

Internalized Racism: Physiology and Abjection in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*

Kerri Sakamoto's first novel confronts the difficulties of narrating trauma, events the narrator cannot register consciously. As readers, dependent upon Asako Saito's narration, we find ourselves placed inside her skin, similarly unaware of the specific traumatic experiences that dictate the events of the novel. I deliberately use the word "skin" to locate our position as readers since Sakamoto's descriptions of the body in *The Electrical Field* illuminate the relations between Asako's corporeality and her psychology. By considering how the barrier demarcating Asako's interior and exterior experiences dissolves, we perceive a similar dissolution of borders separating the personal, social, and political as they interrelate within racist ideology.

Most recent studies of trauma in literature privilege the psychological over the physiological manifestations of traumatic experience.¹ This paper, by contrast, examines physiological responses to psychological trauma to interrogate the complex relations among mind, body, and narrative. Cathy Caruth (1995) recognizes that trauma disrupts mental processes so that recollection of traumatic events occurs belatedly, if at all; however, my goal is to introduce the medical into a discussion of trauma and narrative to inquire how psychological trauma also disrupts the body's narrative.

The Electrical Field won the 1999 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Canada and Caribbean Region) and was short-listed for numerous other literary awards. Coral Ann Howells and Marlene Goldman have written the most sustained studies of the work to date. Howells addresses

monstrosity in the novel and argues that “Asako’s self-perception is tied to the key issues of her gendered and racial identity seen through the distorting lens of her internment experience, which has represented her difference as monstrous to herself” (130). I build on Howells’ work to investigate how racism operates not only on the mind but also on the physical body. I look at how the female body in the novel responds medically to the trauma of internment as it literally begins to don the monstrosity that nationalist discourse fashions for it. Further Goldman, by reading the novel in conjunction with Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, explores “how the discourses of loss, mourning, and the role of the victim have been mobilized and reshaped by Canadians of Japanese ancestry” (363). In Goldman’s discussion of melancholy and trauma, she considers both novels’ images of violence to show how “the wounds inflicted to the body represent the hurts of history” (380). In conversation with this scholarship, I argue that the wounds in this particular book are more than representative; rather, they are concrete, physical symptoms of that history.

By viewing the processes of systemic racism and institutionalized violence as they operate on the body, we can see how internalization produces effects that extend beyond the subject’s negative view of the self. Not only does the subject internalize racism psychologically, but she externalizes it physically. In other words, as the subject processes the experience of racism that comes from outside the self, he produces an externalized racism that comes from within, one that the body displays. Such a reading complicates concepts that deem race a wholly social construction. It expands ideas of what constitutes embodied difference. It 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. We see internalized racism as a product of both embodied difference and social attitudes. Furthermore, looking at the physiological manifestations of such racism we see the body, as it externalizes that which has been internalized, to be marked both from within and without.

In *The Electrical Field*, Sakamoto portrays a body dislocated physically and temporally as a result of internment. I investigate how the narrator’s simultaneous physiological regression to a pre-pubescent stage and her progression to a menopausal stage represent her body’s separation from traditional processes of aging. Such bodily displacement prevents her from “wearing” such effects on her body and echoes—and potentially produces—the temporal dislocation that only allows her to experience and narrate

trauma belatedly. I use Sigmund Freud's work on the death instinct and Julia Kristeva's on abjection to posit that psychological trauma conflates ethnic identification and monstrosity. Physiological manifestations of trauma embody broader national ideologies that view entire ethnicities as threats to the polity.

Sakamoto sets her novel in small-town Ontario, at the edge of an electrical field, where Nisei (second-generation) Japanese Canadian, Asako Saito, narrates a tale of murder and suicide. The story opens with the murders of Chisako Nakamura and her lover, Mr. Spears, at the hands of Chisako's husband, Yano, who eventually kills their two children (Tam and Kimi) and himself. Asako frames her story with adoring and guilt-ridden recollections of her elder brother, Eiji, who died of pneumonia in an internment camp during World War II. The novel's depictions of Asako's guilt question whether the four murders and Yano's suicide result indirectly from her traumatic experience in the camp, and the narrative reverberates with the after-effects of the Canadian government's racist policy.

