Intergenerational Storytelling and Transhistorical Trauma: Old Women in Contemporary Canadian Fiction

by

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational Storytelling and Transhistorical Trauma: Old Women in Contemporary Canadian Fiction

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Intergenerational Storytelling and Transhistorical Trauma: Old Women in Contemporary Canadian Fiction examines fictional representations of intergenerational storytelling exchanges between old diasporic women and younger characters. Focusing on three Japanese Canadian novels and two Caribbean Canadian novels, written post-1970s, I examine the intergenerational tensions between telling personal and collective traumas of the past and maintaining silences within the family. Hiromi Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms, Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, Darcy Tamayose’s Odori, Shani Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night, and David Chariandy’s Soucouverant provide multiple generational and cultural optics through which to address how the past continues to reside within and inform the present moment, and thus impact one’s subjectivity and sense of belonging or dislocation. These novels characterize old racialized women in Canada as complex figures who disrupt assumptions about memory and madness, and I argue their stories contribute important cultural perspectives to theories in social and critical ageing and trauma studies. Drawing together work in literary trauma studies with narrative theory, I investigate the challenges and implications of articulating different types of trauma within the literary genre of the novel. This study analyzes different narrative structures
and strategies that emulate the symptoms of traumatic ‘belatedness’ and provide readers with an understanding of ‘reciprocal storytelling’ as a means of ‘bearing witness’ to personal and transhistorical trauma. However, I query the ethics of the listening-telling relationships characterized within these novels that explicitly identify the old woman as the storyteller and yet her voice and stories are often only rendered through a young character’s voice. In instances, reciprocity between characters affords an articulation of the past that enables a collaborative development of new subjectivities, whereas in other cases, dementia complicates the narrative exchanges and a younger teller, personally invested in telling his/her own story, must negotiate a path between appropriation of voice and imaginative transformations. This dissertation posits a careful consideration of age perspective within intergenerational cross-cultural interpersonal relations, and I argue these storytelling engagements highlight the impact of difference, temporality, and transhistorical transmissions.
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Introduction

THE TELLER AND LISTENER RELATIONSHIP

Intergenerational storytelling has long contributed to one’s understanding of self and situatedness in place and time. In “Storytelling and Narrative Knowing,” Sarah Worth contends, “The way we construct our narratives (fictional or non-fictional) is importantly tied to the way we understand, order, and construct our own reality and our own personality” (54). As stories are passed on, stories about cultural origins, struggles through hardship, and rites of passage, they help construct a coherent family history. For both tellers and listeners, these stories can constitute a narrative of collective identity (that may or may not be a part of a larger cultural identity) through which one can, to differing degrees, self-identify or resist. Yet, what happens when stories are not told and histories seemingly become lost through silences?

In Canada, many immigrant families try to retain traditional ways of being, and intergenerational storytelling often functions as a means to promote this continuity. However, in geographic spaces of cultural convergence, where diverse social practices and beliefs compete for recognition, continuity often proves difficult because of the systemic silencing of minoritized voices. In Canada, dominant ideology has long controlled and restricted which cultural histories define the national imaginary. Assimilation ultimately signifies adherence to the dictated dominant social norms, and thus demands the performance of a new cultural subject who retains the past only as an archive of memory.
For other immigrants who desire to erase their past, assimilation facilitates and legitimizes the writing anew of personal and familial storylines. Yet, as much recent Canadian fiction exemplifies, for the children of immigrant parents who have attempted to rid themselves of personal and family histories, a narrative gap now poses serious challenges for understanding and negotiating one’s sense of self. Many recent novels illustrate that when multiculturalism fails to provide a sense of belonging for children racialized by dominant discourses that continue to frame them as ‘different,’ these children experience an increased desire to know their ‘origins’ and this compels an archeological uncovering of the past as archive. In many ways, intergenerational storytelling promises the possibility of discovering the roots underlying this longed-for absence, and storytelling engagements are figured as a means for a displaced generation to integrate their hybridized or hyphenated liminal positioning with their own new definitions of self.

Diaspora theorist Lily Cho asks, “Who carries these histories into the present? What transformations in these histories occur in the process of transmission and how are these histories transformative?” (104-105). My dissertation explores the works of diasporic authors in Canada who characterize intergenerational storytelling as providing opportunity for dislocated subjects to articulate feelings of “unbelonging” (Chariandy, “Fiction” 827) in order to conceptualize new personally-articulated identities.¹ These

¹ David Chariandy uses the term “unbelonging” to describe the emotional condition of racialized individuals in Canada who experience multiculturalism as a failed project. His critical theory and creative writing address a particular second-generation perspective of a racialized yet Canadian-born child of immigrant parents. Yet, many Canadian authors explore the psychological fragmentation caused by the juxtaposition of simultaneously inhabiting spaces of “belonging” and “not belonging” to the national imaginary. See
authors tell their ‘real’ stories obliquely through historical fiction. Susan Stanford Friedman argues that for the oppressed “to counter the narratives of their alterity produced by dominant society, they must tell other stories that chart their exclusions, affirm their agency (however complicit and circumscribed), and continually (re)construct their identities” (230). By piecing together a silenced past from fragments of stories and memories not one’s own, storytelling enables a teller to creatively re-imagine and interweave the past into the present moment in order to locate oneself within a narrative continuum. As Anne Whitehead claims, memory is “historically conditioned; it is not simply handed down in a timeless form from generation to generation, but bears the impress or stamp of its own time and culture” (Memory 4).

While the novels I address all emphasize the importance of storytelling for providing agency to both tellers and listeners, their subtexts raise important ethical questions about the politics of listening to and telling stories of trauma and violence, particularly when these experiences are not one’s own. A closer analysis of these novels reveals that not all storytelling engagements are empowering. Not all storytellers are afforded a listener, and not all listeners are equipped to hear what is being said. And while forcibly silenced histories demand articulation, sometimes, for various reasons, some stories are simply not meant to be passed on. Considering Paul Gilroy’s 1987 multilayered analysis of Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved, as to what constitutes “not a story to pass on” (187), I examine fictional storytelling engagements that echo the ambivalence in Gilroy’s statement. I explore whether a narrative can still convey an ethics of reciprocity when the storytelling act is not “conversive,” that is not “co-creative,

Himani Bannerji, Rinaldo Walcott, Dionne Brand, Fred Wah, Roy Miki, Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle, and SKY Lee.
relational, [and] transformative” for both teller and listener (Brill de Ramirez, “Surviving” 248).

Thomas King, Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, Paula Gunn Allen, Vijay Agnew, Allyssa McCabe, Anne McKeough, and Sarah Worth all offer different yet complementary understandings about how both narrative and storytelling help structure the way we form, order, and envision our realities and identities. For instance, Vijay Agnew conceives of “remembering” as an “act […] that can create new understandings of both the past and the present” (8), whereas Anh Hua positions “forgetting” as “an act, a creative invention, a performance, a selective loss” (198). Many narrative theories on storytelling emphasize the emancipatory potential of narrating one’s experiences as a way to re-organize social understanding and to redefine personal identity. But, my research on old age, trauma, and intergenerational communicative exchanges shows the need to ‘trouble’ a straightforward analysis of the textual materiality of old women’s stories.

In this dissertation, I examine how intergenerational storytelling engagements afford authors an effective literary device for addressing three key concerns or themes: intergenerational relationships in the diaspora, reciprocity and ruptures, and articulations of personal and collective trauma. I focus on five novels, three written by Japanese Canadian authors – Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), and Darcy Tamayose’s *Odori* (2007) – and two by Trinidadian Canadian authors.

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2 For instance, Jane S. Grassley and Tommie P. Nelms claim storytelling is emancipatory when storytellers become active participants in identifying “social and cultural structures that needed to change” (2448) and when “confronting stereotypes and generating strategies for empowerment” (2449). On the contrary, Trinh T. Minh in “Not You/Like You” warns of the negative stereotypes associated with storytelling as a discourse (i.e., gendered, uncritical, sentimental) (*Making Face* 373). She suggests that without ethical guidelines for listening and a critical awareness of one’s subject positioning and epistemologies, storytelling remains devalued within the existing power structures.
– Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1994) and David Chariandy’s *Soucouyan* (2007). These novels’ fairly recent publication dates (with the exception of Kogawa’s 1981 publication) and their similar attention to intergenerational relationships and diasporic storytelling engagements reflect a particular generational diasporic subjectivity, one that results from an individual’s negotiation of the contradiction between the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism and the social reality of being constituted ‘Other.’

I argue that this generational condition, common (albeit not restricted) to many Canadian immigrant children who have grown up in Canada within the climate of multicultural ideology, can manifest into a sense of displacement that propels a search for origins, which, in many cases, necessitates not reclamation but a reconstitution of familial stories and cultural memories. I have grouped together these novels because they all address geographic displacement, cultural dislocation, experiences and discourses of exclusion, and the silencing of personal and collective histories. Like many diasporic authors, these specific authors speak through their writings with and for individuals who can identify with similar experiences of discrimination, alienation, displacement, and a sense of unbelonging in Canada. Interestingly, each novel presents an intergenerational storytelling engagement between an old³ woman and a younger listener character that

³ I have deliberated over whether to use ‘old,’ ‘older,’ ‘ageing,’ ‘aged,’ or ‘elderly’ within my writing, and yet I am not altogether satisfied with any one term. For instance, French feminist theorist and novelist Simone de Beauvoir protests in 1970 that “old” has “pejorative connotations” with “the ring of an insult” (288), whereas Beverly Hungry Wolf, writing in 1980 from her perspective from the Blood Reserve of the Blackfoot Nation, legitimizes her use of the term “old” because “old woman, or old lady, is a proper one to use among my grandmothers” (100). In 2005, feminist Foucauldian theorist Zoe Brennan justifies her adoption of “older” because, as a signifier, it is “relational, destroying a linguistic barrier that posits youthful on one side and the old on the other” (25). However, I am ultimately convinced by what Brennan positions as “a persuasive argument for employing the word *old* as part of a strategy of reclaiming language by
emphasizes the importance of active listening and telling as a means for bearing witness to past traumas and violence. My research question asks: what do these specific literary representations of intergenerational storytelling tell us about the challenges, implications, and strategies of narrativizing the past and the traumas of others?

Interweaving narratives of ageing, diaspora, and trauma, each novel illustrates how old women – their bodies, their stories, their memories, and their intergenerational relationships – literally and metaphorically reflect the past as it continues to seep into the present moment and affect (in both positive and negative ways) the individual psyche, the family, and the larger community. These literary representations of intergenerational relationships provide readers with multiple age perspectives to better illustrate the multigenerational challenges of negotiating language and cultural difference in cross-cultural geographic environments. These representations also complicate the ethics of telling and listening as bearing witness to another’s story. I will demonstrate how these novels not only address the social, cultural, and political implications of dislocation, trauma, and ageing, but also reproduce and re-enact these very conditions of experience within the narrative structure.

In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead suggests “novelists position the narrator as a mediator of others’ stories and so find a way of expressing an experience which is not directly their own” (6). In each of these Japanese Canadian and Caribbean Canadian literary representations of intergenerational relationships, the old woman is explicitly identified as the storyteller, and the storytelling engagement seemingly affords agency to

subverting the familiar connotations of this description and using it in a combative and positive sense” (25). According to Cynthia Rich, Barbara MacDonald, in her 1983 important anti-ageist feminist work, was “the first to claim the word ‘old’ as a political act” (qtd. in Lipscomb 7).
this old woman. However, upon closer examination of each narrative, we see that Goto’s
old woman Obachan, Kogawa’s Obasan, Tamayose’s Basan, Mootoo’s Mala, and
Chariandy’s Adele do not speak their own stories. Instead, a younger narrator professes
to have listened to the old woman’s stories and, now by telling, bears witness to her life
history. Therefore, what the reader ‘hears,’ in actuality, is rendered through the voice of a
much younger listener, now teller, character. For example, in Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at
Night, the old woman “rambled under her breath all day and all night,” while her nurse
“bec[a]me her witness” and “started to jot down everything she said, no matter how
erratic her train of thought appeared to be” (107). In Chariandy’s Soucouyant, the old
woman “told, but she never explained or deciphered. She never put the stories together.
She never could or wanted to do so” (136). It is her son who endeavours to decode and
articulate her history. But, what are the implications of these acts?

I am concerned about these representations\(^4\) of intergenerational storytelling, that
is the listening and telling relationship between the old woman and a younger character,
and how the narrative focalization\(^5\) from the younger character’s perspective complicates
agency and reciprocity when bearing witness. At times, this narrativization redirects
agency and transforms the storytelling act. I will show that when the younger character

\(^4\) I am employing Stuart Hall’s definition of representation not to denote the simplistic
conception of mimesis but rather to suggest that representations within the discursive
realm become constitutive of identity and subject formation. In New Ethnicities, Hall
suggests, “events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects,
outside the sphere of the discursive; but […] only within the discursive, and subject to its
specific conditions, limits, and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within
meaning” (443).

\(^5\) First introduced by Gérard Genette to differentiate perspective from point-of-view,
focalization pertains to the discourse level in narrative and “who sees?” In An
Introduction to Narratology, Monika Fludernik provides an excellent gloss of Genette’s
typology and Mieke Bal’s critical supplements to the term (153).
attempts to narrate the old woman’s personal history of violence and trauma, what we, as readers, engage with is an act of bearing witness to the younger teller’s personal working through of his or her own experiences of ‘traumatic’ dislocation. Therefore, I am troubled when the old woman’s stories seemingly become a palimpsest over which her listener, now teller, draws his or her own narrative. As we can see, particularly in Goto’s, Mootoo’s, and Chariandy’s novels, when the younger narrator attempts to bear witness to the traumas that haunt the old woman’s past, this narrative act invariably interweaves the old woman’s stories into the teller’s articulation of his or her own cultural displacement and personal desire for a social space of belonging. Thus, at times, this narrative privileging of the perspective of youth problematically re-licenses dominant power relations that ironically threaten the old woman’s agency by continuing (albeit unintentionally) to silence her voice. Consequently, this dissertation questions the ethics of a literary strategy that privileges a younger person as the primary narrator of an old woman’s life history.

These narrative strategies position the reader as witness to the affective conditions of personal trauma, yet conditions that are narrated not by the survivor herself but through a secondhand articulation. In raising questions about focalization and how it influences a story’s meaning, I hope that an awareness of age perspective provides readers with a critical lens through which to analyze the implications of who is telling whose story and for what purpose. Ultimately, these novels do provide multiple age perspectives on how the past continues to inform the present, and they exemplify how diverse forms and modalities of silences necessitate the telling of stories of trauma and
violence. However, they also raise questions about how one ethically listens in order to
tell a story not one’s own.

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*,
Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub explain how “testimony requires a highly collaborative
relationship between speaker and listener” which demands that a listener witness
“sympathetically” to that which cannot be adequately represented (5). Importantly, this
“listener bears a dual responsibility: to receive the testimony but also to avoid
appropriating the story as his or her own” (Felman and Laub 5). Felman suggests the
listener-witness “does not have to possess, or own the truth” to bear witness (“Education
and Crisis” 24), but by listening, the witness enables the speaking survivor to engage in a
“performative speech act” (“Education and Crisis” 17). Conversely, listeners who
become narrators in an attempt to articulate and thus bear witness to another person’s
history of trauma must learn to distinguish “empathy” from “identification,” as Dominick
LaCapra warns; otherwise, one invariably appropriates “the story as his or her own”
(Felman and Laub 5). The novels I examine demonstrate how dangerously easily, and
unintentionally, this appropriative act can occur.

Cathy Caruth, one of the most influential trauma scholars, argues, “the history of
a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another”
(“Trauma” 10). Felman notes how psychoanalysis rethinks the role of the listener as one
who is able to “bear witness” to an experience that continues to escape the speaking
subject (“Education and Crisis” 24). By listening, the witness enables the speaking
survivor to “produce one’s own speech as material evidence for truth” (Felman,
“Education and Crisis” 17). Felman’s use of the term “truth” merits some discussion, as I
read her denoting truthful to mean as accurately and faithfully as possible the rendering of the actual event that occurred while remaining cognizant of the inherent subjective bias that invariably influences any telling act. The contingent, shifting nature of narratives of the past necessitates recognition that all truths are subjective and ideologically weighted. Nevertheless, the act of witnessing, through listening to one’s articulation of the ‘truth’ of past events, re-affirms the value of establishing critical spaces for marginalized and previously silenced perspectives. Accordingly, the teller and listener can collaboratively “reassert the veracity of the past and […] build anew its linkages to, and assimilation into, present-day life” (Laub, “Truth and Testimony” 62). Therefore, the active listener plays an important role by providing a witness for unspeakable events that require testimony to move through and past the immobilization of trauma.

Some of the novels my dissertation examines model a storytelling practice that provides meta-narrative lessons on how to listen and subsequently tell one’s own stories for developing an understanding of self and (re)storying a previously silenced family history. All of the novels emphasize the necessity of trust between teller and listener to create reciprocity within the storytelling exchange. When a listener learns to listen actively and to bear witness to another’s stories, this listener eventually transforms into his or her own storyteller. Through this narrativization act, the younger character begins to voice his or her own story and thereby gain an awareness of the importance of storytelling as a critical means for creating a future space of social belonging. In sections of this dissertation, I explore the concept of reciprocal storytelling as an integral
participatory aspect of intergenerational storytelling when sharing personal and familial experiences of diaspora, trauma, and dislocation.

My use of the term reciprocal storytelling draws from diverse cultures and discourses. In many cultures, storytelling is a reciprocal event between the storyteller(s) and the audience. Tellers draw their audience into a dialogic exchange, generating a creative flexibility in the creation of the narrative. In “Tales of Resistance and Other Emancipatory Functions of Storytelling,” Jane S. Grassley and Tommie P. Nelms present findings from their feminist hermeneutic study on women’s breastfeeding stories. Their study, while limited in perspective by addressing only the beneficial outcomes of storytelling, leads me to conceptualize my theory of reciprocity as a spectrum on which the emancipatory benefits reflect the degree of engagement between teller and listener. In “Language and Literature From a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” Leslie Marmon Silko connects storytelling to her Pueblo theory of language, whereby each word has its own story, that stories are within stories and never end, and that by sharing these stories, the teller provides multiple perspectives for the listener(s) to better deal with particular moments and experiences. Everyone’s stories contribute to the collective repository from which a teller can choose a relevant lesson. Borrowing Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez’s concept of “listener-readers” to denote readers who ‘listen’ actively in order to engage critically with the storytelling experience, I contend that the storyteller figure in literature occupies a discursive site for critical engagement, demonstrating the importance of reciprocity between teller and listener which, in turn, translates into an understanding of a reader’s responsibility to reciprocate as an active participant in the storytelling process.

Reciprocal storytelling, as narrative therapy, has recently become an important
theory and practice in counselling psychology. Discussing storytelling in the context of psychoanalytic child psychotherapy, Jerrold R. Brandell in *Psychodynamic Social Work* defines reciprocal storytelling as “a means of eliciting children’s self-composed or autogenic stories and providing a therapeutic response to them” (268). It also bears pedagogical relevance in both early and adult education. In *Rethinking Work and Learning: Adult and Vocational Education for Social Sustainability*, Peter Willis, Stephen McKenzie, and Roger Harris describe reciprocal storytelling as “a reflective contemplative process” that permits learners to mutually share their knowledge through “mythopoetic pedagogy” and “aesthetic education” (33). This engaged learning exchange links past knowledge to present interests and concerns to develop critical thinking skills. Although not explicitly called ‘reciprocal’ storytelling, many Indigenous educators acknowledge the importance of storytelling exchanges as a teaching tool. For example, in “A Grant Report to the Aboriginal Education Research Network, Saskatchewan Learning,” Melanie MacLean and Linda Wason-Ellam note, “As [First Nations and Métis] teachers shared personal stories of their experiences, the students responded by sharing their own stories within a caring classroom of trusting relationships. In this way, storytelling created a dynamic of interactive shared learning and equality of learners” (7). This pedagogical approach models a reciprocal storytelling engagement between active tellers and listeners.

In works of fiction, reciprocal storytelling occurs as a shared telling act produced when both listener and teller respectfully engage in the storytelling process. Reciprocity emerges from this mutual engagement and depends on characters performing a double role as both tellers and listeners. Trust and respect prove integral in fostering an ethical
listening/telling storytelling exchange. Reciprocity manifests itself as much in the narrative and meta-narrative aspects of such novels as in the ethics that characterize the relationships between the teller/listeners. I posit that if both teller and listener (can) collaboratively take responsibility for the story’s meanings, this kind of reciprocal storytelling functions as a discursive strategy that has a transformative potential to heighten critical consciousness and facilitate social change.6

In this context, I see contemporary diasporic authors in Canada utilizing the novel as a site where the words and concerns of old female storytellers reach and potentially engage a larger audience in intra- and cross-cultural dialogue. I would argue that many novels written by Indigenous authors in Canada also provide an important lens through which readers can gain insight into the significance of old women in the family and the larger community. Here, I am thinking of Ma-ma-o in Eden Robinson’s Monkey Beach, Old Ella in Lee Maracle’s Ravensong, and Niska in Joseph Boyden’s Three Day Road. These novels all feature storytelling as a mode of articulation that can transgress cultural, linguistic, and generational boundaries to potentially help both listener and teller negotiate complicated subject positions informed by liminality and marginalization. As Silko emphasizes in her closing lines of “Language and Literature,” storytelling reveals the “boundless capacity of language” to “bring[…] us together, despite great distances between cultures, despite great distances in time” (72). While these novels characterize the development of reciprocity between teller and listener as integral when sharing stories about trauma and dislocation, they also reflect how the diverse tensions and challenges

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6 Conversely, disagreement and differences of interpretation between teller and listener can also lead to new social understandings, but I would argue only if both participants remain open to the recognition of multiple perspectives.
that arise within intergenerational and cross-cultural exchanges can complicate such a possibility. In complex, multilayered ways contingent on each narrative situation, these novels written by Indigenous authors in Canada – in similar ways to the diasporic novels I investigate in this dissertation, raise questions about which cultural traditions and practices from the past can continue to operate within the present socio-political context and how they may do so.

The diversity in literary representations of old female storytellers in Canadian literature exemplifies how silences, memory loss, cultural and ageist assumptions, and personal and transhistorical traumas can disrupt the process of telling and listening exchanges. Many of these novels illustrate how language constructs barriers of ‘differences.’ According to Walter Ong, the social interaction between teller and listener reveals semantic discrepancies as “words acquire their meaning only from their always insistent actual habitat” which includes “gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs” (47). Acknowledging that “language can never be trusted” (Chariandy, Soucouyant 129), these novels explore the function of sensory communication, and transmission is shown to occur through various non-verbal modes of communication. As Ong contends, “oral memory has a high somatic component” (67), and as seen in Odori for instance, hands perform as communicative tools that transcend the power dynamics inherent in language. The body shares kinetic information that words cannot always adequately express. In Chariandy’s novel, his male protagonist notes that his mother’s “comprehension has

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7 I am conscious of the problems of comparing very different cultural and disciplinary traditions (for instance, Indigenous storytelling philosophies with Japanese Canadian narrative aesthetics). However, I am interested in the tools of analysis each tradition provides for broadening discussions of narrative and the epistemologies of storytelling.
suffered” and she “often forgets the meaning of the most basic words” (41), but “[t]ouch has remained important to Mother” (41). Similarly, Goto’s storyteller explains how “there are times when one can touch the other without language to disrupt us” (25). The complexities of touch and gesture become apparent when Goto’s old woman character recognizes that her granddaughter has learned to “read the lines on my brow, the creases beside my mouth” (15). Emotion, fear, obsession, and loss all transmit via non-verbal cues. Unlike this body talk, verbal communication depends upon a shared understanding of the language used, the physical ability to speak and hear, the willingness to listen, and the cognitive ability to comprehend the information being shared.

Addressing familial, historical, and mythic origins and cultural understandings, old racialized diasporic women’s stories problematize cultural continuity, by demonstrating how language differences, cultural distance, and/or subjective bias inhibit their listeners’ ability to hear, interpret, or translate stories. Trinh T. Minh-ha warns that storytelling can perpetuate unequal power dynamics between the storyteller and her listeners. As Neal Norrick reminds us, “[l]isteners draw inferences from the storytelling performance based on their own background knowledge” (922). A listener too often remains inherently restricted by his or her limited perspective, social experiences, and subjective cultural biases. Without the “same background knowledge” (Norrick 920), there is always potential for misunderstanding and “‘tellability’ can be lost altogether” (Norrick 922). Further, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun rightly asks, how can a listener understand the politics of listening when so often one is never trained to listen?

Filmmaker and scholar Claude Lanzmann asserts that the act of listening to traumatic
events that defy narrative memory demands a “refusal of understanding.” In this way, listening, as bearing witness to events that reside outside a listener’s personal experiences, necessitates a “breaking with traditional modes of understanding” (Caruth, “Recapturing” 155). This refusal of understanding positions the impossibility of a comprehensible story as the locus of what cannot be understood. As Caruth contends, “trauma opens up and challenges [listeners] to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, of impossibility” (“Trauma” 10). With this critical understanding, a witness can ethically participate in the listening-telling act, providing space for a revisionist history that potentially sheds new light on previously silenced or misinterpreted stories.

However, a novel such as Soucouyant exemplifies how a young narrator’s need to construct a family narrative through which he can understand “hurts never his own” (Chariandy 194) inevitably leads to his appropriation of his mother’s story. Why? Invariably, he can understand neither the incomprehensibility of her experiences nor the impossibility of his own comprehension. His storytelling reveals ruptures and involutions. Thus, I ask: does reciprocity function in such cases, and whom does the storytelling engagement primarily benefit?

The narrativization act when focalized from a younger teller’s perspective complicates the possibility of reciprocity occurring in an intergenerational storytelling engagement. While these storytelling acts seemingly provide the younger listener-now teller with a means of working through his or her own fragmented history and experiences of dislocation, this focalization perpetuates a privileging of youth concerns.

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8 In Shoah (1985), a nine-and-a-half hour French documentary about the Jewish Holocaust, director Claude Lanzmann subdivides witnesses in three distinct categories: survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators.
Additionally, in some of these novels, specific diasporic dislocations are represented as transhistorical trauma, whereby intergenerationally transmitted violent histories of collective trauma evoke ‘postmemory’ in subsequent generations. Marianne Hirsch defines *postmemory* as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (103). In “‘The Fiction of Belonging’: On Second-Generation Black Writing in Canada,” David Chariandy describes this experience as a diasporic “unconscious transmission of affect” (826). In his novel, postmemories of transhistorical traumas manifest with the young narrator’s realization that at “a crucial and early point in my life, something seeped into me” (101) and with the young woman Meera’s awareness of events “that happened lifetimes ago and worlds away […] as if she herself had witnessed them first hand” (166). According to Laura Brown, “mainstream trauma theory” now recognizes the possibility that “post-traumatic symptoms can be intergenerational” (108). Yet, this acknowledgement of the legitimacy of transhistorical traumas complicates how practitioners are to define and treat different manifestations of personal trauma. Brown asks, “How then, do we understand the woman whose symptoms of psychic trauma have occurred entirely at secondhand, as it were, through the mechanism of insidious trauma?” (107). While these novels afford readers critical insights into diverse understandings of the transmission of transhistorical trauma and its negative implications, what agency do these stories afford the old woman character in her recovery from her traumatic memories when her story becomes the platform for this other generation to address its identification with a traumatic history that precedes its personal experiences?
Fiction reveals how trauma transmits intergenerationally. When articulated, silences and narrative gaps in family stories can transform into incomprehensible stories. In these cases, storytelling exposes the listener to haunting reminders of unspeakable absence and loss. When unbidden, this past can haunt both the teller and listener. Thus, storytelling engagements with old women provide readers with multiple perspectives – from different age and racialized subject positions – on how the psychological impact of personal trauma and cultural dislocation shape subjectivities in very complex yet individual ways. Simultaneously, these communicative exchanges encapsulate the social and cultural tensions that can emerge between generations living in a diaspora. The diverse narrative strategies these authors use exemplify how secondhand narrativizations of another’s past necessitate a careful reconsideration of the politics of listening and telling. While these storytelling acts can be theorized differently for each novel I focus on, they employ similar meta-narrative strategies that attempt to position the reader, vis-à-vis the listener character, in the role of bearing witness to a storyteller’s telling of incomprehensible acts of violence not of his or her own personal experience.

This project is not designed to be comparative; rather, I chose these texts because of their similarities in narrative strategies and meta-narrative concerns. Sophie McCall argues “[b]y countering the tendency to look at specific diasporas separately, and to hierarchize them according to unspecific criteria, which Cho warns against, we have an opportunity to build coalitions between disparate minority histories and to produce a model for relational history writing” (para. 2). McCall’s assertion is central to my argument. When these novels are positioned in dialogue, they illustrate how both “sub-national and supra-national communities” provide communal voices and visions that
“complement and challenge [the] established national imaginaries” (Brydon 2).

In my dissertation, the authors I study and the characters they create in their novels simultaneously inhabit multiple subject positions, as part of a diaspora and as immigrants through various migrations. They socially and culturally exemplify heterogeneity and diversity. Thus, I do not wish to convey an essentialist perception of diaspora. The variances between individuals within any diasporic group reveal how any such grouping of peoples is inherently reductive and paradoxically obscures while reinstating difference. To illustrate my point further, ‘Caribbean Canadian,’ for instance, as a social designator reductively encapsulates all individuals living in Canada who have migrated from any of the thousands of Caribbean islands, which constitute an immense diversity of family histories and ties to the Indigenous peoples of the region, Africa, India, plus the multitude of occupying colonial nation states throughout the twentieth century. Chariandy’s novel exemplifies this heterogeneity through the marriage of a Black Trinidadian slave descendent and an Indo-Trinidadian indentured labourer descendent both living in Canada. Despite the problematic reductiveness of categorical groupings, as a collective whole, Black Canadians9 and Japanese Canadians10 have both

9 Black Canadian history begins in the 1600s with Mattieu da Costa, an African slave aboard a French explorer ship, arriving in Port Royal (Boyko 158). Slavery was customary practice throughout New France and the Maritimes, until the Act Against Slavery was passed in 1793 in Upper Canada. Canadian history constitutes slaves and freemen and freewomen arriving via numerous migratory routes, including the Loyalist movement during the American Revolution and the Underground Railroad into many different ports of entry along the Canadian-American border. Chariandy’s novel, while contributing to Black Canadian history, specifically addresses a Caribbean Canadian gendered migration. His character Adele represents the multitude of Caribbean women who immigrated to Canada in the 1960s, when Canada symbolized economic promise and the possibility of new beginnings. However, racial discrimination has impacted social relations and economic segregation laws, long before and after the federal government passed the Canada Fair Employment Practices Act in 1945 (Boyko 171). The eviction
suffered long histories of racial exclusion and violent discrimination in Canada, and unfortunately, these histories continue to contribute to the racial politics that inform the racist assumptions that pervade Canadian popular consciousness. Much of recent Canadian fiction written by authors racialized in Canada addresses, albeit in different ways, similar lived realities of Canada’s ongoing history of systemic racialization and the perceived failure of multiculturalism.

Jeffrey Reitz and Rupa Banerjee’s 2007 research paper, titled “Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada” provides statistical evidence of what Chariandy describes as “clear waning of belonging on the part of Canadian second-generation visible minorities, but especially second-generation blacks” (“The Fiction” 818). Reitz and Banerjee report experiences of discrimination in Canada, noting the “highest rate is for Blacks, 49.6 percent, but there are substantial rates also for the other visible minority groups” (10). Additionally, they document how “for the children of racial minority immigrants the percentage of experiencing discrimination is still greater” (11). Dionne Brand in her novel A Map to the Door of No Return articulates the

and destruction of Hogan’s Alley in Vancouver and Africville in Halifax are two fairly recent examples (1964 and 1970, respectively) of legislated discrimination impacting low-income Black Canadian communities. Canadians of Japanese descent have lived in Canada since the 1880s, first residing primarily in British Columbia. Despite their long history of contributions to Canadian society, Japanese Canadian history has always been marred by systemic discrimination and racial politics. Following decades of disenfranchisement and anti-Asian sentiment, both WWI and WWII resulted in violent racial persecution, obfuscating human rights for any person of Japanese descent living in Canada. It took four years after the end of WWII before all restrictions were lifted from Japanese Canadians and full citizenship rights returned. Yet, Japanese Canadians lost all property during WWII internment and had no homes or livelihood to return to. Almost forty years later, the National Association of Japanese Canadians finally won their battle against the Canadian government, which consented to sign the Japanese Redress Agreement, offering an apology and settlement to the remaining survivors of the internment.
consequent disaffection towards the Canadian nation when she writes, “Belonging does not interest me” (85). Cultural critic Rinaldo Walcott claims, “Even as nations give way to various forms of citizenship influenced by the latest trends in globalization, black people in Canada continue to exist in precarious relation to older versions of citizenship and older versions of belonging” (23). However, Walcott’s response to George Elliott Clarke reveals the tensions and contrary attitudes that emerge when attempting to articulate ways to read and interpret “the many blacknesses in Canada” (15). Nevertheless, the ideological concept and the social practice of Canadian multiculturalism remain at odds. Smaro Kamboureli considers the Multicultural Act a “sedative politics” (82) to quell the masses, Neil Bissoondath views it as “cultural apartheid” (Selling 89) and George Elliott Clarke vehemently opposes it as “a racist policy of assimilation” (qtd. in Huggan and Siemerling 100). Bharati Mukherjee criticizes multiculturalism for its perpetuation of an “‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality” (135). In Black Like Who?, Walcott critiques the “nation that forms him, but a nation that cannot imagine him within its own formative narratives” (16). Many contemporary Canadian authors and cultural critics challenge the disjunction between the reality and illusion of Canada as a multicultural nation. Many of their works engage politically in a postcolonial reconfiguring of subjectivities.

Robert Young positions postcolonialism as a process that “names the activities by which new subaltern histories, new identities, new geographies, [and] new

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11 Rinaldo Walcott responds to George Elliott Clarke’s ‘caustic’ reviews of Black Like Who? and criticizes Clarke for separating older black ‘authentic’ rural Canada with newer urban ‘inauthentic’ black immigrant migrations. Writing from a diasporic perspective, Walcott views Clarke’s desire to belong to the nation as “melancholic” (16), and he claims, “Clarke fails to direct his critique at the more appropriate target, like nation-state policies” (18).
conceptualizations of the world – transnational rather than Western – are fashioned and
performed” (Postcolonialism 66). The 1950s and 1960s’ global struggles for
independence from colonial powers, the Women’s and Civil Rights movements in the
U.S. and Canada, and the 1971 Canadian Multicultural Act prompted discussions about
power differentials and incited collective action for social change. By the 1970s and
1980s, Canadian literature began addressing issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.
These postcolonial Canadian authors began to engage in the postmodern political strategy
of “question[ing] whose notion of truth gains power and authority over others and then
examin[ing] the process of how it does so” (Hutcheon, Poetics 18). According to Linda
Hutcheon, this critical intervention “leads to the acknowledgement, not of truth, but of
truths in the plural, truths that are socially, ideologically, and historically conditioned”
(Poetics 18). Aptly, Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin position “literary texts [as] not
merely passive recipients of theoretical discourse, but active participants in the acts of
negotiating meaning and capable of ‘theorizing back’” (qtd. in Donnell and Welsh 448).
Such literature creates a de-spatialized cultural space, Homi Bhabha’s “third space of
enunciation,” within which this literature destabilizes the cultural representations that
mirror oppressive power relations. I suggest that the Caribbean Canadian and Japanese
Canadian literature I discuss perform in such a fashion, by reconfiguring
conceptualizations of the Canadian nation, as transnational and diasporic rather than
national. I agree with Lily Cho’s situating of “minority literatures in Canada as contested
sites of the uneasiness of diasporic citizenship” (94).

The local, national, global, diasporic, and the imaginative all contribute to and
define subjectivity, and site-specific historiographies and personal narratives reveal how
imaginings of home and community and one’s sense of belonging to the nation vary immensely within Canada. My dissertation engages with novels that provide exemplary sites for noting how authors utilize fiction as a staging ground for new configurations of identity and social understanding in Canada. In terms of transnational migration, citizenship, and notions of belonging, the roles and opportunities for women and men are often regulated according to vastly different social expectations. In many cultures, women have long been positioned as the conduits of traditional rules and values, the keepers of the hearth, and their relation to the nation depends upon the patriarchal ideologies governing their social positions and rights to autonomy. When women are symbolically constructed “as the custodians of tradition” (Boehmer 349), this social role ironically excludes them from participating equally with men in society. Elleke Boehmer explains this ‘double bind’ position as a consequence of when women “seek[ing] to distance themselves from cultural revivalism, of which they are nevertheless the designated exponents, […] are accused of selling out to so-called Western values of self-determination and feminist claims for equal rights” (349). Particularly within new socio-political environments, women must continually negotiate contradiction as new ideologies impose different cultural gender norms that contest or, inadvertently, reinforce traditional familial or cultural expectations. In the diaspora, as Floya Anthias suggests, “[w]omen may be empowered by retaining home traditions but they may also be quick to abandon them when they are no longer strategies of survival” (571). At times, new systems of power can afford emancipatory experiences for women, such as economic independence, and yet, “gendered relations are constitutive of the positionalities of the groups themselves” to which immigrant women may belong (Anthias 572). Labour
processes and racialization also radically impact gender dynamics and the resulting class structures within and between immigrant groups. Ethnicity, gender, class, and age construct uneven processes of power distribution, which continue to subordinate women in highly contradictory social positions. Therefore, many women in the diaspora develop new subjectivities influenced by these multiple locations and the contradictory forces of continuity and rupture.

*Chorus of Mushrooms, Obasan, Odori, Cereus Blooms at Night, and Soucouyant* contribute new fictional voices and visions to minoritized histories in Canada. Their characterizations of old racialized women radically differ, thus providing valuable fictional comparisons of the developmental processes and manifestations of different psychological responses to the past, to systemic discrimination, to diasporic memory, and to the figuring of new subjectivities. Their representations of intergenerational relationships between these complex old immigrant women and younger characters afford literary studies with critical sites of analysis on how age, diasporic dislocation, trauma, and racialization collectively impact the narrativization of life histories and contribute in the formation of personal subjectivities. As I said earlier, I do not suggest that any diaspora constitutes a homogeneous collective, or that the texts I have chosen are representative of or define a specific diasporic cultural condition. Rather, my interest in showcasing these specific texts derives from their similar attention to the interpersonal dynamics within intergenerational families, revealing how subjectivities emerge

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12 Other examples are Andre Alexis’s *Childhood*, SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*, Lori Lansens’s *Rush Home Road*, Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*, and Makeda Silvera’s *The Heart Does Not Bend*, and the list could go on. All these novels figure old women as important characters who profoundly influence the lives of other characters in the novels.
dialogically in relation to one another and in particular social contexts. As one would expect, these novels address the specifics of different historical and material contexts within the content of their embedded narratives, yet they similarly position storytelling as a collaborative means for drawing tellers, listener-characters, and listener-readers\textsuperscript{13} alike into larger cultural narratives about home, Canada, displacement, self-definition, and social belonging. What I find intriguing is that despite these novels’ different geo-cultural and diasporic contexts (a Japanese Canadian family in the Prairies, a Japanese Canadian family fractured through the internment process of WWII, a Japanese Canadian great-grandmother and great-granddaughter on an island in the East China Sea, an Indo-Caribbean woman and her caregiver in a Caribbean Alms house, and a Black Caribbean Canadian mother and son in a small Toronto suburb), each emphasizes the significance of old women within the family and community and the challenges of intergenerational relationships within geographic spaces of cultural convergences.\textsuperscript{14} Additionally, these literary representations of intergenerational diasporic storytelling provides authors and readers a critical means for bearing witness to the histories and ongoing experiences of

\textsuperscript{13} I am drawing upon Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez’s conception of readers as “listener-readers” who are positioned in a similar participatory role as the characters within the story and thus must transform from passive receivers of story into active participants in the storytelling process in order to “find the truths and meaning for herself [and/] or himself” (346). I contend that if listener-readers understand storytelling as an interactive transformative dialogic process, then story creates “avenues of understanding and meaning, to shift experiential ground and create visions for the future” (Chinn and Kramer 162).

\textsuperscript{14} Spaces of cultural convergence are geographic sites where people of diverse cultures interact and assert and/or challenge to negotiate their constituted social positions. Anne Michaels’ novel \textit{Fugitive Pieces} characterizes Toronto as a zone of cultural convergence “where almost everyone has come from elsewhere […] bringing with them their different ways” (89).
colonial oppression, cultural dislocation, systemic discrimination, and transhistorical trauma.

My individual chapters focus on novels that represent specific contexts and histories; however, each chapter is read in conversation with the others as they all contribute social understandings about old women and intergenerational cultural politics in Canada. Chapter 2 and 3 focus on Japanese Canadian literary examples, which all figure intergenerational storytelling engagements between female characters. Chapter 4 and 5 focus on Trinidadian Canadian literary examples, which both characterize the listener-tellers/narrators as male (although Mootoo’s narrator’s gender performance challenges normative assumptions about a masculinity/femininity binary). While complex differences exist between their representations, both Goto’s and Tamayose’s old women characters provide emotional and psychological guidance to the younger women in the novels, and they function as positive conduits to the past, to familial histories, and to cultural knowledge. Conversely, Mootoo’s and Chariandy’s old women, also extremely diverse in their representations, both experience dementia, and their loss of language and cognitive acuity render them incomprehensible storytellers of the past. The young male narrators in these two novels must imaginatively piece together the fragments of stories they hear but cannot fully understand from their own frame of reference. Although in this dissertation I do not draw a definitive conclusion about the implications of gendered pairings in a listening-telling act, a comparison of these novels indicates the responses and engagements that occur may be contingent on the gendered context of the relationship.
My questions, projections, provocations, and conclusions raised for each chapter can apply to many other recent novels written not only by diasporic authors in Canada, but as I suggested earlier, to many novels written by Indigenous authors in Canada. I suggest that an examination of different representations of cultural dislocation and critiques of power structures provides useful contradictory and comparative interpretations of both personal and collective experiences and social concerns. As a (relatively) young white woman in academia, I am aware of the implications of the cultural position from which I write and I acknowledge the inevitable limitations of my readings of these novels’ representations of the violence of discrimination (both racism and ageism) and the diverse cultural traditions, folklore, and other culturally specific allusions. I heed Uma Narayan’s suggestion in “Working across Difference” that outsiders must enact a ‘methodological humility’ and ‘methodological caution,’ a strategy mapped out excellently in Helen Hoy’s How Should I Read These: Native Women Writers in Canada. Both Narayan and Hoy posit the necessity of “humility and caution” when acknowledging one’s culture- (and to this I add age-) specific positioning in order to “recognize presumed limitations to the outsider’s understanding and the importance of not undermining the insider’s perspective” (qtd. in Hoy 18). With these words of caution in mind, I hope this study provokes further conversation about the contributions of inter- and intra-generational, cross-cultural, and age perspectives on Canada’s minoritized histories.

I query whether this literary turn to the old woman character affords authors a creative avenue to imagine how diasporic consciousness develops when trauma and history are repeatedly inscribed through family narratives, narrative gaps, and
generational silences. Their intergenerational storytelling engagements exemplify the fraught relationship between memory, subjectivity, and the past, disrupting the linearity of past-present-future to reveal the interconnectivities of the personal and the collective. The stories these old women tell and the stories told about these old women exemplify the connections among time, place, and experience. Storytelling functions as a narrative device that reveals how different ageist, racist, classist, and gendered forms of violence in Canada internally and externally structure the lives of marginalized women and affect individuals, families, and communities in diverse ways. These storytelling engagements of old racialized women as intergenerational storytellers interrogate ‘truths’ as subjective ideologies. While I challenge Catherine Silver’s generalization that older women operate within “a sphere of normative freedom” (379), I do read some old women characters from minoritized groups as socio-political agents who provide models of “agency in later life” (Tulle 175). When intergenerational storytelling addresses the social, cultural, and political implications of dislocation, loss, assimilation, trauma, forgetting, and ageing, it functions as a counter-discursive practice that educes strategies for reclaiming personal and collective identities through acts of self-definition. Such acts draw both listeners and readers into a discursive realm to interrogate ideologies, assumptions, differential power dynamics, and the socio-political processes affecting subject formation within intergenerational and cross-cultural relations in Canada.

My dissertation engages novels that creatively and critically imagine new ways to narrativize trauma and develop intergenerational and cross-cultural understanding in Canada. Undoubtedly, these novels do important work in challenging racist and ageist violence and dismantling negative cultural stereotypes about the intellectual, physical,
and cognitive deficiencies associated with old age. I would like to laud contemporary novels that position old women as central protagonists who profoundly influence the development of others, as these novels illustrate a political awareness of the important roles that old women perform within the family and community. Yet, I recognize a need to raise awareness of what else is at stake in these literary representations of intergenerational storytelling. Guided by the work of theorists such as Proma Tagore and Anne Kaplan on ‘bearing witness,’ I question the representational ethics of storytelling engagements in which old women are explicitly identified within the language of the text as storytellers, yet in actuality, do not ‘tell’ their own stories. We, as critical readers, must learn to identify when this literary strategy of privileging a younger person as the primary narrator merely re-inscribes patterns of ‘age relations,’ a discursive tradition that generates and perpetuates ageism and continues to undermine the authority of old women. I focus on these different acts of telling and listening because each engagement exemplifies how the past refuses to be forgotten and that these traumas demand to be addressed and eventually integrated into a character’s identity.

My project differs from other literary studies on old women in fiction by considering how age perspectives, informed by experiences of discrimination due to perceived racial and ethnic differences, must factor into literary analyses. I draw together the diverse fields of narratology, literary trauma theory, diaspora studies, and social gerontology to provide a broad frame of reference from which to analyze and address how these narratives raise important social and political concerns about traumatic pasts, assimilation, and exclusion. Intergenerational storytelling aids listeners and readers to “navigate diversity with the specificity of histories, languages, and subjectivities” (Miki
117). Complexly marginalized through what Eleanor Palo Stoller calls “interlocking systems of experience (i.e., race, class, gender)” (xx), old racialized women become situated as multiply ‘othered,’ and these facets of their subjectivity inform their narratives, which function as polyphonic sites that interrogate “manifestations of social relations of inequality” (Bannerji 5). Through these narratives, readers encounter different aged perspectives on the effects of dislocation, cultural convergence and assimilation, and intergenerational conflicts that can arise within a new geo-cultural environment. My hope is this dissertation contributes new critical perspectives to literary trauma studies on the multifaceted ways that age, dislocation, discrimination, and the transmission of trauma collectively impact the narrativization and the contingent formation of personal subjectivities.

These five novels written by diasporic authors living in Canada reveal how both stories and silences can house the hauntings of a traumatized past. Within their narratives, sometimes the listening/telling act provides agency to both the speaking subject and the listener, whereas at other times, as I will show, intergenerational storytelling problematically re-inscribes dominant power relations that continue to deny the old woman agency. Each chapter examines different literary representations of the articulation of personal and collective traumas, and I have ordered these chapters in such a way as to address the theoretical implications of narrative focalization. While I will discuss communicative instances of reciprocity and of ruptures in the various novels, I do not wish to be prescriptive and suggest that one novel encapsulates one mode more than another. Rather, I wish to illuminate when these communicative instances occur, how
they are presented, and query their implications for intergenerational and cross-cultural relations in Canada.

Chapter 1 outlines my theoretical framing and methodologies for this project. My investigation of storytelling as a discursive mode of intergenerational transmission draws together narratology with critical discussions about cultural storytelling practices and narrative theories on ageing and perspective, postcolonial studies on gender and discrimination, diaspora scholarship on generational perspectives, and studies on representations of ageing in literature. Narratology provides a critical language through which to address specific storytelling strategies. However, this objective structuralist approach fails to consider satisfactorily context and tradition, and thus cultural studies on non-Western storytelling practices inform my investigation of what and how stories communicate. Additionally, my dissertation explores how memory in old age is a contributing factor in narrativization patterns. Therefore, I supplement my analysis of these old women’s storytelling engagements with theories on narratives of ageing, so as to communicate better how memory, the past, and retrospective life reflections impact the structure of personal narratives and the construction of narrative identities. Importantly however, focalization contributes to a reader’s understanding, and the narrator’s age invariably constructs different age perspectives on how the past influences the present. The novels I focus on provide different age perspectives on the ways that personal and collective traumas impact the individual and the family. In the subsequent chapters, I will demonstrate how trauma theories guide my analysis of specific intergenerational storytelling engagements that reveal modalities of silence, psychic hauntings, and complex acts of forgetting as common manifestations of psychogenic responses to
personal and/or transhistorical transmissions of traumatic memory. Work by trauma theorists and their theoretical concepts related to trauma studies such as postmemory (Marianne Hirsch), transhistorical trauma (Michelle Balaev), insidious violence (Laura Brown), and intrusive memories (Bessel Van der Kolk) will inform each reading.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore what I see as a generational shift in attitude occurring in recent Japanese Canadian writing. In both Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* and Darcy Tamayose’s *Odori*, the narrators provide critique of the cultural codes of silence in Japanese Canadian history. Instead of maintaining silences, as seen in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, these two novels emphasize a turn towards reciprocal storytelling as a mutually dialogic and transformative mode of communication that better facilitates a negotiation of cultural and psychological dislocations. These novels provide different age perspectives on how a character’s subject position informs her understanding and coping strategies for surviving experiences of personal and collective trauma.

More specifically, Chapter 2 investigates the emphasized importance of ‘telling’ in Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*, a novel where the narrative strategies perform as an instructive model for creating reciprocal storytelling engagements. The structure progresses in a way that replicates the developmental stages of reciprocity between storytelling participants. The old woman Obachan teaches her granddaughter Murasaki the importance of both listening and telling as a collaborative means for constructing a family story that looks both backwards and forwards. The different age perspectives in this novel provide insight into the variances in generational beliefs about the continuity of a family’s traditional values and customs in a new socio-cultural environment. This novel illustrates how immigration, assimilation, and Eurocentric ageist discourses in Canada
redefine gendered roles and expectations of old Japanese women, and how this redistribution of power dynamics creates intergenerational cross-cultural tensions within the family. In this reciprocal storytelling engagement, both characters perform a double role as listener-tellers, through which they discover agency to reconfigure and self-define their personal identities, not only within the family, but within the larger context of community, nation, and diaspora.

Chapter 3 begins with an investigation of the complex modalities of silence present in Kogawa’s *Obasan* in order to provide a historical context for Tamayo’s *Odori*, which asserts that self-narration is a necessary strategy for working through the immobilization of trauma. These two novels reveal juxtaposing perspectives on interfamily communication when dealing with familial losses and trauma, yet both equally emphasize the importance of listening (whether to communicative silences in *Obasan* or to diverse expressive modes of storytelling in *Odori*.) This chapter attempts to provide some answers to Anne Whitehead’s query about how trauma can be narrativized, if it inherently resists language or representation. In Tamayo’s novel, the narrative structure reproduces and re-enacts dislocation and the belatedness of trauma as conditions of experience, which helps situate the reader in a dissociated subject position. The old woman character Basan teaches her great-granddaughter Mai about reciprocal storytelling as a key discursive strategy for coping with trauma, and her lessons on the practices of storytelling include numerous examples of non-verbal modes of expression. Mai learns she must begin to articulate the past, and drawing becomes her means.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two Caribbean Canadian novels, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant*, in which the
characterizations of the old women complicate assumptions about madness and storytelling. I will demonstrate how the absence of community results in narrative gaps, which further rupture communication and social understanding. Ultimately, these old women’s dementia poses a challenge for their listeners, who, in both cases, feel compelled to bear witness to the old women’s traumatic histories. These two chapters analyze the various implications of the shift in focalization when the younger character, in taking over the narrative act, transforms from listener to teller.

