Critical attention has recently focused on the ways in which minority discourses contest the exclusionary tendencies of nationalist consolidation. This paper draws on the theories of Homi Bhabha as well as the fiction of Joy Kogawa and John Okada to trace the license and limits of minority discourses.

Resilient ImaginNations: No-No Boy, Obasan and the Limits of Minority Discourse

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A significant development in the field of recent interdisciplinary inquiry has been the convergence of literary studies and studies of discourses of nationalism. This convergence can in part be traced to the insight that as a compelling narrative of social cohesion, a discourse of official nationalism is structured not unlike a realist novel. As a result of this insight, discourses of official nationalism have been subjected to intense and instructive literary scrutiny. At the same time, nationalism has become an invaluable but contested interpretative paradigm in literary studies. Much of the discussion has hinged on the manner in which discourses of official nationalism, through their narrative power, homogenize the disparate entities that comprise a nation into a singular people. The process of national homogenization necessarily elides historical, social and cultural differences among the peoples of the nation. Critical attention has focused increasingly on the racial, sexual and gender differences effaced by social narratives of official nationalism. In particular, critical attention has focused on ways in which literary narratives constructed from perspectives outside or marginal to the discourses of official nationalism—what are referred to as “minority discourses”—may provide opportunities for contesting the exclusionary social narratives of national consolidation.

In this essay I examine the license and limits of certain formulations of minority discourses in the face of the homogenizing impulses of the modern nation. The paper proceeds, in the first instance, as a critical engagement with Homi K. Bhabha’s “DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation,” which presents a trenchant and spirited articulation of the resistant and dissident possibilities of minority discourses in the context of the modern Western nation. Minority discourses, in this formulation, encompass voices and texts constructed from the sites of irreducible cultural difference and inequality, from the perspective of the nation’s margin. Bhabha avers that such texts and voices possess the disruptive capacity to “continually evoke and erase the nation’s totalizing boundaries (both actual and conceptual)” and to “disturb those teleological maneuvers through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (149). This essay examines the conceptual and actual limits of Bhabha’s claims and of the claims of minority discourses in general.

Against the background of Bhabha’s contentions, I explore the disparate conceptions and/or contestations of the modern nation in two Western contexts—Canada and the U.S.—as authorized by two seminal ‘minority texts’: Obasan by Japanese Canadian writer Joy Kogawa and No-No Boy by Japanese American writer John Okada. Written in two distinct historical, geographical, political and discursive contexts, the two texts represent the processes of racialized migration and settlement that, according to Bhabha’s arguments, at once construct(ed) and threaten(ed) Canadian and American nationalities. Both texts take as their point of departure the Second World War, a war that pitted Canada and the U.S. against the Japanese Empire. The two texts examine the effects of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on Asian American and Asian Canadian life in the margins of the two nation-spaces. The internment, dispossession, imprisonment and deportation of “ethnic Japanese” in the wake of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor presents, for the two writers, compelling demonstrations of the instrumentality of race in the definition of both Canadian and American national identities. Using the notion of the instrumentality of race in nation-formation as something of a counterpoint to Bhabha’s notion of “constitutive ambivalence,” I challenge the tendency in criticism to read minority discourse into resistance theory. In this vein, I challenge Gayle K. Fujita Sato’s assertion that Obasan presents a “positive” model for minority identification in contrast to the negative model presented in No-No Boy.

I should specify that I am not singling out Sato (or even Bhabha for that matter) for special critique. The problematic tendency to read minority
Bhabha's reading of the Western nation draws from and subsequently writes against Benedict Anderson's now classic reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson offers a provocative—and problematic—reading of the time and space of the modern nation. The modern nation, Anderson argues, required for its imagining radical shifts in the apprehension of both space and time. Prior forms of government (religious communities and dynastic realms) relied on a sacral ontology, a kind of "Messianic time," "a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present," "a simultaneity along time" (24). By contrast, the modern nation, as a result of the rise and development of the secular sciences, came to be conceived in "homogeneous empty time in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, measured not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (24). Anderson suggests that the modern nation is conceived as a horizontal sociological solidity authorized by the conjunction of a conception of the space of the nation as "homogeneous empty space" and the time of the nation as "serial calendrical time." Such a conception, much like the structure of the realist novel, enables diverse peoples to live in the same moment, to live simultaneously, as one. The nation, therefore, conceives of itself in terms of linear progress across time.

