

## JAPANESE-CANADIAN WARTIME HISTORY THROUGH JOY KOGAWA'S *OBASAN*

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Abstract: This article intends to investigate the narration of historical facts under new perspectives through the novel *Obasan*, from the Japanese-Canadian author Joy Kogawa. The choice of the mentioned novel is due to the fact that it enables the observation of the manners the concepts of identity, memory and representation interact to portray new representations of a determined people by the reinterpretation of historical facts. Throughout the article it will be analyzed the varied narrative strategies Joy Kogawa employs to represent new versions of facts related to Japanese Canadians and their internment promoted by Canadian government in inner Canada during World War II. It will also be observed the manners through which fiction can collaborate to a people's search for redemption with their traumatic past and consequent actions towards improvements for their present.

Keywords: History. Identity. Representation. Japanese Canadians. World War II.

### A HISTÓRIA NIPO-CANADENSE EM TEMPOS DE GUERRA SEGUNDO *OBASAN*, DE JOY KOGAWA

Resumo: Este artigo busca investigar a narração de fatos históricos sob novas perspectivas através do romance *Obasan*, da autora nipo-canadense Joy Kogawa. Tal obra foi selecionada para este estudo por nela poder-se observar a maneira como os conceitos de identidade, memória e história interagem para produzir novas representações de determinado povo a partir da reinterpretação de fatos históricos. Ao longo deste trabalho serão analisadas as maneiras

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pelas quais Joy Kogawa emprega variadas estratégias narrativas para representar novas versões de fatos relacionados aos nipo-canadenses e seu internamento promovido pelo governo canadense no interior deste país durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Será observado também de que maneiras a ficção pode colaborar para a busca de um povo por redenção com seu passado traumático e consequentes ações em busca de melhorias para seu presente.

Palavras-chave: História. Identidade. Representação. Nipo-canadenses. Segunda Guerra Mundial.

*Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa, narrates the story of a Japanese-Canadian<sup>2</sup> family during World War II. The novel was the first literary text to offer an account of the horrors and injustices faced by Japanese Canadians during this period of history.

Among these injustices, one might mention the internment of Japanese Canadians in

“Interior Housing” and “Work Camps” projects, where they were assigned to either the building of roads or to the harvesting of sugar-beet. The measures taken against Japanese Canadians were based on the War Measure Acts, which began to be enforced in December 1941, right after the Japanese attack to the United States at Pearl Harbor. The official

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

discourse asserted that the actions against Japanese Canadians were taken as safety measures, since the relocated people lived mostly in the province of British Columbia, by the Pacific Coast, and, therefore, due to the “proximity” to Japan, they would be more subject to turn into informants to the enemy during the war, betraying the country which had welcomed them and given them a home, Canada<sup>3</sup>.

The fact is that the relations between Asian immigrants and the citizens of Canada had not been good for a long time. Long before World War II, former Canadian citizens had expressed their worries regarding the increasing number of Asian immigrants among them. Although Canada has traditionally been praised as a nation which encourages and facilitates the entrance and permanence of immigrants in its territory, history has, more than once, shown that the immigration issue in Canada has been a troubled one. The first Asian immigration movement to Canada took place way before the first Japanese people set foot in the country. This first movement, which started in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was led by Chinese people, who saw Canada as a country where they could work and prosper. The Canadian government, supported by its people, encouraged the migration, since Chinese labor was necessary for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. As time passed, the first immigrants (mostly men) sent money back to their families in China, together with instructions for their wives and children to come and join them in Canada. Fearing the increase in the number of Asian immigrants in the country, the Canadian government imposed a head tax on Chinese immigrants. The tax value started as Can\$ 50, and progressively went up to

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<sup>3</sup> The data regarding Japanese immigration and the internment of Japanese-Canadian people during World War II and their consequent fight for redress were taken from both the comprehensive study *Canada and Japan in the Twentieth Century*, by John Schultz and Kimitada Miwa (eds.).

incredible Can\$ 500 in 1907, making it virtually impossible for Chinese people to enter the country, consequently severely limiting and ultimately putting a stop to the Chinese immigration to Canada.

