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Transculturality and Uneven Belonging in Multicultural Canada: Mark Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* and Lisa Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*

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ABSTRACT
Set chiefly in the Canadian prairies' Indigenous-settler contact zones, Mark Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* and Lisa Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby* illuminate how histories of colonial violence and trauma shape contemporary Canadian society and show the inadequacies of transcultural theory in capturing Canadian cultural formations. In the Canadian lifeworld depicted in these texts, cultures are imagined as distinct and separate, with asymmetrical power dynamics serving as the ideological bulwark of Canadian multiculturalism. While *Forgiveness* depicts the capacity of Canadian multiculturalism to pave the way for non-white migrants' transculturation, *Probably Ruby* uses Ruby's deracination from her Métis roots to portray how settler colonial histories affect Indigenous cultural lifeworlds, dictating Indigenous peoples' relationship with the Canadian state. The structural erasure of Indigenous identities through historical acts of cultural genocide continues to hinder bidirectional settler-Indigenous cultural exchange and instead fosters the assimilation of Indigenous persons, such as the deracinated Ruby, into the dominant culture.

Keywords
Transculturality; Difference; Multiculturalism; Settler Colonialism; Deracination; Colonial Unknowing; Cultural Conflict

1. Introduction

I was a master's student in Nigeria when I first came across the term *transculturality*. Commonly associated with German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch, the idea dates as far back as the 1940s when the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz formulated its associated term, "transculturation," in describing "the dynamic context of colonial and postcolonial Cuba" (Stein 255), a country that witnessed "extreme mixture of countless cultures in an extraordinarily short time" (Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural* 15). When, in 2018, I first read Welsch's 1999 paper "Transculturality–The Changing Form of Cultures Today,"[1] I was entranced by it and felt convinced it captured the cultural experiences and lifeworld of the very mobile characters in Caribbean and African diasporic literatures. Aside from those dwelling right at home in countries of Africa or the Caribbean, a lot of these characters, mostly well-educated Black people–natives of formerly colonized countries or great-grandchildren of erstwhile slaves–are regularly traversing the globe, although living and working in large metropolitan cities such as London, Edinburgh, Brussels, Paris, Toronto, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, to name a few. They typify what the Nigerian-Ghanaian novelist Taiye Selasi theorized as *Afropolitan*: "African young people working and living in cities around the globe, [who] belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many." Describing that generation's idea of home, Selasi notes:

> [T]his one lives in London but was raised in Toronto and born in Accra; that one works in Lagos but grew up in Houston, Texas. 'Home' for this lot is many things: where their parents are from; where they go for vacation; where they went to school; where they see old friends; where they live (or live this year).

Saturated with narratives such as Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon,* Candice Carty-Williams' *Queenie,* Teju Cole's *Open City,* Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah,* and Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.,* I quickly connected the concept of transculturality to the lived experiences of the characters I had read about,

1. At the core of Welsch's arguments about the world's present-day cultural constitution is the optimism that cultures are increasingly overcoming the ethnic limits of Johann Gottfried Herder's eighteenth-century notion of single cultures. Welsch posited that the Herderian cultural model, marked by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation, and intercultural delimitation, has become outdated, normatively dangerous and unsustainable, and that transculturality offers the most tenable cultural description of our contemporary world.

applying this view too to my speculations about places I had not yet physically visited, reading being my primary way of traversing the globe.

Coming to live and study in Canada, though, and encountering Indigenous literature and history for the first time, I found it curiously exciting to read the narratives of, by, and about the Indigenous peoples scattered around the prairies, the northern territories and other parts of Canada whose lived experiences revealed my ignorance about Canada's colonial history and the challenges of conceiving Canadian cultural formations through a transcultural paradigm. The history of cultural apartheid, suppression, forced assimilation, relocation, and the residential school system, which is part of the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada, starkly casts doubt on transculturality's cosmopolitan ideal. This paper calls for greater attention to specific local contexts in the making of seemingly generalizing statements about the cultural situation of the world, and shows how Canadian literary texts problematize both the universalist discourse of transculturality and the official Canadian nationalist myth of multiculturalism.

In exploring two Canadian literary texts, namely Mark Sakamoto's *Forgiveness: A Gift from My Grandparents* and Lisa Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby,* the former a memoir and the latter a novel, I find that imbalanced power relations shape immigrants' and Indigenous peoples' experiences and relationship with the dominant (Western) culture in Canada. The Japanese example in Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* shows that, even when they experience initial hostilities, non-white individuals of immigrant descent often find a transcultural space in Canada more readily. But for folks of Indigenous descent, as Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby* portrays, the history of colonial violence and the trauma of the residential school system tend to negate transculturality, limiting their experience of cultural contact to one of assimilation into the dominant culture rather than the "mutual give and take" that is essential to the transculturation process (Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural* 15).

