma during the Japanese occupation of North Borneo. The chapter begins in medias res, three years into the Japanese occupation of North Borneo (28), with everything that was solid in Matthew’s childhood now insecure and uncertain. The chapter’s very first line pictures Matthew waking in the night; he “slip[s] his foot out from under the sheet and prod[s] the ground with his toes,” but finds nothing there (23). He had lost his shoe the day before, “[h]is most important possession, disappeared” (23). In its very first paragraph, this chapter shows the banal, everyday world of a young boy suddenly shattered; he has lost his footing and the terrain he must walk is uncertain and dark. Only a few pages later, the narrative jumps forward from Matthew’s childhood to his own daughter’s infancy. Gail is crying in her crib; her mother is still asleep, and Matthew is uncertain of what to do. He stands at the doorway to her nursery, soothing her from the threshold with a quiet “It’s okay . . . It’s alright,” and only enters the room when

her arms reach toward him (29). He steps through the doorway, lifts Gail from her crib, sits down on the carpet, and begins to rock her in his arms. When he “sees that she is struggling to wake herself . . . he whispers to her to give her something to hold onto, a voice to follow out of her own consciousness” (30). The two scenes are resonant: in one, Matthew is a young boy, lost in the dark; in the next, he is grown and is a father, yet he still feels lost; he stands in the darkness of the threshold to his daughter’s room, “unsure what to do” (29). But there is a marked difference between these two scenes, too. Whereas in the first scene a young Matthew must step into nothing—into darkness and uncertainty, into the utter evacuation of the everyday and all the reassurance it has to offer—in the second he can choose to draw his daughter out of a nightmare, out of “her own consciousness” (30), and anchor her to the security of her everyday life: to the voice of her father, to the knowledge that “her mother will be here soon, that it is morning now, and this day will progress in its usual way” (30). Later, we will learn that Matthew’s own childhood experiences would seem to make such a belief in the future untenable. Matthew muses, “To what lengths would he go to keep his child safe? How much of himself would he sacrifice?” (55). The answer is clear: Matthew has “closed himself off in order to protect her, to protect them both” (55-56). Matthew chooses to “[keep] his peace” (56) and so save Gail the profoundly disturbing knowledge his childhood, filled with the traumas of war, has taught him. He opts to maintain the delicate security of the everyday available

to Gail in Canada, where, he muses, “the roads are clean and straight, and the landscape, familiar now, steadies him” (47).

However, despite Matthew’s desire to protect his daughter, his carefully suppressed history of trauma and loss is still transmitted, though in a different form, from father to daughter, evidenced by the “list of eccentricities” (206) about him that Gail recalls tallying during her childhood. Gail explains that her father is an insomniac whose insomnia sometimes “slid into depression” (206). The list goes on: “Her father was afraid of the dark. He could not eat certain foods: sweet potato, cassava and tapioca, which he called *ubi kayu* . . . He had a fascination with Japan, a quick temper” (206-207). Like the violence Kathleen sees in her father, Matthew’s eccentricities mark an embodied remembrance of his experiences during and directly after the Japanese occupation of North Borneo. Both Kathleen and Gail carry with them into adulthood, then, a postmemory no less vivid, though undeniably different, than if their fathers had managed to put into words and into narrative their encounters with the violence of war.

Thien’s decision to place at the centre of her novel the inheritance of inarticulate histories of massive, political violence is significant, for in Kathleen and Gail’s encounters with suppressed family memories, a larger, more public process of inheritance is recognizable. This genealogical mode of inquiry and meaning-making with which Gail engages in *Certainty* is an approach through which, to recall Simon’s phrasing, “it is possible to trace the social grammars that structure confrontations with difference” (“Remembering Otherwise” 9). The

witnesses of Thien's novel do not all testify to politically-motivated or structurally-produced trauma: one woman, for example, testifies to the loss of her son, who drowned while swimming. The traumatic history at the core of the novel, however, is that of Gail's father, Matthew, and it is inextricably entangled in the politics of British, and then Japanese, imperialisms. In fact, both Thien and Ozeki frame violent pasts as difficult inheritances for the children of survivors of systemic, mass violence, as well as more broadly for the new generations their novels depict of supposedly post-war, post-trauma, and post-colonial nations. Indeed, in both novels, the genealogical labours of the artist-witnesses at their centres place the qualifier "post" under duress. *Certainty*, for example, is structured around the loss of a partner and daughter; however, this supposedly private death — the death of a cherished family member — intersects with multiple and differing experiences of loss that cross geopolitical boundaries and what otherwise might appear to be discrete subject positions. In fact, much of the loss, trauma, and pain at work in Thien's novel is connected to the post-WW II period of decolonization in Asia and Africa. Gail's father, Matthew, witnesses the execution-style killing of his father by Japanese occupying forces in North Borneo; Kathleen is tied to her father's traumatic experiences in a prisoner-of-war camp in Hong Kong; and Sipke, whom Gail knows as the partner of her father's first love, Ani, struggles with the horrifying scenes he has witnessed as a photojournalist in states experiencing the violent turmoil of independence movements in Indochina, then Algeria, South Africa, and Indonesia (230).

Thien's engagement with the violence of decolonization in her novel thus marks an engagement with the racism of imperialisms—English, French, Dutch, and Japanese—and their fallouts.

Indeed, that Matthew places a certain amount of faith in the “clean and straight” roads of Vancouver and its “familiar” landscape, which “steadies him” (47) while cultivating a “disconcerting knowledge of British Columbian history” (207) suggests that Matthew is aware of the largely silenced history of colonization in both North Borneo and Canada. Significantly, Matthew's knowledge of British Columbian history is not the triumphant narrative of settler-colonialism often recounted in Canadian textbooks, television, and radio, but of history in B.C. as imagined from the perspective of the land's First Nations. In fact, Thien suggests that his knowledge of history represents “disconcerting knowledge” precisely because it is a knowledge suppressed by colonial rule and now Canadian nationalism. He tells Gail that “[t]he First Nations . . . have an archaeological history here that can be traced back ten thousand years,” and, “shaking his head” he “peer[ed] down at Gail as if he could read the span of years in his daughter's face” (207). Perhaps Gail, under such scrutiny from her father, suddenly felt that knowledge disconcerting, too.

This passage gains more significance when we consider the position Matthew's family held in North Borneo before the war. Matthew's father was from China, so that “[w]hen the British surrender began, he . . . had gone methodically through the drawers, discarding . . . evidence of his work for the

British North Borneo Company” (50). The British North Borneo Company negotiated for the purchase of North Borneo from the sultans of Brunei and Sulu in 1877 (Doolittle 31); the company was granted a Royal Charter in 1881 as an “informal, cost-effective way to expand Britain’s control in the region” (33). Britain saw North Borneo primarily as an asset in maintaining trade routes to China. The Company recognized in North Borneo an opportunity to transform the land that Indigenous peoples had cultivated for centuries through the sustainable practice of crop rotation or “shifting cultivation” (59) into “a marketable commodity based on plantation agriculture” (29). The Company profited from the sale of plantation products, including tobacco and rubber, as well as from rents placed on landowners, whom they were able to select through land claim processes. This meant that the Company imposed British property law on the Indigenous peoples of North Borneo, and subsequently stripped Indigenous people of land held under their own inter-community ownership laws. A significant part in this process of appropriation and marginalization was the Company’s plan to “encourag[e] Chinese immigrants and farmers to establish themselves in North Borneo,” as the British believed that “Chinese were far more industrious than the native population” (53). In 1892, the Company promised to give Chinese men five acres of uncleared government land each, rent-free for the first five years (53). While official avenues were supposedly open for Indigenous peoples to make land claims in North Borneo, they were never given financial

incentives, and, as Doolittle shows, “native [land] rights were often settled *after* European planters received their grants and began cultivating the land” (56).

Matthew and his father benefited from this system of colonial rule.

Matthew’s father owned a rubber plantation; he arrived from China a single man and though Thien makes no comment on the process by which he might have gained ownership of the land, we can infer from the history of the British North Borneo Company that he was granted a land claim out of doubly racist and exploitative colonial policies. During the war, Matthew learns that “people are calling [his father] a collaborator A murderer” (49) for his attempts to appease Japanese forces. But he might also be seen as a collaborator with British colonial agents. Matthew’s interest later in his life in the history of Indigenous peoples in B.C. is suggestive that he may be aware of his father’s, and by extension, his own implication in the settlement of North Borneo, let alone of Canada.²⁶ Upon hearing of his father’s reputation as a Japanese collaborator, Matthew recalls that “[b]efore the war, . . . men from the British North Borneo Company had roamed the streets, and the red flag with the Union Jack and the lion had fluttered above the harbour” (49). Here Matthew recalls a time from before the war, a time that is supposedly peaceful and orderly. And yet, as is the case in Vancouver’s straight roads and familiar landscape, there is a history of violence recognizable to those aware of the “disconcerting knowledge” of

²⁶ Scholars of Asian Canadian studies currently exploring the identification of Asians in Canada as settlers include Enakshi Dua, Malissa Phung, and Rita Wong. I return to this discussion in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

European colonial history. Canadians have inherited a history of colonial violence, an inheritance that goes largely unrecognized in technologies of national pedagogy.

In *Certainty*, then, Thien sketches in narrative form the lesson Ozeki verbalizes through Jiko in *A Tale*: that, even if “peace is all we can remember, and we like it that way . . . actually our whole lives are shaped by the war and the past and we should understand that” (180). Ozeki, like Thien, figures suppressed histories as possible inheritances, though, unlike Thien, Ozeki explicitly signals the connection between acts of suppression or repression and the state. Consider, for example, Nao’s family history. Not long into *A Tale*, the reader turns a page of Nao’s diary to discover a family tree sketched out in its traditional, graphically-spare form. The tree is drawn by Nao herself, and she introduces it rather blithely: “Here’s a family tree,” she writes (68). When I first read *A Tale*, the sudden appearance of this family tree, and its relative simplicity, left me puzzled. The tree records in graphic form what Nao has already explained verbally, so that the appearance of it seems redundant. Furthermore, the relationships it maps are not complex; readers are not in need of this visual aid to understand the family history Nao is describing. The line of descent beginning with Nao’s great-grandmother, Jiko, is easy to grasp. Unlike the family tree that prefaces SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*, discussed in Chapter 1, the line of descent Nao’s tree traces is straightforward, and singular.

However, what follows this rather spare representation of Nao's family history is a remarkably different genealogical effort. In the paragraphs subsequent to Nao's sketch, she verbally traces a second, unofficial family tree, one that maps not biological ties, but social and political ones. This second family tree, rendered in narrative form, traces the origins of Jiko's children's names, and thereby ties Nao to entirely different forbearers. First, we learn from Nao's commentary an important detail that the traditional family tree omits: Kenji, Ema's husband, was adopted by Jiko, "to take the place of Haruki," who, Nao explains, "got killed in World War II . . . the family needed a son to keep the Yasutani name going" (68). This detail is significant because it reveals that the family history with which Nao identifies is, in part, matrilineal. From a discussion of the history of the Yasutani name, Nao moves into the history behind the names of her grandmother and great-aunt. "Speaking about names," Nao writes, "my grandmother Ema was named after Emma Goldman, who is one of Jiko's heroes" (69). Nao adds that Emma Goldman was "a famous anarchist lady" and that "she wrote an autobiography called *Living My Life*" (69). Nao also explains that Sugako, Jiko's younger daughter, was named after Kanno Sugako, "another famous anarchist chick and hero of Jiko's"; she "wrote a diary called *Reflections on the Way to the Gallows*" (69). Ozeki here figures Nao as the successor to a feminist lineage of dissent; in so doing, she powerfully re-imagines a feminine mode of inheritance and knowledge transmission. The second, verbal family tree, then, recognizes gender norms and the restrictions they can impose; it also traces non-biological lines of

kinship, from Jiko to other politicized, feminist writers. In the few pages it takes Nao to trace this alternate genealogy, Nao performs what I recognize at work on a larger scale in *A Tale*, and in a less structured fashion, in *Certainty*: a type of bearing witness that is genealogical in nature, not in a traditional, conservative sense, but in the way that such witnessing attends to lines of reproduction and regeneration that are social and political rather than biological.

Ozeki also examines the function of suppressive remembrance practices as pedagogies of the state. Nao's uncle, whom she calls Haruki "#1," wrote a series of "official" letters while training in the Japanese Imperial Army—letters that he expected military authorities to read and censor—and a "secret diary," the subversive content of which he protects by writing it in French (317) and hiding it at the bottom of his lunchbox, wrapped in oilskin and tucked beneath his rice (318). Ozeki first shows readers the "official" letters. Much later in the novel, his secret diary—a true testimony to his time spent readying himself to be a weapon for the Japanese military as a kamikaze pilot—is revealed, and it is shocking, both for Nao and Ozeki's readers, to witness the extent to which state pedagogies alter national inheritances. Before reading Haruki's diary, Nao believes her uncle a "War Hero who loved peace and life" but who was "still willing to fly his plane into a battleship and die to protect his country" (261). Haruki's diary tells a different story: Haruki is a pacifist, and does love life—at one point writing, "I don't want to die, Maman! I don't want to die!" (322)—but he is no "War Hero," at least not in the sense that Nao had understood the term. Haruki does not

sacrifice his life for his country; instead, he chooses to “steer [his] plane away from [his] target” (328) and crashes into the sea.

Jiko’s assertion that “our whole lives are shaped by the war and we should understand that” (180) takes on deeper meaning with the revelation of Haruki’s illicit testimony. Jiko warns that unacknowledged systemic violence has rendered Japan’s population peace-addled, but it is not so much peace that has “addled” the Japanese in Ozeki’s novel, but state pedagogies of remembrance. Furthermore, in Ozeki’s novel, the violence of WWII has not ended, despite the suppression of subversive, critical forms of remembrance in both Japan and the West. Instead, Nao’s father, also named Haruki, becomes suicidal as a result of a decision much like the one made by the Uncle after whom he is named. Nao’s father loses his profitable job in America, and respect in Japan, when he begins to talk about his deep discomfort with his work—he has designed a gaming-style interface for military weapons, an interface that makes killing “so much fun” (387). By connecting Haruki #1’s state-ordered suicide to his nephew’s suicidal depression a generation later, Ozeki makes clear that Nao’s private, family inheritance—“suicide . . . run[s] in the family” (68), she writes—is in fact a public inheritance. Nao and her family are caught up and implicated in an unending wartime economy, one that did not end with the close of WWII and Japan’s disarmament.

Both Thien and Ozeki therefore make abundantly clear that whether rendered articulate through official, state-sanctioned narratives, or elided in and by those very narratives, histories of mass violence are passed down from one

generation to the next; national subjects inherit the silent, unacknowledged impact such pasts have on their present. What is more, both novels posit that there is a danger in forgetting such pasts, in leaving these terrible histories unvoiced, and the danger is this: that in failing to acknowledge the difficult inheritance of political, systemic violence, publics are in fact failing to acknowledge how the very structures and ideologies of dominance and exclusion that produce such violence are themselves passed down from one generation to the next. Thien and Ozeki pose this complex genealogical inquiry as “the work of inheritance” demanded by difficult pasts. In acknowledging violent histories of exclusion, dominance, and genocide as simultaneously intimate and public inheritances issuing from deep and complex lineages, Thien and Ozeki succeed in crafting novels that themselves instantiate what Simon calls the “difficult gift” of testimony. These narratives pose readers as the inheritors of difficult pasts, to be sure, but they also place readers in a genealogical present—a sense of the present as radically connected to both past and future—a time upon which the work of remembering otherwise is contingent.

II. A Portrait of the Artist as Witness

For Gail the devotion lies in more than the words spoken. It is the words spoken at a specific moment in time, in a particular place. A child singing in the background, a pause in the telling, an old woman wetting her lips, smoothing her dress.

—Thien, *Certainty* (195)

I was talking it over with my husband, and he was really the one that came up with the idea— that as a fiction writer you have to

break the fictional container, and you have to put yourself on the line. He suggested that I need to step in and be in the book, and he was right. It would allow me to respond in a more direct way to these very real events. And I said, 'that's great, but you realize that if I'm in the book, you have to be in the book too', and he agreed.

—Ruth Ozeki, “An Interview with Ruth Ozeki” (n. page)

A Tale and *Certainty* place their protagonists, and, by extension, their readers, in the long durée of genealogical time—in subversive genealogies of the modern nation-state, with its origins in colonial exploitation and appropriation, and in reproductive, counter-genealogies of family inheritance. Yet, in counterpoint to this always travelling, always dispersed, always crabwalking historical perspective, is an insistence on the present in these two novels. In *Certainty*, this seemingly paradoxical insistence on the present of bearing witness to past violence inheres largely in Gail’s unique perspective as an artist whose “devotion lies in . . . the words spoken at a specific moment in time, in a particular place” (195), and in *A Tale*, in Ozeki’s choice to insert herself into the present of her own fiction, and her protagonist-artist, Ruth, in the present of the testimony authored by a now-grown teen-aged girl. This is the “loitering” in the present to which I referred at the outset of this chapter; this is the present of witnessing, of encountering another’s testimony.²⁷ I suggest that Ozeki and Thien labour to apprehend the present of witnessing through the figure of the artist.

²⁷ While my discussion of “loitering in the present” might invoke theories of melancholia, I have moved in a different direction in this project. The theorization of mourning and melancholia has been extensively examined in relation to Asian American and Asian Canadian literature and culture, particularly as melancholia relates to racial trauma. See Anne Anlin Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief* (2001); David Eng’s *Racial*

A Tale for the Time Being and *Certainty* are, in many ways, novels about artists: Ruth, the protagonist of *A Tale*, is a novelist, and Gail, the protagonist of *Certainty*, is a radio documentarian, and Gail and Ruth are not the only artist figures in these two novels. In *A Tale*, Nao writes a diary, and Nao's great-grandmother, Jiko, authored an I-novel in her youth. Moreover, Ruth's husband, Oliver, is also an artist.²⁸ In *Certainty*, Sipke Vermuellen, the Dutchman who married Ani, Matthew's childhood love, and whom Gail meets towards the close of the novel, is a war photographer. Just as Thien takes pains to invite readers into the thinking and methodology behind Gail's work, she carefully scrutinizes Sipke's methods and his approach to photography. So *A Tale for the Time Being* and *Certainty* are artist novels, but they are strange ones; they are certainly not the traditional *Künstlerroman* of the European tradition, which recount the development of a young, privileged man into an artist alienated from society by

Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America (2001); Eng's articles with Shinee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003) and "The Project of Kinship" in *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (2010); and Eng and David Kazanjian's edited collected *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003). In a previous publication that focuses exclusively on *Certainty* (see Kabesh, "Grieving Time"), I draw on this body of literature to frame Thien's engagement with trauma as one that links an attachment to past loss as fecund in its socially and culturally reproductive possibilities. I have refrained from framing this project within theories of melancholia, however, in an attempt to move away from a discourse historically rooted in the pathologization of individual subjects, and toward a view of the present as historically full—a historical fullness that cannot be limited to racialized, queer, gendered, or other marginalized subjects.

²⁸ In *A Tale*, Oliver describes his current art project as a "botanical intervention . . . called the Neo-Eocene" (61). Also described as "a collaboration with time and place" (61), this project involves Oliver anticipating the effects of global warming on the forests of Cortes Island by planting ancient tree species "that had been indigenous to the area during the Eocene Thermal Maximum, some 55 million years ago" (60). A discussion of the relationship between Oliver's approach to art and time in his art and Ruth's approach in hers would be fruitful, but extends beyond the time and space constraints of this project.

his aesthetic sensibilities.²⁹ Yet neither are these two novels easily compared to more recent appropriations of the genre. Susan Gubar and Irma Maini show that for later writers who write from the margins of national and artistic communities, the artist novel engages with art as “[m]ore than just an exercise in aesthetic experimentation”; instead, art “becomes a site of resistance and rebellion in the hands of such an artist” (Maini 260).³⁰ While drawing from both the European tradition with which Beebe engages, and from the more recent, revisionist appropriations of that tradition described by scholars like Gubar and Maini, the novels of Ozeki and Thien draw on the artist novel tradition for different reasons: not to reflect on the artist, per se, but on *the witness*. *Certainty* and *A Tale* are novels that refuse a figuration of the artist as caught up in a sequence of linear development typical of the *Künstlerroman*; this, I contend, is because their artistic non-progress is also the non-progressive, non-predictable time of witnessing.

