

TEMPORAL AND HISTORICAL MODELLING
IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN FICTION

READING POLITICAL HOPE:
TEMPORAL AND HISTORICAL MODELLING
IN
CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN FICTION

By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines explicit and implicit conceptualizations of time and history in four contemporary Canadian novels: Allan Donaldson's *Maclean*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and Lee Maracle's *Daughters are Forever*. Performing close textual analysis from a posture of 'deliberate empathy,' the author identifies several key textual devices and concepts that signal the texts' alternate ideas about time and history. These include temporal simultaneity, historical multiplicity, and the presence of the past. Drawing on critical work from fields including literary theory, globalization and cultural studies, indigenous studies and anthropology, the author investigates the political significance of the texts' different historical and temporal models. She argues that the way individuals and cultures understand time and history bears significant influence on the ways in which they understand their ethical relationships with and responsibility toward the world around them. The dissertation closes with a call for further engagement with questions of temporality and for continued efforts to link pedagogical activity to struggles for human rights.

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**Reading Political Hope:
Temporal and Historical Modelling in Contemporary Canadian
Literature.**

Introduction

Beginning: Reading (living) under the flag.

At the end of my street, where the road winds down at Hamilton harbour, flies a large Canadian flag. Because of the way the road slopes toward the water, this flag is positioned at eye level for anyone who looks ahead while heading up the street from as far away as the farmers' market and public library ten blocks away in the centre of town. I only recently became aware of this strange circumstance and was struck with the recognition that for these twenty minutes of my day, as I am walking home, I am also walking into the flag. My first reaction was to laugh at how unobservant I'd been not to have noticed this in the years I've lived here, and then, rather quickly, to incorporate the flag into my daily routine. It became, when I chose to notice it, a friendly sight that helped me gauge the time and distance between me and home: the larger it loomed, the sooner I knew I could greet my cat, put on the kettle, and get on with whatever was next in my day.

But what, I began to wonder, about my neighbours who also live under the eye of this flag? What are they thinking about as they walk into it? I wonder whether it is as easily overlooked, or incorporated, for them as it was for me. I wonder how the historical forces, cultural mythologies, and material privileges

that enabled my easy response work on these other members of the community. How do they variously react to and understand their relationship with the national identity and values it seeks to represent? While my neighbourhood is by no means a microcosm of Canadian society, it is made up of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and a fairly broad range of classes: my street, like those nearby, is largely working class, and home to many immigrant and racially minoritized families, while those nearby that border on the yacht club and waterfront parks feature the kind of large, renovated homes and landscaped gardens that signal wealth and movement in a social sphere I suspect many of us on my street could not easily access whether or not we wanted to. I wonder how these elements of our identities and experiences, and the histories informing our daily living, shape our experiences of, and attitudes toward, life under the Canadian flag.

What's at stake? Questions and motivations.

My initially easy relationship with the flag at the end of my street could be taken as proof of the 'success' of ongoing political and ideological efforts to solidify certain myths of Canadian identity: surely my comfortable, even friendly, response to the flag over my neighbourhood is a sign of the security and peace it represents for me and for Canadians in general. My questioning above, though, signals a profound discomfort and resistance to such sweeping, glowing claims. Even with all the work put into making this narrative of national identity feel complete and solid, many of us – including some who, like me with my Irish/English roots and Anglophone speech, are generally privileged within this

national mythology – are working to probe Canada's image of multicultural harmony in order to understand the realities that shape life at ground level.

This project looks at literary representations that, by presenting oppositional or traditionally silenced perspectives on Canada's historical and contemporary realities, work to complicate all Canadians' relationships with and perspectives on the country and values represented by the flag. My thesis focuses on four contemporary Canadian novels – Allan Donaldson's *Maclean*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and Lee Maracle's *Daughters are Forever*. I will expand upon my reasons for choosing these texts later on, but for now will note that each, in varying ways, sheds light on experiences and issues that are dismissed or elided by official and mainstream celebrations of Canadian national identity, in the process rendering alternate perspectives on the interplay between Canadian pasts and presents. At one level, then, I am reading my chosen texts as counter-discursive narratives of national history and identity.

While the question of literature's relation to and negotiations with history has received ample critical attention, my approach in this project is distinguished by my contention that my chosen texts present alternate *models*, rather than mere *accounts*, of history. In other words, while I share many critics' interest in these texts' strategies of representation and their alternate historical narratives, I am primarily interested in what these texts say about history as a concept, rather than

as a sequence of events.¹ This subject has been ably explored and debated for decades by theorists working in history and literary studies, and indeed one of the most striking aspects of this analysis is the lively, sometimes even heated dialogue it has created between the two disciplines. My project probes the links between historical and literary representations and builds upon the insights and arguments put forth by scholars including the prominent voices of Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Linda Hutcheon and Herb Wyile.

In the early 1970s, Hayden White sparked a lively and ongoing critical debate about history-telling when he argued that history, rather than providing a clear and direct account of facts and events, is, rather, “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (*Metahistory* ix). In *Metahistory*, he analyzes 19th century philosophy and history to demonstrate and catalogue the various “modes of explanation” historians use in their narratives in order to generate particular kinds of “explanatory affect” in their readers. Historians’ choices and uses of poetic tropes, generic conventions, and metaphors “prefigure” the historical field and enable writers and readers to make a certain, pre-determined kind of sense of the events being described (ix-x). White explicitly links historical narrative to poetic genres, which he draws from Northrop Frye’s theory of myths, of Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire. This move, combined with his continued insistence that “the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real,

¹ Despite my focus on textual representations of history and the past, I am not using the term ‘historiography’ here because, in my understanding, it focuses more on the ways in which history is researched and represented than on such questions as what history means, how it is shaped, and how different moments in the past relate to each other.

into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the *object* of a representation is a poetic process” (*Tropics* 125), have generated much debate about the relative accuracy of historical as opposed to fictional narratives. They were particularly compelling and helpful to me in the early stages of my thinking about this project, as I sought to understand what was at stake in literary and other representations of history, and how it was that they related to broader patterns of cultural interaction.

White’s critique of historians’ “illusion that a value-neutral description of the facts, prior to their interpretation or analysis, is possible” (*Tropics* 134) makes clear the constant and unavoidable link between any representation and broader, lived political realities. His observations about the writing of history are equally apt as observations about acts of representation in any genre, as he insists that language is far from neutral in any context, and that all utterances carry weight beyond the apparent content of their words. He argues that “narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents [...] already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing” (*Content* xi). His comments on the project of explaining historical events speak equally well about my interest in how literary counter-memories and dominant narratives relate to broader relationships of power, domination, and resistance. White – and I – are asking: “What is at issue here is not, What are the facts? But rather, How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another?” (134).

Dominick LaCapra shares White's interest in the ways historical narratives impose and create meanings for the events they represent, and his focus on cultural history in particular lends a political vigour to all of his broad-ranging work. His analysis has focused, among other subjects, on representations of the Holocaust, memory and trauma, and the relationship between literature and history. Given the scope of my analysis here, I am particularly interested in his thoughts on the politics of literary representation and his insights on the workings of memory and trauma. LaCapra frankly admits that his "own inclinations" are toward wanting to "link political and literary reading" (*Novel 2*) and to uncover the political and cultural issues at play within, and that play upon, novels. As he works to establish what I would call his critical reading posture, he muses that "For an approach that focuses on specific readings of texts, the most pressing issue is to bring the text out of the isolation often imposed by 'close reading' and to treat it in a manner that indicates, or at least suggests, its bearing on broader interpretive and critical considerations" (5). His work is instructive in this regard: while he is willing to admit to a certain 'straining' to find the political in texts, his work shows an ability to ably combine literary and political analysis in such a way that the links between them are made readily apparent, rather than appearing forced or arbitrarily imposed. I am mindful of LaCapra's example as I, too, seek to uncover the political un/conscious in my chosen texts without imposing my mandate upon the texts I read.

In literary circles, perhaps no voice is more prominent and no name more widely cited in debates about the relationship between history and fiction than Linda Hutcheon's. Her numerous books on postmodernism, historical fiction, and the politics of literary representation bear an ongoing influence on the development of debates in the field, more than twenty years after she first published her groundbreaking *A Poetics of Postmodernism* in 1988, followed quickly by *The Politics of Postmodernism* in 1989. Hutcheon's work in these texts describes an emergent form of postmodern fiction, which she calls 'historiographic metafiction,' that not only takes up the postmodern project of challenging the authority of any given narrative, but also sheds deliberately self-reflexive light on its own representation of historical events. Hutcheon sees historiographic metafiction as sharing White and LaCapra's "skepticism or suspicion about the writing of history" (*Poetics* 106) and argues that they self-reflexively and deliberately undermine their own authority. These novels insistently maintain "a questioning stance through their common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology" (106).

One could make the case that the texts I am analyzing here – with the possible exception of Maracle's, which is not as easily accommodated by conventional critical terminology and concepts – are postmodern texts, and that their challenges to the authority of any given historical account should be treated as historiographic metafiction. It is difficult to argue that the disruptions and

questionings carried out in *Macleán*, *The Diviners*, *Obasan* and *Daughters are Forever* cannot be productively investigated using Hutcheon's terms. Kogawa and Laurence have both been read and critiqued using postmodern approaches and ideas, while the generally sparse critical attention given to Donaldson, in particular, and to Maracle does not include postmodern treatments, to the best of my knowledge. One could also make a compelling case for treating *Macleán* as a modernist text, given its rupture from sequential, cause and effect plot chronology and its privileging of the protagonist's perspective. However, as I will indicate later on, it is not my concern here to identify the texts' generic qualities or to speak of them only in established terms: I am seeking, rather, to pursue a relatively newer course of analysis. Nonetheless, Hutcheon's work has been crucial to the development of my inquiry, giving me a vocabulary and a conceptual framework within which to begin to understand the stakes of this project in particular, and of historical fictions in general. Her observation that "postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (*Poetics* 110) was particularly resonant to me, and continued to linger in my mind as I began the long process of establishing the terms of my project.

A final informant or foundation of my perspective in this project is Herb Wylie, whose work in *Speculative Fictions* puts White's and Hutcheon's ideas to productive work in close readings of many contemporary Canadian historical

fictions. Wyile's analysis combines a careful attention to textual detail and to the socio-political contexts of production and reception: this balance between close reading and broader analysis provides a model that I strive to emulate in my own work. His eye for the relationship between literary representation and narratives of national identity also provides insights that helped develop my thinking about this project. Attending to the voices of historical 'underdogs,' Wyile demonstrates how these texts "focus our attention on pasts that have been silenced, repressed, or misread in institutionalized forms of historical representation" (Heblé, "Review" 170). Wyile's attention to what different novels have to say about the process of negotiating and renegotiating "what 'Canada' means" (Wyile 110) is most stimulating. In his readings, these processes are ongoing and incomplete, and fiction is one site where they are worked out. Some texts suggest that "cultural negotiation, compromise, and ultimately translation rather than cultural separatism or assimilation" will help to establish a nation in which newcomers and minoritized groups can negotiate a comfortable and secure relationship with both their pasts and homelands and with the country in which they now make their homes (97). Given my interest in divergent, multivocal histories and temporalities, I find Wyile most compelling when he argues that reading Canadian fictions' historical interventions and their implications necessitates "a recognition, rather than a suppression, of the sometimes collaborative, sometimes compromising, sometimes competing forces involved in the negotiation of just what 'Canada' means" (110).

Following Hutcheon's intriguing comment about the ways in which re-presentation can open history to the present, and Wylie's idea that fictions work to negotiate what it means to be Canadian, it is my contention that, by contesting the self-evidences of dominant narratives of Canadian history and identity, the four texts I am studying here stimulate responsive readers to work toward new ways of conceptualizing their implication in contemporary injustices and to develop new ways of being that work to address the concerns and injustices these novels reveal. My position here is strongly informed by Edward Said, who, in his consideration of the social and political responsibilities of writers and intellectuals, asserts that, by providing "alternative narratives and other perspectives on history," their work can serve as "a kind of counter-memory, putting forth its own counterdiscourse that will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep" ("The Public Role" 5). Following Said's lead, I will explore and illuminate the ways in which contemporary Canadian historical fictions can work to rouse the consciences, and stimulate the political engagement, of their readers.

Crucially, this political engagement will not happen in the absence of what I am calling responsive or response-able reading practices. While every act of reading is a relationship, our motivations and postures as we approach a text play a large part in creating the meaning and significance we will draw from it. Part of my goal, then, is to work toward – and to model through my textual analysis – a reading posture that enables openness, respectful listening, and learning, both in the reading encounter and then beyond, in ways that tangibly change our ways of

being in the world. Reading encounters cannot be passive flirtations with adventure or distracting ‘breaks’ from the world: texts are written in and about the world, and our reading will, unavoidably, shape our responses to events beyond the text. What I’m looking for are ways to encourage committed, socially conscious responses to what texts teach us. As Marshall Gregory argues in his discussion of what he terms ‘ethical criticism,’ such a practice is based on the understanding that “there is no such thing as being ‘merely’ entertained, that even at the lowest possible level of engagement, the intellectual and affective exertions that are required just to understand the content, shape, and direction of a story in fact involve a complicitous agreement [by readers] to let the story have its own way with their beliefs and feelings - at least for the time being” (“Ethical Criticism”). I am using this project, in part, to develop the kind of responsive reading practices I hope to inspire in future students.

As I contemplate the kind of reading practice that might best foster the kind of attentiveness and political engagement I hope to inspire, I am drawn to Johannes Fabian’s work in anthropological and cultural theory. Writing about the flaws of the various positions from which anthropologists have conventionally approached their subjects, Fabian argues that, for this exchange to be equitable, the anthropologist must submit to the condition of “coevalness,” both during fieldwork and, crucially, later, when writing about the subjects of study. By virtue of its interactive nature, fieldwork involves coevalness, “an intersubjective sharing of the same historic time and space,” yet conventional anthropological

rhetoric “has systematically distanced the subjects of fieldwork, primarily by denying the contemporaneity of subjects and placing them in temporal frames other than that encompassing the ethnographer and her readership.” Fabian argues that this temporal distancing or “denial of coevalness” functions to “block anthropology’s awareness of its own politicized context and intellectual history” (Marcus). He emphasizes the importance of conceiving of the relationship between researchers and their subjects as one of “coevalness, sharing of present Time,” arguing that such an understanding is a necessary “condition of communication” (Fabian 32) that will help anthropology become a more dynamic, politically engaged field of work.

Given its different generic conventions, fiction does not face the same rhetorical constraints as Fabian critiques in ethnographic writing, but I propose that Fabian’s ideas can be put to productive use in thinking through the relationship between reader and text. His idea of sharing present time is a productive way of understanding the relational process of reading. In this context, I am using coevalness to refer to more than the temporality of reading, or even the alignment of a reader’s experience with those described in the text, which is certainly a priority. I am expanding the term to encompass a sort of deliberate empathy, an attempt at intellectual and emotional intersubjective connection that will open readers to the possibility of experiencing or ‘living’ a text’s events rather than viewing them from a carefully maintained distance. I am seeking alternatives to the kind of voyeuristic or recreational reading postures often

advocated by ‘pleasure readers’ – for isn’t critical engagement and the challenge of altering one’s perspective also a pleasure? – and even seemingly celebrated by some literary critics. Wolfgang Iser, for example, discusses the temporality of reading and the experiences it opens to readers in thoughtful terms, noting that “the reader is constantly oscillating between observation of the characters and experience of what is being observed. The reader stands in two places at once: outside the characters and between that external position and the characters” (Iser 138). When Iser elaborates on his understanding of the function and benefits of reading, however, I find myself disagreeing with some of his basic assumptions.

Literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it. He [*sic*] can step out of his world and into another, where he can experience extremes of pleasure and pain *without being involved in any consequences whatsoever*. It is this *lack of consequence that enables him* to experience things that would otherwise be inaccessible owing to the pressing demands of everyday reality. And precisely because the literary text makes no objectively real demands on its readers, it opens up a freedom that everyone can interpret in his own way. (Iser 29, emphasis mine)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, since the primary purpose of this dissertation is to probe the ‘real consequences’ of reading, I take exception to the argument that reading has no real or lasting effects for readers. I certainly take his point that reading, say, about the death of John Maclean’s wartime buddies or Jules Tonnerre’s family’s death by fire does nothing to affect our physical safety or health, and agree to an extent that reading opens the door to imaginary experiences that have no immediate or necessary effects on us. I disagree, however, that there is no lasting consequence to having read those stories. As I

will argue throughout this project, and as Thomas King so compellingly insists, “Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous” (King 9). This wonder and danger come about because, quite simply, stories *do* something to those that hear them. King explains, “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world” (10). The telling and reading of stories are acts with tangible effects on our personal and cultural thoughts and actions, and are therefore much more than just a form of passive entertainment or vicarious adventure.

Beginning again: Happy Canada Day?

In the years since I walked home into the flag, I have moved to a different neighbourhood. I can't see that giant, waving flag anymore, and new landmarks have taken its place as markers of time and orientation, triggers of musings and reflection. But reminders of those same preoccupations are unrelenting: most strikingly, my new house is on Canada St. A few weeks after I moved in, I wandered along the sidewalk to take in our block's Canada Day celebrations: a small fireworks display attended by cheerful, friendly neighbours. One man, Bob, stood out for his chatty openness and his dry wit. He describes himself as “half Indian, half confused” – though in fact he is of exclusively Native ancestry – and told me he loves it when people wish him ‘Happy Canada Day.’ He likes to give them a long look, then laugh a little and ask them, “Is it?”

This question sums up in two short words so many of the concerns that continue to motivate my work in this project. Who is all this celebration for, and in honour of what versions of the past and present? What is hidden or submerged

in our official narratives of Canadian history and identity, and at what cost to whom? How do the narratives we tell ourselves determine our choices and actions in the present? But there are other questions encapsulated in Bob's challenge which I have come, in the past few years, to find even more compelling than these.

I began this project thinking I would read and highlight novels that told Canadian 'history from below,' using my analysis to underscore the ways in which literature can work to fill gaps in the official historical record and supplement dominant narratives by emphasizing often deliberately marginalized stories and perspectives. This remains a key element of my discussion. The more I read and reflected, though, the more I realized that History proper relies on specific notions of time to maintain its coherence and persuasiveness, and that what I really wanted to get at was how those ideas of time also work to privilege some stories and voices over others. History, as a genre and as a concept, relies on certain agreed-upon ideas about time, what it is, and how it works. Time has to be linear – or at least partially sequential – for history to exist, or else there isn't a past to refer to and there aren't events happening in a sequence from the past and to the present. Hence was born my interest in time, concepts of its shape and workings. Crucially, I had also begun to notice, as I listened to the novels, that they also had their own challenges to pose to conventional thinking about the workings of time. It became ever more clear that how we imagine time certainly plays a huge role in how we understand history, but it also, crucially, shapes our

relationship to the present and future. When Bob asks if Canada Day is really a happy one, he's asking people to turn their gazes toward a different past than the one they are being asked to celebrate. Perhaps it is a past that played out unnoticed alongside the founding of the great nation of Canada, or perhaps it has been deliberately erased from the dominant historical record and public memory. Bob is also asking us to think about the present in a different way, acknowledging that people who live side by side along Canada Street are at once living out of time with each other, inhabiting very different times and perspectives depending where they sit in relation to our shared past.

Motivated by the questions and preoccupations encapsulated in my two opening anecdotes, my thesis will demonstrate how literary representations of historical events, and in particular configurations and treatments of time, work together to compose and communicate their own distinct, particular conceptualizations of time and history – conceptualizations I refer to as historical and temporal models. I use these terms to refer to the ways in which a person, culture, or text imagines time and history to work. These models don't necessarily have to do with the shapes of time and history – and in fact, despite theorists' tendency to try to illustrate their concepts with diagrams, I find it is quite often impossible to find an accurate way to describe how a given idea of time might look – but they do provide a sort of conceptual map or philosophical schema. The kinds of questions they answer might proceed as follows: are moments sequential or is time somehow layered? Is history progressive and linear, or are there cycles

of change and decay involved as events unfold? Can we move across times to experience the past and future, or are we each bound to our own particular contemporary moments? Do we share time with others or can we live in a different temporality, or within a different history, than those with whom we share the world? It is my contention that beliefs about time and history substantially influence cultural politics – or the ways in which a person or culture understands its relationship to others (whether these others are times, places or people) – and that attending to alternate temporal and historical models therefore offers the possibility of rethinking our responsibility and relationship toward events, situations, and people beyond the scope of our own direct experiences.

Timothy Brook's definitions of allochronicity, "the conceptualization of all moments of time as simultaneously present" (Brook 8), and diachronicity, "the conceptualization of all moments of time as existing in sequential separation" (Brook 8) are helpful ways of talking about these ideas for the moment: I will expand on the novels' specific contributions as my discussion unfolds, but for now it is significant to note their shared conceptualization of time as flexible and at least sometimes allochronic rather than straightforwardly linear and diachronic. As I lay out and comment upon the novels' temporal models, I will evaluate their implications for our understandings of history and contemporary politics both within and beyond the worlds of the texts.

Through my readings of Donaldson, Kogawa, Laurence and Maracle's novels, I am attempting to identify the conceptualizations of time and history –

the historical and temporal models – that the texts put forward for readers’ consideration. These might be the models upon which the texts are based, or be suggested by characters’ commentary and contemplation, or come to us only in hints and symbol. My hope is that by reading these fictional accounts of marginalized histories, we can come to an understanding of the ways in which differing temporalities create differing perspectives on the past and, crucially, on the present and future. If the “new histories” (Boire 221) put forth in these texts, in keeping with the characteristics of historiographic metafiction, seek to challenge established versions of Canadian history as part of a “search for new futures” (Boire 221), I want to know how they conceive of our relationship to different temporal moments and how this understanding contributes to or shapes their political imperative.

I referred above to some of the major figures in the ongoing debate about the nature and function of historical narratives: let me now briefly signal where my project parts ways with their work and takes a more temporal turn. While Linda Hutcheon makes repeated, intriguing comments on the ways in which some narratives defy “even such obvious and ‘natural’ constraints” as “those of chronology” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 68), and Herb Wyile celebrates historical fictions’ “resistance to established notions of...the ‘pastness’ of the past” (*Speculative Fictions* 14), neither moves beyond an evaluation of textual surface, or representation, to investigate the alternative temporal models offered within fictional texts. Hutcheon’s work, while invigorating in its attention to the

political subversions of fictional history, is restrained by her belief that, while fictions frequently transgress the boundaries between present and past, “the boundaries still remain” (*Politics* 72), and that the past is something that “*once existed*” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 22; my emphasis). I am arguing that these novels posit temporal models in which the boundaries are not only transgressed but are in fact dismantled, and in which the past actively engages the present and future.

In *White Civility*, white, Anglo-Canadian scholar Daniel Coleman examines the creation, through literary and other textual representations, of a normative white Canadian identity. He analyzes four recurrent allegorical figures in the literature of the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries to illustrate the literary entrenchment of a narrative of Canadian history and a resulting form of white Canadian civility that anxiously insists on its superiority to other nations and simultaneously manages and organizes “an internal racial hierarchy” (Coleman 223). His work not only recognizes but is centrally focused on the links between literary representation and political reality. Reflecting later on his work, Coleman expands on the relationship between temporality and cultural politics, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of chronotopes, the “mental maps or images we have of space and time” (Coleman 231), to explain the different relationships Canadians hold to narratives of national history and identity as well as to contemporary culture. He argues that in order to establish a respectful, “diverse civil society” we must develop an awareness of the constructedness of all chronotopes and resist

granting precedence to any single chronotope over others. “What we need,” he insists, “[...] is a consciousness of multiple and simultaneous chronotopes, [...] of where different ones among us come from and where we variously are in the present, and we need to try to hold more than one of them simultaneously.” This awareness, Coleman argues, could foster a sense of humility in relation to others’ realities and ultimately have “a remarkable impact on real attitudes and in real life” (237). Coleman’s discussion of chronotopes places a greater emphasis on place than does my analysis of temporal models, but the apparent motivation of his work, and his hopes for the effect of reconceptualizing the temporalities individuals and communities imagine themselves to live within, are very much aligned with mine. My goal in this work is to contribute to the project he articulates by deepening, however gradually, an appreciation of the different historical and temporal models people use to make sense of their living, with the hope that this understanding will spark a renewed energy and commitment to creating more just and equitable relations and futures for each of us, wherever and whenever we find ourselves.

Timothy Brook’s reflections on the September 11, 2001 World Trade Centre attacks offer a provocative challenge to established ways of thinking about historical events and their consequences. He suggests that the immediate urge to embed a shocking, disruptive event like 9/11 in conventional, ordered narratives of cause and effect “which are in turn consistent with other understandings about how the world works, thereby neutraliz[es] the capacity of this shock to induce

breakthroughs in standing assumptions” (Brook 2). He suggests, rather, that we experiment with alternate ways of explaining the event and its relationship to other moments and occurrences. Drawing on Huayan Buddhist ideas of “interdependent origination” or “conditional existence,” in which “nothing exists independently of anything else” (3), Brook insists that rethinking temporality and history will create conditions under which social and political change might flourish:

As long as we think of time as a linear channel of causes and effects, linked one to the next as atoms in a chain reaction, violence successfully reproduces itself. What I would like to do instead is to turn this picture ninety degrees and try thinking of time in another way: not as a line of flow but as something more like a simultaneous array of reference and connection. (2)

Brook’s language here follows the impulse to represent time by relying on pictorial representation. In this case, though, he calls up images of time – a channel, or a sequence of atomic reactions – in order to point out their limitations. The images he conjures help to demonstrate the narrowness of the vision he describes. His preferred temporal model of ‘a simultaneous array of reference and connection’ is much harder to pin down as an image. One could, I suppose, think of a flow chart with lines connecting all points, or of a sphere filled with dots and specks representing all moments, coexisting, but these diagrams would by necessity have some moments and events at their centres and others near the edges; English-speakers’ habit of reading top to bottom and left to right would mean that some moments were given chronological precedence over others. Later on, in his discussion of interdependent origination, Brook relies on much more

specific imagery as he explains that moments and events are mutually interdependent just as a rafter and a building only exist because of the other. Without the building, the plank is not a rafter, and without the rafter, the building cannot exist. Brook's use of imagery helps a great deal to clarify the ideas he is articulating, particularly because, to me, those ideas are unfamiliar and difficult to grasp. Based on the drawings of time I have seen in other works, I'm not certain that diagrams would have expressed the idea nearly as effectively as his linguistic imagery does.

This reference and connection do not, crucially, mean that all acts are acceptable or that perpetrators of violence should not be held accountable for their actions: indeed, Brook insists that justice must be done, and that part of the work of the historian should be to insist on "acknowledging the responsibility of all for all" (8), which will, in my reading, necessarily involve seeking peaceful and equitable relations for all. Understanding historical trauma to exist only because of, and in simultaneity with, all other moments means, in essence, recognizing the conditional nature of all existence. Brook very clearly and persuasively expresses the link I am trying to articulate between temporal and historical modeling and political hope when he argues that: "[s]eeing ourselves as existing conditionally, in interdependence with all others, imposes the responsibility of acting in accord with that understanding: to show compassion toward all those others on whom we

depend” (6).² It is in this compassion, born of an understanding of alternate temporalities, that I locate the possibility of readers’ renewed – or entirely new – commitment to struggles for social justice.

Another useful alternative to conventional notions of time as diachronic and linear is offered by Sioux scholar and activist Vine Deloria, Jr. In his discussion of contemporary Native American philosophies of science – which he calls “the Indian perspective on knowledge” (45) – he talks about time as a culturally derived unit of measurement or organization rather than some innate, consistent element of lived experience. The model he describes is a much more organic, life-focused one than the standard image of a ticking clock counting measured seconds and minutes, the model which causes Maracle’s character Marilyn such anxiety and which also confuses or exasperates the protagonists of the three other novels I examine here. For him, time is an element of “a living universe” and its “basic pattern seems to be that of growth processes” (57). In other words, units of time are linked to the cyclic growth and maturation of particular organisms and entities. I take this to mean that insects’ time would be measured very differently from a tree’s time, which would use still different units than would human time. Deloria also talks about Natives’ awareness of “larger

² Donald Goellnicht rightly points out that this language of “we” and “those others” is problematic, particularly in the context of an effort to stress interdependence and mutual responsibility (Personal Communication). In the context of Brook’s work, these terms do have specific referents: ‘we’ are North Americans in the wake of 9/11, feeling “struck” and struggling with the urge to “strike back” and thus risk perpetuating an unending cycle of violence. ‘Those others’ refers to people and events that are, for reasons of deliberate ignorance and the power of conventional accounts of the past, not known or understood in any way that recognizes the multiplicity of truth and the complex histories – including of American colonialism and violence – that led to the attacks.

cycles of time, which can be described as the time jointly shared by all forms of life within a geographic area” (57), a concept which reveals a recognition of the interrelatedness of – and I would say, therefore a mutual responsibility between – all life forms. From his perspective, time is a real, tangible element of all lived experience and relationships among plants, animals, and spirits.

It is crucial to note that Deloria’s temporal model, while rooted in the cycles of growth and decay that make up the natural world, also explicitly recognizes the uses of culturally constructed, measured time. For example, he explains that some Tribal temporal models broke human life into many smaller elements (for example infancy, childhood, youth and so on), and used generational time as a way of measuring a family’s behaviour and responsibility. He explains the moral implications of generational time using the example of the ‘seven generations’ idea: “If a family was respectable and responsible, its members would be granted old age and a person could live long enough to see and know his great-grandparents and his great-grandchildren” (57).

Proceeding: Founding Concepts

Before I turn to my textual analysis, I will pause once more to lay out some of the key terms of my inquiry and the reasons I have chosen these four novels as the focus of my study. My analysis in each chapter is geared toward, and has emerged in response to, the specific text at hand, but in each case my reading is informed by certain underlying ideas and concepts, as well as the motivating questions I have detailed above. I will revisit and expand upon these

concepts as necessary throughout the thesis, but will briefly introduce them here as a way of orienting readers toward what lies ahead and signaling my priorities and investments.

Why Canadian Literature?

In what some see as a ‘post-national’ world, there is arguably no reason to focus exclusively on Canadian literature to perform my analysis of literature’s historical and temporal modelling. Particularly since I have largely moved away from my impulse to document ‘othered’ accounts of Canadian history, why shouldn’t I write on any number of authors and texts, regardless of their putative nationality? My answer is threefold: first, I am interested in drawing parallels and distinctions between texts that address a shared set of circumstances – dominant narratives of national history and identity, for example, and an at least somewhat overlapping reading public; second, because, in my view, however we theorize the issue, at ground level, our location within a nation still has material consequences for our daily and political lives. Our national location subjects us to a shared set of legal codes and restrictions, for one thing, and makes us more likely to encounter certain forms of popular culture than others. As I seek to develop a responsive critical reading practice, I am mindful of Donna Pennee’s assertion that the concept of the Canadian nation and that of literature are still recognized and relevant sites of discussion and experience, “not negligible” considerations and sites of intervention. Here I’m echoing Pennee’s claim that students’ “love of literature and an analytical fondness for Canada, strike me as

not negligible opportunities with which to work” (77). My interest in the political implications of literary representation and with the ways in which attentive reading might stimulate students and readers to engage in social activism makes the choice of Canadian texts a strategically useful one. Canada is where I live, read, and hope to continue my critical and pedagogical work, so it makes sense to focus my work on texts which will have the most obvious relevance – and which will provide on-the-ground opportunities for intervention – to as many readers as possible.³ If, following Thomas King’s argument in *The Truth About Stories*, the stories a nation tells itself have a tangible impact on the ways in which its residents live their lives, then it is worthwhile to attend to the literatures produced in and about a certain country.

Third and finally, my focus on Canadian texts works well to emphasize my argument about the ways in which fictional countermemory works to destabilize dominant narratives of national identity and thus to resist unjust power relations. Their critical perspectives on Canadian national mythology are messages I want to see taken up and expanded, so giving them attention here is also a way of giving them ‘airtime’ in critical discourses around literature and politics. The texts I am studying in this project use their alternate histories or their countermemories to undermine specific elements of dominant narratives of Canadian national identity. I am thinking of *Maclean’s* depiction of the ongoing

³ This is not to suggest that international issues and activism are not important. They are, in fact, crucial to a sense of broader ethical implication in world events. My concern, however, is to provide a clear, easily relatable context of critique and action for students and readers whose political awakenings are just beginning.

suffering inflicted by the so-called ‘Great War,’ the unflinching light shed by *Obasan* on the brutal consequences of the War Measures Act that suspended civil rights and gave rise to anti-Japanese hysteria, *The Diviners*’ reflections of the diverse struggles of minoritized Canadians, whether Native or female or otherwise ostracized within this allegedly happy pluralistic culture, and Maracle’s insistence in *Daughters are Forever* that the effects of colonial conquest and genocide continue to play out with horrendous consequences for contemporary lives. Taken together, with their shared national and political backdrop, the novels’ challenges to various elements of national mythology combine into a forceful critique whose impact speaks to the political force of literary representation and reading.

