

Debunking a Postmodern Conception of History: A Defence of Humanist Values in the Novels of Joy Kogawa

To be without history is to be unlive d crystal, unused flesh; is to
live the life of the unborn. JOY KOGAWA *Itsuka* 280

Joy Kogawa's two novels, *Obasan* (1981) and *Itsuka* (1992), are the first fictional works to explore the Japanese-Canadian people's experience of internment during World War II and their subsequent struggle for redress (Rose 218; Willis 239). Kogawa's works are worthy of close examination not only because they are the sole fictive narrativizations of important events in Canadian history, but also because they explore the process and reception of history writing.

Current theoretical discussions of the relationship between historiography and fiction are informed by antiessentialist notions about the impossibility of reliable representation. Advancing the poststructuralist belief in the essentially unstable nature of signification, postmodern critics who enjoy popularity at present argue that language cannot reflect empirical reality. History is not, therefore, an accurate record of past events but is, like fiction, a subjective construct.¹

Reflecting a relativistic understanding of history, Naomi Nakane, the narrator of both *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, asserts that the "truth" of the Japanese Canadians' evacuation is "murky, shadowy and grey" (*Obasan* 32), and she assumes that belief-affirming modes of expression are ineffectual: "are you thinking that through . . . speech-making and story-telling . . . we can extricate ourselves from our foolish ways? Is there evidence for optimism?" (*Obasan* 199). This historical scepticism, however, 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. As Marshall Berman observes, in a post-modern world people lose both the “desire and [the] power to remember” (qtd. in Carr 58).

I propose to scrutinize the assumptions that underlie historical perspectivism through an analysis of Kogawa’s novels. Through Naomi, Kogawa suggests that the postmodern denial of historical veracity is silencing, debilitating, and, ultimately, “betray[s] the truth in ourselves” (*Itsuka* 246). I intend to show how Kogawa’s novels stand against the widespread critical acceptance of contingency through an implicit “commitment to the theoretically problematic yet ethically indispensable desire to get it right” (Patterson 261).

Naomi’s path to maturity involves a confrontation with her historical background and the recognition that “To be without history is to be un-lived crystal, unused flesh; is to live the life of the unborn” (*Itsuka* 280). Through Naomi’s evolving political consciousness, Kogawa seeks to assert the authority and legitimacy of the Japanese community’s historical perspective in a society whose dominant discourses have traditionally denied it. I feel that it is crucial to defend a humanistic faith in historical writing because, as a Jewish woman, I share with Kogawa a sense of the horror of history. Contemporary critics who assert the relativity of all literary expression and, by extension, all lived experience fail to examine the serious and very *real* implications of such an antiassertionist perspective. If experience cannot be formulated with any authority, and no worldview or theory can legitimately speak as truth, then we cut ourselves off from the concrete, rational knowledge that we require in order to resist repeating the mistakes of the past. Thus, while the postmodern conception of history as subjective construct may be engaging in theory, in practice its consequences can be devastating.

Today, only fifty years after the Holocaust, the revisionist effort in North America has taken on alarming proportions. Over the last decade, two of the most tireless and influential Holocaust deniers have been Canadian: namely, Jim Keegstra and Ernst Zundel. The former a high-school history teacher, the latter a publisher, both profess that the Nazi murder of six million Jews never took place. The Holocaust, according to Keegstra and Zundel, is a myth created by the Jewish people in order to gain political and financial advantage in their effort to take over the world (Bercuson xv-xvi; Weimann 24). If we accept the theoretical position that we cannot claim for ourselves a historical narrative that is absolute *truth*, then we unconsciously

validate such voices of lunacy.² In fact, while Keegstra's and Zundel's statements may seem absurd and thus ineffective, today twenty-two percent of American adults accept that the Holocaust may not have occurred ("Survivors"). If we believe, finally, that all of history is a construct, then we embrace a passivity that renders us helpless against the recurrence of global devastation and monstrous crimes against humanity. "History," in other words, "is never simply 'What Have You,' if only because it has the power to destroy" (Foley 260).

Kogawa's novels have not received a lot of critical attention in academic circles, but they have been extensively reviewed. Reviews of *Obasan* are generous in their praise, expressing approval of Kogawa's impressive "technical skill" and "wholly unique voice" (Thomas 105; Kelman 39). Clearly, reviewers of the text are interested in examining Kogawa's prose in the context of her poetic accomplishments.³ As a result, the "richness of Kogawa's language," "the evocative quality of her imagery" (Bilan 318), and the novel's "sophisticated . . . structure" (Hill 31) are seen as the most salient parts of this first prose effort. Similarly, critics of *Itsuka* show interest in its formal elements, though to a lesser degree, being generally disappointed with the lack of "the kind of poetically charged language and intensity of perception that give *Obasan* its extraordinary beauty and power" (Keefer 35).⁴ While Kogawa's writing skills seem to capture the most attention in reviews, her success in assaulting our "collective amnesia" about Japanese-Canadian history is not overlooked (Thomas 103). Specifically, her ideological agenda is unanimously applauded. Reviewers of *Obasan* and *Itsuka* thank Kogawa for offering us the *real* story of Japanese internment and for reminding us that "It matters to get the facts straight" (*Obasan* 183).

This final attention to, and recognition of, the interpretative authority and moral efficacy of Kogawa's writing indicates that reviewers are not prompted to a postmodern understanding of *Obasan* and *Itsuka*. Similarly, in its focus on Kogawa's success in "re-establishing the facts of history" (Harris, "Broken" 44), early scholarship on her work reveals a commitment to humanist critical concerns. Studies of Kogawa's prose begin from the understanding that "The facts of history need some revision in the light of truth," and they imply a "faith in the liberating power of words" and their ability to convey *actual* human experience (St. Andrews 30; Willis 245). Only by evoking the past through language can Naomi "find the power [to] heal . . . her own fragmented psyche" (Howells 125). The discovery of self,

then, is linked to the discovery, and communication, of a historical reality.

Drawing on Catherine Belsey's discussion of contemporary post-Saussurean criticism, Marilyn Russell Rose defines Kogawa's work as "expressive realist" fiction; in other words, as "literature [that] reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one . . . individual, who expresses it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognize it as true" (225). Similarly, in one of the first published critical studies of *Itsuka*, Mason Harris argues that Kogawa's writing "follows the conventions of mimetic realism, adopting the traditional strategy of penetrating through layers of official mystification to reveal a true history concealed beneath them" ("Kogawa" 33). Scholarship on Kogawa's writing thus suggests that both *Obasan* and *Itsuka* "stand up to critical scrutiny despite their tenacious belief in shared or social reality as something that can be known and must be reacted to" (Rose 225).

