

RECOVERING THE VOICE OF THE JAPANESE-CANADIAN COMMUNITY:

HISTORY AND PRIVATE AND PUBLIC DISCOURSES IN JOY KOGAWA'S POETRY AND PROSE

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Joy Kogawa's creative work has been consistently marked by the memories of her childhood experiences as a Japanese Canadian growing up just before and during the Second World War and living through the internment of the Japanese Canadian community; the injustice Japanese Canadians suffered through the years of racial prejudice and social inequality left a deep mark on the writer. Reading the discourse of trauma, both as an individual trauma and as part of a collective historical experience, bears on several important issues: the interrelation between the actual experience fixed in time and its discursive representation, the temporal break and interpretive distance between the actual experience and the narrative that re-creates it, and the problem of narrativity, reality, and subjectivity (cf. Di Prete, Caruth, Farrell, Garloff, Ibsch, Kaplan, LaCapra, Tal, Vickroy, among others). Kogawa's articulation of the community's historical suffering necessarily engages with the problems inherent in the reading, interpretation and challenging the official history. The complex interweaving of the narrative of Kogawa's personal memory and the official *logos* as represented in the discourses of state policy making, representations in the media, and the public opinion not only raises questions about the mediation of historical truth and the value of individual experience in the context of collective traumatic events but also provides a commentary on the processes of individual and group identity formation. This dialogue of the private and public word—as well as the disruptive and subversive agency of the discourse of private memory in relation to the authoritative and offi-

cially sanctioned word—constitutes a persistent thread in Kogawa's *oeuvre* and serves as a reflection on the new histories in the making. This paper focuses on the dialogue and continuity between Kogawa's poetry, which has received little critical attention, and her later prose writing, specifically, in the context of the articulation of the historical trauma and the negotiation of the private and public spaces.

Kogawa's work provides an insight into the complex relationship we have with the past and into the process of a continuous re-reading of one's own memory versus the official constructions of the past events; her revisionist engagement with the narratives of the past exemplify what is constituted in the state of being "historically conscious":

To become historically conscious means to distance oneself from, or become unfaithful to, the particular narrative constructions of previous generations, to recognize the "past" as the "other" in relation to which new narratives connecting various pasts to the present and possible futures must constantly be created. From this perspective the relationship between past and present must constantly be produced and reproduced. To become historically conscious, and to become a historian, demands an absolute commitment to the "time before now" as both the foundation or condition of the narratives we construct and as the "other(s)" that we must transcend in order to construct our own historical narratives. (Toews 258)

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This "unfaithfulness" to official representations of past events can be seen as a mode of reading and of critical engagement with history, but also as a social commitment. Such persistent movement between past and present—the ongoing re-writing of the official *logos* through the prism of one's own memory and continuous "othering" of the official narrative of the past—constitutes the main problematic of Kogawa's poetic and prosaic work. Although Kogawa's immediate concern was the historical facts of the fate of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, the roots of the racial prejudice surrounding this community as a Canadian minority group reach farther back in the past. The *Issei*, or the first generation of Japanese immigrants, came to Canada in the period between the late 1870s and 1920s and settled mostly along the West Coast. Japanese settlers in Canada had faced segregation early in the history of their settlement when in 1895 they were denied the right to vote in British Columbia and faced drastic reductions in immigration quota in subsequent years. In 1942, the year following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Canada's declaration of war on Japan, and the passing of the War Measures Act, some 21,000 residents of Japanese ancestry, mostly Canadian citizens, living within 100 miles of the Pacific Coast, were removed to labor and detention camps in inner British Columbia. Except for personal belongings, all their property was confiscated. After the end of the war in 1945, Japanese Canadians were faced with the choice of returning to Japan or going into another internal exile east of British Columbia. As many of them identified themselves as Canadians, the latter option was the only acceptable one (Davidson 9-10). Through her poetic word, Kogawa spoke to address the plight of the Japanese Canadian community and articulate the long struggle for historical justice. Kogawa's

working through her childhood trauma brings together the collective and the individual perspectives, as her dealing with her own private memory necessarily bears on the collective experience and resonates within the narrative of the group; this process combines negotiating spaces of memory, the private narratives of epistolary and journal writing, and the public discourses such as newspaper articles, government correspondence, and memoranda. Reflecting on the cultural politics of recognition, Dipesh Chakrabarty comments on the complex workings of history and individual subjectivities:

