

TESIS DOCTORAL

**HISTORIES RECLAIMED AND BORDERS
TRANSGRESSED: THE NARRATIVES OF MICHAEL
ONDAATJE AND JOY KOGAWA IN POSTCOLONIAL AND
MULTICULTURAL CANADA**

**HISTORIAS REIVINDICADAS Y FRONTERAS
TRANSGREDIDAS: LAS NARRATIVAS DE MICHAEL
ONDAATJE Y JOY KOGAWA EN EL CANADÁ
POSTCOLONIAL Y MULTICULTURAL**

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LICENCIADO EN CIENCIAS DE LA INFORMACIÓN

DRA. ISABEL SOTO GARCÍA

DIRECTORA

In memory of my parents and Rosa Maria ...

For Ana and Alvaro

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ABSTRACT

Canada as an officially bi-cultural nation has over time become transformed into its present and officially multicultural state. Arguably, it dates back, even before the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, to late 1960s when writers such as Michael Ondaatje, naturalized Canadian, and Joy Kogawa, Canadian-born of Japanese origin, appear on the Canadian literary scene as fledgling poets, only later to establish themselves as prominent writers of fiction. While Ondaatje is considered to be more experimental in the transgression of generic boundaries by suturing historical, biographical, autobiographical or poetic texts into “real life” and art combined, Kogawa, on the other hand, transgresses the borders of a fictive narrative to enhance fragments of documented facts masterfully woven into a communal historical story.

This thesis explores Ondaatje and Kogawa’s major preoccupations: their concept of truth and fiction in history as a literary artifact; the peripherality from which both writers portray non-official history such as the Japanese-Canadians’ before, during and after the World War II period in the case of Kogawa, and in Ondaatje’s unhistorical narratives of immigrants excluded from the official history of Canada; their narrative aesthetics in the Canadian post(-)colonial and postmodernist context; and their contribution to Canadian literary history. Included in the discussion are the following aspects which may be considered original: a comparative analysis of Ondaatje’s works with those of other (non-) Canadian writers; the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings in *The English Patient* and *Obasan* revisited from a racialized perspective; Hayden White’s notion of the historical text as literary artifact applied to both Ondaatje and Kogawa’s works; Julia Kristeva’s psycholinguistic theory and *Obasan*; and an analysis of Ondaatje’s latest work *Divisadero*.

The recognition of “other solitudes” by literary critics such as Hutcheon and Richmond is a call to reincorporate the once marginally-relegated discourse of the ‘other’ into the traditional monocentric concerns. The metaphoricity of early as well as contemporary Canadian writers, peoples of imagined communities in general, requires a kind of doubleness in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without causal logic (Bhabha). Michael Ondaatje and Joy Kogawa fit well within Canada’s “sense of being marginal” (Elsbeth Cameron) as a multicultural nation which, arguably, has driven Canadians to seek a discourse to locate a tradition of their own. While Ondaatje’s situation is that of a transplanted/transcultural artist, Kogawa’s is the marginalized voice in search of a liminal space to represent the sameness and difference in her (Japanese-Canadian) identity. A condition such as theirs gestures inevitably towards the marginal since both writers are products of hybridity: in-between the postcolonial and the new world. The accompanying doubleness perhaps marks the transgression and blending (read: uprootedness and assimilation) which characterize their works.

On ... [t]he assimilation of the other or ... identification with him, ... Cabeza de Vaca ... reached a neutral point, not because he was indifferent to the two cultures but because he had experienced them both from within – thereby, he no longer had anything but ‘the others’ around him; without becoming an Indian, Cabeza de Vaca was no longer quite a Spaniard. His experience symbolizes and heralds that of the modern exile, which in its turn personifies a tendency characteristic of our society: a being who has lost his country without thereby acquiring another, who lives in a double exteriority.

Tzvetan Todorov
The Conquest of America: the Question of the other

Introduction

The following Doctoral Thesis is a continuation of the Research Project I presented to complete my *Diploma en Estudios Avanzados*. The subject of my research then was exclusively centred on the narratives of Michael Ondaatje. I was advised by my tutor, Dr. Isabel Soto, to combine a close reading of my chosen author with a reflection on my motivations: what compelled me to explore and write about Michael Ondaatje? I will begin by noting that we are likely to identify ourselves with what we read, and, in a way, with the author of the book we read. Consequently, we also tend to choose to research and write about an author whose personal condition and literary work have struck us because his or her theme contains things identifiable with our own experience and condition. For this doctoral thesis, I have decided to broaden my scope of inquiry and include Joy Kogawa in my study following similar aforementioned motivations.

This doctoral thesis will be concerned in the first instance with the narratives of Michael Ondaatje and Joy Kogawa taking into account the following objectives:

(1) To explore these writers' major preoccupations such as Ondaatje's treatment of the marginal figure, the displaced person or the figure of the outsider, and both writers' concept of truth and fiction in history as a literary artifact;

(2) To probe the peripherality from which Kogawa portrays the non-official history of Japanese-Canadians before, during and after the World War II period, on the one hand and, on the other, Ondaatje's unhistorical narratives of immigrants excluded from the official history of Canada;

(3) To discuss both Ondaatje and Kogawa's narrative aesthetics in the Canadian post(-)colonial and postmodernist context;

(4) To underline Ondaatje and Kogawa's contribution to the contemporary Canadian literary history.

I am going to explore, then, the writings of Ondaatje and Kogawa in terms of how those writings fit into contemporary Canadian (national) literary history, in particular, within the postmodernist/postcolonial context and not simply into the official "multicultural mosaic" defined by the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988. As immigrant and second-generation "ethnic" (in the context of my study, other than Anglo-French) Canadian writers, respectively, Ondaatje and Kogawa "write back" to traditional Canadian discourse and project their ancestors' respective countries of origin through their fiction. This dissertation then will include all of Ondaatje's and Kogawa's corpus of narrative fiction and not merely texts which offer "some portrayal of Canada as a semiotic field."¹

Ondaatje and Kogawa share a lot of things in common. In the first place, they began writing and publishing poetry in late 1960s Canada and then turned to writing narrative fiction, seemingly able to switch easily from one genre to another. While Ondaatje is considered to be more experimental in the transgression of generic boundaries by suturing historical, biographical, autobiographical or poetic texts into "real life" and art combined, Kogawa, on the other hand, transgresses the borders of a fictive narrative to enhance

¹In his *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967*, Frank Davey restricts his study to such books "giving special attention to texts that have had impact within at least one anglophone-Canadian constituency" (Toronto: U of Toronto P, Inc. 1993:7). For Enoch Padolsky, Davey contradicts himself and argues that the latter's aim in *Post-National Arguments* is precisely to make readers aware of the "heterogeneity of the Canadian discursive field" (Davey 1993:23) and considers that to neglect authors writing about places other than Canada is at best "counter-intuitive" and at worst "a remarkable methodological shortcoming" ("Canadian Minority Writing and Acculturation Options," <http://ub-dok.uni-trier.de/diss/diss25/20031104/20031104.pdf>).

fragments of documented facts masterfully woven into a communal historical story. Ondaatje is a naturalized Canadian writer whereas Kogawa is Canadian-born of Japanese origin – but both inevitably live and experience the double perspective or the doubleness prompted by their ethno-cultural background, a doubleness that is revealed in how they project their respective works as well as in the way they are perceived in white, mainstream Canada. Further, both Ondaatje and Kogawa are very much concerned with re-writing what they themselves consider as a distorted history by subverting the official political discourse in what they believe as their unflinching search for truth. They have managed to write novels that, intentionally or otherwise, serve as the narrative of the dispossessed, the forgotten or the silenced minority. Hence, inspired by the challenge Ondaatje and Kogawa pose to the shifting canon of Canadian literature, I will focus this study on their attempt to re-write the history of the minority, the colonized, and the immigrants ever on the margins, to transform the colonizing discourse into a revised, postcolonial discourse that makes the margins the centre of its focus.

Michael Ondaatje, co-winner of the 1992 Booker Prize for his novel *The English Patient*, was born in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) of Dutch-Ceylonese descent, then moved to England to join his mother at the age of 9 and, at 19, migrated to Canada, where he has lived ever since. Hazardous as it invariably is to draw a link between life and art, one might be forgiven for speculating that Ondaatje's hybrid roots and dislocation from not just his native country, but successive countries, have contributed to his portrayal of characters who are immigrants, displaced persons and outsiders. The cultural hybridity inherent in these characters may provide the key to their alienation or the double perspective they, as migrants, have adopted. Further, my own condition as an immigrant in Spain, displaced

from my country of birth, is what, I believe, has led me to identify with Ondaatje's recurring theme of "the outsider" in his work.

Although socio-cultural tension exists for both authors as a result of their immigrant/outsider condition in a highly race-conscious society, the consequences for Kogawa are arguably more tragic, discovering as she does one day that the "home" where she was born and raised would, eventually, disown and discriminate against her. Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) is the first long fictive narrative ever published in Canada based not only on her family's but also on Japanese-Canadians' lived experience during and after World War II. Kogawa's painful decision to write this novel made her come back from the "dream" in which (she herself) theorized that "the way to live was to be as non-Japanese as possible, to deny it as much as possible" for it was her way to "survive" in "white Canada."²

For Ondaatje, "[a] literary work is a communal act,"³ a phrase which reinforces the fact that oral storytelling characterizes his particular writing style. This "communal act" also indicates Ondaatje's blending of art with reality in which he mixes his native country's oral tradition of storytelling with written literature. "[I]n Sri Lanka, a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts," he writes in *Running in the Family* (1982:206), referring to the conflicting versions that might be expressed by the people portrayed and included in this work. Ondaatje seeks complicity from people who sometimes become his characters through interviews or dialogues that in turn provide sources for his stories. While we cannot consider literature as a historical document, it nevertheless serves, especially in Ondaatje's autobiographical memoir, as the writer's personal chronicle and whose main

² Andrew Garrod, *Speaking for Myself: Canadian Writers in Interview* (Newfoundland: Breakwater Books Limited, 1986:146-47).

³ Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996: 205).

objective is to reflect insights, reminiscences or socio-political vindications woven into a non-linear narrative. Kogawa, on the other hand, claims to have the best of two worlds – the English language and the “Japanese attention to nuance and gesture” (Garrod 151). Kogawa also learned from her mother “that kind of ‘gut’-telling [...] as a way of making my internal world safe” (Garrod *ibid.*). Nevertheless, no matter how autobiographical, documented and truthful Kogawa’s works appear, she allots some discretion in “tell[ing] other people’s secrets” (*ibid.*) especially if, unlike Ondaatje, she does not obtain their permission.

The overlap of the factual and the fictive in Ondaatje’s work is, indeed, a recurring feature. Although he once said that the “form and shape” of what he writes emerge in “a kind of loose, random, sort of accidental way,” having “no idea what I’m going to find at the end,”⁴ his work eventually dramatizes the quest for truth. *Running in the Family*, for example, is his personal search for “truth” pieced together from stories and photographs gathered from family interviews, print materials, etc., without losing sight of the fact that in the end, the demarcation between truth and fiction blurs and may disappear altogether.

Ondaatje can lay claim to a family background in which life and fantasy co-existed and were mutually reinforcing: his mother would love to dance and act out theatrical scenes and read poetry for family entertainment, whereas his father devoured literature, which also became Michael’s passion as a schoolboy. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje traces both the history of his dispersed family and the source of his creative imagination. He also probes into the background of his hybrid ancestors, characterized by their excesses and eccentricities in the midst of British (post)colonial influence, and yet resisting native

⁴ Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, eds. *Other Solitudes. Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990: 200).

Ceylonese lifestyle. It is through this book, by mixing truth and fiction, that he fills in the “desert of facts” about the father he only knew through stories told by his mother and siblings since his parents’ separation when he was the tender age of two. Ondaatje’s first two long narrative works *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Coming through Slaughter* (1976) reveal the gradual transition of his craft, first as a poet and later as a fiction writer, moving from an impersonal to a more subjective treatment of his own case: his life as a man and an artist. This seems to be implied in the “absent” portrait of Billy the Kid at the beginning of the book and the suggestive photograph of Ondaatje himself as a child dressed in cowboy outfit on the last page. Critics also note the confessional comparison made by Ondaatje himself disguised as a jazz artist in Buddy Bolden’s character, conjoining his own writing and the latter’s cornet playing. He confesses that his views of the characters are actually “based on a series of fragmented insights, often devoid of a full context or background. [...] [T]he ‘truth’ of the protagonist’s life has to be pieced together from whatever is available – a newspaper clipping, an anecdote, a bit of gossip, a hazy memory, a vaguely worded letter.”⁵

Kogawa’s three prose works, *Obasan* (1981), *Itsuka* (1992) and *The Rain Ascends* (1995), written over a span of fourteen years, together with five books of poetry (from 1967 to 2001), do not represent a prolific output. Kogawa writes and in so doing seems to accomplish a task to reach “home,” according to her words, and in the end be liberated; the language she uses in writing plays “an almost sacred aspect” as revelation and truth. She confesses that language is a “tool [...] to till the soil of one’s life” the function of which is towards “a process of understanding more the nature of our reality” (Garrod 152). In what

⁵ Ed Jewinski, *Michael Ondaatje: Express Yourself Beautifully* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1996:16-17).

follows, I will explore, amongst other features, how Kogawa and Ondaatje's creative strategies rely on the "piecing together" of the constituent fragments of their lives and memories.

The articles and critical works published on Ondaatje and Kogawa are almost too numerous to mention; it is my privilege, notwithstanding, to present these authors in this thesis under a study of their shared themes and preoccupations. The queries formulated in my objectives have been raised before but my task is to present fresh critical perspective on these issues. The aspects discussed in this thesis which may be considered original include: a comparative analysis of Ondaatje's works with those of other (non-)Canadian writers; the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings in *The English Patient* and *Obasan* revisited from a racialized perspective; Hayden White's notion of the historical text as literary artifact applied to both Ondaatje and Kogawa's works; Julia Kristeva's psycholinguistic theory and *Obasan*; and an analysis of Ondaatje's latest work *Divisadero*.

Chapter I presents an overview of literature in English in an international context, including works by award-winning authors acutely aware of the fact that they are writing in the language of empire. These writers, amongst whom are non-Britons, non-white, bi-racial and bi-national, arguably comprise the literary demography of postcolonialism. To them we must look for the present re-vitalization of creative writing in the English language.

In Chapter II, I discuss the Canadian government's primordial and official concern to forge a supposedly authentic Canadian national culture through post-war state intervention (the Massey Commission); the period when assertive nationalism emerges approximately from the late 60s through the mid-70s; and the current multicultural/postcolonial/postmodern scenario of Canadian literature of which Ondaatje and Kogawa form a part.

Chapter III presents biographical and literary profiles of the two authors I have chosen for this dissertation. Both Ondaatje's and Kogawa's works (reflective in part of their origins: non-white, of Asian racial and cultural backgrounds) have contributed to the refiguring of the traditional discourse of Canadian mainstream culture; they not only question this (rigid, exclusive) tradition but also offer and vindicate an alternative hybrid identity within the ever-shifting, and apparently now more inclusive Canadian context. Interestingly, towards the end of the 60s both writers appear on the Canadian literary scene as fledgling poets, only later to establish themselves as prominent writers of fiction. The biographical and literary profile of each author will also make mention of what I consider to be most noteworthy of each writer's literary craft: in Ondaatje's case, his deliberate transformation of sparse facts which surround a forgotten (anti)hero or notorious historical event into an intricate personal as well as a communal history; in Kogawa's, her combination of the best of two worlds – her inherent “Japanese attention to nuance and gesture” and the expressive potential of the English language – which characterizes the silence and speech that converge in her writing.

In Chapter IV, I discuss the works of Ondaatje and Kogawa in the Canadian postmodernist/postcolonial context. The mid-60s mark the beginning of the new era in Canadian literary history (Frye; Lecker), thanks, in part, to the demographic (especially, the post-war, non-white immigration influx) re-mapping of Canada, the nation's recognition and/or assumption of postcolonialism and the advent of postmodernism (Hutcheon). Although some critics have already acknowledged Canada's postcolonial condition, a recent debate has emerged which expounds on this same question: *Is Canada Postcolonial?* (2003). Where, at the same time, lies Ondaatje and Kogawa's Canadianness in this matter? The overlap of postcolonialist and postmodernist features points to the periphery from

where both authors tackle the notion of the ‘other,’ on the one hand, and the hybridity which feeds their imagination, on the other. Indeed, Ondaatje’s and Kogawa’s works in which both writers offer an alternative “truth” by questioning and challenging Canadian official history with regard to its politics towards non-Anglo-French immigration and citizenship, is doubly significant. The challenge posed by Ondaatje and Kogawa, neither of whom is of Anglo-French stock, came at a time when traditional sustaining narratives were being questioned everywhere⁶ and when Canada’s cultural history was “ripe for the paradoxes of postmodernism” (Hutcheon 1988:3). Postmodernism in the Canadian context, then, according to Hutcheon, emerges from the regionalist impulses of an ‘ex-centric’ position challenging the central or dominant culture, which contrasts with the political, social and cultural discourse arising from the “colonized” margins, and in response and resistance to colonialism.

Chapter V will focus on outsiderhood and the marginal figure in Ondaatje’s works. It will also feature a close reading and analysis of Ondaatje’s representative postcolonialist/postmodernist works in which his based-on-real-life and/or fictionalized characters express their sense of dislocation, displacement or invisibility in the new world/society into which they are plunged. This uprootedness, which leads to one’s sense of being ‘other’ generates the double perspective Ondaatje attests to in his writing: “All those people born in one place who live in another place have lost their source. In a new continent, the past is a shadowy area and the only way they can survive is to deal in the present” (Jewinski 178).

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Chapter VI will explore Kogawa's narrative aesthetics based on the trek from peripherality and silence towards knowledge and speech; and the blurring of the line between fact and fiction. Indeed, as Kogawa herself admits, the books she has written transformed her and brought forth "memory, insight and understanding" (see quote on p. 26). Kogawa's "hybridity" expressed in themes about her ancestral culture and temperament, together with her non-WASP sensibility mediate a highly nuanced style which blends her ethnic linguistic subconscious and the new (English) language and values into which she was born. Hence the combination of silence and speech in her works is crucial in order to understand her literary aesthetics. While much critical and scholarly attention has been conferred on *Obasan* from diverse socio-historical perspectives, it is also through this narrative that Kogawa defines partly her prose art: "a conglomerate of facts, of realities, of picking here and there and putting it all together" as they "are all mixed up in our minds, in the world, in a work of fiction, in life."⁷

Chapter VII discusses on Ondaatje's narrative aesthetics, transgression of borders and explore more closely the notion of 'otherness' in his prose works. Aside from an experimental merging or transgression of the boundaries between life and art, what is most striking is his ability to invent prose narratives thematically independent from each other, his blurring of boundaries notwithstanding. This is probably explained by the divided cultural allegiances or the double perspective which Ondaatje attributes to himself. These divided allegiances are precisely what inspire him to explore any and all themes freely, and not just those that concern his ethnic condition in mainstream Canada.

⁷ Eva Darias Beutell, *Division, Language, and Doubleness in the Writings of Joy Kogawa* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Servicio de Publicaciones Universidad de La Laguna 1998:162).

Chapter VIII focuses on themes common to both writers: the reclaiming of unofficial histories and the “quest for truth.” The first theme serves to redress the political and social abuses committed by the Canadian government towards an ethnic community, while complementing the archeological method of digging up facts to present an alternative truth or perspective. Reference is made to Hayden White’s considerations on the historical text as literary artefact. White posits the idea that histories are explained through stories made out of chronicles that function and are organized in terms of what he calls emplotment. He proposes that the interests of the “actual” (read: history) and its traditional “quest for truth” will be best served by “contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable [read: fiction]” (60). It could be argued that Ondaatje and Kogawa’s narratives place the actual at the service of the imaginable, their quest for truth mediated through the careful emplotment of official histories.

Ondaatje’s and Kogawa’s vindications are best expressed in *In the Skin of the Lion*, *Obasan* and *Itsuka*. The quest for truth also becomes the central theme of Kogawa’s *The Rain Ascends* as the main character is caught in the dilemma of confronting the truth about her pedophile father, the Pastor of Anglican Church, who, in turn, is unrepentant of his wrongdoings. The quest for truth knows no geographical borders and in *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje portrays the long-running civil war of his native Sri Lanka, in which the (hi)stories of the disappeared and living witnesses alike serve as counter-testimonies to the government’s official chronicle.

Chapter IX will provide further analysis of Ondaatje and Kogawa’s recurring concerns: the writing from the periphery to show the perspective of the (racialized) ‘other’ and the subversion of official history as sustained by the ‘Other.’ This chapter analyzes the specific historical events of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings which underlie *The*

English Patient, *Obasan* as well as *Itsuka*. These novels, which reflect the impact of World War II on the lives of the respective main characters, Kirpal Singh and Naomi Nakane, are an anguished cry against the acts of a supposedly advanced Western civilization which has wrought havoc upon innocent victims of the “brown race” to which Ondaatje and Kogawa themselves belong. These narratives are also an attempt to subvert from a racialized perspective (to borrow Roy Miki’s term) the official justification promoted by the Western military powers that such bombings brought World War II to an end. Aside from the personal and political consequences of such bombings, Ondaatje and Kogawa also explore how the destructive denouement of World War II triggers the main characters’ final explosive release of the psychological tension that has built up throughout the narrative. This chapter also addresses the aftermath of the atomic bombings: as World War II concluded with these attacks, it in turn inaugurated a new turn of events such as the decolonization of Asian and African countries in the immediate post-war period leading to the 1960s. This was followed by migration towards industrialized former colonizing countries for economic or political reasons, with the resulting cultural displacement of migrant persons. These groups led the way in the struggle for equal rights and recognition of their labour and provided cultural contributions from different ethnic and racial groups who were politically excluded and unrepresented in the former Anglo-French socio-political structure of Canadian (mainstream) society.

My concluding chapter will focus on how Ondaatje’s and Kogawa’s works have strengthened the endeavour to incorporate the once marginalized discourse of the ‘other’ into Canadian traditional monocentric concerns. It is perhaps inevitable for native-born and transplanted writers alike to imagine a nation, such as that of the Canadian mosaic, which

articulates a “metaphoric landscape.”⁸ The metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities “requires a kind of doubleness in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without causal logic” (quoted in Turner 110). Canada’s recognition of its hybrid culture or doubleness, makes (Canadian) national identity “too varied to be a unitary identity,”⁹ to quote Said in his argument initially applied to American immigrant settler society. The same observation perfectly applies to the Canadian hybrid/multicultural condition inasmuch as “all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (ibid.).

⁸ Margaret E. Turner, *Imagining Culture: New World Narrative and the Writing of Canada*, (Montreal and Kingston: Mc Gill-Queen’s UP, 1995: 110).

⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993:xxv).

[F]iction is a response to the real often 'untenable' world in which the writer finds herself [sic], but it is also an act of transformation where telling stories reinterprets the world from different angles, reclaiming secrets from the past or hidden within personal histories, reshaping and enlarging the dimensions of imaginative possibility through which readers, like writers, inhabit their worlds.

Coral Ann Howells,
Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities

Chapter I

Revitalizing the English Language: Narrative Strategies in Postcolonial Authors

Writing more than a decade ago, Salman Rushdie lambasted the idea that writers in the English language belonging to the former British colonies or sphere of influence should be grouped under the term “Commonwealth literature,”¹⁰ pointing out that this term was “patronizing” and at the same time, a designation as a “ghetto.” This created an effect, according to him, of reducing the definition of English literature to “something topographical, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist” (63). This division, then, “places Eng. Lit. at the centre” and displaces the rest to the margin.

This exclusive definition of English literature would also relegate to the periphery the works of writers such as Rushdie himself, Nobel Prize winners and writers in English V.S. Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer and Derek Walcott, Booker Prize winner Michael Ondaatje, all of which ironically makes them very central indeed, and a host of other non-Britons or bi-racial Britons, or bi-national or ethnic writers who publish in English and whose literary projections draw on their respective geographical and historical origins. The persistence of colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and beyond, contributed to present-day literary realities. We cannot avoid the fact that Great Britain was the centre of a global empire and that the English language became a very powerful and

¹⁰ Salman Rushdie, “‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist,” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1992) 61-70.

global cultural institution¹¹ and an expressive instrument for the ex-colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. The imposition of English as the language of empire helped create a more “literate” and docile class of colonized subjects (Rivkin and Ryan 852) and “unified” multi-lingual nations like those found in the Indian peninsula, with the consequent valorizing of a common tongue over and above any of the rival native languages or dialects. The pre-eminence of the English language is also the result of the rising political and economic influence of the United States of America and hence of its cultural impact upon world affairs towards the latter part of the nineteenth century.

One of the most painful consequences of British colonial expansion over the span of two centuries was the dispersal of native Africans through the slave trade to the New World, and the forced migration suffered by Indian subcontinent subjects through labour indenturedness in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, decolonization in the twentieth century brought about migration and displacement from the Third World back to Great Britain and countries within its sphere of influence such as the U.S., Canada and Australia. Migration and displacement are, indeed, just some of the dramatic consequences of (post)colonialism, and are still being felt even after, for instance, the regaining of independence by the Indian peninsula, Caribbean and African countries. But the political, linguistic and cultural reality colonized societies once shared (and still do) with their colonizers, is perhaps one of the reasons why the former could not easily shake off a certain affinity with the latter. For one, the political structure of these (postcolonial) nations still persists, their economies dependent upon or largely controlled by the erstwhile mother country while these nations

¹¹ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, “Introduction: English Without Shadows, Literature on A World Scale,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Rivkin and Ryan, eds. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1998) 851.

continue ironically with their political struggle and resistance to the colonizing power even after subjugation came to an end officially. Arguably, the continued dominance of the West over its former colonies simply proves that “[p]olitical liberation did not bring economic liberation – and without economic liberation, there can be no political liberation.”¹²

Thus, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin refer to post-colonial theory as the discussion of “migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe [...] and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being.”¹³ The meaning of the term “post-colonialism” refers to “after colonialism began” rather than “after colonialism ended.”¹⁴ Ashcroft et al. further widen its scope: “the word ‘post-colonial’ [in its hyphenated form] has come to stand for both the material effects of colonisation and the huge diversity of everyday and sometimes hidden responses to it throughout the world” (3), an explanation which could also be applied to post-colonial literatures as resulting from the “interaction between imperial culture and the complex range of indigenous cultural practices” (1). Ashcroft (2001) further clarifies the term ‘post-colonial’ as the representation of the colonized societies’ way of “resistance” to, “appropriation” and “consumption” of the colonial discourse/dominant language by using the modes of this dominant discourse against it and thereby transforming it, in order to “re-emerg[e] in very different political and cultural circumstances” (7). Although various critics and theorists agree on the concept and scope of post-colonial studies, they nevertheless

¹² Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. (MA., USA; Oxford, UK; Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2001) 5.

¹³ Ashcroft, Bill; Griffiths, Gareth and Tiffin, Helen (eds.) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1995) 2.

¹⁴ Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Edward Said*, (London: Routledge 2001) 15.

differ in some assumptions, emphases, strategies and practices. The difference lies mainly in the connotation that the use or non-use of the hyphen in the term “post(-)colonialism” suggests:

The hyphen puts an emphasis on the discursive and material effects of the historical ‘fact’ of colonialism, while the term ‘postcolonialism’ has come to represent an increasingly indiscriminate attention to cultural difference and marginality of all kinds, whether a consequence of the historical experience of colonialism or not. [...] The spelling of the term ‘post-colonial’ has become more of an issue for those who use the hyphenated form, because the hyphen is a statement about the particularity, the historically and culturally grounded nature of experience it represents.¹⁵

Authors Ashcroft et al. and Elleke Boehmer¹⁶ use the hyphenated form of the term and will be so cited in this dissertation. Meanwhile, for consistency purposes, the non-hyphenated form referring to *postcolonial(ism)*, as in the case of how Homi Bhabha and Robert C. Young use it, will be the working form of the term from now onwards. Whereas colonial discourse refused to recognize prior indigenous cultures and difference but rather imposed European (racial and cultural) superiority over the “other,”¹⁷ “postcolonialism has often successfully managed to dismantle the master-discourse of colonialism”¹⁸ operating on the concept of ethnicity instead of race. “Ethnic(ity),” from Greek *ethnikos*,¹⁹ which

¹⁵ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 10.

¹⁶ Boehmer in *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).

¹⁷ “In post-colonial theory, [the other – with the small ‘o’] can refer to the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ‘ego’,” Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, (London: Routledge, 1998) 170.

¹⁸ Enoch Padolsky, “Canadian Minority Writing and Acculturation Options,” 13 July 2005, <<http://ub-dok.uni-trier.de/diss/diss25/20031104/20031104.pdf>> 30.

¹⁹ In his article “Who is Ethnic?” Werner Sollors explains that ‘ethnic’ and ‘ethnicity’ are derived from this Greek word which means ‘gentile,’ ‘heathen’ and which was used contrastively to mean ‘others,’ in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds. (New York: Routledge 1995) 219.

etymologically pertains to “nation” (see also Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond’s definition below), accounts for “human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry, rather than the discredited generalizations of race with its assumptions of a humanity divided into fixed, genetically determined biological types” (Ashcroft et al. 1998:80). These features give post-colonial subjects a “positive self-perception” of their ethnicity that, in turn, gives them an identity “that cannot be denied, rejected or taken away by others” (Ashcroft et al. 1998 *ibid.*).

It is, indeed, those writers, whose cultural and historical roots belong in formerly colonized territories and many of whom have settled in the erstwhile empire, who are currently contributing to the vibrant re-vitalization of creative writing in the English language. For Rushdie, English has now become the language, whether for reasons of “pragmatism” on the part of former colonized countries or a kind of “linguistic neo-colonialism,” which former colonized subjects are now “remaking” and “domesticating” in order to “carv[e] out large territories for themselves within its frontiers” (64). As a result, the present-day demography of postcolonialism has drawn a new map of contemporary literary history wherein “voices” other than those found at the “centre” now constitute the new internationalism, a phenomenon to which Homi Bhabha refers as

the postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacement of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees.²⁰

This has paved the way for the nominally official recognition, if not total

²⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, “Introduction. Locations of Culture” in *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994:5).

integration, of formerly “excluded groups” and new “emerging groups” (Said xii) in American society so that African American, Asian American, Chicano writings, etc. now form part of the anthology – and, indeed, the ever-shifting canon – of contemporary American literature. A comparable cultural pattern has also played an important role in the drafting of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 whose main objectives are to recognize and promote cultural and racial diversity, and the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in Canadian society.

Currently revitalizing creative writing in English in Canadian literature are Michael Ondaatje and Joy Kogawa. As Canadian writers garnering national and international recognition for their respective works, the attention Ondaatje and Kogawa have received has enabled other multicultural writers to emerge and become part of the expanding Canadian literary anthology. This doctoral dissertation will explore the narratives of Michael Ondaatje and Joy Kogawa, who share an obsessive concern with themes of outsiderhood, structures of marginalization and/or displacement and the search for an aesthetically viable means of expression. In practically all of his longer works, for example, Ondaatje has delved into the experience of “otherness” and the political (and social) consciousness that goes with an awareness of racial and ethnic difference, as Linda Hutcheon stresses in an interview with him (1990:ibid.). The tension between marginality and integration, severance and union, and between the competing claims of being native on the one hand, and a foreigner or an immigrant on the other, are some of the recurring themes in Ondaatje’s work. These themes are maintained from his early narrative works through, especially, to his award-winning novel *The English Patient*. This is also true of his long narrative work *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) – where the setting for the protagonist’s estrangement and determination to unearth the truth is the author’s native Sri Lanka – and

in his recently published narrative *Divisadero* (2007).

In the case of Kogawa, the theme of humiliation and forced evacuation of her family from their home in Marpole during World War II reflects the pain and alienation to which they were subjected. Like Ondaatje, Kogawa is also concerned with the marginal figure, in turn traumatized by the loss of her home and her exile in a difficult place of relocation, albeit within the same national borders; and by the confusion and the sense of betrayal experienced at the hands of the only country she knew and considered her own.

I will also probe the peripherality from which Kogawa's works portray a non-official history of Japanese-Canadians²¹ as potential enemies of the State under suspicion after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Perhaps Kogawa did not initially realize the effect that *Obasan* would have on its readers, but it was adopted as something of a political manifesto by the Japanese-Canadian community who was lobbying for redress at that time. The official apology in effect became an admission of error by the Canadian government for its policy and politics towards Canadians of Japanese origin before, during and even after World War II. For most Japanese-Canadians, this move was a triumph as it "officially" concluded "[the] History of Rejection"²² and discrimination that generations of "Issei" and "Nisei" (Japanese-Canadian pioneers born and raised in Japan and second generation born and raised in Canada, respectively) had experienced since the latter part of the nineteenth century.

²¹ The issue regarding the hyphenated Canadian identity such as Japanese-Canadian, Italian-Canadian, etc. seems to be widely accepted amongst writers and critics in Canada. Kogawa and literary critic Linda Hutcheon themselves, for instance, acknowledge their ancestral backgrounds in their writings.

²² This is the title of Chapter 1 which Eva Darias Beautell (1998) has dedicated to the description of Japanese migration and settlement in Canada dating from the late nineteenth century.

Consistent with Kogawa's preoccupation is Ondaatje's other major concern: the un-historical stories, which he also describes as the unspoken and unwritten ones, excluded from the official history of Canada and displaced from mainstream society because of the protagonists' condition as immigrants. Both writers give narrative substance to the belief that the construction of Canadian (national) identity should not exclude other (non-white) peoples and immigrant cultures that now form part of multicultural Canada, precisely because white Canada is a society of immigrants and settlers, whose presence and domination have been forced on an existing native population. Ondaatje (*In the Skin of a Lion* 1987) and Kogawa (*Obasan* 1981 and *Itsuka* 1992) try to reclaim the historical recognition they consider the voiceless immigrants' due, recognizing their part in building the country's infrastructure projects and thus their literal role in nation building. Both Ondaatje and Kogawa seem here to coincide with Edward Said's belief that it is through narration that "colonized [and excluded] people assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (Said xii).

The primary concerns I have mentioned in this chapter are of course articulated through a certain aesthetic. The critic Alberto Mangel has noted Ondaatje's "prose exquisite."²³ Ondaatje has also been acclaimed for his experimental attempts at transgressing genre borders, as well as the boundaries between art and reality as has been pointed out in the Introduction. I propose to discuss Ondaatje's thematic concerns and his prose aesthetics through a close reading of those narratives whose settings and characters (fictional,

²³ S. Tötösy de Zepetnek coincides with A. Mangel's description of Ondaatje's prose as lyrical and poetic, and quotes the critic: "prose exquisite, polie avec la précision et la beauté d'une marqueterie" in "Le poète anonyme," *L'Actualité* 18.8 (15 May 1993:78-80), in "Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, 'History' and the Other." © Purdue UP. December 1999. 3 October 2002 <<http://clwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb99-4/totosy99-2.html>> par. 4.

mythical or based on real life) represent different geographies and histories but converge in similar thematic content and insight characteristic of post(-)colonial literatures such as described by Bhabha and Ashcroft et al.²⁴ as a result of geographical and psychological displacement.

For Kogawa, writing is a transformative journey: “when you use the pen as a pick axe to delve as deeply as you can, it will bring up the most amazing jewels, not only of memory but of insight and understanding, and it will transform you.”²⁵ Kogawa’s literary craft consists in building her narrative, as in *Obasan*, through the documents the narrator (Naomi) encounters, which evoke a recollection of her childhood, by embedding such “archival material in the fictional narrative, blurring the fiction/narrative border [...]”²⁶ *Obasan* is a “documentary-collage,” according to Manina Jones, which Kogawa employs to revise the history of the Japanese-Canadian uprooting (internment and deportation) by blending documented history (letters, clippings, newspaper articles, etc.) and personal story (the narrator’s home; family, friends and neighbours mired in the same plight). Kogawa’s third novel, *The Rain Ascends* (1995), deals with (the author’s) painful and complicated memories of sexual abuse in early childhood. This theme, which also appeared in her first novel, delves into the narrator’s (Millicent’s) conflict of allegiance to the person she loves most in the world: her ailing father who is a church minister and pedophile at the same time. The truth Millicent will have to face is that she is at war “within her being,” between

²⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

²⁵ Sue Careless, “Author on Journey of Self-Discovery,” *Anglican Journal* June 1998 on-line article. Last updated July 17, 1998 at 14:33 <<http://www.anglicanjournal.com/124/06/af01.html>> par. 1.

²⁶ Manina Jones, “Telling Difference in Kogawa’s *Obasan*,” in *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary-Collage' and English-Canadian Writing*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 125.

good and evil. Interestingly for some critics and readers, *The Rain Ascends* does not make any mention whatsoever of the author's Japanese provenance as the scene of the primary conflict takes place in a white religious Canadian Protestant family. With this third novel, Kogawa transgresses the barriers of her "ethnicity" and challenges literary critics to revise their vision of Kogawa, the "ethnic" writer into simply Kogawa, the writer. These previously cited narrative titles, namely *Obasan* (1981) and *The Rain Ascends* (1995), together with *Itsuka* (1992), are Kogawa's three prose works which I will discuss in this dissertation.

The titles of Ondaatje's narratives I will examine in this thesis are as follows: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), a collage of a work which probes the relationship between legend and truth surrounding this American anti-hero; *Coming through Slaughter* (1976), whose main character Buddy Bolden, American jazz cornetist of the turn of the century, has trouble distinguishing between art and reality and goes berserk while playing in a parade; *Running in the Family* (1982), an autobiographical memoir, interspersed with poems, photographs and first-hand interviews, in which the author explores his origins and mixes fact and fiction in trying to reconstruct the story of his family in his childhood Ceylon; *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), a novel which reclaims "unofficial" histories whose main protagonists are immigrants; *The English Patient* (1992), which discusses the issues of nationalism and ideology amidst the physical and psychological decay of damaged characters; *Anil's Ghost* (2000), which is the story of a woman who is born and grows up in one country but is educated abroad, and is then brought back to her native land as a human rights commissioner, now a stranger to her roots, to investigate the war crimes committed by the government of her birth country; and, lastly, *Divisadero* (2007), which, as the title suggests from the Spanish word for division, is a patchwork of small narratives about

different characters divided by time and place and related only through their estrangement from their physical as well as historical surroundings, and from which, at a distance, the narrator clearly gazes (*divisar*) at each of their fragmented stories.

Ondaatje's, Kogawa's and other postcolonial, minority non-Anglo-French writers' literary production in English-speaking Canada has reached a wide range of readers and critical recognition through both national and international literary awards, so that their works have now "been added to the [Canadian] canon of literary histories or university courses."²⁷ Padolsky suggests further that the common terminology used in Canadian literary criticism – "mainstream" and "ethnic" – should be replaced by "ethnic majority" and "ethnic minority" as such terms represent a "more objective cross-cultural frame of reference" (1991:3) and also reflect the historical and social realities of present-day Canadian society.

In the post-colonial realm of Ashcroft et al., the growing corpus of minority writing has prodded "mainstream" critics to assert its significance and veer towards its (apparent) inclusion into the "centre":

As the range and strength of these literatures has become undeniable, a process of incorporation has begun in which, employing Eurocentric standards of judgement, the centre has sought to claim those works and writers of which it approves as British (1989:7).

Similarly, both Ondaatje's and Kogawa's literary craft and choice of themes have also led the Canadian literary canon to claim them as major and "mainstream" writers. Indeed, Canadian literature, as Hutcheon states, has always been ethnic minority writing since the

²⁷ Enoch Padolsky, "Cultural Diversity and Canadian Literature: A Pluralistic Approach to Majority and Minority Writing in Canada," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* (Issue #3 Spring 1991) 112.

“hyphenated Canadian” writers are also “our mainstream writers.”²⁸ Such an affirmation could – perhaps should – lead to a discarding of the notion of “ethnic” authors “writing from the margin.” On the other hand, other critics such as Padolsky make the following distinction: as long as minority writers project or establish “national unifying theses” they will be treated within the “mainstream” areas of concern, whereas if they do not, they will be “relegated to critically peripheral subcategories: ‘ethnic,’ ‘immigrant,’ ‘multicultural’ or ‘non-official language’ writing in English Canada” (1991:112).

For Bhabha, on the other hand, the centre’s shift towards the periphery is the move from the specific to the general “away from the singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational categories [to] an awareness of the subject positions [...] that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world” (Bhabha 1). Postcolonialism, then, according to Bhabha, thinks “beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities” (ibid.), thus resembling the postmodern condition defined by Jean-François Lyotard as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). The postmodern condition, then, entails a widespread loss of faith in sustaining narratives and questions the legitimation of the traditional field of knowledge.²⁹ In the Canadian realm, this distrust of “master” narratives is vindicated in such novels as *Obasan*, *Itsuka*, *In the Skin of the Lion* and *The English Patient*. It is through the spirit of this “sensitivity to differences” that Ondaatje and Kogawa project their poetry or prose art, which is postcolonial/postmodernist in theme, and multicultural as well as “mainstream” in terms of Canadian literary preoccupations.

²⁸ Interview with Joseph Pivato (2001), *Linda Hutcheon: Theories of Culture, Ethnicity and Postmodernism*. July 2001.11 July 2002, Aurora Online: <<http://aurora.icaap.org/>> par. 15.

²⁹ While sharing some common features with postcolonial discourse in terms of strategies (Ashcroft 2001; Tiffin 1993), such as the deconstruction/subversion of dominant discourses, the questioning of traditional historical narratives and a critique of realist representation, postmodern discourse differs in theoretical assumptions and political motivations (see Chapter IV for a more detailed discussion).

I am no different from my grandfather who first came to Canada – like so many new Canadians, I have kept moving, exploring and redefining myself in the geography of the land.

Robert Kroetsch,
The Impossible Home: Robert Kroetsch and His German Roots

All those people born in one place who live in another place have lost their source. In a new continent, the past is a shadowy area and the only way they can survive is to deal in the present.

Michael Ondaatje, *Express Yourself Beautifully*

Chapter II

Authentic Canadian National Culture?

