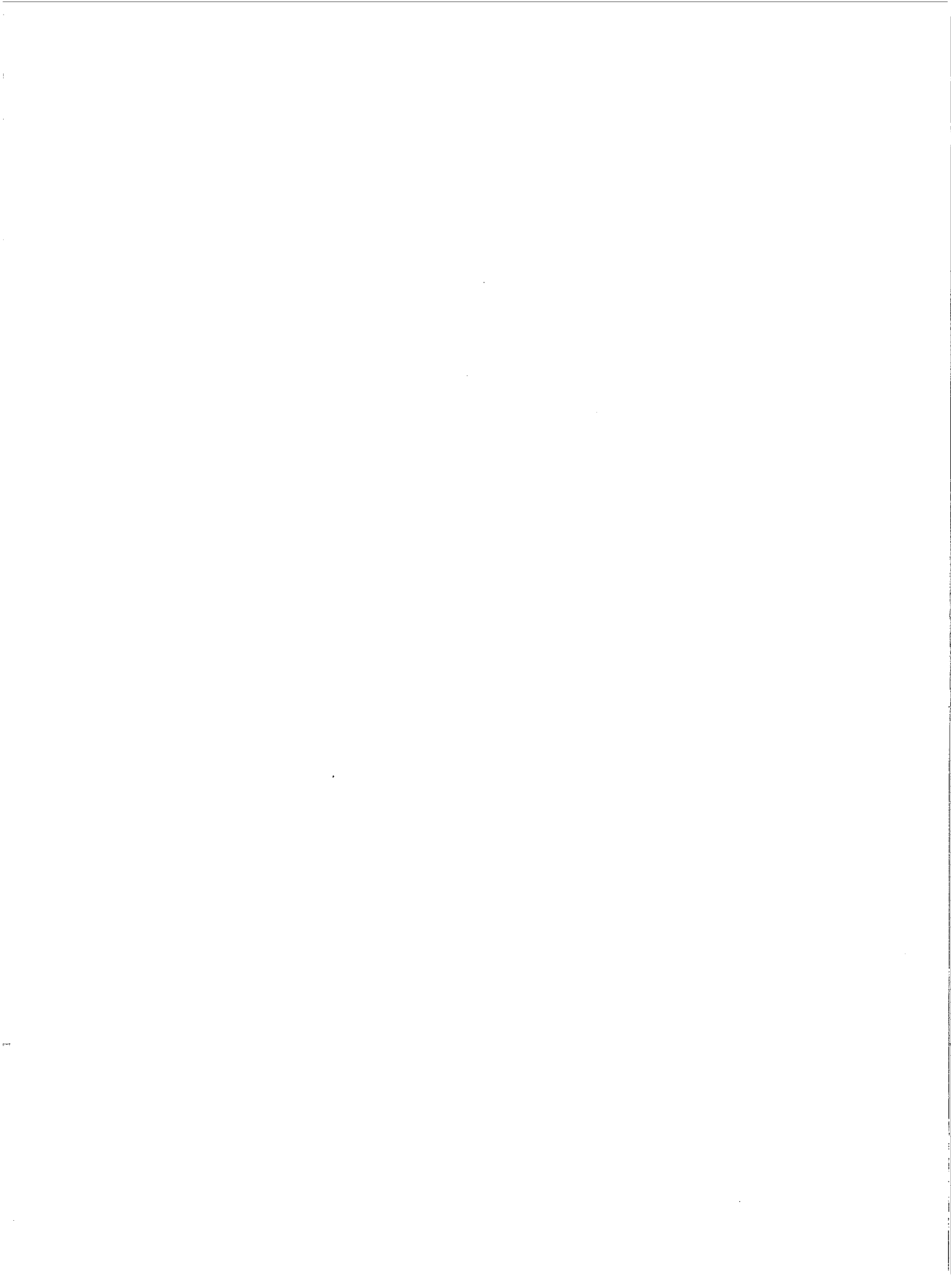


JOY KOGAWA'S *OBASAN* AND KERRI SAKAMOTO'S *THE
ELECTRICAL FIELD*



A HAUNTED HOUSE OF FICTION:
UNCANNY TIME AND THE NARRATION OF THE NATION IN
JOY KOGAWA'S *OBASAN* AND KERRI SAKAMOTO'S *THE
ELECTRICAL FIELD*

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A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts
McMaster University

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MASTER OF ARTS (2009) McMaster University

(English) Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: A Haunted House of Fiction: Uncanny Time and the Narration of the Nation in
Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*

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NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 96

A B S T R A C T

This thesis takes as its subject the uncanny intersection of the history of Japanese Canadian internment and Canadian multiculturalism in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998). Drawing on Benedict Anderson's analysis of the birth of nationalism (2006), and Michel de Certeau's analysis of the temporal structures that order national historiography (1988), this project examines the process by which the imagined multicultural community of the Canadian nation writes itself through a genealogical historiography— through a retrospective mapping of the antecedent origins of multiculturalism. The result of this historiographical process is the construction of a teleological history; consequently, the subversive treatments of race, racialization and systemic, state-sponsored discrimination of both Kogawa's and Sakamoto's historical fictions face repression and containment within the logic of multicultural progress. This thesis examines, then, the tendency within the current multicultural climate to write the history of internment as a regrettable yet past moment in the progress of the nation, and turns to the novels of Kogawa and Sakamoto to investigate the uncannily disruptive and potentially productive method of resistance that their a-linear, synchronic narratives offer in response to the homely narration of the nation.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

To my friends and family: you helped me a lot with this project and it was hard but you made it less hard. In the early stages its size and a bleak Hamilton winter conspired to daunt and taunt me, but you called, cheered and cajoled me into an acceptable level of confidence. I especially would like to thank my mother, whose devotion to this work equalled if not exceeded my own. I would also like to thank the kids of the thesis cohort: Chris Laser, Eva Lane and Vinh Nguyen for the network of support they provided, but mostly for the hilarity. I thank Sarah Truman for sharing her writerly experience with me, Taryn Beukema for reading an early draft of Chapter Two and Erin Aspenlieder for her courage in reading the work in its near 100-page entirety and for responding with the kindest but most careful of comments and questions.

To my supervisory committee: I am grateful to you for the time, experience and care you have brought to my work. I thank Dr. Chandrima Chakraborty, whose insights have awakened in me an interest in new and intriguing paths of enquiry, and I remain indebted to Dr. Roger Hyman for kindly assisting me in the nascent stages of this project, and for his continuing support and unfailing good will throughout the year. Finally, I would like to express, no— I would like to *exclaim* my gratitude and regard for my supervisor Dr. Donald C. Goellnicht, who never fails to challenge me to my best, whose insights, comments and critiques of my work I consider of the highest value, and whose support has been constant and infallible. In working with Dr. Goellnicht, I have benefitted immeasurably from the concern he shows for his students not only as students but as people, and for this I am tremendously thankful.

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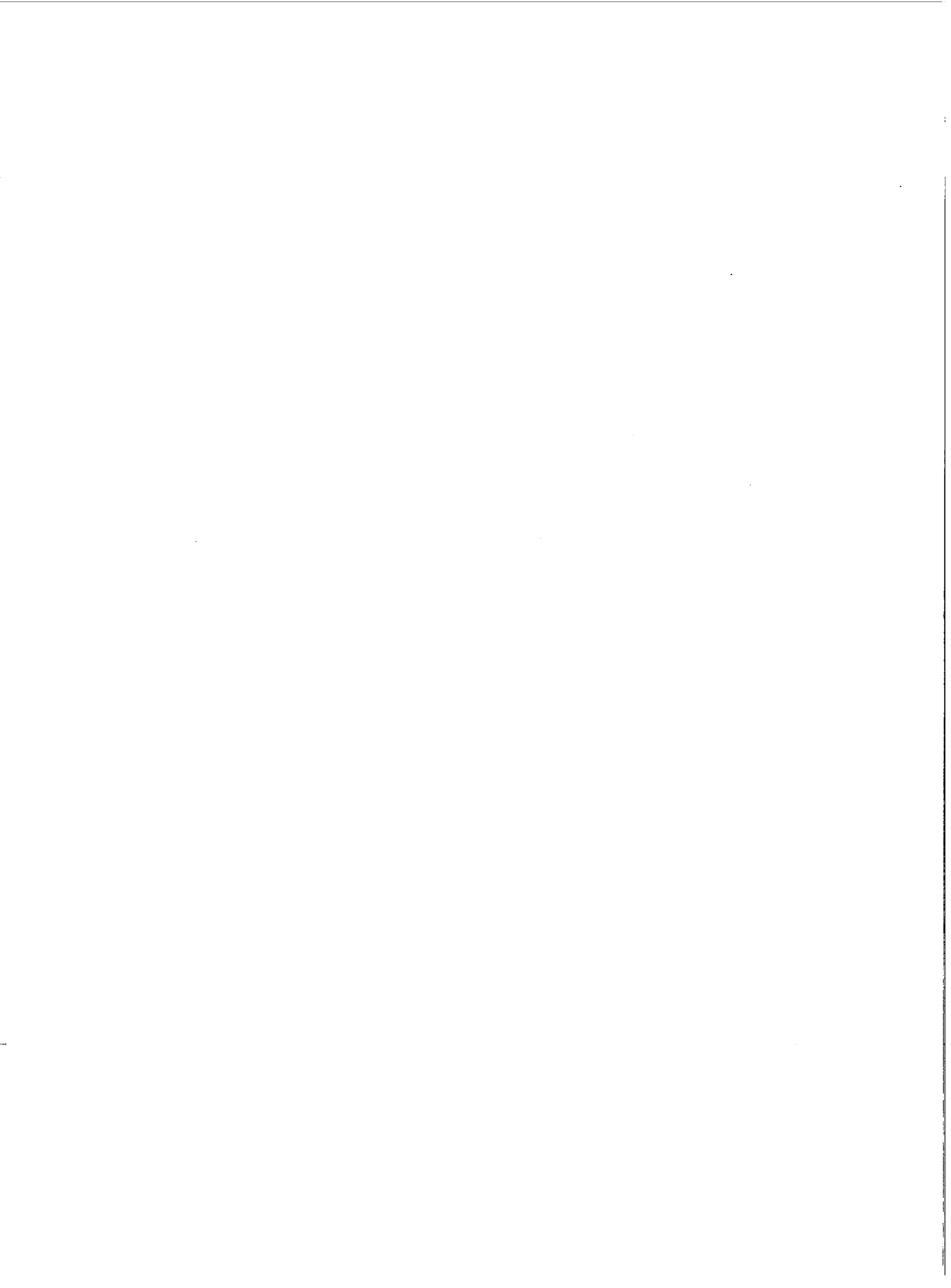
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INTRODUCTION

Obasan and The Electrical Field in Context

As a girl, Joy Nakayama would write from her family's miserable shack in the Alberta sugar beet fields to the new occupants of the comfortable Vancouver home seized from her family during the wartime internment of Japanese Canadians.

She begged the owners for a chance to get the house back. They never replied.

More than 60 years later, in a charming circle of history, Ms. Nakayama, better known as the celebrated writer Joy Kogawa, stood once more in her childhood home this week, eager to guide a visitor through its emotional past.

(Rod Mickelburgh, *The Globe and Mail*, April 25, 2008)

Written nearly twenty years after the announcement of the Japanese Canadian redress agreement in September 1988, and twenty-seven years after the publication of Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* in 1981, the above excerpt typifies media responses to the acquisition and establishment of the Historic Joy Kogawa House as a cultural heritage site and writers-in-residence project. As I followed these stories with the development of the campaign to purchase and restore Kogawa's childhood home and with the news of its acquisition by The Land Conservancy of British Columbia in May 2006,¹ I was struck by the tone of the media coverage surrounding it. As evidenced by above excerpt, the tone tended to be one of celebration, wonder, and reassuring finality. Certainly the campaign, the widespread support it received both from the general public as well as writers' and academic associations, and the rapid success it achieved in its goal to purchase the

¹ To view press releases regarding the acquisition of the house by The Land Conservancy, and other articles concerning the campaign to purchase the house, visit their website at <<http://www.conservancy.bc.ca>>. To follow updates regarding the house and its current status as a writers-in-residence, visit <<http://www.gunhaggisfatchoy.com/blog/JoyKogawaKogawaHouse>>, edited by Todd Wong.

property and establish it as a residence for writers indeed deserved, if not demanded, such an unabashedly positive, laudatory tone. So, the question nagged at me: why did I find it so striking?

I returned to this perplexing question as I began my research as a Master's student at McMaster University. As I thought more on the subject, I began to realize that it was not the celebratory *tone* surrounding the Kogawa House that was remarkable, but the way in which representatives of the media chose to *narrate* Japanese Canadian internment through and around a story of the house. For example, Rod Mickelburgh chooses to characterize the story of internment, dispossession and the eventual purchase of the house as "a charming circle of history," and in an earlier article entitled "Kogawa House a New Miracle", Allen Garr similarly writes a story of loss reprieved by the "miracle" of "what was lost and has been recovered" (*Vancouver Courier*, August 20, 2006). In both of these examples we see the construction of a narrative of resolution, and, notably, this reassuring sense of resolution is achieved through a seemingly "miraculous" or "charming" sleight of hand whereby the breach opened in the progressive, inclusive logic of multicultural history by the haunting spectre of internment is sealed or restored with the restoration of Joy Kogawa's childhood home. I suggest that these narratives of closure, and their inability to name the mechanism of that closure, reveal the construction of Canadian history as a teleological narrative of multicultural progress. The sleight of hand of this mode of narration, then, is a trick of time. If Japanese Canadian history and Kogawa's fictional account of that history represent an intervention in the teleology of the Canadian nation, then it is the charming miracle of a multicultural teleology that resolves this

intervention in the re-establishment of progressive, linear time. In a “charming circle of history,” the removal of the Nakayama family from their home, its seizure and subsequent sale, and the racism that underwrote these events, are reconciled to a timeline of progress.

The germination of this thesis, then, lies in a question about a house and history, and whether, as Kogawa’s childhood home faces restoration to its “original” state before internment, the unhomely history of Kogawa’s novel currently faces suppression in a reassertion of the homely, or in a process of nationalization. This thesis addresses the need to trouble a construction of Canadian history that writes the trauma of Japanese Canadian internment, and the racism that provoked it, as past. Indeed, I argue that Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Kerri Sakamoto’s later internment narrative, *The Electrical Field* (1998), resist such a reading of Japanese Canadian history, and do so with the deployment of an uncanny temporality which seeks to disrupt the teleology of the nation as it is constructed under the auspices of official multicultural policy. The first chapter of this thesis, then, establishes the theoretical framework of the uncanny as a valuable strategic tool by which a disruption of the teleology of multiculturalism can be performed. Chapter One provides a review of Freud’s theory of the uncanny (1919), and seeks to engage not only with Freud’s definition of the “heimlich” and the “unheimlich,” but to further build upon his theorization of the uncanniness of coincidence— of the disruption of diachronic or linear time by the synchronic. Building on the Freudian concept of the uncanniness of coincidence, this chapter goes on to investigate Michel de Certeau’s analysis of the temporal in the historiographical process (1988) and Homi K. Bhabha’s conceptualization of the uncanniness of the postcolonial nation and its narration (1994, 1997). Chapter Two

applies this framework to a reading of *Obasan* and its treatment of Japanese Canadian history. Finally, Chapter Three examines *The Electrical Field* as a text written in response to Kogawa's novel and the redress agreement, and investigates Sakamoto's text as a call for the continued resistance to the suppression of the critical uncanniness that Japanese Canadian history represents in relation to a national history. This thesis proposes, then, an analysis of an unhomely temporality in both *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field* as a tool by which to strategically breach the teleology of official Canadian multiculturalism, thereby revealing contradictions at the level of both policy and politics within the ongoing Canadian national project.

Before an analysis of *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field* can begin, though, it is important to situate both texts within the context of Asian Canadian literature and literary studies. Reviewing the history of the development of the production of Asian Canadian literature and its critical study will reveal one of the central issues in Kogawa criticism and thus in analyses of Sakamoto's return to the same subject matter in her novel: the question of the role of an ethnically demarcated field in relation to the normative centre. What relationship does the classificatory term "Asian Canadian literature" have to "Canadian literature"? This is not only a question of categorization; rather, as my review of the field will show, it is a question of how "minority" literature, and by extension, minority history, operates in regards to the "majority," and whether this relationship is one that functions to destabilize the margins-centre dynamic, or to reinscribe it. As Lily Cho points out, "Black Canadian, Native Canadian and Asian Canadian literatures [...] are

arguably, even unquestionably Canadian; and yet, we cannot ignore the trenchant critiques of Canadianness embedded within these literatures” (93). Following Cho:

we must grapple with why it is that the marking of something like Native Canadian literature matters, why it actually is not ‘obviously’ CanLit; why these differences must be registered, and why the problem with registering these differences isn’t just one of inclusion or potential ghettoization. Minority literatures in Canada demand an engagement with long histories of dislocation both within and beyond the nation. Moreover, minority literatures in Canada insist on an engagement with histories of dislocation that are differentially related. (97)

In regards to *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field*, then, it is important to recognize how these texts both fit and do not fit national and ethnically-marked classifications and to further question their treatment of the particular history of dislocation of Japanese Canadians not as a modification to an accepted version of Canadian history, but as a troubling of the production of history and its role in building the multicultural nation. I ask, and this is a question that Sakamoto also takes up in *The Electrical Field*, whether the disturbing narration of history offered in *Obasan* can continue to disrupt a totalizing vision of Canadian history, or does Japanese Canadian history face suppression and marginalization in the current climate of multicultural discourse?