Chapter 4 examines the teller/listener relationship in Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, which upholds mutual trust as key when bearing witness to another’s trauma. This section asks what are the politics of telling, when listening constitutes the interpretation of what is characterized as madness. Memory loss, commonly associated with dementia and old age, becomes complicated when symptomatic of a personal response to trauma, systemic discrimination, and subsequent dislocation. This chapter shows how an old woman’s ‘madness’ reflects and critiques dominant or popular discourses that are, in fact, exclusionary and serve to legitimize the exclusion of ‘difference.’ Mootoo’s novel offers a sensitive portrayal of an old woman with dementia, but the protagonist Mala’s inability to self-narrate her own life story mirrors Sidonie Smith’s theory that a person with dementia “can only be known through representations by others” (231). Mala’s caregiver, a young transgendered nurse, becomes the primary narrator of the old woman’s violent history; yet, as the narrative develops, it reveals much about Tyler’s own sense of cultural dislocation and ‘unbelonging.’ This novel raises important questions about narrative perspective and what constitutes ‘truth,’ as an objective reflection of reality and considering the ‘truthfulness’ of the telling.
Chapter 5 also critiques the operation of exclusionary discourses, in this case how ‘multiculturalism’ can impact interpersonal and intergenerational familial relations in Canada. In Chariandy’s *Soucouyant*, the representation of storytelling as a mode for articulating someone else’s experiences of trauma becomes problematic when the narrativization act appropriates stories not one’s own. While I will demonstrate that the ‘telling’ of the old woman’s stories provides for the younger character an important means to negotiate both his own experiences of insidious violence and his troubled relationship to postmemory, I query the ethics of this focalization. However, this novel does succeed in creating a site where issues about the appropriation of voice are raised and critically explored. This narrative interweaves personal traumas with transgenerational traumas, yet the narrativization process between teller and listener breaks down at times because of the cognitive, cultural, and communicative distance between the two. Chariandy’s representation of communicative ruptures and the unintentional silencing of the storyteller complicates the intentionality of bearing witness by narrating another person’s life story. Thus, the ambiguity that characterizes this novel challenges how reciprocity might be conceptualized between the old woman and her son.

Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Kogawa’s *Obasan*, Tamayose’s *Odori*, Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Chariandy’s *Soucouyant* provide readers and critics with exemplary representations of the challenges, implications, and strategies for narrativizing trauma in cross-cultural and intergenerational communicative exchanges. All of these novels characterize storytelling as an important means of working through different experiences of dislocation (be it from diasporic migrations, traumatic experiences, cultural displacement, systemic discrimination, or relational fractures occurring
intergenerationally within the family). Thus, I am interested in the stories these fictional old diasporic women tell, to whom they tell their stories, who listens, how these listeners engage in this listening act, and how, on the narrative level, such acts of telling operate.
Chapter 1

Narratives of Ageing, Trauma, and Diaspora

When diasporic novels written in Canada focus on personal and collective experiences of trauma, they reveal similarities in their patterns of structure, textuality, and transmission. While the presence of critical differences among these texts speaks to their diverse cultural contexts, the texts raise similar thematic and meta-narrative concerns about the imperative to tell and the ethics of listening and reading. A literary analysis of Hiromi Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms, Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, Darcy Tamayose’s Odori, Shani Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night, and David Chariandy’s Soucoupant uncovers layered narratives of ageing, of trauma, and of diasporic dislocation. Individually, these narratives all employ similar literary strategies, all thematically address how the past continues to inform the present, and all exemplify how personal experiences and subjectivity shape the structure, content, emphases, and absences in the stories one tells. When combined, these layered narratives highlight the fraught relationship between memory and subjectivity.

This dissertation asserts that personal experiences (sometimes traumatic ones) and the associated memories, plus a diasporic consciousness, intermingle in a complex interplay that shapes subjectivities in very diversified and individual ways. The stories told by and about old racialized diasporic women demonstrate the impact of age, trauma, and diaspora on the recollection and transmission of the past. Therefore, this chapter argues that positioning theories of ageing in conversation with literary theories on trauma and diaspora can reframe literary methodologies to investigate the influence of different
age perspectives on one’s understanding of how the past informs the present both in terms of personal and collective experiences of trauma and dislocation.

To date, very few literary studies examine how age critically intersects with gender, race, and culture in the formation of old women’s subjectivities as represented in late-twentieth century and early twenty-first century Canadian fiction. Yet, in novels investigating intergenerational relations in the Canadian context, old women characters often profoundly influence the psychological development of other characters. Curiously, even theories on diaspora, despite an emerging focus on second-generation issues,¹⁵ have yet to sufficiently address how age influences one’s perspective and analysis of social relations. In this regard, as Floya Anthias protests, diaspora studies, which offer theoretical positions from which to resist normative beliefs in universality, still neglect to consider the importance of intersectionality and its implications for women in diaspora (570).¹⁶ While even Anthias omits age from her discussion, she does point out that “the lack of attention to issues of gender, class, and generation […] is deeply worrying from the perspective of the development of multiculturality, and more inclusive notions of belonging” (577). Literary studies that consider age as a category of difference can provide readers with an important critical lens for better analyzing intergenerational diasporic relationships in the Canadian context.

In order to address the recent increase in literary representations of old women in Canadian fiction, this chapter begins with a survey of post-1950s representations and the

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¹⁵ See David Chariandy’s “‘The Fiction of Belonging’: On Second-Generation Black Writing in Canada.”

¹⁶ See Floya Anthias’s “Evaluating Diaspora: Beyond Ethnicity?” for a discussion on the necessity to gender the diaspora in considerations of class, trans-ethnic alliances, and power relations.
various critical responses from literary studies. This contextual frame illustrates that most literary studies to date examine only the experiences of old white Anglo-Canadian women. This project focuses on more recent works of fiction – written by Japanese Canadian and Caribbean Canadian diasporic authors in Canada – that figure old racialized women as characters who simultaneously mirror and disrupt Eurocentric assumptions about old age and memory. The relationships between old women and younger characters provide sites to reflect on the conflicts that can arise within multigenerational immigrant families in Canada. By analyzing the narrative strategies deployed by the different storytellers within these novels, readers gain insight into how focalization is inherently tied to age perspective. Cultural convergence impacts the differing belief systems held in the family, and readers are provided with multiple age perspectives on the effects of immigration, dislocation, assimilation, and alienation. Thus, this first section addresses these complex characterizations of old women because they increase a reader’s awareness of how one’s subjectivity and life experiences contribute significantly to one’s social understanding.

The second part of this chapter examines a range of theoretical contributions to studies on ageing to map out how they can contribute to literary analyses of trauma,

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17 Asian American scholar Lisa Lowe warns against viewing “Asian-American cultural politics as a struggle between first and second generations within a familial framework” because this restrictive tendency obscures the systemic operations of historical and ongoing exclusions (132). An analysis of age perspective reveals how Eurocentric ageism becomes linked with and thus contributes to intergenerational struggles.

18 I am using French narratologist Gérard Genette’s differentiation of focalization, which pertains to the discourse level in narrative and “who sees” (i.e., the subjective perception from which the narrative is presented.) In Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, Genette outlines the five key concepts he argues are relevant to narrative analysis: voice, mood, order, frequency, and duration. Focalization, while closely related to voice, falls within the category of mood and depends upon variables, such as distance, that impact narrative perspective.
diaspora, and intergenerational relationships in fiction. Combined, these diverse discourses help construct a theoretical frame that recognizes the complexity of these interconnected and variable conditions on subjectivity and memory. By differentiating memory from memories, we are better able to examine how the past surfaces within and inhabits the present. To simplify: in narratives of ageing, the past can reappear through an old woman’s analeptic flashbacks and recollections; in narratives of trauma, past experiences can manifest through recursive psychic hauntings; and in narratives of diaspora, the past often signifies an ‘elsewhere’ that refuses to be forgotten and yet to which no return is possible. In second- or subsequent-generation narratives of diaspora, younger characters’ storytelling can enact a narrative return to a past he or she has not personally experienced. Interwoven within the novels I investigate, these narrative threads provide new perspectives on how difficult life experiences continue to impact the present moment, personally and collectively.

Intergenerational relationships in fiction portray multiple age perspectives and responses to trauma and diasporic dislocation. Whether addressing personal experiences of physical and/or psychic traumatic violence, collective experiences of discriminatory oppression and violence, or collective inheritances of cultural memories and transhistorical traumatic postmemory, many diasporic authors employ storytelling within the narrative as a means for the narrator to reconcile past and present selves or to re-script dissociated selves fractured by the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of trauma. According to Cathy Caruth, the “inherent latency” of a traumatic event “explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in
another time” (8). This chapter examines ‘inherent latency’ as a literary device of narratives of ageing, trauma, and diasporic dislocation. Readers will note how the narrativization of the past begins to impose both a chronological and linguistic ordering onto the memories of incomprehensible experiences of personal and collective trauma. Some narrators discover storytelling enables a working through of psychic dislocations, facilitating the construction of a newly configured, coherent, narrative identity. However, for other characters in these novels—particularly old women (as I will show in Chapters 4 and 5), storytelling does not always afford such emancipatory potential. Chapter 1 concludes by raising a series of questions for the reader who is, in turn, now also positioned as witness to the incomprehensibility of trauma. Considering that certain literary techniques create innumerable challenges for both listening to and telling trauma, how does a reader ethically ‘bear witness’ to fictional representations of another person’s traumatic past?

OLD WOMEN IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

I note an emergent trend in recent Canadian fiction towards an increase in both the number and complexity of literary representations of old women living in Canada. This literary shift from earlier representations better reflects the current demographic situation with old women constituting the fastest increasing population in Canada. According to Statistics Canada’s 2006 census, “Canada’s elderly population (aged 80 and over) surpassed the one million mark, with women comprising 64.6% of this group as their average life expectancy now stands at 82.5 years. The same report claims 13.7% of Canadians are 65 years or older, with studies indicating this population will double within
the next 25 years. The percentage of Canadians aged 100 and older (five women for every one man) has increased nearly 50% since the 1996 census” (Laurent and Malenfant). Of particular interest to my research are works of fiction that figure old women as central protagonists whose characterizations destabilize Eurocentric ageist assumptions about old age, cognitive decline, forgetting, and remembering. These representations of old women protagonists from minoritized groups mark a changing focus and politicization of the culturally discriminatory ideologies and practices that continue to circulate within Eurocentric discourses.

Old racialized women, multiply ‘othered,’ are marginalized through what Eleanor Palo Stoller terms “interlocking systems of experience” (xx) which create complex and situationally dependent hierarchies that contribute to the diversity of experiences in old age. A critical evaluation of their representations provides insight into the discursive powers that produce meaning. Carol Matthews asserts that, from “their dual state of Otherness,” as old and female, old women “exert a powerful influence on our culture and on our literature” (2). Their characterizations as intergenerational storytellers, spiritual guides, and/or madwomen simultaneously reflect and challenge various cultural assumptions about old women and their roles within the family and community.

For many authors, literature affords a social space to expose discriminatory ideologies and address silenced histories. Thus, I argue this recent turn in Canadian literature signals a political awareness of the continued marginalization of ‘visible’ minorities in Canada, particularly of old racialized women. Eurocentric assumptions about old age obscure difference, and novels such as Chariandy’s Soucouyant, which raises questions about the applicability of the American Psychiatric Association’s
diagnosis of dementia for old racialized traumatized diasporic women, illustrate how racism compounds the stigmatization of markers of old age. With both race and old age, skin functions as one of the visible markers of difference; old racialized women suffer increasing objectification and marginalization in a predominately white Canadian society. Therefore, this project began as an investigation of fictional representations that gesture towards the invisibility of ageism complicated by the visibility of race. My interest in the specific novels I analyze in the following chapters derives from my belief that they create, what Wendy Walters calls, “an important location for the staging of resistance identities” (x).

The increasing publication of multicultural literatures in Canada within the past two decades contributes significantly to the complexity in representations of old women who better reflect Canada’s current demographic situation. Thus, my project is timely and has social relevance. Coupled with an increase in immigration since 2001, Canada’s ageing population continues to both diversify and increase in number. Attitudes and assumptions about ageing and old women vary immensely between cultures, as well as both within and between generation cohorts of the same cultural group. Nevertheless, as Matthews asserts, “[o]ld women, in Canada […] endure social, psychological and economic hardships which result from, and contribute to, a state of powerlessness” (2). Therefore, diverse cultural perspectives that afford authority and respect to old women within Canadian families and communities deserve attention.

Anthropologist Joan Weibel-Orlando examines how, within many cultures, old women are considered important members of the family and community. Addressing the multiple roles of grandparents in North American Indian families, she notes the
commonly held “belief that old age represents the culmination of cultural experience” (196). While not speaking specifically about women, Lakota/Anishinabe scholar and author Frances Washburn positions American Indian storytellers as “the repositories of information, the living libraries for their nations, and respected members of their communities” (111), and feminist postcolonial filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha similarly emphasizes the storyteller’s importance in the African context whereby “every griotte who dies is a whole library that burns down” (121). Trinh’s words acknowledge how the African storyteller houses a legacy of cultural myth and history and that, without the transmission of this knowledge to a younger generation, this cultural archive of collective social memory will be forever lost. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, scholar of Native American literature, explains how “[o]lder women’s stories and relationships provide the mainstays of their people’s sacred centres” (247).

Old women can be perceived as conduits or connections to the past. Yet, as seen in many works of fiction, old women can become marginalized by a second-generation author’s emphasis on the future as the primary locus of interest. Novels about intergenerational conflict or the transference of collective memories tend to construct contradictory representations of old women. For example, Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995) provides readers with multiple interpretations of the old woman storyteller whose stories interweave history and myth. Choy’s old woman character Poh-Poh, or Grandmama, is an eighty-three-year-old Chinese Canadian woman who “took pleasure in her status and became the arbitrator of the old ways” (6). However, when all but one of the youngest members of her family adopt the socio-cultural norms of Canadian society, she becomes devalued within the family and socially dismissed as “harmlessly crazy”
Native scholar Paula Gunn Allen notes how the valuing of “traditions, history, and place” often becomes supplanted through one’s desire to shed personal and cultural histories and assimilate (209). This tendency to erase a cultural past appears as a common trope in many immigrant novels set in Canada, illustrating the conscious repositioning of one’s sense of self, place, and values. However, sociologists Eleanor Palo Stoller and Rose Campbell Gibson claim there is a “[r]enewed interest in ‘ethnic roots’ among younger generations that translates old people’s knowledge of ethnic history and culture into an exchange resource,” and they argue this shift “provides mechanisms through which cultural differences within families can strengthen intergenerational relationships” (169). According to their conclusions in Worlds of Difference: Inequality in the Ageing Experience (1994), Stoller and Gibson claim old people are becoming re-valued as socially significant members of the family and community. Asserting the value of old women specifically, Blood/Blackfoot author Beverly Hungry Wolf contends, “it would help the present world situation if we all learned to value and respect the ways of the grandmothers—our own as well as everyone else’s” (17).

Literary theorist Sally Chivers claims, “we currently lack a discourse on the institution of grandmotherhood” (xliv). In her important interdisciplinary study on old women’s narratives, she suggests that Joan Barfoot’s novel Duet for Three and Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms “risk positive ageism in their idealization of the grandmother role,” while simultaneously “exceed[ing] the limitations” (xlvi). This seemingly contradictory characterization enables authors to position old women within the family as spiritual guides for younger generations while retaining the old woman’s own complexity
and individuality. Feminist Foucauldian theorist Zoe Brennan warns that the “adored and adoring grandmother” stereotype controls old women’s agency because this characterization “cannot encompass a life for the matriarch away from her offspring and totally excludes single women” (2); however, Indigenous theorist Jennifer Kelly reads the figure of “grandmother” in Indigenous writings as “neither a fixed location nor a reified image, but as a potentially radical writing and reading strategy” (113). The “grandmother” performs as “a site of construction of identity and a process of reclamation” (Kelly 113). Kelly interprets this figure as a “landscape” that signifies not only as a textual geography where “dominant discourses are challenged, and traditional practices are mediated” (Kelly 119), but also as a site within which we observe the emergence of old and racialized women’s reclaimed identities. Representations of old women that complicate the assumed intellectual, physical, and cognitive deficiencies commonly associated with age contribute to the dismantling of Western cultural paradigms that deny old women agency.

I interpret many of the recent fictional characterizations of old racialized diasporic women as functioning in similar ways to Kelly’s conception of the Indigenous grandmother figure. These old women characters challenge negative discourses by disrupting ageist assumptions about language, about the ‘old’ body as limited in mobility, about the veracity of memory as a repository of history and knowledge, about the complexity of forgetting as a response to displacement and/or trauma, and about storytelling, not as an irrelevant pastime, but as a critical mode of historiography that challenges exclusionary social practices and ideologies. My argument expands Kelly’s perspective to consider the significance of age, culture, and storytelling as constitutive
elements of subjectivity that configure the old woman storyteller as an exemplary site not only for analyzing the politics of her representation and the cultural implications of her storytelling, but also for analyzing differences in age perspectives. My study focuses on the different ways that diasporic authors incorporate intergenerational storytelling to teach practices of listening and telling that can inform the personal narrative and perform as a means of theorizing and negotiating cultural memory and subjectivity.

From the 1950s onward, Canadian literature contains numerous characterizations of old women living in Canada. These characterizations change over time, demonstrating a paradigmatic shift in critical thinking about the roles of old women within families and the larger society. In pre-1980s Canadian literature, the majority of old women are characterized as socially displaced and politically devalued. Many fictional works position old women of peripheral importance, whose insignificance exemplifies the devaluation of old women in a patriarchal Canadian society. Arguably, some post-1950s pre-1990s novels (such as Ethel Wilson’s 1949 The Innocent Traveller, Sheila Watson’s 1959 The Double Hook, Margaret Laurence’s 1964 The Stone Angel, Constance Beresford-Howe’s 1973 The Book of Eve, and Adele Wiseman’s 1974 Crackpot) do offer old woman characters central positions within the narrative, yet these novels still provide only limited social reflections on old women in Canada.

The best-known old woman in Canadian literature is Hagar Shipley in Margaret Laurence’s novel The Stone Angel. Margaret Atwood in Survival describes Hagar as “tough, acerbic, self-critical and angry,” a characterization that “takes the Canadian old-woman figure about as far towards being human as can be expected” (205). This ninety-year-old stubborn and frustrated woman resides with her son and daughter-in-law.
Through her life review process, she comes to realize and regret her current circumstances of increasing dependence and decreasing rights to her own home and life choices. Hagar attempts to escape the inevitability of her future when threatened by an impending move into a care home for seniors. Brennan suggests Hagar’s characterization challenges negative stereotypes because “she manipulates her family and is certainly not a benign presence” (19), whereas Chivers argues that Hagar “constructs her own ageing in keeping with stereotypical attitudes of disgust, horror, and physical unreliability” (xlv).

Some of these critical writings on Laurence’s female protagonist offer important discussions for reconfiguring more positive representations of old women, representations that move away from archetypal identities towards more transformative portrayals of old age as part of a continuum of ongoing subject formation. Some essays focus on how this particular old woman resists ageist dictates of normative behaviour, thus highlighting how ageist attitudes and discourses continue to marginalize old women. Yet, many studies on Hagar also perpetuate a narrowed Eurocentric gaze that

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universalizes the realities of ageing in Canada as that which is experienced by the white, middle-class, Anglo-Christian woman.

Constance Beresford-Howe’s excellent novel *The Book of Eve* focuses also on ageing from a white, middle-class, Anglo-Canadian female perspective. Sixty-six-year-old Eva Carroll (wife, mother, and grandmother) is bored with her everyday routine. Motivated to action by the arrival of her “first old-age pension cheque” (1), Eva walks out on her ill, bitter husband of forty years and discovers freedom in a life more of her choosing. She repeatedly encounters financial insecurity, and due to her dishevelled physical appearance, she is stigmatized as crazy. This novel explores second-wave feminist issues that focus on the female body as a political site and a social text to be read, constructed, and defined as a social category. Beresford-Howe’s novel exemplifies how the embodiment of old age often mirrors the discursive practices that configure personal identities. Like *The Book of Eve*, Ethel Wilson’s *The Innocent Traveller*, towards the closing of the novel, addresses the physical and psychological challenges of care-giving for elderly dependents and exemplifies the causalities between ageing, mobility, autonomy, and the decreasing size of one’s social environment in later life.21

While these novels reflect the complexity of concerns that older women characters face in their everyday lives (i.e., declining physical and economic independence, the fear of displacement from one’s home, and the inevitability of death22),

21 Joan MacLeod’s dramatic monologue *Another Home Invasion* (2009) addresses similar concerns of ageing to *The Book of Eve* and *The Innocent Traveller*. This work of fiction employs a narrative strategy of direct audience address, which not only creates intimacy between teller and listener but also complicity.

22 See Lars Andersson’s discussion on old age concerns. In *Cultural Gerontology*, he claims, “When people survive to old age, fear of death is often replaced by fears of disability or institutionalization” (ix).
more recent novels written by diasporic (and Indigenous authors) in Canada, including Neil Bissoondath’s *The Worlds Within Her* (1998), Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* (2000), Makeda Silvera’s *The Heart Does Not Bend* (2002), and Lori Lansens’s *Rush Home Road* (2002), offer more diversified representations that better reflect the multiplicity of old women who now live in Canada. The characters in these novels illustrate the psychological and economic effects of racialization, alienation, and displacement, while also exemplifying how specific socio-historical and cultural contexts influence not only the “ageing process of the individual” (Ujimoto 22), but also her current sense of social belonging and that of her family members.

Literary representations of old and racialized women function as valuable dialogic sites for examining age as an understudied form of diversity, thus marking an important shift in literary representations of old women. Unlike these earlier Canadian works of fiction I have mentioned, within the post-1980s proliferation of ‘multicultural’ or ‘immigrant’ literatures in Canada, old women characters now occupy more central roles and are shown to influence profoundly the development of other characters within the novels. I am thinking of old women characters as diverse as Poh-Poh (*The Jade Peony*), Miss Saito (*The Electrical Field*), Edna MacMillan (*Childhood*), Shakti Ramessar (*The Worlds Within Her*), Niska (*Three Day Road*), and Adelaide Shadd (*Rush Home Road*). The list could go on. Undoubtedly, these women characters share similarities with Hagar Shipley. Eurocentric social discourse casts them as old, and the social, physical, and economic realities of their gendered and aged subject positions impact their everyday living experiences. Some women experience ageing bodies that limit physical mobility; some suffer from cognitive dysfunction which results in memory lapses and narrative
gaps; and many, like Katya, the old Mennonite woman protagonist in Sandra Birdsell’s novel *The Russländer* (2001), find themselves surrounded by others “who, like her, had come to end their days in identical cubicle-sized rooms of a personal-care home” (Birdsell 270). All old women characters make evident to the reader how old age is both a physical reality and cultural construct.

When fiction deconstructs ‘old’ to reveal its material implications, this political move raises important questions about the cultural specificity of ageist discourses. Literary studies need new methodologies that consider age alongside ethnicity, culture, and gender as key interlocking determinants that influence subjectivities and the development of familial identity within intergenerational relationships. I assert that any literary analysis must begin to account for different age perspectives when addressing issues of race and ethnicity in Canada. Because “the aged of specific ethnic groups are disadvantaged” (Ujimoto 15), I turn to contemporary novels written by diasporic authors. They afford exemplary sites to analyze social relations of inequality that implicate the influence of Western relations of power on immigrant families. For instance, as I stated earlier, many of these texts reveal how immigration and assimilation in Canada redefine gendered roles and expectations of old women within the family.23

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23 Multiculturalism espouses both assimilation and cultural pluralism, contradictory models of social belonging that lead to differing structures of social exclusion and ethnic-based or racialized inequalities. The current diversity of voices within Canadian literature creates an important critical dialogue amongst authors and readers. Canadian authors, writing from and about their own social positionings, offer a more diversified understanding of multiculturalism that does not homogenize, nor erase, cultural differences. Pluralism and diversity entered literary discussions to address the discomfiting gaps in earlier representations, and perhaps thereby slowly engage in reconstructing Canadians’ conceptions and acceptance of who is (and who can identify as) Canadian. However, this discourse has not yet delivered its designed promise of inclusivity and remains open to criticism. From a feminist Marxist anti-racist approach,
Unlike Hagar’s story, old racialized diasporic women’s individual stories highlight the complex ways that racial and ethnic discrimination, cultural and class differences, and language barriers further complicate the personal lived experiences of ageing for old women who are multiply marginalized in the Canadian context. For example, Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Kogawa’s *Obasan*, Tamayose’s *Odori*, Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Chariandy’s *Soucouyant* complicate assumptions about old age as a period of cognitive decline, while exemplifying how normative attitudes and social practices misinterpret certain behaviours and legitimate discursive powers that exclude old women from society. Despite the differences in the histories and social conditions represented in each of these novels, all provide a critique of “old” as a social and cultural construct.

When works of fiction critique how age functions within social, political, and economic relations, they illustrate what Emmanuelle Tulle calls “the regulatory role played by social gerontology” (177). In her essay “Rethinking Agency in Later Life,” Tulle implicates gerontology as having “significantly contributed to the production of knowledge which mirrors understandings of ageing and old age based on its pathological characteristics” (177). However, fiction can also illustrate how the diverse life courses of old women (including experiences of social alienation and cultural and geographic displacement), and the interconnecting psychosocial variables of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and age manifest heterogeneity in later-life subjectivities. Old women

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Himani Bannerji discredits the “discourse of diversity” as merely “a new language of ruling and administration” that “protects ideologies and practices already in place” (*Dark Side* 37). Thus, this continuation of colonial oppression under the guise of multiculturalism “makes it impossible to understand or name systemic and cultural racism, and its implications in gender and class” (*Dark Side* 54).
characters simultaneously inhabit multiple yet shifting subject positions that disrupt conceptions of old age as a homogeneous category, and their ongoing stories exemplify Stuart Hall’s conception of identity as “a ‘production’ which is never complete, [but] always in process” (392). However, many of these novels also complicate Hall’s postmodern troubling of identity, by foregrounding a pervasive fracturing of experience and identity, which results from a personal trauma, including traumatic diasporic dislocation and/or cognitive dysfunction.

Many diasporic authors ascribe similar subject positions (such as grandmother, storyteller, madwoman, and healer) to their old women characters to destabilize the generalizing assumptions underlying such stereotypes. Many old women characters in Canadian literature are characterized as mad, evident in the description of Mootoo’s old woman character who is “madder than a naked chicken at midnight and wilder than a leatherback in laying season” (Cereus 127). Similarly misinterpreted is Goto’s Obachan, who herself explains, “there is a method in my madness” (Chorus 5). Yet, how are we, as readers, meant to read ethically the intentions and behaviours of these ‘crazy’ old women when their ‘madness’ is actually a discourse of resistance? According to Annette Schlicter, the ‘madwoman’ provides readers a social critique from her “paradoxical position of enunciation” (311).

Goto’s novel illustrates the relationship between perceptions of ‘madness’ and age perspective. When Obachan’s daughter Keiko fears her mother may have “finally gone senile” (Chorus 40), Obachan explains how she is utilizing language as a resistance strategy:
Talk loudly and e-n-u-n-c-i-a-t-e. I might be stupid as well as deaf. How can anybody think a body can live in this country for twenty years and not learn the language? But let them think this. Let them think what they will, for they will. Solly, Obachan no speeku Eeenglishu. (4)

While she is seemingly performing certain socially-constructed expectations, at the same time, she warns, “If an old woman sits in a chair and never gets out and talks and talks and talks, don’t ignore her. She might be saying something that will change the colour of your eyes” (37). Obachan understands that words possess power, affording a mode of resistance for those who speak and for those who listen. Tamayose’s old woman character also enacts a similar philosophy. As a kataribe storyteller, she “mumbled like all that have come before her and all yet to come” (147). However, as seen in the Goto example of “Obachan no speeku Eeenglishu” (4), when authors employ various stylistic methodologies that emulate old women’s mutterings and silences, they often also highlight how certain ageist rhetoric masks an underlying racism.

Textual strategies that emulate the complexity of mutterings and modalities of silence demonstrate the different communicative styles that develop in response to experiences of discrimination, dislocation, and systemic acts of violence encountered within a new social environment. Such narratives enable readers to reconsider how they interpret and evaluate experiences and modes of communication. Readers also discover that silences often speak as loudly and powerfully as repetitious disclosures. Old

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24 For two interesting theories on how women’s languages can become unfixed from dominant social structures, see Jo Searles’s account of the “poetic mutterings of old women” in Woman, Aging and Ageism and, more generally, Julia Kristeva’s theory of the “semiotic” as a subversive language that can disrupt the masculine symbolic and authoritative language.
women’s storytelling practices reflect non-conventional linguistic patterns that force listeners and readers alike to learn to identify and decode narrative instances of non-discursivity and other non-verbal communicative modes. Heteroglossic and nonverbal modes of communication substantiate diverse perspectives and interpretive possibilities that disrupt the dominant social order. These diverse modes of storytelling provide readers with polyphonic sites to interrogate different representations of reality and history as subjective ideologies.

Characterized as madwomen and storytellers, old diasporic women characters provide particular age perspectives on the diverse intergenerational effects of immigration, dislocation, cultural convergence and assimilation, and the family conflicts that can arise within a new geography’s socio-cultural environment. Their narratives account for different lived realities, historical contingencies, and experiential knowledge, all of which influences one’s coping responses for negotiating the recurrences of the past within the present and for mediating ideological contradictions that obfuscate the future. Literary representations of these old women’s stories, their racialized old bodies, and their social interactions with other characters oblige readers to think about the operation of other ageist assumptions that stem from Eurocentric racial stereotypes and dominant discourses. Each woman’s stories highlight the diverse ways in which discrimination and dislocation (i.e., geographic, cultural, and psychic) influence her subjectivity and coping responses in later life. Hence, these literary representations not only constitute an important trajectory for diaspora studies but also offer breadth to critical discussions on ageing, trauma, and memory. Yet, old racialized women remain relatively ignored within literary studies.
LITERARY STUDIES ON REPRESENTATIONS OF OLD WOMEN

In her 1972 seminal text *Survival*, Margaret Atwood offers a critical intervention that nevertheless perpetuates an image of old women in Canadian literature as representative of either malevolent sinister crones, as “ice women,” or as “earth Mothers” (197). Her archetypal analysis is carried forward by Carol Matthews in *Transforming Hags: Old Women in Canadian Literature* (1988), who claims that when readers reject negative stereotypes about old women, they “discover the archetypal old woman” who can transform society (17). Matthews’s academic supervisor, Constance Rooke, differs from both Atwood’s and Matthews’s positioning of old women as fixed character types. Rooke’s work acknowledges that identities are never static or complete. In *Fear of the Open Heart* (1989), Rooke coined the term *Vollendungsroman* (74), of which she claims *The Stone Angel* to be exemplary. According to Rooke’s definition, “the most common form of the *Vollendungsroman* is the life review, in which narrative time is divided between past and present. The past – in which the characteristic matter of the *Bildungsroman* is recapitulated – is typically approached and controlled through the operation of the elderly protagonist’s memory” (78). Her conception of narratives of ageing as *Vollendungsroman* suggests ways that identities can be reconfigured in later life. When the old woman divides narrative time between the past and present, she creates a reflective distance to address her memories in order to then reconstruct or reassert her identity in the final phases of her life.

25 See Constance Rooke’s chapter “Hagar’s Old Age: The Stone Angel as Vollendungsroman” in *Fear of the Open Heart* for a detailed discussion on this specific genre and its defining characteristics.
26 Rooke develops her theories about the *Vollendungsroman* from Robert Butler’s 1963 study on the life-review process.
Many old women protagonists comment on the memory’s negotiation of the past with the present because most discovered “a long time ago you can never discard the past. It stays with you always” (Goto, *Chorus* 146). In the *Vollendungsroman*, the old protagonist engages in a life review that makes apparent “the distance she feels between what her life has been and what it should have been” (Rooke 76). Confronted with an ageing body and the constraints of linear time, the protagonist of a *Vollendungsroman* feels a sense of urgency to “hurry, hurry” (Goto, *Chorus* 73). Granted, Rooke’s conception of the *Vollendungsroman* is an important theoretical literary contribution, yet its emphasis on the approaching and ever-present spectre of death limits the potential of old women by locating them only in a life phase characterized by decline, regret, reflection, and inevitable death.

By contrast, I would argue that Barbara Frey Waxman’s *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature* (1990), which analyzes reader response to “a new genre of fiction” (2), offers a more positive interpretation of narratives on ageing. As if responding to Simone de Beauvoir’s “call upon my readers to help me” (7) in *The Coming of Age* to “expose this scandal” of ageism and “condemn the maiming, crippling system in which we live” (6), Waxman positions the *Reifungsroman* as a genre that purposefully “rejects the negative cultural stereotypes of old women and ageing, seeking to change the society that created these stereotypes” (2). Waxman turns to Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland’s study of “female versions of the *Bildungsroman*” (14) in which they claim every aspect differs from “its narrative structure, its implied psychology, [and] its representation of social pressures” (14-15). Waxman suggests the *Bildungsroman*
illustrates the specific challenges and limitations imposed on a female protagonist in a patriarchal society, and narratives about girls growing up “extend the definition of the Bildungsroman” (15) because girls must struggle for a voice against restrictive social options. A modification of the Bildungsroman, the Reifungsroman is a “novel of ripening” (11) and explores an awakening that is arguably deferred to later life for women. Compared to Rooke’s understanding of narratives of ageing as novels of “completion” (74), Waxman’s idea of “ripening” affords agency and mobility to old women characters by envisioning their later life experiences as a time for “discovery, liberation, and adventure” (11). Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis offers a similar reading to Waxman’s. Addressing the works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and other contemporary women writers, Perrakis claims that, through specific characters’ retrospective journeys, they “illuminate a new kind of midlife and older woman’s adventure […] enabling new ways of being and becoming, but open-ended and capable of great variation in practice” (1).

Despite the progression in literary studies towards understanding how old women engage in acts of agency to redefine their personal identity, those few literary theorists who have considered the implications of age as a condition of subjectivity still tend to restrict their analyses to fictional representations of old women who typify homogeneous conceptions of a Canadian national cultural identity as white, Anglo and of British colonial heritage. For example, Rooke focuses on the old women characters in the works of Canadian women writers Mavis Gallant, Margaret Laurence, and Alice Munro, who enact “the Scots-Presbyterian repression of feelings that helps to create our notorious garrison mentality” (9). Rooke argues these women characters (and their authors)
exemplify a “basic Canadian mind-set” (9), one that she calls a “fear of the open heart” which “begins as a national trait, and develops as a problem specifically for women” (14). Rooke borrows the phrase “fear of the open heart” from Mavis Gallant. Whether consciously or not, Rooke’s theorization of the causal relationship between this “fear of the open heart,” the “Scots-Presbyterian repression of feelings,” and Northrop Frye’s “garrison mentality” conflates Gallant’s cultural heritage as an Anglo-Francophone Canadian author with what Rooke generalizes as the dominant national identity. Rooke does so partially by focusing on specific female characters in Gallant’s stories such as Jean Duncan Price, the female protagonist of “Scottish blood” (138) in “Its Image on the Mirror” in My Heart is Broken (1957). Similarly, Zoe Brennan’s The Older Woman in Recent Fiction (2005), a Foucauldian analysis of old women in North American and British fiction, only examines “white [female] characters because [as she admits] different ethnic groups have their own attitudes toward the aged” (5). Granted, by consciously limiting the parameters of her study, Brennan at least acknowledges diversity.

Waxman’s text does offer one analysis of race and age in an American novel written by Paule Marshall. In Praisesong for the Widow (1983), the sixty-four-year-old protagonist Avey Johnson dreams of her great-aunt and recalls her stories. These recollections are the catalyst for her psychological changes, marking “the start of Avey’s reengagement with her ethnic heritage” (Waxman 121). Consequently, Avey desires to reconnect with her Afro-Caribbean origins and then commits to “transmit[ting] her rich cultural heritage to future generations, beginning especially with her youngest, most passionate and ethnic daughter” (Waxman 134). While Waxman’s chapter focusing on
Avey’s life review as “the final stages of individual development” (120) illustrates how Marshall’s novel exemplifies the Reifungsroman genre, it also provides some analytical insight into how American values come to supersede individual cultural identities and beliefs.

In *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women’s Narratives* (2003), Sally Chivers examines cultural narratives of decline from the perspective of age studies, assessing the impact of stereotypes on interpersonal relationships in the family home and within institutional care. Chapters 2 and 3 offer critical readings of old racialized women characters in Canadian literature that inform my critiques of both Goto’s and Mootoo’s novels. In Chivers’s book, she posits “constructive” ageing as a theoretical frame that accounts for both positive and negative aspects of ageing in hopes to “trouble the distinction entirely” (xxvi).

In Perrakis’s 2007 edited collection, Jeanie E. Warnock examines the relationship in Mootoo’s novel between the old woman Mala and her caregiver Tyler, positing that Tyler’s narrativization enables Mala to shift from a powerless victim, caught in a cycle of repetitious reenactments that engrave the destructive memories into her psyche, into a subject capable of reflection and reinterpretation. Although Warnock provides very little focus on age in her discussion, her reading raises important questions about the ethical and moral issues of writing and reading about individual experiences of traumatic violence and dementia.

Amelia DeFalco in *Uncanny Subjects: Ageing in Contemporary Narrative* (2010) also critically addresses the ethics of listening to and the telling of a dementia sufferer’s story. However, she does not focus specifically on women, arguing “the difference
enacted by old age sometimes outweighs the concerns of gender” (xi). Nevertheless, her text provides an excellent overview of the various ways that age, too often, remains excluded from theories of identity. Building upon Freud’s theory of the “uncanny,” DeFalco analyzes how ageing constitutes “an unsettling discovering of repressed strangeness” (xiv). Her work on narratives of dementia offers literary studies a promising movement beyond a focus on representations towards an analysis of narrativization. Like Defalco, Wendy Roy remains unsettled over the ethical implications of “second-hand memory, someone else’s version of events” when one’s ability for self-narration fails (para. 10). Roy’s recent work on language loss and narrative voice in fictional Canadian Alzheimer’s narratives challenges the commonly held perspective that the loss of lexical and narrative ability signals the loss of selfhood.

This small but growing body of work on the representation of old women in popular media and literature provides me with multiple critical lenses that inform my own readings. However, my survey indicates a lacuna in literary research focusing specifically on representations of old women from minoritized and racialized groups.

In my research, I turned to autobiographical and ethnographic literary narratives to examine the interface between fiction and non-fiction narratives because these diverse discourses, at times inadvertently and at other times explicitly, address the issues and concerns of ageing and intergenerational relations. Narratives about, and particularly those narrated by, old women reveal many diverse social and cultural attitudes about old age in Canada where ageism remains inscribed with colonial and classist relations of power. Autobiographical and ethnographic literary narratives expose old-age concerns, such as the social psychology of vulnerability, the pathologizing of female sexuality, the
shifting dynamics in family relations, the paradox of dependence and independence, the social, cultural, and psychological issues restricting accessibility to social support and external resources, and the impact of stereotypes on physical and psychological well-being. They also highlight the various ways that socio-cultural contexts and historical conditionings impact internal, external, and palliative coping mechanisms and contribute to the development of later-life subjectivities.

Recent printed collections of oral histories as told by old Indigenous female storytellers demonstrate how various narrative techniques contribute to social understandings, both intergenerationally and cross-culturally. These women’s stories broaden understandings of different cultural narrative aesthetics and storytelling practices. Julie Cruickshank’s collection *Life Lived Like A Story* demonstrates how literature functions increasingly as a social site for engaging in storytelling with individuals denied immediate access to a cultural storyteller or a community with which to share their experiences and stories. For example, the three Athapaskan/Tlingit storytellers “recognize that children now learn from books” (qtd in Cruikshank 16); their collaborative project to produce a textual archive of familial stories and cultural myths ensures that their younger generations will continue to have access to these oral histories. Although this textual mode of storytelling differs from literary representations of fictional storytellers, their understanding that literature now functions more immediately as the social space for pedagogical engagement relates to how contemporary authors utilize the

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27 See the collected stories of Athapaskan/Tlingit elders Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned in Julie Cruickshank’s *Life Lived Like A Story* (1990); the collected stories of Apphia Agalakti Awa, Rhoda Kaujkjak Katsak, and Sandra Pikujak Katsak in Nancy Wachowich’s *Saqiyq: Stories from the Lives of Three Inuit Women* (1999); and the collected stories of Blood/Blackfoot elders in Beverly Hungry Wolf’s *The Ways of My Grandmothers* (1980).
storyteller character as a moderator in this new spatial learning environment.

Literature models the embodiment of “complex theoretical issues around institutional and discursive power, racialized identities, and the production of meaning” (Hoy 196). Storyteller characters, both culturally and geographically displaced, extend their stories to a diverse audience that exists outside of their own social (and textual) environment. While culturally specific understandings function as markers for identification for some readers, they also double as signifiers of difference, paradoxically alienating and informing cultural outsiders. Regardless of readers’ perspectives, the textual space of fiction enables the words and stories of old women to reach and potentially engage a larger audience in intra- and cross-cultural transformative dialogue. Fiction transforms into a geographic space that enables storytelling to continue as a critical pedagogical discourse that draws listeners into dialogic interactions about identity construction, cultural adaptation and continuity, and epistemological ways of understanding. I acknowledge the importance of listening to how individual subjects voice their personal experiences and construct culturally relevant perspectives and theories. However, ‘insider’ perspectives on old age are underrepresented in both literature and literary theory. Although second wave feminists are now in their sixties, few individuals are of the “oldest old” or “Fourth Age” (85+ years as defined by Baltes and Smith). Therefore, in order to develop a more critical understanding of culturally specific practices and attitudes towards ageing and old people, studies on narrative analysis are important in social gerontology to analyze how old people discuss, embody and inadvertently theorize the ageing process.
Undoubtedly, literature performs as cultural capital and thus can serve to deconstruct systemic forms of discrimination. Literary representations and theories are valuable sites of cultural production that expand our cognitive ability to conceptualize alternative ways of understanding social relations and subject formations. Unfortunately, literary theory offers few tools for analyzing the identity politics in age relations. While Roy Miki upholds “feminism and post-structuralism together” as “the most instrumental theoretical positions to resist and critique the power of patriarchic national forms and the normative ahistoricism of humanist beliefs in universality” (104), these ‘isms’ have performed minimal theoretical inquiry into how literature can perpetuate the marginalization of older women in Canadian society.

According to Neal King, mainstream feminism has “sidelined old women from its theories” (49), and because of this act of “cultural exclusion” (Holstein 325), Martha Holstein accuses feminists of failing in their “commitment to rendering visible the unexplored, the ignored” (325). While early feminist movements focused on women’s independence and equal rights, second-wave feminism, populated by politically motivated younger women, targeted age-specific issues such as reproductive rights. Even in third- and fourth-wave feminisms, old age remains an oversight, despite its material implications that negatively impact old women’s rights and social realities. However, much of this ‘first-world feminism,’ like colonialism, “almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination and a suppression – often violent – of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (Mohanty 18). Biological essentialism was deployed as a mode of resistance to dominant phallocentric discourses but ‘first-world’ feminists remained uncritical of their ahistorical universalism.
However, in the 1990s, American feminist theorists proposed new ways of rethinking gender and sexual subjectivities to account for an infinite complexity in ‘female’ subject positions. For example, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler critiques “compulsory heterosexuality” (42) as the containment of gender identities through binaries contingent upon the opposite for its definition. Instead, she considers how gender performance constitutes alternative possibilities for gender definitions that supersede the male/female dualism. Her work serves to illustrate how the body is a cultural sign and gender is a politically regulated social construct. Thus, by applying her theories of social constructivism to the aged female body, the ‘old woman,’ when viewed as a performed subjectivity, often destabilizes the ‘norm’ in terms of appearance and sexuality, thus necessitating a redefinition of essentialist and ageist understandings of old women. The novels I study in this dissertation help serve to deconstruct binaries of young/old and sexual/non-sexual.

Anti-racist Marxist feminism emerged to critique ‘first-world’ feminist discourses, by addressing the ideological and political structures of racial and classist inequality that govern and impact women’s everyday realities. Audre Lorde explains how “white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore the differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience” (375). Chandra Mohanty argues that this essentialism, in which “women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression” (22), perpetuates the “latent ethnocentrism” in Western feminism (42). Unfortunately, as Catherine Silver points out, “[t]he hypersensitivity to questions of economic inequality and the fight

against sexism and racism in feminist discourses led to overlooking ageism and
generational issues” (385). As a consequence, Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin
rightly suggest a necessary “realigning” of feminist thinking to acknowledge old age as a
political location (2).

Anti-racist feminisms positioned in conversation with social theories of ageing
that account for race, gender, and class can offer literary studies an anti-oppressive
approach that questions the politics of representation. Literary theories that better
acknowledge heterogeneity when analyzing how age functions within social relations
reveal how literature can facilitate social understandings and lead to a reader’s increased
critical consciousness, what Paulo Freire terms ‘conscientizaçao’ or conscientization
(36). My evaluation of ethno-racial literary representations of old women provides insight
into the discursive powers that produce meaning: how race, gender, class, ethnicity, and
sexuality influence in diverse ways, old women’s subjectivities, their coping strategies
and perceptions of social belonging, plus the ways their experiences are both transmitted
and interpreted. Narratives providing intergenerational age perspectives teach readers to
account for the “impact of personal histories, […] socialization experiences and the
structural forces of prejudice and discrimination” (Ujimoto 9) on the development of
subjectivity and life-coping strategies. These dialogic sites also contribute in the
production of knowledge in other fields of study such as social gerontology, sociology,
and literary studies.
CONTRIBUTIONS FROM STUDIES ON AGEING TO LITERARY STUDIES

Drawn together in dialogue, literary and ageing theories can inform and broaden understandings about the relationship between social attitudes and the reification of specific subjectivities premised on ideological and epistemological assumptions: “discourses about a particular subject radiate from numerous localized sources and thus are best analyzed from a perspective that acknowledges this multidirectional dynamic” (Brennan 7). In an attempt to answer some of my own questions about the social implications of negative assumptions about old age, memory, identity, and subjectivity on selfhood, I turned to research on narratives of ageing in social gerontology. From these discipline-specific discussions, I gain a greater awareness of ageism as a pervasive form of discrimination. Ageist rhetoric and discriminatory policies eventually impact everyone, in some manner or another.

While age is simultaneously a biological reality and a socially constructed category, it is nevertheless a relative signifier of difference. Age constitutes a significant aspect of one’s identity, yet paradoxically it remains an ever-shifting social subject position. Therefore, as we age, our age-identity changes, through both an internal and external regulation of behaviours and assumptions. Social contexts engender power structures that govern and dictate the significance of specific age categories. For instance, old age as a marker of authority can quickly disappear when migrated into a system with a different social hierarchy. In many transnational ‘Westernized’ societies, youth is increasingly privileged. The old woman typically suffers greater marginalization because the fetters of patriarchy limit social understanding and perpetuate the undervaluation of the old woman within the family and larger community. Negative representations of old
women highlight a power differential that employs ageism as a discursive mode of discrimination.

Ageism bears its literary roots in Aristotle’s Book II of *Rhetoric*, in which Aristotle differentiates between “youth, the prime of life, and old age” (84), positioning “old age” alongside “death in its various forms, bodily injuries and afflictions … diseases, lack of food” (77). Accordingly, old age becomes classified as one of life’s “painful and destructive evils” (Aristotle 77). Tulle traces the current discursive devaluation of old age to the late eighteenth-century Western European preoccupation with the medicalization of old age. She critiques popular contemporary Western discourse about old people because it, like Aristotle’s writing, tends to “construct old age as a time of decline and dependency” (Tulle 175). This rhetoric positions biomedicine and welfare as key frameworks for the economic and social management of old age (Tulle 179). Simone de Beauvoir’s 1970s outlook on women in their later years of life identifies this negative paradigm of ageing with early psychoanalytic discourse. According to de Beauvoir, old women, although freed from social expectations, remain enslaved by cognitive and physical limitations. In other words, she suggests that, when women are socially perceived as devoid of reproductive power and sexual attractiveness, society deems them useless, irrelevant, and abject. Much of popular media casts old women as intellectually child-like and both socially and economically irrelevant.

In *The Coming of Age* (1970), de Beauvoir writes as a polemicist, offering a first-person view on the treatment of the elderly in numerous societies around the globe, thus providing a fascinating and comprehensive overview of the history of ageing from a comparative cross-cultural perspective. Typically, this book is read as an unremitting
negative exposé of old age, whereby society generally offers only two subject positions for old people: the “venerable Sage” and the “old fool” (4). While de Beauvoir does conflate ‘old age’ with the Fourth Age (the life stage associated with severe physical and cognitive decline), she does this as a tactical strategy and necessity to exemplify the realities of worst-case scenarios for old people. Unfortunately, these worst-case scenarios are still prevalent today (forty years after the book was first published) as seen in two recent articles in the Toronto Star, which discloses the horrific abuse and mistreatment of elderly persons in many of Canada’s senior care facilities. The Coming of Age is commonly misrepresented and critiqued as a negative portrayal of ageing; however, de Beauvoir’s negativity is not directed at ageing per se but at how class systems in society negatively impact the perceptions and thus treatment of older citizens. She writes:

Society inflicts so wretched a standard of living upon the vast majority of old people that it is almost tautological to say ‘old and poor’: again, most exceedingly poor people are old. […] That fact that for the last fifteen or twenty years of his life a man should be no more than a reject, a piece of scrap, reveals the failure of our civilization: if we were to look upon the old as human beings, with a human life behind them, and not as so many walking corpses, this obvious truth would move us profoundly. (6)

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29 See Bruce Campion-Smith’s article “Elder Abuse a ‘Hidden Crime,’ MPs Say” and Jesse McLean and Moira Welch’s “Nursing Home Neglect,” both published in thestar.com on November 17, 2011. Interestingly, in June 2009, the Government of Canada launched an Elder Abuse Awareness Campaign called “Elder Abuse – It’s Time To Face The Reality” and New Horizons for Seniors Program (NHSP) initiatives. However, in 2012, little has changed for seniors in Canada, prompting the Honourable Alice Wong, Minister of State (Seniors), to continue her commitment to the promotion and protection of rights of all Canadians as they age.
In de Beauvoir’s scathing objection to the ill treatment of old people, she argues “the class-struggle governs the manner in which old age takes hold of a man” (10). She implicates “the whole system” (543) as the “criminal” (2) who creates and perpetuates negative perceptions of old age. While de Beauvoir writes of ‘man’ universally in her writings, perhaps reflective of her 1970s political position and intended audience, she also claims to address “[e]very human situation” and the challenge to “define old age _per se_” as it is “experienced in a way that varies according to the social context” (10).