This does not mean that the Canadian state's and people's relationships with Indigenous groups have remained the same, unchanged, since the 1971 announcement of Canada's multiculturalism policy by then liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau. Although the Canadian Indian Act has been amended multiple times (rather than annulled), its continued existence has been argued to reinforce colonial structures of power over Indigenous cultural systems, sustaining legal frameworks that significantly constrain the flourishing of Indigenous cultural identity (Andersen 78). But even from my outsider perspective–as a Nigerian of Igbo ethnic extraction whose parents and grandparents were once citizens of Biafra, a country that no longer exists–I do not find this surprising at all. The first two of the four goals of the Canadian state's multiculturalism policy are "to assist all Canadian cultural groups that have demonstrated a desire and

effort to continue to develop a capacity to grow and contribute to Canada" and to "assist members of all cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society" (Trudeau 8545). Fuelled by a resistance to the history of settler colonial oppression and cultural genocide, Indigenous nationalisms challenge the expectation of "a desire and effort to… contribute to Canada," and articulate demands for self-determination, sovereignty, and full political power as co-equals of the Canadian state, in contrast to their imposed status as colonized nations existing within the Canadian state and unable to determine their own political and economic futures. Hence, although the historical (postcolonial vs. settler colonial) contexts differ, the Canadian government's relationship with its Indigenous peoples echoes the Nigerian government's relationship with the Indigenous peoples of Biafra; and, despite the specific differences (absolute proscription vs recognition-as-containment),[2] the responses of the two states to minority nationalism have been similarly driven by the imperative to preserve state sovereignty and territorial control. In the Canadian context, the apprehension, I dare say, is that granting full political sovereignty to Indigenous peoples would undo the state's control over much of the huge expanse of lands and resources it presently controls.

The Canadian state's response to Indigenous demands for sovereignty mirrors what Charles Taylor calls a "politics of recognition." This involves attempts to "reconcile Indigenous claims to nationhood with Crown sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identities in some form of renewed relationship with the Canadian state" (Coulthard 438). Glen Coulthard avers that multicultural-rooted politics of recognition, involving "the delegation of land, capital and political power from the state to Indigenous communities through land claims," reproduce similar results for Indigenous peoples as the colonial power structures they are seeking to undo (438-39). There is also the gendered dimension of this politics, a phenomenon Rebecca Jane Hall, Leah F. Vosko, and Veldon Coburn have explored in their critique of "recognition-as-containment" (1523). Using the 2021 legal case *Shubenacadie Indian Band v. Canada* as a reference point, they argue that "the settler colonial state uses the regulation of the so-called Indian identity as a dispossessive strategy, a racialized and gendered means of controlling access to resources and attempting to contain Indigenous human, nonhuman, and land-based relations" (1520). Their argument highlights how, even in present-day Canada, the persisting currency of the Indian Act enables the Canadian state to undermine Indigenous cultural sustainability by disregarding kinship relationships, individualizing Indigenous

2. My use of this term draws from Rebecca Jane Hall, Leah F. Vosko, and Veldon Coburn whom I refer to in the subsequent paragraph.

identity (1538), and reinforcing "gendered processes of settler state containment of Indigenous relations and identity, especially those vital to social reproduction" (1521).

All of this is important to trace how, in the Canadian state, systematized forms of Indigenous cultural repression, together with political and cultural resistance by Indigenous peoples, are still very much in vogue and defy transculturality's presumption of bilateral cultural exchange and commodification. And while nation and culture, as Welsch has repeatedly pointed out, are indeed not to be seen as the same, the nation's (or nation-state's) political situation does affect the culture of its people, impacting whether and in what capacity the people retain their ways of life, seeing, and knowing, and how they relate with the cultures around them.

2. Reconsidering the Descriptive Obsolescence of Bounded Cultures

My reading of Sakamoto's memoir *Forgiveness* and Bird-Wilson's novel *Probably Ruby* does not suggest that Welsch's observations about the conflict-retaining nature of multiculturality and interculturality are out of place. However, the texts enable me to show the incongruousness of Welsch's assertion that these cultural models are of the past, no longer practiced, and "descriptively unserviceable" ("Transculturality" 61). If the adjective "transcultural," as Welsch has repeatedly avowed, is the most tenable cultural description of all parts of our world today, including Canada, I can't help but wonder: To what extent has transculturality, in practice, resolved the multicultural skirmishes and such inter-ethnic micro-conflicts that persist despite the interpenetration of cultures and even inner diversities that characterize today's societies, Canadian society for instance? Although Welsch's writing wasn't formulated within the Canadian context, the universalist posture of his theorization makes pertinent the question I raised above–a question that becomes relevant in the Japanese-Canadian migrational context of *Forgiveness* and the context of Métis culturicide depicted in *Probably Ruby*. Both texts are set against the backdrop of cultural contact in Canada from the pre-Second World War era to the present, thus providing a historical context for Canada's contemporary cultural dynamics.

Exploring cultural contact and conflict in both texts, I interrogate transculturality against Canada's 55-year history of multiculturalism. Even though the idea of the transplace, "an all-inclusive space of subjective consciousness and cultural possibilities which does not deny the formative importance of native cultures–and, to some extent, their accompanying worldviews–but… allows openness to the reception, integration, and negotiation of other cultures" (Dagnino 74), sounds ideal, *Forgiveness* and *Probably Ruby* reveal the difficulty

of realizing this in Canada's relationship with non-white migrant and Indigenous communities, showing how histories of colonialism and racial subjugation undermine the optimism of Welsch's earlier writings on transculturality and the aspirational claims of official multiculturality.