Asako's body absorbs the guilt she feels for the deaths of her brother and the Nakamuras and interrupts not only her memory's access to chronology but also her body's. Her reproductive system seems to have shut down after the death of her brother so that during what would be her pubescence she enters apparent early menopause. Conversely, her presumably menopausal age during the novel's narration is marked by a longing for her lost reproductive years and sex life combined with an adolescent understanding of and approach to sexuality in general. Further, as Howells has demonstrated, Asako and other survivors of internment employ a rhetoric of monstrosity in reference to themselves, suggesting that "it is this racialized self-perception with all the connotations of a negative othering that has shaped Asako's sense of herself as an embodied subject, and which may account for her disgust with her own physical body" (128). But I argue that the self-perception extends beyond Asako's *sense* of herself and that the trauma of internment in the camps actually manifests itself physiologically. Hence, there is a particularly (and negatively) embodied understanding of Nisei within Canadian socio-political culture that the survivors produce as well as internalize and project, but that sense of self as "disgusting" can also create actual physical disruptions that are damaging to the self.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud begins with the notion of the pleasure principle, which he believed governed life through its drive to find pleasure and/or to avoid pain. This principle, preoccupied with devel-

opment and change, sustains life. However, Freud asserts that a very different drive pre-exists the pleasure principle and that drive urges the organism toward death. The death drive represents the desire of the organic to return to an inorganic state. Scholars have interpreted this drive as dominating trauma victims as it inhibits their pleasure principle.² Asako's narrative reveals the dominance of the death drive in the traumatized individual.

Freud hypothetically characterizes this drive as "a powerful tendency inherent in every living organism to restore a prior state" (76). He relates the death drive to a repetition-compulsion, a regressive tendency symptomatic of traumatic neurosis, and distinct from the "normal" tendency to repeat found in children. Freud pathologizes the adult compulsion to repeat as representing an attempt to master a situation. In *The Electrical Field*, Asako repeats various versions of two stories to an adolescent girl, Sachi, and to the reader: one story is of her brother's death and the other is of her final conversation with Yano before he committed murder and suicide. Asako's retellings of these two stories are contradictory. We can read her compulsion to repeat them as attempts to master situations resulting in death, situations for which she feels responsible.

As Cathy Caruth notes, with the capacity to remember traumatic experience comes also "the capacity to elide or distort" (156). Asako's retellings elide her role in her brother's death (she repeatedly contradicts herself with claims that she saved him) and similarly erase her part in the murder-suicide (she argues Yano already knew about his wife and Mr. Spears before she told him). Furthermore, we can read Asako's compulsion to repeat as symptomatic of her fetishization of the narrative. James Berger refers to Eric Santner's description of how "narrative itself, the tool of working through, can itself function as a fetish object 'consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place'" (27). In this sense, it is possible that Asako's relationship with the pubescent girl, Sachi, is a traumatic symptom: Asako uses the young girl to fetishize the stories of Eiji's death in the camp as an attempt, in Berger's words, to "expunge the traces of the trauma or loss." Beyond expunging the loss, however, Asako also attempts to expunge traces of herself, the person she blames for the loss.

We can read Asako's narrative as an effort to regress—as Freud's notion of the death drive—to an earlier condition; however, we can also posit that her regression is motivated by a desire to return to the time before Eiji died. Her fascination with the young Sachi's developing sexuality speaks to her desire

to turn back time. The narrator notes that around the time of Eiji's death, she "was still young, barely older than Sachi was now" (177). In some ways for Asako, the girl embodies the pleasure principle since Sachi's sexual instincts are central to the narrator's portrayal of her. In many ways, her sexuality underscores how—in Freudian terms—Asako's pleasure principle yielded to her death drive when Eiji died and her physical/sexual development was arrested. Freud argues that the sexual drives "constitute the true life-drives; and the fact that they act *against* the intent of the other drives. . . points to a conflict between them and the rest" (80). Howells has noted that Sachi might represent an "incomplete double for Asako because of [her] individual difference from her" (136), but with regard to Freud's theory, Sachi and Asako also become representative of opposing drives: Sachi's character exudes the sexuality Freud ascribes to the pleasure principle, whereas Asako's emanates barrenness and death.

