

**TRAUMA RECOVERY THROUGH THE WRITING OF THE COLLECTIVE
FICTIONAL SELF IN *OBASAN*, BY JOY KOGAWA**

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RESUMO: O presente artigo pretende verificar de que maneira o romance *Obasan* (1981), da autora nipo-canadense Joy Kogawa, busca reconciliar a nação canadense com um evento traumático de seu passado recente. O romance aborda a opressão exercida pelo governo canadense contra parte dos próprios cidadãos do país durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Neste período, todos os residentes de origem nipônica do Canadá tiveram suas propriedades confiscadas, além de serem removidos de suas residências e alojados em campos de internamento e trabalho forçado. *Obasan* foi o primeiro relato literário deste período histórico, e adquiriu representativa importância política através de sua narrativa, que combina elementos autobiográficos (com ênfase no coletivo, em lugar do individual), ficcionais e históricos. Para o estudo da obra serão abordadas as teorias de autores tais como Susan Friedman, Leigh Gilmore, bell hooks, Dominick LaCapra, Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson e Hayden White, entre outros.

Palavras-Chave: Autobiografia Ficcional, Recuperação de Trauma, *Obasan*

“There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.”

Joy Kogawa

The epigraph above constitutes the initial lines of Joy Kogawa's first novel, *Obasan* (1981). It differentiates two distinct silences. The first one, the silence that "cannot speak" regards the oppression through which certain minority groups, denominated as "subaltern" by scholar Gayatri Spivak (1988) or "ex-centric" by theorist Linda Hutcheon (1988), like the Japanese Canadiansⁱ portrayed in the novel, are forced to abide by. When this oppression achieves such striking levels as the ones depicted by Kogawa, it is impossible for the oppressed to express themselves, since they do not have the means and opportunities to voice their sufferings. The second silence, the one that "will not speak" regards the silence which remains even after the high-level, explicit (and, in this case, official) oppression is gone. This silence refers to the unwillingness of the oppressed to express themselves and voice their sufferings. Such reluctance may derive from many factors, ranging from conformity to events which occurred in the past to the fear that giving voice to this past trauma would open "sealed" wounds.

This refusal to speak out on the horrors of a past experience is analyzed by scholar Leigh Gilmore, in her essay "Represent Yourself". According to Gilmore, the decision to deal with a traumatic event may result in "either a new wound or the reopening of a wound" (Gilmore, 2001). This view is reproduced by Mizutani-san, an *Issei* (first generation immigrant), therefore a victim of the measures taken by the Canadian government against Japanese Canadians during World War II. In an interview to Kazuko Tsurumi, in his essay "Japanese Canadians: The War-Time Experience", Mizutani-san argues: "Our children tell us not to make too much fuss about

compensation for the injustices done to us. If we do, they are afraid of losing the chances for them to get ahead in Canadian society” (Tsurumi, 1991).

The two different silences exposed in the afore-mentioned epigraph, also constitute the object of study for scholar Arnold Davidson, in his comprehensive analysis of the novel, *Writing against the Silence: Joy Kogawa's Obasan*. As argued by Davidson, Naomi's (the protagonist's) mother and aunt would represent:

the two silences, in fact, that will loom large in her [Naomi's] story – both the silence of her missing mother and the silence of others, especially the aunt ('obasan' is the Japanese word for aunt) who raised her without telling her the full story of the mother's absence and death. 'There is a silence [the mother] that cannot speak. There is a silence [Obasan] that will not speak' (Davidson, 1993).

In her study, “Voices of Stone: the Power of Poetry in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*”, Laurie Kruk quotes Bernard Dauenhauer on *muteness* and *silence* in order to better illustrate the difference between the two silences depicted by the novel:

The power of poetry [in *Obasan*] [...] comes in part from its [...] tendency [...] to draw on brevity's heightened impact and to surround itself with attentive silences. As Dauenhauer notes, the “difference between muteness and silence is comparable to the difference between being without sight and having one's eyes closed” (Kruk *apud* Dauenhauer, 1999).

According to this perspective, Mother would be *mute*, without any voice, while Obasanⁱⁱ would be silent, opting for not talking about the sinister facts surrounding hers (and her family's) traumatic past to Naomi.

In *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa defies the remaining silence regarding the events related to Japanese Canadian subjects born or living in Canada during World War II. Although

the book was first published in 1981, more than 35 years after the war had ended, there was still a disturbing, deafening silence regarding the mistreats imposed to Japanese Canadians during this period of history. This silence that “will not speak” lasted until the period coinciding with the publication of *Obasan*, the first literary account of the interment and relocation of Japanese Canadians. The silence might be related to the Canadians’ refusal to remember a past cruelty perpetrated against part of their own people. This might be observed in the book itself. The front-cover caption for the 1985 Penguin edition reads: “A moving novel of a time and a suffering *we* have *tried* to forget” (Kogawa, 1985, front-cover. My italics). However “trying” might have been done, the writing, the critical acclaim and, more relevantly, the ample reading of *Obasan*, demonstrate that it was not possible to completely discard the wartime events from the Canadian collective memory.