Historical multiplicity

I use this term to refer to the widely recognized fact that there may exist as many versions of history as there are tellers of that history. The novels I discuss here use techniques of multi-vocality, deliberate confusion and revision, and direct challenges to official history to signal their awareness that there is no single, true account of any set of events. As Barbara Godard points out in relation to *The Diviners*, these diverse and unconventional accounts of the past “undermine History [...] as body of knowledge dealing with the truth of fact” (Godard 44). In other words, as Morag puts it when she tries to narrate her own history, “There’s no one version. There just isn’t” (Laurence 373).

In my reading, though, historical multiplicity is more than a device used to insist on the impossibility of a single accurate representation of the past. It also works as a way to create a kind of composite truth that is at once less definitive and more ‘true’ than any single, closed narrative can be. In *The Diviners*, for example, when Morag and Jules share their families’ stories with each other they are also engaged in an activity of cooperative inter-cultural truth-making (see Laurence 161-4). As Jules relates his father’s stories of his family and Métis history, Morag’s parenthetical interjections provide a complementary counterpoint to the names and events he relates. Jules’ and Morag’s personal histories and mythologies don’t fully align or agree with each other, but their overlapping and their incongruities provide a rich, telling expansion on the tales we and Morag have already heard from Christie. Their story exchanges illustrate, as do the historical multiplicities presented in the other novels I am reading here, the processes of undermining and supplementation by which, as Daniel Coleman has said, “cumulative accuracy emerges from the contestations among the various versions” of a given story or history (Personal Communication). This ‘countermemory’ performs a crucial act of asserting the importance of previously unknown, ignored, or silenced experiences. These novels’ contributions of ‘speaking truth to power’ are one place that I locate the political possibility that opens when readers engage with the texts.

Temporal simultaneity

As I have argued above, these novels also undermine the notion of time as a linear, sequential, and bounded series of moments, favouring a more flexible and variable temporal model. Each of the texts features instances of what I call temporal simultaneity, as shifts in tense, interactions between historical and present-day characters, and readers' simultaneous experience of the texts' present and past narratives signal that past and present are sharing time rather than obeying the conventional rules of diachronic time. Through the device of temporal simultaneity, these texts thoroughly disrupt conventional notions of linear, progressive time, positing in their place a much more layered and complex conceptualization of time.

These disruptions can also take the form of characters' explicit engagement and commentary: in *The Diviners*, Morag questions her urge to put family photos into chronological sequence, challenging her own assumption that “there [was] any chronological order, or any order at all, if it came to that” (Laurence 14). Aunt Emily's assertion, in *Obasan*, that “the past is the future” (Kogawa 45), is unarguably important as a claim for history's continuing influence in the present. Like Morag's comment, however, it can also be read as a challenge to conventional conceptualizations of time as linear or diachronic, whereby all moments are understood as “existing in sequential separation” (Brook 8), and as advocating instead an allochronic or ‘simultaneous’ model of time. In these and other ways, Canadian fictions provocatively suggest that historical

events have profound and lasting impacts on present realities, and most intriguingly, that the past is, at some levels, *still happening*. I am arguing that history as it is conceptualized in Laurence's text is, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub describe the Second World War, "a history which is essentially *not over*, a history whose repercussions are not simply omnipresent [...] in all our cultural activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving*" (Felman and Laub xiv). In my reading, it is not only the consequences of the past that continue to play out in the present, but the events themselves, repeated experientially and intruding on contemporary life in very real ways.

Political possibility

Near the close of *Obasan*, Naomi reflects on the horrific facts of her family's history and Canada's mistreatment of its citizens of Japanese descent, and muses that "no doubt it will all happen again, over and over with different faces and names, variations on the same theme." In light of this thought, and the truth of her suffering, she wonders "Is there evidence for optimism?" (Kogawa 219). This project will argue that contemporary Canadian fiction provides precisely the 'evidence' Naomi longs for. By modelling alternate conceptualizations of time and history, and by placing readers in a position of direct engagement with the past, these novels create a moment of hope and possibility. Their oppositional models open the possibility that readers – at least willing, responsive ones – will develop a sense of implication in and responsibility to the histories they read, and a curiosity and openness to the effects

of alternate temporalities on others' contemporary experience. This sense of implication and openness offer, in turn, the hope of readers' renewed engagement with contemporary struggles for social justice. Sharing the belief that reformulating practices and understandings of history brings "the hope of encouraging a reformulation of the practices of politics" (Brook 8), I argue that contemporary fiction's historical remodelling contributes to the 'reformulation' of Canadian attitudes and culture. Each of my chapters closes with a consideration of the political implications of the reading I have performed, gesturing toward the potential implications of each text's modelling for readers' attitudes and practices as they turn outward to the world beyond the text.

Pedagogical interventions

I return to the question of political possibility in more detail in my conclusion, where I talk further about the importance of a politically engaged and responsive literary criticism and pedagogy. As I think about literature's potential contributions to reformulating Canadian culture, I'm increasingly aware that what I am really talking about are issues of pedagogy. I see my project as relating both to the kinds of teaching and learning that take place within formal institutional practices like the university teaching I hope to do and to the kinds of public education literature has long performed. Part of what I do in this project will be to look for ways to analyze and teach these texts that encourage students to read them with an eye for the 'lessons' they communicate and, crucially, the 'unlearnings' they encourage. Just as the four novels I am reading work to

challenge and undermine the deliberate blindness and forgetting that enable dominant groups and histories to maintain their sway, so must our reading and teaching practices deliberately and committedly chip away at what Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak would call the “sanctioned ignorance” that enables the maintenance of privilege and injustice.

Because of my location in institutionalized academics, and because of my belief in education’s social implications, I will inevitably be reading these texts and performing my analysis with reference to issues of pedagogy – how to approach them in the classroom, how to teach students to read toward justice, and how to encourage the kind of invested readings that make personal and social change begin to happen.

In many ways, this project is informed by the work of my MA thesis, which sought to articulate and demonstrate the tenets of what I called a ‘pedagogy for social justice.’ Drawing on work in critical and radical pedagogy, cultural studies, and the experimental pedagogies of University of Toronto professor Ronald Deibert, I argued that educators must work committedly toward the development of a teaching praxis that strengthens the links between classroom activity and movements for social justice. Part of my current project will be to investigate how literary critics and teachers can work in ways that support the goals I outlined in my earlier work. I want to use my analysis of these selected historical fictions to develop, demonstrate, and advocate what might be called an

‘ethically engaged’ or ‘politically informed’ approach to literary criticism, reading, and pedagogy.

As I write about my commitment to literary criticism and educational practices that work for social justice, I am conscious of the tendency of such work to emphasize a text’s worldly politics to the extent that it excludes or neglects its status as a creative work of literary representation. My concern here is to find productive, oppositional, and activating ways of reading literature in order to investigate what its distinct and multiple voices might have to teach us about notions of history, conceptualizations of time and the relationships between past, present, future, personal and cultural identification, and our affective and ethical relationships with the past. The danger is that I will shift from this openness into the sort of ‘mandate-driven’ criticism that imposes its own agendas on the texts it reads. I am mindful of Donna Pennee’s exhortation, following George Elliott Clarke, that we make sure our politically invested criticism and pedagogy are “also literary, not merely sociological...it is imperative that we are acculturated *by* the literature, and not the other way around, that the formal properties of the literature are understood to be as significant as and approached with the same care as the issues about which writers write, or about which some of their critics insist they write” (82-3).

In *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, LaCapra draws on psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concept of trauma, to evaluate the ways in

which cultural memory functions in the wake of disruptive, traumatic events.⁴

What, he asks, is the relationship between trauma, memory, and history? What responsibility do survivors and witnesses bear toward other victims, and toward a witnessing and memorialization of the traumatic past? How should historians and other ‘outsiders’ approach the representation of certain histories? LaCapra is hesitant to adopt modes of analysis and explanation that seemingly close off historical events and sublimate their “continued importance for the present and future” (5). He works instead toward ways of discussing history, memory, and artistic representation that remain attentive to “the hope of renewing imaginative possibilities and reopening the question of the future” (182), motivated – as am I – by a desire to conceptualize “historical understanding as a process that requires a critical exchange with the past with a bearing on the present and future” (6).

This project will not – and must not – become a programmatic ‘how to’ or ‘how not to’ of classroom activity; it will lean away from the tendency of my MA work to list appropriate pedagogical qualities and priorities – or, for that matter, to catalogue texts’ political ‘usefulness’ or ‘successes.’ Rather, it will work, I hope, through a combination of exemplary (as in, representative demonstrations of) close readings and interpretation and clear and insistent advocacy of the importance of critical and pedagogical work informed by these commitments. These historical fictions will be the site of analysis as I work on a literary pedagogy that is at once attentive to textual detail and nuance, and informed by a

⁴ I will return to this important concept and elaborate on psychoanalytical understandings of trauma in Chapter one’s discussion of Allan Donaldson’s *Maclean*.

commitment to human rights and social justice and a sense of readers' responsibility to what/who they read.

Proceeding: Charting a course

These, then, are the ideas and theorists that inform my approach to this project, and the questions that motivate my investigation of the four novels at hand: Allan Donaldson's *Maclean*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and Lee Maracle's *Daughters are Forever*.

The novels

I cannot claim that these four novels are somehow unique among all others or that these are the only contemporary Canadian fictions that re-narrate historical injustice or trauma and offer marginalized perspectives and challenging conventional historical and temporal models. Indeed, I can see the seeds of this temporal re-modelling at work in many of the texts I have read of late – David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*, George Elliott Clarke's *George & Rue*, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, and Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*, to name a few. While the insights and ideas offered up by each text aren't identical, there is some common ground that would have allowed me to perform similar readings and ask similar questions of a wide range of novels. To some extent, then, my selection of texts was arbitrary, but this should not be taken to suggest that they do not each offer opportunities to work through distinct ideas and issues. Because they provide a breadth of material for me to tackle, the differences among these novels are as important as the concerns they share.

Allan Donaldson's *Maclean*, the focus of my first chapter, provides an intimate portrait of the psychological impact of historical trauma. The story of a veteran of the First World War, it offers a readily accessible narrative that, nonetheless, challenges readers to question conventional ideas about time by showing how alternate temporalities look when they play out at the individual level. It is an ideal place to start my discussion as it is seemingly simple, its subject matter isn't unfamiliar to most readers, and its challenges to dominant temporal and historical models are subtle, at least at first read, all factors which make it a good start for those unfamiliar with the kind of reading and the ideas I am working with. I see it as a good first text in a course on alternate temporalities in literature.

I want to briefly note here, lest my later attention to Maracle and Kogawa's use of indigenous and Buddhist philosophies obscure the point, that Donaldson is doing this work from a subject position – white, male, Anglophone, academic, Canadian-born and educated – that is located squarely within the very mainstream, dominant culture his book so brilliantly challenges. The received tradition on which he draws in his writing is the same tradition he challenges, a fact that makes his work harder to the extent that he is bound by the conventions he challenges, and easier, as he is an 'insider' and thus perhaps allowed more room for critique while maintaining the respect of readers who might more readily dismiss, for example, Maracle's indigenous philosophy. Similarly, despite a massive amount of critical work on Margaret Laurence, I have yet to encounter

any that gives substantial thought to her identity as a white, Canadian-born and educated woman of Scottish and Irish ancestry. Her gender is granted significance because it is the element of her identity that falls on to the bottom end of binaristic power divisions. In contrast, much critical work on ‘ethnicized’ or ‘minoritized’ writers emphasizes their cultural and racial identities whether or not they are relevant to the discussion at hand, but white writers’ backgrounds and positions are not nearly so often remarked upon. It is not a coincidence that ethnic information is much more common in the cases of writers who are not white, Canadian-born, or British in ancestry: the vast majority of critical work on Kogawa and Maracle notes their racial and cultural identities, while I had to deliberately seek out such information on Laurence and could find nothing about Donaldson’s ethnic ancestry. Such silence around whiteness functions to maintain an invisible but powerful normativity to certain racialized identities in a similar manner to the way in which conventional ideas about history and time go unannounced and are taken for granted, whereas ‘Othered’ texts that draw on unfamiliar traditions are always noted. In the following work, I worry that I am at times complicit in this silence around whiteness. My intention has been to only mention a writer’s ethnic or other background when it is relevant to the concepts and events expressed in her or his writing.

In chapter two, I turn to Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*. While the novel focuses primarily on the maturation and musings of its protagonist, Morag Gunn, its focus on the historic displacement of her Scottish ancestors and on the

stories of the Métis told to Morag by her lover Jules Tonnerre provide a broader perspective on cultural or group history and trauma and introduce the question of cultural time, as opposed to John Maclean's deeply individual, psychological temporality. It is here that I expand upon some of the critical terms I introduce in this introduction, historical multiplicity and temporal simultaneity, and spend the most time investigating the kinds of literary challenges to historical narrative I have discussed above in reference to the critical work of White, LaCapra, and Hutcheon.

In *Obasan*, temporality is at once individual and psychological, as Naomi and her Aunt live a very different relationship to the past and future, and cultural, as Japanese-Canadians' shared history exerts a strong, continued influence over family and community living long after the end of the Second World War. Chapter three is where I begin to concertedly take up the question of literature's political ramifications, as I discuss the relationship between Kogawa's novel and contemporaneous movements for redress. I return to the political effects of literary representation and engagement in my discussion of Maracle's novel, and again in my Afterword.

Finally, in chapter four I turn to what is arguably the most distinct of the novels I investigate: Lee Maracle's *Daughters are Forever*. Unlike the other three books I am reading here, *Daughters* is not bound by or answerable to dominant Western temporal and historical models, and rather draws upon a discrete, well-established body of cultural knowledge that developed independently of these

ideas. The influence of Maracle's access to indigenous cosmologies and philosophies is not to be underestimated: it enables her to posit much more radical, complete conceptualizations of history and time than the other authors can. *Daughters are Forever* is a fitting choice for my final chapter as it represents a cohesive, sophisticated alternative to the dominant models so effectively critiqued and challenged by Donaldson, Laurence and Kogawa, who aren't able, or choose not to, move fully beyond critique to posit entirely new models. It provides one possible outcome to the questioning, rethinking, and re-modelling that these, and many other texts, invite readers to engage in.

I am not implying that Maracle's is a closed, finished project or that the text itself doesn't also pose provocative and urgent questions to its readers. Indeed, it is the springboard for my final reflections in my Afterword, where I gesture toward the 'next steps' we need to turn to once we have begun the work of empathetically engaging with alternate temporalities. This is where political hope can be found, and I close with a call for more concerted, committed efforts to develop critical and pedagogical practices that work to strengthen readers' engagement with and motivation to pursue contemporary struggles for social justice. It is through this kind of dedicated scholarly and activist work that we can begin, however gradually, to address Bob's question and work toward a future in which, someday, Canada's cultural celebrations might feel like happy occasions to everyone who shares time here.

“Somewhere out of the reach of reason”
Temporal Elsewheres and Possible Futures in Allan Donaldson’s
Maclean

“There’s a man somewhere,” Maclean said, “who says that all the time that ever was, and all the things that ever happened, are still here now, only in a different place.”

“I don’t understand that, John,” Ralph said.

“You say some funny things sometimes.”

(Donaldson 154-5)

John Maclean, for whom Allan Donaldson’s first novel is named, is a shell-shocked veteran of the First World War who, twenty-five years after his return to small-town New Brunswick, struggles with the lingering aftermath of his wartime experiences. He certainly suffers physically, his health failing as a result of his wartime gassing and his alcoholism, but the majority of his pain is psychological, as he struggles with the horrific memories that haunt every moment of his present life, even after more than two decades. Each day, for Maclean, is a tough battle against the suffering, isolation and mistreatment – both remembered and ongoing – that lead him to speculate, in his darker moments, that “There isn’t any decent life” (97).

This précis is not inaccurate, yet I fear that, in rendering such a simplistic, plot-based account of the novel, I have already misspoken. These are certainly the terms in which *Maclean* is generally discussed: each of its very few reviewers speaks very similarly of the text. One describes it as a book about a man “oppressed by the residual nightmare of war” (Writers’ Federation of Nova Scotia) and another signals that Maclean’s greatest challenge is that he is

“haunted by memories—of war, of his cruel father, of opportunities wasted and lost—and each moment is shadowed by his bleak history” (Writers’ Federation of New Brunswick). Again, I concur with these assessments, but only to a point. My concern is that these responses leave in place precisely those conventional notions of history – as completed and as linear - that I think *Maclean* challenges readers to reassess.

If my goal were only to focus on those ways in which history is incomplete, perhaps it would be enough to approach the book as being ‘about’ the continuing effect of the past on the present. Don’t reviewers’ descriptions of Maclean as haunted by his past or as “lost in memories” (Armitage) adequately account for the story’s movement between moments? Certainly, these descriptions *are* accurate, but only within the logic of the temporal and historical models that inform them. These responses are evidence of the degree to which dominant conceptualizations of time have become internalized and normalized throughout and beyond mainstream culture, at least in Canada which is the site of *Maclean*’s reception. This is both understandable and unfortunately limiting. Fortunately, recent critical work in cultural and literary theory, globalization and historical studies, has taken up a re-thinking of received understandings of time and history. For example, Catherine Gallagher, in her analysis of time-travel films of the 1980s and 1990s, notes that “our contemporary preoccupation with the subject of time” has given rise to literary and filmic experimentation with narrative form and chronology (12). Gallagher argues that such works “indicate a significant

expansion of our sense of plausible chronologies” and an “enlarged sense of temporal possibility” (11-12). This project aims to uncover the varied ways in which *Maclean*, like other contemporary fictions, reveals and encourages a similarly expanded sense of historical and temporal possibility.

The interchange between Maclean and Ralph with which I have opened this chapter is one of many elements of Maclean’s struggle to come to terms with the multiplicity of his temporal experiences, the intertwinedness of past and present that characterize his daily life. Throughout the single day during which the entire novel unfolds, he poses several challenges to conventional understandings of history and time: sometimes in the form of internal reflections, at other times by sharing his ideas with others. At still other times, he needn’t articulate those challenges at all: simply reading along is enough to demonstrate to readers that Maclean’s lived experience doesn’t comply with dominant ‘rules’ about how time works. Unfortunately, as signaled by Ralph’s response that “You say some funny things sometimes” (Donaldson 155), Maclean is generally not in company that will take these ideas seriously. Some readers and even reviewers may share Ralph’s dismissive attitude: most strikingly, W.P. Kinsella finds room in a brief review of *Maclean* to write off its protagonist as “just a bum and not in the least interesting” (“First Novels”). On the other hand, it is also possible that Maclean’s disconnect from those around him may encourage readers of his story to assume a position of empathetic engagement, and to see what it is *Maclean* has to offer to our “sense of plausible chronologies” (Gallagher 11). This chapter is an

initial inquiry into how the text might expand our understandings of how time works. The frequency of characters' reflections on questions of history and time, the novel's recurrent depiction of interactions and moments that touch on these themes, and its intriguing final passages certainly work to keep questions of time from fading from readers' minds as they engage with the story's many facets. The following discussion, then, will investigate *Maclelean's* representations of historical events, and in particular its configuration and treatment of time, in an effort to understand the text's particular conceptualizations of time and history – conceptualizations I refer to as historical and temporal models.

As I have mentioned, as of the time of writing no critical scholarship has yet been published on *Maclelean*: written responses to the book have been limited to a small number of reviews, only two of which diverge substantially from the official promotional copy circulated by its publisher. This lack can be attributed to the text's recent publication and its publisher's relatively low profile: it was, as a recent article explains, "one of two novels released by Vagrant Press in Fall 2005, its inaugural season" (Writers' Federation of New Brunswick). The forces of capital are most definitely in play: one sympathetic reviewer complains that since literary fiction has become "yet another lap dog leashed to commerce," even the most wonderful books published by small presses tend to "fall below the market and media radar within days of even glowing reviews -- if they're reviewed at all" (Bartley). He worries that *Maclelean* will be one such book, lamenting that it "well deserves the promotional heavy artillery that Halifax's modest Vagrant Press,

despite best intentions, can't possibly deploy" (Bartley). Despite these apparent limitations, however, *Maclean* has earned reviewers' acclaim, with *The Chronicle Herald* celebrating it as "a small, hard but brilliant gem of a book" and *The Daily Gleaner* urging that "readers should be extravagant in their praise for this fine novel" (qtd in Writers' Federation of New Brunswick). These few were not alone in their admiration of the novel: in February 2006, *Maclean* was among five finalists selected for the The Writers' Trust of Canada's Fiction Prize. This news generated more media attention, largely in articles noting the book's nomination and reiterating the now-familiar sentiments and phrasing of the novel's reviews and promotional material.

My reading of *Maclean* is in part an attempt to provoke further – and more thoughtful – discussion on the novel: in this case by focusing on its negotiations with history and time, and on the models it proposes for understanding them. As I try to find a reading strategy, or posture, that will enable me to productively engage with the text, I am drawn to Johannes Fabian's concept of coevalness, which I have described in my introduction. My reading in this chapter – and in each of the following ones – seeks to adopt a posture of empathetic coevalness with the texts' characters and their world. Because this text is so closely aligned with Maclean's perspective, it is easy – and sometimes unavoidable – to experience the narrative as though we are sharing time with him. Of course, readers' experiences cannot be in complete accord with his own: he has longstanding familiarity and knowledge of 'life as Maclean' that we are not privy

to, so we are often taken aback by, for example, the intrusions of memory when he may be quite accustomed to a constant jolting back and forth between present and past. Readers, justifiably, might take a while to get their bearings.

Reading *Maclean*

Maclean opens with a simple phrase that sets the scene and tone of our entry to the novel's world. It reads, "He found himself labouring along a narrow, mud road, deeply pitted and rutted by the passage of great columns of men and wagons" (Donaldson 1). While many novels' opening passages can be initially disorienting as readers seek to make sense of what we are witnessing, *Maclean's* is particularly so: the words 'he found himself' convey none of the certainty or solidity readers might take from a similar sentence starting with 'he was'; instead, we get an immediate sense of disorientation. So we, as readers, find ourselves just as he finds himself, immersed in his immediate experiences and viewing them from his perspective. We are shown the world around him as he sees it, taking in the road, the "thick entanglements of barbed wire" that run alongside it, and the "bare, treeless fields" beyond them, spotted with "the scattered remains of other entanglements." The level of detail is dense and immediate, but gradually our disorientation is explained as it becomes apparent that we are witnessing a dream. The clearest clue that this is not straightforward plot description comes as we read that "He became aware that other soldiers had taken shape...[and] he had the sense that they were men he knew" (1).

While some critics insist “that authors will attempt to guide us toward particular ethical positions on their characters' actions” (Phelan), I am not terribly concerned with assessing Donaldson’s intentions as author of this text, or what he ‘meant’ readers to make of Maclean’s perspective on his world. Such speculation is not particularly relevant to my concern with the effects and implications of readers’ negotiations with the text: it is more than sufficient to this project to attend to the workings of the text itself – its movements through and between times – as it is taken up in the moments of reading. As readers, we find ourselves intimately aligned with Maclean’s own experiential gaze: in a sense, we dream his dream with him. The third person narration could arguably have a distancing effect between readers and the events we witness, but I would contend that this is not the case with *Maclean*. Because the narrative perspective is focalized in Maclean’s experiences and his responses to them, and our discoveries of each are concurrent with his, the text’s narrative strategy encourages readers to develop an intimate relationship with the protagonist. This sympathetic positioning significantly affects readers’ relations with the text’s world and events and will also have important implications for my later discussion of the text’s interventions in debates about the concepts of history and temporality. For now, though, let us return to the opening scenes.

We are seeing Maclean’s dream, yet much of the description is clear, detailed, and stable-feeling: a hint, perhaps, that this scene of struggle and suffering is not unknown to the dreamer. The ditches, the stink that rises from the

ground, and the cold, hunched soldiers we read about are all tangibly present; what's less clear (to Maclean and thus to us) are the faces of the men he walks with. We learn that "although he leaned down to look up under the helmets, he couldn't make out their faces" (Donaldson 1). This fuzziness amidst the general clarity of the dreamscape is telling, and bears many possible interpretations. It is possible that the men's faces are indiscernible because their individual identities are not relevant to the dream's atmosphere of terror and dread, and would possibly detract from Maclean's sense of absolute isolation amidst the horror. It could also signal that the soldiers' personal identities are of no consequence to the machine of war, where, as Maclean's later memories show us, Death does not discriminate based on personal history, rank, or identity. Certainly, what we see of their wartime experiences, as well as Canada's later treatment of the veterans, suggests that these people have been seen as meaningless, irrelevant, and forgettable –in fact, as I will discuss later, the returned soldiers, with their scarred minds and bodies, represent something that dominant culture deliberately strives to forget. Indeed, shortly after their appearance alongside Maclean, the soldiers abruptly disappear, and he becomes aware that there is a presence behind him, chasing him down. "Then the curtain of rain seemed to part, and he beheld, suddenly close up, the thin-lipped, skull-white face, the sunken, always searching, malevolent eyes. He felt his bowels turning to water with fear. It was Death. Sergeant Death" (2). Maclean is alone, terrified, and chased by Death: even the rain that falls on him is "dead, straight...relentless and unpitying" (2). By this

point in the narrative, readers may suspect that much of this dream is based on firsthand lived experience rather than pure imagination. The rain, then, may figure for the suffering and injustice with which Maclean lived and continues to live. In a way, this dream is more than a haunting memory of war: it is a description of the world as experienced by Maclean. This hunch is affirmed as we move with him into his waking life.

On page three, we witness Maclean's awakening from this dream. This is a remarkable moment in the text for its understated and touching revelation of the bleakness and pain that characterize Maclean's living, whether awake or asleep. The physical description of his room echoes the colours and climate of his dream: the dream's sky and his room's ceiling are both grey and dull, and the dirt-grey and brown meltwater stain on the ceiling echoes the rain and muddy fields of the dream. In Maclean's waking life, however, it takes longer for us to perceive his emotional state. Whereas we were soon shown the terror of his dream, when he wakes there is no immediate signal of his feelings. In fact, the tone is calm and almost mundane - but this is not a passage to skim over. The language here is crucial to understanding the ongoing influence of Maclean's past on each aspect of his present life. In the waking section, the language and imagery are often those of war, violence, and suffering. To Maclean, the stain on the ceiling looks like "contour lines on a map" where the "water's successive advances" have given the heart of the stain a colour "dark as the colour of encrusted blood" (3). Particularly after having witnessed his dream, readers may wonder why he is disposed to

interpret even such mundane things in these terms, and how he knows so well the colour of encrusted blood (as on an uncleaned wound? as on a spill left to dry?). It is also significant that the figure of Death in Maclean's dream shares its name, and at least some physical characteristics, with a person Maclean knew during the war. 'Sergeant Death' was, as another character explains, "the guy [who] used to bury our dead men...and he loved it" (Donaldson 48). Sergeant Death's early appearance, with the revelation that he exists in both Maclean's dream world and his lived past, serves to underline the overlap between different levels of Maclean's reality, both in terms of the implication of past and present and in terms of the blurred divisions between 'reality' and imagination.

We also learn that Maclean is so intimately familiar with the wallpaper and layout of his room that he can quite accurately tell the time based on the sun's position on the paper's pattern. His knowledge of the room is so thorough that "he knew just where the light fell on those columns at every point in the cycle of the seasons. When he woke up and had got himself located, he could even tell to within a few minutes what time it was" (3). This indicates that he has lived in this room, and this dream-tinged, haunted, violent emotional space, for a long time. They are familiar to him, known, home. The space of his present life is familiar, I would suggest, partly due to his long occupancy and also because of its similarity to the space of the dream, which has somehow bled into and informed his present life. It is not yet clear if he is accustomed to, or pained by, the violent shade over

his vision. Is it permanently in place, or has it been brought on by his nightmare and the memories it conjures?

Another edifying glimpse into Maclean's past and character comes when we learn that his makeshift time-telling technique is entirely self-taught, not built from a familiarity with other time-telling devices. We learn that "He had seen a sundial once, but it had been knocked over and the pedestal broken, lying in a yard littered with the wreckage of some rich family's life" (3). I will return to this mention of 'wreckage' in a moment; first, the broken sundial and Maclean's private form of time-telling wallpaper need some attention. The images of the wallpaper's columns and the smashed sundial are closely linked in the passage's description of Maclean's waking world, and both are discussed in relation to the measurement and passage of time. For Maclean, the wallpaper is a reliable way of orienting himself in time; on the other hand the sundial, designed and intended to be used as a time-piece, is broken, lying amidst the rich family's other trappings and decorations. Maclean's experience of time is a deeply internal, personal one, and conventional tools and measurements are shown to be insufficient or unnecessary to his experience. When he glances at his watch, he already knows what time it is: he uses it a handful of times in the text, always when making decisions that involve others' schedules, yet its appearance signals to readers just how irrelevant it is to Maclean's own experience of his world. Later on, as he deliberates on whether to pawn the watch in order to afford a gift for his mother, Maclean's hesitation has nothing to do with the watch's usefulness as a tool for

keeping track of time; rather, he hesitates because he has carried it with him since the war as a sort of “good-luck piece.” During the war, “He always looked at it before they were going into danger, and he used to sit holding it when they were being shelled” (120). In his current life, we know that he looks at it before getting up to face the day and as he enters the pawn shop; in other words, as he heads into the danger of the public world beyond the familiarity – if not comfort - of his own psychological world. The watch, in this text, is a source of security and a means of improving his present and mending his past by reaching out to his mother. The time-pieces in this text, and the meanings and events associated with them, signal the unconventionality of Maclean’s negotiations with ‘regular’ time and memory.

As Maclean remembers the broken sundial he once saw, we learn that he has seen the “wreckage” of people’s private lives and domestic spaces, but again, as with the blood-like colour of the stain and the setting of his dream, we are not given details of when and how he gained this knowledge. We know that he has witnessed turmoil and the aftermath of trauma, and through the waking scene we are beginning to sense that he still lives through and in those experiences. Crucially, the passage about the sundial also creates an explicit distinction between him and this wealthy family: his self-taught ability to read the sundial of sunlight on the walls of a tiny, leak-stained room stands in clear contrast to the family that might once have pondered their sundial in the garden of a home filled with the mahogany furniture, damask curtains, china dishes and gilt-framed mirrors that Maclean only saw in ruins. As the scene continues to unfold, we see

that his room is “hardly bigger than a cell” and sparsely furnished (3). As his gaze takes in the room, we can compare his personal geography with that of the wealthy family. This memory, appearing amidst the modest surroundings of his waking life, emphasizes his material poverty. Maclean’s lack of money and ration coupons are of tremendous importance to the story, as the entire narrative centres on his determined, bloody, day-long struggle to find enough money for “A bottle of wine for himself and a birthday present for his mother” (12). At the same time as he struggles to survive and suffers in his marginal existence, Maclean also carries a wisdom born of his earlier experiences. He is well aware of the tenuousness of wealth and privilege: he has, after all, seen their wreckage firsthand. Perhaps this insight offers some solace to him as he fights and scrounges to get through his day; it certainly adds to his complexity and reminds readers that, however materially poor he is, he is no less intellectually and emotionally deep than anyone else. At any rate, as Maclean wakes and takes in his grim little room, he remembers that he will need his mother’s present by the following day.

The prose in this section is characteristically spare –there is not a single unnecessary word in the whole novel – and also characteristically rich and suggestive. In these first few dense pages, we learn much about Maclean’s history and psychology, and seeds are planted that will reveal his, and the novel’s, recurrent concerns. While these concerns are broad ranging, the text’s negotiations with concepts of time and history, signalled early on, are one of its major focuses.

When I suggested above that *Maclean* challenges readers to re-think conventional notions of time and history, I did not mean that the text or its characters consistently or explicitly advocate such contemplation. While some of the text's challenges do take the form of characters' direct commentary, many of its interventions lie in the workings of the text. Each of the various ways in which *Maclean* negotiates with these concerns can be seen as an intervention in the ways in which Maclean and his reader/companions perceive time. I have identified three key ways in which *Maclean* articulates its contemplations of time and history: these are narrative form, direct commentary, and the hope of elsewhere.

Narrative Form

As I have mentioned above, the text's narrative approach positions readers in intimate proximity with Maclean, a position that encourages a sympathetic relationship with him. The narrative strategy of linking our experiences to Maclean's also works to ensure that our experience of his day plays out in step with his own: we are never privy to information that he does not also receive, nor do we learn of events before he goes through them. This technique very effectively aligns us with Maclean's perspective on the world around him: thus immersed in his experience on this day in 1943, we readers find out his name only as he hears it spoken, and we discover his physical appearance when he confronts his reflection in the mirror. Crucially, this perspective also ensures that our temporal experience meets up with Maclean's: when he is suddenly plunged into

memory, so are we; when a voice pulls him into the narrative present, we too are pulled.

As I have suggested, this sense of immersion in Maclean's experience, and of the immediacy of the text's events, is unhindered by the fact that the novel is narrated in third person and in the past tense. *Maclean* is by no means unique in this regard, but it is nonetheless important to note that, while the story is written as though it is 'over,' readers experience it as ongoing. This little feat of imaginative fusion is just one of the ways in which literature persistently overcomes what are presumed to be unalterable 'facts' about the working and boundaries of time. Further, in this text, these imaginative subversions are repeated at intensifying levels throughout the reading experience, both within the text itself, through Maclean's experiences, and beyond it, in the relationship between reader and text.

