

## After *Obasan*: Kogawa Criticism and Its Futures

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Article abstract

One way of contributing to the growing body of cultural criticism that considers the cultural politics of emerging "ethnic canons" in Canada is through an examination of the large body of critical attention paid to Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*. *Obasan* can be understood as a symptom of how Canadian literary studies has attempted to reinvent itself by trying to address a "racial past" in a "multicultural present." Kogawa criticism should be at the centre of a contemporary rethinking of Canadian literary studies informing how critics have read and continue to read racialized texts and representations of histories of racism in Canada. It is also important to consider Asian American discussions of *Obasan* that are often informed by a tension between the cultural nationalist commitments of the Asian American movement and a concomitant desire to construct a coherent literary history with canonical texts.

# After *Obasan*: Kogawa Criticism and Its Futures

GUY BEAUREGARD

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION in 1981, Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* has had an enormous impact on the literary scene in Canada and abroad. It won numerous prizes, including the *Books in Canada* First Novel Award, the Canadian Authors' Association Book of the Year Award, and the Before Columbus American Book Award; it has been widely taught in universities, not only in specialized upper-level courses but also frequently in first-year courses taken by a wide range of students; it played a key role in mobilizing support for the 1988 Redress Settlement, in which the federal government and the National Association of Japanese Canadians negotiated and signed an agreement providing a formal apology and compensation for Japanese Canadians for losses sustained in the 1940s; and it has generated great critical interest, becoming the subject, in my latest count, of some fifty-three articles or book chapters written by scholars in Canada, the United States, Europe, and Japan.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, *Obasan* has become a key text for critics discussing the broad contours of contemporary Canadian literature written in English: an entry in the second edition of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, for instance, refers to *Obasan* in its opening and closing paragraphs to frame its discussion of "Novels in English 1983 to 1996" — a framing that is especially noteworthy given the fact that Kogawa's novel was not published during the historical period under discussion (see Heble).

This essay considers what this remarkable degree of critical attention might mean. In doing so, it attempts to contribute to an important and growing body of cultural criticism that investigates the cultural politics of *Obasan* and, more generally, the cultural politics of emerging "ethnic canons" in Canada and the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Of this existing research, I would like to draw attention to Roy Miki's ongoing attempt to investigate the incorporation and institutionalization of texts by writers of colour (including *Obasan*) in Canadian literary studies. Through this investigation — which has spanned most of the 1990s, and which has taken the form of numer-

ous conference papers and essays, many of which are collected in *Broken Entries* — Miki analyzes, with great nuance, the cultural politics of the present. In doing so, he directs our attention toward the conflicted cultural politics of *inclusion* in Canadian literary studies as it attempts to come to terms with the proliferation of cultural texts produced by writers of colour and First Nations writers. In a memorable phrase, Miki asks: “What’s a racialized text like you doing in a place like this?”<sup>3</sup> For Miki, it is crucial to recognize what he calls “an escalating cultural capital for texts of colour and for academic studies of such texts” (*Broken* 168) in English studies and Canadian literary studies in Canada while at the same time recognizing that “visibility is no guarantee that racialized texts can perform liberatory effects on readers” (171) — even as literary critics in Canada discuss texts such as Kogawa’s *Obasan* and SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* in their teaching and writing. In a recent essay, Miki returns to and extends his investigation of the cultural politics of inclusion by theorizing the potential value of the term *Asian Canadian*:

“Asian Canadian,” when dislodged from its foreclosures, becomes a revolving sign which re-articulates and thus exposes discourses of both globalization (i.e. towards Asian markets and economies, for instance) and a reactionary nationalism (i.e. as a “yellow peril” that is asianizing white Canada). “Asian Canadian” then becomes both a localized subject — of research, cultural production, interrogation — and a double-edged site: where relations of dominance threaten to be remobilized (more of the same), or where critiques of the nation can posit future methodologies of resistance and collective formations. (“Altered” 53)

At the heart of this “double-edged site” — and the unsettling conjunction or used to hinge its possibilities — lie profound ethical questions about how we read, discuss, and teach racialized texts in contemporary Canadian literary studies.

Critical discussions of *Obasan* — what I call in this essay *Kogawa criticism*<sup>4</sup> — have been and continue to be the sort of “double-edged site” theorized by Miki. As I discuss below, the sometimes uneven manner in which critics have analyzed *Obasan* can be understood as a symptom of how Canadian literary studies has attempted to reinvent itself by trying to address a “racist past” in a “multicultural present.” In hindsight, the detritus of this attempted critical reinvention can sometimes appear shockingly unattractive. The temptation — and I am certainly not immune from this — is to denounce some of its cultural politics and to disavow its contem-

porary implications. I argue, however, that an understanding of Kogawa criticism, in all its unevenness, should be at the center of a *contemporary* rethinking of Canadian literary studies and its potential futures.