...[I] found it helpful to think of a particular mix of history and memory that I have come to call the "historical wound." My use of this expression grows out of Charles Taylor's discussion of "the politics of recognition" in multicultural societies. Within the perspective of this politics, wrote Taylor, "misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred." I work with the same idea of "wound" but I assume that, for a person or group so "wounded," to speak of the wound or to speak in its name is already to be on the path to recovery. (Chakrabarty 77)

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Kogawa's "speaking of the wound," however, was not just an inherent element of working through the trauma but was also part of the process that constituted challenging the dominant at the time representation of Japanese Canadians, which became instrumental in bringing about the movement of redress. Because of the success of *Obasan*, which has long become the focal point of Kogawa's creative career, her poetry commonly—and unjustifiably—has remained in the background of critical attention; yet the reader familiar with her poetic work will recognize the persistent themes that will come to define her later prose writing. A strong desire to give voice to her people and to lift the silence on the historical injustice was evident already in Kogawa's first collection of poetry *The Splintered Moon* (1968). Despite a certain lack of unity, the collection articulates the themes, tropes and allegories that will find their way into her later writing, both poetic and prosaic. The space of silence in Kogawa's prose has received extensive analyses in critical literature, with an almost exclusive focus on *Obasan* (cf. Cheung, Davidson, Fujita, Jones, Kruk, Thiesmeyer, Willis). Kogawa's construction of silence as a vehicle of memory and knowledge, however, emerges already in her early poetry. Thus, for example, "Old Woman" anticipates the development of the same theme in *Obasan*, where the narrator's aunt's silence becomes a medium of knowledge and resistance. The maturity of Kogawa's poetic voice is evident in the prose poem from the same collection, where the theme of collective memory and history—the theme that will become central to most of her creative work—is addressed for the first time:

We had not seen it. None of us had seen it. It was not that we were incapable of sight. But we were shielded from it. Some of us knew—most of us knew—that behind that shield it was there. Some of us chose to forget. A very few of us...tore at the shield, tore wildly. But none of us fully saw. (12)

The emphatic repetition of the plural pronoun is highly significant here. The poem, a meditation on the process of social awakening, becomes the collective voice of a community whose memories of social injustice have been muted for decades. "...[we] knew that if we all, each with our ten fingernails, and two fists, clawed and grappled, if we as one endless stream of energy battered at the shield, we could see, and seeing, we could end it" (12). The "shield" or wall of silence, repressed memory and forgotten knowledge becomes a common trope in Kogawa's poetic discourse. The coming together of the poet's personal voice and the space of collective agency marks the ongoing negotiation of the individual and the collective, private and public, where the collective experience and memory of Japanese Canadians, while remaining excluded from the officially sanctioned production and legitimation of historical knowledge, demands recognition. A similar sense of collective empowerment emanates from the poem "Divisions," which creates a strong impact of centrifugal movement, of bursting through the barriers of silence and historical amnesia: "We explode ourselves / Lurch from our centres / Split ourselves into endless splinters / Releasing waves of consciousness / That swell a cohesive bind / Midst our separate parts" (12). Kogawa's engagement through the poetic word with the process of awakening and formation of a collective consciousness in the Japanese Canadian community was at the very roots of the movement of redress that will take shape in the 1980s.

In the 1978 collection *Six Poems*, a small compilation of highly polished poetry, Kogawa continues the exploration of the same theme. The opening poem "Offerings" both sets the tone of the collection and reaffirms the poet's belief in the power of the poetic word, which becomes the space of resistance and active social engagement:

We lift
the barricades
we take the edges
of our transience
we bury the ashes
of our wording
and sift / the silences (n.p.)