Accordingly, she contends the treatment of “[o]ld age exposes the failure of our entire civilization” (543). De Beauvoir does not speak of old age as a stage of life but rather a “state” (543), and this rhetoric places old on a continuum in order to critique the various ‘states’ in operation. Thus, while ageing as a state of decline is inevitable, and changing the (nation) state’s capitalist view of old age as redundant appears an impossible task, de Beauvoir’s writings seem to suggest that altering the ‘state’ of mind of individuals may be the only political possibility for social change.

Zoe Brennan adopts a similar rhetorical approach. She suggests old women continue to suffer from marginalization when cast as a “tragedy” (27) by the Eurocentric assumptions that govern social relations. She argues, when women internalize and reify such ageist ideology, thus when they embody the negative stereotypes of old age, they “collude in their own oppression” (Brennan 9). Jenny Hockey and Allison James view the embodiment of old age as a “self inhabiting a body within particular social structures, producing and reproducing those structures as a set of particular cultural understandings of the ageing process” (170). According to Julie McMullin, this “reification” constitutes the “[s]ocial processes through which social phenomena or characteristics become
naturalized and thereby considered immutable” (83). She concludes that, particularly for old women, physical appearance is a “critical source of ageism” which “varies by the intersection of social locations” (McMullin 86). Yet, much of the literature on ageing indicates that old age – while seemingly regulated by particular cultural understandings – can also be a performance, an act of mimicry, subversively attempting to disrupt normative assumptions. For instance, Stoller and Gibson suggest that, by “reclaiming the power of self-definition,” “public displays of compliance” do not necessarily reflect “internalized negative stereotypes,” but can also be interpreted as “powerful weapons” of resistance (53). Therefore, the body itself becomes “a site at which discourses of ageing are animated, reproduced or resisted” (Hockey and James 157).

Chris Gilleard criticizes how “[t]he experience of bodily ageing is a topic curiously ignored by mainstream gerontology” (139), and thus contends that agency must occur at the specific site or “social text of the body” (143). Holstein suggests that old women themselves must actively engage in defining what constitutes agency and how it might be performed. One method, she proposes, would be “to refuse to deny age and to engage in self-exploration and resistance” (315); however, this argument assumes one has the luxury of such privilege and opportunity. As Ruth E. Ray points out, “age relations are the basis of much social, economic, and political inequity” (42), yet age remains an understudied form of diversity and this creates knowledge gaps in social understandings. Besides Glenda Laws’s 1995 study “Understanding Ageism: Lessons from Feminism and Postmodernism,” which configures age within “a complex of social relations,” Calasanti and Slevin contend that most scholarship has “scarcely theorized age relations” (5). This research gap prompted their critical analysis of “age relations,” with their theory
highlighting three interrelated dimensions:

First, age serves as a social organizing principle; second, different age
groups gain identities and power in relation to one another; and third, age
relations intersect with other power relations. Together, these have
consequences for life chances […] The focus on age relations enables us
to learn more about how all of our positions and experiences rest on power
relations based on age. (Calasanti and Slevin, original italics, 5)

Both Calasanti and Slevin’s work and McMullin’s theories expand on how the
operating principles in social relations, such as class, age, gender, ethnicity, and race,
function as fundamental structures or organizing features of social life. While Calasanti
and Slevin accurately note that “different age groups gain identities and power in relation
to one another” (5), Helen Hoy reminds us, “power can flow in more than one direction
within multiple systems of domination and stratification” (18). Age further complicates
power relations because, unlike other visible markers of identity, with age “one’s group
membership shifts over time” (Calasanti and Slevin 9). My dissertation draws from these
diverse studies on age and power relations to illuminate how narrative focalization is
inherently implicated by the complexities of age perspective.

Research from social gerontology informs understanding of age as a diversity issue
and ‘age relations’ as a discursive mode that generates and perpetuates ageism. However,
many of the conclusive results from studies about ageing produce objective data that
cannot, or does not, distinguish cultural from situational factors, and thus generates
inaccurate assumptions about ethnicity and ageing. Further, despite the considerable
attention age relations receive in gerontological studies, according to Victor Ujimoto, the
majority of social theories on ageing remain governed by “the Eurocentric biases implicit in their underlying assumptions” (25) and fail to consider “the socio-historical and cultural contexts in which certain life events occurred and how these events in turn influenced the subsequent ageing process of the individual” (22). However, with these shortcomings in mind, social gerontology affords awareness of the socio-political and economic implications of inequality in later life, thus providing insight into the many discriminatory practices and discourses that deny old women agency.

Ageism remains inscribed in Western power relations and Eurocentric gerontological and feminist theories of senescence. The latter, with its recent class-blind narrow focus on biomedicalization and middle-age concerns about healthy, independent, active lifestyles, “perpetuate[s] the ghettoization of the aged and eradicate[s] the complexity of their lives” (Brennan 18). To rectify the homogenizing tendencies in ageing studies, what Mohanty would criticize as “latent ethnocentrism” (42), Ujimoto argues that both ethnicity and ageing research must acknowledge the “impact of personal histories, the socialization experiences and the structural forces of prejudice and discrimination” (9). Agnes Calliste and George J. Sefa Dei claim further that “the specifics of […] ancestral histories, critical traditions and local knowledge” must factor into ageing theories about “identity, power and possibility in the context of externally-regulated social demands” (15).

The ‘double jeopardy’ paradigm, initially introduced in anti-racist feminism to interrogate the interplay between gender, race, and class, was subsequently adopted by
anti-ageist rhetoric.\textsuperscript{30} Old racialized women, complexly marginalized through interlocking hierarchies, become discursively situated as ‘doubly Other.’ Subsequent research on ageing expands the notion to a ‘multiple-jeopardy hypotheses’ (Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban), which attempts to account for “age composition, residence, marital status, fertility, household composition, religion, immigration and internal migration, language, education, and income” (Ujimoto 15). This theory attempts to locate theoretical discourse within the realities of women’s everyday experiences.

Stoller and Gibson’s research emphasizes how “people’s location in the social system, the historical period in which they live, and their unique personal biography shape the experience of old age” (xxiii). They argue for a critical yet sensitive perspective to ageing studies that recognizes “diversity among people of different ages within the same population category” (Stoller and Gibson xxv). Their work attempts to undo fallacies about the cohort construct, which assumes that individuals born of the same generation experience and respond to the same historical events in similar ways. Such an approach homogenizes the roles and responsibilities of a particular age group and neglects consideration of variances in cultural and familial traditions. In similar ways to Stoller and Gibson’s research, McMullin’s work addresses ‘age reification’ as a critical shortsightedness in ageing studies, which “treat[s] chronological age as the life-course variable and does not take into account other factors that influence ageing” (91). Instead,

\begin{itemize}
  \item In 1970, Frances Beal employs the term “double jeopardy” to discuss the intersection and discrepancies between anti-racist and gender discourses (see “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” published in \textit{Sisterhood Is Powerful}). In 1972, Susan Sontag adopts “double jeopardy” to discuss sexism and ageism (see “The Double Standard of Aging,” in \textit{Saturday Review of the Society} 55: 29-38). In 1978, J. J. Dowd and V. L. Bengston transfer “double jeopardy” to the context of age and racial discrimination.
\end{itemize}
McMullin asserts ageing as “a biopsychosocial process” in which “social, psychological, and biological factors” collectively contribute to the complex developmental stages of ageing (103). I posit any study of old age (whether literary or sociological) necessitates an examination of the relationship between the socio-historical context and an individual’s defining life experiences, such as trauma or migration, which can impact one’s cognitive development and social responses.

THE NARRATIVIZATION OF OLD WOMEN’S STORIES

Old women’s stories exemplify how, over a life span, particular psychological trajectories and perspectives develop in response to life-altering events. From her age position, the old woman storyteller has a critical perspective on time, and her storytelling generally emerges from an urgent need to tell. The reasons vary infinitely from her desire to ensure continuity, or to instruct, absolve, share, connect, reconcile, negotiate, remember, forget, reconstruct, reclaim, or implicate. Henry Krystal’s extensive psychoanalytic research on Holocaust survivors, trauma, and ageing finds “[o]ld age, with its losses, imposes the inescapable necessity to face one’s past” and this “development determines that one either accepts one’s self and one’s past or continues to reject it” (83). Stories repeated, oftentimes verbatim, reflect how specific life experiences and repeated occurrences (e.g., interpersonal familial relations, language barriers, and exposure to racism) impact one’s coping strategies and thus one’s capacity to survive hostile social circumstances. Age may afford some older narrators the benefit of distance and reflection, yet for other individuals, memories of personal or collective traumas
remain un-verbalized, with the negative impact transferring intergenerationally through oblique stories, silences, and social practices.

Both Rooke’s *Vollendungsroman*, “a novel of ‘completion’ or ‘winding up’” (74), and Waxman’s *Reifungsroman*, a “novel of ripening” (11), theorize narratives of ageing as employing the life review, what Neal Norrick describes as “retrospective reassessment” (904), to evaluate one’s current age position, while the trope of death is perceived as a journey into an uncertain future. From her age position, the old woman character inhabits the present, the liminal moment between the past and the future, which enables her to oscillate between these three different temporal positions. According to Norrick, retrospective reassessment enables “older narrators to move between the past and the present in a single storytelling” (904). His study on elderly narrators’ storytelling suggests this simultaneous multi-directional glance provides critical temporal and spatial distancing for retrospective reassessment. Thomas King explains a similar practice occurs in Native storytelling, when storytellers construct “panoramas” of life by “looking backward and forward with the same glance” (112). The rhetorical strategy of “inserting a later perspective on an experience” constructs “multiple perspectives on the past, providing both initial and retrospective evaluation” (Norrick 905). This leads to “[s]imultaneous self-association with certain past identities” (Norrick 924), which reveals “multiple [and sometimes conflicting] identities simultaneously” within a single narrative (904). Norrick’s theories contribute to the postmodern unfixing of essentialized identities. Like Rooke’s *Vollendungsroman*, which she argues is a genre in which “human projects are never completed” (76), all of these novels envision identities “as multiple rather than dualistic” (Mardorossian 3), challenging a ‘then’ and ‘now’ approach to understanding
shifts in subjectivity. This is particularly important when understanding storytelling as a means to articulate and work through immobilizing traumatic (and, in my argument, specific diasporic) experiences.

Certain narrative techniques (i.e., intrusive frames, repetition, ellipses, and fragments) immerse a reader within a space of multiple focalizing perspectives, narrative indeterminacies, and “explanatory gaps” (Worth 47). An author’s use of ellipses, sentence fragments, metaphors, and tense shifts inserts ambiguity into the narrative, constructing spaces for interpretive open-endedness. Further, when storytellers insert other voices into their stories, they offer additional perspectives for readers to evaluate and accept or dismiss.31 Sarah Worth argues that ‘explanatory gaps’ necessitate that readers develop abductive or ‘narrative reasoning.’ In order to understand the textual complexities of each novel’s narratives, the reader must negotiate indeterminacies in the narrative by identifying ambiguities and referential ambivalences in order to draw inferences to make sense of the explanatory gaps and thereby gain an awareness of multiple possible explanations. Furthermore, anachronic temporal shifts between and within embedded frames, plus the replication of memory lapses or obscure associative understandings, enable a reader access into the complex processes that can fragment an old woman’s life review. Arguably, when textual strategies replicate informational gaps, generational silences, cultural dislocations, and linguistic differences (such as non-English language words), the reader discovers her/himself in a double role, first as reader

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31 Also see Wolfgang Iser’s gaps of “indeterminacy” (283).
of the text and then as a listener who must negotiate the slippage between past memories and present experiences in order to bear witness responsibly to the stories being told.\textsuperscript{32}

Narratives of ageing replicate oral storytelling patterns and demonstrate how private articulations of the past invariably transform into public memories. Personal memories, what Paul Ricoeur describes as “living memory,” combine with historical or “public memory” (223), and the resulting stories exemplify how all memories are comprised of various fragments within “a system of relationships” (Ricoeur 224). Storytelling enables temporal shifts between present thoughts and occurrences and past experiences, revealing multiple voices and perspectives, and demonstrating that new stories develop out of other stories. Hiromi Goto’s novel describes the storytelling process “not [as] a linear equation,” but as evolving “outwards” and capable of reflecting something different depending upon context, intention, and perspective (\textit{Chorus} 132). Readers learn that stories can simultaneously reveal “something new, something old, or something you’ve forgotten” (Goto 132). This understanding serves to disrupt the conceptual boundaries of Eurocentric universal assumptions about narrative structure.

Paula Gunn Allen contends that Western narratives’ singular focus remains masculinist, monotheistic, linear, fixed, unidimensional, monolithic, excluding, and chronological, when the reader addresses the limitations of her/his own subjective knowledge and problematizes her/his own epistemologies, new ideas and social understandings encountered within a text can be mediated and assimilated into “a new conceptual system” (Bakhtin 282). Thus, through this active engagement with both the narrative’s structure and content, the reader also participates reciprocally in the storytelling process as a listener and producer of new cultural meaning. These narratives enable readers to deconstruct assumptions and creatively imagine new spaces of belonging for displaced individuals. However, as Sherene Razack warns, when there is an “absence of critical engagement with the ideas proposed” (114), assumptions remain unchallenged, and readers (and critics alike) “feel no compulsion to explore their own complicity in the oppression of others” (117).
whereas the narrative aesthetics of tribal literatures are accretive, fluid, multidimensional, and achronological (244). Nancy Wachowich, in her study of three Inuit women storytellers, notes the flexibility of truthfulness in stories, as “properties of time and place changed quickly as memories provoked new thoughts and recollections” (9). Stories oscillated “between the present and an ever-changing past […] Stories were told and later retold to me within the context of other stories, or in combination with new tales” (Wachowich 9).

As the storyteller moves between present and past, she becomes positioned simultaneously as teller and participant in and of her own story. This dual position shows how one possesses multiple identities, and how past identities are affected and influenced by current experiences that enable the development of a new subjectivity in the present moment. Ultimately, with the old woman’s stories, the past is carried forward, not static but as a dynamic force through which she will live on after death in the new stories told. As a younger character becomes the primary storyteller of her life history, the old woman becomes immortalized as she transforms into a memory in someone else’s storied history, albeit her identity redefined and her life history re-scribed by the new teller.

Old racialized woman characters offer life narratives that push boundaries to reveal the long-term consequences of ageist and other forms of discrimination on psychological well-being. Many diasporic narratives reveal the insidious violence of discrimination that many immigrant families experience within their new social environments. By detailing the everyday realities of being racialized in Canada, these literary representations provide multiple optics for examining diversity within intergenerational family relations in Canada. Younger characters as narrators of old
women’s stories, in actuality, reveal their own sense of ‘unbelonging’ in the present moment and their psychological inheritance of a traumatic past not their own.

As Cathy Caruth rightly suggests in her preface to *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*, “the particularity of each individual story” denies the fixing of a “generalizable set of rules” to understand and diagnose trauma (ix). Trauma study requires a critical openness to account for the specificity and varied complexities of an individual’s historically and contextually contingent response to a specific (or recurrent) traumatic event. Intergenerational trauma remains outside one’s conscious understanding but can be accessed through symptomatic re-tellings of previous incidents of trauma within the family. Second-generation diasporic narrators, while subjected to stories and experiences they cannot fully comprehend from within their current contextual frame of understanding, become storytellers who attempt to bear witness to the individual and collective memories of their family’s history of trauma. The reader becomes simultaneously positioned as bearing witness to the narrator’s (unwitting) telling of her or his family experiences of insidious and intergenerational trauma.

These novels exemplify how ‘truth,’ while subjective, only reveals itself when one is ready to tell and another is present to listen and thus bear witness. What becomes of utmost importance for literary analysis is how an author facilitates an ethical and affective response to trauma that, in turn, transfers to the reader the responsibility to bear witness. Witnessing trauma requires a willingness to ‘listen’ ethically to the words and silences of testimony, evident both in the teller’s narration and within the narrative gaps. Turning to literature and trauma narratives, Shoshana Felman asks “How is the act of *writing* tied up with the act of *bearing witness* …? Is the act of *reading* literary texts itself
inherently related to the act of facing horror? If literature is the alignment between witnesses, what would this alignment mean?” (original italics, 14). We, as readers, become secondary witnesses in this literary act of witnessing. We bear witness to a trauma that can only be heard as it makes itself available to the consciousness of the teller. Yet, Caruth questions how literature can simultaneously defy and demand our witness. How are we, as readers, to ethically bear witness to an event we stand outside of? How do we ‘listen’ to an unspeakable trauma that language cannot describe?

Fiction can operate as textual sites that deterritorialize conventional modes of transmission to produce what we might see as a critical pedagogical discourse that draws readers into a dialogic engagement with “multiple discourses of dominance, resistance, identity, and of difference” (Kelly 114). My dissertation offers readers a critical lens that acknowledges the operation of age perspectives through which they may begin to query if and when second-hand narrative acts of bearing witness threaten to “leave[...] the victims and the crimes as unmourned as they have always been” (Schlant 14). Focalization always incorporates an age perspective, thus some degree of age relations will always be present within any narrativization act. The following chapters investigate the reciprocality between teller and listener in intergenerational storytelling exchanges that address the challenges, implications, and strategies of narrativizing trauma.
Chapter 2

Reciprocal Storytelling in Hiromi Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms

According to Charlotte Sturgess in *Redefining the Subject*, Hiromi Goto’s “poetics seeks to adequately express the reality of loss, and the difficulty of speech, when the split between worlds and between languages means no one discursive medium adequately reflects the experience of displacement” (26). In her 1994 novel *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Goto constructs a multigenerational story about the impact of cultural dislocation and assimilation on a Japanese Canadian family living in the Prairies. Offering multiple generational and age perspectives, Goto articulates the development of female subjectivities through individual understandings of self and belonging. *Chorus of Mushrooms* implements narrative strategies that emphasize the importance of intergenerational storytelling as a discursive mode for articulating and asserting personal identities, with reciprocal storytelling creating a powerful, dynamic engagement between a teller and listener. Goto’s old woman character Obachan performs a vital role in the development of her granddaughter’s self-configuration, by teaching storytelling as a discursive strategy for negotiating cultural dislocation and re-imagining a new self-defined personal identity.

Obachan’s characterization as a dynamic and empowering old Japanese Canadian woman and an intergenerational storyteller with a complex subjectivity influenced by age and alienating life experiences affords a critical reading of the importance of old women and their stories within the immigrant family and the larger community. Obachan’s intergenerational storytelling practice functions as a mode of communication that
transgresses the boundaries of language and cultural difference. Her lessons about storytelling promote reciprocity as an integral component of a listening and telling exchange. Reciprocal storytelling functions as both the novel’s subject and the medium of transmission. The narrative structure of this novel with its incorporation of specific narratological elements guides the reader into accepting the complexity of reciprocal storytelling as a collaborative act between an active listener and teller, which in effect facilitates a collective, yet personalized, story.

This chapter begins by examining Goto’s representation of the female intergenerational relationships in this novel to understand how age perspective informs the narrative, both in terms of structure and the storytelling engagement. An analysis of each subject position provides insight into how storytelling can afford recognition of diverse experiences of dislocation and how counter-discursive narratives can destabilize stereotypical assumptions about Japanese Canadian female subjectivity. Like many other old women storytellers in Canadian fiction, Obachan facilitates and produces narratives of memory and origins that would otherwise remain inaccessible or unproblematized. Her practice demonstrates storytelling’s effectiveness as a critical mode of historiography that questions exclusionary ideologies. By enacting reciprocal storytelling, this old storyteller enables her younger listener to witness the past (to which she has no immediate access) so she may dialogically imagine and begin to collaboratively articulate a new familial story that draws this past into her present self-understanding.

The second half of this chapter provides a close reading of the novel to illustrate the ways in which Goto’s narrative strategies model (for listener and reader) a reciprocal storytelling practice that fosters an understanding of self as simultaneously a site of
individual definition and of collective consciousness. As Sarah Worth rightly suggests, “The way we construct our narratives (fictional and nonfictional) is importantly tied to the way we understand, order, and construct our own reality and our own personal identity” (54). This novel provides both narrative and meta-narrative lessons on the developmental stages in a reciprocal storytelling engagement. These strategies position the reader as witness to this reciprocity, as Obachan guides her granddaughter Murasaki to engage in her own discursive practices of self-articulation to discover and define her own sense of identity.

**STORYTELLING AND AGE PERSPECTIVE**

How are we to understand an old Japanese Canadian woman who describes herself as “Eighty-five years old and horny as a musk-drenched cat” (Goto 39)? What happens to our ageist assumptions when this same old woman decides to have an affair with a young truck driver and then transforms into an energetic age-defying rodeo rider who “gives bullriding a whole new meaning” (Goto 217)? Knowing this old woman to be a literary character, do we dismiss her actions as merely some trick of magic realism, or can her story serve to destabilize various assumptions about the limitations of old age? Goto’s delivery of Obachan’s life story exemplifies the genre *Reifungsroman*, which Barbara Frey Waxman describes as a narrative in which old women embark upon “a journey, frequently a meandering one, in quest of self-knowledge, self-development, and a role for the future” (16). Waxman explains how protagonists in this genre of literature “gradually come to terms with crucial decisions they made as youths” (17) and “usually they […] become revitalized, newly knowledgeable, self-confident, and independent
before they move forward” (17). This narrative structure provides insight into Obachan’s developing consciousness, inviting readers to reconsider the limitations of their own ageist assumptions and participate in new imaginings of agency in old women’s late life experiences.

While Obachan offers her specific perspective as an aged Japanese Canadian woman who immigrates to Canada later in life, her granddaughter Murasaki provides a second-generation Canadian-born perspective. Obachan’s stories reveal how consciousness and attitudes shift over time and with experiential knowledge, whereas Murasaki’s multiple narratorial perspectives exemplify how such a process occurs. This latter narratorial strategy familiarizes the reader with Murasaki’s developing subjectivity as it also shifts over the course of the novel. These two primary characters – the grandmother/Obachan and the granddaughter/Muriel, who self-identify respectively as Kiyokawa Naoe and Murasaki (Goto 190) – model the passing on of a storytelling tradition, one that demonstrates a reciprocal engagement between two teller/listeners who not only tell stories to each other but also conceptualize and narrate each other’s stories.

While Obachan is explicitly identified as “the grandmother telling stories of the past to the avidly listening grandchild” (Goto 172), the frame narrative slowly unveils the granddaughter Murasaki as the novel’s primary storyteller. The reader hears Obachan’s voice only as it is embedded within Murasaki’s narration. Nevertheless, this old woman is integral to the emotional and psychological development of her granddaughter, and her storytelling practice provides meta-narrative instruction on the importance of an active listening and telling engagement. Murasaki, trained by her grandmother, learns there is “a partnership in the telling and listening, that is of equal importance,” that “[l]istening
becomes telling” (Goto 172), and that “if the one who speaks should tire, the other is there to finish” (Goto 20). When she finally masters these lessons, Murasaki transforms into a storyteller who crafts both of their stories into one dynamic interwoven narrative. Sturgess offers an important reading of this transmission: “as Naoe’s [the grandmother’s] tales are carried on, they become ‘translated’ from one feminine site to another, and the stories become community ones” (31). Goto’s representation of storytelling “challenge[s] the static, self-contained roles of teller and listener” (Beauregard 51), and this novel serves to undo Western assumptions about individual authorship and appropriation.

By promoting an ethics of telling and listening, this novel offers a vision of storytelling as fostering the development of a sense of self as an individual located on a continuum of shared consciousness. Through the grandmother’s teachings, these two storytellers rearticulate the Kiyokawa and Tonkatsu family history using a reciprocal storytelling process that interweaves multiple narratives, developed by both tellers, into a collective story. What I call reciprocal storytelling involves a telling act that is produced when both listener and teller respectfully and actively engage in each other’s storytelling process. Reciprocity, then, emerges from the mutual aspect of this engagement and depends on characters performing a double role as both tellers and listeners. Furthermore, reciprocity manifests itself as much in the narrative and meta-narrative aspects of the novel as in the ethics that characterize the relationship of these two teller/listeners. Trust and respect prove integral in fostering an ethical listening/telling storytelling exchange. This collaborative arrangement enables both tellers to examine various aspects of their personal and familial relationships within the larger context of community, nation, and diaspora so that they can relocate themselves within their newly constructed family
history that imagines a future, more inclusive, space of social belonging (in this case, in the Canadian context).

Many critical essays on Goto’s novel focus on this work as a critical response to Joy Kogawa’s 1981 novel *Obasan*. For example, Guy Beauregard offers a comparative reading of the two novels and concludes Goto is “writing back” to Kogawa (52).\(^{33}\) Likewise, Sneja Gunew suggests *Chorus of Mushrooms* could be positioned as a “counter-text” (230),\(^{34}\) while Mari Sasano calls it “a response” (38); however, Goto clarifies she “was not interested in exploring redress” like Kogawa (qtd in Morris 236), but rather she wants to address the psychological impact of “racist incidents – minor in the context of world events – but a daily wearing down of your inner core” (qtd in Morris 235). Elsewhere Goto describes Canada as “an often politely systemically racist country” (“Translating” 113), a reality she plays out in her novel.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon claims postmodern writers are “‘agents provocateurs’—taking pot-shots at the culture of which they know they are unavoidably a part but that they still wish to criticize. This almost inevitably puts the postmodern writer into a marginal or ‘ex-centric’ position with regard to the central or dominant culture” (3). In *Cinema Interval*, Trinh T. Minh-ha explains her perspective on this subject positioning: “marginalized people are always socialized to understand things from more than their own point of view, to see both sides of the matter, and to say at least two things at the same time. They can never really afford to speak

\(^{33}\) However, Beauregard’s reading of metaphoric parallels between the two novels does little to substantiate and prove his claim: for example, he writes, “[t]he very title of *Chorus of Mushrooms* could be read as an attempt to politicize female sexuality by taking the mushroom cloud of the atomic destruction that haunts Kogawa’s narrative and reconfiguring it as an orgasm” (52), but then he fails to develop this assertion. Furthermore, I find Beauregard’s act of equating genocide and female sexuality ideologically disturbing, particularly in its lack of theorization.

\(^{34}\) See Gunew’s comprehensive analysis of the conjunction of bodies and food in Goto’s novel.
in the singular” (39). Marlene Nourbese Philip describes these multiple voices and perspectives that Trinh speaks of as a “chorus” (qtd. in Mahlis 686), an interesting and apt metaphor when applied to the context and narrative strategies of Goto’s novel.

In an interview with Robyn Morris, Goto explains how writing enables her to “make sense of my world with the instruments of the cultures I’ve inhabited” (235). In her article “Translating the Self: Moving Between Cultures,” Goto describes the process of writing her novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* as an act of “translating my self” (112), that is “to make known what is not” (111). Goto then problematizes her own use of this phrase. Translation, according to Goto, enables “discourse across difference” (“Translating” 111), while simultaneously reinforcing existing imbalances of power, and thus “translating the self” problematically implies that one may do so independently of external forces. As Mark Libin points out, “Goto is acutely aware in her writing of the marginalized status of the Japanese Canadians, and her texts are framed by the desire to explore this status by analyzing the position of the Japanese Canadian subject in contemporary society” (94). Despite my issues with some of Beauregard’s interpretations of this novel, he provides an insightful reading of how Goto’s characters “resist[…] external definition” (47) by “recuperat[ing] story-telling’s potential to renegotiate gendered, racialized, and cultural borders” (60). He notes how “Goto’s fiction refuse[s] to conform to a self-evident split between the colonizers and the colonized: her Japanese Canadian characters are in varying degrees implicated as *both*” (Beauregard 59). Goto addresses this complicated subject position in her own critical writing, where she describes herself sarcastically and polemically as “Canasian, as a Canadian citizen, I am colonizer/colonized” (“Translating” 112). Forced to negotiate this hybridized, yet minoritized, subject position, Goto’s fictional characters actively engage in a process of personal

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35 See Footnote 33.
renaming and redefinition, what Beauregard calls “‘translations’ of themselves” (58), his language gesturing towards Goto’s own critique of her writing process. Yet for Goto, translation through writing becomes not “just an act” but a “reaction of resistance” against “white colonist ideology” (“Translating” 112).

Speaking with Morris, Goto blames “the sexist world we live in” for perpetuating an “alienation from the mother” (223). In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen expresses a similar sentiment and outlines what she perceives as the devastating consequences of this alienation:

> Failure to know your mother, that is, your position and its attendant traditions, history, and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost. (209)

This loss of the maternal figure and everything that she represents appears as a trope common to all the texts I analyze in this dissertation. In Goto’s novel, Murasaki’s dislocation is in many ways equivalent to what Gunn Allen describes as “being lost” (209). Murasaki lacks an intimate relationship with her own mother, and without access to her cultural origins and her family stories, she turns to her grandmother for emotional and cultural support.

According to Goto, patriarchal societies position mothers as “central” and “yet still [as an] unrecognized and unacknowledged authority,” a contradiction that perpetuates “a state of great conflict, both externally and internally” (qtd. in Morris 233). *Chorus of Mushrooms* highlights the tensions within the two mother/daughter relationships when differing cultural epistemologies converge: for instance, when
Obachan’s daughter, Keiko, abandons traditional Japanese customs to assimilate to the dominant white, Anglo-Canadian social mores. Transnational migration, when accompanied with cultural dislocation, complicates family relationships and can create social and ideological disconnection between different generations within a family. Belief systems and familial practices shift within a new cultural environment, as members negotiate the forces of assimilation and varying degrees of subjection to marginalization and cultural ‘othering.’

Victor Ujimoto notes that while “childhood socialization about traditional age norms and social values can be expected to dominate the individual’s behaviour patterns over the life span” (8), the North American model based on individualism often overrides the traditional Japanese model based on Confucian ethics (8). His research suggests that adherence to filial piety can be undermined by neoliberal ideology that promotes individualization and privatization, which pushes individuals to act independently even in later life. In *The Year of Finding Memory*, Chinese Canadian author Judy Fong Bates indirectly supports Ujimoto’s theory. She writes:

As I grew older and more Westernized, my connection to Confucian philosophy became tenuous. On the surface those assumptions of obedience and filial piety felt anachronistic and irrelevant to the culture I had adopted, one that promoted independence and challenged authority.

(124-25)

This memoir articulates Fong Bates’s conflicted perspective on the continuity of traditional familial practices and beliefs when living in the diaspora.
In Goto’s novel, within the Tonkatsu home, this discordance in belief systems ruptures the mother/daughter relationships. Obachan, while living in the Canadian Prairies, struggles with the lack of respect displayed by her daughter and protests being treated like a “child” (Goto 13). Her daughter Keiko’s adoption of new cultural ideologies, evident for example in her threats to send Obachan to an old age “h-o-m-e” (Goto 4), results in an irreconcilable intergenerational conflict. Obachan expresses indignation at the thought of being “cast from my home” (Goto 4), and her concern exemplifies how the convergence of different belief systems can displace traditional practices and epistemologies and negatively shape new cultural attitudes about old age.

Goto’s novel emphasizes the situatedness of any configuring of subjectivity, and her diverse characterizations of the women in this Japanese Canadian family illustrate “the way language and culture interact within the local, personal domain of the subject’s experience” (Sturgess 20). The inclusion of The Herald fictional newspaper clipping provides the three women characters (Murasaki, Keiko, and Obachan) differing age perspectives on Canada, their sense of belonging, and their personal understanding of ‘home.’ Murasaki protests, “Life is hard in Canada” (Goto 189), describing Canada as a place where “if you didn’t abide by the unwritten rules of conduct, you were alienated as an other” (Goto 189). While she exhibits ambivalence towards identifying anywhere as

36 Charlotte Sturgess argues Chorus of Mushrooms can be read as a radical and feminine departure from the literary history of Canadian prairie literature. Sturgess reads the “anxiety of environment” present in Goto’s work through Northrop Frye’s concept of the “garrison mentality” (22). However, she argues that Goto challenges the epistemological underpinning of Canadian literature’s iconic cultural representations of the prairie’s social territory. Her writing examines how Goto’s “imaginary ‘re-mapping’ of the West” in Chorus of Mushrooms “both echoes and subverts” the traditional masculine ethos canonized through earlier works of fiction such as Sinclair Ross’s As for Me and My House (21).
home, her mother Keiko proudly adopts Canada as “my home” (Goto 189). Wanting to make sense of the ideological contradiction of her mother’s assimilation to the Canadian nation-state that still imagines her as ‘other,’ Murasaki desires reconciliation between her own cultural longing and sense of social displacement. Not “given the chance to choose,” Murasaki responds with “bitterness” (Goto 189) to her mother’s decision to acculturate to white, Anglo-Canadian social mores. Obachan performs a critical role in helping Murasaki negotiate this complicated social and cultural space of ‘in-between-ness’ that positions Murasaki as belonging to neither here (Canada) nor there (Japan). Obachan criticizes her daughter Keiko’s sense of national belonging as disillusionment. She protests, “[y]ou cannot move to a foreign land and call that place home because you parrot the words around you” (48). Obachan’s life reflections illustrate that her unique understanding of ‘home’ derives from her childhood displacement: “I was home only until I was five years old. I’ve been gone ever since” (Goto 110). Mirroring her granddaughter’s ambivalence, she too never specifically identifies Canada as home. As Obachan accepts “[t]here is little hope left” for reconciling her relationship with her own daughter (Goto 14), she turns her attention to her granddaughter and their future together. Her sole intention is so that “[i]f a few words I uttered were to echo in someone’s mind, then that is enough” (Goto 38).

Obachan inhabits what Catherine Silver describes as “a sphere of normative freedom” whereby her age permits her to “question society’s norms” (379). This old woman character acknowledges how old age affords her critical insight into her past. She admits, “now I see with some distance so my eyes have room to focus” (Goto 45) and “the pain of having not spoken, of not bothering to ask questions, still aches inside me
now” (Goto 46). Here, we see Waxman’s defining elements of the *Reifungsroman* being illustrated. Despite having little “breath left in this set of bellows” (Goto 3), she now refuses to be silent: “I am an old woman and I must speak” (Goto 5).

While *Chorus of Mushrooms* is more closely aligned with Waxman’s *Reifungsroman*, this novel also exhibits similar narrative strategies deployed in the genre Constance Rooke defines as the *Vollendungsroman*, a “novel of ‘completion’ or ‘winding up’” (74). According to Rooke’s definition, “the most common form of the *Vollendungsroman* is the life review, in which narrative time is divided between past and present. The past – in which the characteristic matter of the *Bildungsroman* is recapitulated – is typically approached and controlled through the operation of the elderly protagonist’s memory” (78). Robert N. Butler’s definition of the life review is worth quoting at length:

[T]he life review is a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated. Presumably, this process is prompted by the realization of approaching dissolution and death, and the inability to maintain one’s sense of personal invulnerability. It is further shaped by contemporaneous experiences and its nature and outcome are affected by the life-long unfolding of character. (381)

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37 See pages 56-57 in Chapter 1 for my discussion on Rooke’s concept of the *Vollendungsroman*. 
While Butler’s claim of universalism remains problematic, the significance of his theorization of this later life cognitive process reveals itself within many narratives of ageing. For instance, Obachan comments how she “found out a long time ago you can never discard the past. It stays with you always” (Goto 146), and she thus negotiates her past through consideration of her present condition.

Neal Norrick’s study “The Construction of Multiple Identities in Elderly Narrators’ Stories” suggests that an elderly narrator’s simultaneous glance backward and forward in time provides her critical temporal and spatial distancing for “retrospective evaluation” (905). Obachan complicates this theory of a multi-directional glance when she claims “[m]y Japanese eyes are at the back of my head, and they can only see backwards. My Japanese eyes are twenty years dimmed” (110). Her comment acknowledges that memories fade and distort as time passes, thus reminding the reader that life narratives cannot be assumed as a complete and accurate record of past events. Nevertheless, her past does inform her storytelling, and through her narrativization act, she examines how her life course did not materialize as expected:

I never thought I would end up in a hotel with a cowboy. I never expected to leave Japan. I never knew I would get married and then divorced. I never thought I would bear a daughter who speaks a different language.


Typical of the Vollendungsroman, Obachan’s life review makes apparent “the distance she feels between what her life has been and what it should have been” (Rooke 76), but

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38 For a detailed discussion on this rhetorical strategy, see page 76 of this dissertation.
this disparity is not viewed with regret. Rather, she now realizes the consequences of her earlier actions, having “spent so much time saying nothing in [her] youth” and decides to “make up for things unsaid” (Goto 26). Her life review supplies the motivation to act and construct her future in ways she is only beginning to imagine. She claims, “I’m not too old to change” (Goto 113). However, like a narrator of a Vollendungsroman, Obachan is confronted by the physical realities of her ageing body and the constraints of linear time, and she feels a sense of urgency to “hurry, hurry” (Goto 73).

Old age bestows Obachan critical perspective, as she notes how in her current position, “here now,” she is able to “look back with eyes that see” (Goto 45). Through a specific Christian reference, she notes, “There are no pillars of salt in my culture” (Goto 82), signalling a willingness to reflect on both what has come before her and that which she is choosing to leave behind. She shows no remorse at her departure and claims, “Everyone knows that home is long gone and wishing won’t make it otherwise” (Goto 110). Through retrospective evaluation, Obachan realizes that as a child “[i]t was important to me to be important” (8), and this attitude still affects her behaviour in her later years. As an old woman, she strives to become “the best old woman you’re ever going to find for many years to come” (Goto 111). She challenges, “Let people remember me” (Goto 146), a goal to which she succeeds, becoming known as “a legend in these parts” (Goto 217).

Goto’s literary representation of Obachan enacts a new cultural politics that transforms this old woman into a socio-political agent. Obachan provides readers with a complex model for “agency in later life” (Tulle 175). She does not view age as a limitation and her perspective enables her to experience excitement and adventure in her
later years (even if only perhaps imaginatively). Obachan never denies her ageing, openly acknowledging, “I am an old woman” (5), and at times, she even comments upon changes to her physicality, but without anger or remorse: “When I was young and beautiful, my lips were an ornament upon my face. Now my face is crumpled with care and seams adorn my cheeks” (24). For Obachan, old age signals the culmination of experiences and knowledge and affords her power to disrupt ageist assumptions. Shifting between first- and third-person perspective, she describes her own sexual desire as ironic:

Most unseemly, to be this age and horny, but it is funny after all. This muttering, old, lamb-haired Obachan wearing elastic-waisted polyester pants, brown collarless shirt with pink flowers, grey cardigan and heel imprinted slippers. Just pulling out the waistband with one quavering hand and the other just about to slip into cotton briefs, toying with the idea of—.

(39)

Categorizing her sexuality as “[m]ost unseemly” suggests specific ingrained socialization about age appropriate sexual behaviours; the use of the em dash signifies her hesitancy to continue with her fantasy. However, she later disregards these ageist dictates about female sexuality when she “spreads her arms, her legs wide,” “curving to her pleasure” (86). She describes herself “with supple strength, her buttocks curving, swelling, with flesh and longing” (84), and her one-night sexual affair with a cowboy truck driver further exemplifies her freedom from restrictive social norms.

Sturgess argues Obachan’s role “as adventuress in the narrative shifts the traditionally represented role of women from ‘the house’ to ‘the horse’” (25). As Obachan reevaluates her life, she begins to identify “[t]he chair [that] had lent her
stability” as transforming into “her prison” (81). This shift in consciousness prompts her to “[l]eav[e] what I know to explore what I don’t” (76). Her active movement away from the domestic space (and its symbolic enclosure) to become a famous rodeo rider exemplifies Waxman’s analysis of old women protagonists moving from “hearthside” to “the open road” (11). Waxman describes the distinctive features of the Reifungsroman as “an opening up of life for […] ageing heroines as they literally take to the open road in search of themselves and new roles in life” (16). Obachan’s character provides readers with a vision of old age as “liberated from the constraints of age and tradition” (Sturgess 25).

Even her storytelling reflects her specific attitudes about ageing. In particular, in the Uba-Sute Yama story, a traditional Japanese tale about the abandonment of older people during periods of starvation, Obachan demonstrates her wit in “re-telling and re-creating” (Goto 185) and modernizes the story for her listener. She emphasizes both the positive and negative power of words, explaining that “what we call something governs the scope and breadth of what it’ll be” (Goto 68). Playing with semantics, she transforms anxiety about old age into a positive reading, interpreting Uba-Sute Yama to signify not a negative “place where people are abandoned” but a positive “place of abandonment!” (Goto 68). By engaging with the polysemic nature of language, Obachan enacts a post-structural practice of interpretive openness in meaning and signification, and redefines old age as a time of freedom.

Goto destabilizes cultural stereotypes of old Japanese Canadian women’s subjectivities to illustrate the model’s limitations; in the case of the grandmother, Goto mobilizes multiple stages of subjecthood simultaneously, enabling her to be read as “a
chain of slippery signifiers merging into one another” (Sturgess 25). Initially, Obachan is characterized as a tiny and decrepit old Japanese woman who sits in a darkened hallway, muttering incessantly in a language that no one else speaks. She is incorrectly assumed ignorant of the language of the dominant culture in which she has lived for twenty years. She voices her experience of social isolation in this small prairie town where “most town folk were unaware that [she] was even living with the Tonkatsus” (Goto 88). And, despite the esteemed position her age would afford in a traditional Japanese family, she suffers from cultural alienation within her own family, the “only Japanese-Canadians for miles around” (Goto 121). When her daughter and son-in-law abandon their ‘mother-tongue’ upon immigration and choose to culturally assimilate, Obachan has no one with whom to speak Japanese. Even her granddaughter “couldn’t understand the words [Obachan] spoke” (Goto 18).

Obachan’s voice inserts a unique cultural and age perspective into the narrative. Through storytelling, she navigates the diversity of age, race, class, gender, and ability, engaging her listener in her new politics of difference. Her stories reveal how specific cultural beliefs and key life events influence subjectivity and the development of specific coping strategies in later years. For this particular old woman, these strategies or “adaptive resources” (Stoller and Gibson xxvii) translate into acts of self-empowerment that benefit both herself and her granddaughter. When this old woman transforms her own experiential knowledge into new stories, her storytelling potentializes the “emancipatory function” (Grassley and Nelms 2448) of articulating personal
experiences.\textsuperscript{39} Her teaching of a reciprocal storytelling practice highlights the heteroglossic potential of stories as a “site of multiple discourses of dominance, resistance, identity, and of difference” (Kelly 114).

As a Japanese Canadian storyteller, Obachan shares with her granddaughter family stories about cultural origins and Japanese traditions and, eventually, she reconciles her own anger and sense of dislocation through the construction and articulation of a new diasporic understanding of ‘home.’ Obachan offers Murasaki a creation story as a starting place, “Somewhere to begin” (Goto 29) in her search for identity and belonging within multiple cultures. Thomas King, in \textit{The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative}, provides a valuable illustration and explanation of creative stories as offering “relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist” (10). Through a return to origins (interweaving the \textit{yamanba} creation story, myths, and family histories), Obachan integrates contemporaneous social understandings within chosen Japanese cultural narratives to help both herself and her granddaughter integrate the past with the present.

One particular myth that Obachan shares with her granddaughter models female agency when the character Izanami realizes “It’s time to make a new home” (Goto 30). Later, Obachan explains to her granddaughter, you must “[f]ind your home inside yourself first” (Goto 48) and then with “[your] home in the cup of [your] palms […] travel from story to

\textsuperscript{39} Jane S. Grassley and Tommie P. Nelms claim storytelling is emancipatory when storytellers become active participants in identifying “social and cultural structures that needed to change” (2448) and when “confronting stereotypes and generating strategies for empowerment” (2449).
Murasaki, first as listener and later as her own storyteller, learns the importance of origins and continuity for negotiating her own future within two cultures. Storytelling will allow her to creatively imagine her own conception of home within Canada.

MODELLING RECIPROCITY THROUGH NARRATIVE

*Chorus of Mushrooms* exemplifies how framing and variances in presentational mode, both in voice and tense (temporal relations), work in different ways to communicate meaning. Even the paratextual information (e.g., author’s photo, the dedication, acknowledgements) is framed in such a way that it too contributes to an understanding of how we are to ‘read’ this novel. In the “Acknowledgements,” readers are informed that the author’s construction of a “personal myth” incorporates aspects of her “grandmother’s history” into the telling. The resulting “contemporary folk legend” (“Acknowledgements”), the novel itself, is an intergenerational story that reveals a legacy of women with a shared collective history as storytellers. This information, plus the intertextual allusion to Murasaki Shikibu (Goto 165), the tenth-century female author of and storyteller in *Genji Monogatari*, serves to situate these women storytellers (Obachan, her granddaughter Murasaki, and the author Hiromi Goto) within a long-standing Japanese tradition.

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40 Obachan’s words echo Tagish/Tlingit elder Angela Sidney’s philosophy that life should be lived “just like a story” (qtd in Cruikshank 146).
Interweaving life review with myth, this novel’s episodic and associational structure departs from the conventional Western paradigmatic structure. Goto explains her creative desire “to play with a narrative form which reflected our experiential world” (qtd. in Morris 232). Carine M. Mardorossian characterizes the new postcolonial aesthetic as one that attempts to “modify, unsettle, and call into question the very terms of postcolonial discourse” (2). Although specifically addressing the works of Caribbean women writers, Mardorossian’s insights apply to Goto’s novel, in which “attention to transcultural exchange inside and outside national and international boundaries is central […] to questions of culture and identity” (6). Accordingly, marginalized authors “write from within or in symbiosis with the dominant discourse whose claims they undermine internally rather than oppositionally” (Mardorossian 7), as this approach acknowledges “the specificities of politics of location and positionality” (Mardorossian 6). When Murasaki queries, “When does one thing end and another begin? Can you separate the two?” (213), her concern relates not only to her telepathic relationship with her grandmother and their reciprocal storytelling practice, but to the overall structure of the narrative, whereby each story (or myth) interconnects and one character’s experiences merge with and inform another’s. Murasaki describes this storytelling process “not [as] a linear equation” but evolving “outwards” and capable of reflecting something different.

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41 Structuralism constructed understandings of narrative as possessing a universal structural aesthetic, and although poststructuralist theorists later contested this universalism, this understanding continues to pervade Eurocentric studies as the normative paradigm. For example, William Labov’s structure of the narrative simply furthered Aristotle’s “ideal narrative,” outlined in Poetics, and Roland Barthes’s systematic analysis of the syntagmatic (horizontal) narrative “thread” and the paradigmatic (vertical) structure served to define how “storeys” interrelate (87).

42 Similarly, in the American Indian tradition, as Paula Gunn Allen explains, “stories work dynamically among clusters of loosely interconnected circles” and the “focus of the action shifts from one character to another as the story unfolds” (241).
depending upon context, intention, and perspective (Goto 132). This understanding serves to reveal simultaneously “something new, something old, or something you’ve forgotten” (Goto 132).

The multiplicity of interwoven narratorial voices creates a challenge for readers to attribute focalization consistently to a particular character. Four narrators co-exist within this novel: Murasaki and Obachan’s clearly marked roles; an unnamed primary narrator, signaled by a font shift into italics and eventually identifiable through textual clues as an older Murasaki who governs the narration of the frame narrative; and an unnamed narrator, not identified by italics, who speaks from an extradiegetic perspective, that is, external to both the frame and embedded narratives.43 (Are we to read this latter voice as the implied author’s?) When this extradiegetic narrator asks, “When does one thing end and another begin? Can you separate the two?” (Goto 213), are we to interpret Murasaki and her Obachan, both narrative protagonists and narrators of their individual stories, as one and the same? Where does one’s story end and the other’s begin? These questions, delineated from the rest of the text, ambiguously address “you.” “Can you separate the two?” (Goto, my italics, 213) becomes a meta-narrative challenge for Goto’s readers: need fact and fiction be separated? This rhetorical question complicates traditional narratological assumptions about what constitutes fictionality. Monika Fludernick contends that “fictionality,” whether a narrative is fictional per se, depends upon two literary conditions: “whether the story is a construct (*fictio*), [and] whether the events

43 In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette formulates a narrative typology that differentiates “voice” into three categories: person, time of narration, and narrative level (99). Extradiegetic and diegetic refer to different narrative levels from which the narrator speaks. On the diegetic, or story, level, the narrator is positioned as a character. On the extradiegetic level, the narrator speaks from a position external to the story world.
depicted are made up (\textit{fictum})” (60). Yet, through its narrative strategies that create a “personal myth” from family “history” (“Acknowledgements”), \textit{Chorus of Mushrooms} forces reconsideration of traditional narratological categories.

Thus, one recurring theme in this novel is the questioning of an assumed binary relationship between fact (configured as ‘truth’ within the novel) and fiction, with the paratextual material convoluting further distinctions between real author, implied author, and the granddaughter character who is an autodiegetic narrator (a first-person narrator who is the central protagonist of her own story). Fictional characters may derive from the author’s personal history, as suggested in Goto’s dedication “\textit{For Kiyokawa Naoe. I love you Obachan}” and again in her acknowledgements when she thanks “Kiyokawa Naoe for the stories.” This name doubling (of Obachan as the author’s own grandmother and as a character in her novel) blurs the boundary between autobiography and fiction. Goto, having “taken tremendous liberties with my grandmother’s history” (“Acknowledgements”), in effect, creates her own grandmother’s story anew. The resulting story incorporates elements of the past (the stories her Obachan told her) into Goto’s present (albeit always already past) act of writing/telling in order to engage actively in the creation of an “immigrant story with a happy ending” that is told by Murasaki (Goto 212).

Reconstructing her own history, author Goto, as storyteller, positions herself within a collective cultural legacy of Japanese women storytellers. Suzette Henke suggests, “Autobiography has always offered the tantalizing possibility of reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject ideologically inflected by language, history, and social imbrication” (xv). Henke’s work broadens the traditional parameters of the genre of
autobiographical writing to include “memoirs, diaries, letters, and journals, as well as the bildungsroman and other personally inflected fictional texts” (xiii). I see Goto’s creative writing performing in much the same way that Henke conceives of the potential of “life-writing”:

As a genre, life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and to interpret the intertextual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by society and culture. Because the author can instantiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semifictive protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world. (xv-vi)

In Broken Entries, Roy Miki describes life writing as when “the assumed wall between an autobiographic ‘I’ and a fictive ‘I’ has become permeable to create a textualized ‘I’” (39); in turn, this literary strategy repositions the reader and critic as “an active producer of significances and values” (Miki 39). Goto’s fictionalized self-representation—her “semifictive protagonist” or “textualized ‘I’” storyteller character Murasaki—functions as a narrative reflection of the creative possibilities of storytelling.

Chorus of Mushrooms begins in italics; the visual fluidity of these lines in this part of the text, combined with the spatial imagery created through the opening words, “We lie in bed” (Goto 1), produces an illusion of uncertainty about the time frame of this scene. The strategy of creating the primary frame narrative as a bedtime story alludes to the universal timelessness of storytelling. The reader is drawn into the calm intimacy of
this moment where, under the influence of the “murmur of our blood beneath our surface touch,” the unnamed narrator is “too comfortable to move” (Goto 1). Goto employs an etic opening, which offers readers very little information about this narrator. Markers of identity, such as gender, age, and ethnicity, remain ambiguous. Readers are left to interpret details such as “the swell of my hip,” and “the rough palm, just beneath my breast,” along with comments such as “[m]y Japanese isn’t as good as my English” (Goto 1). How are we to read this narrator who, we are told, lies “in bed” (Goto 1) with her listener? The use of “lie” plays out its polysemic complexity, suggesting, on one hand, that the narrator and listener are physically lying together in bed, while, on the other, that these two characters are engaged in an act of deception. The language that describes their positioning suggests an intimate relationship between two lovers, and their conversation reveals the necessity of trust between teller and listener before the storytelling performance can begin.