Why have critics focused so intently on *Obasan*? One possible answer is that Kogawa's novel is notable for making uncommonly fine use of language that often verges on the poetic. According to this explanation, the attention that critics have lavished on *Obasan* is a response to its formal greatness: the density of its poetic language, the depth of its haunting symbols, the precision of its narrative structure, and so on. A second possible answer is that Kogawa's novel addresses questions of history and historiography at a moment in which literary critics were also trying to sort through such issues. Kogawa's representation of events in the 1940s thus became part of larger debates on the reconstruction of history, the knowability of the past, and the connections between historical and literary narratives. But, to my mind, the most obvious answer to the question of why *Obasan* might matter to contemporary critics is the precision with which Kogawa's novel represents a specific moment in the history of racism in Canada — that is, the internment of Japanese Canadians and its aftermath — largely from the point of view of an individual (the character Naomi Nakane) who attempts to come to terms with the implications of this history. Literary critics have responded by revisiting, time and again, *Obasan* and the history of racism it represents. I wish to suggest that it is time to ask ourselves what these repeated visits might mean. While critical discussions of *Obasan* consistently revisit Kogawa's representation of the history of the internment, many of these critical accounts discuss the internment in ways that limit a serious critical investigation of the history of racialization and anti-Japanese racism in Canada.<sup>5</sup> In the face of the existing scholarly record, we are left with the need to contest what Miki calls "the absence of race awareness in the critical frameworks that have evaluated *Obasan* as a CanLit novel" (*Broken* 136). But we are also left with the need to ask why critical discussions of *Obasan* have taken the shape they have — and how a contemporary understanding of Kogawa criticism can help us imagine potential alternative directions for Canadian literary studies as it engages with representations of histories of racism in Canada.

Before I present the specific terms of my argument, a few caveats are in order. First, I wish to acknowledge the perhaps self-evident point that the cultural politics of reading and interpreting a literary text such as *Obasan* are inevitably more complicated than the assumptions informing

published literary criticism: Kogawa's novel has circulated widely both within and outside of academia, and its potential pedagogical significance extends well beyond critical debates in scholarly journals and in the tertiary education system.<sup>6</sup> Second, if one does focus on the cultural politics of published literary criticism, as I do in this essay, one should immediately note the conflicted nature of the scholarly record, in which various poststructuralist positions clash with humanist ones, and critics who focus on social contexts question the terms of engagement put forward in literary formalist analysis. One noteworthy example is the important and somewhat acrimonious debate between Donald Goellnicht and Rachelle Kanefsky over the status of history in Kogawa's fiction.<sup>7</sup> And third, I wish to underline the wide range of locations and academic disciplines in which Kogawa criticism has appeared: discussions of *Obasan* in Asian American studies, as well as discussions taking place in Europe and Japan, pose questions that are distinct from some of the questions raised in Canadian literary studies.

Thankfully, the scholarly record includes a number of useful critical summaries of Kogawa criticism that has appeared up to and including the mid-1990s.<sup>8</sup> In a critical summary published in 1993, Arnold Davidson expresses dissatisfaction with what he calls "the ethnocentricity of much of the criticism" (20) on *Obasan*. As Davidson observes, "For Canadian critics, the novel is, not surprisingly, mostly about Canada" (20). By contrast, many critics working in Asian American studies, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, have read *Obasan* as if it was a *Japanese American* or *Asian American* text. Miki provides a succinct observation about this phenomenon:

The now canonic status of *Obasan* in Asian American literature courses ... has resulted in the erasure of the difference that "nationalisms" make; in an act of institutional appropriation by US academics, the site-specific formation of the Japanese Canadian subject (as one effect, say, of the Canadian-based War Measures Act which allowed for more severe violations in Canada) tends to become another version of the "Asian American" example. (*Broken* 155 n15)