Maclean's plot is structured around the course of a single day in John Maclean's life. The text opens as he wakes in the morning, takes us through the seemingly mundane events of his day, and closes in the darkness of nightfall. In the sense that it follows the linear progression of events through time, the text holds very strongly to conventional ideas and techniques. What complicates and fleshes out this seemingly tidy and potentially restrictive structure is the repeated occurrence of memory sequences, the explicit presence of the past as part of Maclean's day. These frequent movements between narrative past and present interrupt the text's steady movement forward in time, presenting moments of

temporal instability which call into question – and in fact defy – the very conventions (of forward-moving, linear time) upon which the narrative relies for its coherence. It is worth stressing that this text, with its challenges to the fixity and teleological movement of time, is structured in a way that clearly demonstrates that the narrative of a single day can also be the narrative of a man's entire life. The span of a day can include moments encompassing many more moments than it is conventionally thought to contain. The use of memory and dreams to flesh out a temporally restricted story is not unusual, but in this text, with its explicit and repeated attention to the workings of time, it is significant as more than a narrative technique and can be read as contributing to the novel's commentary and historical modelling. The temporal boundaries of a calendar day are at the very least permeable, and possibly even insignificant when compared with the complex workings of memory, the slipperiness of time, and the movements of the human imagination. Time is privately perceived, and for Maclean, a day can hold many years.

As my discussion of the opening dream/waking scenes has suggested, this text shows the borders between past and present, remembered versus actively lived experience, to be highly permeable, at the very least. Just as the colours and images of his dream carry over into Maclean's view of his room, the past that forms his memories also plays an active role in his engagement with the present. For example, because he has run out of ration coupons and is short on money, Maclean decides to put in a couple of hours in his cousin's livery stable in order

to earn some money to buy his mother's gift. Entering the stable triggers thoughts of the owner's father, old Nate Gartley, and as Maclean's mind follows the path of memory he recalls that old Nate was killed by a horse that kicked him "straight into the guts so that he died right there on the stable floor just as if he'd been shot" (16). The following paragraph begins: "The shells came out of nowhere all together" (17). This abrupt shift may take readers aback, making them confused and disoriented. At first, readers might think that the shells are flying into this quiet stable in 1943 rural New Brunswick – but as the events unfold it becomes evident that the shells originally, and literally, fell elsewhere. They are being re-experienced by Maclean in such an intense way that the time of the shelling seems to overlap with or intrude upon that of Maclean's stable chores. Over the course of this paragraph we learn that "a whole battery must have loaded up and fired all at once" and that "a dozen or more [are] killed on the spot, a lot more wounded" (17). Eventually, we come to understand that this is an element of Maclean's past, conjured by some trigger of memory and circumstance.

Donaldson's choice not to signal the shift between Maclean's present and his past allows readers to share in Maclean's sense of being overcome by memory, or shifted into another temporal moment. The text is full of moments like this one which serve not only to deepen readers' understanding of Maclean's experience, but which also serve to highlight our reliance, as readers, upon conventional chronologies and narrative devices to signal temporal transitions. It is never suggested that these movements, in themselves, are troubling to Maclean:

he is, after all, well aware of the linkedness of supposedly discrete historical moments. In contrast, readers' disorientation emphasizes our investment in the very conventional models of time that Maclean throws into question. The text is urging us to rethink these investments and assumptions and to consider how our relationship to past and present might shift if we were to take up a different position of engagement with them.

Shortly afterward, Maclean is grooming a horse and offers her some oats:

...he got some oats and let her eat them out of his hand while he began working down the other shoulder.

Maclean didn't hear him until a board creaked under his foot as he crept the last step and his hand fastened on the back of Maclean's shirt and pulled it tight against his throat, hauling him up until only his toes touched the floor. (20)

Again, the shift across temporal moments is not signalled. Donaldson gives neither introductory comments – 'Suddenly he was a child again ...' – nor other, non-verbal cues such as a line dividing the sections, or a dingbat to signal the narrative's movement between present and past. Apart from a few moments when Maclean actively remembers people and events, the past always enters the narrative present in this way, making unbidden, unpreventable incursions into Maclean's experience. These moments in the stable provide our initial experiences of what seems to be a common occurrence for Maclean. For the rest of the novel "memories invade him" (Bartley), or he moves into memory, as triggers in his present life spark his movements back in time. We as readers become more adept at identifying Maclean's movement between memory and

contemporary events, but they always occur unannounced and are recognized only after the transition has occurred.

On the surface, what I am describing as movements through time can be explained as nothing more than the effectively expressed workings of memory. In these passages, one can argue, Maclean is simply recalling moments from his past as elements of his present life prompt associations with these memories. Their sudden appearance and un-remarked integration with the text's narrative serve to signal the intensity and immediacy of these memories, the extent of their ongoing impact on Maclean, and nothing more. If we need further explanation, their suddenness and intensity can be attributed to Maclean's shellshock and perhaps to his frequent drinking. To my mind, each of these arguments is reasonable. The text certainly demonstrates the power of memories, their forceful impact even years later, and the way in which a sudden memory can seem to jerk us away from our immediate surroundings and momentarily consume us. Certainly, much of what Maclean goes through during the novel's day lines up with clinical and anecdotal explanations of the effects of what used to be called shellshock and is now commonly diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. I do not suggest that these interpretations are untrue or invalid; indeed, one of Donaldson's many accomplishments is that he has created such a compelling, nuanced fictional account of the way in which past trauma can play out in the ongoing life of the survivor. I would not disagree with anyone who sought to argue that *Maclean* is an eloquent depiction of life with PTSD. But, as I have suggested, these

explanations are insufficient to the text's scope and complexity. I will return to the insufficiency of psychological explanations in a moment, but will first expand upon the symptoms, effects and significance of PTSD as explained in Cathy Caruth's work on trauma and memory.

As Caruth defines it, "post-traumatic stress disorder reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control" (58). In her terms, "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). We can see examples of such 'uncontrolled repetitive' intrusions and 'taking over' throughout *Maclean*, including in the scenes I have described above as Maclean works in his cousin's stable. Caruth notes, in fact, that "[t]he experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century" (11). Maclean the war veteran is, in a sense, an emblematic figure, and his story can be seen as the story of a generation of men whose lives were irrevocably altered by their experience of the horrors of war.

Caruth expands upon conventional definitions of PTSD and argues that it is, in fact, not so much the 'brush with death' that so haunts victims of trauma, but that they are in a sense *more* troubled by their survival of this encounter. She

argues that “trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience” (58). Her discussion here brings to mind Maclean’s dream that opens Donaldson’s novel: he is surrounded by ruin and destruction, marching among faceless soldiers, perhaps the fallen and forgotten. In the dream, the only figures he recognizes are himself and Sergeant Death, who is chasing him down. We learn as he wakes that he escapes Death, both literally (he has returned home from the war) and in this later, belated experience of the war, by waking from the dream. Drawing on Freud’s writings on the “returning traumatic dream” so common in victims of “what were called war neuroses in the wake of World War I” (59), Caruth describes the moment of waking from such dreams as a moment of double shock. Not only does the dreamer suffer the shock of having had the trauma return unbidden, but it is also a shock to find that one has survived this encounter (64). I am not certain that Maclean experiences this shock upon waking, but it is clear that his psychological experiences align very closely with trauma and PTSD as Caruth describes them. The past’s recurrent intrusions into his conscious and dreaming lives can be understood as another of the text’s examples of the presence of the past.

Her discussion of trauma and memory becomes most stimulating when Caruth turns to an evaluation of how these emerging understandings might affect

our ways of thinking about, and telling, history. She argues that the “bewildering encounter with trauma” and the impossibility of full comprehension of traumatic events open “the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference).” Instead, by conceiving of history as a collection of traumas “we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not” (11). The notion of history as a belated act of sense-making – albeit an admittedly and necessarily incomplete one – is a compelling one, and particularly relevant for this project, with its focus on novels that renarrate historical events from marginalized perspectives. This formulation offers productive ways to move beyond reviewers’ neat and limiting accounts of *Maclean* as a text about haunting memory.

While Caruth’s discussion is compelling and clearly applicable to Maclean’s situation, as I suggested above, readings that explain Maclean’s movements through time as ‘only’ the workings of traumatic memory or the effects of shellshock overlook the text’s contributions to discussions of the workings of time and history. They risk a reductive reading that side-steps the deeper thinking the text prompts us to undertake. *Maclean*’s historical and temporal models offer potentially fruitful ways of understanding our relationship to different moments in time, and should not be overlooked simply because there is an easier explanation at hand. Put simply, I propose that we take the text

seriously and let its account of Maclean's experience shape our interpretation of its events and ideas. Because we only know the novel's world through Maclean's experience of it, the narrating voice, which speaks from Maclean's perspective, is our only way into this reality. Because what we know as reality is experiential, and because the text positions us in intimate relation to Maclean's lived experience, part of what we will have to do if we seek to understand the workings of time within the text will be to treat his experiences as, for lack of a better term, 'real.' I am informed here by Wayne Booth's concept of "responsible readers" who carefully "listen" to literature. Booth uses "listen" "to cover all serious engagement with stories" ("Why"). With respect to historical and temporal models, this serious engagement will mean, for example, treating our moments of disorientation not only as the effects of clever rhetorical strategies, but also as responses to tangible (textual) events that may in fact warrant such confusion. Under this logic, we are disoriented not simply because Donaldson has not shifted tense or inserted a line of dashes between paragraphs, but because we have moved through time to another moment in history, and such movements can be disorienting – particularly to those who are not open to making them or who are not accustomed, as Maclean has become, to inhabiting both past and present. Under this logic, past and present are inseparable, or at the very least, the boundaries between them, if any, are highly permeable and easily crossed if we're in a mental or emotional state that enables us to do so.

Another way of saying this is to argue that Maclean encourages us to experience and conceptualize time as allochronic rather than diachronic.⁵ I use these terms in keeping with Timothy Brook’s definitions of “diachronicity as the conceptualization of all moments of time as existing in sequential separation, and allochronicity as the conceptualization of all moments of time as simultaneously present” (Brook 8). If we accept that the text’s events unfold over the course of a single calendar day, which Maclean’s watch tells him is Saturday, August 21, 1943 (Donaldson 4), and also accept my challenge to take Maclean’s experiential reality seriously, then we must conclude that many parts of Maclean’s day take place in temporal moments beyond the named and numbered date of the narrative’s present. The day that plays out in the text involves moments in the text’s present year, a visit to Westminster Cathedral during the First World War, his return to Canada in 1918 after being deemed “no longer healthy enough to be killed” (99), and many childhood memories including “the day the old Queen died,” which my knowledge of other historical narratives tells me refers to Queen Victoria’s death in 1901 (25). In this text’s time-scape, one day is all these days, and more. This is the case not just because memories occur in the present, and thus past experiences are ongoing at an experiential and perceptual level, but also because history, as *Maclean* shows us, is not clearly bounded nor is time unidirectional. As my partial listing indicates, these movements in time do not

⁵ Another fruitful way to conceptualize time in *Maclean* is to conceive of time in this text as similar to tightly woven cloth: when the course of one temporal experience coincides or overlaps with some element of another, Maclean’s experience heads off along another thread, following that one until another such moment of contact or coincidence occurs.

follow any discernible linear chronology or sequence. When all moments are simultaneously present, one's movement among them occurs in response to shared sensual or emotional links rather than some preexistent organizing structure. In Maclean's case, the connections that spark movement through time are most often based on feelings of fear and danger, social isolation and intolerance, or shame.

I should briefly qualify that Maclean's movements are not exclusively from one painful moment to another: Maclean spends a visit to his sister Alice moving between their stilted conversation and his more pleasant memories of childhood picnics and his first sexual relationship. Although these moments are tinged with the sense of loss, regret and shame that characterize all his experience, Maclean spends much of this time savouring the moments he spent with Elsie Skadget, relishing the softness of her body and the loudness of her laugh (73-79). Interestingly, Maclean enters this moment through a comment Alice makes about "that awful flu" that killed so many, including Elsie Skadgett (73). His entry into this time, despite having been occasioned by Alice's bleak reminder, is through a happy moment on a bright morning, where we see him riding with Elsie in a farmer's wagon, thrilled to be with this girl "he had decided he was in love with" and enjoying the feeling of "her hip soft against him" (74). Maclean makes a positive connection this time, and it is only after going through many peaceful, happy teenage awakenings that he arrives at the moment of Elsie's death. In allochronic time, history is organized according to sensual and emotional

connections, and even for the most deeply traumatized individuals, this connective power is not limited to negative experiences.

Direct commentary

I have referred several times to the fact that I see characters' and narrators' comments as offering more than insights into the characters' concerns or the novels' themes: if taken seriously, I contend that they offer suggestive commentary and put forward alternate ways of conceptualizing time, history, and the links between past and present, present and future. For many readers, this second element of *Maclean's* historical modelling may be the most provocative: there is something arresting about hearing a character openly speculate about unconventional flows of time or the unreliability of history.

The text's first instance of direct commentary takes place while Maclean stands in line at the high school to collect his new ration books. His presence seems to offend or distress the woman in front of him, who looks at him "as if she might be getting ready to throw up" and moves away (27). Possibly to deflect feelings of hurt, anger, and shame, Maclean detaches himself by looking around the hall in which they stand. He reflects that:

The walls of the hall were lined with pictures of graduating classes...He himself was in none of them, though somewhere there would be one that a ghost of him might be in, waiting to step out, as the group dissolved, into the ghost of the life he had never had. (27)

Maclean's musings here are filled with regret and bitterness at the way his life has unfolded, as well as a stirring sense of the complexity of time. These brief comments are intriguing, particularly his speculation that ghosts can inhabit – and

step beyond - photographs, and his idea that lives unlived (dead lives, perhaps, or unrealized potentiality) are also ghosts. Through Maclean's reflections, the world of the photograph is brought into an active relationship with the time-scape of its viewers. Further, if a photograph can simultaneously preserve the 'present' of the moment it represents *and* hold the alternate presents that might have come to be – in this case, the ghost of Maclean's high school graduation – then the moment of viewing a photograph is also a meeting of multiple temporal moments. Multiple pasts come into contact with a present which is also multiple. J. M. Coetzee has argued, with respect to the writing of W.G. Sebald, that the photographs that appear in his work are "a kind of eye or node of linkage between the past and the present, enabling the living to see the dead and the dead to see living, the survivors" (qtd. in Remmler 2). The idea that photographs are a 'node of linkage' can be helpfully applied to *Maclean's* treatment of photographs, but needs expansion to include contacts that take place between the living and the not-yet-lived, or between a person and his or her other possible outcomes.

Later on, during his visit to Alice, Maclean creeps into her living room and once again confronts photographs representing moments in his past. This time his reflections are more suggestive, giving us a clearer idea of the way he has come to imagine the workings of time and history:

He looked back at the studio photo of Alice. How pretty she was!...It was as if there was another person altogether still living somewhere there in the past who had nothing to do with the fat, sweating old woman with her straggly hair who was in the kitchen making cookies. Or as if maybe, somewhere along some other branch of the road of time, there was an Alice this age, but not this Alice – an Alice who had been let go

to high school and had married Harry Noles, who had not gone to the war, not been blown to pieces at Festubert. And another John Maclean too who had not gone to the war either because he had finished high school and had better things to do with his life than join the army and fight for the god-damned English. (94)

The bitterness and resentment in this passage are unmistakable, yet Maclean is articulating so much more than his own frustrated hopes. As we follow his thoughts, he opens to us the possibility of an unconventional, richly textured, conceptualization of time. What if we were to live as though there are younger versions of us “still living somewhere” in the past? What would that mean for our relationships to historic events, for example, or for our understanding of the relationship between past and present? What experiences that we work to contain as ‘memory’ might take on renewed prominence in our individual and cultural psychic landscapes and present reality? I am even more intrigued by Maclean’s notion that, along other branches in the road of time, there exist multiple simultaneous presents, lived by the different versions of ourselves that have developed according to the paths we’ve taken. While visiting his mother, Maclean relives his fear and terror of his father’s violent and controlling temper, witnessing the man’s shooting of a raccoon and her young kits, their corpses intended as “a warning to anything else that dared invade the sacred territory of Angus Maclean” (Donaldson 138). Back in the text’s present, Maclean questions his mother’s choice to stay with Angus rather than protect herself and her children from him. “Why didn’t she take Alice and him and go back across the river to her

own people?” he wonders. In their care, he thinks, he and Alice “could have gone through school. They could have had another life” (139).

Catherine Gallagher characterizes the plots of time-travel films *Back to the Future* and *The Terminator* as ones of ‘undoing.’ In this genre, characters travel back to some crucial moment in time and alter the course of events, “sending history off in another direction” so that the characters’ present is also altered (Gallagher 11). She explains this understanding of time using the shape of the letter Y: the branches at the top of the shape represent the “possible futures” that may develop from the course of events that is the Y’s stem (Gallagher16). This figure offers one useful way to visualize the model of time Maclean is contemplating in the passage above, though his recurrent speculation about the possible courses his and others’ lives might have taken may require a more elaborate structure, perhaps an infinite number of Ys whose branches serve as stems to each other.

However we visualize it, Maclean’s sense of time is decidedly out of step with that shared by most of the people around him, whose perspectives seem to be in line with conventional Western notions of history as diachronic, linear, and teleological. While his branching time is built on a linear temporal model, its multiple presents and pasts introduce a simultaneity that conventional temporal models do not allow for. At several points in the day, he attempts to engage others in conversation about the directions their lives have taken, and the alternate futures that might have emerged had they made different decisions or taken

different actions. His friend, the thoughtful Henry Dade, is the only person who will take on these ideas with him: in one of their long talks Maclean and Henry decide that if “even one little thing happened differently, then all sorts of other things would happen differently too... Children might have been born. Other lives lived” (81). Henry, in fact, is the “man somewhere” to whom Maclean refers in his comment to Ralph about the possibility that all time still exists “in a different place” (154-55). In Maclean’s talks with his friends, however, the men fall short of engaging with their direct experiences, and their exchanges seem to be restricted to a theoretical rather than an intimately personal investigation of other possible futures. Ralph, as we’ve seen at the opening of this chapter, is entirely unreceptive to this line of thinking, possibly because it is unfamiliar and complex, possibly because he finds it too painful to consider that his past, which already hurts him enough in the present, might still be ongoing, and possibly because its challenge to normative thought is unsettling.

At Alice’s house, Maclean emerges from yet another trip into the past and, seated at Alice’s kitchen table while she bakes busily, he takes the risk of inviting Alice to join him in his temporal reimagining. He poses several interventions in realities of their past, speculating first about the employment he could have found had he not been pulled from school, and then moving to a speculation about Alice’s own actions. Her irritation, which has been simmering throughout his visit, surges when Maclean bluntly insists that she “should have married Harry Noles.” If she had asserted herself, walked out of the family home and lived her

own life, he argues, she could have “had a good life” (98). Beyond her anger at Maclean’s presumption, Alice also seems to be profoundly uneasy with his refusal to accept the events of the past and to leave them there. The incompatibility of their perspectives on time and history is abundantly clear, as she deflects and interrupts his speculations by insisting that “it was a long time ago,” sharply telling him he “can’t even talk sense,” and asking “what’s the sense of bringin’ all this stuff up after all these years?” (96; 97; 98). Perhaps because he knows his response would not make sense to her, Maclean leaves this question dangling, unanswered. Mentally, though, he acknowledges that he is compelled to attempt this conversation by “some need or other – perhaps some such craziness as a notion that just by talking to Alice, he could take them back to that fork in the road of time where they could take the turn toward the lives they ought to have had” (95).

Maclean’s reference to “the lives they ought to have had” can be read in many ways, with provocative implications for the broader ideas of history and time at play in the book.⁶ Is he gesturing toward the idea that people’s lives are pre-ordained in some way, and that his and his sister’s have somehow deviated from their intended paths? Is he arguing that a life’s unfolding is not random but somehow tied into a larger destiny or plan? Do his words suggest the existence and involvement of a higher power, and if so has that higher power somehow failed him? In my reading, based on what I know of Maclean from his reflections

⁶ I am grateful to Donald Goellnicht for pointing out the possible implications of this statement.

elsewhere in the text, his use of the word ‘ought’ does not indicate his investment in the notion of a benign god, or any god for that matter, who should have protected him from his current fate. While I think he does have trouble reconciling himself to the idea that history and time are utterly cruel and uncaring to individual suffering, I also don’t think that his conceptualizations of time and history align well with the kind of “moral universe” Vine Deloria, Jr. describes, where part of a person’s purpose in life is to find the proper path they are to follow in order to maintain harmony within the broader universe.⁷ Rather, I see his words here to be conveying his deep sense of grief and bitterness at how his life and Alice’s have unfolded. He is angry and resentful about the experiences he has had to endure both during the war and upon his return, and the ways in which these unchosen forces have constricted his ability to choose between forks in the road of his history and time. Similarly, he sees Alice’s current life as inferior to the one she might have lived had she been able to make different choices in the face of their father’s abuses and her own timidity. I think he is partly frustrated at the limitations of individual will in navigating time and shaping one’s history – a feeling that can only be magnified by the daily indignities and trials he faces in doing such simple things as affording to meet his basic needs or navigating the town without enduring abuse and derision. He is also, of course, deeply traumatized by the intrusions of external violence which so thoroughly and irreparably interrupted what he thinks would have been the normal, healthy

⁷ I will expand upon Deloria’s philosophies of time in chapter four.

development of his life. Here, then, lie some of the limitations of his temporal and historical models. While there are limitless potential paths one can take through life and time, this does not mean that a person has anywhere close to full control over which turns one takes, and when.

One of my goals in this reading has been to approach the text from a position of empathy with Maclean in order to discover what his perspective can offer to our understandings of time and history. It's important to clarify that this doesn't necessarily mean that Maclean's is the only – or even the preferable – way of dealing with memory and the past. Alice's resistance to Maclean's speculations, and her stubborn insistence that, whatever she might have done differently, "I do have a good life" (98), probably represent her own survival strategy. It's possible that this is her considered perspective, drawn from her own reflections and experience. It could signal a desire to refute the possibly overwhelming responsibility she might bear if she were to acknowledge her own potential to make changes in her life. As Daniel Coleman points out, for Alice and people like her, "Insisting on the closedness of the past is a way of resigning herself to the inevitability of the present." In other words, there is a link between "the *willingness* to re-enter the past [and the] willingness to make different decisions in the present" (Personal Communication). In this way, *Maclean* shows us the deep inter-relations between personal psychology and conceptualizations of temporality. Not only is the experience of time subjective, but one's intellectual understanding of it is also a product of one's personal state. Unlike Maclean's

urge to revisit the past and imagine alternate futures, Alice's tendency – one seemingly shared by the bulk of characters – is to let the past rest and to focus on seeing the best in her current life, containing the past in order to preserve balance in the present. As Naomi comments in *Obasan*, “What is past recall is past pain” (Kogawa 48): for many, forgetting – or at least resisting memory – is an act of self-defence. This doesn't imply that she's come to terms with the past, but it might enable her to move beyond the grasp of her past, something Maclean seems to struggle with.

Dominick LaCapra argues that people who experience trauma tend to react in two basic ways: either by 'acting-out' or by 'working-through.' To an extent, his ideas might be fruitfully applied to an analysis of Maclean's and Alice's argument about how best to deal with the past. While this kind of psychoanalytic evaluation doesn't fully account for the temporal modelling I see in *Maclean*, it is very useful for its discussion of the ways in which experience can affect an individual's relationship to time. In acting-out, LaCapra explains, an individual's actions often fall into a pattern of repetition: such people “have a tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it.” Maclean moves between temporal spaces, so he doesn't fit exactly into this model, but LaCapra might be describing him when he notes that, for those who are acting-out, traumatic “occurrences intrude on their present existence, for example, in flashbacks; or in nightmares” (LaCapra 2). I think Alice and *Maclean*'s many reviewers would not hesitate to put Maclean into this

category. Alice's responses seem to demonstrate an at least partly successful process of working-through: her refusal to engage in Maclean's speculations and re-visitations of the past might be characterized as her efforts to "gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present, and future" in ways that help her to "engage in life in the present, to assume responsibility" (2; 5). Clearly, while LaCapra's concepts are helpful and resonant, I do not think that they are the best – or, more crucially, the only – ways in which readers might make sense of *Maclean's* negotiations with history. This text, as a work of creative writing, can be read more meaningfully than as merely a study in post-traumatic psychology. However, the idea that trauma and memory can affect one's conceptualization of and relationship with time is becoming central to my discussion of this text, and will continue to inform my analysis in later chapters.

Maclean's interactions with people who think as Alice does often undermine his developing understanding of time: as I've noted above, he starts to suspect the "craziness as [his] notion that just by talking to Alice, he could take them back to that fork in the road of time where they could take the turn toward the lives they ought to have had" (95). This is one of *Maclean's* most heartbreaking moments. Maclean, lonely and marginalized as he is, dismissed as a failure by most of the culture around him, including his sister, is resolutely striving, in the only way he can conceive, to save those he loves from their unfairly difficult lives. They, however, are unable or unwilling to connect with him or his vision of alternate possibilities, and he remains, in their company,

alone and misunderstood. Later that evening at the nursing home, Maclean delivers a modest and hard-earned gift to his mother, and inadvertently learns that Alice is throwing a birthday party the next day from which he has been deliberately excluded. He is not surprised, as “he had passed out of their world a long time ago” (137), but he is hurt, and he is angry. He reflects on the difficulties of his day, which he spent struggling to scrape together enough money to buy his mother’s gift, and he suffers profound hurt and self-doubt. Crucially, at this moment his emerging reconceptualization of time is also thrown into question:

All that fuss about the present. Working. Getting robbed. Nearly getting killed on the god-damned railroad bridge. Why? For what? Perhaps the same insane notion that had taken him to Alice’s that afternoon, the notion that took shape somewhere out of the reach of reason, the notion that somehow at Alice’s or here some miraculous act of transportation would take him back into the past so that everything that had gone bad could be made to happen in a different way. Crazy. (137-38)

When he is outside of his own private world, suffering in the face of his ongoing exclusion and marginalization by his family and mainstream culture more generally, Maclean doubts himself and adopts the attitude and logic which define him as useless, a dreamer, a failed life. This is a great threat of mainstream culture to those who live on its margins: the threat of internalizing that culture’s denigrating and demoralizing perspectives. Reviewers’ simplistic argument that Maclean’s pain stems largely from his struggle with the onslaught of traumatic memories is insufficient because, among other things, such appraisals fail to take into account the incredible loneliness he experiences. He lives, largely, without a sense of belonging or community, and this is at least partly due to the fact that his

experience of time is so thoroughly out of joint with conventional understandings of how history works. In a sense, then, Maclean lives ‘out of time’ with most of the world he inhabits, a reality which is alienating and depressing, yet, as I will illustrate in my final section, simultaneously a source of possibility and hope in his otherwise dreary existence.

Julie McGonegal’s work on *Obasan* offers an insightful reading of the role of memory in working toward both forgiveness and political resistance. Her discussion also provides one possible response to Alice’s question about “the sense” of recalling past traumas and suffering. McGonegal argues that *Obasan* “adopts the view...that the past is available only through memory, and that while this does not eliminate the ontological inviolability and irretrievability of pastness, it does mean that the original past is open to modification and revision” (Future of Racial Memory). This revision, as Alice understands, cannot change what has already happened, but it does offer the hope of remembering and renarrating the past as a route toward healing and improvement in one’s present and future. Maclean’s acts of re-imagining his past can be read, via McGonegal’s argument, as a means of working toward reconciliation with the paths his life, and those of his friends and family, have taken. His visits to the past and his alternate accounts of lives he might have led are, like Naomi’s story in *Obasan*, “not a forgetting of events themselves, but a different way of signifying” (McGonegal). These texts, with their recognition of the imprecision of memory and the impossibility of a completely accurate history, on the one hand, and their

insistence on working toward a ‘truth-telling’ that enables recognition and healing, on the other, are a form of signification which McGonegal, citing Paul Ricoeur, argues "gives memory a future" (qtd. in McGonegal).

While *Maclean* does not focus at any length on forgiveness, McGonegal’s discussion is very productive in the context of my discussion, specifically when she insists that renarration can function as a way of putting even a traumatic, painful past to productive, positive use in the present and future of those doing the remembering. John Maclean, whose every moment produces another echo of his past suffering, is exploring ways of putting those echoes, those rememberings, to work in altering the legacy of that past.

Lest my celebratory tone suggest an unequivocal and unproblematic belief in the flexibility and malleability of time and history, let me pause here before I move into my optimistic reading of the novel’s final scenes. Maclean’s second thoughts and doubts are more than a reflection of his exposure to dominant conceptualizations of time: they also signal the text’s ultimate ambiguity on such questions. Maclean’s reflections in the passage above, as elsewhere, represent the text’s insistence that readers work to form their own historical models in response to the ideas Maclean presents. His comments above are a warning against the kind of celebratory, “redemptive narrative” (LaCapra 10) one might be tempted to craft from Maclean’s story. By insistently highlighting Maclean’s own doubts about his ideas, this passage places responsibility squarely on readers to decide how to respond to the ideas and questions the text has raised. The question is left

ambiguous, but we are certainly left with a sense of possibility: Maclean does clearly doubt himself and his ideas, but the text closes on an altogether less definitive note.

The hope of elsewhere

Early in the novel, we learn that Maclean likes to spend time in the woods near the boarding house. Some years ago, he struck up a friendship of sorts with a grey squirrel that lived there, training it to come to him when he summoned it and feeding it peanuts right from his hand. One day, though, the squirrel did not come when he called, and he never saw it again. He wonders if some human or some dog “killed it just for the heck of it,” and wonders if its death was his fault and it died because he “wooded away too much of its instinctive distrust of mankind” (7). For Maclean, this story tells us, intimacy is difficult and precarious, and even nurturing relationships are risky rather than inherently safe. Maclean’s long experience of rejection and social isolation have led him to expect mistreatment, and he frequently laments the difficulty of getting by “in this inconsiderate world” (5). Indeed, his current marginalization may have to do with his shellshock and alcoholism, but I think it also signals the dangerously exclusive function of dominant, normative ideas of belonging and otherness. His poverty, physical state, and psychological scars most certainly impede his entry into the town’s public community, but I share Maclean’s sense that much of the hostility and wariness he encounters is caused by others’ unwillingness to acknowledge the truths he represents. At one point, Maclean takes an unusual route through town

in order to save time. He finds himself walking down “the kind of street he didn’t like walking on,” a manicured and affluent-looking one, where he imagines “indignant ladies” twitching their curtains to peek at this unwanted trespasser who, “in his skeletal lineaments and the evident fragility and brevity of his expectations,” serves as an unwelcome reminder “of the dust and mud and rot that all this tidiness was designed to allow them to forget” (69).

The idea that the neighbourhood has been deliberately cultivated to encourage forgetting – of the war, of suffering in general, or of survivors’ marginalized existence – is a striking one. At a few points in the text we see people deliberately averting their gazes to avoid looking at Maclean and his drinking companions, and it makes sense that these people would choose an environment for themselves that helps to maintain this intentional blindness. Maclean’s body is in itself a reminder of the events and aftermath of the war, which his contemporaries are longing to forget about, to move on from, and to treat as indisputably ‘over.’ Maclean’s battered, traumatized body and psyche are clear evidence that the war, while officially over, is an ongoing force in his contemporary world. Marita Sturken argues that, through their very physical presence, “The survivors of recent political events often disrupt the closure of a particular history” (Sturken 5). Maclean is certainly disrupting the illusory peace – based on ignoring the presence of the past – in which many of the town’s residents seek refuge. In a lecture he gave in 1882 entitled “What is a Nation?” Ernest Renan put forth a provocative and highly influential response to the

question, and offers another way of understanding townsfolks' responses to Maclean and his ilk. Renan argues that "the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (Renan 11). Renan explains the crucial role of selective memory and forgetting in building and maintaining national identity and narratives, saying that "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality" (11). The danger of historical inquiry, and I would add of the kind of inescapable testimony Maclean carries with him, is that it "brings to light deeds of violence" (11) upon which national unity and prosperity is built, thereby undermining the myths of greatness and justice upon which nations define themselves. Thus, not only does Maclean figure as a challenge to conventional, more comfortable notions of linear time and completed history, but he also threatens the national narratives from which his neighbours might draw pride and a sense of security.

With his background of trauma and its recurrent presence in his day to day life, however, Maclean does not have the luxury of living in a world that encourages forgetting, and nor could he, I suspect, if he tried. Throughout most of the day that makes up this text, for the reasons I have described, he remains detached from any sense of community or personal intimacy. I think this is partly due to the fact that he is shunned by the majority of people around him, and also because, as I have already discussed at length, his experience and understanding

of the world are so at odds with conventional, dominant thought. As Daniel Coleman points out, “much of our personal sense of belonging has to do with the fit between our individual time-space maps and those of the communities in which we live” (231). Maclean’s conceptualization of time and perspective on national history are deeply at odds with those of the community he lives in (or around), and he is therefore very much alone.

