

Article

## Contesting Canada's Narrative of Nation through Canadian Nikkei Children's Literature

Lyle F. De SOUZA

**ABSTRACT:** This paper argues that the representations of Canadian Nikkei identities in modern Canadian Nikkei children's literature about incarceration contest Canada's narrative of nation. Adopting a postcolonial framework based on Homi Bhabha's ideas on nation and narration, I use an interview with Canadian Nikkei children's book author Susan Aihoshi combined with close readings of three works by Canadian Nikkei authors to show how they query the narrative of nation during the period in and around the Second World War. The paper uses the children's books *Naomi's Road* (2012) by Joy Kogawa, *A Child in Prison Camp* by Shizuye Takashima (1991), and *Torn Apart* by Susan Aihoshi (2012). It highlights how, despite unequal access to political power, media, and other resources; Canadian Nikkei writers can challenge long-held ideas of what makes the nation.

**KEYWORDS:** Bhabha, Canada, Nikkei, nation, children's literature

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## 1. Introduction

Canada's narrative of nation foregrounds its Anglo and Franco white majority in its nation-building particularly before the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988), therefore we miss the perspective of minorities such as Canadian Nikkei. There are fewer than 100,000 Canadian Nikkei amongst Canada's five million people of visible minorities (2006 Census). By comparison, the population of Chinese Canadians is nearly fifteen times larger. Thus, it is important that a group which is a minority amongst minorities not only has its voice heard but is portrayed in Canadian history on its own terms rather than is used as a pawn for the sake of nation-building.

Cultural producers including academics, filmmakers, and novelists have produced works which contest how minorities feature (or not) in the narrative of nation. Often created by Canadian Nikkei themselves, these works are important for giving voice to the marginalised Canadian Nikkei. Joy Kogawa's (1994) novel *Obasan* [Aunt], first published in 1981, portrays the predicament of Canadian Nikkei through the eyes of a young girl during and after the Second World War. Academic writers on Canadian Nikkei cultural memory include Roy Miki, Kirsten McAllister, and Audrey Kobayashi. Miki (2004) shows the internal dynamics of Redress, thus creating a voice for Canadian Nikkei whilst dispelling the myth that Canadian Nikkei simply accepted their incarceration during the Second World War unchallenged. McAllister (2010) explores Canadian Nikkei memory as collective practice, showing how the memory of incarceration continues to affect them. Kobayashi's various studies on Canadian Nikkei include looking at the Redress settlement in terms of its implications for race relations (Kobayashi 1992). Despite such contributions, there is no scholarship to date that has looked at how Canada's narrative of nation has been questioned by Canadian Nikkei children's literature. This study provides a bridge between the creative works of cultural producers and the scholarly writing of academics.

I argue that the representations of Canadian Nikkei identities in modern Canadian Nikkei children's literature about incarceration contest Canada's narrative of nation. Adopting a postcolonial framework based on Homi Bhabha's ideas on nation and narration, I use an interview with Canadian Nikkei children's book author Susan Aihoshi combined with close readings of three works by Canadian Nikkei authors to show how they query the narrative of nation during the period in and around the Second World War. The paper uses the children's books *Naomi's Road* (2012) by Joy Kogawa, *A Child in Prison Camp* by Shizuye Takashima (1991), and *Torn Apart* by Susan Aihoshi (2012). It highlights how, despite unequal access to political power, media, and other resources; Canadian Nikkei writers can challenge long-held ideas of what makes the nation.

## 2. Nation and Narration in Canada

Homi Bhabha's (1990) collection of essays in *Nation and Narration* address how a nation becomes building upon Benedict Anderson's (2006) work on the creation of 'imagined communities'. Although a 'postcolonial' theory, Bhabha's ideas on the narrative of nation apply to Canada (in its historically subordinate role both politically within the British Commonwealth and economically to its neighbour the United States) and to its minority communities including Canadian Nikkei. For my analysis, I use the children's books to interrogate the cultural space of the nation through its "transgressive boundaries" and "interruptive interiority" (Bhabha 2006: p 5). By taking advantage of the nation being haunted by "a particular ambivalence" (Bhabha 2006: p 1) that also haunts the "language of those who write [of the nation] and the lives of those who live it", the authors can find ways to write minorities into Canadian history.

The narrative of a nation is an ongoing process which although continually being negotiated often emerges from the will of the most dominant power groups specific to a nation. Temporal structures tend to order the national historiography (see De Certeau 1988). Canada's narrative of nation is arranged chronologically on a linear path of progress through three critical periods spanning a period of over 150 years: the formation of the Canadian Federation, the Second World War, and contemporary multicultural society. The nation's racist past, particularly the incarceration of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War, is explained as something that belongs to the past so should be understood and forgiven in that context, but has anyhow been morally overcome by the triumph of the multicultural present.

In his analysis of Canadian high school textbooks from 1945 to 2005, Ken Montgomery (2006) examines the ways in which high school Canadian history textbooks have represented national participation in wars and peace-making/keeping operations. Montgomery (2006: p 19) explores "...how national mythologies of Canada as a kinder, more tolerant, or less violent national body permeate the narratives of national history textbooks, but also position Canada, in racialized terms, as a nation superior to all others and thus burdened with the fantasized responsibility to uplift implicitly inferior spaces, nations and peoples elsewhere on the planet. ... these textbooks do not simply tell the history of the modern state of Canada and its relationship to war and war-related issues (i.e., peace-making/keeping), but rather redundantly disseminate racialized representations of Canada as a glorious and exceptional 'living organism' that matures through the development of such redeeming qualities as respect for humanity, morality, compassion, heroism and tolerance." The essence of Montgomery's argument is thus that these representations of Canada assist in the hegemonic maintenance of white power, privilege, and governance. Richard Sanders (2017) goes so far as describing Canada's narrative of nation as being fiction in his chapter *Canadian History Books as*

*Captivating Works of Fiction:*

History textbooks are not found in the fiction section of the library. Many should be. The artificial divide between works of fiction and nonfiction is well illustrated by the false narratives about Indigenous people found in Canadian school books. These texts have been key to promoting patriotism and faith in the nation-building project called 'Canada.' Achieving this goal has usually been far more important than conveying disturbing truths about the unjust treatment of First Nations by Europeans.

