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Gerry Turcotte
University of Wollongong, Gerry.Turcotte@stmu.ca

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RESEARCH ONLINE

"A Fearful Calligraphy": De/scribing the Uncanny Nation in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*[1]

GERRY TURCOTTE

University of Wollongong

> Freud noted that the archaic, narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal. (Kristeva 185)

I

This paper takes as its starting point Joy Kogawa's 1981 novel *Obasan*, a story which revolves around what McFarlane has called "arguably the most documented instance of ethnic civil rights abuse in Canadian history" ("Covering Obasan" 401): the internment of the Japanese Canadians during and after the Second World War and their subsequent dispossession and exile. It also takes as one point of intersection the Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement—the decision of the Mulroney Government on 22 September 1988 to offer an apology and restitution to the Japanese Canadians for their suffering and unjust treatment. More specifically, this reading is located in the way Freud's analysis of "The Uncanny" (1956) can be brought to bear on an understanding of these events.

I have in mind here a number of "elaborations" of the uncanny. One is a series of readings which locate the uncanny as a central feature of "Gothic" narratives in Canada and Australia, and which highlight the way they come to reflect a specifically colonial and postcolonial

[1] This paper was originally presented at the 1st Asia-Pacific Conference in Canadian Studies, organized by the Japanese Association for Canadian Studies (JACS) held in Japan on 27–28 March 1998. I would like to thank the organizers for their invitation, and the many scholars who entered into a constructive debate over the issues raised in this article. I am grateful to my colleague, Anne Collett, for her suggestions.

terror of (un)settlement.[2] I am also interested in two studies by Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs (1995, 1998) which use the insights of Freud's essay to read postcolonial Australia's contemporary responses to recent political developments which have contributed to making that country "unfamiliar to itself".

In particular, they are referring to the relatively recent Native Title Act of the High Court, popularly known as the Mabo decision, which negated, at long last, the offensive myth of British colonization that Australia was *terra nullius*—a land owned by no one and therefore legally available for colonization. Gelder and Jacob argue that the media- and government-generated myth-information that Aborigines can now potentially re-claim most of Australia—a perception encouraged by the Australian Prime Minister himself, in a number of cases by holding up a map of Australia covered in red marks representing potential Aboriginal claims on the country—has had the effect of making Australia at once familiar and unfamiliar to non-Aboriginal Australians. "Mabo (re)produced a great deal of anxiety; and for those non-Aborigines who even momentarily entertained the possibility, after Mabo, of losing their homes to Aboriginal claims to land, Freud's 'uncanny' might offer an immediate truth" ("Uncanny Australia," 1995 150).

Freud's theory of the uncanny provides a useful account of terror-making experiences, suggesting that one of the principal ways in which the feeling of uncanniness is produced is when the familiar is suddenly made unfamiliar. Freud's insight lies in identifying how one becomes the other—his brief etymological study demonstrates how the *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*, that is, how the homely becomes unhomely—and in showing how the terms effectively co-exist at the same time. As Gelder and Jacob insist, "[t]his simultaneity is important to stress since, in Freud's terms, it is not simply the unfamiliar in itself which generates the anxiety of the uncanny; it is specifically the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar—the way the one seems always to *inhabit* the other" ("Uncanny Australia," 1995 150–51).

As has been argued elsewhere, the uncanny is resonant in numerous narratives in Australian and Canadian fiction precisely because it enables an emblematic articulation of fears which are, in other circumstances, unmentionable: fears about settlement, dispossession, miscegenation, and contamination. In these narratives, the uncanny is frequently produced as

[2] See for example a number of studies by Turcotte, including, "Australian Gothic," "English-Canadian

and by a crisis of (il)legitimacy—engendering stories which agonize over the right of belonging to an invaded place, or stories which attempt to justify invasion by turning the Native peoples into something monstrous to legitimate genocidal activities. In the nineteenth century, these stories are frequently about bloodlines, unlawful or unjust transportation which severs family ties, or they are settlement narratives in which the newcomer, no matter how the migration is "justified" by the authors in political, moral or Christian rhetoric, is threatened or surrounded by a resident evil upon arrival in the new world space. Twentieth-century narratives maintain many of these tropes, though frequently the right of place is less overtly questioned, and instead identity politics are examined through narratives that explore (or exploit) troubling questions about gender and "race."[3]

Gothic figures generally act at once as alien and yet also as strangely familiar figures. In some versions—such as Frankenstein's monster—the creature is born of the detritus of humanity and is the child of the individual/culture which rejects him; in other accounts—say *Dracula*—the "other" appears as a contaminant which will infect the dominant group, so that "us" always finds itself in danger of becoming "them." Or, as Van Helsing puts it in *Dracula*, the vilest threat posed by the vampire "is that we become as him". Certainly, Canadian and Australian narratives about "Asian" migration are frequently framed through metaphors of invasion—in nineteenth-century Australian rhetoric, the Yellow Peril represents a type of migrating Dracula figure which will overwhelm "us," and which will take over "our" land, "our" women, "our" selves.