Although *Obasan* deals largely with WWII through a series of flashbacks that revisit the narrator’s memories from as early as the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the “present” that frames the novel in 1972 and its publication in 1981 places the text firmly in the context of the development of multiculturalism as a national ethos after the official announcement of multicultural policy by Prime Minister Trudeau in 1971. At the time of the publication of *Obasan*, though, Asian Canadian literary studies had yet to coalesce into a recognizable field. As Guy Beauregard observes in a 1999 article, “[d]espite the

fact that Asian Canadians have been writing since the late nineteenth century, the usage of the term ‘Asian Canadian literature’ is relatively recent” (“Emergence” 53). While Beaugard is able to trace the origins of the term to the 1960s and the development of the Asian Canadian Writers’ Workshop (53), its place in academic institutions is still under negotiation. In a 2007 article, Christopher Lee argues that “[t]o think of Asian Canadian Studies at this time is to confront its institutional absence”, and he points to a lack of academic institutions “dedicated to mobilizing research and teaching on Asians in Canada” (1). Lee’s framing of this lack of institutional attention as “a problem of lateness” (1) recalls the terminology used by Donald C. Goellnicht in an earlier article that conceptualizes the field of Asian Canadian literature as undergoing a “protracted birth” (“A Long Labour” 1). According to Goellnicht, “we in the academy seem to operate in an almost perpetual state of *announcing* Asian Canadian literature, a literature that has taken, from our snowblind perspective, twenty to twenty-five years to be ‘born’” (2). While Asian Canadian literary production began with the works of the Eaton sisters in the late nineteenth century, the recognition of Asian Canadian literature as a coherent field remains caught in a temporal bind of delay or deferment, either lagging behind the literary products of Asian Canada in a state of lateness, or struggling in a present progressive of becoming.

Anthony B. Chan, amongst others,² identifies a surge in Asian Canadian literary production in the 1970s (58). This surge in production is widely accepted as a result of

² See Goellnicht’s “A Long Labour: The Protracted Birth of Asian Canadian Literature” and Beaugard’s “The Emergence of ‘Asian Canadian Literature’: Can Lit’s Obscene Supplement?” for further discussion regarding the forms of Asian Canadian cultural production of the 1970s and their influences.

activism in the United States and the growing production of Asian American literature.³ Chan suggests that “Asian America provided the model for Asian Canadian writers”, arguing that “Asian Canadian literature remained stagnant until the flourish of writings erupted from the desks of Asian American writers during the 1970s” (70). Yet, as mentioned above, Canadian academic institutions still lagged behind this production. Both Chan and Goellnicht partially attribute this lag to the existence of a significantly larger Asian population in the United States before the changing of immigration laws in both countries in the mid- to late 60s that opened immigration based on a quota system (Chan 70; Goellnicht 4). Goellnicht further points to the smaller Black population in Canada and the lack of a substantial anti-Vietnam War movement as contributing factors to a lack of activism based on issues of race in Canada (4,6). Thus, while “a string of ethnic studies programmes concentrating on Asian, Black, Chicano and Native American studies from Seattle to San Diego” (Chan 58) followed the American civil rights movement, in Canada the relative absence of coherent activist groups and voices led to less government funding and institutional attention to the same issues.

The differences apparent in the development of Asian American and Asian Canadian studies, though, cannot wholly be attributed to differences in population and stronger activist movements in the United States. Rather, a divergence in nation-building policy and rhetoric in the United States and Canada also attributed to the growth of Asian American studies and the absence or delay of Asian Canadian studies. Terry Watada, in an article chronicling the surge of creativity and production of Asian Canadian literature

³ Ibid.

in the 70s, identifies this lag in Canadian literary studies as one that is directly linked to how race and ethnicity were constructed and conceptualized at the time:

In 1969, there was no such thing as Asian Canadian writing, at least not as a genre. In fact, there was no such thing as an Asian Canadian. Japanese Canadians were Japanese; Chinese Canadians were the Chinese. The generic term was 'Oriental.' (80)

In 1971 this began to change, as the introduction of multiculturalism as policy would appear to allow a hyphenated inclusion of ethnic or cultural diversity in constructions of Canadian identity. While this may appear to resolve the issue raised by Watada of claiming an Asian *Canadian* identity, multicultural policy became a part of the rhetoric forming the Canadian nation as progressive, a teleology that precluded protest and opposition. As Goellnicht asserts,

in contrast to the American "melting pot" policy and the development of the United States into the new imperial power, Canada "was considered a liberal democracy, not an imperial power, a country that had adopted progressive social welfare policies such as universal medical insurance and a universal pension plan; on the international stage, it was the country that had pioneered the concept of the U.N. peacekeeping forces. (7-8)

The deployment of multicultural policy as part of a progressive, liberal approach to difference in Canada further limited the possibility of cohesive activist movements through its function as a means of containment. While multiculturalism ostensibly valorizes difference in the name of diversity, it also sets the standard for desirable performance of diversity. Eva Mackey asserts that "[s]tate recognition of diversity also limits diversity" (65), and notes that this delimiting of discrete ethnic or cultural groups also results in a depoliticization of these groups: "In the multicultural model of culture the cultural fragments become conceptually divorced from politics and economics, and

become commodified cultural possessions” (66). The containment of racialized groups in discrete pockets thus disaggregates what otherwise might become a politically powerful body. With multiculturalism contributing to the isolation and depoliticization of racialized minority groups in Canada, the construction of the Canadian nation as a liberal, progressive mosaic effectively weakened the political weight of Asian Canada and delayed the genesis of Asian Canadian literary studies.

With the growing establishment of the field, though, there is a danger that Asian Canadian literary studies will reinscribe rather than trouble the boundaries of prescribed forms of multicultural identities. Or, to return to Mackey’s terminology, that it will commodify and effectively quarantine Asian Canadian literature and thus elide the issue of the construction of Canadian identity, especially through the construction of national history. In his 1999 analysis of the field, Beauregard raises the same concern: “The act of ‘rewriting’ national narratives is certainly appealing as a subversive strategy, yet as with all strategies, it risks consolidating what it presumes to take apart” (57). Drawing on Zizek’s concept of an “obscene supplement,” Beauregard suggests that Asian Canadian literature, and by implication other ethnically marked literary designations, operates as a supplement to Canadian multicultural identity and nationalism not through conformity with the homogeneity of national identity, but “rather through a regulated transgression” (58). This leads to compelling questions: “Does Asian Canadian literature and its voices of dissent ‘disturb the calculation’ of Canadian nationalism? Or does it function as a regulated transgression given prominence precisely in order to reinscribe the putative ‘openness’ of Canada’s ‘multicultural’ identity?” (59). Roy Miki recognizes this

problematic positioning of Asian Canadian literature as a “double-edged site: where relations of dominance threaten to be remobilized (more of the same), *or* where critiques of the nation can posit future methodologies of resistance and collective formations” (“Altered”, 53). Certainly *Obasan* represents one such “double-edged site,” where the troubling of official Canadian history that the text performs calls into question the function of the deployment of subversive and resistant modes of writing history.

Much of the critical response to Kogawa’s treatment of history— and to the question of the stakes of her fictionalized account of historical events— has focused on whether *Obasan* represents a challenge to the assumptions of traditional historiography or an affirmation of a referential conception of the historiographic process. To simplify for the purposes of this introduction, two main camps can be identified in Kogawa criticism in regards to the treatment of history and historiography in Kogawa’s novel: a humanist perspective that asserts the referentiality of historical accounts to a retrievable historical truth and one that sees *Obasan* as an example of Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographical metafiction and thus emphasizes the fictionality of all discourse, including historical discourse. At odds in this debate is Kogawa’s experimentation with the writing of history, evidenced by the a-linear structure of the text and the inclusion of historical documents (both adapted personal documents and official documents from representatives of the federal and provincial governments), and the oft-cited call in the text by Aunt Emily to “write the vision and make it plain” (32). Naomi’s reaction to her Aunt’s dictum, though, problematizes concepts of referentiality and “truth”:

Write the vision and make it plain? For her [Aunt Emily], the vision is the truth as she lives it. When she is called like Habakkuk to the witness stand, her testimony

is to the light that shines in the lives of the Nisei, in their desperation to prove themselves Canadian, in their tough and gentle spirit. The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey. (*Obasan* 32-3)

Notably, Naomi's concern with "truth" here is not simply a question of its knowability, but of testimony, of speaking or enunciating "truth," and this concern with "truth" and language puts it at the centre of the critical debate over the treatment of history in Kogawa's novel. Read within the context of history and historiography, the "coming to voice" narrative that *Obasan* offers presents the problematic of the enunciation of history.

Critics that assume a humanist perspective of history in *Obasan* tend to do so out of a position of defense that arises from a fear of a postmodern, deconstructionist division of sign and referent, history and historical object. Humanist critics argue that a disavowal of historical truth denies historical subjects space for agency and responsibility. Minh T. Nguyen maintains that *Obasan* and Kogawa's later novel *Itsuka* provide a warning against such a disavowal, arguing that Kogawa's novels "caution against the retreat into a noncognitivist relativism that avoids all responsibility for hermeneutical and normative adjudication" (178). Nguyen's emphasis on the need for responsible adjudication of the past echoes a stance taken earlier by Marilyn Russell Rose, who argues that in *Obasan*, Naomi represents Kogawa's ideal of a "modern historian" who must carefully read and synthesize multiple accounts of the past (224). Rachelle Kanefsky goes even further and provides a scathing critique of a postmodern perspective that would view historical "truth" as inaccessible through language, arguing that "[t]his historical scepticism [...] is the very cause of Naomi's social and political paralysis. Because she embraces

indeterminacy as a means of dealing with the past, Naomi is removed from any personal responsibility as a historical agent” (11-2).

Yet, reading *Obasan* as an example of historiographic metafiction does not necessarily preclude historical agency and responsibility. As Goellnicht argues in his article “Minority History as Metafiction: Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*,” the self-conscious reflexivity and fictionality of historiographic metafiction “does not deny the existence of past events, but recognizes that the only way we know those events is through texts, themselves a form of fiction-making” (290). For Goellnicht, the “raison d’etre” of Kogawa’s novel is simultaneously to expose the official justification for the internment of Japanese Canadians as “a fabrication constructed by a paranoid majority and a complicitous government who masked their racism in claims that Japanese Canadians posed a military threat to Canada” as well as to conduct a “search for truth carried out with the understanding that such a search produces another fiction” (290). To return to Hutcheon’s terminology, the “ex-centric” (“The Postmodern Challenge to Boundaries”) positioning of the minority writer allows Kogawa to reclaim historical responsibility, as the ex-centric turns to critique the centre, and to further locate agency in the construction of an alternate history.

While I do not wish to embroil myself here too deeply in a debate regarding the ethics and efficacy of Hutcheon’s theory, I do wish to emphasize that, as Goellnicht’s article shows, *Obasan* is a text that troubles not only the historical record of the time of its publication, but further destabilizes the act of writing history. Goellnicht criticizes a humanist reading of the text as a framework that “views the novel as being realistic

(representational of the empirical world) and didactic (a tool to correct our knowledge of history)” (287). The danger in a humanist-realist conception of history, then, is one that reduces the ex-centric, the marginal, the minority or the ethnic history to the function of a corrective that simply supplements or reorders an understanding of history as empirical. In fact, the spatial concept of the centre-margin relationship is in itself problematic in that the margin may be valued only in its relation to the centre. As Miki puts it, the “so-called margin” is “itself a critical construct for a prior ‘centre’” (*Broken*, 105). The centre is thus necessarily given centrality or priority, and the margin takes on the role of the supplement, susceptible to what Miki identifies in Hutcheon’s theory as “a curious exoticism” (*Broken* 105), where the margin is valorized and desired for its ex-centricity, as a site of critique and change.

How to avoid this exoticization then, or, to return to my discussion of the commodification of culture, fetishization? Much of the early criticism surrounding Kogawa’s text performs this fetishization, recognizing Kogawa’s engagement with history yet ultimately praising this engagement as stylistically and aesthetically nuanced. Arnold Davidson identifies this tendency to extol the artistry, beauty and subtlety of the text in his review of early Kogawa criticism (17), yet Davidson’s own engagement with the text is itself exemplary of early Kogawa criticism that tends toward the fetishistic. In his discussion of the significance of the text, Davidson highlights its value as representative of minority literature:

The novel does not, however, resolve the vexing current question of just who has rights to what group’s stories. But it does suggest from what quarters the most telling versions are likely to come, and has therefore helped to lay the groundwork for the recent flourishing of ethnic fiction in Canada. (16).

We can track the fetishization of the ex-centric here in Davidson's circuitous arrival at a positioning of minority literatures as ethnic "quarters" from which superlative tellings of Canadian history will be produced, and Davidson's word choice further betrays the doubled configuration of the ex-centric as that which is ostensibly a site of power and yet is simultaneously ghettoized into ethnically demarcated quarters. Such an approach to Kogawa's novel functions to overwrite the anxiety the text raises surrounding Canada's racist history with the valorization of the special position of the minority writer as a glittering new prospect for the improvement of the centre.

The danger in this process of fetishization thus does not reside only in its "curious exoticism;" rather, the fetishization of minority literature and minority histories speaks to the suppression or containment of the anxieties that such histories provoke. Miki points to this containment of the treatment of Canadian history in *Obasan* as operating through a discourse of resolution, suggesting that criticism of Kogawa's text frames the novel within "a resolutionary (not revolutionary) aesthetics" (*Broken*, 115). Miki's assessment of the field recognizes the tendency to read *Obasan* as a text whose function is primarily one of closure, where past wrongs are resolved through a movement from silence to speech. Beauregard suggests that this prevalent critical response to *Obasan* may, in part, be attributable to the narrative structure of the text, a response that he lampoons as one that, "to echo the South Park song [...] is to 'Blame *Obasan*'" ("After", n. page). Indeed, much of early Kogawa criticism focuses on a resolutionary reading of the text, specifically framing *Obasan* as a novel that maps the transition from silence to speech in an inexorable progression from wounding to healing and injury to forgiveness. Erika

Gottlieb's analysis of the structure of the text provides a particularly nuanced example of such criticism. According to Gottlieb, the structure of the novel establishes a teleological thrust toward closure: "The first and last chapters [...] are symmetrical like book ends. In the first chapter a question is asked, a puzzle set up. In the last chapter the question is answered, the puzzle resolved" (37). She further argues that the novel consists of a concentric pattern composed of three dimensions: the psychological, political and universal, and asserts that "[t]here will be only one solution to the three riddles, three questions" (36). While Gottlieb thereby successfully avoids limiting both her argument and Kogawa's novel to a purely individual, psychological analysis, such a holistic reading of the structure of the text overlooks and oversimplifies the differences between the personal or private negotiation of loss and its political or public negotiation, not to mention the differences between and unequal subject positions of the victim and the victimizer.

A resolutionary reading of Kogawa's novel thus becomes difficult to support in its potential to write Japanese Canadian internment and the history of racism that led to internment as an aberration in Canadian history, or, to continue with the metaphor of injury, as a healed wound. Indeed, the structure of the text itself does not support such a reading. While Naomi arguably reaches a form of psychological healing that allows her to mourn the loss of her mother, this psychological closure does not, in fact, close the novel. As Miki points out in his oft-cited reading of the Memorandum that closes, or indeed reopens the text, Naomi's return to the coulee in the last chapter of the novel does not mark its conclusion. Miki argues that the lack of a Japanese Canadian voice in that

document communicates the silence and silencing of Japanese Canadians as a social and political community, which functions to problematize the ostensible closure of the previous scene. Miki insists that “[t]he implication, in the materiality of the document, is that nothing has happened to change the social and political contexts of Naomi’s experiences” (*Broken*, 116). While it may be argued that Naomi reaches a form of personal closure in the final scenes of the text, it yet does not hold that this limited resolution bleeds into the text’s problematization of history and racialization.

This thesis, then, takes as its aim the need to disturb the resolutionary discourse surrounding both Kogawa’s novel and the history of Japanese Canadian internment that it concerns. Following Miki’s assessment of the implications of the redress settlement of 1988, a discourse of resolution in regards to Japanese Canadian history carries the potential to reinscribe that which it ostensibly disrupts:

No longer the outsider wronged by the state, the ‘Japanese Canadian’ subject is redressed— in metaphoric terms, dressed anew— in the garment of reconciliation and resolution— in the garment of citizenship. In the process, the nation to which the redressed subject belongs is redeemed. (*Broken*, 197)

Miki’s play on the word “redress” here illustrates the fetishistic process by which the unsightly presence of that which represents a lack in the multicultural ethos of the nation is denied in favour of the reinvestment in or re-vestment of the legal codes of a western, liberal ideal of citizenship. The denial and subsequent redress of the subject of historical injury also represents the suppression of that history; indeed, while the legal language of redress, restitution and closure acknowledges past wrongs, it simultaneously restores such wrongs to a teleological history of multicultural progress.

This thesis argues that, despite much of the criticism surrounding Kogawa's novel, and despite its use during the announcement of the redress agreement in 1988, *Obasan* refuses a telos of resolution, and rather proposes an uncanny temporality that disturbs the teleology of nation time and the elisions it performs. Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* represents a response to the discourse of resolution surrounding both Kogawa's novel and the redress agreement in its own deployment of an uncanny temporality. To return to Kogawa's and Sakamoto's novels, one might pose the same question posed by Naomi, the narrator of *Obasan*: "Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?" (44). Her question comes as a response to her Aunt Emily, who campaigns through letter-writing to expose the history of the internment of Japanese Canadians during WWII and the lived experiences of racism and racialization. I suggest, then, that it is not the dead that Naomi speaks of here, but the past, and while her question seems to write the past as past, it yet haunts her: "we're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead— all our dead— those who refuse to bury themselves" (26). And, in *The Electrical Field*, despite Asako's assertion that, "'What's past is past'" (122), we see that the past surfaces again and again, coming to loom over the present much as the shadow of Mackenzie Hill looms over Asako's neighbourhood. In both texts, then, the past comes to haunt the present, and, following the publication of *Obasan* in 1981, the novel itself would come to haunt Canadian history. As works that expose a portion of Canadian history previously ignored, as well as the racist policies that shaped that history, *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field* remain today contentious texts that work to threaten the

teleology of multicultural history, and the image of a progressive nation that this teleology supports.

CHAPTER ONE

The Haunted House of Fiction: The Nation, Narration and Time

In “The World and the Home,” Homi Bhabha responds to Iris Murdoch’s assertion that “A novel must be a house for free people to live in” and asks, “Must the novel be a house? What kind of narrative can house unfree people? Is the novel a house where the unhomely can live?” (446). In both Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*, houses figure prominently; yet, the houses in both texts are haunted by the past, by the repressed memories of the protagonists of each, and by the suppressed history of Japanese Canadian internment and the institutionalized racism that led to it. In each text, the interned, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed, the *unhomed* come to inhabit or indeed to *haunt* the unhomely houses of Kogawa’s and Sakamoto’s fictions. I assert that it is not Murdoch’s claim that the novel might function as a home that requires questioning, then. Rather, this thesis takes as its object of enquiry the *type* of home the “house of fiction” (Bhabha 445) represents, or is presumed to represent within the context of national literatures. Are ethnically demarcated or “marginal” literatures located outside of the house of Canadian fiction as that which allows a signifying boundary between domestic and foreign, unity and difference? Or, can marginal literatures, or the “marginal” history of Kogawa’s and Sakamoto’s accounts of Japanese Canadian history, come to trouble that boundary and the process of signification it supports?