In *Certainty*, the novel’s central artist-figure, Gail, engages in a genealogical approach to witnessing through her work as a radio documentarian. Gail conducts interviews, researches and records personal histories, edits her recordings, and ultimately is responsible as producer of a product: radio shows that air on the CBC. Witnessing in Thien’s novel, as in Ozeki’s, is therefore a deeply re-creative act. And, in both novels, witnessing also requires a sustained

²⁹ See Maurice Beebe’s figuration of “the artist-as-exile” (6) and Carl D. Malmgren’s discussion of the artist as “a *marked* man” (6) whose “markedness” is “less a cause of difference than a sign . . . of a distinctive sensibility” (7).

³⁰ Gubar’s feminist reading of *Künstlerromanee* authored by women argues that women authors of the modernist period intervened in the genre to write out of and against the marginalization and appropriation of female reproductive labour, both biological and artistic.

connection to others. Returning to Simon's description of *zakhor* is helpful here. Simon asserts that *zakhor*, or remembrance, must be understood "as a relationship" (11); as such, it is active—"something one must do"—rather than a "passive undergoing of recollection or remembrance" (11). The active practices that Simon asserts are essential for maintaining remembrance of the past in relationship to others in the present are the same practices that comprise Gail's work as a radio documentarian. Gail's work involves studying, or listening; speaking, or editing and re-producing testimony; and, finally, "repeating one's lessons, finding new questions to pursue, and hence not foreclosing one's relationship to others" (Simon 11), and to the histories with which they arrive to those relationships. The work that Gail does as a radio producer in *Certainty* adds to Simon's formulation of remembrance, then, by recognizing and acknowledging that encounters between witnesses and testimonies are mediated by histories that place people and pasts in uneven positions of relation.

Gail's refusal to foreclose her relationship to the testimonies she has witnessed is represented in the "reverence" (195) she feels toward her collection of tape. She keeps "reels and reels"—"outtakes"—that she "can't throw . . . away" (Thien 55). In fact, Gail keeps all of the audio recordings of her interviews. Her explanation for her inability to discard them is telling. She says of her interviewees:

You know that feeling when you're moving house, going through boxes, and you find something unexpected? That's what I feel is happening to them. Inside their minds, they open a box, and there it is right in front of them, almost as if they're seeing it for the first time. (84-85)

That Gail draws an analogy between witnessing and the rediscovery or perhaps inventory of one's possessions, stored in a box, as an explanation for why she cannot let go of the "reels and reels" of testimony, demonstrates her open and ongoing relationship to that testimony. Gail's analogy suggests that those "reels and reels" might be rediscovered in some future present, and understood—again, again—as time unfolds.

In this scene we see in brief the celebration of the reproductive work involved in bearing witness that Gail, as artist, takes up, but in *Certainty* not all forms of recollection and reproduction are presented as commensurate. Pilar Cuder-Domínguez suggests that in *Certainty* Thien privileges Gail's artistic production as a radio producer over Sipke's work as a war photographer. Cuder-Domínguez asserts that this privileging is a question of the ethics of the representation of trauma, pointing to the photograph as a mode of representation that is decontextualized and thus open to dangerous (mis)interpretations. According to Cuder-Domínguez, *Certainty* becomes a "critique of the visible" (12). Sipke, is a war photographer, and Thien arguably devotes as much text to an engagement with his art as she does to Gail's. However, Gail's work receives laudatory, even reverential treatment, while Sipke's is the subject of a great deal of anxiety. I agree with Cuder-Domínguez's assessment, then, of the privileging of Gail's work as a radio documentarian, but I am less confident in her assertion that the novel marks a blanket "critique of the visible." Instead, I suggest that the

privileging of the aural over the visual in Thien's novel is not only a matter of the ethics of art, but also a question of how trauma is located in time.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth turns to the Greek etymology of the word to define trauma as a wound, but she is careful to note that a traumatic event does not simply constitute a wounding; instead, she emphasizes that trauma “is not just any event but, significantly, the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident” (6). Caruth's work addresses traumatic events that are catastrophic or singular, or what Maria Root has called “direct trauma”: “*Direct traumas* generally include certain forms of maliciously perpetrated violence, war experiences, industrial accidents, and natural disasters. Direct trauma includes being the target of the trauma as well as being forced to commit atrocities that one otherwise would not” (Root 239). Furthermore, direct trauma includes trauma experienced by individuals as well as by communities, in the form of genocide, forced dislocation, and destruction of community (239). It is this direct, catastrophic form of trauma that *Certainty* takes up in its engagement with visual representations of trauma. Caruth's definition of direct or catastrophic trauma as a form of accident is significant in that the subject of trauma experiences an element of fright, or “the lack of preparedness to take in stimulus that comes too quickly” (62). It is this “lack of preparedness” that leads to an inevitable return of trauma, as the traumatic event “is not fully perceived as it occurs” (18). Trauma thus becomes “latent” (17) or “belated” (7), as the subject of trauma must revisit that which was not seen, what one was not prepared to see. As

Caruth explains, “What returns to haunt the victim . . . is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that violence has not yet been fully known” (6). The subject of trauma will not experience trauma as a known memory of a past event, but will instead experience trauma as a latent event, repeating in time.

Visual representations of trauma in *Certainty*, consequently, become problematic not simply in their lack of context, as Cuder-Domínguez suggests, but also in their tendency to fix trauma in the past, thereby precluding a witness’s ability to encounter another’s trauma with an awareness of how her own history and subject position mediates that encounter. As a war photographer, Sipke is praised for his ability to “catch and distinguish the defining moment” in his photos (229). When he describes the last photo he took as a war photographer, a photo of a traumatic event that forced him to abandon his work, he explains,

It’s the last good photograph I have taken, but I can’t bear to look at it. I keep asking myself, what happens when the context is lost and only the image remains? People look at that picture now, in magazines and books, and they speculate about it. They don’t know what happened before or after. All they see is this one moment, disconnected from the past or the future. (245-46)

Sipke is clearly anxious about the isolation of the traumatic event from its context, an isolation that “feeds [the viewer’s] imagination” and leads to “speculation” (246). The photograph becomes the object of voyeuristic consumption and is further open to misinterpretation and manipulation. While Cuder-Domínguez focuses on the danger of speculation that Sipke’s photograph feeds, I wish to draw attention to Thien’s identification of the photograph as “one moment,

disconnected from the past or the future” (246). Sipke’s photograph removes the traumatic event not only from its political and human contexts, but also from its continued presence in time.

The decontextualization of trauma that Sipke’s work performs becomes an essentially violent act in *Certainty*. We learn that Sipke, as a war photographer, “tried to follow Robert Capa’s famous dictum: ‘If your pictures aren’t good enough, you aren’t close enough’” (229). The imperative to get as close as possible to the subject of the photograph, to the point where the photographer becomes a part of the scene, where “his body dissolv[es] into the scene around him” (Thien 229), bespeaks the realist assumption that lies behind Sipke’s photojournalism. This assumption of realism is best delineated by Roland Barthes, who argues that a “specific photograph . . . is never distinguished from its referent” (5). According to Barthes, “The Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of ‘Look,’ ‘See,’ ‘Here it is’ . . . and cannot escape this pure deictic language” (5). Yet the realist notion that photography is an essentially deictic or referential mode of representation overlooks the codes that inform the processes of selection and production involved in photography. Allan Sekula points to the fallacy of the conception of the photograph as referential or evidential, suggesting that “within the dominant culture of photography, we find a chain of dodges and denials: at any stage of photographic production, the apparatus of selection and interpretation is liable to render itself invisible (or conversely to celebrate its own workings as a kind of moral crusade or creative magic)” (446). Sipke’s work as a

war photographer is problematic precisely because it performs such “dodges and denials.” Sipke sees himself both as invisible, with “his body dissolving” into the scenes that he photographs, and as a deliverer of a truth. To Sipke, “[t]he photograph is revealing, it triggers something that you know, a truth that you haven’t yet found a way to express” (Thien 238). This view of the photographer as a passive medium of reality functions to deny the codes that inform the photographer’s gaze and the contexts that place the photographer at a scene; in other words, the codes, contexts, and histories that inform and construct such “truths.”

The referential mask of photography allows for the possibility of the performance of a different type of violence in *Certainty*. In a realist construction of photography, the photographer does not merely pose as an objective lens that elides a project to hunt and consume the photographic object; rather, the realist presumption of referentiality further functions to seize the photographic object as an object of an eternal, immutable past. Barthes points to this violent seizure in his recognition of the “immobilization” (91) of time in photography. According to Barthes, “when we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anaesthetized and fastened down” (57). Put differently, photographic subjects are frozen in an eternal past, unable physically to move forward in time. Since the subjects of Sipke’s photographs are traumatic events, his photography runs the risk of rendering trauma eternal, and thus of

representing the shock and horror of trauma without mediation, and without an understanding of the historical and political contexts in which it is embedded, as well as—and this is key—how a viewer’s own history and positioning inflects its viewing. As a result, the seizure of traumatic moments in Sipke’s work potentially renders viewers of his photographs victims of a visual violence; alternatively, it risks positioning viewers as a-historical subjects capable of viewing the photograph, and the historical, political acts of violence it depicts, passively. To return to Caruth’s definition of trauma as an accident for which the subject is unprepared: Sipke’s war photography carries the potential not simply to represent trauma but also to re-inflict it on unprepared viewers. At the same time, it leaves viewers unprepared to engage with the photograph in relation to their own position as viewers and witnesses who are differently implicated in and by the act of looking. The referential images of trauma that Sipke produces, then, become potential sites of a re-wounding, thereby repeating trauma without establishing a connection between the past the photograph represents and the present.

In contrast, Gail’s work as a radio documentarian insistently locates trauma and loss in the passing of time. I opened this section with an excerpt describing Gail’s devotion to her archive of tape and testimony: “She collects tape the way others collect rare books, safeguarding them with a feeling of reverence” (195). What is significant to note is that Gail’s “devotion” lies not in the collection itself, or in the archival record it provides, or in any sense of historical accuracy to which it might be presumed to speak. Instead, we learn that

for Gail, the devotion lies in more than the words spoken. It is in the words spoken at a specific moment in time, in a particular place. A child singing in the background, a pause in the telling, an old woman wetting her lips, smoothing her dress. A man who forgets the presence of the microphone, who begins a conversation with himself. (195)

What remains important, then, in Gail's work—as well as in the work of witnessing the novel itself performs, in its depiction and construction of multiple forms of loss and testimony—is the refusal to relegate loss and what Anne Cheng identifies as its “grievances”³¹ to the past.

For Gail, then, it is imperative to recognize the place of past lost in the present, to recognize the moment of its telling in time, even as that telling gestures to a time now past. The novel is structured in such a way as to perform this timely mediation of loss, especially the “loss” of Gail. I bracket loss in quotation marks here because, while at the outset of the novel, Ansel, Clara, and Matthew have already lost Gail, her death is also a loss that unfolds, that is always on the horizon of the narrative. Indeed, the novel opens with an invocation of Gail's presence, and in so doing, ushers in an uncertain time signature to the novel:

In what was to have been the future, Ansel rolled towards her, half awake, half forgetful. He curved his body around hers and Gail's warmth drew him back into sleep. Morning passed into afternoon, the rest of the world waited outside, but he and Gail were just rising from bed, they were fumbling into their clothes, they knew that the day was long. (3)

³¹ In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng deploys the term “grievance” in her discussion of the losses of racialization specifically for its association with an “implied logic of comparability and compensation” (6). In so doing, she draws on the term's legal connotations in order to focus attention on what she recognizes as oft-overlooked sources of legal and political grievance. Her use of the term, then, articulates the transition of racial grief or injury to viable social claims (3). I draw on Cheng's language here to invoke this definition of grievance: as the process by which social injury—especially racial injury—can be mobilized to obtain political goals, to incite change, or to demand restitution.

With this introduction to her novel, Thien locates the narrative in an uncertain temporality; the very first line paradoxically situates the future perfect—“to have been”—in the past—“what was.” Throughout her novel, Thien troubles a progressive concept of temporality, a troubling that is mediated not simply through standard narrative devices like flashbacks, but through a continuous repetition and revisiting of events and images. The past is not simply represented as anterior, then, as a time or event to which the narrative may shift *back*; rather, the past repeats in the present, and, as such, is also constantly *immanent*, about to arrive.

While *Certainty* opens six months after Gail’s death, the structure of the text configures her loss as either present, as in the above example, or about to arrive. Ansel’s memories of her death and the conditions surrounding it unfold as the narrative develops, and as a result, the reader is placed in a position of constant anticipation. In the first chapter, enigmatic intimations of her death appear in the mention of Ansel and Gail’s last conversation, “a telephone call, long distance” (7), and in Clara’s memories of her daughter intersecting with a fragmentary reference to “Prince George, the hotel room, the suitcases of clothes all disintegrating” (17). By the third chapter, Gail’s loss remains on the horizon, although it appears a little more clearly, as Ansel recalls the onset of Gail’s illness while working in Prince George (86-87). The loss of Gail becomes both “a loss that is spread out over time, bits and pieces that break down and gradually

disintegrate” (87) and a loss that is arriving, that is undergoing a process of reconstruction or reproduction.

The same can be said for the other losses recounted in the text: the death of Matthew’s father and the trauma surrounding the Japanese occupation of North Borneo occur in the past, haunt the present, and loom on the horizon of the novel’s future; the loss of Sipke’s wife, Ani, to cancer, likewise shares this uncertain temporality; and, finally, one loss resides only in its imminence—the death of Al, suffering from HIV-AIDS, is expected with the close of the novel, his loss already felt by his sister. Indeed, in the midst of the scene detailing the discussion of his prognosis between Al, Al’s doctor, and his sister, the text interrupts itself: interjected between exchanges in their conversation, we learn that “outside, in the hallway, time continues. They can hear the voices of nurses, of visitors in a nearby room” (299). Throughout the novel, aural and visual cues remind the reader that the losses represented in the text are situated in a present that is passing, and a future that is arriving. Again and again, the narrative interrupts itself with seemingly insignificant asides, with “a group of school children . . . laughing down the sidewalk, two by two, holding hands” (202) as Gail sits down to work one day; with “a woman call[ing] out, then a screen door open[ing] and slowly clos[ing], the hinges creaking” (210) as she writes an email; with Clara imagining Matthew “rising from bed, standing at the curtains, gazing out at this starlit night” when, from “across the hall, she can hear the floorboards creaking” (16). Each of these cues, often aural, remind the reader of Gail’s

devotion not to the words of a story, or to their ostensible referentiality, but to their utterance in “a specific moment in time, in a particular place” (195).

Certainty thereby becomes a text whose narrative marks witnessing as a dramatic encounter with the past anchored in a present. The representation and reconstruction of trauma becomes constitutive not only of a past, fixed record, but also of a changing present.

Thien consistently refuses a narrative structure that places the past as antecedent to the present, and instead formulates a genealogical present that is in recurrent, but changing, relation to an immanent past. In *A Tale*, Ozeki similarly introduces to her readers a strange temporal structure that allows Ozeki to access a sense of the present as genealogical. In *A Tale*, moments of witnessing—of testifying, listening, and of remembrance and retelling—are embedded each within another. Writers and witnesses, too, seem each to encase another: Ozeki writes about a novelist named Ruth, who is remarkably like herself; Ruth writes about a teenaged diarist, Nao; and, finally, Nao writes about her great-grandmother, who was also a writer in her youth. This is what Chris Baldick, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, calls “the Chinese box effect” of the literary device *mise en abyme*, which “often suggests an infinite regress, i.e. an endless succession of internal duplications” (n. page). The Chinese box effect, indeed: within Ruth’s narrative, we find Nao’s, and within Nao’s, Jiko’s story can be sighted, though never quite fully grasped. The writers who create each “box” of the novel remind me of nested Russian dolls: Ozeki, the author, is the

outermost figure; through her writing, she births Ruth, who in turn, through her own writing, births Nao, and so on. However, Ozeki's *mise en abyme* offers more than a metaphor for the imaginative work of kin-making, or of a feminist "remembering" of the female body and matrilineal lines of knowledge transmission, as discussed earlier. Instead, I focus here on the temporality the use of *mise en abyme* imparts to *A Tale* to show that, in Ozeki's novel, the act of writing, of bearing witness, effectively turns time inside out. In *A Tale*, Ruth's story in the present bears stories of the past. The past is not antecedent to the present; instead, it comes into being within or perhaps alongside the present. For this reason, I consider the function of *mise en abyme* in literary history, and query Ozeki's particular adaptation of the device.

Mise en abyme is generally understood to be "a term denoting . . . self reflection within the structure of a literary work" (OED n. page), which often leads to a somewhat anachronistic description of the device as postmodern in its self-reflexivity and meta-fictional impetus. *A Tale* is certainly exemplary of *mise en abyme* in this regard: the entire text provokes a metafictional troubling of authorship and narrative. In a 2013 interview, Ozeki explains that when she "first started writing the novel in 2006, [she] was not the reader" ("An Interview with Ruth Ozeki" n. page). In other words, Ruth, the protagonist of the 2013 publication and reader of Nao's diary, did not exist in the novel's 2006 instantiation. The version of the novel that would go to press represents Ozeki's choice, following her husband's suggestion, to "put [her]self on the line" (n. page)

by inserting herself, or a version of herself, into its narrative. Ozeki deliberately chooses to frame her novel as a self-referential *mise en abyme* in order that she might “break the fictional container” (n. page); she thereby calls readers into a troubling awareness of and active reflection on the novel as a novel.

I might add to this analysis of Ozeki’s purpose in deploying a *mise en abyme* in her novel the postmodern desire to challenge modern notions of progress and linearity, and to undo the authority of authorship and the singularity of history. Certainly this is in part what Ozeki achieves in making of her novel an elaborate *mise en abyme*, but I am also struck by the deeply personal nature of the authorial doubling in her novel. The Ruth of the 2013 publication, whom Ozeki describes as “semiautobiographical” (“An Interview with Ruth Ozeki” n. page), shares with her creator many characteristics: like Ozeki, Ruth is an author who is married to an artist named Oliver; like real-life Ruth Ozeki and Oliver Kellhammer, fictional Ruth and Oliver live on Cortes Island off the coast of British Columbia; finally, like Ozeki, the Ruth of the novel has recently lost her mother, who, like Ozeki’s mother, lived with Alzheimer’s.³² Ozeki imports to her novel personal details in excess of what might be required of a metafictional gesture at narrative deconstruction—the shared name and occupation between the

³²In the same interview, Ozeki explains that she “was thinking about writing a memoir and had been playing with this idea over the past decade, but had never quite committed to it” and that her mother is “in all of the characters, in all of the stories [of *A Tale*—not just the story of her Alzheimer’s and her demise” (n. page). Her website, *ozekiland*, offers a short biography, which states that she lives with husband Oliver Kellhammer on Cortes Island in British Columbia, as well as in New York City (www.ruthozeki.com/about/biography). Fictional Oliver’s “Neo-Eocene” project, discussed briefly above, is also one of Oliver Kellhammer’s art projects, described at www.oliverk.org in much the same language as appears in *A Tale*.

author and her protagonist alone succeeds in establishing an uncanny resonance between the two. So why does Ozeki choose to put herself “on the line,” as she phrases it, by inserting so much of herself in her representation of Ruth?

If we read Ozeki’s deeply personal *mise en abyme* as a method of narrative deconstruction, her choice to make her story-within-a-story reflective of herself might seem unnecessary, or even self-indulgent. However, if we read Ozeki’s novel as an engagement with witnessing, the personalized *mise en abyme* that structures the novel suddenly assumes new meaning. Ozeki explains that she was “about to submit” a draft of *A Tale* to her editor in 2011 when “the Japanese earthquake and tsunami hit, and that changed everything” (“An Interview with Ruth Ozeki” n. page). She continues:

When a catastrophe of that magnitude happens it changes everything. I thought about the book some more, and asked the question—how does a fiction writer respond to something that real? And not only real, but something that is occurring as we speak and will continue to unfold—the effects of the tsunami, the meltdown at Fukushima, all of that. They weren’t going away. There was an ongoing tragedy. (n. page)

Ozeki faces the challenge of engaging with a catastrophic event that has and will continue to have tragic consequences on both a local and global scale. The meltdown at the Fukushima plant, and the continued leaking of contaminated water into the ocean at the plant, speaks to an ongoing, largely invisible fallout from the meltdown. The catastrophe of the Japanese earthquake, then, evokes much of the same concerns surrounding state-sanctioned or structurally-embedded “catastrophes” of mass violence. In a way, Ozeki is speaking to a crisis in witnessing—how can she bear witness to a tragedy unfolding elsewhere, in Japan,

and how can she be responsible to those human and non-human forms of life that were, are, and will continue to be impacted by it?