While these earlier analyses make some valuable contributions to the study of Kogawa's works, more recent (largely postmodern) critical approaches to her writing do her a grave injustice. Among these, Donald C. Goellnicht's "Minority History as Metafiction" stands out as the most extreme and, I would argue, uncompromising postmodern interpretation of Kogawa's prose. Distinguishing himself from critics who remain "staunchly mimetic and humanistic" in their views of Kogawa's writing, Goellnicht examines *Obasan* "through the powerful . . . lens of recent theories of the postmodern and current poststructuralist" concerns (287, 288). Specifically, he defines Kogawa's text as "what Linda Hutcheon has ingeniously labelled 'historiographic metafiction'" and seeks "to demonstrate that history is relative and that danger lies in believing it to be absolute" (288, 291). According to Goellnicht, Kogawa makes no attempt to convey an authoritative historical reality, being "too aware of the impossibility of such a task" (294). He rather presumptuously concludes, furthermore, that "We as readers share this text's awareness that its truth cannot be absolute" (302).

But this is not the prevalent understanding of the text. It is not mine; nor, in fact, does it seem to be Goellnicht's. Although he insists that the telling of history can never be "unproblematic" and cannot be conveyed through "transparently referential" language (287), Goellnicht—as Arnold Davidson so astutely points out—"proceeds to present quite unproblematically much of the history in question" (19): "Before turning to the theoretical matrices

of my argument, . . . I should summarize some of the recent, and long overdue, historical accounts of the internment, evacuation, and dispersal of Japanese Canadians during and after the Second World War” (Goellnicht 288). Furthermore, Goellnicht informs us that, on the day that the Canadian government agreed to compensate Japanese Canadians for their losses and offered them a formal apology, parts of *Obasan* were read in the House of Commons (306). This occurrence, coupled with the fact that *Naomi no Michi* (1988)—Kogawa’s fusion of *Obasan* and her children’s book, *Naomi’s Road* (1986)—is a school textbook in Japan (Redekop 16), confirms that Kogawa’s words are understood as relevant, accurate, and, finally, as signifiers of truth.

The inconsistencies in the postmodern position on historical writing have inspired my study. While each individual lives, perceives, and describes experiences in his or her own unique and, ultimately, subjective way, we do *not* as a society, or as a world community, function as disengaged, isolated entities. We live in communities, we share knowledge, and, most importantly, we share and *act on* a sense of what is *true*. My study will differ from previous humanist analyses of Kogawa’s work in arguing that Naomi *initially* exemplifies the kind of historical scepticism characteristic of the postmodern “ex-centric.”⁵ However, I will ultimately reject the postmodern position by arguing that antiessentialist implications are evident in Kogawa’s writing only to demonstrate their practical futility. While postmodern thought may bring attention to “the ‘different’ and what has been considered marginal over what is deemed central” (Hutcheon, Introduction 10), the logic that the “margin” needs to call all of history into question in order to validate its own perspective is faulty. Deconstructing the notion of truth in order to validate a marginal point of view serves, in practice, to delegitimize *all* voices. In effect, then, Kogawa’s historical perspective would be as questionable as any other.⁶ Thus, in conceiving truth as an arbitrary construction, “some kinds of postmodern thought,” as Robert Holton argues, “have the effect of de-realizing concrete historical experience quite thoroughly, compounding rather than helping to ease the postcolonial situation” (303).

I will look at how Naomi’s initial distrust of historical truth and her suspicion of language result in a retreat into silence, an uneasiness with community, and a loss of faith in, and indifference to, social change. In other

words, Naomi's historical scepticism is alienating, silencing, and politically crippling. Looking specifically at *Itsuka*, I will then examine Naomi's transition from ambiguity to truth; from a questioning to a confirming of history. Naomi's sense of alienation from both historical legitimacy and historical discourse is countered through connection, political activity, and love. Her ultimate return to voice, to action, to community, and to a shared sense of historical reality is the result of her rejection of ambiguity, radical indeterminacy, and perspectivism. Ultimately, Kogawa suggests that faith, belief, and an embracing of univocality—"We've got to speak with one voice" (*Itsuka* 204, 209)—are necessary parts of "the endeavour to obliterate doubt" and to free "the truth that . . . lies badly mangled" beneath it (*Itsuka* 56).

Historiographic metafiction, according to Linda Hutcheon, is work "obsessed with how we come to know the past today" (*Politics* 47). This form, she argues, is appealing to contemporary Canadian writers because it satisfies both "a post-colonial Canadian need to reclaim the past" and a more general postmodern "need to investigate the ontological nature" of narrative (*Canadian Postmodern* 73). So convinced of its extensive use and vast appeal, Hutcheon has written *exhaustively* on this postmodern literary form. In her decade-long examination of the problematic nature of historical knowledge, Hutcheon repeatedly attempts to convince us that there is "never one truth" ("Pastime" 59), that there is no "real" outside ("Pastime" 68), and that it is with "scepticism" and "suspicion" that we are to perceive the world, not through a naïve "positivist" "faith," or "confidence," in empiricist epistemologies ("Pastime" 55).

Maintaining the poststructuralist conviction that "language . . . constitutes reality rather than merely reflecting it," Hutcheon argues that "the mimetic connection between art and life . . . has changed" (*Canadian Postmodern* 65, 61). The reader, she explains, no longer passively absorbs the text but actively participates in the production of meaning through the metafictional self-consciousness of the authorial voice. Citing Timothy Reiss, Hutcheon argues that this "discursive activity" has long been ignored "in the name of scientific objectivity and universality, or in the name of novelistic realism" (61). Rejecting mimesis as an effective narrative strategy, Hutcheon endorses George Bowering's notion that "realist fiction was intended to produce a window on the world. . . . Post-modern novels, on the other hand, are in a way decorative. If they are windows they are

stained-glass windows” (qtd. in *Canadian Postmodern* 63). Thus, in Hutcheon’s model, obfuscation is valued over clarity, and ambiguity over meaning. “[T]here is,” according to Hutcheon, “no transparency, only opacity” (*Politics* 47). In this theoretical context, history is no longer a reliable reflection of external reality but a problematized rendering of individual consciousness. Therefore, the function of historiographic metafiction, she argues, is to reveal our inability to both “(unproblematically) *know* . . . [historical] reality” and “to be able to represent it in language” (“Pastime” 68).