Bhabha's revision of Anderson's thesis turns on an examination of "the complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of 'the people' or 'the nation' and makes them the immanent subjects of a range of social and literary narratives" (140). Bhabha's critique of the homogeneity of the space of the nation and the linearity of the time of the nation begins with a rebuttal of the "progressive narrative of modern cohesion—out of many one—[which] treat[s]..." gender, class or race as social totalities that are expressive of unitary collective experiences" (140). Revising Anderson, Bhabha contends that the nation as a singular entity marching up (or down) history is but a discursive effect tenously secured through the disavowal of irreducible difference. The modern nation achieves the illusion of unity paradoxically by displacing its heterogeneous modern space onto the disavowed sacral ontology of mythic time:

For the political unity of the nation consists of a continual displacement of its irredeemably plural modern space, bound by different, even hostile nations, into a signifying space that is archaic and mythical, paradoxically representing the nation's modern territoriality, in the patriotic, stacist temporality of Traditionalism. Quite simply, the difference of space returns as the Sameness of time, turning Territory into Tradition, turning the people into One. (149)

In Bhabha's revision, then, the modern nation does not represent the discontinuous break with erstwhile regimes that Anderson implies. In its efforts to contain differences, the homogeneous serial time of the modern nation continually harkens back to the sacral ontology that undergirded earlier religious communities and dynastic realms.

The paradoxical conjunction of modern territoriality and mythical temporality internal—and integral—to the modern nation that Bhabha traces is concurrently stated and denied in Ernest Renan's famous formulation of nation-ness: "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in undivided form" (19, my emphasis). Bhabha defines the mythical temporality of the nation (in Renan's argument, the nation as a large solidarity, constituted by a common past) as the performative address/discourse of the nation. He defines the nation's modern space (in Renan's formulation, the nation as a kind of daily plebiscite) as the performative discourse/site of the nation. The pedagogical address/discourse of the nation cannot guarantee a common national present or future.

Despite the illusion of singularity in linear time, "the people" invariably emerge as "the doubling of the national address, an ambivalent movement between the discourses of pedagogy and the performative" (149). A radical
disjuncture or ambivalence appears at the heart of the structure of the modern Western nation: the split between the pedagogical and the performative addresses of the nation. This split, this internal within the modern nation, provides the disruptive license of minority discourses:

The problem is not simply the selfhood of the nation as opposed to the otherness of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split in itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation It/Self, alienated from its eternal self-generated, becomes a signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and the tense location of cultural difference. (148)

My study of two minority texts (the one Canadian and the other American) attempts to occupy the dissident and revisionist spaces opened up by Bhabha's exploration of the time and space of the Western nation. I will be assessing the extent to which such sites provide the dissident "place from which to speak of, and as, the minority, the exile, the marginal and the emergent." (148).

I need perhaps to underline what my critical engagement with Bhabha does suggest. A familiar, but to my mind inadequate, response to Bhabha's argument is the charge that his theoretical formulations lack historical specificity. This charge presumes as a matter of course that the concept of "historical specificity" is both self-evident and incontestable (in a context in which every other concept is presented as infinitely contestable). The claim here (made by such critics as Anne McClintock, Arif Dirlik and Robert Young) is that Bhabha's frame of reference—the Modern Western nation—represents an unsustainable generalization, which dilutes the application of his arguments to any specific instance. To criticize Bhabha's thesis as "historical," however, constitutes a serious blunder: Bhabha opens his essay by self-consciously displacing questions of historicity and positing instead questions of temporality. It is not that Bhabha is rejecting the "historical" but that the stakes in his argument lie elsewhere. He writes: "The discourse of nationalism is not my main concern. In some ways it is the historical certainty and settled nature of that term against which I am attempting to write of the Western nation as an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the locality of culture. This locality is more around temporality than about historicity" (140). In more pointed terms, Bhabha asserts that his focus on temporal dimensions of nationhood is an attempt to "displace the historicism that has dominated discussions of the nation as a cultural force" (140).

There is nevertheless a problematic double bind at the heart of Bhabha's argument: the attempt to deconstruct the histories of colonialism proceeds simultaneously with the attempt to contest the notion of history as an explanatory model. This productive double bind cannot be resolved by purporting to re-insert historicism into Bhabha's theoretical framework. My paper does not attempt to trace Canadian and American nationality in all their historical complexity and specificity. Such a project in dense historicism would stand in the way of my engagement with Bhabha's "temporalist" contentions. I also avoid extended commentary on the complex histories of the idea of America as a "melting pot" and the idea of Canada as a "cultural mosaic." I am not interested in the specific content of each competing nation narratives at a particular moment. I am, rather, interested in these concepts as discursive formations, as highly productive myths, around which a range of competing narratives of national cohesion coalesce.