Ozeki responds to her anxieties about witnessing—about bearing witness to “something that real,” as she puts it—by placing herself in the narrative. In doing so, Ozeki answers to what many theorists and critics might call the “command” of testimony: that it can make of us, as Shoshana Felman phrases it, “coerced listeners” (48); that it can make us feel “actively addressed . . . by the intensity and intimacy of the testimonial encounter” (48). Simon explains: “When subject to a testament attempting to bestow such memories, I find myself commanded by the traces of the past to see, hear, and remember in ways that take such testament into account” (“Remembering Otherwise” 9). In other words, witnessing can implicate the witness in a deeply personal way; it can transform witnesses by asking of them, somehow, to bear responsibility to a testament. Ozeki’s insertion of herself into her novel enacts the responsibility often invoked by witnessing. By putting herself “on the line,” Ozeki highlights the way in which bearing witness to a traumatic event can command us to “take the memories of others . . . into our own lives and so live as though the lives of others mattered” (“Remembering Otherwise” 9).

Ozeki-the-author is not the only figure to “break the fictional container” in her novel. Ruth, too, breaks into Nao’s story. Here conditions are reversed, however. Whereas Ozeki inserts herself into a fictional world, Ruth enters into Nao’s real life, into her history, via a dream. She does so after coming to the end

of Nao's diary only to discover blank pages: "She knew the pages had once been filled because on at least two occasions she had checked" (343). In a dream that directly follows this discovery, Ruth finds Haruki in a park on the day he has decided to commit suicide, and she delivers the following message about Nao: "She's planning to kill herself, and you're the only one who can stop her. She needs you" (353). In Ozeki's magical-realist novel, Ruth's dream alters reality. When Ruth checks the diary the next morning, she discovers that Nao had "written a whole new entry" detailing her reconciliation with her father; what is more, each time Ruth returns to the diary "there are more pages . . . the end keeps receding, like an outgoing wave" (376). Ruth's intervention, it appears, has averted both Haruki's and Nao's suicides, and the metaphor of an "outgoing wave" seems almost a reversal of the violent force of the tsunami, as though fictional narrative could reverse or escape trauma.

I have to admit that I am still not sure how to read Ruth's real-time intervention in Nao's past in *A Tale*. Part of my uncertainty comes from my own discomfort with the move. In an analysis of the pedagogical framing of Anne Frank's diary, Deborah Britzman identifies a number of problematic responses to witnessing, responses she deems problematic because they

can foreclose the very process of what it means for contemporary students to attach to the diary: to make from the diary new meanings in their own lives; to become attentive to profound suffering and social injustices in their own time; to begin to understand the structures that sustain aggression and hatred. ("If the Story Cannot End" 29)

The first response that Britzman warns against is idealization, which, according to Britzman, “attempts to restore as unchanged both the lost object and the ego who perceives the other” (34). Idealizing the loss recounted in testimony—reducing complex narratives of war and trauma, for example, to heroic narratives of struggle and sacrifice—can shield the witness from that loss, and from the challenge to his or her sense of self-coherence such loss can provoke. The second response Britzman casts as problematic is one that I see at work in Ruth’s dream. This problematic response Britzman calls identification. She explains that identification with another’s loss or pain can cause a witness “to try to help the other who stumbles” (35), a gesture which Britzman describes as “incomplete” (35) pedagogically because such an heroic impulse can function as a defense to the difficult knowledge testimony seeks to pass on to a witness. In identifying with and attempting to save the other, the witness’s sense of self and epistemological grounding is solidified rather than troubled; in another publication, Britzman warns that identification risks “imped[ing] an understanding of the differences between the learner’s knowledge and the knowledge of the other” (*Lost Subjects* 118).

The urge to step in and save testifiers and those they have lost is an undoubtedly common affective response to testimony. Ruth struggles with this urge throughout the novel, so much so, in fact, that she comes to forget that Nao’s diary recounts events that happened years before. When Ruth begins reading the diary, she is struck by the “lingering sense of urgency” she feels, and wonders at

her own “[r]idiculous” response: “an urgency... to what? To help the girl? To save her?” (29). While she quickly shrugs off these initial concerns early in the novel, her sense of urgency only grows as she continues reading the diary, until much later in the novel, when Oliver questions her adamant defense of what she describes as the urgent need to track down Nao and her father. “You told him it was a matter of some urgency?”, he asks her, and she responds: “Of course. The girl is suicidal. So is her father” (313). Ruth here slips into the present tense to describe the psychological states of people in a particular point in the past. Oliver is surprised: “Do the math,” he tells Ruth. “The dot-com bubble burst back in March of 2000. Her dad got fired, they moved back to Japan, a couple of years passed. Nao was sixteen when she started writing the diary. But that was more than a decade ago So I just wonder if *urgency* is really the right word” (313). Ruth, her “cheeks burning,” explains: “I just... forgot” (313).

In a way, it is troubling that Ozeki chooses to give Ruth the power to act on both her identification with Nao’s suffering, and her idealization of Nao—she later explains to Oliver: “In my mind, she’s still sixteen. She’ll always be sixteen” (314). Both emotional responses risk translating the testimony of an other into the discourse and values of the witness. And yet Ozeki’s choice to so empower the witness in her novel also marks a compelling, honest engagement with the challenge of bearing witness, or with the challenge of responding to the command of testimony *ethically*. In fact, Ozeki’s *mise en abyme* functions as a means to stage the act of witnessing; it functions to render in narrative the contingency of

testimony on its articulation in the present, and on the witness's own present desires. In their introduction to *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*, Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert note that "tellings of traumatic histories that encompass not only a repetition (a retelling) of the story of another but also the *story of the telling of the story*" (7) are unique for the "staging" (8) of the dynamic of witnessing they perform. If, as Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert argue, "[r]emembrance is . . . a means for an ethical learning that impels us into a confrontation . . . not only with stories of the past but also with 'ourselves' as we 'are'" (8), then forms of remembrance that not only engage with another's story, but also engage with the experience of encountering that story in the present, as we "are," offer a unique perspective on the learning, and the resistance to learning, witnessing can provoke. The staging of witnessing that stories of the telling of a story perform therefore introduces a pedagogical dimension to the work of witnessing.

I suggest that *A Tale* is a uniquely pedagogical text for this reason, unique even among Ozeki's novels, which are often associated with didacticism. In a review of Ozeki's first novel, *My Year of Meats*, in *Salon*, Nina Mehta called the novel "[r]obust, funny and insistently educational in tone" (n. page). Scholarly reviews of *My Year of Meats* echo Mehta's. Shameem Black describes the text as "a popular novel with a strong didactic impulse," typical of what Black calls "entertainment-education fiction" (14), which she defines as "a form of storytelling explicitly designed to educate its audience about political or cultural

issues through melodramatic narratives” (68).³³ Marilyn Iwama, in her review of the novel for *Canadian Literature*, is much more disparaging: she dryly remarks that *My Year of Meats* “may have been a book that captivates as much as it educates” (n. page). Ozeki’s second novel, *All Over Creation*, received similar critical attention. Even Molly Wallace’s balanced reading of the novel’s treatment of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) inevitably raises the spectre of moralizing didacticism. Wallace suggests that the novel at times resembles what ecocritic Lawrence Buell calls “moral melodrama” (Buell 659) in its attempts to “counter prevailing ‘expert’ knowledge by asserting the dangers . . . or risks” involved in genetically modifying foodstuffs (Wallace 158).

Since the publication of *A Tale*, Ozeki has made a deliberate effort to distance her work from its didactic reputation. In an interview with Eleanor Ty, Ozeki acknowledges that her first two novels were “very issue-driven,” though she claims that she “wasn’t writing in order to push an issue” (161).³⁴ Ozeki adds: “It’s not like I have a secret plot to educate people about the evils of genetic modification or anything like that” (161). In another interview, she appears even

³³ Black acknowledges that entertainment-education fiction is “usually associated with television programming in developing countries” (68), but maintains that the sentimentality and melodrama of *My Year of Meats* marks the novel’s affiliation with the genre. In particular, Black argues that “Ozeki’s novel [*My Year of Meats*] turns to the codes of sentimental fiction and feminist politics to encourage her characters and readers to sympathize and act with others across national borders” (14), but also notes that this educative drive “remains squarely within the comforts of liberal humanism” (15). As a result, Black warns that “Ozeki’s vision of engaging significant otherness . . . is not appropriate for situations of grave discrepancies in access to power” (15).

³⁴ Similar language appears in a review of *A Tale for the Time Being* for the *New York Times*, wherein Felicia R. Lee quotes Ozeki: “Readers got distracted by the themes in the first two novels . . . I became seen as a political activist” (n. page).

more defensive when her interviewer describes her previous novels as

“polemical” Ozeki responds:

I don’t think of my novels as didactic or polemical. I certainly don’t write them in order to ‘teach’ or to ‘convert.’ That’s totally not the point. I write in order to initiate an inquiry . . . and if the reader’s spirit of inquiry is sparked by my puzzles and enthusiasms, well, that’s great, but it’s almost a by-product. (“A Conversation with Ruth Ozeki” n. page)

I raise the criticisms of Ozeki’s earlier work, and her defense of that work, not to engage in a debate on whether Ozeki’s writing is educational, didactic, or moralizing. Instead, I raise the debate on the educational dimension of her writing to help clarify what I mean when I say that her latest novel is pedagogical, and, indeed, uniquely so.

A Tale is pedagogical in part for the distinctive signalling it performs of the process of witnessing: in *Ruth*, readers quickly recognize not only a reflection of Ozeki, but also of themselves, for, throughout the novel, Ruth is figured both as a writer and a reader. Readers follow along as Ruth sits down to read, researches what she has read, reads aloud to her husband, discusses what she has read with others, and reflects internally on what and *how* she is reading. Reading is not simply one theme of many in the novel; instead, the very act of reading—and the witnessing it involves—structures the text. I describe *A Tale*, then, as a pedagogical or “teacherly” text because it explicitly engages the reader in a conversation about *how* we read, and how we witness. Yet Ozeki’s novel is *uniquely* pedagogical—something more than, or other than, didactic—in its refusal, or perhaps inability, to mark any of Ruth’s reading practices as a model or

lesson to be followed. Ruth is not an ideal reader or witness. She is forgetful, impatient with others' responses to the diary, especially Oliver's, and finally she is invasive: she seeks to fix a past and write a happier conclusion to Nao's diary.

Rosenberg writes that "all learning at the level of the psyche . . . is structured by a passion for ignorance, an ignorance that is an active (but not conscious) refusal to know and particularly to know one's implication in what is being presented for learning" (252). According to Rosenberg, the ignorance we encounter when witnessing difficult testimonies is not *only* our ignorance of the other, and the other's experiences, but also our ignorance of ourselves, and our own implication in the traumatic event (252). These "two ignorances" Rosenberg names "a constitutive demand" on those bearing witness to a traumatic event (259). What I find so fascinating about Ozeki's staging of the act of witnessing—of the telling of the telling of a story—is that it enacts precisely the troubling, difficult encounter that witnessing is, not in terms of a melodramatic accounting of the emotional and intellectual "costs" of witnessing on the witness, or in terms of a sentimental celebration of the learning or insight that witnessing can provoke. Ozeki stages witnessing neither as a progressive unfolding of meaning, nor as epiphany; instead, she stages witnessing as a radically stalled or stalling process, wherein engaging with testimony inevitably, constitutively, involves a resistance to learning.

I am not sure that Ruth does witness ethically in *A Tale*—I do not know if I can term her suicide-prevention/intervention ethical. However, I do recognize in

Ozeki and Ruth's interventions in testimonial narratives a radical engagement with testimony in the present, in *their* presents. To recall Simon's, Eppert's and Rosenberg's words, Ozeki stages the act of witnessing as an encounter with testimony as Ruth *is*—as a historically-constructed and historically-specific subject. In fact, her attempts to understand Nao and her story are marked by an attempt to respect the terms on which Nao wrote it: "Nao had written the diary in real time, living her days, moment by moment. Perhaps if Ruth paced herself by slowing down and not reading faster than the girl had written, she could more closely replicate Nao's experience" (38). Significantly, Ruth attempts to close the gap between herself and Nao not through a sympathetic response to the text, but by making herself temporally proximate to Nao: she attempts to inhabit Nao's testimony in the present of its articulation. Or, perhaps, she attempts to bring Nao's present into her own.

I wonder, finally, if we can see Ozeki's nested narratives in *A Tale* as a method of making complicit. In her book, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed writes: "complicity can be a starting point; if we start with complicity, we recognize our 'proximity to the problems we are addressing'" (Ahmed 4-5).³⁵ Ahmed's framing of complicity as "proximity" is derived from the work of Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, whose discussion of the cultural baggage associated with "being complicit" is helpful in understanding how the

³⁵ Here Ahmed is quoting from Fiona Probyn-Rapsey's "Putting Complicity to Work for Accountability: An Australian Case Study," in which she proposes a study of "the complicity of whites and whiteness in the history of the Stolen Generations," which is the history of the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and communities from 1910 to 1970 (154).

avoidance of complicity, even when well-intentioned, can in fact preclude responsibility:

[c]omplicity, when deployed colloquially, does not have positive connotations. In fact, it is used always in a negative sense—it is loaded with the meaning of the *bad act* to which it refers But awareness of complicity can also enhance ideas of responsibility and accountability. Complicity highlights the individual's *proximity* to 'the problem' (such as colonialism), rather than *separation* from it. (161)

Probyn-Rapsey adds, "complicity is an 'always already' condition of our responsibility to others" (162). In *A Tale*, Ozeki writes herself into the text to enact the "always already" complicity she senses with the systemic violence with which she engages. In Ozeki's novel, the ethical work of thinking through one's response to difficult testimony arises out of writing oneself into the present of testimony.

III. Conclusion: Learning and Not-Learning in the Classroom

Thien and Ozeki's novels present subversive, fertile engagements with historical trauma: they emphasize the reproductive, positive labours of the witness while at once acknowledging that such labour is epistemologically fecund precisely for the troubling it achieves of the witness's sense of the passage of time. *Certainty* and *A Tale* introduce to their readers what I have called the "genealogical present." In Heather Love's discussion of Foucault's conceptualization of genealogical historical inquiry, she describes genealogy thus: "Divisive and incendiary, genealogy points out the otherness of the past, and shows us our own image in the present as multiple, subject to an internal alienation" (44). Thien and Ozeki's genealogical narratives prove capable of

turning on its head what Love calls “the seeming inevitability of the present” (44). In *Certainty*, as the reader learns more of Matthew’s past and its precarity, the precarity of his present-day becomes increasingly apparent—Matthew’s present is anything but stable or inevitable. And in *A Tale*, Ruth transforms herself via dream into a *deus-ex-machina* capable of intervening in the past, producing, she theorizes at the end of the novel, an alternate reality in which Nao and her father are safe and well. Both novels also succeed in making affiliative connections between pasts and presents; more accurately, they show their artist-protagonists as they labour to create affective connections to past trauma and the foreclosed futures the losses of such trauma precipitate. These affiliative moves in both novels function to bring past losses into the present. In *Certainty*, Gail attends to the story of the telling of another’s story by marking its articulation in the present: in the ambient noise of its telling, in a soundscape which itself marks multiple, unfolding presents. In *A Tale*, Ruth slows time—slows her own reading—so that she can better approximate—become more proximate to—Nao’s story.

But as I have stated in the preamble to this chapter, I am not only wary of purely critical reading practices, I am also wary of my own disciplinary haste to arrive at these “so whats,” at least in regards to trauma fiction, and especially in regards to these two novels. Both *A Tale* and *Certainty* carefully inhabit the present of witnessing; they both carefully attend to the encounter of witness with testament, an encounter that is shown to be as uneven, uncertain, and radically non-progressive as the genealogies the novels engage. These novels remind

readers that learning from testimony is not inevitable, and that meaning is not born from testimony, a product of corporate will between witness and testifier. Instead, the act of learning and meaning-making is contingent on both testament and witness, is friable and changeable; it is an inheritance that may be recognized, but may also be refused.

Britzman has said that “we are just beginning to consider the psychic difficulty of learning from traumatic experiences of others” (“If the Story Cannot End” 28). In the search for an ethical response to histories of trauma propelled by colonialism, militarism, racism, and nationalism, it is easy to overlook or forget the deep challenge witnessing can bring to bear on a witness’s sense of self and ontological coherence. Britzman reminds us that learning from traumatic histories must attend to this challenge:

If ethicality does not begin with what is successful, ideal, or familiar about our actions and thoughts but rather with what becomes inaugurated when we notice the breakdown of meaning and the illusiveness of signification, then our pedagogical efforts must also begin with a study of the difficulty of making significance from the painful experience of others. (29)

Note that Britzman acknowledges that learning from testimony ethically somehow paradoxically requires a not-knowing: she describes meaning in witnessing not as *elusive*—as difficult to grasp, but certainly there—but as “illusive”—illusionary, unsteady, perhaps not quite there. Similarly, Rosenberg calls ignorance a “constitutive demand” of bearing witness to histories of trauma; she recognizes ignorance in response to testimony as a “refusal” that represents a “shielding of and for the self, for the self’s intactness” and as an “endeavouring (not) to open

ourselves up to the social and psychic wounds of those who have died violently,” which, she argues, “may indeed be necessary to continuing on” (251). By way of conclusion, then, I turn to those moments in Thien and Ozeki’s novels where signification proves *illusive*, where witnesses and survivors fail to move, or to move on, where their narratives loiter in the challenge witnessing can pose to both witness and testifier. By way of conclusion, then, I want to discuss failure in *Certainty* and *A Tale*: the failure to remember, and the failure to listen, or look.

Y-Dang Troeung notes that *Certainty* is a novel “replete with characters who believe that they have failed to save someone in the past” (102), and she compiles a compelling list of instances of what she calls “the failure to save”:

Matthew wishes he could go back in time to prevent the murder of his father (167); Ansel spends night after night studying Gail’s test results, trying to find ‘the detail that might have saved her’ (95); Ani dreams about her mother telling her ‘to stop searching backwards,’ that Ani ‘cannot save’ them because ‘the past is done’ (172); Clara is told by her father ‘that what she believed was false,’ that she could not have saved the boy that she watched fall to his death (123); Sipke is plagued by the memory of failing to stop the mob from setting fire to the family of the war collaborator. (Troeung 102)

Troeung marshals this catalogue of guilt, shame, and melancholic anxiety to counter what she calls the “relentless call to remember” (106) made in the name of a politics of loss. In an analysis of Nam Le’s book of short stories, *The Boat*, Goellnicht adds to Troeung’s critique of the “call to remember” by reminding his readers that “[t]oo often readers of ethnic literature maintain a voyeuristic gaze that assumes the right of the dominant culture, the viewing subject, to know the viewed as an ethnographic object of study” (“Ethnic Literature’s Hot” 216).

Goellnicht argues that Le offers his readers “a pedagogical example of the way a reader should approach and respond to ethnic literature/subjects: with a respect that does not demand knowledge, but rather keeps the reader open to possibilities” (216). Goellnicht adds that, in Le’s work, an “[e]thical response . . . demands empathy and compassion even in the face of lack of comprehension” (216). In Goellnicht’s analysis of *The Boat*, the “failure” to remember in fact marks a refusal to be understood by a western audience, where such understanding is purchased at the cost of the commodification of ethnicity and trauma.

Thien and Ozeki’s novels undoubtedly favour generative memory work, as this chapter has demonstrated. However, both novels are careful to place limits on the call to remember and the demand for knowledge. *Certainty* insists that what a survivor or victim chooses to remember—or not remember—must be respected. Consider, for example, that when Gail receives William Sullivan’s decoded diary, “it is not disappointment she fears, but trespass. To awaken a memory that has no consolation” (216). And, when a woman testifying to the accidental drowning of her teenage son becomes “suddenly angry, asking why she dared to ask these questions, what right she had,” Gail only “open[s] the recorder, remove[s] the cassette tape [and] place[s] it carefully in the older woman’s hand” (210). Silences and gaps in narrative are not condemned in *Certainty*; neither are they always mourned. Instead, they are acknowledged. And, I think, as part of the myriad responses to trauma and loss, they must be acknowledged too as part of the inheritance of postmemory. They too must be acknowledged as part of the work

of inheritance: scholars working in trauma studies must listen to, and must carefully acknowledge and respect, silence.