Although the original desire to forge a bicultural Anglo-French nation already existed towards the latter part of the nineteenth century, Canada's real independence was not achieved until the first half of the twentieth century. Canada's status as an independent state actually evolved gradually from being a self-governing British colony in 1867 "marked by political and legal subjugation to British Imperial supremacy in all aspects of government – legislative, judicial and executive,"³⁰ to a practically sovereign member of the Commonwealth and whose independent status became official only in 1982. The passing of the Canada Act by the British Parliament in 1982 declared that no British law would thereafter apply to Canada.³¹ Canada's political development from the early colonial days would also be reflected in the evolution of the history of Canadian literature initially characterized by and patterned after the tradition of British canonical texts to the present-day post-colonial and/or multicultural literary production. With the creation of the Massey Commission in order to foster the development of arts, literature and science in 1949 following the end of World War II, the quest for a "strong and authentic national culture" became official:

During this period of assertive nationalism in English-speaking Canada, literature (including literary criticism) was widely regarded as a site where the remnants of the old colonial relationship with Britain and the new colonial relationship with the United States could be resisted, i.e., subverted.³²

³⁰ Andrew Heard, "Canadian Independence" Copyright 1990, 6 September 2006, <http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/324/Independence.html#_edn1> par. 2.

³¹ Ibid. par. 1.

³² Tamara Palmer Seiler in "Multi-Vocality and National Literature: Toward a Post-Colonial and

The idea of “seeing literature as foremost an expression of a single national character”³³ in Canadian literature is rather difficult to sustain in the light not only of Canada’s original bi-cultural structure but also the fact that its erstwhile condition as a colonizing nation has now metamorphosed into a colonized society. The white Anglo-French settler population evolved from their condition as colonials, then colonists and eventually into postcolonials. This transformation is probably due to the new status the (white) settlers/colonists currently possess which has caused them to switch allegiance to the local place they now inhabit away from the imperial/colonial centre. Still far from identifying themselves with the plight of the original, indigenous First Nations and/or Inuits displaced from their ancestral lands, the (natural-born) white settlers are now beginning to acknowledge the latter’s as well as their own displacement in a colonial society that discriminated against and excluded the indigenous population. Although I am aware that the original settlers and/or indigenous population were the first ones who experienced exclusion from the very start of white colonization of their ancestral lands, an experience reflected in the literary corpus penned by Native Canadian writers on similar subjects addressed in this dissertation, my focus will be primarily on the writings of my chosen authors, who are of non-Native Canadian origin.

What Ashcroft asserts with regard to place as an important factor in forming cultural identity is instructive here. A sense of place, according to Ashcroft, may be so deeply ingrained in the cultural psyche of a people that contention or struggle only arises when

Multicultural Aesthetic,” in *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Fall 1996, 31 August 2006, <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3683/is_199610/ai_n8741501/pg_2> par. 7.

³³ Ibid. 3, Seiler quotes W. H. New, General Editor. *Literary History of Canada, Canadian Literature in English*. 2nd ed., Vol. 4, (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1990) xxxii.

colonization disrupts it “by imposing a feeling of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies; by physically alienating large populations of colonized peoples through forced migration, slavery or indenture; or by dispersing peoples throughout the world” (2001:125). One is inevitably reminded of the axiom attributed to Heraclitus, “Geography is fate,” in reference to the close association between subject formation and place, be it one’s birthplace or adopted country. In the case of African Americans, Ralph Ellison noted the differences between himself (a Southwesterner from Oklahoma) and Richard Wright (born in the Old South, Mississippi), “united by our connection with a past condition of servitude, and divided by geography and a difference of experience thereupon.”³⁴ At the same time, Canadian novelist, poet and critic Robert Kroetsch sustains that the ability of (displaced) immigrants to re-invent themselves enriches and renews a nation: “I am no different from my grandfather who first came to Canada – like so many new Canadians, I have kept moving, exploring and redefining myself in the geography of the land.”³⁵

At the start of the period of (Canadian) assertive nationalism as Seiler observes, which covered between the late 60s and mid-70s, English-Canadian mainstream voices such as Robert Kroetsch’s (despite his German roots) and that of Methodist ministers’ grandson Dennis Lee³⁶ articulated what Ashcroft describes as the “sense of the lack of fit between the language available and the place experienced” (154). As writers/poets,

³⁴ “The Shaping Role of Place in African American Biography,” MCLA (Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts) Copyright © 2007, 375 Church Street, North Adams, MA 01247, 22 November 2007, <http://www.mcla.edu/Academics/Majors_Departments/History_Political_Science_Geography/African_American_Biography_Project/aab/index.html> par. 3.

³⁵ “The Impossible Home: Robert Kroetsch and His German Roots,” in *A Scattering of Seeds: The Creation of Canada* (A 52-part television series celebrating the contribution of immigrants to Canada), 23 November 2007, <<http://www.whitepinepictures.com/seeds/i/9/index.html>> par. 3.

³⁶ See Kroetsch’s and Lee’s respective articles “Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction” (1974) and “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space” (1974).

Kroetsch and Lee expressed the estrangement they felt from the language – English – as well as the (colonized) place, i.e., Canada, as colonized subjects. The language used by the colonizers to explore and “name” the alien land was no longer felt to apply to the (post)colonial subjects who felt the “inauthenticity” (Lee) of the (Canadian) word and its concealing of other experiences, “sometimes British, sometimes American” (Kroetsch). We will discuss further the debatable postcolonial condition of Canadian literature in Chapter IV.

Ethnicity and Canadian Multicultural Society

Some critics such as E. D. Blodgett consider the “kind of benign diffidence” that Euro-American reading audiences have towards Canadian literatures as the result of the inability of (Canadian) critics to “[be] bold enough in spirit to find ways of establishing [...] the context that would make them significant to imaginations formed on [sic] European cultures.”³⁷ Arguably, it was not until major Canadian writers such as Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch resisted “external and imposed values” (Florby 16) through a questioning of their (post)colonial condition – their political, economic, cultural and even linguistic dependence not only on Great Britain but also on the U.S. – that such an identifiably Canadian context came into being. Indeed, Laurence and Kroetsch are “two of the most important representatives of the cultural resistance movement that has put its stamp on a great deal of Canadian literature since the 1960s” (Florby 10). Applied to their

³⁷ Quoted by Gunilla Florby in *The Margin Speaks: A Study of Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch from a Post-Colonial Point of View* (Uppsala: Lund University Press 1997) 9, from E. D. Blodgett’s essay entitled “After Pierre Berton What? In Search of a Canadian Literature” published in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, Vol. 3 (1984-85). Florby, in turn, vindicates here the works of the two major Canadian writers, the subject of her study, whose condition as “Canadian and hence of necessity peripheral,” has forced them to overcome numerous barriers before reaching the “Euro-American metropolitan centres.”

writing, this “cultural resistance movement” opposed the mainstream Anglo-American “tradition” and embodied the feeling of cultural alienation in the midst of a settler-invader country.

Without wishing to conflate postcolonialism and multiculturalism,³⁸ I would suggest that, with the exception of mainstream Anglo-French writers, Canadian “ethnic” writers are undergoing a similar process as they “write back” to the Canadian traditional discourse and project their own or their ancestors’ respective countries of origin through their fiction. As a result of postcolonialism, which has made them aware of “the ability to resist” the dominant discourse as “anti-imperialist subject[s]” (Ashcroft and Ahluwali 112), and multiculturalism, which “officially” acknowledges the existence of cultural difference, Canadian multicultural and/or minority writers have in recent years explored the problematics of identity. In matters of refiguring identity, issues such as gender, ethnicity and race, sexuality, immigrancy, expatriatism, or indigeneity, inevitably concern novelists as they construct and reconstruct their identities (Howells 2003:2). Hence, the authenticity of one’s identity largely depends on the personal background of the ethnic subject, who, in turn, (re)defines his or her context in the narrative of his or her life. In this regard, Howells quotes Stuart Hall: “Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past,”³⁹ adding that this positioning lies also within the narratives of the present.

³⁸ Victor J. Ramraj cites Chelva Kanaganayakam’s paper “Cool Dots and a Hybrid Scarborough: Multiculturalism as Canadian Myth” in which the latter argues that “the postcolonial experience, from the perspective of diasporic life in Canada, incorporates [multiculturalism, migrancy and nationality] in varying degrees (140)”; Ramraj clarifies the conceptual difference between postcolonialism and multiculturalism, the former being “based on the imperial-colonial divide” while the latter “involves different peoples relating to each other” perceived as polycultural rather than postcolonial, in “Answering the Answers, Asking More Questions (314-15).” Both articles, in *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*, Laura Moss, ed. (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP 2003).

Meanwhile, the double perspective or doubleness that ethnic writers experience in their condition as members of an immigrant or minority group has engaged with hybridity; their so-called resistance to “tradition” is twofold, shaped by a ‘here’ and ‘there,’⁴⁰ or acculturation and displacement. One inevitably thinks of “double consciousness,” a term probably borrowed from American Transcendentalism, and invoked by W. E. B. Du Bois⁴¹ as a consequence or feature of the “practical racism that excluded every black American from the mainstream of the society” (238). For Du Bois, the feeling of “two-ness,” that of being an American and a Negro at the same time was the result of “two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (11). Double consciousness thus embodied “an internal conflict in the African American individual between what was ‘African’ and what was ‘American’” (238); the context of race and geographical displacement is inherent in “double consciousness.” Critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond refer to it as the “kind of tension felt by any immigrants [sic] to any place. Doubleness [...] is the essence of immigrant experience. Caught between two worlds, the immigrant negotiates a new social space; caught between two cultures and often languages, the writer negotiates a new literary space” (9). The term ‘hybridity,’ which connotes different meanings and usages in different times,⁴² was applied by Bakhtin in its

³⁹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman (New York and London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1993) 392-403; also quoted in Howells 2003:2.

⁴⁰ Padolsky (“Canadian Minority Writing and Acculturation Options”) cites Frank Birbalsingh (*Novels and the Nation: Essays in Canadian Literature*, Toronto: TSAR 1995:157) in the latter’s treatment of the phenomenon ‘here’ and ‘there’ phenomenon.

⁴¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” and Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness,” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Souls of Black Folk. Authoritative Text, Context, Criticism*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terry Hume Oliver, eds. (New York: Norton, 1999).

⁴² For a detailed discussion of the cultural and racial concept of hybridity, which was originally and exclusively used to refer to crosses between two distinct species and was eventually confused to signify

linguistic sense to “delineat[e] the way in which language, even within a single sentence, can be double-voiced” (Young 1995: 20). Bakhtin’s hybridity, according to Robert C. Young, describes the process of the authorial unmasking of another’s speech, “the point where authoritative discourse is undone” (22), which takes place as a result of the (hybrid) speaker’s “double-accented” and “double-styled” language.

Also, according to Young, Bhabha has shifted the subversion of authority “through hybridization to the dialogical situation of colonialism, [...] a process that ‘reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority’” (ibid.). In an essay entitled “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” Bhabha suggests that with the intervention of the “Third Space,” in which all cultural statements and systems are constructed (Ashcroft, et al. 1995, 2nd edition 2006:156), we begin to understand why claims to the inherent purity and originality of cultures are “untenable.” The “Third Space of Enunciation,” which articulates an effort to conceptualize an *international* (sic) culture, is therefore “based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*” (157).

There have been some recent considerations that immigrant or second-generation ethnic (other than Anglo-French) Canadian writers, who deal however much in passing with Canada as a subject matter, should not be excluded from the canon of Canadian literature. Ironically, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act has not resolved the existing differentiation between what is “mainstream” (white Anglo-French cultural reference) and what is “ethnic” (groups excluded from the socio-political realm of the two founding nations such as white non-Anglo-French and/or non-white Canadian-born, including

‘mongrelity’ [sic] or crosses between distinct races, see the introductory chapter “Hybridity and Diaspora” in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race*, Robert J. C. Young (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

indigenous peoples as well as recent immigrants). Although the Canadian government's policy of multiculturalism has "helped to foster public awareness (in both English- and French-speaking communities) of the increasing role of minority writers within (English) Canadian and Quebec literatures and cultures in general" (Padolsky 1991:111), it has, on the other hand, sustained the "mainstream-ethnic" (binary) distinction in Canadian literary criticism. Canadian writer and critic Roy Miki, for instance, points to the "erasure of Canadians of Japanese ancestry" in Margaret Atwood's critical guide to Canadian literature *Survival* (see discussion in Chapter IV), which banished "racialized" Canadians in the anglocentric literary space. Canadian-born writer (of Ukrainian descent) Janice Kulyk Keefer, on the other hand, opts for a "central" rather than a "marginal" impact and challenges the "two solitudes" icon of the Canadian nation, defending the term "multiculturalism" as being preferable to "ethnic" in order to represent a variety of linguistic-cultural heritages (Hutcheon and Richmond 296). Meanwhile, Neil Bissoondath suggests that the approach to multiculturalism should be neither the "relaxed" U.S. "form of absorption" nor the Canadian "division between groups" which results in "a kind of gentle cultural, ethnic, Canadian apartheid," and proposes instead "a mingling of the two" (Hutcheon and Richmond 315). Also, for Bissoondath, what makes the Canadian multiculturalism project a sham is the onerous multicultural hyphen (his condition is Trinidadian-Canadian or West Indian-Canadian) and its link to the exoticism conferred on "ethnic" communities in general which, far from defining or including them, produces rather a form of estrangement.⁴³

⁴³ Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto: Penguin Books Canada Ltd. 1994:116-117).

In the light of this recent debate, therefore, a discussion and an exploration of the insights of immigrant and second-generation writers is called for, focusing on their transformation as transplanted subjects and what they choose to project – even if this is, for some critics, a distinctly non-Canadian experience – in their narrative. To exclude from the canon of Canadian literature and to label as “anomalous”⁴⁴ the status of immigrant/ethnic writers writing outside the “Canadian experience” is a simplistic and reductive reading of their works and inconsistent with the concept of Canadian multiculturalism as differentiated from the American “melting pot” culture. Arguably, it is precisely through these (multicultural) writers’ bold[ness] in spirit (Blodgett) that the monolithic tradition has been challenged, paving the way for a new era in Canadian literature (Frye, Lecker) and the re-definition of Canada as a nation. The critic Frank Davey even posits “post-national arguments” (albeit contradictorily according to Padolsky, “Canadian Minority Writing...” 7), declaring that nation and nationalism are ideological formations too homogenizing in their implications (1993:15, 17).

Michael Ondaatje and Joy Kogawa are two current major Canadian writers who seem to embody Kroetsch and Laurence’s tradition of “resistance,” questioning and challenging prescriptive notions of “authentic Canadian national culture.” Ashcroft’s concept of resistance also transcends the simple binary oppositionality which Europe established to define its ‘others,’ as it has also “always operated in a wide range of processes to which post-colonial societies have subjected imperial power,” (2001:14) i.e., by way of the “‘resistance to absorption,’ the appropriation and transformation” of the

⁴⁴ For instance, for the critic Sam Solecki, Michael Ondaatje’s anomalous status in the Canadian literary culture compels a “rethinking of the notion of our national literary tradition,” in *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje* (Montreal: Vehicle Press 1985:9), see epigraph to Chapter X.

dominant, colonial discourse itself. This is achieved, according to Ashcroft, through an “interpolation” which not only interrupts but transforms that dominant discourse. I will discuss in Chapter IV the language employed by my chosen authors to “interpolate” and thus transform the Canadian colonial/traditional discourse. Ondaatje and Kogawa’s resistance involves reclaiming the unofficial histories of a silenced group, mainly immigrants who do not officially belong to the Anglo-French bi-cultural tradition or “authentic Canadian national culture.”

Ondaatje, an immigrant writer from Sri Lanka, uses an experimental narrative approach by transgressing genre borders to explore his “self” and truth, while Kogawa is a ‘Nisei’ (second-generation) Japanese-Canadian whose recollection of her family’s history has served to explore and attempt to come to terms with her “doubleness” and expose (through her novels *Obasan* and *Itsuka*) the injustice of Japanese-Canadian community’s internment and discrimination during and after World War II. Ondaatje and Kogawa, who both started writing and publishing poetry in the late 1960s, evolved within the Canadian literary tradition and emerged from the “periphery” even before the official canonization of Canadian multiculturalism. Proof of this is the early recognition awarded to both Ondaatje (Governor General’s Literary Awards in 1970 and 1979, respectively, for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *There’s a Trick with a Knife I’m learning to Do*) and Kogawa (Books in Canada First Novel award, Canadian Authors Association Book of the Year award, both for *Obasan* in 1981 and 1982, respectively) by different Canadian literary associations.

Sri Lankan by birth but educated in England from age 9 until he migrated to Canada in 1962 at the age of 19 to further his studies, Ondaatje’s arrival could not have been more timely. He arrived at a moment “when everyone changes, when everyone wants to remake

themselves” (Hutcheon and Richmond 197), and confesses that he embraced the migrant’s double perspective of being re-focused by and on another place. Although his books of poetry outnumber his list of published novels, he nevertheless became internationally known when his novel *The English Patient* garnered the Booker Prize in 1992, the first ever to be awarded to a Canadian national.

Meanwhile, Kogawa’s publication of *Obasan* in 1981 was also timely for its political significance. It was a time when the issue of reparation to Japanese-Canadians was gaining ground in public opinion. In September 1988, a few months after the drafting of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, and more than forty years after the uprooting of some 22,000 Japanese-Canadians from their homes to be sent away to internment camps in interior British Columbia after the Pearl Harbor attack by Japan in World War II, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney formally apologized and offered \$300 million in compensation on behalf of the Canadian government to Japanese-Canadian survivors and their families. But *Obasan’s* political significance alone, according to Gary Willis,⁴⁵ does not explain the prizes the novel won as *Books in Canada* First Novel Award in 1981 and the Canadian Authors' Association Book of the Year Award in 1982: “*Obasan* is a moving and original novel, expressive of a sensibility that wishes to define, in relation to each other, Japanese and Canadian ways of seeing, and even to combine these divergent perceptions in an integrated and distinctive vision” (par. 1).

The concept of an authentic Canadian national culture does not hold. The Canadian monolithic tradition represents the legacy of colonialism. Major Canadian writers such as

⁴⁵ Gary Willis, “Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*” in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 25 July 2006, <http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol12_2/&filename=Willis.htm>.

Robert Kroetsch and Margaret Laurence have challenged certain conventions from a marginal perspective, questioning their (post)colonial condition, and their (economic, cultural and political) dependence on Great Britain and the U.S. The concept of an “authentic” Canadian culture has been further challenged by later writers such as Ondaatje and Kogawa. Positioned from the “periphery” despite their developing within a Canadian literary tradition, Ondaatje and Kogawa have continued to complicate Anglo-American assumptions and reclaim unofficial histories.

*Never build three doors
in a straight line*

*A devil might rush
through them
deep into your house,
into your life.*

Michael Ondaatje, *The First Rule of Sinhalese Architecture*

*. . . I have a house in the
shadows now and have
learned to eat minerals
straight from stone.*

Joy Kogawa, fragment, *Minerals from Stone*

Chapter III

Biographical and Literary Profiles

Michael Ondaatje: “from sparse facts to intricate history”

Born in 1943 in Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, to a Burgher family of Dutch-Tamil-Sinhalese ancestry, Michael Ondaatje received a postcolonial British schooling in this country until he was sent for by his divorced mother to join her in England in 1952 when he was nine. Doris Graetien, his mother, was separated from her husband Mervyn when Michael was only two years old because of his father’s addiction to alcohol, as the author would reflect in *Running in the Family* years later. While his mother was abroad, he was left under the care of her brother Noel, responsible for his early education. He resumed his formal British education by attending Dulwich College in England, a select boarding school where he learned much about literature as he became a compulsive reader. At the age of 19, he moved to Canada to follow his brother Christopher who had earlier established himself there as a banker.

The making of Ondaatje as a poet and later as a novelist started in the early ‘60s when, upon arrival in Canada, he first attended Bishop’s University, where he met numerous people that would shape his literary career. At that time, Ondaatje was already composing poetry and Ralph Gustafson, poet in residence and his professor at the same time, would read and comment on some of his earliest poems (Jewinski 34). It was also here where he met George Whalley, then professor at Queen’s University in Ontario, and where Ondaatje had the opportunity to be exposed through poetry readings to living poets

such as the British poet W.H. Auden. His exposure to another professor, Arthur Motyer, aroused in him a further love of literature as poetry reading was transformed into an “acted poem” and this also made him realize that the pleasure of literature lies in reading: “that great intimate act, between reader and author, reader and book”(Jewinski 38).

A few months after his arrival at Bishop’s University, Ondaatje faced economic difficulties as his businessman-brother Christopher, who was based in Toronto and who was paying for his schooling, suddenly incurred financial losses. Michael was then helped by another Bishop professor Doug Jones, who invited him to stay with his family to relieve him of his board and lodging expenses. Jones introduced him to Canadian writing, “offer[ing] him a sense of freedom and possibility” (Jewinski 42). This was the place where Ondaatje would meet Jones’ wife Kim, 15 years his senior, and who would later become Ondaatje’s first wife. The marital relationship between Doug and Kim had already gone cold even before Michael arrived, so the separation was an amicable one. Married at the age of 22 out of a sense of propriety, Ondaatje accompanied by his new wife transferred away from the Jones family community to the University of Toronto to complete his B.A. degree in 1965. While still at the University of Toronto, Ondaatje’s poetic talent gained recognition when he won at least three poetry awards.

Immediately afterwards, he earned his M.A. at Queen’s University (1967) with his thesis on “Mythology in the Poetry of Edwin Muir: A Study of the Making and the Using of Mythology in Edwin Muir’s Poetry.” The topic of myths fascinates Ondaatje, “especially with how a few sparse facts can suddenly become an entire intricate history” (Jewinski 61). [Ondaatje applies this method of gathering sparse facts to compose an intricate historical fiction in his chosen mythical (anti-)heroes such as Billy the Kid or Buddy Bolden as discussed in Chapter V]. He was then offered a teaching job at the University of Western

Ontario until 1971, the year he joined the Glendon College faculty, York University in Toronto.

His first published book was a collection of poetry called *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), followed by *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969). Then in 1970, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* came off the press. It is actually a collage of poetry, prose interviews and photographs, treating the protagonist not as a mythic figure but more the focus of Ondaatje's personal enquiry. It won him his first Governor General's Award. He also produced eight other books of poetry from 1973 to 1998, including *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* (1979) which gained him his second Governor General's Award. Not as prolific a novelist as he is a poet, he has written only five novels so far and a memoir.

Working as an editor in different publishing houses, Ondaatje has developed his style of writing, the influences of which he received from other Canadian poets. One of these influences was Stuart McKinnon's *The Interval*, which he especially admired for the fact that "it starts from the personal and moves out" (Jewinski 75). This same process – from the individual or personal to the collective, the "sparse" to the "intricate" – would be his guide in building up the characters of his novels. He began writing, for instance, about Nicholas Temelcoff (*In the Skin of a Lion*) without having in mind that he would eventually also write about immigrants who helped build a bridge in Toronto in 1917:

The writing was a learning process, as the writing of books often is for me. I don't go into the book with a full set of ideas: this is going to be a book about this issue or that period of time. [...] The moving out from the self and into a wider sphere is what I enjoy (Hutcheon and Richmond 199).

Ondaatje's writing process is a painstaking and meticulous one. He usually accumulates materials for a projected work and then spends some time in writing, editing

and rearranging the manuscript. His *Billy the Kid* was practically three years in the making. His first experimental novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, is another case in point. Upon discovering that Buddy Bolden, the best black American jazz cornetist of the turn of the twentieth century, went mad while marching in a New Orleans parade, Ondaatje accompanied by his first wife Kim travelled to Louisiana to research on the life and setting of the story of this legendary jazz musician. The purpose of the visit was to gather facts and details about Bolden's life from local archives, including the mental institution in Jackson where he was confined. The material Ondaatje gathered for this novel hardly filled a page, but what most interested him was developing a "statement about an artist" and not a "true history of a man," finally to transform it into a contemporary mythology (Jewinski 133). It would take Ondaatje over four years to finish this novel. He was uncertain as to how critics would receive *Slaughter* since he tried to construct an experimental work flashed as a "mental landscape" of names and rumours which become popular truths. *Slaughter* became co-winner of the Books in Canada First Novel Award in 1976.

Other literary prizes Ondaatje received include the City of Toronto Book Award and the Trillium Book Award for *In the Skin of a Lion*. In 1987, Ondaatje shared the honour of becoming a finalist for the Ritz Paris Hemingway Award for this novel, together with Nadine Gordimer and Toni Morrison. Faced with the difficult task of selecting the best work from among these authors, the jury failed to declare a winner that year.

Sri Lanka has always been in the heart of Ondaatje. Peter Coughlan⁴⁶ observes the movement in Ondaatje's work regarding Sri Lanka: a "gradually evolving vision" which

⁴⁶ Peter Coughlan, Online Interview with Michael Ondaatje, "Meander, If You Want to Get to Town," Toronto, 28 March 2001, ©Copyright 2002 Pacific Rim Voices, 30 August 2003 <<http://www.kiriyamaprize.com>>

started as a “rumour” (Coughlan par. 10-11). Twenty-six long years since after leaving at the age of nine, until the time Ondaatje went back at thirty-five, his native country was never more than a rumour: of family lore through relatives and letters. *Running in the Family*, a product of several visits, is not merely about an attempt to come to terms with his father, “unknown” to him, or to understand a generation of naïve and eccentric ancestors. This memoir marks the start of the author’s decision to dissipate the blurry impressions he had of the country of his birth and childhood. Eight years later in 1989, Ondaatje would publish another Sri Lanka-inspired work: *The Cinnamon Peeler*, a collection of poems.

Meanwhile, in 1998, Ondaatje would revisit his native country producing *Handwriting*, a book of poems, drawing on history, archeology, poetry, mythology and his personal memories of Sri Lanka. This was probably the time when he was researching and writing his novel, *Anil’s Ghost*. Published in 2000, *Anil’s Ghost* is not a personal or family perspective of Sri Lanka but based rather on the horror of a long-running civil war told through the perceptions of doctors, archeologists, forensic anthropologists, and members of the human rights and civil rights organizations he met while working on this novel. Acclaimed by critics as the most powerful of his works of fiction to date, if not the finest, *Anil’s Ghost* garnered for him his fourth Governor General’s Award and the Giller Prize in Canada.

In his latest novel *Divisadero*, published in 2007, almost seven years after *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje continues to explore his main concerns: the transgression of boundaries between fact and fiction, the truth of fiction and the intertwining of the personal and communal histories of his characters fragmented in mini-narratives. Thus *Divisadero* may be divided into two or three layers of mini stories which start with Ana’s (the narrator-protagonist’s) reminiscence about her *de facto* family living on an isolated farm in

Petaluma, California, that is, her relationship with her father, her adopted sister Claire and her foster brother Coop. The mini narratives then develop in a non-linear style with time and setting shifting to the south of France where Ana seeks refuge from an earlier violent episode in her family and where she becomes a literary historian. There she meets and becomes romantically involved with Rafael, son of a Roma family whose father echoes the fictive thief character Caravaggio in two of Ondaatje's previous novels. The work ends with the narrator's plans to rescue from oblivion the life and works of a once-successful, early twentieth-century (fictitious) French writer, Lucien Segura. The reader is presented with a possible key to understanding the disparate characters and stories depicted in this long narrative when, early on, one of the narrators declares that "[e]verything is collage, even genetics. There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross" (*Divisadero*16).

Michael Ondaatje became world-famous when he received the prestigious Booker Prize Literary Award for his novel *The English Patient* in 1992. *Divisadero*'s publication in 2007 came a few weeks after the announcement on 12th April of Ondaatje's inclusion on the shortlist for 2007 Man Booker International Prize,⁴⁷ a literary achievement in fiction awarded every two years to a living writer either originally in English or a translation available in the English language. Also, for the fifth time, Ondaatje was bestowed the Governor General's Literary Award for this work late in November of the same year. Such recognition has ensured his prominence in the Canadian literary tradition and an official

⁴⁷ Rachel Giese, "Bewitching Ondaatje: Author works his magic again in new novel," (Book Review) April 23, 2007. 9 December 2007 <<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/books/ondaatje.html>> par. 1.

and continuous inclusion on the list of prestigious (postcolonial) international writers in the English language which include Salman Rushdie, Nobel Prize winners V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, Nadine Gordimer, John Coetzee and many others.

At present, Ondaatje is co-editor of a literary magazine called *Brick: A Journal of Reviews*, a literary publication he co-founded in 1991 with his second wife, Linda Spalding.

Joy Kogawa: a writer-activist “yanked out of silence to speak”

It is rather surprising to note that *Obasan* was written “without explicit political or didactic intent” (Garrod 140) and yet it became significant precisely for the political, social and cultural implications it raised for the Japanese-Canadian community, the Canadian government and Canadian society as a whole. Prior to her switch to narrative, author Joy Kogawa had already published two volumes of poetry, *The Splintered Moon* (1968) and *A Choice of Dreams* (1974). These collections of lyric poems reflect her Japanese heritage and the evolution of her split cultural consciousness as she was born Joy Nakayama in June 1935 in Vancouver, British Columbia, daughter of an Anglican minister father (Gordon Goichi Nakayama) and a kindergarten teacher mother (Lois Yao), both Japanese (Issei). To speak of Joy Kogawa’s biography is inevitably to learn about the history of the Japanese-Canadian community – the Issei and the Nisei – a history which is linked to racial discrimination, rejection, and what came to be known as the “military justification”⁴⁸ (the protection of Canada from spies and a potential Japanese imperial invasion) which led politicians of the early 1940s to relocate a sizeable ethnic group in internment camps.

⁴⁸ “Introduction,” in *Factors in the Decision to Intern Japanese-Canadians in World War II*. 25 August 2005 <http://members.tripod.com/intern_canada/Internment/Internracism.htm>

In 1942, the Nakayama home in Marpole, Vancouver was confiscated by the Canadian government along with the property and businesses of thousands of other Japanese-Canadians to prevent “disloyalty and sabotage”⁴⁹ to be sold later to white Canadians at a meagre sum without the owners’ consent. Workers were dismissed from Canadian industries and fishing boats owned by Japanese-Canadian fishermen were impounded by the Canadian Navy. The Nakayama family (women, children and elders) were evacuated to internment/labour camps of interior Slocan, B.C., but the father (along with other young male adults) were sent to inland road and lumber or prisoner-of-war camps. For Japanese-Canadians, all this was interpreted as a convenient pretext to rid British Columbia of natural-born and naturalized citizens of Japanese origin, amid an ever-growing anti-Asian sentiment since the first Japanese immigrant worker arrived towards the latter part of the nineteenth century. There is documented proof of the prohibition of citizens of Chinese, Japanese and Indian ancestry from the right to vote by the Provincial Elections Act of B.C. in 1895.⁵⁰ Discrimination persisted when “[i]n 1920, the federal government disenfranchised the Japanese-Canadians through the introduction of the Dominion Election Act” (Beutell 23) whereby these “Asiatic” subjects would be barred from participating in the general elections. Racial prejudice was also rampant in the different labour sectors: fishing licences were restricted, hiring in the lumber industry

⁴⁹ “British Columbia wages war against Japanese-Canadians” in *Japanese Internment* 25 August 2005 <http://history.cbc.ca/histoire/?MIval=EpisContent.html&series_id=1&episode_id=14&chapter_id=3&page_id=3&lang=E>

⁵⁰ Anon., “From Racism to Redress: The Japanese Canadian Experience” <<http://www.amachi.bizdivers-files/en/pub/faSh/ePubFaShRacRedJap.pdf>>

diminished, etc., not to mention the reduced annual quota for Japanese immigration entry into Canada, workers or otherwise.⁵¹

After the war ended in 1945, and even after verifying that “there had been no proof of guilt [of treason] as a basis of evacuation” (Adachi 279), the Nakayama family and the rest of Japanese-Canadian internees were not allowed to return to British Columbia coastal areas. Joy, then ten years old, and her family were forced to move to Coaldale, Alberta where they worked as field labourers; others were either dispersed to other parts of Canada unknown to them or exiled or repatriated to Japan. When the war ended, the plight of Japanese-Canadians started gaining recognition from public opinion mobilized by church groups, civil libertarians and journalists. These groups protested against deportation and succeeded eventually in forcing a government decision to overturn it. In 1948, Japanese-Canadians were allowed the right of suffrage and the next year, wartime restrictions such as the freedom to travel throughout the territory were lifted, which allowed them to return to the west coast. As the community was gaining ground with their claims, they decided to mobilize politically.

Joy was six years old when she was sent to Slocan internment camp, where she started elementary school. After the camp, she continued school in Coaldale until she graduated from high school. In 1953, she pursued her teacher’s training at the University of Alberta and the following year she began teaching elementary school in Coaldale. Perhaps it was from this place that Kogawa mirrored her experience as a schoolteacher in the first part of *Obasan*. In 1955, she studied music at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto,

⁵¹ More proofs and documented history of the injustices committed towards Japanese-Canadians may be found in books written by, among others, historian Ken Adachi, *A History of the Japanese Canadians: The Enemy That Never Was*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart; Inc. 1976 and activist Muriel Kitagawa, *This Is My Own: Letters to Wes & Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941-1948*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks 1985).

also attending the Anglican Women's Training College and the University of Saskatchewan. In 1956, Joy Kogawa moved back to live in Vancouver and the following year she married David Kogawa, with whom she has two children. The Kogawa family lived in different places – from Vancouver to Grand Forks, B.C. or Moose Jaw, to Saskatoon, and finally to Ottawa (Hutcheon and Richmond 94). It was not until 1959 that Kogawa began writing. In 1964 she published her first short story and also began writing poetry. She was much less concerned with the technical side of writing as she had always felt that she was prompted “by some sense of ‘obedience’ to the pen. The pen or the hand seems to have its own language, logic, wisdom, direction. Poetry sometimes gets written like that for me – the pen just takes itself off and writes” (Garrod 147). Her first collection of poems (*The Splintered Moon*) would be published in 1967, although some of them had previously appeared in various literary magazines. In 1968, Kogawa divorced her husband.

Kogawa's first visit to Japan in 1969 and successive trips led her to recognize where her sense of belonging and allegiance lie:

Japan to me is not home, except in the sense that anywhere can be, though there is an undeniable connection. If I have to locate myself geographically in a place called home, it would be Toronto, but that doesn't particularly feel like home either. I could leave [...]
(Garrod 151).

Evidently she feels she can go anywhere and nowhere, since according to her, the English language is an aspect of home. Kogawa is aware, though, of the best of two worlds that allows her also to use “nonverbal ways of communicating” and she prides herself on the inherent “Japanese attention to nuance and gesture” (ibid.) she was born into along with the English language.

In 1974 Kogawa published her second book of poetry, *A Choice of Dreams*, followed by another collection of poems, *Jericho Road*, three years later. During that time,

from 1974 to 1976 she worked for the Prime Minister's office. *Obasan* the novel was based on the short story of the same title which Kogawa published in the March (1978) issue of *Canadian Forum*. During the 1970s, she discovered the correspondence of Muriel Kitagawa, a passionate militant activist. Kogawa was fascinated by Kitagawa's outspoken, forthright personality – a type of personality that “did not exist” (in Kogawa's own words) among Japanese-Canadian women. Kitagawa would become her inspiration for the character of Aunt Emily in the novel published three years later. Kogawa did not expect the overwhelming interest it received when it was first published and not only for the awards it garnered. The individual responses to this work prodded her to become politically active to the extent of joining the National Association of Japanese-Canadians (NAJC): “We have within us the political person and at times I think that person is yanked out of silence to speak,” said Kogawa in 1989 (qtd. in Kambourelis 120). At that time the NAJC was staunchly campaigning for redress. The official apology from the highest Canadian institution and was similar to the redress achieved by the Japanese Americans, would come almost seven years after *Obasan*'s first publication. Although for some victims it was too late, Canadian Prime Minister Mulroney's announcement was, indeed, significant for it meant a moral victory for the Japanese-Canadians especially the Isseis, many of whom had died “believing they were living in a country where this would never happen” (Beautell 1998:18 qtd. in Kogawa, Mclean's 101. 3 Oct. 1988:12).

Meanwhile, Kogawa remained busy writing and publishing her successive works: *Ushinawareta (The Lost Motherland)*, 1983, Japanese version of *Obasan* for children), *Woman in the Woods* (1985), a collection of poems; *Naomi's Road* (1986), a children's version of *Obasan*, revised in 2005. The revised edition includes historical information on the fate of Naomi's mother. *Naomi's Road* was staged and premiered by the Vancouver

Opera in 2005. *Itsuka* (1992), her second novel, is a sequel to *Obasan* which deals with Naomi Nakane's reconciliation with Canada and her hopes that someday Japanese-Canadians will succeed in gaining redress and compensation from the Canadian government. *The Rain Ascends* (1995), touches on painful memories of abuse in early childhood, emplotting the dilemma this time on the story of a daughter torn between the love and respect for her church minister father and revulsion over his sins of sexual abuse of young boys. *A Song of Lilith* (2001), a book-length poem, was followed by the publication of *Emily Kato* (2006). Coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki that killed Naomi's mother in *Obasan*, Kogawa decided to revise and re-write *Itsuka* giving it a new title of *Emily Kato*. She reasons that "when *Itsuka* came out in hardcover [in 1993], I was killed by a single review in *The Globe and Mail*. He (sic) said it was unpublishable, full of pages and pages of painfully embarrassing writing. It killed me as a writer for years. I took it to heart, even though I didn't know what was embarrassing about it [...] I couldn't hear anything else. I trusted *The Globe*. I thought that was the truth."⁵² Kogawa was led to think that other positive reviews "were just being kind" to her. When Penguin released *Emily Kato*, Kogawa felt the reception was worse than for *Itsuka* as the latter novel did not receive a single review. And in a span of about a decade, Kogawa seems to have taken a respite from writing novels (except for *The Rain Ascends*), probably disappointed by the lack of critical response to *Itsuka*.

Meanwhile, Kogawa has devoted her time to a community project in Toronto, to the campaign to save her impounded childhood home in Marpole from demolition and to

⁵² Michael Posner, "Restoring a Book to Life," (*The Globe & Mail*, March 9, 2006 p. R3) 16 August 2007 <<http://www.kogawahouse.com/events/globe-mail-joy-kogawa-interview-about-rewritten-emily-kato-by-michael-posner-mar-2006>> (par. 5).

giving lectures and conferences, to cite just a few of her activities. In one of these lectures given at McGill University Department of East Asian Studies in 2003, Kogawa set out her aesthetic convictions and religious beliefs. With *Obasan* and *The Rain Ascends* in mind, Kogawa argued that “[f]iction permits the author to open herself radically to the narrative of an Other, often silenced. The novel becomes a privileged space where one may reconcile the authority of the writer’s voice with the silenced voices of the personal and historical trauma.”⁵³ Through her religious convictions, Kogawa further makes a link between the Nagasaki event and the prophet Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac by analogously linking the mistake of the pilot in dropping the bomb on Urakami Cathedral north of Nagasaki instead of the city centre. The destruction of Nagasaki meant the moral victory of having saved (American soldiers’) lives and secured the privilege of writing history for the Allies, but at the price of sacrificing other lives, those of their “enemies” – the bomb’s victims. In other words, the “blessing” of this military mission by a Catholic priest so that God would grant it “speed and efficacy” (“Mercy...” 4) paralleled that of the vengeful Old Testament God demanding the sacrifice of the innocent (Isaac). Mercy and/or forgiveness, virtues already discussed in Kogawa’s third and last novel, can be embedded in fiction writing, which for the author is “an act of self-effacement and humility” (ibid.). The events previously mentioned and the theme of Naomi’s mother’s death caused by the bombing of Nagasaki, may well be the plot for her next narrative currently in gestation. At the time of

⁵³ “Mercy in an Age of War: Joy Kogawa Lectures at McGill,” *McGillEast The Centre for East Asian Research* (Volume 5, Issue 1 Fall 2003 p. 1) 18 August 2007 <<http://www.mcgill.ca/files/eas/newsletter03.pdf>>

writing this dissertation, Kogawa is preparing a new novel whose tentative title is *Gently into Nagasaki*.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Michael Posner, "Restoring a book to life," in *Globe & Mail* (March 9, 2006) 16 August 2007, <<http://www.kogawahouse.com/node?from=70>> (par.9).

We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.

Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*

The lost language, forever lurking somewhere inside the ventricles of the hearts of those who had lost them. Jules, with two languages lost, retaining only broken fragments of both French and Cree, and yet speaking English as though forever it must be a foreign tongue to him.

Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners*

Chapter IV

The Post(-)Colonial and Postmodern Connection

In Chapter I, I noted the inevitable shift in gaze by mainstream critics towards writings found at the periphery and the latter's subsequent incorporation into the centre. This situation, such as it is in contemporary Canadian literature, describes simultaneously the postmodern and the postcolonial features embodied in Ondaatje's longer narratives. The apparent relationship between post(-)colonialism and postmodernism parallels the present Canadian cultural scenario: a former "white settler colony" converted into an officially multicultural society engaged in the post(-)colonial and/or postmodernist challenge (Hutcheon). The officially bi-cultural nation has over time become transformed into the present and officially multicultural Canada. I deem it relevant, then, to include in this chapter a review of the socio-political beginnings of Canada as a nation prior to its latter transformation. Also, Canada's postcolonial condition reflects the feelings of second generation mainstream writers such as Dennis Lee and Robert Kroetsch in British Canada in search of a language to express their own Canadian experience as discussed in Chapter II.

Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge's article entitled "What is Post(-)colonialism?"⁵⁵ seeks to define not only this (literary) approach but also the "crossing over of post-colonialism into post-modernism" (281). The apparent relationship between the two has also inspired the title for this chapter inasmuch as present Canadian culture (no longer

⁵⁵ In *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.

strictly white settler colony but officially multicultural) is engaged in the post(-) colonial and/or postmodernist challenge as Linda Hutcheon argues in a series of books she has authored on the subject. Similarly, the inevitable link acquires certain relevance, as shown in recent critical discussions surrounding authors from the former “white settler colony” states as well as migrant writers from non-white Commonwealth countries who generally share a common post-colonial past. Indeed, our close readings of Ondaatje’s and Kogawa’s works in this chapter will also allow us to see the relevance of both Ondaatje’s and Kogawa’s texts in the post(-)colonial/postmodernist context.