Set immediately after the end of the Second World War, No-No Boy traces the attempts by Ichiro Yamada, the central character in the novel, to integrate into American society following his internment and imprisonment. The novel unfolds as a conventional realist narrative, a tale of progress along serial calendrical time. But it is a novel set squarely in the charged racial margins of the American nation-space: it develops almost exclusively within the confines of Japanese American culture. Although written in the third person, the novel does not unfold in homogeneous empty time but, rather, self-consciously adapts the perspective of Ichiro, a Japanese American internee who, unlike Okada, declined to serve in the U.S. army. No-No Boy is an exemplary minority text; an allegory of attempted minority integration into the national body politic in the wake of violence and trauma. Despite the linearity of his plot, however, Okada does not construct a narrative of progress in the fullness of national time. In a sense, he constructs a narrative of the failure of Japanese American integration in the wake of the Second World War.

Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Ichiro was interned along with other subjects on the margins of American society, other "Japanese aliens in America." He was subsequently—and contradictorily—imprisoned for refusing, while interned and separated from his father, to serve in the American army. By the time of the writing of the novel (1957), the internment by the American government of defenseless civilians unproblematically designated "Japanese," comprised that part of history that American nationals would have been, according to Renan's
argument, obliged to forget even as they memorialized America's triumph in the Second World War as the triumph of good over evil. Okada recalls this past.

As a realist documentation (a graphic and meticulous account) of the fate of racially marked immigrants in the American nation, No-No Boy illustrates the split between the pedagogical address of the American nation and its contradictory performative acts. The pedagogical address of the American nation was (and continues to be) predicated on the notion of "out of many one," the notion of America as a "melting pot," a land of opportunity and freedom for disparate immigrants. I am well aware that this idea of America as a melting pot has a complex and rich history; it has not meant the same thing in different historical, cultural, and social contexts. The idea was first articulated in Israel Zangwill's play, The Melting Pot, a powerful assimilationist tract written by a Jewish immigrant. Ironically, the idea of an American melting pot was popularized by Horace Kallen's essay "Democracy or the Melting Pot," an influential rejection of assimilation in defense of cultural pluralism. In the wake of Kallen's essay, many formulations of the melting pot have emerged. The notion of racial integration into national oneness recommended by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the context of a racially stratified New York city of the 1950s is, for example, importantly different from the notion of "mongrelization" endorsed by Bharati Mukherjee in the late 1980s. A dense historical account of the idea of America as a melting pot has recently been provided in Philip Gleason's instructive study Speaking of Diversity. Suffice to say, for my purposes, the fact that the idea of melting pot resonates differently in different contexts does not in and of itself undermine the function of this myth as a powerful narrative of national cohesion. It should be borne in mind that No-No Boy preceded current debates on multicultural citizenship in America; these debates cannot be introduced retrospectively as the novel's context. In his analysis of No-No Boy, Jinqi Ling insists that the novel be read contextually to take account of the ideological forces that presented both obstacles and opportunities for Okada's writing (359-81). He asserts that at the time of the novel's publication discourses of the Cold War had legitimated a jingoistic U.S. nationalism and promoted the ideological embrace of a common national culture, a seamless American-ness. This particular re-citation of the coercive and fictive discourse of "out of many one" implanted the terror of the enemy without—the Soviet Union and the threat of global communism—in an attempt to elide differences and injustices within. Ling argues: "Implicated in this was the political unwillingness on the part of dominant culture to acknowledge the class divisions in American society and to address the grievances about economic or racial injustice, especially those suffered by Japanese Americans during and after the [Second World] war" (363). But as Ling points out, the threat of difference within the American nation continued to loom large. The writing of No-No Boy coincided with a heightened civil rights campaign by African Americans, a struggle that faced fierce, sometimes violent, resistance from dominant culture. Paradoxically, the unwillingness of dominant American culture to confront issues of racial and economic injustice coincided with a renewed interest in certain aspects of "Asian culture": food, dress, literature, etc.

Ling argues that the superficial interest in Asian American culture was intended to deflect the civil rights campaign by producing the image of Asian Americans, in contrast to disenchanted African Americans, as a model assimilated minority. This image required the effacement of the experience of Japanese American internment. It is within this context of a willfully 'forgotten' historical injustice and of lingering racial and economic inequalities, on the one hand, and the fetishization of aspects of Asian American culture on the other, that Okada's groundbreaking attempt to construct a Japanese American identity emerged. As Ling
avers, *No-No Boy*’s obscurity (and, in a more general sense, Okada’s obscurity during his lifetime) can be explained, at least in part, by the general invisibility of Asian Americans as self-representing subjects in the post-war/Cold War American imaginary. The novel’s publication also coincided with the Korean War, a crucial context that, I contend, the novel (as well as Ling’s materialist and contextual reading of it) suppresses—or willfully forgets.

