

The Book as (Anti)National Heroine: Trauma and Witnessing in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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FROM THE MOMENT of its publication in 1981, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* has enjoyed a status unprecedented for a book written by a non-white Canadian. Among other things, the novel has been credited with changing the Canadian literary canon, facilitating a practice of multicultural pedagogy, and bridging the gap between writing and political activism. *Obasan* has played a mediating role in the (re)construction of the national memory of traumatic events related to the treatment of Japanese Canadians during and after World War II, and has been instrumental in the success of the redress movement.¹ Although it was one in a series of writings on a similar subject published in the 1970s and the early 1980s,² Kogawa's text has become what Christl Verduyn calls a "catalyst" for the return of the repressed content of Canadian experience and Canadian literary history, as well as for the subsequent revisions of this experience, prompted by the need to acknowledge its legacy of racism and ethnocentrism. In the context of women's studies, *Obasan* has facilitated the introduction of a race perspective into courses organized around gender. *The Literary Review of Canada* has listed *Obasan* as one of Canada's one hundred most important books. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that by acknowledging the novel's tremendous impact on Canadian cultural politics we are participating in a discursive construction of the book as a "national heroine."³

The phenomenon of *Obasan* has consequences far beyond literature and pedagogy, and can be seen as symptomatic of larger shifts that an integrative analysis of gender, race, class, and sexuality has brought about in Canadian constructions of national identity. One can say that Kogawa's text addresses the relationship between narrative and history by forcing Canada to undergo a radical change in its "communal knowledge" of itself as a nation (Felman

111). In this sense, *Obasan* exemplifies what Shoshana Felman, in her reading of Albert Camus's *The Plague*, calls "narrative as testimony": a mode of writing capable of mediating the relationship between narrative and history, and which makes it possible "not merely to record, but to rethink and, in the act of its rethinking, in effect *transform history* by bearing literary witness" to trauma (95). What follows constitutes a discussion of how the novel's performance of trauma witnessing could cause several disruptions of the nation's (self)image. I focus on the cultural and political work performed by *Obasan* in the context of its reception and reading. Why has this particular text been embraced by critics of Canadian literature? In what ways does the dominant culture benefit from its engagement with "minority" writing like *Obasan*? How does the novel resist potential appropriations by the liberal nation-state and remain, like a true heroine, an embattled contestatory site of different narratives of the nation's history? What subversions of nationalist discourse has *Obasan* provoked under the sign of the Other/Woman? By making the content of the repressed history "available to the imaginative act" (Felman 108), Kogawa's text enables us to see that the nation-building project is erected on the bodies of racialized and gendered "others."

Looking at the impact of *Obasan*'s reception on teaching and writing about the internment of Japanese Canadians, it is fair to say that the book attempts to forge a "new transformational relationship between narrative and history" (Felman 95). As testimony, it has a power to perform the pedagogical and ethical work of unsettling its readers — be they high school students of multicultural curricula or academic critics of Canadian literature — from their habitual perceptions of themselves as Canadians, citizens, members of a nation, or historical subjects. It interpellates its readers to recognize themselves as "subjects to history," inviting them to explore the impact of this history on people who have been or are "neither its perpetrators nor its most immediate and most devastated victims, but its historic *onlookers*: its *witnesses*" (Felman 96). Felman demands that a commitment to witnessing be "unqualified": that is, that the witnesses do not view themselves as outsiders, as external to "the condemned and the condemning situation" (107) of which the narrative gives testimony. This is a situation of "total condemnation ... from which one cannot choose to exclude oneself, except by self deception" (107). To paraphrase Camus, we are reminded that from now on this will be our history, and that from now on we will be from here (qtd. in Felman 107). From now on it will be impossible to forget that, in Aunt Emily's words, "What this country did to us, it did to itself" (33).

The fact that the book has enjoyed such exceptional popularity and success, has received numerous awards,⁴ and has been read in academic institutions and added to multicultural school curricula qualifies *Obasan* for what David Palumbo-Liu calls “model minority discourse,” defined as “an ideological construct not coextensive with the texts themselves, but rather designating a mode of apprehending, decoding, recoding, and producing Asian American narratives” (396). As the product of a particular mode of reading and subject construction, model minority discourse suggests “resolutions to a generalized ‘problem’ of racial, ethnic, and gendered identities” (395). Such texts participate in the rhetoric of depoliticized self-healing that suppresses material differences and sees change as the function of individual adjustments required of ethnic subjects or communities. To other immigrants, model minority discourse represents patterns of assimilation that other groups ought to imitate; to the dominant group, it offers a sign of possible recovery from racism, of putting such troubling issues behind. According to Palumbo-Liu, Asian American literature has been exploited as model minority discourse in order to affirm dominant ideologies of the self and of success, popularizing the liberal notion that racial minorities can only blame themselves for their alienation in America (400). The issues of racism, sexism, and class differences are addressed in model minority discourse in ways acceptable to a liberal audience, by thematizing “the ethnic split,” “a crisis of identity,” and “healing.” After all, the dominant function of model minority discourse is pedagogical. It reproduces specific minority subject positions within the hegemonic order, reinforcing the dominant culture’s normative expectations of conformity and a larger ideology of individualism. In this sense, Palumbo-Liu views model minority discourse as “an exemplary case of the predisposition to read ... according to particular psychosocial needs” (409).