The latter's virginity is a source of her frustration and shame at having "waited too long instead of not long enough" (60). Despite Asako's lack of sexual experience, however, she remains a sexualized figure. She derives pleasure from participating vicariously in Sachi's sexual play with Yano's son, Tam, during which she provides the girl with Japanese words to describe her body's "private parts." From language, the game proceeds to a game of sexual show and touch. Her interest in Sachi's sexuality suggests that the child may function as a surrogate who experiences what Asako could not. Conflating sex, ethnicity, and language, Sakamoto depicts Asako hiding and watching the game unfold as Sachi uses the new language Asako has bestowed on her. The translation of "private" parts into the Japanese might represent Asako's sexual coyness, as she removes such descriptions from the English she and Sachi use to communicate. However the use of the Japanese language also locates Sachi's sexuality in the culture that Asako seems to find less shameful, somehow more "pure" than that she experiences as one of the Nisei living in Canada.

The narrator recollects that the onset of her period coincided with feelings of shame. Playing seahorse, a game in which she swam onto Eiji's back, she says she'd been "holding too tight, making him go down" (150). Asako felt shame for her actions and explains: "My hands seemed to have grown large and heavy, the fingers thick and swollen. . . . It was that very morning, when I went to my room to change for school, that I saw it: a trickle of blood in the sand on my thigh" (150). To compound the sense of shame Asako associates with the onset of menstruation, she describes how her mother

“pushed [her] away with the repulsion you can only have for one you are obliged to love and care for” (151). She continues, “The last time I bled was just after he died. It didn’t surprise me that it stopped. It didn’t worry me because I knew right then what my life was to be. . . . Wiping the steamed mirror now, I half expected to see that young face of an old soul” (151).

The cessation of her period in response to the trauma of Eiji’s death signifies the regression of her physical development to a pre-pubescent stage and its simultaneous advancement to a menopausal one. Medical opinion might assume that Asako experiences secondary amenorrhea as a result of stress; however, as her period never returns after the initial bleeding, she seems to enter a phase of permanent secondary amenorrhea which occurs after menopause. In this respect, she becomes at once child and aging woman. Accompanying her feeling of shame at clinging too tightly to her brother, she says her hands grew large and heavy, “her fingers thick and swollen.” These are menopausal symptoms she reiterates when comparing herself to the beautiful, youthful Chisako. Asako explains, “My hands loomed grotesquely large in my lap” (201). Such similar descriptions of her hands as an adolescent and as a middle-aged woman, combined with her expectation of seeing “that young face of an old soul” (151), suggest that as a fourteen-year-old girl, she became what she has been ever since, and still is now at age 45.

When Chisako boasts of her sexual relationship with Mr. Spears, Asako tells the reader that Chisako is “ruthless, bringing me face to face with a certain experience of life I’d been denied, rubbing my nose in it” (209). Significantly, the disruption in Asako’s physical development, which she relates to Eiji’s death, causes her to bypass entirely her own reproductive stage. In Asako’s case, traumatic experience seems to have disrupted her body’s narrative and initiated in her a repetition-compulsion which hinders her pleasure principle’s protective and productive capabilities against the death instinct.

From the time of her brother’s death, Asako’s governing instinct has been one of gradual self-effacement. Initially, she stopped eating and sleeping. Asako recalls, “There was nothing my body could take in. It was hateful to me, the thought of my body succumbing to sensation with any relief or pleasure when all I wanted was to be numb. . . . Yet, however deadened, alive to my own misery” (220). At this stage, Asako recalls her preference for self-torture over annihilation. Later, her retelling of stories to Sachi is a traumatic symptom which functions partly as self-torture—as she privileges the

past with Eiji over her present—and partly as a survival mechanism, as she elides her role in his death with each telling.

Not only is the negotiation of time crucial to the survivor of trauma, but its connection to place is also significant. Pamela Sugiman, in her interviews with Nisei women in Canada, notes that “*Place* seemed to bring together or root ‘events’ that had no ‘logical’ sequence or connection” (366). Thus, it is possible that the traumatized individual’s understanding of events in time relies on recollections of her body’s situation in particular places. Asako’s bodily experience of dislocation from place and from a typical process of aging disrupts her recollection of the events that occurred. Eventually, on some level, Sachi recognizes the potentially pathological nature of Asako’s retellings. She says, “You keep telling that story when you know it isn’t true. Can’t you say what really happened?” (275). Asako’s inability to “say what really happened” corresponds physiologically to her inability to menstruate. Such correspondence posits that the disruption in the bodily process, beyond echoing the mind’s inability to recall or retell events chronologically/consistently, might actually produce it. Regardless of which process—verbal or physical—collapsed first, at the border of the electrical field, a place of power generation, Asako Saito is a figure of denial or negation. The title image of the field, in this way, ironically suggests her desire to negate herself.