In sharp contrast to the obscurity to which it was consigned immediately following its publication, *No-No Boy*, since its “re-discovery” in the 1970s, has been canonized as a Japanese American classic. In her essay “Momotaro’s Exile; John Okada’s *No-No Boy*,” Gayle K. Fujita Sato contends that despite this canonization, the construction of “Japanese American” identity in the novel remains problematic in terms of both race and gender (239-58). She argues that by setting up Japanese and American identities as mutually exclusive, Okada appears to endorse a Japanese American identity that implausibly repudiates everything Japanese (239). Sato is also troubled by the representations of the mother in the novel. She argues that responsibility for Ichiro’s internment and imprisonment is displaced from racist nationalist discourses and domesticated into a crisis of masculinity in a home where a hapless son and an effeminate father are dominated by an “unnaturally” strong mother.

There is considerable merit to Sato’s criticism of the novel. Okada structures *No-No Boy* around Ichiro’s attempt to reclaim an American identity following his release from prison. This involves coming to terms with his family and with other Japanese Americans, principally Kenji (the dying Second World War veteran) and Emi (a woman abandoned by her “no-no boy” husband). Kenji and Emi both offer models for Ichiro’s intersubjective turn to American-ness as a necessary, at one level, by a “quintessentially American” generosity of spirit (a generosity of spirit that Okada, I will argue shortly, ironizes through Emi). This forgiving generosity of spirit helps sustain the progressivist narratives of nationalist pedagogy. Kenji is also motivated by a profound ambivalence about the moral superiority of his own choices, an ambivalence written literally onto his diseased and dying body. Kenji seems at points to suggest that the choices that he and Ichiro (and thousands of other Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants) made during the war were so over determined as to be, at some level, ethically indistinguishable. A dying Kenji attempts to authorise Ichiro’s integration into America, Ichiro’s *No-No boy* status notwithstanding. In spite of Kenji’s authorisation, in spite of Emi’s romantic love, and in spite of his mother’s “timely” death, Ichiro’s American-ness is still undetermined at the end of the novel. He still feels unable to take up any of the limited jobs available to *No-No boys* in post-war America. The novel ends with the death of Freddie, another *No-No boy*. Exasperated by Bull’s touting and abuse (Bull is a war veteran), Freddie attempts to put up a fight and is killed in a freak accident. In the wake of Freddie’s death and in the wake of Ichiro’s mother’s death, Bull and Ichiro seem to enter an uneasy, ill-defined truce at the end of the novel. This inconclusive ending illustrates Okada’s reluctance to endorse the triumphant and progressivist pedagogical discourses of the American nation.

Okada’s deeply ambivalent relationship with the pedagogical discourses of American nationalism is also embodied in the character of the nation could not secure its plural peoples as one, as homogenized parts of a newly patriotic body politic.

The objections Sato raises with respect to the possibilities for Japanese American identification presented in *No-No Boy* cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, any unqualified reading of *No-No Boy* as a celebration of the redemption and incorporation, in the fullness of time, of a racial minority into the homogeneous time of the nation-space, ignores considerable textual uncertainties. Kenji, the “Yes-Yes Boy” who, from his ostensibly privileged site as a loyal American national subject, attempts to authorize Ichiro’s re-incorporation into the American body politic represents, I suggest, an embodiment of Okada’s ambivalence towards the continuous and progressivist vision of American nationhood. A wounded war veteran, Kenji treats Ichiro with respect instead of the self-righteous contempt and displaced rage that others within the Japanese American community (including Ichiro’s younger brother) reserve for “*No-No boys*.”

Kenji’s kind-hearted treatment of Ichiro is motivated, at one level, by a “quintessentially American” generosity of spirit (a generosity of spirit that Okada, I will argue shortly, ironizes through Emi). This forgiving generosity of spirit helps sustain the progressivist narratives of nationalist pedagogy. Kenji is also motivated by a profound ambivalence about the moral superiority of his own choices, an ambivalence written literally onto his diseased and dying body. Kenji seems at points to suggest that the choices that he and Ichiro (and thousands of other Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants) made during the war were so over determined as to be, at some level, ethically indistinguishable. A dying Kenji attempts to authorize Ichiro’s integration into America, Ichiro’s *No-No boy* status notwithstanding. In spite of Kenji’s authorisation, in spite of Emi’s romantic love, and in spite of his mother’s “timely” death, Ichiro’s American-ness is still undetermined at the end of the novel. He still feels unable to take up any of the limited jobs available to *No-No boys* in post-war America. The novel ends with the death of Freddie, another *No-No boy*. Exasperated by Bull’s touting and abuse (Bull is a war veteran), Freddie attempts to put up a fight and is killed in a freak accident. In the wake of Freddie’s death and in the wake of Ichiro’s mother’s death, Bull and Ichiro seem to enter an uneasy, ill-defined truce at the end of the novel. This inconclusive ending illustrates Okada’s reluctance to endorse the triumphant and progressivist pedagogical discourses of the American nation.