There is one troubling aspect in Palumbo-Liu’s conception of model minority discourse. This conception renders minority literature passive by focusing on one-way flow between minority literature and majority literature and culture, namely on what the mainstream gets out of this relationship. Walter Ong’s model provides a useful corrective to this pattern in that he views the relationship between minority literature and majority culture as interactive: “A minority literature often negotiates for its own identity with the majority culture and constantly redefines itself, ultimately bringing the majority culture [to redefine itself, too]” (qtd. in Yamada 306). We must be careful not to strip minoritized authors of agency in their own reading

communities.⁵ So-called “minority” literature matters not only because of what it does for the dominant group, but also because it deals with issues of subjectivity and identity relevant to diasporic subjects. Kogawa’s novel addresses itself not only to the majority culture, but also to the Japanese Canadian community traumatized by wartime events and their aftermath, exorcising fear and shame, and the protective silence assumed “for the sake of the children,” the phrase that the narrator Naomi often hears in Uncle and Aunt’s house and which prevents her from learning the truth about her mother’s death until the age of thirty-six. The narrative registers different attitudes to the past among members of the scarred community. There are people like Naomi’s Aunt Emily, for whom “the injustice done to us in the past was still a live issue” (34). There are those like Obasan who are numb, wordless, stone-like. There are some “opting for ‘the good life’” who are against “rocking the boat” (35). And there is even an odd person who “quite openly applauded the wholesale imprisonment of Canadian and American Japanese” (35). Obviously, the struggle for change and for a better future, embodied mostly by Aunt Emily, the novel’s chief crusader for truth and justice, is oriented both within and without.

From its opening pages, the book foregrounds a form of witnessing that sets the stage for major reevaluation of the role of whiteness in the Canadian politics of the nation. By the stroke of pathetic fallacy, the Southern Alberta prairie — with its images of the grass and the sky in the coulee where Naomi’s Uncle performs his annual ritual of mourning on the anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing, the catastrophe to which she lost her mother — is a silent witness to past atrocities recalled through the evocation of Native peoples’ history:

Everything in front of us is virgin land. From the beginning of time, the grass along this stretch of prairie has not been cut. About a mile east is a spot which was once an Indian buffalo jump, a high steep cliff where the buffalo were stampeded and fell to their deaths. All the bones are still there, some sticking right out of the side of a fresh landslide. (2)

Within a short space of this chapter, Naomi compares Uncle to “Chief Sitting Bull squatting here” and draws parallels between the Native students in her class and Japanese children in Slocan, one of the internment camps where Japanese Canadian families were forcibly relocated.⁶ Through this landscape, the injustices of colonial racism and imperialism are connected, merging the identities of victims. The similarity of the shared fate of having dominant narratives superimposed on Native people and Japanese Canadian surviv-

ors of the internment reoccurs in other chapters as well, when the silence of the traumatized Japanese Canadians is mirrored by the silence of the Natives. For example, like Naomi's Aunt Obasan, the Native girl Lori is also enwrapped in silence, "never says anything" (8). Similarly, old Bill Rough Lock, an outcast of Slokan who rescues Naomi from drowning, associates her refusal to talk with the story of the last Native survivor who "never said the word" (146).

The trauma of racialization is enacted by means of two intertwined histories, those of the family and of the nation, that find their poignant juxtaposition in the group photograph of Naomi's grandparents "pasted over with Rule Britannia" (18). The story of Naomi's interrupted childhood and the fate of her family members demonstrates how historical events intervene in the lives of two families, the Katos and the Nakanes. These national and familial narratives are discrepant, revealing the concept of the racialized nation defining itself through whiteness and exclusion.⁷ The package containing personal and official papers that Naomi receives from Aunt Emily documents anti-Japanese racism and a tragic failure of Canada's self-image as not only a democracy but also a Christian country. The clergy refusing communion to Uncle (38), the RCMP betraying the trust of Japanese Canadian citizens, the press spreading the yellow peril propaganda — different national institutions confirm Aunt Emily's statement that "white Canadians feel more loyalty towards white foreigners than they do towards us Canadians" (95). Implicated in the violence of racism are not just government leaders and bureaucrats, but also ordinary Canadians: neighbours and other citizens who profited from the losses inflicted on the Japanese Canadian community. The idea of whiteness as menace is reinforced throughout the narrative by the recurrent metaphor of the white hen pecking the yellow chickens that Naomi associates with the Yellow Peril game: "To be yellow in the Yellow Peril game is to be weak and small. Yellow is to be chicken" (152).