My reading of this phenomenon, which I have elaborated elsewhere (see Beauregard), is that Asian American cultural criticism continues to be informed by a tension between the cultural nationalist commitments of the Asian American movement and a concomitant desire to construct a coherent literary history with canonical texts. As a result of this tension, critics of Asian American literature have at various times attempted to

incorporate texts by Asian Canadians (including *Obasan*) without significantly changing the U.S.-centred frame in which they are working. As a result, Asian American discussions of *Obasan*, despite their impressive commitment to the importance and the subtlety of Kogawa's text, are consequently receiving careful scrutiny in contemporary scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Receiving less critical attention are the articles published in Europe and Japan. These articles, while obviously not speaking from any single location or academic discipline, nevertheless provide additional international perspectives that have to date often framed their concerns in a form of comparative analysis one may associate with Commonwealth or postcolonial literary studies.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the above caveats, and despite the range of possibilities opened by the entirety of Kogawa criticism, I wish to focus particularly (but not exclusively) on Kogawa criticism that has appeared in Canada. In doing so, I attempt to investigate what certain aspects of this body of criticism might tell us about the critical conceptualization of cultural difference in Canadian literary studies. Needless to say, this conceptualization of cultural difference is neither singular nor complete; it is provisional, contested, and always in process. But reading Kogawa criticism published in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s nevertheless brings into focus particular coherent patterns of how critics in Canadian literary studies have read and continue to read racialized texts and representations of histories of racism in Canada.

The most significant pattern I wish to identify concerns the way some critics understand and analyze the representation of historical events in the 1940s. Donna Bennett's influential article, "English Canada's Postcolonial Complexities," makes a brief yet significant mention of *Obasan* that helps to clarify this issue: "*Obasan* dramatizes the error made by a Canadian wartime government that resulted in the internment or relocation of *Canadians*, and shows the reader how that error arose from the persistent misperception of Japanese-Canadians as Japanese" (192). Bennett is of course right to draw attention to the question of nationality and how Kogawa emphasizes, at certain points in her narrative, the "Canadianness" of Japanese Canadians. Bennett's description of the Canadian state's actions as an "error," however, locates her analysis squarely within the assumptions — and, subsequently, the problems — of an "aberration" model of racism in Canada. We should note that Bennett is not alone in configuring the internment in this manner. B.A. St. Andrews, for instance, refers to Japanese Canadians as "those victimized by racial misunderstandings" (31), a characterization that implies that had there

been better “understanding” at that point in history, the internment and its aftermath would presumably not have occurred. Erika Gottlieb, in a much more extensive and influential reading of *Obasan*, similarly claims that “Canada fell victim to the hysteria — fear, greed, the need for a scapegoat — it was fighting against” (43). In each of these cases, critics configure the internment as an irrational aberration in Canadian history, one that can be explained as an “error,” or a “misunderstanding,” or a result of wartime pressures on the Canadian state. What is unaddressed in these critical accounts — and what needs to be underlined in any serious discussion of racism in the 1940s — is the complex history of anti-Japanese racism in Canada, a history that extends far beyond the narrow and tumultuous window of 1942–49. As historian Ann Sunahara has asserted: “Abuse of Japanese Canadians did not begin with the Second World War. Rather, the uprooting, confinement, dispossession, dispersal and attempted deportation of Japanese Canadians were the culmination of a long history of discrimination resulting from Canadian social norms that cast Asians in the role of second-class citizens” (161). Restrictions on immigration, the franchise, and the ability to enter or remain in certain professions are only the most obvious forms of state-directed anti-Japanese racism that shaped Canada and the subjectivities of Japanese Canadians from the late nineteenth century onward. An “aberration” model of racism in Canada disregards the accumulated weight of this history and the critical task of understanding its persistence.

Why has Kogawa criticism taken this particular shape? One possible answer, to echo the *South Park* song and its recent witty appropriation by Terry Goldie, is to “Blame *Obasan*” (see Goldie). In this approach, one could note with some degree of justification that *Obasan*’s narrative structure underlines the obvious significance of the events of the 1940s as a massive and singular disruption in the lives of Naomi Nakane and the other Japanese Canadian characters in the novel. In this approach, one could argue that *Obasan*, to the extent that it turns to the 1940s as a key historical starting point for its narrative, has, however indirectly, helped suggest the routes some literary critics have subsequently followed. But one could counter (with greater critical nuance, I think) that the narrative structure of *Obasan* is more complex than a singular focus on the 1940s as *the* moment in the history of anti-Japanese racism in Canada can suggest. The novel represents, early and explicitly, the social processes of gendered racialization that mark the character Naomi as an outsider to an assumed white Canadian norm, social processes that show no sign of abating in the early 1970s (the narrative present of the novel). Out of

many possible examples, one could turn to Naomi's date in the rural setting of Granton, Alberta:

Once a widower father of one of the boys in my class came to see me after school and took me to dinner at the local hotel. I felt nervous walking into the Cecil Inn with him.