Kogawa's unmistakably minimalist world manifests a complex interweaving of the particular and universal, private and social. As she comments later, "[t]he practice of poetry for me is the sweeping out of the debris between the conscious and the unconscious. It's engaging the discipline of dreams" (Williamson 155). *Six Poems* displays a distinct continuity with the previous poetic collections through the further exploration of the speech/silence dichotomy and the significance of collective memory.

It is, however, in her poetic collection *A Choice of Dreams* (1974), which partially builds on Kogawa's experience during her first, three-month trip to Japan in 1969, that the poet starts to reflect on the lessons of history through the narrative of her memory while reconnecting with her ancestral roots ("For the Annual Service of Thanks that Kyoto Was Spared the Bomb," "Hiroshima Exit"). Her meditation on Japan's historical trauma and the process of construction of meaning about the past

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(“In round round rooms of our wanderings / Victims and victimizers in circular flight / Fact pursuing fact,” “Hiroshima Exit” 33) leads her to reflect on the war-time experiences of the Japanese-Canadian community and her own childhood memories of the events. In “Trunk in the Attic,” Kogawa ponders the transient nature of the older generation’s knowledge and memory (the space of the attic, with its hidden or forgotten objects that “speak” history, will also be featured later in *Obasan*). Looking through the war-time family belongings stored in the trunk—the trunk “which travelled with us / Through the World War 2 evacuation of Japanese / From the West Coast” (50)—is a process that inherently connects the material presence of the artifacts and their symbolical significance through the memories that come back, the memories that she never had, and the memories that she consciously (re)constructs. The passing to her of her mother’s cultural knowledge becomes diffused in the poet’s own imaginatively fashioned space, where she pictures a childhood undisturbed by war and social trauma: “My white-haired mother hands me / A deep purple kimono
348 bought / In some vaguely remembered girlhood / Of apple shaped pears and sweet chestnuts / And utterly unabandoned babies / Asleep on their mothers’ backs” (50). Kogawa’s reflection on the inaccessibility of the past and the elusive nature of cultural transfer underlies her sense of un-belonging and double alienation, both from the country of her parents’ origin (Japan) and the country she now claims as her home (Canada). The memories of her mother in “Chain Necklace” echo the construction of the character of Naomi’s mother in *Obasan* as a beautiful, elegant, graceful woman who stoically endured the hardships of the forced displacement: “...in real life she made / Her choices, wore her chains / Kept her cygnets in the / Ugly barnyard world” (56). Similarly, in one of the interviews Kogawa talks about the breaking down of her family’s realities during the internment and, more specifically, about the way the extreme destitution and suffering affected her musician mother—something she found emotionally difficult to talk about (Williamson 156-57). In “Chain Necklace,” the different generations’ responses to social injustice are articulated in the opposition of the mother’s silent endurance and grace and the poet’s active resistance: “told me constantly to be / Gentle and to wear / The heavy chains with joy / But I grew squat and goose-like / And pick and jab my noose / At every chance” (56). The dichotomy of passive fortitude/silence and active opposition/speech becomes prominent in *Obasan*, where Naomi’s mother’s and Obasan’s private discourses of mute stoicism are juxtaposed with Aunt Emily’s public activism.