(Sanders np)

Children's literature serves a similar purpose to history textbooks in shaping the minds of young people including their relationship to the nation Canada. Children's literature is often interwoven into the language and culture of its origins. It also often carries an important (moral) message, or something to be learned. Minority children's literature therefore has an important role not just in emphasising the plurality of language and culture in Canada, but in positioning minorities as valuable contributors to national history. Particularly when they are placed on national school curriculums (as Kogawa's works in particular usually are), children's books offer a powerful opportunity to play on Bhabha's ambivalence of the nation thus directly influencing and educating future generations. In the book *Children's Literature and National Identity* (Meek 2001), contributors show that questions of national identity in children's literature are highlighted which we often take for granted. Yet, as Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) work on cultural capital and legitimate culture helps us to see, the Anglo and Franco majorities in Canada dominate the nation's economic, social, and cultural capital thus dominating culture including the narrative of nation. In her book 'From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood: Children's Literature and the Construction of Canadian Identity', Elizabeth Galway (2008, p 11) shows the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon dominance in Canadian children's literature:

As Canadian writers attempted to define the country, a variety of definitions of what it meant to be "Canadian" emerged in children's literature. In many instances Anglophone writers display an ethnic bias, with many tales focusing on characters of British descent. Some writers exhibit the feeling that Canada needs to preserve its largely British population as the norm, defining the Canadian identity as being predominately Celtic or Anglo-Saxon at heart. Yet there are other stories from the late-nineteenth century that demonstrate a growing awareness and acceptance of Canada's diversity.

It therefore requires deft skill for Canadian Nikkei children's authors to contest Canada's narrative of nation.

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Children's literature is often highly ideological, deeply embedded with issues of race, gender, class, and identity (see Hunt 2006). If children's authors are successful their books can have a profound effect on both children and adults beyond what is possible in other literary genres. The moral purpose and didacticism of children's literature is particularly prevalent in recent works and from broad postcolonial contexts (within which we could include the case of Canadian Nikkei writers). Its effect on children can be particularly strong and unique, thus distinguishing it from 'adult literature' and other art forms. Psychoanalysts such as Bettelheim (1976) have described how children's literature unconsciously shapes their perception and guides their development. In the case of Canadian Nikkei, children's literature is particularly important if we agree with Feagin and Van Ausdale (2001) who claim that at ages as young as three years old children have already formed race ideologies of the adult world and can use children's books to create and negotiate racist attitudes.

As a narrative device, using a child's voice encourages readers to empathise and be sympathetic to their suffering. It allows the events of history to be framed morally in simple black-and-white terms, which is especially of use when teaching schoolchildren (Potucek 1995). Indeed, Canadian elementary school teachers often use children's stories narrating trauma to develop "an interpretive lens of critical nostalgia...placing the question of contact zones within the context of memory studies, trauma studies, curriculum theory and critical pedagogies related to remembrance" (Strong-Wilson et al. 2014: 79). A child's voice is also useful as a temporal device, utilising the full lifespan of an adult whilst telling a life story, with the ability to encourage flashbacks that disrupt linear chronological narratives. Children's books give a clear moral message. In Kogawa's case in particular in which Old Man Gower sexually abuses her fictional child Naomi, there is a corresponding motif of Canadian Nikkei innocence and victimisation. Kogawa also uses Western and Japanese fairy tales in *Obasan* (including *Momotaro*) because "the discourse of fairy tale constitutes a distinct language, coping mechanism, and interpretive tool that are used to explore and articulate historical/collective and individual trauma" (Swenky in Wilson 2011: 159).

### 3. Canadian Nikkei in the Nation Canada

In their early history from their first arrival Manzo Nagano in 1868 Canadian Nikkei were Othered by society and government who wished to strengthen the idea of a unified white Canadian nation. Canada at that time was still in the early stages of its development as a nation-state, so Canadian Nikkei *issei* [first-generation] pioneers were not able to relate to Canada as a nation in the way that people can today more than 150 years after the proclamation of the Canadian Confederation in 1867. The concept of a national identity was still nascent. *Issei* were open, however, towards learning more about their new home. However, they would find resistance to being accepted as part of the burgeoning state since

it was based on a “logic of ethnicity” (Kymlicka 2015: p 1), specifically Anglo- and Franco-whiteness whereby the “federal government sought to re-emphasize Canada’s ‘duality’—i.e., to re-emphasize the equality of British and French as the “founding nations” (Kymlicka 2015: p 2).