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Emi. She seems to simultaneously accept and to doubt the continuist, progressivist narratives of American nationalism. As part of her efforts to facilitate Ichiro’s integration into American civil society, she tells him, for example:

In any other country they would have shot you for what you did. But this country is different. They made a mistake when they made you do what you did and they admit it by letting you stay around loose. Try if you can to be equally big and forgive them and prove to them that you can be an American worthy of the frailties of the country as well as its strengths.

It’s hard to talk like this without sounding pompous and empty, but I can remember how full I used to get with pride and patriotism when we sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” and pledged allegiance to the flag at school assemblies, and that’s the feeling you have got to have. (Okada 96)

This statement reproduces, essentially without critical examination, the pedagogical discourses of the American nation inculcated, in part, through the evocative and emotive recitations of the national anthem and the pledge of allegiance. Few symbols so powerfully embody the idea of the oneness of the nation as the anthem and the pledge. Emi appears quite literally to be calling forth the spiritual idea of America, mythologized and normalized in the citational practices of nationalist song and speech. But she immediately concedes that it is difficult to recite these pedagogical addresses without their being rendered pompous and empty in iterative performance.

A few minutes prior to this speech, Emi casts doubt on the possibility of a transcendent national moment—such as those moments suggested by recitations of the national anthem and the pledge of allegiance—in a racist polity: “It is because we’re American and because we’re Japanese and sometimes the two don’t mix. It’s alright to be German and American or Italian and American or Russian and American but, as things turned out, it wasn’t alright to be Japanese and American. You had to be one or the other” (Okada 91). Emi’s performative utterance, “a minority discourse,” discloses the instrumentality of race in the pedagogy of official American nationhood. Kogawa achieves a similar effect in Obasan when an embittered Aunt Emily wonders why the Canadian government was hostile to Canadian-born Japanese Canadians even as it embraced German-born German Canadians: “Why at a time of war with Germany and Japan would our government seize the property and homes of Canadian-Born Japanese but not the homes of German-born Germans?” she asked angrily. “Racism,” she answered herself. “The Nazis are everywhere” (Kogawa 38).

Sato concludes her critique of No-No Boy by comparing it with Obasan. She argues that while Okada offers an image of Japanese American identity...
that is predicated on a troubling disavowal of all traces of Japanese heritage, Kogawa’s “successful­ly” posits Japanese Canadian-ness as a dual identity (255-57). The two novels are undoubtedly quite different. A number of factors account for this difference. Firstly, the two books are separated in terms of publication by nearly twenty years, during which time the modes of ethnic identification as well as the discourse of civil rights in North America shifted considerably. Secondly, there are important distinctions between Canadian nationality and American nationality as well as considerable distinctions between “ethnic” Canadian identification and “ethnic” American identification. Thirdly, there were differences, notwithstanding the broad similarities, between the legacy of the internment of Japanese Canadians and the legacy of the internment of Japanese Americans. Finally, the two novels differ substantially in terms of how they configure the connection between discourses of nationalism and discourses of gender. Whereas in No-No Boy the possibility of a masculinist minority identification with the nation is presented through the displacement of racism onto the mother’s gendered body, in Obasan the subjects of minority identification (the two central characters in the novel, Aunt Emily and Naomi) are women.

The gender-specific nature of the time and space of national inquiry that Kogawa constructs in Obasan is of crucial importance. Bhabha identifies women, along with minorities and exiles, as one of the identities capable of continually evoking and erasing the nation’s conceptual and actual totalizing boundaries. This contention draws its force from Julia Kristeva’s contentions concerning women’s time. In ambivalent contrast to masculinist time which, like the discourses of official nationalism, unfolds in a linear progressive fashion, “woman’s time,” Kristeva contends, occupies a double temporality, at once linear and recursive. As Bhabha remarks, there is an uncanny resemblance between his formulation of minority discourse and Kristeva’s formulation of women’s time. The structure of Obasan lends credence to the notion of woman’s time. Unlike No-No Boy, Obasan is not a third-person realist narrative that unfolds in serial calendrical time. Obasan is told in the first person from the perspective of Naomi’s day-to-day activities in the three-day period immediately following her uncle’s death as well as the perspective of Naomi’s disjointed memories. Kogawa continually juxtaposes descriptions of Naomi’s present life with disjointed memories of her internment and its aftermath, and with snapshots of her life prior to internment. The novel unfolds within a double temporality in which scattered incidents from the past are superimposed onto the chronological unfolding of the present. Whereas the narrative present of the novel consists of the three days immediately following the death of Naomi’s uncle, the story the novel tells spans recursively across a period of thirty-one years.