Kogawa’s poetic reflections on the individual and collective past constitute the necessary repetition or re-living of the historical wound. As argued by Caruth, trauma—a wound of the mind—is a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world”; it is an event that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly” (4). Kogawa’s speaking through poetry—which is both private and public—represents one of the forms of this process of repetition. As the actual past experience is inaccessible outside re-presentation, it is the act of telling and the story itself

that attempts to communicate the experience to its audience and to relate the truth as known by the traumatized subject. Commenting both on the hermeneutical aspect of reading the wound and on the problem of language and reality, Caruth claims that “[t]his truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (4). The very language of poetry, the symbolical, tropological and multiply deferred spaces further enhance the opaqueness of language that resists interpretation and opens to a proliferation of meanings: “The power of poetry—its intense and concise artistry in words—comes in part from its dancing with silence, both structurally (in verse forms, line breaks, or syllable counts, for example) and rhetorically, by its tendency—at least the lyrical tendency—to draw on brevity’s heightened impact and to surround itself with attentive silences” (Kruk 77). It is the unknown, the unarticulated, and the impossible to represent that, at least in part, comprises the truth of such an act of telling, while necessarily engaging the reader in co-experiencing the event and adapting/adopting it along the lines of his/her own construction of knowledge within a socio-historical continuum.

Although childhood trauma in Kogawa’s work is often articulated in the context of the communal historical wound, it is also reflected on in a series of more specific memories/reconstructions that appear in *A Choice of Dreams*. In the poem “When I Was a Little Girl” the nostalgic world of childhood is punctuated by the deeply hidden anxiety of difference and continuous fear of being ostracized growing up as a Japanese Canadian. The poet’s childhood memories of racial prejudice become the theme of another poem of the collection, “Snakes,” but the presence of an autobiographical voice is particularly obvious in “Woodtick,” where she (re)constructs what could be a specific incident or a generalization of many similar memories: “I was eight years old and the Japs were / Enemies of Canada and the big white boys / And their golden haired sisters who / Lived in the ghost town of Slocan / Were walking together, crowding me / off the path of the mountain, me running / Into the forest to escape...” (57). Kogawa’s deliberate use of the derogatory “Japs” acquires an ironic sense in terms of a temporal gap (between the actual occurrence and the point of writing) and a narrative distance (between the child’s and the adult’s perspectives); in her implicit addressing the reader, however, it also becomes a dialogue, a reminder about the lessons of the past. This memory is framed by a reference to an occurrence that is happening almost thirty years later: “The spring day the teen on his bike slanted his Caucasian eyes / At my eight year old beautiful daughter / And taunted gibberish” (57). The incident’s prompting the poet’s own childhood memory emphasizes the historical continuity of the ideological structures of racism and the repetition of the patterns of prejudice.

The intensely private world of the above poems is subverted by the fact that the published collection necessarily constitutes a public voice that projects an audience and anticipates a response and a beginning of a dialogue. The ambivalent balance between these private memories and the need for social acknowledgement of the past

injustices is carefully crafted in “What Do I Remember of the Evacuation,” which acquires the tone of a poetic testimonial narrative. Kogawa’s memory of the wartime events is constituted by a twofold perspective: that of a small child who constructs her reality through the prism of imagination and of a mature adult who reinterprets the childhood memories from a different—informed and critical—perspective. The temporal and interpretive gaps inherent in the process of speaking the wound become especially obvious in this text. The question posited in the title of the poem is a self-reflexive commentary on the nature of memory and the process of remembrance; it comprises both a private, introspective moment of engagement with the past and a public address to the audience. The poet’s childhood experiences of the evacuation and life in inner British Columbia are shaped by her family’s desire to minimize the trauma on the children (“I remember how careful my parents were / Not to bruise us with bitterness” 55). What comes to the fore of the layers of remembering is the hushed conversations in the background, sifted through the prism of memory, overheard at night: “I hear there were people herded / Into the Hastings Park like cattle. / Families were made to move in two hours / Abandoning everything, leaving pets / and possessions at gun point. I hear families were broken up / Men were forced to work. I heard / It whispered late at night / That there was suffering” (54). However, even the child’s carefully protected world is not immune to her peers’ attitudes steeped in the public social structures of racism and hatred: by remembering episodes of injustice from her childhood years, Kogawa also explores the roots of her fractured identity, of simultaneous belonging and non-belonging, of inherent outsiderness:

And I remember the puzzle of Lorraine Life
Who said “Don’t insult me” when I
Proudly wrote my name in Japanese
And Tim flew the Union Jack
When the war was over but Lorraine
And her friends spat on us anyway
And I prayed to the God who loves
All the children in his sight
That I might be white (55)

Kogawa’s reflection on the etiology of what Chakrabarty conceptualizes as a “historical wound” becomes part of the path toward recovery and public recognition. Her poetic word is increasingly more assertive of the necessity of collective agency and social commitment: “the perspective / Is of our choosing and we are / Victim by choice, our victory only that / We can choose” (89). The poet’s focus on history remains strong in the 1985 collection *Woman in the Woods* (written four years after the publication of *Obasan*), where she confesses that she is “obsessed with history / and always scratching for clues” (58). This process of “scratching for clues,” interrogating and revising the official narrative of history, filling the gaps and remembering the forgotten re-emerges in the poems devoted to Coaldale, Alberta, where the Nakayama family was forced to live after the war. It is, however, in the cycle “Road

Building by Pick Axe,” from the same collection, that Kogawa employs a technique that also defines her narrative strategy in *Obasan* and later in *Itsuka*: she brings together personal experiences, memories, spaces of poetic imagination alongside documentary-style references, facts, names, dates, and newspaper headlines—the strategy that will be conceptualized as the “documentary-collage” in the context of her prose writing (Jones 1993). The poet reflects on her road trip down a BC highway that was built by forced labour and, in another poem, on the aging *Issei* in nursing homes, with whose hands, by pick axe, the road was built. The “Found poem” tells a story of a dispossessed farmer of Japanese ancestry who fought in the Canadian infantry during WWI, and “May 3, 1981” quotes a Vancouver newspaper on racism in Western Canada. In “Memento,” the deceptively laconic reference to the 1974 Slocan reunion in Toronto represents the unknown lives and experiences of thousands of displaced Japanese Canadians. In her bringing together facts and poetic imagination, Kogawa deliberately blurs the line between the factual and poetic, and appropriates the space of the official discourse for her own uses while also asserting the value of the individual experience and memory.

Kogawa’s archival work in Ottawa and her discovering the letters and journals of Muriel Kitagawa proved to be a turning point in her creative journey. The poet’s deep engagement in social and political issues clearly dictated the need for a different mode of expression, which brought her to prose writing and the novelistic genre. For Kogawa, the word—in the broadest sense—is invested with a lot of power: “Where there’s a wall there are / words to whisper by loose bricks, / wailing prayers to utter, birds / to carry messages taped to their feet, / There are letters to be written— / poems even” (*Woman in the Woods* 15). The belief in the transformative power of speech and its ability to bring about social change is part of the drive that underlies Kogawa’s poetry: “I don’t know where the dividing line is for me in art and politics” (Koh 35). It was, however, the need to tell a story and to give the individual and communal experiences an intelligible voice that required a different form. As suggested earlier by Hayden White, it is narrative that may posit a solution to “the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*” (1980, 5; emphasis in the original), and Kogawa’s short story “Obasan” was one such narrative exploration. After having encountered Kitagawa’s archival materials, however, the short story kept growing to become a novel. Kogawa’s commentary on her transition from poetry to the novelistic genre emphasizes the difficulty of continuing writing in a lyrical, unitary voice and the need to reflect other, emerging voices: “I became aware of another voice that I was not conscious of being within me, Muriel Kitagawa’s voice. To me, it was a voice from the outside, one that I had never encountered, and one that I could only report on” (Williamson 21-22). Telling personal and collective histories inevitably involves negotiating areas of epistemic tension, reconciling the official/public narrative against personal stories, which are also constituted by facts and truth; it is the very process of articulating the truth that becomes instrumental not only for the public recognition of the historical wound but for the restoration of the historical knowledge and

self-worth to the community itself: "We tell the facts many times / until we believe, until we / know that it is so" (*Jericho Road* 100). *Obasan's* project of "telling the facts" engages with a multilayered process of (re)construction of events through the memories and accounts of witnesses and participants. If Hayden White's "emplotment" of history problematizes the possibility of knowing the past outside the mediation of language and narrative, Kogawa's telling of individual histories asserts both the possibility and necessity of knowledge that inheres in personal stories. The tension between the postmodern deconstruction of the historical narrative and the impetus toward social commitment in Kogawa's writing bears on the ongoing dialogue she engages in around the nature and validity of historical truth and construction of the past.