*Issei* suffered racism and discrimination both from the local population and government, such that it “had defined their communities since the first immigrants arrived in the 1870’s” (Kobayashi 2005: p 28). For pioneer Nikkei to Canada, their personal identities were initially overwhelmed by their Othering as ‘yellow peril’ (Lee 2007: p 550) which made their cultural identity externally mandated, partial, and collectivised. “For the Chinese and Japanese, it was argued that they were unassimilable peoples who did not know what it would take to be a citizen” (Kordan 2002: p 123). Canada at that time was defining what was meant by the term Canadian citizen, yet it is clear that it was based on ethnic whiteness thus not including Asians (Kymlicka 2015: p 6). Although ideally the assimilation of non-Anglo or non-Franco Canadians was considered “not only desirable but necessary...for the stability of the nation” because it was based on whiteness this was possible only for some ethnic groups and excluded those of Japanese descent (Sunahara 1981: 117).

Along with Chinese Canadians, *issei* were one of the main targets of the 1907 Powell Street anti-Asian riot. The government denied them the right to vote and eligibility for social assistance (Roy 2007). The Asiatic Exclusion League was formed in 1907 and eventually abandoned in 1925 after protests by Canadian Nikkei. The provincial government limited the number of passports given to male Canadian Nikkei and restricted them from certain professions. Although Canadian Nikkei could naturalise and children born to *issei* were automatically citizens, Canadian Nikkei still had limited rights so could not consider themselves yet fully Canadian. In terms of cultural identity, this polarised Canadian Nikkei between a binary of alienation or of wishing to belong to wider Canadian society. Some of those who were the target of racism would look inwards to other Canadian Nikkei to draw support and understanding. They would consider their cultural identity in terms of their differences (in appearance, language, attitudes, and so on) to local white Canadians. The denial of some rights could appear as the sanctioning by the Canadian government of their inferior status within Canada. Alternatively, being denied rights would make some Canadian Nikkei, particularly *nisei* [second-generation] want these rights even more. Their reaction to the discrimination they faced was to confront it or to attempt to integrate as much as possible in order for Canadians to accept them. Canadian Nikkei expressed their desire for acceptance through their high rate of naturalisation and by volunteering to help Canada’s military campaign in the First World War.

*Sansei* [third-generation] and some *nisei* though very few *issei* lobbied for many years from before the Second World War to a couple of decades after it to gain or reinstate their rights, plus to gain citizenship (Roy 2007: p 309). The split between the different generations

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of Nikkei is important because it shows that each generation held different experiences of Canada and attitudes towards their rights and citizenship. Generally, *issei* tended to want to forget the trauma of their incarceration and maintain a stoical silence. On the other hand, *sansei* grew up with western values and education which led to them demanding better rights and citizenship. *Nisei* were often caught somewhere between on the spectrum although perhaps slightly towards *sansei* values. Pamela Sugiman, a *sansei* Canadian Nikkei professor at Ryerson University and author of books on Canadian *nisei* women, writes of citizenship and Canadian Nikkei history:

My interpretation of Japanese Canadian history, moreover, is one in which *citizenship*, at a particular historical moment, suddenly seemed to mean *nothing*. Yet, at the same time, paradoxically, it grew to mean *everything* in the lives of persons of Japanese origin. This seeming contradiction was perhaps most acutely felt by the *nisei*, who were born and raised in Canada, yet who bore the physical markers of “Japaneseness” [emphasis in original]

(Sugiman 2012: np)

The Canadian government forcibly incarcerated Canadian Nikkei in British Columbia during the Second World War in response to the attack on Pearl Harbour by the Imperial Japanese navy. The government detained Canadian Nikkei without charge or trial. After the war, Canadian Nikkei were released but only given a choice of relocation within Canada east of the Rockies, or deportation to Japan, which was chosen by about 3,700 people<sup>1</sup> (Broadfoot 1977: p 309). Racism persisted, including at the top level of government. Prime Minister Mackenzie King's wrote: “It is fortunate that the use of the bomb should have been upon the Japanese rather than upon the white races of Europe” (King Diary, 6 August 1945). As Peter Ward (2002) explains in *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Towards Orientals in British Columbia*, it was not only the government through their public policy promulgating the idea of a Canada based on whiteness but citizens and media too.

The narrative of nation claims this wartime treatment was an aberration and that since then Canada has gained moral high ground by becoming leading advocates for multiculturalism and accepting refugees. However, incarceration shapes the cultural identity of Canadian Nikkei more than nearly anything else does because it is such a unique shared experience. Filmmaker Karen Suzuki describes its lasting impact:

I was fortunate to have my paternal grandparents in my life until recently and though they didn't talk about the internment, I took it upon myself to learn about it and was always amazed at how they endured that and yet seemed to be so happy and at peace with their lives as Canadians. In

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<sup>1</sup> Initially up to 21,000 people were prepared to leave Canada for Japan; Takata (1983: 142).

many ways I believe that my cultural identity is shaped more by the internment than by Japan, considering the amount of mixed marriages that happened after... As for Japanese Canadian culture, the story of the internment needs to be taught to each generation so that it won't happen again to any people in Canada. That is the legacy that is important to me.

(Suzuki 2013)

Whilst there are many shared characteristics amongst Nikkei—including historical similarities in the Americas where Nikkei were also treated as the enemy—their individual histories do vary appreciably. The period of incarceration to Canadian Nikkei is undoubtedly a significant one and one that has become their dominant cultural memory. It provides the impetus for some of the most striking cultural productions by Canadian Nikkei who have attempted to make sense of the events of the period, highlight the injustices, and lead the way forward.