In “thematiz[ing] the postmodern concern with the radically indeterminate and unstable nature of textuality and subjectivity,” historiographic metafiction challenges what Hutcheon perceives as the totalizing voice of dominant history (*Politics* 48). Specifically, in its self-conscious rejection of univocality, this postmodern literary form serves to dismantle what Helen Tiffin defines as “the European ‘master narrative’ of history” (173).⁷ The dominant Eurocentric interpretation of Canadian history thus becomes open to interrogation by the “colonial other” or postmodern “ex-centric.” In other words, the stories of the marginalized are legitimated through the deconstruction of existing hegemonic discourses. Thus, “story-telling has returned,” Hutcheon argues, “but as a problem, not as a given” (*Politics* 51). Building on Hayden White’s theory that historical records are subjected to narrative form in order to endow the events of the past with meaning (“Value of Narrativity” 5), Hutcheon maintains that the “teller—of a story or history— . . . constructs . . . facts by giving a particular meaning to events” (58). “Facts,” in other words, “are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events” (57).

Plugging *Obasan* into Hutcheon’s theoretical model, Goellnicht asserts that Kogawa “knows that history is not fixed, but discursive, a ‘form of saying’ founded in language, which is always in a state of flux.” “In this self-knowledge,” he adds, “Kogawa’s fiction—like that of many minority writers—transcends the mimetic approach . . . many critics still search for” (294). In accordance with Hutcheon’s notion that the narrator of a historiographic metafiction is not “confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty” (“Pastime” 66), Goellnicht argues that Naomi’s retreat into silence “is linked to her doubts about the efficacy of [Aunt] Emily’s words to present reality or effect change” (294-95). While Naomi is the paradigmatic ex-centric—“self-consciously reinterpret[ing] history from . . .

[a] minority position”—Aunt Emily, he argues, “is not yet the postmodern” (290, 293). In her idealistic “attitude to history as the piecing together of truth out of fragments,” Aunt Emily is naively unaware that “surely her truth remains itself a construct that can only be partial” (293). “That Naomi maintains the self-consciousness to recognize the uncertainties in epistemology is,” according to Goellnicht, “her abiding strength” (294). Therefore, against Aunt Emily’s active search for truth and tireless efforts to effect social change, Goellnicht posits the despondent and passive Naomi as the real spirit behind her community’s sociopolitical cause.

There is little evidence to support Goellnicht’s claim that Kogawa sets Aunt Emily up as an “inferior” historian to Naomi.⁸ Rather, through these seemingly opposed characters, Kogawa explores two possible approaches to historical narration. In so doing, she underscores the paradox implicit in the postmodern position that all language is value-ridden and that all value, in turn, is contingent. Specifically, if to articulate a perspective means only to “produce another fiction” (Goellnicht 291), then on what basis is one motivated to speak at all? Goellnicht attempts to resolve this “apparent catch-22” by arguing that

Naomi unravels the paradox by realizing . . . not only that to remain silent means the loss of any opportunity to shape personal and public history, but also that in shaping history through discourse or narrative one must be self-conscious, aware of the manipulative power of the word so as not to claim absolute truth for one’s vision. (299)

In other words, Goellnicht concludes that we are able “to shape personal and public history” not through an emphatic claim to a single shared reality but through an individualized “acknowledgement of limitation” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 58). His argument leaves unanswered the question of what specifically kindles Naomi’s thoughts, inspiring her to speech and action. What impels Naomi to operate morally and responsibly—in short, for the good of the whole—if there is no real or shared truth to pursue? In his subjection of Kogawa’s writing to a fixed theoretical formula, Goellnicht ignores that Naomi derives the strength and inspiration to speak by sharing in Aunt Emily’s social reality. Naomi indicates that Aunt Emily’s “papers are wind and fuel nudging my morning thoughts to flame” (*Obasan* 32), and that her “yearly stories are pebbles skipping over my quiet sea. Each one of her stones helps to build the ground on which I seek to stand” (*Itsuka* 66). Clearly, through sharing in Aunt Emily’s and, by extension, the communi-

ty's sense of what is true, Naomi abandons indeterminacy and passivity and allows "the rage within [to] begin . . . its slow emergence" (*Itsuka* 71).

Naomi's narratives in both *Obasan* and *Itsuka* can be defined as retrospectives. Spanning about a month and a half of current time, and thirty years of the past, *Obasan* documents Naomi's experiences as a child exposed to social discrimination and racist politics. Beginning where *Obasan* ends, *Itsuka* opens with the middle-aged Naomi reflecting on her toiling in the beet fields of Alberta during childhood and early adolescence. Thus, "*Itsuka* . . . covers," as Kathryn Barnwell notes, "some of the same stories we read about in *Obasan*" (39). In *Itsuka*, however, the death of Obasan impels Naomi to make a change, and she leaves Granton to join Aunt Emily in Toronto. With this relocation, Naomi's narrative becomes less focused on inward and past experiences and assumes an outward and forward-looking emphasis. Thus, "While *Obasan* is intimate and personal, *Itsuka* moves into the public and political" (Barnwell 39). Naomi's introverted and introspective narrative in *Obasan* reveals her suspicions of Aunt Emily's discourse and actions. *Itsuka*, on the other hand, traces the development of Naomi's political consciousness, following the story of her growing involvement in the pursuit of historical truth and her investment in the dream that "*itsuka*"—someday—"the time for laughter will come" (*Obasan* 178; *Itsuka* 288).

In *Obasan*, Naomi's rejection of Aunt Emily's values suggests a commitment to the historical relativism characteristic of the postmodern perspective. "All our ordinary stories," Naomi asserts, "are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past" (25). It is the fallibility of memory, then, that renders the past, and Aunt Emily's truth, questionable. Even "Aunt Emily's Christmas," Naomi maintains, "is not the Christmas I remember" (79). Thus, it is not possible, according to Naomi, to know history with any certainty, because past experiences are lost or distorted with time. For Naomi, then, history is a chaos of disjointed and discrepant events from which only "[f]ragments of fragments" and "[s]egments of stories" are retrievable (53). The past is not a continuous sequence of events that form a coherent whole but a mystery filled with "many unknowns and forbidden rooms" (*Itsuka* 119).

Because the relationship between lived and reexplored experience seems tenuous, Naomi loses faith in the objectivity of historical representation and

in the notion of historical truth. As a result, Aunt Emily's encouragement to "Write the vision and make it plain" meets only scepticism and defiance from Naomi:

Write the vision and make it plain? For her, 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,⁹ 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)

For Naomi, authorized truth is an archaic fiction. Reality, she believes, is ideologically and discursively constructed. The government's published "Facts about evacuees in Alberta," for example, is accompanied by "a photograph of one family, all smiles, standing around a pile of beets. The caption reads: 'Grinning and happy'" (193). According to Naomi, however, "That is one telling. It's not how it was" (197).