"Where do you come from?" he asked, as we sat down at a small table in a corner. That's the one sure-fire question I always get from strangers. People assume when they meet me that I'm a foreigner.

"How do you mean?"

"How long have you been in this country?"

"I was born here."

"Oh," he said, and grinned. "And your parents?" (6-7)

For Naomi, the social processes of racialized differentiation that enabled the events of the 1940s to be imagined and implemented continue to shape her everyday life in the novel's narrative present. As she sharply describes herself immediately following the date scene: "Personality: Tense. Is that past or present tense? It's perpetual tense" (7).

A second possible answer to why Kogawa criticism has taken its present shape is to "Blame Japanese Canadian Historiography." While Ann Sunahara states, as I quoted above, that "Abuse of Japanese Canadians did not begin with the Second World War" (161), the historical narrative she provides in *The Politics of Racism* nevertheless begins with the events of early 1942 (1), as does Roy Miki's engaging introduction to the "life and times" of Japanese Canadian writer and activist Muriel Kitagawa (Miki, "Introduction" 2). In understanding the shape of Japanese Canadian historiography, it seems impossible to overstate the profound effects on the Japanese Canadian community set in motion by the actions of the Canadian state at that time. As Roy Miki stated in a May 1987 conference:

there hasn't been any other ethnic community in this country — and I hope never again will be — whose entire history was permanently disrupted and disturbed by one single event. Of course I'm talking about the mass uprooting. That single event in our history is like BC and AD, if I may use the pun. Before 1942 was BC, and after was a new world, AD. Everyone who is Japanese Canadian or who has any relationship to Japanese Canadians, if they think about their own past and their own present, will always come back to that one point of change. ("Workshop" 72-73)



The emphasis Sunahara and Miki place on the events that began with the uprooting had obvious strategic value for the National Association of Japanese Canadians as it pushed for a negotiated redress settlement with the federal government. But curiously — and in my opinion disturbingly — the particular narratives used strategically in Japanese Canadian historiography to confront the racism of the Canadian state have been adopted and adapted by literary critics to contain the implications of the history of anti-Japanese racism in Canada by characterizing the events of the 1940s as an isolated aberration.

I should point out here that standard Japanese Canadian historiography also includes longer general histories, most notably Ken Adachi's *The Enemy That Never Was*, that have also had a significant impact on how literary critics in Canada have understood the history of the internment and its aftermath. The impact of Adachi's general history is especially visible in "Generations," a chapter in which Adachi frequently refers to members of the Japanese Canadian community on the basis of undifferentiated references to their generation, references that appear in the form of assertions that "the Nisei were ..." or "the Nisei felt ..." (158). Literary critic Mason Harris, whose work I will discuss in some detail below, provides the following summary and adaptation of Adachi's argument:

In his comprehensive history of the Japanese Canadian community, Ken Adachi describes the conflicts between Issei and Nisei generations. These conflicts are characteristic of any immigrant culture, but made sharper for Japanese Canadians by the conservatism of the Issei community and its rejection of the *mores* of western culture. Like many first-generation immigrants, the Issei sought a dignified accommodation with the surrounding society, *but without joining it or altering their way of life*. ("Broken" 42; emphasis added)

One could quarrel here with this passage's benighted characterization of "the Issei" as autonomous liberal subjects able to "choose" whether to "join" the "surrounding society" or to "alter" their "way of life." I would suggest, by contrast, that the very subjectivities of the Issei were constituted by and against the various forms of violence and outright exclusion directed against them, particularly following the 1907 Vancouver Riot and the subsequent so-called Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan, which severely curtailed immigration from Japan to Canada.

But the main point I wish to underline is that Adachi's account of "the generations," much like the historical narratives that begin in February 1942, has influenced the shape of the arguments put forward in

Kogawa criticism. One clear example is Harris's "Broken Generations in 'Obasan'," an essay that universalizes the workings of "immigrant communities" and essentializes the particularities of Japanese Canadians:

In all immigrant communities the first, second, and third generations represent crucial stages in adjustment to the adopted culture. The importance of these generations in the Japanese Canadian community is indicated by the fact that they are given special names: *Issei* (immigrants from Japan), *Nisei* (the first generation born in Canada), and *Sansei* (the children of the *Nisei*). ("Broken" 41)

It is tempting here to dismiss this passage's explanatory frame as bad sociology that rests on an imprecise knowledge of Japanese: to claim that "generations" are of particular importance to Japanese Canadians because Japanese has the words *Issei*, *Nisei*, and *Sansei* is tantamount to saying that "generations" are important to English speakers because English distinguishes between *first generation*, *second generation*, and *third generation*. For Harris, the notion of "the generations" accounts for not only the particular history narrated in *Obasan* but also the more general category he calls "autobiographical narratives by Asian-North American women" ("Joy" 148):