#### 4. Joy Kogawa's *Naomi's Road*

Joy Kogawa was born in Vancouver in 1935, a second-generation (*nisei*) Canadian Nikkei. She was incarcerated along with her family during the Second World War, which influenced her to write her best-known work the semi-autobiographical novel *Obasan* (Kogawa 1994), first published in 1981. Her other novels include *Itsuka* (Kogawa 1992) later rewritten as *Emily Kato* (2005) which acts as a sequel to *Obasan* continuing the narrative of Canadian Nikkei during the period of Redress. She has also published poetry over a forty-year span and has received many awards including being made a Member of the Order of Canada in 2006. Her two children's books, *Naomi's Road* (Kogawa 2012) and *Naomi's Tree* (Kogawa 2011) feature the same protagonist Naomi who also appears in *Obasan*.

*Naomi's Road* was first published in 1986 which is significant since it is in the period just before the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988). Although the work appears to fit into the contemporary narrative of nation where minority voices are to be embraced, I argue that the book is in fact insisting that minorities have been an important part of Canadian history since well before then. The book was later adapted by Vancouver Opera into an opera which was performed across British Columbia in elementary schools and to the public. It tells the story of a Canadian Nikkei family's incarceration in Canada during the Second World War. The story is told through the eyes of Naomi Nakane, a child during the incarceration. This perspective, combined with the predominantly female gendered perspective (the other two main characters being her mother and *obasan*), provide a contrasting approach to how the narrative of nation glosses over Canadian Nikkei incarceration using it as part of a longer-running overall narrative arc. The 'road' refers literally to the journey from Vancouver on the west coast to the internment camp in the British Columbia interior, and metaphorically



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to Naomi's growth from child to adult in understanding the predicament of Canadian Nikkei in Canada. Through their interactions with each other and through revisiting painfully suppressed memories, the characters struggle to come to terms with their history in Canada and their position as Canadian Nikkei in Canada. The story questions whether there is virtue in silence, whether it is worth remembering the traumatic past, and whether there is a place for (Canadian Nikkei) immigrants in Canada.

Kogawa uses the relationship between Naomi and the white Canadian girl Mitzi to represent Canadian Nikkei and white Canadians respectively. At first, the emphasis is on difference and exclusion. This mirrors the narrative of narration of the wartime period and earlier with its white majority denying belonging (to reinforce their own sense of nation) to the Other. Although only a young girl, Naomi is acutely aware of her difference both culturally and physically to white Canadians and how she does not belong:

The school in Granton is different from the one in Slocan. Most of the children here don't have black hair like Stephen and me. And they don't have to stay home to work like us either. Only the children like Stephen and me have to work.

(Kogawa 2012: p 36)

Mitzi is hostile towards Naomi and her brother Stephen. She points out to them both in their first encounter that: "It's not your country" (p 22). Later, after Stephen trades his marbles for a Union Jack flag and stands to attention then salutes it, Mitzi still disputes their belonging despite his apparent patriotism: "That's not your flag" (p 24).

However, over the course of the story, the relationship between Naomi and Mitzi changes into one of friendship. The transformation begins due to their shared love of dolls. Naomi uses her doll as a comforter to soothe her suffering due to her absent mother. Her wish is "Most of all though, I want to be a child forever and forever" (p 5) although she knows that "But children grow up" (p 5). Naomi is inconsolable when her doll goes missing during her train journey to the internment camp. It means not only the ultimate detachment from the memory of her mother but also the end of her childhood and its innocence. When Mitzi shares her dolls, Naomi is offered not a reconnection to her mother and childhood but something new—a connection to Canada and belonging. The connection is deep and meaningful:

WE TWO ARE A SISTERHOOD

WE SEAL THIS SECRET

WITH OUR BLOOD

LYLE F. DE SOUZA

We're blood sisters! I feel like jumping out of the covers. But I mustn't let anyone know. It's a secret. A blood sister is forever. If we tell anyone, the magic will be broken and our secret codes will be destroyed. If one of us gets caught in a war, we have the power to rescue the other.

(Kogawa 2012: p 41)

By developing a friendship between a Canadian Nikkei and a white Canadian, their separation along ethnic lines becomes less important, almost disappearing. They are both Canadian. Their blood does not separate them, rather it joins them together. The narrative of nation depending on using Canadian Nikkei as Other to develop a national identity based on whiteness becomes problematic when both white and non-white exist together harmoniously. The racial nationalism of the period during and just after the Second World War in Canada organising Canadians along different lines based on their 'blood' is challenged by Naomi's attesting of her friendship with Mitzi. Naomi uses the words 'blood sisters' not as a way of racializing herself and her white friend but as method to circumvent the socially constructed categories (and hierarchies) of race in Canada. Naomi also challenges the notion that her Japaneseness is something permanently ascribed to her by her own blood. Overcoming "the logic of 'White' or 'Yellow' blood (Kowner 2012: p 273) challenges the narrative of nation based around racial nationalism in Canada. Temporality is also important here. Whereas the narrative of nation only starts to include minorities during the period just before the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988), by including them as early as the period around the Second World War Kogawa is showing us that minorities should be involved in the narrative of nation from the beginning of their migration to Canada and not just in the convenient contemporary context for promoting multiculturalism.

We cannot merely dismiss the participation of a minority group by a one-sided history. "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time" (Bhabha 2006: p 1). By taking advantage of the ambivalence of the culturally indeterminate nation Kogawa uses her Canadian Nikkei characters to contest the narrative of nation fixated on whiteness. By showing how naturally and easily friendship between children occurs, Kogawa implies that perceived difference between the majority and minority populations in Canada need not be divisive, indeed it can even be celebrated. If, according to Bhabha (2006: p 1), "The nation's 'coming into being' as a system of cultural signification, as the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity, emphasizes this instability of knowledge", then Kogawa is aware of the importance of such cultural signification and even seems to playfully acknowledge this at the very end of the story when Naomi reaches the cusp of adulthood with its greater understanding and lack of childhood innocence.