In *A Tale*, Ozeki relieves the reader—both her reader, and Ruth—of having to live with the memory of the “failure to save.” Ozeki imbues Ruth, after all, with the power to step into the past via narrative to save its actors. But in Ozeki’s novel, failures in witnessing abound. In many ways, *A Tale for the Time Being* is an enactment of the resistance to learning that witnessing invokes. Ruth resists recognizing readily apparent, perfectly obvious knowledge: that Nao, by the time of Ruth reading her diary, must be grown, or dead; that Ruth cannot “save” Nao—the matter is not “urgent,” despite her firm belief and repeated urging that it is. Ruth also resists re-reading the notes she faithfully recorded of “the gradual erosion of her mother’s mind,” and of Ruth’s concurrent “feelings and reactions” (64). She repeatedly fails to finish the memoir that sits at her desk: despite her desire to return to the memoir, of which the story of her mother’s illness and death is part, she cannot. Ruth seems, too, to resist ready knowledge about her mother’s life as she lived with Alzheimer’s, that, for example, her mother had friends, perhaps a strange thought to a daughter whose mother seems no longer her mother, this idea that her not-mother could have friends (who are they friends with, then, if not her mother?), and that they mourn her, this woman, her mother, or maybe not-her-mother. Finally, Ruth resists, too, the knowledge of others’ reactions and responses to Nao’s diary and to the artefacts that arrived with it—she cannot understand others’ interest in Nao’s diary (144-146), the

dump manager's deep grief over Haruki's letters (315-316), or Oliver's different, more hopeful mode of identification and empathic response to Nao's traumatic story (292-296). In Ruth there is undeniably a deep refusal to know.

If *Certainty* raises the question of the place of forgetting “in a politics of loss” (Troeng 91), particularly on the part of survivors and others especially close to trauma, *A Tale* considers the effects on remembrance of a world flooded with information tallying murders, deaths, atrocities, and environmental disasters. When researching the Japanese tsunami in search of clues as to whether Nao and her father survived the catastrophe, Ruth asks: “What is the half-life of information? Does its rate of decay correlate with the medium that conveys it?” (114). Her subsequent question is yet more incisive. She asks: “Does the half-life of information correlate with the decay of our attention?” (114). Ruth explains that

[t]he two weeks following the earthquake, tsunami, and meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear reactors, the global bandwidth was flooded with images and reports from Japan, and for that brief period of time, we were all experts on radiation exposure and microsieverts and plate tectonics and subduction. But then the uprising in Libya and the tornado in Joplin superseded the quake, and the keyword cloud shifted to *revolution* and *drought* and *unstable air masses* as the tide of information from Japan receded. (113)

In *A Tale*, Ozeki undoubtedly frames witnessing as an inheritance, as a “difficult gift” that commands the witness to attend. However, Ozeki also compellingly shows that, in an age of global, mass communications, the difficult gift of witnessing is one that might be easily refused or ignored, or that may be lost in the clamour for the attention span of global witnesses.

Troeung asks, “Is there a space left for forgetting in our endeavours to develop a politics of loss?” (91). I ask, is there a space left for respecting the resistance to learning, and the limited knowledge of the experience of trauma such resistance might engender, in our pedagogical engagements with trauma and witnessing? Can scholars and teachers make space for, can we *acknowledge* the “ego defense mechanisms” (Britzman “If the Story” 29) that we might encounter in our students and in ourselves, in our scholarship on histories of trauma and loss? Indeed, I wonder if respect for both testifier and testament requires a respect for, and a working through, the resistance to learning that scholars might encounter in their research in fields like trauma studies and in their classrooms. For if, as David Leiwei Li has argued, the study of literature cannot be equated with the political activism of grassroots organizations, election campaigns, and social movements, but instead constitutes the important cultural work of “testing boundaries, critiquing social arrangements, and imagining more emancipatory relations” (15-16), then we must better attend to the conditions upon which such testing of boundaries—or, indeed, the shattering of boundaries, as encounters with traumatic testimonies might provoke—can, or cannot, take place.

Chapter 3

Reading Queasy: From Risk to Encounter in Rita Wong's *forage*

In 2013 the professor for whom I was working as a Teaching Assistant asked if I would cover a lecture for him. I said yes, I would be happy to, though in all honesty my willingness to take on the lecture had equally as much to do with helping my TA supervisor as it did with my own desire to spend more time with the poetry of Rita Wong. The texts I was to cover in lecture were two poems from her 2007 collection, *forage*: “nervous organism” and “canola queasy.” I was—and am still—excited about the amazing ways in which Wong manages in *forage* to weave together her own investments in decolonization, anti-racism, celebrations of gender and sexual difference, labour, and environmental justice. These are investments that Wong carries in her own life as an activist as well as a poet; juggling and balancing them is no mean feat in either realm. Wong’s refusal to neatly separate out differentially-related issues of ethics and access to power in her thinking about social justice and activism makes reading *forage* for me part consolation and part inspiration. However, in the process of preparing for my lecture, my excitement faltered. In fact, I felt myself growing distinctly nervous, queasy even. This was not a case of performance anxiety. Instead, I felt queasy about the prospect of teaching these particular poems. I found myself wondering, did I want to teach anxiety?

“nervous organism” and “canola queasy” are both poems that attempt to engage a politicized awareness about Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs).

They also both attempt to do so primarily by leveraging anxiety, even as anxiety is tempered in both poems by a persistent, tongue-in-cheek punning. “nervous organism” purposely elicits fears about the unknown effects of GMOs on human health by calling up gothic figurations of mutations, monsters, science lab experiments, and vampires, and “canola queasy” begins with the ominous image of “vulture capital hover[ing] over dinner tables” (1) and proceeds with language that invokes illness, violence, and exploitation. I felt uneasy about appealing to fear and anxiety to instigate mindfulness in the class about environmental, ecological, and social justice issues.³⁶ I am not convinced that inciting anxiety is at all effective in eliciting mindfulness; I worried at the time that engaging with Wong’s poems largely through the lens of anxiety would obscure the complexity of her poetry and potentially risk reducing her poetic intervention to a question of individual consumption, and, perhaps even more disconcerting, to individual hygiene. I am thinking here of an anecdote recounted in the introduction to Stacey Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures* wherein Alaimo relates Ladelle McWhorter’s epiphany

³⁶ I use these terms interchangeably in this chapter, though not without recognition of their changing historical valences, and how different groups have claimed these monikers as titles for radically different projects, and with deeply different investments. Phaedra C. Pezzullo and Ronald Sandler, for example, note that “[s]ince at least the early 1990s, activists from the environmental justice movement consistently have criticized what they consider the ‘mainstream’ environmental movement’s racism, classism, and limited activist agenda, charges against which environmental organizations have responded in ways ranging from defiance to varying degrees of acceptance” (2). David Schlosberg shows that some scholars and activists make a distinction, too, between environmental justice, or “justice on environmental issues among the human population,” and ecological justice, or “justice between humans and the rest of the natural world” (vii). Rita Wong’s poetry does not fall neatly into any of these three categories: environmentalism, environmental justice, or ecological justice. Furthermore, her investment in social justice, which is not always associated with environmental or ecological concerns, proves difficult to separate from her concerns about ecological sustainability, the distribution of waste and wealth globally, exploitation of racialized labour, and the promotion of indigenous rights and sovereignty.

experienced whilst “[m]unching on a bag of Doritos” (Alaimo 12). “[S]he is about to toss the crumbs in her composting trench but stops,” Alaimo reports, because, as McWhorter explains, ““can’t feed that crap to my dirt”” (qtd. in Alaimo 12). McWhorter concludes: “I haven’t purchased a bag of Doritos since” (qtd. in Alaimo 12). McWhorter’s “epiphanic” (Alaimo 12) experience reveals a changing ideation of her own body and self, as well as its relationship to the soil out of which her food grows. Her decision to forgo Doritos, and, presumably, any other food not worthy of her garden’s soil, can be read as a desire to opt out of an unethical agricultural economy, an action which, if practiced by many, contains the potential to disrupt North America’s problematic reliance on monocultural food production. However, read reductively, McWhorter’s decision to change her eating practices might simply translate into a question of hygiene—of what one will, and will not allow entry into the semi-sacred realm of the body. While *forage* repeatedly points to the power of and need for quotidian interventions in systems of exploitation, it also compels readers to do so out of a consideration of how such small-scale choices impact others near and distant, human, and non-human. Wong’s collection as a whole asks readers to consider who benefits from modern agricultural systems and who systemically suffers from practices like seed patenting and the bringing to market of untested GMOs; it exposes the historic exploitation of racialized labour under colonization and globalization; and it considers the unequal distribution of wealth and waste, both globally and within nation states. *forage* also compellingly explores the complex affective modes of

engagement these social and ecological justice issues require and elicit. Risks to individual bodies and the anxiety such risks might provoke constitute only one mode of engagement out of many in Wong's collection.

In subsequent pages I discuss in greater detail what I felt were the risks of employing a discourse of risk in service of environmental justice in the classroom, as well as how I attempted to ameliorate such risks. However, for the purposes of this introduction, and the staging of the work that I hope this chapter will achieve, it is enough to say that in my desire to avoid replicating anxious modes of address in the classroom, I instead reproduced a perhaps more pernicious mode of address. The mode of address I reproduced operates temporally, and this temporality is tightly tied to privilege. I wanted to show students in that lecture hall that Wong's poems were not only about the health risks GMOs might pose to individuals, but also about how the human body is intertwined with ecosystems and globalized economies in ways they had not previously thought. I positioned students as ignorant of a worldview that did not place the human at its centre, and as resistant to conceiving of themselves otherwise—as, for example, contingent on and enmeshed in the economic, political, and environmental systems in which we are all embedded. In other words, I had assumed that everyone in the room was thoroughly occupied by European, Enlightenment thinking that figures the human as exceptional, and nature as something “out there.” In so doing, my mode of address, to borrow Elizabeth Ellsworth's language, risked “miss[ing] [my] students” (*Teaching Positions* 8). In particular, it risked missing students who are

already well-versed and invested in theories of decolonization. It risked missing Indigenous students who are immersed and active in Indigenous communities that may not elevate the human over the non-human, for as Vanessa Watts writes, “in many Indigenous origin stories the idea that humans were the last species to arrive on earth was central,” which, Watts explains, “also meant that humans arrived in a state of dependence on an already-functioning society with particular values, ethics, etc.” (25). Finally, my mode of address risked missing students who are a part of communities that do not have the privilege of conceiving of the human body as autonomous and hermetic, students who may, by the force of experience, be aware of the ways in which systemic inequalities in access to public institutions of education and healthcare and unequally distributed environmental health hazards make it difficult to conceive of the body—of the bodies of the poor, of people of colour, Indigenous peoples, and of women—as somehow autonomous and safe from both “spectacular” violence and violence that is, to draw on Rob Nixon’s conceptualization of “slow violence,” “neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive” (2). Ulrich Beck writes that “*poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic*” (*Risk Society* 36), and yet we know, of course, this is not entirely true.

I begin with this reflection on teaching Wong’s poetry not to formulate exactly where I went “wrong” in my lecture, or how I might improve it, though I hope that thinking through the issues this reflection raises might push me toward creatively rethinking classroom practices, as well. Instead, opening with a

reflection on my teaching experience affords a scope for a discussion of *forage* wide enough to engage with the many modes of address at work in Wong's poems and furnishes an opportunity to consider how readers and learners meet Wong's multi-modal address in particular. Ellsworth suggests that "the event of address takes place in the space that is social, psychic, or both, between the film's text and the viewer's use of it" (*Teaching Positions* 23). This is because "[a]udiences are not simply 'placed' by a mode of address" (29); instead, audiences—here, readers—meet with and engage modes of address. They speak back to them, resist them; they may work to re-articulate them, or disarticulate them.

This chapter departs from the structure established in the previous two, where theories of pedagogy engaged primarily in the introduction and conclusion worked to frame the literary analysis that comprised their central sections. In contrast to this approach, this chapter begins by focusing intently on a specific pedagogical scene—my experience giving a lecture on "canola queasy" and "nervous organism"—and then moves into a close reading of *forage*. This structure is in large part reflective of my attempt to explore the non-progressive temporality invoked by Wong in her collection in my own writing, which is to say that this chapter departs in format from Chapters 1 and 2 because it marks a self-conscious attempt to consider writing as an exploratory space of pedagogical engagement. The central claim of this chapter is that *forage* presents to readers what I am calling a poetics of encounter, a poetics which I argue is realized in the text in a radically non-sequential mapping of activism that represents a form of

creative genealogy. I suggest that this poetics can usefully inform approaches to teaching and learning, especially to teaching and learning about social justice.

This chapter comprises four sections. In the first, I reflect on the linear, progressive timescale that implicitly informed my lecture on “canola queasy” and “nervous organism,” and consider how this temporality limited the mode of address by which I could engage students in the course. The final three sections of the chapter turn from this reflection to a close reading of *forage* as a whole. These sections also shift in terms of their theoretical framework: while the first section applies a theory of mode of address to the literature classroom, the final sections read Wong’s collection through Sara Ahmed’s figuration of encounter, which is instructive in the way it focuses the chapter’s analysis on *forage*’s non-linear, deeply networked, and ultimately affiliative mapping of resistance, solidarity, and activism. Finally, the chapter concludes by making a case for thinking of teaching as activism.

In Chapter 1, I examined the figure of the detective, who doubles as a genealogist of both the state and her own family, in the historical fictions of Joy Kogawa, SKY Lee, and Kerri Sakamoto. Chapter 2 turns to a similar figure in two novels of Asian Canadian literature set in our contemporary, “post”-colonial moment: the figure of the artist who, as a listener or reader of another’s testimony of mass violence, also becomes a witness capable of performing a reproductive genealogy tracing unexpected ties of intimacy. Both chapters engage with the politics of reading, with what it means to read in search of a narrative of justice, in

the first, and with what it means to learn from and resist the demand of testimony, in the second. In this chapter, I examine the figure of the artist, activist, and pedagogue that I recognize as the speaker in *forage*, which affords a theorization of the teacher as activist. I am particularly interested in the genres or modes of address Wong deploys in her poems, from the gothic to what Lawrence Buell calls “toxic discourse,” and how these modes of address position readers. I argue that *forage* resists positioning its readers as privileged subjects temporally moving from a state of ignorance to a state of anxious awareness, not out of a negative desire to avoid (mis)using anxiety as affective leverage, but out of a positive desire to position the subject as always already in a state of deep inter-relationality, with others human and non-human. In *forage*, this deep inter-relationality produces a sense of time that is non-linear. Cause and effect, desire and change, anger and activism produce and reproduce one another in unexpected temporal relations; time—change—here is as networked and contingent as subjectivity. Finally, I suggest that this non-linear sense of time and subjectivity attempts to sidestep European thinking that sees thought as always predicate to being, and knowing to action.

I. Teaching Anxiety, Teaching Privilege

Remember that we ask hard questions and explore difficult subjects because we have hope and love for humanity, and because we learn from one another in the process of facing those questions together.

—Rita Wong, “Rita Wong Discusses *forage* and Canada Reads Poetry” (n. page)

Ulrich Beck argues that in a risk society, as opposed to a class society, “the *commonality of anxiety* takes the place of the *commonality of need*,” such that “*solidarity from anxiety* arises and becomes a political force” (*Risk Society* 49). In a world where risk and the means by which it is identified and measured seem in endless proliferation, the desire to seek safety from risk can mobilize and consolidate oppositional politics, just as the desire to eliminate or reduce need can motivate political movements in a class society. However, whether or not discourses of risk, fear, and anxiety function as effective tools for inciting people to action who are already “immiserated” (*Risk Society* 51) in a collective, diffuse state of apprehension is an entirely different question. The distinction I am trying to make here is important: organizing an oppositional politics around or articulating it through a thoroughly modern (or postmodern) state of apprehension is, in Beck’s formulation of risk society, inevitable—in many ways, people cannot help but respond to risk society as the assessors of risk it takes them to be. Finding individual motivation for engaging in such a politics, however, may be an entirely different thing. The desire to seek a more equitable distribution of industrial harm, for example, is just as likely to arise out of desire, love, or hope, as it is out of anxiety.

In interviews, Wong has repeatedly emphasized that she recognizes hope, love, and joy as strong components in her commitment to social justice. Speaking with Larissa Lai in 2000, seven years before the publication of *forage*, Wong describes her investment in activism and community as a form of balancing: “Lily

Tomlin says that ‘reality is the leading cause of stress for those who are in touch with it.’ I need to balance what I see of the ugly realities with positive realities too” (6). Eight years later, and one year after the publication of *forage*, Wong explains in an interview with rob mcLennan that both *monkeypuzzle* and *forage* “have anger, protest, and bewilderment in them, but also joy, love, and humour at times” (“12 or 20 Questions” n. page). Similar language appears in her description of *forage* in a 2011 interview as part of the CBC’s Canada Reads Poetry competition for that year, which *forage* won³⁷: “*forage* arises from the process of exploring everyday life and perceiving what’s overlooked within it” (n. page), Wong explains. She continues:

The history of what we use, wear and eat in our daily lives matters—it’s part of us, whether or not we know it, and we, in turn, are embedded in systems shaped by an international economy and a political landscape. As such, the book dwells with the daily range of responses to the complex world in which we live, where anger, protest, anxiety, bewilderment, hope, humour, love, all coexist. (n. page)

In the same interview, when asked if she has any advice for Sonnet L’Abbé, who would be “defending” *forage* in the competition, Wong offers in the imperative mode firm words that might well be read beyond the scope of the question that prompts them: “Remember,” Wong implores, “that we ask hard questions and

³⁷ Canada Reads is an annual CBC program that airs on CBC Radio One. The CBC dubs the annual competition a “battle of the books” (<http://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/about/index.html>), and the format of the show reflects this militaristic metaphor. Five books are nominated by relatively well-known Canadians who must “defend” their chosen book, one of which is eliminated each episode. The 2011 Canada Reads Poetry competition was not produced as a radio show; instead, panelists defended their choices in an online chat, after which the public voted *forage* the winner. Also nominated that year were: Dionne Brand’s *Inventory*, Alden Nowlan’s *Selected Poems*, Erin Mouré’s *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person*, and Anne Carson’s *Nox*. See: <http://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/2011/04/forge-by-rita-wong-is-the-canada-reads-poetry-winner.html>

explore difficult subjects because we have hope and love for humanity, and because we learn from one another in the process of facing those questions together” (n. page).

forage reflects Wong’s belief that hard questions—anxious questions, even—arise out of love and hope, just as much as they might out of anger and fear. In fact, taken as a whole, *forage* does not neatly separate anger from hope, or anxiety from love. Christine Kim writes that in *forage*, “Wong can be understood as revisiting her earlier optimism” (“Resuscitations” 167); that is to say that in *monkeypuzzle*, Kim recognizes an optimism that seems reconsidered, or qualified, in *forage*. According to Kim, “the ways in which the political ground ha[d] shifted in the intervening decade since *monkeypuzzle*’s release” required Wong to reconsider the optimism with which she closed her earlier collection of poems (167). In *forage*, Wong shifts her focus from what Kim calls the “explicit struggles” addressed in *monkeypuzzle*—or from specific, historically-demarcated moments of resistance and oppression—to the “less visible forms of domination” (167) enacted through a global economy invested in maximizing profits through labour exploitation, irresponsible and exploitative resource extraction, attacks on national and community sovereignty, and the patenting of life and monopolization of food production.

However, it is easy to misrecognize Wong’s affectively complex approach to activism and social justice in the two poems I was to lecture on last year: “nervous organism” and “canola queasy.” Not surprisingly, “nervous organism” is

a poem that seems all nerves. Like “canola queasy,” its typographic layout is distinctive: a tight block of poetry is encased in a quotation that runs entirely around its edges. Both poems appear as one paragraph, though “canola queasy” is a prose poem that refuses to demarcate lines or sentences with line breaks, punctuation or capital letters, while the short lines of “nervous organism” are made distinct through the insertion of forward slashes. Punctuation also helps separate one line from the next in “nervous organism,” but here, as in “canola queasy,” Wong’s habit of avoiding capitalization means that to an eye quickly scanning the page, it is difficult to recognize where one sentence ends and another begins. The result in both is that, at first glance, the poems present themselves as tight blocks of text that prove unamenable to ready apprehension. What is more, if one does choose to attend carefully to “nervous organism,” for example, its lack of line breaks, capitalization, and a reliable subject-verb word order results in an incredibly quick read. As Roy Miki writes, “sound precedes sense” in “nervous organism” (*In Flux* 186); syllables sound rapidly in the reader’s mind as the eye rolls across the page, unfettered even by grammatically correct syntax.

In its closing line, “nervous organism” quickly deteriorates from a simple sentence into a run-on accumulation of threatening nouns, and finally culminates in a cartoonish but no less ominous onomatopoeia: “your science experiment snack yields slugfish arteries brain murmurs tumour precipitation whack” (17).³⁸

³⁸ When citing line numbers in “nervous organism,” I have chosen to treat Wong’s backslashes as line breaks. For “canola queasy” and other prose poems from *forage* where no slashes are present to indicate line breaks, I cite line numbers as one traditionally does for verse.