For Gelder and Jacobs, the current debates over Mabo have "unsettled" many Australians, because they have exposed in the law what has hitherto only been understood in an often unspoken way that "what is 'ours' is also potentially, or even always already, 'theirs': the one may also be the other" ("Uncanny Australia," 1995 151). As they go on to argue:

> […] because many Aboriginal land claims are either in the process of being dealt with or are yet to be made, a certain kind of un-settlement arises which is given expression by non-Aborigines and Aborigines alike—at the very moment when modern Australia happens to be talking about "reconciliation" […]. In an uncanny Australia, one place is always already another place because the issue of possession is never complete, never entirely settled […].

Gothic," "Sexual Gothic," "Footnotes to an Australian Gothic Script," and "How Dark is My Valley?"

[3] Specific examples of such narratives are discussed in the articles by Turcotte cited above.

> We can think about this process as a way in which "place," as a designation which implies boundedness, is always at the same time in a condition of unboundedness. ("Uncanny Australia," 1995 151).

II

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* can be understood in similar terms, both in its own narrative account, as well as in its reception. Certainly, Kogawa's book is not gothic in any "familiar" sense of the word, and of course it is not an Indigenous text commenting on landrights in the usual understanding of the term. But it is a text which produced a sense of the uncanny within and without its narrative, by "re-animating" a history of oppression that forced Canadians to confront their own suppressed and unacknowledged violent history. In materialist terms, many Canadians would have had to admit that the very land they owned, the very objects they possessed, were literally stolen from Japanese Canadians. In this sense alone, then, the familiar space of ownership and belonging would have been, for many, made uncanny. Boundaries once solid were unbounded by this realization.[4]

As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have suggested in "What is a Minor Literature?," in another very real sense, the text, speaking a minority view into a dominant master narrative, produces the effect of deterritorialization. And as Roy Miki has argued, "[b]y 'deterritorialization,' [Deleuze and Guattari] point to a disturbed use of language that foregrounds its surface as a conflicted space" ("Asiancy" 145). Miki goes on to argue that "[m]inority writers, because of their subordinate position, must work in a language that disrupts the stability of conventional discourse and communication" ("Asiancy" 145). He suggests that "[m]inority subject matter, when encoded in forms adjusted to accommodate the expectations of the social majority, can willy-nilly lead to compromise, distortion, and misrepresentation. Formal disruptions, such as the generic crossing of fiction, history, autobiography, and documentary in *Obasan*, become strategies of resistance to norms" ("Asiancy" 145). Rosemary Jackson makes a similar point about uncanny narratives when she notes that,

> A literature of the uncanny, by permitting an articulation of taboo subjects which are otherwise silenced, threatens to transgress social norms. Fantasies are not, however,

> countercultural merely through this thematic transgression. On the contrary, they frequently serve (as does Gothic fiction) to re-confirm institutional order by supplying a vicarious fulfilment of desire and neutralizing an urge towards transgression. A more subtle and subversive use of the fantastic appears with works which threaten to disrupt or eat away at the 'syntax' or *structure* by which order is made. (72)

Obasan's language is not "opaque" or resistant in the sense defined by Deleuze and Guattari. But it does produce an effect of opacity in its staccatoed presentation and withholding of the details of its story, and, as Miki suggests, in its blurring of generic conventions. For Goellnicht, Kogawa's "use of multiple discursive modes, tenses and narrative points-of-view […] disrupts and contests the dominant culture's totalizing, omniscient voice of history" (294). The effect of this "resistance" yields an uncanny narrative, in which "normal" values are reversed and standard images of normalcy are displaced or entirely emptied of meaning.

In many, if not most, fantastic narratives, signification deteriorates and we witness the collapse of language. Fittingly enough, then, *Obasan* is a novel of silences, in which language proves unreliable in so many ways that it produces a general effect of deterritorialization, both for the characters in the novel, but also for readers who see the language which they take for granted de/scribed in a variety of ways.[5]

Throughout the work, the protagonist struggles to find an identity, attempting to define herself in a language inadequate to the task. In the second chapter, for example, Naomi "spells" what she is for her young students: "'Not "Nah Canny,"' I tell him, printing my name on the blackboard. 'NAKANE. The a's are short as in "among"'" (*Obasan* 6). Later, when Naomi is having dinner with one of her student's fathers, she must answer the inevitable question, "Where do you come from?" In her reply, she explains that she was born in Canada, like the widower himself, and then, once again, "spells" what she is: "'NISEI' I spelled […] 'It means "second generation"'" (7).

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[4] See Kogawa's comment in Fujita (1985) that the people who now own her parent's home are in possession of "stolen property" (p. 41, n. 3).