Rejecting the ability of words to reflect empirical reality accurately, Naomi disputes the efficacy of Aunt Emily's discourse:

All of Aunt Emily's words, all her papers, the telegrams and petitions, are like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity, scaly claws hard at work. But what good they do, I do not know—those little black typewritten words—rain words, cloud droppings. . . . The words are not made flesh. (189)

In questioning Aunt Emily's language and resisting her "vision," Naomi removes herself from responsible historical agency and relegates herself to an ahistorical subject position. With no past to believe in, or from which to define herself, she becomes a silent and cynical bystander; a passive observer who is "no crusader," "doubt[s] almost everything," and is "not a true believer of anything much" (*Itsuka* 109, 31, 163).

It is clear, therefore, that Naomi's narrative reflects the exaggerated emphasis on subjectivity and the heightened sense of separateness articulated in postmodern conceptions of history. However, while Kogawa explores historical perspectivism through Naomi's sense of indeterminacy, she also exposes the implications that underlie this outlook. Naomi's conception of history as unknowable in any accurate or verifiable way results in a radical individualism that serves to alienate her further from her community.

Initially, it is the official dispersal policy that severs the bonds that tie both the Nakane family and the Japanese community together.¹⁰ The close relationship that Naomi once enjoyed with her parents, brother, and relatives exemplifies the rich familial bonds characteristic of Japanese culture:

“My parents, like two needles, knit the families carefully into one blanket. Every event was a warm-water wash, drawing us all closer till the fiber of our lives became an impenetrable mesh.” However, Japanese Canadians—“the original ‘togetherness’ people” (20)—are weakened through the systematic dissolution of the family unit. In *Obasan*, Naomi’s father is sent to work on a road gang, her mother disappears in Japan, Aunt Emily flees to Toronto, and she, Stephen, and Obasan and Uncle Isamu are first relocated to the “ghost town” of Slocan and then sent to labour in the beet fields of Granton. Consequently, in *Itsuka*, Naomi, at the beginning of her adult life, is consumed by a feeling of homelessness: “I can’t see myself as part of Granton at all. I’m a transplant. Not a genuine prairie rose. . . . Even if I stood still for a hundred years on Main Street, there’d be no Granton roots under my feet” (48).

It is Naomi’s philosophical disposition, however, that exacerbates her sense of estrangement. In other words, her rejection of a legitimate, shared historical reality further alienates her from her community. Disengaged from her ethnic group’s convictions, Naomi ultimately experiences discomfort with the notion of community: “Something inside me cringes whenever I hear the phrase ‘your people’” (*Itsuka* 114).¹¹ However, she is incapable of connecting not only with her community but also with any other human beings. In both *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, Naomi’s repeated references to her “Old maid,” “Spinster,” or “Bachelor lady” marital status underscore her heightened sense of isolation (*Obasan* 8). Convinced that we are separated by both the subjective nature of our experiences and the inevitable bias of our discourse, Naomi lives in loneliness and solitude: “I know this aloneness. I’m lying here in this \$323-a-month bachelor apartment in Chinatown Toronto, a middle-aged throwback to the reptilian era, and I’m alone alone alone” (*Itsuka* 6). Embracing ambiguity and indeterminacy as a means to deal with the past leaves Naomi with a sense of her own futility and meaninglessness: “Sometimes I wake up in the darkness, wondering what life has been all about, wondering if there was any reason I was born. At times I’m almost violently empty, wandering among the life-bludgeoned in the shopping malls, in the subways, the stressways” (*Itsuka* 104-05). Transcending the purely physical, then, Naomi’s homelessness ultimately becomes an emotional and spiritual dislocation as well.

With neither a historical truth to believe in nor a shared reality to act on, Naomi retreats into silence and forgetfulness, transforming herself into “a small white stone” (*Itsuka* 180).¹² Her silence, however, is not purely self-imposed but a manifestation of learned behaviour. Raised almost exclusively by Obasan, Naomi is a “serious baby” who “almost never talks or smiles” (*Obasan* 57, 101). Obasan, who is always “gentle and quiet” (68), exists in accordance with traditional rules of behaviour, which emphasize delicacy, duty, and service. Therefore, she “does not dance to the multi-cultural piper’s tune or respond to the racist’s slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands” (226). From Obasan, then, Naomi learns “that speech often hides like an animal in a storm” (3). As Kogawa herself explains, as an adult Naomi is a “completely non-political person.” In keeping with Obasan’s manner, she is “subterranean; her stream of consciousness remains underground” (“From the Bottom” 96).

The silent suffering and dignified passivity that Naomi learns from Obasan is characteristic of the issei’s behavioural and moral code.¹³ The issei are “shadow-dwellers,” gentle and unassuming people “who are proud to be humble” (*Itsuka* 273, 137):

How well I know the issei, who will never ever complain. It’s their code of honour requiring them to gaman, to endure without flinching, that makes them the silent people of Canadian nursing homes. From their early childhood in Meiji Japan, they witnessed the poverty and the beyond-exhaustion labour of their fellow villagers, who bore suffering without words, for the love of old parents, for the honour of ancestors, for the sake of the whole. (*Itsuka* 131)

In accordance with her belief in endurance without complaint, Obasan’s natural inclination is to dismiss the injustices that she suffered at the hands of the Canadian government: “Everything is forgetfulness. The time for forgetting is now come” (*Obasan* 30). Therefore, for Naomi, the most obvious alternative to political commitment and the pursuit of historical facticity is silence and denial: “If it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past pain. . . . [Q]uestions referring to turbulence in the past, are an unnecessary upheaval in the delicate ecology of this numb day” (*Obasan* 45).

In complete opposition to Obasan, Aunt Emily, a “made-in-Canada woman of Japanese ancestry” (*Itsuka* 3), is an aggressive, highly vocal, self-proclaimed political activist. Completely “non-Japanese in her exuberance,” she defies silence and passivity, rejecting the possibility of “ever becom[ing] a bridge-dweller or a fence-sitter, a person who becomes useless through

inaction" (*Itsuka* 3, 165). In his examination of the discursive strategies employed in the fiction of women of colour, Robert Holton argues that the sense of abuse and outrage expressed by the overt, or outspoken, narrative voice reflects the writer's "attempt to impress these facts and this point of view in an undeniable way" on her readers (217). True to Holton's model, Aunt Emily functions as a "jarring witness" whose primary objective is to make "the experience of [Japanese Canadians] . . . available and comprehensible outside the confines of that group" (193). Holton argues further, however, that "given an extreme enough degree of marginality and alienation, this experience must be legitimated even for members of the marginalized group itself whose interpretative categories may be overwhelmed by the *sensus communis* of the dominant social and interpretative community" (193). Thus, it is also Aunt Emily's role to dismantle the politics of negativity that have separated Japanese Canadians from their social memory, or history. It is her task specifically, then, to convince Naomi of the veracity and relevance of her own testimony: "You have to remember. . . . Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene" (*Obasan* 49-50).