With due respect to Ann McClintock’s “misgivings” about the term “post-colonial theory” in which she questions its orientation and organization “around a binary axis of time rather than power,”⁵⁶ the post(-)colonial and/or postmodern context we shall be concerned with in this dissertation is precisely the apparent ubiquity of the prefix “post,” and the fitting opportunity it provides for marginal subjects to question and subvert (central) power at practically all levels. The term’s (post-colonialism’s) premature celebrations of the pastness of colonialism, according to McClintock, “runs the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial imperial power” (ibid.). McClintock contends that formal (political) independence from the founding metropolitan (mother) country lingers as colonial control displaced from the metropolis to the colony itself. Such is the case of “break-away settler colonies” which have not undergone decolonization, as in the case of the United States, South Africa, Australia, Canada and New Zealand (89). Also, post-colonialism has become unstable and also “a history of hopes postponed” (92) with respect to women as the term is associated with (male) gender power,

⁵⁶ Ann McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” *Social Text*, No. 31/32, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues (Duke University Press 1992:88) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/466219>> 16/07/2009.

hence limiting, if not completely barring, women's access to rights and resources. The validity of these arguments, notwithstanding, the offspring of colonials and later generations born in former colonies now apparently acknowledge their sense of displacement from their forefathers' colony as in the case of Canadian writers Dennis Lee and Robert Kroetsch (see discussion in Chapter II).

Post-colonialism, therefore, defined as 'after colonialism began' (see page 21) rather than after it ended, finds its connection with postmodernism inasmuch as the latter also marks what is beyond, while subverting certain features of, modernism. In the first place, both colonialism and modernism are based upon the Enlightenment project which privileged "reason and rationality: mind and reason conquer[ing] superstition, control[ing] nature."⁵⁷ Enlightenment intellectuals believed in the idea that human reason could be used to combat ignorance and superstition. This "belief" gave rise to the "justified" (European) subjugation or domination, all in the name of progress, of native populations such as those of Africa, Asia or the New World, considered of "inferior culture," thus linking the relationship of Enlightenment with colonialism and imperialism. In Mary Louise Pratt's words, the emergence of "planetary consciousness"⁵⁸ brought about the systematizing of nature through expeditions and explorations to put into order the "chaotic" off-European frontiers as an excuse to appropriate and exploit the world's natural resources. Europe's aggressive colonial and imperial ventures or the systematization of nature, Pratt suggests, fomented the establishing of the slave trade to sustain the plantation system which in turn triggered colonial genocide in North and South America and elsewhere (36). Colonization,

⁵⁷ Terry Dehay, "A Postcolonial Perspective," Department of English, South Oregon University, 28 August 2006, <<http://www.sou.edu/English/IDTC/Issues/postcol/Resources/Terry/dehay.htm>> (par. 6).

⁵⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London-New York: Routledge 1992 [Rpt. 1995]) 15.

therefore, either through “re-naming” of natural species or geographical “re-mapping” of the world from the European perspective contributed to (economic) “accumulation” in order to create “the capital that launched the Industrial Revolution” (ibid.) in Europe.

Postcoloniality in Elleke Boehmer’s definition is “that condition in which colonized peoples seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical subjects” (3). Boehmer distinguishes the postcolonial from the hyphenated term *post-colonial* to refer to the post-World War II period and those writers who have mostly migrated to and are now based in either the U.S., Great Britain or other Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia. Post-colonial literatures, which include the literatures of African countries, Australia, Canada, Caribbean countries, the Indian subcontinent, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka (Ashcroft et al. 2), arose out of the experience of British decolonization “and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre” (ibid.). The task undertaken by postcolonial writers, then, is to articulate this shared colonized experience of subordination, exclusion and alienation. Incidentally, American literature is excluded from this category as a result of the neo-colonizing role the U.S. has played as a world power.

For Linda Hutcheon, on the other hand, postmodernism is “a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts [the conventions of discourse] it challenges.”⁵⁹ Hutcheon’s theorizing of postmodernism therefore avoids polemical generalizations such as Frederic Jameson’s “radical break or

⁵⁹ Linda Hutcheon, in “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism,” *A Postmodern Reader*, Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, eds. (N.Y.: State University of New York Press: 1993:243)

*coupure*⁶⁰ (from modernism) which designate a temporal (contemporary) as well as economic (late capitalism) localization period. Postmodernism is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political” (Hutcheon 1993:244) manifest in the postmodernist concept of “the presence of the past.” Historiographic metafiction, then, as Hutcheon labels it, is a kind of postmodernist contradiction which is self-reflexive and lays claim to historical events and personages (245-246). It is narrative which incorporates fiction, history and theory and paves the way for history’s rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. Postmodernist culture’s contradictory relationship to the “dominant or liberal humanist culture” (246) characterizes what Jean-François Lyotard labels as the incredulity towards master and meta-narratives (sic) (247). Postmodernism, as Lyotard explains it, is the critique or the questioning of the metanarratives used to legitimate knowledge and maintain the system of stability and order in modern societies (xxiv). Moreover, the postmodern condition allows the deconstruction of the “master narrative” and favours the telling of “mini narratives” and local and private stories.

Although the prefix ‘post-’ suggests succession or a new period after colonialism and modernism, both post-colonialism and postmodernism in addition question the European colonial discourse and/or the Enlightenment narratives. In his review of *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*,⁶¹ Roger Berger observes the relationship existing between these two “posts”:

⁶⁰ Frederic Jameson, in “Excerpts from *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late capitalism*,” *A Postmodern Reader*, Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, eds. (N.Y.: State University of New York Press: 1993:312).

⁶¹ Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, eds. (Calgary: U Calgary P 1990).

Post-modernism [sic] is simultaneously (or variously) a textual practice (often oppositional, sometimes not), a subcultural style or fashion, a definition of western, postindustrial culture [...] and the emergent or always already dominant global culture. At the same time, post-colonialism is simultaneously (or variously) a geographical site, an existential condition, a political reality, a textual practice, and the emergent or dominant global culture (or counter-culture).⁶²

Postmodernism and post-colonialism converge then in that they both are a “textual practice” and explore the idea of authority as the “dominant global culture.” However, there are other points of convergence between postmodernism and post-colonialism as Berger observes with regard to Hutcheon’s essay “Circling the Downspout of Empire”: the “deployment of ‘magic realism,’ subversion of Eurocentric master narratives” and the “strategic use of ‘irony as a doubled or split discourse’” (par. 5). Nevertheless, they differ in the fact that postcolonial writings have a geographical and political agenda – the aim of rewriting the (European colonizer’s) master text. Furthermore, postcolonialism, according to Robert C. Young, is “contestatory” and “attacks the status quo of hegemonic economic imperialism and the history of colonialism and imperialism” (2001:58), whereas postmodernism, in much the same way, challenges the “modernist totalizing ideal of progress” (Hutcheon *Poetics* 1988:25) and thus also considers the (European) rationalizing notion of progress as obsolete.

Their contrasting agendas notwithstanding, postcolonialism and postmodernism evidently share common features. They overlap in their critical role in bringing about change that carries out “a symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings” (Boehmer 3) in order to replace the previous (colonial) monolithic discourse (of authority). At the same time, in order to dismantle master narratives from colonial centre, both schools question the unified and coherent subject used as the (homogenizing) narrative of

⁶² Roger Berger, in “Past the last Post-“ 1 January 2007, <<http://www.infomotions.com/serials/pmc/pmc-v2n2-berger-review.txt>> (par. 2).

domination: for postmodernism, as defined by humanism and for postcolonialism, as defined by imperialism. Although postmodernism and postcolonialism share similar strategies they nevertheless have different motivations:

A number of strategies, such as the move away from realist representation, the refusal of closure, the exposure of the politics of metaphor, the interrogation of forms, the rehabilitation of allegory and the attach (sic) on binary structuration of concept and language, are characteristics of both the generally postcolonial and the European postmodern, but they are energised by different theoretical assumptions and by vastly different political motivations.⁶³

The distinction between the postcolonial and the postmodern as formulated by Helen Tiffin can be summed up thus: postmodernism attempts to subvert aesthetics and/or authority in general, whereas a postcolonial writer will explore the specific implications of European and western authority (ibid.).

The Canadian Postmodernist/Post(-)Colonial Context

Ever since the publication of his first book of poetry over forty years ago in 1967, Ondaatje has ceaselessly endeavoured to master his literary craft, eventually earning wide critical recognition. Proof of this are the various literary prizes awarded to his work. (Coincidentally, Kogawa's first collection of poetry was also published in the same year as Ondaatje's first book of poetry.) Ondaatje's arrival in 1960s Canada was very timely indeed, as the country was undergoing historic changes. The mid-60s would mark the beginning of the new era in Canadian literary history, as Northrop Frye and Robert Lecker have noted (see below). Part of the reason for those changes was the re-definition for the

⁶³ Helen Tiffin, "Post-Colonialism, Postmodernism and the Rehabilitation of PostColonial History," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXX, 2, 1993, p. 172 is cited in Gilbert McInnis' web essay "The Struggle of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism" 18 February 2003 <<http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/post/poldiscourse/mcinnis1.html>>

Canadian concept of 'nation,' and the re-mapping of Canadian demography as a consequence of the increasing number of non-Anglo/French, non-white, non-European émigrés, for political or economic reasons, that entered the country during the post-World War II era. In *Imagining Culture*, Margaret E. Turner attributes the existence of the Canadian nation's "condition of unclarity and general quandary [...]" to "the historical presence of the two founding nations"⁶⁴ in addition to the official inclusion of the First Nations and migrant ethnic communities which now comprise Canadian socio-cultural mosaic.

The other reason for the changes lies in the recognition by some sectors of Canadian society, if not total assumption by society at large, of their postcolonial condition, although Linda Hutcheon distinguishes the Canadian situation (as a 'settler-invader' colony) from that of Third World countries' (subjugated colonies')⁶⁵ condition. Hutcheon further contends that "in a specific sense of the word," Canada as a settler colony has experienced cultural inferiority to the British Empire and now has to cope with the American cultural empire (ibid.). Meanwhile, Bart Moore-Gilbert, in his *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (1997, rpt. 1998), sets Canada as an example to illustrate how the term "postcolonial" is typified in its condition "in terms of its temporal, spatial, political and cultural meanings" (10) in at least five cases. Moore-Gilbert goes on to cite the 1960s as the period during which, as suggested by Mary Louise Pratt, Canada was confronting its

⁶⁴ Margaret E. Turner echoes James Snead's discussion of African and European writing ("European Pedigrees/African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative and Community in Tutuola, Achebe and Reed") by re-configuring his statement and applying it to the Canadian condition in her "Conclusion" to *Imagining Culture: New World Narrative and the Writing of Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1995) 108.

⁶⁵ Linda Hutcheon, "Critical Perspectives on Writing Ethnicity in Canada," interviewed by Rosalía Baena in *Tricks with a Glass: Writing Ethnicity in Canada*. Davis, Rocio G. and Rosalía Baena, eds. (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000) 294.

cultural and political dependence on Britain; its economic, cultural and political subordination by the U.S.; the Quebec “predicament” towards Anglophone Canada; the First Nations’ post-/neo-colonial relationship with modern Canada; and the status of immigrants arriving mainly from Commonwealth countries consequently changing the cultural map of Canada.

Moreover, there has been a recent debate that challenges the central question of whether Canada is postcolonial or otherwise, compiled and edited by Laura Moss in the previously cited book *Is Canada Postcolonial?* The conclusion reached “depends on how we perceive Canada” (Ramraj 314). Indeed, Canada is such an amalgam of “ethnic majority and ethnic minority writers” (note the terminological shift from “mainstream” and “ethnic” writer/writing),⁶⁶ that its literary output represents a mosaic not only of the reductive Canadian but also of the extensive topographic/cultural experiences reflected in each author’s paradigm. Stephen Lemon, in his Afterword to *Is Canada Postcolonial?*, suggests taking a hard look at one’s origin together with the educational and economic structures in which one moves when attempting to respond to this question:

The postcoloniality that these essays promote is not one that simply inhabits a text, an individual, or a collective at the level of social *identity*. The postcolonial these essays suggest, is not a club that issues memberships, not a state that patrols its borders, not an ethos that subtends a literary canon. Rather, the postcolonial in these pages is an incomplete project; it is colonialism’s shadow; it is a dialectic of engagement and not a singular logics. This postcolonial, in the first instance, demands attention to the difficulty of the archive. It seeks out the micro-narratives rather than a single motor for social and political causality under colonial and neo-colonial relations. That is why the postcolonial in Canada appears in these pages not as an answer, not as a single project or hypothesis, but as a set of engaged differences (320).

⁶⁶ Enoch Padolsky, even in his previous articles, already suggested a different, pluralistic approach to Canadian writing. In the former approach, the “mainstream-ethnic” distinction implies a “we-they” unicultural “othering” by the dominant socio-cultural group whereas, the “ethnic majority-minority” distinction represents a more objective cross-cultural frame of reference. “Cultural Diversity and Canadian Literature: A Pluralistic Approach to Majority and Minority Writing in Canada,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, Spring 1991:113.

Citing Salman Rushdie's suggestion of a postmodern approach to India's current identity issues, Victor Ramraj also claims that the postcolonial approach to Canadian literature "denies [Canadian texts] complexity in seeing them simply, reductively, as products of the imperial-colonial divide. It falsifies the experience of 'postcolonial,' which cannot be comprehended *only* through postcolonial theories. We need to see them in terms of the more encompassing theories of postmodernism" (317). Ramraj also cites Ian Connell's article⁶⁷ in which the latter compares the treatment of Western texts that incorporate the magical and fantastic as postmodern whereas, similar texts written by a postcolonial writer are considered as "magic realism," which, Connell argues, is a way of "othering." To a certain extent, according to Ramraj,

disequating Canada as 'postcolonial' would be doing that to [Canadians]. We are part of the postmodern world. We are a complex nation. We cannot be comprehended only by a theory predicated on the hegemonic encounter between imperialists and their colonies as given from the perspective of the former colonials or postcolonials rather than of their imperial rulers (ibid.).

The advent of postmodernism, indeed, in Canada would also help to re-focus attention on authors writing on the margins, and to acknowledge literary preoccupations other than the canonical British. Ondaatje is one among contemporary Canadian writers, several of whom are migrant, that reflect both postcolonial and postmodernist concerns in their work. Meanwhile, some critics consider the peripheral position of Canadian literature (with respect to British and American literatures) as manifestly doubly postmodernist, especially when this peripherality refers to minority writing which struggles to emerge from unofficial historical events of outsiders – "ex-centrics," to borrow Linda Hutcheon and

⁶⁷ Ian Connell, "Discarding Magic Realism: Modernism, Anthropology, and Critical Practice," *Ariel* 29.2 (Apr. 1998) 95-110.

Ajay Heble's term – to challenge and deconstruct Canadian master narratives.

One such challenge is Kogawa's third novel *The Rain Ascends*. In this narrative, Kogawa uses the postmodern strategy of parodying conventional or patriarchal texts and the patriarchal God worshipped by the character Rev. Shelby who has "parodied" his faith himself (see Chapter VIII for a more extensive discussion of this work). Hutcheon cites certain leading literary critics who have argued for the importance of the Bible and biblical structures in Canadian literature, but novels written by Canadian authors such as Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* exploit and subvert those literary critics' undeniable cultural authority (1988:7). Hutcheon further notes that "[p]arody is a typical postmodern paradoxical form because it uses and abuses the texts and conventions of the tradition" (1998:8). In this regard, Kogawa's *The Rain Ascends* can be rightfully included as one among such authors. *The Rain Ascends* is also Kogawa's bold attempt to tackle a controversial subject without the slightest allusion to her ethnicity as Japanese-Canadian. Kogawa's narrative is polemic because she has "parodied" or "ironized" one of the most revered White Anglo-Saxon Protestant institutions. To start with, the main characters in *The Rain Ascends* belong to the WASP stock of Canadian society; also, Reverend Shelby, himself an English immigrant to Canada, is a minister of the Church of England; thirdly, Kogawa emplots a sexual abuse scandal at the core of the Canadian Anglican Protestant community, hardly a politically correct move. Finally, perhaps, what Kogawa also achieves in this novel is to remind the reader of Canada's postcolonial status, in stressing that practically all immigrants to Canada have individual stories to tell about their provenance and about the new society of which they now form part, whether in the mainstream or on the margins. Thus, Kogawa's writing may be considered as ex-centric since the focus of her texts is on self-definition both as Canadian-

born and as a “visible” member of the Japanese-Canadian community for obvious reasons of her ancestors’ race, origin and culture.

The Imaginary Cohesiveness of Canadian Identity

The historic founding of Canada as a bicultural nation brought together the distinctive influences of the United Empire Loyalists based in Ontario on the one hand, and the largely French-speaking population in Quebec, on the other. Canada’s development as a nation was characterized by the strong colonial sympathy for its British mother-country alongside the reluctant adherence to the Confederation by the French-speaking Quebecois.

In the Introduction to his study *Novels and the Nation*, F. Birbalsingh analyzes further the historical background of Canada and its “psychological” yearning for national identity despite its bi-cultural co-existence. Whereas its southerly neighbour, the U.S., achieved its nationhood at an earlier time, thus making its literature follow a very different trajectory, Canada preserved its colonial status as a result of the insecurity of annexation posed by the rise of the U.S. as a world power in the late nineteenth century, and the persistent issue of independence or secession with regard to Quebec. Even after Canada was granted self-governing privileges, it still elected to maintain affiliation with Britain, to the point of adapting British institutions and political structures to suit the needs of Canadian citizens.

This duplicitous identity – English-Canadian and French-Canadian – failed to create a real sense of nationalism. The country is so vast a continent that, it seems, each region’s mode of survival is to assert its own identity, thus making it simultaneously “local and

regional,”⁶⁸ in Northrop Frye’s description. Early attempts at reflecting in writing a colonist’s impression of the local landscape (that of Susanna Moodie’s, in particular, *Roughing It in the Bush* [first published 1852] 1988), inaugurated what would partly be Canada’s late twentieth-century preoccupation and was echoed in Margaret Atwood’s recreation through poetry of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970):

We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen – it is so easy to leave – and if we do choose it we are still choosing a violent duality (1970: 62).

Canadian literary criticism up to the mid-1960s – when Northrop Frye’s “Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*” was published – “would become only a debunking project, leaving it a poor naked *alouette* plucked of every feather of decency and dignity” (Frye 1971:213). But later critics have observed how that date would mark the boundary between the old and the new in Canadian fiction. Sam Solecki writes in his entry “(Canadian) Novels in English 1960 to 1982” in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, that Frye’s assessment of that period suggests how far Canadian fiction “ha[s] come since then” (823). Robert Lecker refers to the same date as the birth of the institution called Canadian literature. The term “Modern Canadian Writing,” therefore, employed after (Canada’s) independence (Ashcroft et al. 2) would no longer apply as Linda Hutcheon talks of the arrival of postmodernism in Canada, but taking a distinctly Canadian form, in the seventies and eighties.

Canadian postmodernism, according to Linda Hutcheon, carries a different “ideological baggage” (1988:2) from that which American (postmodernist) novelists

⁶⁸ Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Ontario: House of Anansi Press, Ltd., 1971) ii.

sustain, perhaps because these have been inspired by the cultural history of “a revolution and a civil war.” Meanwhile, Canadian writers, who are endowed with “a more conservative cultural history as a colony,” (ibid. 3) have, in turn, developed their own acts of questioning and challenging conventions from a marginal or “ex-centric” position:

Since the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada’s perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of the nation (Hutcheon ibid.).

This position away from the centre, but which springs rather from the regional perspective as Northrop Frye says, is but part of the human response to the writer’s immediate surroundings:

the creative instinct has a great deal to do with the assertion of territorial rights. The question of identity is primarily a cultural and imaginative question, and there is always something vegetable about the imagination, something sharply limited in range [...] (i).

Thus, a writer is first a New Englander, Midwesterner or Mississippian, etc. before becoming American (Frye ibid.). Or, in the case of Canada, its national identity is articulated through “regionalist impulses like the ex-centric forces of Quebec, the Maritimes, or the west” (Hutcheon 1988: 4). But it seems that the question of identity is not so disturbing a problem as the position of the frontier in Canadian sensibility. In his “Conclusion to a *Literary History in Canada*,” Frye localized the importance of the position of the frontier in the Canadian imagination. The frontier, he observed, which

was a part and a condition of one’s whole imaginative being, [...] was [what] primarily separated the Canadian, physically or mentally, from Great Britain, from the United States, and even more important, from other Canadian communities. Such a frontier was the immediate datum of his imagination (220-21).

Perhaps, the “other Canadian communities” to which Frye referred here were none other than the already existing multicultural and multilingual original inhabitants of the land, and who were excluded by the founding nations of Canada. The English- and French-speaking territories formed part of the “two solitudes” (in reference to Hugh MacLennan’s novel of the same title published in 1945 about the struggle and conflict between two peoples condemned to live within a single nation) that would officially characterize Canadian identity. But these notions of a Canadian nation, of a bi-cultural identity, and even its mainly canonical British literature, which prevailed before other literary productions on the borders were acknowledged, represent the legacy of colonialism which needs transforming.

In her effort to find a single unifying symbol for the country, Northrop Frye’s disciple Margaret Atwood came up with the thesis of Canadian “survival mentality” with her publication of *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: House of Anansi) in 1972. In this book, Atwood attempts to distinguish “Canadian literature from the other literatures with which it is often compared or confused” (13). There are key patterns and characteristics which shape Canadian literature, and at the same time, reflect national and cultural environments, according to Atwood. Canada as a state of mind is an unknown territory for its inhabitants, Atwood further states, and in order to survive and not get lost, one needs a map so “we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who and where we have been [...] we need to know about here, because here is where we live” (1972:19). Atwood came to the conclusion that Canada’s distinguishable unifying symbol is (physical, geographical and cultural) survival/*survivance vis-à-vis* other countries’ dominant symbols such as The Frontier for the U.S. and The Island for Britain:

Our central [Canadian] idea is one which generates, not the excitement and sense of adventure or danger which The Frontier holds out, not the smugness and/or sense of

security, of everything in its place, which The Island can offer, but an almost intolerable anxiety. Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience – the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship – that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival ... (1972:33).

Such a theory alluded to the physical as well as the psychological struggle is reflected in Susanna Moodie's and other pioneer writers' imaginative accounts of their exploration of this "hostile" land. These accounts would only confirm Canada's postcolonial condition under the British rule, and further, its neo-colonial status under the aggressive economic and cultural American "invasion." Hence, Canadian writers have portrayed "the political, the personal, and the natural worlds as harsh and oppressive, and have developed a literature in which bare survival is the predominant theme."⁶⁹

While *Survival* may still be Canada's best-known and most widely read work of literary criticism more than 30 years after it first came off the press, it has nevertheless not resisted recent criticisms of its "slipshod" construction (Reid par. 4), its arbitrary methods in the selection of Canadian authors under study based not on readers' preference but rather on the author's personal criteria, and its exclusionary anglocentric concerns which both "banish[] 'racialized' Canadians [First Nations, Asian Canadians, writers of colour, in general] from public space"⁷⁰ and overtly exclude "all immigrant writers as [they are] not genuinely Canadian" due to "the absence of pressures to assimilate" and "of a Canadian identity to which they can conform" (Reid par. 25). For Atwood, the prose works by immigrants to Canada are generally characterized by "failed sacrifices" as they come

⁶⁹ Scott Reid, "Survival According to Atwood: Margaret Atwood's guide to CanLit maintains its popularity because it fits our pre-conceived notions," in *The National Post* (10 April 1999). 30 August 2007 <<http://www.authorscollective.com/storage/Atwood.html>>

⁷⁰ Roy Miki, *Broken Entries: Race Subjectivity Writing*. (Toronto: The Mercury Press 1998: 101). See Miki's critical analysis of Kogawa's *Obasan* as cited by Gerry Turcotte in Chapter V.

unprepared and are confused by the hostile WASPs and the French who were, in turn, early immigrants themselves. Hence, a typical Canadian immigrant plot, according to Atwood, may be described as follows:

First, Canada does not demand a leap into the melting pot [unlike the typical American plot], though the immigrant may decide to attempt one anyway. Secondly, if he does wipe away his ethnic origin, there is no new 'Canadian' identity ready for him to step into: he is confronted only by nebulosity, a blank; no ready-made ideology is provided for him. And thirdly, though he has sacrificed his past and tried for success, he is much more likely to find only failure. The sacrifice has been made for nothing: not nothing plus money, just nothing (1972:150).

In her critique of the stories authored by the “reluctant immigrant(s),” the subtitle given to Chapter Seven of *Survival*, Atwood vividly but pessimistically explores the insights of generations of “failed sacrifices” by the immigrant’s family saga in a Canadian setting in what looks like a survey of immigrant fiction. It seems that, as Atwood points out, the Canadian experience for immigrants is programmed for failure no matter how hard their attempt to assimilate and to adapt to the Canadian way of life. If that were the pre-conceived idea of immigrants of non-Anglo/-French descent, then the exploitation in Toronto of migrant workers who came from impoverished regions of Europe as depicted in Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* and the history of rejection of generations of Chinese- and Japanese-Canadians in Sky Lee’s and Kogawa’s novels, respectively, would simply be their resigned “naturalistic” fate caused both by harsh geographical and prejudiced social environments. Accordingly, migrant workers who came to “exploit” Canadian wealth would be solely responsible for their failure, which, in turn, would justify Atwood’s (highly personal) interpretation of Moodie’s “purpose” for writing *Roughing It in the Bush*, i.e., to “tell[] others *not* to come” (1972:149), implying that if they did, they came at their own risk. It is indeed rather disconcerting to note here a certain inconsistency in Atwood’s

observation. Two years earlier (*The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, 1970), Atwood recognized the “immigrant” condition of all Canadian-born persons faced with “violent” estrangement towards the unknown parts of the vast territory, she herself even empathizing with the newcomers’ plight (see quote on page 75). It seems that in Atwood’s attempt to “outline” some “key patterns” to distinguish Canadian “national” literature from “all others” in *Survival*, she wittingly or unwittingly regards fatality in immigrant fiction as the consequence of the doomed attempt to come to terms with the immigrants’ foreign ancestral values regardless of their degree of assimilation and integration into Canadian society.

This is why, for some critics, *Survival*’s thesis rests on a deliberate exclusion and discrimination of the non-Anglo Canadian experience, a strategy that strips other ethnic communities of their Canadian identity in Atwood’s text of nationhood. Roy Miki is bothered by Atwood’s concluding statement which confirms the “erasure of Canadians of Japanese ancestry” in her failure to acknowledge their “Canadian predicament” (of uprooting, dispossession and deportation) – the result of “xenophobic Canadian policy”:

[...] the tendency in English Canada has been to connect one’s social protest not with the Canadian predicament specifically but with some other group or movement: the workers in the thirties, persecuted minority groups such as the Japanese uprooted during the war (Atwood 1972:242; Miki 1998:101).

Likewise, Miki admonishes the appropriation of (minority) discourse through the reductive treatment (subject versus object) or translation (representation of the other) of the Japanese Canadian experience by a non-Japanese (read: white Anglo-) Canadian writer that projects distorted notions of this minority group to a “mainly anglocentric political space” (102). In his analysis of the dramatic poem “Call my people home” (1950) by Canadian

poet Dorothy Livesay,⁷¹ who Atwood in turn critiques for “dwelling on a minority,” Miki states that the documentary mode Livesay employs “turn[s] Japanese Canadian subjects into racialized objects of white discourse.” Miki goes on to unmask “the guise of liberal empathy” which excludes “specificities of language, culture, history, and geography, effectively stripping away the subjectivities” of the Japanese Canadians depicted in the poem (102-103).

When *Survival* was reissued in 1996, Scott Reid deplored the fact that Atwood did not revise her foreword to the book in order to review any of the “outrageous generalizations” made, much less correct any of its more “egregious factual errors.” Canadian literature has expanded since *Survival*’s first publication in 1972, even crossing Canadian borders with Canadian writers gaining international recognition and exploring themes beyond nationalist concerns. Arguably for some critics, the present reality of Canadian literature, proof of which is the considerable number of independent Canadian publishers that have emerged since the erstwhile culturally-nationalist oriented House of Anansi⁷² was founded, is veering away from the canonical British/Canadian monolithic centre. The focus is now located on a new type of border, this time comprised of the once-excluded, marginalized minority groups whose voices are struggling to be heard; after all, Atwood’s “survival thesis” has its all-time applicability to the Canadian condition.

⁷¹ When asked in an interview if she consciously wrote poetry as a social function starting with the universal deliberately, Livesay said: My earlier documentaries were full of immediate passion, like “Day and Night.” It just sprang out of my experience. But “Call My People Home” was planned. I had to present what happened to *those* people. So I did a lot of research beforehand” (*my emphasis*). “Strong Voices” by Alan Twig (1988), BC Bookworld Authorbank: Livesay, Dorothy, 5 September 2007 <http://www.abcbookworld.com/?state=view_author&author_id=1837> (par. 16).

⁷² Created by Canadian writers Dave Godfrey and Dennis Lee in 1967 to feature especially Canadian talents, the House of Anansi wanted to promote a sense of Canadian culture through literature.

This is why, in allusion to Yeats, and concurring with Hutcheon's theory of the Canadian postmodern, Robert Kroetsch is convinced that

[t]he centre does not hold. The margin, the periphery, the edge, now, is the exciting and dangerous boundary where silence and sound meet. It is where the action is. In our darker moments we feel we must resist the blind and consuming power of the new places with their new or old ideas that now want to become centres. In our happier moments we delight in the energy of the local, in the abundance that is diversity and difference, in the variety and life that exist on any coastline of the human experience. This willingness to refuse privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of metanarratives becomes a *Canadian strategy for survival*⁷³ (*my emphasis*).

Perhaps the boundary to which Kroetsch refers as the site of the action may not be the same frontier which Frye considered to be the source of the Canadian writer's imagination. Frye was speaking of the settler colonies' experience and from the viewpoint of a "modernist at heart" as Kroetsch described him. But one thing is clear, Frye, Kroetsch and a host of other writers and critics coincide in the fact that the border is a strategic location from which Canadians were able to write. Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974) is set precisely on this geographical frontier. The writer-protagonist of the novel, Morag Gunn, is born in a rural backyard of Manitoba. As she regresses back into her childhood, she becomes fascinated by the stories her foster father Christie used to tell her about the origins of their ancestors who lived in northern Scotland. Morag later deplors the loss of language and original culture suffered by Christie and her *métis* childhood sweetheart, Jules. They have become victims of the damage and transformation resulting from colonization. Another story that depicts the resistance to English occupation and colonialism is Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973). Wiebe personalizes and interprets the history of the Indian chief Big Bear who refuses to sign a treaty that would

⁷³ Robert Kroetsch, "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy" in *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. Ajay Heble, Donna Palmateer Pennee & J.R. (Tim) Struthers, eds. Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997:357.

devastate the livelihood of his people. Canada's official history is questioned here by this Mennonite writer, a second generation offspring of exiles from Russia, who goes beyond the canons of storytelling and assumes the personality of Big Bear in order to speak the silenced thoughts of the First Nations communities suffering from harsh exclusionary practices and driven to near extinction.

Meanwhile, the imaginary cohesiveness of Canadian identity, as Kamboureli calls it (*Making a Difference* 11), could no longer sustain the relegation of the First Nations and non-Anglo/French immigrants to invisibility. Thus, the collapse of the "physical and mental" frontier was followed by the legislation of the "Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada," otherwise known as the Multiculturalism Act of 1988. The canonization of Canadian multiculturalism signified the awareness, if not the total acceptance⁷⁴ of Canadian society's cultural and racial diversity. But Canada's adoption of a mosaic cultural identity seemed to generate a series of tensions and contradictions between the model of "literary hybridity" and the "canonical British" nationalist approach, something noted by Ashcroft et al. in *The Empire Writes Back* (36). In this regard, Eva Darias Beautell observes that Ashcroft et al. overlook the possibility that the "canonical British" is something "the [Canadian] settler cultures have assimilated, appropriated and adopted [...] to their own concept of tradition."⁷⁵ Beautell explains further that this is so because the majority of the Canadian population either came from Europe or has been in Canada long enough to assimilate and transform European master codes into its own transcultural experience (ibid.). But if such is the case, the experience of Canadian

⁷⁴ Hence, the sustained official recognition of bilingualism.

⁷⁵ Eva Darias Beautell, "Writing Back and Beyond: Postcoloniality, Multiculturalism, and Ethnicity in the Canadian Context" in *Tricks with a Glass: Writing Ethnicity in Canada*, op. cit. 23.

indigenous cultures and those of recent non-European immigrants will therefore be excluded from this theory, as Beautell herself acknowledges through her footnote. Or, perhaps, also be assimilated in due course?

The Canadian postcolonial situation differs from other colonized countries, whose current preoccupation is to re-discover their (native) roots/identity prior to the British colonial rule. On the one hand, Canadian writers who have been born into the kind of literary canons considered as their own from the very beginning of colonialism are not affected by the tension arising from the imperial/colonial, or the foreign/native (op)position. On the other hand, these binary oppositions, according to John Bolland, will only serve to reinforce “racist and colonial discourse,”⁷⁶ and are incompatible with (Canadian) immigrant writers’ adoption of the “double perspective” (such as Ondaatje’s). Bolland also alludes to the Canadian critics Linda Hutcheon and Ajay Heble’s term “ex-centric subject” to describe the concept of subjectivity in writers like Ondaatje, who place themselves outside the oppressive structures of this binary model. Indeed, it is through this binary structure of colony/empire that the official policy of multiculturalism has received much criticism. Beautell notes that this confrontation becomes evident in the case of diasporic writers “who do not always fit into the above binary pattern” (24). She goes on to cite other critics such as Gayatri Spivak who observes that “what multiculturalism sometimes does is to homogenize, even ghettoize, a variety of subject positions into the prescribed and accepted *ethnic* images and *ethnic* tokens of the country.”⁷⁷ The “ghettoization” of these diverse positions under Canadian multiculturalism reminds us of

⁷⁶ John Bolland, *Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient: A Reader’s Guide* (New York/London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2002) 31.

⁷⁷ Gayatri Spivak is quoted by Beautell in her article published in *Tricks with a Glass*.

the labelling of the literary production in English of ex-British colonies as “Commonwealth literature,” which Rushdie scathingly dismisses (see Chapter I, page 19).

This is precisely what Neil Bissoondath means when he rejects the critical designation of a migrant writer based on his or her country of origin – in his case, as a West Indian writer – arguing that it limits the writer’s projection as an artist. When asked whether quality is impeded by encouraging multiculturalism, Neil Bissoondath agreed and added that “multiculturalism is an attempt to freeze people into what they have been, and an artist has to be open to everything. [...] Multiculturalism seems to heighten the distinctions between people. It doesn’t really bring people together.”⁷⁸

Ondaatje has suffered a similar designation or “freezing”: as a Sri Lankan-Canadian writer, he has been criticized for being more concerned with aesthetic issues rather than with those that touch on his (ethnic) condition as a Sri Lankan based in Canada. Ondaatje rejects being considered an ethnic writer, feeling himself to be simply a writer and responds:

As a writer I don’t think I’m concerned with art and aesthetic issues, any more than I would want to be just concerned with making the subject of being a Sri Lankan in Canada my one and only subject. I go to writing to discover as many aspects of myself and the world around me as I can. I go to discover, to explore, not to state the case I already know (Hutcheon and Richmond 198).

But ethnic writing has now become part of the Canadian literary scene, according to Hutcheon.⁷⁹ The hyphen that goes with the writer’s “ethnic” background is “merely the externalization[] of the reality of hybridity” (289). Whereas the hyphenated American notion of identity, which refers to one’s “ethnic” origin separated by a hyphen from

⁷⁸ “Neil Bissoondath,” in *Speaking for Myself: Canadian Writers in Interview*, Andrew Garrod, ed. (Newfoundland: Breakwater Books, Ltd. 1986) 50-51.

⁷⁹ In the interview by Rosalía Baena in *Tricks with a Glass*: 287-98.

“American,” has long been considered pejorative as it owes a half-hearted allegiance to the U.S.,⁸⁰ the Canadian concept of multiculturalism seemingly upholds the hyphenated nature of one’s identity to emphasize hybridity: “A Canadian is a hyphen,”⁸¹ as Joy Kogawa asserts in her second novel *Itsuka*. Even Susanna Moodie, Hutcheon states, is considered an immigrant writer – an Englishwoman who is “roughing” it in Canada (290) and whose impressions as a pioneering woman were reflected in her book *Roughing It in the Bush or Life in Canada*. Therefore, the tradition of immigrant writing, as Hutcheon observes, “has been [in Canada] from the start” (ibid.). The themes hyphenated Canadians write about reflect especially the places of which they have been part and which now serve as the topographical projections of their art. In rekindling their topographical memory, then, these writers are tapping what is immediate to the imagination no matter how “marginal” or uncentred it may be to the monocentric culture.

Language and History Reconstructed: Alternative Paradigms in Michael

Ondaatje

With the theme of marginality as the colonial world’s source of creative energy (Ashcroft et al 12), immigrants and children of immigrants in Canada have also taken it upon themselves to use their own backgrounds as source material of their literary production. Kogawa’s battle for redress waged in favour of the Japanese-Canadian

⁸⁰ In 1915, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt criticized the use of the term “hyphenated American” as it showed the lack of the citizen’s “pure” allegiance to the United States. From then onwards, American ethnic identity has been expressed through the “dehyphenated” version such as Afroamerican, Asian American, etc. “Hyphenated American.” 2 October 2004 <http://www.fact-index.com/h/hy/hyphenated_american.html>

⁸¹ From here onwards I am going to use the hyphenated form of Canadian hybridity, e.g. Japanese-Canadian, unless other writers and critics, in their use, omit the hyphen otherwise.

community and against the Canadian government's racist policies during and after World War II through her first two novels, attests to this strategy. In the case of Ondaatje, though he started experimenting with genre by writing longer narratives ostensibly about characters such as Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden (*Coming through Slaughter*), subjects who were apparently impersonal and merely biographical in treatment, he was actually dealing with themes of the outsider and the 'other' – both very close to home.

The notion of the 'other' is central to Ondaatje's writing. In his exploration of this 'otherness,' Ondaatje has incorporated the nineteenth-century American marginal figures of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden in order not simply to re-create their historical past but also to be able to experiment with language by mixing fact and fiction. According to Tötösy, Ondaatje's "postmodern use of the historical produces poetic fiction that 'manages' history." Tötösy further quotes Ajay Heble's observation in her article "Michael Ondaatje and the Problem of History," a study of Ondaatje's first two longer narratives. Heble notes: "The force of Ondaatje's texts thus resides in their ability to articulate a tension between [...] an insistence on what Ondaatje calls 'the truth of fiction' [and] on his imaginative account of the past as being narratively faithful to the way things might have been" (Tötösy par. 3). We can add to this observation Ondaatje's own "imaginative account" of his narrator's identification with the character at a certain point especially in these aforementioned stories in which the narrator assumes the persona of, or blends with, the character in an attempt to resolve the conflict created by the latter (see Chapter V for a more detailed discussion of this process).

Out of the historical past also emerges the marginal figure of Laszlo Almasi as the wrongly identified 'English' patient in Ondaatje's novel. Although the title *The English Patient* is apparently based on Count d'Almasi, his illicit romance with a married

Englishwoman and the fragmented memories of his past, the novel evokes notably and more centrally the psychological disintegration and sense of displacement of the other three characters stranded in the Tuscan villa. The novel also questions Eurocentrism and colonialism, and presents the issue of an identity constructed from different cultural origins. For Ondaatje, diaspora or geographical dispersion as a result of colonialism makes one's identity unfixed and indeterminable. The indeterminacy of identity is echoed in the novel in the impossibility of mapping the borderless desert and of resolving the unknown identity of the charred patient. Furthermore, the treatment of Kirpal Singh's story – his recruitment into the British Army as a sapper and his dislocation from the imperial culture – evokes the postcolonial condition described by Homi Bhabha. Solecki alludes to the chapters and scenes involving Singh as those which illustrate the post-colonial theory such as formulated by Ashcroft et al. in their book *The Empire Writes Back* (Solecki 1997: 355). The (hi)story of the imperial centre crumbles to give way to the personal narratives of Kip, Hana, Caravaggio and even the patient's (who turns out to be not an Englishman, after all).

The English Patient was made into an award-winning film in 1996, which, as the author himself declared in an interview, “has become something quite distinct, with its own DNA.”⁸² Ondaatje, who is very interested in filmmaking and has tried his hand at directing documentaries, approved the film version by director Anthony Minghella of his novel and insisted: “We all wanted to make a good film rather than a faithful adaptation.”⁸³ While Ondaatje managed to blend the features that characterize both postcolonialism and

⁸² Dafoe, Willem. “Michael Ondaatje on *The English Patient*.” *Bomb* Winter 1997. pp. 14-19. 10 November 2002, par. 8 <<http://ovrdedge.simplenet.com/tep/players/index.html>>

⁸³ Tyler McLeod, “*Patient* author impressed by movie” *Daily Express*, November 3, 1996, 10 November 2002 <<http://ovrdedge.simplenet.com/tep/players/index.html>> par. 5.

postmodernism in his book, its cinematographic version downplayed the private narratives of the main characters, and tellingly, non-Anglo Kip and Hana. Are we to infer from Ondaatje's somewhat defensive statement that faithfully making the Kip and Hana story the centre of the film would have resulted in a *bad* artistic decision? The unfaithful adaptation of the book into a commercial and successful film disregarded some of the most significant tenets of postmodernism inasmuch as it stressed British nationalism and imperialism and extolled the victory of the Allied forces. In addition, other critics have coincided in their view of the film version as "a reductive Hollywood romance" of "a complex postmodern novel," a marginalization of the non-white, Asian Kirpal Singh and the conversion of the English patient into a saint, etc. Of all the criticisms hurled at Minghella's film adaptation of Ondaatje's novel, the most significant in the context of the present thesis is the one that argues that Kirpal Singh's story in the book is "essentially a postcolonial statement" which is suppressed by Minghella and transformed into "an orientalist tale,"⁸⁴ in reference to Said's thesis of Western conceptions and 'othering' of the "Orient."

Although Solecki confesses his admiration for Ondaatje's "complexity and profundity of art and vision," and his importance and potential as a major writer, he designates Ondaatje as "something different from 'a major *Canadian* writer'" (1985:9). More than a decade after the official recognition of Canadian multiculturalism, Solecki still considers Ondaatje's work, with the exception of *In the Skin of a Lion*, as "among the least obviously Canadian" (1997:882) especially in terms of subject matter. But other critics

⁸⁴ David L. Krantz cites Jaqui Sadashige, Subhash Jaireth and Maggie Morgan based on their respective articles about the film adaptation of *The English Patient* in "The English Patient: Critics, Audiences, and the Quality of Fidelity," *Literature Film Quarterly* January 1, 2003, <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3768/is_200301/ai_n9212932>

such as John A. Thieme think otherwise. Thieme sustains that despite Ondaatje's treatment of American cultural myths such as Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, the Sri Lankan-Canadian writer's literary production

is typically Canadian in many of its preoccupations. His concern to explore the past and how cultural mythologies are formed, his postmodernist investigations of language and form and his attempts to break down generic barriers in texts which mix various modes of prose and poetry with visual and documentary material all make him one of the most typically Canadian writers of the contemporary period.⁸⁵

Moreover, according to Thieme, despite the use of an American theme in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje follows the tradition of Canadian writers such as Robert Kroetsch, George Bowering, bp Nichol and Bill Bissett in "collaps[ing] the boundaries between discourses in their attempts not only to deconstruct received versions of language and history, but also to reconstruct them in alternative paradigms" (ibid.). The mingling of history, fact and personal experience allows Ondaatje to create another postmodernist work in the character of Buddy Bolden (*Coming through Slaughter*), tormented by order and certainty and narrated in a non-linear fashion.