The two texts present Canadian histories from two distinct minoritarian identity perspectives and literary styles. While Sakamoto's memoir uses a non-fictional form to present a Japanese-Canadian history involving initial migration, naturalization, repression during WWII, and efforts at reintegration, Bird-Wilson's novel employs realist fiction to depict Canadian history through an Indigenous perspective, foregrounding Métis struggles to retain cultural identity amid the Canadian government's assimilationist policies and cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples. While the state of Canadian multiculturality might not have been the primary issue gnawing at Sakamoto's and Bird-Wilson's minds when they wrote their individual texts, their works do say a lot about the cultural evolution of present-day Canada, highlighting the ways notions of transcultural mixing, respect for inner diversity, and the ultimate question of Canadian identity are inflected by histories of colonialism, racial segregation and trauma. But of course, such histories and the overall issue of marginality–including the ways marginalization fuels a quest for Indigenous nationhood–are something transculturalist theorists seem too fast to write off as inconsequential; Welsch states, "It is usually the (real or supposed) losers of globalization who try to retreat to national identities" (*We Have Always Been Transcultural* 4). The question, though, would be, what made people of certain ethnic and racial heritage "losers of globalization" and why are certain territories of the world so suspicious of global integration that they choose to find succour in national identities? To blame these "losers of globalization" for retreating towards national identities is to perpetuate what Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein have theorized as colonial unknowing, the entrenching of a parallel history that renders illegible the historical and present-day acts of colonial-like subjugation of one culture (and nation) by the other.

Writing within the context of settler-colonization, Vimalassery, Hu Pegues and Goldstein argue that whereas colonization continues today in both subtle and overt forms, its beneficiaries have been oriented not to comprehend its existence. They maintain that the process of actively forgetting or choosing not to know masks the link between colonial history and ongoing settler-colonization and racialization in North America. In other words, by choosing not to know or remember, those in social and racial positions that benefit from the colonial past make it seem that colonization never happened, is not still happening, or that the epistemological, ontological, social, and economic positions of various races and segments of the world's population are as they should be, balanced and fair. Drawing on the concept of colonial unknowing,

I emphasize that even in places that purportedly have become transcultural, sphere-like thinking and social structuring remain prevalent, with ethnic minority cultures existing at the margins as the dominant culture reinforces itself and suppresses its others under the guise of embracing them. This situation encapsulates the imbalanced cultural relationships found in Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* and Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*.

3. *Forgiveness:* the Persistence of Cultural Conflicts in the Transplace

In *Forgiveness,* Mark Sakamoto traces the deep transcontinental roots of his family, dating back to his Japanese-Canadian paternal grandparents, who were born and raised in Canada but were treated as enemy spies by the Canadian government during WWII. Echoing a similar history of adoption and discrimination, *Probably Ruby* depicts a Métis woman, Ruby, who was adopted as a baby and raised by a white family that severed her from her Indigenous roots and culture; as an adult, Ruby rebels against her adopted white community's anti-Indigenous rhetoric and ideology, and searches to reconnect with her biological family and Métis culture. Both books grapple with the difficulty of framing a distinct Canadian identity. While Canada prides itself on its multicultural society, Canada's stated commitment to protecting the rights and freedoms of its citizens and residents, as set out in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, repeatedly clashes with its founding white settler colonial ideals, a fact Sakamoto articulates through his grandparents' stories.

Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* captures the forced relocation of the Japanese Canadian population in the wake of WWII, during which they wonder, "How could this be happening to them? They had done nothing wrong. They were all Canadians" (96). The statement "they were all Canadians" becomes a question, interrogating the absence of the inclusive feeling of "comfort and security" (Lim xii), in Bachelard's words, the "joy of dwelling" (91), for the Canadians of Japanese extraction and, by extension, all other Canadians whose ethnicity defies the normative racial configuration of Canadianness. Describing the book, Anupa Mistry explains: "Despite its benevolent title, *Forgiveness* incites a discomfort that lingers well past the narrative resolution that comes in the memoir's last few pages. It's difficult to read through the fascinating personal histories… without confronting the national rhetoric of this country as a peaceful, liberal, multicultural enclave of the world" (R14). The memoir thematizes Asian presence in Canada, calling on readers to examine Canada's history of migrant acceptance from the perspectives of the Japanese, who lived through one of the most challenging periods of that history. Although the 1907 mass arrival of Japanese in Canada, as Sakamoto relates, begins

with an invitation by "Canadian officials in Japan [who] were taking names of men who wanted to obtain Dominion visas" (40), the later maltreatment of Japanese migrants in British Columbia (and later in the Prairies) indicates that this offer of free visas to the Japanese was simply an economic push for increased labour and production within the Dominion. Despite benefiting Canada economically, this move was widely protested by white Canadians who felt threatened by the perceived invasion by Asians. "The Vancouver that Yosuke Oseki fled to in 1907 was a pioneer town–muddy, rainy, hardscrabble," says the narrator. "The Japanese all congregated along Powell Street. The name of that part of town was *as unwelcome as the country: 'Japtown'*" (Sakamoto 40; my emphasis). The name Japtown speaks of the apartness between the immigrants and their hosts. As the text shows, the 20th-century history of non-white immigrants to Canada is marked by intercultural conflicts and multicultural contentions.