Something similar was to happen to the Japanese immigrants. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first Japanese started to arrive in Canada. Though the vast majority of them were en route to the United States, some Japanese people started to settle in the British Columbia province, working mainly in the fisheries. Being extremely dedicated fishermen, the Japanese immigrants started to worry their Canadian counterparts, who argued that the “Japs” (a pejorative way to refer to Japanese people) would work more for lower incomes. As they gathered money and started having their own properties, the first Japanese immigrants, which were almost all males, followed the example of former Chinese immigrants, and requested their families, still in Japan, to come to Canada. The initial steps towards the establishment of Asian people in British Columbia led to the first registered riot towards the Chinese and Japanese immigrants. The riot took place on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1907. Rioters headed to Chinatown and damaged Asian people’s properties. Canadian federal government sent William Lyon Mackenzie King, then Deputy Minister of Labour, to investigate the issue and assure the immigrants that the government would pay for all damaged property. In her essay, “Not All Were Welcome: Canada and the Dilemma of Immigration”, scholar Patricia Roy reproduces Mackenzie King’s words regarding the situation. The minister understands there was more than a labor agitation against the Japanese immigrants going on:

The people of British Columbia of all classes are pretty generally in favour of restricting the immigration of Japanese simply because they not only fear Japanese competition, but the possibility of complications in the future should the Japanese ever secure too strong

a hold in that Province. There is a good deal (...) to indicate that Japan is desirous of becoming a great power on the Pacific, and it is only natural (...) that her statesmen should have an eye upon the western coast of this continent (ROY, 1991, p. 8).

More than the financial or physical damages caused to the Japanese immigrants, this first riot exposed the real issue behind the alleged labor concerns. After the riot, intolerance and racial hatred towards the Japanese immigrants was explicit in a level it had not reached before.

Racist acts performed by Canadian people were not isolated or original. Actually, racism could already be detected in the former immigration propaganda created and divulged by the British Columbia government. As argued by Patricia Roy,

The 'establishment' of British Columbia, themselves mainly immigrants from the United Kingdom and Eastern Canada, wanted to make their new home a 'white man's country'; they did not want immigrants from Asia no matter how intelligent or industrious they might be. On the contrary, the very intelligence and industry of the Japanese made them people to fear rather than to welcome (ROY, 1991, p. 3).

In *Obasan*, the character Aunt Emily reminds both her niece, Naomi, and us, readers, that racial hatred against Japanese people had taken place much before World

War II: "the war was just an excuse for the racism that was already there. We were rioted against back in 1907, for heaven's sakes! We've always faced prejudice"(KOGAWA, 1985, p. 35).

Still in 1907, after the insurgence of Canadians against Japanese people, Canada and Japan settled a series of agreements regarding the number of Japanese people to

enter Canada annually. The most representative among these was the “Gentleman’s Agreement”, which reduced Japanese immigration to 400 people a year. In comparative numbers, before this agreement, “in the first seven months of 1907, 5,571 Japanese [had] landed at British Columbia ports” (Roy, 1991, p. 7). In spite of Canada and Japan’s many measures to control and reduce Japanese immigration, and the racism faced by Japanese people, the fact is that before World War II the Japanese were firmly established in British Columbia. This establishment was asserted mainly during World War I, when Japanese people took advantage of a depressed real estate market and bought properties to settle not only their houses, but also farms and small business.

Many Japanese immigrants naturalized as Canadian citizens and the sons and daughters of the first Japanese immigrants were born in Canada. They all lived a period of reduced agitation and certain tranquility during and after World War I (in which Japan was allied both to England and the United States). This stillness ended with the outbreak of World War II. In February 1942, after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, Canada’s federal government ordered the evacuation of all Japanese and Japanese

Canadians from the Pacific coast. They were to be relocated to at least 100 miles away from the shore. The British Columbia Security was created to perform the relocation of not only first generation Japanese immigrants, but also of their children and grandchildren. It is estimated that out of the total amount of 21,079 evacuated Japanese Canadians, over 17,000 were Canadian-born or naturalized citizens of Canada. The evacuation was part of the War Measures Acts, and as a result of this large and radical displacement, Japanese Canadians were sent to varied “projects” and areas. Most of them, 11,694, were allocated to Interior Housing, being sent to ghost towns in inner Canada. Another substantial number of people, 3,988 were sent to Sugar-beet

Projects, and 986 to Road Camp Projects. In January 1943, all property belonging to either Japanese people or Canadians of Japanese descent was confiscated by Canada's federal government and then auctioned.