The most obvious feature that the novels of Kogawa, [SKY] Lee, and [Amy] Tan have in common is an intense concentration on the relation between mother and daughter as the focal point for conflicts between the values of the old and new worlds.... The central problem is a failure of communication between the generations caused by the imposition, especially on females, of old-world moral constraints that suppress the truth of both personal experience and family history, as opposed to the determination of the novel-writing daughter to liberate herself in the present while recapturing the family past — and exposing its secrets in the process. ("Joy" 148)

There is much to take issue with in this critical formulation: the continued focus on "the generations," which becomes interwoven with a focus on "conflicts between the values of the old and new worlds," a formulation that uncritically assumes these "worlds" (as embodied by different "generations") to be incommensurable and distinct; the assertion that "the central problem" in these narratives is "a failure of communication between the generations" in the face of sometimes overwhelming and always present social processes of cultural differentiation that are represented in the narratives; and the claim that this "central problem" is somehow "caused by

the imposition, especially on females, of old-world moral constraints” and not by the historical and ongoing forms of racialization and racist exclusion in Canada represented in Lee’s and Kogawa’s novels.<sup>11</sup>

It should be clear that I have fundamental disagreements with some of the assumptions that inform the narrow range of Kogawa criticism I have discussed. But the point I wish to make is not simply that this criticism is “wrong.” Nor do I feel that it is especially productive to “Blame *Obasan*” or to “Blame Japanese Canadian Historiography” for the present state of affairs. Rather, I want to suggest that the shape of Kogawa criticism needs to be understood as a symptom of the cultural politics of contemporary Canadian literary studies, in which literary critics attempt to discuss a “racist past” in a “multicultural present.” More specifically, I want to suggest that this body of criticism serves the function of attempting to manage the implications of a particular moment in Canadian history *by remembering it in a particular way* — in this case, by remembering the events of the 1940s as an “error” or as a “conflict between the generations.”

In this sense, critical discussions of *Obasan* share a great deal with wide-ranging and ongoing debates over “commemorating” and “remembering” colonial histories in a postcolonial era.<sup>12</sup> A particularly valuable debate about “historical memory” is occurring over what Lisa Yoneyama calls “Japanese amnesia” (“Memory” 500) about the violence of its colonial past. Yoneyama argues that while examples of this “amnesia” (over, for instance, Japanese military atrocities in the Rape of Nanjing) are easy to locate in the pronouncements of Japanese politicians and in the policies of the Japanese Ministry of Education, a significant shift has occurred in how “the past” is remembered (500). She writes,

Contrary to the common perception, the hegemonic process within the production of Japan’s national history is moving beyond what we currently see as reprehensible — that is, beyond amnesia — to a point where those in power are contriving to “come to terms with the past” (Adorno 1986), through at least partially acknowledging the nation’s past misconduct and inscribing it onto the official memoryscape. Yet, as Theodor Adorno wrote, the coming to terms with the past (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) “does not imply a serious working through of the past, the breaking of its spell through an act of clear consciousness. It suggests, rather, wishing to turn the page and, if possible, wiping it from memory.” (504-05)

In the case of contemporary Japan, the key issues at stake revolve around “coming to terms” with a history of military aggression and colonial rule.

"To secure political and economic stability in the adjacent Asian and Pacific region," writes Yoneyama, "it has become necessary for the government to incorporate memories of Japan's colonial and military atrocities into national history, but in a manner that does not threaten the present order of knowledge" (513).

In her important recent study, *Hiroshima Traces*, Yoneyama elaborates on these concerns by asking "how acts of remembering can fill the void of knowledge without reestablishing yet another regime of totality, stability, confidence, and universal truthfulness. How can memories, once recuperated, remain self-critically unsettling?" (*Hiroshima* 5). At stake here are ethical imperatives that Yoneyama presents in the following terms:

If we are indeed witnessing a "memory boom of unprecedented proportions," as Andreas Huyssen has observed of the European cultural scene, then it becomes imperative to reflect on why issues have come to be formulated in terms of remembering and forgetting, rather than in other ways. We must also question why and how we remember — for what purpose, for whom, and from what position we remember — even when discussing sites of memory, where to many the significance of remembrance seems obvious. (4)

The implications of Yoneyama's research have been succinctly discussed by Kyo Maclear, who writes that "it may be time to move with and beyond reductive dualisms which take as their focus organized forms of social remembering and forgetting ... and begin to look as well at how dominant strategies of remembrance may seek to incorporate rather than openly suppress surplus memories of loss and trauma" (143). The key issue here, emphasizes Maclear, is that "while commemorative inscriptions may be seen to litter our everyday lives, the mere presence of these inscriptions offers no guarantee of *how and towards what ends* collective remembering will be enacted" (203).