Sakamoto suggests that the narrator’s psychological and physiological denial of her reproductive potential results from her desire to efface herself, a desire initiated by feelings of guilt over her brother’s death. Her reproductive system’s response to such guilt directly relates to the narrator’s own limited sexual experience and her perception of herself as repulsive. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva accounts for the subject’s desire to distinguish itself from the abject, the otherness whose expulsion from the subject is necessary for its survival, yet whose presence constantly challenges and undermines the subject. Bodily fluids, for example, which our systems expel, demarcate our subjectivity from the blood, pus, and feces that *are* where we are not. In our progression toward death, however, this border between subject and object dissolves until the border itself becomes an object and the self cannot distinguish between itself and other. She writes, “Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit” (3).

Asako has begun to view herself as abject, as that which must be expelled. Kristeva explains that one experiences abjection at its strongest when the

“subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject” (5). Asako’s mother’s repulsion at her daughter’s menstruation signals a possible start to her identification with the abject. Asako’s body’s refusal to release menstrual blood can be read as a physiological response to this identification. As her body hangs onto that which her mother sees as repulsive, Asako *embodies* that repulsion, contaminates herself from within. She might also have stopped menstruating in order that her mother might see her as other than repulsive. Her body responds to her identification with the abject and refuses to conform to a conventional/linear aging process. Asako’s particularly sex-based—and by extension gendered—notion of her own repulsiveness specifically echoes her association of menstruation with guilt. Her shame at having held Eiji “too tight” and her understanding of his death as a consequence of his near drowning combine with her subsequent menstruation and her mother’s repulsed response to it to compound Asako’s sense of guilt.

This entanglement of the physiological and psychological initiates Asako’s future conflation of bodily, emotional, and mental processes. She exhibits a bodily guilt. Asako’s body manifests her regret by accelerating her sexual development so that she exhibits signs of menopause—namely ceased menstruation and swelling—while she is still at the age of puberty. Such menopausal signs of the abject, particularly marked by the retaining of fluids, correspond with her death instinct since the ultimate example of abjection of self is the corpse, when the border between self and abject completely dissolves. In a premature menopausal state, Asako’s body hastens this dissolution. Furthermore, Asako loves and identifies with her brother, Eiji, who is dead. Both physically and psychologically, Asako anticipates her own death.

Moreover, Sakamoto suggests that Asako’s only direct sexual experiences occurred with her brothers. The most significant—and those that corresponded with her own development—took place with Eiji. Asako describes the feel of his “small lumpy bundle inside his left leg, warming [her] thigh, pulsing through [her] with a tiny rhythm” (166). She notes how she soothed his skin that suffered from his father’s belt as she “inched [her] hand under his pyjama bottom to the welts.” She continues, “At first he pushed me away, but then he gave in” (168). She also reveals that her sexuality frightened him: “Eiji was fearful, I came to understand, of his little ojosan with the soft lumps swelling on her chest and the furry spots sprouting here and there” (220-221). Such encounters reveal Eiji’s significance in Asako’s psychological

process of sexual awakening. Correspondingly, her physical/reproductive development began with physical contact with her older brother and stopped after his death. Therefore Asako's body grieves the loss not only of her brother, but also of a kind of sexual partner, a loss which initiates her desire to efface the self—the body—in shame.

Having realized that she understood the impossible position in which she placed Yano when she told him of Chisako's affair, Asako recalls: "The electrical field in winter glimpsed from my window after a night of snowfall. Almost pristine that December afternoon I'd sat with Chisako at the bus stop, before my walk home, before I sank my footprints into it. And when I did, how I'd wanted to take them back, to somehow erase them" (244). Plainly, this passage signifies her wish to take back her words, which she believes initiated the course of events resulting in four murders and a suicide, but it also implies a desire for total self-effacement. In removing the footprints, she would erase the bodily imprint she made in the snow, the traces of disruption she leaves in her wake. The image of imprinting relates to a similar incident involving the novel's other prominent figure of abjection, Yano, Chisako's husband and murderer.