[5] For more detailed studies of silence in Kogawa, see Cheung, Davidson, Fujita, McAlpine, and Willis. Most critics "reading" *Obasan* comment to varying degrees on the way language is "destabilized," or on how expectations about linguistic stability are shattered, in this text. See Miki, "Asiancy"; as well as Goellnicht and Jones. See also Miki's extended note in *Broken Entries*, 155, n. 8, for a brief though important contextualizing of the numerous critical responses to this text, including the way *Obasan* has been institutionally appropriated by US academics so that the "site-specific formation of the Japanese Canadian subject ... tends to become another version of the 'Asian-American' example" (155, n. 8).

Both acts of self-definition are fitting metaphors for postcolonial self-articulation, particularly as they utilize forms and conventions of an older world (pronunciation keys), to define a self not actually accepted in the new environment (her citizenship is questioned by the widower). If Naomi proves unsuccessful in defining herself, it is only because she has not found a language which mediates effectively between her two worlds, or one which adequately expresses her situation in her world. Naomi goes so far as to pun on the nature of herself in grammatical terms: "Personality: Tense. Is that past or present tense? It's perpetual tense" (7). To demonstrate the inadequacy of language is to demonstrate the tragedy of the self in transition—in exile.

In *Obasan*, language is severely scrutinized, its indeterminacy foregrounded in many ways. Kogawa underlines language's fragile connection to history; offers examples of the tendentious nature of academic and journalistic language; and stresses the polysemous character of the Japanese and English-Canadian tongues. This thorough progression through all types of information—of both verbal and non-verbal communication—is meant to establish clearly how tenuous the links between actions, words, and meaning are.

Kogawa's novel deliberately challenges the labels affixed (by both the government and by the non-Japanese Canadians) to the Issei, Nisei, and Sansei, in order to "unname," and so "re-vision" their place in society. Thus, the reader is shown the falseness of the Government's "language" and the obscene reality it attempts to misrepresent. Sick Bay, for example, "was not a beach at all. And the place they called the Pool was not a pool of water, but a prison at the exhibition grounds called Hastings Park" (77). If such things can be lied about, the text suggests, then how can equally pernicious accounts about enemy aliens and the need for exile be believed? Such reflections are profoundly deterritorializing.

Miki's comments concerning the generic combinations which occur in *Obasan* form part of that process of deterritorialization. In *Obasan*, the layers of meaning vie for a place on the page, from acute cultural silences—themselves redolent with meaning—to bureaucratic documents which blatantly state the opposite of what they mean. And yet, it is also true, as Miki argues in a later essay, that *Obasan* is contained by the fields of knowledge which organize, discuss, interpret, and evaluate the novel. In "Sliding the Scale of Elision," Miki discusses the institutionalizing mechanisms which establish CanLit as a field of knowledge, underlining the exclusionary nature of such projects, an "Anglo-European identity politics

that imprints itself through a process of differing at the expense of 'its' racialized others" ("Sliding" 130). Numerous critics, even whilst acknowledging this process, take umbrage behind the fear that too comprehensive an inquiry might dismantle, not simply the institution of CanLit, but in Lecker's metaphor, the "peaceable kingdom" itself.[6]

One way to shore up both the stability of the canon—and arguably the "kingdom"—is to gesture towards "challenging texts" without endangering the structure. Indeed, by incorporating such texts—consuming them in other words—it becomes possible to reinscribe "relations of internal dominance" ("Sliding" 134). Miki's account of *Obasan's* canonicity articulates this process of consumption. His metaphor signals the voraciousness of the critical, mainstream appetite which, shark-like perhaps, "circled [*Obasan's*] textual body with interpretive strategies that penetrated its apparent foreignness" ("Sliding" 135). But does this institutionalized acceptance indicate a change in the dominant structure? Miki's view is that it does not. Far from disarticulating the totalizing Anglo-European frameworks, such incorporation frequently leaves the structure intact; indeed, the texts, thoroughly digested, can be used to maintain the flexibility and generosity of the policing boundaries without in fact extending them in any way.

In a powerful reading of *Obasan*, Miki demonstrates how the text is compromised because of its recourse to a series of narrative and aesthetic structures that ultimately recuperate the novel into the dominant system—in particular Naomi's inner journey of self-discovery, and the use of Nagasaki as a gesture of resolution. Whilst I accept Miki's point that there is a danger in universalizing Naomi's experience—particularly through a potentially depoliticizing aestheticization of the text so that it speaks a narrative of personal development at the expense of wider issues—it is difficult to agree with his reading of Nagasaki as a similarly aestheticized moment that flattens the horror of Japanese Canadian internment. Rather, the two events are so conclusively interlocked that they must be read as equally horrific—as large-scale events which indict the Anglo-European community responsible for such atrocity. If universalizing occurs here, it is precisely—and hence productively—at the expense of the dominant culture.

