

Literary Canadian internment narratives and redress politics

THE ABSENT VOICE

In *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice*, writer and activist Roy Miki recounts the date September 22, 1988, when Prime Minister Brian Mulroney apologized in Parliament for wartime measures under which the government of Canada, during the Second World War, “wrongfully incarcerated, seized the property, and disenfranchised thousands of citizens of Japanese ancestry” (quoted in Miki, 2004, p. 4). Miki, who had negotiated the Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement, observed as a silent “guest” in the House of Commons gallery as the prime minister announced the agreement. Miki also acknowledged that New Democrat opposition leader Ed Broadbent responded by reading a passage from Joy Kogawa’s landmark novel *Obasan* (1981), a literary text that had gained much public attention for its emotional portrayal of Japanese-Canadian upheaval during the war. Broadbent himself was tearful as he read, “There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep” (quoted in Miki, 2004, p. 7).

Miki remarks that in this moment of formal redress, *Obasan* stood in for an otherwise absent “Japanese-Canadian” voice that “reflected the inner turbulence of the redress movement and its connections to a lengthy history of estrangement from the Canadian nation” (Miki, 2004, p. 8). In the scene that Miki describes, literature further serves as what political scientist Matt James defines as a “system of interest intermediation” (2013, pp. 31-32), a means through which social groups can raise their issues to government officials, and by which governments can, in turn, reshape these issues. This brief essay examines the intermediary role of literature in the space between social movement activism and government

BY RYAN GIBBS

Ryan Gibbs (MA) is an English professor at Lambton College in Sarnia, Ontario, currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Western Ontario. His dissertation focuses on the intersection between Canadian internment fiction and redress politics. His review of *Behind Barbed Wire: Creative Works on the Internment of Italian Canadians* has been accepted to *Italian Canadiana*, and his own creative work has appeared in *Tower Poetry* and *The Windsor Review*.

[L]iterature ... serves ... as a site of redress for wartime internments.

policy to demonstrate how literature functions as a site of redress for wartime internments.

THE ENEMY ALIEN

To begin with, language itself was an important means of wartime internment. As Miki explains, a nation cannot *intern* its own citizens because such an act would violate the Geneva Convention. But when the government reclassified Japanese-Canadian citizens as enemy aliens, internment came to legitimate the numerous violations of citizenship rights experienced by Japanese Canadians when they were detained and relocated from the BC coastline to camps in the Canadian interior (Miki, 2004, p. 58). Likewise, Miki notes that the government use of the term “evacuation” to describe this mass uprooting was a euphemism, in that one is more commonly evacuated only temporarily from a threat of danger. But the wartime “evacuation” of Japanese Canadians from the west coast was intended to be permanent, with property confiscated and the real threat being racial violence

from white Canadians uncomfortable with the growing economic prosperity of Japanese Canadians in the community—a violence neutralized by the term (Miki, 2004, pp. 50-51). Through this mobilization of an official language that reconfigured Japanese Canadians as non-citizens, violations of their citizenship rights were both underscored and legitimated.

As language was once a site of wartime violations against Canadian citizens of Japanese descent, the question then arises whether language could be considered a site of redress for past injustices today. For Miki, even after the 1988 government apology and reparations to Japanese Canadians, the meaning of redress remains elusive. As he remarks, “the ‘Japanese Canadian’ subject is redressed—in metaphoric terms, dressed anew—in the garment of reconciliation and resolution—in the garment of citizenship” (Miki, 1998, p. 197). Redress in this instance can be coercive because it attempts to stabilize a Japanese-Canadian identity still fraught with unresolved tensions between racialized subjects and the nation-state. Instead, Miki advocates for a “poetics that takes on the burden of social struggle and still attends to creative acts which begin (not merely end) at the boundary lines” (Miki, 1998, p. 199). Here lies an argument for the power of literary works to redress past wrongs beyond the limits of litigation and identity politics, through the imaginative use of figurative language to destabilize national and racial identities that appear deceptively harmonious through acts of political reconciliation.