This does not mean that he does not long for a sense of belonging and of being at home with others. At Alice’s house and in his quiet moments alone, Maclean spends much of his day longing for the domestic peace and comfort he has never had. He revisits his several broken romantic relationships and laments the history that created this lonely present. As mentioned earlier, though, I think there is room for hope even in Maclean’s grim life. I find it in the novel’s final chapter, Maclean’s evening, which he spends in the home of Ellie Deboys, a black woman who sells bootlegged liquor and whose house acts as an unofficial social club for the assorted drifters, friends, and margin-dwellers who assemble there. Here, in the company of familiar and non-judgmental friends who tell and re-tell stories that have “been told a hundred times over the years, gathering around [themselves] an atmosphere of tranquil predictability like that of a bedtime story” (145), Maclean gets as close as he ever has to peace. Of course, Maclean’s comfort here is certainly partly due to the company he is keeping: nobody here is judgmental or repulsed by him. There is also the reassuring fact that Ellie’s dog, Dreadnought, is keeping watch, guarding the perimeter of this margin. I think,

however, that there is more at work here. Ellie's house is where Maclean is able to feel the most in step with others. The lack of direction to their banter and their repetition of familiar stories generate a cyclic experience and a familiarity to each evening he spends there; in a sense, the outcasts have created their own sphere of cyclic, ritualistic time. Their narration and re-narration of chosen events is a way of protecting themselves from the intrusions and pain of the past. Selecting stories and subjects is their way of controlling their experiences of and negotiations with the past, at least for a while and at least to an extent.⁸ In a sense, each night at Ellie's house is the same night, and because it is an experience they have created for themselves, well apart from their own personal histories – of wartime trauma, of slavery, of heartbreak and disappointment – Maclean is able to relax into it in a way that he never can in his daytime journey. This is a small haven where Maclean can savour his present – enjoying the pleasures of bootleg liquor, food, and quiet chatter – and also engage in careful, controlled memory. Interestingly, though, despite its relative comfort, Ellie's house is where Maclean has his exchange with Ralph, who does not understand his idea of temporal simultaneity and shuts off conversation with his comment that “you say some funny things sometimes” (155). Unlike his failed conversation with Alice, however, this one does not upset Maclean, and he just returns to his quiet contemplation, taking in the aimless drift of conversation that circles around him. Near the end of a night of gentle banter and slow drinking, Maclean takes in the homely details of Ellie's

⁸ It is striking that the stories they select and use for self-preservation are precisely the ones that the townsfolk in the neat, closed houses strive so diligently to forget.

kitchen, cataloguing the comfortable details of the curtains, the cupboards, the scrubbed floor, the baking bread. “It was good,” he reflects. “It was the way the rest of the world should be but, of course, never would” (156). Coming as they do after these hours of comfort and peace, Maclean’s words here do not invoke sadness or resentment; they sound like acceptance, the thoughts of a man who has at least temporarily found contentment in the midst of suffering.

After Ellie closes up for the night, Maclean takes his leave of this group of outsiders and walks toward the darkened centre of town, stopping at the Court House, whose lawn is flanked by the town’s “twin memorials of the Great War.” These are an old German field gun and a granite cenotaph, topped by a soldier at attention, the sides of which contain lists of the dead. We know from earlier in the day that Maclean always stops to look at these memorials, and that they hold a powerful significance for him. While Aleida Assmann has pointed out that monuments are intended to last beyond the present and “enable cultural communication with the distant future” (Holtorf, “Prospective Memory”), the cenotaph functions for Maclean as a point of contact between his past and present. Sometimes as he looks at it, particularly if he has been drinking, “one or the other of [the men listed] would suddenly without warning take shape so clear he could imagine him speaking” (24). For him, then, the memorials are a site of memory and also a place to make contact with the dead. Of course, the memories and connections conjured for Maclean probably don’t align with the memorials’ intended meanings. Holtorf draws on Jan Assmann to argue that, in the

construction of monuments, “Political power is legitimating itself retrospectively while it is immortalizing itself prospectively” (“Prospective Memory”). He points out that war monuments attempt to convey the glory of soldiers’ sacrifices as a way of securing the immortality and greatness of the greater whole, in Maclean’s case the nation (“War memorials”). In Maclean’s experience, however, the memories loosed by the monument hold little glory, and he is much more concerned with the individuals whose lives were lost than with the greater picture of fighting for “the god-damned English” (94).

Instead of lingering over the names on the cenotaph as is his usual custom, this time Maclean goes over to the field gun, which is “the only German gun he had ever seen” because during the war they had never managed to find “the bastards who were shelling them” (24). Maclean carefully looks it over, taking in its shape and speculating that the gunners’ seats must have been “damned hard on the ass” (158). In a touching moment of apparent empathy with the soldiers he fought against, Maclean climbs into one of the seats (where his speculation is confirmed) and tries to imagine the scene of the gun’s capture. Here, the monument is functioning for him not as a place to celebrate the Canadian / British victory but rather to connect him to his former opponents. He wonders if they might have used their folded coats as cushions, and he muses over the possible ways in which they died. This moment is truly remarkable: after a day spent suffering as a result of his involvement in the war, Maclean finds the strength and willingness to empathize with his former enemies, those who were behind his

trauma. Caruth describes trauma as being “always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4), and those cries are heard everytime Maclean flashes back in time to a point of crisis or terror. Caruth is careful to emphasize that this story, this crying out, is not only an isolated, individual experience. Rather, the voice reveals “the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound.” (8) This is, I think, what is happening as Maclean sits drunkenly on the field gun contemplating the experiences and ultimate deaths of the German soldiers who once shared his seat.

Maclean sits a while longer on the gunner’s seat, thinking about the war and its lasting effects on all it touched. He wonders whether “maybe none of them had come home...Maybe one way or another, quick or slow, they had all died of their wounds. And maybe that wasn’t so different, after all, from the way life happened for everybody” (159). Maclean thinks about the people he knows and has known, of the disjuncture between their hopes and their lived realities, and thinks that maybe life itself is a kind of war, different only in that the suffering and death take much longer “in what they call peace” (159).

Finally, rousing himself and finishing off the last of his rum, Maclean decides he had best move along before someone sees him and calls the police to remove him. He eases himself down to the ground, carefully puts the cap on the

bottle, and “pop[s] it into the barrel of the gun” (160). This simple, drunken gesture carries much symbolic potential. First, it could represent an offering to his dead comrades or even to his newfound acquaintances, the German soldiers: perhaps he is drinking to their memories. It represents a reaching out from the living to the dead, a celebration and an acknowledgement of the fallen. The image of a liquor bottle held in the barrel of a gun is both horrible and wonderful. It is haunting and melancholy when one thinks of the devastation that war and subsequent alcoholism have caused for Maclean and countless others, yet the gesture is also strangely pleasurable, a tiny act of subversion by a man determined to retain a sense of dignity in the face of overwhelming inhumanity. Sarah Tarlow notes that WWI memorials were constructed “with distinctive prospective memories in mind [...] When flowers are put at the bases of war memorials, as it is customary, they [...] honour and re-confirm their established meanings” (Holtorf, “War memorials”). Maclean’s empty rum bottle, on the other hand, interrupts and combats the monument’s intended and established meanings and asserts his presence in a world that would rather he disappeared or went silent. He may be a marginalized, drunken man, but he is *here*, too, speaking back to the official histories that would sugar coat his experience, silence his version of the past, and ignore him in the present.

Cornelius Holtorf’s work on ancient megaliths is helpful here: he contends that they must be understood not only as “monuments *from* the past” but also as “monuments *for* the future”; what gives monuments their importance, Holtorf

argues, is “the message they wanted to preserve for the future” (“Prospective Memory”). Borrowing from Jan Assmann’s work, Holtorf describes these intended meanings as “prospective memory” (qtd in Holtorf). Maclean’s tiny gesture takes heightened significance when we consider his action as an intervention in the monument’s creation and maintenance of fabricated memory: the bottle constitutes his intervention in the narratives created and perpetuated by monuments like this one. If the monument, as Holtorf argues, is power’s way of justifying and celebrating itself, then Maclean’s gesture insists on his presence and significance in the history the monument represents. If the monument seeks to naturalize and glorify soldiers’ deaths for the nation, then Maclean’s bottle is a gritty reminder that it was not all glory and that, indeed, for many soldiers the end is drawn out and ongoing, and the sacrifice continues, albeit hidden from view. Passersby the next morning might see the bottle and be forced to acknowledge the destruction that has come to many who were granted the ‘glory’ of fighting for their country. The evidence of his gesture may provoke others to rethink conventional narratives of the First World War – and perhaps not. It may not matter. This small event is momentous because it signals Maclean’s refusal to be silenced or written out of history by this monument’s grand narratives of victory and heroism. In this simple act, he is asserting his capacity for self-determination and his resolution to live with the truths of his experience.

Next, Maclean crosses the lawn and circles the cenotaph, reading and touching the names of each of “the boys who had been his pals.” He knows where

each name is on the cenotaph, and as he runs his fingers over them he takes a mental roll-call “Here. Here. Here. All present and accounted for” (161). After these lingering moments, having paid his respect to – and conjured the spirits of – his dead friends, Maclean heads onto Main Street for the rest of his walk home. Maclean’s walking soon becomes a march, and he moves from the sidewalk to the middle of the street, “his arms swinging wider and wider arcs” as he builds momentum (161). At first he is alone on the deserted street, surrounded only by the darkened windows of shop displays filled with piles of fruit, music posters, strange assemblages of furniture and well-dressed mannequins. Maclean is indifferent to these sights: as the narrator puts it, “he was elsewhere now” (162). His reflections and symbolic rite at the field gun, his moments of communion with the fallen soldiers, and possibly even the rum he has been drinking, have created a state in which he is able to finally cross into another, as yet unlived, moment. Not only has he moved through time, but he seems to possibly be marching into a “possible future” that he could not have reached but through these moments. He has found his way back to a fork in the Y of his life’s timeline, or he is already marching steadily along another of its potential branches: either way, he is, as Gallagher would say, “‘elsewhen,’ in another dimension of time” (Gallagher 17). And then, as Maclean moves into this moment:

Slowly out of the great gulf of the past, the boys took shape around him. Bob, Frank, and Harry. Dan. Bill. Charlie. All just the way they had been before the bad things started to happen, swinging along in the close-packed, khaki lines of the old battalion, marching at ease, their rifles slung on their shoulders, the peaked caps tipped back, the sun streaming down, the band playing. (Donaldson 162)

Here, at the close of the novel, could Maclean finally be achieving that ‘distant notion’ he has been mulling over, struggling to overcome, and seeking out? He is undoubtedly a drunk and psychologically scarred man, and his redemption may be just a temporary moment of deluded happiness. But my feeling at the end of this long day with him is that this is something different. However we might dismiss or deny it, he has escaped the drudgery of his life and found an alternate past – and present and future – for himself and his war buddies. They might be marching into war, but this time they might survive; they could be at their victorious homecoming march, greeted as heroes and welcomed back into their community; they could be going somewhere else entirely. What matters is that they are full of health and comfort, and joy. As he and his young, healthy, friends march hopefully toward their futures, I am left with the irrepressible sense that this time, for now, they have taken a better fork in time’s road.

As Maclean and his friends march down the street, the novel’s final scene shows us a man who has been watching from his window slowly pulling down his blind – yet another who would rather not see Maclean or the ongoing history he represents. Yet another who literally blinds himself to the historical and temporal visions Maclean might offer, if only someone were to listen to him. We do not know for certain what he has seen, but either way it is his loss. Like the blind mannequins, like Alice with her attachment to established facts and the pastness of the past, he will miss out on Maclean’s opportunity to march, however briefly or tentatively, toward an alternate prospective future.

The hopeful march with which this novel closes opens room to imagine a positive, happy future for John Maclean, whether in his small, unwelcoming town or beyond it. The scene is strikingly similar to the one which opened the text, the dream in which Maclean trudges along a dirt road with the same companions. There is a fitting circularity to the novel's opening and closing scenes: Maclean, the young soldier, walks in formation, surrounded by his friends and comrades. The cycle is not a closed one, however: the moods and details of these scenes differ significantly. The opening dream is tinged with horror, pain, and fear, whereas the closing march is an optimistic and happy one, the march of healthy, hopeful young men. Unlike in the dream, Maclean can easily recognize and identify his friends, and there is no sense of being chased or hunted; rather, they are choosing their forward motion and are confident in their direction. This suggests, for me, that *Maclean's* historical model is not simply a circular one, in which moments can repeat endlessly and we can move across and between moments. It is, as I have established throughout, clearly not a linear, teleological one either. I would propose, rather, that over the course of the text's sweeping narrative Maclean has returned to the place – or perhaps more accurately to the time – where he began, but to a better version of that time. This suggests a temporal model that allows for cyclic movement, but that also leaves room for improvement, often figured as upward movement. Perhaps time and history, then, are circles that rise, or a spiral, so that our paths through memory and time have the potential to move in positive directions. By revisiting, remembering, and

refiguring the past, *Maclean* suggests, we may also be able to create alternate, improved presents and futures for ourselves and those around us. This is where I see political hope in the text. I will return to the links between textual historical modelling and political action in the following analysis of *The Diviners* and again, in more detail, in chapter three's discussion of *Obasan*.

**“The dead don’t always die:” historical multiplicity, temporal
simultaneity,
and political possibility in Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*.**

“They say the dead don’t always die;
They say the truth outlives the lie”
- ‘The Ballad of Jules Tonnerre’, Laurence 483

The songs of Jules Tonnerre weave their way through *The Diviners*, working as subtle and often overlooked reminders of the novel’s central concerns. In the lines above, Jules articulates what I see as the novel’s two central themes. These are the continued presence of figures from the past – whether in spirit form, through memory, or through story – and the text’s preoccupation with the inaccuracies of many forms of history telling and its insistence that truth can be spoken in many possible ways. Most of *The Diviners*’ reviewers and many of its critics focus on the novel’s central plot, working to categorize it within the now familiar frameworks against which it is so frequently read. “Established readings” of the text focus on “such themes as death and old age, history and tradition, motherhood and women’s careers, along with analysis of narrative structure and technique in Laurence’s writing” (Warwick 5). Critics often treat the novel as a *bildungsroman* of sorts: under this logic, the novel tells the story of Morag Gunn’s personal growth – and, many suggest, ultimate fulfillment - through a combined process of reflection and experience. Morag Gunn is in her late forties, grew up in small-town Manitoba and now lives in rural Ontario. In the process of writing her latest novel, Morag reflects on her life and seeks a new level of self-

understanding. Morag revisits memories of her childhood and young adulthood, and these scenes show us Morag's personal journey to self-awareness. Investing in this linear, progressive account of the text's plot, critics generally agree that the text ultimately "portrays the traditional development of a protagonist from early uncertainty and insecurity to mature certainty and acceptance" (McLean 97).⁹

Certainly, much of *The Diviners'* affective power and interest lie in its frank articulation of a middle-aged woman's reflections on her life to date. One of Laurence's striking accomplishments is her ability to enliven a seemingly ordinary story in ways that make the novel a compelling and profoundly moving read. But I am not satisfied with the idea that this novel lends itself to tidy summaries or neat, linear accounts that end with resolution. As was the case in my discussion of *Maclean*, my goal in this chapter is to problematize these neat summations of *The Diviners'* scope by attending to other, more nuanced elements of the novel. These elements may be variously described as its subtexts, its meta-commentary, its underlying themes, or its philosophical concerns. To my mind, some of the text's most pressing concerns have to do with the articulation and experience of history, and, following this concern, with the movement of time and the relationship between past and present. My project in this chapter is to read Laurence's text for its possible contributions to ongoing discussions about the representation of time and history in fiction; in other words, to see what temporal and historical models it offers to us. There is a significant, if not overwhelming,

⁹ For other treatments of the text as a *bildungsroman* or *kunsterroman*, see Greene; Langston.

body of critical writing on the subject of *The Diviners*' treatment of history, mostly dealing with its challenges to the possibility of accurately representing the past and its critique of the exclusions and silences enacted by dominant historical narratives. I will draw on these energizing, enlightening discussions as I consider the novel's treatment and conceptualization of history, and build from these insights as I turn to my discussion of the text's temporal modelling.

My approach to this text, as indicated by my title, is three-pronged. I am interested in tracking and expanding on two key concepts I see at work in *The Diviners*, concepts that I believe are central to the text's message. My project is to identify the ways in which the text -- through both its narrative form and its content -- develops and illustrates those concepts, which I have called "historical multiplicity" and "temporal simultaneity," and to consider what "political possibility" these concepts might open to us. First, I will draw on existing criticism and my own readings to outline the first lesson I take from *The Diviners*, that of historical multiplicity. Then I will attend to the text's detail to elaborate on the concept of temporal simultaneity, which, while typically overlooked by critics, is a key focus and problem in the text. Finally, I will gesture toward the text's political possibility by exploring what these conceptualizations of time and history might offer readers who are committed to taking these lessons seriously and to responding by changing our ways of being in the world.

Narrative Form

This text's innovative narrative structure – the present and past narratives are intermingled as memories, imaginings, and various characters' stories alternately come into focus - has earned it much attention. Many critics' analyses of the novel's structure are concerned with questions of genre, and these treatments have generated a lively debate about whether and how the narrative strategy and other characteristics qualify as metafiction, whether postmodern in Linda Hutcheon's terms or a feminist form of metafiction (see, eg, Greene, Harrison) . In the context of my project, however, an investigation of the novel's narrative structure takes on a different relevance, yielding important insights about *The Diviners*' understandings of time and history.

The Diviners is composed of events taking place alternately in the text's present and in its several, distinct pasts. In sections dealing with the past we hear about Morag's childhood in the small town of Manawaka, her early sexual discoveries, and the birth of her daughter Pique, for example. In the text's present she tells us of her relationships with her neighbours, the death of Jules 'Skinner' Tonerre, her intermittent lover and Pique's father, and her struggle to recognize her now-adult daughter's independence. While this movement between time frames is far from uncommon, I am interested in the consistent links the text makes between Morag's present experiences and those in her past. As she goes about her daily activities, talks with her friends, or works on her book, Morag's consciousness – and thus her narrative – shifts smoothly between present and past

as elements of one overlap with the other. This is more than a narration of memory, though: she even communicates and interacts with fictional and historical figures such as a legendary and possibly fictional ancestor Piper Gunn, and the early Canadian settler and writer Catharine Parr Traill. In these and other ways, which I will explain as I proceed, divisions between present and past are shown to be highly permeable, and one could argue that they are dissolved entirely.

Not only do past and present intermingle in Morag's lived experience, but their boundaries are also blurred for readers. Laurence's striking use of tense in the text is what initially drew my attention to questions of time in the novel. In *The Diviners* the past is narrated in an active present tense, while the novel's present is told in the past tense. At its most simple level, this technique creates a liveliness and immediacy to Morag's memories and other elements of the textual past, perhaps a way of insisting upon history's ongoing relevance for times to come. Many analyses of Laurence's work come to this conclusion, saying that, in her fiction, "the point of the past is its active function in our present, not a vanished reference point on which to focus fond nostalgia, resentment or regret" (Thomas 144. See also Beckman-Long; Harrison). If we linger a little longer in our contemplation, we start to see that, rather than simply attesting to history's ongoing legacy, Laurence's use of tense complicates conventional ideas of time by showing past events to be ongoing and present ones to be, from other points in time, already history.

The novel's five chapters are subdivided into smaller segments, which also alternate between "now" and "then." Many of Morag's memories are labeled "memorybank movies" in recognition of the ways in which memory impinges upon her contemporary experience and plays itself out before her. Morag's description of these intrusions of events from the past as movies rather than, say, as stories like Christie's or as photographic images, suggests that the workings of memory in this context have a strongly visual and auditory character. She watches previous events unfold before her rather than simply recalling and describing them. This is somewhat reminiscent of the ways in which photographs become animated in Maracle's text, although in Morag's case the movies she watches are reruns of events she has already witnessed, whereas Marilyn sees previously unknown details through the photos. Unlike the sudden, unsignalled intrusions of John Maclean's memories, these are explicitly recognized by Morag, who can feel their approach and who gives them descriptive titles; similarly, various remembered stories told within the text are introduced by titles such as "Christie's tale of Piper Gunn and the long march" (94), which identify each story's author and subject matter. In keeping with the frank and lively tone of the narrative, one of Morag's childhood stories has the wonderful title "Conversation overheard from the teachers' room all of them in there gabbing at recess" (71)! My argument throughout this chapter is that the interweaving of past and present suggests that Morag inhabits a temporality in which present and past can coexist rather than only occupy discrete locations on some temporal trajectory. Certainly, one might

argue, these clear labels, applied by the adult Morag, demonstrate that she is fully aware of and invested in conventional notions of time that see past and present as clearly divided. Well, yes and no. It is possible to be aware of, and make use of, conventional temporal models, without it precluding the awareness and experience of other kinds of time-consciousness.¹⁰ Morag clearly distinguishes between events that are just now happening and those that have already happened, but my argument is that, in her experiential reality (and, crucially, in readers' experiences through our encounters with texts), the act of remembering brings an event to life: she re-experiences a moment each time she recalls it, and thus it becomes part of her present experience as well as of her past.

Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualization of stories as "acts encapsulated in time, 'enacted' every time they are spoken aloud or read silently" (67) lines up nicely with the function of memory and storytelling in *The Diviners*. I will return to the significance of reading as an action or a happening in later chapters, but for now would like to comment briefly on another 'life-giving' act or process of animation at work in the text. Jules Tonnerre, while absent for most of Morag's life and narrative, is a central figure in her life and story. He is a man of few words, but he often talks about his work as a musician and a song-writer, and toward the end he even performs some of his songs for Pique and Morag. The songs he writes are his personal oral history, telling the stories of his grand-father, father, and siblings after their deaths, a way of keeping them alive through song

¹⁰ I will expand upon the text's blending of conventional and non-linear temporal models later, in the section on Temporal Simultaneity.

and memory. When he commits suicide at the end of the text, his songs and these histories don't die with him: Pique has already begun to sing them, breathing her own life into his stories and thus keeping his memories – and his memory – alive. Gayle Greene argues that, in *The Diviners*, art serves a dual function of memorializing and also resurrecting the dead. She observes that “Lazarus is ‘born again’ in Jules’ songs” and notes the song’s insight, with which I have opened this chapter, that “the dead don’t always die” (Laurence 483). The cycle of animation through song and story continues as “Jules’s songs live on in Pique’s songs, and all are made to live in *The Diviners*” (Greene 156). These songs, Jules’ legacy, function not only to maintain his presence in Pique’s world, but also to ensure that their relatives remain active members of her life.

Toni Morrison’s concept of “re-memory” is pertinent here. In *Beloved*, Sethe reflects on the ways in which past events and places live on in memory and in the physical world, too. She says,

I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. [...] The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again... (Morrison 35-36).

Sethe’s idea of ‘rememory’ gives what Kimberly Chabot Davis calls “a connotation of cyclical recurrence” to historical suffering and trauma and a

recognition that a person often “lacks control of her memory” so that past events can suddenly appear and unfold in their present lives (83). The repetition and intrusions of the traumatic past bear some similarity to the effects of trauma as described by Cathy Caruth, with the crucial difference that, in Morrison’s formulation, the past is a physical presence, and repeats itself independently of an individual’s psychological engagement or presence. If you can bump into past events and suddenly find yourself witnessing somebody else’s trauma, then there is more to this presence of the past than the workings of memory.

Laurence’s temporal model falls somewhere between Caruth’s trauma and Morrison’s rememory: Morag re-experiences past events and presences in tangible ways, but the figures and events that come to her do so by way of her own memory and thought processes. There is none of the abruptness or unwilling witnessing involved with PTSD, nor is there a sense that these events continuously unfold independently of her – or somebody’s – reflection and memory, tied more strongly to place than they are to memory or imagination.

Laurence’s / Morag’s use of titles serves to signal the narrative’s shifts between textual present, memory, and myth; perhaps they are best understood as something more nuanced than a statement about the divisibility of past and present. Since most of the text works to complicate conventional approaches to time and history, it is difficult to accept that, at the end of the day, Laurence is ultimately committed to maintaining them. In her extensive discussion of narrative techniques in *The Diviners*, Hildegard Kuester argues that “Laurence

clearly felt that the traditional distinction between three time levels was as inhibiting as the equivalent differentiation between tenses in a narrative. Yet she also felt bound by the convention, while at the same time trying to express the sense of continuity she sensed at the core of human experience” (86). I am inclined to agree with this assessment, and to see the use of headings and titles as ways of helping readers, accustomed to conventional ideas of time, to navigate the text’s movements through overlapping temporal moments. As Kuester speculates, “Laurence had to find a compromise between her idea of the blending of the different time planes and the reader’s competence in making sense of this” (97). What better way to accomplish this balance than to have Morag herself involved in deliberately marking the distinctions between past and present narratives? Not only does this act as a sort of ‘reading guide,’ but it also makes explicit the idea that ways of distinguishing one time from another are constructs rather than independent ‘truths’ – so that the text is helping readers while also drawing attention to our reliance on certain literary and temporal conventions. Laurence herself, in a 1984 interview, revealed that she didn’t see the chronological sequencing and organization of Morag’s narrative as a problem, because, as she said, “Morag is consciously recalling her past, and she is recalling it chronologically because she wants to make sense of it” (Arnason and Cooley 1984). In other words, Laurence’s reliance on conventional temporal models is not proof of her belief in their accuracy, but rather the result of pragmatic recognition that readers, and her characters themselves, have come to rely on such

models to organize and understand our experiences. They are conceptual tools rather than essential truths.

A final key element of the text's structure is its presentation of multiple versions of the same story. For example, the tale of Piper Gunn and the events of the Red River rebellions are told many times over from varying characters' perspectives, and with significant variation. Not only are stories and histories told differently by different characters, but individuals sometimes rework others' versions of a story: a case in point is "Skinner's tale of Lazarus' tale of Rider Tonerre" (159). Finally, characters themselves often adapt their own accounts of the same event. At one point, when Morag questions Christie's version of the Piper Gunn tale, he admits that "Maybe the story didn't go quite like I said" and sets out to tell an amended version (146). Here we have a clear demonstration of the text's concept of "historical multiplicity."

Historical Multiplicity

Kuester notes that Laurence's and Morag's narrative approaches send a strong message about the possibility of ever telling a true story. She says that "[b]y juxtaposing different and contradictory narrative voices and fictional forms, the author draws the reader's attention to the complexity of fictional truth" (85). Indeed, as I will discuss below, the novel's juxtapositions of voices and forms also work to highlight the complexity and equally elusive nature of *historical* truth. Just years after the publication of *The Diviners*, Hayden White famously argued a similar point: while historians labour under the false assumption that

they can merely let “facts speak for themselves,” their selection of certain tropological conventions and patterns of emplotment means that, in fact, “the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is – in its *representation* – a purely discursive one” (125, 12-13). In other words, as Laurence observes and asserts in *The Diviners*, the narration of history and the writing of fiction are both acts of creative writing. This argument is supported by the text and its characters: Morag herself is aware of the impossibility of telling a unified, true history. In a conversation with her mother, Pique presses for the truth about her personal and family history. She tells Morag “I want to know what *really* happened.” Morag’s response is to laugh a little coldly and tell her daughter that “[t]here’s no one version. There just isn’t” (Laurence 373). At another point, Morag reflects on the many stories and histories she’s been told and appreciates their conflicts. She comments to her friend Eva that she likes “the thought of history and fiction interweaving” (444).

Morag is apparently not alone in her openness to this interweaving of story and history; there’s a general pattern within *The Diviners* of characters adapting and readapting histories. For example, when Christie tells Morag about his wartime friendship with Morag’s biological father, he casts Morag’s father in the role of hero. We learn later, however, that in all likelihood this version of the story is deliberately at odds with his remembered experience of the event (223-24). Rather than try to present an objective truth, Christie has chosen to tell a

story that will fill Morag's need for a personal history and a sense of identity of which she can be proud. Importantly, this sort of adaptation and alteration is not only performed on an individual basis, but also functions at a broader cultural level through official narrative. After the battle of Dieppe, Morag tells us that "[t]he newspapers for days are full of stories of bravery, courage, camaraderie, initiative, heroism, gallantry, and determination in the face of heavy enemy fire. Are any of the stories true? Probably it does not matter. They may console some" (159). Throughout *The Diviners*, as these examples demonstrate, history is deliberately altered to serve its tellers' particular, desired ends. The message I take from this frank "process of adapting the past to the individual's [or public's] own requirements" (Thomas 142) is that, for the characters at least, a narrative's effects are more important than its factual accuracy. Yet again, Thomas King's reflections on the "truth about stories" – specifically his insistence that a story, once unleashed, will continue to affect the world in which it circulates – come to mind. I will return to King's ideas in my discussions of *Obasan* and *Daughters are Forever*.

As I have suggested above, the text challenges the very idea of an accurate, complete, account of history. It does this in various ways, often by presenting differing versions of the same events, and also through Christie's frustration with the inaccuracies and gaps of historical accounts of the First World War, which do not come close to capturing his experiences. "Oh Jesus," he comments after reading one such report, "don't they make it sound like a Sunday

school picnic?” (101). These books represent the failure and insufficiency of conventional, clear, linear historical narratives. Interestingly, Donaldson’s Maclean – like Christie, the silenced underdog of conventional history – complicates the critique of dominant history by frankly acknowledging his own complicity in circulating falsely palatable accounts of the First World War. When his landlord asks him about it, Maclean tells us, he trots out “the usual, well-sanitized lies” (Donaldson 85). Finally, *The Diviners*’ challenges to the reliability of historical narratives also take the form of Morag’s direct commentary and questions.

At another point in the “present” narrative, Morag muses that “a popular misconception is that we can’t change the past – everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it. What really happened? A meaningless question. But one I keep trying to answer, knowing there *is* no answer” (70). At the literal level, Morag seems to be arguing that we can change the actual past, that we can alter the progression of past events. Within the larger conceptual framework of this novel, however, I understand Morag to be making a much more complex and convincing argument. She recognizes that as soon as an event is past, it can only be known through story; given the variations she sees in the stories she’s told, Morag understands the impossibility of ever discovering “what really happened.” History is always and only a narrative as soon as it has happened, so when Morag claims that we can change the *past*, she is really speaking of its *representation*, which she is most clearly able – and willing – to

change, recall and revise. In this way, *The Diviners* tells us that we have some control over which stories, which versions of history, we invest in and carry with us. Morag makes such an investment as she decides which family myths to pass on to her daughter Pique, and which to leave untold. Clara Thomas aptly describes Morag's role as that of "selector and shaper of the past for her daughter" (151). We also know that, as a child, Morag fills "gaps in her personal history" by telling herself "fictions about her parents and her own origins" (Godard 36).

So, through its depictions and discussions of historical multiplicity, *The Diviners* tells us that no single narrative can account for the multiple and divergent experiences conjured by a single event. Crucially, it also teaches us that history is created, not simply related, or as Ajay Heblé explains in reference to Herb Wyile's ideas, that history "is not something one finds, but rather something one produces" (Heblé, "Review" 170). Finally, it shows us that histories are contingent upon their readers' and listeners' needs and expectations: history, in its narrative form, does not just account for fact. Rather, *The Diviners* suggests, we possess a certain amount of agency to write it, to create it, for ourselves. History, according to this text, is more functional than factual. As Julie McGonegal has cogently argued, and as I discussed at length in my reading of *Macleam*, we can revise our narratives of the past and, though its events remain unchanged, its function and legacy in the present are transformed with each retelling. The past, then, is transformed and, thus, transforms present and future.

My discussion of individuals' choice and agency with regard to history is not intended to imply that they possess absolute power or exist in an unproblematic relationship with the past and its representation. To do so would be to negate the very significant, tangible operations of systems of power and privilege in shaping historical events and their representations. Indeed, systemic oppression and hegemonic discourses, along with many other sociopolitical forces, play a major role in restricting individual and group access to information and the means of representation. When I argue that Morag and others can choose their preferred versions of history, I do not mean that they have an unlimited repertoire of narratives and perspectives to select from. In *The Diviners*, and in general, knowledge -- and thus the agency I describe -- is limited by the narratives to which an individual has access. While that access may be imaginative, or established through written and oral records, it is necessarily constrained by the particularities of the individual's social and temporal moment.

Despite these limitations, the concept of historical multiplicity provides a provocative way of reconceptualizing history. Barbara Godard aptly notes that *The Diviners'* polyvocality, its presentation of marginalized voices, and its use of oral narratives and multiple, divergent perspectives all serve to destabilize conventional notions of History. She argues that "these narratives undermine History, both as linear progression (through repetition and re / circulation) and as body of knowledge dealing with the truth of fact" (44). I am particularly interested in Godard's comment about the text's disruption of history's linear

progression, an observation that leads me to *The Diviners*' second key concept of temporal simultaneity.

Temporal Simultaneity

The significance of this narrative strategy, and the importance of remaining attentive to literary conceptualizations of time, is suggested by Laurence herself. In an essay published shortly before *The Diviners*, Laurence insists that the treatment of time, as a major element of narrative structure, is of “paramount importance” (“Time and Narrative Voice”). Part of what makes the treatment of time so important to Laurence is its complexity. She clarifies that what she means by “time” is not “clock-time” but rather “historical time, variable and fluctuating” (qtd. in Kuester 86). These intriguing comments indicate that Laurence clearly differentiates between linear, measured time and a concept of historical time that is not manageable, predictable or stable. Laurence’s “historical time” has, I think, much in common with my idea of temporal simultaneity: they share the basic premise that time does not function in an isochronic, orderly, forward-moving manner. *The Diviners* signals temporal simultaneity in two principal ways: by disrupting conventional understandings of time and by alerting us to the presence of the past.