In the fictions of both *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field*, haunted houses provide a spatial frame for the texts, literally housing the uncanny histories recounted therein. In *Obasan*, Naomi's Aunt Obasan lives in a house in which she is "altogether at home" (15), where nothing is thrown away but rather "preserved in shelves, in cupboards, under beds" (15). The remnants of Obasan's past thus literally house her present, so that they become as familiar as her own body: "They rest in the corners like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory" (15-6). Obasan's house is thus both her home and "her blood and bones" (16), and its attic harbours not only the "scene of carnage" (25) of grotesque spiders, but also the documentary traces of internment, of "the dead", of "those who refuse to bury themselves" (26). It is in this haunted house that Naomi negotiates the suppressed history of Japanese Canadian internment and her own repressed memories; likewise, in *The Electrical Field*, we see the protagonist, Asako, navigate repressed memories of both internment and its continued after-effects through the gothic "maze" of her house (74). In both texts, then, the trope of the haunted house provides a spatial or structural frame for the narrative, and yet such a framework does not function to contain or suppress the processes of historical narration that each explore. Rather, in each text, the haunted house provides a spatial framework for narration, a narration that travels strangely in time, coming to house the uncanny temporality of the repressed.

I. *An Uncanny Temporality: The Breach of Coincidence*

Before an exploration of an uncanny temporality can begin, though, it is necessary first to return to Freud's theory of the uncanny. In his essay entitled "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud turns to a dictionary entry of the word "heimlich" or "canny" in his attempt

to identify precisely what is canny, and what is uncanny. This linguistic review of the term “heimlich” significantly reveals that the uncanny does not in fact stand in semantic opposition to the canny. Rather, we learn that the first meaning of “heimlich” circles around the home, which is to say that it is related to the adjective “domestic” and can further describe that which is homely and carries a positive connotation, similar to “intimate,” “friendly,” “comfortable” and so on (342); moreover, the second definition of “heimlich” means “concealed, kept from sight [...], withheld” (344) and thus carries a negative connotation. And we find, as we continue reading the dictionary passage provided by Freud, that, in fact, this second definition of “heimlich” arrives at the same meaning as its supposed opposite, “unheimlich.” The passage begins with a definition of “heimlich,” but ends with a final paragraph that instead seeks to elucidate the meaning of the term when qualified by the prefix “un.” Freud thus arrives at the following conclusion:

What interests us most in this long extract is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word ‘*heimlich*’ exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, ‘*unheimlich*.’ What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*. (345)

Indeed, the recognition that the homely always already includes the unhomely is what interests us, or has interested critics and theorists who wish to deploy the uncanny as a critical theoretical tool.

The uncanny thus proves a particularly useful critical framework by which to grasp concepts of home, the public and the private, and the nation. To clarify, the concept of the uncanny is not simply an articulation of the co-existence of feelings of the familiar and unfamiliar, or of the homely and unhomely; rather, the uncanny remains a critical

theoretical tool in its recognition of the concomitance of the concept of the homely, whether that be the home or the nation, and that which has been repressed, or kept hidden, as roots beneath the surface, or as a malicious act behind someone's back (Freud 344). The uncanny thus becomes "everything [...] that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (345), and Freud goes on to explain that the uncanny "is something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returns from it", so that the prefix "un" becomes a "token of repression" (368), rather than opposition. Yet, as Freud himself points out, while it is true that the uncanny signals the return of that which has been repressed, not all surfacings of repression invoke a sense of the uncanny (368). It is particularly fruitful here to return to Freud's own terminology when describing the linguistic definition of *heimlich*: "The *Heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (347). I wish to draw attention here to the term "coincide." For, as we continue an analysis of the uncanny, we will find that it is the coincidental that disturbs the homely suppression of that which has been "kept from sight" or "withheld from others" (344), through its unhomely repetition.

A visual analysis of the uncanny may appear to be the most direct path to understanding not only the unhomely as a concept, but as a critical tool. Freud, for example, points to the example of the haunted house as one that readers might expect him to turn first (364); yet, an immediate foray into the spatial would be misleading. I suggest that this is because the uncanny, or the surfacing of that which was to be kept from sight, arises out of a temporal relationship, rather than a spatial one. In other words, it is through

disjunctions in narration, in the teleology of narration, that the uncanny arises. As noted above, the process by which the homely becomes unhomely is not, in fact, a progression. Nor is it a form of ambivalence, where a sense of the home oscillates between the homely and the unhomely. Rather, the two meanings *coincide*— they exist simultaneously rather than diachronically. Turning to examples from myth and his own patient’s case history, Freud notes that a sensation of uncanniness arises when people experience coincidence, and that coincidence becomes even more uncanny if less time elapses between two coincidental events (362). The uncanny here, then, is the disruption of the logic of linear time; what is more, it is achieved through repetition, or through coincidence.

Freud’s discussion of fairy tales in his essay also proves useful in isolating the temporal function of the uncanny. While Freud turns to the fairy tale to differentiate between an “aesthetic” uncanniness and the uncanniness of experience (370), his analysis of fairy tales reveals not the difference between the fictional and the real, but rather elucidates my basic premise that, in fact, the uncanny is the surfacing of the ostensibly illogical coincidence in the logic of narration. Freud states:

I cannot think of any genuine fairy story which has anything uncanny about it. We have heard that it is in the highest degree uncanny when an inanimate object— a picture or a doll— comes to life; nevertheless in Hans Andersen’s stories the household utensils, furniture and tin soldiers are alive, yet nothing could well be more remote from the uncanny. (369)

What Freud fails to recognize here, as well as in his distinction between the aesthetic uncanny and the uncanny of experience, is that the fairy tale cannot be uncanny precisely because its narration, or its internal logic, does not rely on a teleological temporality. In the fairy tale, the coincidental does not signal the surfacing of the repressed; rather it

signals the fairy tale's own strange logic. To return to my argument, the uncanny, then, is the disruption of diachronic time, of a teleological narration with the eruption of coincidental time. The uncanny arises precisely out of this disruption of the logic of narration.

II. *Nation Time: Coincidence, Simultaneity and the Genealogical History of the Nation*

The uncanny, and specifically the uncanny disruption of linear time, thus provides a valuable critical framework for an analysis of the narration of the nation, as well as for the strategic political potential for an uncanny temporality to disrupt the homeliness of national history. Benedict Anderson's analysis of the birth of nationalism is useful here in its recognition of the temporalities that structure or support the conceptualization of a socio-political community. Anderson's focus on temporality reveals that the imagining of community as bound and delimited within a geopolitical space is in fact buttressed by specific modes of conceptualizing time. Anderson terms the first mode of temporality "simultaneity," and specifies that this form of simultaneity is "marked [...] by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (24). This coincidental, calendrical time does not function as the uncanny repetition of the suppressed; rather, it is the idea of events occurring *at the same time* that binds members of a community together in the present without their ever meeting. To borrow Anderson's example:

An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000-odd [sic] fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any other time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (26)

I wish to focus here on the adjectives "steady" and "anonymous." Significantly, the sense of simultaneity that allows for the daily, renewing imagining of the present time of the

nation requires the conceptualization of the repetition of actions and events as anonymous, or typical. The coincidental in this context thus does not represent the opposition of two events, but rather the apposition of two or more typical or representative moments that repeat steadily and predictably. The present of the nation is thus configured through the reassuring conceptualization of repeating moments co-existing in time.

While Anderson thus asserts that a calendrical temporality of repeating, simultaneous moments orders the present of the nation, a linear temporality constructs its past, or history. Anderson argues that the decline of monarchical systems, and of their conception of divine governance legitimized by a hierarchical stratification, led to the collapse of a cosmological conception of temporality in which “the origins of the world and of men [were] essentially identical” (27). In the absence of this cosmological view of history, reassurance was sought in what Anderson terms a “genealogical” imagining of the history of the nation: “thus began the process of reading nationalism *genealogically*—as the expression of an historical tradition and serial continuity” (195). The conceptualization of the history of the nation as a genealogy thus provides both the reassurance of a retrospective mapping of origins, and further supplies a sense of almost familial continuity, of future, continuous reproduction.

Yet, if we follow the premise that the nation is an imagined community, as Anderson terms it,⁴ then so too are the supposed origins of the nation. The writing of the

⁴ Anderson explains that the nation “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). See Anderson’s “Introduction” (1-7) for a brief overview of the concept of the nation as an imagined community.

history of the nation thus involves a reimagining or the reclamation of events in a process of a retrospective plotting of successive antecedents. Michel de Certeau characterizes this process of the genealogical writing of historical origins as the construction of a chronological narrative. Imperative to this act of narration is the “necessary concept of a zero-point, an origin (of time), indispensable for any orientation” (90). Significantly, such a designated point of origin, or the originary break of the chronological line, is arbitrary:

By allowing the present to be ‘situated’ in time and, finally, to be symbolized, narrative posits it within a necessary relation to a ‘beginning’ which is *nothing*, or which serves merely as its limit. The anchoring of the narrative conveys everywhere a tacit relation to something which cannot have a place in history—an originary non-place— without which, however, there would be no historiography. (90-1)

The act of narrating the *nation*, then, requires an imagining of national history around that which cannot be said, or that which has been repressed, or kept from sight. The “originary non-place” of national history thus represents an active disavowal of the unhomely, or of that which disturbs the national telos, so that, following de Certeau, “[t]his initial nothing traces out the disguised return of an uncanny past” (91). Or, to borrow from Ernest Renan, the homeliness of the nation relies on repression, on both shared commonalities amongst members of a nation, as well as shared amnesia:

Or, l’essence d’une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun et aussi que tous aient oublié bien de choses. Tout citoyen français *doit avoir oublié* la Saint-Barthélemy, les massacres du Midi au XIII^e siècle. (qtd. in Anderson 199)⁵

⁵ Martin Thom translates this passage as follows: “Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century” (Renan 11).

Here we see that the imagining of the nation requires not simply imagined commonality. Rather, obligatory repressions become prerequisites to the conception of the nation, and these acts of repression signal the paradoxical obligation to “have already forgotten” the shared knowledge of histories of violence and rupture in the national narrative.

While we have thus established the reliance of the homeliness of the nation on the necessity of repression, de Certeau’s concept of an “originary non-place” and Renan’s recognition of the imperative “doit avoir oublié” do not reveal *how* this repression is mediated. I assert that the repression of the uncanny is achieved through narration, and to better understand the process by which the act of narrating the nation suppresses uncanny histories, I turn to de Certeau’s “simple example” of the temporality of narration (89). Here, we can recognize how the linear temporality of narration functions to eliminate the surfacing of uncanny coincidence:

we can say that ‘the weather is good’ or ‘the weather is bad.’ These two propositions cannot be maintained at the same time, but only one or the other. In contrast, if we introduce temporal difference so as to transform the propositions into ‘yesterday, the weather was good,’ and ‘today, the weather is bad,’ it is now legitimate to maintain them together. Contraries are therefore compatible within the same text under the condition that it is *narrative*. Temporalization creates the possibility of making coherent an order and its ‘heteroclitic,’ its irregularity. (89)

The suppression of the uncanny irregularities of the past, then, does not necessarily entail a straightforward act of exclusion or forgetting. Rather, as de Certeau’s “simple example” shows, even the act of telling or of writing history can indeed function to suppress certain histories, through the alignment of the disturbingly irregular within the temporal logic of narration.

Anderson identifies the process by which past events are reclaimed in the name of

the nation as “reversed ventriloquism” (198). Following Anderson, this process constitutes an “exhumation” (198) of the dead, whereby the gaze of the historian looks back upon the dead in order to write them into the national project. Or, to continue with Anderson’s metaphor, the historian raises the dead in order that they might speak for the nation. The dead are thus “by no means a random assemblage of forgotten, anonymous dead” (198). Rather, turning to Michelet’s account of the events leading to the French Revolution, Anderson shows that in Michelet’s hands, the dead become “those whose sacrifices, throughout History, made possible the rupture of 1789 and the selfconscious appearance of the French nation, *even when these sacrifices were not understood as such by the victims*” (198). We might add to this postulation that the exhumation of the dead in the name of the nation not only does not require the knowledge or understanding of those supposedly involved in the birth of the nation; rather, the retrospective plotting of the genealogy of the nation can and indeed does precede the formation of the nation, and thus also precedes the development of a national telos.

To clarify, we might turn here to Homi Bhabha’s theorization of time and the nation in his essay “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation” (1990). Like Anderson, Bhabha identifies two temporalities at work behind the image of the nation: a repeating, calendrical temporality and a linear, narrative temporality. Bhabha’s articulation of these two temporalities yet differs from Anderson’s in his treatment of the nation as a semiotic unit. This post-structuralist reading of the nation proves useful in that it traces how a national sign is produced both through enunciation and syntax. The first process of signification is one of repeated enunciation or

performance, and thus we might term it the present performative. The second process establishes a linear temporality, where the national sign or national history is achieved through the syntactical production and regulation of difference. Bhabha thus recognizes a calendrical or repeating sense of time as the “enunciatory present” of the nation, “marked in the repetition and pulsation of the national sign” (299). And the past of the nation is configured through the “narrative authority” of tradition, where the nation or a people are posited as an “*a priori* historical presence” (299).

Like de Certeau, then, Bhabha identifies a national past as that which presupposes an arbitrary point of origin. National history is thus contingent upon the imagining of a national unit in existence before the birth of nationalism. The linear temporality of the past or history of a nation thus allows for the regulation of difference:

the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of its irredeemably plural modern space, bounded by difference, even hostile nations, into a signifying space that is archaic and mythical, paradoxically representing the nation’s modern territoriality, in the patriotic, atavistic temporality of Tradition. (300)

Bhabha further provides a reading of this process of signification as that which potentially opens a space in which to mediate alternate significations of the nation in order to challenge and reorient how the national sign is produced. Bhabha repeatedly configures this political potential as one that resides in an interstitial *space*, articulated in Saussurian terminology as the “in-between” or the “‘gap’ or ‘emptiness’ of the signifier that penetrates linguistic difference” (299). While Bhabha thus returns to a spatial configuration of the nation and, I find, unnecessarily complicates his theory in the spatialized constructs of structuralism, he yet significantly proposes alternative narratives

as that which can disrupt a national teleology and the process of suppression that it performs: “Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries— both actual and conceptual— disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (300). I carry this point further and argue that a reimagining of the *time* of the nation provides a temporal space by which to produce politically powerful narratives that counter both an essentialist construction of the nation as well as the essentializing process of writing national history.

III. *Time and the Topography of Multiculturalism*

The uncanny, then, proves a particularly useful critical tool in the analysis of national narratives in that it allows for a double vision by which to read the narration of the nation and how its unhomely roots are entrained and suppressed in the logic of its narration. I signal a need to move away from a spatial conceptualization of the uncanny, or of the uncanny nation, and its tendency to obfuscate the process of narrating the nation in its focus on the visual, especially in regards to multiculturalism in Canada and the construction of the multicultural nation as a mosaic. For example, Roy Miki’s criticism of Linda Hutcheon’s spatial configuration of a centre-margins dynamic in her work *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (1991) identifies the mapping of a topography of exotic locales configured in opposition to the metropole (“Asiancy” 137). In her earlier work, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary Canadian Fiction* (1988), we can see that this topographical imagining of the nation, and of Canadian literature, indeed leads Hutcheon to occlude historical difference and power inequities. Identifying the “periphery” as a “frontier” (3) in Canadian literature, Hutcheon displays the “curious

exoticism” (“Asiancy” 137) for which Miki criticized her later work. Yet, this curious exoticism also becomes a curious form of nationalism. While Hutcheon’s valorization of the marginal as a frontier or “the place where new possibilities exist” (4) evokes an imperialist appropriation of the exotic locales of colonial territory, her valuation of the margins also evokes the rhetoric of Canadian nationalism. Indeed, through a circuitous valorization of Canada as a country of margins, Hutcheon suggests that postmodernism and its concern with breaching boundaries is a particularly Canadian position. Asserting that Canada “is a vast nation with little sense of firm geographical centre or ethnic unity” and that Canada’s “multicultural mosaic is no melting pot”, Hutcheon goes on to suggest that “the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of the [Canadian] nation” (3). The spatialized imagining of the Canadian nation as a mosaic thus runs the risk of constructing the sociopolitical space of Canada as topographical surface, thereby eliding the construction of the nation through its narration.

A spatial configuration of the nation thus isolates “minority” histories or “ethnic” histories to an oppositional space vis-à-vis the presumably normative historical record, and thereby fails to highlight how such histories are elided as they are entrained within the teleology of that record. Within the context of official Canadian multiculturalism, this spatial imagining of the nation as one entity comprised of culturally and ethnically diverse quarters further functions to overwrite histories of domination and unequal power dynamics between racialized others and the normative, Anglophone centre. Himani Bannerji argues that multicultural ideology, in a project to “avert a complete rupture” in the imagined topography of political unity in Canada, “creates ‘others’ while subverting

demands for anti-racism and political equality” (97). According to Bannerji, the simultaneous marking of “otherness” and suppression of that otherness in Canada arises from the need to demarcate acceptable or desirable forms of difference in the face of the threat that Quebecois nationalism represents to English Canada (94-5). This spatial configuration of Canada as a mosaic further functions to overwrite or obscure histories of violence and oppression that lie beneath the construction of that mosaic. Following Bannerji, “a cultural pluralist interpretive discourse hides more than it reveals” (97), and it is the valuation of visible, cultural difference that overlays the uncanny roots of the “deep contradictions” (97) of the power relations of Canada’s colonial past and continuing multicultural project.