"Yes," the minister says, smiling and nodding. "The world is full of signs. We have to know how to read them."

Therefore, *Naomi's Road* serves not just as a watered down version of her more well-known 'adult' novel *Obasan*, but an influential work in its own right in questioning the narration of nation. Kogawa's use of children both as an audience and as the main characters showcases the issues in clear and unambiguous terms. It needs to be said that Kogawa was not the first Canadian Nikkei to write a children's book questioning the narrative of nation. That honour belongs to Shizuye Takashima who published in the early 1970s.

### 5. Shizuye Takashima's *A Child in Prison Camp*

Kogawa enjoyed a social relationship with Shizuye Takashima (born 1928 in Vancouver, died 2005) an artist and writer. Takashima was best known as an artist with paintings and sketches currently held at Toronto Public Library's Osbourne Collection, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Burnaby Art Gallery, and private collections. Her artwork contrasts her illustrated novel *A Child in Prison Camp* (Takashima 1991), first published in 1971. Whereas her art is "best recognized for her use of warm and welcoming watercolour paintings" (Learning to See: Shizuye Takashima in Retrospect, 2009) her novel shows the bleak reality of a young girl incarcerated during the Second World War. Some of Takashima's art does reference incarceration directly, including a series of paintings in the 1970s such as "In August is O-bon, the Festival for the Dead" and "We Wait for the Train in Small Groups Scattered Alongside the Track" which both appear in *A Child in Prison Camp*.

Although Takashima was fourteen when the Canadian government uprooted her family during World War II, in *A Child in Prison Camp* she makes herself two years younger because she "felt younger" and "seemed so helpless" at the time (Shizuye Takashima Biography, n.d.). The Canadian government forced her four brothers to separate from the family and sent them to another camp. Joseph, her younger brother, eventually joined the Canadian Army and served in India. The government sent Takashima along with her parents and sister to a relocation camp near New Denver, seven hundred miles from Vancouver.

*A Child in Prison Camp* therefore shares striking similarities with Kogawa's *Naomi's Road*. They were both published before Redress and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988). They are both semi-autobiographical children's books, written by female authors featuring their younger selves as protagonists. They both hold a long-standing influence and significance, revitalised during and after the socio-political changes due to Redress and Canadian multiculturalism. *A Child in Prison Camp* is also distinctive for several reasons. First, it is one of the first direct attempts by a Canadian Nikkei to appeal widely to a geographically diverse group of people as well as to both adults and children. The awards it won in Japan, Italy, the United States, as well as Canada reflect this. Second, its rhetoric is not

only through words but through illustrations too. *A Child in Prison Camp*, which has similarities to *The Diaries of Anne Frank*, also differs from the other books in this paper since it presents itself as non-fiction. By comparing it with Kogawa's children's literature, we can see differences between how Takashima and Kogawa remember their childhood. Takashima's narrative also offers the possibility to explore reasons for the emergence of the Japanese community in Canada and the pre-war Canadian Nikkei community.

Although Kogawa's *Obasan*, and to a lesser extent Kogawa's children's novels, have become synonymous with the fictional representation of Canadian Nikkei during their incarceration, *A Child in Prison Camp* pre-dates the first publication of *Obasan* by ten years and the first publication of *Naomi's Road* by fifteen years. This timing is important as it explains why the novel did not have the same impact as Kogawa's works in contesting the narration of narration. The fact that it was a children's book perhaps also reduced its impact on adult readers and beyond the Canadian Nikkei community including the Canadian government, although it was useful in stirring the emotional consciousness of its Canadian Nikkei readers:

Within the context of the Japanese Canadian community, it gave many sceptical Japanese Canadians who had attempted to forget their past a personal and emotional perspective which allowed them to identify with the movement for redress. But as a fictive account it did not rely on systematically deployed research procedures to generate findings, nor was it produced in association with a reputable research institute. Thus it was not a text that could be used directly to negotiate with the Canadian government.

(McAllister 1999: np)

*A Child in Prison Camp* tells the story of twelve-year-old girl Shichan (short for Shizuye Takashima) and her Japanese-Canadian family in Canada during and after the Second World War. Shichan's road—like Naomi's—also includes life before incarceration, incarceration itself, and life after incarceration. It is set over the period from 1942 to 1964 moving across locations in Canada including Vancouver and Toronto. In addition to Shichan, the main characters are her family members, though in contrast to *Naomi's Road* male characters dominate this book particularly Shichan's father and brother. Although the themes in the book are similar to *Naomi's Road*, there is a greater emphasis on art as metaphor, particularly the landscapes of Canada.

As in *Naomi's Road*, the young girl protagonist of *A Child in Prison Camp* and other Canadian Nikkei are Othered by the dominant white majority. Shichan's father captures their predicament:

I have to pay all the taxes, but I have never been allowed to vote. Even now, here, they took our land our houses, our children, everything.

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We are their enemies, don't you understand?  
I have no desire to be part of this country.  
There is no future for you here either.