The time span necessary to the approach of a traumatic issue is observed by collective trauma researcher Gabriele Schwab. In her representative article “Writing against Memory and Forgetting”, Schwab observes that “human beings have always silenced violent stories. Some stories, collective and personal, are so violent we would not be able to live our daily lives if we did not at least temporarily silence them. [...] Too much silence, however, becomes haunting” (Schwab, 2006). The mentioned need to access a traumatizing event of a nation’s past may be related both to the dominant group (white Canadians) as well as to the minority (Japanese Canadians). This is the perspective proposed by Eva Karpinski in her article “The Book as (Anti)National Heroine: Trauma and Witnessing in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*”, in which the author states that,

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 of culture, but also to the Japanese Canadian community traumatized by wartime events and their aftermath (Karpinski, 2006).

Events such as the ones narrated in *Obasan*, characterized by the continuing (however involuntary) remembrance of past distressing events, constitute the core of *trauma*. As observed by history and trauma researcher Dominick LaCapra, the key feature of trauma regards its persistence through time: “A crucial issue with respect to traumatic historical events is whether attempts to work through problems [...] can viably come to terms with (without ever fully healing or overcoming) the divided legacies, open wounds, and unspeakable losses of a dire past” (LaCapra, 2001). By speaking the “losses of a dire past”, the relevance of *Obasan* ascends from a literary to a broader, political importance. This might be related to the moment in which the novel was published. Although earlier versions of *Obasan*, including a short story of the same title, had been previously published (Lefebvre, 2010), when the complete novel was finally released, the discussion over official government redress was at its top. According to Ann Sunahara, in her book *The Politics of Racism: the Uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War*,

Obasan, introduced thousands of ordinary Canadians to the wartime history of Japanese Canadians by putting them vicariously inside the experience. At the other extreme was a study conducted by the respected accounting firm, Price Waterhouse, which revealed that the economic losses from the wartime property confiscation were \$443 million in 1986 dollars. By 1986, polls showed that 63% of Canadians supported redress and 45% favoured individual compensation (Sunahara, 2000).

It is relevant to observe that the political and representative relevance achieved by Joy Kogawa comes from a fictional representation portrayed in *Obasan*, since, as observed by the author in the opening of the novel: “Although this novel is based on historical events, and many of the persons named are real, most of the characters are fictional” (Kogawa, 1985, title page). The representation of the self through fiction might also be related to scholar bell hooks’s analysis of the representation issue. As argued by hooks, the main concern of autobiography writers should not be exactness or accuracy, but rather the impressions and memories past events may have left upon them: “autobiography is a personal story telling – a unique recounting of events not so much as they have happened but as we remember and invent them” (hooks, 1998).

This writing of the self through fiction is a relatively recent approach to the narration of historical events. In their article, “Life Narrative: Definitions and Distinctions”, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that the traditional autobiographical writing followed the model proposed by scholars such as Philippe Lejeune. Smith and Watson maintain that, according to Lejeune’s proposal, in the traditional autobiography “the ‘vital statistics’ of the author, such as date and place of birth and education, are identical to those of the narrator; and an implied contract or ‘pact’ exists between author and publisher attesting to the truth of the signature” (Smith & Watson *apud* Lejeune, 2010). This perspective might be counterpoised to Hayden White’s proposal regarding the entanglement of historical and fictional narratives in his essay *Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory*:

One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less “true” for being imaginary. It all depends upon how one construes the function of the faculty of imagination in human nature. The same is true with respect to

narrative representations of reality, especially when, as historical discourses, these representations are of the “human past” (White, 1992).

Besides contesting conventional autobiographical writing through the use of fiction, Joy Kogawa also contests the established autobiographical tradition through other manners. First, the account of the historical traumatizing events regarding the Canadian government’s measures against part of its own people during World War II is portrayed through the perspective of a traditionally *silent* and *silenced* group. Instead of the customary white male dominant group, the narrative in the book is depicted by one of the oppressed Japanese Canadians families. Such an innovative approach might be related to the question prompted by theorist Priyamvada Gopal: “Who is the ‘one’ who interprets historical events and how does the mediation of that ‘investigative consciousness’ influence the writing of history?” (Gopal, 2008). The relation between the re-writing of history through narratives dealing with trauma is analyzed by Kerwin Lee Klein in his article “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse”. As proposed by Klein, “‘trauma’ is the key to authentic forms of memory, and memories shaped by trauma are the most likely to subvert totalizing varieties of historicism” (Klein, 2000). Therefore, by retelling an important period of Canadian history through a new perspective, *Obasan* gives the power over historical narrative to a traditionally excluded minority.