Heather Zwicker explores the forces of national production that shaped the writing and reception of Kogawa’s novels, Obasan and Itsuka. Zwicker offers a compelling interpretation of the discourses of “official multiculturalism” embodied in the pedagogical address of the Canadian nation. Whereas the pedagogical address of the American nation is predicated on a view of America as a “melting pot,” the pedagogical address of the Canadian nation is predicated on a view of Canada as a “cultural mosaic.” Formulated in an attempt to address the inextricable crisis in national identity posed by the bilingual nature of Canada’s dominant white population, multiculturalism has been an official state policy in Canada since 1971. As Zwicker notes:

The policy was never intended to counter systemic racism; rather, it attempted to appease white ethnic voters other than English or French—German, Ukrainian, Scandinavian, for instance, who were worried that their cultures were going to be forcefully assimilated to [former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre] Trudeau’s vision of a French/English bilingual Canadian identity. Multiculturalism, in effect, was a code for a color-blind ethnicity that served to consolidate the dominance of Canada’s two major white cultures. Trudeau’s appeasement worked, more or less, and for the next decade [1971-81] arguments over Canadian diversity overwhelmingly concerned the French/English question. (6-7)

In other words, the policy effaces the centrality of race in the construction of multicultural Canada. Moments of officially sanctioned racism—the genocide of First Nation people, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the internment of Japanese Canadians—are appropriated by the pedagogical address of the nation into a singular narrative of multicultural progress in serial time. Zwicker argues:

The nation, according to Multiculturalism Canada, is unfolding as it should, away from the bigotry of the past, towards a brighter, more pluralist future. [ . . . ] As Canada’s official history would have it, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in World War II, Japanese Canadians posed such a threat to national security that they needed to be dispossessed, interned and ultimately relocated to the interior of British Columbia and Alberta; now, however, Canada can embrace the people it dispossessed, in a gesture of unproblematic inclusiveness designed to undo the past and thereby smooth the nation’s trajectory into the future. (9)
Written in 1981, *Obasan* represents an attempt to interrupt the progressivist discourses of official multiculturalism. Kogawa presents not so much an unproblematic reminder of a “forgotten” historical moment central to the construction of Canadian nationality, but rather, an interruption of the continuous narrative of national progress promulgated by Multiculturalism Canada. Kogawa’s interruption does not aim simply to correct official history with a definite counter-narrative authorized by superior claims to truth and ethics. She instead intervenes in official history by posing a series of “supplementary questions.” The “supplement”—as something that comes after or in addition to the “original”—possesses the advantage of “belatedness” or “secondariness” that enables it to challenge and disturb the primacy of the “original.” Regarding the supplement Bhabha writes:

> The minority does not simply confront the pedagogical or powerful master-discourse with a contradictory or negating referent [...]. Insinuating itself in terms of the dominant discourse, the supplement antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidity. The questioning of the supplement is not a repetitive rhetoric of the “end” of society but a meditation on the disposition of the space and time from which the narrative of the nation must begin. The power of supplementarity is not the negation of the preconstituted social contradictions of past and present; its force lies [...] in the re-negotiation of those times, terms and traditions through which we turn our uncertain, passing contemporaneity into the signs of history. (135)

I am arguing that Kogawa offers a sustained example of the power of the supplement as she writes against the official multiculturalist vision of Canadian nationality. Coming about ten years into Trudeau’s multiculturalist pedagogy, Kogawa’s minority text disturbs, through its belatedness, the progressivist, continuist narratives of Canadian nationalism. The displacement of contemporary struggles in cultural identity into a “forgotten” history of racial injustice marks Kogawa’s insertion of the supplementary questions that antagonize the power to generalize that is implicit in Canada’s national master-discourses.

*Obasan* takes as its point of departure the death of Naomi’s uncle, Isamu. Naomi, a thirty-six-year-old Japanese Canadian, is propelled by this death to come to terms with the history of racial injustice that has left traces of trauma on her body as well as on the collective body of her ethnic community. At the opening of the novel, Naomi does not quite know the racist history of Canada and the ways in which the history is inscribed in her own family biography by the death of her parents and the dispersal of her extended family. Naomi’s ignorance persists in spite of the fact that she was interned and relocated by the Canadian government as a child. The full details of the dispossession, internment and displacement of Japanese Canadians during and immediately after the Second World War have been substantially hidden from her by the will to nationhood that obliges Canadians to “have forgotten” that history. She has also been spared these details by her elders, a generation of Japanese Canadians who, in the wake of surviving internment, were determined to withhold memories of their suffering and rebuild their scattered, scattered lives “for the sake of the children.” Well into her adulthood, Naomi remains unaware of her mother’s fate. She remains in a state of arrested development.