Canadian multiculturality operates along three lines: "descriptively (as a sociological fact), prescriptively (as ideology) [and] politically (as policy)," with linguistic diversity its core component (Brosseau and Dewing 5). But what does this linguistic diversity mean for speakers of minority languages in light of Canadian bilingualism? Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* underscores how linguistic differences heighten intercultural conflict and feelings of marginalization, accentuating the experience of living in a world while being external to it. The narrator explains, "While almost all of the immigrants were literate, it was in the Japanese language. Most did not speak English, but the safety and security of Japantown allowed them to function with ease" (Sakamoto 40). This language difference, which reflects ethnic consolidation, also implies the social homogenization of Japanese (and, by extension, Asian) life in Canada, limiting the ability of the white and Japanese worlds to merge.[3] While Japanese-Canadian migrants' resort to their national language rather than English is an unavoidable consequence of arriving in a world that speaks a different language, what is significant is the unwelcoming responses of their Western hosts to the foreignness existing in their midst.

Despite the economic contributions of Asians to the Canadian economy in the early years of Asian migration to Canada, the Western news media's posture towards this economic migrancy indicates the hostile atmosphere and micro-aggressive attitude of the dominant culture towards the new minority

3. This language question, a recurring issue in Canadian history, echoes the English-Cree problem we will see later in *Probably Ruby,* which depicts the residential school system's attempts to consolidate whiteness by unteaching Indigenous children the use of their ancestral Cree language.

culture, perceived to be a threat to whiteness. The Canadian news media refer to the presence of the eight thousand Japanese in British Columbia and their Chinese counterparts as "the Asian invasion" and "yellow peril" (Sakamoto 41), thus strategically instigating public outrage against these newcomers. The narrator calls the resultant inter-racial crisis between the Asian residents and their Canadian hosts "a downward spiral," setting a pattern of life to come for the Japanese migrants' offspring born in Canada. Describing this world in which Yosuke's children and other Canadian-born Japanese live, the narrator says:

> Mitsue lived in two worlds. There was the Japanese world, her community in Celtic. Her family, her friends, the food she loved, and the Japanese Centre were all there. That was the world of the familiar, filled with love. *But tomorrow was not there*. Mitsue knew from a very early age that *her future was in the English world*, the world of education, modern lifestyle, modern fads, it had movies and fashion and spoke English. She wanted to be a part of that world. Her parents wanted her to be a part of that world too. *She tried to fit in*. She was taught to play by the rules, follow the instructions, and not cause any trouble. If she did well, she thought, she would be accepted. (Sakamoto 45; my emphasis)

Far from capturing a desire for transculturality, the above excerpt captures the struggles of a representative communal minority figure to shed her identity to gain acceptance of and into a world whose rules and system of being are defined by a different and supposedly superior group: a dominant racial group opposed to the presence of any potentially divergent existent within its borders. In the section that follows, I highlight how *Probably Ruby* depicts white settler opposition to other forms of cultural lifeforms as the bane of the Indigenous cultures, resulting in generations of Indigenous cultural alienation effected through the Canadian state's instrumentalization of Western education and the residential school system as a colonial tool.

4. Three Generations of Cultural Repression in Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*

Like Sakamoto's *Forgiveness,* which explores three generations of Japanese Canadian experiences*,* Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby* centers the struggles of Indigenous identity in Canada along the intersecting lines of three generations. The novel revolves around Ruby, a young Canadian woman of Métis descent, who is adopted and raised by a white couple and given a life that is disconnected from her Métis ancestry. As a grown woman battling an identity crisis and a sense of rootlessness, Ruby must embark on tracing her life history through the narratives about her relatives. Structurally,

> Bird-Wilson constructs Ruby's narrative into a fragmented, non-chronological structure, with the story being told from a third-person point of view but following a different character in each chapter. Most of these characters interact directly with Ruby, yet there is never a chapter devoted explicitly to her perspective. (Schwartz 121)

The novel's fragmented structure, much like Ruby's incoherent sense of self, echoes the fractured nature of Canadian cultural identity. While multicultural Canada is made up of diverse Indigenous groups, descendants of British and French settlers, and peoples of diverse migrant descent, Canadian history on the Indigenous part of the equation has predominantly been a history of trauma and forced acculturation. Thus, by interlacing narratives of Ruby's experiences with those of Rose, Leon, and Grace, Bird-Wilson calls attention to generations of ethnic and cultural repression of Indigenous peoples in Canada, with Ruby's directionlessness and eventual search for her roots suggesting that these histories, though officially of the past, are arguably ongoing in present-day Canada. Not only does Ruby face various shades of discrimination as an Indigenous Prairie girl adopted by a white Canadian family, but she also, like the Japanese in *Forgiveness,* experiences what it means to live in the world and yet not feel a sense of home within that world. This inability to experience a feeling of homeliness is a lingering feature of the Indigenous lifeworld captured in the text and springs from the history of ethnic repression and cultural deracination faced by Indigenous peoples, even in the midst of Canada's adoption of respect for diversity as a political ideology.