Perhaps because of his multicultural roots, Ondaatje invariably explores questions of personal and cultural identity. In *Running in the Family*, for example, the subject matter is superficially unrelated to the Canadian context: it is Ondaatje's attempt to rediscover his Ceylonese/Sri Lankan background. Yet as Thieme notes, it can be considered essentially a Canadian text as it shares the concern with both a private and public quest of origins, which is very much in consonance with the themes of major Canadian writers such as Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Robert Kroetsch and Jack Hodgkin (40-41).

⁸⁵ John A. Thieme, "'Historical Relations': Modes of Discourse in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*," in *Narrative Strategies in Canadian Literature: Feminism and Postcolonialism*, Coral Ann Howells and Lynette Hunter, eds. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991: 40).

Similarly, with regard to *Anil's Ghost*, the act of the forensic anthropological excavations set in Sri Lanka coincides metaphorically with Kroetsch's notion of postmodernism: "[i]n this postmodern world, we trust a version of archeology over the traditional versions of history. History, in its traditional forms, insisted too strongly on a coherent narrative" (Kroetsch 357). In this sense Ondaatje delves into the centuries-old traditions of a country mired in a free-for-all civil war as he at the same time unearths the human dramas of love, family relationships, the split of allegiances, etc. In her desire to unravel the truth about the government's implication in crimes against its citizens, Anil Tissera, the novel's main protagonist, resists her native country's notions of truth, customs and traditional beliefs, of which she was once a part. Indeed, Ondaatje shows us the complexity of digging into the lives of individuals found in the "borderland of civil war among governments, and terrorists and insurgents" (*Anil's Ghost* 289) in the same way that Kroetsch posits an "archeological sense [in which] every unearthing is problematic, tentative, subject to a story-making act that is itself subject to further change as the 'dig' is on" (ibid.).

The same kind of archaeological methodology is what Ondaatje claims to perform on his characters in the writing of *Divisadero* as he is much more interested in "how the writer evolves in the writing, so that the novel evolves as well."⁸⁶ It was through what Ondaatje calls the "thin sheaf of information" (see quote from *Coming through Slaughter* on page 111) and from the fragment of story he was told about in passing that Ondaatje was able to develop *Divisadero*: the scene of a horse which got loose in a barn and knocked

⁸⁶ Bunbury, Stephanie. "Michael Ondaatje's never-ending story," *The Sydney Morning Herald*. May 5, 2007. 9 December 2007 <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/books/michael-ondaatjes-never-ending-story/2007/05/03/117788276873.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap2>> par. 3.

down its owner, one single female character turned into two, and a young man, their adopted sibling. For Ondaatje, it is not only the themes that recur but also how his creative impulse is reflected repeatedly in each of his works. We are reminded of how he first conceptualized the scene of a nurse nurturing a patient, the real-life jazz musician who went mad in a parade and the travails of the Macedonian immigrant Nicholas Temelcoff, to name only a few of such characters about whom he knew very little until “you work backwards” (Bunbury *ibid.*) to unveil their stories.

Doubleness: The Source of Kogawa’s Imagination

Already a well-established poet, Kogawa did not write her first novel until she was in her mid-forties. The idea of writing about the Japanese experience in Canada had been brewing in her mind for some time. She was reluctant in the beginning to consider the idea of rekindling the memory of the whole family’s internment: “horrific for me just to even think about all that stuff” (Garrod 146). Kogawa confesses to feeling a kind of revulsion about the whole experience of her ethnicity. At first, she fell into the strategy of self-denial in which anything Japanese – the language, friends, memories – was avoided or rejected, doubtless a survival strategy in the face of such haunting experiences just as Naomi Nakane’s brother “[Stephen] is always uncomfortable when anything is ‘too Japanese,’” (*Obasan* 261). “[A]ssimilation was the watchword” (Garrod *ibid.*), according to Kogawa. She was convinced that what mattered most was (the history of) white Canada; she wished she had been white. It was not until she got hold of certain documents about the Japanese community’s World War II evacuation that she started writing *Obasan*. Kogawa confessed further that she simply “obeyed” her pen – its logic and direction towards the reality that truly concerned her and what members of the Japanese community had endured. The

conflicted self would spring actually from the doubleness experienced by this Canadian ‘Nisei’ subject, the probable cause of this “revulsion.” Indeed, while different “hyphenated” Canadian writers confess to varying experiences related to their “ethnicity,” they coincide in their desire to belong and explore the tensions between ethnic cultures and heritages in order to overcome the negative connotations attached to the word “ethnic.” While second-generation Ukrainian-Canadian Janice Kulyk Keefer’s writing is “fed by [her] ‘ethnicity’” (Hutcheon & Richmond 296) and the stories her grandmother told her as a child, (Trinidadian-)Canadian Neil Bissoondath resents ethnic origin identification. He opts for a middle ground between “absorption” (or the US melting-pot reduction policy) and the Canadian policy that provokes division.

In her study of Kogawa’s works, Beautell cites Eli Mandel’s notion of ethnicity as “a duality that can only be solved in a myth, a restructured self, a fictional being.”⁸⁷

Beautell explains further:

[T]he process of writing as the articulation of conflict, instead of leading to some kind of resolution, more often than not reveals the many contradictions of the minority voice, and, eventually, makes the writer recognise doubleness as an integral part of his or her identity (ibid.).

Realizing the existence of the subconscious ‘other’ of the ‘self,’ or what Mandel calls the “dialectic of self and the other” (quoted in Beautell 1998:41), perhaps Kogawa became gradually aware of this conflicted condition when she felt the need to reflect in writing her own and other people’s experience of internment. It would be simplistic reading, indeed, to consider Kogawa’s narrative as mainly and restrictively “ethnic” writing. Kogawa’s works, Beautell stresses, “transcend any possible single classification, be this ethnic, minority

⁸⁷ Beautell 1998:41, cites Eli Mandel in *Another Time*, Three Solitudes: Contemporary Criticism in Canada 3 (Press Porcupine 1997:95).

literature or Japanese Canadian writing” (1998:42), or, to echo Kulyk Keefer’s multicultural vision, hers is a kind of narrative that clamours for “a central and not marginal impact” (Hutcheon and Richmond *ibid.*).

Without suggesting a return to the discussion of Laurence’s or Kroetsch’s exploration of the self and its origins, it is fitting to note here that Kogawa’s quest through language is likened to that of these two major Canadian writers’. Writing from the border as the source of Canadian imagination has been considered as the position where the Canadian minority writer can pose the challenge to the central British-Canadian canons. Likewise, it is from this border where “newcomers” can re-invent themselves, and through their dream or imagination, participate in enriching and renewing a nation (Kroetsch). The periphery is where Kogawa portrays “a minority (non-official) culture and history,” as Beautell herself (1998:10) observes. We may note, then, that Kogawa is trying to re-write, revise and openly challenge the history made official by Canadian authorities in their discriminatory decision to evacuate citizens of Japanese origin. And in her attempt to reconstruct her experience, Kogawa manages to rescue and uphold the “decentred subject,” contrary to what some critics, such as Joseph Pivato contend (although he does not specifically refer to Kogawa’s works), regarding the narratives of “many minority ethnic writers”:

Some critics have tried to read these works as postmodern. And we can see how it is appealing to read many ethnic minority novels as open to postmodern theories that promote the ‘decentred subject,’ support the fragmentation of linear narratives and show scepticism about master narratives. I have argued that many ethnic minority writers do not want to decentre the subject but simply to find or construct the minority subject for the first time. They do not use anti-narrative fragmentation because they are often trying to reconstruct a lost narrative for the first time from the chaos of fragmented oral histories.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Joseph Pivato, “Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Fall 1996, 23 July 2005, <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3683/is_199610/ai_n8744049/pg_4> par. 28.

Obasan, which means “aunt” in Japanese, is the first long narrative that focuses on a Japanese-Canadian author’s historiographical experience, whose recollection by the narrator (Naomi Nakane) emerges from the vague fragmentary memories supplied by Uncle Isamu and Aya Obasan’s acceptance and gratitude for life *vis-à-vis* Aunt Emily’s militancy and clamour for justice. This novel, structured in the elliptical mode (see also Mark Levene’s description of Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, Chapter VIII), opens with the scene in the coulee one late summer evening in 1972 and Naomi and her uncle’s annual “pilgrimage” (about the same time) to the place not far from Granton. It is the “spot” where uncle and niece contemplate the sea of grass as a mnemonic surrogate for the sea on the Vancouver coast from where they were forcibly uprooted. Similarly, the narrative concludes one month later in September at dawn, following the wake of her uncle’s death, with Naomi trekking to the same coulee in a sort of epiphanic resolve:

Up at the top of the slope, I can see the spot where Uncle sat last month looking out over the landscape.

“Umi no yo,” he always said. “It’s like the sea.”

Between the river and Uncle’s spot are the wild roses and the tiny wildflowers that grow along the trickling stream. The perfume in the air is sweet and faint. If I hold my head a certain way, I can smell them from where I am (296).

Although the novel apparently begins in chronological mode with a diary note, it nevertheless breaks up into fragments of fact and fiction as Naomi’s memories of the past leap back and forth from the very moment she accompanies Obasan on the eve of her uncle’s funeral. It is, precisely, in the attic in Obasan’s company, and upon opening the “Pandora box” (M. Jones 124) which contains not only letters, clippings (papers which serve as “wind and fuel nudging [Naomi’s] thoughts to flame” [*Obasan* 38]) and

documents, some of which were written in “euphemised language”⁸⁹ to neutralize Japanese-Canadian persecution and internment by Canadian authorities,⁹⁰ that Naomi rekindles the past she initially wishes to bury:

But we’re trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead – all our dead – those who refuse to bury themselves. Like threads of spiderwebs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles (*Obasan* 30-31).

Naomi would still resist Aunt Emily’s crusade for redress and the latter’s efforts to convince her niece of the need to break the silence. The narrator appears to be shrouded in the imposing silence of her other aunt, Obasan, who “lives in [stone],” in a “language [that] remains deeply underground” (*Obasan* 39) throughout most of the first novel until the first half of the sequel, *Itsuka*. Perhaps Naomi’s awakening occurs symbolically after Obasan’s death and after developing a special friendship with Cedric, the priest working for *Bridge*, the Japanese-Canadian community’s bulletin in Toronto.

Kogawa’s first two novels *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, whose titles are purposely expressed in Japanese, represent a transgression *per se* and a vindication of the mini-narrative of a family as well as an “alternative” to the “official” (hi)story of the Japanese-Canadian community relegated by its government to exclusion. While *Obasan* is a novel based on the narrator’s (and to a certain extent, the author’s) lived experience as a child of her family’s, as well as the Nikkei community’s, dispersal from the Canadian-Pacific coasts, *Itsuka* goes

⁸⁹ Teruyo Ueki, “*Obasan*: Revelations in a Paradoxical Scheme – Asian Perspectives,” MELUS Winter 22 December 1993, 23 July 2003 <<http://www.findarticles.com/p/search?qt=teruyo+ueki&tb=art&qf=all>> par. 5.

⁹⁰ In his book, *The Enemy that Never Was*, Ken Adachi had previously and equally denounced the “primitive and austere conditions” of the camps euphemistically “labelled by government administrators as ‘interior housing centres,’ ‘relocation centres’ or ‘interior settlements’” and the uncertainty of the future and humiliation of evacuation which internees faced, by quoting chroniclers who analyzed what the Canadian government did to its (Japanese-Canadian) citizens at the outbreak of war, 251-252.

on to depict the narrator's life, this time as an adult: her own and her community's "coming of age." Through this narrative, she eventually breaks the silence which also shrouds the disappearance and the fate of her mother, while resolving to join Aunt Emily's crusade in order to achieve redress in the end.

Even from the start, *Obasan* chronicles that, perhaps, *itsuka* – someday – the Japanese-Canadians will go back "home." Home can be on the coastal areas of Vancouver where the Issei first settled and eventually belonged or, "home is where our stories are, and that's not just a question of ethnicity or even country, [...] home is where the struggle for justice takes place" (*Itsuka* 192). But the remainder of this story is something that has yet to be told, according to the narrator. *Obasan* as a novel simply could not have ended there. The sequel is a hopeful "fight for redress" in which the main character Naomi Nakane, now an adult and past her prime years, is transformed and becomes more politically aware and involved. The uprooting of Japanese-Canadians and dispersal from the *border* coastline into the interior, *central* B.C. prairies, probably to make them at the same time visible (under surveillance of the authorities) and invisible (utterly unassimilable) to the eyes of the WASPs, was both unintentionally ironic and a cynical move – a clear evidence of "othering" and rejection: "To a people for whom community was the essence of life, destruction of community was the destruction of life" (*Obasan* 223), as Aunt Emily claims.

Through her doubleness and her writing from the border Kogawa revises and openly questions the history made official by Canadian authorities. The periphery is the position where the Canadian (minority) writer can pose this challenge, which is also from where Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch explore self and origin. Similarly, Ondaatje's literary production is typically Canadian in many of its preoccupations: his exploration of the past and how mythologies are formed, his postmodernist investigation of language and

form, his attempt to break down generic barriers in texts, etc., his concern with both a private and public quest of origins, and his archeological drive to “dig” into the lives of individuals.

Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.

Frantz Fanon,
Black Skin, White Masks

... I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and emigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers, gatherings in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language, gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. Also the gathering of the people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned ...

Homi K. Bhabha,
DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation

Chapter V

Deracination and Displacement: Outsiderhood and the Marginal Figure in Ondaatje's Works

This chapter will focus on the postcolonial themes of deracination and displacement caused by geographical, sociological, political as well as psychological and linguistic factors, all converge on the subject who, displaced, marginalized and divided, grapples with the burden of outsiderhood and the desire to belong in a new setting. This crisis is articulated in terms of his or her ethnic context generating differing cultural syntaxes as the borders of the once monolithic centre are traversed. Before exploring Ondaatje's and Kogawa's writerly engagement with the above, a brief look at the responses of other 20th-century writers are warranted.

Deracination, Displacement and Postcolonialism:

Other 20th-century Writers Respond

A major concern of post-colonial literatures is with place and displacement (Ashcroft et al. 8). It involves the crisis of identity caused by the forceful replacement during colonization, and the resulting hybridity in post-colonialism, of the indigenous culture. Diaspora as a result of slavery or indentured labour, subjugation of native identity through imposition of the English language on colonized subjects, or migration for political or economic reasons in the twentieth century have all brought about dislocation. The exposure to a new setting and of being subject to a different sociological and psychological condition require an appropriate recounting of this post-colonial experience from the point

of view of the writers themselves, immigrants or not, in order to express this “sense of ‘Otherness’” (Ashcroft et al. *ibid.*).

While the language used to reflect this experience in former colonies of the British Empire is English, Ashcroft et al. distinguish between “the language of the erstwhile imperial centre” and “english” as the linguistic code transformed into several distinctive varieties worldwide as a sign of subversion of the standard code (English), symbol of Commonwealth hegemony. For some African and Caribbean nationalist writers, the use of the English language implies a continuous British imperial colonization and the “assum[ption] of a [different] culture.”⁹¹ The loss of their mother tongue as a result of the African diaspora has made them feel the “foreign anguish”⁹² of dispossession and disconnection with their culture of origin. On the other hand, while Caribbeans “yearn” for the forgotten tongue, Indian and some African writers consider English as part of their (multilingual) cultural background and therefore have now “accepted [it] as a creative medium” (Boehmer 209).

This same language problem was singled out by African American author Richard Wright in his essay “The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People” written in the late 1950s in which he stated: “[t]he elite of Asia and Africa are truly men without language.”⁹³ Wright further deplored the absence of “psychological language” as a consequence of invasion and subjugation and proposed that the most distinctive and powerful way of

⁹¹ Elleke Boehmer cites in this respect Franz Fanon’s work *Black Skin, White Masks* in *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 207.

⁹² *Ibid.* The poet Nourbese Philip’s work is cited by Boehmer as she discusses the effects of the use of the imperial language in defining one’s “post-colonial” identity.

⁹³ Eugene E. Miller quotes Wright from “The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People” in *White Man, Listen!* (1957) in his Introduction to *Voice of a Native Son. The Poetics of Richard Wright* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990) xx.

retrieving it is for “[oppressed people] to reorganize their lives in accordance with their own basic feelings” (qtd. in Miller *ibid.*). The psychological language to which Wright referred, and which Miller, in turn, rationalizes and explains is

a code that did aesthetic justice to [Wright’s] connatural, affective, experiential knowledge of reality, his ‘basic feeling’ that sprang from his existence in a repressed minority group (Miller xx).

Similarly, cultural critic Stuart Hall is conscious of this “basic feeling” but refers to it as something that emerges from a particularly “ethnically located” standpoint:

The splitting of the notion of ethnicity between, on the one hand the dominant notion which connects it to nation and ‘race’ and on the other hand what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery. That is to say, a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture. [...] We are all in that sense, *ethnically* located.⁹⁴

Richard Wright’s experience of growing up in brutally segregated Mississippi led him to describe “the state of abandonment” and “aloneness,”⁹⁵ a sentiment consciously brewing in the personality of Cross Damon in *The Outsider* (1953). Damon’s condition as a “Negro,” i.e., an outsider (albeit native-born in a white-dominated society) in Wright’s novel written while in exile in Paris, depicts the protagonist’s outright transgression of law and morality. In his attempt to flee from personal conflicts and responsibilities, Damon is forced to assume the identities of two dead persons on different occasions in substitution of his own in order to survive; and he is eventually pushed into a chronic marginal existence.

⁹⁴ Stuart Hall, “The New Ethnicities” in *Ethnicities*. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 163.

⁹⁵ Donald B. Gibson’s entry on Richard Wright in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris, eds. (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 794.

On one level, the reality of being black in a white supremacist environment, condemns Damon to outsiderhood. On another level, his assertive embracing of that condition could be said to embody the theory of “extreme individualism” which Wright developed to explain his artistic strategy of “Personalism.” Wright’s “personalism” is conceived as an aesthetic with a special stress on “personal protest.” While Miller views it as an anarchistic aesthetic in its absence of cohesion and values, and for its emphasis on “tendency rather than form or content” (xviii), Wright was especially concerned with its role as an “art attack” wherein the distance between art and reality is overcome,⁹⁶ foreshadowing Ondaatje’s own strategy of blending art with reality, which I discuss below.

Postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha proposes the trope of the “beyond” to describe the postcolonial condition in which “time and space cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (1). It is a movement that does not seek a new horizon, but rather follows an alternative direction that traces a circular motion, crossing the threshold of the centre that was once exclusively linear and predominantly subjective. Bhabha’s innovative postcolonial move lies in thinking beyond the dominant subjectivities and addressing the crisis – be it political, sociological or of identity – of the outsider or marginalized subject in terms of his or her non-mainstream, ethnic context. For Bhabha, postcolonial writers similarly address themes of displacement and outsiderhood through individual stories reflecting their marginality and/or ethnicity *vis-à-vis* the monolithic society.

⁹⁶ And one way of doing this is by “push[ing] art beyond mere contemplation” towards one which has “implications and consequences in the social sphere” (Miller xviii). The solitary and marginal figure that Damon eventually becomes in *The Outsider* is a personal revolt against a society that foments exclusion, a society that is ignorant of whatever extreme action the ‘outsider’ is capable of executing in order to assert his will to survive.

To be an outsider is to be in a state of culture shock, similar to that felt by Santosh, a Hindu character-narrator in V.S. Naipaul's *In a Free State* (1971), who retreats ridiculously into a cupboard at the height of the violent protests of the *hubshis* (a derogatory Indian term for black people, in general) on the streets of Washington D.C. Both Santosh and his first Indian employer, domestic and diplomat, respectively, are clear examples of the cultural confusion of Third World subjects and their status in the First World as outsiders or aliens, a feature of Naipaul's own experience as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a "nomadic intellectual" in a postcolonial world.

An immigrant automatically becomes a displaced person. In British-Caribbean author Caryl Phillips' *The Final Passage* (1985), this displacement is brought about by the social, cultural and psychological estrangement from the "Mother Country" by West Indian immigrants after traversing the "Passage" to arrive finally and discover that the BBC world service hegemonic term – immigrant – has betrayed them. Their hopes to "make a fortune" and gain a comfortable life and a better future in Great Britain, the kind of colonial expectations their Caribbean country has instilled in them, are shattered by the reality of the racial discrimination they suffer upon arrival in Britain. Leila, together with her son and husband Michael, braves the "passage" to England to join her mother only to find her ailing and dying in hospital. The family spend their first night in her mother's squalid bedsit, and later, they are forced to accept the dirty, unhomey abode which is all they can afford to rent. It is hinted that the difficult situation may contribute to Leila's husband's attitude of indifference and irresponsibility towards herself and their child. The tone and atmosphere of the chapter "England," especially, articulate the anxieties of dislocation felt by a newly-arrived immigrant and soon-to-be outsider.

Margin versus Centre and Canadian Multiculturalism

As we have seen, in the Canadian scene recent developments have altered the way non-mainstream stories are read and interpreted as the voice and image of the ‘other’ – the ‘other’ referring to the individual who belongs to a non-mainstream, ethnic background; once disregarded and marginalized, this individual has gained recognition since the 1970s. The process was further enhanced with the advent of the Multiculturalism Act of 1988, an official recognition that contemporary Canada is formed of diverse cultural backgrounds from the First Nations as the original inhabitants of the land, right up to the last group of immigrants. A number of ethnic literary anthologies have been compiled as writers from differing “cultural syntaxes” emerge to define their stand and give voice to histories that were once omitted or silenced.

In their introductory notes on *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond comment on the meanings and implications carried by the term “ethnic,” with the term “multicultural” being used in its place to neutralize the marginalizing “stigma” attached to the former. Etymologically, *ethnos* means ‘nation’ or ‘people’ and should therefore suggest that all Canadians are ethnic, including the French and British (recalling Stuart Hall’s notion of ethnicity above). Hutcheon and Richmond further clarify that a second meaning is derived from its usage as ‘pagan’ and ‘heathen’ in its earlier associations, or ‘foreign’ in its more modern ones. Accordingly, the word “ethnic” “always has to do with the social [and political] positioning of the ‘other’” (2).

On the other hand, Smaro Kamboureli foregrounds her intention to reconsider texts designated both as mainstream and minority literatures in Canada in her study, *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*. Kamboureli explains:

Multicultural literature is not minority writing, for it does not raise issues that are of minor interest to Canadians. Nor is it, by any standard, of lesser quality than the established literary tradition. Its thematic concerns are of such a diverse range that they show the binary structure of 'centre' and 'margins,' which has for so long informed discussions of Canadian literature, to be a paradigm of the history of political and cultural affairs in Canada (3).

The powerful works of multicultural writers, then, serve to educate the mainstream populace about its lack of information regarding the experiences of "marginal" Canadians. Canadian national politics, prior to the official recognition of the country's multicultural condition, were adamant in demanding citizens of non-mainstream backgrounds to efface their other culture, in short, their past.

Joy Kogawa, as a hyphenated Canadian (native-born Canadian of Japanese descent), for instance, has managed to recreate the history of her Japanese ancestors in Canada (*Obasan* 1981) not only from facts gathered through oral narration from relatives but also through documents from newspaper clippings, archives, etc. about their reverse "internment" or isolation from Canadian society during and after World War II, simply because they were ethnic Japanese. The work responds to her original purpose, the urge to narrate the haunting personal history of her family and has further become a collective vindication of their presence for at least three generations in the midst, or rather on the margins, of white self-centered Canadian society.

Meanwhile, the state policy of the "official rhetoric of multiculturalism," to which Teresa Gibert refers, has been particularly criticized by ethnic minority writers themselves. These ethnic writers advocate "genuinely shared political control and access to real economic power for the marginalized"⁹⁷ instead of the superficial action and lack of real

⁹⁷ Teresa Gibert, "Multiculturalism Revisited: Canadian Literary Deconstructions," in *Visions of Canada Approaching the Millennium*, Eulalia C. Piñero Gil and Pilar Somacarrera Iñigo, eds. (Madrid: UAM

concern in which minorities are bribed by “a trickle of funds” for “a book project here, a little folk dancing there” (*Itsuka* 1992: 50). Gibert further dissects other complaints about how multiculturalism has converted the culture of minorities into a commodity item likened to a collectible souvenir; the manipulation of the word “multiculturalism” during election campaigns to gain votes from these sectors; its use as an instrument to foment rivalry between ethnic communities (the “divide and conquer” principle); or the exclusion of the Black community from the benefits of multiculturalism tends to apply to Canadians of European (read: white) origin.

The Conflicting ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the Works of Michael Ondaatje

Cultural definition of one’s identity is, according to John Bolland, “largely determined by the relationship between self and other” (30), in short, by the perception the self has of the other, while one’s condition as foreigner or alien is subject to the gaze of a nation or an ethnic group who perceives the “difference.” The outsider figure does not only imply class non-acceptance by the mainstream group as Bolland states but crucially for our purposes here, also suggests a political positioning over subjects considered racially “inferior.”

‘Otherness,’ ethnic difference, rootlessness and uprootedness: these are themes post-colonial writers consciously (or perhaps, subconsciously) explore as their inevitable recurring ghosts. And Ondaatje’s condition as immigrant writer and naturalized Canadian citizen at the same time, helps him to delve into them with bold frankness. Ondaatje’s preoccupation with the experience of ‘otherness’ and the exploration of the state of being “different” within a dominant culture allow him to mould his characters’ displacement and

Ediciones, 1999) 117.

alienation. When asked by Hutcheon about this concern, Ondaatje declared:

That moving out from the self and into a wider sphere is what I enjoy. In *Lion* and in *Running* I wanted to move out from the focus of one individual as in *Slaughter*, for instance. [...] I wanted to step away from a private story into a public one, a social one – although obviously much of the emotion that the migrants feel in the book has a personal source. I just didn't want to limit this story, which I think is important, to one which would have been seen as a sort of self-portrait (*Other Solitudes* 199-200).

In his desire to “move out” from the self, Ondaatje has managed to create characters that reflect struggling emotions of longing for the part of the self that is half-exiled, the self that is torn between the culture of the country of origin and that of the adopted country. Ondaatje likens the move to an internal search for “home” knowing that it is neither geographical nor psychological: “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal [sic] who hates the foreigner” (*Running in the Family* 79). This self-in-conflict is explained by John Bolland as the paradox that describes Ondaatje's thought and writing “between an identification with the figure of the outsider – whose marginality is the source of a powerful if anarchic creative energy and integrity of vision – and an equally felt need for belonging” (9). Bolland further illustrates this by focusing on the “migrant's double perspective” adopted by Ondaatje and contrasting it with the binary oppositions used in colonial discourse. Ondaatje's thinking is reflected not only in *The English Patient* but also in his other longer works. There is tension between being native-born and immigrant or a foreigner and also between marginality and integration, severance and union.

Indeed, other critics have also observed Ondaatje's fascination with anti-heroes or marginal figures that formed part of the historical past. In his essay “Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, ‘History’ and the Other,”⁹⁸ Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek cites Ajay

⁹⁸ Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, “Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, ‘History’ and the Other,” December 1999 © Purdue University Press, 3 October 2002 <<http://clwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clweb99-4/totosy99-2.html>>

Heble (“Michael Ondaatje and the Problem of History”): “Ondaatje has repeatedly been engaged in an attempt to incorporate marginal figures out of the historical past into a non-historical genre” (Tötösy par. 3), in reference to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming through Slaughter*. These two works by Ondaatje would mark his transition from poetry to narrative prose and as such would be his experimental attempts to portray the lives of these two quasi-contemporary American personages: Billy the Kid, a notorious outlaw born in mid-nineteenth century, and Buddy Bolden, a black jazz cornetist born in the late nineteenth century.

Ed Jewinski, one of Ondaatje’s biographers, considers Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden as Ondaatje’s alter egos, arguing that they reflect the writer’s experiment in mixing fact and fiction, or art bordering on reality, and in moulding his ‘self’ and ‘other’ through them – a contradicting duplicity present in most of his texts. In his first two longer works, Ondaatje started to explore the image of the self reflected in the other. The choice of a “poetic gunslinger” and a legendary jazz artist provided the writer’s landscape to explore different “formal perspectives,” as Siemerling⁹⁹ observes in *Slaughter* and in *Billy the Kid*, “including a single line on an otherwise empty page (60), passages of lyric prose poetry, narrative prose, lists, photographs, interviews and tape transcripts”(108). From the “thin sheaf of information,” which Ondaatje gathered from his own research on the life of Buddy Bolden, he manages to arrange facts and products of his imagination, without simply following a predetermined layout that would allow him, according to Siemerling, to move more freely and more easily along predictable lines. This parallels Bolden’s revolt against

⁹⁹ Winfried Siemerling, “‘Scared by the Company of the Mirror’: Temptations and Identity and Limits of Control in the Work of Michael Ondaatje,” in *Discoveries of the Other: Alterity in the Work of Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Michael Ondaatje and Nicole Brossard* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

predictability as he is “almost completely governed by fears of certainty” (*Slaughter* 15).

The narrator’s identification with Bolden is clearly shown in the aftermath of the latter’s going mad in a parade:

When he went mad he was the same age as I am now. The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. *For I had done that* (133, my italics).

In another passage, the narrator reveals his inventiveness in reconstructing a story from “a desert of facts” and his fascination with Bolden’s character expressed in the form of an elegiac lament on the latter’s disappearance:

The thin sheaf of information. Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, ‘Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade ...’ What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body, and you like a weatherbird arcing round in the middle of your life to exact opposites and burning your brains out so that from June 5, 1907 till 1931 you were dropped into amber in the East Louisiana State Hospital. Some saying you went mad trying to play the devil’s music and hymns at the same time, and Armstrong telling historians that you went mad by playing too hard and too often drunk too wild too crazy. The excesses cloud up the page. There was the climax of the parade and then you removed yourself from the 20th century game of fame, the rest of your life a desert of facts (134).

The lack of known “records” or facts about these “heroes” is what has prodded Ondaatje to probe deeper into their identities. The narrator’s identification with the central character is so intense that in most cases the voice of the former blends with that of the latter until they finally become indistinguishable. This is what Siemerling calls the “implicit identification or superimposition of self and other” (110) which occurs when Ondaatje concludes his narrative. This critic further cites in his article the following passage from *Billy the Kid* as illustration of this “undecidable ambiguity:”

It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so one can see it hanging in pillars or sliding along the roof like amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still in my shirt (105).

This blurring of the distinction between narrator and central character is also found in *Running in the Family*, when, for instance, Ondaatje imagines his drunken father wanting to look at his face in the mirror: “He sat down forgetting the mirror he had been moving towards. Scared of the company of the mirror” (*Running* 189). This last sentence without a subject, presumably referring to the father, at the same time could be interpreted as the narrator seeing himself in the mirror of his father’s life (Siemerling 111).

Running in the Family is the product of Ondaatje’s visit to Sri Lanka on two different occasions to investigate the “historical relations” of his ancestry. Ondaatje’s urge to write about his roots came at a time when he was living in Hawaii away from his wife and children (Jewinski 151). As he tells us in *Running in the Family*, writing his family “chronicle” has made him come to terms especially with the father he once had but never had the chance to get to know. Ondaatje confesses it has been like confronting the estranged ‘other’ that has been haunting the ‘self’ by trying to piece together fragments of truth. This work has also become a quest for the historical roots of his native country. The themes of his lost father and the country of which he is a native, seem inevitably to converge in the midst of the author’s digressions linking both the historical (and foreign) origins of his ancestors and of his native Sri Lanka.

Ondaatje’s Displaced Characters

The self in conflict, torn between roots and uprootedness and between outsiderhood and belonging, which is central to Ondaatje’s work, may well sink into disintegration and decay, both physical and psychological. Thus, Ondaatje’s protagonists are an outlaw, an insane musician, an anarchist-saboteur, an alcoholic father, a dismembered World War II

thief-spy, an unidentified patient burnt beyond recognition, or “international bastards” who have lost their sense of individual and national identity. It is this “sense of homelessness and placelessness,” according to Birbalsingh, which provokes the “general disease of human fragility and vulnerability.”¹⁰⁰ The sense of homelessness and placelessness is none other than the dislocation inherent in Ondaatje’s main characters, who suffer from the ill effects of colonialism and of the postcolonial condition. This postcolonial syndrome may be diagnosed not only in *The English Patient* but also in the rest of Ondaatje’s work.

Mervyn Ondaatje, for instance, the father the author creates for himself in *Running in the Family*, is afflicted by this syndrome. Through descriptions based on stories furnished by family and relations, the narrator discovers an eccentric father, who often resorts to excessive drinking, but a charming and gracious man when sober. He is portrayed as a man who grew up in the midst of the existing *métis* (hybrid Eurasian) lifestyle in the colonial twenties and thirties wherein “a large social gap existed between this circle and the Europeans and English, who were seen as transients, snobs and racists” (*Running* 14). The English and Europeans snub the Eurasian community who, in turn, tries to emulate them. A victim of alcoholism, Mervyn is abandoned by his wife and small children. Although he manages to raise a new family in his second marriage, Mervyn Ondaatje’s continued addiction to drink drives him to self-destruction, depression and oblivion at “the mercy of distance” (179) as his grown-up children were then living miles away from him. In this sense, Mervyn Ondaatje and Buddy Bolden as the author’s versions of these real-life protagonists, arguably share the same vulnerability that has plunged them into self-destruction and eventual silence. While one is more obsessed with exploring “chaos”

¹⁰⁰ Frank Birbalsingh, “Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*,” in *Novels and the Nation. Essays in Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Tsar Publications, 1995) 171-72.

through his art and life, the other is bent on carrying to extremes the eccentricities that run through his ancestors. Although such extreme behaviour and, to a certain extent, violence may not be directly related to the type of displacement central to our discussion, the physical and psychological disintegration and duplicitous personalities of these two characters are difficult to ignore. The self-destructiveness that plagues these characters would seem to be a by-product of the postcolonial syndrome we are discussing, a syndrome or condition that is placed at the service of the author's narrative aesthetics, after all.

A barber in the daytime and a jazz cornetist at night, Bolden's relationship with his loved ones is driven by his self-conflict: a caring father and spontaneous with his children but erratic with and intolerant of wife Nora's "delicate rules and ceremonies." What he hates most especially is certainty, or "the sure lanes of the probable" which makes him burst with rage and start "[b]reaking chairs and windows glass doors in fury at [his wife's] certain answers" (*Slaughter* 15-16). While Bolden's fluctuating mood is characterized by his impulsiveness and violence, Mervyn Ondaatje lets loose his eccentricities by going berserk, usually under the influence of alcohol. Paranoid as a result of the possibility of a Japanese invasion, he even hijacks a train full of military personnel to rid the place of "bombs" planted supposedly by the enemies. On another occasion, he runs off deliriously drunk and naked into the jungle and is later persuaded to return home by a friend who finds him holding and swinging five dogs at arm's length.

There are various passages presenting images of psychological fragmentation which relate to both Bolden and the author's father in *Slaughter* and *Running*, respectively. In one passage, the author imagines his father alone at home after an earlier meeting with estranged wife Doris and an entire day of drinking:

In the bathroom ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode. A whole battalion was carrying one page away from its source, carrying the intimate print as if rolling a tablet away from him. He knelt down on the red tile, slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. [...] He sat down with his back against the wall and waited. The white rectangle moved with the busy arduous ants. Duty, he thought. But that was just a fragment gazed at by the bottom of his eye. He drank. There. He saw the midnight rat (*Running* 189).

Meanwhile, madness creeps slowly up on Bolden as the recurring nightmare of mutilation haunts him. In one of his fits of self-torment, he enacts his ecstatic death:

He lay there crucified and drunk. Brought his left wrist to his teeth and bit hard and harder for several seconds then lost his nerve. Flopped it back outstretched. Going to sleep while feeling his vein tingling at the near chance it had of almost going free. Ecstasy before death. It marched through him while he slept (*Slaughter* 79).

Portraying fathers of different protagonists or protagonists who are fathers themselves could be read as Ondaatje's way of trying to understand his own absent father. It may be valid to argue that the sense of loss and estrangement, family disintegration and the absence of a father figure (as was the case for Ondaatje, or the absent mother in Kogawa's narrative, to be discussed in the next chapter), reinforce and become part of the alienation a postcolonial subject has to negotiate. In *Running*, for instance, and according to Jewinski, Ondaatje portrays his father "not only as an idea, as an image of love and fidelity and responsibility, but also as a figure who has abandoned and betrayed his family. Ondaatje had to understand his father and forgive him in an imaginative encounter, for there could be no other form of reconciliation" (156). It may also have led him to depict various conflicted and potentially destructive father-offspring relationships in his narratives. Buddy Bolden describes his "fathers" or musical mentors as "those who put their bodies over barbed wire [t]o slide over into the region of hell" (*Slaughter* 95). Bolden's further description reveals the inevitable influence these eccentric mentors had in his life: "drawn to opposites," suicidal, and alcoholic as "[a]ll my ancestors died drunk or

lost” (96).

Meanwhile, Patrick Lewis’ father (*In the Skin of a Lion*) is an “abashed,” solitary man but industrious and self-sufficient, from whom he later learns his craft as an explosives technician by “absorbing everything from a distance”(19). Years later, Patrick will offer to look after his lover Alice’s daughter Hana, the orphan of a murdered union activist. Although Hana has always been aware of her biological father’s tragic story, Patrick has become her surrogate father, who “[has broken] upon your emotions more than someone of your own blood” (*The English Patient* 90). The recurring tone of regret expressed by the father(-figure) or offspring, may be expressive of the author’s attempt to bridge the geographical and psychological distance between these characters; indeed, it may also be expressive of the desire to overcome the estranged and dislocated condition of the postcolonial subject itself.

Temporarily retired from cornet playing, and while a friend is trying to lure him back into music, an image of his abandoned family flashes on Bolden’s mind:

And I’ve always thought of her as sad Nora, and my children, all this soft private sentiment I forgot to explode, the kids who grow up without me quite capable, while I sit out this drunk sweat, thinking along a stone path. I am terrified now of their lost love (*Slaughter* 102).

On the other hand, Hana takes refuge in nurturing the English patient out of her sense of guilt and helplessness at the death of Patrick, her stepfather, in the same war she is in:

He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. Do you understand the sadness of geography? I could have saved him or at least been with him till the end. I know a lot about burning. How long was he alone with doves and rats? With the last stages of blood and life in him? Doves over him. The flutter when they thrashed around him. Unable to sleep in the darkness. He always hated darkness. And he was alone, without lover or kin (*Patient* 296).

And meanwhile, in the autobiographical memoir, the author-narrator manifests the “loss”

that haunts him, the things he never had the chance to talk about with his father:

Words such as love, passion, duty, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning – except as coins or weapons. Hard language softens. I never knew what my father felt of these ‘things.’ My loss was that I never spoke to him as an adult. Was he locked in the ceremony of being ‘a father’? He died before I even thought of such things (*Running* 179-80).

It seems that loss is what a postcolonial subject can most easily remedy as a consequence of his or her experience of dislocation. Already bereft of their sense of individual and national identity, Hana, Kip and Almasy became members of what the first of these characters calls “international bastards – [those who are] born in one place and choos[e] to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from [their] homelands all [their] lives” (*Patient* 176). They share a certain degree of “invisibility” while living in the midst of war and away from their respective nations and races, particularly in the case of Kip, the Indian Sikh. For Kip, his invisibility begins when he joins the Sikh regiment and is shipped to England to serve in the British Army as a member of the bomb disposal unit. In Hana’s eyes, Kip’s “invisibility” (or “self-sufficiency and privacy” [196]) is not due to his being assigned as a sapper in Italy but as “a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world” (*ibid.*) as he is ignored in the various English barracks. He has acquired some “defences of character” growing up as an outsider, which allow him easily to “switch allegiances [and] replace loss”(271-72), and this is what particularly fascinates Hana. The Indian sapper is also depicted as a (post)colonial subject enticed by the English culture that has made him ignore his older brother’s anti-English remarks, siding with “whoever was against the English” (291).

Hana’s displacement, on the other hand, may be gauged by the “depth of darkness in her” (271) caused by the loss of her child, the father of the child, and her stepfather in the

on-going war. Hana's obsession with the care of the English patient is her way of clinging on to her grief, but she realizes in the end, the deceit they (she, her father and Caravaggio) have been plunged into by Western colonial expansionist power, expressed in the letter to her surrogate father's friend Clara:

I am sick of Europe, Clara. I want to come home. [. . .] And wait for you, wait to see the silhouette of you in a canoe coming to rescue me from this place we all entered, betraying you. How did you become so smart? How did you become so determined? How were you not fooled like us? (296).

Similarly, Kip almost loses his mind when he learns of the ultimate expression of Western colonial expansionism: the unleashing of the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He furiously attacks "this tremor of Western wisdom" (284) which has supplanted his and the rest of the world's own traditions and which dares only to "[bomb] the brown races of the world" (286).