The text talks back to this legacy of past and present racialization by inscribing its pedagogical stance. Early in the classroom scene we see Naomi as a teacher. Her Japanese proper name gets expropriated through her students' mangled pronunciation, signalling her non-belonging. The narrator as a teacher is also the writer's persona, dedicating herself to educating others in this mini-allegory of the text's pedagogy, of the "minoritized" group teaching the "dominant" group a lesson in phonics and history (7-8). This pedagogical thrust is also reflected in Aunt Emily's efforts to overcome racial prejudice around her by trying "to make familiar, to make knowable, the

treacherous yellow peril” (40). Aunt Emily’s mission to give a new meaning to “Canadianness,” and to make Canada a better, more inclusive place, is supported not only by her political idealism, but also by the narrator’s understanding of the role of the Japanese Canadian community in the country’s history. This theme of earned entitlement is another subtle way of educating the reader about the enormity of injustice experienced by this racialized group. Naomi makes a direct connection between the contributions of the generations of Japanese Canadians to the nation-building project and earlier pioneer and immigrant efforts:

We are those pioneers who cleared the bush and the forest with our hands, the gardeners tending and attending the soil with tenderness, the fishermen who are flung from the sea to flounder in the dust of the prairies. We are the Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei, the Japanese Canadians. We disappear into the future undemanding as dew. (112)

Relocated into the ghost towns of Alberta, and later dispersed to work on sugar beet farms, they bring life and prosperity to their new settlements. The narrative strives to give a deeper meaning to the suffering of the entire community: “We are the man in the Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of the light” (111). The edifying message of their experience is channelled simultaneously through Naomi’s Christian imagery of the community united in the act of communion, offering its “souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice” (177), and through Aunt Emily’s lay hopes for communal and national reconciliation by means of communication and “mutual recognition of facts” (183).

Yet, despite this overwhelming evidence of racialization and its pedagogical urgency, there are numerous examples of “normalizing” readings of *Obasan* that use the novel as “model minority discourse,” or what Roy Miki calls “resolutionary” as opposed to “revolutionary” interpretations:

all [academics] tend to incorporate a resolutionary (not revolutionary) aesthetics in their overall critical framing of the novel. The agreement seems to be that Naomi resolves her silenced past, so establishes peace with the human rights violations that caused such havoc and grief to her, to her family, and to her community. (143)

Rachel Kanefsky discusses some of the early scholarship on *Obasan* that “reveals a commitment to humanist critical concerns” (13). More recently, Guy Beauregard, in his comprehensive analysis of Kogawa criticism that appeared in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, identifies some “coherent pat-

terns of how critics in Canadian literary studies have read and continue to read racialized texts and representations of histories of racism in Canada” (9), noting a common tendency to downplay the historical weight of racism. An example of such recuperative readings that might be mentioned here is Carol Ann Howells’s discussion, which shifts attention to “the lyric intensity” of the novel, downplaying its power of “historical indictment” (125) and injecting optimism into the ending. Like Howells, Erika Gottlieb also emphasizes healing, implying that “the persecution and suffering endured by the Japanese Canadians during and after World War II” (34) represented a crisis in Canadian history, when Canada had “fallen into the trap” of racist hysteria (42). Kanefsky’s reading, incorporating the sequel *Itsuka*, rejects what she identifies as “the postmodern position” of historical skepticism and traces Naomi’s transition from paralysis, ambiguity, and perspectivism to “faith, belief, and . . . univocality” (16). However, in her argument Kanefsky blurs a distinction between history and narrative, a fact and a verbal act, or what happened and the telling of what happened, which for Shoshana Felman are mutually dependent and “implicated in each other” (95).⁸

Typically, model minority discourse is praised for its lack of self-pity, bitterness, or solemnity. The case of *Obasan*’s reception confirms the dominant culture’s investment in the containment of minority discourse. Despite, or perhaps because of its astounding artistry and poignancy, the novel has been quickly tokenized, inviting extremely sophisticated academic analyses couched in postmodern, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and feminist rhetoric. At the same time, Kogawa’s text as required curriculum for Canadian high schools and universities yields itself easily to crude didacticism, guided toward the liberal-humanist discovery that we are all human after all, that racism is bad, and that all we need to do in order to become a healthy society is to “recover” our individual and communal past.⁹ The book of such haunting poetic beauty and philosophical depth, challenging the concepts of transparent language and transparent history, is repeatedly invoked in Canadian classrooms as a cliché of multicultural literature. But is it not, after all, consistent with the fate of national heroines to be assimilable into the repertoire of national clichés?

Although some readings force the novel into this model, *Obasan* resists the rhetoric of healing and the role of model minority discourse. Showing the interrelatedness of personal trauma and the institutional violence of racism to the collective subject, Kogawa’s text offers the possibility of “progressive redefinitions of ethnicity, class, race, and gender” as affecting pol-

itical change (Palumbo-Liu 399). The political is not sublimated into the personal; on the contrary, the political is foregrounded through Aunt Emily's diary, through archival materials interspersed in the text, and through the appendix, including "Excerpt from the memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada, April 1946" (248). Such proximity of fictionalized life writing and government documents serves as a reminder that the personal is embedded in the political. Similarly, the role the novel played in gaining support for the redress movement — a collective and political act — gives it a political life of its own.