The Diviners opens with the adult Morag watching the river outside her house. The river, she tells us, flows both ways: its current flows in one direction, while the wind creates ripples that appear to flow the other way. Throughout the text Morag is repeatedly fascinated by this illusion, which she describes as an

“apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible” (Laurence 11). This river, which the chapter’s title calls the “River of Now and Then,” is generally understood to represent the passing of time and the interactions between past and present. Its two-directional currents, in this popular reading, signify the constant and unavoidable influence of history on the present. Kuester speaks for many when she argues that “*The Diviners* thematizes the close interrelation and interdependence between past, present and future” (86. See also Beckman-Long 106; Harrison 140).

I agree with the general critical consensus: *The Diviners* certainly emphasizes the role of the past in shaping the present and future. The text adeptly demonstrates the profound truth of Ernst Bloch’s concept of “synchronous nonsynchronicity,” which attends to the ways in which “sedimented layers of past time continue to shape contemporary experience, how in the very act of experiencing the Now we constantly brush up against the all too solid ghosts of the past” (Felski 24). I would, however, like to go further than this and argue that *The Diviners* is showing us not only that historical events have profound and lasting effects on present realities, nor simply that time doesn’t always move in an orderly fashion, but also, and most intriguingly, that the past is, at some levels, *still happening*.

After watching the river for a while, Morag moves from the window and gets out some old snapshots from her childhood. As she looks through the photos, she puts them into sequence and thinks through some of the events of her early

childhood; these stories, like the photos, are neatly ordered in chronological progression. Morag, ever alert, notices this organizing impulse and questions it. She observes that she has been behaving “[a]s though there were any chronological order, or any order at all, if it came to that. She was not certain whether the people in the snapshot were legends she had once dreamed only, or were as real as anyone she knew” (Laurence 14). Here, on only the fourth page of the book, is a direct challenge to both the possibility of accurate historical documentation and to the idea that history and time progress in any sort of predictable or orderly pattern. If, as Morag suggests, there is no order at all to a person’s life story, then standard notions of time and history are clearly insufficient. Near the closing of *The Diviners*, Morag looks yet again at the river of now and then, and once again her quiet reflections substantially disrupt conventional understandings of time. “Look *ahead* into the *past*,” she thinks, “and *back* into the *future*, until the silence” (477; my emphasis).

Within the narratives of Morag’s life, with their seemingly simple movement between present and past, are reminders of other kinds of temporal movement, other possible forms of time-consciousness. These take the form of Morag’s own direct commentary, narrative techniques that place the past in direct conversation with the present, and more subtle occurrences. One striking example of the text’s most subtle interventions in conventional, linear conceptualizations of time is the recurring appearance of the Canada geese that fly through Morag’s sky at several points in the narrative. They tend to appear at times of transition: at

one such moment, Morag feels herself to be moving forward and making progress in her life. She has accomplished her goal of leaving Manawaka and has made it to Winnipeg, where she is attending university. One night, as she walks back to her boardinghouse, “she hears the geese.” She stands and watches the geese as they fly over her, “sounding their far clear cold cry that signals the approaching frost” (193). The honking birds appear seasonally, as they perform their migrations: their flight is continual, constant. It moves across generations, to and from the same places and seasons, and their presence points to a time that is cyclical in movement, circular or spiral in shape.

Morag reflects that the geese are “[g]oing somewhere. Able to go. At will. Last year she saw them and thought *This time next year I’ll be away too*” (193). This reflection signals her sense of identification with the geese and their movements through time, but also, remarkably, signals her use of the geese’s cyclic presence as a way of measuring the passage of her own lived time. They also function as a marker of future time: their repeated flight through Morag’s sky not only marks the end of a cycle but also signals the ongoing enactment of another. In this way, cyclic temporality takes on a predictive as well as a measuring function. In this passage, disparate modes of time are shown to coexist and even complement each other in Morag’s search for understanding. It also points out the inadequacy of any single temporal model to account for our lived experiences of the world. Laurence seems to recognize, as Rita Felski does in a later discussion, that “Western culture, in spite of its strong reliance on linear

time, is also saturated with time cycles” and thus that one cannot adequately account for the complexity of temporal experience simply by “opposing linear and cyclical time as... essential and mutually exclusive principles” (Felski 19).

Importantly, when I argue that this novel presents a model of flexible, non-linear temporality, I am not arguing that it completely rejects linear, isochronic temporality. Indeed, Morag’s present-day situation, including her daughter’s troubles, her questions about myth and her family’s past, and her sense of disorientation, is the result of all that has happened before this moment. The past happened before the present, and is the reason the present looks the way it does. What I am arguing, however, is that while Morag and Laurence rely upon and can even be said to believe in the linear progression of time and history, they do not accept that this is the only way in which a life can unfold or a story be told. While time is sometimes experienced and explained as linear, at other times linearity just can’t account for the ways in which characters move through time and time moves through them.

My argument is not simply that time, in this novel, does not move straightforwardly. I am also making the much more contentious claim that, in *The Diviners*, time is not simply linear, and that the past is still happening. The text urges us to consider these temporal models as Laurence and Morag repeatedly alert us to “The Presence of the Past.”

Reflecting on the deaths of her parents when she was five years old, Morag recognizes that, even though she has no clear memories of them, her

parents play a significant role in her life. She muses that “I remember their deaths, but not their lives. Yet they’re inside me, flowing unknown in my blood and moving unrecognized in my skull” (27). Many critics read this passage as a discussion of the role of storytelling in forming Morag’s character and behaviour. Paul Hjartarson, for example, explains that Morag’s parents “exist as characters in the stories the older Morag tells herself...and these stories structure her life...and determine who she is” (50). While I agree with this reading, and in fact much of my discussion has been based on this argument, I am not satisfied to stop there. When read in light of my additional interest in *The Diviners*’ treatment of time, Morag’s discussion of her parents becomes much more provocative than Hjartarson’s comments allow.

This is a fascinating passage, for in it, as in many others, Morag gently but radically destabilizes conventional wisdom. Her dead parents, she states, are a physical presence in her life. This presence is certainly genetic, but Morag’s description of their movements in her skull, site of intimate thought, implies that her parents have an influence beyond mere biology and are also active in shaping her perceptions and experiences. Further, Morag’s parents are an active force in Morag’s life despite the fact that they’re “unknown” and “unrecognized.” The message here is that the past, and our ancestors, actively shape and inform our living whether or not we know of them. Previous generations, according to *The Diviners*, possess some kind of agency and energy that is independent of the current generation’s will and awareness.

Another striking moment occurs when Morag returns to her apparently empty childhood home after visiting an ailing Christie in the hospital. Lying in her old bedroom, Morag quickly senses that she is not, in fact, alone: “Prin is here, and Piper Gunn and Clowny Macpherson and another younger Morag, the felt or imagined presences of real and fictional people, the many versions of herself, combining and communing here, in her head, in this room with its time-stained wallpaper.”¹¹ Significantly, Morag tells us, “none of the ghosts seem threatening” (421).

Morag is clearly comfortable with this potentially frightening merging of times and planes of reality, and even with the presence of multiple versions of herself. The message I draw from this fact is that a fluid, fluctuating model of time is preferable, and in fact better suited to her lived reality, than the linear one she tried out earlier with the photographs. In this moment, Morag is having perhaps her most intense experience of temporal simultaneity, as the dead merge with the living and she shares space and time with the ghosts of her former self. I am also intrigued by the fact that Morag is communing with “real *or* imagined,” “real *and* fictional” people. Yet again, we learn that factuality is not ultimately important to Morag: the characters she mixes with are all real to her. They have all lived in her stories, and are thus capable of having presence in her present.

Piper Gunn, the heroic ancestor Christie creates for Morag throughout her

¹¹ This ‘time-stained wallpaper’ is reminiscent of Donaldson’s description of John Maclean’s little room with its water-stained ceiling and distinctive marks on the walls. Both Laurence and Donaldson use these rooms as ways to signal the idea that past time leaves tangible marks on the present, and comprises part of the present’s geography and physical space. I will return to this idea of a temporal landscape in my reading of the novel’s closing scene at the river.

childhood storytimes, is an example of this kind of ‘real and fictional’ person. Thus, the myths and histories Morag hears and tells work to shape – and even to create – elements of her reality. Their characters are present in more than a figurative sense, as more than simply memories, functioning as a force and a presence with tangible material influences. They are, in their way, alive alongside Morag and her family. It is in this sense, through this presence and influence, that *The Diviners* shows the past to be still happening. It continues to change and to be retold, it is a process rather than a finished product, but the past is always, at some level, present.

At the end of the text, as I have already mentioned, Morag returns yet again to the river. A close reading of the novel’s final, striking images clearly demonstrates the two key concepts with which I have been dealing.

How far could anyone see into the river? Not far. Near shore, in the shallows, the water was clear, and there were the clean and broken clamshells of creatures now dead, and the wavering of the underwater weed-forests, and the flicker of small live fishes, and the undulating lines of gold as the sand ripples in the sun. Only slightly further out, the water deepened and kept its life from sight. (477)

Kuester provides one insightful way of understanding this textual moment. At this point, she argues, the river bears a very specific metaphoric meaning. Morag’s ability to see beyond the river’s surface signals her “newly gained insight into the mystery of life” and her developing artistic talent for “recognizing glimpses of ‘inner truths’” (93). In Kuester’s view, Morag’s final reflections on the river provide a positive conclusion to the novel’s central story, which is that of “an artist’s epistemological quest for truth” (93). While Kuester’s argument is

convincing within the framework of her discussion, I propose that this passage be reframed. As I mentioned at the beginning of my discussion, I do not agree with critics who claim that *The Diviners* ends with the kind of closure and completion that Kuester is describing. Further, I think the river can be read differently: in keeping with my concerns in this study, I contend that this passage can also be read fruitfully in relation to questions of time and history. Morag's meditations make up much of the novel's final passages, and deserve careful consideration.

In my reading, this description of the river provides a sort of geography of time or temporal landscape as it is experienced by Morag and conceptualized by the text. In the above passage, the river of time contains a blend of dead shells, "clean and broken" remnants of the past. They are clean in that they pose no danger, and their brokenness results from their continued use, reuse, and reformation over time. These shells represent the Presence of the Past: the residues of earlier lives, like those of Morag's parents and other ancestors, still structure – literally, give form to – present experiences and material reality. The riverbed's piled shells serve, both literally and in terms of inheritance, as the foundation and basis for ongoing life. As the shells' limitless depths and layers are buffeted about, their arrangement varies, some coming to the surface and others being pushed, for the moment, beyond view – much as characters from the past appear to her when she needs their stories and insight. These shells figure not only for former generations, but also represent the many stories, histories, and myths which shape our negotiations with the present.

The water plants and “small live fishes” symbolize the living, who comfortably share place and time with the dead, and who live in physical and temporal simultaneity with them. The sun and sand indicate that the natural world is part of this pattern of continuity and shared life: humans’ lives and stories may be deeply involving, the text suggests, but they are only part of a much larger web of interactions. Further out, the river deepens and keeps “its life from sight,” a reminder of the secrets of even the present moment, and of course of the past. The water, importantly, has its own life: since the river represents time, I see this as a hint that time, rather than being something we define and measure and organize, is a force of its own with dimensions including – but beyond – our own realities. This theme has been suggested earlier, as a young Morag – in a moment that calls up the young Naomi in *Obasan* – wonders why “the trees and river and even this bridge” shouldn’t “have their own spirits” (140).

Turning from her contemplation of the river, Morag returns to her house and settles down at her kitchen table to work on her latest novel. All she has left to do is “write the remaining private and fictional words, and set down her title” (477). Here, as the text closes, is a hint that those words and that title have ultimately been made available to us as *The Diviners*. The novel we have just read is, perhaps, Morag’s latest version of her own story, her private and fictional words. That these words, which we rely upon to reveal the details and events of Morag’s powerful story, are explicitly identified as “fictional,” is of tremendous significance. With that single word, *The Diviners* effects a final disruption of

conventional understandings of literary and historical truth, blurring comfortable boundaries between the two and suggesting that they are, in fact, closely intertwined. Perhaps, in *The Diviners*, fiction is truth and truth fiction. This is, in my mind, one of Morag's and Laurence's strongest and most provocative moves. In the text's final sentence, in one deft phrase, they simultaneously underline and undermine *The Diviners'* message. The text ends, then, with questions rather than clear answers, with suggestion rather than declaration. *The Diviners'* ultimate impact hinges on this effect: the text's meaning, like historical truth, is shown to be questionable and unresolved, and ceaselessly intriguing. This lack of resolution does not mean that there isn't a sense of what Daniel Coleman calls "emotional completeness" to the novel (Personal Communication). Rather, there is a peace that comes with accepting the limits of one's knowledge and capacity to ascertain an ultimate truth about one's family or the shapes of time and history.

I will close, in this spirit, with a few preliminary suggestions of my own. I propose that we view *The Diviners'* concepts of historical multiplicity and temporal simultaneity as offering a conceptual space, and several key tenets, from which to work to improve the world beyond the text. In my belief, readers are never engaged in a simple or "pure" relationship with the texts we read. We are also, and always, implicated in the particularities of our communities, our various social locations and historical moments. For this reason, then, the lessons we take from a text will always, inevitably, affect our thoughts and actions as we move about in our own lives. Motivated by this conviction, I would like to conclude

with a few comments on the potential influence *The Diviners*' teachings might have as we turn from the text toward our shared world.

Discussing the processes by which meaning and identity are created through subjects' relations with language, Godard asserts that "In fact, reality is a fiction produced (coded) by its cultural representations" (28). If we accept this idea, and the ones I have laid out above, we affirm that, to some extent, both history and the present are recreated each time a story is told. Each telling, in other words, will have tangible – if unrecognized – effects on present and future realities. Having acknowledged this potential to alter others' understandings, and thus their actions and experiences, we bear a tremendous responsibility every time we engage in acts of representation, whether fictional or factual, whether of ourselves or others.

If, as *The Diviners* tells us, we have some agency in deciding which elements and versions of the past we endorse and pass along, then we have the power and opportunity to begin filling in conventional history's many gaps and silences. Further, if this ability to shape history belongs to all of us, regardless of our positions within systems of oppression and hierarchies of power, then individuals can use their stories to challenge dominating univocal narratives. It is by including ourselves among the multiple voices working to tell our pasts, and thus to configure our presents, that we may begin to work toward a more just future.

Unfortunately, as with any power, there is a potential for misuse: deliberate exclusion of known facts, self-serving manipulations of historical events, or a rewriting of history to serve oppressive ends. I think immediately of the case of Holocaust deniers, who use their stories to encourage and promote hatred, violence, and continued injustice, or of conventional accounts of Canada's 'discovery' that silence and conceal the genocide and colonization of its Native inhabitants upon which this country was founded. Another limitation of this model of choice and personal agency is that it overlooks the fact that so many historical details and facts have already been lost. There are certain historical 'truths,' certain lived realities, that are inaccessible to their would-be tellers. In this case, the admirable goal of speaking History's silences is unattainable. A further complication (and possible consolation), which I have illustrated in my discussion of the presence of the past, is that these forgotten histories and silenced voices will nonetheless continue to influence individuals and events for lifetimes to come.

While far from offering a perfect solution, conceptualizing time as Laurence and Morag invite us to might help us to act and speak with a greater sense of responsibility. After all, *The Diviners* shows us that our actions and stories – and perhaps we ourselves – will be circulating and influencing the world for a long time to come, shaping future presents we cannot yet imagine. This, I think, is where the text locates political possibility. We are called to live mindfully, sharing Morag's deep understanding of our implication in other

ongoing social and temporal moments. We are called to seek and listen to the voices that are currently left out of the telling of our pasts and the shaping of our presents. If we take *The Diviners*' message seriously and heed these calls, then maybe we can begin to destabilize unfounded claims to authority and to work, together, toward a more just future.

Perhaps I have succumbed too readily to what Ken Mclean calls the text's "numerous centripetal impulses" as I seek to make a final statement about what *The Diviners* offers readers. Problematizing conventional unified readings of the text, Mclean contends that the novel's complexity stems from the presence of many "tendencies which work against such a harmonizing, that dialogize any such certainty" (Mclean 97). Susan Warwick responds to Mclean by commenting that "reading against the fictional pull towards harmony and resolution need not result in the diminishment of the importance or the accomplishment of the work itself" (Warwick 4). In my mind, these comments apply equally well to the novel itself as they do to its critics. Morag's 'journey,' in this text, does not reach a clear resolution, and her negotiations with the past do not lead her to a final clarity. But this does not mean she has not learned. Through her interactions with characters from her past and her myths, through her negotiation with memory and histories, Morag comes to an acceptance of confusion, multiplicity, unfinished or unverified stories, and the coexistence of multiple temporalities. Perhaps Morag's legacy is to signal to readers the possibility and strength that can come with accepting complexity rather than seeking to deny or elide it. I wonder, too, if *The Diviners*

isn't quietly advocating a posture of humility in our dealings with other people and unfamiliar ideas. Rather than declaring that celebrating multiplicity will clear the path to multicultural harmony, or that time is always cyclic, we might be better off humbly offering our perspectives and suggestions about these issues and then beginning again the long, careful process of listening to others' stories and thoughts in order to further challenge, refine and nuance our own.

In keeping with this comfort with incompleteness, *The Diviners* offers up temporal and historical models that are complex, layered, and ultimately in flux. The text's vision is clear, not confused, but part of its message is to assert the strength that comes with acknowledging the limits of one's understanding. As I said above, Laurence seems to recognize – and to want to assert – that no single historical or temporal model can fully explain or contain the multiple ways in which human beings interact with their world. The text's conceptualization of time presents a model in which cyclic and simultaneous temporalities are merged or quilted together with conventional linear ones, and the threads that hold them together are an understanding of their interrelation in a person's or a culture's perceived reality. Various divergent accounts of time and history might take on relevance as their needs and circumstances shift. Employing one account is not a negation of the truths and usefulness of another, but rather an acknowledgement that truth can not be spoken in a single voice. As I argued in my introduction, there is a way in which contesting narratives work in concert to bring about a truer, albeit perhaps a less tidy, history. In this sense, through the sometimes

cacophonous sounds of multiple dissonant histories, the truth, as Jules Tonnerre
sings, outlives the lie.

Reading *Obasan*'s "Perpetual tense"

'Life is so short,' I said sighing, 'the past so long.
Shouldn't we turn the page and move on?'
'The past is the future,' Aunt Emily shot back.
(Kogawa 45)

This exchange is one of *Obasan*'s many direct engagements with the longstanding critical and literary debate over the workings of time and history. Aunt Emily counters Naomi's desire to "move on" from the pain and trauma of the past, asserting instead a deep and inescapable link between past and future events. While Emily's statement can be read as simply an affirmation of history's continuing influence on the present, within the context of the novel it can also be seen as a challenge to conventional understandings of time and history. Emily's words, and much of the novel in fact, pose a profound challenge to conventional ideas of linear, sequential time. If "the past is the future," then maybe time is cyclical, or maybe both times coexist. Such are the possibilities *Obasan* urges readers to consider.

In *Obasan*, as in *Maclean* and *The Diviners*, truth, history and time are shown to be complicated and multi-faceted. Early in the text, the adult Naomi firmly resists the pull of memory and any challenges to her belief that the past, which is finished and gone, should be left undisturbed. Over the course of her narrative, however, she comes to a more nuanced and complex understanding of history's ongoing presence in her life. This journey of awareness may sound awfully like the kind of progressive development that one might expect this text

to confound, but a careful reader will notice that Naomi's position at the close of the text is more like a return than an arrival. Indeed, in childhood, Naomi is not invested in rigid notions of linear time, and her speculations and experiences show her to be open and sensitive to interactions with other planes of existence, both temporal and spiritual. Naomi's journeys into and through the past and her interactions with other characters - including ghosts, spiritual presences, and the natural world – recover for her and reveal to readers a temporal model built on the principles of historical multiplicity, the presence of the past, and temporal simultaneity. *Obasan's* temporal model is one built upon the intermingling of times, frequent interaction between living and dead, and, most obviously in this text, differing versions and accounts of history. Neither the text nor its narrator offers a final statement or absolute account of the workings of time, but perhaps their more subtle 'truth' can be found in their consistent and effective critique of models and lines of thought that would presume to make any claim to such absolute authority.

As in Emily and Naomi's exchange above, some of the text's contributions to debates around time and history take the form of characters' direct commentary and discussion. Many more of these interventions, however, are textual events and encounters that defy the conventional limits of sequential time or the separation between living and dead. In these ways, *Obasan* artfully and insistently challenges Naomi and her readers to think beyond dominant notions of the pastness of the past.

Obasan's complexity, its foundation of apparent contradictions, is signalled from its very opening: the epigraph to this novel states that "[t]here is a silence that cannot speak" (Kogawa i), yet the text can be seen as an eloquent and at least partially 'successful' attempt to fill the void of this silence. Many critics have focused on the text's negotiations with speech and silence, some arguing that the text ultimately emphasizes speech as crucial to survival, others celebrating its attention to the ways in which silence itself can be a form of speech (for varying approaches and conclusions on these negotiations, see Cheung, Gottlieb, Howells, Magnusson, Willis). *Obasan* also forges a skilful path between the poetic, heavily symbolic language of the "prose poem that opens the novel" (Goellnicht 297) and the plainer, more direct expression of conventional prose and reportage. Indeed, the first passages of chapter one stand in sharp distinction to the language and imagery of the opening poem: the first line is a date-stamp, telling us that the narrative time is "9:05 p.m. August 9, 1972" (Kogawa 1). The following two paragraphs quickly provide detail on the physical setting, which is a grassy coulee "half a mile from the Barkers' farm and seven miles from the village of Granton where we finally moved in 1951" (1). As the narrative continues, different tones and forms of language are intermingled, the narrative voice shifting easily between modes of address. Throughout *Obasan*, as in these first moments, conventional distinctions between speech and silence, and categories of genre and voice are shown to be slippery at best: for Naomi, and for readers, communication

and experience are shown to be impossible to categorize according to normative, binaristic divisions.

Naomi tells us that she and her Uncle visit this same coulee “every year around this time” for reasons she does not yet understand, although she has repeatedly asked her Uncle to explain them (1, 3). Here, on the first page, we encounter a nod toward cyclic or ritual time. The annual trip to the coulee, where Naomi always makes her way to the bottom of the slope to listen to the underground stream and pick “at least one flower” (3) has a profound significance for both of them, even in the absence of full understanding on Naomi’s part. That Naomi can feel the solemnity and importance of this annual pilgrimage even without knowing why she makes it signals that she is attuned, in some way, to levels of communication and connection beyond the level of spoken language and reason.

Much later in the novel, we learn that this annual excursion to the prairie commemorates the 1945 American bombing of Nagasaki, where Naomi’s mother was horribly disfigured and ultimately lost to the family when she vowed to remain silent and apart rather than let her children know of her suffering. Thus, for Uncle Isamu, this ritual is a way of remembering and honouring his sister-in-law and the many others who suffered through the war. It is also a way of connecting, through gesture, place, and his meditations, with the dead. Bringing Naomi is his way of including her in this family tradition as fully as he can without breaking his pledge to stay silent about the details of her mother’s death.

Retrospectively, this scene at the coulee takes on a new poignancy and significance as the future of the narrative brings new depth and meaning to its past.

Arnold Davidson provides an expanded and more nuanced reading of these trips to the coulee. He notes that August 9th is not only the day of the second atomic bombing, and the yearly ritual a memorialization of that event, but that mid-August, the general timing of the visits, “does allow for another evocative Japanese reference” (Davidson 31). This reference is to O-Bon, a Japanese Buddhist “festival of the dead” in which people honour and commune with their departed relatives who are “called back home again to share briefly in the world of the living” before returning to the world of the dead (31-32). Significantly, people honour and comfort those dead who do not have graves by sending “tiny straw boats” holding lanterns or lit candles and incense out to sea or onto a running stream. According to Davidson, in Uncle’s adapted version of this ceremony, the specificities of his location and situation lead to several substitutions:

There is no ocean in Alberta but the waving grass; no stream but the ‘surface seepage’ in the coulee; no incense but the smell of the roses growing along the edge of that ‘trickle’; no lantern or candles but the new moon and ‘[t]he whole dark sky...bright with stars’ (1); nevertheless, the annual August evening [is]...a one-night hail and farewell that mourns the tragic death of a sister-in-law in Japan even as it commemorates the abiding links between the living and the dead. (32)

Naomi and her Uncle sit in a still silence that belies the dense emotional significance of their presence on the coulee. Naomi, ever attentive to her

surroundings, takes in the textures and details of the grasses, soil, and sky around her, and her sense of time slows to a halt. When she says that she and her Uncle “sit forever, it seems, in an infinite night” (4), I hear an insight in her words. The words ‘it seems’ suggest a stirring recognition that time is qualitative and can only be perceived rather than quantitatively measured. When Naomi is ready to move on from their shared moment, she touches her Uncle’s arm and makes her way down the slope to pick the blossom that forms her (as yet unrecognized) tribute to her mother.

The second chapter takes place about a month after these events, as its ‘date-stamp’ tells us. It is now September, and Naomi is at work in Cecil, Alberta where she is a school teacher. Again, the opening words signal some of the text’s broader concerns as Naomi says that “In the future I will remember the details of this day, the ordinary trivia illuminated” by a significant event to come (5). The narrative strategy here is remarkable: the voice of the textual ‘present’ of September 13, 1972 is already aware that future developments will lend a different light to this moment, giving new as-yet unknown layers of significance to its mundane details. Naomi faces the ignorance and curiosity of her new students, their impertinent questions leading her to reflect on her identity and characteristics, which she wryly catalogues in her mind. She goes through her name, age, health, and marital status before arriving at “Personality: Tense. Is that past or present tense? It’s perpetual tense. I have the social graces of a common house-fly” (7). This passage reveals some of Naomi’s irreverent wit, and also fills

in some preliminary details of her character. Her comments can certainly be read as frank self-observation of her social anxiety, or as a “pun linking nervous tension with stoppage of time [which] suggests a blocked sense of development” (Harris 34). Yet this ‘stoppage of time’ can also be seen as a suggestive glimpse into Naomi’s developing temporal awareness. Perhaps “perpetual tense” describes time and history as Naomi experiences them. Certainly, by the close of the text, we have seen many scenes which seem to play out in suspended time and which hint at the possibility of another plane of time fittingly described as perpetual tense. At a more basic level, the novel’s narrative structure also contributes to this sense of perpetual or simultaneous time: as Davidson observes, time is “difficult to fix” in this novel, as Naomi’s varying temporal positioning creates a narrative in which “one place or time can easily merge into another” (50).

Shortly after these reflections, Naomi receives the news of her Uncle’s death. This is the life-changing event that lends an illuminated clarity to her memories of this day. Naomi quickly leaves for a visit with her bereaved Aunt, the Obasan for whom this novel is named. When Naomi arrives, she is met with Obasan’s typical silence and self-containment. Obasan is a woman of few words and profound, articulate silence. As Naomi observes, Obasan “has learned it [silence] well, its idioms, its nuances” (14). When Naomi asks about her Uncle’s death, answers are not forthcoming. After a few initially cryptic responses, and with many pauses, Obasan shares a few stilted details of Uncle’s death, enough that Naomi can piece together the general story. Reflecting on her Aunt’s manner

of expression, Naomi tells us that, when Obasan talks about the past, “the full story never emerges in a direct line” (18). These comments have been widely interpreted as part of *Obasan*’s broader commentary on the unreliable nature of dominant histories which claim to tell the whole story in order (for diverse arguments which all draw this conclusion, see Cheung, Goellnicht, Grice, Turcotte). In this text, through Obasan’s alternate forms of expression and the gaps in Aunt Emily’s archive, history is shown to be fragmentary, partial, incomplete, and ultimately unknowable. I would like to expand upon these interpretations and argue that Naomi is also commenting on the temporal structure of Obasan’s stories: in her subtle or indirect accounts of the past, Obasan gives little import to sequential, linear narrative structures. Instead, she focuses on moments and experiences that have emotional or other significance, building her history around those rather than around dates and ‘facts.’

The undated photograph she gives to Naomi as a link to “the best time...the best memories” also demonstrates her commitment to this non-linear temporal historical model (50). Naomi lingers over the photograph, which shows her, aged two or three, with her young mother. “When would this be?” she asks herself, seeking to locate the image in her chronological history (50). But there is no identifying information, no date, on the back. Obasan’s assertion that “this is the best time” is heavy with significance, for hers is a model of time without dates or strict order. It is organized instead by memory, experience and emotion. The photograph and the moment it represents are ‘timeless’ and therefore unending.

This is emphasized by Kogawa's / Naomi's use of the present tense when describing photographs. They are moments, suspended, and the events they depict are in some way ongoing and still happening. Later in the text, Naomi experiences a moment of communion with her mother by viewing a photograph of the two of them together.¹² Thy Phu notes that "Photographs in the novel often function as compelling though inadequate substitutes for the absent subjects of those images" ("Photographic Memory"). I would argue that, in this perpetual tense, Naomi and her mother are outside of history and therefore, perhaps, free of the separation and trauma that, chronologically speaking, loom so close after the photo was taken.

Particularly at the beginning of her narrative, Naomi seems frustrated by Obasan's unwillingness or inability to give her a clear, sequential account of their family's history. As she proceeds with her narration, however, it becomes apparent that Naomi's own approach to history-telling has much in common with Obasan's. As Davidson notes, although Naomi regularly signals the dates and order of the events she recounts, readers are soon aware that her story "will not be the straightforward chronology suggested" by her use of these cues (48). Naomi's movement between and across times and her narrative strategy of interspersing fragments of the emerging far-past, near-past and present narratives reveal that for her as well as for Obasan, stories and time do not move in a direct line. Beyond the level of narrative sequence, she also relates many scenes – such as a visit from her mother (who, unknown to Naomi, was a victim of the US bombing of

¹² I will expand on this idea of physical contact via photography later in this chapter.

Nagasaki) to her bedside shortly after the end of the war – in which one time acts and impinges upon another. These scenes alone render linear temporal models like the one she longs for in *Obasan*'s stories utterly insufficient. By the end of the text, Naomi seems much more comfortable with the permeability or outright inaccuracy of distinctions between past, present, and future.

Helena Grice also reads temporal significance in *Obasan*'s narrative structure, explaining that “Naomi's discontinuous narrative stresses the interplay between past and present as well as the chafing of personal and official chronologies” (2). The narrative shifts constantly between times and places, and, as Grice suggests, between discursive modes. The history Naomi re-presents is told partly via personal memory and partly through the newspaper clippings and parliamentary reports Aunt Emily has preserved, and the tensions and contradictions between these accounts signal the text's use of historical multiplicity to challenge the authority of dominant narratives. Indeed, the versions of history often chafe sorely. The gulf between the falsely cheery newspaper headlines celebrating the contributions of “Grinning and Happy” Japanese, the “Best Beet Workers” (Kogawa 213), and Naomi's “vivid account of the grinding hardship of life in a chicken-coop on the Barker farm” where her family was effectively made hostage is, as Donald Goellnicht points out, the “most bitter and absurd contradiction” of ‘fact’ in the text's competing histories (293-94). Goellnicht firmly insists that the text does not merely strive to ‘correct’ the oversights or misinformation of dominant accounts of history. Criticism that

praises the novel for “correcting history,” he argues, “misses a major point of Kogawa’s fiction” (287). This point, he contends, is that Kogawa’s historiographic metafiction “problematizes the very act of reconstructing history by comparing it to the process of writing fiction” (287-88), revealing in its artful way that, no matter what claims are made or whose voice is speaking, “truth cannot be absolute” (302). Goellnicht’s argument is compelling and offers a nuance that helpfully informs my focus on historical multiplicity.

As Goellnicht argues, *Obasan*, like the other texts I investigate in this project, does more than challenge dominant accounts or versions of history by presenting multiple and varied perspectives on events. These texts, while they are committed to telling their stories and histories, are also concerned with challenging the very idea of capital-H History as a knowable, tellable truth. As my readings of Donaldson, Laurence, and now Kogawa have demonstrated, history as a construct, as a narrative, is also thrown into question: however sincere a writer’s intentions, the creation of an orderly or disorderly account and the selection and exclusion of elements of a story necessarily create a narrative which is always partial, unobjective, and incomplete. As King-Kok Cheung notes, while *Obasan* seeks “to recoup” what she calls “the lost annals of Asian Americans” (11), Kogawa’s self-conscious narrative, with its artful interplay and blurring of distinctions between history and art, “must not be confused with definitive history” (12). While the novel’s events are closely aligned with her own Japanese-Canadian family’s experiences during and after the Second World War, Kogawa

is not merely seeking to “replace a dubious official history with another imperative one” (13) and any reading which bases its argument in the ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth’ of the narrative has missed a vital component of the text’s pedagogical imperative. In *Obasan*, as in the other texts I am discussing, “History is not rejected but rethought, refocused, and re-presented. [...] To read them as purely mimetic beclouds the authors’ artistry and obscures their alternative ‘historiography’ (13). Part of the work of this project is to attend to the insights and potential for broadened understanding that comes from recognizing – and even celebrating – the impossibility of writing a ‘complete’ historical account, and learning to attend to the partial, creative, multiple histories available to us through contemporary literature.