It is noticeable that, although the procedures at the War Measures Acts were officially taken in order to protect Canadians from war enemies (including not only Japan, but also Italy and Germany, the other members of the Axis), the measures taken against Japanese and Japanese-Canadian citizens were not the same as those taken against German and Italian immigrants or descents. This corroborates the idea that racism and prejudice prevailed even in the moment of applying "defensive" measures.

As observed by Ann Sunahara, in *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the War*:

Like the German and Italian aliens, all Japanese Canadians had to register with and report bi-weekly to the RCMP, could not travel more than twelve miles from their residence or change their address without permission. In addition, all Japanese Canadians, unlike the German and Italian aliens, were required to observe a dusk-to-dawn curfew and to abandon their homes, farms and businesses for an unknown destination (SUNAHARA, 2000, p. 46).

The argument is similar to the question performed by the character Aunt Emily, in *Obasan*: "Why in a time of war with Germany and Japan would our government seize the property and homes of Canadian-born Canadians but not the homes of German-born Germans?" (KOGAWA, 1985, 38).

In March 1945, while the war was still going on, RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) officers visited relocated Japanese Canadians and gave them an option whether to remain in Canada or to "return" to Japan (although most of these people were Canadians and many of them had never

been to Japan). In reality, the choice was really unfair. For those who wished to go to Japan, all assistance and expenses would be provided, while those who decided to stay in Canada had to prove they had a formal job proposal east of the Rocky Mountains. Although 9,000 had initially agreed to “return” to Japan, only 3,000 effectively went there after the war. To understand the reason why so many Japanese Canadians decided to remain in Canada, one must realize that, although the Canadian government had done many wrongs to them, Canada was the place those people chose as their “home”.

As a matter of fact, it is not so difficult to understand why, in despite of all their suffering, most Japanese Canadians decided to stay in Canada. The most obvious reasons for this permanence are related to Japan’s defeat in the war. This defeat allowed Japanese Canadians to be free from what was once known as the “Imperial taboo”, “the constant power the Japanese Emperor would have over all Japanese people even when they were abroad” (ROY, 1991, p. 7). After the Emperor’s defeat in the war, Japanese people were free from this taboo, and the Japanese Canadians could freely choose whether to stay in Canada or go to Japan. Another relevant issue is related to the fact that, after the Allies’ attacks, most Japanese Canadians’ properties in Japan were damaged or entirely destroyed. Also, in the post-war period, economy in Canada was progressing, and Japanese Canadians who had effectively decided to stay in Canada stopped sending money back to their families in Japan (mainly because they recognized the country was so disrupted that it would be difficult to reach their families back in Japan). These factors increased the Japanese Canadians’ income and, as a consequence, improved their living conditions.

However, maybe the most influential reasons for the permanence of Japanese Canadians in Canada are related to future prospects for their children. Before World War II, a



considerable number of Japanese Canadians' children were sent to Japan to finish their studies and find a good job, since prejudice in Canada was so big that, no matter how qualified they were, Japanese Canadians would only be given subaltern jobs. This vision is reproduced by Mizutani-san, an *Issei* (first generation immigrant), in an interview to Kazuko Tsurumi in his essay "Japanese Canadians: The War-Time Experience":

Before the war, there was such discrimination against the Japanese Canadians that even the college-educated ones among them were not able to get decent jobs. So most of us sent our children back to Japan to be educated. Now that our children may get white-collar jobs here in Canada, according to their qualifications, they do not wish to go back to Japan (TSURUMI, 1991, p. 25).

In Mizutani-san's opinion, living together with former Canadians was also a key factor to the improvement of Japanese Canadians' living conditions and professional opportunities. According to her, "thanks to war-time evacuation, which forced us to live among the whites, the second generation Japanese Canadians are now getting good jobs and earning good money" (TSURUMI, 1991, p. 26).