Clearly, then, Naomi becomes torn between the silent forbearance that *Obasan* demonstrates and the outspoken revolt that Aunt Emily demands. It is when Naomi hears Grandma Kato's letter and learns of her mother's death, however, that the conflict between silence and speech is resolved. The rage and the sense of injury that emerge with Naomi's knowledge of her mother's experience at Nagasaki indicate that she accepts Grandma Kato's words not as arbitrary linguistic symbols but as signifiers of a specific, heinous reality. In other words, Naomi's response to her mother's particular experience suggests that she no longer discredits objective consciousness or perceives the past as unknowable. Rather, her very emotions imply her commitment to a specific historical truth. For how can one feel when one does not know anything with any certainty? Acceptance of an explicit—albeit horrific—historical past, coupled with Aunt Emily's documentation, inspires Naomi's rejection of an open-ended conception of historical interpretation and the silence that is its consequence.¹⁴

Both textual evidence and critical commentary contradict Goellnicht's conviction that Naomi completely dismisses Aunt Emily's position as naïve, ineffective, and thus futile. Naomi, Mason Harris asserts, is finally "able to acknowledge the validity of Emily's concerns" ("Broken" 52). "A faith in the

liberating power of words,” Garry Willis argues further, “is something that Naomi comes to share with Aunt Emily” (245). Similarly, Lynn Magnusson notes that, when Naomi revisits the coulee in the final pages of *Obasan*, she wears Aunt Emily’s coat, “a sign that she will enter Emily’s (and Kogawa’s) wordy world” (66). Indeed, Aunt Emily’s papers become “symbols of communion, white paper bread for the mind’s meal” (*Obasan* 182), that offer salvation from the doubt, distrust, and lack of conviction to which Naomi had submitted.

However, as Willis contends, “To say that Naomi converts from Obasan’s view that silence is best to Aunt Emily’s view that one has to speak out is, finally, to oversimplify” (243). Rather, it is from the synthesis of Obasan’s and Aunt Emily’s outlooks that Naomi derives her new perspective.¹⁵ Specifically, while it is from Aunt Emily’s unrelenting activity that Naomi is encouraged to break the silence, it is from Obasan’s utter humanity that she secures the strength to do so. Naomi acquires a definitive sense of history from Aunt Emily, but it is from Obasan, and the issei generation to which she belongs, that she gains her spirit:

Though they lacked political power, their spiritual powers remain—their steadfast rock-hard endurance, their determination, dignity, graciousness, loyalty, modesty, resourcefulness, reliability, industry, generosity, gratitude, their reverence for nature, their respect for education, their amazing tenderness towards the young, their intense passion for us to be worth something. They endured for the sake of the long-term good, for the well-being of the whole. They endured for a future that only the children will know. Their endurance is their act of faith and love. What they offer to the future are their keys to the safekeeping of the soul. (*Itsuka* 250)

Combining Obasan’s dignity with Aunt Emily’s determination enables Naomi to accept both her “need to be educated” and her responsibility to defend the humanist conviction that “What’s right is right. What’s wrong is wrong” (*Obasan* 188, 183).

In *Itsuka*, Kogawa explores Naomi’s spiritual rebirth through her re-insertion into community and her reclaiming of a shared historical reality. As a sequel to *Obasan*, *Itsuka* follows Naomi’s journey from a questioning to a confirming of history, from personal scepticism to political commitment to redress.¹⁶ While *Obasan* concludes with Naomi’s knowledge of “the fuller story of her life of loneliness and loss, that knowledge,” as Arnold Davidson points out, “constitutes the grounds for revi-

sioning a past, not for claiming a future” (85). It is in *Itsuka*, then, that “the middle-aged Naomi tak[es] the first tentative steps towards freeing herself from a prison of emotional, physical, and spiritual homelessness” (Keefer 35) by establishing connections that will encourage her to build a meaningful future. The novel is the story of Naomi’s transformation from a profound scepticism of interpretation to a full acceptance of her community’s objective order of values and integrated worldview: “the picture grows clearer, our wholeness forms, when even a few of us, in our brokenness, start coming together” (168). In demonstrating how commitment to the common good and the valuing of the collective over the individual effects significant and meaningful social change, *Itsuka* rejects the postmodern belief that “the importance of logical clarity, brotherhood, reason as arbiter, political order, [and] community . . . are dead as *useful* frames of reference or pertinent guides to procedure” (Graff 408).

When *Itsuka* opens in September 1983 Japanese Canadians are “pieces of a jigsaw puzzle . . . scattered across the nation”; “there’s no Japantown anywhere” (168, 9). The novel’s primary emphasis, consequently, is the need for connection, community, and collective political activity. “The dispersed,” Aunt Emily stresses, “are the disappeared, unless they’re connected” (3). Without belief in a shared system of values and a common historical reality, there can be no community, no knowing, no identity, no self. In short, there can only be indifference. Thus, Aunt Emily asserts, “If our community is to live again, we must go down together into the mud and keep on struggling. . . . This we must do for our psychic survival. This first, this basic thing. What heals people is the transforming power of mutuality. Mutual vulnerability. Mutual strength” (188).¹⁷

In both *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, Aunt Emily’s character remains static. Her faith in her vision, in other words, is unwavering: “She walks down a road made narrow and straight by an unswerving heart” (*Itsuka* 276). If anything, Aunt Emily’s ideological stance and political purpose reflect an even greater commitment to rational humanist ideals. Convinced that ambiguity breeds indifference, while absolute knowledge fosters change, Aunt Emily contends that “We’ll disappear if we don’t care. We can’t care if we don’t know our stories” (*Itsuka* 248). However, in *Itsuka*, she seeks not only to defend the truth of her community’s stories but also to demonstrate their connection to other tales of oppression. “[All our] tales of suffering,” according to Aunt Emily, “should be [our] bond” (197). She struggles not

only to vindicate the rights of her own community, then, but also “to better the human condition” in general. Thus, Aunt Emily’s discourse and political efforts are not limited to her own specific reality; they address a global sense of injustice: “Oppression is oppression. It’s all connected, whether it’s one abused nisei or the starving in Ethiopia” (189).¹⁸