For Miki, the universalizing of suffering and its interiorization through a range of narrative functions, including the use of Christian symbology to recodify Nagasaki, "performs the

[6] See Miki's discussion of this issue, and Lecker's argument, on pages 130–31 of *Broken Entries*. Lecker's

personal redemption of history achieved through narrative. As Japanese-Canadian internment is transformed through this lens, race comes under erasure to allow for a depoliticization process in which the power of the victimizer [...] is internalized by the victim" ("Sliding" 142). Miki goes on to argue that "[t]his misplacement of blame, on the one hand, elides the materiality of history, but on the other, valorizes the humanist allegory of suffering as a 'universal' condition" ("Sliding" 142).

Yet, the text also always comments on precisely this process of inversion, in which the victim is made to accept the blame for her/his own suffering. Miki is certainly correct when he argues that the recuperative possibilities which exist in the structures which shape the text's reception, as well as in the available reading strategies which allow for this sleight of hand to take place, explain why the text has figured so centrally—so canonically—"in the institutional hall of CanLit" ("Sliding" 142). Despite this, there is a danger in yielding the text entirely to this reading at the expense of its phenomenological impact. It is crucial to continue to insist on how the text can be mobilized to resist "methodologies of institutional readings that consistently fail to account for issues of appropriation and misrepresentation" (143); of not allowing "the majority white 'we' to inhabit the text" (143); or of accepting a construction of the text which would locate the endemic racism it addresses as "past."

One way of doing this is to read the text out of frame—or to read the frame itself. How has *Obasan* made the nation—and the traditional literary history of nation—monstrous, as Jonathan Kertzer has recently argued?[7]

III

If *Obasan* produced an uncanny effect upon the dominant culture in Canada, it did so in part by cleverly showing that this was precisely the impact which Canadian Government policy had had on the Japanese Canadians. For the latter, the Government's response to the outbreak of war—which was to seize property, to imprison people illegally, to force the repatriation (*sic*) of Canadians to a country that was not theirs—resulted in making the

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argument can be found in "The Canonization of Canadian Literature," 656–71.

[7] See Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation*, in particular Chapter 4. Whilst I am attracted to certain aspects of this study, I am concerned that Kertzer homogenizes "difference" in his assessment of the way in which "ethnic, feminist and Native writers" make "the bourgeois nation" into a monster, "an ideological aberration to be corrected, rather than a natural habitation" (133). Such a blanketing of difference reproduces the homogenizing account of the "other," reductively eliding the very material specificities which Miki is concerned to foreground.

familiar terrifyingly unfamilar. Kogawa's text is uncanny in the way the ordinary gets stripped of its mundaneness; her account makes terrifying reading in the it demonstrates that rights which should be taken-for-granted—of belonging, of citizenship, of liberty, and justice—were denied virtually overnight. These rights are re-written in the name of undisguised racism. Identity becomes destabilized. The experience seems straight out of a Gothic novel—except that this experience is not fiction.

For a number of commentators, including Sartre, the world of the fantastic—of the Gothic nightmare—is possible only when "someone right-side up" is "transported miraculously into an upside-down world" which "sets off, by contrast, the strange character of the new world" ("Aminadab" 27). For Naomi—and of course for many Japanese Canadians—this dislocation actually occurs. The safe, "right-side up" nature of the home, which rests on the rightness of law and order, is violently inverted when that law, that home, collapse. As Homi Bhabha has put it:

> To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the unhomely be easily accommodated in that familiar division of the social life into private and the public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you as stealthily as your own shadow, and suddenly you find yourself [...] making the measure of your dwelling in a state of "incredulous terror." ("World and the Home," 445)

Like the homes of the Japanese Canadians, Canada itself as a political and geographical space becomes uncanny to the Japanese Canadian community, which once lived and moved through a familiar, "owned" landscape. After Pearl Harbour, they are literally deterritorialized and thrust into a Gothic landscape, whilst forced to live in Canadian Ghost towns such as Slocan, and later to move into the "alien" landscape of Prairie towns, where Naomi, for one, loses her humanity and becomes a "scarecrow" (191).

The landscape of Lethbridge, Alberta, is described in *Obasan* in distinctly Gothic terms:

> We have come to the moon. We have come to the edge of the world [...]. Here, the air is a fist [...]. On the miles of barbed-wire fences, there are round skull-shaped weeds [...]. Between the shed and the farmer's house are some skeletons of farm machinery [...]. Every bit of plant growth here looks deliberate and fierce. (191–92)

Everything is unrecognizable to them, prompting Naomi to think, "[t]here are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep" (194). For all the

propaganda which constructed the Japanese Canadians as monstrous figures—an infection in part identified as the Yellow Peril, and turned into a boardgame "Made in Canada"[8]—it is the majority culture which is dis/figured as monstrous by Naomi's narrative.[9] At one stage Naomi points out that "[t]he worse the news from the Eastern Front, the more ghoulish the public becomes" (88). And despite being forced to live invisibly in various ghost towns, the Japanese Canadians bring life, not death, to them. As Naomi says of Bayfarm in Slocan, "[t]he ghost town is alive and kicking like Ezekiel's resurrected valley of bones" (160).