Drawing on Bannerji’s assessment of the development of multicultural policy as a strategic response to Quebecois nationalism, Eva Mackey provides an analysis of multiculturalism in Canada, yet Mackey refuses to enter into the logic and rhetoric of the nationalist metaphor of a cultural mosaic. Mackey asserts, much as Bannerji does, that the nation, and specifically the Canadian nation, is “a site of a constantly regulated politics of identity”, where the reproduction of the crises of Canada’s “two solitudes” and of cultural and ethnic pluralism allow for the regulation of difference while maintaining a myth of national unity (Mackey 13). Notably, though, Mackey frames her assessment of official Canadian multiculturalism with the metaphor of a house. Mackey’s chosen title for her book, *The House of Difference*, marks a reference to the House of Commons, and to the regulated management of difference through legislation and policy, but such a configuration of the Canadian nation as a house further proves intriguing as it prompts a

troubling line of inquiry: how does Canadian multiculturalism house or contain the unhomely in its narration, and how can the unhomely come to breach that containment?

IV. *The House of Fiction: Housing Uncanny Temporalities in Obasan and The Electrical Field*

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* works to provoke such a breach, yet its subversive telling of the history of Japanese Canadian internment faces repression in the telling of a multicultural national history. The writing of Canadian history does not necessarily seek to ignore or excise the history of racism that Kogawa's novel recounts from any "official" historical record. Rather, the genealogical, retrospective mapping of the "origins" of multiculturalism as a national ethos threatens to enfold Canada's domestic policy of World War II into a narrative of multicultural progress. In Canada's "house of difference," we must ask: can the narratives of the unfree, the unhomed and the disowned come to disrupt the telos of multiculturalism?

Chapters Two and Three of this thesis thus seek to explore the novels of Kogawa and Sakamoto as unhomely fictions that function to intersect with, engage and trouble Canadian national history, and I argue that an exploration of Kogawa's and Sakamoto's treatment of Canadian history remains imperative within the context of the continued project of its construction. *Obasan* has gained wide acclaim, winning, amongst others, the Books in Canada First Novel Award (1981), the Canadian Authors Association Book of the Year Award (1982) and the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award (1982) (Lo 98). A portion of the text was read in the House of Commons by Member of Parliament Ed Broadbent as part of the announcement of the Redress Settlement in 1988,

and the novel is widely taught in high schools and post-secondary institutions throughout Canada (Lo 98). Kogawa's novel has also undergone multiple forms of adaptations. Kogawa wrote a children's version of *Obasan* entitled *Naomi's Road* (1986), and in an interview she explains that in the children's version, "the focus of the story would change to friendship as a resolution" (Davis 99). In fact, the resolutionary tone of *Naomi's Road* does not even attend the resolution of the text; rather, the thematics of resolution become apparent before the story even commences, couched in the rhetoric of multicultural nationalism of the prefatory "letter from the author": "O Canada! What a vast, beautiful country. Here there are people from all around the world. And along with the Native Peoples, we are all Canadians together" (n.pag.). There is also a picture-book version, *Naomi's Tree* (2008), for young children, which sanitizes the message even further. Kogawa also worked with Japanese publishers to adapt and translate that text for an intended audience of young-adult students in Japan. Kogawa describes the Japanese adaptation as more akin to *Obasan* than to *Naomi's Road*, and yet, due to the publisher's demands, the Japanese translation notably omits the character of Aunt Emily and her political activism (Davis 100).⁶ *Naomi's Road* was also made into an opera, although this adaptation was not led by Kogawa (Davis 100). In short, the role of Kogawa's novel in the legislated reconciliation of the redress settlement, in the pedagogical institutions of Canada and in the dissemination of messages of closure in subsequent literary

⁶ See also Kathleen Donohue's interview with Joy Kogawa (1994). Here Kogawa explains: "In *Obasan*, Naomi's mother dies. I didn't think that would do for a children's book. There had to be a problem and a resolution" (41). When asked why Aunt Emily was excised from the Japanese version of *Naomi's Road*, Kogawa responds: "If it was to be a children's book it had to be simplified, and the fewer the characters the better. So I just didn't add her. I don't think I really thought about it that much. It's very odd to think of this book in Japan, because the *Naomi's Road* there is different from the *Naomi's Road* here. It's a combination of *Obasan* and *Naomi's Road*. But it doesn't have Aunt Emily in it, so it's a very strange book I think" (42).

transmutations beg the question: can *Obasan* continue to trouble the conceptualization of Canada as inclusive, unitary and progressive, or does it in fact reinforce such an imagining of Canada and its national history? Indeed, Sakamoto's novel asks the same question. Written following the ostensible closure of the redress settlement, *The Electrical Field* works to destabilize such a message of resolution in its revisiting of not only the history of internment, but the continued effects of internment and Canada's history of racism.

Despite the role Kogawa's novel appears to play in the writing of a Canadian national teleology of multiculturalism, both *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field* work to unhome the narration of the nation. And while globalization may destabilize the boundaries of the modern nation, constructions of national narratives remain significant. Bhabha argues that "the unhomely is a paradigmatic postcolonial experience" (446), and further asserts:

Where the transmission of 'national' traditions was once the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees— these border and frontier conditions— may be the terrains of world literature. ("The World"449)

Bhabha here privileges the interstitial spaces occupied by the migrant, the colonized, the refugee and the diasporic subject and thus may appear to promote a transcendent transnationalism or even postnationalism. Yet, I assert that it is in fact the persistence of the conception of nations as unitary, homogenous entities that demands a reconsideration of the unhomely disruption of national narratives. Anderson claims that the "end of the era of nationalism,' so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight" (3), and while Anderson's argument is situated in the close of the cold war, nationalist rhetoric and

continued projects of constructing national genealogies persist in the current context of globalization. This chapter has thus worked to provide an analysis of the uncanny in order to lay out the theoretical groundwork for an examination of the disruption of a teleology of Canadian multiculturalism, and, more specifically, the analysis of the subversively uncanny temporalities of both *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field* in Chapters Two and Three.

CHAPTER TWO

*An Animating Stillness: Uncanny Time and the Renegotiation of History in
Joy Kogawa's Obasan*

The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful.
(Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, 14)

In the early chapters of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Kogawa links language to silence, silence to the body, the body to the domestic, and the domestic to a haunting sense of death and decay in a series of seemingly ever-growing and intersecting associations. At the centre of this web of associations we find the character for whom Kogawa named her novel, our narrator's Obasan. Obasan is silent, yet her silence is, as King-Kok Cheung has observed, articulate; it is the "language of her grief" and is both nuanced and idiomatic (Kogawa 14). This silence is yet also corporeal, it has "grown" into something "powerful" in Obasan's body; it thus becomes not only articulate but animate. And, within the course of a just a few pages, this allusive and even elusive language shifts direction, pulling readers from a connection between silence and the body to one between the body and the domestic:

The house is indeed old, as she is also old. Every home-made piece of furniture, each pot holder and paper doily is a link in her lifeline. She has preserved in shelves, in cupboards, under beds— a box of marbles, half-filled colouring books, a red, white and blue rubber ball. [...] They rest in the corners like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory. This house is now her blood and bones. (15-6)

Naomi here links her aunt's body to her home— a domestic space that becomes both corporeal and corpse-like, stilling the body of silence described only a few pages earlier

as animated, with the “tiny specks of memory” coming to “rest” in a morbid description of “hair cells, skin tissues [...], blood and bones” (15-6). How can we read these paradoxes? How can we grasp a silent language, or an animating stillness?

I. *The Stilling of Teleology: Obasan and Time*

The urge to reconcile such apparent oppositions appears to be the typical response to Kogawa’s associative and seemingly contradictory writing style. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, much of the early critical response to *Obasan* focused on the beauty of its stylistics, praising Kogawa’s adept use of language. This focus on the beauty of Kogawa’s language and play with metaphor partially arises from her background as a poet. In a 1999 interview, Kogawa herself explains: “I started writing that novel [*Obasan*] and wrote it mainly the way I wrote my poems” (Davis 99). She adds:

I think that when I was writing *Obasan*, for the longest time, I hadn’t shifted in the sense that I was still writing poetry. The way I used to write poetry was that I would have these images that would come at me and I would write them down and figure them out later. I wrote the novel that way, without any direction, without any particular structure in mind [...]. (99)

Kogawa’s own recognition of the influence of her discipline as a poet on her prose might thus appear to invite a reductive reading of the stylistics of *Obasan* as the aesthetic inclinations of a poet rather than intentional, purposive constructions. Of course, while Kogawa may have written *Obasan* “without any direction, without any particular structure in mind,” such a writing strategy does not preclude the production of meaning. Indeed, according to Kogawa, her writing style represents an *exploration* of meaning, a process that constitutes a “not-knowing [...], trying to see what it is that is fermenting, what it is that’s coming forth, struggling to be born” (Davis 99).

While the thrust of Kogawa's play with metaphor and associations may be overlooked in favour of her style, there is also a tendency to reduce the multiplicity of metaphors and allusions in the text to a singular meaning. Erika Gottlieb (1986) asserts that the associative style of the text mimics the structure of the novel, and suggests that this structure reveals a unitary meaning at its centre. According to Gottlieb, the text follows a "concentric pattern", and "the deliberate visibility" of this pattern "compels the reader to search for a central meaning at the core of the multi-layered texture of Naomi's narrative" (34). The repeating tropes of webs, quilts, and balls of string in *Obasan* thus become, in Gottlieb's view, puzzles to be solved. For Gottlieb, then, the complex web of associations created by Kogawa requires reduction; indeed, Gottlieb's reading refuses contradiction, opposition or the coincidental, as she argues: "There is an imperceptible, sinister, extremely able spider working somewhere in the cosmos to set up these intriguing puzzles, and together with the narrator we are compelled to seek answers" (40). While Gottlieb's final assertion that *Obasan* represents the key figure in the resolution of many of the problems or mysteries of the text is accurate, particularly the resolution of the mystery of Naomi's mother's failure to return from Japan, her analysis does little to answer the questions that begin our investigation here. How can we read Kogawa's linkage of *Obasan*'s living body with her home as a morbid resting place for haunting memories? How can we read the animating stillness of *Obasan*'s house?

I find it useful to return here to Homi Bhabha's discussion of the uncanny and postcolonial literature in his essay "The World and the Home" (2002). I do so not simply for Bhabha's investigation of the uncanny; rather, upon reading his analysis of the

unhomely “house of fiction” (445) of postcolonial literature, I was struck by his discussion of time. Bhabha turns to the uncanny almost apologetically, opening his essay with the following entreaty: “You must permit me this awkward word— ‘unhomely’— because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place” (445). We can recognize this unsettling disjunction of the public and the private in the gothic description of Obasan’s unhallowed attic. The attic is littered with the dead: a dead sparrow lies “on its back, its feet straight back” (23), and spider webs form a “graveyard and feasting ground combined” that hangs “like evil laundry on a line” (25). Yet beyond these gothic-inspired images of spiders and corpses set in the darkness of an attic after midnight, we find that Obasan’s attic appears to be haunted by Naomi’s uncle, Isamu Nakane. And this haunting is not only effected by a sense of his continued presence. Rather, what comes to haunt Naomi, and the reader, is the disturbing intersection of the public and the private, of the world and the home, and, more specifically, of the Canadian state and the ostensibly personal issue of identity:

Obasan is searching through bundles of old letters and papers. She picks up a yellow wallet-size ID card. I shine the flashlight on it and there is Uncle’s face, young and unsmiling in the bottom right-hand corner. Isamu Nakane #00556. Beside the picture is a signature which looks like ‘McGibbons’—Inspector, RCMP. (24)

In 1940, the process of the registration of people of Japanese descent living in Canada began: people of Japanese origin were issued and required to carry at all times a National Registration card, referred to in the above-quoted passage as an ID card, which stated name, address, age, height, weight, marks of identification and occupation; the card also included a photograph, thumb print and serial number (Adachi 191). This mandatory

registration was clearly discriminatory, for, as Ken Adachi (1991) points out, Japanese Canadians were the only group registered (191). And, Adachi also comments that “symbol hunters might have gloried in the choice of colours which signified status: white cards issued to Canadian-born, salmon-pink to naturalized citizens, yellow to alien Japanese” (193). Naomi’s Uncle’s yellow ID card thus functions as a legally-inscribed ethnic marker, a marker that cannot be escaped because it is mandatory. In the recesses of Obasan’s family home, then, we see the personal effects of Naomi’s uncle, and what rises strangely familiar to the surface are not simply the remnants of this man’s life, but the government-sponsored racism and racialization that shaped it and the lives of so many others.

To clarify, I emphasize that the state-sponsored racism invoked by Isamu’s ID card is not uncanny in and of itself; rather, it is the coincidental recognition of both the presumably private notion of identity and the disturbingly familiar recognition of state control over that identity— a recognition that is disturbing precisely because it is already familiar, has already been tacitly recognized— that constitutes the uncanny. The seemingly contradictory apposition of the public and private, held uneasily in the same moment in time, produces an uncanny effect, or the “deep stirring of the unhomely” (Bhabha 445) in Kogawa’s readers. And it is this uneasy temporality, or what Bhabha terms the “feverish stillness” (445) of the unhomely, that I recognize at work in Kogawa’s novel, deployed strategically to breach the linear temporality of Canadian history and its disarticulation of the concomitance of the public and private in its sequential telling.

I propose, then, that we can see Bhabha's concept of a "feverish stillness" at work in Kogawa's novel. Drawing heavily on Walter Benjamin's concept of historical materialism, Bhabha's "feverish stillness" recalls Benjamin's identification of a productive acedia (258). Following Benjamin, the arrest of a progressive conceptualization of time is "pregnant with tensions" (264); his language choice bespeaks the productive potential in refusing a linear, causal and inevitably progressive ordering of history in favour of a view of a temporality that sees the present as answerable to the past. Benjamin's oft-cited image of the "angel of history" (259) is pertinent here, as Benjamin remarks:

His face is turned to the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (259).

It is this stilling of time, or the piling up of the past in "the time of the now" (265), that allows for a productive renegotiation of history, as the seizure of teleology wrests historical events from a causal chain of progress and frees Benjamin's historical materialist to empathize with and renegotiate the past within the context of the present. And, while Benjamin does not explicitly arrive at this point, I emphasize that the arrest of a teleological view of history is achieved through the conceptualization of a synchronic rather than diachronic concept of time. In the piling up of the events of history in the present we can thus recognize the potential for the synchronic to breach a linear temporality and reveal what has been repressed in the logic of progress.

To return to Bhabha, the productive potential of Benjamin's concept of acedia, or of the "feverish stillness" of the unhomely, allows for what Bhabha terms the "re-

cognition” (447) of history, where what has been repressed may not only be recognized, but also re-thought. For Bhabha, this process of re-cognition requires mediation outside “historical time” (447), or the linear temporality of nations, and through what he terms an aesthetic temporality. Bhabha is careful here to distinguish his concept of an aesthetic temporality from an “homogenous or transcendent temporality of the aesthetic” (447); rather, he suggests that an aesthetic of a stilling of time offers “another temporality in which to signify the ‘event’ of history” (448). Significantly, according to Bhabha, the feverish stillness of the uncanny refigures the historical event “through a temporal distancing or lag” (447). We can see, then, that the stilling of time does not represent a simple seizure of a linear succession of events. Instead, the feverish stillness of the uncanny represents the return of the repressed, invoking a sense of “belated repetition” (448) as that which has been forgotten resurfaces, or as that which has been repressed but expected arrives, always late.

The seeming contradictions of Kogawa’s novel, then, do not require resolution but instead demand recognition, or re-cognition. The web of associations structuring Kogawa’s novel functions not as a puzzle to be solved and thus re-ordered in the causal logic of narration, but rather ask to remain unresolved, revealing the apparent contradictions or irregularities of Canadian history. Kogawa herself describes the writing of *Obasan* in a similar way, favouring the coincidental over the singular or linear:

I was just writing the way I would be writing poetry, that is: wake up in the morning, put it down, write in the middle of the night, be led by all these synchronistic things that would happen. (Davis 99).

I argue that in *Obasan*, Kogawa works to deploy such a synchronistic or synchronic narrative structure in her retelling of the racism that typified Japanese Canadian life in Canada during WWII. And, as an exploration of the uncanny bodies and spaces that populate Kogawa's text will show, the synchronic temporality of *Obasan* works to render Canadian history, and the repressions that its linear telling performs, uncannily and disturbingly familiar, thereby opening up a temporal space in which to inscribe a productive counter-narrative.

II. *Kogawa Criticism: Obasan in Context*

Before turning to an investigation of the text, I wish to situate my analysis of *Obasan* within the context of Kogawa criticism. As we have seen, *Obasan* was published in the midst of a developing multicultural policy in Canada. The novel was published in 1981, ten years after the announcement by Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau of official multicultural policy, called "Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework" (Mackey 64). The "present" of *Obasan* is also set in 1972, only one year after the announcement of this policy. It is important then to understand the novel's reception within the context of the development of multiculturalism as a national ethos in Canada, and to question the rhetoric of this policy as that which informs the context in which critics approach *Obasan*. Indeed, within the contemporary context of official Canadian multiculturalism, an examination of the subversive temporality at work in Kogawa's text remains imperative as the progressive logic of multiculturalism threatens to overwrite the uncanniness the text works to provoke.

In his essay “Altered States: Global Currents, the Spectral Nation, and the Production of ‘Asian Canadian’” (2000), Roy Miki argues that the literary products of Asian Canada are indeed subject to a such a threat, as the subversive projects of such texts face suppression in favour of the valorization of the ethnic writer in multicultural society. Miki asserts that the relatively recent visibility of “Asian Canadian” as a subject of “research, cultural production and interrogation” positions the field as a “double-edged site: where relations of dominance threaten to be remobilized (more of the same), *or* where critiques of the nation can posit future methodologies of resistance and collective formations” (53). In Canada’s continuing multicultural project and its valorization of certain forms of diversity, ethnic literatures face a cultural fetishization that both celebrates and reifies prescribed forms of difference vis-à-vis the normative white centre. More specifically, Miki identifies the tendency to recognize texts like *Obasan*, as well as *The Electrical Field*, amongst others, as “colourized versions of CanLit”, through which a “salvage operation” can be performed:

a reconstituted— even improved— ‘Canadian’ can be retrieved through ‘minority’ subjects who are supposedly connected to vital cultural networks with the resources to rejuvenate the nation, that, by implication, has made them possible. (58)

The subversive counter-history that *Obasan* offers thus faces the possibility of suppression, or indeed inoculation, functioning to bolster the concept of the progress of Canadian multiculturalism.