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The shaping of the "historical consciousness" of *Obasan's* narrator Naomi Nakane is traced from the early 1970s, a decade before the Japanese Canadian community in 1983 files a petition with the government for an official acknowledgment of the past injustices and a compensation. Naomi's trip to the funeral of her uncle, who helped raise her, forms one of the external narrative frames of the novel, which runs parallel to the internal journey through her memory—a process of reconstruction of

truth and personal recovery that (within the novel) never comes to a closure. Kogawa deliberately departs from the traditional linear plot, a technique which mimics the non-linear nature of memory and remembering and also subverts the assumptions, conventions and narrative strategies of realism. In *Obasan*, the author forces the reader to embark on an exploration of a personal memory, which is fragmented, elusive and malleable, and is being continuously reinterpreted by the narrator herself: "All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery" (25). As Naomi goes through Aunt Emily's letters and other documents (based on Kitagawa's archival materials), she is forced to revisit the past and to re-interpret her memories in the context of Emily's narrative; Naomi's remembering is rooted in "dream images" (120) and all she has is "[f]ragments of fragments... Segments of stories" (57). Her fragmented world is woven out of mosaic-like childhood memories, old photos, her activist Aunt Emily's archive of diaries and personal correspondence, newspaper clippings and copies of government documents related to the redress movement. The recovery of memory in Naomi's narrative acquires a significance deeper than a personal account of an individual trauma. It becomes a voice of three generations lost to the indignities and displacements of the wartime period. As Kogawa commented later, "[t]hat is one way of trying to write the truth, saying that this happened on this date and so on. But that's not the truth. I don't know in how many years it's been that we have used the words 'truth' and 'fact' as if they were synonymous. Because truth is much more than fact, I think" (Koh 34). Both in her poetry and prose, memory is holistic and healing; it is one of the truths that is juxtaposed with the authoritative interpretation of the past. The fundamental incompleteness, open-endedness, and inconclusiveness of the epistemic space that is constructed from the fragmentary knowledge that is available to Naomi, with its multiple gaps and silences, also implies the impossibility of completeness and finality of the official version of the past events and serves as a subversive interrogation of the official metanarrative of history.

Among the many private spaces of knowledge and memory explored in Kogawa's poetry and prose is the space of child's imagination, which further enhances the interpretive gap inherent in the act of remembering. The ironic distance between the child's memory and the lyrical voice telling the memory is particularly effective in the laconic language of poetry. Thus, in "What Do I Remember of the Evacuation," the trip to the internment settlement in Slocan is seen partially through a child's eyes: "...I remember the mountains and I was / Six years old and I swear I saw a giant / Gulliver of Gulliver's Travels scanning the horizon / And when I told my mother she believed it too" (*A Choice of Dreams* 55). It is, however, Kogawa's use of the fairy tale topoi that becomes an important strategy in the articulation of a child's displacement. The intertextual weaving of fairy tale elements into her poetry and prose creates a symbolic space that posits another version of truth. Discussing the signifi-