Returning to the language question, Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby* links linguistic erasure to the identity crisis that characterizes Indigenous experiences in contemporary Canada and the novel's textual lifeworld. In the text, the residential school system mandates Cree-speaking Métis characters like Rose to shed their Cree language and learn English as a prerequisite to thriving in the same land their ancestors had lived in before them. The narrator follows Ruby's thoughts on the suppression of Cree, the dominance of English, and the overt way the Anglocentric episteme and ontology infiltrate the Métis life of her grandmother, Rose. The narrator observes: "Ruby longed to know something impossible, how they'd arrived here, just here, exactly. *Ten years* at residential school qualified kohkum Rose to speak English, *become a waitress*, a *housekeeper in a motel*, and a farmhand's wife" (Bird-Wilson 102). This instance reveals the existential dangers of the assimilation process fostered by the residential schools. Like her friend Ernestine and other Indigenous children, Rose is forced to spend years learning English in the residential school system and dissociating from Métis affiliations.

Thus, *Probably Ruby* portrays the assimilation process as having the same economic objective as Canada's Dominion visas to the Japanese in 1907.

Echoes of this abound in African colonial literature and history, wherein colonial education was geared towards producing a workforce for the colonial system rather than towards the humanistic goal of training individuals to overcome colonial and economic oppression. It is not surprising, then, that Rose, despite her yearning to run away from the residential school system, absorbs the residential school's doctrines and teaches her children the precepts of white superiority rather than an Indigenous or even hybridized and perhaps balanced view of the world. The narrator comments:

> After years of being told not to speak her language, Rose had refused to teach her kids Cree, convinced they would be better off without the accent, better able to function in the white world. Her husband, Johnny, more traditional, had wanted to teach their children Cree, but Rose insisted on raising the kids her own way, wouldn't be told. She nurtured them with what she'd been given at residential school. (102)

It might appear that Rose's feelings exemplify a desire for transcultural selfhood. However, transculturality arises from cultural exchange rather than from deracination, which the excerpt above shows. The transculturation process "is not simply… a process of 'acculturation'… but rather a reciprocal give-and-take in which all population groups are in transition and from which they emerge changed" (Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural* 16). It involves the retention of one's ethnic or cultural identity, followed by an openness to cultural "exchange and coming to terms with each other" (Welsch, "On the Acquisition" 12).

Later in life, Ruby finds out from Rose, her paternal grandmother, that she is Cree, "But also, French-Metis. Half-blood. So not *all* Cree" (Bird-Wilson 237). Although the Métis are descended from the intercultural union between First Nations' women and European (especially French and Scottish) fur traders, they constitute a unique Indigenous group whose cultural practices and belief systems–founded within the Canadian colonial matrix of power–are Indigenous to Canada, rather than Europe (Andersen 39). Andersen emphasizes that whereas the notion of hybridity in postcolonial discourse is often extolled as enabling "'in-between' spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" (Bhabha 1), in the Indigenous Canadian context of the Métis people, rather than enable what Bhabha describes as a transgressive "third space of enunciation" (37), hybridity has been adapted as a classificatory term that invisibilizes the colonial power structures under which the Métis came to be (Andersen 39). Andersen asserts, "Métis are classified as hybrid–with all the denigrating connotations of the term–in ways that deny that which we seek most, an acknowledgment of our political legitimacy and authenticity as an Indigenous *people*" (38). Ruby's discovery of her Métis ancestry does not make up for her

lifelong disconnection from her Indigenous identity, nor does it undo her cultural deracination.

Similarly, instances of the apartheid between national cultures in Canada can be seen in how *Forgiveness* describes the relationship between Japanese children and their white counterparts. The narrator observes:

> The Japanese kids would stick together on the weekends, rarely playing with the white children. Mitsue and Miyoko would play with the *hakujin* kids at school, but once they were on our own [sic], they would usually stick together. There were no signs to make it official, *no physical barriers; it was just the way it was*. (Sakamoto 46; my emphasis).

Notice that even though the Japanese and the "hakujin" (white) kids attend the same school and even meet each other on the weekends at Celtic's community park, they do not mix. Their playing together in the supervised atmosphere of the school, but not on the free grounds of the community park, indicates a performance of mixing, a performance whose lack of depth is exposed by the freedom the community park offers. The narrator notes that existing between these two is an overwhelmingly felt and yet physically unseen barrier.