When the narrator’s lover asks to be told “a true story” (Goto 1), the narrator problematizes ‘truth’ as a concept. The lover assumes a true story offers a ‘truthful’ – that is exact – reflection of reality, one somehow devoid of narratorial bias and inflection. The narrator must explain to her lover that within stories one can always “hear lies and truth dissembled” (29). When they both agree upon the necessity to “listen” (Goto 2) without need for absolute understanding, and after the listener assures the narrator to “Trust me,”

44 Steve McCullough claims, “Goto’s book exemplifies in literary form both the possibilities and the anxieties of a postmodern vision of fiction in which issues of reality and facticity take second place to hermeneutic or experiential truth values” (149). He suggests the “conflation of truth and fiction” (McCullough 152) in Goto’s novel is what creates contingency between authorship and the “largely uncontrollable nature of readerly interpretation” (McCullough 151). Yet, despite what he calls a “narrative risk,” McCullough suggests the text is not rendered meaningless or “subject to arbitrary whim” (168).
the narrator begins “Mukashi, mukashi, omukashi” (Goto 2), using the Japanese narrative opening convention (which roughly translates as “A long, long time ago”) to segue to Part One. *Chorus of Mushrooms* employs an intrusive narrative pattern, whereby the frame narrative repeatedly disrupts the embedded narratives throughout the novel in order for this primary narrator/storyteller to remind both of her listeners (her lover and the reader) of her narrative purpose.

Part One begins with an expressive “Ahhhhh” (Goto 3), and the bold font chapter title “Naoe” signals the speaking subject of this section. Initially, this narrator refers to herself in the third-person as an old woman called “Obachan” (Goto 3). Diegetic markers in the narrative indicate her age. With “[n]ot much breath left in this set of bellows” and “mummy carcass” (Goto 3), she can be easily read as ‘old.’ By the second page, the reader learns that she is “Eighty-five years old,” that she has lived in “this country for twenty years,” and that the emotional “space between” herself and her daughter is so immense that their relationship seems irreconcilable (Goto 4). Occasional direct speech interrupts her monologue and inserts additional voices and perspectives into the narrative, specifically that of her daughter Keiko. Obachan is “bitter” and asserts her authority as “an old woman [who] must speak” endlessly (Goto 5), at which point her story shifts from her present focus on the injustice that there is “no one to listen” (Goto 4) and spirals into a past reminiscence of her childhood in Japan, especially her relationship with her brother and mother “Okasan [who] would tell us tales” (Goto 7). Employing an analeptic flashback, this embedded narrative of her childhood reveals details that serve to construct Obachan’s sense of self as gendered female within a male-dominated culture. Her retrospective commentary that “I am not bitter for losing something [the family’s seal to
A door banging in the wind interrupts Obachan’s memory and simultaneous narration of this past event. The narrative structure echoes its own disruption with singular punctuated onomatopoeic words: “Slap, bang. Slap, bang” (Goto 11). Obachan then explains, “A cup in my hand. It has always been there, smashes against the door. Shatter” (Goto 11). Her narration of this event does not explicitly position her as the actant, and this distancing narrative strategy enables her to avoid taking responsibility. Her violent response of throwing her cup against the door seems atypical when juxtaposed with the previous image she has carefully constructed of herself as a young naive Japanese girl. Such manipulations of the narrative, combined with her reflections on her relationship with her antagonistic daughter who she tells us “ignores me” (Goto 13), reveal certain biases in Obachan’s narratorial perspective. However, the question of Obachan’s reliability as narrator of her own story becomes irrelevant when, on page twelve, another italicized section transects the narrative flow, drawing the reader back to the initial narratorial perspective.

The frame narrative repeatedly interrupts the embedded frames to remind the reader of specific meta-narrative questions that pertain to storytelling, truth, and the listener’s role. This frame narrator (Murasaki), unidentified to this point, has begun the slow revelation of her character; the use of italics serves to differentiate her from Obachan, the subject of her narrative. The narrator’s relationship with Obachan becomes clear when the listener-lover identifies the old woman as “your grandmother” (Goto 12).
These italicized sections make apparent that Naoe’s section, while seemingly narrated autodiegetically by Naoe (referred to as Obachan by her granddaughter), is actually narrated by the novel’s primary narrator, an older Murasaki. At the conclusion of this frame, the narrator again addresses her listener’s anxiety about the distinction between a truthful account of reality and a story, by revealing her conscious historiographic role in “making up the truth as I go along” (Goto 12). With this paradoxical statement about storying truth, the narrative structure shifts back to Naoe’s perspective and narrative voice (albeit, as noted before, rendered through Murasaki’s storytelling.)

This section highlights the intergenerational challenges that confront this immigrant family when cultural perspectives differ. Obachan interprets her daughter Keiko’s assimilation to the dominant Western culture as having led to the destruction of their mother/daughter relationship. Obachan reveals her strategies of survival: her personal mailbox, her collection of coins from “the couch cracks” (Goto 15), and her hope that “[i]f the few words I uttered were to echo in someone’s mind, then that is enough” (Goto 38). This desire for transmission provides the narrative motivation for teaching her storytelling practice.

Situated between the section titled “Naoe” and the one titled “Murasaki” is an untitled section, told from a third-person heterodiegetic perspective. This omniscient narrator, located external to the scene, mimetically recounts the narrative using the strategy of isochrony. This slowing down of the narration, so that the duration of time that passes in the act of reading replicates the narrative time, enables the reader to situate her/himself as an active witness to the measured events, in order to participate in the sounds of “crackle crunch” (Goto 16), anticipate the flavours of foods shared, and gain an
understanding of the intimate relationship that exists between grandmother and
granddaughter. Although (or perhaps because) they speak different languages, their
relationship develops through these shared experiences of specific foods and cultural
understandings. From within “Obachan’s bed of feasts” (Goto 18) her stories convey
their meaning through “notes of music instead of symbols to decipher” (Goto 29).

In the subsequent section titled “Murasaki,” the story thread from the previous
section continues yet the focalization shifts from this external narratorial perspective to
Murasaki’s, yet not from her position as the primary narrator but as one who provides a
first-person account as a character within her own story. She and the old woman, now
explicitly identified as Obachan, discover a common language to communicate through:

Smack, smack! (Obachan)
Smack, smack! (Me)
Smack! Smack! (Obachan)
Smack! Smack! (Me) (Goto 17)

Murasaki listens to and learns to mimic the sounds/words her grandmother makes, an act
she will later transform into her storytelling practice. When Murasaki narrates the
experiences she shares with her grandmother, she integrates Obachan’s Japanese
language into her telling. However, as the reader knows, Murasaki does not know this
language because her mother “taught her no words so she cannot speak” (Goto 15);
therefore, this embedded narrative as told through Murasaki’s voice is rendered
implausible. Questions about the reliability of this narrator demand the reader suspend
disbelief. Murasaki informs us, “I couldn’t understand the words she spoke, but this is
what I heard. Mukashi, mukashi, omukashi…” (Goto 18), at which point the narrative
perspective shifts back to Obachan, and she takes over the storytelling as narrator. Speaking with experiential wisdom, she frames the “bed of tales” (Goto 19) as a space to share stories that can “ease the ache within you” (Goto 18).

In this novel, the bed symbolizes a safe environment for developing understandings of storytelling and engaging its potential. Much of the storytelling occurs in bed, be it between the narrator and her lover or between Murasaki and her grandmother. The bed is the centre stage of the frame narrative, as the novel both opens and closes with the narrator and her lover in bed and, thus, the entire narrative can be conceptualized as one “bedtime story” (Goto 20). The bed is a space where time dissolves, as indicated in Murasaki’s questioning of her Obachan:

(Murasaki: How long have we been in bed, Obachan?

Naoe: I don’t know.

Murasaki: How long will we stay in bed, Obachan?

Naoe: Child, I don’t know.) (Goto 19)

Here (as elsewhere), the narration disconnects from both the main frame and the embedded narrative. At this early point in the novel, the significance of the text enclosed in parentheses remains elusive. The use of line breaks purposely differentiates this conversation from the analeptic story happening in the narrative, and eventually the reader discovers the parentheses marking off this dialogue between Obachan and Murasaki signals a telepathic communication occurring between two storytellers who no longer inhabit the same spatial realm. Throughout the novel, parenthetical conversations between these two characters repeatedly interrupt the narrative flow and simultaneously situate them outside both the primary and embedded frames. Much like a direct address
that breaks the fourth wall between the stage and its audience, this narrative device similarly distorts an imaginary boundary between the reader and the work of fiction. However, in this case, the reader is not addressed as a direct listener, but instead is positioned as a listener who overhears these private conversations. This structuring directly involves the reader as a third participant in this intimate relationship, which imparts mutual trust and respect as integral aspects of any ethical listening act.

Following this narrative interruption, Obachan proceeds to tell an instructive story about her brother and his wife. She describes how they “tell each other tales” (Goto 20):

So lucky for them, they are two. One can begin forming the words, the other listening, and if the one who speaks should tire, the other is there to finish. They tell each other legends, myths. They re-create together. (Goto 20)

This embedded story functions as a metanarrative lesson on the importance of reciprocal storytelling. Before Obachan leaves, she wants assurance that the legacy of storytelling will be transferred to ensure its continuation. However, the transfer of story and practice between grandmother and granddaughter complicates simplistic notions of transmission. In the narrative, Goto deploys what Sturgess reads as “code-mixing”: “the juxtaposition of Japanese and English scripts and speech” (28). This defamiliarization strategy (for the non-Japanese reader) is a textual effect that actively structures difference into the narrative (Sturgess 28) and informs the ideal reader. Like translation at its most basic level, this narrative device displaces one linguistic system for another, and yet does not provide an easy bridge, thus positioning the reader either as insider or ‘othered.’ Much of Obachan’s narrative voice (and, consequently, many of her meta-narrative lessons)
appears in Japanese, such as “Anta ga jibun de imi o sagashite chyodai” (Goto 17), and this narrative device positions the non-speaking Japanese readers alongside the younger Murasaki who “never learned the language” (Goto 189). Yet, for Murasaki, such linguistic barriers do not inhibit transmission, as she learns to “read the lines on [Obachan’s] brow, the creases beside [her] mouth” (Goto 15). Both grandmother and granddaughter discover that story transmits in more ways than just through words. When Murasaki learns to “stop pretending to understand” and to actively “listen” (Goto 20) to the words like “notes of music” (Goto 29), her “mouth open[s] of its own accord and words f[a]ll from [her] tongue” (Goto 20-21). When the sounds of language begin to transfer from storyteller to listener, Murasaki transforms from a passive receiver of Obachan’s stories into an active participant in the telling process.

Murasaki eventually “learn[s] how to speak Japanese” (Goto 12), yet her hesitancy to engage with a language she is not yet comfortable speaking reveals itself in her early attempts at storytelling. Initially unprepared to formulate her own stories, she resorts to repeating traditional Japanese themes about elderly grandparents, poverty, village life, and naughty boys (Goto 20), but the start and abrupt breaking off of each tale reveals her anxiety. She has yet to learn that “[y]ou commit yourself to what you don’t know every time you tell a story” (Goto 185). Her false start of “Mukashi, watashiwa—” (Goto 20), at which Obachan then prompts her, “What are you waiting for” (Goto 20), indicates that this younger storyteller has not fully discovered her own voice or her own stories to tell. Reverting back to English, she defeats herself when she chooses instead to

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45 Anta ga jibun de imi o sagashite chyodai roughly translates to mean “Find the meaning by yourself.” Translation provided by Junko Ansel.
46 Watashiwa translates as “I” in English.
admit, “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I stop” (Goto 20). The blank space visually inserted into the text bespeaks the void in her communicative ability. Yet, as she matures into her own practice as storyteller, she discovers storytelling as a process that is “not a linear equation,” but one that evolves “outwards” and is capable of refracting something different depending upon context, intention, and perspective (Goto 132).

Later, Murasaki voices concern about her inability to create closure in stories, yet Obachan assures her there is “[n]o need to tie [stories] up. There is always room for beginnings” (Goto 63). Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez explains that when stories remain open-ended, they provide a “range of understandings and interpretations found by each listener-reader” (“Storytellers” 345). Worth claims narratives often present an “explanatory gap” (47) which helps listeners develop abductive or “narrative reasoning” (48). In order to understand the narrative, listeners must sort through the information provided and draw inferences to make sense of an explanatory gap, and through this reasoning process, they gain awareness “there could be multiple explanations” (Worth 45). “Silent pauses” also perform in a similar fashion, as “additional spacing which the listener-reader is expected or at least enabled to fill with her or his own responses to the text” (Brill de Ramirez, “Storytellers” 346). This strategy when utilized within textual storytelling mirrors oral devices and, like Worth’s “explanatory gaps,” this aporetic space enables “listener-readers” “to find the truths and meaning for herself or himself” (Brill de Ramirez, “Storytellers” 346). Brill de Ramirez defines conversive storytelling as “co-creative, relational, [and] transformative,” which “invites an interactive participation in the stories that lie beyond the textual surface” (“Surviving” 248).
Other narrative strategies and rhetorical devices serve to create meaning or, at times, contradiction, forcing the listener (and reader) to either actively participate or disengage from the storytelling process. Malka Muchnik and Anat Stavans’s study, “Telling the Same Story to Your Child: Mothers’ Versus Fathers’ Storytelling Interactions,” suggests gender influences the narrative devices tellers utilize to engage their listeners, and variances occur in emotive, interactive, and linguistic cues (such as repetitions, word order, thinking and content questions, first- versus third-person perspective, present versus past tense, affirmation comments, and high register words). Tag questions “serve as a reinforcement of joint production of conversation” (64), while directives function more as stimulators to encourage or guide, and first-person adds “tension” and creates “intimacy” (Muchnik and Stavans 63). Heteroglossia, through the insertion of additional voices, “introduces the attitudes or perspectives of others directly into […] stories” (Norrick 905). For instructive purposes, Obachan’s father’s voice – in her hanko story – provides the lesson that informs her, Naoe-chan, about her gendered position within socially dictated normative roles. Julie Cruikshank discusses this “use of dialogue” (164) in storytelling as a narrative strategy “to explore conflicting points of view by taking parts of successive characters and creating discussions with them” (164). Obachan repeatedly uses the strategy throughout her storytelling practice; she “doesn’t offer a judgement but uses the narrative to reflect on the incident” (Cruikshank 166). Obachan also demonstrates the importance of repetition, which is explicitly signaled through the recurrence of the opening convention (“Mukashi, mukashi, omukashi…”) and implied through the recirculation of traditional Japanese stories, such as the origin myth, Uba-Sute Yama, Yuki-Onna, and the story of yamanba. However, repetition does
not create stasis because “these stories keep changing” (Goto 73). According to Obachan, stories must be conceptualized as living entities that transform because “that’s the nature of all matter” (Goto 73).

In response to Murasaki’s anxiety about her own role as a storyteller, Obachan patiently explains, “I can’t give you answers, child. I’m just beginning to find answers of my own. But listen” (Goto 127). Instructing her granddaughter to find guidance through the stories, helping Murasaki learn to “stand on [her] own” (Goto 162), Obachan pushes her to construct her own stories for developing understanding and not just reiterate those she has heard. With the skills of storytelling and an understanding of its power to create unlimited possibilities, Murasaki “must shape her own location” (Goto 113) as a second-generation Canadian-born diasporic subject. When she has created for herself a space of belonging, she will no longer “have to wonder where [she] live[s]” (Goto 189).

Murasaki understands that “a layer of cultural displacement” (Goto 98) imposes a seemingly insurmountable barrier between her mother and grandmother, but she does not have the critical perspective to analyze her own mother/daughter relationship, admitting that “Mom is a whole different story and one I can’t even begin to comprehend” (Goto 98). She turns to her grandmother’s stories, and to her father’s eventual confession of how when he and Murasaki’s mother “moved to Canada” they decided to “put Japan behind us” (Goto 207), in an attempt to make sense of the complexity of this multigenerational cultural conflict. Her secure sense of reality becomes defamiliarized as she begins to “doubt the things I saw with my eyes [and] heard with my ears, as truth” (Goto 135). She gains a critical awareness that the stories she has been telling herself to explain her confusion about her parents’ behaviour, stories derived from too many unspoken
words, possess the power to influence and govern social relations. As Anne McKeough explains, “the narrative mode makes sense of the social world by interpreting human actions and intentions, organizes everyday experience, and seeks plausibility and internal consistency” (150). Thus, the stories Murasaki has been living her life by have constructed her representation of truth which, in turn, has informed her perception of reality. She reflects, “It’s funny how you can sift your memories, braid them with other stories. Come up with a single strand and call it truth” (Goto 93). With her familiar assumptions deconstructed, she realizes that social constructions of meaning are both mediated by stories and often merely “a question of belief” (Goto 169).

**THE POWER OF TRANSMISSION**

Engaging with Obachan’s stories, yet developing them with her own expressions and experiences, Murasaki transforms into a reciprocal teller. Through this process, she learns that understandings of identity, of self and others, can shift depending upon the story one chooses to tell or listen to. Stories and ‘truth’ thus coexist in an interdependent relationship. Murasaki can no longer “separate the stories from our real lives” (Goto 186) because stories construct truth(s) and truth(s) inform representations and understandings of social relations. One creates the other. Or, in Thomas King’s words, “[t]he truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2). As Ben Okri explains in *A Way of Being Free*, “[o]ne way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves […] If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (46). Eventually, Murasaki learns from Obachan that “words give shape to what will happen” (Goto 186).
Obachan, speaking from her multiple locations as grandmother, storyteller and old woman, reveals the importance of story for self-definition, as both grandmother and granddaughter collaboratively discover their own agency.

According to Audre Lorde, intergenerational communication is critically important because otherwise “[w]e find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did because we do not pass on what we have learned or because we are unable to listen” (376). Murasaki recognizes her role in maintaining this storytelling legacy, passed from “[t]he daughter of a daughter of a daughter…the list is endless” (Goto 52), and her awareness of this responsibility reveals her sense of self as simultaneously both collective and individual. Jenny Hockey and Allison James offer an interesting interpretation of a collective configuration of identity that relates to what this novel emulates. Hockey and James suggest, “identity which is seen as unique to the individual, on the one hand, and […] identity which is seen as shared, collective and social, on the other, have to be understood as not only both ‘intrinsically social’ but also as ‘routinely related’ to one another” (167). This novel demonstrates how the singularity of the protagonist’s role transforms into a position shared by multiple characters who partake equally in the narrative’s central interest. The truckdriver and Obachan’s lover Tengu, a peripheral character in the novel, questions the seeming crossover in Obachan and Murasaki’s identities that is linguistically apparent in their names, when he queries, “You call your mago [granddaughter], Murasaki, and tell me to call you Purple. Why do you suppose?” (Goto 174). In Japanese, Murasaki means “purple” (Goto 165), and this name doubling suggests that both women constitute a continuum of familial consciousness. Both women become what Trinh conceives of as
“but one link” in a “chain and continuum” of storytellers (122). Even Obachan’s leaving on her adventurous travels to Western Canada does not sever their intimate connection, but rather exemplifies the strength of this eternal psychic interconnectedness in which their “stories entwine and loop around and this will never change. She [Murasaki] lingers here, with me [Obachan], even now” (Goto 113).

Murasaki and Obachan’s characterizations both continue to evolve independently while simultaneously revealing slippage between their characters’ identities. The centrality of both Obachan and Murasaki’s roles and the complex interplay of their narratives destabilize any narratological assumptions that one story showcases one protagonist. These two characters are both storytellers within the novel, and their reciprocal storytelling engagement unabashedly complicates clear distinctions about who is telling whose story. When the novel is read as both Obachan’s and Murasaki’s story and history, the individualism of the protagonist becomes reconceptualized as a collective identity that belongs to a long legacy of women storytellers, extending back to the tenth-century Murasaki Shikibu. Neither character becomes privileged over the other, just as neither story takes precedence.

Obachan’s teaching of reciprocal storytelling provides Murasaki with a model of how to claim power for self-definition. When the old woman’s granddaughter adopts her namesake role (Murasaki Shibiku), she comes to embody the belief that “[e]very woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission” (Trinh 121). In Obachan’s absence, Murasaki, as storyteller, “is there to finish” (Goto 20). She takes responsibility as the primary narrator to tell this story in which both she and her grandmother discover the strength and agency to embark upon a new life journey. By imaginatively expanding
upon her grandmother’s stories because “[s]tories grow out of stories grow out of stories” (Goto 172), these two storytellers “re-create together” (Goto 20). When Obachan’s teachings have been successful, Murasaki’s new role and self-identity confirm that, as Trinh suggests, “What is transmitted from generation to generation is not only the stories, but the very power of transmission” (134). Through the act of transmission, a member of the younger generation becomes a storyteller bearing witness to her family’s past while simultaneously articulating and making sense of her own diasporic consciousness and intergenerational cultural location. This new storyteller becomes configured as part of a chain of storytellers that Brill de Ramirez describes as playing a “healing” role. These are storytellers who “weave the verbal webs that reinscribe the old words, the old stories, the old ways into revisions that provide new ways of seeing, understanding, and interpreting a world for which the old ways are no longer sufficient” (Brill de Ramirez 333).

Murasaki has learned from her Obachan that “we hold the power to change our lives for ourselves” (Goto 186). When Murasaki, as the primary narrator, rises from her bed at the conclusion of her narrative, she reminds her listener, “You know you can change the story” (Goto 220). Her words, functioning as a meta-narrative statement, assume an active listener as a participant in the construction of narrative meaning, one who now has an understanding of agency to story up her or his own version of history and the present moment.

Through their reciprocal storytelling practice, Murasaki engages in “re-telling and re-creating” (Goto 185) her family’s story in which she and her grandmother “take up […] two different journeys at different times” but “are walking toward the same place” (Goto 200). This novel configures female subjectivities as emerging into collective,
heterogeneous expressions. The old woman and her granddaughter, through reciprocal storytelling, become what Tengu describes as translations of each other: “So you’re a translation of Murasaki and Murasaki is a translation of you?” (Goto 174). However, as Goto rightly reminds us, “the crux of translation is who is translating and for whom?” (“Translating” 111), a statement that bears remembering when evaluating the ethics of the narrative engagement between listener-tellers. Obachan’s response to Tengu, “That’s one reading of it” (Goto 174), reminds readers that multiple interpretations always exist. Truth(s) are subjective and reflective of one’s subject position. Thus, a reciprocal telling act necessitates a mutual agreement whereby both participants take active responsibility when ‘translating’ a story’s development and transformation.

As two individuals who both embrace a diasporic consciousness, an identity that understands itself “in the context of migrations” (Davies 2), Obachan and Murasaki exemplify Carole Boyce Davies’s belief that the “convergence of multiple places and cultures” necessitates “the re-negotiating of identities” (3). This novel reveals how individuals within a diasporic group identify in multiple and diverse ways, with some choosing to embrace one nationalist identity over another, some transnational, and others a combination of both. While diasporic theory focuses on the implications of displacement and cultural loss, the old woman’s sense of identity and belonging tends to be neglected. Studies on intergenerational conflict or the transference of collective memories often position older women as conduits or connections to the past, yet they easily become marginalized by an emphasis on the second-generation’s future as the primary point of interest. Yet, Goto’s novel does no such injustice.
In “Generation Gaps and the Potential of Grandmotherhood,” Sally Chivers analyzes the ways that “[o]ld women could be considered powerful within language” (55). In her discussion on Chorus of Mushrooms, she demonstrates how “Goto’s freeing metaphors provide a refreshing counterpoint to the damage more common metaphors do to perceptions of old age” (55). This old woman’s journey from “hearthside” (Waxman 11) to “horse” (Sturgess 25) becomes creatively imagined through her transformation into a “mystereeeerious bullrider” (Goto 217) who performs “the Greatest Show on Earth” (Goto 218). Thus, as Chivers argues, “[d]eliberately making Naoe’s experience into a metaphor […] forces a recognition of a liberatory potential nestled within figurative language” (55). This novel contributes to Canadian literature an important representation of an old woman as a complex, dynamic, evolving character who performs a critical role in both her own and her granddaughter’s development. Obachan’s attitude towards ageing provides readers a model of resistance against ageism, and her teachings of a reciprocal storytelling practice helps her granddaughter realize her own agency in their collaborative construction of their collective future.

The following chapter develops from this discussion on Goto’s narrative and meta-narrative emphasis on the importance of intergenerational storytelling. Focusing on two Japanese Canadian trauma narratives (Joy Kogawa’s Obasan and Darcy Tamayose’s Odori), I will provide analysis of the different narrative strategies they use to address similar concerns of loss, language, and trauma.
Chapter 3

ARTICULATIONS OF TRAUMA IN JOY KOGAWA’S OBASAN AND DARCY TAMAYOSE’S ODORI

Where do we come from Obasan? We come from cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth. We come from our untold stories that wait for their telling. (Kogawa 248)

When Joy Kogawa’s protagonist Naomi questions her aunt Obasan about the past, her rhetoric gestures towards the damaging repercussions of a family history governed by “untold stories” (248). Kogawa’s novel Obasan (1981) attempts to address the symptoms and experiences of the personal and historical traumas suffered by Japanese Canadians during internment in World War II. Anne Whitehead defines “trauma fiction” as an emerging genre through which authors imaginatively “represent or make visible specific historical instances of trauma” (1). Yet, as Whitehead astutely asks, how can trauma be narrativized when, by its very nature, it resists language and representation? Thus, trauma fiction often exemplifies the paradox of trauma narratives, which Dori Laub explains as a conflict between an imperative to tell for personal and collective survival and the “impossibility of telling” (64) as trauma evades articulation due to the inherent incomprehensibility of the experience.47

To render such experiences comprehensible so that they afford understanding for the reader, authors of trauma fiction utilize diverse narrative structures and strategies.

47 In Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History, Dori Laub specifically addresses the survivors of the Jewish Holocaust, yet his insights on “telling” bear significance for survivors of other genocides, wars, and personally traumatic experiences.
Often temporal shifts (through analeptic recursions, with nightmares, haunting memories, somatic sensations, and certain behavioural reenactments) reflect the symptomatic ‘belatedness’ of trauma, that is, when the mind is unable to properly process and record a traumatic experience in the moment of its occurrence, and thus the encoded memory only surfaces unbidden at a later time and place. Kogawa’s novel is structured in such a way as to emulate the experiences and symptoms of trauma, illustrating the gaps, repetitions, and temporal latency characteristic of traumatic remembering. This structure that mirrors the temporal conditions of traumatic belatedness permits the story to develop in such a way that the narrative return to the traumatic climax – that is the irruption of trauma – occurs towards the end of the novel. Another Japanese Canadian trauma narrative, Darcy Tamayose’s *Odori* (2007) explicitly foregrounds the traumatic events and then allows the *before* and *after* to unfold within the embedded narratives. This narrative strategy enables Tamayose to position storytelling as a means for working through trauma’s belatedness. The old woman storyteller character teaches her listener the importance of creating story because the act of narration transforms the moment of trauma into a starting point for a new conscious understanding that enables movement past the immobilization of trauma.

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48 Sandra Birdsell’s novel *The Russlander* is another example of Canadian trauma fiction that deploys this structural device. The traumatic moment is explicitly unveiled in the opening pages. A newspaper clipping announces the massacre of a Russian Mennonite family, and as the narrative slowly guides the reader towards the defining moment, this structure strategically invokes an affective response, positioning the reader as witness to the recording of Birdsell’s old woman character’s first ever articulation of her traumatic memories. Katya’s storytelling reveals how trauma inserts narrative gaps that rupture her personal and familial storyline, and her storytelling illustrates a particular age perspective on bearing witness, that is through both the telling and listening, to personal and collective narratives of trauma.
This chapter examines how these two Japanese Canadian novels, Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Tamayose’s *Odori*, use different narrative strategies to illuminate the multiple ways interfamilial silences and intergenerational storytelling can influence one’s response to the past and the aftermath of trauma and contribute to one’s subjectivity in the present. Both novels provide insight into multiple generational and age perspectives on the various modalities of interfamily communication when dealing with familial losses and trauma. Kogawa never seems to privilege one mode of communication (silence and speech) over the other; the ending of her novel, which suggests movement towards the emergence of the most horrific and unspeakable, introduces ambiguity about the value of maintaining silences within the family. This ambivalence invites *Odori*’s subsequent engagement as a Japanese Canadian discussion on traumatic loss, silences, and *telling*. While reflecting different consequences of intergenerational silences and telling, each novel equally emphasizes the value of listening, whether to communicative silences in *Obasan* or intergenerational storytelling in *Odori*. Without homogenizing the Japanese Canadian experience, my analysis of these novels reveals that they interweave narratives of ageing, trauma, and diasporic dislocation to project multiple social responses, understandings, and experiences of personal and familial trauma. Thus, Kogawa’s and Tamayose’s novels generate important Japanese Canadian cultural and generational perspectives on the implications of silence and telling for literary trauma theories.

In ways similar to Hiromi Goto’s novel *Chorus of Mushrooms*, both Kogawa’s and Tamayose’s novels address the complexity and inadequacy of speech and language when dealing with interrelated concerns of personal and collective memory and loss. *Obasan* demonstrates how traumatic experiences and familial silences exacerbate the
haunting memories that disrupt one’s ability to move beyond the traumatic moment. Through her writing, Kogawa, a Nisei interned during WWII, explores how specific cultural values informed by historical layers of trauma can result in an intricacy of silences within Japanese Canadian families, entangling those silences that “cannot” speak with those that “will not” speak (epigraph.) *Odori*, published almost three decades after Kogawa’s novel, affords an alternative representation of how the traumas of the past can inform the present and future. Reflecting a different cultural perspective and historical context than Kogawa, Tamayose writes from a Japanese Canadian generational perspective as one who did not personally experience the WWII internment. Yet both of their novels interweave this war throughout the narrative, reflecting multiple ways it impacted Japanese Canadian families within Canada and abroad. However, Tamayose’s novel enacts a shift from Kogawa’s investigation of familial silences to explore the importance of intergenerational storytelling. In *Odori*, the transmission of the past through story enables the listener to bear witness to another’s trauma, to understand these experiences as part of one’s family legacy, and thus this transmission encourages the listener to engage in her own storytelling practice to ensure that future generations have access to this history. This reciprocal engagement affords a sharing of personal and collective traumas so that the individual can collectively work through the immobilization of personal trauma to construct a new understanding of self for the here and after.

This chapter analyzes the different ways that personal and collective trauma are addressed in these two novels, with regards to both the old women and the younger women characters’ lives. The two primary old women characters, Kogawa’s Obasan and
Tamayose’s Basan, both live through the same war, albeit one in Canada and the other in Okinawa, Japan, and their life stories detail the traumatic long-term impact of this experience on themselves and their families. Kogawa’s young woman protagonist Naomi also lives through this war, and her stories reflect its influence on her child and adult age perspective. Tamayose’s young woman protagonist Mai, however, was born and raised as Canadian in the climate of Canadian multiculturalism, and thus her personal trauma represents a very different experience than the other three women. For Mai, family history bears little significance for her daily reality until she re-encounters her great-grandmother immediately after a tragic car accident. All of these women’s diverse experiences influence their coping strategies and their willingness and capability to address the past.

These novels characterize old women as instrumental in shaping the young female Canadian-born narrator’s social and psychological development, despite the diverse beliefs these old women hold regarding the place of the past within present discourse. In Obasan, Naomi’s aunt Obasan, the primary caregiver, maintains a pact of silence, keeping certain historical events and knowledge from the children, whereas Aunt Emily, a political activist (and a peripheral character in Naomi’s life), repeatedly asserts that Naomi and her brother “should be told” (240). The family secret remains withheld until the closing chapters of the novel. In Odori, the great-grandmother Basan is the primary storyteller who guides her great-granddaughter Mai, with Mai’s mother eventually adopting this legacy as tradition keeper in the closing chapters of the novel. For both Obasan and Basan, the past haunts and remains silenced as part of their strategy for personal and collective survival. Yet, in both novels, the past comes to constitute social
memory when unintentionally disclosed through letters and journals. These narrative disclosures suggest the past cannot and will not remain silenced. Through letters read aloud, both Naomi and Mai bear witness to their mothers’ histories. These ‘telling’ acts compel these young women to shift their response to the past and integrate this new knowledge into their present consciousness and subjectivity.

The old women’s coping strategies are communicated intergenerationally, with these diverse modes of communication bearing different consequences for the young women’s own response to their personal trauma. As Obasan never verbally addresses the truth about the past, Naomi is left alone to suffer with her trauma. Yet Obasan’s maintenance of silence also signals her own inability to articulate her trauma. Kogawa interweaves Japanese cultural practices of interfamily silences with a representation of trauma’s ‘belatedness’ as a symptomatic response of personal silences and hauntings that recur after a traumatic experience. According to Suzette Henke, “It is through the very process of rehearsing and re-enacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis” (xix). *Obasan*’s embedded narratives enable the reader to bear witness to the traumatic reality of Japanese Canadian internment and its lasting impact on Japanese Canadian subjectivity.

In Basan’s case, her embodied memories interweave with collective history and myth to inform her great-granddaughter Mai’s personal narrative. After death, Basan possesses the critical distance for retrospective reflection. She “takes a moment to sort through all the stories in her head. Forward, backward” (Tamayose 196), and this simultaneous multi-directional glance compels Basan to ensure the transmission of the past so that her great-granddaughter can understand her history and legacy. Like Goto’s
novel, *Odori* emphasizes the important role that old women as intergenerational storytellers within the family play in the transmission and continuity of Japanese cultural practices. Readers learn “[I]ong ago in Okinawa of old, a *kataribe* storyteller was held in a place of respect” (Tamayose 17). I argue that, like Goto, Tamayose’s recourse to storytelling as a means of asserting one’s identity and location reflects a new generational response emerging within Japanese Canadian literature. King-kok Cheung also notes a similar socio-cultural shift away from reticence in recent texts written by second-generation Asian American authors who “are not only bicultural but also bilingual” (16), a shift she suggests potentially signals how “many younger Asian Americans have come to favor a more strident tone as a means to combat social invisibility” (9). While Goto represents storytelling as a discursive strategy for negotiating cultural dislocation, Tamayose’s novel exemplifies how storytelling can function as a means for articulating both personal and collective trauma to counter the adverse affects of traumatic dislocation.

Through storytelling, Tamayose’s old woman character teaches the *Sansei* generation how stories from the past can be consciously woven into the present moment, thus allowing new stories and new narrative identities to emerge. This novel exemplifies Leslie Marmon Silko’s philosophy that “the storyteller’s role is to draw the story out of the listeners” (“Language and Literature” 57). *Odori* figures intergenerational storytelling as both a thematic and metanarrative concern, while affording an understanding of

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49 With “san” meaning “third,” the Sansei constitute the generation of Japanese Canadians born in Canada whose grandparents emigrated from Japan. The Nisei are the parents of the Sansei generation and the Issei are the first generation of Japanese Canadians who immigrated.
storytelling that moves beyond orality to explore other modes of expressive communication. In *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing*, Henke draws from James Pennebaker’s polemical inquiry in *Opening Up*, in which he asks, “is talking necessary for the talking cure to cure?” (qtd in Henke 40). By destabilizing the assumed conditions of enunciation, Tamayose’s novel provides us with at least one response. Her old woman character teaches alternative possibilities to narrativize trauma in ways not contingent upon language or verbal articulation. *Odori* positions Japanese cultural arts, such as *odori* dance, *sanshin* music, and calligraphy, as modes of storytelling that challenge the unspeakability of trauma.

**MODALITIES OF SILENCES IN *OBASAN***

In *Articulate Silences*, King-kok Cheung discusses the semantic differences between the definition for “silence” in the English language and “the most common Chinese and Japanese ideogram for silence [which] is synonymous with “serenity” and antonymous with “sound,” “noise,” “motion,” and “commotion” (127). In agreement with Cheung’s assertion that “[t]hese differences are all too often eclipsed by a Eurocentric perspective” (127), Trinh T. Minh-ha, in “Not You/Like You,” points out how “Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech” (373). Understanding silence to possess more linguistic complexity than a simple binary relationship affords, Trinh notes how “Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored” (“Not You” 373). This complexity of silence as a language is exactly what Kogawa explores in her novel.
Kogawa’s novel details the long-term negative effects of internment on the Japanese Canadian psyche, thus offering a critical revisiting of Japanese Canadian histories by providing “inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity” in order to “challenge the traditional notions of perspective” (Hutcheon, Canadian 11). Exemplifying the genre of postmodern novels that Linda Hutcheon defines as “historiographic metafiction,” *Obasan* is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political,” and thus marks a “site of struggle” (*Poetics* 4). Focusing on three generations of Japanese Canadian women, this novel offers Naomi Nakane’s narrative account (focalized from her age perspective as a now thirty-six-year-old woman) of her continuing struggle with her incomprehensible childhood experiences during WWII. This novel also demonstrates the negative consequences of a life-long silence through the characterization of Obasan as an old woman. In *The Language of Silence*, Ernestine Schlant explains, “Silence is not a semantic void; like any language, it is infused with narrative strategies that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions” (7). She differentiates between silences of and silences about, the former denoting an inability to speak, a silence resulting from an unspeakable event, while the latter signals a refusal to address. The weight of both silences can prompt individual desires for a stable narration as a means to impose order and create meaning (although silences of complicate such a narrative act because they arise from an event that denies comprehension). Kogawa’s novel, as historiographic metafiction, attempts to counter by addressing both the silences of and about Japanese internment in Canadian history.

Kogawa’s novel engages with what Cheung calls a “spectrum of silence” (139), yet many critics perpetuate a cross-cultural misinterpretation that subordinately positions
a singular understanding of silence in binary opposition with speech. Gary Willis’s “Speaking the Silence” and Erika Gottlieb’s “The Riddle of Concentric Worlds in Obasan” both provide readings of Obasan that exemplify an ethnocentric and logocentric shortsightedness that simplistically values Obasan’s silences through their own Eurocentric interpretive bias. Other critics focus on Obasan’s silence as a consequence of her victimization, yet this “perpetual return to a narrative of wounding and victimization” (Cho 104) generally leads to pathologizing the subject. However, Kogawa, “[s]ituated at the crossroads of cultures” (Cheung 128), possesses critical insight into diverse cultural understandings of silence and speech. In an interview with Cherry Clayton, she differentiates the Japanese perspectives from what she terms the “Western world”:

In the Japanese culture the silent strong would be valued, whereas in the Western world forthright speech is valued. There could be conflict there, as to which has greater value at any given time. Value differences need to be constantly described and explained to prevent misunderstanding. (qtd in Clayton 3)

In an interview with Susan Yim, Kogawa describes how these value differences also vary depending upon the Japanese Canadian generational perspective. She explains that for “the issei, honor and dignity is expressed through silence,” whereas the “sansei view silence as a dangerous kind of cooperation with the enemy” (qtd in Cheung 126). As Schlant’s work suggests, different perspectives on silence manifest due to cultural codes.

Kogawa’s novel Obasan negotiates the multifaceted linguistic functions and semantic intentions of communicative silences, in its attempt to address the conflicts that arise from the convergence of different cultural and generational perspectives on silence
and speech. Kogawa “reveals the strengths and limits of discursive power and quiet forbearance alike” (Cheung 128). Cheung elucidates:

[Kogawa] maintains the complementary functions of verbal and nonverbal expression. Certainly, words can liberate, but they can also distort and wound; and while silence may obliterate, it can also minister, soothe, and communicate. (128)

Kogawa is interested in exploring the various “[m]odalities of silence” (Cheung 3), and her text disentangles “oppressive, inhibitive, protective, stoic, and attentive silences” (Cheung 25) to differentiate the “undesirable” from the “enabling” (Cheung 20).50

Obasan demonstrates how the layers and differentiations of silences contribute to the communicative complexity of the “many tongues” (Gottlieb 37) that speak in the Nakane and Kato house.

Cheung’s work provides an important cultural perspective to the “impossibility of telling” (Laub 64). Developing Gayle K. Fujita’s discussion on the “sensibility of silence” (6), as a defining characteristic of the Nisei and particularly the Issei generation, Cheung notes the complex ways that “verbal restraint [is] often inculcated in both Chinese and Japanese cultures and reinforced as a survival strategy in the face of racism” (6). Obasan begins with the now famous lines of its epigraph:

There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.

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50 Cheung includes “listening” as an “enabling” silence, which she argues is the “very antithesis of passivity” and therefore “demand[s] utmost vigilance from writers and readers alike” (20).
These words attempt to encapsulate the complexity of silences at play within this novel. Some silences exist because, as Felman notes, a traumatic event cannot be articulated because it invariably cannot be witnessed in the moment of experiencing. These silences persist as the belated hauntings of “those who refuse to bury themselves,” returning as a “memory [that] comes skittering out of the dark […] ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles” (Kogawa 26). Traces of the past invariably surface because “untold stories” (Kogawa 248) are communicated within the family, albeit as disjointed uncontextualized fragments that leave the inheritor a chaotic puzzle without a map.

This novel offers two poignant examples about the articulation of traumatic experiences. One comes from the characterization of Aunt Emily, a fictionalized representation of the actual political figure Muriel Kitagawa. Emily, twenty-five years old at the time of the internment, initially speaks of being “numb” (Kogawa 104), “past feeling” (Kogawa 95), yet eventually she voices “the truth as she lives it” (Kogawa 32) and speaks out for “people like us […] who are the most hurt” (Kogawa 108). Finding emotional support amongst other likeminded Nisei individuals, Emily comes to realize, “I had no idea how much I still hurt” (Kogawa 34). This cognitive recognition and verbal admission of her own personal suffering propels her transformation into a “word warrior” (Kogawa 33), who worries that silencing the truth will only fuel the intergenerational transmission of transhistorical traumas. She argues that Japanese Canadians must “glu[e] our tongues back on” because otherwise “we’ll pass our anger down in our genes. It’s the children who’ll suffer” (Kogawa 38). For her, “the injustice done to us in the past was still a live issue” (Kogawa 35), and this prompts her to coach Naomi to also “remember […] Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out!
Scream! Denial is gangrene” (Kogawa 54). However, as the novel illustrates, this ‘past’ that Aunt Emily speaks of does not constitute the same ‘past’ that Naomi lived through. Naomi remains challenged by Aunt Emily’s call for collective agency, as this past is one she is not yet capable of articulating.

A second example about articulating trauma is found in the letter Naomi’s Grandma Kato writes after the bombing of Nagasaki. This old woman, writing about her traumatic experience and survival, confesses that “however much the effort to forget, there is no forgetfulness” (Kogawa 257). After Grandma Kato discovers her daughter alive (Naomi’s mother), she admits they “were unable to talk of all the things that happened. The horror would surely die sooner, they felt, if they refused to speak” (Kogawa 259). Yet, the letter continues, explaining how “the silence and the constancy of the nightmare had become unbearable” (Kogawa 259), and thus, “she hoped that by sharing them [her experiences] with her husband, she could be helped to extricate herself from the grip of the past” (Kogawa 259). These powerful words, from an old woman who at one time was a very important presence in Naomi’s world, offer Naomi an alternative perspective on the potential dangers of silence, a perspective similar to Aunt Emily’s.

This novel “shows a mixed attitude toward both language and silence and reevaluates both in ways that undermine logocentrism” (Cheung 128). Obasan maintains a sense of “calm and she doesn’t want any discussion in front of the kids” (Kogawa 117). Kodomo no tame, translated as “For the sake of the children” (Kogawa 22), was upheld by all of the adults to shelter Naomi and her brother Stephen from the devastating truth about their mother’s horrific death after the bombing of Nagasaki. After her “mother disappears” (Kogawa 71), Naomi’s repeated questioning, “Why did my mother not
return?” (Kogawa 26), only elicits complicit adult silences. These are the silences that “will not speak” for in passing them on, they become a burden that another must also bear. As Naomi explains, “The [adults’] memories were drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence” (Kogawa 22). Thus, while addressing the unspeakability of trauma, this novel also provides important cultural insight into the communicative complexities of Issei and Nisei silences.

The novel begins a month prior to Naomi’s uncle’s death. Naomi recollects their last walk together in the Albertan coulee, remembering how her Uncle, an old man, “wobbles” and “totters” and “walks jerkily as a baby” (Kogawa 1). He admits he is “Too much old man” (Kogawa 1) and while he longs to tell Naomi something he has held secret since 1954, he remains resolute to wait for “[s]ome day” (Kogawa 3). Naomi’s frustration with his silence reveals itself in her proleptic shift in narrative voice, which she articulates as a retrospective statement:

What he was intending to tell me “some day” has not yet been told. I sometimes wonder if he realizes my age at all. At thirty-six, I’m hardly a child. […] He seems about to say something, his mouth open as he stares straight ahead, his eyes wide. Then, as if to erase his thoughts, he rubs his hands vigorously over his face and shakes his head. (Kogawa 3)

Does Uncle’s gesture signal his desire to forget the past, to ‘erase’ his memories, or is he bound to his silence by a pact shared with his wife? Naomi will never know. When Naomi returns home after her Uncle’s death, Obasan “opens her mouth to say more, but

51 Similarly, Naomi comments that her aunt “totters as she moves” (Kogawa 15).
there is no further sound from her dry lips” (Kogawa 14). The pact of silence is maintained.

Naomi knows little of her family history as Obasan’s “answers were always oblique and the full story never emerges in a direct line” (Kogawa 18). Yet, she does learn that Obasan lost a parent when she was young, was then raised “in private schools” (18), and after she married, her first and second child “died during birth” (Kogawa 19). The devastating traumatic implications of the Japanese Canadian internment during WWII, which fractured families and communities and destroyed livelihoods, further added to Obasan’s experiences of loss. In an old picture from when Obasan was forty-two years of age, Naomi reads “an exquisite tenderness in Obasan’s slanted eyes, her smile more sad than demure” (Kogawa 19). This novel, at times subtly and other times blatantly, discloses Obasan’s long history of loss and grief, and “[f]rom the few things Obasan told [Naomi]” (Kogawa 20), the young woman is left to “wonder” about what other sadness haunts the rest of the Kato and Nakane family.

Obasan’s life-long experiences of traumatic disruptions and familial loss contribute to her maintenance of, and her eventual inability to break, her silence. Naomi worries about Obasan, noticing how “[t]he past hungers for her. Feasts on her” (Kogawa 27), and that “[o]ver the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful” (Kogawa 14). Silence becomes so powerful a force that when Obasan’s husband dies, she becomes “deaf and impassive, unavailable for questioning or their ministrations. Her land is impenetrable, so thick that even the sound of mourning is swallowed up. In her steadfast silence, she remains inviolate” (Kogawa 246). For Obasan, “[t]he language of her grief is silence” (Kogawa 14). We learn that Naomi has “never
seen her cry” (Kogawa 12) and that Obasan has “hands that toil but do not embrace” (Kogawa 24). As a child, Naomi mirrors this emotional restraint and never “really cried” and “almost never talks or smiles” (Kogawa 109). She has learned (whether consciously or not) how to “make the way smooth by restraining emotion” (Kogawa 137). As an adult, Naomi understands intuitively from her own childhood experiences and from her “years of teaching […] it’s the children who say nothing who are in more trouble than the ones who complain” (Kogawa 36). This expression of silence indicates a learned behaviour, a survival strategy to mask pain and avoid conflict. This awareness of the dangers of silence affords the adult Naomi insight into her own silences, how they facilitate memory’s claim on her present state of mind, enabling the past which refuses to be buried to persist, to coexist, albeit in debilitating ways, with each present moment.

Obasan, who swore to care for her young niece and nephew, embodies the pain and buries the trauma of loss to protect these children. A protective silence becomes a pact amongst the adults, known but not understood by young Naomi who “could hear the adults whispering, ‘Kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children’” (Kogawa 22). These whispered consents were an attempt to assure that “[c]almness was maintained” (Kogawa 22). However, throughout the novel, while this pact is contested repeatedly by Aunt Emily, it is upheld because “Mother […] specifically requested that Stephen and I be spared the truth” (Kogawa 259). Thus, the fate of Naomi’s mother remains a secret withheld from the children until decades later when Nakayama-sensei reads aloud two war-time letters.

Naomi remains perplexed by “How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan’s language remains deeply underground, but Aunt
Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior. She’s a crusader, a little old gray-haired Mighty Mouse” (Kogawa 33). Earlier in the novel, she equates Obasan with “every old woman in every hamlet in the world […] Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to the network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life’s infinite personal details” (Kogawa 16). Yet, this storykeeper will not disclose her secrets; they will die with her. Only through a journal of letters from Aunt Emily to Naomi’s mother dated from 1941 does Naomi gain insight into her Obasan’s nature and nurture:

[Aya] says you entrusted [the kids] to her and they’re her kids now until you return and she won’t part with them […] Aya is being very calm and she doesn’t want any discussion in front of the kids. All she told them is that they are going for a train ride. (Kogawa 117)

Obasan’s silence was intentional and protective. These letters fill in many of Naomi’s gaps of knowledge, and she describes this mode of bearing witness to the past like “breaking into a private house only to discover it’s my childhood house filled with corners and rooms I’ve never seen” (Kogawa 85). Aunt Emily sent Naomi the box as a means to disclose, and thus offer entry into the past and the silences that persist within the family.

In Obasan, letters and photographs function as memory aids that temporally shift the narrative. Chapter 9 begins with a description of a photograph that places both Naomi and the reader as joint spectators of Naomi’s past. For Naomi, the image triggers early memories of her family’s relationships, which in turn provide the reader with filtered snapshots from Naomi’s childhood perspective. These snapshots, however, can only be
read as they are remembered, as “[f]ragments of fragments […] Segments of stories” (Kogawa 57). This understanding of the inherent incompleteness of memory affords a creative segue into Chapter 10 which opens with a photograph providing fodder for Obasan’s storytelling. Obasan’s story begins with the traditional Japanese storytelling convention of “Mukashi mukashi o-o mukashi” (Kogawa 58). This rhetorical device also elicits Naomi’s early memories of her mother’s storytelling and transports Naomi into the past. We witness the impact of a particular cultural story, the “Momotaro” (Kogawa 58), on Naomi’s social development. She informs us how “[e]ach night from the very beginning, before I could talk, there were the same stories” (Kogawa 58), and that her favourite story taught emotional restraint as an act of honour. The story explains, “[t]here are no tears and no touch” because one must be “careful […] not to weight his pack with their sorrow” (Kogawa 60). From this story, Naomi learns not to speak of her “loneliness or fears” (Kogawa 60) and that silence is respectful and enabling. The lessons from the Momotaro story connect to a later teaching when Obasan guides Naomi not to be wagamama, that is “selfish and inconsiderate” (Kogawa 138), and to “always honour the wishes of others before our own. We will make the way smooth by restraining emotion” (Kogawa 137). Japanese cultural lessons on the discursive power of silence are repeatedly reinforced through modeled behaviours and storytelling.

Naomi begins to socially mirror the Japanese cultural behaviours she sees enacted by her mother and Grandma Kato, and then Obasan after their leaving. Eventually, she becomes intuitively fluent in the family’s Japanese cultural “discourse of the body” (Kamboureli 179). In Scandalous Bodies, Smaro Kamboureli labels the silent “discourse of

52 Translates as “A long, long time ago…”
the body” (179) in Obasan as “body talk” (179). She elaborates on how the “body’s language—steady eyes, calm face, deft fingers—is translated into silence in the realm of linguistic articulation” (Kamboureli 179). Later in the essay, she differentiates “silence-as-concealment” from “silence-as-archive,” two discrete modalities of a non-unified discourse (201). Building from Roy Miki’s argument that Obasan must be read with a revolutionary and not resolutionary aesthetics (Broken 115), Kamboureli decrees that this revolutionary potential resides in “the way Naomi’s character operates as a montage—not a ‘synthesis’—of different historical discourses” (176). Choosing montage as her metaphor permits Kamboureli to emphasize how different cultural modes of communication merge in the formation of Naomi’s subjecthood, yet remain irreconcilable.