As I have argued above, *Obasan*’s multiple, contradictory historical narratives signal a commentary on ideas of temporality as well as history. Commenting on these ‘contradictions of fact,’ Grice argues that the text’s “oscillation...between Naomi’s personal ruminations and recollections and the various reported accounts of that history reflect the juxtaposition of private and public temporalities” (2). While Grice does not define her terms, in my understanding private temporality refers to time as it is lived at the personal, experiential level, and public temporality refers to the conventions (of linearity, sequentiality, and so on) that structure the workings of organized time – the calendar year, train schedules, the planning of events - and official history. In this statement, Grice acknowledges that time as it is experienced is not necessarily the

same thing as time as it is described, measured in conventional terms. I am particularly appreciative of the simplicity with which Grice phrases her discussion: rather than falling into the temptation to use psychoanalysis or needlessly convoluted terminology, Grice makes her observations calmly and clearly. By resisting the urge or pressure to justify her arguments in relation to conventional ‘common-sense’ about time, Grice clears room for a discussion of alternate temporal models that doesn’t have to answer to dominant ideas, and also raises the possibility that perhaps convention should explain itself instead. In other words, I am arguing that characters’ differing conceptualizations of time are not merely the result of their personal psychological traumas or idiosyncracies; rather, each individual’s or text’s temporal model represents a real, plausible way of making sense of the world, no more incredible or imperfect than any other.

By talking of *Obasan*’s blurring of divisions between moments, I am not suggesting that the reading experience itself is disorienting or confusing in the ways *Maclean* can be. In *Obasan*, shifts in voice, time and place are clearly signaled in a manner more reminiscent of the markers Laurence uses in *The Diviners*.¹³ Experientially, though, and despite this narrative clarity, past and present frequently merge and mingle for both Naomi and her readers: Davidson also observes that “Present and past oddly coalesce in the novel” (48) despite, or perhaps because of, Naomi’s early efforts to keep the past at bay. Perhaps her

¹³ Mason Harris notes that *Obasan*’s use of “associative memory to launch narratives of personal experience” finds its “closest analogy in Canadian fiction...in *The Diviners*, where the narrator responds to a sense of crisis in her present by reviewing her past through the involuntary ‘memorybank movies’ (*Joy Kogawa and her Works*).

early habit of dating segments of the narrative indicates her effort to keep time orderly and contained. As Mason Harris notes, “Naomi’s narrative is often dated like a diary” (25). Diary or journal writing often proceeds chronologically, assigning thoughts and events to their ‘proper’ times as in the typical phrasing “Today I...” that opens many diary entries. Yet Harris’ comparison of the novel to a diary prompts other associations. In a sense, this text is the personal story or journal of one woman, Naomi, part of which is composed of another journal written by her Aunt Emily. Emily’s journals and documents are frequently credited as providing the ‘factual’ elements of the story of Naomi’s family and of the Japanese community’s mistreatment in WWII Canada, and it is certainly true that the package of documents she sends Naomi, particularly the clippings and letters she preserves, are the source of much of the text’s historical ‘data.’ It is important, however, not to overlook other dimensions of Emily’s contributions to the text: the inclusion of her personal journal in the package, its intimate tone and content and the way she frames her entries as letters to her sister in Japan all represent a form of history-telling that is significantly distinct from conventional narratives which assert neutrality, objectivity, and reliance on hard ‘facts.’

Obasan’s refusal of boundaries continues: the book is at once a journal within a journal, and as popular opinion describes it, a ‘history lesson’ that “document[s] in careful detail a suppressed and painful chapter” in Canada’s history (Harris 1). I have already argued that this kind of characterization overlooks Kogawa’s insistent challenges to idea of a complete historical account, but it is important to

acknowledge that the novel is broadly received as a corrective to dominant history, a way of telling the real story of Japanese Canadians' wartime experiences. Cheung notes, "Reviewers of *Obasan* laud the novel for furnishing the 'true' story about Japanese Canadians" (11). However much their readings overlook about the text's destabilizations of conventional notions of truth and history, the text does play a crucial pedagogical role, increasing readers' understanding and awareness of the events of WWII. With its use of diverse narrative techniques, its interactions between moments and characters from the past and present, and the multiple readings it generates, *Obasan's* multiplicity and complexity lend it a compelling affective power and they are also, I believe, at the heart of its 'lessons' or philosophy.

Shortly after Naomi arrives at her Aunt's house, Obasan presents a package that has recently arrived from Aunt Emily. This package contains Emily's journal, newspaper clippings, letters Emily has exchanged with various politicians and bureaucrats during and after the internment. Emily's political activism and outspoken character may seem typically 'Western' traits, but interestingly, Harris claims, "her use of a diary as family archive and historical document may be particularly Japanese" (14). Sweeping claims about a character's or a behaviour's 'Westernness' or 'Japaneseness' are suspect, but I do note with interest Harris' contention that Japanese culture places a heavy emphasis on the preservation of the past through records that are both concrete and emotionally evocative" (Lifton qtd. in Harris 15). I do not accept Harris'

reading and his categorization of some practices as ‘Western’ and others as ‘Japanese,’ and would argue, rather, that Emily’s complexity works with the rest of the text and contributes to *Obasan*’s multiplicity and refusal of divisive categories, its incorporation of more than one cultural approach to history-telling. If we choose to speak of the text in Harris’ ‘racialized’ terms, it is much more productive to reject binaristic divisions and understand it in terms of cross-cultural pollination and interchange.¹⁴ As Cheung notes in her critique of Frank Chin’s “hard-line distinction” between ‘fake’ and ‘real’ Asian American literature, this critical focus on “cultural purity” and authenticity erroneously “ignores one of the most defining characteristics of Asian American literature and ethnic American literature generally: hybridity” (11). The same also applies in the case of ethnic Canadian literatures, which share many – but not all – contextual and textual characteristics with the Asian American literature Cheung discusses.

15

As Naomi holds Emily’s journal, it “feels heavy with voices from the past” and a potential connection to her Mother and her Grandma Kato (Kogawa 49). The book creates a “strong urge to put everything aside and read the journal” but Naomi is interrupted by another, more immediate, voice from the past: “it is

¹⁴ My thanks to Donald Goellnicht for his helpful commentary on this issue.

¹⁵ In point of fact, Kogawa is one of the three so-called ‘Asian American’ authors Cheung analyzes at length in *Articulate Silences*. At the very least, this misnomer is misleading; further, it risks limiting readers’ engagements with text by linking it to a different and non-equivalent political and cultural background than that in which it originated. Roy Miki cautions that American critics’ treatment of the text obscures the text’s Canadian specificities so that the “site-specific formation of the Japanese Canadian subject...tends to become another version of the ‘Asian-American’ example” (*Broken Entries* 155 note 8).

Uncle's absent voice that speaks even more urgently and that I must attend. 'Care for Obasan,' Uncle is saying" (50). Naomi immediately heeds her Uncle's absent yet audible voice, and sets to work cleaning and tidying Obasan's house. This remarkable exchange alerts us to the powerful presence of the past. Not only is Naomi's deceased Uncle a presence in her lived reality, but he is an active one who can influence the course of present and future events. It is also interesting to consider the implications of Naomi's decision here for our understanding of the text's temporal modelling. That she quickly decides to heed her Uncle's call rather than attend to those other voices from the past signals that, depending on context and circumstance, some presences from the past may seem to be more present, or as Naomi puts it 'more urgent' than others. Some engagements with the past can be delayed, while others, perhaps by virtue of the immediacy of their implication in present and future, cannot wait.

As I have indicated in my introduction, this project takes its impetus from my interest in what reading *does*, and from questions about how textual encounters can affect readers' practices in their daily lives. While I consider bigger pedagogical issues about whether and how reading can spark engagement with movements for social justice, Naomi's actions offer fascinating insight. Her Uncle's voice issues a directive, so this might account in part for her prompt response, but as Lorraine York has intriguingly suggested, perhaps his use of the word "care" is central here. As York explains, "'Care' is both something we do (an act) and a quality that we bestow: it projects itself into the future" (Personal

communication); perhaps this sense of implication in the future is what drives Naomi to put aside the journal and take on the more immediate tasks of caring for her Aunt. When a voice from the past calls upon her to work toward a better future, Naomi responds without question. What might this insight offer to the project of a social-justice oriented literary pedagogy? How can we read in order to find other voices which, like Uncle's, call for our engagement in caring for lives to come?

In his analysis of historical fiction, Herb Wyile uses the term 'temporal duality' to describe a 'device' through which authors can investigate the influence of the present on the past, and use the past as a site to reflect upon the present (see Wyile 214-15). Wyile provides a useful way to investigate the doubling of time that often occurs in fictional texts, and to evaluate the ways in which texts mediate between the past they represent and the narrative present within which they're written. The idea of duality, however, falls short when applied to the kinds of experiential phenomena I have just described: scenes like this one don't just bring present and past into dialogue, but thoroughly muddy conventional divisions between past and present, bringing them into union, into the same moment. My term 'temporal simultaneity' is an attempt to signal that my primary focus is on the simultaneous existence or occurrence of conventionally distinct temporal moments.

Obasan also offers other ways of understanding individuals' relationships to time. The morning after she gets to Obasan's house, Naomi surveys the

contents of Aunt Emily's carefully kept box of documents and letters and frustratedly contends that "all of this belongs to yesterday and there are so many other things to attend to today" (46). Obasan, too, is constantly performing her own archival rituals and negotiations with the past. Her house is full of boxes of old newspapers, pencils, marbles, all of which "is of her ordering" (15). It is possible that these objects serve as gateways to the past: at other moments, photographs serve as triggers to Naomi's memory, launching her journey into the past and her interactions with ghostly presences. At this moment in the text, Naomi watches as Obasan sorts through and handles various balls of string, wool and thread, incorporating the twine from Emily's package into her existing ball, and reflects that "All her movements this morning are in another dimension of time" (47).

Naomi does not follow up on this intriguing comment, so readers are left to ponder its possible meanings. The statement may initially be read as saying that Obasan is moving slowly; indeed, this reading is supported by Naomi's later comment that, as Obasan rises from her seat on a mandarin box, her movements are "Slow as pyramid blocks rising one by one" (47). But there is another way of reading this statement: as a calm observation that Obasan, while she is physically sharing space with Naomi, occupies a different temporal moment. In other words, while Naomi and her aunt are in the same room at the same time, they are also, at once, in different times. Naomi, resisting the pull of her own memory and Aunt Emily's exhortations to revisit the past, is for now squarely planted in Obasan's

kitchen in September, 1972. Obasan, immersed and involved with events, objects, and people from the past, is, to borrow a term from Catherine Gallagher, “elsewhen” (17).

In her sensitive, if unfortunately brief, discussion of the “non-verbal lexicon” of time in *Obasan*, Helena Grice emphasizes the roles of personal sensibility and perception in influencing characters’ temporal experiences. She cites Naomi’s observation that “...the present disappears in her [Obasan’s] mind. The past hungers for her” (Kogawa 27) and argues that “Obasan’s time increasingly becomes past time as the novel progresses” (Grice 1, 2). Indeed, throughout the text’s ‘present’ narrative, Obasan’s time is past time. From our first glimpse of her, she is a keeper of memories, an old woman bearing “keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels” (Kogawa 16). As Naomi’s journey unfolds, Obasan is drawn more and more deeply into her remembered past and further from the textual present. As Grice rightly suggests, Obasan has not always dwelt in past time. Through Naomi’s memories and Emily’s letters, we see that Obasan as a younger woman spent much of her time and energy addressing the needs of the present. Throughout a major portion of her adult life, during and after the Second World War, she ceaselessly devoted herself to the hard work of making the present as safe and comfortable as possible for Naomi, Stephen, and the rest of their family. Perhaps because of the strain and trauma of this period in her life and its devastating effects on her and her family,

in the years after the internment and displacement, Obasan moves to occupy past time, particularly favouring the time before the disruptions of WWII began.

Another way of understanding Obasan and Naomi's different temporal positions is explained by Elliot Jacques:

No two men living *at* the same time live *in* the same time. Each one, living at the same moment, has his own personal time perspective, his own living linkage with past and future, the content of which, and the scale of which, are as different between one person and another as are their appearance, their fingerprints, their characters, their desires, their very being. (qtd. in Felski 23)

In my brief discussion of Obasan's house full of discarded or reusable objects, I described it as a historical archive of sorts. I will now return to this topic and expand my focus to include that most fascinating area of her house, its attic. Naomi's descriptions of Obasan's house are lengthy and particularly attentive, and it seems reasonable that our readings of them should be as well. I see these descriptions as offering a temporal geography of sorts, a map to the ways in which time is understood and configured in the text. Late in the night of her arrival at Obasan's house, Naomi is woken by her Aunt's presence in her room. Obasan is determined to make her way strenuously up the attic stairs, searching by flashlight for something she does not name but urgently seeks. As Obasan shuffles papers and magazines and rummages through trunks of old clothes, Naomi takes in the dusty, cobwebbed, room. She is clearly on edge, skittishly recoiling when a spider runs by on its web, and impatient for Obasan to complete her search so they can go back downstairs. As Naomi waits, she draws a parallel between the sticky strands of the spiders' webs and the "sticky and hovering"

past, which she feels is lurking in wait for Naomi or Obasan to fall into its snares. This extended metaphor, and the language and imagery Naomi uses, signal her apprehension and fear of memory and the past. Death figures prominently in her language at this point, and it is resisted rather than accepted. She feels threatened by the pull of memory and sees the past as a powerful and sinister foe to be battled and avoided.

In all this darkness, though, there is a more complicated, even positive, meaning to the symbolism in this passage. When Naomi cringes at the sight of the spider, her jerking arm sends the flashlight's beam up to the attic's cobwebby rafters. "Ugh! What a sight! A graveyard and feasting-ground combined" (25). Naomi's tone is certainly one of repulsion, but the words she uses carry hope as well as decay. The attic, which stores countless mementoes of her family's past, is also rich with evidence of the natural cycle of life and death. This takes the form of a dead sparrow, the hunting spiders, *Life* magazine, and a disintegrating "flowery patch-work quilt Mother made" for a very young Naomi (22-26). This graveyard and feasting-ground signifies the interdependence of life and death, past and present; it is one of many images in the narrative that recall the fertility that can come with decay and decomposition. That Naomi recognizes this scene of horror and fear as, at once, the site of feasting and growth, signals the shifts that will happen in her experiences and understandings of time, death, and the past. The language and images here resonate with Laurence's description of the Manawaka Nuisance Grounds, the dump where discarded items are heaped and

mostly forgotten. While the dump is a public space and the attic an intensely private one, both are sites of decay and a sort of rebirth. At the Nuisance Grounds, unwanted castoffs are buried, and trash is piled, but it is also a site of respectful interaction with the dead, as Christie tenderly buries a dead baby he's found in someone's garbage, and of new life, as he discovers and salvages items he thinks may still be of use.

The morning after the women's trip to the attic, Naomi dreams a shifting scene in which an aged man and woman labour deep in a forest, amidst mist and a grey "smoky curtain continuously rising" under the commanding eye of a British army officer. She moves to join them, and they "toil together in the timelessness" until the "dream changes" and her Uncle appears, dancing "a flower dance – a ritual of the dead" (Kogawa 29-30). The dream contains elements of the tension, perceptual temporality, and interaction with the dead that characterize *Obasan's* model of time, expressed in an evocative and imagistic language that engages readers in a deeply affective and non-rational connection to Naomi. Naomi's waking further emphasizes the extent to which her experience, however much she may resist it, is embedded in this kind of temporal suspension or simultaneity, this coexistence with the past. In a scene that recalls Maclean's waking at the opening of Donaldson's text, Naomi is initially disoriented and strives to orient herself in relation to dominant, measured time. She notes that "Some mornings it isn't clear at all where the edge of the forest or the dust storm is" (30) as her experiences of one plane of reality overlap with another. Her disorientation, her efforts to find a

familiar geography to locate herself, and the limits of chronological time, are all revealed in her question, “What time is it and how am I back in my low-ceilinged bedroom with the ladder stairs along the wall?” (30)

In the novel’s final few chapters, Naomi finally reaches the moment and the knowledge she has sought for so long. Her Aunt Emily and her brother Stephen have arrived at Obasan’s house, and their devoted minister and family friend, Reverend Nakayama is preparing to read them the long-suppressed letters from Grandma Kato that will reveal to the children their mother’s fate. These are densely emotional moments for Naomi and her readers, coming as they do at the end of over thirty years of longing and a novel’s worth of memories and questions. These letters from the past were sent by Grandma Kato in Japan to her husband, who remained in Canada throughout the internment. Once the family has gathered, there is a seemingly endless wait for Rev. Nakayama to begin reading. The two blue letters are passed around and reviewed by Aunt Emily, Obasan, and Nakayama-sensei, while Naomi and Stephen just watch and wait. While this delay only lasts a few moments and a handful of pages, for Naomi – and likely for many of her readers as well – it feels achingly long. When Nakayama pauses in his reading, the delay feels similarly interminable. Another moment of suspended time, perhaps, as readers and Naomi wait in perpetual tense.

Before I continue my discussion of this climactic textual moment, a pause of my own to acknowledge yet another way in which this moment of revelation is

a layered one. Audrey Kobayashi notes that Naomi and Stephen were far from unique in their longing for an understanding of their familial and cultural pasts. As Kobayashi says, “most of the postwar generation of Nikkei children [grew up with] a gaping hole in their collective past” of “a time disremembered” (Story Telling); for other children, particularly members of the dominant group, myth and story furnished a rich sense of their history. Kobayashi notes that “My Japanese grandmother gave me no stories, only kindness” and speculates that this reticence stems in part from the fact that “To re-member the past was, for most of the Issei, a painful thing, made more painful by the events of the 1940s” (Story Telling). This silence on the part of survivors, coupled with the white-washing and denial that continue to characterize dominant or ‘official’ accounts of Canadian history and identity, combined to create a situation in which readers of all backgrounds were coming to the text as ignorant of Canada’s wartime actions as Naomi and Stephen, and their real-world counterparts, were of their own personal histories.

Thus, *Obasan*’s long-deferred moment of revelation, striking enough in its impact within the world of the text, is simultaneously a moment of cultural and historical enlightenment – and frequently of shock – for many readers. I will return to the effects of this revelation near the close of this chapter.

Within the world of the text, the letters are explicitly recognized as a voice from the past. Rev. Nakayama pauses one last time before he reads to tell Naomi and Stephen that their “mother is speaking. Listen carefully to her voice” (256).

The first letter simply states that, of the family, only Grandma Kato, her niece's daughter, and Naomi's mother have survived. The second, Naomi describes as "an outpouring" detailing in brutal honesty the circumstances of the family's presence in Nagasaki and their tremendous agony during the impact and aftermath of the B-29 bombings of March 9, 1945 (257, 259). "From this point on," Naomi observes, the letter's narrative "becomes increasingly chaotic, the details interspersed without chronological consistency" (259). This is, no doubt, an effect of the shock and trauma Grandma Kato has suffered. Perhaps her memories are fragmentary and disorganized, as Cathy Caruth, who I have discussed in detail in relation to *Maclean*, explains is typical of survivors of trauma (*Unclaimed Experience*). But I think the letter, like the shape of Obasan's stories, signals the influence of a temporality and a sense of history organized primarily around personal affect and experience rather than external and arbitrary markers of time and sequence. As the story emerges, we learn that when Grandma Kato finally came across Naomi's mother she was badly injured and "utterly disfigured," her body covered with "great wounds and pustules and crawling with flies and maggots" (262-63). Although she manages to survive, she always keeps her scarred face covered and prays that her children will never have to bear the weight of knowing her fate. This wish is another example of the presence of the past: her mother's wish retains an active power over Naomi's childhood and adult life decades after its utterance, shaping her, her relationships, and the unfolding of her life in innumerable ways. Her mother's wish is behind all the silence and hushed

voices that have circled whenever Naomi asks of her mother, and it is also, tragically, behind her painful lifetime of longing and loneliness for her mother's presence. In many ways, her life has been shaped and some might say stunted by this urgent "desire for a return to her mother" (Grice 5). Faced at last with these gruesome truths, readers might wonder, now that this enormous gap in her history is filling in, how Naomi can react to this terrible knowledge in a way that is anything but destructive.

Goellnicht's discussion of the moment of disclosure offers a stimulating way to think through the hope that comes with this awful revelation:

Significantly, when the letters from Naomi's Mother are read after Uncle's death, the rain, the water of life, the unfrozen word, falls in torrents; Naomi will use it to water the plants, to make the seed flower with speech (p. 233). Words have left the vault of time, transformed from dead, cold icons into living signs through the act of reading. (301)

As Grandma Kato's words 'leave the vault of time,' the moment of reading becomes a crossing of temporalities, a fusion of experience across time. Her words become an active force as they are spoken, and they will give life to further speech and action, as rain nourishes the seed. Crucially, this positive reaction is rooted in Naomi's own willingness to listen to the past and to learn from it.

Naomi's response to the shattering news in her Grandma's letters is to shift into another plane of experience. Closing her eyes, she asks her mother to "assist me to hear you" (264) and the narrative moves into a dream-like sequence of reflection, spiritual connection, and ultimate communion with her lost relatives.

Naomi reflects upon her mother's gruesome suffering, moments in her own life touched by her mother's absence, and the photograph Obasan showed her earlier in the text. In these passages, Naomi's narrative shifts so that she is directly addressing her mother, and again she describes the photograph, and its moment, in present tense. In the photograph, she relates, "My fat arm clings to your leg. Your skirt hides half my face. Your leg is a tree trunk and I am branch, vine, butterfly. I am joined to your limbs by right of birth, child of your flesh, leaf of your bough" (267). The photograph, as Naomi views it, becomes a reunion, an experience rather than simply an image. The moment it captured is revived now, as she views it, and she lives her mother's company and closeness much as she did in the originating moment. Naomi is connected to her mother, physically and emotionally, through her re-narration and re-viewing of the photograph. The photograph acts as an avenue to shared space and time in which she and her mother are organically, symbiotically interconnected. After lingering here a while, Naomi withdraws a little from this immersion in the past and comments on a lesson she has taken from her journey through the past:

I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here. The letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves. (267)

This passage is a touching articulation of Naomi's emerging awareness of the permeability of conventional divisions between moments, physical and spiritual planes of existence, and the dead and the living. It also pushes readers to

think more deeply about her experiences of physical and non-physical contact. Although she suffers a raw visceral longing for her mother in particular and keenly feels the physical absences of her family, even as a child Naomi *does* in fact experience presence without flesh. These take the form of encounters with ghosts or spirits, as when her dead mother visits her and Naomi understands that “She is here. She is not here” (183). They have also taken the form of interactions with a different kind of flesh, as creatures in the natural world temporarily hold the spirits of people both dead and alive. As she and Obasan make their way to Grandma Nakane’s funeral, Naomi contemplates a school of tiny fish “shimmering...like a wriggling grey cloud” and wonders “Could her spirit be in the little grey fishes?” (137). She doesn’t directly answer this question, but seems to find some comfort and reassurance in the idea. As an adult, as she acknowledges here and as I have discussed above, Naomi most definitely experiences presences without flesh that take an active and influential role in the unfolding of her life and narrative.

According to Davidson, Naomi’s musings represent little more than her “childish stumblings” toward understanding of the bigger issues she grapples with (57). Much like W.P. Kinsella’s dismissal of John Maclean as “not in the least interesting” (“First Novels”), I see this as a limiting and condescending appraisal of the protagonist’s and the text’s perception and intellect. In keeping with my commitment to taking this text and its commentary seriously, I would posit that, to gain a greater mental flexibility and understanding of the possible worldviews

contained in the text, and to avoid missing out on its contributions to our understanding, we should take Naomi's comment seriously and seek to learn from the alternative ways of seeing she offers.

Roland Barthes' reflections on photography in *Camera Lucida* offer a compelling way to read Naomi's encounters with family photographs. He places great weight on the "photographic referent" which he defines as "the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph." Barthes emphasizes this 'realness' of the referent, seeing in its physical presence and in the photograph's ability to document "only and for certain what has been" an essential truthfulness to photographic images. He acknowledges that photographs can be tampered with, but argues that this will only enable them to lie about "the meaning of the thing" but "never as to its existence." Photographs, for Barthes, are "authentication itself" (*Camera Lucida*, n.p.). Having established the solidity or the "that-has-been" of the objects and beings depicted in photographs, Barthes goes on to describe the relationship he perceives between the viewer of a photograph and the body in the photograph, a relationship which he understands to be a physical, sensual one. This is where things get interesting for my consideration of the relationship between present and past in *Obasan* and other texts:

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a

carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.
(*Camera Lucida*)

In this way, then, when Naomi gazes at a photograph, she can also be seen to be in physical contact with its referent – in many cases, her missing and missed mother. It is not, of course, the kind of touch or proximity she craves as a little girl or, later, as a grown woman who wishes for her mother's presence, but it is another kind of contact to add to her spiritual and dream-world encounters with her dead and distant family members.

Early the next morning, Naomi's meditations are still unfolding. They are at once dark and painful, thoughtful and reverent. She wonders about the moments and the meanings after death, asking "After the rotting of the flesh, what is the song that is left? Is it the strange gnashing sound of insects with their mandibles moving through the bone marrow?" (268). She wonders if it is "enough that we were once together briefly in our early Vancouver days" or whether, perhaps, memory is insufficient to meet her need for contact and connection (269). At one point Naomi mourns the loss of a shared physical existence, acknowledging defeatedly that the hands of the dead "can no longer touch our outstretched hands" (269). At this late point in the text – and in my reading of it – Naomi herself seems to caution against a too-optimistic celebration of the power of memory or of interaction with figures from the past. After all, she points out, they are not actually here with her in a physical, tangible way, and she misses them dearly. This could indicate a limitation of the temporal model I am arguing, a place where the boundaries between moments are not sufficiently permeable to

meet the human need for contact, affection, and physical touch. Ultimately, though, Naomi's journey ends in a hopeful space, in a rich and moving passage celebrating the abiding closeness and intimacy, the collaboration and tangible links, between living and dead.

Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight, to the place where the colours all meet – red and yellow and blue. We have turned and returned to our arms as you turn to earth and form the forest floor. Tonight we picked berries with the help of your sighted hands. Tonight we read the forest braille. See how our stained fingers have read the seasons, and how our serving hands serve you still. (270)

Grice argues that Naomi's "path towards reunion with her parents and reconciliation with her parents' history culminates in sensory connection between them all at the close of the novel" (5). Through this reunion, Naomi is able to regenerate and experience an intimacy and relationship she has long mourned and to find the seeds of life in these grim facts of history. Here, planes of existence, levels of perception, and temporal moments come together in productive, sensual union. All are marked by it, and the experience leaves Naomi with a peace and calm that, until now, she has only known through vaguely remembered fragments of her childhood.

Harris draws significance from the shift in imagery from the single tree around which the child Naomi clings to the forest of this passage, its floor a gift of the dead. He argues that "The conversion of a single tree into a forest suggests that Naomi has found a new relationship with the outside world as well as with her mother," and that "the fact that this forest grows from graves suggests that she

has accepted the permanent loss of relatives and community” (42-43). Harris’ suggestion that the forest signals a development in Naomi’s relationship with the world beyond her seems apt: I would build from this brief comment to argue that the forest signals Naomi’s newfound sense of implication in, and attachment to, a broader community. This community, I think, includes her family, the Japanese Canadian community from which she had become disconnected, and a range of characters both living and dead. I strongly disagree, however, with the second part of Harris’ reading: in the context of Naomi’s reflections and experience, it is simply implausible to argue that this forest signifies acceptance of loss or of the horrors and death experienced by her relatives and community. Rather, Naomi is justifiably angry about this treatment, and while she may have found a sort of provisional peace with her past, her tone near the close of the text and her subsequent activism in *Itsuka* show that she is far from having accepted or ‘moved on’ from the injustices and horrors of WWII. In fact, after she finally learns of her mother’s fate, Naomi explicitly states that “I am not thinking of forgiveness” (264). I would suggest that the forest rooted in graves symbolizes, like the landscape of the attic and many of *Obasan*’s other scenes, the interdependence and intermingling of different moments in time, and the rich growth that can occur when one is able to perceive the ways in which present and future are rooted in and continually acted upon by what came before. Rather than having “accepted the permanent loss of relatives and community” as Harris

claims, Naomi has in fact found a place among her ancestors and relatives, living and dead, from which she can build toward a new way of living in her present.

Naomi's narrative ends with her making another trip to the coulee, this time in full understanding of the significance of her Uncle's ritual, now her own. In the "predawn stillness" and under the gradually lightening sky, Naomi seems to have found a peace and a tender hope that she had lost over time, represented by the "sweet and faint" scent of wildflowers that wafts to her through the air (Kogawa 270-1). Fittingly, her narrative ends where it begins, with a reminder of the centrality of unconventional temporal models to Naomi's personal identity and story, and of the endurance and importance of cyclic time.

Goellnicht argues that, by the close of *Obasan*, Naomi and the text itself have reached what he aptly describes as a "negotiated balance" on two central tensions. Balance has been achieved between silent communication and symbolic language, as well as "an attempt at balance between the old 'mother culture' (in this case Japan) and the new 'father land' (Canada)" (Goellnicht 298). I would suggest that the text has also negotiated balance of other kinds as well. Naomi's narrative also negotiates a complex and delicate balance between times, understandings and accounts of, temporal models, and forms of communication.

Obasan was published in 1981, as the Japanese Canadian redress movement was building to create major waves in Canada's cultural and political life. The novel is frequently mentioned in accounts of the movement's key milestones, and is even credited by some as having directly contributed to the

movement's eventual success – for example, *Canada's Who's Who* describes Kogawa's work as “instrumental in influencing [the Federal Government's] 1988 settlement with Japanese Canadians for their loss of liberty and property in Canada during World War II” (552). Indeed, Kogawa's text is so closely associated with the movement that, “On the day the [settlement] agreement was announced, parts of *Obasan* were read in the Canadian House of Commons” (Goellnicht 306 n 28) by NDP leader Ed Broadbent.

I see other links between *Obasan* and the struggle for redress. It is not insignificant that both the text and the movement work, in part, by encouraging similar affective responses in their audiences. I would argue that many struggles for social justice, like each of the novels I examine, build their effect on a sense of implication and involvement in past events and an acknowledgement of responsibility toward history. I see in this overlap another site of possibility for literature's political agency.

As I have mentioned above, Audrey Kobayashi offers a provocative discussion of the role of history-telling in Japanese Canadian cultural memory and its relation to social and political movement more generally. Her observations are also rich with insight on the questions of time and history that I am taking up here in relation to *Obasan* and merit sustained attention at this point. Kobayashi explains that, just as most first generation Japanese Canadians chose to silence their pasts rather than pass them along, their children were also taught to silence their memories, nudged by their parents' example and by the racist influence of

dominant Canadian culture to develop “a capacity to forget.” Therefore, most of the post-war generation of Japanese Canadians grew up with “a gaping hole in their collective past.”

Despite this general atmosphere of silence, says Kobayashi, “stories nonetheless played an important part in the healing that took place leading up to and after the Redress settlement of 1988.” She bolsters the critical consensus I have noted above when she contends that “*Obasan* has perhaps done more than any other book to...convey the Nikkei experience to the world.” In the months and years since its initial publication, *Obasan* generated an enormous critical and popular response, moving many Canadians from ignorance and apathy to passionate mobilization and playing a significant role in the ultimately successful redress movement. Critics resoundingly credit the novel with bringing long-overdue attention to the injustices and legacies of Canada’s wartime mistreatment of its citizens of Japanese origin. Eva Karpinski, for example, argues that the text plays a testimonial role by acting “as a substitute for the survivor’s body in that it embodies and generates memories of the pain that has shattered individual, communal, and national histories” (Trauma and Witnessing).

Crucially, this expression served as emphatically more than entertainment for many readers. Further, *Obasan*’s effect was not only to ‘educate’ mainstream Canadians – a widely circulated truism revealed in, for example, Mason Harris’ celebratory – and presumptuous or exclusionary – assumption that the text “*crosses ethnic barriers to enable us to become, in imagination, a member of a*

Japanese Canadian family” and to learn first hand about internment and dispersal during the Second World War (Harris 1, emphasis mine). Kobayashi contends that Kogawa’s novel also played a crucial role in encouraging self-recognition and empowerment among Japanese Canadians, some of whom, like Naomi, went on to become activists. Kobayashi explains:

Leading up to the redress settlement of 1988 required a diachronic process of convincing the government and the general public of the rightness of our cause, and at the same time initiating the healing within the community that would encourage all Nikkei to come out and fight. In that process, stories of the past were told and re-told, and in the process the narrative shifted from recollections of sorrow and suffering to political conviction and a sense of human rights.

I am struck by the parallels between this ‘narrative shift’ and changes in Naomi’s attitudes toward Japanese Canadian history over the course of her story – a shift which ultimately leads, in *Itsuka*, to her active participation in the redress movement. Given my interest in temporality and non-linear history, I am particularly struck by the fact that repetition (of stories, and thereby, for listeners, of past events) played a key role in the emergence of a politically motivated narrative and activist movement. Here is an example of cyclic temporality at work in the world. By challenging dominant narratives, foregrounding multiple voices from and accounts of the past, and rejecting a linear conception of time that would argue that WWII is ‘over,’ Japanese Canadians mobilized a powerful and effective social justice movement. Thus we see striking and inspiring evidence of the power of the stories we tell ourselves – about the past, about history, and about the workings of time.