In the previous line, another onomatopoeia sounds with a similar jolt: “smack” (16). Miki argues that it “strikes the nervous system of the reader” (186), and, indeed, Miki’s statement could stand in as a summary of the entire poem. “canola queasy” also invokes the unsettled condition for which it is titled. Here imperatives directly address the reader, such as the commanding statement, “reclaim the long now” (13). In the final line of the poem, Wong addresses the “bloated monstrosity” (13) of monopolistic agribusiness invested in the development of genetically modified foods; while it is possible that she is addressing the industry as a whole, the reference to Monsanto’s lawsuit against Canadian farmer Percy Schmeiser at the bottom of the page suggests that “canola queasy” was written as a vehement response to that company. The poem’s concluding line threatens Monsanto even as it rejoices in wordplay: “hey bloated monstrosity: transcribe your ethics first or your protein mass shall turn protean mess and be auctioned off in the stacked market and so you can reap endless cussed stunts” (13-16). Like the lines that precede it, and even those of “nervous organism,” this final line of “canola queasy” is an intriguing, even bewildering mix of threat, impassioned resistance, and wordplay.

“nervous organism” and “canola queasy” are unique in *forage*, then, because they thematize a subjectivity and embodiment made nervous by modern agribusiness specifically, and by advanced capitalism more broadly. This anxious subjectivity is inflected by what Beck has termed world risk society, where individuals increasingly must, to borrow from Ursula K. Heise, “rely on the

nonexperience of others rather than on [one's] own senses" (195). Here Heise describes what Beck has called the "expropriation of the senses" (*World at Risk* 116), wherein individuals cannot rely on their own senses to come to decisions, but must make decisions based on external technologies that measure and calculate risk. For this reason, Beck notes that risks "must be *believed*, they cannot be experienced *as such*" (*Risk Society* 28); what is more, risks reside in what we know (and are translated into probabilities), as well as what we do not know, or what Beck calls "non-knowledge" (*World at Risk* 116). Subjects of risk must make decisions based on identifiable threats, as well as on the risks of what one *does not yet know*, and even what one *cannot* yet know. Heise writes: "In Beck's view, the fact that knowledge about risks comes in such highly mediated form to the overwhelming majority of individuals leads gradually to a transformation in the logic that structures everyday experience" (151). This is, in part, precisely what "nervous organism" and "canola queasy" are getting at: that advanced capitalism constructs the modern subject as a nervous organism defined largely by the imperative to manage life via decisions based not on sensory experience, but on disembodied calculations, a process of navigation that is a constantly anxious reflexivity that must consider both "known" risks, and the risks involved in things not-yet-known, or perhaps even unknowable.

Miki's reading confirms this perspective on Wong's text, though he articulates his reading of apprehension in *forage* without recourse to Beck's theory of risk society. Miki suggests that *forage* develops a "poetics of the

apprehensive” (*In Flux* 183) that locates in the body (or organism) both the quality of being “uneasy, or anxious or fearful about the future,” and of being “capable of understanding and quick to apprehend” (183). Miki argues that this “double-edged apprehensiveness . . . functions as both affect and effect, invoking the conditions of fear and uncertainty, while simultaneously mourning an alternative to systems of power” (202). In *forage*, then, apprehensiveness both marks “signs of social and political disorder” and “the medium through which forms of resistance and agency can arise” (193). Miki turns to “nervous organism” to demonstrate how Wong figures apprehensiveness as both symptom of disorder and medium of resistance, as anxious affect and apprehensive capacity. He notes that in “nervous organism,” nonsensical phrases result in “the syllables . . . tak[ing] on a life of their own, as if organizing to resist the reasonably proper meaning of scientific language” (186). Further, as discussed above, the poem’s string of near-nonsense syllables means that “[s]ound precedes sense” (186); this Miki emphasizes in order to draw attention to the way in which Wong privileges the somatic, or the body, in her poetry as a site of a different type of knowing and resistance—in other words, as a locus of politicized apprehension. If I am reading Miki correctly here, he is suggesting that Wong addresses her readers through the language of the somatic in order that they might, through the body, come to apprehend a threat to their own bodies: GMOs. In fact, Miki reads *forage*, as I do, as a pedagogical text, though he recognizes its pedagogical intervention in its incitement to apprehensiveness, arguing that “Wong . . . approaches textual

praxis as a means of awakening her critical consciousness and that of her readers to the anxieties posed by the ‘iron house’ of closed systems of power” (205). According to Miki, anxious signs allow the body to learn to apprehend threat before the mind possibly can, and this apprehension is at once an apprehensiveness; it is an anxiety that ties itself tightly to the food the body might consume, a sign of the disordered agricultural system upon which we in the West subsist.

What Miki does not acknowledge, however, is the gap between the somatic apprehension triggered by the poem about GMOs and the somatic experience of purchasing and consuming GM food itself. By this I mean that the “science lab in my esophagus” (Wong 5) that “nervous organism” conjures as indictment against the lack of testing or unreliable testing around GMOs³⁹ is not something I or any other consumer of GM food may be able to apprehend. This is to say that Wong is making the sort of somatic intervention she does in “nervous organism” precisely because we are not able to somatically grasp the risks of ingesting GM foods. She is providing a sort of poetic substitute for the signs of risk that our tongues, esophagi, and stomachs cannot quite apprehend. That there is a gap between Wong’s poetics of apprehensiveness and the body’s ability to apprehend may not seem so noteworthy, for, after all, Wong is intervening in order that she might help bridge that gap. But in doing so, does Wong not also

³⁹ Mae-Wan Ho argues that “[w]hat makes genetic-engineering biotechnology dangerous . . . is that it is an unprecedented alliance between two great powers who can make or break the world: science and commerce. Practically all established molecular geneticists have some direct or indirect connection with industry” (13).

interpellate her readers as managers of personal risk rather than actors embedded in a system that distributes environmental risks unequally amongst “developed” and “developing” nations, and differentially among classes and races within nations? If, as Miki suggests, sensory input outstrips sense in “nervous organism” and “canola queasy,” then do these poems not rearticulate the process by which information exhaustively outpaces the modern subject’s capacity to apprehend, comprehend, and act out of their emplacement in a system that seems to continually exceed their senses?

Greg Garrard shows the way in which technologies that measure risk—in particular, forms of pollution or toxicity—outstrip not only human sensory apprehension, but even other, preceding technologies of prosthetic apprehension. Garrard cites W.H. Baarschers’ critique of “[e]nvironmental pressure groups [that] may also promote ignorant paranoia rather than educated critique” (Garrard 11). I will cite Baarschers at length here, as Garrard does, to help demonstrate what cause I might have for distrusting a politics of apprehensiveness. Baarschers writes:

In dealing with environmental reports or policies or regulations we must always keep in mind that what was zero today will no longer be zero tomorrow. We have already moved from measuring micrograms in the 1950s to measuring pictograms in the 1980s and 1990s At the same time, we must keep in mind that there is no relationship between toxic effects and our ability to detect a chemical. Small amounts only matter if they do affect living organisms. (46-47)

Baarschers voices concern over the way in which technological measurement outpaces the public’s understanding of it. However, as Garrard points out,

Baarschers “does not account for the possibility that public anxiety is a response precisely to the extent and degree of environmental surveillance that he describes”

(11). Garrard continues:

Rather than simply divorcing the ‘real risk’ as defined by toxicologists from the ‘perceived risk’ felt by the public, then criticizing people for not trusting the experts, we ought to see perceived risks as, paradoxically, a consequence of increasingly sophisticated surveillance. The more accurately the expert measures hazards, the greater the disjunction between official estimates of risk and any conceivable lay assessment based on personal experience. (11)

We find ourselves returning, then, to Beck’s concept of the “expropriation of the senses.” So, too, would I like to return to my lecture on “nervous organism” and “canola queasy.” For, looking back on that lecture, I believe I was trying to trouble what I am calling here a politics of apprehensiveness—a politics that places on the individual the perhaps impossible responsibility to apprehend, or to sense and understand, what might, in fact, be beyond an individual’s capacity to grasp.

In order to help alleviate my concerns about the function of apprehension in “nervous organism” and “canola queasy” in my lecture, I wanted to do two things. First, I wanted to slow down the class’s reading of the poems. Wong has said that “[i]n our media-saturated society, it’s easy to feel helpless or overwhelmed by the news, which goes by quickly in huge volumes. Poetry offers a way to slow down and respond to some of what we witness” (“The Great Canadian Writer’s Craft Interview” n. page). “nervous organism” and “canola queasy,” however, mimic the saturation of information that Wong recognizes as

problematic in the West. I was concerned that students might feel helpless in the face of the risks and threats these poems catalogue in textual onslaughts, but I felt even more strongly that students might simply be overwhelmed by these visually and verbally dense texts—I was very aware that I may be grasping at a small sliver of students’ attention spans, split as attention must be between the many and wide-ranging courses students take as undergraduates. The lecture hall provided a space where we could slow down our reading of “nervous organism” and “canola queasy,” a deceleration that might allow us to read against the rushing dissemination of information that the poems themselves perform and therefore expose for analysis and critique.

This meant that, beginning with “nervous organism,” I asked students in pairs to consider the tone of the poem, what sort of immediate responses looking at and reading the poem elicited in them, and how they might account for those responses in the structure and form of the poem itself. Students reported feeling rushed by the poem’s non-stop flow of words; others felt the nonsensical language and compressed typography made the poem opaque, if not illegible; and yet others reported that the poem’s wordplay and heightened pace excited interest—they wanted to read, and to know, more. When asked to connect these responses to the form of the poem, and to hypothesize the intent of the poet in making such formal choices, one student shared a fascinating reading: she noted that “nervous organism,” with its bordered, rectangular shape, resembled a food label, either the “Nutrition Facts” table that by government mandate appears on all commercially

sold food products in Canada, or the accompanying list of ingredients. If food labels in Canada are intended to allay consumer concerns and fears by the very act of informing consumers—by making of consumers informed decision-makers—then Wong’s “nervous organism” might be read as precisely the opposite: a counter food label that seeks to excite concern and fear, and that works to inform consumers not of what they can know, but of what they cannot.

In this way the class moved into a discussion of mode of address in “nervous organism” and “canola queasy.” I asked students what sort of subject, reader, or consumer—“nervous organism” does deal with food, after all—the text might communicate as desirable or undesirable, or as possible or impossible. Ellsworth notes that modes of address (she discusses films in particular, but mobilizes a film studies’ understanding of the concept to discuss address in the classroom) are not easy to pin down: “filmmakers make many conscious and unconscious assumptions and wishes about the who that their film is addressed to and the social positions and identities that their audience is occupying. And those assumptions and desires leave intended and unintended traces in the film itself” (*Teaching Positions* 24). Mode of address, then, “is not visible” (24); it cannot be pared down to a “literal visual or spoken moment” (24) and instead is composed of many differentially related elements of a text that “structur[e] the relationship between the film and its viewers as it unfolds over time” (24). Ellsworth wryly explains that “[n]or does someone in the film literally say: ‘Hey, you! You 12-year-old white suburban boy! Watch this! It’ll be fun . . . And when the film ends,

you'll feel that being a white American suburban 12-year-old boy is the best thing in the world to be" (24). While Ellsworth is parodying here the idea that mode of address might be so audible and singular—she is careful to point out elsewhere that "[t]here's never just one unified mode of address in a film" (26)—her emphasis on *desire* in this parody, on "feel[ing] that being a white American suburban 12-year-old boy is the best thing to be," is important. Mode of address, while it may not accurately apprehend those subject positions and identities with whom it actually meets, is nonetheless capable of communicating and shaping norms of desirability and undesirability bound to White supremacy and gender and sexual normativity.

The class seemed in agreement that "nervous organism" and "canola queasy" position ideal readers as knowledgeable consumers. Also as apprehensive ones; these poems were intended in part to "smack" readers awake. In truth, I do not know if I can accurately say the class agreed on such a reading. To what extent might my own framing of the poems, as much as I tried to ask neutral and open-ended questions about form and tone, have shaped and limited what students felt could be said and could not be said in that class? Furthermore, the modality of this class discussion—a lecture—and the fact that I, as a guest lecturer, could not return to this discussion in later lectures or assignments means that the limited feedback available to me (in the form of the responses of a small percentage of students during the lecture) proves a terribly inadequate measure of ascertaining any consensus, or lack thereof, in students' readings of the texts. Talking about

the pace, tone, and formal elements of the poems, however, did allow us to slow down our reading of Wong's two poems, and gave me the opportunity to pose two sets of questions for reflection. First, if Wong is playing with the modes of address found in advertising and news reports that somehow position consumers and individuals as needing to know, as needing to be ever more informed, then why might she reproduce that mode of address in "nervous organism" and "canola queasy"? Does she mean to "smack" readers awake? Or does she mean to ask us to question our positioning as apprehensive individuals? Second, I asked students to consider what sort of information or knowledge news agencies, advertising campaigns, and government communications, television, and film might ask us to be responsible for, and what sort of information is marginalized. Who benefits from these hierarchies of knowledge? My hope in posing these two sets of questions was to encourage students to think critically about modes of address that position individuals as managers of risk, while also asking students to consider how discourses of risk management prove inarticulate or silent when it comes to certain types of risk—risks that might threaten consumption, national economies, and national identities for example, or risks that cluster disproportionately for people living in marginalized communities.

Before I could engage students in a discussion of the politics of mode of address in the two poems, however, I felt it necessary to provide them with background information on the context out of which, and against which, "nervous

organism” and “canola queasy” speak. This because, as Michael Mikulak remarks,

What for most of human history was quite evident is now often as inscrutable as the workings of the electronic device in your pocket: who can fathom the mystery of the immortal Twinkie, let alone the near absurdity of bumper stickers that remind us that ‘Farmers Feed Cities’ or Michael Pollan’s invocation to ‘Eat Food’? (3)

“canola queasy” excoriates a global agricultural system that makes food—its ingredients, nutritional value, origins, modes of production, and economic, human, and ecological costs—inscrutable. Here Wong directly addresses the “twenty-year monopoly culled the patent regime” (3-4) and asks “how to converse with the willfully profitable stuck in their monetary monologue” (7-8). The monopoly and its monetary monologue to which Wong refers are parts of a system of agriculture built on mono-cropping or monoculture that became standardized in what Mikulak notes is the “ironically named” green revolution (65), which saw the industrialization and centralization of agriculture and food distribution take hold in the West during and after World War II. Vandana Shiva notes that the “dominant paradigm” of modern, industrialized agriculture is one that conceives of diversity—in terms of both agricultural practices and biodiversity—as “against productivity” (*Monocultures of the Mind* 70), resulting in the “push to replace diversity with homogeneity in forestry, agriculture, fisheries, and animal husbandry” (68). High-yield varieties of organisms are favoured based on a value-laden definition of yield; as Shiva notes, “there is no objective measure of ‘yield’” (39). Modern agribusiness defines yield in terms of

crop size and profitability, but yield might also be, and has traditionally been, defined in terms of how much a crop might produce for human use, how it contributes to the sustenance of webs of life, upon which agriculture depends, and how much biomass it produces in the form of what modern agribusiness calls “waste” for reintroduction to the soil.

Because modern monocropping relies on external inputs to the soil, Mikulak notes that “[m]onocultures cultivated by industrial agriculture are possible only when whole ecosystems are essentially sterilized and then reinvigorated with the most basic nutrients required for life: phosphates, nitrogen, and potassium” (65). While this results in “unprecedented short-term gains in yield,” he also enumerates the ecological and economic costs of monocultures, citing the annual usage of “400 gallons of oil . . . to feed each citizen, and even more to transport, process, cook, and distribute the food” in the United States (65). Shiva, on the other hand, highlights the social costs of big agribusiness’s investment in monocultures, and particularly the patenting of genetically modified organisms. She points out that while patents “apparently . . . provide a new legal context for corporate competition, the most profound impact will be felt in the competition between farmers and the seed industry” (124). “Patent protection,” she writes, “displaces the farmer as competitor, transforms him into a supplier of free raw material [in the form of germ plasm], and makes him totally dependent on industrial supplies for inputs like seeds” (123). Shiva further emphasizes how

the ownership of life forms makes farmers in “developing” countries particularly vulnerable and represents a serious threat to indigenous cultures.

Read in isolation, “nervous organism” may appear to irresponsibly promote a politics of environmental justice intent on securing individual rights against individual anxieties, especially on the right to be informed about the health risks of GM foods. “canola queasy,” however, emphasizes the threat transnational agribusiness poses to local sovereignties and cultures, and so, in my lecture, I decided to begin with a discussion of this poem and its larger social frame, in order that I might avoid translating the complex social and ecological threats posed by modern agricultural monopolies into a language of individual anxiety. I began by recalling students’ attention to a text discussed earlier in the course that year. Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village* was written partially in response to a long poem written by Goldsmith’s great-uncle, *The Deserted Village*, which describes the abandonment of the fictional village of Auburn due to the enclosures of common land in 18th-century Britain.⁴⁰ I shared with the class Shiva’s observation that “enclosures are not just a historical episode that occurred in the 16th century in England,” or in the 18th century, and asked students to consider, for the span of the lecture, the enclosure of the commons as “a guiding metaphor for understanding conflicts being generated by the expansion of IPR [intellectual property rights] systems to biodiversity,” as Shiva suggests (“The Enclosure” n. page). It was my hope that in framing our discussion of “nervous

⁴⁰ See Bentley, D.M.R. “Oliver Goldsmith and *The Rising Village*.” SCL 15.1 (1990): n. page. Web.

organism” and “canola queasy” in the context of neo-colonial enclosures that we could better grasp Wong’s complex stance on social and ecological justice, that we might recognize, to borrow again from Shiva, how “[m]onocultures of the mind make diversity disappear from perception, and consequently from the world” (*Monocultures of the Mind* 5). However, I had assumed that such a way of thinking was beyond students. My intent was to show that the enclosure of intellectual commons, agricultural technologies, and living organisms into private property was at odds with a world view that sees the human as one actor among many in ecological systems, and that recognizes communities—human and non-human—as radically contingent on diversity and interdependence. In short, I sought to challenge what I assumed was students’ investment in a European, colonial conceptualization of the human as exceptional and autonomous.

It is here that I inadvertently reproduced a mode of address that now leaves me feeling uneasy. The mode with which I addressed the class that day betrays many similarities to what Lawrence Buell identifies as “toxic discourse.” Buell writes that “[t]he fear of a poisoned world is being increasingly pressed, debated, debunked, and reiterated” (639). However, for Buell, invocations of toxicity in and of themselves do not mark a discourse as toxic. Instead, toxic discourse involves the narration of a particular temporal cadence: the narrative begins by positioning its subjects in a pastoral landscape where the human and the non-human are safely discrete, which is then interrupted or shattered by “traumas of pastoral disruption” (647) that demonstrate the contingency of the human on

the non-human; from this, there is “an awakening—sometimes slow and reluctant—and a horrified realization that there is no protective environmental blanket, leaving one feeling dreadfully wronged” (646). Toxic discourse carries its full rhetorical freight in the temporal progress of subjectivity and affect: subjects of the narrative, and those interpellated by it, begin with happy innocence, move to shock, then to awareness, and finally to indignation.

In my lecture on “nervous organism” and “canola queasy,” I created a narrative following a similar temporal progression; while I took pains to temper shock with wonder—it is wondrous, to me, to learn about the sheer abundance of life in soil, for example, and to consider soil to be, as Shiva phrases it, a living organism with rights⁴¹—I still assumed that the students in the classroom occupied a certain blissfully ignorant state, and I addressed them in kind. The conversation I imagined I was having with the students in the classroom that day was one that hinged on students fully “buying into” an idea of the self as autonomous, discrete, and exceptional, and on their feeling “dreadfully wronged” upon learning that their colonial, neo-liberal educations had led them so astray.

As I see it now, there are a number of problems with such an approach to engaging students in a reflection on Wong’s poetry, and on social and environmental justice more broadly. First, it betrays a vision of the classroom as a-historical. I had imagined that I was providing students, through Wong’s poetry,

⁴¹ Shiva writes that the “fertility of the earth is contained in the thin layer of topsoil which supports all plant life and which is, in turn, protected by plants” (*Staying Alive* 140). Recovering soil life, according to Shiva, “lies in rediscovering natural ways of renewal and learning, once again to see that the soil has a right to a share of her produce in order to renew herself” (152).

a language with which to speak back to human exploitation and ecological destruction. Perhaps this is not such a terrible goal; it may not be far from how activist poets conceive of the political or transformative power of their work. But it does betray a conceptualization of the classroom as somehow outside of history, one that sees students potentially, to borrow from bell hooks, “coming to voice” (*Talking Back* 16) in or through the classroom, and then “talking back” (5) against oppressive power structures sometime in the future, outside of the lecture hall. hooks’ formulation of “talking back” does not follow this temporal progression: in hooks’ work, “talking back” against systemic inequities is something students might learn in the classroom, but it is also something she hopes to see exercised within that space. I did not entertain the possibility that students might feel the need to “talk back” to me, a White woman instructor, or to the assumptions that undergirded my lecture. In other words, in preparing for my lecture, I failed to “examine the implications of the gendered, raced, and classed teacher and student” (Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?” 310). I failed to examine my own position, and the potential diversity of students’ positions, and this resulted in me constructing my lecture on a temporal scale that saw students coming to an awareness previously unavailable to them.