Some critics have observed that this "episode" in the novel "appears inconsistent [and] out of character" and somewhat abrupt against the "ruminative tone of most of the novel."¹⁰¹ Kip's sudden change of behaviour here may be attributed to his release of pent-up anxieties considering his constant exposure to danger through defusing bombs. Ibarrola-Armendáriz has pointed out that Kip's disenchantment with the "fragile white island" appears when his parent-figures (Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden) in turn vanish, victims of a bomb explosion. The brewing alienation Kip feels and the dangerous task he carries out daily, perhaps explain this "psychological explosion" and even more so, for his failure to "defuse" the bigger bombs which massacre thousands of lives in that Asian nation. Kip's

¹⁰¹ Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz , "Boundary Erasing. Postnational Characterization in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*," in *Tricks with a Glass. Writing Ethnicity in Canada*, Rocio G. Davis and Rosalía Baena, eds. (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000) 55.

going berserk may also be explained by the despair and guilt he felt for the death of a (British) soldier celebrating victory atop a mined statue earlier in the novel. Ibarrola-Armendáriz attributes this “jarring jump” into the “finale” to Ondaatje’s attempt to appease “those critics who have repeatedly accused him of disloyalty to his Third-World origins” (55). Perhaps there is a fairer and more logical alternative reading to this turning point of the narrative: it is how the author explains his vision of displacement and alienation. Note that those same critics have similarly reprimanded Ondaatje for romanticizing the suspicious character of Count Lazslo de Almasy in real life. On the same denouement of the narrative Ibarrola-Armendáriz further comments: “After having observed his westernized behaviour and habits of mind, we are likely to find Kip’s resuscitation of his long-buried Indian identity *unexpected*, to say the least” (*my emphasis* *ibid.*). One may indeed find this analysis as outrightly racialized and incomprehensively inconsistent at the same time considering the fact that this same critic is aware of the kind of experience exiles such as Kirpal Singh endure as, in his own words, it “involves division and duplicity” (56). He goes on to acknowledge that it “remain[s] invisible until one subverts some overriding structures of thought and art” (*ibid.*), which is somewhat the condition Kip and the rest of the post-national exiles in the Villa San Girolamo are in.

Behind the fragmented story of the charred, black body of the English patient whom Hana desperately nurses, is Count Almasy’s multiple and indeterminate Hungarian, “Bedouin” or mixed English nationalities. Indeed, Ondaatje’s concern with issues of identity persists throughout the novel. The English patient, whose Englishness is doubted and probed, is a metaphor for an unfixed and eroded identity likened to the desert which

could not be claimed or owned – it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East (138-39).

The desert, then, as a topographic setting is a borderless and changeable territory that defies mapping, i.e., ownership, and which allows those who come to love it “to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry” (246). Therefore, the “mission” which the English Geographical Society team of explorers sets out to accomplish in mapping, fixing boundaries and re-naming oases and dunes after the explorers themselves is an artificial way of fabricating borders and a futile attempt to colonize the desert. For the nomadic desert tribes know no borders, as Almsy himself has found out: “We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states” (138). The English patient also believes in a “cartography” in which one naturally gets assimilated to other cultures, thus becoming part of “communal histories, communal books” (261).

Caravaggio’s obsession with proving that Hana’s patient is not English but rather an enemy spying for the Germans, eventually dissipates when Kip suddenly rages against the “Englishman,” blaming the West for the bombings of a brown Asian nation: “No. Not him. Mistake. Of all people he is probably on your side” (286), says Caravaggio. Caravaggio, who is a thief and an Italian immigrant to Toronto in Ondaatje’s previous novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, has served the Allies by stealing papers and information from the Germans in *The English Patient*. Consistent with his characterization suggested in the early novel, in which he represents the “individual resistance and solitariness”¹⁰² of a marginal figure, Caravaggio is tortured in *The English Patient* as his thumbs are cut off when caught by

¹⁰² Frank Davey, “Art over History. *In the Skin of a Lion*,” in *Post-National Arguments. The Politics of Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 149.

enemies. He is initially depicted as someone who “has avoided permanent intimacy” (116). Caravaggio’s attitude later changes in the course of the novel as he sees himself through the eyes of Hana, Kip and the English patient stranded in the villa. Stealing Hana’s stock of morphine for her patient, Caravaggio eventually learns to live in harmony with the family the alienated occupants of Villa San Girolamo have become. It is in this place where not only Caravaggio but also the rest of his co-exiles have learned to “[shed] skins” as there will be room only for truths and intimacies amongst them.

Even before the outbreak of war (*In the Skin of a Lion*), David Caravaggio’s alienation has been marked by his marginal(ized) character. For him, invisibility is his great ally in his trade as a spy and a thief. It has indeed helped him to escape from Kingston Penitentiary when, on his request, his prison mates paint him blue just like the blue tin jail roof that renders him invisible to the prison guards down below. His worries about “demarcation” disappear when he breaks into shops or houses and he moves stealthily in darkness:

And the door opening below him – a man walking in to pick up the telephone and dialing, while Caravaggio hung high up on the bookcases knowing now he should move the second he was seen up there in his dark trousers and singlet, as still as a gargoyle against Trollope and H.G. Wells” (*Skin* 198).

In the later novel, *The English Patient*, Caravaggio’s prowess in playing “invisible” is similarly tested: he attempts to steal a roll of film from a German officer’s mistress who has previously taken a photograph of him. This time the thief does not have to camouflage himself in blue but strips naked in order to break into the intimacy of the mistress and the German officer’s bedroom.

Caravaggio’s “skills [made] official” (*Patient* 35) may have allowed himself to feel

a useful immigrant for Canada when hired by the Allies as a spy, but the price he has paid when caught and maimed will render him forever disabled for his “occupation” as a thief.

Patrick and Anil: the Truth of the Outsider

The condition of being an outsider is felt not only by immigrants to another country but also by individuals who find themselves on the fringes of mainstream society and strangers to the land they were born into. Such is the case of Patrick Lewis (*In the Skin of a Lion*), and Anil Tissera (*Anil's Ghost*), respectively. Patrick is portrayed as a poor native-born white Canadian who hails from an unexplored, unmapped countryside and decides to migrate to Toronto, while Anil now feels a stranger in the native country (Sri Lanka) she comes back to after a long absence.

Through his side of the story, Patrick witnesses and experiences the plight of an outsider like himself and of the immigrant workers in different settings: the snowy rural area where he spent his boyhood; and the tunnel waterworks and leather factory where he himself had been employed. Meanwhile, Anil, who has lived abroad for 15 years, returns to her homeland as a forensic anthropologist sent by a human rights organization to find, examine, and identify the bones of missing victims of the civil war.

Through these protagonists, Ondaatje writes not only about identity and socio-political conflicts but also explores their silenced, “unofficial” histories in their effort to get at the truth. For instance, Nicholas Temelcoff, a Macedonian immigrant, is the figure Ondaatje used in *In the Skin of a Lion* to represent the silenced and exploited immigrant workers who take part in the construction of some of the nation’s most important landmarks, such as the Bloor Street Viaduct in Toronto. Temelcoff’s story also reflects the

anonymous attempt to integrate by immigrants as well as the author's attempt to reconstruct their so-called "official" history. The writing of and about "untold stories" is but another of Ondaatje's concerns and as such, it deserves discussion in detail. I explore this theme in Chapter VIII of this dissertation.

Back in his home village when he was a small boy, Patrick is already conscious of the existence of the "collection of strangers" (*Skin* 7) working as farmhands and loggers, but he is barely aware of the miserable conditions in which these foreign workers live. It is not until he becomes "an immigrant to the city" (53) that he comes in contact with various immigrants himself. Alice introduces Patrick to the socio-political realities of foreign workers. Repressed by Canadian authorities, immigrant workers are not allowed to organize public meetings, much less to speak in public in a foreign language other than English or they face deportation. Alice's husband Cato, for instance, is murdered for organizing a labour union among Finnish factory workers.

[Patrick] had lived in this country all his life. But it was only now that he learned of the union battles up north where Cato was murdered some time in the winter of 1921, and found under the ice of a shallow creek near Union Lake a week after he had written his last letter. The facts of the story had surrounded Hana since his birth, it was part of her. And all of his life Patrick had been oblivious to it, a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country, a blind man dressing the heroine (157).

Patrick, it seems, who "is the one born in this country, [h]as always been alien, the third person in the picture [and] knows nothing of the place" (156-57). Indeed, Alice is the voice the author uses to appeal to another character's (in this case, Patrick's) consciousness about the socially oppressed. We can find a parallelism here with Aunt Emily as Naomi's conscience in Kogawa's *Obasan* in which the aunt bombards the niece with official documents and newspaper clippings about the humiliating sanctions inflicted on their family and fellow Japanese-Canadians during and after the war. Also, considering Alice

and Cato's condition in *Skin* as second-generation native born Canadians by parents of foreign origin, they are fully entitled as citizens of their native country to redress social inequalities and prejudice (much as the main protagonists of Kogawa's novels do as I show in my discussion of the next chapter).

Ondaatje's duality of allegiance as Canadian citizen and native-born Sri Lankan has obviously allowed him on this occasion to delve into a moral subject encompassing his home country – to offer his “point of view,” (Coughlan par. 15) according to him, of the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka. *Anil's Ghost* tells of the conflict that dates back to the mid-eighties between the government's struggle to crush Tamil separatist guerrillas in the north and anti-government insurgents in the south. Found in the middle are the silenced stories of families ravaged by the disappearance of their relatives. Anil, who initially feels “[t]he island no longer [holds] her by the past” and “interpret[s] Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze” (11), will now be faced with the different perceptions of “truth” as opposed to the scientific and factual “truth” she has learned in the West as a forensic anthropologist. Anil also realizes later that she will need more than simply to brush up on her Sinhalese in order to cope with the islanders' attempts to survive the apparent free-for-all “unofficial war,” in order effectively to assert her designation as human rights specialist and to counter the idea that she is merely a “return[ing] prodigal” (10).

The discovery of a recent skeleton, re-buried in a centuries-old site of archeological diggings, and probable victim of a government-sanctioned massacre of civilians, reminds her that “[the skeleton] was just like her. Not just evidence but someone with charms or flaws, part of a family, a member of a village who in the sudden lightning of politics raised his hands in the last minute so they were broken” (170). For Anil, identifying the skeleton is not just about proving the government's guilt but also a triumph in rescuing one's

identity from oblivion and uncertainty. For uncertainty and shyness have made Anil feel alien the first time she arrives in England. It does not take her long to discover that developing her forensic skills has “signalled her existence” (141).

The author further tackles the theme of identity through Anil’s recollection of an anecdote that her father’s friend used to tell of being “sent to school in England as an eleven-year-old” and his suggestion that outwitting others with “the right remark or gesture [...] would open all doors:”

On the first day he was called a ‘native’ by a classmate. He stood up at once and announced to the teacher, ‘I’m sorry to say this, sir, but Roxborough doesn’t know who I am: He called me a “native.” That’s the wrong thing to do. *He* is the native and I’m the visitor to the country’ (141).

This remark or gesture may also be considered as an outright subversion of the dominant discourse on the part of the ‘other,’ that is, by the visitor in the anecdote who learns prematurely to strike back through this postcolonial strategy. Curiously enough, Ondaatje was practically the same age when he first went to school in England. It seems fair to speculate that he used the same “gesture” – a gesture designed to open all doors for him but also help him balance his double perspective. Anil’s anecdote may also represent an episode in Ondaatje’s early life in England when he was made consciously aware of his identity and his condition of the ‘other’ who had migrated from the former British colony.

We have seen how themes of uprooting, dislocation and cultural hybridity are major concerns of a number of postcolonial writers, including Ondaatje. The experiences behind these themes generate the sense of alienation and outsiderhood – in short, ‘otherness’ – which characterize the human figures we find in these writers’ works – Damon, Santosh, Leila, Buddy Bolden, Mervyn Ondaatje, Anil Tissera and Patrick Lewis. The next chapter explores how Joy Kogawa presents her literary preoccupations and

strategies in tackling similar themes of doubleness, marginality and the reclaiming of silenced histories.

By definition [the writer] cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it. Otherwise, he will be alone and deprived of his art. Not all the armies of tyranny with their millions of men will free him from his isolation, even and particularly if he falls into step with them. But the silence of an unknown prisoner, abandoned to humiliations at the other end of the world, is enough to draw the writer out of his exile, at least whenever, in the midst of the privileges of freedom, he manages not to forget that silence, and to transmit it in order to make it resound by means of his art.

Albert Camus, *Banquet Speech, Nobel Prize in Literature 1957*

There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak. Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone . . .

Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pockmarks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream.

Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*

Chapter VI

The Language of Silence, Hybridity and Peripherality: Kogawa's Narrative Aesthetics

Nearly three decades now after the publication of Kogawa's first novel, most critics still would not refrain from using the terms "ethnic" and "minority" to refer to Kogawa's writing. Such categorization may be considered to be in complete disregard for her condition as a natural-born Canadian as well as her status as a major Canadian writer. To be "ethnic," as one writer-critic (Bissoondath 99) observes, and certainly in the popular sense of the term, is to be something "foreign" or "exotic" or "visible"; the reverse concept of ethnicity would render a Canadian of (white) Danish heritage, for example, as "too invisible, [...] fad[ing] into the landscape" (100). Issues of visibility/invisibility and ethnicity/centrality notwithstanding, Kogawa's work arguably deserves a reading focused less on her ethnic Japanese ancestry and more on her narrative style and strategy. *Obasan* gives an account of the internment experience of Kogawa's family in particular and the Japanese-Canadian community in general. The strategy of bearing witness also accommodated a (re)interpretation of history from a different angle, denouncing past Canadian political decisions and airing personal and communal historical grievances. As already noted, Kogawa's first novel caused considerable political impact and reinforced the campaign for official apology and redress already initiated by the Japanese-Canadian community. Kogawa's novel educated the Canadian public on the matter of their silenced history and led to the present government's admission of error in the discriminatory treatment of the Japanese-Canadian community before, during and after World War II.

The dichotomous and alternating language of silence and speech, her (Japanese and Canadian) culturally hybrid condition and the margins from which Kogawa projects her art in order to subvert official history all make up what may be considered Kogawa's narrative aesthetics. Indeed, many of the scholarly articles on *Obasan* and *Itsuka* emphasize the dual language of silence and speech. Both novels are a journey towards the narrator's discovery of the private (the 'self' and in a broader sense, the family) and the public history of humiliation of the ethnic community to which she belongs and which now forms part of Canadian (political) history. Kogawa unveils in these works the reality in which she initially was raised – "I experienced myself as White almost all my life"¹⁰³ – until she became involved in the political struggle of Japanese-Canadians. Kogawa acknowledges the importance of the community she represents and admits that as a writer she feels fortunate to be "involved in a community that has inspired me,"¹⁰⁴ while bearing in mind that "a community can also be uninspiring" (Kogawa 1990 *ibid.*), this in probable reference to that other side of Canada of which she also forms part. Kogawa's double vision and hybrid status enables her also to see the "back alleys" and the "rotten stuff" (96) of a larger (Canadian) community from a certain distance, a community that was instrumental in the dispersion of Japanese-Canadian families and the pillaging of their property.

In his review of Kogawa's first novel, W. H. New considers *Obasan* as Kogawa's Bildungsroman, in which the writer and her characters try to find the forms and words to relate to the larger community without surrendering the values that inhere in the language

¹⁰³ Joy Kogawa, "In writing I keep breathing, I keep living ..." in *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*, Janice Williamson, Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 1993: 149).

¹⁰⁴ Joy Kogawa, "From the Bottom of the Well, from the Distant Stars," in *Telling it: Women and Language Across Cultures*, Sky Lee, et al., eds. (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1990:95).

and culture of their own ethnic community.¹⁰⁵ In the protagonist Naomi Nakane's case, what is perhaps difficult to "surrender" is the language or culture into which she has been born and the blurring of the dividing line between what is Japanese and what is mainstream Canadian as in, for instance, the (Japanese) Momotaro tale made to pass for Canadian in Naomi's young mind. There are also two different identities (represented by Aunt Emily and Obasan) in both novels, which accompany and haunt the main protagonist: "[o]ne [who] lives in sound, the other in stone" (*Obasan* 39). One is contained and repressed, perhaps very Japanese in her ways and the other is much more outspoken, i.e., more Canadian or westernized. Kogawa's use of language in *Obasan* and *Itsuka* reveals the doubleness the protagonists experience in situations such as the rift in allegiance to Japanese and Canadian traditions; the history of Naomi's family and of her Nikkei community; speech and silence, etc. According to Beautell, the presence of "dichotomous images" throughout the book provides Kogawa with a double vision enabling her to weave her narrative into a complex but enriching process of self-representation (1988:11).

For Kogawa, power does not solely reside in speech, but in silence as well. The author presents the narrator's two conflicting sides on how to resolve grief and overcome the injustice suffered during the war as represented by her two aunts: "[Obasan's] language of [...] grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful" (*Obasan* 17). For Obasan, silence is not weakness, though, but rather strength to withstand oppression; a strategy for survival, decorum instead of emotional collapse, a language totally different from Aunt

¹⁰⁵ W. H. New, *A History of Canadian Literature*, (Montreal and Kingston-London: Ithaca-McGill-Queen's University Press, 2nd edition, 2001). For the complete quote, see Note 129 on page 159.

Emily's outspoken stance. Aunt Emily, born and raised in Canada, believes that the past must not be denied: "If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene" (60). Aunt Emily's is the voice that conflicts with, but at the same time complements, the apparent silence of Obasan and Uncle Isamu, especially the silence intended to protect their niece Naomi from the terrible truth surrounding her mother's death in Nagasaki. This is the "fundamental difference" in the Japanese mode of operation – "to pull with control rather than to push with force" (28-29) and in stark contrast with the Canadian or Westernized manner.

Other critical readings tend to associate the language and theme of silence with the author's inevitable Japanese (and feminine) ethnic trait, which is arguably an "orientalist" interpretation along the lines of Said's notion of "Orientalism" (see discussion below). These readings suggest that silence may be received differently depending on the cultural norm of an ethnic group – be they from an Asian or European background. While a quiet white American is respected for his or her reserve or discretion, Asian or Asian American reticence is racially stereotyped as being submissive or docile, terms that acquire a specific gender-resonance if the protagonist is a woman¹⁰⁶; silence can also be coded as suspiciously timid, "inscrutable" or even emasculated, transcending gender scrutiny (Cheung 2). Citing anthropological scholarship, however, King-kok Cheung notes that silence has different communicative functions such as the expression of scorn, coldness, defiance, respect, and other types of emotions (ibid.).

At the same time, Asian American/Asian Canadian (women) writers portray in their

¹⁰⁶ King-kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993:2).

works the struggle to overcome the silence imposed by gender as well as cultural codes or sometimes uncomfortable circumstances as foregrounded in Kogawa's narrative and in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. In *Obasan*, Naomi is partly silenced by her white child molester neighbour and partly by her family's dispersal and exile; whereas in Kingston's narrator, silence is the consequence of her dilemma over whether to assimilate (to be Americanized, to speak English assertively) or reject her "Chineseness" and her parents' attempts to groom her to become "more feminine" and soft-spoken. At the same time, Kogawa and perhaps to a lesser degree, Kingston, challenge the unconditional Western value given to speech and resort to the perspective of silence and the nonverbal as an alternative strategy to give expression to their double vision in the hybrid environment in which they move. There is a reductive tendency on the part of some feminist critics to consider the nonverbal text of these Asian American/Canadian writers as reflective of a lack of self-assertion, translating their silent context into a negative absence. Cheung, as Helena Grice observes, breaks away from and critiques this tendency to valorize speech unconditionally.¹⁰⁷ Very much in contrast, then, Cheung emphasizes these writers' boldness in questioning the "authority of language" and argues that nonverbal linguistic signals are a form of "articulate silence":

They articulate – question, report, expose – the silences imposed on themselves and their peoples, whether in the form of feminine and cultural decorum, external or self-censorship, or historical or political invisibility, at the same time they reveal, through their own manners of telling and through their characters, that silences – textual ellipses,

¹⁰⁷ Helena Grice cites as examples of the scholarship dealing with the silence/speech dichotomy in *Obasan* the articles by Gayle K. Fujita's "'To Attend to the Sound of Stone': The Sensibility of Silence in *Obasan*" and Shirley Goek-lin Lim's "Japanese American Women's Life Stories: Maternity in Monica Sone's Nisei Daughter and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*" in "Reading the Nonverbal: The Indices of Space, Time, Tactility and Taciturnity in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," MELUS, Winter 1999. FindArticles.com. 17 Jun. 2007. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2278/is_4_24/ai_63323861>

nonverbal gestures, authorial hesitations (as against moral, historical, religious, or political authority) – can also be articulate (3-4).

Similarly, Christina Tourino¹⁰⁸ points out Cheung's insight of silence as nuanced communication in *Obasan* in which the author asserts that "while silence may obliterate, it can also minister, soothe, and communicate" (quoted by Tourino par. 11). Likewise, Chinese-Canadian writer Sky Lee views silence as a positive ethnic trait and is aware of its power when used under strict constraint as compared with the "unpredictable" consequence of the power of language. Lee articulates this distinction through Kae, the main protagonist of her first novel *Disappearing Moon Café*:

There is power in silence, as this is the way we have always maintained strict control against the more disturbing aspects of our human nature. But what about speaking out for a change, despite its unpredictable impact! The power of language is that it can be manipulated beyond our control, towards misunderstanding. But then again, the power of language is also in its simple honesty.¹⁰⁹

The Language of Silence and the Absent Mother

The Western attribution of silence and passivity to Asian women as a form of subservience to hierarchy on the one hand, and a gender-imposed cultural trait, on the other, is challenged by the articulate silences noted by Cheung. Such gender/cultural stereotypes may be dismissed as simplistic appreciations which ignore the intricacies of nonverbal communication. As in real life, the apparently silent nature of the characters in any text articulates a meaning through a nonverbal form of intercourse. Furthermore, the use of silent language is not an exclusive trademark of Asian writing.

¹⁰⁸ Christina Tourino, "Ethnic Reproduction and the Amniotic Deep," *Frontiers*, 2003. FindArticles.com. 28 Jun. 2007. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3687/is_200301/ai_n9183468>

¹⁰⁹ Sky Lee, *Disappearing Moon Café*, (Seattle: The Seal Press 1990, Rpt.: 1991: 180).

In his study of the silent language in literature,¹¹⁰ Stephen R. Portch observes that nonverbal codes such as physical appearance, vocal tones, touch, space, time, body movements, etc. help readers solve the mysteries unexplained by speech or dialogues in a given story. Portch analyzes the nonverbal scenes of characters in short stories written by Ernest Hemingway, Nathaniel Hawthorn and Flannery O'Connor, hardly ethnic Asian writers. Needless to say, silent language or the unspoken dialogue in literature to which Portch refers, forms part of the context that communicates truth more reliably than spoken words (Portch 6). Nonverbal language or certain body signals have no consistent meanings – and it is upon communication and context then that our understanding of humankind depends, as Portch quotes the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in acknowledgement of his considerations on this matter:

What is characteristically man [sic] – in fact, what gives man his identity no matter where he is born – is his culture, the total communication framework: words, actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, the way he handles time, space, and materials, and the way he works, plays, makes love, and defends himself. All these things and more are complete communication systems with meanings that can be read correctly only if one is familiar with the behavior in its historical, social, and cultural context (ibid.).

In other words, the context of one person's gestures, gaze and other things that make up his or her "communication framework" differs from another's depending upon the cultural identity into which each is born. It applies not only to ethnic Japanese-Canadians, Italian-Canadians, etc. but also to British-Canadians, French-Canadians, etc. Yet the language of silence alluded to, characterized and inspired by Kogawa's mother in *Obasan*, is indeed culturally imposed as the writer freely admits in an interview: "The title [*Obasan*]

¹¹⁰ Stephen R. Portch, *Literature's Silent Language: Nonverbal Communication*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1985) <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&docId=59949249>>

refers to the word 'aunt.' In real life, my mother was the model for Obasan" (Beutell 1998:163-64).

The 'Japaneseness' of the mother does indeed problematise a linguistic reconstruction: she appears as a silent presence in the ephemeral happiness of Vancouver, representing the ideal of motherhood, all tenderness and intuitive understanding, in whose language of the eyes and gestures Naomi feels infinitely protected (Beutell 1998:74).

Kogawa clarifies further and contrasts the quiet, very intelligent but very nonverbal personality of her mother with the author's more verbose manner, the result of being born and raised in North America (Beutell 1998:164). The language of silence, then, is wielded by the characters in Kogawa's story and the Japanese-Canadian community in real life as an instrument of subversion and a way of enduring their internment and evacuation uprooted and far removed from their British Columbia homes. On the opening page of *Obasan*, Kogawa clearly distinguishes between "a silence that cannot speak" and "a silence that will not speak," when "one chooses not to" and when "the other is unable to," as she explains later in the same interview with Beutell. The absent mother in her first two novels represents the speech that "came by way of dreams, by way of a different kind of listening." Naomi's mother is forced to abandon her daughter at the age of six in order to attend to an ailing elderly relative in Nagasaki before its catastrophic bombing. This period is also significant for the protagonist: prematurely absent, Naomi's mother is unable to guide her daughter from silence to speech, or rather, from infancy to childhood and then from childhood to puberty. As if it were still not enough to convey this feeling of "absence," Naomi encrypts "silence" in the epigraph to the first chapter of *Obasan* through words such as "sensate sea," "amniotic deep" and "stone." These "nonverbal lexicons" predominate in the text through touch, space and time (Helena Grice par. 2) as well as other sensory

perceptions such as the visual, in the characters' gestures, and olfactory awareness, especially in absent relatives. Naomi, who is under the influence of her two aunts – “one lives in sound, the other in stone” – inhabits these two worlds. Naomi then learns the language of silence at a very early age from Obasan (“Our language is gestures, the nodding and shaking of heads, the shrugging of shoulders” [*Itsuka* 85]) as the latter becomes the mother-figure and closest relative with whom she lives. However, Naomi eventually succumbs to Aunt Emily's articulate vigilance: “You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee” (*Obasan* 60).

Meanwhile, Kogawa's allusion to the “amniotic deep” on the opening page of *Obasan* may be interpreted in two ways: the narrator Naomi's longing to reach out physically to her (absent) mother, and the author Kogawa's appeal and/or regression to the archaic relationship with the mother in order to evoke feeling and energy by “diving” into the (writer's) stream of consciousness. Julia Kristeva's theory of the pre-verbal semiotic¹¹¹ is instructive here. The association of language by Kogawa's narrator with the maternal and a pre-verbal state (“amniotic deep”) makes it difficult to ignore the parallels between Kogawa's reference to the amniotic and Kristeva's concept of the semiotic; both authors seem to coincide in their evocation of the maternal associations of the speaking subject's pre-verbal stage. In the early nineties, American feminist critics observed the apparent connection between Kristeva's semiotic and Kogawa's amniotic, although from the perspective of women's poetics and *Obasan*'s character Naomi Nakane's doubly marginal

¹¹¹ In 1974, Julia Kristeva published her doctoral dissertation *La révolution du langage poétique: l'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle, Lautréamont et Mallarmé*, only a third of which was later translated and published in 1984 as *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In this book, Kristeva sustains that the works of literary avant-garde writers produce a “revolution in poetic language” (McAfee 13). The distinction between the “semiotic” and the “symbolic” elements of the signifying process is found in the first chapter of the English-language version of Kristeva's book.

condition as woman and ethnic minority.¹¹² Tomo Hattori argues that the feminist psycholinguistic readings of *Obasan* by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Donald C. Goellnicht and Robin Potter which link poetics with maternal creation, may result in “orientalist typologies that are unwarranted by [Kogawa’s] text” (130). Hattori suggests further that the influence of French feminist psychoanalytical theories relegates the Asian mother/culture to the pre-verbal, pre-oedipal realm of the semiotic versus the West’s figurative masculine language of the symbolic, yet another example of orientalist othering. In this regard, Hattori underlines the “misapplied” postcolonial theory of Said’s “Orientalism” when feminist critics use it as an “interpretive tool within Chinese American literary culture” (120) and Japanese Canadian “literary feminism” (129). Rather than discussing the orientalist consignment of Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic to (Asian) ethnic/gendered typology, this chapter will be mainly concerned with the link between the maternally mediated semiotic and amniotic.

In the novel, Naomi’s mother’s sudden disappearance has taught the narrator to resort to memory and the sense of touch and to establish a matrilineal connection especially with Obasan and Grandma Kato. “Touch, the mother of all senses, develops in the womb and remains a biological necessity,” stresses Portch (Helena Grice par. 5). This physical closeness with both female relatives through Obasan’s “warmth and constant presence” (81) and the public and private bathing scenes with Obasan and Grandma Kato (“[...] over the redness of my body she scrubs vigorously” [59]) surely help Naomi relive the tactile and olfactory presence of her mother: “My arms are flung around my mother as she lies

¹¹² Tomo Hattori, “Psycholinguistic Orientalism in Criticism of *The Woman Warrior* and *Obasan*,” in *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, ed. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998:129.

beside me and I breathe in her powdery perfume as she continues her chant” (67). Naomi’s actual separation from her mother does not take place on the very same day the latter sails back to Japan. It is Naomi’s guilt, secrecy, or rather, silence imposed on her by her pedophile white neighbour, Old Man Gower, that has alienated her from her mother: “If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I will be torn from her. But the secret has already separated us” (77). Similarly, the word “amniotic” to which Helena Grice refers as Naomi’s journey back to her mother, may also be read as Naomi’s desire to understand and rediscover the past of her ancestry in an attempt to cope with her present in a world that turns out to be different, a world that now disowns her. The speech that frees and comes from the amniotic deep, according to the epigraph to this chapter, is the voice that haunts the narrator as the words themselves are absent and meaningless so that the sound only breeds silence. The words in the world into which Naomi was born clash with those of the outer world. We must bear in mind that Naomi is raised believing that everything (ethnic Japanese) which she imbibed in her family home is in fact Canadian, including the Momotaro legend, which is made to pass for “a Canadian story” (68). The Momotaro tale tells of a “golden and round [...] little boy [who] leaps on the table from the heart of [a peach]” and “[s]imply by existing a child is delight” (67). For Naomi, Momotaro is the embodiment of a happy childhood, the childhood she herself had when her mother was around to tell her this story and before it was prematurely cut short.

As just noted, Kogawa’s evocation of the “amniotic deep” may be linked plausibly to what Julia Kristeva terms the “semiotic.” Accordingly, the signifying process operates in two modalities: the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic is “the extra-verbal way in which bodily energy and affects make their way into language,” whereas the symbolic

“depends on language as a sign system complete with its grammar and syntax.”¹¹³ Simply put, the former is associated with the maternal, the latter with the paternal. In other words, the speaking subject’s feelings, desires and (unconscious) drives are expressed in the semiotic in contrast to the symbolic mode’s (conscious) expression of clear and orderly meaning (McAfee 15-16). Kristeva’s theory of the signifying process challenges traditional Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis whereby the Oedipal stage or the paternal function “initiates the negation [of the father’s intervention in the mother and child’s possibly incestuous relationship] and the [child’s] identification [with the father; Lacan’s mirror stage of development] that finally propels the infant into both language and subjectivity.”

¹¹⁴ In contrast, Kristeva contends that both the negation and the identification are already operating within the maternal function even in the speaking subject’s pre-verbal stage. Nevertheless, the semiotic, which Kristeva relates to the pre-oedipal, archaic relationship with the mother, is in constant tension with, although inseparable from, the symbolic. It is this tension therefore which produces signification and gives rise to “all *creative* activity.”

Thus, Kristeva claims that

[i]n fact, all *creative* activity [...] presupposes the *immanence* of libido and the symbolic process along with their dialectalization and harmonization [...]. Innovation is never the repetition of the paternal discourse or a regression to an archaic mother. It presumes that the subject, let’s say a woman, is able to take charge of her entire archaic libidinal apparatus (which is unconscious and egoistic) and to invest it in a symbolic articulation.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva: Routledge Critical Thinkers* (Routledge: New York and London, Taylor and Francis Group, 2004:17).

¹¹⁴ Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993:3).

¹¹⁵ Eliane Boucquey, interviewer, “‘une(s) femme(s)’: The Woman Effect,” in *Julia Kristeva Interviews*. Ross Mitchell Guberman, ed. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996:109).

What Kristeva posits then is that the (writer's) source of creative (or artistic) production lies in a regression to the repressed "maternal function" while allowing it to fuse with the symbolic element of signification. The semblance between Kristeva's notion of the semiotic and Kogawa's invocation of the amniotic becomes even more plausible if we consider the latter's own description of the dominant feeling she experienced when she began writing *Obasan*: "I was writing it in the way that I write poetry [...], not thinking very much about structure, method or anything like that, mostly dealing with imagery" (Beautell 161). Admitting that she was "not terribly conscious" (ibid.) when she was writing *Obasan*, Kogawa suggests that she was drawing from the "speech that frees" and "comes forth from the amniotic deep" (see the epigraph to this chapter), compatible with Kristeva's reference to the "archaic libidinal apparatus." *Obasan*'s narrator Naomi's invocation of the amniotic and the memory of the rift with her long absent mother may perhaps represent an allegorical reenactment of the speaking being's regression to the pre-oedipal stage as a way of engaging with what Kristeva terms aesthetic or intellectual sublimation (Boucquey 108), thus enabling the repressed to speak. Accordingly, the drive and energy emanating from the semiotic *chora*,¹¹⁶ a term Kristeva adopts in reference to the space in which infant echolalias, rhythms, alliterations, intonations, etc., take place and dominate meaning, frees the speaking subject's repressed pre-verbal experience. The poetic prose in *Obasan*'s epigraph to the first chapter may be read as Kogawa's return to the semiotic/amniotic phase in order to perform the task of transgressing the (symbolic) barriers to her creative expressiveness. As if distancing itself from the symbolic order, the

¹¹⁶ Kristeva borrows the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* which refers to the "original space or receptacle of the universe" (McAfee 19).

poetic language that pervades the epigraph conjoins lexical contradictions such as the “silence that cannot speak ... will not speak; to attend [the speech’s] voice ... is to embrace its absence.” In the same manner, the alliterative phrase “beneath the grass the speaking dreams ... beneath the dreams ... a sensate sea” culminates in an allegory of silence: the stillness, the stone and the sealed vault. The narrator’s inability to tell her story is perhaps the result of the repression of the “living word” which can only be freed when “the stone bursts with telling” and “the seed flowers with speech.” These words seem to hold the key to resolving the narrator’s dilemma in confronting her ghosts: the maternal absence since her childhood; the uprooting of her Japanese-Canadian family and community from their British Columbia homes; and the redress challenge posed to the White Canadian status quo, presumably the “White sound” referred to in the same epigraph.

By contrast, Tourino links the “amniotic” in Kogawa’s novel not only with the “unvoiced ethnic story” but also with the “ethnic reproduction” aborted by Canadian immigration policies and caused by “dislocation” in the New World (par. 1). The figurative tropes of reproduction, especially in the literary works of immigrant and marginalized women, “present female protagonists unwilling or unable to procreate” (par. 2). The internment and separation of Japanese-Canadian women from their men, who were sent to work camps at the time of war, could have been part of the plan “to prevent further propagation of the species” (*Obasan* 116). Aunt Emily’s diary recounts the systematic enactment of this plan: not letting any “Jap females” into the men’s building, placing “constables at the doors” and assigning mothers/women to sleep in bunks with small children, “stripped of all privacy” (ibid.).

The women in Naomi’s family have a special concern for procreation, but different circumstances cause these women to terminate or discard maternity as an option. Firstly,

Naomi has an unresolved psychological anxiety as a result of her childhood sexual abuse but also her mother's sudden and later, prolonged, inexplicable separation from her at a very young age. Secondly, Obasan's two unsuccessful attempts (both stillbirths) to have a baby prompt her to give up trying. Finally, perhaps in her determination both to challenge the Asian patriarchal concept of women's most revered duty to procreate and her desire not to "pass [her] anger down in [her] genes,"¹¹⁷ Aunt Emily fails to make time for such things (i.e. procreation) and devotes herself to political involvement in the Japanese-Canadian cause. In *Itsuka*, Aunt Emily satirizes the state of mental health and reproduction of the Nisei women after the war:

[A] study should be done on the many older nisei like herself who never married. It would show how deeply they've obeyed the order to disappear.

We've had a cultural lobotomy, she says, and have lost the ancient ways. There's a button in the brain that signals when to die ... (138).

Kogawa's *Obasan*, which was initially hailed as a Japanese-Canadian subject's triumph from silence to speech, has with time been interpreted as the representation of a(n) (female) ethnic subject, thus emphasizing gender, and her "silence" construed as a cultural marker. Some feminist critics have interpreted the behaviour of the female characters in Kogawa's novel as stereotypically Japanese, feminine (read: "powerless," Tourino par. 10) and culturally bound to act in supposed compliance with Asian patriarchy. But Cheung, as we have seen, vindicates the use of nonverbal behaviour, stressing that it is "a corrective to the prevailing critical trend that privileges speech" (128). Silence, as seen in Kogawa's

¹¹⁷ In this part of the novel, Aunt Emily is trying to point out to Naomi through her clipped documents and papers the urgency and importance of suing the Canadian government for justice: "We have to deal with all this while we remember it. If we don't, we'll pass our anger down in our genes. It's the children who'll suffer" (43).

Obasan, takes different forms depending on the intentions and reasons that induce it. The enforced silence which accompanies censorship, the impounding of property, dispersal and internment, may be the reason behind the voluntary silence adopted for survival. Nevertheless, even if nonverbal behaviour for the purpose of protecting, soothing and attending is also voluntary, it is never resigned, regardless of the cultural context. Both Obasan and Uncle Isamu have maintained their silence about the tragic death of Naomi's mother in Nagasaki ("for the sake of the children") to spare them from grief:

"What is the matter, Uncle?" [...] "Too young," he said softly. "Still too young." [...] "Someday," he said.

"Uncle," I whisper, "why do we come [to the coulee] every year?"
He does not respond. From both Obasan and Uncle I have learned that speech often hides like an animal in a storm. (3-4)

"Please tell me about Mother," I would say as a child to Obasan. I was consumed by the question. Devoured alive. But Obasan gave me no answers. I did not have, I have never had, the key to the vault of her thoughts. (31)

Obasan, the aunt turned surrogate-mother, Naomi's absent mother, Grandma Kato and Aunt Emily, around all of whom the narrative seems to revolve, tend to overshadow the male characters in *Obasan* and provide more than a hint of matriarchy. Although Kogawa has tried to depict even-handedly the great hardship endured by her male and female characters during the war, readers and critics may find themselves unable to overlook the importance of gender and race in her novel. Similarly, Issei and Nisei male characters have borne the brunt of the silencing of the Japanese-Canadian community in wartime. Stripped of their livelihood and property, and separated from their families to be exploited in work camps, these men have been brutally emasculated in socio-cultural terms. Therefore, feminist critics' reproach to the Japanese women for their acquiescence in patriarchy,

simply does not hold for *Obasan* since patriarchy was no longer functionally viable.

Kogawa confesses that

the figure of the mother is extremely important to come to terms with one's life [so that] both gender and race are important issues to be considered, but if I have to weigh things on the scale, race becomes more crucial to me than gender. (Beutell 1998:164)

Far from downplaying the taciturnity of her male characters, Kogawa blends in her narrative the essence of the ethnic Japanese male not as the absolute patriarch but as a member of a sound Japanese-Canadian (at least in the case of the Nakane) family assimilated into a hybrid society although not necessarily accepted by the white dominant society. The opening chapter of *Obasan* renders, alongside the nostalgic vision of Naomi's uncle, an insight into the exile and tribulations of a character whose silence is a burden difficult to bear and which is only "abated" through the yearly "pilgrimage" to the coulee. The coulee, "the closest Uncle ever gets to the ocean" (2), is a poetic semblance of his home and livelihood near the sea. Naomi gives an account of Uncle Isamu as a symbol of endurance comparable to Chief Sitting Bull as he has "the same prairie-baked skin" (ibid.) that blends with the landscape. The reader later discovers the partial history of the first Japanese immigrant workers to Canada as the narrator unveils the life story of her surrogate father. Naomi depicts him through the "stone bread" he bakes, which in turn, inevitably associates him with "his own hardiness" (Cheung 141) and enforced silence partly due to the loss of his lifetime trade as a boatbuilder. Together with *Obasan*, Uncle Isamu represents the last of the Issei generation that will not survive to witness the government's official apology to Japanese-Canadian war victims and receive the war reparation due them.

In *Obasan*, the tattered, silent past, which seeps into Naomi's memories as she finds the "frayed and moth-eaten" (30) patchwork quilt in the trunk, reminds her again of her long lost mother:

Just a glimpse of a worn-out patchwork quilt and the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return? After all these years, I find myself wondering, but with the dullness of expecting no response (ibid.).

Here, Kogawa wittingly or unwittingly uses the metaphor of the patchwork quilt to exemplify the silent past in Naomi's attempt to shed light on the blurry mother-daughter relationship in the novel. Surely aware of the cultural bond and practice of patchwork as an art, which was and still is an important part of North American lifestyle, Kogawa immerses patchwork quilting in the home of the bi-cultural Nakane family. For those Canadian mainstream critics who still question the Canadianness of Kogawa's novel, the patchwork scene should make them reconsider their exclusionary position. Also, to borrow Elaine Showalter's argument, patchwork as "an art of making do and eking out" has become "the central metaphor of American [as well as Canadian] cultural identity."¹¹⁸

In *Obasan*, the worn-out quilt brings to Naomi's mind the time when her mother sewed it for her bed. The "thin flowery patchwork quilt" made up of "small triangles of colored cloth" can be read as her mother's coded message to Naomi's providing warmth and comfort in her future absence and silence. For Naomi, the tattered quilt now speaks of the silent "memories of the dead" (30) – her mother, father, grandparents, and lastly, her uncle. Also for Naomi, their deaths will remain as "unresolved" as the silencing imposed on their community by what she considers their country and government is unjust. Little

¹¹⁸ In *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* [Oxford: OUP, 1991], as cited in Margaret Rogerson, "Reading the Patchworks in *Alias Grace*," in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33.1 (1998: 5).

Naomi's witnessing of the making of the patchwork quilt somehow prefigures imagistically the "fragmentation" her family would later undergo during and after the war. In another sense, Naomi Nakane reconstructs "her-story" out of the fragments of childhood memories, dreams, historical documents and newspaper clippings. Naomi's reconstruction of her own story provides a parallel with the "patchwork"¹¹⁹ task imposed while in prison on Grace Marks (Margaret Atwood's main protagonist in *Alias Grace*, 1996, written and published much later than Kogawa's *Obasan*, 1981), another marginal (and immigrant) character in Canadian literature. Although the scene with Naomi's mother's patchwork quilting is not central in Kogawa's work, it suggests a similar nonverbal code through which the mother reveals premonitory to her daughter their imminent separation and also the fragmented lives in store for the Japanese-Canadian community. In both novels, patchwork quilting transcends its North American cultural icon status; it is also a code of expression reconstructed in patches which possibly only women can decipher. In *Alias Grace*, the protagonist Grace Marks sews in patches or fragments of what seem to be the events of her life while being interviewed and evaluated by the psychiatrist Simon Jordan in order to reconstruct the double murder she has supposedly committed. Whereas the analysis of the nonverbal codes in *Obasan* reveals a better understanding and exploration of the characters' perceptions, sewing in *Alias Grace* allows its protagonist to articulate her secrets. Rogerson argues that quilting

as a form of female discourse, empowers Grace to speak in a language that is not universally accessible. In particular, it enables her to withhold her secrets from her male inquisitor, aspiring psychiatrist, Dr Simon Jordan, as he attempts to recover her lost memories of the crime using the traditional method of suggestion by association. [...] She betrays an intense interest in patchwork quilts and their designs, but because he

¹¹⁹ Rogerson writes that Atwood uses patchwork as a medium through which we can read the central character, convicted murderess and expert quiltmaker, Grace Marks, and, in addition, as a metaphor for the literary artefact itself (ibid.).

lacks an understanding of women's culture and the discourse of needlecraft, Simon is unable to detect any special meaning in her remarks (6).