What qualifies Kogawa's novel for the role of such a celebrated catalyst of change is its perception by the establishment as unthreatening. This perception derives from the novel's much admired modernist qualities, such as verbal restraint; its silences, gaps, and indirections; the "poetic" language that attenuates the "mimetic" truth of the experience it describes; as well as other elliptical devices, such as "juvenile perspective, fragmented memories and reveries, Western fairy tales and Japanese fables" (Cheung 129). Not without significance is also the fact that the book has been praised for its lack of "explicit political or didactic intent" (Garrod 140), and that the history presented in *Obasan* receives a political/textual closure through the actual award of redress and through the sequel *Itsuka*, with its appended government apology. Moreover, the text, which culminates in the cataclysmic event of the (American-made) nuclear explosion in Nagasaki, provides a counterbalance to Canada's responsibility for the atrocities committed against Japanese Canadians.

Attempts to turn *Obasan* into model minority discourse confirm the thesis advanced by Peggy Phelan that the production of statements about the past is always "contingent upon the material, moral, political, and psychic needs of the present — as they are understood by those in power" (78). The cultural politics around Kogawa's book, and especially the novel's quick assimilation into the mainstream of literary criticism and pedagogy, involve mechanisms of co-optation that can tame and contain even the most "disagreeable" message, revealing that the invention of national history, including the one structured around the nation's guilt, is ultimately a conserving and conservative enterprise.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that the text, to a certain extent, colludes with discourses of appropriation and containment. I argue that *Obasan* deliberately presents itself as unthreatening. Asian American critic

Traise Yamamoto discusses this feature of Nisei women's autobiography as a masking strategy, thereby restoring agency to the writing subject. The didactic purpose of Kogawa's book accounts for its reliance on writing strategies perceived as unthreatening. This didactic end necessitates "the avoidance of overt conflict with those readers whom [the author] desire[s] to educate" (Yamamoto 105). Constantly facing the risk of provoking a potentially defensive and hostile reaction among white Canadian readers, the text attempts to teach white Canada the very principles of democracy that the dominant culture espouses as its own. The book's attenuating devices include a deployment of multiple discursive frameworks — academic, archival, documentary — that provide counter-discourses to the national and familial narratives on which the novel's plot is hinged. A summary of Japanese Canadian "harsh history" (33) is gradually introduced through external "found" documents such as a pamphlet entitled "Racial Discrimination by Orders-in-Council" that lists the injustices incurred by the community. At the same time, the folder put together by Aunt Emily also contains newspaper clippings documenting public dissent through voices of those Canadians who opposed the violation of civil liberties of the Japanese Canadian population, suggesting competing versions of Canada as a democratic country (41). Selective and guarded in voicing its criticism, the narrative employs a masking device of "shaming" white Canada into recognition of the betrayal of its own democratic standards.¹⁰

Significantly, in *Obasan*, overt criticism of the racialized nation is confined to Aunt Emily's statements, marking her position vis-à-vis history as "extreme" compared to other Japanese Canadian women. Her radical outspokenness is foiled by Naomi's skepticism and also by a slightly comic but fond portrayal of Aunt Emily, who is described as "a little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse" (32), "a small tank of a woman with a Winston Churchill stoop" (33), "Stephen Leacock's horseman" (33), a bulldozer (35), and so on. Naomi's initial dismissal of victimization ("People who talk a lot about victimization make me uncomfortable. It's as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind" [34]), and her debates with Aunt Emily about objectivity and seeing "the point of view of the other side" (35), add another layer of buffering. As Yamamoto writes,

Nisei women who assume autobiographical authority must be ... careful to present their stories in "acceptable" terms ... [;] there is reluctance to speak about their experience of the camps and their feelings, a guardedness about the act of revelation. (106)

Already marginalized by their race and gender when they speak, these women employ the trope of masking, which often involves tonal masking such as a matter-of-fact, ungrudging, or reasonable tone, and use euphemisms such as “prejudice” instead of racism. Similarly, Kogawa’s choice of the novel form rather than autobiography can be construed as a mask that allows for articulation of a self that is critical of Canada. Her use of narrative masking can be seen as a way of negotiating “the tension between the communal act of witnessing and ... the specific experiences of the individual self” (Yamamoto 122). We need to keep in mind, however, that such strategies can be double-edged: they paradoxically reinforce the hard message while ostensibly making it more palatable. They also stand in ironic contrast to the dominant “masking” of racism in the government use of such euphemisms as “Interior Housing Projects” instead of prisons (34).

So why do most mainstream critics fail to see beyond the book’s attenuating strategies? Taking up the thesis put forth by Smaro Kamboureli, that “repression, psychological and political, is at the heart of the story this novel tells” (197) on the level of individual, family, and community experience, I want to suggest that this “repression” is enacted through various readings of the novel, on the level of reception as well. The meaning of the text “depends on who reads it, as well as the conditions under which it is read” (Kamboureli 197). Critical responses to *Obasan*, especially those of a humanistic kind, seek closure to the developmental narrative of the novel’s movement from silence to speech. This need for closure, healing, and coming to terms with the past is motivated by the refusal or inability to conceive of the nation’s history as founded on racist premises. According to Marita Sturken, discourses of healing “can often be employed as forms of forgetting and depoliticization” (16): for example, as smoothing over the disruptions of the war narratives or romanticizing them. Hence there is a tendency among the readers of *Obasan* to see in the text a resolution of the isolated racist “episode” from the nation’s past, rather than an indictment of an ongoing problem of racism. One of the strategies employed by the critics is to privilege the event of internment, ignoring the presence of racism as a trauma pervading the whole text, including Naomi’s pre- and post-war experiences.¹¹ It is also significant that the internment finds a kind of desired historical closure in the government’s apology and redress, the fact that may largely account for the novel’s “safe” positioning in the national imaginary. In a way, it is the racial unease that prompts the critics to contain the problem of racism to a singular historical event of Pearl Harbor, while completely