cance of fictionality in the representation of the past and the absence of specificity in such representations, Caruth suggests “the possibility of faithful history in the very indirectness of...telling” (27). As I argue elsewhere, the fairy tale intertext in Kogawa constitutes a particular cultural and symbolic code, a coping mechanism, and an interpretive strategy that is used for articulating trauma. Fairy tale motifs and tropes appear as early as *The Splintered Moon*, where the intertextuality in “Princess and the pea,” “I think I am that fabled princess,” and “Nutcracker” provides a context for voicing the problems of identity, displacement, and otherness. Rewriting and subversively re-imagining the traditional tales creates a heightened sense of irony and critical distance. Characteristically, the lyrical persona’s anxieties of unbelonging are transferred onto the Western fairy tale canon, which is suggestive of the poet’s de-territorialized identity. In the later prose, fairy tale intertext becomes more pervasive. It is through the alternative worlds of magic that, both in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, Naomi finds it possible to conceptualize and express some of the traumatic memories. The traditional Japanese folk tale “Momotaro,” which used to be told Naomi by her mother, is connected to the young Naomi’s space of home, comfort and belonging. A traditional metaphorical tale of journey and conquest, it is rich in cultural context; however, just like in the tales revisioned for *The Splintered Moon*, “Momotaro”’s formulaic promise of happy ending is not fulfilled in Naomi’s journey through *Obasan*. Apart from “Momotaro,” the extremely diverse fairy tale intertext in both *Obasan* and *Itsuka* draws on the Western canon that creates symbolical spaces of danger, alienation, discrimination, de-territorialization and displacement within the Canadian cultural and socio-political space. Kogawa’s revisionist treatment of well-known tales, such as “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves,” “Goldilocks,” “Humpty Dumpty,” “Chicken Little,” “Rapunzel,” and “Cinderella,” foregrounds the exile motif while questioning, subverting or altogether suppressing the traditional homecoming formula. Rewriting the symbolical matrix of these tales allows Naomi to appropriate their narratives for reading and making sense of her own memories and experience. In *Obasan*, it is only the Japanese “Momotaro” tale that is given a positive reading as it is situated in the context of Naomi’s cultural in-betweenness and hyphenated identity. In Aunt Emily’s words, Naomi was “fed on milk and Momotaro” (61), which implies a mix of the Western and Japanese traditional cultures; Naomi’s identity, thus, is a product of both. “Momotaro,” once transplanted on the Canadian soil, becomes part of Canadian heritage. Emily, a social activist and, in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, one of the key figures in the movement of redress, stubbornly asserts her Canadianness: “Momotaro is a Canadian story. We’re Canadian, aren’t we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian” (61). What Emily says is in fact a succinct expression and anticipation of multiculturalism, which had not become an official policy yet in the narrator’s reality of the early 1970s.

The continuous juxtaposition of lyricism and documentary facts becomes an important tool of de-stabilizing both the narrative itself and the epistemic space within which historical knowledge is constructed. The example below follows the

chapter where Naomi reads Aunt Emily’s diary, feeling “like a burglar...breaking into a private house only to discover it’s [her] childhood house filled with corners and rooms [she has] never seen” (85). Having finished reading the diary, Naomi leaves the discursive and ontological space of Aunt Emily’s writing—something she indicates very explicitly (“This is the last word in the journal” 118)—and begins to connect it to her own construction of the next chronologically sequential event, which is the train evacuation to Slocan. This ambivalent connection links two very different insights: Emily’s meticulously dated, brief but detailed diary entries and Naomi’s childhood memories of the train trip from “three decades ago”. The weaving together of two heterogeneous spaces of knowledge, two truths, in their simultaneous linearity and non-linearity posits understanding of history as an ongoing, open-ended negotiation. Between both narratives, however, there is also a lyrical segment, which disrupts the transition and obstructs the attempted temporal linearity, offering yet another telling of the event:

1942.

[...]