The improvement of Japanese Canadians' living conditions, although making life in Canada easier for those who lived there after the war than it was to those who first arrived and settled in the country, also makes many Japanese Canadians not want to remember the wartime experience and the wrongs done to them. As affirmed by Mizutani-san: "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, p. 26). This opinion is similar to that of Naomi's uncle, Isamu, in *Obasan*. In a discussion with Aunt Emily, regarding the fight for official government redress,

Uncle, who had been assigned to work camp during the war, states: "In the world, there is no better place (...) This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude only" (Kogawa, 1985, p. 42).

After a 30-year struggle faced by members of the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC), official government redress ultimately came in 1988. The official agreement included the following items:

the Canadian Government recognition that their treatment of Japanese Canadians during and after World War II was unjust; a redress payment of twenty-one thousand dollars (...) to every survivor who is entitled to redress — one who was forced to evacuate or sent to a concentration camp, and whose properties were confiscated; the payment of twelve million dollars through NAJC, to the Japanese-Canadian communities, for the purpose of carrying out educational, social, and cultural activities and projects to promote welfare and protection of their human rights (TSURUMI, 1991, p. 27).

It is important to notice that, even after official redress was announced, and although the mentioned redress was only possible due to the struggle of Japanese Canadians, some entitled survivors did not apply for redress payment, thus reinforcing the idea that forgetting the injustices done to them was the best thing to do.

The opposition concerning continuous silence and uprising speech towards past oppression constitutes the core of *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa. *Obasan* was the first novel to refer to Japanese-Canadians internment during World War II and thus posited Joy Kogawa as one of the most representative voices regarding this period of Canadian history. The author was born in Vancouver in 1935, a third generation (*Sansei*) Canadian of Japanese ancestry. She lived in Vancouver until 1942, when the War Measures Acts imposed to her

and her family relocation to an internment camp (officially named "Interior Housing Project") in Slocan, in the central part of British Columbia. In *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa combines her traumatic experience and fictional elements to reproduce the sufferings faced by Japanese Canadians. The novel was first published in 1981, a period when Japanese Canadians' struggle for official redress was rising. As observed by scholar Gary Willis in his 1987 essay, "Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*":

The political significance of the book's publication may be what strikes us first: the novel appeared at a time when the question of reparation to Japanese Canadians was beginning to receive exposure in the press; and since the newly elected Prime Minister Mulroney's promise of reparation in 1984, the issue has become "hard news" and receives continuing media attention (Willis, 1987, p. 1).

*Obasan* is Joy Kogawa's most critically acclaimed work. The novel was praised for the manners through which it subtly, yet bravely, denounces mistreats and injustices perpetrated against Japanese Canadians. Scholar Ann Sunahara reinforces the sociological importance of the novel: "*Obasan* introduced thousands of ordinary Canadians to the wartime history of Japanese Canadians by putting them vicariously inside the experience" (Sunahara: 2000, p. 154). Mainly told from a child's (Naomi's) perspective, the narrative adopts a poetic and allusive style, which conquers the reader. Although the novel regards the horrors done to Japanese Canadians, through Naomi's standpoint one might see (and feel) beauty. Joy Kogawa published a sequel to the novel in 1992, *Itsuka*, which portrays the adult Naomi's involvement in the struggle for governmental redress. *Obasan* was also published in 1986 as a children's book, *Naomi's Road*, which was adopted by Japanese elementary schools and adapted into an opera by the Vancouver Opera. *Obasan* was awarded the *Books in Canada* First Novel Award and the *Canadian Authors' Associa-*

tion Book of the Year Award. Joy Kogawa was made a member of the *Order of Canada* in 1986, and a member of the *Order of British Columbia* in 2006. She has currently received seven honorary doctorates from Canadian universities. In 2008, Joy Kogawa was awarded the *George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award*, for her literary career. In 2010, she was honored with the *Order of the Rising Sun*, by the Japanese government, for her contribution to the preservation of Japanese-Canadian history and culture<sup>4</sup>.