forgetting the pre-war hysteria of the “treacherous yellow peril.” Another strategy is to identify with Aunt Emily’s faith in Canada as a democratic state. She takes a witness stand in the testimony to the Nisei efforts to prove themselves Canadian in the climate of “an undemocratic racial antagonism — which is exactly what our democratic country is supposed to be fighting against” (82). After all, what better proof of Canada’s liberalism do we need to invoke than the very fact of *Obasan*’s publication and its celebrated status? Quite predictably, Emily’s liberalism invites “liberal” interpretations of the novel. However, as Kamboureli observes, because Emily never recognizes racialization as “embedded in the foundations of the Canadian state, she unwittingly reproduces the liberal ideology that justifies racism within a democratic framework” (188). Her denial is symbolized by her scribbling on the pamphlet: whenever the words “Japanese race” are used, she replaces them with “Canadian citizen” (33). It is the same mechanism that permits some white Canadians or other mainstream-oriented readers to turn *Obasan* into an optimistic token of the present multicultural reality by replacing “race” with “culture” in the name of Canadian benevolent plurality.

Potential readers assume the subject positions of Emily (identified with transparent readings of corrective versions of history) or Naomi (identified with repression and crisis of representation). Aunt Emily’s activism focuses on the juridical-discursive apparatus of discrimination that is in need of improvement rather than on the genealogy of racialization operating in the sociopolitical discourses of power. On the other hand, Naomi, for whom the truth is “more murky, shadowy and grey” (32), focuses on how racialization affects particular subjectivities: that is, on the subjective dimension of trauma. However, one argument to avoid generalization of Naomi’s first-person narrative as neurosis or repression is to keep in mind that she relates not only her own story but also her community’s history. According to Kamboureli, Naomi’s “hysteria” has to be decoded as “a double gesture of giving away and withholding” (206). This view is consistent with my reading of the text’s masking strategies. Like Naomi, Kogawa’s book doesn’t align itself with either of the two sides in the binary constructions of speech and silence, inside and outside, ambiguity and truth, or passivity and action. Embracing and interrogating both sides of these constructed binaries, the narrative refuses to be forced into any ideological regime that might inform the novel’s critical readings.

Nevertheless, contradictory meanings can be inscribed onto the body of this text, partly because it offers itself as a screen, as the body of a woman,

an unthreatening Asian other.¹² Undoubtedly, racialized gender politics also play a role in the novel's reception as a paradigmatic national text of ethnic healing. Reading against this script, however, I want to acknowledge the novel's subversive use of the power of imaginative constructions of the nation through the Other/Woman. The national trauma at the heart of the story — the human-rights violations against Japanese Canadians — is revealed from a gendered perspective split onto three women: Naomi, Aunt Emily, and Obasan. Collectively, they embody a racialized gendered position of difference that leads to contesting a national identity founded upon the principles of racial and ethnic homogeneity. In the situation of war, such principles override human empathy or gender solidarity, as noted by Aunt Emily, who witnesses how members of the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire actively participate in bashing Japanese Canadians. She finds it "illogical that women, who are the bearers and nurturers of the human race, should go all out for ill-will like this" (82-83). The contrast between the reality of forced evacuation and Aunt Emily's unwavering humanist faith in democracy as capable of transcending racism reveals race as precisely the trauma of Canada's national history.

The gendered character of racialization is consistently highlighted through the novel's central figuration of the gaping wound of racism as rape. Racism and sexual abuse are the book's "dirty" secrets. They are connected through Naomi as survivor with "a double wound" (243). Racism is linked to rape through the power of the racializing gaze whose manifestation ranges from the tenuously offensive stares of white Canadians to the most sinister invasion of Naomi's body by Old Man Gower. Contrasting the images of Naomi's mother's eyes, "the eyes of Japanese motherhood" that "do not invade and betray" (59), and the invasive gaze of white (male) strangers like the boy on the street corner or the man on the streetcar staring at Naomi (47), Kogawa, according to Di Brandt, "makes a connection between the Western use of the gaze and the tendency toward colonization, to 'invade and betray' non-Western cultures" (119). Another association between racist abuse and rape is explicitly made in Naomi's horrific dream about "three beautiful oriental women" lying naked in the muddy road, guarded by soldiers with rifles. Like four-year-old Naomi molested by Old Man Grover, the women believe that "The only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive" (61). One of the women "was trying to use the only weapon she had — her desirability. This is what a punished dog feels — this abject longing, wretchedness, fear, and utter helplessness" (62). When the soldiers fire

the shots truncating the women's bodies, Naomi connects the scene to her own experience, generalizing the ubiquity of gendered violence: "Does Old Man Grover still walk through the hedges between our houses in Vancouver, in Slokan, in Granton and Cecil?" (62). Moreover, as Di Brandt writes, "It is adult male violence, again, multiplied a billionfold in the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki" (115), that is responsible for Naomi's mother's disfigurement and silence.