Two opposing visions come to light as Naomi and Grace contemplate their respective patchwork quilts. While Grace "betrays" knowledge hidden from her psychiatrist through her patchwork, and allows herself to delight in what comes out of her matching and arranging, Naomi, on the contrary, grieves at the sight of her "moth-eaten" patchwork quilt. The mere "glimpse" of the tattered fabric and loose thread only reminds Naomi of the fragments to which her family has been reduced – forever in exile, whose dead even "refuse to bury themselves" (*Obasan* 30).

Hybridity, Doubleness and Peripherality

In the introduction to this thesis, allusion was made to the problematics of the double perspective or doubleness as an almost inevitable consequence that minority ethnic writers experience *vis-à-vis* a dominant, mainstream culture. Caught between the tension of "acculturation" and "displacement" (Padolsky), the minority writer undergoes a process of "hybridization," the corollary of which is a negotiation of a new social, and, therefore, literary space (Hutcheon and Richmond). In Bakhtin's concept of linguistic hybridity, "the condition of language's fundamental ability [is] to be simultaneously the same but different" (Young 1995:20), an irony in which one voice is used to unmask the other within the same utterance. Bakhtin distinguishes between organic and intentional hybridization, which involves the mixing and fusion of two or more languages and cultures into a new mode on the one hand and, on the other, the division and separation whereby two points of view are set against each other dialogically. For Bhabha, hybridity is co-extensive with

what he terms the “Third Space.” It is this Third Space that enables other positions to emerge, something which in turn paves the way for new histories to emerge, setting up new structures of authority and new political initiatives,¹²⁰ and allows the construction and reconstruction of a fluid, not static, identity. Bhabha’s hybridity or third space enables us to elude a politics of polarity (Orient and Occident) and a cultural binarism (civilized/uncivilized, colonizer/colonized) in which

identification [not so much identity, becomes] a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification – the subject – is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness. [...] The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation (Rutherford *ibid.*).

Bhabha underlines the important function that hybridity performs: its constitutive doubleness displaces original or originary cultures (according to Bhabha, all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridization), and gives rise to a third or liminal space wherein cultural interstices, the “traces of other meanings and discourses,” are found.¹²¹

It is because of the existence of this Third Space, therefore, that homogeneous national cultures can no longer sustain their official historical traditions without excluding

¹²⁰ Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1990 Rpt.: 1998: 211).

¹²¹ “The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You [...]. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space. [...] The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation [...] makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process. [...] It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. [...] [T]he theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based [...] on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. [...] And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.” Homi Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (New York/London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001:2395-2397).

the narratives of both colonial and postcolonial diasporas. Migrants of all conditions, whether political or economic, now form part of the present-day Western metropolitan/multicultural landscape as they start to frame their respective postcolonial histories/memories. In Canada, the literary production of indigenous, native-born second-generation, and post-war migrant writers, dubbed as “other solitudes” (Hutcheon and Richmond), comprises an anthology of the private and public histories with a double perspective turned away from the traditional literary canon. One may be forgiven for comparing the condition of writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Neil Bissoondath or Rohinton Mistry, naturalized Canadians in their own right, with writers such as Joy Kogawa or Sky Lee, who are native-born second generation Canadians. Ondaatje, Bissoondath and Mistry may freely follow their memories back to their native countries as well as create narratives touching on cosmopolitan sensibilities, but what is uncanny about Kogawa and Lee’s condition is their eternal struggle to integrate into and be accepted by a predominantly white society, in the midst (or on the margins) of which they have lived all their lives. The disavowal expressed towards them by their only known country continuously reminds them of their split identity.

To have a split identity then is to inhabit two worlds. Kogawa and Lee as ethnic Asian-Canadian writers echo this condition as well as the continually recurring and associated theme of silence, at least in their early narratives. For instance, Lee’s main protagonist Kae Ying Woo in *Disappearing Moon Café* reflects on a Chinese trait that defines her nature/identity and the fact that she is subject to her (ethnic) community’s code of silence:

I wonder. Maybe this is a chinese-in-Canada [sic] trait, a part of the great wall of silence and invisibility we have built around us. I have a misgiving that the telling of our history is forbidden. I have violated a secret code (180).

There is an inevitable split of allegiance in the protagonist's perplexed existence and a feeling of guilt that her telling may be betraying her ethnic family/community. Similarly, the scene in *Obasan's* Chapter Two illustrates how Naomi, the schoolteacher, strives to "feel at home with a new class" (7) as she painstakingly explains by spelling to her pupils her Japanese surname, finding its equivalent pronunciation by using English phonetics. In actual fact, Naomi's finding a common ground by using a hybrid language, and discovers a liminal space to reveal the sameness and difference of her Canadian and Japanese identity. Naomi's attempt to define herself to her young pupils is no less a difficult task than it is with regard to adults. This uncomfortable feeling persists whenever she has to answer the questions: "Where do you come from?" or "How long have you been in this country?" (8), this time from a widower who takes her out on a date.

Gerry Turcotte, in his article "'A Fearful Calligraphy': De/scribing the Uncanny Nation in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*,"¹²² pointing out "the uncanny" in *Obasan*, notes that "[i]f Naomi proves unsuccessful in defining herself, it is only because she has not found a language which mediates effectively between her two worlds, or one which adequately expresses her situation in her world" (127). Perhaps it is not a problem of language, or not only, but also of culture. Canada's political, social, economic and cultural structure is based on the British (English) system. The fact remains that the Canadian metropolis remains

¹²² Gerry Turcotte, "'A Fearful Calligraphy': De/scribing the Uncanny Nation in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," in *Reconfigurations: Canadian Literatures and Postcolonial Identities*, Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi, eds. (Berlin-Frankfurt: P.I.E.-Peter Lang S.A., 2002).

sufficiently provincial¹²³ so that it still looks to white Anglo cultural hegemony as the measure of its adequacy in the metropolitan world. We also cannot help but note that Naomi's white Canadian widower date is probably ignorant of the existence of the Japanese-Canadians on Canadian soil since late nineteenth century nor does he seem to be aware of the internment and dispersal of some 22,000 Japanese-Canadians during and after World War II. The Canadian widower seems to consider the Japanese-Canadian World War II issue as peripheral or provincial. The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh's definition of provincialism (see footnote 123) may be compared with the Canadian metropolitan world's disregard for the migrant's double perspective and by extension of what is culturally hybrid and peripheral.

An analogy may be also drawn from the situation of the African American community in the "American world" which "yields" [the Negro] "no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" so that "double-consciousness [is] this sense [...] of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," as W.E.B. Du Bois asserted in his essay, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" (11) from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The term "double consciousness" which Du Bois coined to refer to this "peculiar sensation" has become, without a doubt, a feeling common to Asian Americans, Hispanics, First Nations, etc. in North America that share the same history of rejection, racial segregation and labour exploitation from pioneering times to the present. Although black slaves looked to Canada

¹²³ My use of "provincial" is based on the comparison established by the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh between parochialism and provincialism. "The provincial," according to Kavanagh, "has no mind of his own" as "he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis has to say on any subject. [...] The parochial mentality, on the other hand, is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish," cited by Susan Bassnett in *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993: 63).

as the land of freedom where they could escape from southern plantations during the U.S. ante-bellum period, the truth was that, practically at the same time, the Canadian government under the auspices of the Canadian Royal Commission was designing schemes and passing laws to discriminate against and segregate from the rest of (white) society Chinese, Japanese and immigrants of colour, in general. More ironically still, Canada may also be the “uncanny nation” to which Turcotte refers and as described by Kogawa in *Obasan*.¹²⁴ Sigmund Freud’s etymological dissertation on *heimlich* and *unheimlich* (from which Turcotte derives his reading of *Obasan* as an uncanny nation) yields the insight that the uncanny is produced when what is lexically familiar or homely develops into something concealed, secret (*geheim*) and coincides in meaning with what is unfamiliar or unhomely, in short, “in identifying how one becomes the other,” or “how the homely becomes unhomely” (124). Turcotte further observes that

the uncanny is resonant in numerous narratives in Australian and Canadian fiction precisely because it enables an emblematic articulation of fears which are, in other circumstances, unmentionable: fears about settlement, dispossession, miscegenation, and contamination. In these narratives, the uncanny is frequently produced as and by a crisis of (il)legitimacy – engendering stories which agonize over the right of belonging to an invaded space, or stories which attempt to justify invasion by turning the Native peoples into something monstrous to legitimate genocidal activities (124-25).

Thus, Naomi Nakane’s (the family name mockingly pronounced by one of her pupils as ‘Nah Canny’) anxiety and her striving to feel at home (in her known world or in a world that does not recognize her) in the examples cited above articulate the ironic, “unhomely” and uncanny sensation that resonate throughout both Kogawa’s novels on Japanese-Canadian wartime internment. These narratives, which are not totally works of fiction, may

¹²⁴ Turcotte bases his essay on previous studies by Ken Gelder (1995) and Jane M. Jacobs (1998) which use Sigmund Freud’s analysis of “The Uncanny” (*Das Unheimliche*, 1956) to discuss the offensive myth of British colonization of Australia as *terra nullius* – absolute denial of the presence of Aborigines.

be regarded as truly “unhomely lives” or what Bhabha describes as “an estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world” (1994:9). For Naomi’s family and the Japanese-Canadian community in general, it is “relocation” and “dislocation” at the same time. The outbreak of World War II only served for the then Canadian government to carry out further its policy to strip this community of their ‘home’ – their rights “of belonging, of citizenship, of liberty, and justice were denied virtually overnight” (Turcotte 130).

The Double Speak of Dispersal

In his attempt to find the “location of culture” in the marginal, ‘unhomely’ moments in the works of Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer, Bhabha points out how feminist/female writers employ the “logic of reversal.” This inversion strategy makes visible the “forgetting of the ‘unhomely moment’ in civil society,” disturbs its “patriarchal, gendered nature” and introduces the “difference of genders” through the women writers’ ‘domestic space’ by personalizing the political and locating the world in the home (10-11). The narrative of Naomi’s family and of the Japanese-Canadian community, the private and the public, may then constitute an “interstitial intimacy” verbalized from a hybrid, “in-between” reality, hence the articulation of the two titles in the Japanese language, signalling that they are novels about the Japanese in Canada. *Obasan* and *Itsuka* challenge the official wartime chronicles and question the subtle language used by the government in subjugating this ethnic Asian group by reversing its logic. As Bhabha notes:

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an

‘in-between’ temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history. This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge, which [...] represents a hybridity, a difference ‘within,’ a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive ‘image’ at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world (1994:13).

We may also conclude that Kogawa deliberately blurs the line between fact and fiction. This bipolarity or dual relationship or the blurring of the line between fact and fiction is, perhaps, from where the hybrid space emerges and from where, in this particular case, Kogawa articulates and vindicates the silenced, distorted Nisei history, an incontestable part of present multicultural Canadian history. The language used in public, official wartime chronicles issued by the Canadian government of the day is counterpoised by Aunt Emily’s diary. The journal of letters, addressed to Nesan, Aunt Emily’s elder sister and Naomi’s mother who was in Japan at the time, represents the personal and private histories of Japanese-Canadians, corroborated with names, deeds and events of which they become protagonists; all are equally chronicled to unmask the heinous intentions of the Canadian authorities. From the RCMP¹²⁵ to institutions and public figures of the Alderman, religious clergymen and organizations such as the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire and the Sons of Canada, all made attempts to rid the “protected area” (British Columbia coastal areas and also Ottawa) of suspicious “spies and saboteurs” (98), forced the ethnic Japanese men to “volunteer [to leave] or else” (103), considered the Nisei “enemy aliens” (110), lashed out in racist attacks on “Japs” as “a lower order of people” and for the same reason,

¹²⁵ The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who at the beginning were “on [the Japanese-Canadian community’s] side,” eventually changed as tension heightened. They started to censor the (Nisei) Council meetings, then the cards and letters coming from the outside world. “Not a word from the camps makes the papers. Everything is hushed up” (*Obasan* 120). Also, in one of Aunt Emily’s diary entries, she recounts that “one very handsome Mountie came with his truncheon and started to hit (the women and children at the Pool) and yelled at them” (118).

“unassimilable,” and if they assimilated and became educated, the complaint then was that they “will cease being (Canada’s) ‘ideal servant’” (104). The journal also serves as a documented testimony to challenge the distorted and one-sided official Canadian history. Alderman Wilson’s racist views (105), which Aunt Emily mentions in her diary, is indeed documented by the historian Ann Gomer Sunahara in her book *The Politics of Racism Home*:

Throughout the 1930s, while Nazi propagandists had been promoting the "big lie" of a Jewish conspiracy to overthrow Germany, B.C.'s public figures had promoted the "big lie" of a Japanese conspiracy to overthrow British Columbia. As each victory made Imperial Japan seem more invincible and B.C.'s defences more inadequate, the same public figures fanned public prejudice and criticized the federal government for failing to take drastic measures against Canada's Japanese minority. Vancouver's Alderman Wilson not only personally demanded harsher measures against Japanese Canadians – including expulsion – but also organized the Pacific Coast Security League in order to better promote his racist views (*Vancouver Sun*, 29 December 1941, 5 January 1942).¹²⁶

A disinterested observer at that time, cited in this same book, became aware of the deliberate attempts of some individuals to spawn conflict between Japanese-Canadian and White B.C. residents. Such is the case of Alderman Wilson (mentioned at least twice in the diary), who submitted to a Victoria daily newspaper a “dangerous and entirely false report [...] of an alleged clash at Prince Rupert between personnel of the Canadian Navy and Japanese fishermen” (Sunahara 29).

Aunt Emily’s character as the outspoken polar end of Kogawa’s self-confessed “dual nature” was inspired by Muriel Kitagawa’s letters¹²⁷ which the author came across, in some

¹²⁶ Ann Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism Home: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1981; Ottawa: Publisher: Ann Gomer Sunahara 2000, PDF format) 10 August 2007, <http://www.japanesecanadianhistory.ca/Politics_of_Racism.pdf> 25-26.

¹²⁷ Kitagawa’s letters have now been compiled and published as *This Is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941-1948*, Roy Miki, ed. (Talonbooks.com 1985). The book consists primarily of letters Kitagawa sent to her brother Wes Fujiwara, a medical student in Toronto, in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbour bombing of December 1941.

library archives (Beautell 164). Part of the contents of the entries in Aunt Emily's diary was taken straight from Kitagawa's letters, probably reflecting Kogawa's intention to show that "everything weaves and moves through everything" and that "symbol, sign, reality, are all mixed up in our minds, in the world, in a work of fiction, in life" (Beautell 162). In the first of the diary entries dated December 25, 1941, Aunt Emily writes:

It's the small businesses that are most affected – the dressmakers, the corner store, etc. – because the clientele are shy of patronizing such places in public. Lots of people have been fired from their jobs. . . . (*Obasan* 98).

In Kitagawa's mid-December 1941 letter to her brother, she writes:

Most of the *hakujin* [whites] deplore the war but do not change to their known Japanese friends. It is the small businesses that are most affected, like dressmakers, the corner store, etc., because the clientele are rather shy of patronizing in public such places whatever their private thoughts may be... (Sunahara 24-25).

Again, on March 2, 1942, Aunt Emily wonders:

How can the *Hakujin* not feel ashamed for their treachery? My butcher told me he knew he could trust me more than he could trust most whites. But kind people like him are betrayed by the outright racists and opportunists like Alderman Wilson, God damn his soul. And there are others who, although they wouldn't persecute us, are ignorant and indifferent and believe we're being very well treated for the "class" of people we are... (*Obasan* 104).

Kitagawa's 21 December 1941 letter closely resembles Kogawa's paragraph above:

How can the *hakujin* face us without a sense of shame for their treachery to the principles they fight for? One man was so damned sorry, he came up to me, hat off, squirming like mad, stuttering how sorry he was. These kind of people too are betrayed by the [Halford] Wilsonites. God damn his soul! Yet there are other people who, while they don't go so far as to persecute us, are so ignorant, so indifferent. They believe we are being very well treated for what we are... [Kitagawa's emphasis] (Sunahara 45).

It is in this deliberate blurring of the line between fact and fiction then that Kogawa presents the ugly side of certain Canadian historical figures such as Ian Mackenzie, wartime

Minister of Pensions and National Health, whose political success in his B.C. constituency depended mainly upon an anti-Asian stance:

Submitting a report that masked the strong sentiments of the B.C. delegation, Mackenzie played up the danger of rioting by the white population. Diplomatically rephrasing B.C.'s blatant demands, he proposed that Japanese aliens be "transferred" to work camps "without necessarily being interned." Such a policy, he urged, would remove the 1,700 male Japanese aliens from the West Coast, while the Canadian-born and naturalized would be "controlled" by the proposed Civilian Service Corps, a corps Mackenzie assumed they would readily join to prove their loyalty to Canada (Sunahara 29).

According to Aunt Emily's diary, the Civilian Labour Corps is no more than "a demonic roundabout way of getting rid of us," of eliminating enemy aliens "within and without Canada" (*Obasan* 102). Similarly, terms such as Sick Bay (a building to confine the sick and the elderly) "was not a beach [or a holiday resort] at all" (92) but some kind of place for terminal health cases – "a death sentence for the old ones" (89) and the Pool "was not a pool of water, but a prison on the exhibition grounds called Hastings Park" (92), which, naturally, is not a park or playground at all. From the reader's viewpoint, Kogawa succeeds in challenging and in unmasking the "language" of subordination, or deceit, for that matter, by ironizing on the authorities' scheme to uproot these "undesirable aliens" from their homes. The reader is therefore shown "the falseness of the Government's 'language'" (Turcotte 128) and informed about an unhappy event in Canadian history, inconsistent with the (just, democratic and tolerant) image most Canadians hold of their society (Sunahara vii).

Despite the widespread acclaim *Obasan* has received, most Canadians are still not aware of this "inconsistency" with the tolerant and democratic image of their society. Their institutions may be partly responsible. For one, as Turcotte cites in his essay, Roy Miki¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Roy Miki, "Sliding the Scale of Elision: 'Race' Constructs / Cultural Praxis," in *Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing*, pp. 125-159.

argues that CanLit as a field of knowledge – an institutionalizing mechanism which organizes, discusses, interprets, and evaluates the novel – applies its exclusionary nature (Turcotte 128) by upholding an “Anglo-European identity politics that imprints itself through a process of differing at the expense of ‘its’ racialized others” (Miki 130; Turcotte 128). In order to maintain the stability of the canon and mainstream *status quo* or the “peaceable kingdom,” to use Lecker’s metaphor (which, in turn, was borrowed from Northrop Frye) as cited by Turcotte, such texts become “incorporated” or “consumed.” This process of consumption to which *Obasan*’s text has been subjected, according to Miki, does not necessarily indicate a change in the dominant structure: “[the text’s] recourse to a series of narrative and aesthetic structures [...] ultimately recuperate the novel into the dominant system – in particular Naomi’s inner journey of self-discovery, and the use of Nagasaki as a gesture of resolution” (Turcotte 129). While Turcotte agrees with Miki’s point about “a potentially depoliticizing aestheticization of the text”¹²⁹ when approached as a “Bildungsroman,” he disagrees with Miki’s reading of Nagasaki in similarly aestheticized terms that minimize the horror of Japanese-Canadian dispossession, internment and exile. On the contrary, both events are so “conclusively interlocked” (Turcotte) that they occurred as a consequence of hatred and racism towards this particular Asian ethnic group. Generated by the white ruling authorities’ obsession in the West to eliminate their militaristic, imperialist counterparts in Japan, persecution prevailed at the expense of

¹²⁹ One such review is W. H. New’s likening of *Obasan* as Kogawa’s “Bildungsroman that fades into the Künstlerroman” (230) in which Kogawa’s characters and the writer herself, “try to find the forms of word that will communicate with the larger community [...] without surrendering the values that inhere in the language and culture of the ethnic minority to which they also belong” (ibid.). Hence, according to New, it is this desire to belong to the mainstream which is in essence a desire for language and at the same time, knowledge, in the case of Naomi, *Obasan* and *Itsuka*’s narrator. In W. H. New, *A History of Canadian Literature*, (Montreal and Kingston-London: Ithaca-McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2nd edition, 2001).

innocent lives in Nagasaki (and Hiroshima) and of the Japanese American and Japanese Canadian communities in North America. (A close reading of the works by Michael Ondaatje [*The English Patient*] and Joy Kogawa [*Obasan* and *Itsuka*], who coincide in using the bombing of Nagasaki as an underlying theme and depiction of how the atrocious aftermath affected the lives of their respective main protagonists and the people around them, will be presented in Chapter IX).

Meanwhile, other critics contend that Kogawa's literary aesthetics is overlooked and deplore the fact that critical studies of minority literature have focused more upon the social and political content than on its potential aesthetic value. For these critics,¹³⁰ the ideal literary analysis should go beyond thematic exploration of one's ethnicity, if possible touching on actual artistic literary value. In the case of Kogawa after *Obasan*, it is now very difficult to categorize her as an author and her narrative. In the first place, Kogawa is not an immigrant writer. She has written about Canadian themes *par excellence*, for example, that of the (Slocan, B.C. interior; Coaldale, Alberta) prairie landscape; therefore, she cannot be considered exclusively a Canadian minority (ethnic?) writer. Kogawa may now be regarded as one of the most widely studied contemporary Canadian writers if we consider the extensive material published on her work and her life to date – essays, critical analyses, full-length studies, interviews and comparative articles. Arguably, it is perhaps not mainly or not only Kogawa's "ethnicity" or exoticism that have created such an impact on Canadian society since her work first came out in the early 1980s. From the margins, Kogawa's *Obasan* has managed to force the Canadian canonical literary centre to train its focus on a semi-autobiographical, historiographic meta(fictional) narrative that recounts

¹³⁰ Beautell shares Gayle K. Fujita's view in this regard and quotes her from the latter's unpublished PhD Thesis presented at Brown University in 1986, 42.

recent Canadian history from an alternative and critical perspective. It is this peripherality which makes the telling bolder and more accusatory. Coming from a woman writer and member of a “silenced” minority community, the formerly “undesirable” Japanese-Canadians, Kogawa’s voice becomes more dissonant as her dissidence clamours for a case (historical) revision. Canada, it seems, despite its geographical vastness, has no State policy of its own. Not completely detached from Great Britain, notwithstanding its political independence, Canada also seems to be professing blind political obedience to its powerful southerly neighbour. Curiously enough, Canada’s Asian immigration policy has been patterned since before the war after that of the U.S. concerning such decisions as Asian immigration restrictions, head taxes, internment of persons of Japanese origin in World War II, and lately, the reparation/compensation package for Issei, Nisei and Sansei survivors of wartime internment.¹³¹

[...] 1900 was the year the U.S. opened its legendary terminus for European immigrants at Ellis Island. The United States’ most substantial immigrant-receiving years were identical to those in Canada, and it began to restrict immigration at virtually the same time as Canada (that is, temporarily during the First World War and completely from 1930 until the end of the Second World War). Following the war, both countries reopened their borders and began to remove de facto pro-North-European entry restrictions in the 1960s and 1970s. This does not even begin to explore patterns of immigrant behaviour, job choices, economic success, likeliness to intermarry among the general population, likeliness to commit a crime or to run for office, or internal geographic dispersal within the host countries, which seem to have been identical on either side of the border (Reid par. 24).

This quote succinctly exposes Canada’s colonial, provincial status, the result of its blind imitation of practically all precedents set by the U.K. and the U.S.A. Canada’s postcolonial history is within its own borders. Its postcolonial history comprises the social

¹³¹ The Redress Agreement, which provided a symbolic \$12 million to Japanese Canadians, was signed in Canada by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney on September 22, 1988 largely because US President Ronald Reagan set the precedent by signing the Civil Liberties Act of August 4, 1988 allocating \$20,000 per Japanese American who had been interned during World War II, in *BC Bookworld Author Bank* 15 August 2007 <http://www.abcbookworld.com/?state=view_author&author_id=3755>.

and political exclusion of both the First Nations and the ethnic minority immigrants in general, and the Anglo-French economic and political struggle against American and British dominance. While Canada has been a victimizer, repressor of its (“ethnic”) minority citizens, it has also been a victim of its provincial/neo-colonial status as an economic, social, political and cultural extension of the U.S., which, ironically, white mainstream writers of the CanLit tradition adamantly denounce in their works. In the same manner, dissonant voices from Canadian minority communities are standing up against injustice and exclusion as they commit themselves to representing their difference and to reminding the Canadian ethnocentric public that “the truest eye may now belong to the migrant’s [or minorities’] double vision.”¹³²

¹³² Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*, as cited by Bhabha 1994:5.

A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing. That is why the concept is that of horismos, that is, the horizon, the boundary.

Martin Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.

Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

Chapter VII

Ondaatje's Narrative Aesthetics, Transgression of Genre Borders and 'otherness'

Readers and critics could be forgiven for agreeing that the best way to understand Ondaatje and his art is through his fictionalized autobiographical memoir, *Running in the Family*. It is a trek back not only to the investigation of what is private – the past of his ancestors, but also to the exploration of what is public – the history of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. In short, Ondaatje stamps the seal of his personal identity and multiple cultural origins in this work. For a writer who grew up in a family that mingled theatre acting and poetry reading with domestic life, it is no wonder that he now presents art as that which naturally transgresses the frontiers of reality. For, as we have already seen, at a very early age Ondaatje began to learn the meaning of fiction and non-fiction through stories his family and relatives told him about his ancestors and about local legends.

Ondaatje's education in three different countries (Sri Lanka, England and Canada) has enabled him to create narratives that incorporate such disparate characters as the American outlaw Billy the Kid; Kip, the Indian sapper who works for the British Army in World War II; and explosives expert Patrick Lewis, whose life becomes intertwined with the immigrant workers in Toronto in the 1920s, etc. Likewise, Ondaatje evokes landscapes and themes other than the traditionally Canadian, thus making his literary output for some critics difficult to categorize. His desire to explore, discover and "write very freely," disregarding a Canadian linear literary tradition in terms of "subject matter, vision and

verbal texture,”¹³³ allows his settings to constitute a “triangulation of different locations.”¹³⁴ These places, which were formerly part of the British Empire, share a common historical experience and, as such, comprise the settings and themes for the writer’s literary projections.

Ondaatje’s borderless settings, non-linear literary style, exploration of mini-narratives and historical sense, all part of his narrative aesthetics, are also reflected in his latest narrative, *Divisadero* (2007). Published seven years after *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), *Divisadero*, which will also be discussed in this chapter, centres on the migration and displacement of its characters who, at the same time, are protagonists of the settings and stories that overlap within Ondaatje’s notion of the past and present postcolonial world.

The Merging of Art and Life in Ondaatje’s Work

Ondaatje’s work then represents a merging or transgression of the boundaries between life and art. Originally a poet himself, Ondaatje crossed the borders of conventional literary genres when he wrote *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, a narrative collage of poetry, documentary, news articles, sketches and photographs. This work inaugurates his passage from strict poetry writing to narrative fiction. In *Coming through Slaughter*, his second long narrative or first attempt at writing a novel, Ondaatje

¹³³ Sam Solecki, entry on Ondaatje in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2nd edition William Benson and William Toye, eds. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997) 882.

¹³⁴ In his essay “Burning Down the House: Neil Bissoondath’s Fiction,” David Richards stresses the shift in which postcolonial writings have displaced the dualistic notion of the Commonwealth as centre and periphery. According to him, the three places which V. S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid and Ondaatje have been part of, are now the sites from where they draw their topographical projections. *Narrative Strategies in Canadian Literature*, Coral Ann Howells and Lynette Hunter, eds. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991) 49.

rescues from oblivion the mythical *fin de siècle* American jazz cornetist Buddy Bolden by merging biography and historiographic metafiction.

Readers of *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter* find themselves wanting to know more about the man behind these works whose main protagonists so often resort to violence.¹³⁵ The fact remains that some critics consider the writer as the alter ego of his two adapted personages. The narrator's reflection of his own self in the 'other' somehow parallels "the compulsively destructive nature of the creative impulse," as Solecki sustains in his article "Making and Destroying: *Coming through Slaughter* and Extremist Art" (1985: 247). Solecki analyzes further the link between Ondaatje and his chosen characters such as the figure of Buddy Bolden, a cornetist playing at the height of his career who suddenly goes mad. Solecki argues that Ondaatje's choice of a cornetist – a producer of musical sounds to illustrate the literal silence of his art – "makes the images of a fall into silence particularly forceful" (248). Had the novelist used another writer, the result would have been a merely figurative silence and acoustically irrelevant. It probably marks, according to Solecki, "an end of a phase of his career" (*ibid.*).

Meanwhile, in Linda Hutcheon's essay, "Postmodern Challenge to Boundaries," Michael Ondaatje is cited as one of the Canadian writers "playing with and contesting the boundaries between men and women, but also between art and life, fiction and autobiography" (81). Attracted to the boundaries and margins, Ondaatje transgresses literary conventions and deconstructs mythical, historical personages as sites of his novelistic investigations, as seen in his fictionalized interpretations of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden. Even the character of Mervyn Ondaatje is half-truth and half-fiction – all

¹³⁵ Violent imagery constantly erupts in Ondaatje's work (particularly in these narratives) but he insists that it is not deliberate: "That just happens in the process of writing, but I'm not conscious of it while I'm writing it [...]. I don't think I'm a particularly violent poet" (Jewinski 118).

Michael was able to learn about his father was what other people knew about and “guess[ed] around him” (*Running* 200). The narrator therefore concluded that “[t]ruth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships” (53).

In *Running in the Family*, the relation of language to the representation of reality is an important issue, according to Hutcheon (1988:85). Ondaatje uses both a historical or real referent and a narrativized one. Treating the family history as his own personal one adds still another element to this linguistic tension (Hutcheon 1988:86). But the book transcends the mere treatment of the historical background of his family and ancestors to arrive at his own expression of the origins of his art as a poet and a writer. As Hutcheon observes, the book is therefore replete with lines and allusions to the vehicles of literacy such as the self-consciousness that accompanies the act of writing and the concern for language (“Half a page – and the morning is already ancient” [*Running* 17]). Ondaatje simply includes these vehicles as part of his daily existence.

As for the philosophy behind the characterization in *Running*, Ondaatje defends his treatment of his family and relatives in the book:

It would have been very easy to make the whole thing an ironic or even sarcastic look at the generation. But why bother? When characters in books are “lesser” than the writer, there seems to be a great loss in the subtleties and truths being discovered or discussed. Obviously the politics of the time is important. But it *is* a book about a family. Also the thing about writing is that you want to represent or make characters who are believable, who are fully rounded, and that stops you from making them just politically good or politically vicious. I’m more interested, I guess, in making people as believable and complex and intricate as possible (Jewinski 155).

Running is like “A Portrait of the Artist,” a discovery of his “perverse and solitary desire” “to touch [the memory of his family and relations] into words,” which came to him “in the midst of this party among my closest friends” before “travelling back to the family I

had grown from” (*Running* 22). The book depicts the intellectual awakening of the young Ondaatje exposed at an early age to his parents’ interest in English literature and drama. It is a self-commissioned investigation into his artistic temperament, and the source of his attraction to depicting the ways in which art and life – fiction and reality – cross each other’s borders. Ondaatje uses documents, quotations, and interviews combined with his own songs, poems, and narrative, all in the service of the truth of fiction. By blending history and fantasy, Ondaatje explores the inner life of his subject in the same manner as, in an earlier work, he recorded and invented the inner life of Billy the Kid.

Other readings of *Running in the Family* present it as Ondaatje’s ironic search for his ethnic roots. Graham Huggan argues in his essay, “Exoticism and Ethnicity in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*,” that Ondaatje consciously satirizes the attempt to retrieve the past of his ancestry. The way Ondaatje digs into the stories of his ancestors conjoins with the fictitious accounts of his origins and the legendary attributes of the exotic flora and fauna of his native Sri Lanka. For these anecdotes, adorned with myth and fantasy, are deliberately constructed out of the impossibility to determine his ethnic roots: “[e]thnicity scorns the exotic, yet it partakes of the exotic” (Huggan 119). The irony of Ondaatje’s text lies in the narrator’s treatment of the self as ‘other’ probably as a result of his genetic *métissage* as well as his postcolonial cultural exposure. This feeling of alienation (“I am the foreigner, I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” [*Running* 79]) is what invades Ondaatje whenever he is in one place or another – in England, in Canada or in Sri Lanka, something which Huggan calls a “process of self-estrangement” (122):

Th[e] recognition of exotic experience as a spurious panacea – as a pseudonostalgic longing for a time and place other than one’s own – lies behind Ondaatje’s self-ingratiating, but also sharply self-critical, text. And it also lies behind his exploration of his ethnicity, for if exoticism allows Ondaatje to confront his condition of alienation, it

also gives him insight into his divided cultural allegiances. To which community, or country, does he seem to belong? Where do his sympathies lie? Which group or place, can he call his own? (123).

These divided cultural allegiances or the double perspective which Ondaatje attributes to himself are precisely what inspire him to explore any and all themes freely, and not just those that concern his ethnic condition in mainstream Canada. Perhaps the most disconcerting criticism that Ondaatje and this memoir have received so far comes from South Asian critic Arun Mukherjee, who accuses the Sri Lankan-Canadian writer of “sacrific[ing] his regionality, his past and that most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada” (qtd. in Huggan 118). Huggan points out that much of Ondaatje’s work has precisely to do with otherness and most of his fictional characters are go-betweens, hybrids and outsiders. Chelva Kanaganayakam joins Mukherjee in attacking Ondaatje’s work for the way in which it reflects the writer’s own and his family’s “immaturity”: “it glosses over a history of bloody conflict in Sri Lanka, preferring, instead, to bask in a comforting world of private myth” (qtd. in Huggan *ibid.*). Meanwhile, Smaro Kamboureli (“Signifying Contamination: On Austin Clarke’s *Nine Men Who Laughed*”) also cites Mukherjee’s deliberate “exclusion” of Ondaatje in her essay “South Asian poetry in Canada: In Search of a Place” since, accordingly, Ondaatje’s work “does not speak of his otherness and visibility” (214). Mukherjee’s strategy of “exploring the racial difference, attacking the racism of Eurocentric discourse and forging a positive racial identity that is grounded on the memory of the historical struggle of the community,” according to Kamboureli, is an ironic position as it prompts colonized subjects to adopt a collective identity both threatened by mainstream society and rejected by migrant writers such as Ondaatje and

Neil Bissoondath. A Eurocentric position veers from hybridization and relegates the postcolonial subject to exclusion and continued marginality.

Would these South Asian critics' opinions of Ondaatje as a(n) ("ethnic") writer have, perhaps, changed after reading *Anil's Ghost*? Although it was not Ondaatje's intention to appease these critics when he wrote the novel, but rather to unearth the roots and explore the truths of the long-running Sri Lankan civil war, would *Anil's Ghost* and its author's depiction of the main protagonist's double perspective have somehow met their expectations? If there is one thing which Ondaatje owes exclusive allegiance to, it is, his art. He has confessed in various interviews that he is primarily concerned with projecting a private, individual story rather than a more public and social one. The characters he explores transgress not only the barriers of marginality but also their ethnic background – Canadian, Macedonian, American, English-Hungarian, Indian, and of course, Sri Lankan. What Mukherjee fails to acknowledge, for instance, is that Ondaatje's portrayal of characters such as Temelcoff, an immigrant of white, European origin, is an allegory of Canadian otherness and which transcends, therefore, the author's non-European ancestry.

Ondaatje's concept of literature as a communal act is embodied in the literary and historical intertexts present in Ondaatje's work, especially in *Running in the Family*, something which the critics Linda Hutcheon (1988) and John A. Thieme both emphasize. Hutcheon alludes to Michel Foucault's theory of intertextuality (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*), cited in one of the epigraphs to this chapter. The section in Ondaatje's *Running* entitled "Historical Relations" (39-41) talks about the history or the past of his 'relations' or 'relatives' or ancestors, a 'history' the writer links with *An Historical Relation*, a memoir about exotic Ceylon and its traditions written by Englishman Robert Knox held captive in Ceylon for twenty years. Thieme underlines the writer's use of the

double entendre of “Historical Relations” together with the narrator’s investigation of his own personal history and the early known written information about Sri Lankan history. Thieme further notes that *Running in the Family* is Ondaatje’s both private and public quest: an exploration of the past of Sri Lanka as well as an investigation into his own personal past (41).

Ondaatje, according to Hutcheon, is also influenced by Gabriel García Márquez’s magical realism.¹³⁶ The syntax of Ondaatje’s depiction in *Running in the Family* of his grandmother Lalla, as she is swept away by flood waters (“Years later, when Lalla was almost a grandmother, she was standing in the rain at the Pettah market on her way to a party” [42].) is reminiscent of the opening of García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (“Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” [qtd. in Hutcheon 1988: 88]). The appeal of this oral story-telling style for Ondaatje is perhaps due to the fact that he and García Márquez share a common background in that both their indigenous cultures are replete with tales and legends where orality is the traditional vehicle for telling tales and whereby ‘truth’ depends on the reporter’s ‘creativity.’

One Hundred Years of Solitude and *Running in the Family* are about a quest for the origin of the Buendía and the Ondaatje families inasmuch as they are about the history of the respective authors’ countries marked by the invasion, colonization and exploitation of their peoples by foreign powers. Both works make use of memory and imagination that overlap and blend with their compendium of communal stories characterized by myths, legends, superstitions, beliefs, folklore and oral tradition.

¹³⁶ Linda Hutcheon, “The Novel,” in *Literary History of Canada. Canadian Literature in English*. Second Edition, Vol. 4. W.H. New, General Editor (Toronto: U of Toronto P) 1990:88.

Ondaatje, for instance, wittingly or unwittingly borrows García Márquez's image of the ritualistic death of Aureliano Babilonia's baby son, devoured by ants; in *Running in the Family*, the narrator describes how an army of ants carries away the page of the book his father was reading: "It was page 189. He had not got that far in the book yet he surrendered it to them" (189). Siemerling (1994) further notes the intertextual link of Ondaatje's passage with the end of the fictive world of García Márquez's novel as it concludes "with an image of its own undoing when the jungle reclaims Macondo" (qtd. in Siemerling 151).

Ondaatje also alludes to the communal act of literature in *The English Patient* through Almasy's rescue of a book from the plane crash:

It is the book he brought with him through the fire – a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations – so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus (16).

Almasy's discovery of "supposed lies" (246) in his reading of Herodotus, further leads him to conclude that history is related to or based on fiction:

I see [Herodotus] more as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage" (118-19).

Indeed, Herodotus' histories, as John Bolland indicates, "illustrate [...] a persistent instability in the evidentiary status of the narrative of the *Histories*, and the rejection of a single authoritative version of the past in favor of a record of the multiple voices that constitute a communal, oral record" (50). This point brings us back to the postmodern challenge to the official version of the past as evidenced in Ondaatje's work: *The English Patient* is written on multi-layered histories of the past, alongside the stories of real and fictive characters, all fragments of a communal book that challenge the frontiers between fact and fiction.

While we may consider Ondaatje to be more prolific as a poet, when it comes to narratives he seems to make a pause after each work. After publishing *Slaughter* in 1976, for instance, he would not publish his autobiographical memoir until 1982, followed five years later by *In the Skin of a Lion* in 1987; then came *The English Patient* in 1992 after a lapse of a further five years; then, after eight years, *Anil's Ghost*, in 2000; and lastly, *Divisadero* would not be published until 2007. The long respite after each novel results in a totally different work from the immediately previous one but with traces of his personal concerns. Ondaatje seems to embark on a quest for historical perspective before he begins another piece of narrative fiction:

That is what I do. I live a life where I go to work in one era, or place, or historical moment, and at the end of the day return to another. It's schizophrenic, but it's a constant thing. I'm often uncertain about what I'm trying to make. The clarity doesn't click in until somewhere near the end (Dafoe par. 63).

Ondaatje, whose prose style is described by critics as lyrical and poetic, begins his novels without plot or “any sure sense of what’s happening or even what’s going to happen.”¹³⁷ He builds his story from what he calls “germs” of scenes he imagines his characters move in. *The English Patient*, for example, begins with the image of a plane crash. The unearthing of this tragic scene leads to a nurse healing her patient and Almsy and Katherine Clifton’s illicit and tragic love affair becoming a counterpoint to Hana and Kip’s relationship. Caravaggio, whom readers have already met in Ondaatje’s previous novel, reappears in this one as the same thief, who is later tortured and suffers mutilation of the thumbs at the hands of the Nazis. The way all these characters of different backgrounds

¹³⁷ Gary Kamiya, “Delirious in a Different Kind of Way,” An Interview with Michael Ondaatje October 4, 2001. <<http://www.salon.com/nov96/ondaatje961118.html>> par. 5.

meet and connect at some point in the story illustrates Ondaatje's concept of the communal act embodied in his literary work. Another scene evocative of a connection between these two characters are the images of Hana back in Canada dislodging a glass and Kirpal Singh catching a fork at home in India in the epilogue of the novel.

In particular, Ondaatje's use of hues of light and shadow in *In the Skin of a Lion* underlies "the overall narrative rather than [just] one character" (Davey 151). The scenes which describe Caravaggio training himself to work "in unlit rooms," the "minimal light" in the mushroom factory where he hides after his escape from prison; Patrick, as a boy, examining insects in the dim light, watching the immigrant loggers skating by torchlight on a frozen river; the night shift at the bridge construction where Temelcoff employs his acrobatic feats to swing from one point to another, etc. all evoke what Davey terms a "discourse of darkness" (150). "Darkness" punctuated by faint light as the text's oft-recurring word, Davey notes, helps to emphasize "individual action and mistrust of collective politics" (ibid.). The faint light limits the field of vision so that perception is narrowed down to "a social space that can contain no more than two or three people" (151).