Naomi, “the unusually silent child,” lives out the contradictions of these two positions. Even though the novel is structured around her investigating and reclaiming the past, she remains reluctant to confront this past. In numerous real and imagined conversations with her loquacious Aunt Emily, Naomi casts doubts on the possibility of ever acquiring full historical knowledge, the adequacy of language to translate and transmit bodily trauma, and the possibility of complete healing. For a long time Naomi declines to read the documents Aunt Emily sends her. Despite this pointed refusal, she keeps careful track of Aunt Emily’s activities and does not destroy any of the documents sent to her. The racist history Naomi is reluctant to confront has left traces on her body; she carries unprocessed memories of her dislocation as a child, her separation from her parents and, in particular, the unexplained disappearance of her mother. At the end of the novel, Naomi overcomes her reluctance and learns of her mother’s fate from an unofficial narrative constructed, curiously, from scattered and suppressed childhood memories and readings of the unofficial history Aunt Emily has meticulously collected. She learns that her mother, a Canadian national, had gone to Japan to look after her ailing grandmother shortly before the war but was denied re-entry into Canada when the war broke. She was subsequently disfigured and killed in the atomic bombing of Nagasaki.

In *Obasan* (in contrast to *No-No Boy*) the mother’s death does not efface the interrelation between race and nation nor does it displace the racist discourse of nationalism onto a sexist discourse of domesticity. Rather than domesticate and displace the political, the mother’s death in *Obasan* demonstrates the imbrication of the gendered realm of the domestic in the racialized space of the nation. The domestic sphere is not
presented as the depoliticized space of unnatural femaleness. Instead, Naomi's mother's biography illustrates that the domestic sphere is demarcated as such by the political operations of the nation.

Kogawa structures the novel in such a way that the official version of events (in terms of government reports, contemporary newspaper accounts, etc.) is disrupted by a series of supplementary interventions. For example, Kogawa reproduces a lengthy contemporary newspaper account which attempts to make the case that dislocated Japanese Canadians were both happy and productive in their new homes (Kogawa 191-92). Entitled "Facts about the Evacuees in Alberta," the account includes the following statement from Mr. Phil Baker, President of the Alberta Sugar Beet Association: "Generally speaking, Japanese evacuees have developed into the most efficient beet workers, many of them being better than the transient who cared for the beets in Southern Alberta before Pearl Harbor" (192). This account suggests that dislocation had transformed ethnic subjects—model minorities—into national subjects of a superior breed.

After reproducing this progressivist version of events, Kogawa uses Naomi's memory to intervene:

Facts about the evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep.

There is a word for it. Hardship. The hardship is so pervasive, so inescapable, so thorough it's a noose around my chest and I cannot move any more. All the oil in my joints has drained out and I have been drained out and I have been invaded by dust and grit from the fields and mud is in my bone marrow. I can't move any more. My fingernails are black from scratching the scorching day and there is no escape. (109)

The passage represents a powerful instance of supplementary intervention. By way of Naomi's belated and reluctant memories, Kogawa is able to challenge the official version of history without positing a counter-narrative. She indeed seems to question whether such a counter-narrative is at all possible: "There are some nightmares from which there is [...] only deeper and deeper sleep." Kogawa's meditation on the space and time of the Canadian nation, much like the questioning of the "supplement," draws its power not from the negation of the preconstituted narratives of the past and present but from a 'belated' contestation of the times, terms and traditions through which instances of racial injustice are subsumed by discourses of gradual multicultural progress.

I have been implying (in a manner that, on the face of things, is none-too-different from Sato's contentions) that Obasan (and to a certain extent No-No Boy) embodies, in its writing, a "successful" instance of minority discourse. Such a reading of a text as "successful" does not, however, take into account the capacity of the field of cultural/national production to incite and contain resistance. This issue is at the center of Gikandi's critique of Bhabha's work: performativity is not confined to minorities; it is a game that the dominant national culture plays as well and plays very well. In spite of its disruption of both the space and time of the nation, Obasan's rapid hypercanonization as a classic in Canadian literature calls into question the "success" of its critique of Canadian multicultural discourses. Since its publication Obasan has won widespread critical acclaim and multiple awards, including the Books in Canada First Novel Award, the Canadian Authors Association Book of the Year Award, and the before Columbus Foundation American Book Award. The book has also been the subject of extensive comment in critical journals. As many critics note, Obasan occupies a prominent place in the Canadian literature curriculum. The text has even been canonized in Asian American literature in ways that, as Zwicker argues, do not always take into account Kogawa's Canadian specificity. It is instructive, for example, that both Sato and King Kok Cheung (whose essay I discuss below) use Obasan as a counter-point in their discussions of issues in Asian American literature and culture without fully acknowledging its Canadian specificity. I do not mean to suggest that for Obasan's critique of the nation to be judged "successful," the text ought to have been a popular and academic "failure." I mean to emphasize, nevertheless, the ambivalence that would allow a putatively dissident and disruptive minority text to become a much-acclaimed national text.