It would be possible to argue that the very spaces of internment, particularly those located in the British Columbia interior, were themselves paradigms of the duplicitous Canadian government policy of saying one thing and doing another. As Adachi points out, "[u]nlike the arid desert exile of the Japanese-American evacuees, encircled by barbed wire and military police in watchtowers, the detention camps in the interior of British Columbia were another setting altogether. They were set against a splendid physical background" (251). As he goes on to say, however, "[t]he magnificence of the outdoor setting and the echoes of a romantic past were but candy wrapping, hiding a grim reality" (251).

In *Obasan*, the most uncanny space entered into, however, is not the devastating landscape of the prisons and ghost towns, but memory. It is memory which threatens and allows for the return of the repressed—which is triggered, for Naomi, by her Uncle Isamu's death. Because of his death she is forced to reopen old wounds, to return to the past, and the disjunction created by this rupture is Gothic in tone and circumstance. Indeed, it seems fitting, given Freud's definition of the *unheimlich* as unhomely, that many of the most unsettling moments in the novel take place within the supposedly safe environment of the home, thereby reminding the reader that this space has been permanently violated by the Canadian Government's racist wartime edicts so that it can never again be a space of security and boundedness. The dispossession and violation of the known space is always there. To quote Bhabha again:

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8 See *Obasan*: "The Yellow Peril is a Somerville Game, Made in Canada" (152).

9 A similar reversal occurs in the "Preface" to Ken Adachi's *The Enemy that Never Was*, when he claims that he had been "the victim since childhood of a particularly virulent strain of racism," which impelled him to "reveal the demon in all its scaly ugliness and perhaps exorcise it" ("Preface" n.p.). Timothy Findley, in his brief introduction to the 1991 reprinted edition of the book, seizes on this metaphor to note that, "[w]hen he speaks of virulence, Adachi reminds us that racism is a parasitical disease. A sickness. A viral infection that spreads from person to person. It can even bring death" ("Introduction" n.p.).

> In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (445)

Early in the novel, for example, when Naomi returns to Obasan's house, she is compelled to follow her aging Aunt into the attic. Obasan is looking for memories, and her ascent amounts to a type of descent into a profoundly Gothic space, undertaken, as one would expect, at midnight. When they get there, Naomi discovers "a whole cloudy scene of carnage [...]. A graveyard and feasting-ground combined" (25). Here everything is covered in cobwebs and dust—"A whiff of mothballs wafts up. The odour of preservation" (25). The preserved corpse—the *revenant* here—is the past, which rises up to haunt this narrative and its reluctant witness.

This theme is carried through in *Itsuka*.[10] When Naomi is forced to sell Obasan's house, the act of going through everything which her aged aunt has accumulated through the years is described in these terms:

> I'm an undertaker disembowelling and embalming a still breathing body, removing heart, limbs, life blood, all the arteries, memories that keep one connected to the world, transforming this comatose little family into a corpse. We have entered the garbage-dump stage of life and I'm rototilling it all. (*Itsuka* 69)

After she sells the house, the "new owners of the house bulldoze it. Our shack of memories disappears. I should not have let it happen" (*Itsuka* 69).

Whereas, in traditional Gothic, barriers are physical, with locked doors and dungeons signifying entrapment—here it is memory which imprisons. In *Obasan* Naomi says, "we're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves" (26). But if there is one ghost which haunts this text more than all others it is of course Naomi's mother. The absent mother who haunts the text devours Naomi, who is "consumed by the question" of why she did not return. The language used to address this silent absence is distinctly Gothic. Naomi is "[d]evoured alive" (26) by the memory of her. But no one in the family speaks and Naomi has no "key to the vault of her thoughts" (26). If

[10] References to *Itsuka* will be cited parenthetically in the text, preceded by the title to distinguish them from quotes taken from *Obasan*.

the mother is characterized as monstrous, however, it is because she is denied a right to speak her/story. As in most ghost stories, this spirit haunts because her pain has not been put to rest. Her/story is still untold. So she communicates obliquely. "I waken suddenly […]. Something has touched me but I do not know what it is. Something not human, not animal, that masquerades the way a tree in the night takes on the contours of hair and fingers and arms […]. She is here. She is not here" (167).