In Naomi's narrative racism and rape are also connected through the metaphor of darkness into which she plunges after the incident with Old Man Gower, at the same time as she experiences escalating terror around her:

The darkness is everywhere, in the day as well as the night. It threatens us as it always has, in streetcars, in the stores, on the streets, in all public places. It covers the entire city and causes all the lights to be turned out. It drones overhead in the sounds of airplanes. It rushes unbidden from the mouths of strangers and in the taunts of children. It happens to Stephen even more terrifyingly than it does to me. (69-70).

Racism and sexual abuse are traumas similarly shrouded in silence and shame. When her brother returns from his all-white school badly beaten, Naomi empathizes with his silence: "Is he ashamed, as I was in Old Man Gower's bathroom? Should I go away?" (70). In this context, Naomi's final insight, which ties together her inability to disclose her abuse by Old Man Gower and her mother's silence ("Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" [243]), as well as her symbolic donning of Aunt Emily's coat, represents an understanding that silence can collude with the abuse and make it possible to continue.

As Marita Sturken observes, official history has an ambivalent attitude to the body of the survivor, as survivors "often disrupt the closure of a particular history" (5). Trauma survivors testify through their very presence to the body's importance to memory, to the materiality of memory. Embodying personal memory, survivors participate in the processes of inscribing, producing, and giving meaning to cultural memory, which is understood as "a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (Sturken 1). Thus survivors stand at the intersection of memory and history, where different narratives are legitimized so as to produce concepts of the nation and Canadianness, especially in the event of great public traumas. Kogawa's book acts as a substitute for the survivor's body in that it embodies and generates memories of the pain that has shattered

individual, communal, and national histories. To paraphrase Cathy Caruth's words, the traumatized text "carries [an] impossible history within [itself]," becoming itself "the symptom of a history that [it] cannot entirely possess" (*Trauma* 5).

Positing the Other/Woman as an (im)possible national subject, *Obasan* brings Canadians to the limits of understanding themselves as a nation; in fact, through this gesture, the book stages a crisis of nationalist discourses as such, as an offshoot of the patriarchal state's attempt to ensure the "purity" of its progeny. How can a Japanese Canadian (or, in a different context, a First Nations or an African Canadian) woman figure in the Canadian symbolic as "mother of the nation?" At best, she can only be read as a symptom of Canada's national guilt, deprived again of subjecthood and citizenship rights so sacrosanct to Aunt Emily. The internment, repatriation, and dispersal of Japanese Canadians, which was the result of the unilateral narrowing down of the meaning of Canadianness in the government's vigilante action, foregrounds with a particular force the question "Who is a Canadian?" The Japanese Canadian subject emerges at a site of contradiction between legal citizenship and multiple identities and identifications — cultural, racial, or religious — that the subject inhabits and that have been voluntarily chosen and/or imposed from without. Kogawa's novel rehistoricizes and creates a counter-discourse to the narratives of Canada as an inclusive nation. Deploying the effects of discourses of race and gender on discourses on nationalism, *Obasan* shows that juridical citizenship signifies little in the face of a Canadian national imaginary unable to conceive of the Asian subject as Canadian. Race as "a powerful and negative signifier," together with gender, class, and other signifiers of difference, pushes against "the universalities of the modern state" such as citizenship, property rights, democracy, and nationalism (Palumbo-Liu 393). While hoping to forestall the re-enactment of the state's violence, the novel also reminds us that the state and the nation, to use David Palumbo-Liu's words, "should not be read as monolithic (that is, not contradiction-free) entity against which the 'ethnic' [or racialized subject] is simply posed" (388), but rather that "America" [and by extension Canada] "is always in process itself" (389).

I want to suggest that application of contemporary theories of trauma is promising insofar as *Obasan* seems to resist attempts to read it in terms of earlier psychoanalytic theories of hysteria and repression, as in the reading offered by Kamboureli. Such readings approach the complex textuality of the novel as a series of "symptoms" whose hidden "truth" has to be uncovered in

the end. Besides, such a Eurocentric approach seems to diminish the agency of the writing subject and fails to account for the novel's masking strategies, which have been recognized as culture-specific by Asian American critics like Yamamoto. Rather than pathologizing Naomi's reaction to the multiple traumas experienced by her in her embodiment as a gendered, racialized, historicized subject, there seems to be more promise in viewing the book from the perspective of recent theories of trauma. Although taking their departure from Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma theories have developed approaches that are sensitive to historical and cultural contexts, and to the intersectionality of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. By allowing a movement from individual trauma to group trauma, based on the assumption that "the theory of individual trauma contains within it the core of the trauma of a larger history" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 71), such approaches can more effectively focus on the experiences of racialized, postcolonial, or minoritized subjects, and can mediate the emergence of a political consciousness.¹³ Trauma research confronts us with a new task of learning to listen to trauma beyond its pathology and to understand its human and social effects (Caruth, *Trauma* vii).