Reflecting on her childhood socialization, Naomi asks:

Who is it that teaches me that in the language of eyes a stare is an invasion and a reproach? Grandma Kato? Obasan? Uncle? Mother? Each one, raised in Japan, speaks the same language; but Aunt Emily and Father, born and raised in Canada, are visually bilingual. I too learn the second language. (Kogawa 50)

The rhetorical ordering of these questions reflects Naomi’s realization that, while she may have learned to be “visually bilingual,” the teachings provided by her primary caregivers – those adults “raised in Japan” – have been more influential in her learning. These lessons, plus the protective silences that infantilize Naomi, contribute to her easy adoption of Obasan’s perspective on silence. Naomi claims, “Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. Didn’t Obasan once say, ‘It is better to forget’?” (Kogawa 48). She confesses, “I want to get away from all this. From the past and all these papers, from the
present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words” (Kogawa 201). Naomi believes that to speak out against the injustices, as her Aunt Emily does, would have little effect:

I can cry for the flutes that have cracked in the dryness and cry for the people who no longer sing. I can cry for Obasan who has turned to stone. But what then? Uncle does not rise up and return to his boats. Dead bones do not take on flesh. (Kogawa 219)

Naomi recognizes that Obasan’s maintenance of silence and possible inability to speak of her own trauma turns her “to stone” (Kogawa 219). Obasan’s “cheeks sink into the cavity of her mouth making her face resemble a skull” (Kogawa 14) and her “thin purple veins a scribbled maze, a skin map, her thick toenails, ancient rock formations” (Kogawa 84). Naomi’s words cast Obasan as part of an “ancient” landscape (Kogawa 200) and as a spectre of death; these observations bespeak Naomi’s conflicted perspective on old age and the possible consequences of never giving voice to the traumatic past. By the end of the novel, she describes Obasan as “small as a child [who] has not learned to weep” (Kogawa 269). Despite her negative descriptions of “the skin of her [aunt’s] buttocks

While trauma is most conventionally conceived as resulting from a specific event which impacts a survivor’s sense of well-being, trauma theorists are studying the traumatogenic effect (that is, the creation of a psychic wound) that results from repeated exposure to situations of systemic oppression and violence. Recent amendments to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV) expand the definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to include Complex PTSD, or Disorders of Extreme Stress, Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS), which can result from “interpersonal victimization, multiple traumatic events, or events of prolonged duration” (Luxenburg, et al. 374). According to Luxenburg, Spinazzola, and Van der Kolk’s outlined diagnostic criteria for Complex PTSD, these individuals will “seek to avoid reminders” through the “avoidance of thoughts, feelings, and conversations about the event” (Luxenburg et al. 374).
loose and drooping in a fold” (Kogawa 84) and her “wrinkled neck” (Kogawa 14), Naomi senses, beneath the frailty of her aunt’s physical being, the magnitude of her social and cultural importance:

Seeing Obasan now, older than the grandmother I knew as a child, older than any person I know today, I feel that each breath she takes is weighted with her mortality. She is the old woman of many Japanese legends, alone and waiting in her ancient time for the honour that is an old person’s reward. (Kogawa 58)

Obasan is the old woman of the Japanese *Uba-Sute Yama* legend. Death may offer her peace through closure to her life of hardship, but for Naomi, Obasan’s death signifies the absolute loss of her Japanese cultural and familial knowledge. Like the old woman of both the Japanese myth and the *Vollendungsroman* genre, Obasan feels “Too old” (Kogawa 15) and understands that “the time is approaching for her [death]” (Kogawa 200), that “Any day now is all right” (Kogawa 84), but this reality of old age is a difficult one for Naomi to accept. For both women, cultural lessons on emotional restraint, plus trauma, impose multiple layers of silence that limit their social and behavioural coping mechanisms.

Through Naomi’s character, we witness these traumas manifesting belatedly as recurring nightmares. She speaks of “night terrors” (Kogawa 195) and confesses, “There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep” (Kogawa 214). One of her many nightmares about her mother exemplifies the profound traumatic impact of her loss. In this dream:
[Mother] is here. She is not here. She is reaching out to me with a touch deceptive as down [...] She is a maypole woman to whose apron-strings streamers I cling [...] She is a ship leaving the harbour, tied to me by coloured paper streamers that break and fall into a swirling wake. The wake is a thin black pencil-line that deepens and widens and fills with a greyness that reaches out with tentacles to embrace me. I leap and wake.

(Kogawa 183)

Eventually, Naomi’s mother becomes a hallucinatory presence that “takes the form of a shadow which grows and surrounds me like air” (Kogawa 71). Naomi realizes, “we’re trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves” (Kogawa 26). Cathy Caruth contends the “double telling” in trauma narratives resides between “the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Unclaimed 7). Both Naomi’s and Obasan’s personal histories reflect “the profound link between the death of the loved one and the ongoing life of the survivor” (Caruth, Unclaimed 8). In a silent address to her absent mother, Naomi interweaves past and present and oscillates between first and third person in her attempt to understand her loss. As an adult, she reflects on the multitude of silences and traumas that have come to define her. She speaks of a “double wound” that characterizes the symptoms of her trauma: “The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell. I apply a thick bandage but nothing can soak up the seepage” (Kogawa 267). In Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, Caruth draws from a literary example found in Sigmund Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle to theorize how the wound functions as the voice that eventually bespeaks the truth of the
unspeakable trauma. Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem Liberated* (Freud’s literary example) shows the protagonist Tancred accidentally kill his beloved Clorinda twice: once in person and a second time when he slashes the tree in which her “soul is imprisoned” (qtd in Caruth, *Unclaimed* 2). Tancred becomes traumatized when his repeated action (the second event and killing of Clorinda) reveals the first instance of death, which had previously evaded his knowing. The traumatic experience appears to be processed through a cognitive temporal delay that “carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment” (Caruth, “Trauma” 10). However, when Clorinda speaks through the tree’s wound, her voice performs what Caruth describes as a “kind of double telling” (*Unclaimed* 7), which enables Tancred to hear and thus witness his role in the previous events of history. Clorinda’s voice, the wound, speaks as a “historical witness” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 8) to “a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4).

Naomi’s double wound refuses to be healed, continuing to seep, thus forcing witness of its presence (a presence that had previously evaded Naomi’s knowing), while simultaneously denying the child the ability to speak the causes of her wounds.

Trauma, as Freud first suggested, inflicts itself upon the mind as a psychic wound that cannot be understood at the moment of inscription but only in its belatedness. When a person survives such a traumatic ordeal, the moment of trauma denies its own recognition, and conscious cognitive recall can be rendered impossible. Trauma tends to recur at a later time and place, persistent as recurrent nightmares and waking memories that cannot adequately be integrated with other history because language cannot approximate an affective response. Psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk addresses how “the traumatized individual [can be] left in a state of ‘speechless terror’ in which words fail to
describe what has happened” (286). A traumatic experience disrupts the regular encoding process and “can lead to extremes of retention and forgetting” (Van der Kolk 282). The body becomes affectively charged by an extreme physical and psychological threat, and the traumatic experience becomes encoded in this heightened state of consciousness as pathogenic. Remaining unsymbolized and unintegrated into narrative memory, the experience cannot be ordered on the linguistic level. Thus, “[t]he child is forever unable to speak” (Kogawa 267). Van der Kolk hypothesizes “[t]he experience is laid down, and later retrieved, as isolated images, bodily sensations, smells, and sounds that feel alien and separate from other life experience” (295).

Henry Krystal classifies this inability to express emotions in words as alexithymia, and he suggests that “the undifferentiated, mostly somatic, unverbalized affective responses are so intense, threatening, and painful that one must ward them off by self-deadening, or else abort the process by escape into denial” (87). Both Naomi and Obasan exemplify how this alexithymic inability to represent the trauma in words denies the survivor a witness to her experiences. Krystal claims this isolation perpetuates haunting memories that eventually become so distorted that even survivors can no longer bear witness to their own experience. As Laub argues, the “silent retention” of a past traumatizing event “serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny” which will only “contaminate the survivor’s daily life” (64). External somatic stimuli can trigger an autonomic response that re-activates memories of the event. However, often these events return only as unmediated and involuntary repetitions that remain independent of temporality and full cognitive understanding.
Daniel L. Schacter posits, “emotionally charged incidents are better remembered than nonemotional events” (163). Naomi’s first childhood trauma occurs when a neighbour, Old Man Gower, repeatedly sexually abuses her and imposes a debilitating secretive silence. Naomi’s response reflects a destructive, thus “undesirable,” modality of silence that Cheung categorizes as “speechlessness induced by shame and guilt [and] the oppressive or protective withholding of words in the family” (20). Only years later, at an emotional distance, Naomi can critically question if “this [is] where the terror begins? I am four years old” (Kogawa 67). Shortly after Gower’s abuse begins, Naomi’s mother leaves for Japan, and her unexplained failure to return forever haunts Naomi. These events coincide with the family’s displacement into internment camps during WWII, at which time Naomi is five years old and Obachan, her primary caregiver, is fifty. Although Naomi may have been “too young to know what was going on” at the time of internment (Kogawa 203), her characterization as a child who “almost never talks or smiles” (Kogawa 109) reflects the imprint of these traumatic disruptions of her childhood. These experiences manifest silences within the family that continue to haunt Naomi throughout her childhood and into adulthood.

As an adult, Naomi does not know how to heal her own wounds, but she desires closure, asking “Shouldn’t we turn the page and move on?” (Kogawa 45). This metaphor of the “page” functions metanarratively, positing a responsibility to remember upon the reader who should now recognize the impossibility of Naomi’s request to forget. The reader learns that despite Naomi’s urge to “get away from all this,” she remains “weighted with decorum, unable to shout or sing or dance, unable to scream or swear,

54 In her list of “undesirable” silences, Cheung also includes “the glaring oversight in official history” (20).
unable to laugh” (Kogawa 201). With only the company of a silent aunt who is unwilling or unable to speak of the past, Naomi lacks a witness to share her trauma. Addressing her long absent yet ever present mother, this young woman now realizes and laments, “Gentle Mother, we are lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction” (Kogawa 267). In this silent prayer, Naomi “beg[s] that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs learn to dance” (Kogawa 267). However, her cry for help remains unanswered.

**THE WOMEN AND THEIR TRAUMA IN ODORI**

Tamayose’s novel *Odori*, the name of a traditional Japanese dance, shows readers how an individual (and her surviving family members) can learn to ‘dance’ as a means to share and subsequently work through the psychological impact of trauma. *Odori* opens with a car accident, which results in the death of Mai Yoshimoto-Lanier’s husband, the father of her children, and in Mai suffering from aphonia, the loss of ability to speak due to “laryngeal trauma” (Tamayose 257). Immediately after the car crashes into Alberta’s Belly River, Mai discovers herself “lost to another world” (Tamayose 15), where “time is vast and yet nothing matters but the here and now” (Tamayose 17). Mai’s comatose state, characterized as a period of momentary forgetting, mirrors the temporal cognitive delay associated with traumatic belatedness. Mai’s situatedness in this liminal state that separates “then and now” (Tamayose 122) reflects her mind’s inadequacy to comprehend the trauma in its immediacy. According to Krystal, latency manifests into a numbing of body and mind that results in a psychic ‘void.’ Thus, a survivor cannot be witness to her or his own traumatic event, as the immediacy within the situation collapses one’s
understanding of the impact of trauma on the psyche. The characterization of Mai exemplifies both the metaphorical and literal silences that can result from traumatic experiences. Kimberly A. DeMichelle, in “Memories of Suffering,” notes that while a “narrative often focuses on one's recollection of what was thought, seen, heard, and felt at a particular point in time, trauma is thought to disrupt the memory process by severing the connection between past and present and breaking the narrative into a ‘before’ and ‘after’” (104). While Mai’s psychic wound collapses immediate understanding and thus narrativization of the experience, her physical wound erases any possibility of its future articulation. “I have no story” (Tamayose 17), she tells her great-grandmother Basan. This experience of trauma cannot be spoken. However, this novel does much to disrupt this assumption, demonstrating how a storytelling exchange can engage non-verbal modes of telling and transmission.

Through storytelling, Tamayose’s old woman character Basan offers her particular perspective on the immediate and life-long implications of a psychic wound. Unlike Obasan, and Obachan in Goto’s novel, who both remain relatively socially isolated throughout their lives in Canada, Tamayose’s old woman character Basan “was well known to the small Okinawan community of southern Alberta” (Tamayose 189). This community likely enabled Basan a strong support network for herself and her family, thus fending off the ill effects of social isolation. Nevertheless, her characterization highlights a contradiction in old age of a desire to preserve the containment of the past and the necessity for its articulation.

An analysis of Tamayose’s novel indicates how Basan’s age perspective informs her narrativization of her life stories, which bear witness, through both the telling and
listening, to personal and collective experiences of trauma. Basan’s stories fill the narrative gaps in her great-granddaughter Mai’s understanding of her family history. This old woman is characterized as an archive of memories, whose narrative account represents not only a personal and family story but also the collective experiences of the Okinawans who survived World War II. As Basan recounts the bombing of her community, the reader becomes immersed in the Okinawa trauma through Mai’s participatory listening and witnessing. Tamayose’s narrative structure strategically invokes an affective response, positioning the reader as witness to these multiple traces of memory.

Basan’s storytelling exemplifies the complicated interweaving of individual and social memory, what Paul Ricoeur differentiates as “living memory” and historical or “public memory” (223). The resulting narrative contains many dialogic fragments “too intertwined to be distinguished” (Ricoeur 224). Ricoeur suggests that all shared memories are declarative, in that they enter into and utilize “public language” (223). With trauma’s articulation, through what Freud would call a secondary elaboration, memory births narrative, and personal memory becomes dialogically integrated into public memory through a shared engagement between tellers and listeners; thus, all memories reflect the various fragments within “a system of relationships” (Ricoeur 224).

By interweaving storytelling and trauma in the same narrative, Tamayose’s novel collapses temporality and chronology to mirror the conditions of dissociation, with the frame narrative presenting the before and after of trauma and bracketing the embedded narratives that emulate the period of psychological repression. The concept of traumatic belatedness, which Caruth defines as “the temporal delay that carried the individual
beyond the shock of the first moment” (*Unclaimed* 10), permits literary trauma theorists and authors of fiction to rethink temporality in narrative. Whitehead’s research demonstrates how representations of trauma in fiction necessitate “a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (4). She argues, “the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (Whitehead 1). Tamayose’s narrative structure diverges from a conventional linear sequence, employing cyclical storytelling techniques commonly identified as characteristic of trauma narratives. Repetition, continuous present tense narration, indirection, ambiguity and gaps, and associational connections also characterize trauma narratives. Literary devices and narrative strategies attempt to replicate structurally the conditions of trauma and psychological displacement. Analeptic recursions, as a rhetorical narrative function, withhold the specifics of past traumatic events until the end of the novel. The opening pages of *Odori* explicitly unveil the traumatic moment, with the subsequent pages slowly guiding the reader towards the defining moment, at which point Mai, prepared by her great-grandmother to confront the aftermath of the trauma, emerges from her coma. The embedded narratives take pause in this moment of temporal cognitive delay, when the immediacy of the traumatic moment “collapses its own understanding” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 17). This pause provides the protagonist with a non-linear temporal reprieve to engage in healing therapies that she can then apply as her mind moves past the shock of the first moment – the death of her husband. This belatedness affords the old woman storyteller adequate time to model a storytelling practice for her listener to learn to speak and thus become the teller of her own wounds.
Thus, the stages of acquisition of a reciprocal storytelling practice occur in this period of latency.

Tamayose’s novel illustrates how an old Japanese Canadian woman draws upon her own experiences to engage her great-granddaughter in a storytelling practice that proves a productive means for working through personal experiences of trauma. At “ninety-seven years of age” (Tamayose 189), Basan has lived a long and traumatic life. She has experienced war and borne the devastating weight of many deaths. When her only son dies, “she quickly understood that the pain of loss would never leave” (Tamayose 90). However, as the primary caregiver to her son’s two daughters Emiko and Miyako, she cannot dwell on her own pain. She understands the importance of “telling her granddaughters the truth” yet struggles with its articulation “for she herself had yet to come to terms with the death of her only son, his wife, and their youngest child” (Tamayose 83). She adopts a philosophy of “duality; it made sadnesses bearable and happiness composed. It made life more predictable and patient, it allowed her to navigate through turbulence” (Tamayose 129). Readers learn how her repeated exposure to traumatic events eventually results in her becoming “an experienced circumnavigator of misfortune” (Tamayose 61).

During the war years in Okinawa, Basan recognizes “Terror intruded on [her granddaughter] Emiko’s senses” (Tamayose 137). Emiko (Mai’s mother), traumatized by the horror of war and death, “struggled to keep her basan’s stories in her mind; there was comfort in their company […] Emiko locked the stories safely in her mind to access later, after the war” (Tamayose 136). Emiko possesses a child’s understanding of Basan’s philosophy of duality, and is capable of recognizing simultaneous “suffering and small
graces” (Tamayose 140). During the fire bombing by American war planes, as she rocks her friend Fumiko’s dead body, young Emiko speaks the “old Unchinan language […] something that [Basan] had taught her” (Tamayose 142). The novel offers a translation:

Even after we part,
Should fate have it so,
We will be like flowers,
Linked together,

Never torn apart. (Tamayose 142-43)

In this child’s voice, I hear something similar to Trinh’s philosophy on female storytellers: “In this chain and continuum, I am but one link” (Trinh 122). Basan’s words, now echoed by Emiko, serve as a guiding philosophy in this novel, with the different intergenerational relationships repeatedly enacting its message. For instance, Basan’s materialization in Mai’s moment of need demonstrates how the imagination permits Basan to always maintain a presence. This language of being ‘linked together’ now metaphorically reflects Basan’s legacy, which is carried forward in time to help Mai deal with the loss of her husband and her own voice.

Like the protagonist of the Vollendungsroman, Basan realizes that “[t]he body that houses this soul is near its end” (Tamayose 78). Rooke explains how the genre “collapse[s] time even as [it] enforce[s] its tragic necessity” so that the old woman protagonist can “point both to the past in what she might have spoken thus, and to the present in which she does ” (75). In life, Basan does not speak of the traumas of the past. However, in the after-life, with the wisdom of retrospective reflection, Basan now understands the importance of articulating the past because otherwise trauma forever
haunts through “persistent memories” (Tamayose 189). This old woman who “hosted a graveyard of memories” (Tamayose 188) now possesses the temporal perspective to look backwards and forwards to assess the psychological damage of repressing traumatic memories.

In life, her character strength had been her ability to “speak sharply” and deploy “wit” (Tamayose 189). Language afforded her power over the course of her life to stave off sadness by controlling her emotional responses. However, in her late-life years as her death approaches, this ability diminishes. She notes now:

Her words, less and less tempered by her wit, were becoming acid and raw. They did not convey their intended meanings; the madness that was so long barricaded inside now flooded forth. Was it madness or wisdom? Sometimes, the two seemed the same. (Tamayose 189)

Basan’s critical questioning of a binary division between these two heavily weighted concepts, ideologically embedded with contradiction, positions madness on par with wisdom as a cognitive state worthy of consideration. Repressed pain and anger, long controlled through containment, now asserts itself and demands expression. She is “no longer able to fend off” the “ghosts” that linger “and soon the numbness spreads to other parts of her mind” (Tamayose 189). Whether conceived of as madness or wisdom, her inability to regulate her “tongue” (Tamayose 189) enables the past to resurface so that another (in this case, Mai) may bear witness to a history that has long remained silenced.

This novel enacts Mai’s metaphysical return to the past, to “the home of my great-grandmother” (Tamayose 16). Her great-grandmother Basan is critically aware of her role as “a storyteller [and] gatekeeper of history” (Tamayose 22). Her body houses “a century
of earthly knowledge” and “preserves memories that shift from island to prairie and back to island again” (Tamayose 147). She is “a *kataribe*, a storyteller of old who has mumbled like all that have come before her and all yet to come” (Tamayose 147). This old woman understands the multiple ways the past continues – through stories, language, letters, journals, silences, and inheritance. She explains to Mai, “The underlying sadness you’ve inherited from your aunt trails behind you” (Tamayose 148). Basan attempts to counter this collective weight of sadness by illuminating its source through story. She facilitates the transmission of the past, thereby addressing Mai’s knowledge gaps, by reciting Emiko’s letters to her sister Miyako during the war years. From Basan’s stories, Mai learns her mother “wrote many letters [while hiding] in the [Okinawa] caves during the war. They became her means of survival” (Tamayose 149). Later, Mai recalls her own childhood memories of her mother reading to her the same letters and sharing stories of her childhood. From her mother, Mai learns Miyako was haunted in the war “with the screams of tormented souls” (Tamayose 238), that she lived amongst the “*worst night monsters*” and felt “mankind has lost its soul, never to be reclaimed again […] the spirit makes the supreme sacrifice and is splintered beyond repair” (Tamayose, original italics, 239).

Caruth asserts, “the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (“Trauma” 10). Shoshana Felman claims that a listener who “bears witness” to a truth that continues to escape the speaking subject “does not have to *possess*, or *own* the truth” (24), but enables the speaking survivor to engage in a “performative speech act” and “produce one’s own speech as material evidence for truth” (17). The active listener plays an important role by providing a witness for
unspeakable events that require a testimony to move through and past the immobilization of trauma. The scene in which Emiko discloses to her daughter Mai the truth about Miyako’s death supports Felman’s claim; Miyako’s death was something Emiko “had never admitted […] to anyone” and yet “[i]n the words she spoke aloud she felt a sense of liberation” (Tamayose 235). Mai’s presence enables her mother to assimilate this long-held secret into her present day life-story. Basan’s reconstruction of this scene through story provides the adult Mai access to its implications.

Another of Basan’s “war stories” (Tamayose 187) about Mai’s mother reveals how trauma disrupts and can forever fracture one’s life narrative. This novel provides readers with a different Japanese Canadian perspective on WWII from Kogawa’s representation of the experiences of internment. Tamayose situates readers in Okinawa where the “kibi sato fields, ditches, beaches, quickly became muddied with the blood of old men, women, and children who had got in the way of the battle between two powerful nations [America and Japan]” (Tamayose 169). For survivors, the horror persists long after the end of the war; even after Mai’s mother immigrates to Canada, “the memories tormented her” (201). This novel invites narrative empathy by providing a representation of the Okinawan peoples in WWII, not as the Japanese ‘enemy’ but as innocent victims caught between imperialist powers and thus impacted by the human atrocities of war.

Because of her “great-grandmother’s kataribe tongue,” Mai now possesses a greater understanding of her mother’s traumatic history, and admits “I weep for all she lost” (Tamayose, original italics, 179). However, through this narrative act, she bears witness to a past of which she knew nothing. She admits, “I am not prepared for the responsibility of bearing my mother’s sacred ruins,” although Basan realizes and
explains, “If not you, then who?” (Tamayose 149). Her mother’s stories are her own as well, and her inheritance of sadness bears understanding. Listening to the words in the letters, Mai now conceives of trauma as a defining moment that separates the before and after of the traumatic moment. She realizes that her mother, as a young girl, was “caught between two moments in time that would from this day forth be known as then and now” (Tamayose 122). The letters, and the knowledge they disclose, lead Mai to wonder if her mother “lost her odori spirit at the beginning of the war, or when [her friend] Fumiko died in her arms” (Tamayose 155). These intergenerational transgressions into the past through story afford Mai a new empathic understanding of her mother’s life and, consequently, of her own collective history.

Just like the old woman storyteller in Goto’s novel *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Basan emphasizes that Mai must learn to tell her own stories, and through repeated assurance, Mai is eventually “prompted to action” (Tamayose 17). With the narrative conflating temporality, in the present of the past, Mai adopts her position as “the great-granddaughter of a *kataribe*” (Tamayose 17). As a “teller of tales” (Tamayose 22), Basan teaches Mai the language of hands to transmit stories, via drawing, dancing, and music. She carries stories around in her hands, stories that can provide knowledge of where she comes from, and more importantly, enable her to construct a better understanding of who she is here and now. As a teacher and life-long practitioner of *odori*, Basan explains how in dance “Your hands speak, your mouth does not” (Tamayose 67). She recognizes Mai’s “underlying sadness” (Tamayose 148) and counsels, “the great-granddaughter of a *kataribe* […] must tell the story” (Tamayose 17). As Basan encourages Mai to understand and practice storytelling as a means “to find parts of [her]self including [her] voice”
at her insistence, Mai begins to “sketch the first drawing of my story” (Tamayose 18). Bessel Van der Kolk, in his extensive research on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, has observed a “speechless terror” which disrupts an individual’s ability to transform emotion into words. Therefore, he suggests:

Prone to action, and deficient in words, these patients can often express their internal states more articulately in physical movements, or in pictures than in words. Utilizing drawings and psychodrama may help them develop a language that is essential for effective communication and for the symbolic transformation that occurs in psychotherapy. (Traumatic Stress 195)

Eventually, Mai learns that “[p]ainting was part of [her] healing therapy” (Tamayose 264). As her mother had often stated, Mai now also realizes, “my hands were my mouth, [and] that my drawings were my language and they spoke plenty” (Tamayose 17). When Mai explains that “my basan and I begin to hear each other” (Tamayose 17), we see these two women begin to reciprocally share personal and family stories. This past is experienced through the stories the two women share, which enables Mai to learn the power of storytelling as a means of connecting with others to work through trauma inflicted on the mind and body. Mai’s use of the word ‘hear’ suggests an alternative understanding of storytelling, as complex communication conveyed via multiple modes of creative transmission.

Recognizing the importance of listening and telling, Basan cautions Mai that there is a proper time for both: “Hai, listen now, draw later” (Tamayose 37). Reciprocal storytelling occurs only after this old woman storyteller first teaches her listener how to
listen actively, that is to be critically engaged while deferring judgment, in order to learn
to hear how and which stories need to be told, so that this listener can then know how to share her own experiences. As a storyteller, Basan’s words possess great power and Mai acknowledges, “the kataribe has altered the firmament of my soul and forever marked my future with her tongue” (Tamayose 185). Yet importantly, not only Basan’s tongue speaks:

She reaches for my pen and paper. Her old hands are adept as they create the Japanese characters. She corrals the lines into something fine. I wonder what it could say.

“This must be a word of great beauty,” I say.

“It is.”

“What does it say?”

“She continues with her story. (Tamayose 98)

Basan follows a philosophy by which “[s]he does not claim to an untainted, precise circle of life, but is content with her hand-drawn misshapen one” (Tamayose 147). This emphasis on hands as possible creators of life encourages Mai to embrace her own means of expression, so that she may eventually come to terms with the “taste of underlying sadness on the tip of her tongue” (Tamayose 263). Her tongue will never articulate her sadness, but her hands can. When Mai gains adequate understanding of the past through storytelling, she is told by Basan, it is “time to go home” (Tamayose 251), back to her own children to help them deal with their own personal loss of their father. In the closing of the frame narrative, the protagonist emerges from her coma, a latent state between the
before and after of the traumatic moment, with a better understanding of how to cope with the aftermath of the trauma and its wounds.

The novel ends with another old woman, Emiko, now a grandmother to Mai’s two daughters, continuing the family traditions by “teaching Heather and Hanna an odori” (Tamayose 257). Emiko brings Basan’s magatama, “a thing forgotten” (Tamayose 256) but always a part of her history and spiritual belief, to the hospital “hoping to find the secret that would awaken her daughter from her coma” (Tamayose 256). According to Peter Homans, “loss awakens the capacity to remember, and that remembering can, in turn, also heal” (Ricoeur 232). From within her coma state, Mai begins to remember the accident, “in the shadows of [her] mind […] on the edge of memory” (Tamayose 224-25). Basan “recognizes that [Mai is] trying to remember” but “can’t get past this part of [her] recollection” and so Basan “begins to dance” (Tamayose 225), drawing her great-granddaughter into the movements with her.

Returning to story and positioning herself as a character within her story, Basan speaks of how she “watched her granddaughter and great-granddaughter performing odori” in the Albertan prairies (Tamayose 247). Witness to this intergenerational performance, Basan realizes she has successfully passed on her teachings and that they will continue in the blood and practice of her future generations. When she is certain that Mai has “listened to her stories […] tasted her words” and has “heard” (Tamayose 251), “at that very moment […] it occurred to her that she had not time left on this earth” (Tamayose 247). Age pre-determines Basan’s life-course; this ninety-seven-year-old woman “according to folklore […] was to be newly born […] she was to become god-like” (Tamayose 247). As the character of her life-story, Basan articulates out loud her
next destination, “Okinawa” (247), a name that conjures an emotional response and symbolizes a simultaneous diasporic return to the past and an imaginary journey forward into the future. Basan slips into her next life – the afterlife. Yet, only in the moment of death does the body that housed her ‘soul’ reflect its physical decline, described as “grey and white hair, skin the texture of parchment and colour of tofu, and arms with flaps of skin, bowed legs with saggy nylons” (Tamayose 250). This life-less shell differs radically from her body in the after-life, which is “not bony at all; she is not a fleshless ghost, she is soft and comforting” (Tamayose 251). The basan who Mai conjures from memories and imagination embodies strength and love. As this old woman leaves, enabling Mai to return to the world of the living, “she whispers and nods her head as if casting the word from her mouth to mine” (Tamayose 251). She assures Mai that they will always be “Linked together, / Never torn apart” (Tamayose 143) and then she “disappears with the wind” (Tamayose 251).\(^{55}\) At this moment, Mai “begin[s] to emerge from [her] dream, but [her] voice stays behind” (Tamayose 251).

When Mai returns home from the hospital, she “noticed Emiko’s resemblance to Basan” and she “realized that Emiko knew [the family stories and cultural practices], because her basan had told her so” (Tamayose 263). Like her basan, “Emiko always had a way of defusing an escalating situation with her wit” (Tamayose 140). In multiple ways, she carries forward the past, guiding her own granddaughters just as she and her sister had once been taught by their grandmother Basan. Importantly, and in recognition of her granddaughters’ Japanese Canadian hybrid identities, Emiko integrates local

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\(^{55}\) Curiously parallel, at the end of Goto’s novel, the old woman Obachan also disappears into her next life riding on “an infinite source of wind” (219).
beliefs into her two granddaughters’ learning. When she accepts the girls’ gift of a “newly found rock” for her juggling practice, she explains “[t]he Blackfoot consider ammolite to be a holy stone, used to ward off evil spirits” (Tamayose 267). Mai watches her mother adopt her position as the old woman and facilitate the circle of life in the here and now and also for her future generations to come.

This novel ends with Basan’s final words. Like the wind, “circling and re-circling the land and sea, after a time of witnessing sorrows and happiness” (Tamayose 267), she is reassured by the scene she leaves behind: “the woman teaching her grandchildren odori, and the other tending to the peonies in the garden. Your story is done, and you take flight” (Tamayose 268). This kataribe has ensured the stories will continue. Tamayose’s representation of her old woman character as a kataribe serves to demonstrate how creative storytelling can help facilitate the healing of physical and psychogenic wounds. Basan’s stories explicitly reveal how the past informs the present, how personal memories and public memories intertwine and inform the construction of identities, and how the articulation of past experiences offers the possibility of working through the traumatizing conditions that contribute to one’s subjectivity. This old woman storyteller provides narrative instruction on order, theme, and structure to teach her listener to locate herself within a legacy of family and cultural history. The meta-narrative lessons embedded within this novel help emphasize the importance of reciprocal storytelling as a social and cultural practice for individual and collective survival. However, Odori does not offer a naïve simplistic representation of trauma, as it warns “the bombs still echo when the wars are over” (Tamayose 187) and “wounds never disappear completely” (Tamayose 121).
Unlike Naomi’s wounds that continue to seep because she cannot yet speak, Mai can begin her healing process because she has learned how to (metaphorically) speak, that is express her trauma through non-verbal modes of communication. Odori emphasizes that, through whatever form of creative engagement, storytelling offers the survivor and her listener a means to interweave moments of the past into one’s present narrative to work towards a reconciliation of the fractured ‘then and now’ of trauma.

CONSEQUENCES IN THE HERE AND AFTER OF TRAUMA

Both Tamayose’s and Kogawa’s novels illustrate the psychological consequences of not wanting to ‘tell’ and not being able to ‘tell’ certain stories. While Basan’s character questions whether her articulation of the past signifies madness or wisdom, we can read Obasan’s silence, not only as a culturally informed behavioural response, but also constitutive of her traumatic inability to articulate the past. For her, silence functions as a means to preserve calmness, to best ensure collective survival, and while telling might afford a release of ghosts, her life-long adherence to silencing the past ultimately denies its articulation. Sadly, even at the end of her life, Obasan “has not learned to weep” (Kogawa 269). In contrast, Basan, who also “had not cried in so many years,” is now capable of revealing her emotions; her “[f]ilmy eyes once hazel, now bruised with years of earthly sights, began to glisten” (Tamayose 247).

Tamayose’s novel ends with a positive representation of how the past and all its “sorrows and happiness” can inform and guide present and future generations. Kogawa’s novel, on the other hand, concludes with an overwhelming sense of ambiguity about how to reconcile oneself with the past and its traumatic silences and telling. While Mai is
“reassured by her mother’s quiet smile” (Tamayose 258), Naomi’s mother, who is frozen in time in a “black and white photograph, smiling [her] yasashi [easy] smile” (Kogawa 267), offers Naomi no reassurances nor comfort. The adult Naomi senses “[l]ove flows through the roots of the trees by our graves,” yet she still laments the “silences” and “wordlessness” (Kogawa 267). This “destruction” of the soul she speaks of contradicts the hope that resides in “the earth [which] still stirs with dormant blooms” (Kogawa 267). Thus, I have difficulty reading healing in this novel, although Naomi does suggest, “[t]he song of mourning is not a lifelong song” (Kogawa 270). Is this her acknowledgement that mourning can end? Am I to read the “bright in the darkness” and “the colours of rain” (Kogawa 270) as Kogawa offering a sign of hope that those Japanese Canadians interned in WWII can potentially heal from the traumas of their Canadian histories?

As the novel closes, Naomi is able to appreciate “the wild roses and the tiny wildflowers that grow along the trickling stream” (Kogawa 271), yet the reader, like Naomi, is left with the ever-resounding negative echoes of the 1946 Memorandum that closes the novel. As Miki acutely points out, “[t]he last word [of Kogawa’s novel] is written in the rhetoric of dominant language” (116), thereby demonstrating how “Japanese Canadians are still spoken for” (original italics, 117). Miki argues, “silence stills haunts in the absence of a Japanese Canadian name on this political document” (116); thus, its inclusion suggests “nothing has happened to change the social and political background to Naomi’s experiences” (Miki 116). Nothing resolves “the dichotomy between silence and speech” (Miki 116). However, as we are told, “[s]omewhere between speech and hearing is the transmutation of sound” (Kogawa 269). Therefore, if we listen carefully to the gaps, somewhere between Obasan’s silences and
Kogawa’s metanarrative telling, we learn an important history lesson about personal and collective suffering and survival. Kogawa’s telling started a collective healing process with the eventual 1988 Japanese Redress,\textsuperscript{56} but both Obasan’s and Naomi’s stories illustrate how healing constitutes a very personalized and conflicted process; thus, their characterizations provide important insights into Japanese Canadian cultural and age perspectives when analyzing silences and articulation in trauma studies.

Henke’s notion on \textit{scriptotherapy}, a type of life-writing which affords an author a therapeutic response to trauma, applies aptly to Kogawa’s novel. Henke suggests:

\begin{quote}
  The story of survival in the face of racial, cultural, and psychosexual adversity reconstructs a fragmented ego forced to the margins of hegemonic power structures. The act of life-writing serves as its own testimony and in doing so, carries through the work of reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and of effective agency in the world. (xix)
\end{quote}

As I previously discussed in Chapter 2, Henke contests the traditional defining parameters of the genres of life-writing and autobiography to include “the bildungsroman and other personally inflected fictional texts” (xiii). In doing so, she analyzes the ways that authors reinvent the self – through a critical re-assessment of the past – to create a counternarrative from an “empowered position of political agency” (Henke xvi). On the metanarrative level, Kogawa’s novel engages in this important cultural project. As Henke

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Obasan} was published in 1981, seven years before the signing of the Redress Agreement. On September 22, 1988, the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) finally elicited a formal apology from Prime Minister Brian Mulroney for the injustices committed against Japanese Canadians by the Canadian government during and following the years of WWII. The final restrictions of the War Measures Act remained in effect until 1949, when Japanese Canadians regained full rights of citizenship.
\end{flushleft}
suggests, through writing, scriptotherapy can help an author bear witness to oneself through the reader’s narrative participation. On the level of story, the ending hints at the possibility of Naomi acquiring agency to now reconstruct her personal and family history into a cohesive narrative. As first-person narrator, Naomi functions meta-fictionally as the author of the entire story that she pieces together once she can bring herself to listen. Yet the old woman’s subjectivity remains committed to a protective space of silence. Although Obasan “tries to speak,” she remains unable, her “round dry mouth” shaped as a “small accepting ‘o’” (Kogawa 269).

I read Odori’s ending as mirroring Obasan’s inarticulate gesture of a silent “o”; however, unlike in Obasan where it is the old woman who does not speak, in Odori, it is Mai who mouths her brother’s name, “emphasizing the o. Silence” (Tamayose 266). In both novels, silence constitutes a language understood by only those who know how to listen to its complexities. Both families must learn to live with their histories, their traumas, and the silences that remain. How they do so radically differs; while Obasan ends with sounds of “emptiness” and “Grief’s weeping” for a family that knows not how to weep (Kogawa 269), Odori ends with dance and magical flight. Thus, I return to my original premise that Tamayose’s novel (along with Goto’s novel Chorus of Mushrooms) asserts an important Japanese Canadian generational perspective that positions intergenerational storytelling as a critical discursive strategy for reframing specific cultural codes of silence. My focus on the discursive value of storytelling in Tamayose’s novel is not meant in any way to discredit the importance of Kogawa’s novel, as this canonical work of Canadian literature helped reshape the entire field by inserting into popular discourse invaluable perspectives on the Japanese Canadian experiences during
and after internment. Rather, what Tamayose’s novel demonstrates to me (and what my discussion in Chapter 2 supports) is that when a person is able to share experiences of trauma with an active listener, this storytelling exchange carries forward personal and familial stories of the past so these stories may better inform the development of both participants’ subjectivity in the future.

Chapter 4 further engages with this emphasized necessity for ‘telling’ personal and collective experiences of trauma. Shani Mootoo’s novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* affords us another critical site to analyze the importance of intergenerational storytelling, in this case when trauma and dementia complicate the narrativization of one’s own life history. Albeit situated in and representative of an entirely different cultural and historical context, Mootoo’s Caribbean Canadian novel also emphasizes how intergenerational storytelling can generate an intimate mode of communication for developing interpersonal relationships, engaging in self-discovery, and exploring imaginative possibilities for enacting agency and social change.
Chapter 4

SHANI MOOTOOS FIGURING OF THE OLD WOMAN AS IMAGINATIVE TRANSFORMATION IN CEREUS BLOOMS AT NIGHT

Two Caribbean Canadian novels, Shani Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night and David Chariandy’s Soucouyant, both portray old women with dementia in ways that complicate assumptions about madness, memory, and storytelling. The Caribbean madwoman figures as a common literary trope, with these novels as no exception. What they reveal are the negative consequences of alienation and isolation, illustrating the impact of a community’s engagement in social practices of discrimination and exclusion. For both authors, fiction affords a social space for negotiating ‘otherness’ and ‘un-belonging,’ and the use of the soucouyant from Caribbean mythology functions as a metacritical figure and a literary device that enables them to subversively critique dominant or popular discourses that perpetuate and legitimize the social exclusion of ‘difference.’ While each novel has its specific focus (Chariandy critiques Canadian multiculturalism as a national rhetoric masking racialized exclusions, and Mootoo critiques colonial discourses about ‘non-normative’ sexuality and gender), both also illustrate how old age functions as a marker of difference.

In these novels, the old women are characterized by their cognitive decline: their loss of language, social skills, and connection with their surrounding community. Their everyday actions and perception of reality begin to differ radically from their community’s limits of normative acceptance. These old women exist within a realm of difference, both internally adopted and externally imposed, and this difference serves to

57 I use ‘normative’ here to denote the prescribed acceptance, assumption, and policing of social behaviours by the dominant members of a community.
alienate them from any collective social concern. These two novels reconfigure understandings of the “old crazy woman” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 8) by problematizing rhetoric that denies agency to individuals, particularly old women. Similar to the other novels under examination in this thesis, both novels demonstrate telling-listening engagements between an old woman and a younger character. Despite similarities in their characterizations of the old woman, these novels provide readers with different layered interpretations of the social implications of a younger character taking over the narrative act and transforming from listener to teller of an old woman’s story.

Both Mootoo’s and Chariandy’s old woman characters experience traumatizing violence throughout their life courses, and their personal stories illustrate how an absence of community exacerbates the subsequent silencing of their respective pasts. With no one concerned about their social welfare, no one to listen to their stories of trauma and to empathetically engage them within a community, these old women appear destined to suffer “alone with their traumas, forever alone” (Chariandy 165). Both novels exemplify Carole Boyce Davies’s claim that “Horror disrupts seamless narratives of people and place” (4). Both old women experience the loss of language, because of dementia and as a symptomatic response to experiences of trauma and isolation. With interpersonal communication ruptured, the increasing presence of narrative gaps fractures any linear narrative representation of these old women’s traumatic histories, terrifying somatic memories, and experiences of social alienation.

This chapter focuses on Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, a novel about a woman traumatized by abandonment, incestuous violence, and her own eventual actions against her father, the perpetrator. After Mala Ramchandin kills her father, she
experiences a psychic break and retreats from all interpersonal relations. Her isolation, both self-enacted and externally imposed by a community that alienates and stigmatizes her, leads to her further withdrawal – from humans, language, and social mores. This withdrawal of all interpersonal relations impacts her psychological health, and, without social support, Mala exhibits signs of dementia. Alternatively, we could read Mala’s psychic break as the catalyst for the onset of her dementia, whereby her social retreat and denial of social convention reflect her changing cognitive state. Either way, her extreme isolation accelerates her instinct for survival, yet her actions become equated with madness. Her community labels her a soucouyant, the monstrous outsider who serves as the community scapegoat and can be legitimately demonized. This Afro-Caribbean cultural myth overwrites Mala’s personal story with a collective one, assigning her a new identity that coupled with dementia simultaneously eliminates her voice and perspective.

Similar to what I emphasized in Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter will further illustrate the importance of establishing mutual trust between listener and teller when bearing witness to another’s history of trauma. However, unlike these previous chapters, this one critiques the violence enacted by discourses of exclusion to analyze how Mootoo’s portrayal of storytelling performs as a discourse of resistance capable of “imaginative transformations” (Tiffin 429). First, I investigate the connections between Mala’s assumed ‘madness’ and the use of the soucouyant story as a literary strategy for critiquing ideological discourses of exclusion. Mootoo’s madwoman’s voice speaks from what Annette Schlicter terms a “paradoxical position of enunciation” (311). Then, I introduce Helen Tiffin’s concept of “imaginative transformations”(429) as a literary strategy that disrupts binaristic assumptions and demonstrates how fiction affords new
social understandings. These sections establish the necessary groundwork for my subsequent analysis of the listener-teller relationship in this novel. Mootoo’s carefully crafted narrative models for her reader how trust within interpersonal relations is an integral component in the development of a positive interdependency in a reciprocal storytelling engagement. Suzette Henke’s analysis of Judith Herman’s research in Trauma and Recovery highlights three fundamental stages in healing, which aptly apply to Mala’s situation: “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and regaining a sense of community” (xvii). Henke’s work asserts the importance of narrative recovery of the past for reconstituting one’s “shattered self” (xix). She claims, “[a] great deal of evidence now suggests that the formulation of narrative cohesion can reconfigure the individual’s obsessive mental processing of embedded traumatic scripts” (Henke xviii). Mala’s nurse Tyler organizes her verbalized fragments into a linear story, and this narrative cohesion affords Mala a sense of agency through closure.

In “Critical Madness, Enunciative Excess: The Figure of the Madwoman in Postmodern Feminist Texts,” Annette Schlicter responds to what she terms “the discourse of critical madness” (310), the conflicting feminist readings of the madwoman in literature. Countering such arguments as Nina Baym’s infamous “The Madwoman and Her Languages” in which Baym asserts the madwoman denies feminists any subversive potential because she simply mirrors the consequences of dominant social and political restrictions on female authority, Schlicter instead turns to the writings of Shoshana Felman, Lucy Irigaray, and Kathy Acker to illustrate how the “figuration” (Haraway 87) of the madwoman, in fact, inhabits a “paradoxical position of enunciation” (Schlicter

58 Chapter 5 will focus on Chariandy’s novel and its representation of the telling-listening engagement.
This madwoman, configured as a polemicist, her voice caught simultaneously “in-between” and “beyond the opposition between ‘normal’ and ‘mad’ speech” (Schlicter 313), offers readers a critique of representations by enacting the “symptom[s] of women’s symbolic and social disempowerment” and “strategies of intervention into patriarchal systems of representation” (310). Schlicter argues this double position highlights women’s entrapment in dominant epistemologies and asserts a “politics of enunciation” that “works towards an authorization of feminine self-representations” (310).

Albeit through a secondhand narration, Mala Ramchandin’s life story provides readers with “the vision of a madwoman” (Trinh, Woman 123). I use Trinh T. Minh-ha’s words here to examine the madwoman’s “paradoxical position of enunciation” (Schlicter 311). Although Trinh speaks ironically about storytelling in her essay “Grandma’s Story,” published in Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, the narrative form she claims is most commonly associated with madness nevertheless challenges dominant narrative theories about the structural features of story. She explains, “a story that has no end—no end, no middle, no beginning; no start, no stop, no progression; neither backward nor forward, only a stream that flows into another stream, an open sea—is the vision of a madwoman” (123). Within the dominant tradition of the novel genre, Mala’s fragmented, seemingly discordant, non-linear articulation only becomes meaningful when rendered through the narrator’s ordering and interpretation, yet this narrativization act serves to destabilize and reconfigure the conditions of her representation. Mala’s trauma narrative forces into question the insidious mechanisms
and negative consequences of patriarchal oppression, destabilizing numerous assumptions about memory, dementia, language, and female madness.

In Chapter 3, I suggest that Darcy Tamayose challenges her readers to envision non-linear narratives as something more than reflecting madness. Mootoo’s investigation of the complexity of language and the power of story contributes greater depth of meaning to the old woman’s words in Tamayose’s novel. Let me remind my reader here of Basan’s coupling of madness and wisdom within storytelling: “the madness that was so long barricaded inside now flooded forth. Was it madness or wisdom? Sometimes, the two seemed the same” (Tamayose 189). I would like to suggest we read Mala’s sudden flood of words in the presence of her listener-teller as “both mad and not mad at the same time” (Schlicter 316). Dementia disrupts Mala’s language capability and “she spoke rapidly and with great urgency, in a low monotone, repeating herself sometimes for hours without end” (Mootoo 107); however, as Tyler, the narrator of her life story, informs us, “[t]here was little doubt that I was being given a dictation, albeit without punctuation marks or subject breaks” (Mootoo 107). The reconfiguration of this madwoman storyteller’s discourse as a site of heterogeneous voices comprised of multiple subjectivities “offers strategies for a cultural critique that turn[s] the theoretically impossible into the critically imaginable” (Schlicter 324).

Charged with nothing more than being “a crazy old woman” (8), Mala is committed to an alms house, where her caregiver Tyler, a young transgendered nurse, empathetically records her story with the purpose of it gaining the attention of her long lost sister Asha. Mala’s inability to self-narrate her own life story mirrors Sidonie Smith’s theory that a person with dementia “can only be known through representations by
others” (231). Tyler becomes the primary narrator (and witness) of this old woman’s traumatic history, and as the narrative develops, it reveals much about the violence of cultural misrepresentations and assumptions. At times, the narrator nurse Tyler patiently (and often enthusiastically) engages in actions that “help the trust building between [himself and Mala]” (18); whereas on other occasions, such as the first time he must leave Mala alone at night, he outright pleads with her, “you must trust me!” (22). As trust develops, Tyler becomes “witness” to Mala’s story and discovers “finally a purpose to [his] listening” (Mootoo 49).

His narrativization of her past helps Mala reconfigure her traumatic memories, and in the process, he comes to better understand himself. From Tyler, the reader learns that behind any rumour, “there is much more to that story!” (Mootoo 49). Through what becomes a reciprocal storytelling act, Tyler humanizes the monstrous, which, in this novel’s case, signifies not only the old woman Mala, but also himself. In “Ethics of Empathy and Reading,” Elina Valovirta investigates Mootoo’s narrative strategies for evoking reader empathy and argues that, “[i]n drawing attention to the way in which [Tyler] wants to not draw too much attention to himself, [he] in fact does just that: captures the reader’s interest and attention in him” (144). By analyzing Tyler and Mala’s listener-teller relationship, this chapter will address Valovirta’s question, “does Tyler make Mala his double by way of his narration?” (145). Ultimately, I will demonstrate how their interpersonal storytelling engagement interweaves individual experiences and memories into a joint narrative that exemplifies both the importance of community and that “memory is social” (Basting 161), that is relational and existing “between people, not as belonging to one person or another” (69), as Anne Davis Basting astutely suggests.
THE MADWOMAN IN THE ALMS HOUSE

Grace Khungwon Hong describes Mala as “a gothic madwoman figure who haunts the fictionalized Caribbean town of Lantanacamara” (73). Interestingly, the Caribbean ‘madwoman’ repeatedly manifests as a *soucouyant* within many recent works of Canadian and American fiction. Yet, what differentiates many of these representations from those that precede them is the author’s emphasis on her humanity. Meredith Gadsby explains, “Whereas she [the *soucouyant*] has been used in folklore as a cautionary tale for women who disobey men, she can also be read as a woman who refuses to sacrifice her sexual or emotional independence for middle-class domestic stability” (70). By humanizing the *soucouyant*, many diasporic authors transform her figuring from the inhuman supernatural creature that is ‘crazy’ by day and deadly by night into a woman shaped by a history of cultural oppression and familial violence. These new diasporic representations exemplify how multiple ideological perspectives figuring the *soucouyant* can inject new cultural understandings into traditional narratives.

In Mootoo’s novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the *soucouyant* silently haunts the narrative. Mootoo never identifies nor names this folkloric creature in her novel, and for Mootoo’s uninformed reader – that is, one with no cultural knowledge about this creature – its absence in the narrative only further reflects the power of gendered and ageist discourses that serve on the basis of oversight to exclude. For Mootoo’s culturally informed reader, this novel affords another level of critique through which one can re-

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evaluate cultural myths that serve to marginalize and disempower particular old women within the community.