Yano argues how, "Everything would have been different" (299) had they not been interned. He says, "We would be different people. We might not be here. . . . I'd be educated," and Asako explains, "He was touching his hand to the tops of my things throughout the room, planting his prints in the dust" (299). His prints in the dust remind the reader of the newsprint that Asako describes as staining her hands with a guilty permanence when she reads of the murders. Her fingers subsequently mark with ink whatever they touch, even after washing. Similarly, Sakamoto uses the image of Yano's prints in the dust to remind the reader of the green-tea stain—a substance which the characters repeatedly remark doesn't stain—that Asako left on Chisako's white carpet symbolically contaminating the purity of Japanese-from-Japan Chisako, who never knew the shame of internment.

The narrator's tendency to idealize Japan marks her sense of herself and other Nisei as inferior. Asako's prints in the snow, her inky fingerprints, and Yano's prints in the dust mark both of them as figures of disruption and build on her narrative's previous descriptions of them as abject. Furthermore, her descriptions compound to identify a larger categorization of Nisei as figures of abjection within the Canadian social body. We can read Yano's argument that they were coerced to leave Canada and go to Japan—in his words, "shipped back to where you'd never been" (93)—as a government attempt to

remove the abject. Yano says, “They were hoping we’d all commit hara-kiri in the camps. . . . You know, Saito-san, there were a few who did kill themselves. Out of shame” (258).

Later, Chisako provides an image that contrasts Asako’s childhood idealization of Japan when she discusses the bombings and how “People shut themselves away. It was better they kill themselves, to spare their loved ones the sight of them, day after day” (211). Here the conflation of physical ugliness and shame results in the removal of the ugly from society through hiding or suicide. It is an act of consideration, to avoid shame, to act honourably, selflessly. Yano’s description of the kamikaze points to a similar sense of honour: “The kamikaze cleansed themselves and prayed before they flew off to die for the emperor” (257). The association of Yano with the kamikaze forces the reader to question the role of honour/duty and shame in Yano’s murder of his family and his suicide. The day Yano speaks of the kamikaze, Asako explains that “He was not so ugly to me that day. He wore fresh, clean clothes; even his fingernails, habitually long and dirty, had been clipped. He was a different person. Almost handsome” (257). Following her description, she reveals that at that moment she was helping Chisako to deceive him. We can read Yano’s sudden concern for hygiene and his reference to the cleanliness of the kamikaze as an indication that he already knows about Chisako’s affair and is planning his strike, that he is “dressing” his act in honour. Sakamoto reminds us that suicide can be an act of shame, but it can also be an act of pride, not just defensive, but also offensive.³

The association of honour with Japan and shame with Canada further suggests Asako’s understanding of the Nisei as lacking honourable recourse in the face of injustice because of the shameful position they occupy. Therefore, whereas Japanese people in the novel, in general, wrestle with issues of shame and its associations with physical ugliness, Sakamoto suggests a double bind constrains the Japanese who are living—and specifically those born—in Canada. Yano’s suicide suggests that second-generation Japanese Canadians experience a particularly troubled lack of agency. Though Asako’s Papa (Issei) lies barely alive upstairs, at times in his own waste and thereby exemplifying the abject, he perseveres. Papa’s lack of agency in the novel’s present is mostly a product of his age and though he is perhaps the character most literally identified with the notion of the abject, he seems less associated with the shame Asako and Yano feel. Though Asako describes her father as “nothing now, less than an infant,” her childhood recollections of him invoke images of power (102). She remembers her father as

“strong” and “brutish” and notes how she “sank to the floor outside her papa’s door in the dark . . . silently weeping to be let in, afraid she’d be left alone” (102-103). Her larger sense of cultural dislocation partly reflects the disconnection she experienced and feared even within her own family. The Nisei’s responses to their lack of agency suggest an intergenerational fissure that reveals the second generation as utterly unconnected, lacking a sense of belonging in any physical, psychical and geographical territory but that of absence.