Following Freud's late insight into the relation between trauma and history, Caruth writes that the structure of trauma consists

not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. (*Trauma* 8)

The inherent latency means that "the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, [but] it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (8). This view of the relation between crisis and survival illuminates the reaction of the Japanese Canadian community: "for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; ... survival itself, in other words, *can be a crisis*" (9). Thus Naomi can be seen as "a witness who speaks, enigmatically, out of the crisis of [her] own survival" (10).

The critical reception of *Obasan* illustrates the difficulty of listening to and recognizing the truth of traumatic stories. The readings that reduce Naomi's adult trauma to the events of childhood, locating the origins of her traumatic experience of sexuality and race in her abuse by Old Man Gower and in the internment of Japanese Canadians, miss what Caruth identifies as

“the central Freudian insight into trauma, that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (*Trauma* 9). The “truth” of Naomi’s trauma is situated at the intersection of personal memory, cultural memory, and official history — a site where contradictory meanings are produced and validated. Kamboureli’s discussion of the continuity of racism, together with her analysis of the pre-internment racial trauma that Naomi experiences as the violence of the racializing gaze, directs our attention to the history of Japanese Canadians in Canada as a continuous struggle against racism, rather than offering a consoling fiction of a single historical occurrence, a one-time error that has to be acknowledged. However, Kamboureli’s interpretation of the novel’s ending as disappointing suggests the presence of tacit expectations of a “cure,” or a political rather than merely aesthetic resolution. I would add that, for Naomi as trauma survivor, the reality of violence is still present, and the trauma of racism continues to affect her in the “present” as we see Naomi in the classroom, taunted by a white student named Sigmund.

Traumatic events force us to recognize the political nature of memory, individual and collective. However, trauma must be understood not only as

a repeated suffering of the event, but ... also [as] a continual leaving of its site. The traumatic reexperiencing ... carries with it ... the impossibility of knowing what first constituted it.... To listen to the crisis of a trauma ... is not only to listen for the event, but to hear in the testimony the survivor’s departure from it. (Caruth, *Trauma* 10)

If in reading Naomi’s story we are invited to listen to her departure from it, our witnessing opens up the possibility of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event, as well as challenging the discourse of putting behind and forgiveness.¹⁴ Mona Okinawa, in her recent study of the cartography of violence, revisits the sites of internment through oral narratives of women who were incarcerated in camps. She argues that “survivors’ testimonies provide a counter-map to a sanitized landscape of national forgetting” (Okinawa 76). The hegemonic ideologies of forgetfulness and forgiveness in liberal multiculturalism obscure the continuing relations of domination and subordination in the Canadian nation-state. Silence on the part of Naomi’s aunt Obasan and other Japanese Canadians is also eloquent evidence of the violence they experienced, especially when juxtaposed with the silences of “the

white beneficiaries of the violence” (Okinawa 92). Obasan speaks through her silent body, described as “a fearful calligraphy” (26).

According to Cathy Caruth, the promise of trauma studies lies in the belief that trauma itself may provide a link between cultures that goes beyond “a simple understanding of the pasts of others” — in *Obasan*, the history of Japanese Canadians — and that, “within the traumas of contemporary history ... [restores] our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (*Trauma* 11). Through its contestation of definitions of the nation and Canadianness, the cultural memory of trauma reenacted in Kogawa’s book reveals the demand for a less monolithic, more inclusive image of the nation. Unlike a historical narrative that relegates violence to the past, the novel functions as a “testimonial bridge” that joins events to language and guarantees the “correspondence and adherence” between narrative and history (Felman 101). The readers are interpellated to imagine their own implication in history and are faced with an ethical imperative to accept the role of witnesses. From now on, as onlookers, they will be contaminated by the “total condemnation of the testimonial truth” (Felman 107).

Inevitably, the book raises questions of collective responsibility in the conscience of generations of Canadians who resist becoming witnesses in Felman’s difficult sense of “total condemnation” and fail “to imagine their own implication and their own inclusion in the condemnation” (108). Naomi’s lament on the nation at the end of the novel gestures toward the possibility of such inclusion:

Where do any of us come from in this cold country? Oh Canada, whether it is admitted or not, we come from you we come from you. From the same soil, the slugs and slime and bogs and the wigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside... We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. We come from Canada, this land that is like every land, filled with the wise, the fearful, the compassionate, the corrupt. (226)

Without renouncing Canada, in the end she rejects both silence and multi-cultural jingoism, suggesting that a more honest telling of the stories of oppression is required. Making the past available to imagination, Kogawa’s text opens up the possibility of rescuing us as readers and witnesses from the “immediate forgetfulness of history” (Felman 112).

NOTES

¹ Guy Beauregard says that *Obasan* “played a key role in mobilizing support for the 1988 Redress Settlement, in which the federal government and the National Association of Japanese Canadians negotiated and signed an agreement providing a formal apology and compensation for Japanese Canadians” (5). In 1988, excerpts from *Obasan* were read in the House of Commons during the Canadian government’s apology and announcement of redress to Japanese Canadians (Beedham 147). Roy Miki, in his monumental history of the Redress Movement, provides some anecdotal evidence of the book’s powerful impact on mobilizing the community into action. He recalls a story told by Dr. Wesley Fujiwara, the younger brother of Muriel Kitagawa, a historical prototype of Aunt Emily in the novel. Dr. Fujiwara’s involvement in the movement began “when one of his patients mentioned Joy Kogawa’s recently published novel *Obasan*” (200).