In her recognition of the mutuality inherent in all suffering and in her call for a collaborative politics, Aunt Emily rejects the postmodern belief in contingency and fragmentation, which denies a common, or shared, sense of reality. As Gerald Graff argues, then, the valuing of commonality, univocality, truth, and meaning is not necessarily tied to a single, “centrist” sense of experience, “but [is] part of a more universal human heritage” (417). Specifically, if we conclude that all experience and every articulation of experience are necessarily constructs created by the “centre” or oppressing social class in order to maintain its position of privilege, then we also reject the possibility of the sharing that links us in a common struggle for a just society. As Rita Felski argues in her examination of feminist literature and social change, the contemporary subversive aesthetic “which undermines truth and self-identity has a potential tendency to limit direct political effect” and to undermine the “more determinate interests of an oppositional politics” (162).¹⁹

Itsuka documents how, in order to effect significant social change, not just the Japanese community “must speak with one voice” (209), but all Canadians “need to be linked arm in arm” with “our roots . . . firmly interlocked” (171, 4). Thus, in order to legitimate their historical truth and alter the government’s perception of their community, Japanese Canadians must confront the politics of multiculturalism that, as Janice Kulyk Keefer argues, has “abetted rather than eradicated the racism that [Kogawa] presents as an institutionalized aspect of Canadian life” (35). Instead of offering ethnic communities access to real power, the Canadian government sponsors “a multicultural event in the foyer of the Arts Centre where we sing pretty songs” (*Itsuka* 243). By exposing the hypocrisy inherent in such token efforts to promote ethnocultural unity, Kogawa suggests that only the illusion of significant and meaningful multiculturalism exists in Canada: “We tell people we’re integrated here and get along in our neighbourhoods. Then we step from the stage and disappear” (243).

The success of the movement for redress, Kogawa reveals, is dependent on building a valid and visible multicultural society. Consequently,

Japanese Canadians must act as “bridges,” “hyphens,” and “diplomats” (85), forming a single, united front with all Canadians by sharing the meaning of suffering and asserting a common experience of a significant external reality. In so doing, the Japanese community can attack the shallow relativism expounded by Canada’s various ministers of multiculturalism—personified in the novel by Dr. Stinson, “consultant to Ottawa’s Multicultural Directorate” (149)—who dismiss minority history as an articulation of “personal bias” and who evade the issue that it is now “time the Japanese Canadian story was better known” by responding with: “Yes indeed. . . . But from what point of view? . . . What point of view?” (152).

While exploring the fight for redress, *Itsuka* also follows the growth of Naomi’s relationship with Aunt Emily and its pervasive influence on her political and philosophical disposition. Contrary to Goellnicht’s interpretation, Aunt Emily remains the primary impetus behind Naomi’s transformation from ambiguity, silence, and passivity to truth, anger, action, and, finally, empowerment. She also becomes Naomi’s principal source of nurture, providing her with a tie to the maternal that, as *Obasan* poignantly reveals, is crucial to Naomi’s sense of belonging: “Aunt Emily’s bimonthly phone call is the kite string, the long-distance umbilical cord, that keeps me connected to a mothering earth” (83). In the very opening of *Itsuka*, we learn that Naomi no longer rejects Aunt Emily’s position; on the contrary, she begins to adopt it: “Over the years I have learned to understand some of Aunt Emily’s sources of anger. And back in Granton and Cecil, in the years following Uncle’s death, I was discovering my own capacity for that unpleasant emotion” (69). As Naomi “watches others try to claim and contain [redress],” as Davidson points out, “she becomes more involved, more her Aunt Emily’s advocate and ally” (86).

Naomi’s transformation from distrust and suspicion to faith and conviction is inspired by an awareness of mutuality learned from Aunt Emily. Her initial scepticism toward traditional pretensions to truth results in the loss of a sense of commonality and meaningfulness and in the consequent inability to commit to anything larger than the self. Naomi is ultimately drawn into the political, however, not through her singular, self-contained understanding of the past but through a sense of responsibility to, and personal connection with, the historical experiences of others: “I . . . got involved because of Cedric. . . . And Cedric was drawn by Aunt Emily, who was drawn by Min” (229). Naomi learns that, in shedding one’s “cocoon”

and “coming forth with dewy fresh wings,” connections are made, collective activity is inspired, and the rational pursuit of political order is carried out. She begins “to fly by stuffing envelopes” (211).

By sharing her community’s worldview, participating in its pursuit of justice, and accepting her responsibility as a historical agent, Naomi overcomes the feelings of isolation and loneliness that consumed much of her early life. Her new sense of historical agency and meaningfulness affects not only her public life but also her personal relationships. In this way, “The erotic and political plots of *Itsuka*,” as Keefer asserts, “are made to intertwine” (35). Specifically, Naomi’s intimate relationship with Father Cedric signifies not only her sexual awakening but also her new faith in our ability to know, understand, and, finally, connect with one another.²⁰ Thus, with her commitment to, and defence of, a shared historical reality, Naomi overcomes her feelings of aloneness and her consequent self-conception as an old maid. It is not through scepticism, suspicion, and distrust that she discovers her political and personal self, then, but through trust, truth, and, finally, intimacy: “The fact of flesh is new in my life. A simple fact, as commonplace as pebbles on a beach. But I’m a pebble that was lost. Now I’ve been found” (215).

It is with hope and faith that the novel ends; with the fulfilment of the dream that “*itsuka*,” “someday the better time will come,” “someday, your sacrifice will be known” (208, 249). On 22 September 1988, Naomi and Aunt Emily gather with other members of their community in the House of Commons to hear the Canadian government’s formal apology and to witness the signing of the redress agreement.²¹ By ending *Itsuka* in this way, Kogawa demonstrates that “more things are wrought by passion than this world dreams of. You don’t need hired staff, or gobs of money. All you need is belief and a handful of people phoning, running around putting up posters, delivering press releases” (210). In other words, it is through community, positivism, and a united defence of truth that “the telling leaps over the barricades and the dream enters day” (288).