Guy Beauregard likewise identifies the field of Asian Canadian literature as a double-edged site. More specifically, Beauregard recognizes the need to examine the continued response to *Obasan*’s treatment of Canada’s history of state-sponsored racism,

highlighting the tendency in Kogawa criticism to anaesthetize the novel's critique of that history. In his article "After *Obasan*: Kogawa Criticism and its Futures" (2001), Beauregard argues for the recognition that critical and hegemonic discourses have moved beyond the duality of remembering and forgetting and towards containment, or towards the performance of a form of remembering that contains and isolates racism against Japanese Canadians in Canada to WWII. According to Beauregard, much of the critical response to *Obasan* functions to "configure the internment as an irrational aberration in Canadian history, one that can be explained as an 'error,' or a 'misunderstanding,' or a result of wartime pressures on the Canadian state" (n.page).⁷ The danger in such readings is that they provide what Beauregard terms "an 'aberration' model of racism in Canada" (n.page). Beauregard thus argues that "the shape of Kogawa criticism needs to be understood as a symptom of the cultural politics of Canadian literary studies, in which literary critics attempt to discuss a 'racist past' in a 'multicultural present'" (n.page). Moreover, such a framing of Kogawa's novel functions "to manage the implications of a particular moment in Canadian history by remembering it in a particular way" (n.page). I suggest that the counter-history recounted in Kogawa's novel faces entrainment in a narrative of multicultural progress, where the racism it indicts becomes a progressive step towards the perfectibility of multicultural diversity and acceptance.

⁷ Beauregard specifically cites B.A. St. Andrews' "Reclaiming a Canadian Heritage: Kogawa's *Obasan*" (1986) and Erika Gottlieb's "The Riddle of Concentric Worlds in *Obasan*" (1986) as examples of criticism that casts racism against Japanese Canadians as either an "error" or "misunderstanding" (n.page). Beauregard further points to Mason Harris' "Broken Generations in *Obasan*" as an analysis that functions to displace the issue of sanctioned racism and processes of racialization in Canada on generalizing assumptions about Japanese Canadian culture and generational differences therein. Beauregard thus criticizes Harris' work as "an essay that universalizes the workings of 'immigrant communities' and essentializes the particularities of Japanese Canadians" (n.page).

Scott McFarlane recognizes just such a message of multicultural progress in the cover of Kogawa's novel. In "Covering *Obasan* and the Narrative of Internment" (1995), McFarlane addresses how the cover of the 1983 Penguin edition of the novel tells a story at odds with its subversive content. Pointing to the cover's depiction of a young Naomi encased in a train window with eyes averted, McFarlane suggests that such a framing is racist as it "depicts her as an object lacking the power" to look back at the viewer, and further reaffirms stereotypes that figure Japanese women as "child-like, quiet, passive and in need of protection" (406). McFarlane's analysis of the racist tropes that inform the cover photo is valuable, although I question whether he confuses a typical representation of a child with stereotypes of Japanese women. What I find particularly intriguing in McFarlane's analysis, though, is his identification of the train in the photo as an icon of national progress. Noting that the train on the cover marks a reference to the novel's account of the transportation of Japanese Canadians to internment camps by train, thereby "alluding to Japanese Canadian internment itself", McFarlane also points out that the cover frames Naomi "within an institutional discourse in which it is an icon of the development of Canada" (407). As a result, the narrative of national progress invoked by the image of the train functions to displace Naomi's story within that of a "national bildungsroman" and, McFarlane argues, "[t]his displacement allows for the suggestion that both Naomi and Canada have grown from their internment" (407). Yet the train on the cover also invokes other histories of violence and racism, namely the Holocaust and the history of Chinese immigration to Canada. Within a specifically Canadian context, the train invokes the exploitation of Chinese labourers in the building of the Canadian Pacific

Railway, the high fatality rate of Chinese men working on the CPR, and the racist enactment of the Chinese head tax in 1885 restricting the immigration of Chinese to Canada. The image of the train on the cover thus speaks to other histories of dislocation, racism and trauma; in so doing, it highlights the potential for *Obasan* and other narratives of trauma to create productive linkages between what may appear to be otherwise isolated and discrete histories of loss.

III. *The Stilling of Speech: Obasan and Productive Silence*

There is a silence that cannot speak.
There is a silence that will not speak.
(Kogawa, *Obasan*, Prologue.)

Reading *Obasan* as a national bildungsroman remains deeply problematic, then, precisely in its tendency to close and thus isolate the history of dislocation it represents. The risk of a “coming of age” reading of *Obasan* lies in subsuming Kogawa’s counter-history under an ostensibly inclusive umbrella of national history, in which the history of racialization and victimization of Japanese Canadians is rendered a growing pain in the progress of the nation. Such a reading echoes analyses of the novel that see the text in terms of a “coming to voice” narrative. I argue that reading *Obasan* as a straightforward narrative of finding one’s voice undermines the counter-history of Kogawa’s text. Seen as a story of overcoming the silencing effects of racism, Naomi’s narrative becomes a corrective—a corrective in that her movement to speech literally corrects the symptom of the racism and racialization of her past, namely her silence, construed as powerlessness—but also in that her narrative itself becomes a corrective to a previously incorrect or incomplete national history. Reading Naomi’s coming to voice as a resolution to the

violence of her past overlooks the problematization of speech, as well as the privileging of silence in Kogawa's novel. And, while critics have adeptly fore-grounded the problematization of both speech and writing in the text and its valuation of silence as a measure of resistance, as a "silence that *will* not speak" (emphasis added), I wish to emphasize the productive value of a "silence that *cannot* speak" (emphasis added) as a form of stillness that refuses the linearity of narration.

King-Kok Cheung's analysis of silence and speech in *Obasan* is useful in its nuanced recognition of the negative and positive implications of both silence and speech in Kogawa's novel, a reading that complicates a linear, singular reading of the text as a coming-to-voice narrative. Cheung identifies a "spectrum of silence" in *Obasan* that ranges from an "oppressive and inhibitive silence" to the "protective and stoic" and finally to the "communicative and attentive" (118). Naomi's reaction to her abuse by Old Man Gower typifies the first form of silence; his censure to "not tell [her] mother" (Kogawa 65) silences her communication with her mother, both rendering Naomi a "parasite on her body" and engendering a sense of separation from her as Naomi senses: "If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I will be torn from her" (Kogawa 69). While this oppressive silence clearly harms Naomi, the stoic silence of Naomi's mother protects her, as "without a word and without alarm" Naomi's mother responds to her plea for help when the hen attacks her chicks in Naomi's backyard (63). Notably, the silence Naomi's mother exhibits here is also communicative: "Her eyes are steady and matter of fact [...]. They are eyes that protect, shielding what is hidden most deeply in the heart of a child" (63). While Naomi's mother

thus remains literally silent, her silence is yet in a sense audible as her *eyes* speak, or, perhaps more accurately, as Naomi is able to read or hear a message in her mother's eyes.

Cheung's analysis of silence in *Obasan* thus allows for the recognition of Kogawa's redefinition of silence, or her complication of both silence and speech. Cheung's analysis of the two is particularly useful, though, in its refusal to read silence and speech as oppositional or contradictory. Cheung challenges the "Western hierarchical opposition of speech and silence" (125), noting that in English, "*silence* is often the opposite of *speech, language, or expression*" but that the Chinese and Japanese character for "silence" is "antonymous to *noise, motion, and commotion*" (113). This challenge to the assumed link between voicelessness and powerlessness allows Cheung to remobilize silence as a powerful form of resistance in the novel so that silence becomes a refusal to enter into the power politics of language. As Donald Goellnicht writes, "Language shapes, rather than merely reflects, reality for both the victimizers and the victims, its manipulation resulting in empirical, concrete actions" ("Historiographical Metafiction," 291). Government discourse overtly labels Naomi's Uncle an "Enemy Alien" (Kogawa 40), and yet also obscures the project to inter Japanese Canadians by calling internment camps "Interior Housing Projects" (36). Language thus has the power to inscribe and impose difference, as well as the power to "disguise any crime" (Kogawa 36), as Aunt Emily asserts. The refusal to speak, then, does not represent an opposition to self-expression or self-empowerment; rather, silence becomes a means to resist a hegemonic mode of discourse.

Of course, as Cheung's analysis shows, Kogawa's novel does not exclusively endorse silence over speech, or vice-versa. We can assert that Aunt Emily represents speech in the text, while Obasan represents silence. Both characters represent real and necessary forms of political and social awareness. Yet, Obasan is clearly privileged in the text: quite simply, the novel bears her name, and her influence on our narrator and protagonist is like that of a mother. While Emily is present largely only in the form of letters and documents, as she lives in Toronto through much of the events of the text, Obasan raises Naomi throughout the internment and after.⁸ Naomi's movement toward speech by the end of the novel is thus both a form of telling and a resistance to telling. Cheung argues convincingly that Naomi's movement to speech is only possible through her acceptance of an "attentive silence." Her recognition of herself in the dream figure of the Grand Inquisitor whose "demand to know was both a judgement and a refusal to hear" allows Naomi to realize that "the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence" (Kogawa 250); that to hear, to access speech, one must first resist speech, one must first listen. Patti Duncan describes this synchronic positioning of silence and speech as a form of "doublespeak", arguing that *Obasan* "enact[s] both speech and silence simultaneously in order to both *tell* and *untell* the history of internment" (103). It is the simultaneous performance of silence and speech that allows Kogawa's text to negotiate both the

⁸ See Donohue (1994), where Kogawa explains: "I veered more towards the Obasan person, Naomi's identification being stronger with her than with Aunt Emily", and notes that "[t]he consciousness of one's own activities can so take over oneself that if you lose touch with the other dimension you can become like a cut flower" (36). In another interview (Williamson, 1993), Kogawa reasserts the need for balance between the political and the spiritual, and further appears to express concern regarding the character of Emily and the focus of her political activism: "That's what worries me because I've often felt that Emily is one-dimensional, a person who is present, political, immediate, a person who feels now. [...]. What worries me is the smaller-mindedness of conscious political activity which informs Emily and which informs me now" (154-5).

production of an alternate telling of Canadian history while simultaneously disturbing the totalizing project of linear narration. Like the uncanny stilling of time, silence in Kogawa's novel stills the linearity of speech.⁹

IV. *Re-Animating Bodies and Re-Membering the Dead: Obasan and Uncanny Bodies*

A feminist reading of Naomi's process of "coming to voice" in *Obasan* sees the mediation of silence and speech as the deployment of a form of feminist revisionist writing. Cecily Devereux recognizes Naomi's narrative, and the foregrounding it performs of the limitations of a linear, patriarchal discourse, as a strategic writing of the female body. Marie Vautier assumes a similar position in regards to Kogawa's novel, arguing that *Obasan* represents a "[retelling] of political history in the feminine" (157). Vautier further points to the valuation of silence in the text as the promotion of a feminine form of communication and community, evidenced in the novel by "a quiet togetherness of women, in the baths and at work: a peaceful, safe, intimately female territory" (185). Devereux provides a more nuanced reading of *Obasan* as *écriture féminine*, pointing to the text as a form of revisionist writing that recognizes the female body as an inscribed "site of oppression" that, through an identification of the body "as a site of difference", allows for the revaluation and mobilization of that difference (232). Following Devereux, then, the movement from silence to speech maps the recognition of an oppressive

⁹ For a psychoanalytic approach to silence and speech in *Obasan*, see Goellnicht, "Father Land and/or Mother Tongue: The Divided Female Subject in Kogawa's *Obasan* and Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*" (1991). See also Tomo Hattori's critique of such an approach, and to Goellnicht's in particular, in "Psycholinguistic Orientalism in Criticism of *The Woman Warrior* and *Obasan*" (1998). Hattori recognizes both the positive and negative implications of silence and speech in *Obasan*, but is wary of an analysis that would divide either along an East-West axis.

silencing of difference in order to remobilize that difference in positive, empowering terms.

What I find particularly interesting in Devereux's reading, though, is her identification of the configuration of the past as a body in Kogawa's novel, and of that body as a text. Following this line of argumentation, Naomi's narrative becomes a process of rebirth, of the rebirthing of the body of the past. And, significantly, the body of the past is recovered through memory, through a *re-membering*. Devereux writes:

The process Kogawa is discussing of excavating the past, exhuming the body buried within— it is both 'lost' and 'dead'— and simultaneously giving birth to the body of the narrative is a fundamentally redemptive strategy, which utilizes a series of body-to-text metaphors for the purposes of symbolic recovery and reconstruction within a community— and within individuals in that community— shattered by a divisive system of discrimination. (234)

While Devereux never explicitly identifies it as such, this process of re-membering the body of the past is gothic in tone. While configured partially as a hopeful process of regeneration and redemption, Devereux's extended use of a metaphor of exhuming the dead, or of re-membering the disfigured calls to mind the uncanny raising of that which has been repressed, or of that which has been buried.

I turn here, then, to a discussion of uncanny bodies in Kogawa's text. An examination of the disfigured and almost monstrous representations of the body in the novel will show how Kogawa works to map the processes by which racialization and gender oppression render the body both familiar and unfamiliar to the racialized or female subject. I take up Devereux's argument, yet seek to emphasize the subversive effects of Kogawa's uncanny bodies. For, while Devereux provides a persuasive, original argument in her analysis of a corporeal textuality in *Obasan*, her article nonetheless tends to totalize

the multiplicity of forms of discourse apparent in the text in an attempt mobilize the novel as *écriture féminine*. Such a singular reading is problematic in that it overlooks the significance of the different forms of discourse in the text, including, of course, silence, but also the discourses of Naomi's childhood perspective, Aunt Emily's political activism and the hegemonic government documentation included in the text.¹⁰ Even the breathless style of the essay, relying heavily on dashes as though the argument could not stop for explanation as it builds toward resolution and unity, mimics the process that Devereux seeks to describe: a movement towards regeneration or re-membering, a movement towards unity and wholeness. While Devereux does not explicitly claim that the process of remembering the past and re-membering the body heals the wounds of racism, that implication remains and thus echoes the discourse of multiculturalism and its writing of racism as past. The problem, then, with such a totalizing approach to the uncanny bodies of Kogawa's novel is that in its search for affirmation in unity it overwrites the uncanny spectre of racialization and discrimination that haunts both Kogawa's text and the Canadian nation.¹¹

¹⁰ See Goellnicht, "Minority History as Metafiction: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*" (1989). Goellnicht writes that "in [Kogawa's] use of multiple discursive modes, tenses, and narrative points-of-view— from the soaring lyricism of Naomi's narrative, through the 'factual' reportage of Emily's diaries, to the authoritarian, third-person stance of government documents and newspaper articles— Kogawa disrupts and contests the dominant culture's totalizing, omniscient voice of history. The rupture constitutes both a break and an opening for revision" (294).

¹¹ Goellnicht evaluates the totalizing tendencies of *écriture féminine*, or "writing the body" in his article "Father Land and/or Mother Tongue: The Divided Female Subject in Kogawa's *Obasan* and Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*" (1991). Goellnicht writes: "this writing— for all its stress on diversity— strikes me as primarily Eurocentric— or at least academic and white— and 'writerly' rather than 'speakerly'" (120) and calls instead for an analysis that "situates the acquisition of gender within a social and cultural specificity" (121). Goellnicht's article provides a nuanced, persuasive response to Kogawa critics like Vautier and Devereux whose analyses of gender in *Obasan* tend to elide the specificities of race and culture, arguing that women from racialized immigrant communities face a "potential double powerlessness" as both gendered and racialized subjects (123), an argument to which I will return in Chapter Three.

Devereux's claim that *Obasan* works to repair the "divisive" (234) effects of discrimination on the female body yet remains significant in its recognition of the power of a hegemonic, patriarchal system to name, delimit and mark the body. The violence imposed on the body manifests in the text most clearly in the scenes of sexual abuse. Here Kogawa shows that Old Man Gower's abuse results in a physical, as well as psychological, division in Naomi. In this physical and psychological rupturing of Naomi's sense of self we can also recognize the negative implications of silence in Kogawa's text, as Naomi's experience with Old Man Gower painfully silences her: "If I speak, I will split open and spill out" (68). Directly following the account of the repeated instances of abuse suffered by Naomi as a child at the hands of her neighbour, the adult Naomi of the "present" of the novel recounts the story of a recurring dream in which the bodies of "three beautiful oriental women lay naked" in a muddy road before several soldiers, whose "first shots were aimed at the toes of the women, second at their feet" (Kogawa 66). Our narrator clearly links this dream to the abuse she suffered as a child, for we find that despite the fact that "[t]he only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive", both for the women in the dream and the child Naomi "[i]t was too late" (66). In the dream the result is dismemberment; "the first woman's right foot lay like a solid wooden boot severed neatly above the ankles" (66), and, for the child Naomi, the result is the terrible realization: "In the centre of my body is a rift" (69). Naomi's encounter with Old Man Gower results in a repressed wounding, and the result of this repression is a form of alienation, where Naomi's body becomes unfamiliar to herself. The scratched knee that Old Man Gower "only pretend[s] to fix" (68) becomes, in Naomi's dreams, a "double

wound” as “the wound on her knee is on the back of her skull, large and moist” (267). Naomi’s body is thus marked by a physical, visible wounding, as well as one not so easily recognizable, one that remains hidden to herself, yet familiar. This wounding also renders the body strangely *unfamiliar*, as Naomi fails to explicitly recognize herself in the wounded child in her dreams; rather, she persists in naming that child in the third person rather than the first.

In an analysis of *Obasan* that reads the novel as an example of Canadian gothic fiction, Gerry Turcotte recognizes this same process of self-alienation in regards to the racialized body in *Obasan*:

For any visible minority, skin represents the mark of difference. A particularly powerful aspect of *Obasan* is how it demonstrates the way in which the racism of Canadian culture made Japanese Canadians foreign *to themselves*. As Stephen says, “[w]e are both the enemy and not the enemy” (70). They are Canadian and yet not Canadian. Naomi’s mother is there but not there. In this sense, the experience comes across as specifically uncanny. (12)

As Japanese Canadians, members of the Nakane family are labelled “Enemy Alien” (Kogawa 40); racist discourse literally alienates the bodies of Japanese Canadians from themselves. And the same discourse of racialization writes Japanese Canadians as “yellow”, represented in Stephen’s “Yellow Peril Game, Made in Canada” by “yellow pawns” (165). The racialized body becomes a site that is clearly marked as different, as alien, and yet this threatening body of difference is also repressed, or literally interned. The uncanny bodies of Kogawa’s novel thus reveal the process by which racialization effectively alienates the racialized subject from his/herself, and how the racialized body further comes to haunt the text as spectres of Canada’s racist past.