*Obasan* narrates the story of Megumi Naomi Nakane, a primary school teacher who lives in Cecil, Alberta. When the narrative starts, in 1972, Naomi is 36 years old and receives the news of her uncle's death. She then goes to the nearby city of Granton, to visit and care for her widowed Aunt, Ayako, who she simply calls "Obasan" (the term being the Japanese word for "aunt" in this context). At Obasan's house, Naomi finds a parcel containing varied documentation regarding the period in her childhood when she saw her family split apart due to Canadian federal government's War Measures Acts. While waiting with Obasan for her brother Stephen and her aunt Emily (the owner of the package) to arrive for Uncle's wake and funeral, Naomi remembers and relives her childhood.

From this moment on, the reader is invited by the narrative to join Naomi's difficult task to come to terms with her painful past. We learn that Naomi belonged to a middle class Japanese-Canadian family. She lived in Vancouver with her brother (Stephen, three years older than Naomi), mother and father in a mostly white-Canadian neighborhood. Her father used to build boats, together with his cousin, Isamu (simply referred to as "Uncle" by Naomi). Naomi's house was

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<sup>4</sup> Data regarding Joy Kogawa's life and awards to *Obasan* available at the Canadian Encyclopedia website (<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/joy-kogawa,last> retrieved on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013).

a big and comfortable one, and the visits of her aunt Emily (Mother's sister) and Grandparents Nakane (Father's parents) and Kato (Mother's parents) were frequent. But all her world is completely shaken by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, during World War II, after which Canadian government approved the War Measures Acts. According to the Acts, Naomi's family was to be relocated to varied places in interior British Columbia. The Acts also demanded that all of the family's properties should be confiscated and then auctioned by the British Columbia government. Naomi, then, witnesses the disruption of her family: Grandmother Kato and Mother go to Japan, to care for Naomi's great-grandmother; Grandfather Kato and Aunt Emily manage to move to Toronto; Grandparents Nakane are taken to different sections of Hastings Parks Pool (a former animal shelter, now overcrowded with people); Father, and Uncle are assigned to Road Camp Projects, being sent to distinct work camps. In May 1942, Naomi, together with Stephen and Obasan, goes to Slocan, in the interior of British Columbia, one of the "ghost towns" administered by the Interior Housing Projects.

After one year in Slocan, Obasan, Stephen and Naomi are joined by Uncle, who returns from the road-work camp. In 1944, Father joins them, but he is demanded to return to work camp after only a few weeks with his family. Naomi and the others would never see him again. In 1945, with the imminence of the war ending, Obasan, Uncle, Stephen and Naomi are allowed by RCMP officers to move to Lethbridge, Alberta. Young Naomi expected many improvements in her life, abandoning the "ghost town" Slocan and going to a real city. That was not what happened, though. If in Slocan they lived in a "two-roomed log hut at the base of the mountain" (Kogawa, 1985, p.118), which, if not comfortable, had enough room for the four of them, in Lethbridge they must all share a "one-room hut, (...) smaller even than the one we

lived in Slocan,(...) [where] dust leap to the walls” (KOGAWA, 1985, p. 192). The mentioned hut is located at the end of a yard where a big white house is situated. The house belongs to the owner of the sugar-beet farm where they all would work. When seeing the house for the first time, Naomi recalls her family’s house in Vancouver: “The farmer’s house is a real house with a driveway leading into a garage. It makes me think of our house in Vancouver though this is not as large” (KOGAWA, 1985, p. 192).

In 1951, Uncle starts working at a potato farm, in Granton. They move to this town, this time to a “real house”, where they finally settle. Naomi’s detailed description of Granton’s house demonstrates how eager the girl was to live in a proper house:

The new house is at least a house. (...) In my house we have a living-room, kitchen, one large bedroom, and one small room that is about twice the size of the pantry we slept in Slocan. Uncle and Obasan have a double bed in the bedroom and I sleep on a cot separated from them by a pink flowered curtain hung from a clothesline wire. Stephen is in the other room with all his musical instruments (KOGAWA, 1985, p. 210).

Naomi remains in Granton and studies to become a schoolteacher. Stephen, on the other hand, leaves Granton in 1952, and moves to Aunt Emily’s house in Toronto, where he studies music and works as an acclaimed professional pianist.