On the other hand, Chariandy’s novel *Soucouyant* explicitly introduces the *soucouyant*, via his title and novel’s content, into Canada’s multi-lingual language system, extending and enriching the interpretive potential of the *soucouyant* beyond the boundaries of its former Caribbean context. To compensate for a reader’s potential knowledge gap and to ensure the *soucouyant*’s integration into Canadian cultural discourse, Chariandy’s novel offers a didactic, textbook explanation of what a *soucouyant* is. He enlightens his reader:

A *soucouyant* is something like a female vampire. She lives a reclusive but fairly ordinary life on the edge of town. She disguises herself by dressing up in the skin of an old woman, but at night she’ll shed her disguise and travel across the sky as a ball of fire. She’ll hunt out a victim and suck his blood as he sleeps. (135)

Through Chariandy’s text, Mootoo’s protagonist can be re-read. When I asked Mootoo about her use of this myth, she agreed the *soucouyant* figures prominently in her representation of Mala’s character. She explained how Mala’s characterization – as an old marginalized crazy woman – emerges from her memories of an impoverished and alienated old woman who lived on the outskirts of the Trinidadian community of Mootoo’s childhood (“Conversation”). This old woman’s seemingly unconventional behaviours fuelled the imagination of the local community. Like the children in her

60 In a conversation with Shani Mootoo, during her guest visit to my classroom at the University of Guelph, she said that no one has ever asked her before about the *soucouyant* in her novel.
The word *soucouyant* is a linguistic utterance deeply embedded with culturally specific connotations derived from a long syncretic history. The oral lineage of the *soucouyant* can be traced back to the Yoruba peoples in pre-colonized Africa. The *soucouyant, socriant, or hige* was believed to be an old person who lived within, or just outside of, the community and sucked the blood of young children in the night. This creature was used to rationalize the unexplainable deaths in the community. During the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the stories of the *soucouyant* migrated across the Middle Passage with the slave ships and this creature became a part of a coded story about the blood-sucking colonial slave-master. Giselle Anatol, in “Transforming the Skin-Shedding *Soucouyant*: Using Folklore to Reclaim Female Agency in Caribbean Literature,” claims that, also during this time period, Victorian England adopted the *soucouyant* myth, and gendered the creature female. Boyce Davies critiques the misogynistic nature of *soucouyant* tales in the Caribbean oral tradition, and she argues these stories constituted part of a genre of “evil women” tales (“Woman” 171). In this incarnation, the *soucouyant* functions as a narrative device to “socialize women according to patriarchal dictates” (Anatol, “Transforming” 46). Now representative of deviant behaviours, the *soucouyant* symbolizes the Victorian ‘New Woman’ who disrupts gender conventions and challenges the hierarchy of the patriarchal system. Drawing upon Franz Fanon’s interpretation of

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61 The trajectory of the *soucouyant* story migrated from African Yoruba culture through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to the Caribbean to authors writing today from within the diasporic literary context.

62 Theories on the discourse of madness also emerge in the nineteenth-century when Victorian ideals fuel the institutionalization of misogynistic medical practices that firmly link conceptions of femininity with hysteria.
madness in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jaspal Kaur Singh explains the contradictory impact of colonialism and nationalism on women: “On the one hand, they were encouraged to become ‘new women’ through nationalistic discourse, and, on the other, they were urged to become more traditional and self-sacrificing” (48). In the Victorian context with the nation appropriating the image of “the chaste and pure unconquered woman’s body” (Singh 46), the *soucouyant* came to signify a threat not only to the family and its children, but to the safety of the entire British Empire. This folklore served to persecute “women who choose independence over social convention” (Gadsby 70). Perceived as a menace to the community’s cohesion, this nineteenth-century *soucouyant* could be justifiably punished with a severe beating with a large stick, which would thus reinstate the dominant colonial social order.

Charlotte Bronte’s 1847 novel *Jane Eyre* exemplifies this colonial fear of this ‘Other.’ Bertha Mason, the Victorian quintessential ‘madwoman in the attic’ (Gilbert and Gubar), is portrayed as a wild, violent, “mad” Caribbean Creole “Vampyre” (Bronte 286) with a “swelled black face” (Bronte 288) who attacked her husband and “sucked the blood” (Bronte 215) of her own brother. She symbolizes a threat not only to her family but to England. By classifying women, such as Bertha Mason, as monsters, the community (and her husband) could justify their social response (restraining her freedom and excluding her from society) as a means of protecting the health of the community and ensuring social conformity. In this Victorian novel, Bertha’s own story remains silenced, whereas Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) offers a re-telling of *Jane Eyre* and gives Bertha a voice and the power to share her personal history of fear, colonial violence, familial deceit, and patriarchal oppression. Rhys’s version offers readers a critical
perspective on Bertha’s social condition and the personal limitations imposed by her social position. In *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*, Meredith Gadsby contends female independence “shatter[s] the master narrative of masculinity that permeates Caribbean culture” (66), and thus Rhys’s novel challenges previous negative perceptions of Bertha. As a postmodern novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* “inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces” (Hutcheon 11). Rhys’s characterization shifts critique towards the colonial society that governs Bertha’s existence. Gayatri Spivak argues that it is Rhys’s articulation of the psychology behind Bertha’s actions that “keeps [Bertha’s] humanity intact” (125).

Mootoo’s representation of the Caribbean ‘madwoman’ invites questions about the social conditions responsible for Mala’s perceived ‘madness.’ Mootoo’s complex and contradictory characterization of Mala, socially constructed by town gossip as a dangerous madwoman yet revealed through Tyler’s narrative as the innocent victim of horrific familial sexual violence, exemplifies how rumours about this old woman (as a monster to be feared) serve to erase her personal history and abdicate the community of their complicity and social responsibility. Vivian M. May argues that “[t]he community’s readings of Mala entail no understanding at all: they place Mala within socially acceptable cognitive frameworks so that the community can move on. Madness has no meaning other than as a repository for the abject” (“Dislocation” 109). May suggests, Mootoo’s novel “pushes us to […] recognize how passivity plays an insidious role in domination” (“Trauma” 117). To expose the ideological operations behind these social practices of exclusion, Mootoo’s novel challenges the blind acceptance of authoritative
discourses assumed “as reliable as their Sunday school teachers” (127) and seeks to reveal “the whole truth” (Mootoo 7). Mootoo’s narrator professes evocatively to have full access to the “whole truth” of the old woman’s life story. Yet, at one point in the novel, he does admit, “As much as I had learned to not discount her mental fitness, I must admit there were times when I believed her words were fanciful imaginings” (110). This problematic ‘truth’ claim, embedded in his secondhand narration, necessitates questioning whether his assertion of truth is meant as a discursive strategy to assert authority and thus control over the old woman’s actual experiences. On the metanarrative level, this novel self-consciously troubles the concept of truth, exposing how it is always “socially, ideologically, and historically conditioned” (Hutcheon, Poetics 18). Speaking from and about his own diversely marginalized subject position, Tyler’s narrative act reveals his own counter-discursive critique of a colonial legacy of discriminatory practices. His testimony of Mala’s trauma instates a subtext into the novel calling for an epistemological shift that recognizes human diversity and multiple identities.

Mootoo’s novel participates in this literary tradition of characterizing Caribbean women as ‘mad,’ yet the characterization of the storytelling engagement between an old woman and her younger listener-teller humanizes the old woman by highlighting the social processes behind the cultural construction of Mala as ‘Other.’ Mootoo’s representation derives from, but disrupts, the persistence of Victorian conceptions of femininity and sexuality. As Michel Foucault claims in Madness and Civilization, “Madness and non-madness, reason and non-reason are inextricably involved” (xii). Drawing from Donna Haraway’s definition of figuration as a “mode of theory when the more ‘normal’ rhetorics of systematic critical analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our
entrapment in the stories of the established disorders” (87), I will demonstrate that the soucouyant’s story when told within the Canadian literary context offers a new mode of feminist theory that engages in “a critique of representation and […] a paradoxical politics of enunciation” (Schlichter 312).

Anatol notes, “no one has attempted a critical interrogation of these ‘creature’ stories, much less a feminist analysis” (Anatol, “Transforming” 46)63; Anatol’s work examines how recent literary representations of the soucouyant (such as Nalo Hopkinson’s Brown Girl in the Ring) disrupt the tradition by affording the soucouyant the potential of female mobility and self-expression. She becomes a metaphoric linguistic binary that signifies both restriction and independence. With Mala figured as a soucouyant, this tension is exemplified as “officers wrestle with the wriggling old lady” (Mootoo 201).

IMAGINATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

In her creative writing, Mootoo engages in what Helen Tiffin has described as “the post-colonial project of imaginative transformations” (429). According to Tiffin, these transformations occur within novels that “set out to destabilize” the concept of divisive binaries, so that “its erosion in the course of each text […] points away from

63 David Chariandy exclaims he is “quite excited by recent feminist and queer re-imaginings of the soucouyant figure” (qtd in Dobson 811), but then contends, “my work doesn’t really go in that direction” (qtd in Dobson 811). At the Caribbean Narratives of Race, Place and Migration conference hosted by the Australian Association for Caribbean Studies (AACS) in Newcastle, Australia in February 2011, I presented a paper titled “The Migration of the Soucouyant: From Afro-Caribbean Diasporic Folklore to Canadian Multiculturalism.” In this paper, I illustrate how Chariandy’s statement can be disputed.
imperialist imageries towards transformative ones” (429). When works of fiction reveal the “interlinked issues of voice, resistance, and agency” (Mardorossian 19), they enable alternative perspectives to emerge and counter the dominant ontological and epistemological constructions of difference. Carine M. Mardorossian investigates how diasporic authors recast postcolonial critiques from a relational perspective in which they “write from within or in symbiosis with the dominant discourse whose claims they undermine internally rather than oppositionally” (7). Mootoo’s novel engages in “a critical and transformative dialogue” (Mardorossian 11) that unsettles conventional perspectives by articulating alternative categories of difference.

Mootoo’s migration of the soucouyant folklore into the Canadian literary realm forces a reimagining of discriminatory discourses by exemplifying the social processes through which “[t]he living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (Bakhtin, Dialogic 276). As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, the integration of “the social diversity of speech types” into a novel through “[a]uthorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters” (Dialogic 262-63) gives voice to a multiplicity of perspectives informed by diverse cultural understandings. Every word “has its own history of contradictory acts of verbal recognition, as well as that heteroglossia that is always present in such acts of recognition” (Dialogic 278). Heteroglossia, literally meaning “a mixture of tongues” (Pearce 229), reflects the intricate combinations of different linguistic styles and social attitudes that circulate within a
society and constitute the body politic. Heteroglossia reveals an author exploring the semantic complexity of a word or linguistic sign.

Writing within (and about) the early to mid-twentieth century socio-political context, Bakhtin contends that the novel, of all genres, best reflects an inconclusive future in which “all the semantic stability of the object is lost” (“Epic” 851). Such a statement acknowledges the interpretive possibilities for language development because, with this semantic indeterminacy, the object’s “sense and significance are renewed and grow as the context continues to unfold” (“Epic” 851). Bakhtin describes this process from the novelist’s perspective:

[T]he prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object […] For the prose writer, the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they “do not sound.” (Dialogic 278)

Mootoo as author inserts her own voice, as the implied author, into the complex intertextuality of ideas and languages that inform her representation of Caribbean society; through engaging with different ideological structures and systems, new linguistic relationships develop that reflect her critical cross-cultural awareness. Through “interillumination” between different language systems, whereby words from different
languages “throw light on each other,” the tripartite relationship between author, narrator, and reader enables multiple re-conceptualizations of a specific object-conveying sign operating within a now renewed linguistic system (Bakhtin, “Epic” 843).

Homi K. Bhabha, acknowledging the linguistic and semantic slippage within language(s), recognizes the potential of the ‘Third Space’ of enunciation, as “the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Location 55).

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha defines this Third Space as “the inbetween space” where “we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (Bhabha 56). However, this intervention only occurs when “we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others” (Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity” 157). Singh argues the postcolonial writer⁶⁴ must write from an “in-between space,” located between a masculinist poetics and an oppositional stance that “others” oneself (52). This liminal space can afford multiple critical perspectives, through which an author can “produce counter-narratives of nations” (Singh 53).⁶⁵ Thus, her question, “How do we interpret representations of madness by female writers inhabiting these conflicted spaces?” (Singh 48), prompts my investigation of Mootoo’s figuring of Mala as a soucouyant.

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⁶⁴ While Singh reserves this space for the postcolonial woman writer, I hesitate to limit its usefulness to one sex.

⁶⁵ Singh’s argument, although not specifically about Mootoo’s novel, provides a relevant frame for evaluating this novel’s reception. Singh suggests that writing from a liminal position can generate a “space of conflict, or contrary and maddening reception and understanding, and only in the hybrid social spaces are [marginalized authors’] poetics read as empowering, albeit sometimes through misreadings – as their poetics are sometimes viewed through universal feminist perspectives and other times through a critical postcolonial feminist lens” (52).
Mootoo’s novel plays with “semantic openendedness” (Bakhtin, “Epic” 840) to simultaneously exemplify and critique the ways the *soucouyant* folklore demonizes old women who defy a society’s dominant monologic cultural understanding of normative behaviours. The semantic complexity of the term *soucouyant* enables diasporic authors to cultivate a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities, which Anatol claims “holds tremendous subversive potential for women of the Caribbean diaspora” (“Transforming” 59). By locating the *soucouyant* within a Caribbean setting, Mootoo challenges Caribbean discourses that demonize difference. I am particularly interested in her use of the *soucouyant* story as a discursive device that constructs the old woman as ‘Other,’ in order to illustrate the psychological consequences for old women when discursive powers authorize negative assumptions about the interrelations of gender, language, and madness.

Many critics examine how Mootoo (re)configures alternative sexualities to raise questions about the ideological processes governing assumed gendered, sexual, and national taxonomies of belonging.⁶⁶ For instance, John Corr and Ann Cvetkovich both posit Mootoo’s “queer sexualities emerg[ing] from the traumas of migration and sexuality” (Cvetkovich 148). Cvetkovich argues “their links to traumatic history must be acknowledged rather than denied or repudiated” (148), and Corr investigates how “queer transnational formations produce creative responses to trauma” that “incorporate the affective life of queer diaspora cultures into the transnational archive of migration as trauma history” (Corr 13). According to Gayatri Gopinath, Mootoo’s novel, working

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⁶⁶ For other work interested in constructions of identities and alternative sexualities in Mootoo’s novel, see Shompaballi Datta-Kimball, Heather Smyth, Prudence Layne, Brenda Jean Wray, Grace Khungwon Hong, Donna McCormack, and Meg Wesling.
within the “framework of a queer South Asian diaspora,” serves to critique “the discourses of purity and ‘tradition’ that undergird dominant national and diasporic ideologies” (27). Alongside studies on the identity politics at play within the novel, much critical attention has also focused on the significance of the garden and its contribution to postcolonial Caribbean fiction. Sarah Phillips Casteel suggests the “semi-magical garden that is set against the experiences of displacement” (24) functions “as a metaphor for identity, [as] the cereus plant simultaneously points to hybridity, mutability, and mobility on the one hand and to attachment to place on the other” (26). Jill H. Casid also analyzes the book’s figuring of the garden and the cereus cactus, claiming this plant mimics “a network of unruly loves and transplanted gardens” which provides the reader with a vision of an “alternative cartography of desire” (xviii).

While Christine L. Fox also emphasizes the importance of the cereus plant, she positions the Alms House as more central to the narrative and the ethics of the novel. She identifies “the alms house and its residents’ garden as a place of productive literary thirdspace” (70). Fox draws her argument from Rita Wong’s essay “Queerly (Can)Asian” in which Wong makes the claim “Cereus operate[s] within an unsettled and unsettling thirdspace” (18), and justifies her use of literary thirdspace as a natural extension of Bhabha’s concept. Drawing upon Bhabha’s work, Fox argues that cultural meanings are redefined within the Alms House garden, symbolic of an ‘inbetween’ space. Johanna Garvey’s work also focuses on the Alms House, tracing how it transforms for both Mala and Tyler into a safe space “where extreme mental, physical, and sexual violence are not overt threats” (5), and thus where Tyler and Mala together begin to discover agency.

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67 For other readings on the garden in Mootoo’s novel, see Michelle Ramlagan, Rhonda Kaleel, and Isabel Hoving.
Despite so much critical attention, most articles on Mootoo’s novel either ignore the interfamilial sexual violence or interpret it reductively as symbolic of oppressive colonial histories.

Works by Vivian M. May, Proma Tagore, and Jeanie E. Warnock offer insightful analyses on Mootoo’s novel as a trauma narrative, highlighting the interrelations between trauma, dislocation, witnessing, and telling. May’s differentiation between “wilful” and “strategic” ignorance provides a useful understanding of this novel’s political intervention. In “Trauma in Paradise,” May develops these concepts to illustrate how they function within Mootoo’s novel. She defines “willful ignorance” as “carefully crafted methods of not-knowing that are a means of perpetuating privilege and domination” that “serve[…] to maintain the status quo” (“Trauma” 109). While the town folk of Lantanacamara know that Mala’s father rapes her and her sister, they choose to turn a blind eye to the girls’ circumstances. Mootoo writes, “there were those who took pity [on Chandin] […] such a man would take to the bottle and to his own child, they reasoned, only if he suffered some madness. And they further reasoned, what man would not suffer rage akin to insanity if his own wife, with a devilish mind of her own, left her husband and children” (195). Here, violence against females is condoned by a society governed by patriarchal power relations. A scorned man’s “insanity” is rendered permissible because of his wife’s perceived transgression; thus, madness becomes

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68 While I draw from May’s writings, I would argue they are not without flaws, some of which I will discuss in the section on trauma in this chapter. Additionally, while Jeanie E. Warnock offers an important critique of May’s reading of Mala’s garden as a site of political agency, as a “subversive method of politicized resistance” (Warnock 104), this reading fails to recognize how Mala remains powerless to resist the psychological trauma that repeatedly manifests.
revealed as an unstable category whose significance is determined by gender and power relations.

The community’s response of pitying Mala’s father after his wife leaves him for a woman, and their justification of his sexual abuse against his children, demonstrates the power of the law of the father to silence the victim and erase any acts of social responsibility. Instead, the community demonizes the daughter, Mala, and consequently, her traumatic story becomes erased by the collective construction of her as a *soucouyant*. Her identity transformed, she further suffers from patriarchal practices of domination and silencing.\(^69\) May positions “strategic ignorance” as a means to counter “willful ignorance” (“Trauma” 109). Strategic ignorance signifies “to not know the world as you’ve been taught … so that you can survive, and challenge dominant norms and expectations, and can expose the false moralizing and patent lies of the oppressors” (May, “Trauma” 109). According to May, Mootoo’s novel provides various examples of “strategic ignorance” such as “[c]hosen exile or purposeful relocation” (119), enacting a “split or composite subjectivity,” and “the use of silence and linguistic noncompliance” (122). These counter-discursive strategies function as “a means of developing consciousness resistant to oppression, of forging and nourishing a decolonized imagination” (May, “Trauma” 110). Like other Caribbean women writers, Mootoo “craft[s] an imaginary space from which to remember identities and histories differently” (May, “Trauma” 107). By destabilizing divisive binaries, this novel enacts new imaginings.

\(^69\) In “The Flight from Certainty,” Maryse Condé attributes the “life-robbing cloud” of ash that descends upon Lantanacamara after Mala’s house burns as “the visible metaphor for Paradise’s willful ignorance” (my italics, 67), and she notes how this cloud does not lift until Mala is exonerated of all charges.
In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the interrelated binaries such as rational/crazy, captivity/flight, house/nature, day/night, order/chaos contribute to interpretive readings of Mala’s character. Structuralism looks for and expects to find binary oppositions as one form of relational difference within a novel, and this way of interpreting relationships between objects, concepts, and characters as divisive and oppositional and only understandable through binary difference adheres to a problematically Western notion of understanding social relations. This assumed existence of binaries serves to impose order, structure, and meaning to social understanding, and the hierarchies understood to exist within binary relationships thus encourage a thematic analysis of the novel based on power structures and differential relations. Themes participate in and can be interpreted through a master signifying system, accepted by structuralists as universal to narratives. Structuralism presupposes certain recurrent patterns existing in all narratives, and this predetermined bias (that structures are fixed, immutable, and independent of social changes) limits analytical discoveries. However, in Mootoo’s novel, the binary pairings of rational/crazy and woman/soucouyant challenge a hierarchical relationship because, as the reader discovers through the effectively crafted work, they complement each other as two aspects that contribute to an understanding of the other. Here, I draw upon Paula Gunn Allen’s conceptual model for literary criticism that reconfigures divisive binaries as “complementarity” (82), whereby relational pairs (male/female in Allen’s discussion) deconstructively enhance understanding of each other as parts of an active system, rather than opposing each other as separate and distinct units understood only through perceived differences and hierarchal imbalances. In other words, with an assumed binary of
superior/inferior disrupted, neither bears greater importance, and neither can be understood in isolation.

Mootoo’s novel demonstrates how two separate entities exist not in opposition but as a continuous system, one blending into or developing out of the other. Mala’s existence exemplifies her understanding of this interrelatedness; for instance, she “did not ascribe activities to specific times” but instead “responded regardless of the time of day or night” (Mootoo 137). For Mala, the differentiation between day/night dissolves, thus reflecting the novel’s model of social understanding premised on interconnections and relational awareness. Yet, this old woman’s mechanism for coping with her traumatic past is repeatedly misinterpreted by her community as merely the actions of a madwoman. Rumours dehumanize her by erasing her violent history and transforming her from a woman into a dangerous soucouyant who “turned into a ball of fire and whipped across the sky at night” (Mootoo 126).

I want to consider woman/soucouyant not as a binary opposition, but as a relational pair. As discussed earlier, the Caribbean cultural myth of the soucouyant dehumanizes women who are perceived as social deviants and erases their personal histories, transforming them from women into dangerous creatures who must be excluded from society. Mala, as an old woman, is characterized by the community as a soucouyant, as “an unrecognizable wild creature with a blood-stained face, frothing at the mouth” (Mootoo 246). The dual nature of the soucouyant’s representation can be seen in Mootoo’s novel the moment when Mala “sunk her teeth deep into [her father] Chandin’s wrist” and “had drawn blood” (Mootoo 246); she paradoxically frees herself from her father’s control while simultaneously exemplifying the threat a soucouyant poses for the
patriarchal order. His death disrupts the social order of the house, and she usurps power from her oppressor. Eventually, Mala exists only in the villagers’ imaginations as “parents used her legend to their advantage, as though she were a whipping cane” (Mootoo 122). She suffers alienation and then isolation when “[e]veryone in the village seemed to have finally forgotten about [her]” (Mootoo 121).

Yet, an analysis of Mala’s character and her psychological shift from what could be argued as rational behaviour to an irrational psychosis complicates assumptions and interpretations of what constitutes an act of agency. Tyler’s perspective offers readers an important reminder of the complex nature of individual responses to trauma:

I wonder at how many of us, feeling unsafe and unprotected, either end up running far away from everything we know and love, or staying and simply going mad. I have decided today that neither option is more or less noble than the other. They are merely different ways of coping, and we each must cope as best we can. (Mootoo 97)

Through zero focalization (an unlimited view, sometimes described as omniscient), Tyler details the stages and corresponding actions of Mala’s withdrawal from society. The reader learns that “just before Mala stopped using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there” (Mootoo 136). Flaunting “care for social graces” (Mootoo 136), Mala retreats from the norms of her society into “her half-acre [garden] world” (Mootoo 137). While dementia seems to finally free Mala of time and social conventions, her psychic trauma insists she remains haunted by the memories of her childhood abuse.
Binaries tend to privilege one position over the other, yet such a reading neglects to consider the agency of the _soucouyant_ as a response for a woman oppressed by social conventions. Structuralism favours deterministic actions based on reading the past rather than promoting the possibility of individual agency. Hence, any interpretation of Mala’s motives is deemed irrelevant within a structuralist analysis that does not fully attribute and interpret her _soucouyant_ role. In _Cereus Blooms at Night_, madness coupled with flight signifies freedom from the constraints of a rationalist world that permits violence against children and restricts female mobility. The _soucouyant_ metaphorically signifies a linguistic pairing: restriction and independence. Her daily existence reveals the isolated reality of her marginalized position, but at night, she flies free from all that binds her to her subservient position as a woman. She experiences mobility and freedom from the limitations imposed by a patriarchal system. However, this freedom has a price: she must disguise her true identity (often behind a mask of madness) and is, thus, only tolerated at the margins of society, plus she risks the violence associated with discovery. Boyce Davies agrees the soucouyant story can be read as “a narrative of transcendence,” yet she rightly notes how “[i]t is the ability to fly that takes center stage, not the price paid for it” (“Woman” 70-71).

Mootoo’s figuring of Mala as a _soucouyant_ without naming her as such invigorates a dialogized process that deconstructs monologic assumptions premised on binary oppositions. While the pairing woman/_soucouyant_ continues to carry traces of its negative meanings, it also anticipates future significance as it transforms understanding from a monologic ‘either-or’ interpretation into a Bakhtinian dialogic approach of ‘both-and.’ Dialogism reveals the “inherent ability of language to express multiple meanings...
simultaneously, especially because the same statement can mean different things in different contexts or to different readers or listeners” (Booker 477). Thus, multiple perceptions can present themselves simultaneously within a text, creating ambivalence that affords different viewpoints “without any privileging of one over the other so that different worlds can comment on each other in a dialogic way” (Booker 109). Hence, through centrifugal forces that push the boundaries of language and social understanding, Mootoo positions the old woman as a figure symptomatic of multiple and often conflicting ideologies. While she is perceived and treated as monstrous by some, her ‘madness’ reveals to others her community’s neglectful response to her horrific social circumstances.

Himani Bannerji, in *The Dark Side of the Nation*, examines how “disembodiment and objectification” of women “are the foundation of violence against women” (169), how this social act of “converting a person, an embodied socio-historical being, into a sign or symbol” (169) dehumanizes her and renders her powerless, thus revoking any possibility of social or political agency. Mala’s exclusion and subsequent demonization shifts attention from her social circumstances, and any dialogue that may have critically interrogated the causes of her behaviour inverts and assigns to her all responsibility for her condition. The community shifts focus to symptoms rather than the causal factors, as these implicate the community. This inversion of responsibility serves to absolve the community of its complicity and facilitates the silencing of her trauma. The community alienates the monstrous to suffer “alone with their traumas” (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 165) and this isolation offers old women few paths of resistance. The alienated ‘Other’ discovers her personal history silenced and her identity redefined by the community.
Women become objects that serve only to re-inscribe the dominant social order. Mala already powerless becomes a disembodied metaphor when interpellated as a monster, as a *soucouyant*. John Hector (the gardener of the Alms House where Mala now resides) best describes to Tyler the social circumstances perpetuating Mala’s alienated position:

[S]ince I growing up I hearing ’bout she. When I was a young fellow my Pappy used to threaten that if I didn’t behave myself he would take me and drop me in she yard and leave me there […] plenty people use to go and harass the lady […] Children used to go and pelt she and pelt she mango and come back frighten-frighten but still excited that they break a window or sling-shot a bird. (73)

For Mala, trauma silences, rumours dehumanize, and dominant discourses legitimize communal acts of alienation and violent discrimination. Even amongst the staff, “[t]he rumours about Miss Ramchandin continued” (25). This novel’s social critique illustrates how individuals and communities are complicit in the act of alienating, silencing, and ‘othering.’ Community members justify their social response of excluding from society women like Mala who threaten patriarchal stability, in order to protect the cohesion of the community and ensure social conformity. Or, as May suggests, “[p]assivity is another locus of willful ignorance, another means by which the status quo is maintained” (“Trauma” 116). Whether consciously acted or not, this naming act which casts Mala as a *soucouyant* demonstrates the relationship between dominant gender configurations and discursive authority. However, I argue that by destabilizing binaries that limit representations of old women, Mala’s life story, fragmented and articulated from a “paradoxical position of enunciation” (Schlicter 311), invites critique of the politics of
representation and positions reciprocal storytelling as a strategic means to engage in “imaginative transformations” (Tiffin 429).

THE EMPATHIC LISTENER-TELLER RELATIONSHIP

_Cereus Blooms at Night_ features interdependency in a listener-teller relationship that develops from trust and a mutual understanding of the emotional and social impact of being ostracized as a community outsider. Both the old woman Mala and nurse Tyler’s lives have been negatively shaped by their experiences of discrimination. Their community has long participated in spreading vicious gossip and rumours about them, derived from the subject of taboo sexuality, and these discourses of exclusion serve to generate contempt for both characters’ socially perceived difference. This ‘difference,’ in Mala’s case, results from the sexual violence of incest committed by her father against her, compounded with her social isolation, misinterpreted behaviours, dementia, and old age; in Tyler’s case, it derives from social ignorance regarding his transgendered sexuality and cross-dressing. Gossip functions as a socially consented silencing act that further enacts violence against the sufferer. Both Mala and Tyler suffer the cruelty of rumours, a form of insidious violence that dehumanizes them, alienates them, and forces them to suffer alone the violence enacted upon them.

The gardener John Hector offers Tyler an acute observation that serves as this novel’s overarching critique:

Somehow you don’t question things until you come face to face with the person and suddenly—suddenly you realize that behind all them stories it
have a flesh-and-blood, breathing, feeling person who capable of hurting, yes! (73).

Although Mr. Hector speaks of Mala, his words ring true of Tyler’s own experiences. Thus, his words substantiate Tyler’s narrative purpose. Positioned as “an outsider” and recognizing that he “may well always be” (6), Tyler views himself and Mala as similarly marginalized. Tyler possesses his own understanding of the social implications of “difference,” and he muses, “I did fancy that she [Mala] and I shared a common reception from the rest of the world” (21).

According to feminist trauma theorist Laura Brown, systemic discrimination is a form of trauma, an ‘insidious trauma’ that can inflict damaging and lasting wounds on the psyche. Theorists are now exploring the traumatogenic effect, that is the creation of a psychic wound that occurs from not just one event, but from the repeated exposure to systemic oppression and insidious violence. Her work raises important questions about the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) definitions of trauma. In Brown’s essay “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma” (in Caruth’s Trauma: Explorations in Memory), she discusses the “private, secret, insidious traumas” (102) of rape, racial and sexual discrimination, domestic assault, incest and other forms of interpersonal violence. Experiences of childhood and adult trauma (e.g., incest, rape, discrimination, and other modes of physical and psychological abuse) breach interpersonal trust, which disrupts one’s personal sense of safety and accentuates fear of insidious violence as a regular, naturalized, everyday possibility. Insidious traumas can psychologically manifest an increased awareness of one’s vulnerability to common high-risk forms of violence that target specific individuals
because of factors such as gender, race, age, sexuality, or religion. These psychological experiences have material consequences, affecting coping strategies, social belonging, and interpretive responses to everyday events. Violence reinforces differential power relations, and interpersonal encounters that may not be intentionally harmful nevertheless can become routinely viewed through reactive lenses that anticipate some form of underlying or direct discrimination.70 Recent amendments to the DSM expand the definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to include Complex PTSD, or Disorders of Extreme Stress, Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS), which can result from “interpersonal victimization, multiple traumatic events, or events of prolonged duration” (Luxenburg et al. 374).

Conditioned by his repeated experiences with discrimination due to his sexuality, Tyler explains, “Behind the flattery, the edge of mockery was plain to anyone who must, as a matter of survival, learn to detect it. I could detail for you the number of times I have come across the same tone. I am aware of the subtleties and incremental degrees in a hostility” (16). In a moment of confusion about his own sexuality, he admits to his insecurities about acceptance and love for “the adult Tyler, who was neither properly man nor woman but some in-between unnamed thing” (76). To deal with the insidious violence of discrimination, rumours, and misinterpretations about his ‘difference,’ Tyler admits, “I employed then the one strategy of survival that has saved me time and time again” (16). He practices being proud and honest to himself, traits he recognizes within Mala’s character and mutually enacted within their developing relationship.

70 Brown argues that insidious trauma can also “spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group [...] when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma” (108).
In Mala’s behaviours, Tyler “detected [...] symptoms of trauma” and “did not want to leave her alone” (14). Trauma is perhaps most conventionally understood as resulting from a specific or repeated occurrence, which impacts a survivor’s sense of well-being and inflicts itself upon the mind as a psychic wound. According to many trauma theorists, the “inherent latency within the experience itself” (Caruth 17) results in a condition of belatedness, whereby the event cannot be witnessed by the individual experiencing it in the moment it occurs. A repression period follows between the actual experiencing event and its return as psychological shock at a later time and place, through unexplainable nightmares, repeated dreams, and involuntary memories. For the survivor, the horror and inconceivability of the event collapses any immediate understanding, and only after the formation of a psychogenic wound does the past surface within the present. Sigmund Freud maintains that traumatic memories remain fixed as mental imprints replicating the specificities of the initial event.\(^7\)\(^1\) In “The Unconscious,” Freud emphasizes how the memories that reside within the unconscious cannot be “altered by the passage of time” (187).

Mala’s reliving of her trauma occurs annually at 10 a.m. on one particular day; “[t]ime would collapse” (142) for Mala, as the “brown, ammoniac smell” of the rainy season and “the light” of the sun “would dazzle white like a blinding star” (141). While

\(^7\)\(^1\) Conversely, in *The Seven Sins of Memory*, Daniel L. Schacter focuses on “memory’s malfunctions” or “fundamental transgressions” (4) and suggests that all memories of the past are subject to change through subsequent experiences and shifting ideologies. Transience, defined as the “weakening or loss of memory over time” (Schacter 4), impacts the effectiveness of recall for all memories (i.e. episodic, semantic, and working). The vividness and particulars of an experience diminish into a more generalized sense, which is then increasingly susceptible to re-writing as the mind attempts to reconstruct the particulars of a memory through inference and associative familiarity. Therefore, memory when conceived of as a record of past experiences raises questions about veracity, intentionality, and the complexity of forgetting.
May argues that Mala “willfully uses searing pain to remember […] what everyone would rather forget” (“Trauma” 124) through a “once-yearly ritual” (“Trauma” 131), I read this event quite differently because “[o]ne such morning […] [Mala] began strategizing against it” (142). Somatic triggers of smell and sight unwittingly force Mala’s mind to recall “in perfect imitation […] another moment, long ago” (141).

According to Cathy Caruth, this cognitive temporal delay “carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment” (“Trauma” 10), yet as illustrated in Mala’s characterization, the reader witnesses how trauma often continues to haunt through traumatic flashbacks and often “against the will of the one it inhabits” (“Trauma” 5). As Anne Whitehead acutely observes, “Nietzsche’s willed forgetting is thus not an option that is available to Freud, for we cannot simply ‘extinguish’ the memory of the past; all of our attempts to do so are, indeed, paradoxically greeted by its more aggressive revival or return” (Memory 101). And, as this novel shows, ‘willed forgetting’ is also not an option for Mala. If no one can be witness to her or his own traumatic event, as one’s immediacy within the situation collapses understanding of the impact on the psyche, another person becomes crucial as witness to an eventual testimonial so that together the teller and listener can “reassert the veracity of the past and […] build anew its linkages to, and assimilation into, present-day life” (Laub 62).

The importance of having a listener with whom one can share stories, experiences, and hardships is central in Mootoo’s novel. Gadsby proposes “kitchen table talk” as a strategic response to the challenge of “existing and surviving whole within the

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72 This paradox applies as well to narratives of displacement of events that are repressed and willed forgotten, which invariably tend to manifest at a later time and place as recurrent memories that demand attention and redress.
belly of the colonial beast” (Gadsby 8). This concept of “kitchen table talk,” she derives from Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, whereby the kitchen becomes a community gathering place, and the conversations that occur within this space provide “much-needed communal support and spiritual sustenance” (123) for individual and collective survival. Gadsby positions the kitchen as a transformative space of resistance for women and their children in the diaspora (123). However, in Mootoo’s novel, there is no kitchen, no collective gathering of women, and no communal support. Yet, Tyler’s presence in Mala’s life affords her a listener, one who can bear witness to all that has been silenced.

Mala’s position, condition, and characterization illustrate the social impact of a community’s exclusionary practices and discourses. After Mala’s mother leaves the family, Mala’s father repeatedly forces sexual violence on his two young daughters, Mala and Asha. After Asha flees the house never to return, Mala eventually turns on her father, killing him in an act of fury and fear. Subsequently, Mala’s life-long trusted friend and suitor Ambrose Mohanty also abandons her. His evaluation of her appearance, the last time he tries to visit her, speaks of her seeming transformation from woman to *soucouyant*: “Mala, my sweet Mala, had aged overnight and was keeping her hair as wild as a worn-down, coconut-fibre broom. I decided it was unsafe for me to go back” (255). Even the postman, “deeming the Ramchandin house to be a place of sin and moral corruption” (263), refuses to approach the house and deliver her mail. With all communication and trust severed, Mala retreats to the solitude of her garden. For Mala, the house signifies as a complicated site of trauma and becomes a forbidden space. In the garden, she imaginatively constructs herself a sanctuary removed from the horrors of her
reality. When the police finally discover her father’s body, Mala is forcibly moved “into the alms house in Paradise to receive proper care and attention until the end of her days” (8). However, after Mala’s removal from her property, the house is destroyed by fire, and this event symbolically frees the old woman, finally enabling her to speak of her past. Her nurse collaboratively helps her re-imagine the past, which creatively enables Mala’s traumatized childhood self to escape from the psychic confines of this family’s house.

Early on, Tyler apologizes to his reader, “I must be strict with myself and stay with my intention to relate Mala Ramchandin’s story. [About myself] I will add this and nothing more” (16). The reader hears this disclaimer numerous times, with each disclosure offering more details about the narrator’s personal experiences and developing sense of self. For instance, in a meta-narrative frame, Tyler explains to his implied reader:

*The temptation to digress from my mission and to relate every scintillating detail of the romantic blossoming of my knowledge of Otoh Mohanty is overwhelming. […] I must remind myself, however, that Mala Ramchandin’s story is my prime purpose here. Asha, if you are reading this, all I will say is that, thanks to your sister, my own life has finally – and not too late I might add – begun to bloom. Enough said. Now, I will exercise restraint. You will hear little more of me as I apply myself to the story of Mala Ramchandin.* (original italics, 113)

This passage illustrates this narrator’s understanding of his purpose and responsibility, and yet it gestures towards his own personal growth as a positive consequence of the narrativization act. Initially, the reader witnesses what appears to be Tyler interspersing
his own stories within his narrative recording of Mala’s history; however, as the novel progresses, the old woman’s story and Tyler’s own story eventually become intertwined into one carefully crafted transformative story featuring both characters. Throughout his storytelling, Tyler reiterates his narrative purpose, reminding both himself and his reader of the novel’s focus and his intent: to transform Mala “from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had dedicated my life to serving” (11). Tyler remains true to both his narrative and life purpose. Thus, even when recounting his personal conversations with Otoh (his romantic interest, and the transgendered child of Ambrose Mohanty), he is conscious of his own story potentially taking precedence over Mala’s; thus, he clarifies how he will “dwell mainly on those discussions concerning her” (132).

When transitions in the narrative framing occur, the narrative voice, tense, and focalization also shift, reflecting an increasing development of trust between Tyler, as both interlocutor and narrator of Mala’s story, and Mala, whose traumatized mind and cognitive dementia renders her an unintelligible narrator of her own history. *Cereus Blooms at Night*’s structure reveals linguistic strategies that enable fluid movement between the frame narrative and the multiple embedded (or ‘secondary’) narratives. Framing and variances in presentational mode, voice, and tense (temporal relations) all indicate different ways that Tyler and his narrative act communicate meaning and states of consciousness.73

73 Gérard Genette’s theory of narrative offers a typology to examine how narrative discourse constructs a narrated reality, useful for analyzing both the novel’s form and the narrativization strategies employed. However, while a structuralist reading of order and focalization helps develop understanding about narrative positioning and perspective, the biases governing this theoretical approach obfuscate the significance of psychosocial
The novel’s opening prologue introduces the frame narrative and the storyteller’s intentions. As an overt first-person narrator, Tyler describes himself as “the relator of this story” (3), thus revealing his awareness of storytelling as a narrative act. He proclaims that, by recording Mala’s story, he hopes his words will “reach many people” (3), including Mala’s sister, who may happen upon this book. He professes that “this book” (3), the novel itself, is a truthful account of historical events. Analysis of this novel reveals a complex form: embedded narratives interwoven in an intrusive frame narrative perform as a meta-narrative by repeatedly alluding to the book’s veracity as a material artefact. *Cereus Blooms at Night* employs an intrusive narrative pattern, whereby the frame narrative repeatedly disrupts the embedded narratives throughout the novel in order for the narrator to continually remind both his ‘implied’ and ‘real’ reader of his narrative purpose.

Tyler’s meta-narrative statement attempts to blur any distinction between the story world and the world external to the text. Narrative intrusions are evident, for example on page 96 when Tyler directly addresses Mala’s sister and, again, when Tyler asks, “Asha, if you are reading this” (113). Asha is constructed simultaneously as both the desired (thus implied) reader who exists external to the text and as a character present within specific analeptic stories. An implication of the double-ended framing is it enables the narrator to conclude his “book” by reiterating the importance of “these words” (269) and reaching the specified listener or anyone who may know of her. These discursive strategies create the illusion of the story’s veracity on both the extradiegetic narrative and variables (such as gender, age, race, class) impacting one’s subjectivity. Thus, this method of literary criticism poses critical limitations as it fails to fully consider the social, political, transcultural, and historical context and content of the novel. However, current narratology in Project Narrative is developing Genette’s theory along these lines.
story levels. This narrative act, in turn, serves to position the reader as secondary witness to Mala’s story, and thus in direct line of Tyler’s questioning: “what was the point of empathizing without taking more positive action?” (21).

Following the prologue, the novel begins with an etic opening, omitting information about who specific characters are or where ‘here’ might be. The narrator slowly reveals information about himself, developing his character alongside subtle suggestions of a “scandal” (6) revolving around Mala’s supposed involvement in murder, and these details drive the plot, yet remain enigmatic until late in the novel. Tyler narrates Mala’s story from multiple perspectives, at times a heterodiegetic narrator with zero focalization, positioned on the extradiegetic narrative level, while at other times on the diegetic or story level of the events occurring in the seniors’ facility. Cognizant of his ambiguous positioning, Tyler acknowledges that by “being a narrator who also existed on the [heterodiegetic] periphery of the events, I am bound to be present” homodiegetically within the story (3). As both character and narrator, he invariably inscribes himself into his story, a strategic act that creates the illusion of both authenticity and authority. He hints of his own importance by proclaiming, “I am the one who ended up knowing the truth, the whole truth, every significant and insignificant bit of it” (7). Ironically, his truth claim serves to undermine his own authority. Postmodern theory suggests all stories, however ‘real,’ are fictive constructions manipulated by their narrators’ subjective biases and underlying ideologies and by the inherent limitations and ambiguities of language. Therefore, Tyler, while acting as an empathetic listener and teller, invariably cannot speak “the whole truth” (7), just as we, the reader, can never know the ‘truth’ of another’s traumatic experiences. But his profession of ‘truth’ raises questions pertaining to the
postmodern refusal of objective knowledge and the impossibility of a linguistic sign performing an absolute reflection of reality. Further, Tyler’s narrative act substantiates both postcolonial concerns regarding the silencing of the subaltern and feminist concerns about a male articulating female subjectivity. A young, male, transsexual, Western-educated narrator interprets the story of, and speaks for, an old, Caribbean (albeit also Western-educated via missionary schooling) woman, who is deemed crazy by other members of the community. Feminist and postcolonial theories extend the implications of Tyler’s ‘book’ by addressing how one speaks, and examining the moral implications of who speaks for whom.

As interlocutor of her story, Tyler confesses, “I had become her witness” (107), and professes to bear truthful witness to the stories Mala shares with him. However, even Mala has difficulty rendering her own story. Consequently, the reader receives her narrative second-hand through Tyler’s interpretations and conscious framing. Therefore, the reader only has access to Tyler’s version, as Mala’s story is always rendered through his narrative perspective and discourse. When he engages in the act of recording her storytelling, he admits to “fashioning a single garment out of myriad parts” (107). He interprets while retelling Mala’s story anachronically through embedded narratives. Before the events of the story, Tyler learns parts of Mala’s story from his grandmother; as the narrative progresses, he acquires supplemental information from Mala’s childhood friend Ambrose Mohanty. Mohanty is both a figure in Mala’s history and in the present action of the story. These shared details enable Tyler “to fill in gaps and make sense of things [Mala] mumbled” (110). The old woman, traumatized and thus an ineffective
narrator of her own story, recounts her experiences to Tyler, or so the reader is to assume from Tyler’s remarks:

I started to jot down everything she said, no matter how erratic her train of thought appeared to be. When she saw me awaiting her next word and writing it down as soon as she uttered it, she drew nearer. … She spoke rapidly and with great urgency […] I scribbled and when she took to repeating parts, I caught my breath and rested my cramped fingers […] There was a purpose to it and to all the chatter, and finally a purpose to my listening and to sifting, cutting and sewing the lot. (107)

As “an explorer charting [Mala’s] life in murky, unmapped waters” (77), this narrator self-consciously acknowledges his reciprocal participation in Mala’s storytelling act. His role is as co-creator, as he “tried to decipher the words in her eyes” (23) and piece together her fragmented, yet repetitious, “erratic train of thought” (107) in order to create a linear narrative. Despite the chorus of voices that contribute to Tyler’s re-scripting of Mala’s story, many of the details cannot be known by anyone other than Mala, who is not capable of coherently communicating them to Tyler. His omniscient narration problematically positions him as an authority into this seeming empathic act of bearing witness, and this shift in power dynamics raises ethical concerns about the ideological impetus behind the narrative act: for what purpose is this story being told?

Mala’s birdcalls, “cooing, rasping, gargling” (137), and the animal noises she makes are perceived by outsiders as visible signs of her insanity. Typical of persons with dementia, Mala’s “difficulty in constructing a coherent life story [i]s caused not just by
memory lapse, but also by loss of lexical abilities” (Roy para. 11). Trauma compounds Mala’s narrative inabilities. According to Piaget, traumatic memories are not organized verbally and semantically, and thus they inherently defy narrativization. In some instances, as Bessel van der Kolk describes, “the traumatized individual [can be] left in a state of ‘speechless terror’ in which words fail to describe what has happened” (286). Trauma only encodes as sense perception, and thus cannot be represented in language. Mala’s communication reflects her instinctual response to her surroundings “that words were unable to match or enhance” (136). Mala becomes one with her natural environment, and her social withdrawal appears as a literal manifestation of Ambrose’s construing a “world freed of nomenclature, syntax and lexical form” (229). He grasps this experiential process whereby one’s “entire being, the physical, and most of all the spiritual, is a vibrant network of synesthesia” which transforms the human body into “a conduit … in the functioning of the universe” (229). Ambrose’s scientific discourse provides an alternative perspective for reading Mala’s withdrawal that disrupts normative assumptions about her unconventional social behaviours.

As Tyler articulates Mala’s memories of her past, the reader learns and witnesses how Mala “wove memories. She remembered a little and imagined a great deal” (152). Tyler aids her imaginative transformations, and eventually, encouraged by Tyler’s considerate care and attentive listening, Mala slowly emerges from her psychological seclusion. By psychologically severing Pohpoh, her childhood self, from the woman she

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74 This quotation is from Wendy Roy’s analysis of Constance in Jane Rule’s Memory Board (1987). In similar ways, David Chariandy’s protagonist Adele exhibits loss of her lexical ability as her dementia worsens: she “began to forget the laws of language and the routes to salvation […] [and] excuse herself from the world we knew” (12).
has become, Mala frees her mind from her memories. Through Tyler’s storytelling, she pronounces, “I, Mala Ramchandin, will set you, Pohpoh Ramchandin, free, free, free, like a bird” (187). Some trauma theorists and psychoanalysts argue that an experience can only be understood through the process of narrativization, and thus, they argue, sense memories that are continually re-experienced as intrusive and repetitive hauntings must be articulated, as narrativization orders and organizes the experience, helping a narrator construct meaning from a traumatic experience for oneself and for others.

When Mala sings an old nursery rhyme, Tyler wonders “what I was discovering beyond her voice” (77). By her actions and responses to him, he begins to realize “there was more in her head than bird and cricket and frog imitations and childhood chants” (81). Additionally, following a conversation about his sexual orientation with Mr. Hector, Tyler notes Miss Ramchandin’s acute perception and cognitive awareness, how “in her quiet, invisible way, [she] had heard most of what was said” (79). Her subsequent action (when she steals a nurse’s uniform for Tyler to wear in secret) demonstrates her perceptual acuity. An interpersonal relationship develops between the storyteller and his subject, and this is reflected through a transformation in storytelling. The frame story retreats while foregrounding direct speech without tagged names, when Tyler eliminates his presence from the scene, thus allowing the speaking subjects to speak for themselves:

“I could even see little fish and seaweed and seeds from other countries floating in yuh hair.”

“And starfish?”

“Uhuh.”
“And seagulls?”

“Uhuh.” (87)

Tyler shifts from diegesis, or ‘telling,’ to mimesis, thus performing as a silent witness by ‘showing’ the reader this childhood conversation between Mala and her sister. Later in the novel, through zero focalization, Tyler offers an unlimited view as Mala recounts a specific moment in her childhood when her “body remembered” the pain of sexual violence (188). Again, the narrator removes himself from the scene while his omniscient perspective affords an internal view of the child’s fear “of what she usually ignored or commanded herself to forget” (188). The act of rape, so violent and disturbing to both Mala and her childhood experiencing self (differentiated by the name Pohpoh), can only be re-lived through brief snapshots of memory, and the narrative frames reflect this disturbance, temporally jumping back and forth between the past and present moments. When the child acknowledges, “Fear was breaking her, was unprying her memory. She was reminded of what she usually ignored or commanded herself to forget” (188), “Mala remembered” as well (188). Adult Mala and child Pohpoh’s actions remain parallel; thus when Pohpoh remembers, so, too, does Mala. However, Mala now understands that she and Pohpoh were once “one and the same. But these days she wished that she and that Pohpoh could have been two separate people” (186). Earlier in the novel, the narrator recounts a particular scene in which Otoh visits Mala, and the reader learns that Mala “had relived this scenario so often that even she did not remember how much of it actually took place” (171). This uncertainty of memory assists Mala’s later re-imagining

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75 See Fludernik’s discussion on diegesis versus mimesis (151) in her *Introduction to Narratology*.
76 In this scene, Otoh dresses as his father would have when he was Mala’s suitor many years before, and this disguise contributes to Mala’s confusion.
of past events. Thus, now emotionally supported by Tyler, she returns (through Tyler’s narrative act) to her memory of the day the police arrested her, and she “reconfigured” a different conclusion (188).

This anachronic deviation from chronological order, which is separated by single line breaks, finally conflates in one paragraph as the analeptic frame with its story of Pohpoh meets up with the present tense reality of Mala: “[w]hen Pohpoh arrived at Mala’s fence she knew she had reached a refuge” (189), and “[i]n her dreaming Mala whispered as though to Pohpoh” (190). At this point in the narrative, the fluctuations in the temporal order freeze in the present moment with the frames now shifting between two simultaneous versions of reality: one perceived from Mala’s perspective and the other from the perspective of the police. This narrative structure creatively collapses temporality, oscillating between Pohpoh’s and Mala’s remembering of the traumatic violence both experienced. With this conflation of time frames, the past (Pohpoh) and present (Mala) experiencing self are now present as two separate entities within a single narrative frame.