It is particularly fascinating that *Obasan* contributed to these projects of convincing and healing when one considers that Kogawa herself has admitted that, when she set out to write *Obasan*, “she had little interest in politics or contact with the redress movement” (Harris 7). As she wrote, however, she came to identify with Aunt Emily’s quest for truth and justice, and by 1983 she was following her fictional character’s example by “becoming an activist in the Japanese Canadian redress movement” (8). In an extraordinary convergence, the novel’s protagonist, its author, and many of its readers all seem to have followed the same basic process of empathetic engagement and activation. Kobayashi and others seem to be right when they argue that *Obasan* did some of the work of convincing and motivating that led, ultimately, to Pierre Trudeau’s formal apology to the Japanese government and the Brian Mulroney government’s much more meaningful passage, in September 1988, of a redress agreement with the National Association of Japanese Canadians, complete with individual and community settlements to survivors of the internment and dispersal.¹⁶ This is a truly profound testament to the affective power and potential political agency of literary texts.

Roy Miki offers a riveting account of his experience of listening to Mulroney’s official announcement of a redress agreement in the House of Commons. Fascinatingly, his autobiographical narrative shares much with the fictional ones of Maclean, Morag, Naomi, and Marilyn: he lived that moment split

¹⁶ See “Apology and Compensation” for basic details of the redress settlement, and Miki for a sustained description of the organizing efforts behind the settlement.

between memory and present, moving between moments as family memories played out alongside Mulroney's formal political diction. Intriguingly, he also comments explicitly on the disjuncture between the moment's conventional temporality, on one hand, and its momentousness for Japanese Canadians, on the other. He notes that "The 'official acknowledgement' lasted only minutes, and its brevity was, for me, quite disproportionate to its significance for Japanese Canadians" (7). This could mean that he thought the matter should have been given more of the House's time, with duration somehow signaling a recognition of its importance: according a sort of 'currency' to time. He might also mean that the moment was experienced as a much more lingering one by listeners like him, who heard and lived a whole history in the time it took Mulroney to read his statement. In this case, it's an example of different temporalities inhabiting the same space; the moment for some listeners covering much more temporal and historical ground than it did for others. Miki's moving testimony demonstrates that the principles of temporal simultaneity, the pull of the past, and the concept of an individual temporality that is out of step with dominant, conventional time, are not only effective novelistic techniques, but in fact resonantly capture the complexities and fascinating diversity of 'real' people's lived experiences.

In closing, I return to the text itself in order to make one last comment on the implications of its narrative structure for our understandings of time, history, and political responsibility. It is important to note that Kogawa does not use Naomi's trip to the coulee, with its cyclic significance and hopeful quality, to

close *Obasan*. This is, as I have discussed, where Naomi's narrative ends, but the text itself gives the 'last word' to an entirely different voice: the novel closes with a historical document Kogawa entitles "Excerpt from the Memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada, April 1946" (Kogawa 272). In the Memorandum, the Committee argues for the withdrawal of current Orders-in-Council that seek "the deportation of Canadians of Japanese racial origin." Its authors argue that, among other reasons, the Orders violate International Law, are based upon racial discrimination, contravene the United Nations Charter, and are an "adoption of the methods of Naziism" (272-74).

The document and its argument are forceful and compelling, and can be seen as positive evidence that Japanese Canadians had allies, even among members of the dominant and ruling classes, who mobilized to work against their mistreatment. However, the document also serves as an indisputable reminder that, as Aunt Emily would remind us, even with the end of the war, their struggle was far from over. Kogawa's choice to close with the voice of 'official documentary history' can be seen as a strategic move that will convince resistant readers of the ongoing impact of wartime events. Perhaps she is emphasizing the differential power and authority accorded to some voices over others, both in April 1946 and by her contemporary readers, who might find themselves listening differently to these passages than they do to those written in Naomi's reflective, less insistent voice.

As Vikki Visvis notes, some critics have challenged “the accepted reading of the novel's ending as generating the closure we expect from teleological narratives.” Roy Miki, for example, “suggests that we reconsider Kogawa's novel as open-ended, particularly by reading the postscript” that I discuss here “as an indication of political indeterminacy” (Visvis 69-70). Given that the memorandum is written by three white men presumably acting on behalf of (silent and non-present) Japanese Canadians, indicating what Visvis, following Miki, calls “the same racially-informed power structure that initially allowed the internment to take place” (Visvis 70), Miki reads the document as evidence that “nothing has happened to change the social and political background of Naomi's experiences” (Miki 116, qtd. in Visvis 70). Miki's reading suggests to me a lack of closure to the text and to Naomi and Emily's journeys toward reconciliation, healing, and justice. If “nothing has happened” that would rule out future racist apprehension and government-sanctioned theft, then Japanese Canadians continue to live in a hostile climate, precariously dependent on the whims and turns of government and ‘mainstream’ attitudes. Visvis herself, while she appreciates Miki's idea that the novel's ending “indicates the need for further political action,” seems to see more merit in a reading that sees *Obasan* as reaching at least the beginnings of resolution. She argues that “the narrative suggests individual and national reconciliation by allowing for the triumph of speech over silence. Closure may be tentative, but the process of mourning has been initiated” (70). Impulses like this one have the dangerous potential to elide the ongoing reality of

racism in shaping the lives of minoritized Canadians, enabling a response to *Obasan* that deflects or ignores its insistence on the need for further action and change. Julie McGonegal, on the other hand, assesses the interpretive trends shaping much Kogawa criticism and astutely critiques the “assumption...that the thematics of forgiveness and reconciliation that dominate her texts--thematics influenced by an admixture of Christian and Buddhist heritages--undermine their project of resistance to racial persecution, suffering, and injustice.” McGonegal’s reading refuses the easy, celebratory closure that many critics seem to seek. She attends to the “transformative potential” of ideals of forgiveness and reconciliation without forgetting that one of the “problematic messages they can relay is that racism in Canada belongs to a putatively discontinuous past” and that “genuine forgiveness” cannot be based on falsified versions of events. Apologies or forgiveness based on understandings of the racist past as over and aberrant “[remember] the internment for the sole purpose of isolating it from a multicultural present, of containing its potential to disrupt comforting nationalist illusions about the achievement of racial harmony.” In this formulation, memory has a radical and vital role to play, and “forgiveness itself does not and cannot constitute a negation or annihilation of the past, an excision from collective and individual memory of racial pain and suffering. Genuine forgiveness, according to Kogawa’s pedagogy, must be dissociated from amnesia of any kind” (*The Future of Racial Memory*).

Visvis' assessment of *Obasan's* "tentative sense of resolution" and Miki's argument that the novel is left "open-ended" (Visvis 69-70), along with my emphasis on the multiplicity and indeterminacy of historical 'truth' in the text, all ultimately refuse the neat closure one might expect from a typical *bildungsroman* or teleological narrative. Kogawa's denial of narrative closure is a powerful move, and a potentially productive one. It can generate a discomfort for readers stemming from the recognition that, while the events Naomi describes are technically 'over,' their legacy, and the conditions that generated them, live on. While this text is based in the past, it speaks a truth that may have ongoing resonance. As Eva Karpinski puts it, "readers are interpellated to imagine their own implication in history and are faced with an ethical imperative to accept the role of witnesses" (Trauma and Witnessing). Karpinski cites Shoshana Felman to argue that "From now on, as onlookers, they will be contaminated by the 'total condemnation of the testimonial truth'" (Felman 107 qtd. in Karpinski). This 'contamination' can be linked to Thomas King's argument in *The Truth About Stories* about the ways in which a story, once heard, cannot be unheard and will continue to influence the thoughts and actions of its listeners. I will return to this concept in my final chapter as I discuss Lee Maracle's *Daughters are Forever*.

I want to suggest that even Karpinski's forceful reading doesn't go far enough in imagining the text's potential impact. Giving the last word to historical injustice through the memorandum's plain revelation of abuse and virulent racism allows it to ring on in readers' minds, rather than to fade away under the more

pleasant image of Naomi's peaceful musings at the coulee. The text leaves us in a place and state that linger unpleasantly in our minds, just as the conditions that allowed for the internment persist in Canadian culture. Rather than closing off the past, the text gives it the last word, insisting on its prominence and ongoing relevance in the lives of survivors and their descendants. This, then, is the text's final call for action. It is less direct than Aunt Emily's frequent declarations and less poetic than Naomi's reflections, and it bluntly refuses to let Naomi's sense of healing stand in for political action and accountability. The text seems to take up Felman's insistence, described by Karpinski, "that a commitment to witnessing be 'unqualified': that is, that the witnesses do not view themselves as outsiders, as external to 'the condemned and the condemning situation' of which the narrative gives testimony" (Felman 107 qtd. in Karpinski). Committed readers, having read both the "novelistic testimony" and the official documentation Kogawa shares, cannot undo the witnessing that has happened as they read; nor can they, if they have heard it, un-hear the text's call for action.

As I have discussed above, some readers of the text chose to join or support the Redress movement. Others have chosen to do nothing, to treat this as 'just a story' or to use it as a cathartic way to assuage the guilt that comes with privilege. For others, it has opened a window on personal and cultural pasts that were silenced or hidden. In each of these cases, however, the novel demonstrates, time and again, the lasting influence of past on present and future, and of narrative on readers' lived, material existence.

**“Magic moments” and the call for responsibility in Lee Maracle’s
Daughters are Forever.**

“Marilyn thought it interesting that Elsie spoke in the present whether the event she was referring to was in the past or present. Maybe it was for Elsie the difference between active and inactive.”
- (Maracle, *Daughters are Forever* 215)

Of the four novels I am examining in this project, Lee Maracle’s *Daughters are Forever* is the most direct and self-conscious about its conceptualizations of time and history. Much of its plot centres on the struggle of the protagonist, Marilyn, with the repeated ‘gapping’ that sees her losing her grip on time and undergoing vivid memories and journeys through her past. She spends much of the book musing on the nature and function of time and experiencing the slippery borders between past and present; events from the past play out repeatedly and directly affect characters living a hundred years or more after the events’ first occurrences; memory-based experience plays a key role in the narrative’s ‘present’; and dead ancestors appear to Marilyn to pass along words of advice or guide her through places from her past that she needs to revisit on the path to personal healing and maturity. There is no need for close reading or extended argument to contend that, in the world of this novel, the past is an active figure in the present. This fact is an explicit and central tenet of the book. The novel lays out its historical and temporal models in plain sight, offering them for our consideration and possible edification.

Marilyn is a Salish woman whose own experience of child apprehension motivates her social work with other indigenous women whose children have

been seized by the Children's Aid Society, or are in danger of being taken from them. Her reflections on her client Elsie's manner of speaking, which forms the epigraph to this chapter, reveal her own growing awareness that, in many ways, the past can be a stronger presence, and exert more influence, than the actions and interactions of a person's daily life. This awareness is not a revelation to the narrator or to the winds and spirits who work with Marilyn toward her transformation, but witnessing Marilyn's journey is an opportunity for readers to learn along with Marilyn. To live her life fully, to "open [herself] up to her own pathways" (242), Marilyn must reckon with her individual and cultural pasts – including a cultural history of European colonialism and genocide, a childhood of abuse at the hands of her step-father, and her adult struggles with an often absent, neglectful husband, alcohol abuse, and her own violence toward her daughters – and put them to use in creating the future she desires. Hers is not a solo journey: many others, including ancestors, community, and most pressingly her daughters, are also crucial to the process. As the novel's title indicates, this is a multi-generational effort involving figures from the time before she was born and, as implied by the word 'forever,' also affecting those who will follow.

This process is not an easy one for Marilyn, and she is profoundly uncomfortable with the interactions and events that enable her to start to heal. Marilyn is particularly perturbed by her visions and her movements into the past. Witnessing Elsie's daughter's death play out inside a case file photo, she calls "to no one" to "spare me, I'm hallucinating" (Maracle 44); she has no belief in a

being upon whom to call, and knows no other name for what she is experiencing. Later on, submerged in layered moments of her childhood abuse and her own violence toward her daughters, she again pleads to be released, saying that she “can’t afford another breakdown” (111). Unlike *Maclean*, Maracle’s text does not ask readers to decide whether its protagonist’s strange experiences are manifestations of mental illness or important insights: from the outset of the novel, the omniscient narrator shows us that there are greater forces at work in bringing these thoughts, words, and experiences to Marilyn. Her personal struggles are a legitimate and important part of a bigger cultural and cosmic picture of continuous suffering, remembering, and healing. It is crucial to note that this novel is not – or not only – a *bildungsroman* depicting an individual’s quest or journey to maturity. It is important to remember that, in Maracle and Marilyn’s cultural locations and I would argue for most people, healing can never be an isolated, personal thing. For Native people, “healing requires personal and family cleansing of unresolved grief, loss, historical trauma, shame, and fear” (Labun and Eblen 209). This is why Marilyn’s daughters, ancestors, friends, and memories are all part of her healing process.

Perhaps the biggest reason this text stands out so strongly from the others I’ve analyzed is that it draws most deeply and sustainedly on a world view which was developed and articulated independent of the Euro-Canadian philosophies that shape dominant ideas about time, history, and social responsibility. This text and author have less ‘letting go’ to do in negotiating with, for example, linear

conceptualizations of time or notions of the past as dead. Drawing on a rich tradition of Native cosmology to articulate their alternative ways of seeing and being enables them to offer up sustained, nuanced historical and temporal models for consideration. However, pinning down which specific Native epistemologies she draws upon in her work is difficult – at least for an outsider like me – since she holds a flexible view of identity as a result of her own family history and, going deeper, of broader First Nations history in Canada. Maracle identifies strongly as an Indigenous woman and has dedicated most of her adult life to writing, teaching and activism aimed at improving the lives of other members of the Indigenous community in Canada and beyond. It is clear where her identity and affiliations lie. One biography sums up her cultural and ‘racial’ identities thus: “Maracle is of Salish and Cree ancestry, grew up on a reserve in North Vancouver and is a member of the St:lo [sic] First Nation” (Cooper), providing some insight into the possible roots of her ideas about time and history – or at least those which aren’t her own creations. Perhaps reflecting the complexity of Native identity and self-identity and attesting to the difficulty of relating an accurate history, this account is at odds with Maracle’s own description of her childhood in *Bobbi Lee, Indian Rebel* where she describes her childhood neighbourhood as one peopled by squatters living in houseboats and shacks on the mud flats alongside the Reserve, where she and her siblings sometimes went to play with other children (*Bobbi Lee* 25-26). Maracle describes herself variously as Métis, Native, Indigenous and Salish, and despite the painful erasure that she says

comes with being Métis, she also insists upon a recognition of the diversity to which she is heir. “By 1885, in Manitoba the term Métis reflected not just Indian and white bloodlines, but also Indigenous genetic diversity. We are Huron, Mohawk, Micmac, Anishwabe (Ojibway), Cree, Salish, Chilcote, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, French, Basque and Chinese by blood. These are the bloodlines of my own children” (Maracle, “Lost Days”). Marilyn, this novel’s protagonist, is Salish, and it seems that the creation story that opens the text, as well as the winds and other forces that work with her throughout it, find their roots in Salish tradition and myth.

So it is that this novel is built from a rich and diverse range of ideas and Indigenous cosmologies. Maracle’s work in cultural activism and her long-standing commitment to Native communities and to re-telling traditional myths (see Cooper) bring her a large range of conceptual tools with which to work. Whereas *Maclean*, *The Diviners* and *Obasan* sometimes tentatively, sometimes boldly chip away at dominant conceptualizations of time and history and offer their alternate models, *Daughters are Forever* starts from a different place, with long-standing cultural philosophy to work with as it establishes its own textual worldview.

Having struggled to uncover and articulate alternate ways of seeing time and history, I am refreshed and excited to find a text that is so confident and clear in its historical and temporal modeling. It is stimulating and heartening to read the novel’s matter-of-fact expositions on time’s function as “a critical illusion” (64;

141) and its descriptions of the ways in which memory and figures from the past can act upon a person by grasping or releasing her thoughts (eg. 17; 44; 109-11). Many of the concepts laid out in the text are ones I can heartily adopt as I seek new ways to conceptualize my relationship to the past and responsibility to the present and future. At the same time, I am keenly aware of the danger of engaging in uncritical celebration of the text and passively enjoying it without giving her ideas the respect of careful listening and active engagement. My ignorance of Native culture and beliefs in general, let alone the specificities of Coast Salish ones in particular, may lead me to erroneously read Maracle's personal interventions as long-standing indigenous values, or vice versa. I am also concerned not to fall into the pattern whereby cultural outsiders pick and choose a few exotic tidbits of another culture in order to somehow enrich or decorate our own lives, without giving respect by learning and appreciating, as best we can, the cultures and traditions from which these morsels are taken.

In her work on reconstructing Native women's identities, Kim Anderson discusses the challenge of seeking out respectful writings about Natives by non-Natives. In many cases, the authors' self-serving, racist motivations and biases poison their texts to the extent that Anderson puts them aside rather than engage with them in the hope that they will yield some useful material. Some of them represent an author's quest to cross boundaries and uncover secrets: these Anderson describes as perfect examples of "a modern-day colonial process" involving acts of cultural appropriation and of "eating the Other" (44). She cites

bell hooks' sharp critique of mass culture's penchant for commodifying and savouring racial difference. Hooks says:

The commodification of Others has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture (hooks 21).

I am not seeking decontextualized novelty here, but frankly my reading of Maracle's text *is* an interested one, and my engagement with the novel is shaped by my concern with rethinking temporality. My response to the text, as to each of the texts I've discussed in this project, is of course constrained by the limits of my knowledge, but also by my choice of focus. I wonder where to draw the line between inspiration and borrowing, on one hand, and cultural appropriation, on the other; or between selective engagement and blinkered cherry picking. What I do know is that Maracle wrote this book to be read, and that I, as one of her readers, am called to respond as best I can from my own particular position.

As Anderson insists upon readers' – particularly non-Native readers' – responsibility to examine their motivations and relinquish stereotypical expectations as they approach Native texts, she is careful to leave room for their respectful engagement with the texts. "I would not ask that anyone suspend their own frame of reference" she writes, but she cautions readers to acknowledge the nature of their capacity to respond and asks that they "resist the temptation to 'claim' the text, and that they be open to new interpretations, paradigms and meanings" (51). Having established the terms of the relationship she seeks with

readers, she agrees that “From here, we can move together through this book” (51). I am struck by this approach to writing: while her text can be taken up and read by anyone who can access it, Anderson assumes a posture of mutuality and cooperation which will ideally generate a sense of obligation to read well and respond judiciously. Readers would do well to approach all texts from such a position: my reflections on *Daughters are Forever* are offered in this spirit.

Reading *Daughters are Forever*

Maracle’s novel, summed up by its publisher and reviewers as the story of “a woman’s rediscovery of self” (cover copy), is adamantly not only an individualistic tale of personal growth. As I have suggested above, Marilyn’s personal struggle and self-discovery are not isolated, in this text, from the broader world around her: her problems are shown to have grown from her broader cultural history, and her own life overlaps a great deal with those of other Native women living in her time. Further, her life is deeply interwoven with the many forms of life that make up the world around her: the winds whisper in her ear to nudge her toward certain desired actions, and the sky people drop specific memories to her in an effort to spur necessary insights. The natural world is an integral force in the novel’s plot, and the plot is concerned with Marilyn’s fate as well as that of her ancestors and contemporaries. This is Marilyn’s story, but it is at once also the story of her people and their world. As Jeannette Armstrong explains in her foreword to *Bobbi Lee, Indian Rebel*,

...the telling of the Native sojourn through the quagmire of Canada's colonialist past is an extremely important document to Canadian literature.

In particular the telling of our lives, the back-tracking [...] is perhaps a more important exercise than we Native people readily appreciate. [...] In the movement of the life story of Bobbi Lee, what unfolds is the story of many natives during those times. There were real conditions that shaped people like Lee. (Armstrong 15)

Armstrong is speaking of an autobiographical work, but when she argues the importance of telling Native stories and lives, and of the impossibility of disentangling a personal narrative from a cultural, communal one, her argument also holds for the stories Maracle tells through her fiction.

Indeed, the novel opens with a creation story telling of Westwind and sky woman's roles in creating human life on Turtle Island (North America). We hear of Westwind's growing passion for sky woman's daughter and of their mutual play, which culminates with Westwind planting "seeds of future" in star-nation daughter's womb, and in the birth of humankind and varied plant life from this union (Maracle 12-13). Part one of the novel is dedicated to a narrative of human and cultural origins, a sort of history in mythic or symbolic form. It includes a description of traditional values and ways of living, stories of the early times and the rich, successful development of human culture, and a vivid description of the trauma and brutality of European colonization and genocide.

Importantly, our protagonist is mentioned only once during the novel's first section; this suggests that while the book is 'about' her, she cannot be known (or know herself) apart from the stories of those who came before her. While villages are being slaughtered and the earth echoes the faltering voices of the

women slain by the newcomers they had prepared to greet with song, the narrator tells us that “this song invaded Marilyn’s dreams” (17). I am intrigued not only that she can hear voices that were silenced well before she was born, but also by the use of tense in this section. The murder of Turtle Islanders and Marilyn’s dream are both narrated in the same, past tense. Does this suggest that the song invades her dreams at the same time as it is being sung? Is the unborn Marilyn dreaming as these events occur, or is the brutality ongoing and permeating Marilyn’s present-day dreams? I’m not certain the answer to this question matters in this context. What is key is that past, present and future are intertwined in the novel’s rendering of Native cosmology and lived experience. Parsing the tenses does nothing to change this fact or to make the concept easier to grasp to a mind not accustomed to thinking in this way. The melding of times in this passage is our first glimpse of what is to come in a novel where temporal boundaries are acknowledged as constructs and become increasingly permeable and unstable, and where Marilyn spends more and more of her time living in the past, whether in her own childhood and young adulthood or in an older history to which she is heir.

The active past

Blood memory

One way of understanding Marilyn’s preoccupation with, or rather her occupation by, her forebears’ history is through the concept of ‘blood memory.’

Anderson explains:

Many Native cultures teach that we carry the memories of our ancestors in our physical being. As such, we are immediately connected to those who have gone before us. We live with the trauma that has plagued the previous generations. We know their laughter, but also their sorrows.
(24-25)

In the first section of *Daughters are Forever*, we learn that early Islanders maintain balance through a set of complex agreements with other beings and that systems are maintained through stories and teachings drawn from a form of bodily memory. “Women were born awake” in that they came into life already carrying knowledge and memories inherited from previous generations. Their bodies housed “the memories of their star-nation mother’s moment with Westwind. In their blood coursed traces of old agreements” (14). The descendants of the sole survivor in the opening narrative of colonial genocide are born knowing the stillness and silence that may preserve them when they are threatened or in danger, but unfortunately it also hinders their successful resistance or engagement. “A rigid, pain-filled stillness replaced the body’s natural desire to move”(19) and “became [their] response to life’s critical events, the ones that might cause them to grieve, then move on to that magical creative space of change” (23).

Later in the text, Marilyn feels the presence of blood memory inside herself. She realizes that her attempts to excuse her abuse of her daughters are insufficient to the wrongs she has committed. She recognizes that she acted in ways that defied the traditional values of her culture, and therefore violated her own beliefs, whether or not she consciously espoused those values at the time.

“Belief is old,” she reflects, “coded into the memory of every cell. Tribal consciousness, lineage memory, old beginnings were pushing up at the new layers inside Marilyn” (140). The idea that her tribal values are an integral part of her psyche even when they go unrecognized speaks to the importance of one’s heritage to one’s character, to the influence of one’s past whether known or unknown. The image of these old beliefs pushing up and sprouting into Marilyn’s consciousness demonstrates the power of cultural legacy to endure, even through violence and genocide, and to sustain the lives of later generations. In this very important sense, the past is never passed but always a part of the present emotional and cultural environment. The presence of the past is tangible and has material consequences for present and future.

This passage also brilliantly demonstrates the kind of negotiations between past and present, tradition and cultural change that this text so adeptly navigates. Tribal memory, says our narrator, is coded in cells: in this statement, the relatively new language and concepts of genetics and cellular biology are put to use to explain a tenet of a culture that dates back to before Canada as a nation existed even as an idea. The new is integrated with the old: culture adapts to stay alive. Many Native thinkers, activists and cultural workers insist that, at a broader level, this merging and adaptation are crucial to ensuring cultural survival. It is imperative that traditional ways are not forgotten or abandoned, and much important work is dedicated to remembering and uncovering the cultural knowledge that colonizers “expropriated and consigned to deadwood leaves in

libraries” (Maracle, *I am Woman* 92). At the same time, though, these beliefs and this culture cannot be expected to remain stagnant while the rest of the world changes. Paula Gunn Allen describes this important blend of tradition and adaptation:

We [most tribal Americans] define ourselves; we identify with our communities and our traditions. They are both, for the most part, at least a thousand years old. One does not discard them as readily as one might a used pair of shoes...Our communities may reflect their modern existence; communities do that – adjust themselves to the situation. Were they to fail in that adjustment, no one would be left to tell the tale. (17)

Maracle herself has sharp words for those who would attempt to keep Native culture frozen in time, locked in some imagined past rather than free to move and change with the times. In a 2008 interview, she comments that “Humans are constantly reinventing themselves, but First Nations people have been less entitled than everyone else to reinvent ourselves...We’re always being pressed to be authentic aboriginal people. But put on a bustle if you’re going to talk to me like that” (Maracle, “Interview”). Maracle’s humorous tone doesn’t dull the pointed criticism she levels at racist hypocrisy, and she goes on in a more serious vein to point out that to clutch stubbornly at tradition without leaving room for change is to defy traditional teachings. “In fact,” she explains, “in our origin story, we’re to gather new stories and create new stories. So our creation story calls on us to constantly transform. I think that’s who we are” (Maracle, “Interview”).

This pressure to be ‘authentic aboriginal people’ reveals a racist mentality according to which time is meant to stop for Native people, while the rest of North America goes rushing into the 21st century chasing progress and technological advances. I cannot help but feel that this urge is at least in part motivated by a barely repressed sense of lingering guilt and implication in the suffering and struggles that Native people have endured in the time since Europeans made it their business to ‘civilize’ and colonize North America. By reducing Natives to stereotypical figures, unchanging and understandable, members of the dominant culture – of which I am one – can confine them to a sort of stasis, pretend our presence has not affected them in any way, and thus avoid the necessary hard work of reckoning with our shared past and our responsibility for a better, more just future. Terry Goldie sees this process at work in literary and cultural treatments of Indigenous people in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. In these works, he argues, “the reified indigene is seen to put us in contact with pure prehistoricity” (Goldie 148). Even when well-meaning authors seek to present positive images of Indigenous people and lament their mistreatment by colonizers, their “semiosis presents the indigene as a sign for past” (150).

The experience of time

The pressure to adhere to stereotypically ‘traditional’ ways and identities can make it very difficult for contemporary Natives to develop a healthy self-identity. Because colonial processes and education have worked concertedly to kill off cultural memory and traditional knowledge and dismantle the traditional

social structures which would nurture this memory and sustain this knowledge, many Natives today are lacking a sense of their ancestry and traditional ways. Anderson notes that “I think many of us feel insecure because we lack the knowledge that was ripped away from our ancestors. We have internalized the belief that we are ‘less’ Native because we can’t measure up to some kind of quintessential ‘Native experience’” (26). When Marilyn asks her client, Elsie, what nation she is from, Elsie simply answers “I’m Indian” (217). When pressed, Elsie reveals that she is Ojibway, but knows nothing about “Ojibway ways, traditions, cultures, songs” (*ibid*). Marilyn recognizes that Elsie is “unidentified from within” and that this lack of identity is a main reason for the young woman’s inability to value herself, to participate fully in her own life.

In one of *Daughters’* many characteristically incisive narrative commentaries, Marilyn reflects that,

Colonization is such a personal process. Culture is so intensely personal. There must be something about us that never quite gives up that never quite can be completely erased, but at the same time over a hundred years of cultural dismemberment has to surface in some intensely personal way. (216)

From the perspective of my interest in the workings of time, the pressure on Native people to live a stagnant, externally imposed identity, and their often violent, deliberate unmooring from their cultural pasts, share an end result. Both work to deprive Native people of the opportunity to experience the passage of time and to recognize their locations in the unfolding of history and the creation of future. In earlier chapters, I have critiqued the notion of linear, measured time

as a construct with negative, stultifying effects on many people. I still believe this to be true, and my reading of *Daughters are Forever* has opened me to the idea that a personally meaningful relationship with time can be crucial to the healthy unfolding of a life. For example, after the colonial genocide depicted in part one of the novel, the male descendents of the slain have no referent by which to define their being and meaning. “They plant seeds but don’t bother to watch them grow” and they drift heavily and without purpose. The effect of their trauma, guilt and shame is heightened by the loss of a location in time, and their lack of direction and sense of purpose or self is directly linked to it as well: “Their world has lost its future. Cut off from considering their past, they list in the momentary context of the present” (Maracle 24). Rather than living their lives, these men are passing them. They see time as a burden to bear and as something to endure. The imagery is stark and striking as Maracle describes these Native men’s emptied lives:

They mark time. Time is the enemy of the dispirited. Those who dare not make use of it mark time for death, for murder. These men wander aimlessly, killing time in small pieces. They bellow ominously from barstools, party houses and booze cans in every impoverished urban centre. They float from one woman to another, leaking manhood into wombs...(25)

As this passage underlines, Maracle’s view of urban life is clearly quite a negative one. She sees cities as sites of decay, alienation, suffering, and, worst, “integration into the oppressor society” (*I am Woman* 105). Elsewhere, Maracle refers to Toronto as “that ugly city” and describes it as a place she needed to escape from for her own survival (*Bobbi Lee* 111). She explains that her book on the impacts of colonialism on Native women is written for Natives “in desperate

circumstances, those who need to recover the broken threads of their lives.” She describes these people as “not just surrounded, but buried beneath the urban giant, reduced to a muffled voice by the twang and clang of machines” (*I am Woman* 10-11). Indeed, social changes over the past century mean that an increasing number of Natives live in urban centres, and Maracle sees this as one reason for contemporary Natives’ struggles with identity and self-articulation in the face of colonial culture. While Maracle’s description of urban Native men’s lives is admittedly a simplistic and even moralizing characterization of what is, of course, a complex and varied group of people, and while urban living needn’t necessarily entail disconnection from one’s cultural past, her anti-urban sentiment is worth investigating.

With increased urbanization and limited opportunities on reserves, an increasing number of Natives are moving into cities, and Maracle observes that the past decades have seen “the birth of a large and stable urban [Native] population” (*ibid* 104). Furthermore, the colonization of Native land and the later creation of the reserve system forcibly removed many Native groups from their traditional lands and forced them into new, often unfamiliar, areas. This means that individuals and communities are developing at a distance from the land and culture in relation to which they might otherwise have defined themselves. The problem here is more than the change from traditional to contemporary ways of living – a formulation which privileges the kind of teleological linearity I have been critiquing. It has to do, as well, with place as it is connected to time and

history. The Stó:lô people traditionally live along British Columbia's Fraser River and its tributaries (Labun and Emblen 208). Their "oral traditions tell that we have always been here" ("Historical"), and archaeological findings confirm human occupation of their traditional lands for 9,000 – 11,000 years ("Historical," Labun & Emblen 208). As the Stó:lô Nation's website explains, "We take our name Stó:lô from the word we give the river. We are river people. It is from the river and surrounding land that our cultural traditions are derived" ("Historical").

The Fraser valley is thus "the context that gives the Sto:lo their identity, their traditions and stories, and their history" ("Historical") and a relationship with their traditional lands is central to the Stó:lô's sense of spiritual and physical well-being. Drawing on a series of interviews with members of the Stó:lô community, Labun and Emblen explain that "Recognizable physical landmarks and sacred places are part of the Sto:lo identity. Traditions and stories, along with physical landmarks, give the Sto:lo a sense of balance and continuity" (213). Having placed the passages above into their presumed cultural context, one can better understand the roots and deep significance of Maracle's and Marilyn's scepticism and dis-ease with urban life, particularly in Toronto, which is even more distant from the Fraser valley than Vancouver, where each of them seems much more at ease. In *Daughters are Forever*, a disconnection from one's traditional land also ruptures one's connection to one's cultural history, so that urban living here is an interruption of, or an obstacle to, one's experience of being

located in time. Time and space are not binaristically opposed, nor are they distinct quantities, but rather they exist in relationship.

Turning back to Maracle's aimless, wandering urban Native men, it is crucial to note that, in her view, men's disassociation from full experience of lived time is linked also to their mistreatment of women and the decline of life-giving family and community structures. These issues are at the heart of the novel and are the focus of much of her other activist work as well. When one's past and heritage are unknown, and current time is the enemy, it can be difficult not to turn on oneself and those nearby. The absence of a sense of time, and of one's location in the movement of time, is catastrophic. The experience of time is not some abstract philosophical concern, but rather a tangible element of reality with immediate, far-reaching consequences for the individual and the human family. Vine Deloria, Jr. also ascribes great importance to the experience of time, seeing it as central to processes of self-knowing and maturation: "Part of the experience of life is the passage of time, the fact of personal growth, and the understanding of oneself produced by reflective memory processes" (53). To intervene in a person's, or a culture's, movement in time is to arrest the journeys of development and discovery of which life should consist.