III. *The Topography of the Nation: Obasan and Uncanny Spaces*

An analysis of the uncanny in *Obasan* also requires an examination of the uncanny spaces of the text, as well as the uncanny or gothic bodies that haunt it. Turcotte argues that Kogawa's counter-history works to unsettle or "deterritorialize"¹² its readers, as it forces readers to confront repressed anxieties which are otherwise "unmentionable: fears about settlement, dispossession, miscegenation, and contamination" (2). Following Turcotte, the geopolitical space of Canada is rendered unhomely or strangely unfamiliar, as Kogawa's text forces Canadians to recognize Canadian territory as the site of "their own repressed and unacknowledged violent history" (4). Consequently, the topography of the Canadian nation suddenly transforms into the unfamiliar: the West Coast and specifically Vancouver and New Westminster, the homes of the Nakane and Kato families in the text, respectively, suddenly become sites of forced dispossession or unhoming rather than homes or hometowns; Hastings Park becomes "the Pool" (83), an unsanitary prison where Japanese Canadians were housed before internment, thereby disturbing the "National" site of the Pacific National Exhibition; and finally "ghost towns such as Slocan" (82) are re-animated, but as haunting spectres of internment. Yet, when Aunt Emily, Obasan, Uncle and Naomi return to the ghost towns of British Columbia years later, in 1962, no sign of the mass uprooting and internment remains:

The first ghosts were still there, the miners, people of the woods, their white bones deep beneath the pine-needle floor, their flesh turned to earth, turned to air. Their buildings— hotels, abandoned mines, log cabins— still stood marking their stay. But what of the second wave? What remains of our time there? (125)

¹² Turcotte is building here on Miki's concept of deterritorialization. Miki proposes deterritorialization as political strategy where "a disturbed use of language foregrounds its surface as a conflicted space", thereby "disrupt[ing] the stability of conventional discourse and communication" (Miki, "Asiancy 145) and, it follows, the systems of power maintained by that discourse.

In the landscape itself, then, the uncanny history of Canada's racist past remains repressed, so that "[n]ot a mark was left" (125). And, notably, as Turcotte points out, while Kogawa's treatment of Canadian topography here is explicitly linked to the history of Japanese Canadian internment, implicitly, the unsettling sense of deterritorialization invoked by Kogawa's text further raises the spectre of anxieties over Canada's colonial past and the colonization of indigenous territory. Kogawa alludes to the fraught issues of territory, deterritorialization, colonization and citizenship in Aunt Emily's manuscript entitled "The Story of the Nisei in Canada: A Struggle for Liberty" (40) in a poetic manifesto punctuated with the refrain: "This is my own, native land" (42) listed with changing emphases on the possessives "own" and "my" and the qualifier "native." Emily is emphatic in her assertion of Canadian citizenship and identity, concluding her work with the statement: "I am Canadian" (43); yet, this passage functions at the same time to problematize Emily's desire for an identity bound to the legal constructs of the modern nation, a nation which elides its history of deterritorialization and colonization.¹³

An analysis of the uncanny spaces of Kogawa's novel, though, reveals not only the uncanny deterritorialization of Canadian topography, but further exposes an uncanny temporality that unsettles not only a spatial imagining of the Canadian nation, but the narration of national history within a multicultural framework. Heather Zwicker, in an

¹³ For an analysis of the representation of Native cultures in Asian Canadian texts, with a specific focus on *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, see Marie Lo, "Model Minorities, Models of Resistance: Native Figures in Asian Canadian Literature." *Canadian Literature* 196 (2008). Lo argues that Asian Canadian writers turn to histories of colonization and racialization experienced by indigenous peoples to highlight the effects of racialization experienced by Asian Canadians, and further suggests that representations of Native culture and history in Asian Canadian literature offer a "model of resistance" to racially-motivated oppression. It is important to recognize, though, the potentially reductive and universalizing effect of this strategy, and Lo carefully notes that "[t]he conflation of anti-racist politics with decolonization politics [...] potentially de-centres analyses of the continued colonization of Aboriginal people by co-opting decolonization struggles into a liberal-pluralist framework" (n. page).

attempt to address the success of *Obasan* and the relative lack of success, both commercial and critical, of its sequel, *Itsuka*, argues that

Obasan articulates a far more complex political problem and, therefore, a far more nuanced solution than does *Itsuka*. While official multiculturalism posits national history as a chronological narrative of progress directed toward future perfectibility, *Obasan* worries the relationship of the past to the present and wonders whether history can be represented at all. (149)

Kogawa deploys an uncanny temporality in her novel in order to destabilize what Zwicker terms Canadian multiculturalism's "common sense notion of historical progress" (149) and thus works to challenge the repression of histories of violence, oppression and racialization it performs. *Obasan* thus becomes not only a site of the un-settlement of national territory, but also the un-telling of a narrative of national progress.

IV: An Uncanny Breach: Time and the Disruption of Progress in Obasan

The introduction to this chapter has already delineated the process by which *Obasan*'s attic uncannily stills time. As Naomi's flashlight sweeps through the darkness of the attic, she brings to light, or brings suddenly to the present, the eerie death and decay of the insect inhabitants of the house, as well as the personal history of Naomi and her family. Naomi's "zigzagging flashlight beam" alights on webs and quilts (26), and the memories that arise from this search mirror this web-like or patchwork construction, surfacing in a synchronic web of associations rather than a linear narrative. This synchronic temporality is what allows Naomi's memory, and the history of her family, to rise, strangely familiar, to the surface. With "[j]ust a glimpse of a worn-out patchwork quilt", Naomi tells us that "the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a

giant moth. Why did my mother not return?" (26). The familiar surfacing of "the old question" in Obasan's eerily still attic haunts Naomi, and this sudden surfacing of the past in the present is what allows Naomi to begin to turn her face to the past, and, much like Benjamin's historical materialist, in so doing redeems that past in the present.

This uncanny, synchronic temporality, housed uneasily here in Obasan's attic, structures the account of both the personal and national history offered in the novel. Zwicker suggests that, "[a]t first, *Obasan* looks like a conventional chronological narrative", pointing to the opening scene of the novel and its setting "precisely in time, right down to the minute" (152) as that which sets up readers' expectations of a traditional, diachronic account, with dates and time to be clocked as they succeed each other in the telling of the narrative. Yet, if anything, while the opening line of the novel, which reads "9:05 p.m. August 9, 1972" (1), clearly establishes the "present" of the text in 1972 and thus seemingly indicates a linear construction of history, the clocked, 24-hour time indication also suggests the potential for repetition, and thus the synchronic resurfacings of repressed histories. And, indeed, this first chapter is situated in a sense of time that repeats. As Zwicker points out, we learn that Naomi and her Uncle Isamu's visit to the coulee recounted in this first chapter is "habitual" (152), occurring annually. What is more, this chapter, set in the coulee in the present of the novel, cuts to a previous visit in 1954 to the same physical space. What could this play with time and narrative structure indicate, so early in the text?

Eva Darias Beautell argues that in Kogawa's novel, "[t]he collapse of chronicity hints at the inadequacy of representational ordering" (196). In *Obasan*, there is not simply

a “collapse” of a chronological or diachronic sense of time, but rather the eruption of a synchronic temporality in the expected linearity of narration. The shift in time of the first chapter from 1972 to 1954 might easily be termed a flashback. Yet, it represents a breach in the linearity of a teleological telling of history, as the past of the novel comes to coincide with its present, marking a “synchronous narrative move across time within the same space” (Zwicker 152). And, this coincidental temporality structures the entire novel, and the alternate history it recounts, as Naomi navigates synchronic shifts in time from the present to the past as she grieves her Uncle’s death in Obasan’s house. Indeed, the surfacing of a memory often leads Naomi, and her readers, not simply to flash *back* in time; rather, memories arise like the patchwork or spider webs of Obasan’s attic, imbuing the present with the past in coincidental relationships of association. We find, then, that Naomi does not cut backward and forward in time, from the present to the past and back to the present again; instead, the surfacing of her memories might bring one moment to the present, which might then cause another to surface, and so on.

The coincidental temporality of *Obasan*, then, functions not only to indicate the non-referentiality of historical narrative, or, as Darias Beautell writes, “the inadequacy of representational ordering.” While *Obasan* certainly is a novel concerned with the referentiality of historical discourse, the synchronicity of the text invokes an uncanny sense of the disturbingly familiar in its readers, a surfacing of the repressed or what Zwicker terms a sense of “deferred significance” that comes to characterize and destabilize “the relationship between readers and the story” (152). The opening and final scenes reveal this destabilizing sense of repeating coincidence. For, as Zwicker points

out, “not until the end of the novel do we realize this first scene commemorates Naomi’s mother’s death as a result of the bombing of Nagasaki” (152) on August 9, 1945. It is with an uncanny, disturbing force that the reader faces this revelation at the end of the novel, and its disturbing uncanniness arises precisely out of the coincidental recognition of the already known trauma of the bombing of Nagasaki. And while Miki critiques the close of the narrative of Kogawa’s novel and its invocation of the atomic bomb as that which “serves simultaneously to relativize and universalize the particularity of Japanese Canadian internment” (*Broken*, 141), the uncanny surfacing of the past in the present in fact functions to further problematize the telling of Canadian history that would elide its racist past. Miki argues:

the atomic blast in Nagasaki functions not only to resolve Naomi’s narrative quest for knowledge but also to recontextualize Japanese Canadian internment in relation to an event of such horrific proportions that it flattens out its enormity. (141)

According to Miki, the result is of this “recontextualization” of Japanese Canadian internment is the deflection of the “political ramifications of its site-specific ‘Canadian’ conditions” (141-2). While Miki makes a strong case here for a reading of the close of the narrative as that which deflects the political specificities of Japanese Canadian internment in the wake of the horrific bombing of Nagasaki, the surfacing of the repressed story of an event involving Japan and America in fact functions to raise the spectre of the violence of Canada’s racist policies.

As Miki suggests, the revelation of the story behind Naomi’s mother’s failure to return from Japan is resolutionary in tone as it serves to resolve the mystery of her absence. Yet, the loss of her mother in the bombing of Japan at the hands of America

brings to the “present” of the text— here the living room of Obasan’s house in 1972, where Nakayama-sensei reads Grandma Kato’s letter— the spectre of Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s policy of the repatriation of people of Japanese origin to Japan. As Aunt Emily’s letters show previously in the text, people of Japanese origin were given “the choice to go east of the Rockies or to Japan [...] without time for consultation with separated parents and children” (201-2). Emily’s letter further quotes the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, Norman Robertson: ““Canada has done rather a poor job with the whole matter of the Japanese ever since they have been in Canada, therefore it might be better for them in their own interest to go to Japan”” (202). This repatriation campaign proved largely successful, as Peter Ward notes that it resulted in the transportation of one-sixth of the Japanese Canadian population to Japan (15). The loss of Naomi’s mother, recounted belatedly at the end of Kogawa’s novel, then, reveals the repressed violence of the racist project of assimilation carried out in Canada by policies of internment, relocation and repatriation. And while Naomi discovers that her mother stayed in Japan to assist family, and that this choice was not a direct result of government regulations, as a child, the link between the absences of both her mother and her father— who was separated from the family and sent to a work camp— and the government policy of dispersal remain indissociable for Naomi. In other words, the resurfacing of Naomi’s loss in 1972 first experienced with her mother’s departure in 1941 brings painfully, although metonymically, to the present the specific losses of Japanese Canadians during WWII as well as the losses experienced by the racialized subject. In *Obasan*, then, the uncanny temporality of the repressed comes to bear on the Canadian history recounted in

the text, prompting in its readers a re-cognition of Canada's repressed history of violence and oppression. The uncanny temporality of the novel thus comes to challenge the teleology of progress couched in the ideology of multiculturalism, and in so doing further challenges a multicultural project that writes histories of racism and oppression as past, and as that which has been corrected by a saving, nationalist, progressive multicultural state.

CHAPTER THREE

*Reinvestigating Internment: Uncanny Time and the Return of History in
Kerri Sakamoto's The Electrical Field*

Over and over he'd ask me about the camps. He'd say the government owed us money and an apology. Badger me with where this, when that, and how long. "How long were you there, Saito-san?" For the tenth time. [...]. Thirty years gone by, and still it was fresh
in my mind.
(Kerri Sakamoto, *The Electrical Field*, 5)

Published in 1998, Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* revisits the history of Japanese Canadian internment seventeen years after the publication of *Obasan*. As a text that deals directly with internment, Sakamoto's novel opens in an unexpected fashion: with a murder mystery. With the opening page, our narrator, Asako, learns from her worried young neighbour, Sachi, that another neighbour, Mr. Yano, has disappeared with his two children. A few pages later we learn that Yano's wife, Chisako, and her lover, Mr. Spears, have been shot and killed. The novel, then, is structured around a murder mystery; yet, folded into the framework of detective fiction is an account of Asako's childhood years, spent in an internment camp, and the story of her brother's death there. The narrative shifts seamlessly from the "present" of the novel, set in the 1990s, and two "pasts," that of the events leading up to the deaths of the Yano family, and that of Asako's childhood, leading up to an account of her brother Eiji's death. These two "mysteries", then, unfold simultaneously within the present of the text, and we see that Asako's internment experience surfaces in the same mysterious, uncanny manner as the shocking, gruesome and inexplicable murders of the Yano family. This prompts the

question: why does Sakamoto choose to frame a narrative of internment within the conventions of detective fiction?

I argue that the answer lies in the publication date of *The Electrical Field*.

Sakamoto's novel revisits the history of Japanese Canadian internment first broached in fiction by Kogawa in *Obasan* seventeen years earlier. As Vikki Visvis explains:

Published almost twenty years after the internment was recuperated by *Obasan* and ten years after the redress settlement seemingly resolved the political and ethical implications associated with the event, the very appearance of *The Electrical Field* suggests the need to re-evaluate our current responses. (68)

In other words, Sakamoto's text does not simply mark a belated response to the history of internment and its heightened visibility following the publication of *Obasan*; rather, Sakamoto's renegotiation of that history signals the need to reassess internment and its implications even after redress and its rhetoric of reconciliation. As a reconsideration of not only internment but of the continuing after-effects of a history of racism and racialization, Sakamoto's choice to frame the work within the genre of detective fiction becomes much less surprising. If *Obasan* ends on a resolutionary note,¹⁴ and if the

¹⁴ I wish to make a distinction here between the close of the narrative of Kogawa's text, which returns to the novel's opening, at the coulee, and the textual close of the novel, which is marked by the document, "Excerpt from the Memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada, April 1946." As previously discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, Roy Miki (1998) argues that while the final scenes of the narrative communicate a sense of closure with the explanation for Naomi's mother's failure to return from Japan, in contrast, the document that directly follows the close of the narrative functions to reopen that sense of closure. Miki convincingly argues that the lack of a Japanese Canadian voice in the Memorandum problematizes the sense of reassurance and resolution of the previous chapter, asserting that "the silence still haunts in the absence of a Japanese Canadian name on this political document submitted to the government. The implication, in the materiality of the document, is that nothing has happened to change the social and political contexts of Naomi's experiences" (*Broken* 116).

subsequent adaptations of Kogawa's text only reinforce this message of resolution,¹⁵ Sakamoto's novel labours to refuse such closure, reopening Japanese Canadian history.

The Electrical Field works to counter a discourse of progress that reassuringly writes internment as a closed case. In *The Electrical Field*, internment ceases to be a mysteriously aberrant moment in the progress of multicultural Canada, and instead surfaces as that which remains uncannily fresh to this day. As a result, *The Electrical Field* is a distinctly uncanny text, and it is through Sakamoto's play with the uncanny conventions of detective fiction that she is able to render the narration of Canadian history strangely and subversively unfamiliar. Sakamoto not only works to subvert the expectations of closure central to the genre, she also refuses to perform the retroactive ordering of the past into a chronological narrative typical of the final "revelation" scenes of detective fiction. Instead, Sakamoto produces a synchronic negotiation of internment, creating, much as Kogawa does in *Obasan*, a temporal space where a repressed past comes to coincide uncannily with the present.

I. *Aliens, Monsters and the Fetishized Doll: The Uncanny Body in The Electrical Field*

The Electrical Field takes up many of the tropes, metaphors and themes apparent in *Obasan*, marking Sakamoto's attempt to reinvestigate many of the issues first raised by Kogawa. One such trope is that of the uncanny body, and Sakamoto's return to an examination of the racialized and gendered body in *The Electrical Field* points to the continuing processes of sexism and racialization faced by women of colour in Canada's multicultural society. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, the uncanny bodies of

¹⁵ See Chapter One, pg. 33-4.

Obasan reveal the processes by which sexism and racialization render the body uncannily unfamiliar to itself. As hegemonic, racist discourse writes the Japanese Canadian body as a threat, as “yellow peril” and “Enemy Alien”, the body becomes alien, perhaps even perilous, to the racialized subjects of Kogawa’s novel. In his article “Father Land and/or Mother Tongue: The Divided Female Subject in Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*” (1991), Goellnicht asserts that Kogawa explores the ways in which the racialized female subject faces a double alienation in her novel:

the girl from an immigrant racial minority experiences not a single, but a double subject split: first, when she takes on the gendered position constructed for her by the symbolic language of patriarchy; and second, when she falls under the influence of discursively and socially constructed positions of racial difference. (123)

Goellnicht goes on to assert that this double alienation further results in a “situation of potential double powerlessness— of being woman and minority” (123), so that the gendered, racialized bodies of Kogawa’s novel are doubly inscribed with a disempowering difference.