We can establish the currency of Canada's non-transcultural attitude by putting the timeline of events in *Forgiveness* (some of which are as close as 2008) in context with those of *Probably Ruby*. For instance, when Grace becomes pregnant–with probably Ruby–in 1975, her mother and brother, Doug, hide her in Bethany Home (a social service housing project for perceived endangered women) to avoid the social embarrassment of people knowing that she, a white girl, is pregnant with a child of an Indigenous man. The social worker assigned to her case voices this feeling of shock and disgust when she learns the Indigenous status of the baby's father:

> 'What's that?' the social worker said, pretending at first not to hear Grace. 'The father's Native? An *Indian*?' She rubbed her eyes as if tired. 'Oh, dear.' She moved like she would write something, but then decided against it–in the end making no notes in her file. Not yet. Instead she said, 'But you're so fair? So blonde?' (Bird-Wilson 116-17)

In other words, why and how could Grace, a white girl with blonde [in other words, superior] hair colour and racial origin, have condescended to date an Indigenous person, let alone have sexual intercourse with such a *lowly creature*? This denigration of Indigenous status, as the text indicates, is an ongoing process in Canada.

The repression of Indigenous identity and culture by the dominant white world forms a barrier against the transcultural blending of the two cultures, much like the omnipresent and yet invisible barrier between the whites and the Japanese in *Forgiveness*. Describing this barrier and the apartness it creates as the way things are, in other words, the order of things, the narrator in *Forgiveness* points out that even as WWII nears and Canada sets about determining the fate of the Japanese and securing the country, it is still from the standpoint of separation rather than unification that the government approached it, attempting even to sow division amidst the Japanese. As government repression creeps into the lives of the Japanese, the Japanese Canadians are ordered by the government to obtain registration cards whose colours serve to divide the Japanese:

> The registration card included a photo, an identification number, and a fingerprint. Mitsue hated getting her fingerprints taken. She felt like a criminal. But she smiled for the camera so as not to be rude. Mitsue's card was white because she had been born in Canada; her parents' cards were pink because they had been issued Canadian citizenship. Those who were not Canadian citizens got yellow cards. (Sakamoto 54)

By distinguishing the Japanese born in Canada from those who had come from Japan and obtained Canadian citizenship, the government frames Canadian citizenship along a scale measuring gradations of normativity. In the section that follows, I turn to how both texts depict the production of normative and non-normative forms of citizenry within the Canadian state, with each form dictating the extent of one's acceptance by and integration into the dominant Canadian social body.

5. Normative and Non-Normative Canadian Bodies in *Probably Ruby* and *Forgiveness*

Probably Ruby highlights one aspect of the non-normative form of Canadianness when the narrator talks about adopted Indigenous children. The narrator describes Ruby as having an almost clairsentient ability to "spot an Indigenous adoptee a mile away. Pick them out of the crowd like it was a serious parlour game. Sixth sense. And it wasn't just a visibility thing, a Native kid with their non-Native parents. Take the so-called parent out of the picture and she could still spot them" (Bird-Wilson 75). Consequently, one of the discursive strategies of *Probably Ruby* is to hold up the Canadian government's assimilationist adoption policy as a transcultural project, only to then turn around and

critique and tear it down, using, as with a hammer, a stockpile of evidence of its failure to unify society existentially. The text suggests that the Canadian assimilationist policy involving the adoption of Indigenous children by white parents, which has come to be known in scholarly literature and history as the Sixties Scoop, created in the adoptees an existential vacuum, a hole, deep and vacant, yearning to be filled. The narrator strikingly captures the Indigenous adoptees' sense of emptiness by comparing it to a "window, a blank spot like a slipped stitch in a knitted scarf–once it was missed there was no going back to fix it… Ruby recognized that spot a mile away" (75).

But why wouldn't this emptiness persist in the first place, when the very idea of being adopted carries a lot of stigma, with other children, "no pretending allowed," asking Ruby in public: "Are you adopted?" (Bird-Wilson 75). Obviously, the kids are not asking to know her family status but to categorize her, in other words, to (much like Ralph's stubborn younger brother, Ford) turn "the tables" (Sakamoto 25) and enjoy the glory of having at least someone they could place below them in status. Bird-Wilson's narrator reveals: "Siblings in other families would play the adopted card to torment one another saying, You're really adopted, because being adopted was supposed to make a kid cry" (75). In simple terms, the Indigenous kids adopted by white parents are cast as the other, whose existence lies outside of the normative social body. In *Probably Ruby*, the protagonist Ruby, who experiences firsthand this questioning of the adopted Indigenous kid's legitimacy, seeks to prevent a continuation of the cycle for her children, teaching her son Junior, right from when he hits ten, to be wary of the government and its institutions, especially the police (Bird-Wilson 246).

This question of normative versus non-normative bodies, the foreign versus the familiar, features extensively in the Japanese experience in Sakamoto's *Forgiveness*, especially during WWII. Narrating the feelings of the Japanese about their forceful relocation from British Columbia, the narrator captures Pat's question, "How could this be happening to them? They had done nothing wrong. They were all Canadian." This outsider feeling arises from the white world's questioning of the other's legitimacy in Canada and testifies to the inability of the society to transculturalize.

Furthermore, although most of the Japanese have, at least on paper, become Canadian citizens, the government, particularly members of the Conservative political class in British Columbia at the time, sees them as outsiders and makes it its business to ensure they feel this outsiderliness. Thus, when Susanne, Mitsue's sister, who is also Canadian by birth, is asked by her classmates why she will not join them on the Ice Capades excursion, she replies that she has a curfew, and they ask, "Why?" Her answer: "because I am Japanese" (Sakamoto 98). This reveals the superordinate place of racial identification

among Japanese Canadians, a feeling that exists also among white Canadians in Sakamoto's memoir.