Again, in *Itsuka*, the metaphor of the mother as ghost is repeated. When Naomi visits Japan, she thinks "[w]e know so little of their last days, except that they lived within a well of silence, a grave before the grave. A haunted place. Mother hid herself from view. She scuttled through the night" (*Itsuka* 83). The act of visiting the hospice where her mother died strips her of identity. It is significant that as she witnesses the "ghost" of her mother—"I hear Mother in the sounds of footsteps, in the swishing of the broom outside" (*Itsuka* 83)—she is un-named. "When I pick up the pen to sign my name, my hand shakes so much that the N ends up looking like a V. I can't finish my signature. That's Mama's fault" (83).[11]

This spectre is not easy to exorcise because first it must be acknowledged. And for Naomi to do this, she must confront the most terrifying horror at the centre of the narrative—and therefore at the centre of her self/body—the bombing of Nagasaki. As Cecily Devereux has argued in relation to *Obasan*,

> [c]ultural discrimination, like gender discrimination, begins at the body, which always visually identifies otherness in relation to the dominant group. The body is a sign of alterity, and is therefore the first and most important place to be taken over by the oppressor; the body is itself identified as "the enemy," an identification subsequently internalized. (234)

For any visible minority, skin represents the mark of difference. A particularly powerful aspect of *Obasan* is how it demonstrates the way in which the racism of Canadian culture made Japanese Canadians foreign *to themselves*. As Stephen says, "[w]e are both the enemy and not the enemy" (70). They are Canadian and yet not Canadian. Naomi's mother is there but not there. In this sense, the experience comes across as specifically uncanny.

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[11] It is worth comparing this moment of de-scription with the earlier instance when Naomi attempts to inscribe herself into "white" space, as mentioned earlier: that is, Naomi "spelling" herself for her students. In *Itsuka*, the complete breakdown of even the act of inscription after her "encounter" with her mother, and in the wake

What the novel also particularly emphasizes is how such valuations are translated into policy and enacted in the brutality of war. The bombing of Nagasaki makes humanity alien to itself—but far from universalizing that "self," the moment demonstrates the site-specific—the "racially" specific—nature of warfare: "I am wondering, did Grandma and Mother waken in those years with the unthinkable memories alive in their minds, *the visible evidence of horror written on their skin, in their blood, carved in every mirror they passed*, felt in every step they took" (235, italics added). As Devereux puts it, "Naomi's mother is effectively erased from discourse, from signification, as Manina Jones indicates: she is 'de-faced' and 'dis-figured' in the radiation of the bomb" (241). Humanity becomes unrecognizable to itself because the fiction of its representative homogeneity is shattered. The white "we" cannot inhabit the "skin" of the victim in this scene—it is unthinkable.

For all of the texts of Empire which cast the "other" in the role of monster, which define migration as a type of disease which will infect the blood, and which posit the outsider as soulless (so much so that they often cast no reflection),[12] the power of Kogawa's narrative is located in the way she demonstrates where true monstrousness lies. It is not the Japanese Canadians who "infect" the West—indeed they are the West! It is Western technology and policy which disfigures, which contaminates the blood through radiation poisoning, and which carves out the reflection of the other in the mirror of its own making so that the other can no longer bear to gaze upon itself—"project[ing] out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal," as Kristeva avers in the opening epigraph of this paper (185). Naomi's description of her mother after the explosion is truly horrific:

> One evening when she [Grandma Kato] had given up the search for the day, she sat down beside a naked woman she'd seen earlier who was aimlessly chipping wood to make a pyre on which to cremate a dead baby. The woman was utterly disfigured. Her nose and one cheek were almost gone. Great wounds and pustules covered her entire face and body. She was completely bald. She sat in a cloud of flies and maggots wriggled among her wounds. As Grandma watched her, the woman gave her a vacant gaze, then let out a cry. It was my mother. (239)

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of the horror of Nagasaki, restates the connection between the national and the personal, the public and the private.

[12] Again, *Dracula* is a useful example in this instance.

The beast, in *Obasan*, is a Gothic creature which, like Dracula, not only consumes but transforms its prey. The Japanese Canadians are made unrecognizable to themselves by the infection of the Government wartime policy.

It would be possible to speak of the history of Japanese Canadian internment in Canada as a type of *revenant* which haunts the people who were so brutally oppressed by the Canadian Government; but it is also one which will continue to haunt the Government and the Canadian people as a whole, because such history functions as a narrative which, in the tradition of the uncanny, exposes the illusory nature of totalizing narratives—which underscores the impossibility of wholeness without healing.

In revisiting the past, *Obasan* foregrounds Canada's disparate selves, despite the nation's repeated attempts to present a myth of unity. Uncanny narratives are ruptured spaces, forever incomplete because of an excess of meaning.[13] The past and the present are forever in competition and hence contaminate each other—they inhabit the same space simultaneously—making resolution impossible. History, in this and in all narratives, is un-Dead. Like Naomi's dead, the past refuses to bury itself. As Naomi says of her Aunt Obasan, "[t]he past hungers for her. Feasts on her. And when its feasting is complete? She will dance and dangle in the dark, like small insect bones, a fearful calligraphy" (26). Aptly enough, the body is made to write the fearful story, since it is the body which bears the mark of racialization—it becomes the visible signifier which is either over-invested with, or stripped entirely of, meaning.