This a-historical approach to the classroom points to the second problem such a mode of address introduced to my lecture. hooks asserts that “[t]he struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice”

(*Talking Back* 15). “To make this liberated voice,” she argues, “one must confront the issue of audience—we must know to whom we speak” (15). Did I know to whom I spoke in that lecture? I don’t mean just the question of who was actually in the room—I couldn’t ascertain that, and wouldn’t demand that level of self-identification from students. What I mean to say is, did I know whom I imagined I was addressing in that lecture hall? The temporal movement from ignorance to awareness to indignation that my lecture attempted to invoke suggests that I imagined myself addressing either students fully colonized by European, Enlightenment concepts of the human subject, or students with access to privilege that made them exempt from recognizing the contingency of human life and agency on social and political structures of power. And, finally, in addressing such privilege, I wonder if I engaged students by a mode of address that positioned them as victims of advanced capitalism, rather than complicit agents or *already* resistant actors in the economic and political systems in which they work and live. Embedded in the lecture’s internal narrative of awakening, which, much like toxic discourse, sought to bring students to “a horrified realization that there is no protective environmental blanket, leaving one feeling dreadfully wronged” (Buell 646), was the assumption that students should feel somehow victimized by the very lack of “environmental blanket” between, for example, themselves and GM foods. “canola queasy” begins with “vulture capital hover[ing] over dinner tables” (1), and “nervous organism” conjures “soil vampires” (14) and “avocado bullets” (11), but to assume that Wong catalogues these threats to marshal the

victimization of affluent, Western citizens as cause for political action would be a serious misreading of Wong's politics, and of *forage* as a whole.

I do not have any easy solutions to the problems I have raised here, or any way out of the quandary that I am only recognizing now, in retrospect. Could I have done things differently? Was I not limited in parts by the lecture format, by the foundation of scholarship in the West on European, colonial lineages, and by the national literature anthology with which I worked? Yes, but it bears emphasizing that reflecting on this teaching moment has allowed me not only to work towards ameliorating my teaching practices through reflection, but also to consider the “epistemological differences . . . that made real conversation impossible” (Coleman, “Grappling with Respect” 84) between myself and Wong's two poems, and perhaps the class that day.⁴² In the following section, I turn from a consideration of modes of address to a consideration of modes of *encounter* in order to attend to the question of how such epistemological and historical differences mediate how we learn, and do not learn, from others. I turn, then, from the reflective work this first section of the chapter has undertaken, and

⁴² The language I have borrowed from Coleman comes from a recent publication in which he performs what in the social sciences might be recognized as a “counterfactual” reflection: Coleman “imagin[es] a conversation that never took place” (66-67) between Catharine Parr Traill, an English settler and writer who arrived in what is now Eastern Ontario, and Kahgegagahbowh, a Nishnaabe man who lived in the same region during the same time period, and who, under the English name George Copway, published *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation*, among other books. Though there is no reason to believe the two writers ever actually met, Coleman takes advantage of their temporal and geographical proximity to imagine what could have been—their meeting—and what could not—what Coleman calls a “real” conversation based on a shared concept of respect (84). While my reflection on teaching “canola queasy” and “nervous organism” is in no way counterfactual—my meeting with the text did, in fact, occur—I have taken my cue from Coleman's desire to consider “the conditions determining the mode of encounter” that inflect such meetings.

move from a consideration of modes of address in “nervous organism” and “canola queasy” to the mapping of encounter I recognize in *forage* as a whole. For while *forage* engages in Western, Indigenous, and Chinese epistemologies and traditions, the text avoids presenting Western thinking as somehow primary—in terms of value or of an obligate foundation to “other” knowings.

II. Staging Encounter

That is, we can move our attention from the particularity of an other, to the particularity of modes of encountering others.
—Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* (144)

In thinking through the question of otherness, of how “others” come to be, Sara Ahmed compellingly shifts the focus from the individual to “the encounter as sociality” (*Strange Encounters* 133). Ahmed argues that “‘being’ only emerges through and with others” such that “meetings between particular others do not necessarily presuppose a meeting between two already constituted beings” (143). For Ahmed, then, difference cannot be located either in the body, or in the present, for “differentiation [is] something that happens at the level of the encounter” (145). Gender and race, for example, cannot be thought of “as something someone *has*”; instead, “such differences are determined at the level of the encounter, insofar as the immediacy of the face to face is affected by broader social processes, that also operate elsewhere, and in other times, rather than simply in the present” (145). Ahmed’s conceptualization of encounter “as sociality” recognizes the ways in which otherness is framed within social, political, and historical relationships, and so cannot in any stable way be thought

to inhere in an individual, or to exist a-priori and inflexibly outside of the social. Much as film theorists talk about mode of address “less as something that is in a film and more as an event that takes place somewhere *between* the social and the individual,” or “between the film’s text and the viewers’ use of it” (Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions* 23), Ahmed wrests identification from a binary of self and other, and relocates it in a differential meeting of histories. Difference, as constituted in encounter, becomes an iterative event.

In *forage*, Wong foregrounds moments of encounter: formal elements of her poems make moments and modes of encounter visible; the poems themselves describe and relate encounters missed, tenuously grasped, opened up, and closed down; and the collection in its entirety creates or perhaps recreates encounters in incessant intertextuality in the form of oblique references, direct quotations, and even bibliographic references. Meetings, connections, and misconnections abound in *forage*, and the collection itself embodies encounter in its layout and persistent intertextuality. Encounter is not simply foregrounded in *forage*, it proves its organizing logic. As a result, Wong, to borrow from Ahmed, achieves a “radical rethinking of what it might mean to face (up to) others” (145), because she “move[s] our attention from the particularity of an other, to the particularity of modes of encountering others” (144). This is not to say that Wong’s poetry somehow advocates a foreclosure of encounter via a recursive, self-conscious examination of oppressive histories as determinants of encounter; rather, her collection considers the ways in which relationality is always historical.

I have demonstrated my discomfort in reading *forage* through the lens of apprehensiveness above; I have questioned the productivity of promoting a relationship to social justice that measures its viability in depoliticized terms of personal and individual risk. However, in addition to my own apprehension *about* apprehension, careful attention to *forage* as a whole renders untenable a reading of the text that sees it intent on positioning its readership in an anxious lean toward future peril. In *forage*, Wong is invested in attending to the ways in which politicized subjects might remain present in their specific social, ecological, and historical positionings as they encounter hope, despair, frustration, alienation, and joy. The collection engages with the difficulty of making change, but also with the difficulty of maintaining a future-oriented, apprehensive positionality. It catalogues the affective costs of even hopeful apprehensiveness, and in so doing offers a map to the affective landscape of activism and resistance. I intend to show that this map reveals, as the lunar, cyclical structure of the collection suggests, that affect and temporal orientation in activism are constantly recursive; resistance cannot and does not reside exclusively in bodies of vigilance or apprehension. In other words, Wong figures activism and resistance neither as a dimension of one's moral or ethical character nor as personal identity. Instead, Wong reframes political resistance as an event, as events constituted in and through encounters. While Miki argues that Wong develops a poetics of apprehensiveness in *forage*, I suggest that Wong in fact articulates a poetics of encounter, of which apprehensiveness proves to be only one mode. And, like Miki, I see Wong's

poetics as a pedagogical endeavour. I recognize in Wong's mapping of activism a framework for thinking about how we might conceptualize the classroom as a space of political action.

Throughout *forage* Wong makes formally apparent the importance of encounter, and two poems in particular typographically thematize encounter: "the girl who ate rice almost every day," and "recognition/identification test." These poems are made distinctive in *forage* by their layout on the page: each is divided vertically in half, with one type of discourse running down the left of the page, and another running down the right. In "the girl who ate rice almost every day," two prose narratives develop side-by-side. The first is a re-telling of the Little Red Riding Hood story in which a young woman named "slow" is in search of rice (rather than her grandmother); instead, she finds grotesque simulacra of beets presumably turned poisonous by genetic modification, proffered to her by a wolf-like grocer. The moral of the fairy tale arrives with slow realizing "that she had been eating imported rice from china . . . and the united states of amnesia . . . for most of her life" (18).⁴³ After wondering what sort of rice might grow where slow lives, "the land of salish, musqueam, halkomelem speakers" (18), land that is now known as Vancouver, slow determines to go underground—literally, into the sewers—to grow her own rice, which flourishes (18-19). This allegory of slow, local food production and subterranean resistance unfolds alongside excerpts

⁴³ To avoid confusion, I cite page numbers and not line numbers for "the girl who ate rice almost every day," which is more like prose than Wong's other prose poems, is three pages long, and is divided on each page into two columns that do not align typographically with each other.

taken from the US patent database. Language that is decidedly scientific and managerial emerges here as Wong transcribes patent numbers and descriptions for genetically-modified wheat, Basmati rice, canola, and transgenic pigs. By placing an allegory of slow resistance beside, but never intertwined with, the language of corporate food production, Wong suggests that a meaningful conversation between the two is impossible, and inappropriate. The appropriate mode of encounter between the two is one of resistance; these two discourses appear in direct opposition.

Like “the girl who ate rice,” “recognition/identification test” is divided into two columns, a division that appears to highlight deep epistemological rifts between the two discourses it separates. In “recognition/identification test” Wong seems to be playing with the trope of identification found in naturalist guides to fauna and flora *and* in the modern consumer brand market. On the left a list of single words appear that are English names for plants. On the right balances a list of brands: “nike / pepsi / BMW / macdonald’s” (1-4), and the list goes on. By placing these lists in counterpoint, Wong suggests that these two worlds cannot speak to one another: what could “crocus” possibly say to “nike” (1), for example? At the same time, she gets her readers wondering, perhaps suspicious even. Are these two worlds, the natural and the commercial, so separate after all?

At first glance, it may seem as though “recognition/identification test” stages the gap between the so-called natural world and the human, supposedly non-natural world. Alternatively, the poem might be read as contesting the

opposition between the local—represented by plantlife—and the global—represented by the commercial brands. What I suggest, however, is that the poem stages the gap not between the local and the global, but between the local and the mobile, and that Wong specifically juxtaposes the local and what Marie Battiste and James Sákéj Youngblood Henderson call the “Eurocentric illusion of benign translatability” (79). In fact, both “recognition/identification test” and “the girl who ate rice” highlight the incommensurability of what Donna Harraway calls “situated knowledges” and knowledge that masquerades as universal. Harraway defines situated knowledges as located in “particular and specific embodiment” (582); situated knowledges are about “limited location . . . not about transcending and splitting of subject and object” (583). Her concept of situated knowledges marks an attempt to acknowledge the role language and power plays in constructing reality without foregoing the ability of agents, and therefore undermining the ability of marginalized subjects, to apprehend their realities. In this way, Harraway works to redefine objectivity as located in particular bodies and places, and therefore as limited and partial. In Battiste and Henderson’s discussion of Indigenous knowledges, the situated, limited nature of knowledge is affirmed; they assert that “[a]ll worldviews describe some parts of the ecology completely, though in their own way. No worldview has the power to describe the entire universe” (38). Battiste and Henderson here describe Indigenous knowledges as “incommensurable knowledge system[s]” that cannot be captured or contained within Eurocentric epistemology (38).

“recognition/identification test” makes this incommensurability visible; in fact, its form and content mark, to borrow again from Harraway, “an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (583). Indeed, the facile opposition between the local and the global that a quick reading of “recognition/identification test” might furnish proves untenable when we reconsider the plants that Wong has chosen to populate the poem. All of the plants that appear in this list are species that Wong, as a resident of Vancouver, on unceded Coast Salish territory, might see regularly, including bamboo, rhododendron, cedar, willow, sage, dogwood, and blackberry. An un-nuanced reading of this poem might recognize in these lists a binary opposition between the natural world and the socio-cultural world of human economies. Such a Eurocentric binary positions the plantlife listed in the left-hand column as both natural and local, while the corporate brands on the right become man-made and global. However, if we refuse to isolate these so-called “natural” plants from the human world of culture and politics and attend to their social histories, we will see that in Wong’s list of plants local to the area appear a number of non-native species introduced from England (the pansy, for example) and Asia (bamboo is the most obvious example). These non-native plants are listed with plants (including sage, pine, and cedar) that are native to the West coast of British Columbia and significant to Indigenous peoples who are the traditional inhabitants and stewards of that land. We might then read the juxtaposition of

these two lists as an effort at visually correlating the neo-colonial late capitalism invoked by brands like “nike” (1), “pepsi” (2), and “esso” (16) with the non-native plant species listed to the left, for many of the “natural” plants listed are artifacts of an ongoing colonial history, just as the “non-natural” brands on the right are. In some ways, then, the neo-colonial infiltration of corporate brands into new markets maps easily onto the mobility of plant species and their social histories. After all, it is common knowledge that many of the “weeds” now naturalized to North America were in fact imports from Europe; in summertime, in Hamilton, Ontario, I see on a daily basis plants that were introduced to North America by early settlers from Europe, including chicory, dandelion, garlic mustard, and burdock. Perhaps crocus and nike have more to say to one another than one might first think: both might be read as artifacts of colonial expansion and exploitation.

The terminology for designating plant species according to their mobility—and whether this mobility has been hastened by human intervention, accidental or intentional—also facilitates a mapping of Wong’s list of neo-colonial brands onto her accompanying list of native and non-native plant species. In addition to provoking a troubling correlation between colonialisms supposedly past and present, one could read Wong’s poem as critically invoking racist, xenophobic nationalisms that see racialized immigrants as threats to national health and wellbeing. Robert I. Colautti and Hugh J. MacIsaac catalogue the terminology associated with non-native and invasive species, and assert that the

field of “[i]nvasion ecology has enjoyed a rapid ascension in the public domain, owing in part to the extensive use of adjectives like ‘invasive,’ ‘alien,’ ‘noxious’ and ‘exotic’” (135). In addition to these adjectives, they also cite “weed,” “transient,” and “nuisance” (135). Brendon M.H. Larson, Brigitte Nerlich, and Patrick Wallis analyze UK media reports on invasive species from 1999-2003 and find that “[t]he newspapers commonly personified invasive species . . . as foreigners or ‘others’ . . . that spread across our native landscapes” (250). In addition to characterizing invasive plants as foreign others, newspapers also cast them as “killers . . . that threaten to choke us to death” and compared them “to floods, disease, ghosts, and forces such as a bomb” (250). This rhetoric speaks to the ease with which concerns about stability in ecosystems can operate as metonyms for fears about the unity of social bodies, especially nations, and the threat racialized, immigrant or migrant bodies pose to xenophobic nationalisms.⁴⁴ That Wong catalogues plants that originated in North America and those that were brought here from Europe and Asia in one, undifferentiated list also suggests that Wong intended readers to shy away from reading non-European immigrants to North America as somehow not implicated in processes of settlement and colonization. The poem is, after all, titled “recognition/identification test”; readers might easily identify the corporations named in the poem as agents of global exploitation facilitated by brand mobility, but are we meant to recognize in

⁴⁴ The racist representation of Asian immigration to countries like Canada and the United States as a “yellow peril” that threatens western values and ethnic purity is one example of such xenophobia, instigated by European colonial nation states.

bamboo and pansy, for example, allegorical agents of colonization and exploitation, too?

More to my point here, I suggest that Wong's list of "local" plantlife speaks to an opposition between situated knowledges and Western knowledge that presupposes its own universality. In fact, the emphasis Wong places in "recognition/identification test" on plants local to a particular *place* suggests that Wong intends to invoke the Indigenous concept of Place-Thought. Writing about Haudenosaunee and Nishnaabe cosmologies, Watts defines Place-Thought as "the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extension of these thoughts" (21). Similarly, in a 2012 publication, Wong argues that "[h]ow one perceives one's relationship to land changes how one acts" ("Cultivating Respectful Relations" 529). Wong here is responding to a keynote address delivered by Leroy Little Bear at the "Beyond Race and Citizenship: Indigeneity in the 21st Century" (2004) conference, in which he explained that "place acts as a repository of the stories and experiences of both individual and the tribe. In Blackfoot the word for the English word 'story' literally translates as 'involvement' in an event It is the place telling the story. It is the place determining who you are" (qtd. in Wong, "Cultivating," 529).

Acknowledging that she is writing from the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Tsleil Watuth, and Squamish First Nations, Wong turns to the

language of the Musqueam, where “verbs depend on where the speaker is situated in relationship to the water” (529) to think through Little Bear’s articulation of the indivisibility of place and knowledge in Blackfoot epistemology. Wong notes that in the Musqueam language, “your relationship to the river matters, and it is accounted for in the very structure of the language itself. Place is embedded in meaning” (229). If we return to the plants listed in “recognition/identification test,” we can recognize plants that populate the place in which Wong lives and works, plants with which she, as an inhabitant of the area, is inevitably in relation. Furthermore, these plants reflect and record that place’s social and ecological history. Wong breathes in oxygen that these plants might have produced, and exhales carbon dioxide they consume, but she also lives in relation to the historical conditions that have made them a part of her environment. So while we can read the opposing lists presented in the poem as opening up a reciprocal relation between globalization and colonization, we might also recognize a textual staging of the gap between Indigenous concepts of Place-Thought and a European epistemology that divorces the human subject, and by extension, human knowledge, from the particularity of place and its network of actors.

In “the girl who ate rice” and “recognition/identification test,” then, Wong stages an encounter between situated knowledges and knowledges of dominion and power that seek mobility in universality. Key to my argument in this chapter, too, is that the differing epistemologies represented in these poems, while seen in many ways as radically incommensurate, are not presented as in any necessary

temporal relationship to one another. In other words, the reader is not addressed by any of these epistemologies first; while each of the epistemologies Wong invokes in the poems has its own histories, Wong does not present any as primary in value, or in sequence. I felt compelled in my lecture on “nervous organism” and “canola queasy” to locate students in a European understanding of the relationship of the self to a broader world before we could move into an understanding of the self and world that collapses that binary; Wong’s modes of address in the poems discussed above follows no such epistemological teleology. Who can say how the list of plant names and brand names in “recognition/identification test,” and the histories both lists invoke, speaks to readers, and in what order?

If in “the girl who ate rice” and “recognition/identification test” Wong presents to her readers incommensurable worldviews, in *forage* Wong is also intent on tracing potential and nascent encounters between situated localities, communities, and histories. Here she creates kinship through intertextuality even as she continues to launch scathing cultural and political critiques. In “after ‘Laundry Song’ by Wen I’to,” for example, Wong actively engages with a poem written by the Chinese poet in the first half of the twentieth century. As Wong explains, “this poem’s lineage is a protest poem” (“Rita Wong Discusses *forage*” n. page), for Wen’s “The Laundry Song” was written in response to and in protest of the racism he witnessed when visiting American Chinatowns (Hsu 43). Wong explains the process she used to write in response to, and in conversation with,

Wen's earlier poem: it "arose from a creative writing exercise I developed, that involves browsing through poetry anthologies, finding a poem that is 'a high energy construct,' as described in Charles Olson's essay 'Projective Verse,'" and then using five words from that poem in a new poem ("Rita Wong Discusses *forage*" n. page). The five words Wong draws from "Laundry Song" are "patience," "grease," "brass," "blood," and "carpenter." In "The Laundry Song," grease, brass, and blood work to criticize what Wen sees as the "sinful crimes" (6) of an American culture of consumerism and warfare—one line wryly reads, for example: "Washing clothes truly can't compare with building warships" (21). Wen specifically invokes "Grease" (7), "brass," and "blood" (10) both as actual laundry stains and as metonyms for Western "greed, the dirt of desire" (6). Wen further draws out the stereotype of Chinese immigrants in twentieth-century North America as hard-working "men of patience" (13) and presents American racism as hypocrisy in a stanza directly addressed to an American populace that sees "Chinamen" as "low":

You say the laundry business is too base.
Only Chinamen are willing to stoop so low?
It was your preacher who once told me:
Christ's father used to be a carpenter.
Do you believe it? Don't you believe it? (15-19)

In Wen's poem, then, "grease," "brass," and "blood" represent Western, consumer greed, but do not become attached to the stereotype of the "patient" Chinaman; these cultural stains also stand in counterpoint to the Christian valuation of manual labour, represented in the figure of the carpenter.