Additionally, the white kids pretend not to know the fate befalling their Japanese neighbours, choosing to abide by the majority culture's conspiracy of silence that sustains colonial unknowing. For an incident of such magnitude widely covered in the papers and the radio, the seeming apathy of Susanne's white classmates smacks of a well-coordinated epistemology of ignorance. Charles Mills points out that "white ignorance [and, thus, innocence] has been able to flourish all these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for 'racial' reasons have needed not to know" (247). Thus, Susanne's white classmates need not be bothered by the ejection of their classmates and Japanese neighbours from home because they benefit from such unknowing. Even the teachers feign ignorance of the situation, perpetuating colonial agnosia.

It is significant that *Forgiveness* does not document these experiences of racial and cultural apartheid from the perspectives of the Japanese-Canadians alone, but includes, in considerable measure, portrayals of it from a white perspective. Through the narrative lens of Ralph's childhood in Entry Island, the memoir portrays the white population's perpetuation of the insider-outsider dichotomy existing between them and Asians in the country. As Ralph and Ford walk the streets of Charlottetown and chance upon the laundry shop of a Chinese, Ford refers to the shop owner as a chink, insultingly telling him, "hey, Chinaman,… you and your wife are *chinks*!" (Sakamoto 24-25). The narrator so aptly describes the root of Ford's daringness by describing the exoticness of the Chinese "lettering on the window" (24). As the narrator explains, "Different meant from away. Different was feared and desired. Different had a name: 'Chink'" (24). This repulsive reaction to the dynamics of ontological difference in Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* brings this life-writing in discursive consonance with its fictional counterpart, *Probably Ruby*, as both texts implicitly suggest that the imagination of culture as single, bounded, and homogeneous continues to organize social perception and racial interaction in present-day Canada.

The narrator's assertion in *Forgiveness* that "different meant from away" and was therefore feared resonates with Ruby's warning to her son Junior about the police in *Probably Ruby*. She tells him:

> 'They're supposed to help you, but if you're Native [implying different], then they think about you in terms of stereotypes.'
> 'What's that?' Junior had asked.

> 'If they don't know you, they think things about you that aren't true. They might think you're dangerous or not a good person… Before they get to know you. So they don't help you because of what they think they know about you, without knowing anything.' (Bird-Wilson 246-47)

In this case, the foreign, referring to "whatever contradicts our nature, whatever disturbs us and shocks us out of our own sense of security" (Bollnow 88), is the Indigenous person, whose identity is already perceived by the police as alien, dangerous and worthy of being vilified. The police, representing the government, are thus portrayed as unfeeling to the fate of all others whose lives fall outside the established sense of normality.

In *Forgiveness,* the sense of shock engendered by the presence of the foreign pervades Ralph and his younger brother Ford, as they contemplate the Chinese man and his wife in Charlottetown. The narrator explains:

> Neither boy had ever seen Chinese people before. *They looked different* than the people they were accustomed to. It was their eyes that captured Ralph's attention and prompted his imagination. *He tried to figure out how these folks had got here*. What did they like? Could they skate on the pond in the winter? *They may as well have been aliens*. Ralph was in awe. (Sakamoto 24)

The Chinese, just like the Japanese, are seen as aliens, and it is this alien status–this condition of being strange, foreign, odd, and different–that drew Ralph and Ford's attention. This is in much the same way Mark Sakamoto's own racial and facial difference and Grandpa Ralph's mixed-breed face become the markers of distinction and objects of contemplation when, in July 2021, the author and his maternal grandfather, the aged Ralph, enter a bar in the Magdalene Islands:

> Today, they looked us over and I could tell everyone had the same question in their minds: Who are his people? I was a write-off on that front–I was clearly a 'come from away.' But they got forensic with Grandpa. Eyes were squinting, searching for a telltale family feature: Big ears? A particular nose?… Grandpa was scanning their faces too, *on the hunt for familiarity*. From a table near the back of the room just beside the men's washroom came a holler. 'MacLean!' It rang out with the excitement of a call of 'Bingo!' Grandpa had been identified. (21; my emphasis)

Not only does *Forgiveness* depict "familiarity" as the basis of human connection and friendship, but it also shows the absence of it as a source of estrangement, hostility and indifference between persons and cultures.

Consequently, central to the book's enduring theme is the notion that it is often natural for what is familiar to be deemed wholesome and what is unfamiliar to be suspected as unwholesome and even treated with hostility. Hence, forgiveness begins with the recognition and acceptance of the unfamiliar and the overlooking of the initial hostility–something Mitsue and Ralph would come to understand and practice upon their meeting for the 1968 dinner that marks the engagement of Stan Sakamoto to Diane MacLean. It is in light of this act of forgiveness between the Sakamoto family (the representative figures of Japanese nationality and culture) and the Macleans (representing white Canadian culture) that the book espouses a transition from the notion of single cultures to one of cultural mixing, starting with the marriage of their children Stan Sakamoto and Diane Maclean, a marriage that symbolizes the blending of two cultures on a horizontal level, without the assimilationist pressure of any colonial power over a minority culture. An even larger, non-textual symbol of this transcultural exchange lies in the Canadian government's official apology to the Japanese in September 1988 for their mistreatment during WWII, and the ethical insistence by the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) that the Government of Canada "take such steps as are necessary to ensure that Canadians are never again subjected to such injustices [and] that the fundamental human rights and freedoms set forth in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms be considered sacrosanct, non-negotiable and beyond the reach of any arbitrary legislation such as the War Measures Act."