EXAMINING TROPES

But since such political acts themselves often employ figurative language to imagine reconciliation between the state and injured groups, it is important **Internment narratives and redress politics, page 8**

Internment narratives and redress politics

continued from page 7

to consider whether such language is used inclusively or exclusively, though the two uses are not easily distinguishable. Literary and cultural theorist Jennifer Henderson points out that neo-liberalism itself frames how historical wrongs are articulated, restricting the language of redress to “discursive exchanges” because “it is only through this trading of tropes that redress movements can speak to each other and to the dominant political sayable, which they also, unwittingly, sustain” (2013, p. 64). As examples, Henderson compares the use of the carceral trope and the deserving-child trope, both symbolic infringements of liberal notions of freedom, in redress movements around residential schools for Indigenous people and around First World War internments of Ukrainian Canadians. She demonstrates how con-

flated the claims between the movements have become in order to achieve currency in the dominant neo-liberal discourse of reparations. It is thus important to examine particular tropes in specific redress contexts in order to determine whether figurative language reinforces constraints on articulations of injury and reparation captured by neo-liberalism, as described by Henderson, or whether it can signify a “poetics” of redress whereby racial and national identities are destabilized, as promoted by Miki. 🍁

REFERENCES

Henderson, Jennifer. (2013). The camp, the school, and the child: Discursive exchanges and (neo)liberal axioms in the culture of redress. In Jennifer Hudson & Pauline Wakeham (Eds.),

Reconciling Canada: Critical perspectives on the culture of redress (pp. 63-83). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Kogawa, Joy. (1981). *Obasan*. Toronto, ON: Lester & Orpen Dennys.

James, Matt. (2013). Neoliberal heritage redress. In Jennifer Hudson & Pauline Wakeham (Eds.), *Reconciling Canada: Critical perspectives on the culture of redress* (pp. 31-46). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Miki, Roy. (1998). *Broken entries: Race, subjectivity, writing*. Toronto, ON: Mercury Press.

Miki, Roy. (2004). *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian call for justice*. Vancouver, BC: Raincoast Books.

Canada: Homeland or hostile land?

continued from page 1

about the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, another example of state oppression from Canadian history. This is followed by Morais’s essay on the death of Ashley Smith while incarcerated in a Canadian institution. Each of these essays highlights the sometimes invisible role of the state in perpetuating existing inequalities.

The second section, “(Critical) Perspectives on Canadian Multiculturalism,” analyzes the implications of Canada’s perceived multiculturalism. Khan’s essay looks critically at the official policy of multiculturalism, first implemented by the federal government in the 1970s. This is followed by two case studies of multiculturalism: Little’s essay examines Muslim-Canadian women’s response to the proposed niqab

[F]or many, the Canadian homeland can only be a myth.

ban put forth by the Conservative government in 2011; and Kotchapaw’s study focuses on racialized social workers in the predominantly white space of Canadian public policy. Along with Khan’s essay, both case studies highlight the tensions between the rhetoric and official policy of multiculturalism and the lived experiences of minority groups within Canadian society.

The final section, “Overseeing Outsiders: The Canadian State and ‘Foreigners,’” examines the Canadian state’s

relationship with individuals considered to be, in some way, non-members of Canadian society. The essays by Yasin and Henley discuss the high barriers to immigrating to and working in Canada that are faced by non-Canadians. Poggi’s essay examines the competing relationships that second-generation immigrants have with the Canadian state and their parents’ countries of birth, specifically Italian Canadians during the Second World War. The final essay, by Callon, critically examines Canadian foreign policy through a gendered lens. Together, these essays conclude that Canada’s interactions with outsiders are characterized by hostility rather than hospitality, suggesting, for many, the Canadian homeland can only be a myth. 🍁



Learn more about **CanadaWatch** and The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at <http://robarts.info.yorku.ca>