We are hammers and chisels in the hands of would-be sculptors, battering the spirit of the sleeping mountain. We are the chips and sand, the fragments of fragments that fly like arrows from the heart of the rock. We are the silences that speak from stone. We are the despised rendered voiceless...We are the man in the Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of light. We are sent to Siloam, the pool called ‘Sent’. We are sent to the sending, that we may bring sight. (119)

The brief, stark reference to 1942, which forms a separate line, is followed by what appears to be a prose poem that reads like a rhythmic, melodic incantation and bears a stylistic resemblance to the prose poem from *The Splintered Moon*. While the lyrical segment purposefully disturbs the temporality and ontology of both chapters, its voice is also profoundly ambiguous. Who is speaking on behalf of the plural “we”? Aunt Emily? Naomi? Is it a collective symbolic voice of Japanese Canadians? (See also Jones 1993, 133-34, for a discussion of the passage.) The deliberate polyphonic disruption of the unitary perspective and de-stabilization of the reader’s self-positioning within the text posits the imperative of the audience’s active engagement and critical commitment within the space of Naomi’s hermeneutical project of memory, history, and truth.

Kogawa’s strategy of staying true to the “facts of one’s feelings” in reading the community’s historical wound is particularly effective in a direct juxtaposition of the official, authoritative discourse and individual memories. One of the episodes of lasting emotional impact is Naomi’s reading of a newspaper clipping about the post-war labour camps she finds among Aunt Emily’s documents. The article under the title of “Find Jap Evacuees Best Beet Workers” (“Japanese evacuees from British Columbia supplied the labour for 65% of Alberta’s sugar beet acreage last year...” 213) also featured a picture of a family gathered around a pile of beets with the caption “Grinning

and Happy." The casual language of the article and its blatant misrepresentation of the real life conditions of the evacuees enrages Naomi: "Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and cannot...bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep...Is it so bad? Yes. Do I mind? Yes, I mind...It's the chicken coop 'house' we live in that I mind...it's standing in the beet field under the maddening sun...I mind growing ugly. I mind the harvest time and the hands and the wrists bound in rags to keep the wrists from breaking open...Down the miles we are obedient as machines..." (214-17). The dialogism of Naomi's commentary, with its multiple, persistent questions, places the reader in the position of making a choice, a commitment, which is precisely what this narrative demands. The act of story-telling itself engenders a new version of history, and, according to Helms, challenges and interrogates official representations as "[d]ocuments used as source material for traditional historiography are denied their claim to truthfulness" (44).

356 The very structural premises of both *Obasan* and *Itsuka* are predicated on the inherent dialogism of the private and the public. The outer framework of *Obasan* is based on the opposition of the lyrical, meditative opening and the documentary post-script, an excerpt from the historical Memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada in April 1946; the Memorandum demanded an official recognition of the past violation of rights and freedoms suffered by the Japanese Canadian community. The movement from the introspective first-person voice in the opening pages of the novel to the articulation of collective experience in the official language of the Memorandum underlies the formation of collective consciousness that led to the movement of redress. The Memorandum is part of a four-decade process and dialogue that culminates in the official apology by the Canadian government, with the document of the government Acknowledgement forming the concluding page of *Itsuka*. The climactic point of *Itsuka* is the historical event of September 22, 1988, when the key members of the redress movement are invited to the Parliament Hill for the signing of the final settlement between the government and the Japanese Canadian community; it is presented through the prism of Naomi's response: "I laugh. I am whole. I am as complete as when I was a very young child" (276); "Reconciliation. Liberation. Belongingness. Home" (277). In her meditation on the hill over the Ottawa river and her silent communion with "the underground stream" that "speaks through memory, through dream...our words" (279), Naomi's journey finally comes full circle. In the essay "Is There a Just Cause?", presented to the Canadian Caucus on Human Rights in 1983, Kogawa elaborates on the importance of public recognition of historical injustices. The continuity of Kogawa's poetic and prosaic work is constituted "not in the traditional way of teaching a product, but in teaching an epistemological process, a way of knowing" (Goellnicht 302). Kogawa's work is instrumental in both *telling* and *teaching* history as a polyglot process, a dialogic exchange, a negotiation, which is best summed up in her own poetic lines from *Woman in the Woods*: "For many years /

androgynous with truth / I molded fact and fantasy / and where they met / made the crossroads home" (64).

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