From her initial relocation to Slocan, to her final settlement in Granton, Naomi suffers many family losses. Both Nakane grandparents die during the war. Grandfather Kato dies in Toronto, soon after the war ends. Father dies while interned at one of the road-work camps spread across British Columbia. Naomi’s family can not even bury him. The moment we, readers, recognize Father’s death is one of the most moving and touching of the novel. The passage is very

representative, since it displays the way Naomi could understand and react to sad things happening around her, even if she was not able to express her feelings through words:

I am not sure, as I remember the scene, whether I am told after I come in, or later at night when I am in bed, or if I am even told at all. It's possible the words are never said outright. I know that for years I simply do not believe it. At some point I remember Uncle's hand on my head, stroking it. I remember the strange gentle smile on his face when he sees my two hands raised towards him. (KOGAWA, 1985, p. 206).

In her hands, Naomi was holding a bowl with a tiny green frog named Tad, "short for Tadpole or Tadashi, [her] father's name" (KOGAWA, 1985, p. 206). The narrative accompanies Naomi's pain and suffering regarding her father's death, even though the words are not properly expressed. The frog, similarly to her father, disappears from Naomi's life without leaving any traces:

One morning, the frog is on the rim of the bowl sitting there ready to leap. Another time it is on the table. Once I find it in a corner of the room covered in fluff. And then it is nowhere. The bowl sits empty on the table. My last letter to Father has received no answer (KOGAWA, 1985, p. 208).

Mother also leaves Naomi with unanswered questions regarding her whereabouts. Since her departure, with Grandma Kato, to Tokyo, in 1941, Naomi keeps wondering what might have happened to her. The moment when her mother goes to Japan to care for great-grandmother is one of great confusion and inquiries to five-year-old Naomi:

"My great-grandmother has need of my mother. Does my mother have need of me? In what marketplace of the universe are the bargains made that have traded my need for my great-grandmother's?" (KOGAWA, 1985, p. 67).

Once more, Naomi's inquiries are all internal; she does not give voice to her feelings. Naomi remains silent in relation to her mother's absence. The first moment she really speaks about Mother she is already a teenager. Together with Stephen, Naomi finally comes to the conclusion that her mother must be dead. Uncertainty regarding Mother's fate remains until the last chapters of the novel, when Naomi, now at the age of 36, is finally told the truth. We come to know that Mother and Grandma Kato left Tokyo to go to Nagasaki, to care for one of Mother's cousin, who was to deliver a baby. They were both in Nagasaki in 1945, in the time of the atomic bombing, and although Mother survived the attacks, she had gone through utter disfigurement. Grandma Kato writes back to Canada telling everything that had happened to them, but Mother is emphatic when asking the family to spare Naomi and Stephen the truth, "for the sake of the children" (in Japanese, "kodomo no tame", a recurrent phrase throughout the novel).

Again in the narrative, silence plays a crucial role, since the recounts of what had happened to Grandma Kato and Mother finishes in an abrupt way; we never know exactly what happens to them after the Nagasaki events. Coming to know the truth concerning Mother's fate is the final step taken by Naomi to be finally able to reconcile with her family's traumatic history. According to Heidi Tiedemann, in *After the Fact: Contemporary Feminist Fiction and Historical Trauma*, being aware of Mother's destiny enables Naomi to react to past oppressions not only to her family but also to Japanese Canadians as a whole:

"the daughter [Naomi] only gradually becomes aware of the dimensions of the trauma experienced by her own mother, and of the political and ethical responsibilities that she herself bears to know, understand, and possibly publicize her mother's story" (TIEDEMANN, 2001, p. 111).



It is relevant to bear in mind that in *Itsuka*, sequel to *Obasan*, Naomi becomes actively involved with the Japanese-Canadian redress movement.

Naomi's silence might be related to Obasan. As far as she can remember, Naomi recalls Obasan as a woman of no words, speechless. Even during the horrors of the war, Obasan keeps silent. Her reactions to what happens around her are always represented as sighs, looks or little murmurs. Through her silence Obasan manages to raise both Naomi and Stephen. Through her silence Obasan spares them from knowing what exactly is occurring during the war. Uncle also shares this appreciation for silence. Even after being directly affected by the War Measures Acts, being sent to a road-work camp, and then to the sugar-beet farm in Lethbridge, Uncle does not intend to complain or argue against the government after the war ends.