Wong, however, repurposes Wen's language to make legible the bodily register of chemical and racist toxicities on the racialized, labouring body. In so doing, the visual marks of toxic greed attached to the White patrons of the laundry of Wen's poem become associated with the Chinese labourer of Wong's. We might then see the "patient Chinaman" of Wen's poem recast as complicit in the bloody project of colonial domination in North America, as the stains of toxic greed migrate from the White body in Wen's poem to the Chinese body in Wong's. Malissa Phung writes: "[f]or too long now, issues of racial discrimination and exclusion that people of colour face in Canada have been framed as a separate issue from the colonial legacies that still affect the material experiences of Indigenous people today" (291). Wong's own scholarly work affirms this assertion, when she argues that political solidarity between Indigenous peoples and people of colour "is less likely to happen without a deeply felt understanding of each other's perspectives and the ways in which oppression is both common and different for people racialized as 'First Nations' and 'Asian'" ("Decolonizasian" 5). Wong's treatment of the Chinese body in her poem reflects this commitment to a process of decolonisation, and it also, to borrow from Phung's lucid discussion of the term "settler," makes clear that "long-standing racial and class inter-settler tensions suggest that there are multiple ways of being configured as an invasive settler" (295). Phung continues: "Although they may occupy Indigenous lands and benefit from the displacement of Indigenous people, Chinese settlers have also been figured as perpetually *foreign* or *alien*, unsettled

settlers posing an invasive threat to the livelihoods of *Indigenized* white settlers” (295).⁴⁵ “after ‘Laundry Song’” makes the differentially-experienced act of settling in North America by Chinese immigrants clear, not only by marking the ways in which the stains of Wen’s poem migrate to the body of the Chinese launderer, but also, as I show below, by refusing to deal with the “grease” and “blood” of his earlier work exclusively as metaphors.

In Wong’s poem, grease is not just figurative; instead, it represents actual toxicities that produce physical changes in the racialized body, from “soapworn hands to toxic coughs” (1), such that the stereotypical “patience” of the racialized labourer is “rubbed too thin” (2). Wong warns that toxicities accumulate in the exploited bodies of racialized labour; “sudsy chemicals . . . sulk in your blood for a decade” (10-11). Further, in Wong’s poem, the brass that “stinks so” (Wen 10) in “The Laundry Song” becomes an extension of the racialized, Asian body, such that “the brass of cash registers” (6) in her poem “ching chong rings” (7). Here Wong invokes a long history in North America of envisioning the Asian body as a machine. David Palumbo-Liu shows that in the late nineteenth century, a particular conceptualization of the labouring Asian body “came into focus: . . . that it would provide the raw mechanical labor for the industrial economy and thus free whites to be foremen and managers” (37). In the cultural imagination of the White majority in North America, the Asian and particularly the Chinese body

⁴⁵ Though Phung here indicates that Chinese settlers “*may* occupy Indigenous lands” (295, my emphasis), elsewhere in her work she is unequivocal, stating: “I agree . . . that people of colour are settlers” (292). In her essay, Phung is interested in thinking productively about how being a settler of colour is different “at the level of representation [and] at the level of material experience” (295) than being a White, European settler.

were metonymically associated with mechanical production, an exploitative vision of Chinese labour that Palumbo-Liu argues grew out of “the long association of ‘Chinese’ with ‘mass’” (Palumbo-Liu 35), for, as Palumbo-Liu shows, China was seen as a place of massive population, wherein people were seen to be historically accustomed to (if not biologically evolving within) a culture of mass coercion (35-37). The putative passivity and patience of the Asian worker was, and today in many ways still is, presented in opposition to the supposed North American virtues of individuality and freedom of choice. When in “after ‘Laundry Song’” Wong presents the cash register with its “ching-chong” (7) ring as an extension of the racialized, Chinese body, she invokes the racist caricaturing of the Chinese body as machine. In so doing, Wong denaturalizes the racialization she experienced as a child working in her parents’ grocery store. In *monkeypuzzle*, Wong writes about this childhood experience; although in “sunset grocery,” the first poem of the collection, the body and the machine remain physically distinct. Nonetheless, “sunset grocery” records Wong’s experience of racialization as it occurred “behind the cash register” in her parent’s grocery:

i learn the word ‘inscrutable’ & practice being so
behind the cash register. however, i soon realize that i
am read as inscrutable by many of my customers with absolutely
no effort on my part, so i don’t bother trying anymore.
(18-21)

While Wong does not collapse the boundary between the Asian body and the machine in “sunset grocery” as she does in *forage*, her engagement with the racist stereotype that positions people of Asian descent as inscrutable marks an

engagement with a long history of anti-Asian racism that recognizes in the Asian body something distinctly non-human, if not mechanistic.

As we have seen, then, “after ‘Laundry Song’” was written in response to a history of anti-Asian racism in North America and can be linked to Wong’s personal experiences of racism. The poem thereby instantiates a moment of encounter between a history of anti-racist protest and the ongoing racisms that necessitate continued protest. But Wong has also remarked in an interview that “[i]f [the] poem helps build awareness of the . . . phenomenon [of body burden], I’d be grateful for this” (“Rita Wong Discusses *forage*” n. page). Wong explains that “[b]ody burden refers to the hundreds of chemicals that are now found, not only in human bodies around the world, but also in creatures ranging from dolphins to peregrine falcons to household cats” (n. page). Indeed, the poem concludes by invoking this concept; it asks: “how to recompose clean lines / in body burden times?” (20-21). According to Matthew Zantingh, the poem “locates the immediate biological damages of certain toxic chemicals in the laundromats of North America” (631). Zantingh goes into more detail, identifying tetrachloroethylene, or perchloroethylene, as a “key chemical in the dry-cleaning industry” that, if “released into the environment, . . . does not simply disappear but is likely to accumulate in living beings”; this because “the primary mode of human exposure to the product is through the respiratory tract before it is stored in fat and slowly released through the bloodstream” (632). Zantingh notes that “health hazards of the product includ[e] lung irritation, nervous system damage,

and skin irritation” and that it “has suspected carcinogenic properties and contains materials that may cause birth defects and kidney damage” (632). Zantingh also makes clear that the risks of body burden the chemical poses to laundromat workers, and more specifically, the racialized labourers Wong engages with in her poetry, also threatens others human and non-human, for, if perchloroethylene is “spilled or released into the soil, [it] is likely to leach into ground water where it is particularly toxic to fish and aquatic life” (632). In this way, then, Wong stages an encounter between her readers and a capitalist logic that exploits racialized bodies in the name of profit and efficiency; at the same time, Wong asks readers to consider how the burden of exploitative labour practices threatens minority and racialized groups within North America and globally, while also asking them to consider that the effects of such exploitation accumulates and leaches into larger human and non-human ecosystems.

Wong thereby connects her poem, and her poetic resistance, to a lineage of anti-racist protest in North America. She also simultaneously engages in an encounter with the poetic traditions of her parents’ native language, an encounter that she sustains in three other poems: “after ‘I Sing of Lienta’ by Cheng Min,” “after ‘Thinking of a Fair One’ (si mei ren),” and “after ‘The Stars’ by Ping Hsin.” These four poems internalize the logic of intertextuality and encounter, but Wong also visually foregrounds intertextuality by bordering a number of poems with quotations from a wide range of sources. The first such quotation appears in the right-hand margin of “opium,” and comes from the work of literary critic

Avital Ronell. The quotation reads: “Queen Victoria waged war twice . . . in order to ensure the free commerce of opium” (qtd. in *forage*, 13).⁴⁶ “fluorine,” on the next page, quotes a chemistry reference book, which the publisher describes as “bring[ing] the elements to life” through entries that “describe how the element was discovered and by whom, the element's practical role in everyday life, who or what it is named after and more” (*Gale Cengage Learning* n. page). In this way, Wong draws on the authority of scientific writing to help trace the social life of fluorine, an element used in the nuclear energy industry. “nervous organism” is bordered by a quotation from Canadian critic and “father” of thematic criticism in Canada, Northrop Frye, and “perverse subsidies” on the next page is bordered by a quotation from Janine Benyus, a biologist and author who promotes “biomimicry,” or the modeling of biological processes in design and production. A quotation from Benyus also borders “green trust.” “forage, fumage” is skirted not by a quotation, but by translations of Indigenous place names into English. This marginalia is suggestive of Wong’s foregrounding of Place-Thought, discussed above, and tells us that Kanata is “Iroquois for village”; Saskatchewan is “Cree for swift flowing river”; Manitoba is “Cree for strait of the spirit” and Kebec is “Algonquin for where the river narrows” (30-31). These translations serve as reminder of Canada’s colonial history of territorial and cultural appropriation, and also function to resituate place as not only geographically specific, but socially, culturally, and linguistically particular.

⁴⁶For original source, see Ronell 54.

The breadth of intertexts with which Wong explicitly engages in *forage* continues with “canola queasy,” which is framed by a quotation from biologist and critic of GMOs, Mae-Wan Ho. In the margin of “chaos feary,” cursive text informs readers that the poem was written “upon reading *Biopiracy* by Vandana Shiva” (37), a nuclear physicist turned activist and author who currently supports Indigenous sovereignties and women’s rights through Navdanya, a non-profit organization based in India promoting biodiversity and seed saving.⁴⁷ A dedication to “Carol Gilbert, Jackie Hudson, [and] Ardeth Platte, three Dominican sisters who disarmed a missile silo in Colorado on Oct. 5, 2002” runs around the margins of two full pages and two separate poems: “domestic operations” and “domestic operations 2.0.” In the margins of a poem whose title is a quotation from Japanese Canadian poet Roy Kiyooka runs a quotation from Muriel Rukeyser, feminist poet and anti-Vietnam War activist who locates poetry as a site of resistance to capitalist utilitarianism.⁴⁸ A quotation from Kiyooka, who is known for his critical interventions in English or “inglish,” skirts around the edges

⁴⁷ See southendpress.org/authors/17. Accessed 29 Mar. 2014. For more information on Navdanya, see navdanya.org.

⁴⁸ Wong quotes from Rukeyser’s collection of essays, *The Life of Poetry*, specifically from the beginning of an essay in which Rukeyser discusses American poetry and culture as one defined by conflict. The essay begins: “American poetry has been part of a culture of conflict. It is not the variety of our life, for that is easy to draw abundance from; I speak of the tearing that exists everywhere in Western culture. We are a people tending toward democracy at the level of hope; on another level, the economy of the nation, the empire of business within the republic, both include in their basic premise the concept of perpetual warfare. It is the history of the idea of warfare that is beneath our other histories” (61). In the first essay of her collection, “The Fear of Poetry,” Rukeyser establishes her conceptualization of poetry as uniquely opposed to capitalist exploitation and expropriation: “Everywhere we are told that our human resources are all to be used, that our civilization itself means the uses of everything it has—the inventions, the histories, every scrap of fact. But there is one kind of knowledge—ininitely precious, time-resistant more than monuments, here to be passed between the generations in any way it may be: never to be used” (3).

of a poem titled “parent(h)et(h)ical breath” that names the planet “a pulmonary commons” (l. 5); this poem also invokes breath as a component of language. The poem states that “dene becomes need” (l. 11), evidently in response to, or in chorus with the allyship that Kiyooka promotes in the quoted marginalia: “all the peoples comprising the far-flung ‘dene nations’ keep having their entitlements shoved under the bureaucratic red carpet . . . If history can be said to ‘mean’ anything for the likes-of-us, it must surely mean that those who in everyway preceded us . . . have a claim upon those of us who were . . . so recently dispossessed” (Kiyooka qtd. in *forage*, 55).⁴⁹ A lengthy quotation from plant biologist Rachel Carson, author of the ground-breaking *Silent Spring*, runs across the margins of four pages, and so creates a visual and textual bridge across three separate poems. *forage*’s final poem, “resuscitate,” is flanked by a quotation from Richard Van Camp, a writer of the Dogrib nation in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories.⁵⁰ The quotation, from his collection of short stories, *Angel Wings Splash Pattern*, reads: “i would rather unleash the fire than have the fire unleash me” (qtd. in, *forage* 77).⁵¹

If the preceding two paragraphs seem a disordered web of references and citations, it is because I have deliberately avoided categorizing Wong’s

⁴⁹ The “those of us who were . . . so recently dispossessed” that Kiyooka is referring to are likely Japanese Canadians, for Kiyooka contrasts the Canadian government’s treatment of the Dene with its treatment of Japanese Canadians, as a longer excerpt of Kiyooka’s poem than that quoted by Wong shows: “whereas ‘we’ japanese-canadians who / are, to all intents and purposes, rather recent immigrants / have had our Grievances tabled, tallied and in / no uncertain terms, dispatched: all the peoples comprising / the far-flung ‘dene nations’ keep having their / entitlements shoved under the bureaucratic red carpet” (*Pacific Windows* 281-282).

⁵⁰ See richardvancamp.com. Accessed 29 Mar. 2014.

⁵¹ See Van Camp 3.

intertextual gestures in order to better convey the density and breadth of intertextual referencing achieved in *forage*. *forage* weighs in at 85 pages. The total number of poems in the collection is 51, and run across a total of 66 pages.⁵² I cite these figures to create a snapshot of what I am calling, for lack of a better term, the intertextual density of *forage*. For, in 51 poems, and across 66 pages, Wong makes 39 references in the margins or subtitles of her poems, and only 20 poems out of 56 appear without any marginalia or citations. Wong uses a number of tactics to explicitly embed intertextuality in her text: the framing quotations discussed above, titles that reference a writer and a particular text, subtitles that include quotations or dedications, and footnotes. Dedications might appear in any of these forms, so too might acknowledgments or notes about the conditions out of which a poem was written (“upon reading” or “upon viewing” a text or film, for example). The result of this intertextual density, and of the varied fonts, placement, and tone of this explicit intertextuality, is a collection that embodies encounter and intersectionality. Readers are visually confronted with moments of textual and epistemological encounter on almost every page.

The dense intertextuality of *forage* therefore enacts encounter and intersectionality. Wong has stated in an interview with Canadian Women in the Literary Arts that,

For women of colour, it is not always possible to separate out gender from race, class, and other issues. That’s why it’s important to situate a gender

⁵² This number (66 pages) excludes the three photographs included in the collection, as well as the table of contents, reference list, acknowledgements, and other paratexts added by the editors of the collection.

analysis within a context that acknowledges intersectionality, and how oppression on one level (such as gender) cannot be separated from other forms of oppression (that play out in terms of race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and so forth). (n. page)

And, in her article “Decolonizasian: Reading Asian and First Nations Relations in Literature,” Wong promotes attention to encounter and complicity in literary studies as a way to avoid repositioning Whiteness as normative centre:

Oppositionality to whiteness—while logical in the face of racial oppression that was historically codified through instruments such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the War Measures Act, and the Continuous Voyage Provision—still directs energy toward whiteness without necessarily unpacking the specific problematic of racialized subjects who have inherited the violence of colonization. In particular, the challenging relationships between subjects positioned as “Asian Canadian” and “indigenous” raise questions regarding immigrant complicity in the colonization of land as well as the possibility of making alliances toward decolonization. (1)

For Wong, attending to allyship and intersectional encounter in lieu of focusing on discrete subject positions does a better job of getting at the lived experiences of oppression and displaces Whiteness as the centre of analysis; significantly, it also situates subjects within systems of oppression and exploitation, rendering them complicit actors.

By so thematizing encounter in *forage*, Wong creates a non-progressive map of political engagement. She verbally, visually, and structurally marks moments of encounter throughout *forage*, pinpointing both oppositional encounters and ties of kinship, as we have seen in “after ‘Laundry Song.’” The image of a map is helpful here as the dense intertextuality of *forage* quite literally renders the surface of the text thick with intersecting and recursive lines of

histories and socialities. The map available to us in *forage* then is not a map of discovery; it does not lead us to any “new” territory or a promised political liberation. Instead, this map records political engagement and activism as recurring and recursive movements toward encounter, toward meetings that are inflected by and approached through different positionings, and that might result in opposition, incomprehension, resistance, communication, connection, and kinship. In *forage*, political movement cannot be reduced to singular lines of progress and regression.

However, it is not only the dense intertextuality of *forage* that allows Wong to stage encounter as effectively as she does; it is also the poetic form she adopts. The form of Wong’s text allows her to create a radically non-progressive reading experience, much as the often disruptive oscillation between pasts and presents does in the novels discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis. Indeed, it is not so much that Wong’s poetry necessarily achieves different ends than novels do, but that the poetic form she adopts in *forage* allows her to achieve or approach these ends differently. In her discussion of “new formalism” in Asian American literary studies, Colleen Lye warns that “the call to attend more carefully to matters of literary form can never quite shake off the heteronomy of the aesthetic” (92), but Lye also notes that “a tradition of criticism dominated by political prescriptiveness [has been] held to account for a constricted imagination of Asian American literature’s potential power” (93). Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung argue that this constriction results from a rigid conceptualization of a “uniform

‘America’ existing in juxtaposition with—or opposition to” Asian America (11). Cheung and Lawrence suggest that attention to the details of form, genre, and aesthetics in Asian American literature can bring to light the complexity of relationships between dominant, mainstream culture in the United States and Asian American cultures, between Asian American cultures and other minoritized cultures, and among different Asian American communities. For similar reasons, Sue-Im Lee advocates a critical approach to “the aesthetic dimensions of Asian American literary texts as a rich arena of constructedness, as a complicated maneuver of literary conventions, genres, forms, and strategies” (9). I recognize genre and form as key sites of critical and creative interventions in Asian Canadian literature in general, and in *forage* specifically. While a non-narrative structure is not a given of the poetry collection as a form, in *forage* Wong takes full advantage of the form to write and think outside the narrative temporality of fiction and the limits a linearity can impose on the representation of subject formation and inter-relationality.

A comparison of the structure of *forage* with *monkeypuzzle*, Wong’s earlier collection of poetry, shows the extent to which Wong is able to embed a non-linear logic of encounter in her text by transcending the limits of narrative.⁵³ Kim argues that *monkeypuzzle* is “a kind of poetic bildungsroman in which the speaker emerges out of a working-class childhood into adulthood as a politicized

⁵³ A comparison with the structure of *sybil unrest*, which Wong co-authored with Larissa Lai, may also prove fruitful, but I limit my discussion here to Wong’s single-authored texts in order to productively limit the scope of the analysis conducted in this chapter.

global traveler preoccupied with matters of memory, language, bodies and empire” (“Resuscitations” 167). As such, *monkeypuzzle* records a narrative progression that moves temporally from childhood to adulthood, and geographically from the local to the global, or from Wong’s childhood home in East Vancouver, Canada, to sites along the Pacific Rim visited by Wong as an adult, including China, Japan, and the West coast of the United States. As Kim states, “Wong’s collection of poems begins by examining questions of politics and poetics within Canada and then moves outwards to consider how these issues operate in other countries” (“Rita Wong’s *monkeypuzzle*” 60). Critically, this “outward” movement is tied tightly to the narrative of the speaker’s political and psychological development. The personal growth the collection seems to track culminates in its final poem, “somniloquy,” a prose poem that offers a description of what it means to come home for the speaker of the poem, where home is not the physical or even familial space of her childhood, and neither is it her nation of birth, Canada, nor her parents’ native country, China. Instead, home means being with a lover under “stars upon arching stars” (4-5), amid “fireflies flitting an airy punctuation” (8) sitting or perhaps lying with her lover “in the grass together” (9). Home is love, intimacy, locality, and history, so that while China as a discrete geographical or political entity is not elicited as referent to “home,” the speaker nonetheless situates home in a lover and defines that relationship in terms of Chinese mythology: “when a lover appears in your dreams with an ankle red-string-tied to yours, you will know this is the one” (1-2). The home shared with a

lover is also a highly local space demarcated by “the fields around [them]” (7), which remain unattributed to any country or region. The final line of the poem reads, “tonight we have arrived” (9)—this is the line that Kim freights with the optimism she recognizes in *monkeypuzzle*.