(Takashima 1991: p 47)

Unlike in *Naomi's Road*, the young girl Shichan does not become friends with a white Canadian, instead her solution to the problem of her belonging is to imagine cultural identity as being free from the national borders of Canada:

The small candle casts an orange glow on my book. I am reading about Marco Polo again. My mind leaves our house. I hear Yuki and Rose talking quietly, but soon their voices fade away. I feel like a princess being rescued by a brave, dark Tartar. I see the Chinese palace as my hero carries me to his emperor's magnificent summer home, all tiled and mosaic, filled with fountains in the lush gardens. I close my eyes, and dream. The Tartar comes to life, hands me splendid jewels to be placed around my hair. He takes my hand and guides me gently into the garden. I am not afraid as I reach for another world.

(Takashima 1991: p 30)

Freeing cultural identity from any singular national ownership problematizes a narrative of nation based on a simple binary of either belonging to the nation Canada (even at its margins as a minority) or not. Takashima's text was published in 1971 well before the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988), though she will have been aware of the tension between the offering to immigrants of belonging to Canada yet the impossibility of doing so before the postwar period due to the narrative of nation being based on whiteness. Cultures and nations are socially constructed, therefore just as easily as they can be constructed they can also be deconstructed, or change to suit the purposes of the narrative of nation through the legitimising act of representation. Despite coming from a relatively disadvantageous position compared to the white majority with regards to economic, social, and cultural capital, Takashima's character's wish to belong beyond Canada destabilises this legitimacy and draws attention to the political strategy of the narrative of nation.

Takashima explores Bhabha's idea of the ambivalent figure of the nation through the character Shichan who neither joins forces with white Canadians into an agreed 'Canadian' cultural identity, nor collapses into the essentialised notion of Japaneseness her father frequently does:

The Japanese are stubborn and fierce fighters. They have that old samurai tradition which the western people cannot understand.

(Takashima 1991: p 43)

The narratives and discourses that “signify a sense of ‘nationness’” (Bhabha 2006: p 2) in Canada are affected by the temporary and transitional characteristics of cultural representation. Therefore, *nisei* writers such as Kogawa and Takashima who have lived through incarceration can later write a new narrative taking advantage of this impermanence and indeterminacy in the ambivalent figure of the nation. Perhaps Canadian Nikkei do not need to belong, or it is even impossible for them to belong. Shichan’s wish to belong beyond just Canada is emblematic of the transgressive boundaries Bhabha claims is characteristic of modern national belonging:

America leads to Africa, the nations of Europe and Asia meet in Australia; the margins of the nation displace the centre; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis. The island story is told from the eye of the aeroplane which becomes that ornament that holds the public and the private in suspense. The bastion of Englishness crumbles at the sight of immigrants and factory workers. The great Whitmanesque sensorium of America is exchanged for a Warhol blowup, a Kruger installation, or Mapplethorpe’s naked bodies. ‘Magical realism’ after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world. Amidst these exorbitant images of the nation-space in its transnational dimension there are those who have not yet found their nation: amongst them the Palestinians and the Black South Africans.

(Bhabha 2006: pp 6–7)

*A Child in Prison Camp* therefore shares several distinct similarities yet also has several distinct differences with *Naomi’s Road* in how it questions the narrative of nation. Although it was published well before the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, it was still conceived during the period when multiculturalism, identity, and belonging were a topic of intense national debate. Rather than taking Kogawa’s approach of deconstructing apparent racial difference, Takashima’s method of illustrating the multiple possibilities of belonging was ahead of its time and something that future *sansei* and *yonsei* [fourth-generation] Canadian Nikkei writers such as Susan Aihoshi would also tackle in their works although from different starting standpoints.

## 6. Susan Aihoshi’s *Torn Apart*

Writers of Takashima’s *nisei* generation differ from Canadian Nikkei writers born after incarceration in how they approach the issues related to the narration of nation such as memory, place, trauma, and identity; although they maintain the same goal of contesting it. Writers born after incarceration had to rediscover it for themselves, because it was something that elder generations usually did not discuss openly. Susan Aihoshi exemplifies this:

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I never had a true sense of being a *sansei* or even feeling Japanese when I was young. That was also true when I became an adult. I did *odori* [Japanese style dancing] and went to Japanese school as a child but had no real connection to those things and quit before long. I was more interested in what I thought was Canadian culture—comic books and television. I enjoyed Japanese food (and still do!) but back then it was more exciting to try foods of other countries. I realize now how much I emphasized my Canadianness when I was growing up rather than accepting and celebrating my Japanese heritage. It was only this spring that I attended my *first* tea ceremony during Haru Matsuri at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre.

(Aihoshi in Norm Masaji Ibuki 2012)

Susan Aihoshi is the Toronto-based *sansei* (third-generation) author of *Dear Canada: Torn Apart: The Internment Diary of Mary Kobayashi, Vancouver, British Columbia, 1941* (Aihoshi 2012a). She has studied creative writing and has two degrees in English literature. Much of her career has been in publishing and she currently works as a freelance editor. Publishing *Torn Apart* “fulfilled my long-time dream to be an author” (Aihoshi 2012b). Aihoshi shares some similarities with Kogawa and Takashima. They are all female Canadian Nikkei writers. They all draw from the experience of the incarceration of their families, writing through the eyes of children. However, *Torn Apart* arrives significantly after the first publication of *A Child in Prison Camp* and *Naomi's Road*, so although they are on the same subject matter Aihoshi does not approach incarceration for Canadian Nikkei the same way. Indeed, Aihoshi points out how she consciously tried to put distance between her work and Kogawa's:

I deliberately tried to avoid any inter-textual relationship with Joy Kogawa's story, *Obasan*, which also focuses on a Japanese/Canadian family uprooted from their life in Vancouver and sent to a Slocan Valley internment camp. At a minimum I wanted the small details of my own fictional family's everyday life to differ from Joy's fictional family. And Joy's novel, as well as her adaption of it for children, *Naomi's Road* is much more poetic stylistically than the requisite diary format in my book demanded by the series. But there was one thing I never forgot from reading *Obasan* which was Joy's description of the board game *Yellow Peril*. There was something so striking in the mental image of these young children playing a game so steeped in propaganda that I wrote a section in my own book where the same game makes an appearance.