² One can mention here such titles as Shizuje Takashima’s *A Child in Prison Camp* (1971); Ken Adachi’s *The Enemy That Never Was: A History of Japanese Canadians* (1976); Barry Broadfoot’s *Years of Sorrow, Years of Shame: The Story of the Japanese Canadians in World War II* (1977); Ann Gomer Sunahara’s *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War* (1981); Takeo Ujo Nakano’s *Within the Barbed Wire Fence: A Japanese Man’s Account of His Internment in Canada* (1983); and Muriel Kitagawa’s *This Is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941–1948* (1985).

³ The celebrity status of the book is underscored by the fact that in 2000 the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English staged a special session on “The Cultural Politics of *Obasan*” to examine its influence on the ways Canadians have been reinventing themselves in the classroom and in literary criticism during the last twenty years. This paper takes up some of the ideas I presented in the ACCUTE session.

⁴ Soon after its publication, *Obasan* received The Books in Canada First Novel Award (1981), The Canadian Authors Association Book of the Year Award (1982), and The Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award (1982). As recently as 2005, the Vancouver Public Library chose it as the title of the year for its One Book One Vancouver program, an event that coincided with a mass action to rescue the Kogawa house described in *Obasan* from demolition.

⁵ So far I have been using the term “minority literature,” following Ong and Palumbo-Liu; however, I personally prefer to use the term “minoritized literature” as indicative of the unequal power dynamics rather than ontological status of this kind of writing.

⁶ Matthew Beedham offers a detailed analysis of “the connection Kogawa asserts between Japanese Canadians and First Nations people” through Naomi’s comparison of her uncle to Sitting Bull early in the novel (140). This image is used to problematize the relation of signifiers to signifieds, including those of “Canadianness,” “citizen,” and “nation.”

⁷ Enakshi Dua uses the concept in her analysis of “the interconnectedness between nation-building, the politics of racial purity, and the nuclear family” (255).

⁸ Kanefsky seems to collapse “history” as historical fact and “history” as historiography. Other interpretations such as those by Lim, or — more recently — Tharp, also rely to a different degree on the possibility of healing and renewal linked to articulation, writing, poetic language, naming, etc. For a critique of such readings, see Apollo O. Amoko’s article. I suggest that pitting “humanistic” against “postmodern” readings of the novel creates a false dichotomy. Personal closures are necessary and possible insofar as the individual’s ability to carry on with his or her life is concerned. But imposing such a sense of closure and healing onto history may lull our attention to the persistent return of trauma — other racialized minorities will be substituted, and other bombs will fall on civilians.

⁹ Education specialist Jim Greenlaw mentions that in 1987, in Ontario, where he taught high school English, “a new curriculum mandated the teaching of multicultural literature” (1). Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* was one of the texts introduced to students as part of this new curricu-

lum. He argues that without “a critical filter” of postcolonial theories such as Edward Said’s or Rey Chow’s, through which to interpret representations of Asian people and cultures in North American texts and films, students “have little ability to resist stereotypical readings of the ‘Asian presence’” (13). In many high schools, English teachers implementing the multicultural curriculum employ traditional New Critical, archetypal, feminist, or reader-response strategies that often reproduce Eurocentric biases inherent in these approaches. My own experience teaching immigrant and multicultural literature at Seneca College in Toronto in the early to mid-1990s confirms Greenlaw’s observations.

¹⁰The effect of shaming Canadian readers is produced by evidence of unfaltering loyalty and patriotism on the part of the excluded community, ranging from Aunt Emily’s loud identification with her country to such quiet details as the King George/Queen Elizabeth commemorative mugs bought by Naomi’s mother (133); Uncle and Obasan’s decision not to send Stephen and Naomi to Japanese language classes to avoid suspicion of “disloyalty to Canada” and instead making them work on a scrapbook of the Royal Family (138); the flying of a Union Jack in the front yard of their Slocan house; or Stephen’s cry “we won!” at the news of the war’s end (168).

¹¹Guy Beauregard refers to this reading practice as “an ‘aberration’ model of racism in Canada” (9). According to Aunt Emily, “the war was just an excuse for the racism that was already there. We were rioted against back in 1907, for heavens sake! We’ve always faced prejudice” (35).

¹²Apollo O. Amoko offers another discussion of “the gender-specific nature of the time and space of national inquiry that Kogawa constructs in *Obasan*” (47), based on concepts derived from Homi Bhabha and Julia Kristeva.

¹³See Caruth’s analysis of the enactment of memory in the Alain Resnais film *Hiroshima mon amour* in *Unclaimed* 25–56.

¹⁴Smaro Kamboureli downplays the presence of this discourse at the end of the novel, dismissing the allegorical references to Love and Grief as part of Kogawa’s troubling preoccupation with religious imagery.

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