In contrast, the discourse of darkness in *The English Patient* alludes to intimacy, solitude and silence – a haven or refuge. For Hana, it is a time to "sit and read, the book under the waver of light" (6); when she "imagines she also breathes in light" (14) but it is different from the "slow [Toronto] twilight" (49) with its "familiar trees"; and lastly, there is carnal knowledge in trying to "learn[] all the varieties of [Kip's bodily] darkness" (127).

For the English patient, on the other hand, darkness is his charred skin, a perfect camouflage for his real identity; his refuge after a day-long flood of light in the desert: the time when "he is given sight only after dusk" by his "captors and saviours" (22); and

finally, *félhomály*, a Hungarian word for semi-darkness, dusk, half-light, twilight¹³⁸ as he enters naked the darkness of the cave – “the dusk of graves. With the connotation of intimacy there between the dead [body of Katharine] and the living” (*Patient* 170), subtly evoking necrophilia.

The discourse of darkness in *The English Patient* also marks the communal gatherings in both the desert and the Tuscan villa. Before a small fire in the desert, the explorers gather to listen to poetry and tales from Herodotus’ *Histories* so as to avoid being swallowed by darkness; while the alienated group in the Italian villa gather in darkness for comfort: to shed skin and heal wounds.

True to his writing philosophy indeed that art merges with life, Ondaatje seems to persist in the transgression of line between fact and fiction, the intertwining of personal and communal histories, the marginal figure and outsiderhood in practically all his narratives. Ondaatje’s latest work, *Divisadero* (2007) may serve as a manifesto of the writer’s literary aesthetics embodied in what seems like a compendium of mini narratives linked by different characters who, at the same time, are intertwined by place, time and parallel stories. What makes *Divisadero* unmistakably “Ondaatjean” is the collage-like plot of this narrative, as Ondaatje believes that “[c]ollage works not just by putting one colour against another colour [...] but also by putting textures together, so that a rough, porous bus ticket might sit next to something silvery. You have to be able to join these things together

¹³⁸ Tötösy de Zepetnek clarifies that *félhomály* is an oft-used word in Hungarian poetry and it also refers to hybridity or *métissage*. 3 October 2002. <<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb99-4/totosy99-2.html>> par. 5.

naturally, so that you are not conscious of the juxtaposition but the picture as a whole.”¹³⁹ What Ondaatje perhaps would like to achieve through this is the idea that readers look at the small narratives in his latest book as if they were a cubist painting, a structure reminiscent of the aesthetics of *In the Skin of A Lion*, *The English Patient* or *Anil’s Ghost*. Although there have been a number of book reviews and/or newspaper articles written about Ondaatje’s most recent work since its release in 2007, presumably very little scholarly work has been published on *Divisadero*. I take this very timely opportunity then to include in this dissertation, perhaps considering its originality, my own critical analysis of *Divisadero*.

Divisadero: Overlapping Settings, Intertwined (Hi)stories

Perhaps the apparent disparateness in Ondaatje’s most recent narrative *Divisadero* (2007) in terms of characters, mini stories, settings, and especially, of time flying back and forth into the past and present may seem “far-fetched”¹⁴⁰ and probably confound those who read Ondaatje for the first time. But for those who are not first-time readers, they may

¹³⁹ Stephanie Bunbury, in “Michael Ondaatje’s never-ending story,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 2007. <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/books/michael-ondaatjes-neverending-story/2007/05/03/1177788276873.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap2>> 9 December 2007 par. 17.

¹⁴⁰ For Michael Upchurch, *Seattle Times* book critic, Ondaatje’s attempt to link late twentieth-century California with early twentieth-century France in *Divisadero* is “tenuous and fails to generate any kind of narrative tension,” in “Far-fetched narrative in ‘Divisadero’ simply confounds,” 1 June 2007. <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/cgi-bin/PrintStory.pl?document_id=2003729536&zsection_id=200219_537&slug=ondaatje03&date=20070601> 9 December 2007 par.2.

perhaps gather from Ondaatje's sixth narrative fiction an insight which seems to invoke an appeal to the past in order to bring light to the understanding of the present. In Chapter One of *Culture and Imperialism* entitled "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories," Edward W. Said recognizes the fact that "[a]ppeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretation of the present" and that they provoke "not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms [...]" (3). Furthermore, Said cites T. S. Eliot's 1964 critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in which the poet acknowledges the relevance of the "historical sense" in tradition, which he also considers "nearly indispensable" for any poet (or artist):

the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.¹⁴¹

What is perhaps evident and inevitable in this affirmation is the inseparable condition between past and present since, for Eliot, "past and present inform each other" in much the same way as "each co-exists with the other," prompting Said thus to amend Eliot's statement. Accordingly, however we represent the past, it influences our understanding of the present, so that "[n]either past nor present, any more than any poet or artist, has a complete meaning alone" (Said 4). In the same manner, we may highlight the

¹⁴¹ T. S. Eliot, *Critical Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932:14-15) as quoted in Said 1993:4; also in T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. [1960] Rprt. 1964:4).

relevance of Eliot's notion of the historical sense by linking certain events in history to the concept of the term "imperialism." "Imperialism" as a word or an idea would then lead us to include "colonialism" in the former's working definition inasmuch as both terms are inseparable and linked also to the notion of the postcolonial. As Robert C. Young reminds us, imperialism and colonialism are bound to the respective concepts both of "direct-rule domination" and a presentist "global system of hegemonic economic power" (2001:57). Although there have been extensive discussions in Europe and America over the political and economic implications of imperialism and colonialism, concerning especially their aftermath and their persistence (Young), very little attention, as Said observes, has been paid to the role of culture in the modern imperial experience (5). The scope of European past imperialism is global and practically everyone alive today has been and still is part of the history of (post)colonialism, the immediate consequence of which was the displacement or migration of peoples from one world region to another as indentured labour, slaves or colonists/homesteaders. Today, the to-and-fro movement of economic or political refugees on the one hand and multinational corporate brokers on the other, continues. The pattern of dominions and possessions resulting from American and European colonialism and/or imperialism now represents, in effect, a fully global world (Said 6) whose underlying human, cultural and social (hi)stories are relegated, most of the time, to the art of narration, i.e., to the realm of fiction. Ondaatje quotes Nietzsche – "We have art so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth" (*Divisadero* 267) – to remind us of the theme of the "truth of fiction," which once more supports an imaginative account of the past in his latest narrative of the geographical dispersal of various characters from both sides of the Atlantic, whose territories overlap, as do their (hi)stories.

If one can be forgiven for speaking from the position of a modern exile, reading Ondaatje's *Divisadero* evokes a vision that the world is fluently inter-connected as an aftermath of imperial expansionism by past world powers. The legacy of colonial structures established on conquered lands and peoples persists, not only in postcolonial subjects who now form part of most of the formerly colonized Third World countries, but also in (postcolonial) descendants of early European colonists who comprise the present mainstream and/or metropolitan societies of the Western world. The seemingly documented historical development of Petaluma county in California set "more than a century before us" (12) in Ondaatje's *Divisadero* recounts how the place was occupied and exploited by gold miners and homesteaders during the 'California Gold Rush' era. This turn of events took place, of course, after the Spanish colonizers had explored and colonized it to become part of New Spain, eventually to be turned over to Mexican control right through to when Petaluma became part of Alta (Upper) California, and long after being named by the original Native American inhabitants after the Coastal Miwok phrase for "valley of the little hills." What comes much later is the history of a migration of people from different parts of the globe in search of gold and a better life, eventually to become part of the current sociological landscape of Petaluma. Ondaatje emplots the first of his stories on an isolated farm acquired by Anna's (the narrator's) grandfather who was himself an early immigrant. Suggestive of the ethno-cultural divide is the gap that existed between Anna's Anglo-Saxon paternal grandfather who managed to "eventually own[] all the land he looked down onto" (7) and her Hispanic maternal grandfather Méndez who simply "worked the asphaltum pits" (10), and who probably did not reach the socio-economic stature of the former. Pasted together as in a collage, *Divisadero* is arranged by using historical time markers (in spiralling, helicoidal, and definitely not chronological, order) such as the

American intervention in the Gulf Wars of 1991¹⁴² and 2003, World War II and World War I or the Great War, as well as by patching together the personal and/or historical biographies of the main characters. Artfully composed, this novel also juxtaposes the underlying social, cultural and political themes which are embedded in what is seemingly Ondaatje's writing philosophy:

[...] we live with those retrievals from childhood that coalesce and echo throughout our lives, the way shattered pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope reappear in new forms and are songlike in their refrains and rhymes, making up a single monologue. We live permanently in the recurrence of our own stories, whatever story we tell (*Divisadero* 136).

Thus, war time markers also serve to emplot the disparate characters in different moments of history: the pre- and post-1914-18 World War I period which encompasses Lucien Segura's boyhood and adult life as well as the story of the lives of Anna's ancestors; the post-World War II era which surrounds the story of Rafael's father, notoriously known as 'the thief,' and of his mother Aria; the post-Vietnam war period when Anna, Claire and Coop grow up together until they part ways and become estranged from each other; the televised, video game-like Gulf War of 1991 which frames Coop's transformation years later into a big-time gambler in the casinos of Nevada; and Part II of the Gulf War which breaks out 12 years later serving as a historical backdrop to Claire's rescue of Coop, amnesiac from a near-fatal beating at the hands of Lake Tahoe gambling gangsters who want to exploit his skills in swindling another card player. Using both Gulf Wars as

¹⁴² Said cites the Gulf War of 1990-91 between the United States and Iraq as an example of how our understanding and views of the present are shaped by how the past is formulated or represented. Each of these countries, accordingly, claimed "two fundamentally opposed histories" which they both used to their advantage. From the Iraqi perspective, then, their violent invasion and occupation of Kuwait was justified in the belief that the "Arabs had to right the wrongs against them and wrest from imperialism one of its greatest prizes," whereas in the American view of the past, the US was a "righter of wrongs around the world, in pursuit of tyranny, in defense of freedom no matter the place or cost" (1993:4-5). Said concludes that what the Gulf War demonstrated was clashing versions of the past pitted against each other.

narrative time markers, Ondaatje may well not have coincided with Said's interpretation of the 1991 conflict as being between "two fundamentally opposed histories" (see footnote 142). Nevertheless, Ondaatje has been consistent in his criticism of the West's continuous (post)colonial, or to borrow Said's term, 'orientalist,' attitude and policy towards the non-West, in this case, a Middle Eastern country's (Iraq's) challenge to American political and economic influence in the region by invading Kuwait. In the event, in his latest work Ondaatje manages to denounce subtly and ironically the "great high-tech massacres of the modern era" (53) employed by the U.S. military in the bombing of a civilian city (Baghdad). Perhaps what Ondaatje would like to emphasize here is his concern over the killings of innocent lives and the wounds, physical and psychological, inflicted on survivors from both sides. The theme of destruction through warfare is reminiscent of the Nagasaki bombing which Ondaatje explored previously in *The English Patient*.

Meanwhile, the characters' disparate stories in *Divisadero* converge gradually as Anna's consuming interest in rescuing from oblivion the (fictive) early twentieth-century French writer Lucien Segura is revealed: his "articulated voice that suggested a [familiar] wound" (143) and his biography as a whole, which resembles the Petaluma story. This primal story recounts Anna's early life with her adopted orphaned siblings Claire and Coop as they all grow up together with her widowed father on a farm in northern California. Lucien is orphaned twice as a boy. He never meets his biological father and his clockmaker stepfather dies unexpectedly. Lucien and his mother's story is reflected in Rafael and Aria's, while Lucien and Marie-Neige's close sibling-like relationship somewhat resembles that of Anna and Coop's. Similarly, Lucien's daughters' competitive closeness echoes that of Anna, Claire and their silent father's story but narrated from a different perspective. Meanwhile, at one point in the narrative, Lucien considers himself as a mirror of Liébard

(also identified as Astolphe or the thief) and vice-versa, as both men are haunted by their respective wives whom they abandoned in the past. In the same manner, Anna is haunted by Segura's "odd departure [and disappearance] from his family" (143), which resembles her own "wound" inflicted by the "moment of violence that deformed her, all of them" (75), which in turn has been triggered by her father's catching her and Coop in the (sexual) act, immediately causing her "de facto" family to dissolve. Anna flees from home at 16, conceals her identity in a different name and settles in Divisadero Street in San Francisco. Divisadero, which comes from the Spanish word for "division," becomes the narrator's and the author's device to explore fragmented lives and from which point to "look far into the distance" – after all, the word also derives from *divisar*, which means 'to gaze at something from a distance.' One could argue that this distant gazing provides narrators, characters and readers alike with a creative detachment and perspective. "Divisar" enables us to make sense of the (hi)story, both real and fictionalized.

It is indeed from a certain distance, Anna confesses, that she is able to dig into the lives of persons she has lost and heard only rumours about, such as the case of her mother and, inversely, Lucien Segura's unknown father. Anna believes and declares that "if you do not plunder the past, the absence feeds on you" (141), in her attempt to justify becoming an archivist and historian. Perhaps it is through this 'historical sense' (T. S. Eliot) that Anna has been able to "rewrite herself" in southern France albeit "under a mask" (142), and under a different name unrevealed even to the reader, in the same way as she "re-writes" the encounter in Paris between a French *Belle Époque* mime artist (Georges Wague) and a music-hall artist/writer (Colette). It is also at this point in the narrative that the voice of Anna the narrator and that of another third-person narrator (the author's voice, perhaps) blend as writers in their own right, as they assert that "sometimes we enter art to hide

within it,” as a place “we can go to save ourselves, where a third-person voice protects us” (142). For both, narrator and author, the art of unearthing the past is what seems to embody the perception of the pastness and presence of the past, echoing in turn the historical sense identified by T. S. Eliot in his vision of literary tradition. Anna’s use, then, of a more personalized narration and the author’s use of a more detached third-person voice become patches of knowledge which serve to piece together a first-person vision of one’s own past and present, and a third person’s more distant gaze, as if representing a personal as well as a collective past. Both perspectives ultimately converge through the archaeological exploration of the lives of characters: stories intertwine, recur and parallel others as a consequence of “the raw truth of an incident” (267) that is never resolved in Anna’s past. At the same time, Ondaatje’s (the author’s) unshakeable ‘ghosts’ are mirrored in his recurring themes (and characters) throughout his narrative works. “In many ways, Anna’s book on Lucien is very much about Anna. And I think that is what is interesting about writing, in a way. You take in what you are [sic],” declares Ondaatje in an interview, “[e]ven if you are writing about Mars, you are, in a way, writing about yourself” (Bunbury par. 18). Such a statement may be regarded as a more or less clear confession that there are hints about Ondaatje’s personal life and vision in every nook of his narratives. In the first place, Ondaatje seems to grow so fond of the characters he creates that they turn up in successive novels, for example, Hana and Caravaggio appear in *In the Skin of a Lion* and in its sequel *The English Patient*. And Hana’s wounds echo Anna’s in *Divisadero*, in the same way that Patrick Lewis’ laconic temperament and physical dexterity in moving and working underwater resemble Coop’s in his silent relationship with his foster family and his love of risk as he dives in to fix the tank full of “numbing cold” water. Meanwhile, Nicholas Temelcoff’s acrobatic feat as a bridge construction worker in Toronto (*Skin*) is re-created in

Roman's (*Divisadero*) agility in hanging from a rope harness while working on the restoration of an old French church belfry. Rafael's father, 'the thief' (whose secret name his father refuses to reveal preferring instead to be called Liébard and later Astolphe), may well be the same Italian immigrant Caravaggio the thief of two previous novels set in Canada (*Skin*) and later in Italy (*Patient*). Tracing Caravaggio's stint in Italy during World War II in *Patient*, and the thief's confession in *Divisadero* of having been to Italy during the war and "never came back," that he "ha[d] a wife too in another life" (178) and that he was a thief who "believed that property was 'communal'" (82), makes such a theory plausible.

For the reader, some scenes in *Divisadero* are but splinters of violence that resurface inevitably from the memory of Ondaatje's early works. For one, the scene with the "shard of glass" which Anna pierces her father's shoulder to turn him away from attacking Coop, is repeated (or, shall we say, happens almost a century earlier in the narrator's/author's digression into the past?) when Lucien's eye receives a splinter of broken glass after a mad dog charges violently against a glass window. In *Coming through Slaughter*, a glass window is similarly shattered when, enraged with his wife Nora, Buddy Bolden smacks the window hard with his open palm, an act which leaves "his hand miraculously uncut" (*Slaughter* 16). The shattered glass may be the recreation of a nagging image in the author's mind of a window-breaking incident which happened long ago in the Ondaatjes' own kitchen (Jewinski 135). In revisiting Ondaatje's initial poetic narrative works, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming through Slaughter*, one is reminded of the shocking imagery and violent language used to recreate the characters of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, respectively. Some readers and critics noticed at the time of publication of these two works, while Ondaatje was working as a university professor, the puzzling

mystery behind the “quiet, gentle, unassuming professor” who was typecast at the same time as the “poetic gunslinger, the jazz-mad professor, the embodiment of gentle brutality” (Jewinski 135). Perhaps an explanation lies in Ondaatje’s oxymoronic portrait of the artist and his creation: “The making and destroying coming from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of” (*Slaughter* 55). The flashes of violence, which blur the thresholds between what is sane and real, and what is madness and unreal, foreground the experimental nature of these works. Indeed, what Ondaatje also achieves in these works is a landscape which mixes rumour and fact, reminding us of his belief that the raw facts about the artist/protagonist in the novel can be more valuable as clues, so that eventually, “a rumour ... becomes a truth” (Jewinski 133).

Finally, Ondaatje’s “idea of a family that splinters”¹⁴³ has converted his narrator/protagonist in *Divisadero* into a transplanted writer/historian/artist as she crosses the Atlantic back to the Old World. This (post)colonial reverse movement seemingly fits the author’s need to “go out over the whole world” and leave the “very tight universe” (ibid.) in which one has grown up. Anna’s research, therefore, on exhuming and writing about a long-forgotten French poet-writer replicates in a way Anil’s diggings for bones as a forensic anthropologist to investigate the organized murders of innocent victims of civil war in *Anil’s Ghost*. “[T]he quest to unlock the hidden past,” according to Vintage International’s partial description of *Anil’s Ghost* on its back cover, may well be applied to most of Ondaatje’s prose works. The prevailing tone of Ondaatje’s narrative, in general, seems to evoke an inevitable drive to view the past and dig up its textual remains in order to

¹⁴³ Marcela Valdes, “Things fall apart for farm family,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 3, 2007. 16/03/2008 <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/reviews/books/DIVISADERO.DTL>> par. 5.

rescue from oblivion and uncertainty the supposed facts of life of the character depicted, and to adapt them to the author's truth of fiction. Viewed from any angle and guided by his particular historical sense, Ondaatje's self-reflexive literary craft only seemingly unfolds mysteries, disentangles identities and recovers memory.

[H]istories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation that I have elsewhere called “emplotment.” By emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot-structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with “fictions” in general.

Hayden White, *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact*

Chapter VIII

Unofficial Histories Reclaimed.

Alternative Truth in Ondaatje's and Kogawa's Narratives

The central point of the Hayden White¹⁴⁴ quotation that serves as the epigraph to this chapter is that history, as a serious discipline interested in “mapping the past and [in] determining the relationship of that past to the present” (White 42), makes use of “historical narratives” which are considered verbal fictions, whose contents are invented and whose forms resemble literature more than the sciences. Furthermore, White cites the insistence of prominent modern philosopher R.G. Collingwood, that “the historian [is] above all a storyteller.” Accordingly, it is up to the historian to build a story out of fragmentary, unprocessed “facts” to provide sensible historical data by using “the constructive imagination” (46). It is also important for the historian to have “the nose for the story” (47) demonstrated in the ability to come up with a “true” or “plausible” story. Nevertheless, White argues that the bare data gathered from the historical records do not necessarily make a story as these “story elements” have first to be emplotted by the historian himself:

What Collingwood failed to see was that no given set of casually recorded historical events in themselves constitute a story; the most that they offer to the historian are story elements. The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play (ibid.).

¹⁴⁴ Hayden White, “The Historical Text As Literary Artifact,” in *The Writing of History*. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki, eds. (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978: 46).

Therefore, the historian may configure the story elements of one country for nationalistic or patriotic purposes, so that the inclusion or omission of other elements will depend on their relevance to the existing political power of the time. (Hi)stories excluded from the annals of the nation are untold stories, or in short, silenced histories and silenced truths. Dominant or invading cultures have been instrumental in ignoring and subjugating the struggle of colonized subjects, and the latter's search for their own identity as a people or nation. On the other hand, the history of individuals found on the margins of existing mainstream cultures has also been repressed or denied in favour of a monolithic "centre." But what we cannot deny, as Said reminds us, is the fact that the voices of these marginalized individuals have always been there. In North America, for instance, this is corroborated by the existence of a significant corpus of narratives written by former black slaves in both antebellum and postbellum periods of American history. The writings of other non-WASP/minority American authors have also garnered recognition from the reading public and positive reviews from literary critics in contemporary American literature. At the same time, literary productions of hyphenated Canadian writers flourished with the advent of the post-war Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (also called the Massey Commission) which paved the way for the canonization of Canadian literature in, according to Robert Lecker, "fewer than twenty years."¹⁴⁵ Lecker places 1965 as the approximate date of the beginning of this process.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Lecker, ed. *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Values. (1991) Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature* in "English 591: Studies in Canadian Literature. Making National Culture: English-Canadian Literature and Cultural Institutions from the Massey Commission (1949-51) to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988)," P. Hjartarson <<http://www.ualberta.ca/~englishd/eng591a2.htm>>

Indeed, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* cites the period from 1960 to 1982 as the decades which saw the publication of “Canada’s best novels and stories so far.”¹⁴⁶ The *Oxford Companion* entry includes Canadian writers of fiction that have garnered international acclaim such as Margaret Laurence, Robertson Davies, Mordechai Richler, Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Norman Levine and Michael Ondaatje. Some of these Canadian writers have emplotted their protagonists upon historic events either because they were considered notoriously sensational by the chroniclers of the time or the individuals concerned were entirely relegated to the background of the history of an infrastructure landmark which they helped to build. Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* clearly reflects the former case, whereas the latter is at the centre of *In the Skin of a Lion*. It is Ondaatje’s way of vindicating the story of the unknown bridge builders of Bloor Street Viaduct and those of St. Claire’s Reservoir in Ontario. Both these novels feature immigrants to Canada as their main characters, and whose stories occur in two different periods of time. Aware of the fact that their novels are works of fiction, both Atwood and Ondaatje have chosen historical backdrops in an effort, perhaps, to reclaim distorted elements and present a different perspective of Canadian history. In her exploration of the notoriety of the female protagonist Grace Marks, an Irish immigrant to Toronto and accused of the double murder of her master and his common-law-wife towards mid-nineteenth century, Atwood confesses that she has

of course fictionalized historical events (as did many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history). I have not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally “known.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Sam Solecki’s entry of “Novels in English 1960 to 1982,” in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* 2nd edition. William Benson & William Toye, eds. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997) 823.

¹⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood, “Author’s Afterword” in *Alias Grace* (Toronto: McClelland & Stuart, Inc., 1996) 466-67.

The “commentators” referred to by Atwood are what Ondaatje singles out as the “media” – the ones responsible for making stories “official.” Ondaatje believes that the role of the novelist is to write “something unhistorical, unofficial [or] what goes on in private” (Coughlan par. 16). While Atwood’s novel revolves around the historic personality and marginality of Grace Marks as a woman and an immigrant at the same time, Ondaatje prefers to explore unhistorical lives of both fictive and real-life characters. For Ondaatje believes that

reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer. Especially in this country, where one can no longer trust the media. The newspapers have such power over the story and portrait of Canada. You can see the newspapers moving in a certain politically right-wing or economically right-wing direction, and this – before you know it – becomes the official voice of the country, the equivalent of a Canadian pavilion at Disneyland. But we know it’s not a real truth. One of the things a novel can do is represent the unofficial story (Jewinski 167-68).

Although Billy the Kid, Buddy Bolden, Mervyn Ondaatje and Count de Almasy existed in real life, Ondaatje nevertheless creates his own versions of these persons. Consistent with his belief that the “truth” of the character is pieced together from fragments of whatever information is available, Ondaatje is very much concerned with what the “official” story has left out. Perhaps this is why he feels closest to the other characters – Patrick Lewis, Nicholas Temelcoff, Hana or Caravaggio – who represent unhistorical lives as they were “more invented and therefore much more part of [him]self” (Hutcheon and Richmond 201).

In the Skin of a Lion is Ondaatje’s attempt to reconstruct part of Toronto’s history by concentrating on the stories of the anonymous people who helped to build the city. This work questions the idea of a revered, official history and presents the postcolonial challenge of the existence of other personal narratives. In other words, history is reviewed from a

different angle and from the language of the marginalized. Ondaatje also shows his preoccupation with the act of storytelling right at the beginning of the novel, where two nameless characters set off to an undisclosed place:

This is the story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through darkness. Outside, the countryside is unbetrayed. The man who is driving could say, 'In that field is a castle,' and it would be possible for her to believe him.

She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms. And he is tired, sometimes as elliptical as his concentration on the road, at times overexcited – 'Do you see? (1)

The story thus commences and ends with the same scene (an “extraordinarily elliptical narrative” according to Mark Levene¹⁴⁸) and with both characters, this time with the reader’s knowledge that they are Patrick and Hana on their way to Marmora, Ontario, to meet Clara, Hana’s mother’s friend and Patrick’s erstwhile lover. *In the Skin of a Lion* is told on different narrative levels – the narrator’s, Patrick’s and the characters’ own personal accounts. It revolves around important events in the history of Toronto in the first quarter of the twentieth century – the disappearance of theatre impresario Ambrose Small and the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct to bring water to the city under the supervision of commissioner Rowland Harris. The narrator becomes more interested in the lives of the bridge builders who turn out to be immigrants like the author. When asked by Linda Hutcheon why he had chosen the character not of an Asian but of the Macedonian Nicholas Temelcoff, Ondaatje confesses that he “didn’t want to limit this story [...] to one which would have been seen as a sort of self-portrait” (Hutcheon and Richmond 200) and, besides, the immigration influx at that time was mainly European. Similarly, *In the Skin of*

¹⁴⁸ Mark Levene, “Patterns or Syndromes in Postwar English-Canadian Fiction,” in *Visions of Canada Approaching the Millennium*, op. cit. 22.

a Lion belongs to those works which Frank Davey considers

foreground their political engagements in re-staging recent or historical political arguments, constructing the viewpoints of specific actors or positions, and favouring one or more of these viewpoints by representing them in intimate discourses that operate to ‘humanize’ and ‘naturalize’ their postulates (3).

In the Skin of a Lion not only denounces social and political repression by Canadian authorities, it also claims historical recognition for a group composed mainly of immigrants, who “came to this country like a torch on fire” and “gave out light” (149), as Temelcoff did.

The novel is structured into three main narrative segments depicting the alienation of Patrick Lewis, David Caravaggio and Nicholas Temelcoff from the wealth and privileges that the city of Toronto represents. The narrative tension lies in the manner in which (official) History is depicted and the story of each of the protagonists told. Ondaatje manages subtly to subvert the Canadian historical “master” narrative by allowing his characters to articulate their individual and intimate experiences, that is, their local and private narratives, thus lending voice to those forgotten and omitted from History.

The three main protagonists are immigrants to Toronto who become aware of their anonymity and invisibility against the backdrop of wealth and power that the city radiates. Patrick, for instance, has felt like a total stranger – “he was new even to himself” (54) – since his arrival at Union Station in Toronto from his home village. His immigration to the city as a tunnel worker is shown as the reverse experience of an individual who discovers himself to be an alien in his own country while working and living in the midst of a community of foreigners from different ethnic backgrounds who are unable to speak his language and who ironically consider him “their alien”(113). Caravaggio, despite or

because of his individual resistance, realizes that he has been left out of the history of the city he has helped to build: “He was anonymous. [...] He would never leave his name where his skill had been. He was one of those who have a fury or a sadness of only being described by someone else. A tarrer of roads, a housebuilder, a painter, a thief – yet he was invisible to all around him” (199). Meanwhile, Temelcoff comes to Canada at a time when “North America is still without language, gestures and work and bloodlines are the only currency”(43). It was perfect timing for him to earn his way starting from scratch as an immigrant, a daredevil bridge builder, finally to become the owner of his bakery – a citizen and self-made man who manages to break free of the shackles of exploitation. He comes to realize “how he has been sewn into history,” and he resolves that “he will begin to tell stories” (149) to counteract this anonymity and marginality.

Although Patrick is white, Canadian-born, has an English name, and some degree of literacy and linguistic privilege over Caravaggio and Temelcoff, he nevertheless belongs to the group of workers who are exploited (and sometimes exposed to danger) at the farm, the tannery, in the waterworks tunnel, in the mines, etc. Patrick meets Caravaggio in prison after the former is arrested for arson at a resort hotel for the rich, as his individual act of destruction of their power. At this point, the novel offers an insight on the two ways of fighting against the exploitative, the rich and the powerful – “collective social action” versus “solitary acts” of resistance (Davey 148-49). Alice as a social activist and Cato as a union leader represent the former group. Patrick and Caravaggio resort to individual “attacks” through sabotage and thievery, respectively, against the rich capitalists; whereas Temelcoff silently earns his way to self-sufficiency in order to open a bakery of his own. Indeed, the author’s chapter on Temelcoff (“The Bridge”) is a tribute to this immigrant’s

painstaking struggle to “solv[e] his political problems,” as Davey puts it, thanks to his talent and resourcefulness as a daredevil bridge worker

swinging up into the rafters of a trestle holding a flare, free-falling like a dead star. He does not really need to see things, he has charted all that space, knows the pier footings, the width of the cross-walks in terms of seconds of movement – 281 feet and six inches make up the central span of the bridge. [...] He slips into openings on the lower deck, tackles himself up to bridge level. He knows the precise height he is over the river, how long his ropes are, how many seconds he can free-fall to the pulley (*Skin* 35).

“The Bridge” – featured twice in two different book anthologies on Canadian writing and multiculturalism, one in Hutcheon and Richmond’s *Other Solitudes* and the other in Kamboureli’s *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* – is a metaphor which links the boundaries between the dominant culture and the outsiders’ diverse and hybrid origins. In his articulation of the beyond, the boundary that becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing*, Homi Bhabha alludes to Heidegger’s concept of the bridge as a building that “lead[s] in many ways” and cites the German philosopher: “Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks. [...] The bridge *gathers* as a passage that crosses.”¹⁴⁹ In *In the Skin of the Lion*, the bridge is the immigrant-workers’ “passage” to the other bank, to form part of the ‘metropolitan’ civilization founded by the settler colony. The workers realize the significance of the Bloor Street Viaduct’s inaugural event, which is why they make sure they are the first ones to walk on this bridge and “moved with their own flickering lights”(27). Hutcheon considers this act to be the workers’ symbolic claim to having completed the bridge themselves:

¹⁴⁹ Bhabha cites Martin Heidegger’s essay, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” in *The Location of Culture*, 5.

(before the official, recorded historical opening), they walk across it with torches like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley [...] constitut[ing] the future civilization of this particular city [...] [and] they are like summer insects – part of the nature that the officials are trying to overcome, to conquer.¹⁵⁰

For according to Heidegger, “the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge.”¹⁵¹ The workers’ march at midnight before the official ceremony is their way of vindicating their contribution to an ambitious infrastructure project that will carry water and lead traffic to and from the centre, considered important for the life of Toronto. Ondaatje further explores the trope of “the location and the bridge” in *Skin* by sifting through the histories of other workers, mainly immigrants, involved in the construction of a tunnel for the city waterworks. The “illegal gathering” (115) of tunnel workers of various nationalities at the waterworks to watch a silent puppet show, a representation of the persecution of the immigrant by the authorities, is also a symbolic (and clandestine) expression – “[i]t was a party and a political meeting” (115) – in order to air their grievances, albeit only amongst themselves. The meeting also gives rise to their “inauguration” of Harris’ (the government’s) half-built waterworks, which “come into existence” with the help of these voiceless working immigrants.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the bridge is also an important metaphor in Kogawa’s *Itsuka* (1992), the sequel to *Obasan*, where it is “a place to traverse, not a place to linger” (*Itsuka* 189) and wherein “injustice is the chasm” (94) the narrator’s people have to cross.

¹⁵⁰ Linda Hutcheon, “The Postmodern Challenge to Boundaries,” in *The Canadian Postmodern. A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto-NewYork-Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988) 95.

¹⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger Athenaeum from *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971) par. 28 <<http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/heidegger7a.htm>>

The “gathering” in *Obasan* refers to the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II who serve as farmhands for Alberta’s sugar beet plantations and who “played an important part in producing [Canada’s] all-time record crop of 363,000 tons of beets in 1945” (231). Taken from a newspaper clipping, the narrator’s Aunt Emily is collecting information not only to furnish evidence of the Japanese-Canadian exiles’ contribution to the nation’s progress, and hence proof of their allegiance to Canada, but also to bring forth the memory of the “hardship” (ibid.) and humiliation they suffered in the cold prairie lands. However, in a sign of the continuing unofficial racial discrimination policy by the Canadian government, these same productive Canadian citizens were still barred from returning to their homes in British Columbia even when the war was over. Both Ondaatje and Kogawa’s unofficial histories probe the memory of personal narratives and challenge the Canadian official or master narrative. Ondaatje uses anonymous and fragmented stories that allow a plural articulation of individual experiences through different characters/narrators while Kogawa confronts the narrator’s nightmares by re-living the unbearable memory of her family’s internment. Ondaatje once declared that he is more interested in making his characters “as believable and complex and intricate as possible” (Hutcheon and Richmond 198) than in presenting an argument in his work. But in *In the Skin of a Lion*, he has managed to make an undisguised political statement against early twentieth-century Canadian government policy towards its immigrant workers and citizens of alien ancestries. Davey dissects the Canada represented in Ondaatje’s novel and refers to it as “a battlefield of class interests”:

At one extreme in this field are the mill and mine owners, ‘the aldermen and the millionaires’ (238), and entrepreneurs like Ambrose Small who set the economic agenda of the country and, through a complicit media, establish its social significances. At the other are the anonymous foreign workers forbidden to organize publically (sic) or speak, murdered by their bosses if they seek to unionize, allowed only the temporary identities

of their work, as exemplified by the tannery workers who must assume the colours of the dyes their job requires them to plunge into, who must lose their 'skins' as they have each lost language (Davey 146).

A similar Canadian socio-political structure is described in Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Kogawa's *Obasan*, the former set in mid-nineteenth century and the latter in mid-twentieth century. The power structure of Canadian Victorian society and Canada's supposedly democratic government during World War II legitimated the authorities' sense of lawful entitlement to preserve the Establishment. The aldermen, penitentiary governors, doctors "like the judge and the executioner who hold the powers of life and death" (*Alias Grace* 82) in Atwood's novel, and the government commissioners or politicians who decreed the internment of Japanese-Canadians, the confiscation and expropriation of their property, in Kogawa's, are the same power brokers who continue manipulating, discriminating against and violating the human rights of their citizens. Ondaatje, Atwood and Kogawa coincide, then, in depicting in their respective novels the recurring Canadian national policy of seemingly trying to break up new and emerging communities at different times and varying situations.

The other unofficial story Ondaatje saves from oblivion, *Anil's Ghost*, is one which inevitably evokes the civil war in present-day Sri Lanka and which is far from the political naïveté of his ancestors described in *Running in the Family*. This is why, when he returned to Sri Lanka to research his last novel, Ondaatje intended to be detached from his family experience of *Running in the Family*. He wanted to present a "larger perspective" of Sri Lanka but at the same time did not want readers to take *Anil's Ghost* as the only reliable story or source of information about the long-running civil war there. According to Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* is not a book that represents his war-beleaguered home country

(Coughlan par. 15). For Ondaatje, who tells his stories through the different voices – the narrator, the main protagonists and secondary characters – that form a communal setting, it “is essential to recognize that no historical event, or no historical situation, or even human or love story can rely on just one voice or one spokesperson” (Coughlan par. 47). In the same manner, the author thinks that the notion of truth in *Anil’s Ghost* is sustained not by Anil alone but by various characters such as Sarath, Gamini or Palipana. Through “juxtaposition or collage,” the writer can effectively “suggest the complexity of any moment” (ibid.). Their voices form part of what Ondaatje calls the “morality of cubism” – in which truth is seen simultaneously from different perspectives. One of the main concerns in *Anil’s Ghost*, is, again, the issue of truth and how different people from different backgrounds perceive it. The (Sri Lankan) government’s actions aimed at wiping out insurgents represent the clash between public truth versus the truth of private individuals. And one private truth the narrator underlines is the story of Palipana’s relative, the twelve-year-old Lakma who sees her parents killed. The shock drives her into infantile regression: “[s]he wanted nothing more to invade her” (*Anil’s Ghost* 103). When there was “[t]error [...] from all sides,” what is left was innocent victims “caught in the middle”:

It was like being in a room with three suitors, all of whom had blood on their hands. In nearly every house, in nearly every family, there was knowledge of someone’s murder or abduction by one side or another (*Anil’s Ghost* 154).

Peter Coughlan affirms in his interview with the author that Ondaatje treats the profound questions of truth and perception in *Anil’s Ghost*, “through people, through situations, through contrasts in people’s lives and in their responses” (par.73). In a scene in “The Grove of Ascetics,” Palipana and Anil engage in a verbal exchange over the nature of truth. Palipana regresses into Sri Lankan local history to explain to Anil that “[e]ven then

there was nothing to believe in with certainty. They still didn't know what truth was. We have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones." Anil, from the perspective of her Western scientific approach to uncovering truth, replies: "We use the bone to search for it. 'The truth shall set you free.' I believe that," to which Palipana responds, "Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion" (*Anil's Ghost* 102). Here precisely is where the author wants to stress the difference between Anil's world and Palipana's. Ondaatje deplores the Western tradition of solving a crisis without taking into account the existing nuances or sometimes contrasting truths:

The truth! One of the things I wanted to get at was that we in the West have a tradition of believing that there are always answers, always solutions. American foreign policy is based on that belief. You can bomb your way to victory if you want, or you can bomb your way to having your truth accepted in another country. I think that one of the important things that comes up in Asian writing is that sometimes you can have tragedy and light simultaneously, tragedy and almost comedy simultaneously. There's an odd kind of balance. It's a terrible thing to admit to or to accept, but there is an acceptance of it. Truth sometimes can be, you know, as dangerous as falseness (*Coughlan* par. 74).

In this respect, Ondaatje's treatment of Sri Lanka in *Anil's Ghost* may sound moralistic alongside the irony of normal life going on in the war-torn country:

But here it was a more complicated world morally. The streets were still streets, and citizens remained citizens. They shopped, changed jobs, laughed. Yet the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here (*Anil's Ghost* 11).

Although this novel was written as a personal statement by the author, the tragic reality of the inhabitants' clashing points of view over the civil war is central. This is why in his note of acknowledgment, Ondaatje includes the doctors, nurses, archaeologists, forensic anthropologists, human rights and civil rights organizations, etc. who supposedly have not only extended their technical help in the writing of this novel but have also given their views and told stories of victims of this tragic war. The facts gathered by the author during

his research for this novel have perhaps served as the basis for his “inventions and discoveries.” *Anil’s Ghost*, as Ondaatje clarifies earlier, should not be read as an official chronicle of the “actual” events of the on-going civil war in his native land, but as a personal or “imagined” interpretation of it. And in spite of the author’s clear differentiation between his invention and contemporary Sri Lankan history, we cannot eschew the idea that the situations and personal dramas of the characters revealed in the course of the novel may, indeed, be real or factual.

The convenience and relief of the knowledge of truth seems to be a recurrent theme in Kogawa’s works. In Kogawa’s third novel *The Rain Ascends*,¹⁵² the protagonist Millicent discovers in the middle of her adolescent years that her father, Rev. Charles Barnabas Shelby, a minister of the Church, has sexually molested young boys throughout his religious working life. Her dilemma now is how to face the truth and come to terms with the contradictions that this man embodies – admired for his kindness and good deeds and at the same time, mired in such detestable acts as deceit and the abuse of power over defenceless young boys supposedly seeking his protection. More than a timely subject of debate on cases of paedophilia committed by Catholic as well as Protestant men of the cloth as reported by the media in recent times, the theme of paedophilia is apparently so near and dear to Kogawa that it even appears in *Obasan*. Naomi Nakane’s encounter with Old Man Gower, her white neighbour in *Obasan*, is a clear description of the sexual abuse of a four-year-old child. Naomi has lived with this guilt and has kept it secret ever since, a guilt that springs not only from the abject act itself but also from that “pleasurable and frightening” (77) feeling she would later seek out in Old Man Gower’s lap. This is one of the ghosts

¹⁵² Quoted references to *The Rain Ascends* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) from now onwards will simply be cited as *TRA* with the page number.

Naomi has had to exorcise in order to relieve herself of the burden of having betrayed her mother's trust, hence precipitating the loss of the mother-daughter bond. At a very tender age, she associates this "betrayal" with her separation from her mother and thus begins Naomi's search for an eternally absent mother (see discussion in Chapter VI).

On the other hand, for Millicent, the daughter who has always loved and adored her father, the "truth is unspeakable ... and a knife that slays" (*TRA* 9) as her sister-in-law Eleanor keeps pounding on her father's "crime" against innocent boys. Right from the very start, the issue is whether to be silent about the 'sins' Millicent's father has committed or to speak out the truth and let him face the consequences of his acts as her sister-in-law maintains. Millicent's stand at the beginning is divided: to be silent or to condemn. Her father's nature is similarly divided: "He is a man of immense appetites and immense contradictions, a man who is greatly admired and equally despised, a man of faith and a man of falsehood [...] this saint and sinner combined" (18). Ironically, the division extends further in this religious family that lives apparently in harmony and grace; and upheld by the mother and son Charlie's alliance, a relationship which, through their physical and character likeness, rivals the father-daughter connection. The narrative, which is not entirely about the father's sins and his victims, centres on Millicent's dilemma about her own morally questionable personal life and the burden of coping with the seemingly unrepentant behaviour of her father, the victimizer. What later occurs to the daughter is the result of her troubled reaction to her father: she falls victim herself to this tormented circumstance by becoming pregnant at 19 by an older, married clergyman. She decides to have the baby, and twelve years later resumes contact with the same lover, becomes pregnant again, but this time has an abortion.