IV

This article began by invoking theories of the uncanny as they can be understood in a range of issues and texts, in particular that of the Native Title legislation in Australia and the way in which it can be brought to bear in coming to terms with the impact of both *Obasan* and the contemporary history of the Japanese Canadians. It is certainly a dangerous "land slide" to attempt,[14] since it can potentially be charged with "universalizing" the experience of oppression, with obscuring the specificity of experience, and just as pointedly, with equating

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[13] For a more detailed account of the nature of uncanny narratives as they are described here, see Jackson's *Fantasy*.

[14] I am playing here on W.H. New's configuration and meditation on the term in *Land Sliding* to mobilize, as he does, both actual and yet imaginative crossings of space, place, and imagination.

the dispossession of Indigenous peoples with the experience of members of a settler community, however disenfranchised it may be.

To some degree, however, this skewing of the traditional models of comparison is enacted to suggest the very way homogenizing and totalizing systems attempt to contain and manage those they oppress, so that there is a certain logic to reading against the grain in this manner. Nationalist narratives typically elide difference, except when they articulate the "reason" for which such homogenization is needed. When the latter issue is addressed, difference is spoken to alert the Nation to the monstrous diversity (as opposed to State-sanctioned, that is, "unifying" diversity) which threatens to consume the whole.[15] Scott McFarlane successfully captures the "uncanny" register of such fears when he writes:

> The Canadian State, so dependent on Canadian history for legitimacy, is haunted by the insistent return of armies who challenge its representative authority. And these armies are masked. They doubly challenge the authority of the State so dependent on trust in its vision. The masked armies return like ghosts [...]. ("Haunt" 20)

Such a cross-cultural reading as has been attempted here, therefore, can play a small role in dis/articulating the wholesome narratives of empire—in fragmenting the putatively cohesive, internally consistent fictions of integrity and design—those performances of nation which figure as non-existent or extinct what is constructed as the unlocatable, unassimilable spectre of the "other." By dislocating the parameters of the field, the critic can enact an uncanny mis/reading which challenges the binary structures which frequently hierarchize and frame national debates. This also participates in the equally important project of resisting a universalising blandness by, ironically, opening up the issue—deterritorializing the reading—without evacuating the site-specific dimensions of the story. It is a way of forcing the majority white "we" to be conscious of our role in a wider, on-going totalitarian project, which should make the "possession" of the text obscene.

To return, then, to the opening proposition: if Mabo made the space of Australia suddenly "uncanny" for many of its citizens, it is equally true that *Obasan* on a smaller scale played a

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[15] Consider, for example, Australia's Nationalist metaphor "We are one, but we are many," which attempts a similar gesture to the strategies of the Canadian Mosaic paradigm. As McFarlane argues, "liberal Canadian nationalism is dependent for legitimation on both historical and contemporary visions of Canada as culturally monolithic. These visions are incommensurate with the alienation experienced by aboriginal people and people of colour" ("Haunt" 20).

similar role in Canada,[16] reminding Canadians of their fractured identity, and exploding the monstrous liberal humanist myth of Canadian democratic unity. Like the Mabo decision in Australia, the Mulroney Government's redress settlement statement similarly reminded Canadians of this fact. But instead of reading this collective, hurtful memory as a necessary step in the process of reconciliation, some commentators chose to re-cast the gesture as a dangerous precedent that would simply further dismember Canada.

Jeffrey Simpson, for example, wrote in *The Globe and Mail* of 14 June 1990 that the "decision to offer financial redress to Japanese Canadians" had set a "precedent." "The Ukrainian Canadian Committee hit Ottawa this week asking for redress […]. It followed on the heels of organizations representing Italian Canadians and Chinese Canadians who seek similar kinds of redress for historical injustices" (The trouble). For Simpson, the gesture of reconciliation is to be feared, because it has released the monstrous ethnic appetite once more into the benign, reasonable, and wholesome Canadian space.

"Where does this end? Do we compensate Acadians who were expelled? The Irish who were badly treated when they arrived? Those interned during the War Measures Act of 1970?" (The trouble) Simpson goes on to say:

> History has many, often contradictory, lessons to teach us. It is essential to remember those that cast Canada in a dark light, so that they won't be repeated. But there comes a point at which, in a linguistically and ethnically divided country, the search for restitution for past wrongs not only creates precedents that lead we know not where,[17] but also risks piling up more divisions in a country already quite divided.