The strident activist character in the novel, Yano—with whom few wish to mobilize to seek reparations—physically carries out the acts of elimination that the novel and history imply the Canadian government sought when they interned people of Asian descent. His death drive is exaggerated and his act finds agency in a destruction that becomes difficult to read as victorious or as a productive act of resistance to institutional oppression. Though Yano invokes the image of the kamikaze, the murders of his family are neither honourable nor dutiful. Unable to seek redress through organized means—largely as a result of his community’s reluctance to join him—Yano eliminates himself and his family from the social fabric that has cast him to its fringe. As Marlene Goldman has pointed out, Sakamoto blurs the line between victim and victimizer. The author complicates Yano’s lack of political agency by tangling it up in domestic violence and murder. Though Goldman posits that Yano’s murder-suicide is potentially influenced by “outside forces” (379), Sakamoto suggests that his actions are ultimately destructive just as Asako believes her revelation to him of Chisako’s affair was. Sakamoto underscores the potentially dangerous/destructive outward manifestations of the self-hatred that racial oppression produces.

Not only does Asako’s instinct toward death function within herself, but she projects it onto others, specifically on Yano with whom she identifies her own sense of self-repulsion. Her descriptions of his poor hygiene, and specifically his odour, clogged chest, and foul breath resonate with her descriptions of herself. She explains, “A scent filled my nostrils; it was a mingling of Yano’s pungent body odour and the not-unfamiliar smell of fried fish and daikon. This . . . disconcerted me; made me flush with shame at our shared habits, our odours” (114). Combined with a perception of Nisei as repulsive, Asako’s trauma manifests itself in a conscious or unconscious desire to harm others within her social context. As Asako projects her sense of self-as-object onto others of her generation, she—like Yano—takes up the project of government policy to expel the object from the Canadian social

body, “to somehow erase them.” Her own death drive bleeds into the social and political realms.

Asako’s physiological response to Eiji’s death, specifically the cessation of her period, physically marks the onset of such potentially self-destructive consequences. It signals her initial sense of guilt and its relation to her sexual identity; it inhibits her reproductive capabilities and generates a contained space where internalized racism gestates. Asako incorporates the racist ideology of Canadian legislation during World War II and, on some level, to her, the Japanese Canadians who stayed in Canada remained inside the national body and contaminated it from within, potentially similar to her own body that refused to release that which is “repulsive.”

When Asako speaks to the detective, she notices a varicose vein on her leg. She says, “It seemed to vibrate grotesquely. Incredibly, it was a part of me, my own body. How long had it been there? It seemed undeniably a sign” (127). Her surprise that something grotesque could be a part of her and her interpretation of the vein as a sign—while she is in the presence of a white Canadian police authority—reinforces her perception of herself as abject. The detective’s Italian name, Rossi, denotes his family’s immigrant history, yet his association with law and order emphasizes the connotation of disorder with which Asako associates Japanese Canadians. Furthermore, her inability to say how long she has had the vein suggests that her recollection of the onset of menopause is blurry, as is her remembrance of her experiences in the camp.

The confluence of her puberty and menopause is symptomatic of the guilt and shame she feels, responses reinforced by the oppression of the camp and the death of her brother. Speaking with the detective, another sense of guilt arises, guilt over her potential role in the Nakamuras’ deaths and again—as was the case with Eiji’s death—her guilt manifests itself physiologically, as she becomes “grotesque.” She associates such impressions of herself with Sachi and all the Nakamuras except Chisako: “I couldn’t tell if I was weeping or sweating or bleeding, if the dress that clung to me was my own weathered, welted skin, if the sludge under my feet had come from my body or the earth. The whole world was leaking and we were a part of it, and so were Tam and Kimi and Yano, wherever they were” (76). Here the boundaries between the self and the abject are totally dissolved in Asako’s mind. As are the dead: Sachi and Asako *are* the abject.

Several times in the novel Asako refers to herself as a monster. After she admits that she told Yano about Chisako’s affair, she says, “What had I done?

A monster, that was what I was, what I'd always been. I could not stop" (239). Asako's rhetoric of monstrosity also calls to mind notions of reproduction, specifically monstrous births. Images of deformity and grotesqueness permeate the text; we can read them as "products" of Asako's narrative, as products of herself. As she fetishizes the narrative with retellings of specific events, she underscores the monstrosity with which she identifies her actions and herself. She believes that her actions and her physiology are monstrous, that she is the asexual reproducer of monstrosity.