Although the theme of faith is not central to *The Rain Ascends*, Kogawa, the author perhaps inevitably tackles religion through references to sins and forgiveness, and parodies a biblical account. Within the narrative itself, Millicent, the narrator creates an analogous fictive tale by emplotting her father as lion-man King Barnabas on H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in her effort to understand her father's own world of fiction. In this sinister kingdom, the tale reveals the double life led by a wise king by day and a ferocious predator by night, which prods her daughter to seek forgiveness from the Master/Creator and from the souls of small animals the father has slain. Later in the narrative, the narrator uses the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac which, in Arnold E. Davidson's view,¹⁵³ is a complex reversal of the biblical account as "[i]t is the child, the daughter who is sacrificing the parent" using "the pen, not the knife" (par. 4) as her instrument. Thus the author/narrator re-writes the account:

I take the [altar] apart and build it again. And again. And finally now, after all these years, because the wood is so dry, and the pyre is good enough, because I must get on with it, I bind him and lay him on the altar on top of the wood. I stretch out my hand. I take the knife and raise it high. And higher. Where is the ram? [...] If I hold the pen tight enough, with enough determination, if I let it fall just to the point – right up to the throat – that's when the ram will appear. I won't have to say the lethal words, will I? (*TRA* 5).

In the narrator's hope to find the "ram" as the "alternate [sic] sacrifice" (*TRA* 5), the story is reversed again and she, this time, is converted into the sacrificial ram, the resulting innocent victim of her father's "fall from grace," together with his more than three hundred other direct victims who lost their childhood innocence. In another episode of doubt and self-torment, the narrator likens her father, whom she sees defenceless under public

¹⁵³ Arnold E. Davidson, "A Daughter's Dilemma," *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, Books in Review 154 (Autumn 1997) 148-150 University of British Columbia, 17 August 2007 <<http://www.canlit.ca/reviews-review.php?id=8735>> par. 4.

scrutiny, to the same Isaac bound on the altar: “Here he lies, exposed to the skies, my father my lamb, my Isaac. And over there beside him stands ancient Abraham at the impossible altar, frozen as in a painting, his eyes to heaven, his obedient pen raised in his foreverness of faith” (69).

All too soon will the narrator realize that her father’s wrongdoings cannot be justified and she compares herself with another biblical character Jonah, a coward “hiding from God, hiding from the truth” (70). Millicent’s anguished introspection into the truth has also served to unearth the lies, the many fictions built around the lives of her parents. She eventually finds out that her mother (Meredith) and Uncle Jack were illegitimate children, sent to an orphanage after their mother had abandoned them. We learn that their father, Grandfather Hunter to Millicent, was a wife beater and had “a fierce temper,” which drove their mother away. Even Millicent’s father’s childhood is far from being desirable. Also a victim of a broken home, her father was sexually assaulted at the age of eight by an older boy neighbour. Both Millicent’s parents’ probable reason for migrating to Canada is to escape from shame and hardship. But their handicap, notwithstanding their religious fervour, is that they have been incapable of shedding their traumas lived in the Old World once they landed in the New World. Reverend Father and Mrs. Shelby’s charismatic image, their community’s role model for any Christian couple and family to follow, is shrouded in “thick impenetrable fog,” the source of lies, as the prologue announces. They are part of the fiction they themselves have constructed which crumbles “when the truths we once believed turn out to be lies” (86). Millicent, who has been living in a world of fiction, in a home she once believed to be safe, now unfit, wishes “a new and better house [might] be built” (87) swept clean of inadequate fictions. She then advocates that “the truth must be served, the truth must be endured, the truth must be told” (70). Again, perhaps, it is not

mere coincidence that the author makes some intertextual references since her story claims to search and speak the “truth” about the world that underlines social and religious values constitutive of the norms of mainstream life.

In *Obasan*, Naomi has been protected from the horror and pain, that is, from the truth of knowing the fate of her mother after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. “Kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children ...” (26) is what Naomi and brother Stephen overhear the adults whisper in the attempt to protect them from finding out the truth. Naomi’s inquisitive thirst for her mother’s whereabouts surges whenever there is an occasion to interrogate her protectors: “Please tell me about Mother” (31), “What’s this about, Obasan?” (55), referring to the envelopes from the grey cardboard folder containing letters in Japanese writing and which Naomi suspects might bring news about her mother. Even the truth about Naomi’s father’s death has been kept secret from the children. The reading of the two letters penned by Grandma Kato, the telling of the long-awaited news about Naomi and Stephen’s absent mother, represents the denouement that offers a testimony of a private history. It is a telling of a lived experience recorded by its witness (Grandma Kato), recognized by its narrator (Naomi) and finally processed by its author (Kogawa) into an imagined narrative of the actual atomic bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 which concluded the history of World War II. In this regard, the actual (facts about the Nagasaki bombing) and imagined (in this case, the private, personal narrative about Naomi’s mother) elements of narration (see below Hayden White’s notion of the historical text as literary artifact) create an explanation of the denouement of World War II.

On the other hand, the resolution of Naomi’s conflict about her absent mother is uncannily and vigorously narrated by Kogawa, unravelling the monstrous truth to the reader by showing how man can inflict destruction on other human beings:

One evening when she had given up the search for the day, she sat down beside a naked woman she'd seen earlier who was aimlessly chipping wood to make a pyre on which to cremate a dead baby. The woman was utterly disfigured. Her nose and one cheek were almost gone. Great wounds and pustules covered her entire face and body. She was completely bald. She sat in a cloud of flies, and maggots wriggled among her wounds. As Grandma watched her, the woman gave her a vacant gaze, then let out a cry. It was my mother (*Obasan* 286).

If what the West actually wanted to achieve was to save the lives of over half a million American and Allied soldiers by not carrying out a conventional military invasion of Japan, they surely accomplished this mission but at the expense of wreaking havoc on the innocent lives of people living in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at that time. Shortly after the dropping of the bombs, the Japanese government surrendered unconditionally. The West's desire to prove how monstrous and demonic Japan was only proved the former's inexorable ruthlessness to the latter,¹⁵⁴ or the actual mirror image of the former formed in the other. This equally monstrous and demonic deed is only paralleled, if not actually surpassed, by the racist uprooting, exile and dispersal of Japanese-Canadians from their homes, as Kogawa adamantly sustains in *Obasan* as well as in *Itsuka*.

Hayden White suggests that the actual and imagined elements of the narrative genre are what formerly were held to distinguish history from fiction. This older distinction "must give place to the recognition that we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable" (60). Thus, the historian may structure his or her narrative in such a way that the recording of "what happened" will also involve the use of a figurative language, which inevitably becomes part of a literary construction. The distinction, then, White concludes, between "real" and "imagined" narratives is not as significant since "the

¹⁵⁴ Immediately after the atomic bombings of the two Japanese cities, public opinion in the West approved of such political and military move to quell the enemies at all costs. From the West's point of view, this episode of World War II history was written or "explained," in Hayden White's terms, favouring Allied victory against the humiliating defeat of the Japanese imperial army. (See discussion in Chapter IX).

manner of making sense of [history] is the same”(61). I suggest that Ondaatje’s as well as Kogawa’s historical point of view in constructing their narratives vindicates somehow unofficial (hi)stories. Both authors’ manner of telling what happened in their narratives is, in Hayden White’s terms, an “explanation” of an element of history within Ondaatje’s and Kogawa’s respective conception of literary sensibility.

Postmodernism questions the formal separation between literary and historical texts. A re-negotiated approach would “blur the line between fiction and history” (Hutcheon, 1988: 113). Oral history is another alternative: it is unofficial, informal and linked to gossip, myth and legend. “We are communal histories, communal books (*Patient* 261),” says Almasy in an attempt to respect the unmarked territories or borderless nations of the nomadic tribes in the desert. Ondaatje’s use, as John Bolland observes, of the written memory through Almasy’s diary record and “Katherine’s assimilation into communal, oral memory” (49) in *The English Patient*, on the one hand, and on the other, Kogawa’s inclusion of Kitagawa’s letters as contents and context of Aunt Emily’s diary on their internment in the British Columbia interior in *Obasan*, both reinforce this sense of the communal text.

Winston Churchill and Harry Truman found biblical metaphors to describe their first reaction to the atomic bomb. Churchill asked rhetorically, "What was gunpowder? Trivial. What was electricity? Meaningless. This atomic bomb is the Second Coming in Wrath!" Truman reflected in his daily journal, "We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley era, after Noah and his fabulous ark."

Hiroshima & Nagasaki: one necessary evil, one tragic mistake Bruce
Loeb, *Commonweal*, August 18, 1995

Nagasaki: first half hour

The pattern of destruction in Nagasaki was shaped by the geography of the city. The bomb was dropped over the Urakami Valley, a residential and industrial area. The center of Nagasaki, the harbor and the historic district were shielded from the blast by the hills flanking the Urakami River. In the affected area, however, an estimated 12,000 buildings were destroyed by the blast or burned in the fires resulting from the bomb.

As a result of a more powerful bomb and the focusing effect of the surrounding hills, physical destruction in the Urakami Valley was even greater than in Hiroshima. Virtually nothing was left standing. Worshipers in neighborhood shrines and temples and in the great Urakami cathedral, died at their prayers. Children died in their classrooms, prisoners in their cells, workers at their machines.

*Hiroshima, Nagasaki after atomic blasts: story the Smithsonian was not allowed to tell - excerpts from 'Judgment at the Smithsonian'
Philip Nobile, National Catholic Reporter, July 28, 1995*

Chapter IX.

Racialized Subjects, (Re)historicized Narratives:

The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the result of the Allied political and military scheme to force and accelerate the Japanese government's surrender, thereby supposedly putting an end to World War II. It was also the right moment for the Allies to defeat the 'kamikaze' spirit prevailing amongst the Japanese military and civilian population in the early 1940s. This scenario of Japanese fanaticism, the cost of (American soldiers') lives at stake if land invasion was deployed and the pressure to conclude the war definitely in the Pacific, were just some of the reasons given to justify the use of the devastating weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹⁵⁵ This end, according to the then U.S. President Harry Truman and his staff, justified the means employed in killing more than 100,000 people, mainly civilians, in Hiroshima and around 60,000 in Nagasaki. The bombings took place one after the other in a span of less than three days. Truman warned further: "We shall continue to use [the atomic bomb] until we completely destroy Japan's power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us" (Loebs par. 21). The Allies were then determined at all costs to reduce the Japanese imperial army to ashes.

¹⁵⁵ "Hiroshima 1995 - moral aspects of dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in 1945" – Editorial *Commonweal*, August 18, 1995. 13 October 2005, <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1252/is_n14_v122/ai_17210223> par. 2.

Ironically, the Allies resorted to the same highly censured “savage and beastly” (ibid.) practice of the enemy.

Although the aftermath of such bombings was horrendous and devastating, very few, if any, American observers, criticized, much less condemned, the means through which non-combatant civilians were directly targeted. It seems safe to speculate that the American people were conditioned by their government’s intense wartime propaganda aimed at creating hatred of the Japanese (Loebs par. 33): a Gallup poll on August 15, 1945 showed that 85 percent of the American public opinion approved the use of the new atomic bomb on the two Japanese cities (Loebs par. 2).

This chapter will offer a comparative analysis of the official discourse used by the Allied military and political institutions in justifying the means to achieve Japan’s surrender and the contrasting and accusatory perspective of Ondaatje and Kogawa in their novels. Through historical intertext, both *The English Patient* and *Obasan* are emplotted on the World War II period. The actual bombings and the knowledge of how absent relatives may have perished in the bombings mark the denouement and resolution of these narratives. In the first place, a literary fictive work which draws on historical intertext as a representation of the imaginable may contradict history as the representation of the actual. This idea may be rebutted if we consider Hayden White’s theory on the existing relationship between the imaginable and the actual. Secondly, based on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of a Minor Literature,¹⁵⁶ both Ondaatje and Kogawa’s historical point of view, written from the margin and in a major language, deterritorializes the latter as it articulates the minority view. Ondaatje and Kogawa’s revision of the historical past

¹⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What is a Minor Literature?” in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. Tr. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (rpt 2006).

thus opposes and challenges the official Canadian majority and/or mainstream history. Both challenges, arising from an initially individual, minoritarian position, eventually become the political stance of groups seeking redress: those who denounce Anglo-American colonialism and/or imperialism in Ondaatje's narrative and the Japanese-Canadian community's petition for redress in Kogawa's novel. Thus, language deterritorialization, political nature and collective value, constitutive of the characterizing elements of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of Minor Literature together with Hayden White's view of the historical text as literary artefact, may well serve to give credence and support to Ondaatje and Kogawa's own historical perspective.

The victory of the Allies in World War II allowed them(selves) to write the history of this war from their perspective and evade the debate over the (im)morality of the means deployed to end it. Numerous accounts, both fiction and non-fiction, have already been written about Allied victory. Also, countless documentary as well as full-length films have been made about the theme of World War II extolling mostly the so-called heroic battles of the Allies in order to justify the means employed to crush their enemies. For a long time, it seemed that the views and methods used remained unquestioned until the advent of the Cold War era between the Communist-Socialist block and Western democracies. In the light of the tension as a result of the nuclear arms race between them, concerned voices from all over the world started campaigning against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. While advocating disarmament, anti-war activists resurrected the horror that symbolized Hiroshima and Nagasaki to warn the world of the terrible consequences of nuclear warfare.

In Canada, the publication of *Obasan* in 1981 and *The English Patient* in 1992, almost forty and fifty years, respectively, after the atomic bombings of the two Japanese cities in 1945 provided an unofficial revisionist perspective. Although based on the

principles of fiction in which the stories told reinterpret the world from different angles [C. A. Howells, see epigraph page 17]), these two works may well be considered as a challenge to the West's official version of part of the history of World War II. Kogawa's and Ondaatje's inclusion of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as an underlying theme finds its relevance as the discussion over the danger posed by the proliferation of nuclear arms resurfaces. The current nuclear war polemic once more circles back to the Allies' official discourse in 1945, when the British-American military powers justified the use of the atomic bomb principally in order to crush Japan's power to make war. For Truman, the atomic bomb was "the greatest achievement of organized science in history"¹⁵⁷ and "too dangerous to be loose in a lawless world" (Moskin 305). Attributing to itself the exclusive right to use the atomic bomb, the American government would resort to the Manichaeian paranoia of its "revolutionary potential for good" (306) versus the danger posed if developed by countries other than the Allies (or the current NATO members). Satisfied with the destruction of Japan's military might and, at the same time, apparently appalled by the effacement of hundreds of thousands of human lives in just two bombings, Truman and his staff continued to legitimize their action. Part of Truman's legitimizing discourse used such language as "our least abhorrent choice" by insisting that "the bombs put an end to the *Japanese war*" (304, *my emphasis*), and by resolving that the use of atomic energy was "a weapon of peace, not war" (306), exactly the opposite of what the Allies had used it for.

Although Kogawa and Ondaatje's focus on the theme of the Nagasaki bombing may not appear central to the narrative, it nevertheless partakes of the strategy of subtle and

¹⁵⁷ J. Robert Moskin, *Mr. Truman's War: The Final Victories of World War II and the Birth of the Postwar World*, New York: Random House 1996:300.

deliberate revision of (World War II) official history, as we will discuss later in this chapter. Perhaps this revision may be considered even more forceful and accusatory insofar as it is taken from a peripheral and racialized angle: Kogawa and Ondaatje's obvious racial and ethnic origins are Asian, non-white, non-European and non-Anglo-French stock. The main protagonists of both narratives, Kirpal Singh and Naomi Nakane, are also non-white. The term "racialized" as used in this chapter is linked to the discussion of the postcolonial and postmodernist subversion of official history in both narratives. It is however interesting to note how non-white literary critics such as Roy Miki and Neil Bissoondath perceive the term "racialized." The term "racialized" was consciously used by Roy Miki in at least two articles in his collection of essays *Broken Entries*¹⁵⁸ (as cited above), in which he criticizes the banishment and/or "erasure of Canadians of Japanese ancestry" from public space and the representation of Japanese-Canadians as "racialized objects" by Anglo-Canadian authors Margaret Atwood and Dorothy Livesay in their respective works (see discussion in Chapter IV). The same term "racialized" was later cited by Neil Bissoondath to refer to some communities (in Canada) that are shaped by the "heightened sense of their own ethnicity" (Bissoondath 102). To be racialized, according to Neil Bissoondath and referring ironically to Roy Miki's term, "is to have acquired a racial vision of life, to have learnt to see oneself, one's past, present and future, through the colour of one's own skin" (103).

¹⁵⁸ In his essay, "Asiancy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing," which was first presented at the conference "Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies, June 2-6, 1993 at Cornell University," Miki explores and analyzes the "systemic racism" still present even after the framing of the Canadian multicultural policy in which the ideology of assimilation has meant simply the imposition of (white, male, Anglo-European) dominant social values. Miki deplores the continuous "constraints of racialization" which disregard difference and diversity, and which employ a strategy of appropriation of works by non-white (minority) writers through praise and awards granted by (mainly white) critics and publishers in order to apply domestication and normalization. Nevertheless, Miki stresses the importance of "renewed belief in the viability of agency" from diverse subject-positions who write in "heterogenous and indeterminate spaces" from where writers of colour can negotiate their position *vis-à-vis* the homogenizing discourse that establishes the (obsolete) notion of "otherness" as a deviation from "selfness" or the centre.

And this vision is how, consequently, (ethnic) immigration in Canada is differentiated and labelled through the multicultural (read as marginalizing) hyphen which only serves to cause the estrangement and positioning of an ethnic community as an object of exoticism. Bissoondath discourages the use of the marginalizing hyphen; he suggests instead that by viewing each other as simply Canadian ethnic communities may help deflect resentment in a predominantly white society while continuing to demand recognition, assimilation and acceptance in order to avoid the “racialized” distinction of non-white citizens from whites, a reality multiculturalism fails to acknowledge (116).

On the other hand, in Miki’s terms, “the subject racialized is identified by systemic categorizes [sic] that winnow the body, according privilege to those glossed with dominance and privation to those digressed to subordination” (Miki 127). Miki, in turn, also ironizes on Bissoondath’s “illogic” of making “*his* readers believe that racialization is [...] an identity formation wilfully assumed” (ibid.), thus recasting the victim (the racialized) into the victimizer (racist) based on the latter’s theory of “racial vision.” To sustain this view, Miki adds, is to grant (Bissoondath himself) the privileges “for speaking the discourse of whiteness” (128). Although Miki and Bissoondath differ in terms of how to project and interpret the problematics of racialization in critical methodology, they nonetheless both acknowledge the need to neutralize, if not totally discard, the term when works by so-called “writers of colour” are under scrutiny. Viewed from a different perspective, however, racialization or the racialized categorization of non-white literary production (or “minority literature”) may be an alternative strategy or positioning for “racialized” writers from which to challenge both the prevailing Anglo-European canons and the official (historical) narrative of the (Canadian) nation. It is through this conscious sense of the colour of one’s skin, out of which writers of colour may use the term

“racialized” in order to subvert the racists’ “racial vision” which, in Bissoondath’s own words, discriminates, segregates and to a certain point, annihilates, and on which *Mein Kampf* and apartheid were inspired (103).

In similar terms, although perhaps at some distance from Ondaatje’s and Kogawa’s use of the term “racialized,” one may interpret their view of World War II as such, in accordance with the comparable subversion of “racial vision” expressed by Miki and Bissoondath. Also, judging from the success and critical acclaim following the publication of *Obasan* and *The English Patient*, whose underlying theme is World War II, one may venture to conclude that these works consciously foreground a strong historical grievance, made all the more forcefully from the authors’ racialized perspective. Although Kogawa’s and Ondaatje’s respective narratives are works of fiction partly based on lived experience which focus on personal histories emplotted on public historical texts, one must consider them as literary texts, representing an imaginative account mediated through figurative language.

According to yet another perspective, history appears to have a double identity, as argued by Linda Hutcheon in her examination of history and/as intertext.¹⁵⁹ Traditionally, history seems to be separate from the self-consciously fictional text even while it also functions as intertext: “History becomes a text, a discursive construct upon which literature draws as easily as it does upon other artistic contexts” (170). Hutcheon further draws from other theories in which reference in art is that of “text to text” in the same way as the history used in historiographic metafiction refers to the “actual empirical world” (ibid.). This also takes us back to Hayden White’s argument above that historical events are

¹⁵⁹ Linda Hutcheon, “History and/as Intertext,” in *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*, John Moss, ed. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987: 169).

“value-neutral” in the sense that what is tragic from one perspective is viewed as comic from another (47). It is up to the historian therefore to choose the plot-structure that he or she deems appropriate for configuring events so that history as narrative account is figurative, fictive and always already textualized, always already interpreted (Hutcheon 1987:170).

Likewise and according to Hayden White’s concept of the historical text as a literary artifact, the historical records following the Allied victory marking the end of World War II in the Pacific may have been configured in such a way that the events are interpreted for and appreciated by the type of audience for whom the historian is writing. Thus, the essentially literary nature of historical classics, in White’s words, cannot be disconfirmed or negated in contrast with the principles of science, inasmuch as this “non-negatable element” of history is its form of fiction (43). White cites further Lévi-Strauss’ essay on the “mythical” nature of historiography in which a historical event may be written from different angles without making use of the same incidents, so that

the incidents are revealed in different lights. And yet these are variations which have to do with the same country, the same period, and the same events – events whose reality is scattered across every level of a multilayered structure (43-44).

In this regard, one may be justified for questioning the official version of the history of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which was labelled and written as “one necessary evil,” rather than “one tragic mistake.” In his article, “Hiroshima and Nagasaki: one necessary evil, one tragic mistake,” published in the light of the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombings, Bruce Loeb, professor of rhetoric and public address of the Department of Communication at Idaho State University, endorses Truman’s discourse justifying the

use of the atomic bomb. According to Loeb, the bombings prevented a ferocious land battle on mainland Japan and consequently, ironic as though it may sound, the atomic blasts also averted the loss of more lives on both sides. Loeb nevertheless concludes that the Hiroshima bomb was the one that determined Japan's surrender and that the Nagasaki bombing could have been avoided had Truman waited for the Hiroshima attack to work its effects on Japan's leaders.

Behind the justifications and defences of Allied bombing operations to curtail Japanese atrocious aggression (for example, the kamikaze attacks, considered in World War II as primitive and barbaric weapons) and expansion in Asia, lay the main goal of the Allies: to end the long-running, costly war; minimize threat against U.S. forces, and thus maintain political and military control in the Pacific. We must bear in mind that U.S. political and military presence dominated the Pacific region long before the World War II period: Hawaii was a member-state and the Philippines was a colonized Asian nation. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour, and the invasion and occupation of the Philippines may have contributed to U.S./Allied retaliation against Japanese military aggression – perhaps to defend the brown races living in these territories? Ironically in the same time period, on the U.S. mainland and in Canada, citizens of Chinese, Japanese and native Indian ancestry were denied their constitutional rights such as the right of suffrage (see discussion on page 54). One may therefore contend that the non-white race factor in the Allies' atomic bombing decision confirms Ondaatje and Kogawa's racialized accusatory view in their narratives.

The Allied scheme then involved the deployment of effective counter-aggression. But it also meant killing Japanese civilian workers and the rest of the non-combatant community found within the (traditional) bomb's target range or the atomic bomb's

“hypocenter,” the spot immediately beneath the detonation.¹⁶⁰ For the U.S. bombers on World War II missions, this was “the way it had to be.” Accordingly, war meant “killing the enemy before they killed you” (Smith and McConnell 28), so that questions about the immorality of killing innocent people were dispelled and consequently justified.

The decision to use the atomic bomb dated back as early as the latter part of 1939 when the then U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated the Manhattan Project.¹⁶¹ The purpose was to counter Germany’s atomic programme. Historical documents appear to reveal that at no time while the bomb was in the making did the authorities involved hesitate in their plans to use the bomb to force Germany’s surrender. Germany was finally spared when the Nazis surrendered three months before the atomic bomb was ready (Loeb par. 9). When President Roosevelt died in wartime, the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japanese cities, a number of which had already been ravaged by Allied air raid firebombs, became Truman’s responsibility. The idea of a “mere demonstration” (Moskin 286) of its possession, it seemed, would end the war. For the U.S. decision-makers, the devastating effect of the bomb if finally dropped, would serve as a “shock value” (ibid.) to force Japanese surrender. For the men behind the atomic project, the bomb was to be dropped preferably on a large city untouched by “conventional” air raids to “enable them to measure the results in order to justify their effort and expense” (ibid.), and to be “used as

¹⁶⁰ John B. Smith and Malcolm McConnell, *The Last Mission: The Secret Story of World War II’s Final Battle* (New York: Broadway Books 2002: 98-99).

¹⁶¹ The atomic bomb was developed under the joint auspices of the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada between 1941 and 1946 out of Allied fear and suspicion that Nazi German scientists were mastering new technology in physics to manufacture a nuclear weapon. The project was renamed the Manhattan Project by the US Army Corps of Engineers Project Director General Leslie R. Groves after the district where the research team was originally headquartered.

quickly as possible, to prove its worth in case the Japanese quit.”¹⁶² What remained most cynical in Truman’s instructions was to use the atomic bomb as “a weapon of war in the manner prescribed by the laws of war” (Moskin 290) principally targeting war plants and avoiding civilian objectives. Yet, this new, revolutionary weapon knew no distinctions between military and civilian population as it could wipe out at least a mile radius from the hypocenter, not to mention the spread of radiation sickness that would cause certain death to the survivors.

Ondaatje and Kogawa employ the strategy of emplotting the characters’ personal, fictive histories on World War II events in their narratives. While these authors’ resulting narratives should not be considered as a documented historical analysis of wartime events, these narratives are nevertheless a form of literary artifact based on historical text, following Hayden White’s theory of the relationship between the representation of the imaginable (fiction) and the representation of the actual (history). Thus, the destruction, high death tolls and survivors’ affliction after the atomic bombings of the two Japanese cities, which become the turning points in Ondaatje’s and Kogawa’s narratives, represent real events. On the other hand, the news or knowledge of such bombings perceived by protagonists Kip and Naomi in Ondaatje and Kogawa’s respective novels represents what presumably these novelists have imagined. In *The English Patient*, Kip goes berserk upon hearing the news, which then spurs him to seize his rifle and charge at the supposedly English patient, loathing the latter for what all the English (and the Americans) stand for: “When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had

¹⁶² In Moskin’s analysis, the atomic bomb’s use was authorized right after the Potsdam Conference with Truman, Churchill and Stalin, i.e., after August 3 (1945), so Truman would avoid a lot of explaining and as soon as weather would permit visual bombing of any of the four cities selected – Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki (297).

King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English” (286). In *Obasan*, the truth about Naomi’s mother’s harrowing death in Nagasaki, kept secret from young Naomi and her brother Stephen, is revealed after a long lapse of time. Through Grandma Kato’s translated letters to Grandfather narrating the aftermath of the bombing, this knowledge comes as a shock to Stephen and stirs in Naomi’s consciousness the need to recreate her mother’s (physical) presence. In order to resolve her mother’s absence (and hence, her silence), Naomi resorts to a symbolic invocation of her mother. Both Kip and Naomi’s individual responses to the atomic blasts, disparate as they may seem, represent the outburst of dissent and indignation to what could be interpreted as a racist attack on a non-white nation. The rival expansionist Japanese empire challenged the military might of the equally imperialistic white Anglo-American Allies. This, at least, is what Ondaatje’s narrator and characters staunchly accuse the West of perpetrating: “They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation” (*Patient* 286).

Meanwhile, in *Obasan*, Naomi’s knowledge of her mother’s tragic fate in Nagasaki triggers an outpouring of grief and rage in a monologic stream in an attempt to resolve her personal and/or communal suffering. The narrative then concludes where it begins: the coulee which young Naomi and her uncle have been visiting annually in August for eighteen years. The pilgrimage to the coulee falls on August 9th (*Obasan* 1): the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki where Naomi’s mother perished. Unaware of the significance of their yearly visits to the coulee at that time (“Uncle, [...] why do we come here every year?” [4]), Naomi acknowledges eventually the significance of this date for her family and community. In this regard, Naomi’s uncle’s yearly August visit as a way of commemorating the Nagasaki bombing is far from being a refusal to remember. The coulee

scene actually belies the so-called process of forgetting attributed by some literary critics to Japanese-Canadian internment victims. Therefore, the apparent silence of internment survivors is erroneously equated with a refusal to remember, and the victims' seeming acquiescence, to an ethnic trait (see discussion in Chapter VI).

The narrative's subtle protest is actually embedded in the text itself. The language of the text begins with the narrator's attempt to deconstruct and recover the incomprehensible past. With the content of Grandma's letters revealed, the tone of the message (from Nagasaki) is the one that indicts: "In the heat of the August sun, [...] however much the effort to forget, there is no forgetfulness" (281). The text, in general, is also an indictment of official policies and histories all the way to the (Canadian) government's "mak[ing] paper airplanes out of our lives and files [sic] us out the windows" (291). Perhaps, what the narrator also tries to prove is that the fate of Nagasaki victims is very much linked to that of the Japanese-Canadian internment victims. The policy of disavowal towards the victims of internment, then, becomes continuous, from the immediate postwar era up to, at least, the Canadian government's official apology to the Japanese-Canadian community in 1988.

In their analysis of Franz Kafka's resistant use of language as a Czech Jew writing in Prague German, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduce the term "deterritorialization." "Deterritorialization" is used to describe Kafka's writing as a minor literature within a major (German) language and Kafka's use of language is comparable to "what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language" (Deleuze and Guattari 16-17). A similar strategy seems appropriate for minority writers to use in general, especially those who are found in the periphery, subordinate in their position with regard to the social, political, ethno-cultural and/or racial norms of the majority of the population. Thus, Miki suggests that

[t]he act of ‘deterritorialization’ through writing is perhaps a viable method for resisting assimilation, for exploring variations in forms that undermine aesthetic norms, for challenging homogenizing political systems, and for articulating subjectivities that emerge from beleaguered communities – even at the risk of incomprehensibility, unreadability, indifference, or outright rejection (118).

To exemplify such writing, Miki underlines Kogawa’s deterritorializing strategy in *Obasan* through her transgression of generic borders as she intertwines fiction with history, autobiography and documentary. Accordingly, this strategy forms part of “formal disruptions” which in turn becomes “strategies of resistance to norms” (145). Kogawa’s novel then unmasks and challenges the manipulation of language (‘Sick Bay,’ ‘Hastings Park,’ etc.) used by the Canadian authorities in order to camouflage the immoral reality to which the victims of internment were subjected. Thus, Kogawa’s narrative seems to have managed to work in a language, starting with its assertive, clear-cut title in Japanese, “that disrupts the social stability of conventional discourse and communication” (Miki 117). *Obasan* as text, then, also deterritorializes Canada as the setting of Kogawa’s work, posing a challenge to the Canadian authorities’ discourse of racialization applied to natural-born as well as immigrants of Japanese ancestry. But for Miki, the inclusion of Nagasaki as the turning point in *Obasan* and as the narrator’s recourse to an aestheticized, depoliticized denouement (the coulee introspection scene), is seen as having a “revolutionary” rather than a “revolutionary” impact upon its (white) critics. Miki contends that by “writ[ing] her way through [...] silence [...] to come to terms with Japanese Canadian internment” (115), the author/narrator downplays the real issue of uprooting and internment. Miki’s close reading and analysis of *Obasan* has led him to conclude that its “textual body” is consumed or absorbed into the canons of CanLit “with interpretive strategies that penetrated its apparent foreignness” (135). According to Miki, this part of Kogawa’s narrative may appear to be a

yearning for peace and forgiveness – an obviously racialized and gender-conditioned reading of the author’s fatalism.

There are various reasons which make it rather difficult to endorse Miki’s assessment of *Obasan* as being absorbed by the majority culture after its critical acclaim by Canadian academicians. Firstly, Kogawa’s deterritorializing strategy transcends her written texts of *Obasan* and *Itsuka*. Specific examples are Kogawa’s effort to save the expropriated Nakane family Marpole home in her novel and the confiscated Nakayama family Marpole home in real life, both of which acts have become symbolic of the struggle of the Japanese-Canadian victims of internment to reinstate their dignity. Retrieved in 2006, Kogawa’s childhood home in Vancouver until she was five authenticates the transgression and, at the same time, the blurring of the line between what is real and what is imaginary. What is also a fact is the “territory” gained in making the Canadian government acknowledge the wrongs done to the Japanese-Canadian community, surely in part attributable to the sociological and political impact generated by Kogawa’s fiction. *Obasan* vindicates the need to revise the distinction between poetic and prose discourse in historiographic narrative, or, as Hayden White puts it, “if there is an element of the historical in all poetry, there is an element of poetry in every historical account” (60).

Every attempt in the next generation to define and trace a Canadian tradition – analogous, say, to an American one – will have to deal with Ondaatje’s anomalous status within our literary culture. Like Aimé Césaire, V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott and Salman Rushdie [Ondaatje] compels a rethinking of the notion of a national literary tradition.

Sam Solecki, *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*

Within the Canadian patchwork quilt is a bright little square reserved for Japanese Canadians. Interestingly enough, every single thread in that patch, like every other thread in every other human patch, is made of an infinite mix of shadings and colours. Our country [...] is formed of complex individuals who defy stereotyping.

Joy Kogawa, Foreword, *Stone Voices*

The writing we read in Canada is more often than not writing about other cultures. We distrust writing. And yet we desire that the lives we speak be written too.

Robert Kroetsch, *An Arkeology of (My) Canadian Postmodern*

Conclusion

The fact that Canada officially declares itself a multicultural society should leave no doubt as to its commitment to acceptance of and co-existence with other ethnically diverse communities. Or rather, it is the way Canada would like to imagine itself as a nation: as a mosaic. The recognition of “other solitudes,” to borrow Hutcheon and Richmond’s designation of a pluri-ethnic Canada, is, apart from mere reconsideration, a call to reincorporate the once marginally-relegated discourse of the ‘other’ into the traditional monocentric concerns.

In her study of a group of Canadian writers’ “new world” discourse from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Margaret Turner dissects their respective works and understands them to “be imagining [...] a metaphoric landscape” (110). Thus, even early Canadians, immigrants at the time (such as John Richardson from the British Isles) sought to discover a “new world of [their] own creation” (24), in the same way as contemporary, native born writers (such as Robert Kroetsch) experiment in order to “re-place[] language” (79). Turner connects this with Bhabha’s suggestion that the metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities “requires a kind of doubleness in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without causal logic” (qtd. in Turner 110). The gradual but continuous transformation of post-war Canada, which has been felt since the 1960s and which marks the boundary between the old and the new in Canadian fiction, is re-mapping its once “horizontal and homogeneous society,” terms used by Bhabha in allusion to Said, into a modern nation composed of a metropolitan as well as migrant population.

It is not unreasonable to reconsider Canada's status as a multicultural nation since "there [has always been] a keen sense of being marginal."¹⁶³ The early records of explorers, missionaries and settlers, according to Elspeth Cameron, suggest that Canadians were well aware of this feeling. To start with, the indigenous peoples are the first ones to feel marginalized; similarly, French Canadians today with respect to the dominant English culture; the West, Maritimes and regionalists likewise feel resentment towards central metropolitan Canada; and Canadians, in general, feel defensive about their American imperialist neighbours south of the border. This "marginal status" has perhaps driven Canadians to seek a discourse that has helped to locate a tradition of their own.

Indeed, my chosen authors for this doctoral dissertation, Michael Ondaatje and Joy Kogawa, fit well within this tradition. While Ondaatje's situation is that of a transplanted/transcultural artist, Kogawa's is the marginalized voice in search of a liminal space to represent the sameness and difference in her (Japanese-Canadian) identity. A condition such as theirs gestures inevitably towards the marginal since both writers are products of hybridity: in-between the postcolonial and the new world. The accompanying doubleness perhaps marks the transgression and blending (read: uprootedness and assimilation) which characterize their works. Kogawa's effort to dispel the ghosts of her family's internment during the war gave rise to *Obasan* (1981) and *Itsuka* (1992). In these works, the author evokes the history of rejection by white, mainstream Canadian society of the non-white immigrant population, in particular, ethnic Asians. Like Ondaatje, Kogawa began writing poetry in the late 1960s, but only garnered attention when she narrativized

¹⁶³ Elspeth Cameron, ed. *Canadian Culture: An Introductory Reader* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 1997) 9.

her personal/family experience and, to a certain extent, the collective history of the Japanese-Canadian community in World War II Canada.

Ondaatje's emergence, on the other hand, on the Canadian literary scene as a migrant Canadian-educated writer dates from long before the 1988 Multiculturalism Act. His literary output prior to this date, which includes several books of poetry, a memoir and at least two novels, had already caught the critics' attention and recognition: two Governor General's Awards for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in 1971 and *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* in 1980, respectively, and the Books in Canada First Novel Award for *Coming through Slaughter* in 1976, among others. Despite his literary achievements, however, Ondaatje was far from being considered a (major) writer (hence, his "anomalous" status) in the Canadian tradition until the first Booker Prize was awarded to a Canadian national in 1992 for *The English Patient*. The portrayal of figures such as a demythologized outlaw, a cornetist and an alcoholic driven to self-destruction and silence, a patient burned beyond recognition and immigrants relegated to exclusion, allow Ondaatje's imagination to explore and experiment with generic form and language while blurring the demarcation between truth and fiction. Perceived as 'other' by the dominant culture, such figures, marginal, outsider or displaced, populate and protagonize Ondaatje's narratives. Ondaatje admits having a double perspective: part of him explores the alienated self torn between belonging and outsiderhood as a result of his exposure to three different places in his childhood, adolescence and adulthood in Sri Lanka, England and Canada, respectively. The other side of Ondaatje is a poet and writer who knows no allegiance other than his art. His work gives us the measure of his literary aesthetics: experimental in language, transgressive in genre and communal in his concept of characters and the narrative as a whole.

Ondaatje and Kogawa's concern with reclaiming "unofficial" histories, in their attempt to collapse the official authorized narrative, coincides with Rushdie's conviction that "the novel is one way of denying the official, politician's version of truth" (*Imaginary Homelands* 14). Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* and Kogawa's *Obasan* and *Itsuka* represent re-historicized and alternative narratives from a racialized perspective. Ondaatje and Kogawa are not the only ones who dare challenge the official narrative of the Canadian authorities, either. To some extent, works by white, mainstream Canadian writers such as Margaret Atwood, Rudy Wiebe and Margaret Laurence share a certain affinity in themes such through their retrieval of distorted or forgotten histories. Ondaatje and Kogawa's other major concerns such as the blurring of the boundaries between life and art/fact and fiction, and the deconstruction of myths and histories (Hutcheon) both respond to the contemporary Canadian writers' typical (postmodernist/postcolonial) preoccupations (Thieme).

With regard to the exploration of his "ethnic" background, Ondaatje is merely exercising his right as a writer to draw on his roots for his art, but he rejects that it should be the sole source of his literary projection. For him, the writer's free, creative imagination goes far beyond his or her ethnic condition. Displacement and migration have endowed migrant writers with a double perspective, which means, in Rushdie's words, that they are "at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in [a new] society" (*Homelands* 19). Indeed, writing as an insider, Kogawa has probed into mainstream Canadian society through *The Rain Ascends* when she drew on the case of a WASP church minister guilty of paedophilia. Without the slightest trace of the author's ethnic condition, Kogawa's writerly imagination explores the narrator's conflict of allegiance between her love and respect for her father and the truth about her (church minister) father's sexual abuse of innocent

children. In the process, the author applies her literary craft by using the (postmodernist) strategy of subverting a biblical account very dear to WASP Canadian culture.

Ondaatje's commitment to his art does not end with its production. Apart from (creative) writing, he also becomes involved in the technical process of editing. He has worked for various printing presses and has extended his guiding help to fellow writers. As Ondaatje has confessed, he immerses himself in the writing process without knowing what will happen next: the freedom that writing gives him is what he really enjoys. Ondaatje has been writing, publishing and editing in Canada for more than three decades now and his engagement with Canadian writing and literary preoccupations can no longer be questioned, much less his status as 'anomalous' be upheld, as he has now grown within the tradition:

[Ondaatje's] impact on Canadian writing, therefore, must be considered in two ways: he has, as an active writer, played a significant role in shaping the Canadian imagination; he has, through his encouragement and support of other writers, helped to enrich the canon of Canadian literature (Jewinski 143-144).

As I mentioned in the Introduction, this Doctoral Thesis is an extension of the Research Project I presented in order to complete my *Diploma de Estudios Avanzados* based on the narrative works written by Sri Lankan-Canadian Michael Ondaatje. For this Doctoral Dissertation, I have widened my scope to include Japanese-Canadian Joy Kogawa's works. In the course of my current research, I have mentioned, cited and read inevitably the works of and interviews with other multicultural (or hyphenated) Canadian writers such as Rohinton Mistry, Neil Bissoondath, Sky Lee and Janice Kulyk Keefer as well as British multicultural writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro and Caryl Philips. This range of international multicultural writers may become the basis for future research and

dissertations, even if we acknowledge “a willingness to acknowledge the withheld, the unknown, the disguised, the lie” (Kroetsch “An Arkeology ...” 1997:310).

Finally, I would like to invoke the two epigraphs to Chapter III: “The First Rule of the Sinhalese Architecture” and an excerpt from “Minerals from Stone,” both penned by these respective poet-writers. As Peter Coughlan observed in his interview with Ondaatje, which I also note here, this native Sri Lankan architecture is characteristic of how Ondaatje structures his narrative: like a house with different layers, not built in a straight line, but overlooking a vista with different perspectives and waiting to be discovered by the person (reader) who enters it. Meanwhile, Kogawa resorts to the trope of the stone(bread) to illustrate how she moulds her imagination. The house described in the poem seems to reflect the self that has come to terms with the haunting roots of silence. Dionne Brand reminds us that “[t]here is only writing that is significant, honest, necessary – making bread out of stone – so that stone becomes pliant under the hands.”¹⁶⁴

To conclude, I would also like to recall the opening epigraph of this doctoral thesis taken from Todorov’s *The Conquest of America: the Question of the other*. The writing of this dissertation has, likewise, helped me reach a neutral point. My research about and reading of the narratives of Ondaatje and Kogawa have helped me understand and reconcile myself to my own condition as a perennial immigrant, a modern exile who lives in a double exteriority, with a double perspective.

¹⁶⁴ Dionne Brand, *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections, Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming, Politics*. (Toronto: Coach House Press 1994:23); also quoted in Beautell 1998:146.

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