The one who tries to convince Uncle and Obasan to speak about the oppressions they have faced is Aunt Emily. This character is the very opposite of Obasan. During the war, Aunt Emily (Naomi's mother's sister) manages to move to Toronto with her father, Grandpa Kato, thus escaping the forced internment. If Naomi's memories regarding Obasan are always associated to silence and mute reactions, Aunt Emily, through Naomi's standpoint, had always been the personification of the voice and speech against oppression. Extremely active, Aunt Emily becomes politically involved with the defense of not only her family's, but of Japanese Canadians' rights as a whole. During the war, she contests Canadian government's acts towards its own people, as she emphasizes. After the war ends, Aunt Emily is one of the leaders of the movement to obtain official redress from the government. This is the reason why she is so eager to make Uncle and Obasan give voice to their suffering.

Although Naomi is both Aunt Emily's and Obasan's niece, she identifies much more with the latter, since she had always been a quiet person. Also contributes to this identification the fact that Obasan was the one with whom Naomi lived through her childhood and adolescence. Due to the family segregation promoted by the War Measures Acts, Naomi remains 12 years with no contact to Aunt Emily. Although both Obasan and Aunt Emily are Japanese Canadians, they belong to different generations. While Obasan was born in Japan (an *Issei*, first generation immigrant), Aunt Emily was born in Canada, (a *Nisei*, second generation immigrant). Rather than belonging to Japanese moral traditions, Aunt Emily sees herself as Canadian: "I am Canadian" (Kogawa, 1985, 39). More than once Naomi emphasizes the differences between her aunts: "How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone."

Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior" (Kogawa, 1985, 32). The ways both characters are named by Naomi also reflect the manners she views them. While her father's cousin's wife, named Ayako is simply called "Obasan" (Japanese for "aunt", or, in a broader context, "woman"), her mother's sister is called "Aunt Emily", not only with an English name always associated to her, but also with the English word "Aunt". In fact, it is interesting to observe that Obasan is the only character which Naomi *always* refers to using exclusively the Japanese term.

Naomi's silence throughout the novel might also be analyzed regarding the way she relates to her family, especially as a child. According to Gabriela Souza, in her dissertation *Obasan, Obachan: Japanese Canadian History, Memory and the Noisy Silences of Joy Kogawa and Hiromi Goto*, Naomi's silence is neither a communication failure nor a free choice, but a strategy adopted by the protagonist since her childhood to deal with the lack of answers to her questions:

As a child, Naomi was very quiet. So much so that her relatives often thought she was mute. However, she did ask questions, especially about her mother. She never received answers and ceased asking. Similarly, in the chaos of being interned to the camp in Slocan, she lost her doll but only asked about it once because she knew it was lost. This linguistic anxiety clearly marks Naomi throughout the story and even marks the adult Naomi (SOUZA, 2009, p. 43).

Therefore, Naomi's silent responses to the established wartime chaos in her disrupted family might be related to the reactions adopted by many Japanese Canadians (especially the *Issei*), who, even long after the end of the war, would rather remain silent to the wrongs done to them. Naomi's childhood's silence is also analyzed by Helena Grice, in her essay "Reading the Nonverbal: The Indices of Space, Time, Tactility and Taciturnity in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*". According to Grice, Naomi would indeed communicate with her family, especially with her parents; this communication, however, would take place through gestures and sighs, rather than through words:

Naomi's actual reunion with her father and her psychological reunion with her mother are both portrayed in nonverbal terms (...) Naomi's meeting with her father [when he returns from the work camp] is described using the language of tactility: 'We do not talk. His hands cup my face. I wrap my arms around his neck' (...) Naomi's memories of her mother are also nonverbal: 'From the extremity of much dying, the only sound that reaches me now is the sigh of your remembered breath, a wordless word' (GRICE, 1999, p. 98).