"It is essential to remember those that cast Canada in a dark light, so that they won't be repeated," so long as it does not cost "us" anything. Simpson, like Naomi in much of *Obasan*, prefers to deny the creature lurking in the darkness, and wishes to retreat into the shadows of

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[16] For an analysis of the many different writers, film-makers and poets who have commented on this violent moment in Canadian history, see Scott McFarlane, "Covering *Obasan* and the Narrative of Internment," and in particular his comment that "no single text concerning the internment has had a greater impact on the Canadian imaginary than Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*" (402). He goes on to argue that "*Obasan* played a siginificant role in the redress movement as evidenced by its being quoted by both Ed Broadbent and Gerry Weiner during the announcement of the settlement with the government" (402).

[17] Compare this with Freud's notion that E. Jentsch's argument is "incomplete" when he maintains that "the uncanny would always be that in which one does not know where one is" (370). The real point is that the uncanny—the *unheimlich*—leads back to the familiar. Or, put another way, the unfamiliar leads back to, is always already imbricated in the familiar. Simpson's real dread, here, is that he knows very well *where all this will lead*: to accountability.

silence. But as Naomi learns, to deny the monster does not make it go away. If anything it proves more invasive, more destructive, for being left unchallenged. Simpson locates part of the problem with the greed of minorities—with their *unreason*able desire for compensation. If the Canadian Government had maintained its silence, "[t]he Ukrainian Canadian Committee might have been satisfied with a statement of apology, some historical plaques and possibly the financing of university chairs in Ukrainian studies"—a few bobbles or glass beads, perhaps. But now the floodgates are open, and those who will bear the cost for this ethnic avarice are "today's generation," who will have to "pay for policies and attitudes of generations past."[18] As though we were ever free of our responsibility for/to the past.

It is interesting that Simpson, like John Howard, misnames the monster. For Simpson it is ethnic avarice, just as for Howard it is greedy Aborigines. In one way, this is part of the orientalising process which makes the "other" into an insatiable creature which preys on the so-called "real" citizens of Canada and Australia, in order to justify past and present actions. The "real" monster, however, is not the people seeking redress, but the acts of violation which impel this call for restitution. Early in the novel Naomi ruminates on the bad odours emanating from Obasan's fridge and associates them with memories that should be forgotten:

> There are some indescribable items in the dark recesses of the fridge that never see the light of day. But you realize when you open the door that they're there, lurking, too old for mould and past putrefaction.
>
> Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. Didn't Obasan say, "It is better to forget?" What purpose is served by hauling forth the jar of inedible food? If it is not seen, it does not horrify. (45)

[18] This re-figuration of minority calls for justice as dangerous, as avaricious, and as blatantly wrong-headed, are legion. See McFarlane's discussion in "Haunt" of the critical response to the Writing Thru Race conference. See also columns such as Barbara Amiel's in *Maclean's*, in which she maintains that "It makes no more sense for our government to apologize to our native peoples for past treatment than it would to ask today's Africans to apologize for every missionary who was eaten there in the past" ("Saying sorry" 11). The extraordinarily offensive and orientalizing nature of the comparison, coupled with the flawed logic, need not be deconstructed at length here. Predictably, however, the nub of the argument, as with Simpson's, is an economic one. "But the best thing we can do is say 'we are sorry.' Period. Compensation cheque will not follow. Sorry" (11). Not surprisingly, in this context, the Australian Prime Minister has staunchly refused to offer an apology to the Aboriginal peoples on behalf of the nation, arguing that the present should not be forced to make up for actions of the past. A slightly more complex, though similarly motivated argument for refusing redress is offered in J. L. Granatstein's *Who Killed Canadian History?* See, in particular, Chapter 4, "Multicultural Mania."

In the course of the novel, this notion of beneficial forgetting is shown to be false. Naomi is terrified throughout by nightmares—by *not* knowing. The unseen, as any specialist in horror will attest, is always the most frightening and the most crippling. Howard's gesture of holding up the map of Australia, invaded by falsely represented Aboriginal claims of ownership, enacts a dark parody of the British Imperial map with its pink landmasses demonstrating power, influence, scope, conquest, and ownership. It is ironic (though somehow not unexpected) that what was once an iconic and positive representation of British power and domination—the world map covered in pink—should be twisted around to represent White disempowerment at the hands of the voracious Aboriginal "spectre."[19]

And yet, in closing, two points need to be remembered. Firstly, the representation of Aboriginal or ethnic avariciousness is demonstrably false—a fairly typical and long-standing misrepresentation of the facts which recasts the victim as the powerful and evil aggressor; secondly, it is only in acknowledging the past that any hope of reconciliation becomes possible. But we need to remember that the act of acknowledgement *is* costly—*is* painful. To think that it could be otherwise seems destructively and monstrously naive.

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[19] Again, see Gelder and Jacobs ("Uncanny Australia", 1995 and 1998) and Mickler for an elaboration of this "inversion."

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