The other monstrous figure in the text is Yano. Asako describes the detective saying that he thought Yano "had to be some kind of . . ." Asako finishes his sentence: "Monster" (282). Asako associates herself and Yano with the monstrous and the grotesque, both in action and appearance. They see themselves as beings to be hidden. Yano explains, "We're so full of shame, aren't we, Asako? We hide away, afraid that they'll lock us up again. . . . Chisako saw it in me. . . . It isn't attractive, Asako. Especially in a man. I don't blame her" (231).

Asako and Yano's particularly gendered understandings of themselves produce different destructive behaviours. Sugiman notes that "[w]ith the movement of most men into forced labour camps, the places of internment tended to be feminized" (374).⁴ Yano's shame manifests itself in his mind as emasculation, and he kills his family, his wife's lover, and himself. Asako's shame produces a similar experience of "ungendering," which inhibits her sexual growth and manifests itself in a less-direct reaction in which she believes her betrayal of Chisako's secret resulted in Yano's murder-suicide. We can read Yano's response to shame as projecting itself outward and Asako's as projecting itself inward—furthermore, Asako's body's retention of fluid mimics her internalized response to shame even as it makes itself visible. This reading suggests the potential of a gendered divide in survivors' reactions to experiences of indignity.⁵ Nevertheless, Yano's and Asako's "monstrous" acts signify their ultimate refusal to hide. Their responses illuminate the destructive potential of one's identification with the abject. Asako encapsulates the image of the victim transforming into the victimizer when she describes herself clinging to Eiji in the water: "I'd held on as a drowning person does, drowning another" (183).

Complicating this theory of the victimizing victim, however, is Asako's desire to protect and ultimately save Sachi, the young girl who listens to Asako and who mourns the death of her boyfriend, Tam, Yano's son. The young girl feeds Asako's repetition-compulsion by asking for and listening to her stories of Eiji. Although Asako is critical of Sachi's neglectful mother, Keiko—Nisei like herself and Yano—Asako is more drawn to than repelled

by Sachi whose scabbed hands, the result of self-mutilation, we can read as physically/literally signs of trauma, again unspecified, perhaps even inherited. Goldman reminds us that “Freud repeatedly likens melancholy to ‘an open wound’” and she argues that “[i]n portraying images of wounding, [this novel] appropriate[s] and re-stage[s] the violence and trauma experienced by Canadians of Japanese ancestry—the word ‘trauma’ is, of course, Greek for wound” (380). Thus, Sachi’s wounds function symbolically—showing, as Goldman puts it, that “death and loss continue to mark the identities of the next generation” (380).

Recent work on skin and psychology, however, grants Sachi’s scabs a literal or medical significance beyond the symbolic function Goldman has shown. Jay Prosser notes that “Psychic disturbance can inscribe on the skin traumatic memories according to the hysterical symptomisations of the unconscious” (54). Referring to Didier Anzieu’s theory that “damage to the psychic envelope can be remembered physically” (54), Prosser explains how Anzieu’s study reveals that people “appear to remember[,] in their skin conditions[,] what they cannot consciously express. Self-mutilation . . . take[s] [them] back to a childhood memory or unconscious fantasy too traumatic to become conscious. These skin disorders appear as returns of an unspeakable repressed event” (54). Prosser continues that, “skin memories may remember, not just an individual unconscious, but a cultural one . . . ‘a transgenerational haunting’” (54-59). We can read Sachi’s scabs as a concrete example of such skin memories.

Freud argues that “masochism, the sadism within an individual turning back upon its own ego . . . is in reality a return to an earlier stage of the drive, a regression” (94). In their regressive tendencies, Sakamoto allies the two intergenerational characters. Moreover, following the confirmation of Tam’s death, the narrator describes the self-mutilating Sachi as her “wise child, wizened and old” (244), suggesting a parallel between Asako’s life after Eiji’s death and Sachi’s future after Tam. Both characters experience a confluence of life stages following a loved one’s death. We can read Asako’s attraction to Sachi and her interest in her budding sexuality as a regressive desire to return to her own earlier stage of development, perhaps the stage she was at before Eiji died.