The very narration of the wartime events concerning Naomi's family occurs through the employment of the aforementioned nonverbal communication. The fluidity of the narrative, which recurrently goes back and forth in time and

space, is enabled not by speeches but by Naomi's memories of sounds, tastes and smells of both her family's former house and the places to where she is relocated. In Grice's opinion, the way the narrative makes us, readers, aware of the events of Naomi's life is also related to "sensory perceptions" triggered by Naomi's memories:

The dominance of nonverbal information in the text is a result of the interiority of Naomi's narration, as she slides back and forth through time, her memories governed by sensory perceptions and hers and others' speech often only reported. Naomi inhabits a semi-dream world, a 'telepathic world' where tactility, nuance, tonality, as well as spatial and olfactory awareness provide the main indices of communication and information (GRICE, 1999, p. 94).

The way the narrative of *Obasan* goes back and forth in time might also be related to the process Naomi must go through in order to better deal with her past. Naomi's recollections and consequent retelling of her life during the war work as a tool for her final redemption and reconciliation with her own history. Through this process, both Naomi and the reader learn. While Naomi learns how to relate to her past, to be finally able to fight for her rights (as previously cited in this article, according to Tiedemann's opinion), the reader learns what happened to the Japanese Canadians during World War II. Even in Canada the history of these people and their internment during the war are not widely divulged. Joy Kogawa's novel, then, works as a tool for this recognition of injustices perpetrated by a nation against its own citizens. The historical learning process and its relation to both the present and past are analyzed by Edward Carr in his speech *História, Ciência e Moralidade*:

Learning from history is never simply a one-way process. To study the present in light of the past also means studying the past in light of the present. The function of history is to promote a deeper under-

standing of both — past and present — through the inter-relationship between them (CARR, 2001, p. 102— my translation)<sup>5</sup>.

The importance of an autobiographical novel, such as *Obasan*, in the process of disclosing and exposing historical events may also be related to the manner through which Steven Connor regards the function of history and narrative in the novel. In *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995*, Connor argues that

the novel promises a view of that fine grain of events and experiences which otherwise tend to shrink to invisibility in the long perspectives of historical explanation. Novels seem to have some of the authority of the eye-witness account, in providing the historian with enactment, particularity and individual testimony (CONNOR, 2001, p.1).

The historical account presented in *Obasan* might as well be associated to the relation between representation and “imaginary discourse”, as proposed by Hayden White 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, p. 57).

The narration of historical events in *Obasan* is composed by the blending of Naomi’s memories as both an adult

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<sup>5</sup> Original Text: “Aprender pela história nunca é um processo de mão-única. Estudar o presente à luz do passado também significa estudar o passado à luz do presente. A função da história é promover um entendimento mais profundo de ambos — passado e presente — através de suas inter-relações”.

and as a child. Being dispossessed of her house, all her belongings and ultimately of her own family, Naomi's memories constitute the only thing the protagonist may linger to. The effect of this procedure in the narrative is that although many times Naomi refers to horrible and despising injustices performed to her and her family, the novel assumes a poetic tone, since wartime events are portrayed through an innocent kid's perspective. This may be observed when Naomi, together with Stephen and Obasan, goes to the internment camp in Slocan:

The train moves in and out of tunnels, along narrow ridges that edge the canyon walls, through a tooth-pick forest of trees. Eventually the doll grows sleepy and falls asleep in the blanket that Obasan has arranged on her lap. Obasan's hand taps my back rhythmically and her smooth oval faced is calm (KOGAWA, 1985, p. 116).

In "To Attend the Sound of Stone': The Sensibility of Silence in *Obasan*", Gayle K. Fujita recognizes that Naomi's recollection of her childhood memories constitutes a precious strategy for dealing with the traumatic events of her past,

for when she reveals her own astonishing repository of memories, she reveals that a life so intensely felt and thoroughly registered can be its own reward. (...) Naomi acquires self-possession by reviewing, accepting, repossessing her own infinite personal details (FUJITA, 1985, P. 41).

Naomi's memories are her only possessions and that might explain why she so often recurs to them. Her recollections constitute her most precious belongings and the narrative of *Obasan* invites the reader to share this treasure with Naomi and finally access not only her past, but a fundamental extract of Japanese-Canadian history.

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