This intrusion of the external world (i.e., the police) into Mala’s imaginary coincides with her transcending the Mala/Pohpoh psychological split, at which time Mala is able to free her childhood experiencing self from the confines of the house and the horrific reality it signifies. Pohpoh and Mala, now reconciled, become relational pairings of each other: girl/old woman, innocent/crazy, free/captive. The narrative balances Pohpoh’s symbolic escape with Mala’s captivity, and through Tyler’s narrativization, Mala can imaginatively transform her history, her story. Although this scene requires Mala to remember and re-experience the past through its re-telling, this process of
collaborative articulation with Tyler bearing witness to her trauma enables Mala to re-story this final traumatic experience of dislocation.\textsuperscript{77} Mala is determined to save Pohpoh, “who, in her imagination, had already escaped the yard’s confines” (200). Metaphorical flight offers both figures an imaginary escape, their only recourse for freedom; encouraged by Mala, Pohpoh “soared higher […] like a frigate bird” (200) until “her island was soon lost among others” (201).

The fifth section of the book discloses an important missing piece of Mala’s story. Asha’s long-lost letters to Mala are discovered in the back room of the post office, and when Tyler reads them aloud to Mala, he is able to answer her long silent question: “Where Asha?” (81). While this question constitutes Mala’s “first real communication” (81), the final letter completes the narrative. Mala now has knowledge of Asha’s safe arrival in Canada, and Tyler was able to help her close this important narrative gap in her history. When Tyler finishes reading, Mala appears as though asleep, yet “[h]er cheeks were stained with tears” (267). The closure of this scene illustrates Mala’s receptivity and cognitive understanding. However, in the scene immediately following, the narrative shifts focus onto Tyler and his blossoming self-expression. He was now “readier than ever to present [himself] like a peacock in heat” (267). Until Mr. Hector’s voice interjects Tyler’s narrative (two pages later in the text), Tyler speaks of himself in the first-person “I” twenty-seven times versus his five references to “she” (i.e., Mala). He equally uses

\textsuperscript{77} Anne Bastin, author of \textit{Forget Memory: Creating Better Lives for People with Dementia} (2009) and founder of TimeSlips Creative Storytelling Project, devised the concept and practice of TimeSlips, an improvisational storytelling method for people with dementia that “replac[es] the pressure to remember with the freedom to imagine” (www.timeslips.org). This improvisational storytelling enables participants to create connections with other individuals by expressing themselves in ways that free them from the necessity to remember.
“my” and “her” nine times each (267-68), although the majority of references to the pronoun “her” actually denotes actions taken by Tyler himself, such as “I wash her, mildly rubbing her skin with frangipani petals […] and pay special attention in dressing her” (267). These descriptions, in fact, provide the reader more information about Tyler than Mala herself. Nevertheless, as Tyler and Otoh (Tyler’s suitor and Ambrose’s grown child) return from their walk to join the company of Mala and Ambrose, Tyler shifts the narrative focus to reflect upon the actions of the old woman. This snapshot indicates Mala has regained an element of trust in those who accompany her, as “she uttered [aloud] her first public words” in years (269). As the novel closes, Tyler’s voice speaks as one with Mala, explaining to the absent Asha that she is “foremost in our minds” and that “we await a letter” (my italics, 270). Together, they wait, optimistic about “the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night” (270). This once-a-year blooming cactus symbolizes a long-awaited expectation of freedom and renewal.

Due to Tyler’s empathetic response to this old woman, and through their mutually respectful storytelling engagement, both have listened and told their stories to each other and now “Miss Ramchandin and [Tyler] practically hover above the ground with excitement” (267) at the new vision they have created together for their future. However, Tyler’s narrative authority problematizes understanding the implications of this younger listener-teller character articulating the old woman’s history of violence. Is this exchange different from the intergenerational storytelling investigated in Chapter 2 and 3? Like the reciprocal engagements modeled in Goto’s and Tamayose’s novels, this novel also demonstrates how trust and respect prove integral in fostering an ethical listening/telling exchange. Here, readers must also trust Tyler as the listener-teller, if they are to believe
that Mala is, in fact, responsive to the storytelling exchange. As I stated earlier, Mala’s memories and actions are always rendered through Tyler’s interpretation, and we cannot know for sure Mala’s cognitive awareness. Tyler is Mala’s caregiver; thus, in trusting Tyler’s empathic and ethical responsiveness to Mala’s well-being, we can read this storytelling exchange as illustrative of Susan Brill de Ramirez’s concept of conversive storytelling. Then, this interdependent practice becomes “co-creative, relational, [and] transformative” for both storytelling participants (“Surviving” 248). As May suggests, “Each story is incomplete without the others; each fragment gains meaning in relation, not in isolation” (“Trauma” 127). Tyler’s narrativization interweaves his own stories with Mala’s, creating a joint subjectivity that manifests strength through its interdependency. Tyler’s narrative act performs as a testimony of a “story of survival in the face of racial, cultural, and psychosexual adversity” which serves to “reconstruct[…] a fragmented ego forced to the margins of hegemonic power structures” (Henke xix). By articulating both Mala’s and his own experiences, Tyler enables a reinvention of the “shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and of effective agency in the world” (Henke xix).

Mootoo’s novel invites readers to critically examine their own cultural assumptions and their blind complicity in practices of exclusion. When a community can cast certain individuals as ‘Other,’ often times the articulation of personal histories reveals a common humanity. By voicing diverse histories of violence and ongoing experiences of discrimination, Mootoo breaks the silence and transfers accountability to her readers, challenging them to assume “responsibility as perpetrators of such social violence” (Bannerji 170). Jeannie Warnock raises important questions about the ethical
and moral issues of writing (and reading) about individual experiences of traumatic violence, querying “in what ways are we, as readers, supposed to respond” (271). Her essay draws its title from Leonard Shengold’s coined phrase “soul murder,” which describes the psychological devastation of childhood physical and sexual abuse on a survivor’s psyche and interpersonal relations. Warnock challenges Caruth’s reliance on Freud’s contention that trauma inherently cannot be narrativized, as this belief “downplays the importance of the interpersonal element both in causing and resolving trauma” (Warnock 293). Instead, Warnock turns to Gilead Nachmani, who emphasizes the relational nature of trauma. Nachmani argues:

The victim is silenced not only because the traumatic experience cannot be conceptualized but also because of the familial, social, and cultural circumstances surrounding the abuse, as well as the damage done to the individual’s sense of self. (Warnock 273)

Warnock’s work draws from Nachmani, Freud, and Sándor Ferenczi, who all in different ways examine these intrapsychic and interpersonal aspects of childhood sexual trauma. Nachmani contends that a survivor of incest remains trapped with “no credible text, no witnesses, no capacity to bear witness” (204). Therefore, he argues, this survivor comes to “identify[…] with the aggressor in order to survive,” and “has no sense of self free

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78 Also see Proma Tagore’s discussion on the politics and ethics of bearing witness in her article “Witnessing as Testimony.”
79 Shengold first introduces this phrase “soul murder” in his work Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation.
80 Laurie Vickroy’s Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction, informed by Judith Herman’s feminist approach, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, and Suzette Henke’s rereading of Freud in Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing, all attest to the importance of narrativizing traumatic experiences as a means of working towards some form of resolution.
from the inner presence of her or his abuser and loses the ability to listen to and acknowledge her or his pain” (Warnock 273). Applying Ferenczi’s psychoanalytic approach to Mootoo’s protagonist Mala, Warnock argues the incest survivor, in this case Mala, can “reexperience the trauma of the past differently because of the love and restorative care of another” (273). Mootoo’s novel explores “mutuality and reciprocity in intersubjective relationships” (Warnock 274), with this reciprocity resulting from both Tyler and Mala’s asymmetrical love and compassion. Tyler’s narrativization enables Mala to shift from a powerless victim – caught in a cycle of repetitious re-enactments that engrave the destructive memories into the psyche – to her own subject capable of reflection and reinterpretation.

A listener can “bear witness” to a truth that continues to escape the speaking subject (Felman 24). Witnessing violence requires a willingness to ‘listen’ to the words and silences of testimony, evident both in the narration and within narrative gaps reflecting initial lack of understanding. Felman suggests that in order to bear witness, the listener-witness “does not have to possess, or own the truth” (24) of an inaccessible, uninterpreted memory of a previous traumatic event, but by listening, the witness enables the speaking survivor to engage in a “performative speech act” by “prod[uc][ing] one’s own speech as material evidence for truth” (17). Thus, Tyler plays an important role by providing a witness for Mala’s unspeakable memories that require testimony to move through and past the immobilization of her trauma. Yet, what are the ethical implications of Tyler’s narrative? If, as Felman questions, “the act of reading literary texts [is] itself inherently related to the act of facing horror” (14), then we, as readers, must transform into secondary witnesses in this literary act of witnessing. Yet, Caruth contends that
literature can simultaneously defy and demand our witness. If this is true, how are we to ethically bear witness to an event we stand outside of? We bear witness to a trauma that can only be heard as it makes itself available to the consciousness of the teller. Therefore, as Valovirta argues “the development of Tyler and Mala’s relationship, particularly Tyler’s identification and empathy as a narrator, also requires a simultaneous consideration of the dialogic and affective text-reader relationship that arises from the narrative” (141). Valovirta draws upon Sara Ahmed’s concept of “withness” to suggest ways to engage in a “reparative act of self-formation through the participation in the emotional responses of others” so that “others exist within me and apart from me at the same time” (141). Through this model of participation, Valovirta proposes “[a]pplying the idea of ‘withness’ as a premise for cross-cultural text-reader relationship” so that the “affective meaning production process becomes based on a way of knowing that does not impose itself on the experience of the Other” (147). Tyler’s participation in Mala’s storytelling does not enact collusion, and reflects how multiple stories can reciprocally inform one another and become collective and yet simultaneously remain distinct and individual.

Warnock compares Tyler’s storytelling method to historian Dominick LaCapra’s notion of “empathic unsettlement” whereby a reader experiences a “secondary trauma” (qtd. in Warnock 288) that comes “as close as possible to the experience of traumatized victims without presuming to be identical to it” (qtd. in Warnock 295). Mootoo’s reader witnesses Tyler’s careful balance of empathy towards Mala’s pain and recognition of difference in that her story can never be fully understood by herself, or another. In this way, he can assist Mala through her all-consuming pain, without appropriating her story.
This narrative strategy positions readers as witnesses to Mala’s story, “challenging them to work within the potential space created by their imaginative and empathic response to the text and so to arrive at a new understanding of those different from themselves” (Warnock 292).

Within the text, polyvocalism and polysemantic language invite multiple interpretations, and the presence of ambiguity (even over Mala’s apparent murder of her father) highlights the way a single signifier can function simultaneously as a marker of cultural difference and cultural identification, depending upon the knowledge and positioning of the reader. Authors who integrate culturally specific referents and linguistic practices into the Western European art form of the novel engage in creating what Arun Mukherjee labels a “parodic text” (73). As such, through the integration of cultural particularities and polysemic signifiers, the novel form is appropriated and irony is engaged as a discursive mode for Mootoo’s postcolonial critique. Literary criticism that accounts for broader postcolonial, feminist, and queer concerns empowers the critic to explain the workings of the constitutive elements of Tyler’s fictional testimony on the reader. Structuralism concerns itself with the conditions surrounding the interpretive act, that is, how literature conveys meaning and not what individual units of meaning convey, whereas for diasporic postcolonial novels, a poststructuralist critical approach considers “interpretive openness and un-decidable meaning” (Krupat 118), illustrating how cultural myths can perform as social critique.

In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mootoo’s use of the *soucouyant* myth demonstrates the importance of voicing silenced stories in order to reclaim women from their negative representations. By articulating Mala’s stories, the narrator rectifies misinterpretations
and reasserts the old woman’s identity; the monstrous transforms back into an old woman with a personal history shaped by violence and alienation. This old woman character embodies stories of personal and collective struggles, illustrating patriarchal oppression and ageism exist not only within Canada but within the Caribbean as well. This novel offers readers critical insight into interpersonal relations that serve to disentangle understandings of ageing and memory from pathological characteristics assumed inherent in old age. At the same time, the relationship between nurse Tyler and Mala, developed through his empathic articulation of her personal stories and traumatic experiences, empowers Tyler to engage in self-expression of his own transgendered identity. Mootoo positions the soucouyant as an allegorical figure who illustrates the social processes of demonizing ‘difference,’ in order to indict human complicity in acts of discrimination. By giving voice to multiple representations of ‘difference,’ Mootoo humanizes individuals socially construed as monstrous and turns the critical gaze to the community (and her reading public).

The next chapter addresses similar ethical concerns about the politics of a listening-telling engagement in David Chariandy’s novel Soucouyant. When the cultural and cognitive differences between an old woman and her son create too great a distance to bridge, the son turns to stories as a way to build understanding for himself. Like Tyler, Chariandy’s narrator desires to humanize the monster, in this case his mother, yet his narrativization act threatens to appropriate her stories into the articulation of his own experiences of transhistorical trauma.
Chapter 5

ON TRANSHISTORICAL TRAUMA IN DAVID CHARIANDY’S SOUCOUYANT

Like Shani Mootoo’s novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, David Chariandy’s novel *Soucouyant: A Novel of Forgetting* (2007) similarly invests in humanizing the Caribbean madwoman and explicitly employs the *soucouyant* as a sign that metaphorically signifies the culturally constructed ‘Other.’ The opening sentence of *Soucouyant* introduces “an old woman” who “looks out from the doorway of her own home but seems puzzled by the scene” (7). This “old woman” is Adele, a Black Caribbean Canadian immigrant with “presenile or early-onset dementia” (Chariandy 65) who no longer recognizes her social or environmental surroundings. Canada, her ‘home’ for over twenty years, appears foreign and hostile, and eventually Adele refuses to leave the house, a space described by her son as “the foreign nation that’s become her home” (131). Adele even fails to recognize her own son, and when he realizes “she has forgotten me” (8), he struggles with the loss (or forced redefinition) of social roles within his family. He confesses, “I don’t even know how Mother is reading me […] I don’t know what meaning there can be between us now” (12).

The misrepresentation of Adele, the narrator’s mother, as an “old woman” illustrates how diagnosis of dementia conflates memory loss with old age and obfuscates symptoms of trauma. With “medical specialists […] articulating Mother’s new being” (Chariandy 40), Adele’s son realizes that Western psychiatry cannot comprehend “the many unusual features of Mother’s case” (37), that is the personal experiences of a black Trinidadian immigrant woman in Canada who has been continually displaced,
traumatized, discriminated against, widowed, and silenced. Nevertheless, Adele undergoes a series of “diagnostic tests which always seemed to presume meanings and circumstances which were never wholly familiar to them in the first place” (39). Adele’s son unknowingly recognizes the ethnocentrism that governs Western psychiatric medicine (and elder care-giving practices.) As Emmanuelle Tulle in “Rethinking Agency in Later Life” indicates in her critique of social gerontology, this discourse “has significantly contributed to the production of knowledge which mirrors understandings of ageing and old age based on its pathological characteristics” (177).

Consequently, Adele’s son becomes “determined to see her [his] own way” (Chariandy 41). He wants to remember his mother, but not as the neighbourhood ‘crazy’ lady. Through his narrative act, the narrator finally comes to his own interpretive understanding and positive reimagining of his mother. He proclaims:

I wanted to imagine her growing, not diminishing. I wanted to portray her awakening to something that we wouldn’t have guessed at otherwise. The freedom of meaning, the wild magic of existence. Geographies slipping into each other. (194)

By telling his mother’s stories and hearing stories about his mother, he comes to realize she is not a monster, but a woman who “live[d] a reclusive but fairly ordinary life on the edge of town” (135). Her childhood trauma in Trinidad and her experiences of discrimination in Canada are largely responsible for who she had become: an isolated woman living with severe memory loss. He transforms the hauntings of a familial legacy of soucouyants into a new vision of a family relationship that is “all so incredibly ordinary” (196).
Chariandy employs the myth of the *soucouyant* from Afro-Caribbean diasporic folklore as a means to illustrate how a ‘diasporic haunting’ migrates and impacts the second-generation as a figurative return of past traumas. Therefore, the *soucouyant* performs as a metaphor for unspeakable trauma, yet simultaneously it decenters the Canadian mythos of multicultural inclusivity by exemplifying the negative consequences of, what Bharati Mukherjee articulates as, an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality (“Beyond Multiculturalism”). Age, race, and dementia all characterize marginalized subject positions, located on the ‘Other’ end of the social spectrum.

As a dementia narrative, this novel complicates forgetting as not only memory loss but also diminishing language skills with the eventual loss of semantic and syntactical abilities. Chariandy’s old woman storyteller speaks in fragments, rhymes, ambivalences, ellipses, and other illocutionary indeterminacies that render her stories indecipherable. This novel’s portrayal of dementia and the effects of memory loss can be located within what Wendy Roy categorizes as “a relatively long tradition” of Canadian fiction and film about Alzheimer’s disease. Roy’s research on the extensive number of recent novels such as Jane Rule’s *Memory Board* (1987) and Michael Ignatieff’s *Scar Tissue* (1993) and films such as *Away from Her* (2006) indicates “Alzheimer’s disease has a firm place in Western public consciousness” (para. 38). By characterizing Adele as an “old woman” (7), Chariandy’s novel complicates assumptions about the correlation between old age and memory loss. While not chronologically old, Adele is conceptualized as such because of her dementia and subsequent cognitive decline. Only in her mid-fifties, Adele’s characterization as ‘old’ reveals certain ageist and gender stereotypes at play. However, Adele’s personal story forces a reader’s consideration of
the impact of racialization and gender violence on this old woman’s narrative abilities and cognitive function.

As a diasporic narrative exploring transhistorical trauma and cultural dislocation, this novel’s use of dementia complicates the ethics of the narrative act. Dementia, as a device to exemplify narrative gaps, ruptures, and oblique storytelling in intergenerational diasporic communications and relationships, obscures the personal and familial challenges that the condition imposes. According to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, literary representations of disability (and here I include dementia) oftentimes function as “an opportunistic metaphorical device” (47) that provides authors a site to analyze ways in which the loss of memory signals estrangement, oppression, and/or dislocation. As Chariandy admits, his use of dementia “enabled me to explore the fragility and endurance of cultural memory, and, most particularly, the challenge of cultural memory for a second-generation immigrant” (qtd in Dobson 813). This chapter looks at how dementia complicates the ways the past seeps into the present, and how personal traumas affect both the individual and the family. This novel represents different forms of personal and collective trauma: trauma as lived experience, the intergenerational transmission of transhistorical trauma as a secondary affect, and the insidious violence of systemic racism that inflicts both personal and collective wounds. Ann Cvetkovich, in her work on transnational trauma, argues “for trauma studies to focus on race in a way that opens up the field to new approaches and theories. The emphasis would be on the collective rather than individual trauma and on the long-term effects of trauma across generations” (119). While this novel offers an important literary site to analyze the characterization of a traumatized and racialized immigrant woman with dementia, Soucouyant attends more
directly to the impact of cultural loss on the developing subjectivity of a second-generation Canadian-born child of Caribbean immigrant parents. From the son’s particular age perspective, the reader witnesses how this young male protagonist negotiates personal and familial traumas in his search for and construction of a self-identity.

This novel tells a story about a mother who began to “forget to forget” (32) and unwittingly tell stories to her youngest son of a past that she had long tried to erase, stories of dispossession and of violence, and of personal childhood trauma. Adele shares her memories “when she couldn’t help herself” (136); she would “tell you all sorts of things without ever meaning to do so” (82). As this old woman loses touch with her sense of self, her Canadian-born son struggles to make sense of the fragmented stories she now shares, stories of his family’s origins that offer him no space of belonging, and a story of trauma that he cannot comprehend, a story masked amidst her telling of a soucouyant sighting. As Chariandy explains, this contemporary Canadian novel uses the word and the legend of the soucouyant to “explore a particular generational condition, a particular state of sensing but not really knowing one’s origins” (qtd in Dobson 811). Although this novel explores only one family’s story in which dementia further compounds this unmooring of origins, it bespeaks of a Canadian experience familiar to many immigrant families. This family’s multiple transnational migrations and desire to forget past experiences produce a family narrative plagued by more silences than cultural or familial memories.

Although Chariandy’s novel primarily represents and explores a specific Caribbean Canadian second-generation perspective, his characters provide multiple and diversified
age and generational responses to the violence of racialization in Canada. His strategic portrayal of the different types of forgetting that can manifest within Canadian families demonstrates how memory loss, while commonly associated with dementia and old age, can also be symptomatic of social isolation, trauma, diasporic dislocation, cultural assimilation, and systemic racialization. These acts of forgetting create ruptures within this family’s intergenerational communication.\(^{81}\) Unfortunately, due to Adele’s previous conscious act of cultural forgetting, and then because of her early-onset dementia, which leads to her subsequent unconscious acts of remembering and retelling the past, her son only has access to his family history through fragmented stories, mysterious folklore, and linguistic slippages that do not fit neatly together into a linear and logical narrative.

Nevertheless, these pieces generate a plurality of voices and sources that reveal “several

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\(^{81}\) Intentional acts of ‘forgetting’ and intergenerational silence also plays a central role in Trinidadian Canadian Neil Bissoondath’s novel *The Worlds Within Her* (1998). Bissoondath’s novel unfolds the consequences of long-held silences between a Trinidadian Canadian mother Shakti and her now adult daughter Yasmin. Upon immigration, Shakti decided to keep the past buried, all the while realizing the implications of her actions: “So we wound then instead with our silence. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t” (82). She is left to question, “Might I, in sparing Yasmin, have left a wound unhealed that might have closed more successfully through execution of the painful duty? Or, to put it another way, have I left ghosts in my daughter’s head?” (285). For Yasmin, the family stories remain fragmented; she “regrets that her memories come in bits and pieces – sound bites of the mind. What she wants, what she yearns for, is memories that unroll like film: a long and seamless evocation of mood and nuance” (28).

Like Chariandy’s novel, Bissoondath’s investigates what it means to be “individualized creatures of history, society and family” (352). However, unlike the melancholic tone of displacement and diasporic longing that permeates Chariandy’s novel, Bissoondath’s young female narrator “returns to her world […] assured of her place in it” (400). Yasmin “hears the words ‘*back home*’ (original italics, 320)] shaped by her mother’s voice, she hears them shaped by her own, and she is struck for the first time at the difference in implication: the same words signifying different worlds” (320). Thus, as Bissoondath’s novel indicates, Yasmin’s second-generation diasporic displacement does not manifest as a sense of unbelonging in Canada. While such dislocation appears a common trope in Canadian writing, this novel disrupts assumptions of it constituting a universal condition of a diasporic subject position.
versions and interpretations of history which crisscross with each other in the text to resist a common, homogeneous interpretation” (Wilson-Tagoe 230).

As dementia impacts Adele’s ability to regulate the self-narration of her own life story, her son adopts the narrator’s role. However, this particular narrativization act threatens to appropriate or subsume this old woman’s stories, as her son attempts to negotiate his own sense of cultural dislocation and ‘unbelonging’ in Canada. Chariandy employs specific literary devices that textually replicate the conditions of pre-senile dementia, with the novel’s narrative structure attempting to reflect the complexity of intergenerational and diasporic forgetting and remembering. Thus, the ambiguity that characterizes this novel further complicates how reciprocity might be conceptualized between the old woman storyteller and her younger listener-teller.

This chapter captures the key issues raised in the previous chapters, drawing from their discussions on the narrative strategies, challenges, and implications of narrativizing another’s experiences of trauma. However, Soucouyant moves beyond the other texts’ representations of a reciprocal storytelling exchange. Although all of the novels studied in this dissertation illustrate how age perspective informs the resulting narrative, this novel exemplifies the power of transhistorical trauma to bias how one listens and what one tells. This chapter begins by examining Chariandy’s characterization of the old woman and how he interweaves her trauma narrative with his critique of multiculturalism in Canada. This old woman’s life story, when pieced together by the narrator, provides another site to analyze how the madwoman in literature represents a “paradoxical
position of enunciation” (Schlicter 311). Her experiences of trauma and oppressive violence propels Chariandy’s exploration into multiple figurations of ‘difference,’ establishing the context for his racialized second-generation diasporic narrator’s sense of social ‘unbelonging’ in Canada. Through both characters, this novel emphasizes the importance of community and the negative consequences of social isolation and alienation. The second part of this chapter explores how the narrativization process enables the young male narrator to develop an empathic understanding of his mother and transform her story to constitute a significant part of his own personal and familial legacy. I argue that the complex interweaving of personal and transhistorical trauma in this novel disrupts the reciprocity in this intergenerational storytelling engagement.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY**

Adele represents the multitude of Caribbean women who migrated to Canada as part of the late 1960s domestic labour immigration program; she “came here as a domestic, through a scheme that offered landed status to single women from the Caribbean after a year of household work” (48). Canada symbolized economic promise and the possibility of new beginnings. However, when Adele first arrives in Canada, Toronto unveils itself as a space governed by racial prejudice, and she is made aware of how “conspicuously different she was” (49). Her cultural differences and atypical cognitive responses complicate the largely monocultural white community’s understanding of her. Nevertheless, she desires to create a home for herself and consciously attempts to culturally assimilate and to forget the past she left behind, a past 82 See page 170 in Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on Schlicter’s feminist theory of a politics of enunciation.
shaped by a history of colonial violence and personal childhood trauma. However, she
discovers herself completely isolated in this frozen city and spends Christmas alone with
“no friends or family, though she tells herself this is fine” (51). Adele’s son, narrator of
her experiences, reveals his own subjective perspective, when he explains how his
mother, excluded by this racist society, tries to convince herself that racism is an
acceptable inconvenience because “This was the early sixties […] and these were black
women before blackness itself, before the language of civil rights or anything else that
came after” (91). Life in Canada reveals a tension between a dream of national inclusion,
the reality of cultural exclusion, and the necessity for new immigrants to continually
juxtapose past realities with their current situation.

Adele struggles with the emotional contradiction in her experience: “She’s living
the dream of countless people in her birthplace, stuck back there with the running sores of
their histories. She’s been given a chance in a new land. She’s one of the lucky ones. She
must always remember that” (51). Unfortunately, for Adele, remembering is difficult and
as she lacks “trusted networks of support” with which to share her hardships (179), her
Canadian experience becomes one of absolute social isolation. From Adele’s perspective,
discrimination in Canada is a subtle performance. “People everywhere would offer cold
cutting glances” (49) and, although she attempts to ignore this as much as possible, it
becomes easier for her to just avoid the outside world altogether. Adele’s initial refusal to
engage with the Canadians she encounters suggests the negative consequences of these

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83 Adele’s reality mirrors comments made by many racialized Canadians. In *Darkness*,
cultural theorist Bharati Mukherjee writes about her own experiences and frustrations in
Canada, explaining how “I was frequently taken for a prostitute or shoplifter […] society,
routinely made crippling assumptions about me, and about my ‘kind’” (2-3).
“crippling assumptions” (Mukherjee, *Darkness* 3). Conditioned by repeated encounters with racial discrimination, Adele’s self-imposed withdrawal from society appears a means of survival. However, her dementia complicates reading her actions as ambivalence towards belonging. Once Adele exhibits symptoms of dementia with its progressive stages of language loss and state of confusion outside of linear time, her withdrawal is inevitable and cannot be simplistically interpreted as willed.

As a racialized woman, Adele becomes constructed as doubly ‘Other,’ and her early-onset dementia accelerates this process of ‘othering.’ As ‘Other,’ her involuntary subject position obfuscates any awareness or social concern about how her traumatic history of violence, displacement, and isolation has shaped her behavioural responses. Like many individuals who are alienated by a systemic oppression, this woman chose a self-imposed exile as a means of escape from her Trinidadian reality. Her response of further distancing herself from the Canadian community perpetuates their misperceptions and exacerbates their demonizing of ‘difference.’ Deploying dementia as a metaphor for marginalizing the ‘Other,’ Chariandy’s novel minimizes the material effects of this degenerative disease, although the reader does learn “[p]eople everywhere would […] stare openly at the oddity that she had become in this land” (49).

While some new immigrants to Canada are fortunate enough to discover large diasporic communities with which to share stories and build new relationships, Chariandy’s novel explores the negative consequences for the Canadian immigrant (both first- and second-generation) when no supportive community is present. The subtext of this novel also indict the lack of social services available in such extreme cases of Alzheimer’s, where a family may have limited access to or awareness of types of support
systems. When confronted to justify her reasons for helping this old woman, Meera (Adele’s caregiver and the subsequent listener of the son’s narrative act) antagonistically challenges Adele’s son to “take the time to learn about the luxuries this society provides for women with dementia […] Never mind ethnic and poor women” (119). Her sarcasm delivers its intended punch, challenging the reader to consider the implications of Adele’s situation and the devastating consequences of no community support for her and her family.

Canadian immigrants, often silenced by misinterpretation and racialized assumptions, possess histories and experiences that have shaped who they are. In order to avoid the dangers of social isolation, Chariandy’s novel emphasizes the importance of creating a space of belonging within a community that shares stories of past and present hardships. In Chapter 4, I introduced Meredith Gadsby’s concept of “kitchen table talk” as a critical space for displaced women to collectively engage in “much-needed communal support” (123). This “kitchen table talk” transforms the domestic space into a place of collectivism and community where women and girls “could speak, in a language all their own, of the homes they had left behind” (Gadsby123). The kitchen represents a safe space where memories are shared, hardships are addressed, and women can discover collective empowerment through their relationships with one another and organize in resistance against oppressive structures. Unfortunately for Adele, no one will join her in “kitchen table talk.” Even within her own house, Adele suffers from a lack of support and community. When she tries to speak to her family about her childhood, she is met with “[s]ilence around the table” (Chariandy 25).
In Canada, Adele’s only contact with Caribbean culture is through her one friend Mrs Christopher; however, even Mrs Christopher fails to provide any emotional support, because she “speaks in the most ornate country patois that she can muster, not to communicate with Mother, who speaks the language of a different nation anyway” but to “berate” Adele’s Canadian-born son for his lack of cultural awareness (Chariandy 87). While Mrs Christopher’s “Caribbean demotic” (Nourbese Philip, qtd. in Gadsby 129) might have performed as a language of resistance, and Adele’s kitchen where they meet might have provided her and Mrs Christopher an important space in which to “feed [the] children and one another with [this] language of resistance” (Gadsby 124), Mrs Christopher’s concerted effort to alienate the next generation undermines any potential collective empowerment. For Adele, the kitchen functions neither as a place of resistance nor domesticity and it, like everything else, transforms into a foreign space.

Because she lacks “trusted networks of support” (Chariandy 179), Adele has no one with whom to share her stories. Additionally, dementia disrupts her communicative ability and poses extreme challenges for her listeners to comprehend her articulations. Everyone around her fails to understand her need for a supportive community and, eventually, “she began to excuse herself from the world we knew” (12) – from a world that repeatedly rejects her. She conforms to external pressures and exiles herself. Adele’s social responses complicate her small Canadian town’s normative understandings of human behaviour, and as her episodic and working memory increasingly deteriorates, she becomes positioned socially and geographically “alone in a cul-de-sac once used as a dump” (9), outside of the community. Adele resigns herself to “never speak[…] again” (134). Without language, can Adele heal from her horrifying memories? As seen in
Chapter 4, Mootoo’s novel suggests that healing is possible when a listener actively engages in the telling process and inserts missing information into the narrative gaps. Yet, I contend that Chariandy’s novel remains ambiguous as to whether intergenerational storytelling affords the old woman agency to heal from her previous experiences of trauma. Even prior to Adele’s death, only her son’s limited perspective informs our understanding of her life story.

To Adele’s son, dementia “means that she’s forgetting […] or that she’s confused, or even … even that she’s remembering” (66). Despite Adele’s conscious efforts to forget her own past, and even with the early-onset of dementia, her most traumatic memories persist and insist on being remembered and addressed. Her haunting memories repeatedly surface within her storytelling, and the **soucouyant** story becomes this old woman’s “way of telling without really telling [what happened in her birthplace during World War II]” (Chariandy 66). Her son eventually recognizes his own tendency to cast his mother as a monster, to ‘other’ her, and in his desire to rectify his own act of exclusion, he takes on the role of storyteller, as the one who can decode and articulate his mother’s story. However, this young man cannot adequately understand the **soucouyant’s** story. Thus, past traumas that surface as haunting memories and silences continue to elude cognitive understanding and narrativization. Despite not possessing the knowledge to interpret her story accurately, he pieces together story fragments and fills in her narrative gaps so he can give voice to her personal history. Her subjection to

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84 The narrative develops in such a way that the son’s growing grasp of his mother’s life experiences mirrors the reader’s developing understanding.
violence, rape, objectification, discrimination, and social exclusion no longer remain silenced, when his storytelling act transforms the personal into the political.

Adele’s children, born in Canada and distanced from any community of Afro- and/or Indo-Caribbean cultural knowledge, possess very little awareness of where their parents and ancestors came from. In Canada, Adele and her husband, Roger, show “almost no interest in their respective pasts” and “they agree to never wax nostalgically” (73). Their memories of Trinidad become silenced as “mildewed explanations” (70). Adele’s involuntarily shared stories (due to her dementia) provide her son access, albeit limited, to his family history. He tells us, “Mother never deliberately explained to me her past, but I learned anyway. Of lagahoos, and douens, and other spectres of long-ago meaning” (23), and this was how “a nine-year-old boy who grow up in Canada know about soucouyants” (135). He learns of the ‘monsters’ in Caribbean society who function as fearful reminders to those who defy societal rules and expectations. However, the transference of cultural memories, even the transmission of culture, is shown as tenuous at best along all the cultural lines of this family. Adele’s son discovers much of his family

86 In Soucouyant and in Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms, the young narrators’ fathers are both characterized as silent about their respective pasts, albeit in very different ways and with different social and political implications. Chariandy’s father character, Indo-Caribbean Canadian Roger attempts assimilation upon immigration and comes to disregard his past as something that “happened a long time ago, and it didn’t involve circumstances that anyone had thought important to remember and pass on” (79). Death ensures his personal stories and family history are forever silenced, although mockingly after an industrial accident, “the slashed flesh on [his] neck … leered out … like a tongue” (25). Goto’s father character, Japanese Canadian Sam Tonkatsu, is described as “a voiceless man” (59), who, through assimilation, lost his ability to speak the Japanese language and forever feels like “half a person” (207). Both men attempt to silence their cultural histories upon immigration to Canada, and yet both remain haunted by traces of somatic and psychic memories.
history is inaccessible, “just a scrap of something gone” (79), because his parents’ conscious engagement with forgetting has obscured the complexity of family stories.

When Adele does attempt to share her stories, we are told she “speaks in a slow voice” (45), signalling how we, as readers, are to proceed in our ‘listening’ of her story:

‘It happen…’ she begins. ‘It happen one fore-day morning when the sun just a stain on the sky. When the moon not under as yet. I was a young girl running home. Running ’pon paths so old that none could remember they origin. My ankle paint cool, cool by the wet grasses. I run and stumble into a clearing with an old mango knotting up the sky with it branch. The fallen fruit on the ground. They skin all slick and black. The buzz of drunken insect.…’ (Chariandy, original ellipses, 45)

Slowing down Adele’s articulation transforms it into poetic language with visual, physical, and aural cues emphasizing sensory elements that contribute to her listener’s imaginative capabilities by creating an atmospheric setting for her story. Adele juxtaposes alliteration (“fallen fruit,” “skin … slick,” “black … buzz”), generating fluidity, with sentence fragments that insert a staccato-like rhythm. Her story also reveals repetition, never moving beyond the initial narrative moment just prior to the traumatic event:

‘It happen…,’ she tries again. ‘It happen one fore-day morning when the sun just a stain on the sky. When the moon not under as yet. Me, I was a young girl running…..’

‘I know, Mother. It doesn’t matter. You’re here now.’

‘You’re here now…?’
You arrived, Mother. You told me the story, remember? There were lights….’ (Chariandy 47)

In this attempt by Adele to tell her own story, she inserts herself as “Me” within the structural body of the narrative, suggesting her desire to assert herself as the primary narrator and character of her own experience. However, her need to tell her story is repeatedly silenced, with her son saying, “It doesn’t matter, Mother. It happened long ago. A faraway place” (35). Again, as seen in the passage above, he tries to assure her, “It doesn’t matter. You’re here now” (47), but his apparent good intentions only serve to reinforce her silence. Despite these interjections, his repeated narrative, too, remains unfinished, ruptured by the ellipsis that serves to also position the reader in the presence of narrative gaps, thereby mirroring a listener’s interpretive limitations. The reader-as-listener becomes similarly challenged by having to decipher a story impartially given.

*Soucouyant* troubles the issue of who has the right to speak for another and illustrates the challenges of a generation speaking about cultural practices and understandings that it is not necessarily familiar with first-hand. Paradoxically, while the *soucouyant* must have her story told because only then can she transform from a misunderstood monster into a woman with a traumatic personal history, Chariandy’s male protagonist speaks for the subaltern. While Chariandy may be offering a feminist re-imagining of the *soucouyant* and he sensitively articulates marginalized women’s experiences of oppression, his novel privileges the age perspective of a young male subject. Chariandy’s novel is not a *Reifungsroman* (Waxman), and it does not characterize the old woman with agency. The *soucouyant* does not speak her own story; the old woman storyteller is denied her own voice. Repeatedly throughout the novel, the
reader is reminded of who is speaking and for whom. Adele’s son asserts his dominance, shouting, “Mother! How can I tell the story if you don’t listen to me?” (190). At other times, he confesses “I’m telling you what I know, what you accidentally told me” (184) and then, in each instance, the narrative shifts from first-person to a third-person account detailing his mother’s experiences. Even when Adele questions her son, “Is I telling this story or you?” (original italics, 45), her son diverts her attention to other things.

Occasionally Adele voices fragments of her own story in her own voice and in her own language, yet invariably her son fills in the gaps. He does not possess the necessary knowledge to bear witness to her trauma; yet, he also realizes she has forgotten “the routes to salvation” (12), and thus he now desires to do what no one has ever done for her before: listen and support her. Therefore, her stories become interpreted, reconstructed, even re-imagined, by her son, who admittedly does not have complete access to “[t]he clutter of a past never [his] own” (113).

THE SOUCOUYANT AS ‘OTHER’

This novel weaves the allegory of the soucouyant throughout the narrative and, at first glance, the soucouyant exists as a marginal character, relegated to snippets of memory and unfinished stories. However, a closer investigation reveals the centrality of this figure, as both Adele and her mother possess character traits associated with the soucouyant. In fact, the son explicitly views his grandmother as “a monster. Someone with a hide, red-cracked eyes, and blistered hands” (116). Only at the end of the novel does the reader come to understand the significance of this old woman’s distorted features, caused by the traumatic fire at Chaguaramas. Chariandy carefully illustrates
how Adele and her mother are perceivable as monstrous, and, therefore, could be
understood in Caribbean culture as *soucouyants*. However, Chariandy constructs a
narrative that transgresses boundaries of space and time to challenge cultural assumptions
in the Canadian context.

Canada may offer the immigrant a reprieve from the past, but for those perceived
as different from the social norm, it does not ensure a sense of belonging. *Soucouyant*
addresses the complicated subject position of individuals who occupy a liminal position
of neither Canadian nor foreigner, neither centre nor margin. While Chariandy is careful
not to homogenize the black experience in Canada through his multiple character
representations, he speaks to common assumptions based on cultural stereotypes and
societal misrepresentations. Neither Adele nor her Canadian-born sons is ‘understood’ by
the neighbours, and they are, consequently, othered. This novel shows how this social
alienation can generate ambivalence towards any sense of national belonging. Canadian-
born, yet racialized, and thus still deemed ‘Other’ within the national imaginary, Adele’s
son adopts this ambivalence, reflective of what Nana Wilson-Tagoe describes as an
“outward manifestation of an inner division and trauma” (228).

In *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*, Mary
C. Waters’s discussion on the American experience bears relevance for analyzing Black
Caribbean Canadian identity. She notes, “[m]any of the children of the immigrants
develop ‘oppositional identities’ to deal with [their] status” as black Americans, and they
respond in ways that “resemble the cultural responses of African Americans to long
histories of exclusion and discrimination” (qtd in Gadsby 7-8). While the parent
generation arrived in America (and Canada) from the English-speaking Caribbean with
their own experiences of discrimination and oppression, their children have no other
cultural perspective from which to compare their marginalized and socially displaced
status. Chariandy’s novel exemplifies how a personal narrative can perform as a
theoretical framework for analyzing the development of specific subjectivities within the
Canadian socio-political multicultural climate. In an interview with Kit Dobson in 2007,
Chariandy identifies himself as a “second-generation black Canadian” (my italics, 814),
while, in his novel, he positions his fictional protagonist as “a second-generation
Caribbean immigrant” (my italics, 811). This shift in subject identity reveals an internal
struggle between a diasporic and nationalistic consciousness, a conflicting push and pull
in Chariandy’s sense of belonging to the nation. He confesses to Dobson, “the
complicated subjectivity of second-generation black Canadians was something that [I]
had such a passionate investment in adequately representing” (814). This desire to
“adequately represent” echoes Roy Miki in Broken Entries, where he encourages “writers
and cultural workers of colour to assume responsibility for the frames of reference
through which their subjectivities are reproduced in public discourses” (105).

In his critical writings, Chariandy suggests, “second-generation blacks face an
especially difficult task in ‘articulating’ one’s belonging within and/or to Canada”
(“Fiction” 824). His creative writing explores the anxiety and/or ambivalence of
belonging to neither here nor there.87 Querying this diasporic positioning, and drawing
from Karin Aguilar-San Juan’s writings on diasporic longing, Jana Evans Braziel and
Anita Mannur ask, “What happens when future generations do not know how to look

87 In A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging (2001), Caribbean Canadian
author Dionne Brand addresses the long-term impact of racialization on her relationship
to Canada. She recalls her desperate desire as a child for inclusion, but as an adult, she
confesses, “Belonging does not interest me” (85).
back, or […] if looking back means looking back to a place within the [country] where they spent their childhood and not to some primordial beginning in the home country?” (9).

Amin Malak proposes an interesting theoretical option for authors/theorists who must negotiate between two or more locations: “writers negotiating and articulating such an experience have to inhabit an alternative world, a third world: a world of their imagination, their memory, their nostalgia” (original italics, 52). Chariandy exemplifies, in his novel, the complications faced by the second-generation that knows only one home (Canada), and yet a home that is not always welcoming. This sense of displacement can lead to a search for community. As I have discussed earlier, Suzette Henke suggests different forms of writing, including “memoirs, diaries, letters, and journals, as well as the bildungsroman and other personally inflected fictional texts” (xiii), offer authors a critical means of “reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject ideologically inflected by language, history, and social imbrication” (xv). This political act is apparent in both Chariandy’s critical theory and creative writing. As a Canadian-born child to immigrant parents, Chariandy situates himself as part of the “‘second generation’ of Caribbean writers and cultural producers in Canada” (qtd in Dobson 810). He argues, “one important role as a writer, particularly a ‘minority’ writer, is to be a custodian of cultural memory, though always a critical one” (qtd in Dobson 812).

Physical/geographical displacement and feelings of ‘not belonging’ permeate both Canadian and Caribbean literature and occupy a central position in Chariandy’s writings. This general sense of not belonging to the Canadian nation, or to some distant cultural ‘homeland,’ reveals to Chariandy the urgency to address the ways that Canada fails to create an inclusive environment in the daily realities of many Canadian immigrants. In
his article “The Fiction of Belonging: Second-Generation Black Writing in Canada,” Chariandy contends, “we are facing a ‘crisis’ in multiculturalism” (“Fiction” 828), and his novel Soucouyant attends to this crisis, by reflecting a particular age perspective of this generation’s growing ambivalence towards a national identity. Braziel and Mannur propose the children of displaced and dispossessed diasporic parents often enact a “double-gaze of here/home” that “skeptical[ly] resists […] the signified references of here and home” (9). These children become dispossessed by dominant nation-state ideologies that cast them as ‘Other,’ and they psychologically experience the internal fragmentation through a double-consciousness.88

Chariandy claims the core themes of his novel are “generational identity and cultural dilemma” (qtd in Dobson 810). In Soucouyant, the fictional experience of feeling alienated in a predominately white Canadian town mirrors Chariandy’s description of his own childhood growing up in Scarborough, Ontario. He admits, “I don’t feel, or even desire to feel, a sense of belonging to that community” (qtd in Dobson 816). Therefore, the act of writing Soucouyant was his attempt to “address the ghosts of my own upbringing” (qtd in Dobson 815). Chariandy ascribes his personal “ghosts […] shadows

88 In The Souls of Black Folk (1903), W.E.B. DuBois first introduced the concept of ‘double-consciousness’ as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (9). Many recent authors and cultural theorists explore this psychological fragmentation, the simultaneous condition of ‘belonging’ and ‘not belonging.’ Dionne Brand echoes Du Bois, by positioning black identity in Canada as a “curiously complicated doubleness” (40). Fred Wah theorizes the social cost of ‘passing’ as either/or, of “living in the hyphen” (53). Roy Miki speaks of ‘hyphenated’ identities as inhabiting the liminal spaces between culturally constructed boundaries. Himani Bannerji writes about being an ‘insider/outsider’; Rinaldo Walcott of ‘in-between-ness.’ The fiction of Lee Maracle and SKY Lee explores the racialized realities of being identified as ‘half-breed’ or ‘yin-chin.’ This hybridity, or what Paul Gilroy defines as “cultural intermixture” (52), affords a subject position of resistance that destabilizes the dominant Canadian cultural identity.
and complexes” as the consequence of “growing up black and working class in a suburb that, at least at the time, openly prided itself on being the ‘good’ part of Scarborough, precisely because *people like me* didn’t live there in any great numbers” (my italics, qtd in Dobson 815). Chariandy’s ambivalent relationship to this community bespeaks his feelings of isolation in a community that could not relate to his particular experiences of being a second-generation black immigrant from Trinidad.

Chariandy’s young male protagonist occupies a similar subject position and exemplifies Rinaldo Walcott’s criticism of Canada as “[a] nation that forms him, but a nation that cannot imagine him within its own formative narratives” (*Black* 16). Himani Bannerji criticizes multiculturalism’s “discourse of diversity” as merely “a new language of ruling and administration” that “protects ideologies and practices already in place” (*The Dark Side* 37). Thus, she argues the continuation of colonial oppression under the guise of multiculturalism “makes it impossible to understand or name systemic and cultural racism, and its implications in gender and class” (*The Dark Side* 54). The privileged culture defines the social norm and excludes those who do not fit. Anna Rutherford concurs that “[c]ultural nationalism becomes an ally to political nationalism, and both act in the same way” (v). *Soucouyant* engages in what Chariandy describes as “a newly sophisticated ‘politics of representation,’” “a happy worrying of the ideals of official or national belonging” (“Fiction” 821).

Chariandy’s novel interrogates the ways Canadian institutional language, often masquerading as multicultural pluralism, thinly disguises exclusionary ideology. In *Scandalous Bodies*, Smaro Kamboureli describes Bill C-93, the Multiculturalism Act, as “sedative politics […] that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a
contained fashion, in order to manage them” (82). Kamboureli critically challenges this formulation of multiculturalism, which “pays tribute to diversity and suggests ways of celebrating it […] Yet it does so without disturbing the conventional articulation of the Canadian dominant society” (82). Soucoupant draws attention to the subtle racism that permeates much of Canadian discourse to illustrate how the dominant group excludes anyone perceived as different. As if to exemplify Kamboureli’s criticism, Chariandy inserts the “annual Heritage Day parade” to which “everyone was invited to participate” (original italics, 60) to shatter the illusion of Canadian multicultural inclusion. This parade, understood as a “spectacle” with “costumes and uniforms,” proclaims to “recognize ‘people of multi-cultural backgrounds,’ and ‘not just Canadians’” (60). This language, masquerading as multicultural inclusivity, thinly disguises its position on exclusion. The carefully articulated differentiation between “Canadians” and those “other” people “of multi-cultural backgrounds” (60) situates this latter category as not Canadian.

His old woman character, Adele, unknowingly, tests the limits of the community’s willingness to include “everyone” (original italics, 60), and she joins the parade wearing “at least half a dozen pairs of underwear” (62), a bra, shoes, and nothing else. Her multiple layers of female undergarments result in a performance of gender that unconsciously parodies the sexualized female body, rendering her own body abject. As her ‘costume’ does not conform to any identifiable ‘performance’ of culture, she becomes the spectacle to which the public gaze turns. Before being excluded from the community parade, one member of the community shouts at her: “what kind of people are we allowing to live here?” (62). At this moment, Adele becomes “caricatured” (62), not as a
woman with dementia, but as someone unidentifiable and monstrous. Himani Bannerji argues that “converting a person, an embodied socio-historical being, into a sign or symbol” (169) transforms her/him into an object that serves only to re-inscribe the dominant social order. As a disembodied metaphor, Adele loses any agency.

Racial discrimination and ‘othering’ function as insidious violence with a traumatic psychological impact on both new immigrants and their racialized second-generation Canadian-born children. Trauma theorists are finally considering the traumatogenic effect, that is the creation of a psychic wound that occurs from not just one event, but from repeated exposure to acts of systemic interpersonal and institutional violence. Such trauma can psychologically manifest into an increased awareness of one’s vulnerability to common high-risk forms of violence that target specific individuals or groups. It can generate a traumatogenic affect of living in constant fear. Soucouyant attends to the persistence of systemic racism within Canada. By interrogating insidious acts of racialization, this narrative attempts to illustrate how individuals are silenced through discriminatory histories and personal experiences of violence. Voicing these personal stories and traumatic experiences, Chariandy turns the critical gaze back at the reader, asking how, why, and when do we, as members of a community, participate in the violence of social exclusion?

89 Chariandy does not limit his critique to suggest that only racialized bodies suffer from intolerance and ignorance by those who seem incapable of comprehending hybridity and diversity. This novel portrays Canada as a place of social isolation for anyone perceived as ‘different.’ Chariandy offers the character of Miss Cameron, the town librarian who in her “badly fitting second-hand dresses […] was politely shunned by just about everyone in the neighbourhood” (102). He presents Bohdan, a young “albino” boy bullied and teased by the local children, who call him names such as “Indian,” “artistic,” and the “boogey man” (111). He also includes the poem “The Scarborough Settler’s Lament,” written by an anonymous Scottish immigrant who “saw himself as a stranger here” (105), to illustrate that this sentiment of unbelonging in Canada is “at least 150 years old” (104).
Chariandy invites his readers to examine their own discriminatory assumptions, and to re-imagine Adele, not as a crazy old woman, but as “a lesson to us all. Imagine everyone house, everyone community and nation so open …” (140). Like Annette Schlicter’s positing of the madwoman as a “metacritical figure” (311) who affords authors a means to critique dominant epistemologies, Chariandy’s figuration of Adele’s ‘madness’ performs the dual purpose of enacting the “symptom[s] of women’s symbolic and social disempowerment” (310) while authorizing a new subjectivity that challenges the ways that dominant or popularized discourses (the medical discourse on dementia, the cultural myth of the soucouyant, and the discourse of inclusivity in multiculturalism) serve to legitimize the exclusion of those perceived as ‘different.’ *Soucouyant* contributes to a postcolonial literary tradition of redefining madwomen, providing a sensitive and accurate portrayal of an old woman with dementia, while simultaneously exemplifying how personal and collective traumas impact both the individual and the family.