Also, the autobiographical account presented in *Obasan* does not refer just to an individual’s life. In “Women’s Autobiographical Selves”, critic Susan Stanford Friedman comes to the conclusion that, in traditional autobiography, as proposed by Georges Gusdorf, “man must be an island unto himself” (Friedman *apud* Gusdorf, 1998). *Obasan* definitely does not fit Gusdorf’s definition, since the novel is not an

account of a male individual's life, referring to actual events on his life. Actually, the novel works as a representation of traumatic events imposed to a certain people in a certain period of time, as argued by Joy Kogawa, in an interview to Cherry Clayton: "I had to tell a peculiar story of a peculiar *people* at a specific historical time" (Clayton, 2002. My italics). Since *Obasan* provides a *collective* trauma representation through the eyes and feelings of a young girl (and later *woman*), the narrative would be closer to the definition of autobiography proposed by Susan Friedman, who suggests alterations to Gusdorf's definitions. According to Friedman:

Autobiography is possible when 'the individual does not feel *herself* to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community... [where] lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated beingⁱⁱⁱ (Friedman, 1998).

Moreover, the trauma represented in *Obasan*'s narrative works as a representative of many Japanese Canadians who went through experiences similar to those of Naomi and her family. Furthermore, *Obasan* might also be viewed as the practical literary answer to the questions posed by Leigh Gilmore in her abovementioned essay "Represent Yourself": "How can the exploration of trauma and the burden it imposes on the memory be representative? How can the experience of a survivor of trauma stand for many?" (Gilmore, 2001).

It is also relevant to observe the age of *Obasan*'s protagonist. Predominantly, *Obasan*'s story is narrated through a definitely not traditional viewpoint: that of a four-year-old girl. The use of young Naomi's perspective to depict horrifying injustices done to Japanese Canadians might also be analyzed as a necessary strategy employed by

Kogawa. In order to approach such hideous acts as the ones described in the novel, an innocent child's perspective would be able to ease the impact these acts would have upon the reader. Throughout the narrative, the reader acknowledges many facts regarding violence, racism, and official segregation, through the perspective of young Naomi. The employment of such an strategy might be observed, for instance, when Naomi, still in Vancouver, learns the place her Nakane grandparents had been sent is not exactly a "pool", as she had believed: "the place they called the Pool was not a pool of water, but a prison at the exhibition grounds called Hastings Park in Vancouver. [...] From our family, it was only Grandma and Grandpa Nakane who were imprisoned at the Pool (Kogawa, 1985, p. 77)^{iv}.

Through Naomi's innocence the reader is also presented to a traumatic event in her childhood other than the one regarding Japanese Canadians forced relocation and internment. When she is four years old, Naomi is sexually abused by her neighbor, referred to as Old Man Gower. It is interesting to observe the way the narrative subtly, yet remarkably, depicts the narration of the abuse from the young girl's viewpoint. At no moment Naomi recognizes Gower's acts as violent or even disgusting. Actually, not only she does not resist Gower, since "it is unthinkable to be held by force" (Kogawa, 1985, p. 63), but Naomi also goes "to seek Old Man Gower in his hideaway" (Kogawa, 1985, p. 65). When remembering this event, the adult Naomi can only question when "this fascination and danger that rockets through [her] body begins" (Kogawa, 1985, p. 61).

The abuse Naomi goes through is also relevant to the infant's relation to both silence and to her mother. Immediately before remembering the abuse, the adult Naomi mentions she would speak only when in the safety of her house:

It isn't true of course that I never speak as a child. Inside the house in Vancouver there is confidence and laughter, music and meal times, games and storytelling. But outside, even in the backyard, there is an infinitely, unpredictable, unknown, and often dangerous world. Speech hides within me, watchful and afraid. (Kogawa, 1985, p. 58).

As children usually do, Naomi talks mainly to her mother, whom she trusts above all others: "I tell her everything. There is nothing about me that my mother does not know, nothing that is not safe to tell (Kogawa, 1985, p. 60). The only exception regards Naomi's silence concerning the abuse. This secret is what psychologically separates Naomi from Mother: "If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I will be torn from her. But the secret has already separated us" (Kogawa, 1985, p. 64). The psychic separation precedes the immediately subsequent physical segregation, when Mother goes to Japan (where she will eventually die) and Naomi can not understand nor question her departure: "It is around this time that Mother disappears. I hardly dare to think, let alone ask, why she has to leave" (Kogawa, 1985, p. 66).