The critical accounts of *Obasan* that I have discussed fall precisely within this larger problematic of "historical memory": the sheer volume of criticism that has appeared makes it clear that literary critics in Canada and elsewhere are not suppressing a "racist past"; they are instead revisiting that past (often, of course, in particularly circumscribed ways) while expressing an undoubtably sincere form of regret over it. Coral Ann Howells, for instance, refers to the "tragic history" (93) of Japanese Canadians, whom she refers to as "vanished people" (87). Such an account does more than express regret: it also forecloses the possible historical agency of Japanese Canadians by assuming their *disappearance*. This tone of regret is implicated in a

form of white guilt that may, in the words of Scott McFarlane, work to situate “Japanese Canadian culture” as “a sign for a violated *Canadian culture and past*” (407-08), and situate “Canada” in a narrative of “an already fallen yet redeemable nation” (408).<sup>13</sup>

Given the problems with the Kogawa criticism I have discussed, one may be tempted to view it as a series of “misreadings” that should be replaced with readings that are considered to be more historically accurate, or more theoretically sophisticated, or more attuned to the author’s poetics — in other words, by readings that are considered to be more “literate.” George Elliott Clarke takes this particular tack in a recent essay that critiques various critical discussions of the work of Claire Harris, M. Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand, whom he polemically calls in the title of his essay “three authors in search of literate criticism.” Clarke asserts that “we do Harris, Philip and Brand a vacuous — but vicious — injustice, and we short change the entirety of African-Canadian literature, by elevating them to triumvirate status *without paying them the compliment of examining all aspects of their poetics*” (178; emphasis added). This desire to replace a proliferation of “mis-readings” with more “literate” criticism is certainly understandable. From my position, it *matters* to investigate and rethink the history of anti-Asian racism in Canada and the various ways this history is taken up in cultural texts — and, in these critical investigations, some positions are better informed, or more carefully theorized, or more nuanced in their analysis than others. However, and here I wish to state as clearly as possible that my purpose in this essay differs from Clarke’s, I feel that it is not enough to attempt to simply replace “misreadings” with more “literate” criticism — a process that echoes, in the critical arena, well-intentioned attempts to replace “negative” images of minoritized groups with “positive” ones. Rather than attempt to generate new and more “literate” readings of *Obasan* (a text, I need to emphasize, that has been discussed time and again over the past two decades), we would do well to step back and redirect our attention toward the changing disciplinary conditions that have made the current contours of Kogawa criticism possible.

While changes in the discipline of Canadian literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s have been many and varied, I would like to emphasize two prominent, interrelated developments: what Frank Davey calls a “return to history” — that is, an increasing concern with various “interrogations of history and historiography” in English-Canadian fiction (24) — and, as I have mentioned, what Roy Miki calls “an escalating cultural capital for texts of colour and for academic studies of such texts” (*Broken*

168). These two developments in Canadian literary studies are, to my mind, crucially important, particularly for critics addressing literary representations of the historical production of racialized cultural difference in Canada. But these changes in Canadian literary studies have also brought to the surface some of the genuine difficulties involved in analyzing literary representations of racialization and racism in Canada. As Stuart Hall has observed in a different context, “We always knew that the dismantling of the colonial paradigm would release strange demons from the deep, and that these monsters might come trailing all sorts of subterranean material” (259). Kogawa criticism, as an uneven attempt to come to terms with a particular history of racism in Canada, has certainly come trailing all sorts of debris those of us working in Canadian literary studies may not wish to claim as our own. Indeed, there is ample evidence to conclude that the Kogawa criticism I have discussed above practises a form of *sedative politics* in the sense suggested by Smaro Kamboureli: it practises “a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them” (82).<sup>14</sup>

What is to be done?