In this novel’s Canadian context, Chariandy remains ambiguous about who the monsters really are. Monsters appear as passing trains, the “[m]etal monsters in the night” (13); they are the faces of nosy neighbours peering out darkened windows, “the ghastly eyes of monsters” (123); and they are photos of his own “relatives that [he] cannot name” (114), living in boxes in the basement, “the natural haunt of monsters” (113). Childhood monsters and ghosts follow Adele across the ocean and their haunting reminds the family that linear temporality is only an imaginative construct. Past and present coexist in Adele’s mind and her son must untangle her memories in order to reconstruct her narrative. His narrative depends upon unearthing the truths of her past, buried by her mind’s ability to mask trauma through encoded allegories. Her son suspects that the story
his mother repeatedly recounts about her encounter with the *soucouyant* is actually an allegory for the unspeakable truths in her past. Spectral manifestations of that which is monstrous in society, specifically the *soucouyant* and the fearful crazy lady, become allegories for that which society (and Adele herself) would rather ignore and forget.

While no one in the novel sucks blood, nor turns into a fireball and flies, both Adele and her mother can be read (or misread) as *soucouyants*. *Soucouyant* follows the formative life experiences of Adele, in order to demonstrate how social variables shape individual behaviours and societal responses. When Adele is a young girl, the establishment of a U.S. naval base displaces her community from Chaguaramas, Trinidad. As a result, “[e]xtended kinship links were broken, and surviving families were plunged into new forms of poverty without trusted networks of support” (179). Adele and her mother suffer further economic hardship as the legacy of colonial law dictated “they weren’t eligible for any compensation since they appeared unattached to any adult man” (181). Without compensation or community support, as “[n]one will lend her any help” (185), Adele’s mother turned to prostitution as the only means available to provide shelter and food for herself and her daughter. This further marginalizes her and her daughter in a society that already excludes them. When she turns to suicide as her only means to escape, this attempt at an independent choice for freedom is denied to her, and Adele’s mother becomes forever trapped within a scarred body marked as monstrous. Adele initially attempts to free herself from her reality by setting her mother – and all that she represents – on fire, but her persistent memories of this traumatic experience forever deny her an escape. Adele flees to Canada, to the land of forgetting, where she encounters a new reality: her subjectivity as a minority black in a predominately white country,
which refuses to acknowledge her equality. Having no one to discuss her experiences with, Adele turns inwards as a means to escape from her physical and psychological isolation. Her son explains, “one day [she] empties her mind into the sky” (39).

When Adele begins “losing herself. She going she own way” (131), she becomes perceived as the crazy lady, but not only by her Canadian neighbours. Even her own son admits how “frightening a mother […] she had become” (33). He discovers her in the middle of the night, viciously brushing her teeth, her mouth “a lurid drool of blood […] her eyes are punched holes” (129). She eventually appears zombie-like as she “entered a darkened state. […] She doesn’t seem to know if she is thirsty or hungry […] her skin when pinched doesn’t spring back. Her eyes are rheumy but hold no tears” (130). She obsessively collects “fingernail paring[s]” (118), symbolic of the grains of rice used to distract a soucouyant, and she sings the soucouyant’s lament, “Old skin, ’kin, ’kin / You na know me” (original italics, 134). One day, she exposes to her son her secret truth:

Her scalp comes off at the back. This has never happened before

[…] I look upon her skull as if for the first time. The glistening skin infected with purple and brown. The corrugations and whorls like an organ exposed to the air. A brain obscenely naked and pulsing with life. (122)

Like a soucouyant, her skin appears removable and she reveals the organs beneath. The fire consuming her mother had scorched Adele’s head and neck, but for so many years, she had kept this hidden from her family. However, as her son theorizes, while “forgetting can sometimes be the most creative and life-sustaining thing that we can ever hope to accomplish. The problem happens when we become too good at forgetting. When
somehow we forget to forget” (original italics, 32). This moment of exposure reveals Adele has become too adept at forgetting. Adele can no longer hide her violent history; her son is offered glimpses into the horror of her reality – the trauma, the exclusion, the discrimination, the silencing, the misunderstandings.

Previously unable to differentiate his mother’s seemingly random, fragmented stories from this “old nigger-story” (194) of the soucouyant legend, the son’s initial interpretation of the soucouyant derives from “the scenes and secrets [that] were spilling out of her involuntarily” and from the local librarian who provides history books that “offered me meanings when they were lacking” (136). After the soucouyant is revealed to him as a linguistic sign in “a travel guidebook,” he begins to structure his “history” in relation to “a foreign word” (137).

“Soucouyant” as a word is first introduced in the novel when “Mother said [it] aloud to herself one day” (23). “Mother” then questions her young son, “You know what a soucouyant is, child?” (23), and the son responds with a simplistic rendering from conventional Caribbean folklore: “Isn’t she an evil spirit? Someone who sucks your blood at night?” (23). She seems to acquiesce to his limited semantic understanding “after a pause, really only the shortest pause” (23), answering “Yes, child, you is absolutely correct” (23); however, she realizes the cultural, temporal, and spatial distance between this conventional story as legend, its significance to her personal history, and her Canadian-born son’s inability to interpret its meaning in his current social context. As the son struggles to understand his mother, his quest to determine the significance of the sign soucouyant parallels his own developing self-understanding. Her behaviour constitutes a ‘language’ he grapples with so as to unlock its meaning for himself.
This novel positions the old woman as a polyphonic site of multiple ideologies. The *soucouyant*, as a culturally specific linguistic sign overlain with complex significations from multiple social, historical, and political contexts, becomes reconceptualized through Adele’s “way of telling without really telling, you see, and so you don’t really have to know what a soucouyant is. Well, I guess you do, sort of” (66). The implied “you” in the narrator’s statement, while singularly referring to a police officer at the narrator’s door who has come to investigate Adele’s disappearance, signals the various semantic positions of readers who may or may not possess linguistic understanding of the word. To compensate for this potential knowledge gap and to ensure the *soucouyant*’s integration into Canadian cultural discourse, the novel offers a didactic, textbook explanation of what a *soucouyant* is (on page 135), only to then challenge this specific ideological, semantic position. By questioning exactly who the “monsters” are within Canadian multicultural society (Chariandy 123), this novel constructs a conceptual bridge that empathetically links the *soucouyant* of diasporic folklore with the alienated ‘Other’ in Canadian multicultural ideology.

This novel invites criticism of how exclusionary discourses, such as multiculturalism and the *soucouyant* folklore, attempt to contain differences within definable parameters. Adele, however, exemplifies the limitations of such categorical understandings. Her complex subjectivity, her history of abuse and discrimination, her alienation and displacement (both geographic and cultural), and her dementia all disrupt assumptions and stereotypes about her Caribbean culture, her accent and her skin colour, and her role as a mother. When individuals stigmatize Adele as monstrous, her social isolation forces her to suffer “alone with [her] traumas” (165), offering no path of
resistance, and subsequently having devastating and lasting effects on her children. Thus, her son’s underlying critique of Canada (emerging within the climate of 1980s multiculturalism), and his belief that a racist Canada should not exist, also haunts the narrative.

**DIASPORIC HAUNTINGS AND TRANSHISTORICAL TRAUMA**

This novel suggests the second-generation diasporic’s subjective experience of an inherited sense of displacement becomes known through the reclaiming and re-telling of one’s family’s history of dispossession and dislocation. The narrator, while subjected to stories and experiences he cannot fully comprehend from his current contextual frame of understanding, becomes a storyteller who positions himself as bearing witness to his family’s (sometimes reported, often unspoken) history of trauma. As a result of this narrativization process, he unconsciously begins to articulate his own story and comes to make sense of his own diasporic consciousness and personal identification with a transhistorical trauma.

The son can only trace his own history back two generations on his mother’s side to the physical displacement of his mother and grandmother in 1943 from their home in Chaguaramas, Trinidad. Various historical examples of dispossession and displacement weave throughout the narrative, from the coded references to slavery and the Middle Passage with boats full of “ghosts” and “endless floors of bone” (182), to the Spanish occupation of the island and the consequential dispersion of Caribs, Arawaks, and Ciboney, whose “voices still haunted the place” (181), to Adele and her mother who “were among the last of the people displaced from the estates” (181). The reader learns
Adele’s matrilineal family history contains multiple forced displacements that erased much of the traditional African consciousness. When Adele was a young child in the town of Carenage, an old woman “with long memory” (23) was the sole remaining ancestor who remembered the history of the African people and the horrific stories about slavery and colonial oppression. This woman is also the only person left who still practiced traditional African healing, “a skill she had inherited from a long line of knowledgeable women” (182). As young Adele represents the next generation of women who would receive and preserve these cultural practices, her forced exile from the community is suggestive of how a break in intergenerational communication results in an inevitable loss in conveyance of cultural knowledge and thus social memory. This novel explores the interrelation between physical dispossession and the different modes through which intergenerational transmission of culture occurs or ceases, depending upon the situation. As Adele’s son gains an understanding of the relationship between cultural memory and identity, between personal stories and collective understanding, his access to his family’s past becomes crucial for his reconfiguring his own understanding of himself. Thus, he becomes the custodian of her cultural memory and expresses his responsibility to preserve her stories.

In his interview with Dobson, Chariandy asks, “what do you do when the story you need to tell—indeed, the story that is now physically haunting you, and which you now have no choice but to tell—was originally ‘not a story to pass on’?" (qtd in Dobson 813). This novel challenges the assumption that Caribbean culture is “geographically bound to the Caribbean itself” (811), and it attempts to exemplify how “the second generation stands to inherit, consciously or not, the cultural legacies of their parents,
legacies that ultimately stem from geographical spaces and contexts that the second generation may never have directly experienced to any real extent” (qtd in Dobson 811). Chariandy describes this “unconscious inheritance” as an “unwilled circulation of feeling,” whereby “the second generation awakens to its diasporic legacy not through conscious communication, but through an unconscious transmission of affect” (“Fiction” 826). Wendy Walters, drawing on Paul Gilroy’s writings, supports this conception of an unconscious diasporic connection or affect; she suggests “those structures of feeling […] might be termed the inner dialectics of diaspora identification” (ix). Adele’s son confesses that “[a]t a crucial and early point in my life, something seeped into me […] Some mood or manner was transmitted, though my parents tried their utmost to prevent this from happening” (101). Adele’s unintended storytelling shares a “violent return of the untold legacies of the elsewhere past” (“Fiction” 826). The silences, coded-language, and complicated narrative gaps in her stories also result in an “an unconscious transmission of affect” (“Fiction” 826). Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok theorize that transgenerational hauntings occur when secrets and unspeakable experiences are passed symptomatically to the next generation. In some cases, as this novel suggests, what returns to haunt is the trauma of another. Cathy Caruth, drawing from Sigmund Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, claims that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (*Unclaimed* 24) and it can pass across generations.

Like other trauma narratives discussed in this dissertation, in Chariandy’s novel, the transmission of Adele’s trauma occurs in the closing chapter. Through the narrator’s perspective, the reader is transported into the Trinidadian context of the novel to bear
witness to Adele’s childhood experiences of trauma. Earlier in the novel, we are told only of “[t]he thin blue fire on the day of the accident” (136). Adele’s son explains what he has repeatedly heard:

That time when she was very young, when the sun was only a stain on the edge of the earth and the moon hadn’t yet gone under. When she was fleeing upon a path so old that none could remember its origins. An out-of-the-way path, her ankles painted cool by the wet grasses.

(‘The creature. It using water in a rusted oil drum as a mirror. It putting on she skin, syrup sounds and soft snaps. It gloving on she fingers when she roll she eyes toward….’) Mother told me other things too, especially later, when she couldn’t help herself. When the scenes and secrets were spilling out of her involuntarily. The fighter planes crashing into the Chaguaramas harbour. The smells of the soldiers who visited her mother’s home. The thin blue fire on the day of the accident. She told, but she never explained or deciphered. She never put the stories together. She never could or wanted to do so. (136)

He segues in parentheses into her narrative voice, reiterating verbatim what she has told him, yet her story trails off uncompleted, the ellipsis signalling an unfinished narrative, perhaps because it is too traumatic to be remembered and told. He realizes many of her memories are ‘secrets’ and his careful archiving of what she does share is ordered into a logical narrative that attempts to “put the stories together” (136). However, complicating the narrative, Adele witnesses and speaks of more than one “accident” in her past. In short succession, we learn of two accidents. The first is when young Adele discovers her
mother “still holding a pair of scissors to the ragged wounds on her wrists. There is blood rivering down her arms, and she is just about to sit down into a warm coffin when she notices her daughter. There is a moment of indecision” (186). “‘It was an accident,’ Adele’s mother explains” (186), and this traumatic incident is never spoken of again. The second accident we learn of is when Adele sets her mother on fire, only to experience “a pain assaulting her, a sheet of pain on her back and shoulders” as the fire engulfs them both (193).

The son’s narrativization act that finally discloses the details of this second “accident” (136) is prompted by his brother’s journal, which offers “page after page” (171) of words and letters, jumbled and cluttering the pages in stops and starts. One fragment of a word, “soucuy” (171), “catches” his eye (171), and when Adele’s caregiver, Meera, notices him noticing it, she offers him an opening with, “You don’t have to tell me the story,” to which he replies, “I know” (172). This moment of shared intimacy, as Meera “sits close” (172), enables him to finally articulate his mother’s story. He has a listener in Meera and he begins his storytelling with the alliteration, “She saw a soucouyant” (173), followed by a conventional mythic opening, “It happened long ago in a faraway place” (173). By setting this story in a mythic past, he distances himself from the events, positioning himself as an omniscient narrator. While his sentences share the details of his mother’s story, he transforms her dialect into proper grammar. His mother, presented as “a young girl” (174), becomes as much an object in her own narrative as the “fighter plane” that she watches (174). However, this storytelling frame is interrupted by his mother’s voice, as he remembers her questioning his interpretation of various parts of her story. These concluding pages of the novel complexly interweave his version of her
story with her interjections. At times, Adele is a character within her own story, engaging in dialogue with other characters. However, as he approaches the climax of her story, the point when young Adele flees from her mother’s house and from the terror that it signifies and is about to encounter the *soucouyant*, his storytelling dissolves into an ellipsis. He cannot finish her story. She interrupts him at the point when she runs down “a path so old that none could remember its origins” (190). This “out-of-the-way” path (190), while representative of Trinidad’s pre-colonial history that continues to occupy the physical geography, also symbolizes the psychic geography that the *soucouyant* travels via multiple transnational migrations. The path she travels is “so old” that it predates historical memory and, in cultural memory, her origins have become so diffuse and contingent upon the teller’s temporal and spatial context.

The accident that disfigures both Adele and her mother for life seemingly ends the story, but the son, once he finishes telling, queries “But it didn’t end there, Mother. I also know it didn’t end there” (193). He assures her that he, too, knows of her experience, what she has gone through, and he lets her know this so that she is aware she has a listener. By articulating details she has previously shared with him, and reminding her of other details such as a “plant whose name we’ve both forgotten” (194), he hopes to trigger her own memory recall without suggesting forgetting is her deficit but rather something else they both share. The narrator informs us, “it’s foolish to assume that forgetting is altogether a bad thing […] forgetting can sometimes be the most creative and life-sustaining thing that we can ever hope to accomplish” (32).

Adele’s son bears witness to a past he has limited access to, through a storytelling act that interweaves multiple narratives into a collective story developed between family
members and through an individualistic attempt to construct his personal story that takes the present moment and act of narration as the starting point of an historically conscious, new family history. Both approaches piece together fragments of heard stories, non-verbal transmissions, and family silences to reconfigure the past into the present narrative moment in order to create potentially a new social understanding for the future. Telling and listening become imperative so that this narrator can come to know (or construct) the formative story in the presence of another (in this case, Meera), which serves to break down feelings of psychic isolation and emotional estrangement from others. Before his mother’s death, he attempts to explain to her his reasons for re-telling her stories: “I just wanted you to realize that I knew. That I was always close enough to know. That I was your son, and I could hear and understand and take away…” (195).

Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez emphasizes the importance of the listener’s active engagement in the storytelling process because when a passive listener transforms into an active participatory teller, he exemplifies this philosophy that “a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener” (“Storytellers” 337). Adele’s son has heard his mother’s stories before and wishes to help in the narration of her life history. Prior to his mother’s death, he believes his storytelling will heal her pain and relieve her of the burden to tell, and while he only intends to share his mother’s story, through his telling act, the traumatogenic implications for himself begin to emerge. The ambiguity inherent in the ellipsis that trails after “take away” inserts a narrative gap that is suggestive of more than just his inheritance of a story. Walter Ong attributes the power of spoken words to their auditory evanescence, as sound “exists only when it is going out of existence” (32). I would argue that, within written discourse, the ellipsis semiotically
signifies sound “going out of existence” and its specific power lies in the insertion of ambiguity and instability into the narrative. This young narrator cannot express his own sense of diasporic dislocation and traumatic experiences of systemic racialization because he has yet to fully realize its existence.

In “The Turn to Diaspora,” Lily Cho contends that “traumatic dislocation” is one of the defining conditions of diasporic subject formation (104). For Cho, diaspora is a “condition of subjectivity” (95) and, thus, “one becomes diasporic through a complex process of memory and emergence” (105). That is, it “emerges from deeply subjective processes of racial memory, of grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated and longings which hang at the edge of possibility” (Cho 99). She argues, there is no original diasporic subject position but that diasporic subjectivity arises from “the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession” (Cho 98); one is not born diasporic but rather develops a diasporic consciousness as a conditioned response to various subjective influences. Anh Hua concurs that this consciousness derives from “the collective memory and trauma involved in such a [diasporic] dispersion” (193).

Diaspora is a contested term with multiple referents. Theorists differentiate between old and new diasporas to distinguish forced displacements from “voluntary” migrations. Transnational mobility is contingent upon class privilege and the socio-political or economic reasons behind border crossings. However, regardless of whether by a forced or voluntary movement, for minoritized immigrants residing within a new geographic, and hence new cultural, environment, the complex psychological effects of displacement and dislocation can contribute to diasporic remembrances and longings for the past. Yet, such acts of remembrance may not be consciously willed, unveiling
repressed, painful memories that oftentimes accompany displacement. As Vijay Agnew explains:

Memories can be nostalgically evocative of imaginary homelands and places of birth and origins as well as an antidote to the struggles of the present. Others who had wounds of memory inflicted on them consequent to horrific dislocations and dispossessions may find travels to the past an involuntary, albeit necessary, journey to come to terms with their present selves. (10)

Therefore, while some diasporic subjects maintain positive ties with an elsewhere past, for others, this past may be inhabited by “wounds of memory” (Agnew 10) that create psychogenic traumas. Chariandy’s narrative reflects the complex interconnections between culturally diverse communication strategies and unconscious coping mechanisms that emerge in response to diasporic dislocation, insidious violence, and other past traumas. The memory of a traumatic event returns to haunt the survivor (and unwittingly, her family).

Transhistorical trauma is a literary trauma theory (deriving from Freud and Caruth) that suggests trauma can transfer via narration (that is, through verbal or written acts of remembering) or because of a shared racial, cultural, or ethnic ancestry. I have been developing this theory in earlier chapters to build towards this chapter’s analysis of the haunting experiences that psychogenically recur and also (invariably) transmit to other members of the family and/or community. Chariandy’s novel illustrates that histories of displacement and disenfranchisement are often shared with younger generations via stories, while the silences of untold legacies also communicate the effects
of ‘traumatic dislocation’ and can fracture one’s understanding of self, familial origins, and sense of social belonging. Laura Brown claims trauma theories now acknowledge that “post-traumatic symptoms can be intergenerational” (108), and Chariandy’s narrative grapples with just such a possibility. Transhistorical trauma manifests within the imaginary realm as dreams and memories not of one’s own, and remains outside of one’s conscious understanding. Chariandy’s young protagonist notes how “we awaken to the stories buried deep within our sleeping selves or trafficked quietly through the touch of others. This is how we’re shaken by vague scents or tastes. How we’re stolen by an obscure word, an undertow dragging us back and down and away” (Soucouyant 32).

These psychological experiences have material consequences, affecting coping strategies, one’s sense of social belonging, and one’s interpretive responses to everyday events. Thus, this novel attempts to characterize a “diasporic haunting” of family legacies (Chariandy, “Fiction” 826).

In “The Generation of Postmemory,” Marianne Hirsch explores what she terms “postmemory” as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (103). Her research explores how this particular relationship “has come to be seen as a ‘syndrome’ of belatedness or ‘post-ness’ and has been variously termed” (105).  

These terms reveal a number of controversial assumptions: that descendants of survivors (of victims as well as of perpetrators) of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation’s remembrances of the past that they need to call that connection memory and thus that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory can be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event. At the same time—so it is assumed—this received memory is distinct from the recall of contemporary witnesses and participants. (105-106)

Accordingly, postmemory “is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (Hirsch 106). Hirsch conflates postmemory with the “transgenerational transmission of trauma” (103) and argues that postmemory “is relevant to numerous other contexts of traumatic transfer” (108) such as “traumatic interruption, exile, and diaspora” (111). Postmemory “reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture” (106). As Van Alphen argues, “[t]he normal trajectory of memory is fundamentally indexical” with an unambiguous directional “continuity between the event and its memory” (485). That is to say, “the event is the beginning, the memory is the result,” yet for the postmemory generation, “the indexical relationship that defines memory has never existed. Their relationship to the past events is based on fundamentally different semiotic principles” (Van Alphen 485-86). The use of postmemory as a concept for theorizing traumatic diasporic dislocations is useful for “specify[ing] how the break in transmission resulting from traumatic historical events

91 Hirsch contends that photography functions as the best medium of transmission “as it relates to the Holocaust in particular” (107).
necessitates forms of remembrance that reconnect and reembody an intergenerational memorial fabric that has been severed by catastrophe” (110).

Attempting to ground his own diasporic sense of ‘unbelonging’ in Canada and his increasing desire to belong somewhere, Adele’s son asks, “You’re connected to Trinidad, aren’t you, Meera?” (119). When the son further probes, “I mean, you probably weren’t born there. You probably aren’t any more attached to that place than I am, but you’re connected, aren’t you? (119), Meera (also a black second-generation Canadian-born child of a Caribbean immigrant mother) refuses to engage in his line of inquiry and his self-searching for diasporic identification. Yet, the diaspora unconsciously affects the pulse of her consciousness. Meera “tells” him “she doesn’t understand that thing called memory … it never seems to abide by the rules of time or space or individual consciousness. She doesn’t understand how a young woman, in the midst of some small crisis, can remember catastrophes that happened lifetimes ago and worlds away, remember and proclaim these catastrophes as if she herself had witnessed them first hand” (166). Her admission hints at her inheritance of transhistorical memories of trauma. As well, Meera possesses the ability to hear connections to the diaspora through Adele’s voice. When the old woman speaks into the telephone receiver, the diaspora resounds through “her voice as if coming from across the whole ocean” (167).

Through storytelling, old women’s psychogenic wounds inflicted from previous traumas can unconsciously transfer to younger generations as an intergenerational trauma that becomes unwittingly negotiated as part of this younger generation’s identity. Concerned with the “ethics and the aesthetics of remembrance,” Hirsch asks, “How can we best carry their stories forward without appropriating them, without unduly calling
attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them?” (104). Accordingly, she positions “postmemorial” work as the second generation’s attempt to create an affective link to the past. Thus, she suggests:

Second generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma. (Hirsch 112)

Hirsch adopts writer and Jewish scholar Eva Hoffman’s language of “guardianship” and “a sense of living connection” (103), which seems to position postmemorial work as an important ethical act premised on obligation and “responsibility, by the desire to repair” (112). Yet, in a recent conversation on memory and forgetting, Marlene Goldman (a literary scholar of narrative and pathological modes of forgetting) questions for whom this work benefits? Is “cultural postmemory work” (Hirsch 117) always an ethical practice, or does it risk transfer of its own traces of trauma? Hirsch claims her work attempts to illuminate both the “attractions and pitfalls of familial transmission” (115).

Elsewhere, Abraham and Torok examine the affective impact from what is not and cannot be narrated. Their work theorizes transgenerational hauntings, when secrets and unspeakable experiences are passed symptomatically to the next generation. Similar to Kamboureli’s concept of “body talk,” Hirsch suggests that the “language of family, the language of the body” commonly speaks through “nonverbal and non-cognitive acts of transfer […] often in the form of symptoms” (112). Symptoms of trauma become evident in “the sounds of nightmares, the idioms of sighs and illness, or tears and acute aches” (Hirsch 112). The past transmits through speech, silences, and symptoms. Accordingly,
one person’s embodied “memories” come to constitute another person’s inherited “knowledge of events” (Hirsch 103). In this transfer, semantic memory transforms into episodic memory,⁹² which maps the past, present, and future into emotional and embodied memory. In other words, a listener bearing witness incorporates another person’s autobiographic accounts into his or her own personal ‘story.’ However, as Hirsch problematizes, “[i]f we thus adopt the traumatic experiences of others as experiences that we might ourselves have lived through, if we inscribe them into our own life story, can we do so without imitating or unduly appropriating them?” (original italics, 114). This question bears relevance when critically examining the politics of bearing witness in intergenerational narrative acts.

Dori Laub differentiates between different modes of witnessing, and while Laub speaks specifically in reference to the Holocaust, his distinction bears relevance for other instances of witnessing. Adele’s son enacts Laub’s different levels of witnessing, but paradoxically inhabits all levels simultaneously: as “a witness to oneself within the experience […] witness to the testimonies of others, and […] witness to the process of witnessing itself” (“Truth and Testimony” 61). Diasporic intergenerational trauma narratives raise important questions about these levels of witnessing. Does intergenerational storytelling that transmits familial and cultural memories create a diasporic consciousness that can witness the collective trauma of geographic displacement, colonial violence, and cultural dislocation? Furthermore, does the younger generation’s story reflect the psychic wound that bespeaks the trauma of the past that she

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⁹² Semantic and episodic are two different forms of declarative memory, which comprises consciously recallable experiential and informational knowledge. Semantic memories pertain to general information and learned facts, whereas episodic memories are “personal experiences that occurred in a particular time and place” (Schacter 27).
or he only understands experientially through a secondary affect? Are they the voice that bears witness to acts that precede their direct experience and consciousness of it? Is diasporic intergenerational trauma characterized by a realization that the past cannot be accessed other than through narrating it into being? And, how do diasporic authors narrativize “an unconscious transmission of affect” (Chariandy, “The Fiction” 826), that is, the presence of a past that persists as a haunting absence?

For second-generation diasporic writers engaging in “cultural postmemory work” (Hirsch 117), intergenerational storytelling seems to function as an effective literary device for collaboratively refiguring a seemingly irrecoverable past. Within Chariandy’s literary representation of a specific intergenerational relationship in the diaspora, cultural legacies manifest thematically and textually as personal and collective hauntings. These legacies as ‘hauntings’ threaten to rupture the relationship between the old woman and her son. Like the “[g]hosts” (182) on the slave ships that haunt both Chariandy’s narrative and Adele’s son’s consciousness, trauma fiction also figures “a haunting or possessive influence which […] insistently and intrusively returns” (Whitehead 3). In Chariandy’s novel, the soucoupant story intrusively returns as a ghost of Adele’s trauma, symbolizing “the surfacing of the past in the present” (Whitehead 4). Thus, within such paradoxical conditions of subjective remembering, theories from trauma and diaspora studies invariably address and inform one another in productive ways.

For Adele’s son, the historical implications of cultural loss and psychological displacement evoke a realization of an inherited traumatic dislocation, an awareness of “stories buried deep within” (32). Like the traumatic experience that can only be understood through its articulation, this novel suggests a second-generation diasporic
subject’s experience of an inherited history of trauma can become known through reclaiming and re-telling of the family’s history of dispossession. Thus, the second-generation diasporic subject’s experience and articulation of an inherited sense of displacement shares affinities with trauma narratives in that they reflect, as Cho suggests, a “grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated” (99). A parent’s mourning for an actual loss transfers into the second-generation child’s own melancholy for a ‘past’ that he or she never personally experienced. Chariandy’s protagonist becomes a “boy moping for lost things, for hurts never his own” (194). Unwittingly through his narrativization act, this narrator of a younger generation enables a fictionalized version of the unknown past to be carried into the present. Thus, the stories and experiences of others contribute in the production of his diasporic subjectivity, caught in a disjuncture between a national identity and a diasporic longing for an “elsewhere past” (Chariandy 826), not immediately his own.

This diasporic subjectivity and sense of unbelonging derives partially from the narrator’s lack of community engagements. By emphasizing the monstrous effect of social alienation, Soucouyant inadvertently reveals the necessity of a supportive community for individuals needing to survive past (and present) injustices. Through the narrator’s subjective perspective, the reader learns that neither Adele nor her mother in Trinidad experiences the empowerment of a supportive community and, thus, both women lose access to any path of resistance. Soucouyant ends with Adele’s death and her son still longing for some form of human connection. Initially distrustful of each other, he and Meera momentarily let down their walls of isolation. They “reach for each other for support but end up only unbalancing each other more” (95). Intuitively, they realize the
necessity of working together: “we try again, this time together moving shoulder to
shoulder, bumping slippery against each other […] but we make our way up safely this
time” (97). Like the young women characters in Goto’s and Tamayose’s novels, the
young man and woman in Chariandy’s novel also reflect the anxieties and challenges of a
generation of Canadian-born children who must negotiate their uneasy belonging to both
nation and diaspora. Once the son “realized that any return is futile” (129), he turns to his
mother’s stories, first as a listener, then as the teller. Through his attempt to articulate a
family history, this young male narrator gains awareness of the importance of looking
backwards and forwards when creating for himself a new narrative.
Conclusion

LITERATURE AS A SOCIAL SPACE OF BELONGING

What do Canadian literary representations of old racialized diasporic women storytellers reveal about the challenges and implications of intergenerational storytelling as a discursive strategy for narrativizing personal and collective experiences of trauma? I raised this question in the introduction to this dissertation, and in the subsequent chapters, I analyzed five Canadian authors’ interpretations of how intergenerational storytelling informs the development of personal subjectivities and interpersonal relations while living in the diaspora. I have demonstrated that narratives of ageing, of trauma, and of diaspora deploy similar narrative strategies, and when interwoven into a complex narrative bearing witness to old women’s personal histories of violence and trauma, we, as readers, become positioned as secondary witnesses to the younger narrators’ own experiences of discrimination as ‘traumatic’ dislocation. Ultimately, these novels are concerned with exploring and addressing the consequences of when a second-generation diasporic individual cannot access her or his familial history and consequently her or his sense of origins. This gap in knowledge complicates one’s ability for self-definition and configuration of personal identity. These novels highlight the significance of the young narrator’s role as a listener-teller who enacts the creative potential of stories to negotiate liminal subject positions and create meaning of the multiple worlds in which she or he lives. Through different focalizations revealing diverse age perspectives, the reader gains insight into how individual stories interweave through joint storytelling engagements into collective narratives of personal and social memory.
Analyzing focalization as a narrative device, I argue that age perspective impacts a story’s meaning. When the old woman is represented as a protagonist of a *Reifungsroman*, her character transforms into an agent of social change who profoundly influences her own and the younger character’s developing subjectivity. Read one way, these novels illustrate different scenarios in which intergenerational storytelling affords both participants agency to reconfigure their understandings of ‘self’ and ‘other.’ An alternative reading reveals how the discursive intentionality enacted by the younger narrator can disrupt the development of agency for the old woman. When authors utilize the old woman character for the purpose of exploring the impact of the past on another’s subjectivity, the ethics of this literary strategy should be questioned. When a younger character’s investment in the future supersedes the interest of the old woman’s, then the resulting narrative complicates reading reciprocity in these storytelling engagements. These novels illustrate how trust between teller and listener is integral for the creation of an ethical listening/telling storytelling exchange; however, for a reciprocal storytelling act to occur, there must be a mutual engagement with both characters performing a double role as listener-teller. If both participants collaboratively and respectfully take responsibility for the stories’ meanings, then this discursive strategy can heighten critical consciousness, which can, in turn, facilitate social change. However, as Chariandy’s novel demonstrates, when configured as a *Bildungsroman* and not a *Reifungsroman*, a novel that primarily privileges the age perspective of the younger character limits the agency and reciprocity afforded to the old woman characterized with dementia.

Within each novel, a younger character turns to an old woman in hopes that her memories will afford access to the past, yet what becomes apparent from these narratives
is that the privileging of memory becomes a problematic means to access this past.

Chapter 2 and 3 reveal instances where younger narrator characters can only access the past by engaging imaginatively in storytelling exchanges. Chapter 4 and 5 show how different types of forgetting impact the ways events are remembered and relayed. Both Mootoo’s and Chariandy’s novels provide important literary representations of old women with dementia, and their narrators’ articulations of the old women’s traumatic experiences afford readers insight into how trauma disrupts intergenerational narrative transmission. While old age remains an understudied subject position in literary theory, I have shown how many recent novels written about Canada examine the interplay between narratives of ageing and trauma. Upon re-reading Tamayose’s *Odori*, I realized I had initially missed the way this novel subtly offers readers a transformative figuring of an old woman living with dementia in her late-life years. Early in the novel, we are told “[t]he moments when [Basan’s] tongue worked in cooperation with her brain were becoming scarce as the years progressed. It seemed on more and more occasions that [Basan’s] mind was becoming less her own and more the property of the universe – always poised on the verge of departure” (Tamayose 189). I wish to propose Basan’s final flight provides an alternative reading of dementia that disrupts many stereotypical assumptions. Basan’s rhetorical coupling of madness and wisdom strips dementia of its negative depictions of decline and dependency. Instead, her relational configuration of madness-wisdom enables her mind the freedom to “take flight” (Tamayose 268), with her departure read, not as the finality of death, but a long-awaited return of a diasporic subject. However, this flight, easily interpreted as a diasporic return to Okinawa, in fact signals a return to a much farther back mythical past “where time is endless” (Tamayose
By situating Basan in her afterlife in “the ancient Islands of the Ryukyus” (Tamayose 268), this novel suggests that for this old woman, a return of the mind to the elsewhere past is possible. Thus, to read dementia as a mind freed from the troubles that haunt the body and soul permits a re-interpretation of ‘madness’ as an expression of wisdom. A representation of dementia that demonstrates positive ways for family members to build intimate connections with a person with dementia, that is through creative collaborative storytelling, affords new insights into appreciating, not who the old woman was, but who she is here and now.

Future research on narratives of dementia should consider how storytelling practices can move beyond language and memory and shift the storytelling paradigm from memory to imagination. This mode of storytelling invites participation into a listening-telling process that focuses on the present moment and the person now, not the inaccessible past nor who that person was. This focus on the present does not erase the past or its significance nor exclude the future, but rather offers emphasis on the creation of intersubjectivity within particular social contexts. The subsequent redefinition of social roles demonstrates the adaptive nature of subjectivity, which leads to the unfixing of identity that is neither celebrated as a postmodern unsettling of essentialism and master narratives, nor feared as an obliteration of the much protected concept of self. Instead, the person with dementia is given agency to show others she/he is able to contribute and participate within the family and community in meaningful ways.

These life narratives of old women characters also reveal how trauma suppresses articulation and silences insert narrative gaps that rupture intergenerational communication. By overlaying the narrative strategies of a life review with a trauma
narrative, fiction provides readers access into the immediate and life-long implications of a psychic wound and the role of old age on the narrativization process of life stories. For some old women characters, such as Joy Kogawa’s Obasan and Kerri Sakamoto’s Miss Saito in *The Electrical Field* (1999), silence functions as a coping strategy for personal and collective survival. For Miss Saito, the traumatizing events of the past now constitute “things that happened [and] are behind us now. And they are […] private” (110). However, when Miss Saito is finally forced by young Sachi to tell the story of Eiji, her traumatic memories must be addressed. Typical of many trauma narratives, this novel structurally locates Miss Saito’s defining moment of trauma at the end of the novel. Interweaving storytelling and trauma into the same narrative conflates temporality and chronology to demonstrate how reciprocal storytelling and trauma narratives critically unfold in relation to one another. Clarifying the novel’s mysteries for the reader, the end ultimately reveals the weight of Miss Saito’s burden, her belief that her brother’s death was “all [her] fault” (301). For many old woman characters, old age and the realization of approaching death prompts “retrospective reassessment” (Norrick 904), which can instigate the articulation of traumatic histories.

This dissertation explored different literary representations of personal and transhistorical trauma (explained as a collective experience that is not related to one specific instance, unlike loss that is inherently tied to a specific historical traumatic

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93 Kogawa’s and Sakamoto’s similar characterizations of old Japanese *Nisei* women and their enactments of cultural modalities of silence offer an interesting transcultural comparison to the silent Chinese Canadian women in SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990) and Judy Fong Bates’s *Midnight at the Dragon Café* (2004). In turn, these novels provide a useful intra-cultural comparison to the old woman storyteller in Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995).
experience). This theory of intergenerational transmission maintains the supposition that trauma narratives can recreate or abreact a traumatic experience for those who did not personally experience the event. Both Dominick LaCapra and Michelle Balaev assert the necessity to distinguish between personal loss (as lived experience) and an historical absence (that is, an historically documented and transmitted, thus second-hand, experience of trauma), because, as both theorists argue, to conflate such terms obfuscates the significance of personal lived experiences and thus risks limiting the concept of trauma. I would suggest Chariandy’s novel and the other novels investigated in the three preceding chapters all carefully refuse “to singularize violence or subjects who experience violence” (Tagore 46). The interweaving of age perspectives and narratives of dislocation force readers to consider the connections between personal, collective, and transhistorical traumas, so that the collective experience does not supersede the significance of the personal. Although each complicates the boundaries, they do not conflate personal loss with historical absence.

The structural patterns of trauma narratives bear resemblance to the processes of remembrance by diasporic and transnational individuals, in that the past, whether traumatic or not, continues to live within and inform the present. Diasporic fiction attempts to illustrate how histories of displacement and disenfranchisement are often shared with younger generations via stories, while silences (of untold legacies or due to a language breakdown) also communicate the effects of traumatic dislocation, which can fracture one’s understanding of self, familial origins, and sense of social belonging. For many second- or subsequent-generation diasporic subjects who lack immediate access to and understanding of this past, this complicated dislocation can produce a ‘wounding’
Fractured subjectivities attempt to negotiate a disjuncture between inherited past and present identities. The past often remains outside one’s conscious understanding and can sometimes only be accessed through symptomatic re-tellings of previous incidents. Thus, stories provide dialogic spaces to examine how history psychologically affects the old woman, her immediate community, and the younger narrator character. Yet, as historiographies, stories complicate divisive notions of ‘truth’ and fiction when representations of memories obscure the distinctions between forgetting, remembering, and (re)constructing. Memory and history become complexly interwoven narratives that reveal specific epistemologies, with narratives of forgetting and remembering revealing inner psychological states of discontentment, fear, and desire. Storytelling enables past memories to surface into the present yet often times without any recourse for address.

In each novel, the storytelling exchange reflects multiple ways in which the narrativization of memories interweaves fact and fiction. Imagination invariably becomes activated during cognitive recall and narrative structuring, plus ‘truth’ is always subjective and ideologically informed. As Murasaki explains to her listener in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, “It’s funny how you can sift your memories, braid them with other stories. Come up with a single strand and call it truth” (93). Invariably, one’s subject position and personal intentions influence which stories are told and how. Additionally, cultural and cognitive differences between the old woman character and the younger narrator impose a critical distance that inevitably impacts the younger character’s accessibility to the old woman’s stories. In cases where access to stories of the past remains limited or restricted, the narrativization act necessitates an imaginative reconstruction of past events. Yet memory is often falsely equated with history, as these novels show. When memories are
articulated, they are always complexly interwoven with imagination. In *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *Odori*, the storytelling engagements occur within the imaginations of the young women protagonists, as both old women storytellers inhabit alternative physical realms of existence. In *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *Soucouyant*, both old women inhabit alternative cognitive realms of existence, and trauma and dementia complicate their memory and language capabilities. Thus, the younger narrators must use their imaginations to decipher and make sense of the stories they hear.

As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the old women’s stories we hear in these novels broaden our conception of “the paradoxical position of enunciation” (Schlicter 311), a position that simultaneously provides critique and strategy. Recognized as spaces to critique social acts of discrimination and exclusion, these old women’s stories also exemplify how collective participation in creative re-imagining functions as an alternative strategy for constructing a space of belonging for those whose only access to the past and one’s own stories is ruptured through multiple modes of silencing or forgetting. In such instances when dementia, personal trauma, and/or diasporic dislocation result in the intergenerational loss of social and cultural memory, if reciprocity exists between teller and listener, we can read a younger narrator’s creation of a new personal self-narrative not as an act of ‘appropriation’ but as a necessary re-imagining of history. When collaborative, these narrative exchanges create a collective remembering that transforms personal memories into joint narratives now informed by multiple subjectivities and critical perspectives.

The recent publication dates of these novels indicate that this narrative turn to intergenerational storytelling in fiction reflects an important moment in Canadian social
history whereby a younger generation of authors is beginning to acknowledge the significance of the voices and stories of old women. When writing a narrative that traces how the past – as fragments of knowledge, story, myth, memory, silences, oblique stories, consciously shared telling acts, and hauntings – informs the construction of self and subjectivity in the present moment, many diasporic authors look to the old woman character as an entry point into the past. The result, as this dissertation indicates, is diverse characterizations of old racialized women storytellers who embody the social and psychological consequences – on both the self and family – of violence, trauma, silencing, and fractures within intergenerational relationships in the diaspora.

These old women’s stories perform both as “cultural resistance” (Cudjoe 66) and “cultural translation” (Bhabha, _Location_ 303) and reveal the ‘Other’ as a construct of social and cultural representation. By critiquing racism and ageism in the Canadian (and Caribbean) context, all of these novels invite a diverse readership to examine their own cultural assumptions and practices of (in)tolerance and exclusion. In diverse ways, each novel exemplifies the dangerous power of dominant stereotypes and institutionalized narratives to destroy old women’s personal subjectivities by transforming them into objects of fear and permissible subjugation. As Thomas King warns in _The Truth About Stories_, “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world”; therefore, “you have to be careful with the stories you tell” and the ones you listen to (King 10). Through their diverse characterizations of the old woman as a conduit to various histories of past trauma, each narrative situates “interiorally or subjectively experienced violence in relation to the institutionalized narratives that authorize such violence” (Tagore 56). The listener-teller character provides readers with a lens through
which to critique exclusionary discourses that legitimize violence against those individuals perceived as ‘Other.’

By narrating the old women’s histories, younger narrator characters tell stories that offer insight into how a focus on differences can obscure recognition of common human needs and perpetuate social marginalization. Their articulation of personal histories reveals a common humanity. As Carine M. Mardorossian suggests, when difference becomes re-envisioned as relational, “the other becomes that to which one is related rather than opposed” (7). I appreciate Mardorossian’s call for a revision of difference because “diverse configurations of difference cannot be read in isolation since they acquire meaning through one another” (16). While these novels tell of individual experiences, ones shaped by particular social histories and cultural contexts, they also speak a collective story about humans needing humans to overcome the universal adversities of violence, trauma, and social isolation. Each chapter addressed key concerns of physical and cultural dislocation, intergenerational silence, the role and perspective of age in the narrativization act, and the need to tell traumatic histories. As we can see, intergenerational storytelling engagements provide multiple, and, at times, conflicting perspectives on the maintenance of personal and collective memories in new geographic spaces of cultural convergence.

With Mardorossian’s revised concept of difference in mind, a comparative analysis of Métis, Indigenous, and diasporic novels written about Canada “produce[s] a model for relational history writing” (McCall, para. 2). Sophie McCall’s articulation of a “diasporic-Indigenous-sovereigntist critical approach” to Métis writing provides a useful paradigm to compare Métis and Indigenous imaginings of unbelonging with the similar
tensions expressed in diasporic fiction in Canada. While Diana Brydon in “It’s Time for a
New Set of Questions” claims the “concepts of diaspora reach their limits in claims to
indigeneity” (23), McCall argues both “Diasporic and Indigenous-sovereigntist
standpoints share the desire to challenge settler nationalisms and expose the exclusions
that have produced Canadian citizenship” (para. 3).

In Métis, Indigenous, and diasporic fiction, old women are commonly figured as
spiritual guides who help younger characters negotiate the past and present. In Ceremony,
Leslie Marmon Silko explains stories from a North American Indigenous perspective as
“all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death” (2). Here, the old
women in Lee Maracle’s Ravensong, Eden Robinson’s Monkey Beach, and Joseph
Boyden’s Three Day Road instantly come to mind. As discussed using Goto’s and
Tamayose’s novels as diasporic literary examples, the conceptualization of reciprocal
storytelling as a means to facilitate a collaborative working through of trauma and
dislocation applies to other cultural literary representations of trauma and dislocation in
Canada. For example, in Three Day Road, Boyden provides a model of reciprocity in Oji-
Cree intergenerational storytelling. Niska, Boyden’s old woman storyteller, shares stories
that explicitly reveal how her age perspective informs her understanding of the present
moment, how personal memories and public memories intertwine and inform the
construction of identities, and how the articulation of past experiences offers the
possibility of working through the traumatizing conditions that contribute to one’s
subjectivity. Like the old Japanese Canadian women storytellers in Goto’s and
Tamayose’s novels, Niska’s age perspective plays a significant role in the narrative
strategies she uses and the stories she tells to model the developmental stages of a reciprocal engagement between listener-teller and the listener-reader.

Previously marginalized authors now constitute a critical transcultural community that writes to, for, and about each other, utilizing the literary realm as an important public platform for articulating the multiple realities of human experience. In some instances, their literature initiates “imaginative transformations” (Tiffin 429) when representations of differences intersect with understandings of collective human experience. According to Martha Nussbaum, “We imagine the lives of others that are presented through narrative form, and by expanding the moral imagination we are better able to empathize with others and can become better at public thinking” (qtd. in Worth 51). These novels with their diverse representations of personal and collective experiences of trauma and dislocation invite readers to consider how multiple forms of violence impact not only an individual’s sense of self and belonging, but also the stability of the family, the community, and the nation-state.

In the novels I investigated in the previous chapters, the younger characters draw upon the stories of old women in their lives in attempts to construct for themselves a narrative of belonging that negotiates “the local, national and transnational relations in which they are engaged” (Fog Olwig 217). Hiromi Goto, Joy Kogawa, Darcy Tamayose, Shani Mootoo, and David Chariandy join a long lineage of authors and theorists whose novels reflect multiple generational perspectives for negotiating a fractured sense of belonging (or not belonging) to two or more locations. In “Children’s Places of Belonging in Immigrant Families of Caribbean Background,” Karen Fog Olwig suggests, “children’s place-making involves the creation of different social sites of belonging
connected with the various spheres of life that children encounter in their everyday lives” (217). Literature provides such a space to connect those “various spheres” of influence in a coexistence that “dramatizes the multiple worlds of the novel as integral rather than oppositional” (Wilson-Tagoe 249). These literary voices that straddle the complicated positioning of both nationalistic and diasporic imaginings necessitate new reading strategies to accommodate the diversity of interrelated subject positions influenced by age, class, gender, race, cultural history, and geographic location. These novels affirm Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin’s belief that “literary texts are not merely passive recipients of theoretical discourse, but active participants in the acts of negotiating meaning and capable of ‘theorizing back’” (qtd in Donnell and Welsh 448). For diasporic authors negotiating the tenuous positions of ‘Other’ within Canada, a literary community affords them a space of belonging, and their intertextual conversations perform as a new model of “kitchen table talk” (Gadsby 8). Their works of fiction move beyond an oppositional approach to a political engagement in actively “redefining [them]selves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future” (Lorde 374).

David Chariandy explains that his engagement with literature and a literary community enables him “to productively revise the ways in which we frame and conceptualize black writing and cultural politics in Canada” (“Fiction” 820). His work attempts to address what Rinaldo Walcott labels “the ambivalent place of black peoples in the national imagination” (12). In Black Like Who?, Walcott claims that black Canadian literature negotiates “the space of in-between, vacillating between national borders and diasporic desires” (26), and oftentimes reveals “a constant and restless
ethical search for home” (23). I view most diasporic literature written in Canada as negotiating this space of ‘in-between,’ and I interpret the novels in this dissertation as participating in “kitchen table talk,” contributing to the multitude of voices that articulate and share the diverse realities and subjectivities of experience in Canada. This critical creation of a collective voice through literature facilitates new ways to negotiate one’s ambivalent relationship with the nation.

Imaginings of home, community, and belonging infuse much of Canadian literature, with many of these writings participating in a much larger transnational dialogue on diaspora, cultural dislocation, trauma, and the human condition. Homi K. Bhabha in “The World and the Home” asks, “Is the novel also a house where the unhomely can live?” (446). To Bhabha, this “unhomely,” an adjective masquerading as a noun, gestures to those displaced individuals defined by an “estranging sense of the relocation of home” (“The World” 445). He explains:

Although the unhomely is a paradigmatic postcolonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradictions. (Bhabha, “The World” 446)

By highlighting the social and psychological consequences of traumatic and diasporic dislocation on old racialized women and the younger members of their families, the novel offers the unhomely a space to reconceptualize belonging. By positioning the diasporic subject as unhomely, from the perspectives of the old women characters and the young narrator characters, all of these novels interrogate the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘return’ as stable referents. They complicate assumptions that for the first-generation, the diaspora
can offer belonging in a collective unconsciousness and a sense of comfort in its promise of an imagined return to a distant homeland. Additionally, they illustrate how the second-generation (that have never left one land for another) recognize there is no alternative ‘home’ for them. Through intergenerational storytelling, these novels reflect the various tensions that arise when immigrant children, born within new nations, lose access to cultural connections and awareness of where their parents came from. The new stories that younger narrator characters subsequently ‘tell’ illustrate how connections to the diaspora become more tenuous to define or understand when the diasporic imagining fails to offer this second generation the same degree of belonging experienced by their parents. Thus, for many of these younger individuals, the resulting dissatisfaction can motivate a search for an alternative space of belonging.

Walcott, in response to his belief that the nationalistic ideology of citizenship attempts to negate a diasporic subjectivity, asks, “Are there not other ways to belong to a nation that seeks to render you not there?” (Black 20). In At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing (2005), Wendy Walters “seek[s] to unsettle and complicate the typical construction of home and diaspora as binary opposites” (x) and suggests instead a ‘third space’ of transnationalism existing within the nation. In this conceptualization, transnational Canadian literature offers both a critique and a construction of home, even perhaps creating what Walters suggests is “a home within the diaspora” (x). Through their writings, these authors constitute a new literary diasporic community that comes together to debate issues such as nationalism, hybridity, inclusivity, multiculturalism, and discrimination. Their characters exemplify Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s claim, in Getting a Life, that by “citing new, formerly unspeakable stories, narrators become
cultural witnesses insisting on memory as agency in its power to intervene in imposed systems of meaning” (14-15). Through intergenerational storytelling, these novels demonstrate how second-generation children of a particular diasporic subjectivity desire and attempt to generate their own constructions of self and belonging. As narrators of collective storytelling acts, their weaving together of fragments of the past and present afford themselves and listener-readers different interpretations of these moments, which contribute to new collaborative configurations of self and other and, thus, create new social understandings and spaces of belonging. Simultaneously, these literary works that highlight the need to critically evaluate a narrator’s age perspective, subjective positioning, and discursive intentionality remind readers and critics alike to be cognizant of how literary strategies engage them in the politics of listening to and telling stories of trauma and violence.


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