(Aihoshi 2013)

*Torn Apart* uses the Aihoshi family's experience of incarceration in British Columbia during the Second World War to tell the story of a young twelve-year-old girl, Mary Kobayashi. When the Canadian government views Canadian Nikkei as 'enemy aliens' rather than fellow Canadian citizens, Mary's family is 'torn apart' with her being separated from all

of her family except her two sisters. The diary format of *Torn Apart* naturally leads to a focus on its writer, Mary. As in *Naomi's Road*, female characters fill a majority of the lead and supporting character roles. Whilst the themes of the novel remain similar to those in *Naomi's Road* and *A Child in Prison Camp*, there is an emphasis in Aihoshi's work on the struggle of the protagonist to overcome racism directed against her and find her place within the nation Canada.

Critical race theory has shown how ideas of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' have been borne from (colonial) European and North American political history, often also linked to narratives of nation. Canadian Nikkei cultural identity has been affected by dominant historical representations of them, particularly when politicised and normalised through the national media. Stuart Hall showcases the role of the media in the construction of race ideologies, particularly in the construction of blackness, in *Racist Ideologies and the Media* (Hall 2000). Canadian Nikkei have been seen as a threat whilst being labelled as the yellow peril in the early twentieth century (see Goellnicht 2008; Miki 2001). Gary Okihiro writes in "Perils of the Body and Mind" of how people of Asian descent are purposefully contained in part because it helps the narration of nation based on whiteness:

The idea of the yellow peril helped to define that challenge posed by Asia to Europe's dominance and was inscribed within the colonialist discourse as a justification for the imposition of whites over non-whites, of civilization/Christianity over barbarism/paganism. Like Orientalism, however, yellow peril discourse was hegemonic but not all powerful, breaking down or changing when confronted with Asian resistance. The fear, whether real or imagined, arose from the fact of the rise of non-white peoples and their defiance of white supremacy. And while serving to contain the Other, the idea of the yellow peril also helped to define the white identity, within both a nationalist and an internationalist frame.

(Okihiro 1994: pp 137–138)

The representation of Canadian Nikkei as a 'yellow peril' is addressed directly in the work of Aihoshi, as well as by Kogawa. It is a derogatory label which has been used to stereotype East Asians. It was first used in relation to Genghis Khan and continues to be evoked whenever the West feels threatened by the East (Marchetti 1994: p 2). That Aihoshi and Kogawa confront the term in relation to a board game called 'Yellow Peril' from the early twentieth century is significant. In this case, Bourdieu's (1983) metaphor of the game in his field theory becomes real. The creator of the board game, in other words the omnipotent power which makes the doxa (rules), is the Canadian government. The players are given white pieces to control; therefore, they assume the role of the white dominant majority in the field. The stake of the game is to control and block the movement of the yellow pieces (the Canadian Nikkei minority). Whether intentionally or not, by echoing Bourdieu's structure



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the authors show that the field is relational. The habitus (feel for the game) and capital (stakes) may only operate and exist in consanguinity with the field. However, the field is relational, meaning the real is relational too. Thus, we can clearly observe how Canadian Nikkei are used as pawns to create cohesion and unity around notions of national (Canadian) identity. Aihoshi shows in her novel how this representation becomes internalised even by young Canadian Nikkei:

Wednesday, April 15

At supper tonight Harry mentioned a new board game the kids at Hastings Elementary are playing. It's his birthday soon, so Kay asked him to describe it. He said it's called Yellow Peril! We stared at him in disbelief as he went on to explain how a few brave defenders can fight a great number of enemies.

Everyone was dead silent until Emma finally told Harry he would NOT be receiving that particular game. Then she explained that "yellow peril" is what *hakujin* [white person] call the Japanese who might invade North America. It's a phrase being used to convince people that *all* Japanese are evil. Harry said he was sorry, but mama told him this showed why he shouldn't want what everyone else wants. Wartime propaganda again.

(Aihoshi 2012a: p 99)

The strong reaction of Aihoshi's characters against the term 'yellow peril' used by white Canadians to label Canadian Nikkei is the first major step in repositioning themselves in the narrative of nation. Instead of meekly accepting the term, or pretending to ignore it, by confronting the term head-on Aihoshi allows the possibility for Canadian Nikkei to eventually be represented on their own terms. Even when Mary's elder brother Tad jests that "...Geechan's identity card is yellow because he's not naturalized, so he's part of the 'yellow peril'" Mary's elder sister Emma's response is emphatic: "Emma got really mad and gave Tad her famous 'look'. She told him not to say that again *ever*, even if he's kidding!" (Aihoshi 2012a: p 16). Whereas Kogawa subtly alludes to the term 'yellow peril' Aihoshi is more forceful in her rhetoric. However, none of the children's authors in this study take the further step of reclaiming the term (as has occurred for instance in the case of Blacks in the United States with the word 'nigger'). Only recently has this started to happen such as in the film adaptation of Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians* where the director Jon Chu wrote to UK musicians Coldplay to ask permission to use their song "Yellow" since it completes the journey of the complicated relationship (East) Asians have with the term (Sun 2018).