Stephen Slemon wryly observes in his discussion of “postcolonialism in the culture of ascent” that “It is conventional to end a paper that describes a problem by volunteering a solution” (28). Accordingly, readers of this essay may reasonably expect a vision of where critical analysis of *Obasan*, or Canadian literary studies as a discipline, could or should go in the future. Needless to say, the problems I have identified are unlikely to be solved in the immediate future (if at all) — and they are certainly not going to be solved in my brief concluding remarks. My sense, however, is that reading a text such as *Obasan*, and understanding the central place this text has occupied in Canadian literary studies over the past two decades, underlines the ongoing need to develop various forms of *transdisciplinary cultural criticism* that can assist us in tracking histories of racism in Canada and the ways these histories are represented in cultural texts. Needless to say, there will always be necessary (and hopefully productive) disagreements about the shape of this cultural criticism: its aims, its methods, the archives it investigates, the audiences it speaks to, the visions of social justice it imagines, and so on. We do not need a singularity of purpose. But at the present moment we could benefit from a greater collective familiarity with the historical record, with the assumptions of standard historiography, and with the disciplinary conditions that have directed critical discussions in particular directions — all of which could help push forward critical discussions of *Obasan* and, by extension,

critical discussions of other racialized texts in Canadian literary studies. One significant question that remains particular to *Obasan* and other Asian Canadian texts is whether these forms of transdisciplinary cultural criticism would or could be generated in a genuinely interdisciplinary Asian Canadian studies that incorporates research in history, the social sciences, cultural geography, legal studies, and literary and other forms of cultural criticism. The question of interdisciplinarity (and the precise shape it might take) should remain central to future critical discussions of Asian Canadian texts.

In the meantime, scholars working in Canadian literary studies continue to face the difficult implications of reading a “racist past” in the context of a “multicultural present.” As I have argued, a key challenge facing us in the present moment is to recognize how various hegemonic discourses have, in the words of Yoneyama, moved away from active suppression of racist histories to attempt to “contain and domesticate unreconciled discourses on the nation’s past” (“Memory” 501). To be sure, a critical understanding of how these hegemonic discourses are functioning offers no guarantees for disciplinary or other social transformation. But considered pedagogically, as an ongoing process of contestation over how we might understand the representation of Canadian history and Canadian racial formations in literary studies, Kogawa criticism provides important glimpses of where Canadian literary studies has been in the 1980s and 1990s — and where it may possibly go in the future. In this sense, the task at hand is not to disavow this body of criticism and move on. Nor is it to attempt to simply replace this body of criticism with more “literate” readings of *Obasan*, despite the promise offered by forms of transdisciplinary cultural criticism or the formation of an interdisciplinary Asian Canadian studies. The task at hand is rather to take on the slow and difficult process, already underway, of rethinking, as Kyo Maclear has underlined, *how and towards what ends* we discuss and teach cultural texts that foreground the historical and ongoing production of racialized subjectivities in Canada.

#### AUTHOR’S NOTE

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I thank Roy Miki for generously passing along a copy of “*Obasan* Criticism: A Checklist,” against which I cross-checked and expanded my own bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> “The Cultural Politics of *Obasan*” is the title of a session I organized at ACCUTE, University of Alberta, 26 May 2000, while my use of the term “ethnic canons” refers to an important collection of essays edited by David Palumbo-Liu. In the body of research to which I am referring, Roy Miki, Scott McFarlane, Glenn Deer, and Eva Karpinski have questioned the politics of *Obasan*’s reception. In a U.S. context, Sau-ling Wong has written a thorough and convincing discussion of what she calls “the Amy Tan phenomenon,” while David Palumbo-Liu has made the following important point regarding the formation of “ethnic literary canons” in the U.S.:

certain “texts” deemed worthy of representing the “ethnic experience” are set forth, yet the critical and pedagogical discourses that convey these texts into the classroom and present them to students and readers in general may very well mimic and reproduce the ideological underpinnings of the dominant canon, adding “material” to it after a necessary hermeneutic operation elides contradiction and smooths over the rough grain of history and politics, that is, those very things that have constructed the “ethnic” in the United States. (2; qtd. in Miki, *Broken* 179 n2)

For these discussions, see Miki “Asiancy”; Miki, *Broken* 135–44; McFarlane; Deer; Karpinski; Wong; and Palumbo-Liu.

<sup>3</sup> This question is part of the title of an essay in Miki’s *Broken Entries*; see 160–80.

<sup>4</sup> We should of course note the distinction between “critical discussions of *Obasan*” (which focus on a single novel) and the wider category of “Kogawa criticism” (which, in addition to critical discussions of *Obasan*, would potentially include critical discussions of Kogawa’s poetry, her children’s book *Naomi’s Road*, her subsequent novels *Itsuka* and *The Rain Ascends*, and her non-fiction prose). With very few exceptions (see, for example, Kanefsky), literary critics have focused on *Obasan* while paying minimal attention (and, in many cases, no attention at all) to Kogawa’s other writings. In this essay, I use the inclusive term *Kogawa criticism* as an imprecise shorthand to describe critical discussions of *Obasan* that in some cases include analysis of Kogawa’s other writings too.