In *The Electrical Field*, this situation of “double powerlessness” is perhaps most apparent in Sakamoto’s uncanny figuration of Yano’s wife and murder victim, Chisako. Asako notes a change in her friend once she starts seeing her boss, Mr. Spears, a white man. According to Asako, the “old Chisako” was an “ugly duck” with “dull eyes behind thick glasses”, and “[h]er hair, too coarse and heavy, as Japanese hair could be” (48). Chisako’s relationship with Mr. Spears, though, appears to transform the ugly duckling, at least in Asako’s eyes, so that Asako wishes that the world could see Chisako as “the woman she had become” (48). Notably, Asako’s description of the “woman she had

become” focuses on Chisako’s white skin, remarking that “[h]er skin looked very white” (48). Here we see an echo of the image of the yellow chicks in *Obasan* that prompts Naomi to remark that “[w]hen they are babies, they are yellow. Yellow like daffodils. Like Goldilocks’ yellow hair. Like the yellow Easter chicks I lost somewhere”; yet, Naomi also notes: “[w]hen the yellow chicks grow up they turn white” (165). Sakamoto’s ugly duckling metaphor clearly marks an allusion to this metaphor of assimilation at work in Kogawa’s text, as, in Asako’s eyes, Chisako’s affair with a white man transforms her from a dark-feathered ugly duckling into a white, beautiful swan.

This allusion to the story of the ugly duckling does not only speak to the potential of and anxiety surrounding assimilation, but further reveals the projection of Asako’s internalized racism. In an earlier scene, Asako remarks again on the “whiteness” of Chisako’s body: “The skin was white, pale as snow; it took my breath away” and further notes that “the orb of one mesh-covered breast” was “full for a nihonjin [Japanese] woman” (23). Asako thus links beauty with a sign of “whiteness” that extends beyond skin colour and comes to signify the markers of the normative, white female body. The projection of Asako’s internalized racism onto Chisako’s body is also specific to the racialization Asako experienced as a Japanese *Canadian*, so that Asako recognizes in Chisako “the real thing from Japan” (21) whose beauty attracts “hakuji men” or white men who “slow down on the street just to watch her” (21-2). In contrast to Chisako’s “white, pale” body and “authentic” Japanese appearance, Asako looks in the mirror and discovers her “faults glar[ing] back at [her]” (25). Notably, these “faults” represent markers of ethnicity:

As a young girl I stared in the mirror for hours and never got on with things. When I saw my short nose growing wide across my face, I pinched and pinched to stop it. I knotted strips of rags around my knees at night to make them grow straight instead of bowed like Mama's. (55)

Asako's internalized racism thus results in a split vision of the minority female body: in Chisako she recognizes both the white and "ethnic" or exotic "ideal" of femininity, and in herself she recognizes her body's failure to invoke either.

Significantly, Sakamoto figures both visions of the ethnic female body as uncanny. Racialization renders the body of ethnic difference unfamiliar to itself, but it also renders the normative ideal strangely familiar. The repeated comparisons of Chisako to a doll point to this uncanny familiarity, and recall Freud's discussion of the uncanniness of "a doll which appears to be alive" (354). Freud identifies the uncanny in phenomena like dolls, "epileptic fits and [...] manifestations of insanity [...] because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity" (347). In *The Electrical Field*, Chisako's resemblance to a doll produces the uncanny precisely because Sakamoto foregrounds the artificial inscription of race and femininity on the "ordinary appearance" or the ordinary understanding of the body as a site of individual agency. In other words, the way in which Sakamoto chooses to present Chisako allows the reader to identify the constructedness of her appearance, or the almost mechanical yet disturbingly familiar construction of the ideal of the assimilated or fetishized ethnic body. And, this repeated characterization of Chisako as doll-like further reveals her powerlessness. Chisako is compared to a doll three times in the novel, and in each instance this comparison produces an image of weakness or lack of agency. Asako states that Chisako "resembled a doll, a doll dropped

in the snow, forgotten by its owner” (48); she later remarks that “[w]hen she shook her head, she reminded me of a doll whose stuffing has thinned at its neck” (205); and finally Asako describes Chisako as a “[l]imp, will-less doll, limp before her desires, she needed me to act for her” (254). Sakamoto thus highlights the double bind imposed on the racialized, female body as the imposition of difference works to mechanically and disturbingly construct the body.

II. *Monstrosity and Victimization: The Monstrous Body in The Electrical Field*

If Chisako’s body becomes uncannily familiar in its doll-like resemblance to both the assimilated and fetishized ideal, Asako’s body becomes uncannily *unfamiliar* in its monstrous manifestation of racial difference. In her analysis of race and the body in *The Electrical Field*, Andrea Stone asserts that Sakamoto’s text works to show “the processes of systemic racism and institutionalized violence as they operate on the body” (n. page) and argues that such a reading “allows us to see more specifically how one’s experience of physical differentiation and the oftentimes disempowering effects of it are realities of racism for which social construction cannot wholly account” (n. page). Coral Ann Howells likewise points to Sakamoto’s concern with the body as an indicator of the very real effects of racialization, yet while Stone frames her analysis of the body with a discussion of the abject, Howells identifies the estranging process of racialization as one that results in a monstrous self-image. Both Stone and Howells argue with varying degrees of success that Sakamoto works to show the real effects of racism as that which manifests bodily, yet, I wish to shift here from a discussion of the racialized, alienated

body of *The Electrical Field* to an investigation of the depiction of the body as monstrous in the text and its problematization of questions of guilt and victimization.

In both *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field*, the body becomes unfamiliar to itself as a result of racialization; yet, *The Electrical Field* does not unquestioningly mimic *Obasan*'s treatment of the uncanny body. Rather, the uncanny bodies of Sakamoto's novel function to further problematize the processes of racialization invoked by the uncanny bodies of *Obasan*. In her analysis of both novels, Marlene Goldman claims that Sakamoto responds to and diverges from Kogawa's treatment of racialization in *Obasan* in her treatment of victimization in the text, positing that "awareness of [...] one's role as an agent/victimizer is hinted at in *Obasan*, but assumes central importance in Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*" (366). Goldman turns to an interview with Kogawa to illustrate her point, and, indeed, Kogawa does express concern over the roles of victim and victimizer, explaining that "it's interesting [...] how that which was once liberating can become destructive in one way or another" (Donohue 44). Kogawa further asserts that "there comes a time when one needs to know that one is no longer the victim. The danger is that then one can become part of the victimizer" (44). Yet, as Goldman suggests, the distinction between victim and victimizer is not challenged in Kogawa's novel to the extent it is in Sakamoto's. In the dream that follows Naomi's account of her sexual abuse at the hands of Old Man Gower, for example, the distinction between the women lying naked on the road and the soldiers guarding them with rifles remains clear. While one woman makes "a simpering coy gesture with her hands" and "touch[es] her hair and wigg[les] her body slightly— seductively", and while Kogawa even construes this

attempt at seduction as a weapon, as “the only weapon she had” (66), the reader can clearly differentiate between the sense of guilt invoked here on the part of the victim of sexual violence and a problematization of the distinction between victim and victimizer.¹⁶ Kogawa’s exploration of the question of guilt in relation to sexual abuse and violence thus functions to reveal the process by which victims of violence, and by extension, racialization, internalize a sense of guilt for the violence to which they themselves have been subjected.

The Electrical Field’s exploration of racialization reveals a similar process of internalizing guilt. Goldman suggests that both Naomi and Asako “[turn] against themselves and [internalize] the hatred of their oppressors” but argues that in *The Electrical Field* in particular, “where concerns about physical ugliness and moral monstrosity loom large, the effects of internalized racism remain painfully apparent” so that Asako comes to view herself as monstrous, “responsible for [her] loss and deserving of punishment” (371). I should add here that in *The Electrical Field*, the internalization of guilt becomes so severe as to dissolve the boundary between victim and victimizer. Asako thus becomes monstrous not only as a product of the inscription of ethnic difference on the body, but also as she begins to recognize the victimizer in herself. In the midst of

¹⁶ Kogawa works to problematize the victim-victimizer binary in the figure of the “Grand Inquisitor.” In Naomi’s dreams, the Grand Inquisitor questions her mother, and “[h]is demand to know [is] both a judgement and a refusal to hear”; he thus becomes both “her accuser and murderer” (250). And, in her own “carnivorous” (250) desire to know her mother’s story, Naomi begins to question her own role as victim, and asks “Why [...] must I know? Did I doubt her love? Am I her accuser?” (250). This blurring of the line between victim and victimizer is quickly rectified, though, as Naomi’s positioning as the victimizer— as “accuser and murderer” who does not listen, who does not “attend” (250)— is resolved with the following scene of the novel. Here, Nakayama-sensei reads a letter from Naomi’s Grandma Kato, written while she was in Japan following the bombing of Nagasaki. Sensei tells Naomi and Stephen that, through the letter, their mother “is speaking” (256). In hearing her Grandma Kato’s letter, Naomi must abandon her role as victimizer and instead take up the role of listener.

being questioned by Detective Rossi about her knowledge of the murders, for example, Asako's body suddenly becomes monstrously unfamiliar to herself:

It was at that exact moment that I noticed an inch-long section on my leg where the vein was actually protruding, a bluish worm halfway down my calf. It seemed to vibrate grotesquely. Incredibly, it was a part of me, my own body. (127)

Here it is as though the knowledge Asako has repressed or refuses to recognize about her involvement in the murders rises strangely to the surface. And, a sense of guilt in regards to her brother's death also renders her body unfamiliar and monstrous. Recalling a day spent swimming with her brother, where in a panic she held on to him too tightly, forcing him underwater, guilt transforms her hands into "sea creatures that latch on to feed themselves" and she feels a "horror at [her]self" (150). Both Naomi and Asako thus blame themselves for the losses of Naomi's mother and Asako's brother respectively, and this self-reproach reflects a form of deferred or unrecognized internalized racism. The subject here does not hate herself for racialized "differences", but rather for events that occurred as indirect results of racism.

In *Obasan*, readers can recognize this self-reproach as misplaced blame, but in *The Electrical Field*, Sakamoto problematizes the question of blame as Asako's role in both her brother's death and the murders that open the text remains unclear. This may, in part, be due to the reliability or likeability of our narrator. In an interview, Sakamoto recognizes that "[m]any people said that Asako was not a likeable character"; yet, she also explains that "this was very deliberate", as she "wanted to challenge the reader into feeling some compassion, because people who go through difficult circumstances are not necessarily likeable" (Cuder-Dominguez 140). As a result of the narrator's unlikeability,

her reliability also comes into question. Asako clearly is an unreliable narrator— as readers we quickly learn that the information she provides us, as well as other characters, often proves to be untrue or questionable. When Yano asks how long Asako spent in the internment camp, we learn of her inconsistency: “‘Each time you say different,’ he would say. ‘Four years, five, which is it. When was it you left? Forty-six, forty-seven?’” (5). As readers we cannot discern whether she deliberately withholds or misconstrues information; yet, in any case, we come to question her narrative authority. Her unlikeability, or her role as victimizer, only increases our distrust; as readers we feel that we cannot trust the information she provides, nor do we have access to the information that she chooses to screen, both from the reader and from herself. The unstable distinction between victim and victimizer in Sakamoto’s novel thus points to an interrogation of the knowability of the past, as the only access we have to that past is through Asako and what she chooses to articulate, even to herself. We can see a shift, then, in the thematics of Kogawa’s text, which focuses on the dialectic between remembering and forgetting, to a questioning of resolution in *The Electrical Field*. Scott McFarlane suggests that history, and internment in particular, can only come to be known through language, or through articulation. “[I]f the internment is an effect of language”, McFarlane argues, “then it should be understood as a process to be continually negotiated” (403). Sakamoto’s novel shows that if the knowing or understanding of the past is always under negotiation, or in process, then resolution becomes untenable.

III. *An Uncanny Knowing: Detective Fiction and Investigating the Past in The Electrical Field*

Sakamoto works to show the absurdity of the revolutionary discourse surrounding internment through an uncanny subversion of the conventions of detective fiction. Throughout the novel, the question of knowing and not knowing arises again and again, circling around the murders of the Yano family. In one of the interviews between herself and Detective Rossi, Asako repeatedly wonders just what was known, and not known in the days leading up to the murders. Indeed, during this brief interview, the verb “know” repeats persistently, appearing fourteen times in the four pages dedicated to the detective’s questions. What is more, we see that this question of knowing does not stand in opposition to not knowing; rather, knowing and not knowing come to coincide uncannily. Asako thus paradoxically asserts that Yano knew of his wife’s infidelity, even if “[h]e might have thought he didn’t know” (237). And, following the detective’s subsequent questions about what Asako knew in regards to the case, Asako begins to doubt her own knowledge, and her own awareness of that knowledge:

Did I tell him? Did I know that he’d bought a gun from Canadian Tire? Had I seen him take it from his trunk, or put it in? Had I seen him lead Tam and Kimi to his navy Pontiac that afternoon? Had I imagined it, dreamed it? For couldn’t I see them now: two little soldiers dutifully climbing into the back seat of that car? Could he do such a thing? Was he capable? What had I seen? What did I know? (238)

In Sakamoto’s novel, then, we can see a questioning of the knowability of the past, and it is in this disruption of the divide between the known and the unknown that we can recognize the uncanny at work in the text, as known events suddenly become disconcertingly unfamiliar and the unknown surfaces as the strangely, disturbingly familiar.

Significantly, Sakamoto frames this exploration of an uncanny past within the genre of detective fiction, a genre that is known for its resolutionary structure: the unknowns of “who”, “why” and “how” of the murder-mystery genre are typically made reassuringly known to the reader by the end of the text. The murder mystery is reassuring in its emphasis on resolution and the restoration of order. Visvis points out that:

In some fundamental ways, Sakamoto allows this order by revealing Yano as the murderer. However, the identity of the murderer is never actually in doubt in the novel [...]. Rather, the mystery, particularly toward the close of the novel, focuses on how and why the murders were committed. In particular, the question of who revealed the existence of the affair to Yano, and so indirectly precipitated the murders, is the central concern, and this question of motivation is never definitively answered. (75-6)

Sakamoto’s novel thus responds to the closure offered with the final scene of *Obasan*. While *Obasan* is not explicitly framed as a mystery, a mystery does structure the text. In the opening scene of the novel, we find ourselves with Naomi and her uncle at a coulee, but the reason for our presence here remains mysterious, both to the reader and to Naomi, who asks ““Uncle [...], why do we come here?”” (3). Isamu does not respond, but in the final scenes of the novel, the mystery is solved, as is the mystery of the disappearance of Naomi’s mother; we learn that Naomi and Isamu’s annual visit to the coulee marks the anniversary of the date of the disfigurement of her mother by the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

In *The Electrical Field*, on the other hand, the final scene of the text refuses the closure that the final scene of *Obasan* appears to offer. In her reading of the close of Sakamoto’s novel, where Stum and Angel explain to Asako the process by which they sort chicks by sex, and kill the chicks that are “male and female in one” (Sakamoto 304),

Goldman suggests that the ending is “haunted” by assimilation, by “the image of the yellow chicks and the promise of adult whiteness” (383). This haunting reopens the history of Japanese Canadian internment, as it shows that the effects of the racist policy of dispersal continue to this day in the guise of assimilation.¹⁷ Goldman also points out that “the conclusion’s reference to the ‘invisible mark’” that allows Stum and Angel to identify the sex of the chicks “underscores the overarching context of racialization, specifically the way that the ‘mark’ [...] functions in the process of racialization as a sign that supposedly designates an essential nature” (383). Rather than reach closure, then, the conclusion of Sakamoto’s novel works to show that the effects of a history of violence and oppression, as well as the racism and racialization that precipitated that history, are in fact ongoing.

The conclusion of *The Electrical Field* also refuses the apparent closure of *Obasan* in that the mystery that opens the text is never fully solved. Questions of guilt and responsibility regarding the murders and suicide remain unresolved, as Asako continues to question her role in the events leading up to the crime. Near the close of the novel, Asako confesses “the truth, what [she]’d hidden from [her]self” to Sachi: ““It was because of me [...]. I told Yano about the woods. About Chisako. I told him”” (277). She

¹⁷ See Roy Miki’s “Regulating Japanese Canadians: Racialization and the Mass Uprooting” in *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice* (2004) for an elaboration on the connection between the government of Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s policy of dispersal of Japanese Canadians and a project of assimilation. Miki points to Mackenzie King’s address to the House of Commons on August 4, 1944, quoting: “The sound policy and the best policy for the Japanese Canadians themselves is to distribute their numbers as widely as possible throughout the country where they will not create feelings of racial hostility” (King, qtd. in Miki 39). Miki notes that “[h]ere the issue had less to do with military security— the official justification for uprooting Japanese Canadians— and more with fostering national unity” through assimilation (40). Miki thus continues: “Rather than exclusion and expulsion, the desired mode of resolving the ‘Japanese problem’ in B.C. before the war, King proposed the absorption of Japanese Canadians in small doses across the country so that they would disappear as a group” (40).

thus blames herself for her role in their deaths, yet she also indicts herself for her role in Chisako's extra-marital affair, calling herself "Chisako's accomplice" (288). Yet, this confession does not solve the question of guilt usually established with the close of the genre of detective fiction. For, Asako is not the only character who feels responsible; Sachi also confesses that she "showed Tam his mom in the woods, with that man" and she refuses to deny her role in the murders, explaining to Asako: "I know what I did" (277). And, while Detective Rossi explains to Asako that "[t]he case is closed now" (282), the mystery of the causes and motivation for Yano's murder-suicide remains unsolved. Directly after claiming that the case is closed, the detective appears to contradict himself by asking: "Was he crazy?" (282), and Asako struggles to answer him: "No, no. Yes. Maybe. [...]. You might not understand" (282). While the identity of the murderer is clear, and the criminal case officially closed, the question of "why" cannot easily be answered. For both Yano and Chisako, their lives and their relationship were informed by racism and racialization, and, in Yano's case in particular, by internment and the lack of success he experienced in his work for redress. In *The Electrical Field*, then, we find that resolution cannot be achieved, as the novel works to show that past histories of violence, oppression and racialization are precisely *not* past, and instead cohabit and inform the present.