While the conclusion of *Itsuka* is concerned with how the *public* struggle for historical legitimacy is finally won, it also returns to the personal: namely, to Naomi’s struggle for selfhood. Having witnessed the positive outcome of her efforts, Naomi is no longer the sceptic “doubt[ful] of almost everything” and “not a true believer of anything much” (31, 109). On the contrary, she is finally able to pray “a believer’s cloudless prayer” (276), and

she feels “whole,” “as complete as when [she] was a very young child” (285). Her final coherence is connected to the reconciliation of her seemingly divided identity. Specifically, with the success of redress, Naomi’s Japanese and Canadian “sides” are no longer at odds. Her final achievement of personal legitimacy, then, is linked to a sense of belonging not only to her community and its historical reality but also to a country that recognizes the truth of that reality:

Aunt Emily and I look at each other and smile. We’ve all said it over the years. “No, no, I’m Canadian. I’m a Canadian. A Canadian.” Sometimes it’s been a defiant statement, a demand, a proclamation of a right. And today, finally, finally, though we can hardly believe it, to be Canadian means what it hasn’t meant before. Reconciliation. Liberation. Belongingness. Home. (286)

“There is no reason to assume,” Holton argues, “that postmodernism, as an ‘ism,’ can provide the appropriate concrete historical, philosophical or political framework” with which to understand the discursive context of the marginalized (303). If it could, as Andreas Huyssen observes in “Mapping the Postmodern,” then it would have to be a new postmodernism that resists the old, “easy postmodernism of the ‘anything goes’ variety” (qtd. in Holton 303). However, “Is it wholly necessary,” as Graff asks, “to conclude that the humanist alternative is forever and finally dead?” (416). Clearly, Kogawa’s novels are evidence that “certain kinds of literature are still built upon the old humanist assumptions” (Rose 225).

Both the values conveyed in, and the response evoked by, *Obasan* and *Itsuka* contradict Goellnicht’s argument that Kogawa’s “special purpose” is “to demonstrate that history is relative” (291). Appropriating Kogawa as a postmodernist, and labelling her writing as historiographic metafiction, Goellnicht argues that she does not seek “to ‘write the vision and make it plain,’ for she remains too aware of the impossibility of such a task” (294). On the contrary, Kogawa’s writing, as Rose asserts, “denies the illusion of non-referentiality . . . and draws attention to the real historical experience which it seeks to portray” (215). Kogawa’s novels ask “us to take the history of the internment as revealed by Naomi and Emily as the painful truth, rather than as one fictional construct among others” (Harris, “Kogawa” 32).

Through Naomi’s evolving philosophical and political consciousness, Kogawa demonstrates that the struggle for legitimacy in historical representation takes place not in the deconstruction of truth but in the collective defence of truth. One does not, in other words, impose one’s presence on

the historical record by obfuscating meaning but by clarifying it. Textual evidence in, and the reception of, both *Obasan* and *Itsuka* reveal that it is unconvincing to argue that history is in any meaningful sense fictional in Kogawa's narratives. In other words, it is difficult to read Kogawa's novels as purely discursive acts that have no base in reality. There is, ultimately, a responsible reading of Kogawa's texts—it is a reading that demands that we recognize, as Naomi finally does, that “It matters to get the facts straight” because “Reconciliation can't begin without mutual recognition of [these] facts” (*Obasan* 183).

There are, undoubtedly, many stories of the experience of internment. And even Aunt Emily recognizes that there is no one story of redress. Rather, “There are as many stories as there are people” (*Itsuka* 247). However, what is clearly conveyed in Kogawa's writing is that the sum of all these stories—including her own—constitutes one reality, a single truth: “During and after World War II, Canadians of Japanese ancestry, the majority of whom were citizens, suffered unprecedented actions by the Government of Canada against their community” (formal “Acknowledgement,” qtd. in Miki and Kobayashi 8; qtd. in *Itsuka* 289).

What, then, becomes of historical narratives in a “post-humanist society” (Graff 409)? What becomes of history in a world wherein “distortion . . . is taken to be the normal and proper condition of human experience” and “meaning . . . comes to be regarded with a mixture of distrust and boredom” (Graff 394, 401)? It is in such a world, I would argue, that the “refusal of the facts of history,” as Dorothy Rabinowitz documents, can be “heard without much objection, and treated as though it were an argument as good as any other” (36).²² How far are we, in other words, from embracing the lie when we accept the impossibility of absolute truth?

While my humanist approach to Kogawa's novels may seem to reflect dated, or “outmoded,” thinking, the postmodern conception of history articulated by Hutcheon and her predecessors amounts to more than just a “historical simplemindedness” (Rose 216)—it amounts to a dangerous “situation in which meaning is being emptied out of the world, so that things appear only in their simple presence” (Graff 397). In such an indeterminate world we risk losing sight of the difference between good scholarship and bad, between what is right and wrong. “In a society increasingly irrational and barbaric,” as Graff observes, “to regard the attack on reason and objectivity as the basis of our radicalism is to perpetuate the nightmare we want

to escape” (417). Clearly, in a world in which Nazism is resurfacing as surely as its victims, and their stories, are dying, it is our responsibility to reembrace an epistemological model that emphasizes belief and meaning. It is only through concrete, rational knowledge, and not through systems of ambiguity and distortion, that the horrors of history can be prevented from reoccurring. It is in this way that “The past,” as Kogawa teaches us, “is the future” (*Obasan* 42).

NOTES

- 1 Since the writing of this essay, Kogawa has published a third novel, *The Rain Ascends* (Toronto:Knopf, 1995). An exploration of love, family life, and the nature of good and evil, Kogawa’s most recent novel tells the story of a woman who makes the painful discovery that her father abused young boys throughout his career as a minister.
- 2 In his discussion of the possibility of writing factually about observable reality, Robert Scholes argues that “There is no mimesis, only poesis. No recording. Only construction” (7). When applied to historiography, “The deconstructive argument that all writing stands at a distance from that which it seeks to represent entails . . . the dethronement of historicism as an objective discipline” (Patterson 259). For example, in his understanding of history as a poetic construct governed by narrative “tropes,” Hayden White maintains “the essentially provisional and contingent nature of historical representations and their susceptibility to infinite revision” (“Historical Text” 62, 42). Influenced by White’s theory of history as “verbal fiction” (“Historical Text” 42), Linda Hutcheon argues that both historical and fictive narratives are “ideological constructions” that acknowledge their status “as construct[s], rather than as simulacr[a] of some ‘real’ outside [world]” (“Pastime” 61, 68).
- 3 As Barbara Foley argues, “by postulating a radical indeterminacy,” postmodernism has enhanced an “impotent” “view of history as a realm of alien and undifferentiated facticity” (265).
- 4 Kogawa’s books of poetry include *The Splintered Moon* (1967), *A Choice of Dreams* (1974), *Jericho Road* (1977), and *Woman in the Woods* (1985).
- 5 In her very favourable review of the text, Kathryn Barnwell nevertheless notes that “The highly poetic and allusive style of *Obasan* is nowhere to be found in *Itsuka*” (39). Similarly, Maxine Hancock expresses disappointment with *Itsuka*’s “jarring” narrative style after “the nearly perfect poise of the prose of *Obasan*” (50).
- 6 Hutcheon uses “ex-centricity” to define the condition of individuals marginalized as a result of “differences in class, gender, race, ethnic group, and sexual preference” (*Canadian Postmodern* 11). In other words, such individuals do not belong to the white, male, upper-middle-class infrastructure that Hutcheon defines as the central voice in Canadian society.
- 7 Gerald Graff effectively underscores this contradiction in postmodern thinking by linking it to the interrogation of the romantic aesthetic: “If imaginative truth were determined from within rather than without, how could a poet know whether one myth prompted by his imagination were truer than any other?” “The paradox of the sophisticated modern mind,” he argues, “is that it is unable to believe in the objective validity of