The reader at this point has travelled with the speaker on a journey from childhood to this culminating moment of arrival. The first section of the collection, “memory palate,” sees the speaker return to memories of her childhood. In the second section, “monkeypuzzle,” the subject grapples with language, self-articulation, and self-identification, and in a six-page poem dominating this section, variations on the theme of seeds explore different moments of sexual, linguistic, cultural, and political fecundity and growth for the speaker. In the third section of the collection, “transidual,” the speaker travels to other countries, including China, where she discovers she is “chinese & not chinese” (69). In the final section of *monkeypuzzle*, “passion rampant in small secret rooms,” the speaker turns emphatically to the body and to the spaces we constitute as intimate and personal between bodies, where she locates sites of political engagement. While, as Kim writes, “many concerns recur throughout *monkeypuzzle*, such as the connection of the past to the present, the difficulties of effecting change, and the ways in which local social relations are always shaped by global and capitalist forces” (“Rita Wong’s *monkeypuzzle*” 61), the narrative arc traced by the collection’s five sections suggests that its concluding moment of collective arrival is somehow a result of all that came before. Complex affective

relationships to oppression, belonging, unbelonging, identity, and exploitation here culminate in arrival and optimism. Does this temporal mode place confusion, despair, hope, anger, and anxiety as predicates to the optimism necessary to resistance?

Unlike *monkeypuzzle*, *forage*'s structure makes any such sequential reading of affect and activism impossible. *forage* refuses linearity, and therefore resists placing affects in temporal lines of cause and effect, so that structurally, it is impossible to identify in *forage* anxiety as cause for action, or despair as the result of love, for example. In *forage*, emotions, along with political and community engagement, prove constantly recursive and re-constitutive in their recursions. This is in part achieved through the incessant intertextuality of *forage*, wherein deictic references seem to point in all directions, both phenomenologically and temporally. However, *forage* also embeds a non-linear, non-progressive temporality in its structure, particularly in the cyclical form the collection takes, or at least suggests, especially in the title pages that introduce the collection's two sections. Each of these title pages is a poem, and each begins with a single letter or phoneme that doubles in the second line, triples in the third, and then metamorphoses into a full word in the fourth, and a longer word in the fifth. These poems are not aligned with the margins of the pages; instead, they are curved, or crescent-shaped, so that the fifth line, where the longest word is found, marks the apex of the curve; in the sixth line, a shorter word appears, and then the seventh, eighth, and ninth lines reverse the build up of the poem's phoneme that

we saw in its first three lines. The first title-page poem moves from the phoneme “r” and builds to “rise / riven / rice,” (4-6) and the second title-page poem builds on the phoneme “l” to “lore / loose / lode” (4-6). Kim convincingly argues that Wong intentionally grounds “these poetic explorations . . . in sounds that are often difficult for Asian mouths to pronounce” in order to “articulate what is not easily said by individuals and collectives or spoken about in everyday and more specialized conversations” (172). Kim emphasizes, then, that Wong’s phonemical play in these two poems “suggests that the task of formulating new strategies of resistance must be constructed upon this foundation of challenging articulations” (172).

What Kim does not attend to, however, is the cyclical or lunar movement these two title-page poems invoke. Each appears in the shape of a half-moon; if one were to cut the two pages from the collection and place them side by side, they would resemble a full moon. Indeed, the first poem appears next to a photograph that is circular in shape, rather than square or rectangular, which only reinforces the moon imagery the poem invokes. I want to suggest that these two poems are meant to stand in for a waxing and waning moon; their use as title pages for each of the two sections of the collection suggests that Wong is attempting to place her collection *within* this cyclical movement. Kim writes that in “rise/riven/rice,” “the growing momentum of the ‘r’ builds towards an uprising, literally, with the word ‘rise,’ crescendos at ‘riven,’ shatters into (grains of) ‘rice’ and finally decomposes back into the ‘r’” (172). In content and in form, then, this

first title-page poem suggests both a rising moon and an uprising. When Kim remarks that “rice” “decomposes back into the ‘r’” (172), she calls out the cyclical structure the poem invokes, even if she does not name it as such, for the poem is suggestive of the nutrient cycle as much as it is of the lunar cycle.⁵⁴ In “rise/riven/rice,” “r”s grow into uprising and then decompose, returning to the “r” out of which the cycle began. Elsewhere in *forage*, Wong references “Wild Moon Rice” (63); in so doing, she invokes not just a particular crop but an ecological web interconnected with social, lunar, and nutrient cycles. Winona LaDuke, activist, member of the Mississippi band of Anishinaabeg, and founder of the White Earth Land Recovery Project, describes the significance of wild rice harvesting season—the wild rice moon, or September—to members of the White Earth Reservation: “To the ricers of White Earth, the Ojibwe Wild Rice Moon, Manoominikegiizis, is the season of harvest, a ceremony, and a way of life” (n. page). Here the nutrient cycle of wild rice, humans’ role in the sustainable harvest of food crops, and a sense of time grounded in lunar cycles are all interconnected.

The second half-moon poem, “lore/loose/lode” prefaces the second section of *forage*, a section that is much shorter than the first, and qualitatively distinct, too. The first section of *forage* contains 43 poems, while only eight comprise the second. The first of these eight poems is “easy peasy.” A short poem of only eight

⁵⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines nutrient cycle as “the transfer of elements essential for the nutrition of living organisms, from the organisms, to their physical surroundings, and back again, in a continuous cycle” (n. page).

lines, its minute focus on the eating habits of the speaker's sister seems out of place after the preceding 43 poems of explicitly politicized reflection. In "easy peasy," Wong waves no flags in support of or against big agribusiness; instead, an ambivalence tempers this poem, as the speaker describes an energetic, outgoing sister who candidly loves food, and eats without suspicion or compunction. This "omnivorous sibling" (2) unabashedly "crie[s] [for] more sauce for the ride / and hotter next time" (7-8). Her uncritical desire seems at odds with the entrenched suspicion demonstrated toward food in the previous section, as well as with its emphasis on sustainability and responsibility. Yet the speaker does not condemn this sister who seems to have such an "easy peasy" relationship with food and consumerism; there may, perhaps, even be a little envy in this poem.

In the next poem, "susurrus," each line begins with the refrain, "the days passed by"; here the cataloguing of daily activities communicates a sense of lassitude, even hopelessness. The first line, "the days passed by in fear & uncertainty" (1) sets a tone for the poem that is never really troubled. The fourth-to-last line reads no less despairingly: "the days passed by like a repurposed stock market" (18). The final three lines reinscribe the monotony intimated by the tone of the poem by repeating a fragment: "the days" (19-21). "easy peasy" and "susurrus" therefore demonstrate the turn the second section of *forage* takes away from overtly politicized discourse to the intimate realm of the everyday. Even "powell street," the third poem of the section, carefully attends to everyday detail and the intimate details of bodies, even as it describes the speaker's experience at

the Powell Street Festival, a Japanese Canadian festival held annually in Vancouver's "Japantown." Here the speaker finds "a sea of issei, nisei, sansei pride" (72), but also recognizes the pride of other marginalized communities. She recognizes "pride of salish land," "internment survival pride," "ragged ass bi any means necessary random trigonometries of pride," "downtown eastside strung out on the street pride," "glittery drag queen strutting pride," and "finally coming out to your momma pride," all of which is articulated with attention to the physicality of bodies, to a "thirsty tongue," to "the curve of her nape . . . the pout of her lips, in the welcome between her thighs," and to a "quick stride" and a "languid prow" (72). I do not mean to suggest that the poems of the second section of *forage* are by any means *less* political than those of the first section; instead, I emphasize that this section carefully attends to the highly localized, affective, personal experience of living a politics of resistance.⁵⁵

When we consider the turn to the intimate realm of so-called private life in the second half of Wong's collection, "lore/loose/lode" takes on new meaning. Kim makes the case that in "rise/riven/rice," the "rolling 'r' paves the way for subsequent poems" and the "need to articulate what is not easily said" (172). We might understand Kim to mean that the rolling "r" of the poem presages the rolling, verbal uprising the poems that follow it enact. In "lore/loose/lode," though, lore, or story—perhaps history—comes loose, is loosed or unleashed into

⁵⁵ Wong is working here within a long tradition of feminist lesbians, including lesbians of color, who write personal erotic poetry for political consciousness raising. Among Asian North American lesbians, this stretches back to the 1970s. See Makeda Silvera, ed. *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Color Anthology* (1991) and Karin Aguilar-San Juan, "Landmarks in Literature by Asian American Lesbians," *Signs* (Summer 1993): 936-42.

lode. The first two entries in the Oxford English Dictionary for “lode” define it as a “way, journey, or course,” and a “watercourse; an aqueduct, channel” (n. page).⁵⁶ The fourth entry may be the form of the word with which modern readers are familiar: lodestone, which is defined as “a magnetic oxide of iron,” or “something that attracts” (n. page). However, all three definitions of “lode” describe usages now outdated in English; the more likely definition to come to a reader’s mind is that for “load,” which Wong arguably intends as a pun for “lode.” The poems that follow “lore/loose/lode” certainly communicate a sense of load, of the daily weight of resistance. But they also point to the burden of attraction, and specifically to the burden of attraction deemed non-normative, of queer attraction for forbidden objects of desire. This might be the same-sex desire appearing in “powell street,” or the desire for decolonization and allyship recounted in “elbow jab” and “precipice,” or it may be the desire for an ecologically sustainable lifestyle, for “green rooftops / community garden composts / pedal bicycles to save polar bears” (“precipice” 19-21). The suite of poems following “lore/loose/lode” suggests that the only way—lode—forward in politicized resistance is not a way forward at all, but a recursive series of encounters, where hope, desire, frustration, and despair recur and re-inflect new

⁵⁶ In her most recent work, Wong has turned to “researching the poetics of water” (“Cultivating” 529). She writes that “[i]t is often taught as though the hydrological cycle is external to and separate from us, a diagram of what happens ‘out there’” and she turns to Jamie Linton’s concept of the “hydrosocial cycle” to relocate the human body and the political sphere in the cycling of water from atmosphere to earth and back again. Linton defines the hydrosocial cycle as “the process by which flows of water reflect human affairs and human affairs are enlivened by water” (68).

encounters. What is more, the lunar form of “rise/riven/rice” and “lore/loose/lode” shapes our encounter with Wong’s poems: we cannot read her poems in sequence, as points to be aligned into any sort of linear narrative. Instead, the cyclical structure these poems invoke, and the emphatic turn to the diurnal cycles of the politicized, affective body in the second section of *forage* ask us to conceptualize resistance not in terms of linear narratives of personal identification, but in terms of events, each with their own histories, each inflected by the histories we bring to them.

III. Conclusion: Inheritance and Proximity

all the unspoken whys mountain and loom over us, all manner
of anger, all hurt & no heal, can’t breathe fast enough to air such
creeping wounds . . . & so our predecessors’
flaws own us tirelessly, irefully, pulling us to our graves

—Wong, “transcript” (1-4)

In the reflection that opened this chapter, I expressed my fear that in teaching “nervous organism” and “canola queasy” I would reproduce the depoliticized logic of risk society. I feared reproducing a discourse of risk assessment and particularly feared reproducing the potential it carries for translating social and political unease into a managerial discourse of personal hygiene and individual protection. Admittedly, however, I was also concerned about reproducing a discourse that is all threat, that, to borrow Wong’s turn of phrase from her poem “transcript,” is “all hurt & no heal” (2). The gothic tropes Wong employs in “nervous organism” and “canola queasy” certainly provoke

anxiety, and, as Miki argues, apprehensiveness. But *forage* as a whole does not seek to reproduce apprehension, or lobby for political action exclusively through appeals to anxiety. It has been my claim here that Wong's collection does not articulate a poetics of the apprehensive; instead, it powerfully articulates a poetics of encounter. And, importantly, the encounters Wong charts in her collection are between situated knowledges and located histories; they map a desire for connections between communities, political inheritances, and ecosystems even as they invoke threats to all three.

In *forage* then, Wong captures the affective dimension of activism and political resistance through the figure of the artist-activist, as represented in the speaker of her poems, and perhaps especially in the second section of her collection, in the diurnal body of lived resistance. In "transcript," Wong invokes the weight of history and of politicized resistance to ongoing systemic inequities by powerfully conjuring the "crypt" of an unwanted inheritance of inequitable histories of exploitation, colonization, and oppression. She describes how it can seem as though "our predecessors' / flaws own us tirelessly, irefully" (3-4) so that even in resistance, "all manner / of anger, all hurt & no heal" (1-2) and "one fight after another" (5) seem without end. In the midst of this catalogue of resistant anger, despair, and woe, the speaker remarks, "*this is not the gift i want to be known / for. this is not the best gift i have to offer*" (6-7). Instead, the speaker turns to hope with the conclusion of the poem: "even as mercury accumulates, the tides replenish & revise our / policed shores" (10-11). Hope balances despair, but

in *forage* hope lies in community, connection, and encounter. If the speaker of “transcript” fears bequeathing morbid fear to future generations, the collection as a whole shows again and again that another inheritance is possible: the inheritance of encounter, of community, of kinship.

By way of conclusion, then, I would like to suggest considering what “gifts” literature instructors have to offer in the classroom. By invoking Wong’s language of bequest in “transcript,” I do not mean to cast the teacher as a figure of benevolence who passes on instruction to students in need of enlightenment. Instead, I want to invoke the ways in which teaching and learning can reproduce social norms that I raised in the introduction and first chapter of this project. I believe that Wong’s recursive, non-progressive mapping of activist engagement offers a model to think about how learners, instructors, epistemologies, and histories meet in university classrooms, and perhaps especially in classrooms where race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and embodiment are of critical concern. What is more, I believe that *forage*’s articulation of the ways in which implication and complicity might also comprise entryways into resistance, action, and allyship has important implications for literature instructors. As discussed in Chapter 2, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey argues that “[c]omplicity highlights the individual’s *proximity* to ‘the problem’ (such as colonialism), rather than separation from it” (161). In this chapter, I have attempted to reflect on the politics of my own teaching experiences not because the classroom and the work I or other instructors do in that space is of more value than other forms of action and social critique, but

because it is one of the public, political, and pedagogical systems of social and political reproduction to which I am most *proximate*. To say that teaching inevitably constitutes a form of activism is problematic. But to believe that the classroom can be an important site of political activism seems to me necessary.

**Conclusion:
On the Conditions of Higher Education**

What do we read, how do we read it, how do we integrate it into the system of thought we carry? What parts of our thinking are invisible to us and how can we make them visible? How can we think freely?

—Madeleine Thien, qtd. in Charlie Cho (n. page)

An anti-oppressive teacher is not something that someone is. Rather, it is something that someone is always becoming. . . . First, as is the case with standards of anti-oppressive teaching, the actual *practice* of anti-oppressive teaching is always in need of being problematized. No practice, in and of itself, is anti-oppressive. A practice can be anti-oppressive in one situation and quite oppressive in another.

—Kevin K. Kumashiro (14-15)

Underpinning much of this project has been my belief in the perspectives on pedagogy expressed so thoughtfully in the two epigraphs quoted above: that teaching and learning through literature marks an exploration of how people attempt to think freely in, through and beyond epistemological and ideological boundaries, and that this pedagogical engagement requires recursive reflection and reconsideration. The central question this project has explored is how literature instructors might engage students in reading not just *about* social justice in Asian Canadian literature, but *for* social justice. And its primary conclusion is that, just as the five novels and one collection of poetry analyzed in this project show, engagements with social justice require attention to the shifting presents of our encounters, and how such encounters are mediated by different histories and positionalities.

This statement about social justice is no less true when considered in relationship with the encounters we plan, stumble into, and perhaps never realize have occurred, as literature instructors in university and college classrooms. Deborah Britzman's insight into the way in which her approach to critical reading in her "Monsters in Literature" course resulted in a classroom in which "students were missing, as was the teacher" (*Novel Education* 114) has stayed with me throughout the writing of this project. Britzman, writing out of a psychoanalytic framework, identifies the cause of this missed encounter not in the so-called "depressing" material with which she engaged her students, or in her commitment to attending to the political in the social and personal (115). Instead, according to Britzman, there could be no real meeting of learners in her classroom because her pedagogy had not adequately accounted for the desires and resistances that she and her students brought into, and attempted to enact, in that classroom. This, combined with Sara Ahmed's phenomenological theorization of identity and difference as something that is iterated in the uneven encounter of histories, has deeply informed this thesis, and drives its central claim. A pedagogy of literature instruction informed by social justice requires that instructors attend not only to the histories depicted and contested in the literature it engages, but also to how the histories and contingencies that learners and instructors bring to the classroom shape our encounters with that literature, and with one another.

It is perhaps no surprise to learn, then, that when I sat down to reflect on the futures to which this project may point, I didn't get very far. One project that

intrigues me is an exploration of how place-based education might play out in (or, physically at least, outside of) the literature classroom. This is because this thesis, and in particular its third chapter, has allowed me discern a gap in how I experience and relate to my local social and environmental ecosystems, and how I experience and relate to teaching and learning in higher education. Thinking about Place-Thought in Chapter 3 has led me to ponder the role that local placement might play in literary studies and classrooms.

Place-based education, however, takes many forms. As a pedagogical practice, it can simply signify moving learners from the classroom to places in which they can learn experientially (this may involve, for example, moving a lesson on the interrelationship between plants and insects from an elementary science classroom to a local park, or it might involve asking students to engage in community work in a social work degree program). But place-based education has also been adapted amongst theorists of and educators invested in critical pedagogies. David A. Gruenewald, for example, argues that “‘critical pedagogy’ and ‘place-based education’ are mutually supportive educational traditions” and that “place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the wellbeing of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit” (3). And yet, place-based education does not have a reputation for considering the place in which most citizens are compelled to learn: the public education system. I attended a conference recently and joked to a colleague that I wished I could sign up for the place-based education workshop on

offer—it involved canoeing through the Thousand Islands in Ontario—less as an opportunity to learn and more as an opportunity to get outside and into a canoe. My colleague’s response brought me out of my blue-skied, green-scented fantasy of shirking work via paddle power rather quickly. She asked, “Why does place-based education seem so consistently to take learners outside of the places in which formal education happens in Canada? Shouldn’t one of the places place-based education engages be that of the institution of public education?”

I recount this anecdote by way of intimating one of the primary areas of future research to which this thesis points, a gesture which is also an acknowledgment of one of its limitations. This thesis has been shaped by the current conditions of higher education; one of its ironies is that the turn it exhibits to a consideration of classroom learning in part arose out of my desire to think through how the pedagogies of social justice—of anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and decolonization, amongst others—that I recognize articulated in Asian Canadian literature might continue to inform my own pedagogical engagements outside of higher education. This is because in facing an academic job market that, according to the Canadian Association of the Chairs of English saw only seventeen tenure-track hires in the fields of Creative Writing, English, and Cultural Studies in the 2012-2013 academic year (n. page),⁵⁷ it can become

⁵⁷ The Canadian Association of Chairs of English publishes an annual Job Survey, which can be found at <http://cdnassnchairsenglish.wordpress.com/>. The 2012-2013 survey, referenced above, reported on data collected from 48 Canadian institutions, which found that in that year there were “17 tenure-track hires completed and 1 still in process during this period, as compared with 13 in 2012, 25 in 2011 and 19 in 2010” (n. page). Also of note is the finding that “approximately 55% of teaching in English departments is carried out by full-time faculty as opposed to CLTAs or

difficult to envision one's work, and one's placement in an academic discipline, as future-oriented at all. To put that number in perspective, I should note that the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster accepts approximately 10-12 students into its PhD program annually. This is one program out of many in Canada.

I quoted Roy Miki in the introduction to this thesis for his suggestion that “the term pedagogy be approached as broader than the institutional confines of our teaching and research” (“Globalization, [Canadian] Culture, and Critical Pedagogy” 96). My engagement in teaching and learning is not limited to my role as a graduate student, TA, or potential professor. Indeed, the case I make here for practicing a pedagogy of social justice in spheres to which we are most proximate extends beyond the classroom. Thinking through what Asian Canadian literature has to teach me about pedagogy has proven an important way for me to begin to conceptualize how I might intervene in and through those spaces in which I might find myself enmeshed if I do not continue in an academic job. However, thinking about place-based education, and thinking about how encounters are shaped by histories of emplacement, as this thesis does, points to a pressing area of critique and inquiry. The interdisciplinary methodology of conducting close readings informed by critical pedagogy I have adopted in this thesis has not afforded me a clear window into a consideration of how the politics and conditions of higher

Sessional instructors,” though the author of the report is careful to note that “a more accurate result would be reached through the clarification of the teaching of undergraduate and graduate courses” (n. page).

education shape engagements with social justice and literature in the classroom. Nonetheless, this methodology has highlighted for me the importance of attending to one of its blind spots: considering how the conditions of higher education in Canada shape, limit, form, and deform teaching for social justice in the literature classroom. It prompts questions about how the structures of higher education shape the teaching of Asian Canadian literature, in particular, as well, and it raises the question of what an historically-attuned, place-based study of higher education, Asian Canadian literature, and social justice might look like.

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