*Torn Apart* was not just Aihoshi's own project since it was commissioned as part of the *Dear Canada* series after being suggested by Aihoshi's former boss, Hugh Brewster an established writer. The *Dear Canada* series seeks to recreate through fiction different periods of Canadian history in order that children can relate to it better. As such, the audience the

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book aims for is perhaps more general than that which Kogawa and Takashima aimed at in their children's books. Aihoshi seems to appreciate her different audience, and she appreciates how different generations discover and produce cultural identity whilst contesting the narrative of nation:

I am hopeful that there will be a new flowering of cultural productions in all forms. I have met some of the younger generations who are *hapa* or a mixed race and they seem to be searching for more information about their Japaneseness or are more willing to recognise that their heritage, even a small part, has played a role in their cultural identity. They certainly seem to be more open-minded about that than I had been.

(Aihoshi 2013)

For her own writing, Aihoshi considers that even when her subject material is not directly about Canadian Nikkei incarceration the strong cultural memory of it informs her work and this is closely linked to identity and belonging within the narrative of the nation Canada:

Again, prior to 2012 I may not have thought my cultural identity informs my work. Obviously, *Torn Apart* with its subject matter of the uprooting and internment is about being Japanese/Canadian but when I go back and examine some of my unpublished work I recognise now that I had long been exploring some of the issues pertinent to my cultural identity without realising it. I have written a number of short stories based on my childhood. In them the protagonist struggles to be accepted as simply Canadian and yet cannot fit in socially because she belongs to a visible minority. I thought it was simply writing about the struggle to establish selfhood without considering the role that my Japanese heritage played in that.

(Aihoshi 2013)

The diary format of *Torn Apart* hints at realism in constructions of events around the period of uprooting for Canadian Nikkei. This is augmented by Aihoshi's meticulous research on incarceration (Norm Masaji Ibuki 2012). The target audience of children lends to a writing style that presents the issues faced by Canadian Nikkei simply yet starkly and poignantly, as we see when Tad considers joining the Canadian army "to show how loyal Japanese Canadians are":

Tad explained that's not why he'd like to sign up—he really wants to fight for Canada to show how loyal Japanese Canadians are, and maybe enlisting will help us get the vote... Being able to vote is something Papa and Mama have wanted for a long time. They supported the four Japanese Canadians chosen by our community to ask the government in Ottawa for the vote. That was five years ago, and Papa and Mama are still disappointed that nothing has changed.

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(Aihoshi 2012a: p 12)

That a Canadian Nikkei—albeit the fictional Tad in this case—is willing to fight and lose his life as a roundabout way of being fully accepted in Canada and gaining full rights (such as the right to vote) shows how important this was.

*Torn Apart* therefore comes from a different generation and reflection to *Naomi's Road* and *A Child in Prison Camp*, though it shares the same goal of questioning the narrative of nation.

### 7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at how modern and contemporary Canadian Nikkei children's authors have contested the narrative of nation in Canada through their representation of characters in their works. Their strategies range in complexity and method. As well as tackling stereotypes and (mis-)representations of them in the narrative of nation, they show the possibility of co-existence and place for Canadian Nikkei in society, or altogether escaping it. The paper shows that it is possible in the present to interrogate a dominant narrative of nation originating from the past.

These children's books have forced Canadians to rethink the narrative of nation in the period of Canadian history including incarceration. They have also been influential in allowing other Canadians to empathise with the plight of Canadian Nikkei. The books are important because they were among the first to offer an alternative voice to the narrative of nation, particularly the remembering of incarceration. Although this might also have been possible in other ways, for example, through personal interviews with survivors of the period, children's books are effective because they are able to combine devices such as silence, history, memory, and trauma to collectively portray a nuanced representation of Canadian Nikkei. Although, arguably, 'adult fiction' by Canadian Nikkei writers not least Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* might be more successful and effective overall towards adults in offering counter-narratives to the official discourses about Canadian nation, the children's books by the authors in this study have a crucial role in shaping the minds of future generations of Canadian citizens.

These children's writers have an important role in bridging the gap between official (often national) histories and the trauma they and their community have suffered. It is no surprise that key historical moments in Canadian Nikkei history—their arrival in Canada, incarceration, Redress, and multiculturalism—form the key topics and themes anchoring many of their works particularly in literature. Writers have sought to work through trauma (in Dominick La Capra's sense) through exploring their own cultural identity, specifically their representation and belonging in Canada. Writers share this terrain of the diasporic subject with some of the most famous current international authors such as V.S. Naipaul,

Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, and Michael Ondaatje. All are concerned with how the past affects the present leading to the “unhomely condition of the modern world” (Bhabha 1994: p 10) where diasporic identities are fragmented in modernity. All are also concerned at their most fundamental level with a literary interpretation of the question ‘Who am I?’ and seek to answer that question by unravelling the power relations around identity and nation.

Using Bhabha’s ideas on the narrative of nation we can see that it creates a relativisation of racial attributions between the majority white population and the non-visible minorities such as Canadian Nikkei. Whilst sometimes engaging with the narrative of nation to point out its inconsistencies, these children’s books by Canadian Nikkei have mostly used a dual-pronged strategy of self-representation (in other words, reclaiming the representations of themselves) and realism (through *realia*). Some may argue that Canada has already accepted liability for its wrongdoings in the past through Redress and that most contemporary Canadian Nikkei exhibit high assimilation and high ethnicity thus vindicating the multiculturalism model. However, multiculturalism is increasingly being questioned and discussed around the world, so debates on the representation of minorities within narratives of nation are likely to become even more prevalent in the future.

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