The mentioned silence regarding not only Naomi but also Mother, Obasan (Naomi's Japanese aunt), Isamu (Naomi's uncle) and the majority of the Japanese Canadians depicted in the novel, (with the remarkable exception of Canadian-born Aunt Emily) is considered by many critics one of the key elements in the novel. One must notice that only after she is 36 years old and, by accident, finds Aunt Emily's parcel containing varied documentation regarding the traumatic experiences she had gone through as a child and early-teenager, may Naomi remember and retell her experiences, not only to herself, but also to us, readers acquainted or not to the mentioned traumatic

experience. As argued by scholar Gary Willis, in his article “Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*”:

Naomi is presented as a person lost in the nightmare created by her silence; only by expressing her feelings can she reach understanding and emotional health. The novel mimics the mental process by which the narrator, Naomi, achieves a deeper understanding of her life; also, the novel implies that it is the writing of the novel that constitutes the therapeutic process by which greater understanding is achieved. (...) If the novel is therapeutic for Naomi (and, presumably, for Naomi's creator, the author, Kogawa), it is also potentially therapeutic for the community of Japanese Canadians. By maintaining silence, the Japanese Canadians have allowed the lies about them to remain uncontradicted (Willis, 1987).

Kogawa’s writing of Naomi’s family’s sufferings thus constitutes itself the process through which historical trauma may be finally overcome by the Japanese-Canadian community (and, by extent, to white Canadians, as well). This viewpoint is shared by Arnold Davidson who states that “the indictment of the book is, by extension, a call to action, a demand that something be done to oppose, to set right, as much as possible the wrongs exposed” (Davidson: 1993, 14). Is it not interesting to notice that the most acclaimed novel regarding the trauma issue for the Japanese-Canadian community during World War II must come from a novel in which silence is one of the main elements? To the silences exposed by Kogawa in the epigraph to the novel (the one that “cannot speak” and the one that “will not speak”) one might counterpoise the writing of the fictional self as the ultimate way to come to terms with a nation’s trauma.

ABSTRACT: The present article intends to observe the manners through which the novel *Obasan* (1981), by Japanese-Canadian author Joy Kogawa, seeks to reconcile the

Canadian nation with a traumatic event of its recent past. The novel deals with the oppression exercised by the Canadian government against part of its own people during World War II. In this period, all the residents in the country from Japanese ascendancy had their properties confiscated, besides being removed from their homes and relocated to internment and forced-work camps. *Obasan* was the first literary account to this historical period and acquired representative political importance through its narrative, which combines autobiographical (focusing the collective, rather than the individual), fictional and historical elements. To the study of the novel, I consider the works of Susan Friedman, Leigh Gilmore, bell hooks, Dominick LaCapra, Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson and Hayden White, among others.

Key Words: Fictional Autobiography, Trauma Recovery, *Obasan*

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ⁱ Due to terminological consistency this paper will follow Paul Robert Magocsi's definition concerning the use of hyphen in "Japanese-Canadian" as presented in the *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples*: "In the case of compound nouns like Japanese Canadians, no hyphen is used. Hyphens do appear, however, in adjectival forms such as Japanese-Canadian literature (...). The use of the hyphen in the latter case is a convention of English grammar and should not be considered – by those sensitive to (and opposed to) being labelled "hyphenated Canadians" – as any kind of ideological stance" (Magocsi: 1999, ix).

ⁱⁱ In this paper, *Obasan* refers to Naomi's aunt, Ayako, whom she simply calls "Obasan" throughout the novel. *Obasan*, in italics, refers to the novel itself.

ⁱⁱⁱ As argued by Friedman, Gusdorf originally stated that autobiography would *not* develop in societies where "the individual does not feel himself to exist outside of others" (Friedman: 1998, 73).

^{iv} To counterpoise Naomi's perspective I quote Ann Sunahara's description of Hastings Park: "Hastings Park Manning Pool was a holding pen for human beings. [...] The facilities were crude. In the former Women's Building and the livestock barns, rows of bunks had been erected, each equipped with a straw mattress, three army blankets and a small bolster. Eating facilities were equally crude – an army field kitchen hastily erected in the former poultry section of the Livestock Building. Designed to produce mass meals for able-bodied men, that kitchen could not provide the dietary needs of babies and the aged, especially the aged of a different culture. Most shocking to the inmates, whose culture demanded fastidious personal cleanliness, was the ever-present stink of animals and the maggots and the dirt that encrusted the buildings in Hastings Park (Sunahara: 2000, 48).