6. Conclusion

In the Canadian context, 55 years of official multiculturalism have been instrumental in making Canada a nominally immigrant-friendly liberal democracy amid a recent overt rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric. Sakamoto's memoir *Forgiveness*, whose storyline spans over a hundred years of a Japanese immigrant (now settler) family's experience in Canada, exemplifies that Canada's retention of immigrants' cultural diversity over the long term produces what appears on the surface to conform to the ideal of transcultural blending, marked by the retention of multiple cultural origins–the Canada-born individual's immigrant grandparents' ethnic cultural filiation and the numerous cultural affiliations the individual picks up as a result of living close to and amongst people of other racial, ethnic, and cultural origins. But Sakamoto's work also illustrates that this transcultural blending occurs within asymmetrical power structures, in which–as in the case of the Japanese–the individual from the marginal culture is acculturated into the dominant culture. Although he has Japanese parentage, Stan is, as it were, a white man in an Asian body, having been bred within

the primacy of the dominant white culture, into which he inevitably becomes acculturated. Mark, the narrator, explains that his "parents met at a dance at the McCoy High School" (155), McCoy being Stan's Catholic school. Stan has a Western education, upbringing, and social life, with nothing tying him to his Asian ancestry except for his face and family relations. His acculturation into the dominant culture is the first foundation for his marriage to Diane. Impacted by the assimilationist pressure of twentieth-century Canada, Stan's upbringing is mostly Western, with Stan growing up as a non-Japanese speaker whose means of Japanese cultural transmission is through family memory, food, and narrative. This asymmetrical power structure, whereby ethnic cultures become sublimated to dominant Canadian white culture, echoes Welsch's assertion that "Transculturalization processes are often anything but innocent. Cultural enrichment and inspiration represent their beautiful visage, but variously they have power and oppression as their real undercurrent" (*We Have Always Been Transcultural* 5).

But while in *Forgiveness* the Sakamoto family's transcultural implementation lessens "the harshness of power" (Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural* 5) and enables their children and later generations (such as Mark and his own children) to find a secure place in Canadian society and polity, in Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*, the harshness of power remains unmitigated, with the trauma of the Indian Act, the residential school system, and the Sixties Scoop continuing to be felt in the life of the protagonist Ruby who equally teaches her children to trust neither the state (and its instruments, such as the police) nor its promise of fairness and altruistic help. Although Ruby has a biological Métis ancestry, this identity, including its history, is one she has been forcefully torn away from. For most of the book, Ruby remains ignorant of her Métis ancestry and struggles with an identity crisis, an alien with no connection to her origins. *Probably Ruby* shows that for Indigenous peoples, dwelling still predominantly occurs at the margins, with Indigenous cultures suppressed by the dominant white culture. In the novel, cultural loss arises not from exchange between cultures but from the forceful repression and absolute assimilation of one culture by its supposedly superior/dominant counterpart.

While the usefulness of transculturality lies in its capacity to offer a vision of an ideal world towards which society could strive, this ideal transcultural world, in which the zero-point attitudes of the episteme and ontology of various cultures or nations are decentered (thus offering every individual the capacity to find dwelling beyond borders), does not describe Bird-Wilson's narrated portrait of Canada. To argue that *Ruby*'s Métis ancestry and her adoption and upbringing by white parents make her transcultural would be to ignore the absolute cultural deracination she undergoes. In the settler colonial context of Bird-Wilson's novel, transculturality is hampered by the history of colonial

trauma and its impact on individuals of Indigenous descent. *Probably Ruby* depicts the ways settler colonial history and trauma continue to impact Indigenous lifeworlds in the twenty-first century, rendering Indigenous cultures and identity invisible and disposable, fuelling Indigenous anti-colonial nationalism. While Indigenous peoples of Canada indeed typify what Welsch describes as "losers of globalization," their quest for political sovereignty, which springs from an aspiration to overcome histories of epistemic violence, cultural oppression, and economic and social marginalization, says a lot about the cultural state of contemporary Canada in its relationship with its Indigenous peoples, and reveals the persistence of sphere-like cultural frameworks.

The texts together suggest that the aspirational discourse of transculturalism fails to acknowledge the persistent realities of cultural segregation and repression experienced by Indigenous peoples and, though in different forms and to a lesser degree, racialized immigrants in many parts of Canada.

I return to transcultural theory through my transnational reading of literatures from Nigeria to Canada, understanding that without attending to the ongoing, and sometimes apperceptive, legacies of colonialism and settler colonialism, transculturality further obscures the very asymmetries of power that continue to structure cultural life and belonging.

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