Sachi represents a potential seam, a suturing of Asako’s ruptured development. Sachi can experience what Asako did not and will allow Asako to participate in her process of sexual maturation. Sachi herself is scarred and she scars herself. She is a figure associated with repeated injuring and healing

and Asako repeatedly notices the opening and closing of her cuts. Asako's attraction to Sachi—the receptacle of her repeated stories—is an attempt to remedy her inability “to say what really happened.” Freud himself remains unconvinced, by the end of his book, of the significant connection between “the regressive character of instinct” and “the repetition-compulsion” (76). Perhaps Asako's interest in Sachi is not so much regressive and symptomatic of a death instinct, but partially progressive and productive. Sachi can and does say, “I didn't save Tam and you didn't save your brother” (275). As well, Sachi confesses that she told Tam about his mother's affair, but Asako contradicts her, “admitting” for the first time to someone else that she told Yano about Chisako and Mr. Spears, possibly signifying a “breakthrough” enabling her to “say what happened.” Though Asako uses the girl to try and erase her own traumas, Sachi demands that Asako face them. However, Sachi believes in her own guilt. She retorts, “I know what I did. I know what's true and what's a lie . . . even if you don't” (277).

Therefore, Sakamoto undermines Asako's and Sachi's recollections, binds them in feelings of guilt and links them through masochism and physiological disorders, suggesting that internment produced internalized repercussions, both physiological and psychological, that transcend the generation who experienced the shame of the camps; nevertheless, Asako's envious descriptions of Sachi—whose sexual drives counter her death drives—convey optimism. Despite the psychological and physiological associations between Asako and Sachi, the narrator expresses hope and admiration for the Sansei, Sachi, and her ability to express herself both sexually and verbally. Whether Sachi indeed does know “what really happened” remains unclear, but she is determined to believe in her knowledge. For Asako, such willful determination is cautiously inspiring and admirable.

However, the most hopeful character at the end of the novel is Asako's younger brother, Stum. Having disregarded Yano's repeated advice that the Nisei must “stick together,” Stum, unlike Asako, has found someone to love him back (196), someone who hails from the Philippines. If there is any optimism in the novel, as Goldman has suggested, Sakamoto implies it rests in hybridity, or at least an acceptance of it. Sakamoto suggests that resistance to ethnically hybrid relationships signals the psychical and physical damage of racial oppression and further isolating for the Nisei, as she exemplifies through Yano. But the novel is not so hopeful for Asako who, unlike her brother, is old enough to remember internment. After Stum and his girlfriend, Angel, demonstrate how to “sex” the chicks on the chicken farm,

Asako concludes, “Girls here, boys there. It was simple, really” (305). However, Asako has learned the fate of the chick who fits neither category, or rather fits both, the one who is physiologically “no good” as she watches Angel “[close] her eyes and [squeeze its neck] hard for several seconds” (304).

The congestion of Asako’s sexual life corresponds with the clogging of Eiji’s lungs to suggest that she shares more in common with the “no good” chick that Angel kills than with those that fall naturally into the “cycle of things” (305). The sexing of the chicks at the end of the novel suggests that Asako remains a disruption, the abject. Sakamoto’s return to the image of reproductive physiology reminds us of Asako’s simultaneous pre-pubescent and menopausal physiological manifestations of trauma: she is at once pre- and post-reproductive, no more “productive” than the hermaphroditic chick Angel kills. Sakamoto draws parallels within the Nisei, between Asako who has no children, Keiko who neglects hers, and Yano who murders his. By concluding with the image of the simplistically sexed chicks, the author produces an ending doubtful of the “lost generation’s” possible incorporation into the normative, reproductive Canadian national body, one driven to sustain its own life.

NOTES

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- 1 See Fell (2005) and Hughes (2005). Dean Franco’s physiologically centred study (2005) specifically addresses physical trauma.
- 2 See Fell (2005).
- 3 Howells notes that although “[f]rom one perspective Yano’s crime could be seen as honorable . . . it is also an ironic fulfillment of the fate that he had angrily vowed to avoid” (139).
- 4 Further, Paul Lerner traces scholarship on the early twentieth-century relationship between trauma and male hysteria, specifically the illness’s “stigma of femininity” (155).
- 5 Chung, et al. note in their study of Cambodian refugees that “[i]n response to the severity of their premigration trauma, some older Cambodian women developed nonorganic or psychosomatic blindness: they literally can no longer stand to ‘see’ the memories of their distress” (112). The particularity of such symptoms among women support the possibility of gendered physiological responses to traumatic experience. I might further note the potential resonance of Sakamoto’s title with the Cambodian killing fields.

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