IV: *Disturbing Doubles: Double Time and Detective Fiction in The Electrical Field*

Sakamoto thus clearly works to subvert the expectations of closure intrinsic to the genre of detective fiction and thereby responds to the discourse of resolution surrounding *Obasan* and its treatment of internment. And, as we have seen, this refusal of resolution

functions to show that the ostensibly “closed” or past history of Japanese Canadian internment and the racism that informed government policy during World War II are, in fact, not past. Sakamoto is thus able to breach the teleological telling of Canadian history that would write Japanese Canadian history and the racism it bespeaks as an aberration in the progress of multiculturalism. Moreover, Sakamoto’s concern with temporality and narrative resolution works toward the potential for political productivity. As with Benjamin’s concept of the arrest of a progressive conceptualization of time as that which is “pregnant with tensions” (264), Sakamoto’s text works to seize the chronological telling of the past and thereby bring the past to bear productively on the present. I turn here, then, from an exploration of Sakamoto’s subversion of the expectation of closure in detective fiction to an analysis of her manipulation of its already uncanny effects. In *The Electrical Field*, Sakamoto deploys the uncanny temporality of the murder-mystery genre in order to strategically challenge a teleological, linear telling of history that writes racism and racialization as past, as well as to create a temporal space where the past can offer a politically generative potential in the present.

In an interview, Sakamoto explains her choice to return to the history of internment first broached by Kogawa as a desire to offer an alternative narrative framework with which to access Japanese Canadian history. “I wanted to write about internment” explains Sakamoto, “but in a kind of decentred way, where the story of internment was not like a chronicle of that experience” (Cuder-Dominguez 139). A look at Sakamoto’s text reveals that, indeed, her renegotiation of internment is decentred, yet not in its spatial construction. Rather, the setting of the text literally revolves around the

electrical field, as the electrical field marks the centre of the neighbourhood in which the plot of the novel is set. The “centredness” of the setting is also apparent in that it is limited; we leave Asako’s neighbourhood only to visit Mackenzie Hill, the site of the murders of Chisako and Mr. Spears and to drive, once, to Stum’s workplace at the end of the novel. What is more, it is isolated: “not that many [cars] passed since the new highway to the airport had been built” (1). Significantly, this centred, isolated setting fulfills all of the conventions of what Carl D. Malmgren identifies as the typical setting of the murder-mystery genre: that of a country house cut off from larger society (119). Malmgren points out that the world of the murder mystery “exists apart from the ‘modern’ world, isolated from the inroads of time” (119); the “country house” of the murder mystery is thus both physically and temporally isolated.

While the investigation of the murder mystery of Sakamoto’s novel is not limited to the confines of a physical house, the neighbourhood in which Asako lives functions much as the “country house” of the murder-mystery genre. The gothic “maze” (Sakamoto 74) of the house itself recalls the country-house setting of a murder mystery: while it is located in the suburbs, across from a row of houses, each “identical to the others” (2), Asako’s home is in fact the remnant of a country house. We learn that it predates the construction of the electrical field and the suburban homes surrounding it and that it was, in fact, “an old farmhouse” (97), “built by a veterinarian decades before” (3). Like the country house of the murder-mystery genre, Asako’s house is also isolated; it “sit[s] at the edge of the field, up from the creek, all on its own” (3). And it is not only isolated physically, the house, and the neighbourhood in which it is located, is further isolated

from the “inroads of time”, at least in Asako and Stum’s eyes. When Detective Rossi visits, he asks how long the two have lived in the neighbourhood—a seemingly straightforward question that yet provokes confusion in both Asako and Stum. Stum answers, “All my life” but Asako is quick to correct him: “Don’t be silly. [...]. Only since you were thirteen” (131). This amendment only provokes a counter-correction from Stum, who responds: “Twelve” (131). The confusion continues, so that the detective must repeat his question, and while he finally receives a definitive, precise answer—“Twenty-one years, this September” (131), according to Asako—the two siblings yet remain uncertain or unaware of the changes that have passed in those twenty-one years. Asako reflects: “How long. It was painful to say aloud, a blur of time. Just numbers, telling nothing of the tick tick of it” (131) and when the detective states: “That’s a long time in one place”, Stum answers: “You don’t notice it” (132). For Stum and Asako, then, it is as though time has stilled around the electrical field at the centre of their lives. It is in this “feverish stillness” (Bhabha 445) that an uncanny past is allowed to surface in Sakamoto’s novel. The eerie country-house setting of *The Electrical Field* thus provides the centred location from which Asako’s investigation of both the deaths of the Yano family and her own past in an internment camp can be carried out.

The feverish stillness of Sakamoto’s house of fiction, then, provides the spatial framework for an uncanny narration, a narration, like that of *Obasan*, that travels strangely in time. Sakamoto specifically structures this negotiation of the past within the uncannily doubled narrative structure of the murder-mystery genre. In his analysis of the conventions of detective fiction, Tsvetan Todorov (1971) posits that the “whodunit” is

structured by two “stories”, that of the investigation, which he also terms the “plot,” and that of the crime itself, which he terms the “story” of the text (46). According to Todorov, the plot of the investigation “serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime” (46). The investigation is thus set in the present, but is “insignificant” as it acts only as a buffer or setting in which the second “story” of the text emerges (46). It is in the story of the crime, then, that we can recognize the uncanny, for this second “story” is, “in fact[,] the story of an absence: its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book” (46). Martin Priestman (1990) builds on Todorov’s assessment of this double structure of the whodunit and states that “[d]etective fiction works through an extreme extension of the ‘hiding’ of the story by the plot” (20), or the hiding of the story of the crime by the story of the investigation. The story of the crime thus surfaces uncannily as that which has been hidden from sight, or as that which has been repressed. What is more, the story of the crime represents the past, yet it comes to coincide with the “present” of the plot. As Todorov points out, “detective fiction manages to make both of them present, to put them side by side” (46). The genre of detective fiction thus follows a distinctly uncanny narrative structure, as the past of the detective novel comes to surface as that which is disturbingly familiar in the present of the text.

In *The Electrical Field*, then, the murder investigation of the novel does not work to uncover clues or verifiable witness accounts in an archaeological uncovering of a referential past; rather, the past remains unresolved as that which has been repressed must be negotiated and renegotiated in its repeated surfacings. And, this same structure applies both to the murder mystery of the novel as well as to its treatment of internment and

specifically of Asako's internment experiences. In *The Electrical Field*, then, two "stories" remain hidden behind the "plot" of the novel; or, to put it another way, two "pasts" surface uneasily in the "present" of the text: that of the internment of the Saito family and that of the events leading up to the deaths of the Yano family. This double structure further allows Sakamoto to refuse the closure achieved at the close of the typical detective novel, in that the figures of the detective and the criminal uncannily double, or coincide, in her narrative. Priestman points to Sophocle's *Oedipus the King* as a representative detective story, yet one where the "stakes" of the murder mystery are higher due to this same doubling of the detective and criminal in the figure of Oedipus. According to Priestman,

In most detective fiction[,] the stakes are not nearly so high since the criminal's outsider status is clear from the outset and his final removal is purely restorative; in *Oedipus*, by contrast, every movement has its opposite, so that the moment of Oedipus's expulsion coincides with the intimation that, as legitimate heir, he is the ultimate insider whose removal may be as catastrophic [...] as it is necessary." (24)

This uncanny doubling thus disturbs the resolution of the "classical whodunit" which "involves the restoration of an innocent society to a former state of grace through the casting out of a scapegoat" (Priestman 23), as the coincidental role of the detective as criminal denies the revolutionary partition of innocence and guilt.

Sakamoto employs this "doubling" structure apparent in *Oedipus* to collapse the binaries of cause and effect, past and present and innocence and guilt in her construction of the murder investigation of the novel, but also in her treatment of the narrative of internment of the text, especially in regards to racism and racialization. While Detective Rossi fulfills the role of the outsider detective of the typical detective novel in *The*

Electrical Field, other characters in Sakamoto's text double as both detective and potential criminal. Both Sachi and Asako, for example, attempt to solve the mystery of the disappearance of Tam, Kimi and Yano, even searching for clues at the site of the murders of Chisako and Mr. Spears. Asako further attempts to solve the mystery of how Yano learned of the affair between Chisako and Mr. Spears, and who revealed this information to him. At the same time, though, both Sachi and Asako feel a strong sense of responsibility and guilt in regards to the murders, thereby casting themselves as both detective and criminal. This doubling proves particularly disturbing in the figure of Yano, for Yano is undoubtedly the perpetrator of the murders in the novel, yet also takes on the role of an activist-detective in his political work for redress, working to uncover the history of the oppression of Japanese Canadians. Yano further represents the role of the victim, as he is the victim of internment and continued racism. Victim, criminal and detective thus all coincide uncannily in Yano, so that both "mysteries" of the text, or both "pasts" function to refuse the reassuring identification and purgation of guilt of the typical detective novel. In thus applying the structure of the detective-fiction genre to her narrative of internment as well as to the murder mystery of the text, Sakamoto is able to avoid a telling of internment that would "solve the case" of past racism with the identification of a single perpetrator with a single motive.

Sakamoto thus breaches a linear, progressive telling of history with a coincidental temporality, thereby rupturing the logic of a linear construction of time that would write the past, and specifically internment and the racism that underwrote it, as irrevocably "closed." For Sakamoto, this opens up a subversive space that troubles both the linear

discourse of multicultural progress in which *Obasan* and its treatment of internment first appeared, as well as the rhetoric of resolution surrounding the redress agreement seven years after its publication. The coincidental temporality of Sakamoto's novel further allows Sakamoto to conceptualize a present that is "pregnant with tensions" (264), and to offer the potential for political productivity in the breaching of progressive time with the supposedly resolved offenses of the past. In this synchronic temporality, then, where the past comes to coincide with the present, Sakamoto is able to access a telling of internment in a "kind of decentred way", so that the uncanny temporality of the repressed can come to inhabit the stillness of her house of fiction.

CONCLUSION

An Open Case: Further Enquiry

But this business of cobbling facts together was, I told myself, the detective's, not mine.
(Kerri Sakamoto, *The Electrical Field*, 223)

My project began with a question about a house and history, a question which, in the writing of this thesis, has proliferated into queries about narration, temporality, national history and Canadian multiculturalism. The difficulty I feel in summing up the investigation started here, then, would appear to lie in grasping these divergent strands and knitting them together into a single, concluding chapter. Yet, in concluding my discussion of the texts of Joy Kogawa and Kerri Sakamoto and the modes of resistance they represent, my inclination is not toward closure, but toward further enquiry. I ask: Can the uncanny narratives of *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field* continue to unhome a national narrative of progress and the repression of histories of racism and oppression this narrative performs?

The task of "cobbling facts together," then, is not mine. In *The Electrical Field*, Asako repeatedly refuses to discuss her experiences in an internment camp, claiming that she has "no interest in that kind of discussion, of things [she]'d long ago left behind and made [her] peace with" (71) and further asserts that "'What's past is past'" (122). Asako's dismissive treatment of the past in *The Electrical Field* echoes Naomi's reluctance to dig up the past in *Obasan* when, in response to her Aunt Emily's attempt to draw her into a critical investigation of the internment, she asks: "'Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?'" (44) and further states: "'Life is so short [...], the past so long.

Shouldn't we turn the page and move on?" (45). Yet, Asako's refusal to "cobbl[e] facts together" near the close of *The Electrical Field* speaks to more than just reticence regarding a traumatic past. Instead, Asako's refusal to retrospectively re-order the facts of both the deaths of the Yano family and her internment marks her desire to resist the synthetic cobbling-together of the complexities of the past in a singular narrative. And, in *Obasan*, Naomi likewise resists Emily's "black and white" (34) version of history and her detective-like desire to "make knowable" the "treacherous yellow peril that lived in the minds of the racially prejudiced" (43). For Naomi, the past is not so easily recoverable; it cannot be discovered or unearthed as Emily would have it, and instead remains "more murky, shadowy and grey" (33). And, even the revelation about her mother's death at the close of the novel does not achieve a reordering of the past; rather, it reveals how the past comes to repeat in the present.

In concluding this thesis, then, and the examination of the intersection of Canadian history and the narration of the multicultural nation it entails, I emphasize the resistance that both Kogawa's and Sakamoto's novels take up against a linear telling of internment that would write its causes and its effects as past. Both Sakamoto's and Kogawa's texts work to disarticulate notions of ethnicity and race from a discourse of national progress and, indeed, this disarticulation of the body of the past proves uncannily *productive*, bringing its history of violence and racism to bear on the present. My investigation does not close, then, in the retrospective reassertion of order characteristic of the murder mystery, nor does it place its telling within the teleology of Canadian history. Rather, I seek to avoid the reassurance of closure against which Sakamoto and

Kogawa write and instead seek to emphasize the need to worry the reception of these fictional negotiations of internment and their continued repression in a narrative of national progress.

In response to the critical and financial success of *Obasan* and its role in both educational institutions and the redress movement, Eva Karpinski remarks:

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that by acknowledging the novel's tremendous impact on Canadian cultural politics we are participating in a discursive construction of the book as a 'national heroine.' (46)

Indeed, in many ways, *Obasan*, and the narrative of internment that it recounts, has been cast as a heroine in the telling of the progress of a multicultural Canada. Returning to Scott McFarlane's recognition of the text's role in the narration of the Canadian nation as a "national bildungsroman" (407), I argue that *Obasan* becomes the heroine in a national "coming-of-age" story. Significantly, Karpinski relates the construction of the text as a national heroine to the "celebrity status of the book" (Notes, 63). I further suggest that this celebrity status extends beyond the text itself and encompasses the narration of Japanese Canadian internment, and of course, to Kogawa herself. As I come to the end of this project, then, I point to the intersection of historical fiction, celebrity and nationalism as a new, intriguing thread of investigation that could form the basis of a future project or of further study. I ask: To what extent is the celebrity of Kogawa's narrative of internment a function of the *manufacture* of celebrity in the service of constructing a national narrative?

I turn here to a CBC interview of Joy Kogawa to illustrate the potential for the history of Japanese Canadian internment, and for the celebrity of Kogawa herself, to be

co-opted in an inclusive telling of national history that represses the unhomey effects of both Kogawa's and Sakamoto's work. The interview was a part of a special Remembrance Day broadcast on CBC television in 1999, and specifically marked the promotion of a collection of essays describing war from the perspective of children, entitled *Too Young to Fight* (1999). Kogawa and Monica Hughes, a white author who, as a child during World War II, was sent to Scotland to escape the bombing of London, were the subjects of the interview. In the interview, the two women join the anchor/interviewer via video feed; the producers at the CBC take advantage of this opportunity to present the two authors in a split screen, against the backdrop of a digitally-produced image of a cross, representing the markers of deceased Canadian or Allied soldiers, and a field of poppies, this image taken, of course, from Canadian poet John McRae's poem "In Flanders Fields" (1915). The choice to frame Kogawa in the iconography of Canadian nationalism, and specifically within an iconography of remembrance of both world wars, recalls Scott McFarlane's critique of the original cover of *Obasan*. For, here we see Kogawa discussing racism against Japanese Canadians framed by imagery that recalls the nationalistic justification of that racism as a wartime necessity, as a response to the "security threat" Japanese Canadians posed to national security during WWII. And, ironically, this backdrop of nationalistic symbolism evokes a war in which people of Japanese origin in Canada were barred from joining.¹⁸ Add to this the positioning of Kogawa and Hughes side-by-side, as though the two women's stories are commensurate,

¹⁸ Ken Adachi (1991) writes: "An official announcement on the issue of military service came on January 8, 1941, when King announced that a special investigating committee had recommended that citizens of Japanese ancestry be exempted from service. The policy was established 'not upon any mistrust of their patriotism,' King emphasized, but because of the 'dangerous' situation cause by anti-Japanese hostility in British Columbia" (189).

despite the fact that Hughes was relocated in an attempt to *save* her from the German bombing of London while Kogawa's relocation was a part of a racist campaign of segregation and assimilation, and we can see, right before our eyes, the repression of the history of racism that Kogawa works to bring uncannily to the present.

I close my project then, with an attempt to re-open it. To this end, I have inserted here an excerpt of the transcript of the November 11th, 1999 CBC interview with Joy Kogawa and Monica Hughes. For, this interview, and the repression of the unhomely history of Canadian racism that it performs, proves uncannily familiar to the viewer, and, yet, in tension with this disturbing familiarity, Kogawa's resistance to a narrative of repression surfaces again and again.

Excerpt from the CBC interview of November 11, 1999 between Tina Sebrotnjak (interviewer/anchor), Joy Kogawa and Monica Hughes, from the CBC online archives, entitled "Joy Kogawa's Internment Experience":

Tina Sebrotnjak (Interviewer): And Joy Kogawa, you tell a story in the chapter that you contributed to this book, which is incredibly dramatic, about your brother and the day before and the day after Pearl Harbour. Can you tell me about that?

Kogawa: My brother experienced, um, a rather direct hit of racism, um, that, that, um, came to him on Monday morning when he went to school and Pearl Harbour had been announced and he was, um, slapped with the word 'Jap' right away and, um, so I mean racism began for us. I suppose it had been there before but it began with a new twist.

Sebrotnjak: When did you first come to consciousness that there was a war?

Kogawa: Well I was a child in grade one [...]. And um, what I can remember of those days is the air-raid drills and all the terror, the anxiety one felt about airplanes and the black-outs and, on top of that, was the being separated out and the being identified as the enemy.

Sebrotnjak: Yeah... And of course you were sent, you were interned with your family as you've written, you've written about so movingly. Uh, you know, it

must have been, was it the first time you thought of yourself as, as different than everybody else?

Kogawa: Well I can't really remember at what point the identity of being the unwanted and the unwashed, you know, entered me. I think it was by slow degrees and by incidents here and there all along the way, probably from very early days because we were a despised group.

[...].

Sebrotnjak: Have you made peace with that time now? As I say you've written about it and you've obviously thought about it a lot, and of course there was the, the, the acknowledgement, the government apology to the Japanese Canadians. Was that enough to make you at ease, at peace with this?

Kogawa: I think the effects of racism remain very deeply within one's psyche and go on down through the generations. And that is a place where peace does not dwell. But at the other levels, at the sociological levels and the measurable levels and other kinds of psychological, um, health, that one comes to through actions and through political endeavours, I think there is a kind of peace that, I mean, we were very lucky as a group that we were in a way the little train that could because we had a cause and we pushed that train up that hill and it went down the hill and so we had a complete little story which we were able to hold and so, I mean, there are many other people who go through all kinds of injustices that don't have resolutions.

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