King-Kok Cheung points out in her essay, "Attentive Silence: Obasan," that notwithstanding textual ambivalences and anxieties about the ethics and efficacy of speech, and notwithstanding the distinctions that Kogawa makes between kinds of silences, most early reviewers read the novel as a therapeutic triumph of speech over silence (126-27). Readers, including Donna Bennett, B. A. St. Andrews, and Erika Gottlieb, suggested that the novel offered a model for individual and national healing accomplished through the triumph of speech over silence and of true history over false history. These readings also tended to endorse Obasan's forceful correction of the record of Canada's "forgotten" racial history. (It is important to acknowledge that some recent Kogawa criticism, including work by Guy Beauregard and Roy Miki, has challenged these readings of Obasan. In a sense, I am building on these belated revisionary readings. There seems to be an odd convergence between the self-congratulatory pedagogical
proclamations of Multiculturalism Canada, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the performative readings of Obasan as a novel that, through therapeutic speech, accomplishes the long-deferred work of full historical disclosure and national healing. Despite a real and important opposition, both the pedagogical nationalist proclamations and the performative textual reading leave undisturbed the foundational fiction of the modern liberal nation: the teleology of a gradualist national progress across linear time.

The two arguments, read together, encapsulate the complex strategies of memory and forgetting that are integral to the modern nation. Renan, as I pointed out earlier, emphasizes the importance of forgetting the violent moments that create and periodically secure the nation. He contends that such acts of violence, though unfortunate, may be necessary for national cohesion. This argument seems to underpin strategies through which Canada’s pedagogical address appropriates the history of state-sanctioned racism into a narrative of national progress across time. The discriminatory acts in the nation are past (which acts the nation requires all its present peoples to have willfully forgotten) as condensed in the following remark for a popular publication of Multiculturalism Canada, “Canada has been multicultural from the beginning. It has gradually been extending the rights and responsibilities to all its citizens. Although progress has been slow, and often faces many obstacles, progress has been steady, still continues (quoted in Zwicker).” The second sentence in this passage concedes a history of racist exclusion (and in so doing contradicts the first sentence) although, as we have seen, it immediately narrativizes that history into an evolutionary tale of inevitable national progress across time. These two statements show that the notion of “forgetting” that Renan postulates has a more ambivalent relationship to remembering than is at first apparent. Benedict Anderson reminds us that “forgetting” and “remembering” in terms of the imagined community of the modern nation are paradoxically constitutive of each other (199-200). To illustrate this ambivalence, Anderson uses Renan’s example of what every French national is supposed to have forgotten, that is, the massacre of Saint Bartholomew (11). However, in his article, Renan provides no context for this massacre. Moreover, through the example, as Anderson points out, “In effect, Renan’s readers are being told to ‘have already forgotten’ what Renan’s own words assumed that they naturally remembered” (200).

My argument is that Canadian multiculturalism, especially as it is redeployed in the performative field of Canadian cultural/national produc-

tion, depends on a similar ambivalence between memory and forgetting. In its attempt to transform Canada’s race-inflected nation-space into a narrative of progress across linear time, official multiculturalism asks Canadian national subjects to have already forgotten the legacy of racial injustice it expects that they will naturally remember. Every Canadian is expected, as a matter of course, to know the forgotten history of the denial of rights to certain of Canada’s peoples. I am suggesting that readings of Obasan as a novel of individual and national healing, as well as the canonization of the book as a Canadian classic, deploy a complex interplay between forgetting and remembering. Predicated on the certainty of the historical counter-knowledge, the intelligibility of pain and the possibility and necessity of closure and healing, such readings ultimately remember purportedly forgotten injustice precisely in order to “have forgotten it,” or, more properly, to get over it in the fullness of national narrativized time. Read as a single text, Obasan’s critique of the Canadian nationalism seems, in Bhabha’s terms, to be disruptive and dissident. Placed in the context of its field of cultural production and national(ist) reception, however, the result of its critique seems to disclose the power of the pedagogical address of the nation to incite and appropriate performative discourses.*

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