At two points in *Daughters Are Forever* the narrator, focalized in Marilyn's musings and dreamlike thought flows, describes time as "a critical illusion" that plays a crucial role in maintaining order and balance in the world. This illusion "demarcates the difference between the physical and the spiritual

world, between sanity and insanity, between life and death, consciousness and coma” (141). Time is a crucial element of a person’s consciousness, and “The separation of moments in time defines sanity” (64). Throughout the text, Marilyn struggles to maintain her ability to wield this illusion, to keep a grip on time: she senses that her ‘gapping’ is a threat to her mental stability, her interpersonal interactions, and her professional standing. When Marilyn describes time as a critical illusion, she doesn’t mean that time doesn’t exist or that events don’t unfold in relation to other events. Rather, I understand her to mean that any given measure of time is a construct, a tool used to help humans organize their activities, memories, and understandings of the world. Interestingly, Marilyn struggles because she wants to keep moments separate and maintain an orderly sense of the sequences of events. She wants to keep her footing in what one might call ‘external’ time, the linear chronological time of the world around her. In the midst of her spiritual journey with the temporal movements it necessitates, it is an impossible, frustrating task. If the merging of temporal planes and the inconsistencies of her experience and memory were self-evidently normal, expected elements of her daily life, she wouldn’t be experiencing any anxiety or shame about them. While temporality is experienced individually and psychologically, culturally constructed ways of ordering and regulating time play a strong role in shaping individuals’ responses to their temporal experiences. One wonders how she would have reacted to the memories, winds, and figures who

enter her life if she had started the book already familiar with an alternative to Western, standardized, linear time.

As I have discussed in my introduction, Deloria shares Marilyn's recognition that the quantification and measurement of time can be a productive way of creating or understanding broader meanings and significances of one's actions and experiences. His explanation of the principle of the 'seven generations' provides an example of a positive implementation of the 'critical illusion' of organized temporality. For both Deloria and Maracle, I would argue that the experience of time enables change, growth, memory, reflection and learning. As I briefly noted above, while Marilyn fears that her 'slippages' are a sign of mental imbalance – a not unfounded concern given her job as a social worker – from the text's opening readers know this to be untrue. We know all along that Marilyn's apparent instability is in fact the result of carefully orchestrated acts by natural spiritual forces, particularly Westwind, who urges her to confront dangerous, painful memories, nudges her toward the awakening of desire, and works to get her to experience and release the regret, loneliness and guilt she has been stifling for years. We are aware before Marilyn is that her painful immersion in previous suffering, her vividly raw recollection of her step-father's taunting and of her violence and neglect toward her daughters, are happening in the name of some bigger, worthwhile purpose. Thus, experiences and behaviours that could be dismissed as hallucinations or delusions in the codes of Western psychiatric medicine are shown to be, rather, profound moments

offering the gift of insight. Sylvie Vranckx notes that Marilyn's flashbacks, the voices she hears, and her generally unsettled state coincide with what Ernie Crey calls being 'Indian sick' (Vranckx 63). Crey's description is elucidating, offering a productive alternative to dismissing Marilyn as insane rather than in transition:

In our [Stó:lô] society, when you are ill or feeling discomfort, you are described as being "Indian sick," which means that spiritual forces are at work in your life. In order to understand these forces, you must return to spiritual teachers. The elders believe the voices and spirits that non-medical experts might diagnose as a profound mental illness are in fact an expression of the cultural estrangement so many of us have suffered. (Fournier and Crey 44)

In more recent years, some researchers have argued that spirit sickness is "brought on by the interaction between alienation from aboriginal culture and Westernizing influences" (Labun and Emblen 209). While this is a very historically limited understanding of a phenomenon with roots reaching far beyond European contact, it is helpful for its reminder of negative links between colonization and Native physical and emotional health.

In his book on the beliefs of what he calls "traditional American Indians," Donald Fixico also normalizes the kinds of experiences that so trouble Marilyn when he explains that, "Because the true reality of Indian people is a tandem of physical and metaphysical realities, native thinkers have encountered visions and spirits on a regular basis as a part of life" (70). He goes on to liken this element of indigenous peoples' metaphysical lives to "the dreams of individuals of the Western society, who sometimes find answers to questions that could not be answered by their conscious minds" (70). In an essay that discusses the notion of

‘spirit,’ Maracle offers the following observations, which sound very similar to the ideas she advances years later in *Daughters are Forever*.

“I hear my grandmothers speak” is one remark which brings either howls of laughter or nervous looks of scepticism from the faces of most atheists and even Christians. Psychiatry is predicated on dispelling the delusions of patients who hear voices. The victims of voices are guided by the notion that hearing voices is connected to insanity or religious fervour. Some of them even take on the behaviour patterns of religious fanatics or mental derangement, or so psychiatrists maintain. (Maracle, *I am Woman* 113-14)

Perhaps part of the reason Marilyn struggles so long to “get a grip on reality” and assure herself, as she faces vision after vision, that “this isn’t happening” (Maracle, *Daughters* 42) is that she has either forgotten or not yet learned her ancestors’ traditional ways of relating to the metaphysical or spiritual world. A “fundamental premise” of Native thought, Deloria contends, is that when facing confusing experiences or anomalies, “we cannot ‘misexperience’ anything; we can only misinterpret what we experience” (45-46). Over the course of the text, Marilyn moves from misinterpreting her dreams and encounters as unreal and hallucinatory toward an understanding that they provide glimpses of important insight. The reflection and confrontation of the past that Marilyn undertakes help her work toward maturity as Deloria defines it: “a reflective situation” that represents, for Native people, “the ultimate goal of all human existence” (13).

Marilyn’s experiences have much in common with those of John Maclean in Donaldson’s text: one can certainly argue that the sudden intrusions of memory and the way she is often immobilized by the emotions that come with her journeys

into the past align quite well with Cathy Caruth's account of post-traumatic stress disorder. Certainly, this is in many ways a novel about trauma and its ongoing influence on the present, both in terms of individual psychology and community health. Caruth's psychological explanations, however, are not appropriate or sufficient to a reading of Maracle's text, which explicitly identifies Marilyn's 'flashbacks' as much more than psychological in nature: they are, rather, elements of her process of maturation and healing through encounters with spirits, natural forces, and moments and people from her past. Her 'gapping' is not the result of trauma or mental stress, but rather a source of insight intentionally offered to her as she journeys toward healing.

Judith Butler offers a provocative and productive way to understand traumatic memory in her recent work on the cultural and philosophical impact of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA. Instead of seeing mourning as a process to be completed or as a crippling condition that stultifies personal and cultural development, she argues that grief and mourning, rather than being experiences we should rush through and seek to close, are potentially productive opportunities to reach a renewed understanding of our implication in broader relationships of vulnerability and dependence. Grief, Butler says, and making "grief itself into a resource for politics," is not immobilizing but can instead begin "the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself" (30). Butler locates in this identification the possibility of a renewed ethical and political engagement with the suffering of others and a consequent decision to

become active in struggles against injustice and suffering within and beyond the realms of our own daily lives. The idea that memory, even traumatic memory, can function as a positive force is an intriguing and persuasive one, and certainly offers a hopeful way to understand the importance of narrating and renarrating historical trauma, something I have been seeking to do in this project. Butler's argument that a refusal to forget – as opposed to a quest to 'finish' with the past in order to reach closure and finish mourning – can be beneficial also offers one possible reason for the frequency with which Maclean, Naomi, Morag and Marilyn call up or enter into difficult, even traumatic, moments from their pasts. Like Caruth's arguments, though, Butler's can't fully explain what is at work in Maracle's text. Marilyn is not refusing to forget her past; she is being forced to remember and relive it. Forces beyond her control are working concertedly to keep the past present in her mind and in her daily life, and there is a purpose to this presence that goes beyond her own personal commitments. Memories are dangled in front of her, photographs become animated, and events and people from the past visit her as she goes about her mundane business. This is not a political decision or a psychological condition; she quite simply lives in a temporality where times intermingle and events from the past can come into the present. They don't do so through memory and psychology alone, but because that is how time is shaped and how temporality works for her.

Thus, in clear contrast to trauma theorists' reliance on psychology to explain the intrusions of past upon present, *Daughters are Forever* explains them

as part of a broader set of relationships among human, spirit, and natural worlds, and simply part of the normal workings of time. What Marilyn's Western education can only label as insanity is, in fact, what happens when cosmic forces come together to guide her healing. Maracle's descriptions of this process are not only illuminating but also breathtakingly beautiful.

Magic moments peel themselves from the mind like children's stickers. They can sometimes unglue memories and stop them from traveling in the normal direction of the mind. These moments fall from the sky, like people that cross your path when you are desperate for them. Sky people watch humans. They alone own time. They collect it in balls of starlight. Every now and then they toss it to a human they believe needs to catch something. Stuck humans are desperate. Starlight draws attention to locked memories that keep humans stuck. (Maracle 109)

This passage suggests that all moments in time are present and available to sky people to be shared with humans as necessary. To them, at least, the past is not unreachable or unknowable. The image of rolling time into balls implies a pliability that could easily see time manipulated so that seemingly discrete moments fuse to each other in a kind of momentary simultaneity. This happens for Marilyn at several points in the text as she is overtaken by memories that often layer themselves around her. For example, at one point she witnesses herself chasing down a hallway after her frightened daughters, then the picture abruptly shifts and she is "running down a highway, terrified, chasing her stepfather's car" as he taunts her and refuses to let her into the car and drive her home from school (110-11). As this is unfolding, she hears her phone ring "from beneath the sound of her memory" and struggles to "break the grip of this moment" and move to answer the phone in her present-day home (111). She is in two places and two

moments at once, and for a while the pull of the remembered moment is stronger than that of the present. To her “splitting mind” the “person rocking in the easy chair felt like herself, rocking in the bush next to fern and cedar. She surrendered to movement, to the rocking, to the sweet smell of bush” (112). There is no impermeable distinction between memory and reality, past and present: they mingle and touch each other, and Marilyn must contend with both if she is to find a way to live in fullness. This is temporal simultaneity with multiple layers and a clear, explicit purpose.

The purpose I am referring to has to do with the processes of personal healing and maturation I have discussed above, and it is also tied to broader cultural and historical relationships. Reflecting on her work to develop a process of self-definition for Native women, Anderson remarks that “What is distinctly Aboriginal is the way in which past, present and future are understood to be inextricably connected” (15). This temporal model is an important element of Native movements for social change. Anderson explains that “our definition and self-determination as individuals and as nations involves calling on the past to define the future” (Anderson 15-16). As demonstrated by Maracle’s description of aimless, unrooted men, our experiences and conceptualizations of time cannot be divorced from our understandings of and behaviour toward our community: one influences the other. As moments in time coexist and interact in Native worldview, so too do living beings occupy positions of mutual implication and responsibility toward each other and their shared world. Deloria explains that

“Old Indians” system of science ultimately sought “to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person’s life, individuals were supposed to walk. This colorful image of the road suggests that the universe is a moral universe” (Deloria 46). He explains that, since there is “content to every action, behavior, and belief” there is a “corresponding responsibility of every entity to enjoy life, fulfill itself, and increase in wisdom and the spiritual development of personality” (*ibid*). In a moral universe, our actions have implications and influence well beyond our immediate surrounds; further, and for this reason, personal development is never only a selfish act. As Marilyn tells her daughters of her decision to seek counsel to help her with the trauma of her past, “It isn’t just about me. It’s all of us. I want to mend the bridges between all of us” (245).

Daughters are Forever is full of reflections on the meaning of responsibility. Whether facing up to her failure to give her daughters the love and nurturing they deserved, working to help her clients learn the necessary skills to maintain custody of their children, or making speeches urging Native men that “We, the women of First Nations, need you men on our side of the line... We need your love and your support and I am not ashamed to ask for it” (197), Marilyn is constantly pondering the nature of her own responsibility and trying to instill a sense of responsibility in others, with the ultimate goal of reinvigorating a healthy, decolonized Native culture. Marilyn’s relationship to the concept of responsibility is complex and inconsistent. In her personal life, she has abdicated responsibility for years and is just now coming to admit her accountability and

work toward making amends, but at the same time we learn from her travel journal that she has a long history of energetic and passionate political activism under her belt, driven by her conviction that “Dependence has to be the worst condition you can force on a human being” (146). The text acknowledges the difficulty of always living responsibly, and the ways in which factors like personal experience, tribal memory, and cultural history all work to complicate an easy, morally sound path through life. Importantly, though, understanding these challenges does not excuse anyone from the obligation to work to “find the proper road,” as Deloria would say.

This model of mutual implication and responsibility is one I would like to adapt to my own teaching and work, as it articulates very well the sentiments and commitments I would like to instill in students and readers as we engage with texts and culture. Mindful of hooks’ warning about ‘eating the other,’ I do believe there are ways to incorporate ideas into my practice without trying to own them. The respect and painstaking care that Maracle urges us to bring to our study of other beings can and should be extended to all texts, people, and cultures we encounter and engage with. Deloria’s conceptualization of a moral universe means that individual decisions and actions carry great weight for countless other beings. “We are,” he insists, “in the truest sense possible, creators or co-creators with the higher powers, and what we do has immediate importance for the rest of the universe” (Deloria 47). This concept resonates with the kind of political alertness and social engagement I would like to see inspired by textual, and of

course other, encounters. It insists upon a responsibility and implication in all world events and toward all its inhabitants. I would contend that this “rest of the universe” includes different realms of time. Certainly, humans bear responsibility toward the future, and I would argue that we are also implicated in the past, as its living heirs. Wherever the past is still actively harming or constraining others, we are responsible for intervening and trying to rectify, to the best of our abilities given our own circumstances, whatever wrongs we have done or have benefited from. As ‘co-creators’ of contemporary environmental, spiritual, political and social realities, we cannot opt not to respond to what we learn from this text. Inaction is also a choice with consequences.

In Toronto to give a talk about “Indian feminine sociology” and custody of Native children, Marilyn lies awake on her friend Gerri’s couch immersed, as she so often is, in memories of her childhood sufferings and those she later inflicted on her daughters. She struggles to “reach some sort of plan to change the condition she had created for her daughters,” recognizing and urgently knowing that “Some sort of accounting had to happen” (Maracle 140). Her excuses and reasons for past misdeeds, while valid, do not justify her actions, nor do they do anything to “help her daughters free themselves from the chains of fear” created by the way she raised them (141). Marilyn finally makes the painful admission that, since she created the condition, she is responsible for changing it; she tells herself that “As the mother, she was responsible for establishing the atmosphere, the spirit, the nurturing with which her children were raised” (141).

Marilyn's heavy thinking shifts course as she asks herself "What the hell" *responsible* really means, anyway. As she often does, Marilyn turns to the dictionary to help her decipher the complexities and nuances of the English language, which she strives to use carefully and accurately, unlike many Canadians.¹⁷ Marilyn reads: "Responsible: ability to respond appropriately. Defensiveness and guilt would help no one. They were inappropriate responses" (141). This understanding gives her clarity of mind and the hope that she can find helpful ways to respond to the problems she has helped to create. After these weighty reflections and having reached this resolution, she feels confident that "Everything is fixable" and falls into a peaceful, restful sleep (141).

For me, this passage resonates richly with my thoughts about the politics of literary encounters. Faced with a novel that describes in painful detail the process and ongoing aftermath of colonization and with Marilyn's explicit calls for change, readers would be hard pressed not to even briefly wonder about their relationships to this history and call to action, and how they might respond to them. It is very likely that Maracle was aware of and deliberately crafting the layered implications of Marilyn's contemplations here. In a book published two years before *Daughters are Forever* and based on interviews with forty women including Lee Maracle herself, Anderson carries out a nearly identical reading of the word 'responsibility' and calls for respectful and careful responses by her readers to the text. She cites Kimberley Blaeser as the source of the concept of

¹⁷ "Not even white people speak this language with any disciplined understanding," Marilyn muses, seeing a lack of clarity and responsibility in their lax use of words (130).

“reader response-ability” and links the concept to traditional storytelling practices “where it is assumed that the listener has as much a part in the creation of the story as the teller. In this way, the listener also carries responsibility for the knowledge that is created” (Anderson 49). “What is your ability to respond to literature written by (and about) Native women?” Anderson asks readers. “What will you do with the knowledge you have gained?” (Anderson 49).

I will return to oral storytelling in a moment but first want to turn briefly to the issue of a reader or listener’s posture and attitude when engaging with story and text, an issue I first raised in my analysis of *Maclean* and which has remained relevant to my discussion throughout this dissertation. Donald Fixico identifies what he sees as a fundamental difference between conventional linear Western world views and traditional Native thought: “The linear mind looks for cause and effect, and the Indian mind seeks to comprehend relationships” (Fixico 8). Maracle also emphasizes the centrality of interrelationship to Native thought. She explains that “The object of 'study' from a Salish perspective is to discover another being in itself and for itself with the purpose of engaging it in future relationship that is mutually beneficial” (Maracle, “Some Words”). While many read for other, malicious reasons – to establish knowledge that will enable them to control others, or in search of a sense of superiority – in my ideal scenario readers would come to texts with a far different set of motivations in mind. Part of reading, and living, responsibly, is to prioritize the establishment and maintenance of fair and respectful relationships with others as one’s ultimate goal. To

conceptualize the reading relationship in this way is to acknowledge it as implicitly and inherently political and to agree to engage it as such.

Fixico's discussion of traditional storytelling helpfully links the concepts of responsibility and time, as I have been attempting to do. He describes the role and process of storytelling:

Listening as a part of oral tradition is essential for understanding relationships and their multiple meanings. Elders tell stories in the oral tradition of tribes, where it was equally important to listen to the story as well as tell the story. Both storyteller and listener engage in reviving an experience of the past that becomes alive again, thereby transcending time from the past to the present. Both tenses of time blur, becoming one and the same. (5)

I have already discussed the ways in which time blurs within *Daughters are Forever*, but Fixico raises another intriguing question about how time works during the reading process itself. I would argue that his comments about time's blending during the storytelling process can also be applied to readers' encounters with texts. To read about an event is, *in a sense*, to witness its unfolding. For me, this is most obvious when reading a text is painful or uncomfortable. As an example I offer my own experience of emotional distress and pain with each reading and rereading of the scenes that Marilyn witnesses through the photos taken by Children's Aid Society workers to document Elsie's neglect of her children. These passages and the images they convey never fail to make me shudder and push the book away, even though I know it's 'only a book.' Yet this dismissal is ill-founded: two refutations come to mind when I contemplate the assertion that *Daughters are Forever* is 'only a book.' First of all, there is no such

thing as ‘only’ a book when it is written effectively and read with commitment.

The children’s thin little bodies and Marsha’s pathetic attempt to charm some help out of the CAS workers come alive and are happening as we read. Gloria

Anzaldúa articulates this concept as she reflects on her own writing:

My ‘stories’ are acts encapsulated in time, ‘enacted’ every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and ‘dead’ objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). (67)

My second rejoinder to the urge to dismiss the novel as ‘only a book’ is based in Maracle’s frank admission that her explicit purpose in writing is to assert the lived and tangible suffering colonization has brought to Native people. Knowing this makes it impossible to shrug off the more brutal parts of her novel as artistic exaggeration or ‘just fiction.’

Maracle knows, as Marilyn repeats, that “There is power in naming” (65; 199): in this text, Maracle is ‘naming’ the situation as she sees it, and refusing to let squeamish or ignorant readers off the hook. She offers an uncompromising and frank portrayal of some ugly truths, motivated by her belief that, before we can move toward change, people have to know and speak their truth. She is aware that many readers feel uncomfortable, attacked or upset by her shining a cold light on Canada’s history and current situation, but she frankly states that her concern is not to protect readers’ feelings but to motivate change. “Truth is, I don’t care about Canadian guilt, but I am concerned about the transformation of Canada” (Maracle “Some Words”).

Marilyn's second night at Gerri's house is less peaceful than her first. She dreams a ride through directionless tunnels on a train filled with familiar but unknown, unclear faces. She wakes from the dream and is trying to grasp at its meanings when her great-grandmother interrupts her, saying "Meaning is so important, but expression is more important" and urging Marilyn to release her thoughts in words, to "Speak, and speak from your essential self, your most ridiculous self, but speak – always remember to give wind-voice to being." Having finished delivering this message, Ta'ah sits quietly on Marilyn's bed, "waiting for some kind of response" (172). Marilyn is stunned. She contemplates the scene: it is dark, but she sees Ta'ah sitting on her bed and fiddling with Gerri's nail clippers. Her great-grandmother is dead, but she is right there, speaking to Marilyn. Marilyn tries in vain to rationalize what she is experiencing: "I know...I'm still dreaming. I dreamt I woke up and found you here, Ta'ah" (172-73). Unsurprisingly, Ta'ah gets the last word. "Doesn't matter," she retorts. "Still have to think about what I said" (173).

This simple statement carries a lot of weight for Marilyn, who knows she does have to think about her great-grandmother's insight in order to continue to grow. It is also laden with meaning for me, as I contemplate the workings of time and think about the question of readers' responsibility. The fact is, whether or not I 'believe' in Ta'ah's presence in Marilyn's room, or that the past is still happening somewhere, I have now experienced both as truth through reading about them. Having heard Maracle's message about the ongoing impact of

colonization, and read about Marsha's suffering and her big, pleading eyes, I cannot 'unknow' them. After Laurence's Morag allows her Sunday school teacher to read her poem, she is struck by the solemn realization that "there is no way she can unshow it" (92). Similarly, having told her story, Maracle cannot call it back, and her readers can not unread it, either. As Thomas King repeatedly insists in his CBC Massey lectures, "Take [this] story. It's yours. Do with it what you will...But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (King 29; 60; 89; 119; 151; 167).

The task from here, for those who would become what Anderson might call 'response-able' readers, or what I think of as historically informed and future-minded ones, is to find appropriate responses to what we have witnessed through Maracle's text. Once we have closed the book and put it down, how might we begin to live differently, having heard its stories? How might her temporal model, her ideas about time and history, influence our decisions as we go about our lives from here? How might our daily habits or our ways of thinking change in response to a transformed understanding of our relationship to different levels of time, spirit, and life? I will give Maracle the last word. In *I am Woman*, her prose is dotted with poetry that clarifies or expands upon the issues she addresses. Here are her thoughts in a poem entitled "Creation" (8):

I know nothing
of great mysteries
know less of creation
I do know
that the farther backward
in time that I travel
the more grandmothers
and the farther forward
the more grandchildren
I am obligated to both.

“Still have to think about what I said:”

Some thoughts toward future work.

I have argued throughout this project that, whatever our opinions about the truthfulness of a story or about its aesthetic strengths and weaknesses, once we have engaged with a narrative through the act of reading, we cannot opt out of responding to it in some way. Such a move is not only impossible – since putting it down and ‘forgetting about it’ is itself a chosen response – but I would argue it is also irresponsible. For those of us who are committed to reading from a position of deliberate empathy, this means – as Ta’ah’s words, above, remind us – that we need to continue to mull over what we have read, trying on the different subjectivities, experiences, and ideas it opens for us and looking for ways to integrate these new knowledges into our living beyond the reading encounter. The task, of course, is not an easy one. Nor is there any single, clear path to an ‘appropriate response’ to literature’s teachings and challenges. Nonetheless, I am convinced that reading response/ably is important, even crucial work for those of us who read and teach literature and also profess a commitment to struggles for social justice and human rights.

The approach I have taken here is one of countless possible ways of engaging with and responding to the novels at hand and by no means a definitive statement on time and history in these texts, let alone in Canadian fiction in general. It is, however, the intervention I feel best equipped – and most inspired –

to make from here and now, and also one that offers some new ways to think about our relationships to literature, time and history, and to the people with whom we share this world.

As I set out to investigate and articulate the alternate temporal and historical models presented in these texts, I quickly began to feel that I was, like Donaldson's Maclean, quite alone in this project. Western culture and conventional philosophy do not encourage us to question received wisdom about time and the past. Further, the discursive frameworks within which I was located worked to make certain understandings and inquiries possible while ruling others out. The workings of dominant ideology in shaping and constricting even what questions one can ask is evidenced by, for example, the lack of vocabulary I initially had at hand to articulate my concerns and the relatively small amount of critical attention, particularly sustained attention, given to the question of how time works. Work on the shape and function of time is certainly undertaken in physics, differing ideas about temporality are debated in philosophy and described in anthropological reports, but this work, from what I have read, stops short of the kinds of questioning I carried out here. In literary studies most discussions of time focus on narrative strategies or on the reading encounter itself; my research showed a lack of critical attention – particularly sustained attention – to time as it functions within the textual world and, even more rarely, beyond it. When critics do engage in a discussion of temporality, their comments are often a brief stop on the way to the main point of their article, and certainly the conversation doesn't

spill over into a broader cultural debate about how past, future, and present times might inflect and influence one another or about the implications of viewing time and history in one way rather than another.

In my view, then, one of the key contributions of this project is its committed, careful, sustained analysis of the conceptualizations of time and history these four novels present. As far as I know, this is the first full-length study to take on the topic – but I hope it is far from the last. Another key intervention I have made here is to establish a critical vocabulary and some conceptual tools with which to work through the workings of time and history within and beyond literary texts. For example, the concepts of temporal simultaneity and historical multiplicity provide a way of articulating and conceptualizing the pedagogical work texts do through their implicit or explicit temporal and historical modelling. These, of course, are also new terms I have brought to the discussion. Further, I have pulled together a strong, articulate, and diverse group of thinkers from fields such as anthropology, philosophy, critical and cultural theory, literary studies, and indigenous studies whose work provides much-needed insight on this topic and who form what I might call, borrowing from Stanley Fish, a new ‘interpretive community’ from within which I and others can continue to think about the links between time, history, and political hope.

I also want to underline my attention to the ethics of reading. Specifically, I have laid out my argument for a reading posture based on deliberate empathy or

empathetic coevalness with the worlds and characters we encounter through reading. It is my contention that ‘taking texts seriously’ by engaging in respectful listening and by committing to the hard work of becoming a response/able reader is a crucial element of any literary or other critical engagement that seeks to make meaningful interventions in the world beyond the reading encounter or the narrow limits of our academic and personal locations. Related, but still distinct, is my emphasis on notions of interdependence between people, times, and forms of life. This idea emerges in each of the four novels I have analyzed in distinct ways, but their combined impact is an insistence that, whenever and wherever we are, we are always implicated in events, moments and worlds far beyond the apparent limits of our own small lives. Brook, Deloria, Fixico, and King, for example, have made this point very clearly. My contribution is to have found this message in the novels at hand and linked it explicitly to the ways in which we understand time. This, then, is another salient element of my project: I have argued that there is an explicit and direct link between a person or a culture’s conceptualization of temporality and lived, material politics as they play out at ground level. This is not, I have insisted, an abstract exercise in self-amusement. Rather, the ways we understand time and history have immediate, real consequences for our behaviours and relationships in the world beyond the text.

Finally, I want to revisit once more my assertion that time, in these texts and in our lived realities, is more a conceptual tool than a knowable, measurable ‘fact’ of lived experience. The experience of time is certainly vital to our living,

but there is nothing inherent about the ways each of us experiences it.

Conventional beliefs about time, then, our shared temporal models, are a coping tool or a strategy rather than some kind of unalterable, inherently accurate truth. They are also, therefore, culturally and historically determined and variable. I have argued that a genuine appreciation of this recognition will enable much more empathetic, flexible, and understanding encounters between individuals living in different cultural, historical, and temporal places from our own.

The stakes of this project are pressingly important. If we are living in conditions that make it possible for critics like Kathryn Allan to argue, following Fredric Jameson, “that today we live in the perpetual present” and that, as a result of this lack of “narratives of futuricity” “there are no more Utopias in the popular youth imagination” (1), then it is all the more pressing to find ways of using our work as critics and teachers of literature to encourage or awaken students to develop an invigorated sense of implication in the events of the past and of responsibility to the present they live in and the futures they are thus creating.

While Jameson may indeed be correct – we seem to live in a culture and a time that forcefully encourage consumption over contemplation and the immediacy of sensory gratification over the slower, more nuanced pleasures of relationship and community – I am not willing to accept this state of affairs as inevitable, natural, or, worst of all, permanent. Part of my project has been to emphasize the political possibility that is created when we open ourselves to new and different ways of thinking; the importance of hope to my project cannot be

under-estimated. Hope – admittedly, a very future-oriented and even linear concept for a project that works so hard to acknowledge non-linear models of temporality – is crucial precisely because it insists upon the deep interpenetrations of this time and other as yet unrealized moments. Without a sense of what-has-not-yet-come, we lose our grasp on the urgency and importance of work that seeks to intervene in contemporary injustices for the sake not only of ourselves but of those yet to come.

As Ajay Heblé explains, when texts offer “dissonant histories” that “unsettle received notions of Canadian national identity” they can also have “the salutary effect of encouraging us - as readers, students, teachers, and citizens - to cultivate resources for purposeful listening” (Heblé, “Sounds of Change”). Heblé develops his idea of ‘purposeful listening’ in reading in relation to the kinds of attentiveness made necessary by musical dissonance and counterpoint, the simultaneous presence of more than one voice or melody. This mode of readerly listening has much in common with my idea of deliberate empathy, most specifically because both are motivated by a commitment to establishing critical practices that deepen readers’ ability and willingness to engage critically with the socio-political issues, the systemic injustices and historical legacies that contribute to ongoing injustice and inequity in the world around us. Our reading practices and, in the case of academics and other theorists, our critical work have direct and important consequences beyond the boundaries of our living rooms or offices, and if we want our work to ‘matter’ beyond the immediate context in

which we carry it out, we must remain ever-mindful of this link. As Vine Deloria, Jr. reminds us, “We are, in the truest sense possible, creators or co-creators with the higher powers, and what we do has immediate importance for the rest of the universe” (47). My dissertation might not change the course of history, but the mutual implication Deloria describes and these four novels illustrate means that there is no such thing as a neutral act. These are the politics of reading and critical work. They are also, as I have suggested earlier, the pressing politics of pedagogy, the work of teaching.

Speaking in an interview about her prolific and wide-ranging critical and theoretical work, Linda Hutcheon insists that “I certainly do see my role as that of teacher. I’m not sure I separate the role of teacher from that of literary scholar and critic” (Hutcheon, “Theories of Culture”). She elaborates that, in her mind, they are each means to the same end: “Both roles involve conveying enthusiasm and pleasure, as well as exercising critical skills to think through the issues of contemporary culture” (“Theories of Culture”). I share Hutcheon’s resistance to classifying teaching and criticism as separate, unrelated kinds of work. There is no neutral criticism, no literary review or scholarly article that doesn’t convey ideas and lessons about the material it addresses. Similarly, there is no teaching practice that is divorced from or free of the workings of power and the forces of history at work in the broader political sphere. Paulo Freire makes this point compellingly:

...I do not accept (because it is not possible) the ingenuous or strategically neutral position often claimed by people in education...No

one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality. I cannot be in the world decontextualized, simply observing life...it is not possible to study simply for the sake of studying. As if we could study in a way that really had nothing to do with that distant, strange world out there. (73)

Freire's words are a keen reminder of the importance of discovering and enacting pedagogical strategies that work to unveil the workings of power within and beyond the classroom and that thereby awaken students to a sense of their own implication in contemporary – and past and future – politics. His insistence that all study and teaching are embedded in and with the world is reminiscent of Lee Maracle's insistence that the objective of study is to engage and interact in relationship with others. She tells us that, according to Salish belief, the aim of study is "to discover another being in itself and for itself with the purpose of engaging it in future relationship that is mutually beneficial" ("Some Words"). Maracle's phrase "in and for itself" is a reminder of the crucial need for careful, attentive 'listening' to the object of study on its own terms, and for humility in the face of difference or confusion. Maracle's notion of establishing mutually beneficial future interactions ably describes the motivation at the very core of my project, its founding impulse. It is also, I think, the area that needs the most work in order to achieve its goals.

The subject of literature's temporal and historical modelling could bear much more fruitful insights if it were given sustained critical attention by a variety of thinkers with broad-ranging priorities and expertise. It is a subject that can only become more interesting and, importantly, more politically relevant by

being taken up in dialogue with other critics and readers. One of my goals for future work is to work toward creating this kind of interpretive community by sharing my ideas in the classroom and through conference presentations and publications. Another related area that sorely needs more attention is the question of literature's relationship to struggles for human rights. While a growing body of critics is attending to the questions of literature's political force and the links between artistic representation and lived material reality, there remains a need for more scholars who explicitly and committedly frame their work – and choose their work - in relation to and as part of broader, meaningful worldly interventions in injustice. Part of my role now, having written this dissertation, is to seek ways to make it matter in the world. In other words, not only do I need to keep thinking about the books I have read and the ideas I have encountered, but I still have to think about what *I* said, too. Concepts like temporal simultaneity and historical multiplicity, fascinating as they may be, do not in and of themselves contribute to any kind of change in the world. As I argued in my Master's thesis, and I still believe now, "Theory can be very important, but only when, at some level and at some point, it has positive material consequences" (Jackson 108). My hope from here is to find other scholars, teachers, texts and ideas with whom I can collaborate in doing something of consequence – for literary studies, for students, and for our shared future.

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