- meanings yet unable to do without meanings." Consequently, the "crisis" of postmodern thought lies in its "self-contradictory attempts . . . to define . . . a discourse that is somehow both nonreferential yet valid as knowledge" (391).
- 8 It is important to note, however, that critical debates rage about whether the postcolonial is the postmodern or whether it is its very antithesis. While Hutcheon asserts "that the links between the post-colonial and the post-modern are strong and clear ones" ("Circling" 168), Tiffin argues that the two are diametrically opposed. According to Tiffin, while postmodern theory seems to endorse difference, pluralism, and multivocality, "in practice [it has] operated in the same way in which the Western historicizing consciousness has operated, that is, to appropriate and control the 'other', while ostensibly performing some sort of major cultural redemption" (170).
 - 9 Kogawa herself suggests that Aunt Emily is modelled, in part, on Muriel Kitagawa, a champion of the Japanese-Canadian community's political rights. As Patricia Merivale notes, "Kogawa's admiration for her is palpable" (81).
 - 10 The Japanese community in Canada has named each of its generations, the immigrants from Japan being the first generation, or the issei. The issei's Canadian-born children, the second generation, are referred to as the nisei. Naomi and Stephen, born to a nisei father, belong to the sansei generation (Miki and Kobayashi 19).
 - 11 Miki and Kobayashi argue that the destruction of the Japanese-Canadian community was also undertaken on economic grounds. On 19 January 1943, the Canadian government passed Order in Council PC 469, which declared that all confiscated Japanese property (homes, businesses, and personal belongings) would be placed for sale without the consent of the rightful owners. Personally and financially valuable items were immediately sold for well below their actual worth. "This new measure," according to Miki and Kobayashi, "compounding the injustice of mass uprooting, led to the dispossession of Japanese Canadians. With the dismantling of their community, their former social and economic presence on the west coast could now be erased" (42).
 - 12 As Mason Harris argues, Naomi bears the "double burden" of being a "foreigner" in her homeland and an "exile from the community which might have provided a sense of home in that land" ("Broken" 48).
 - 13 In the poem that opens *Obasan*, Kogawa establishes the stone as a symbol of silence. Gottlieb (35), Rose (223), St. Andrews (31), and Willis (240) all examine this metaphor in their various critical approaches to Kogawa's writing.
 - 14 When ordered by the government to evacuate, the issei dutifully obeyed, responding in accordance with cultural norms that dictated conformity and obedience over dissension and revolt. "The status of the immigrant Issei," according to Ken Adachi, "was similar to the roles and positions they had left in Meiji Japan, so that the status their superiors held in Japan was now transferred to the white officialdom, and subsequent patterns of deference or humility were matters of course" (225).
 - 15 Comparing her retreat into silence to her mother's refusal to speak "*kodomo no tame*"—"for the sake of the children"—Naomi finally defines their "wordlessness" as their "mutual destruction" (*Obasan* 243).
 - 16 Similarly, Marilyn Russell Rose asserts that, standing "in dialectical relation to both [aunts]," Naomi is "clearly destined for synthesis" (220). Patricia Merivale argues accord-

ingly that the “seemingly incompatible voices” of Obasan and Aunt Emily “are essential to [Naomi’s] eventual synthesis of her self” (70).

- 17 Following *Obasan*’s account of life during the internment, *Itsuka* is the story of the Japanese community’s subsequent struggle for redress. The movement was first organized by the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) in January 1984. The Japanese community’s struggle “for a just and honourable resolution to the injustices of the 1940s” (Miki and Kobayashi 11) met with vehement opposition from the Trudeau government and continued without success through five successive ministers of state for multiculturalism. It was not until 22 September 1988 that an agreement was reached between the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney and Japanese Canadians.
- 18 In a March 1984 issue of *Canadian Forum*, Kogawa voices Aunt Emily’s sentiment almost exactly: “Our wholeness comes from joining and from sharing our brokenness. . . . Rather than abandoning the way of brokenness, I believe we need to remember the paradoxical power in mutual vulnerability” (20).
- 19 The redress movement sought not only to secure an apology and compensation for the violations and losses suffered by Japanese Canadians during World War II but also to help *all* visible minorities to overcome the effects of racism and discrimination in Canada. Redress was, therefore, a major human-rights issue. Accordingly, the NAJC’s recommendations to the Canadian government included “That the War Measures Act be amended in such a manner as to ensure that similar injustices will not recur, and further that a serious commitment be made to initiate a review and amendment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to guarantee that the rights of individuals will never again be abrogated on the basis of ancestry” (NAJC Redress Proposal, qtd. in Miki and Kobayashi 97).
- 20 Even Hutcheon, in her discussion of the various connections between the postmodern and the postcolonial, recognizes the former’s ambivalent political implications. She admits, in short, that the postmodern aesthetic does not constitute a “constructive political enterprise” insofar as it lacks “a theory of agency and social change” (“Circling” 183).
- 21 Cedric also represents the kind of maternal love and security that Naomi clearly needs. He is Naomi’s “fairy godmother” (145, 148), and he “cradles [her] as a mother holds her child, with care and confidence” (261). Like Naomi’s “Gentle Mother,” whose eyes “do not invade and betray” (*Obasan* 243, 59), Cedric is “as gentle as the smallest waves from the sea where the rainbow is moored and he does not, he does not invade” (261).
- 22 The Canadian Redress Agreement states that the government accepts blame for the discriminatory actions taken against Japanese Canadians during and after World War II, recognizes that such actions were unjust and violated basic principles of human rights, and pledges to ensure that such events will never occur again against any ethnic minority group. In addition, \$21,000 was given to each Japanese Canadian who was subjected to internment, relocation, deportation, loss of property, and/or “otherwise deprived of the full enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms based solely on the fact that they were of Japanese ancestry” (Miki and Kobayashi 139).
- 23 Rabinowitz and Elie Wiesel participated in a conference on the need to preserve, transmit, and legitimate Holocaust history. The central concern of each paper presented was the scholar’s responsibility “to set the record straight” and, in so doing, to preserve the Holocaust from “becom[ing] a matter of indifference—a meaningless, senseless, inexplicable horror” (Smith 1, 3).

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