<sup>5</sup> By *racialization* I mean, following Robert Miles, “a representational process whereby social significance is attached to certain biological (usually phenotypical) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated a distinct collectivity” (74). By *racism* I mean, following David Theo Goldberg, an attempt to promote the exclusion of, or actually exclude, people on the basis of racialized categories (98). It is important to note here that “Racist culture is fluid and often manifests itself in covert and subtle forms” (Goldberg 222). In other words, racialization and racist exclusion need to be understood — and theorized — as historically shifting social processes that take different forms and have different effects in different historical conjunctures.

<sup>6</sup> I thank Apollo Amoko for making this point.

<sup>7</sup> For Goellnicht, a “major point of Kogawa’s fiction” is that “her text [i.e. *Obasan*] problematizes the very act of reconstructing history by comparing it to the process of writing fiction” (287–88). Goellnicht refuses, however, to slide into relativism: “while language is not



representational, does not reflect empirical reality ... , it can shape reality on both personal and socio-political levels" (299). Thus, while Naomi in *Obasan* is aware that "The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey" (Kogawa 32; qtd. in Goellnicht 302), Goellnicht underlines that she is also urged into action (302). Kanefsky's article, which openly attacks Goellnicht's work, argues that "antiessentialist implications are evident in Kogawa's writing only to demonstrate their practical futility" (15). But ultimately, Kanefsky's "debunking" of "a postmodern conception of history" (as the title of her article would have it) rests on what I consider to be an overly rapid argumentative move: conflating a critical questioning of discourse and the construction of history with an easy-to-attack relativism, in which "history" is merely a "subjective construct" (11).

<sup>8</sup> In chronological order, these critical overviews include Arnold Davidson's engaging and extended discussion of the critical reception of *Obasan* from early reviews until the early-1990s; Audrey Kobayashi's brief and pointed analysis of how Canadian literary critics have "written back to Kogawa, further mainstreaming the experiences that Kogawa documents by 'interpreting' those experiences in ways that re-invent Japanese Canadians as 'other'" (221); Mason Harris's critical overview ranging from early reviews until the mid-1990s, an overview that covers much of the same ground as Davidson's but with different critical assessments and more attention paid to Asian American sources; and Roy Miki's concise assessment of the contours and the implications of Kogawa criticism that has appeared in Canada, the U.S., and Japan up to the mid-1990s. See Davidson 17-23; Kobayashi 220-22; Harris, "Joy" 154-61; and Miki, *Broken* 155 n15.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, an important dissertation by Marie Lo, who investigates what she calls "the politics of representation implied by *Obasan*'s valorization in Asian American literary studies," a valorization Lo argues "is based upon Asian American racial formations assumed to be transposable onto a Canadian context" (25).

<sup>10</sup> Out of many possible examples, see, for instance, essays by Howells, Paddon, and Snelting. In focusing on the question of history, these essays underline the significance of the terms of the debate discussed in note 7, as well as the adaptability of Kogawa's novel to the concerns of Commonwealth and postcolonial literary studies both within and outside of Canada. Essays published in Japan (see, for example, Sato) provide what Miki calls "new insider-outsider perspectives on the 'Japanese' elements fictionalized in the narrative" (*Broken* 155 n15).

<sup>11</sup> The problems posed by Tan's work merit an extended discussion that is outside the scope of this essay. For a comprehensive discussion of these problems, see Wong.

<sup>12</sup> I'm indebted to Kyo Maclear for directing me to this important set of debates and helping frame the issues I discuss in this and the next paragraph.

<sup>13</sup> Miki describes this sort of criticism as a "salvage operation" through which "a reconstituted — even improved — 'Canadian' can be retrieved through 'minority' subjects who are supposedly connected to vital cultural networks with the resources to rejuvenate a nation that, by implication, has made them possible" (*Altered* 58).

<sup>14</sup> Kamboureli uses the term *sedative politics* to analyze the implications of Bill C-93, commonly known as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (which became law in 1988). In her evocative and wide-ranging discussion (see Kamboureli 81-130), she makes the following important point:

By legitimizing cultural diversity, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act strives to lay the ground for an "ideal" community. In this "ideal" community, differences are granted nominal positions. Diversity is respected and supported only insofar as it is presumed to articulate subjects rehearsing collective identifications that are determined categorically and not relationally — precisely the point of the federal policy's sedative politics. (112)

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