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Silence, Memory, and Healing in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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December 7, 1941, changed history forever for Japanese Canadians and the world, when Japan let loose their planes in an attack on Pearl Harbour (Adachi 198). That same day, Canada officially declared war on Japan, stating that all people of Japanese heritage in Canada were hence considered "enemy aliens" and in the weeks and months to follow, an order to evacuate anyone of Japanese descent from Mainland British Columbia was invoked (Adachi 222). The events that followed and the treatment of the Japanese Canadians at the behest of the Canadian Government left an indelible black mark on civil rights and democracy as we understand it, and a story of truth that needed to be told for healing to commence. The "Freudian concept of trauma and memory emphasizes the necessity to recreate or abreact through narrative recall of the experience" affording storytelling an important role in healing (Balaev 150). In her novel *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa narrates the traumatic experience of Japanese Canadian internment during World War II through the eyes of the central character, young Naomi Nakane, and the memories she later recalls as an adult. Historical facts and events are carefully woven throughout her semi-autobiographical story to bring context to the emotional response of her characters. Silence as a response to traumatic experience is a prevailing theme in *Obasan,* and manifests through symbolism, unsent letters, unspoken words, unexpressed emotions, and government oppression. The traumas that engender the silence in Obasan cover grief and loss, childhood sexual abuse, racial discrimination, and diasporic hardships as well as longing and the passage of time. Kogawa invites us to intimately examine a shameful episode in Canadian history while thoughtfully unravelling the tragedy of Naomi's absent mother, scrutinizing the treatment of Japanese Canadians, and exposing the horrors of the nuclear bombings of Japan. *Obasan* eloquently integrates fact and fiction with a lyrical power that shatters the metaphorical silent stone and forces us to be the listener, perhaps even allowing Kogawa a way to heal her own trauma through storytelling.

Silence in *Obasan* is symbolized throughout the novel in varying ways. The opening prose refers to silence (the word) as stone and "unless the stone bursts" there can be "no living word" (Kogawa 1981). The introductory passage in her epigraph invokes two different types of silence; one that "cannot speak" and one that "will not speak" (Kogawa epigraph). The silence that "cannot speak" may infer the silencing of the many Japanese Canadians who lost their homes and language during the war, under government order. The silence that "will not speak" may suggest the fear of drawing unwanted attention to themselves, and concurrently, the self-imposed silence of the victims of internment to suppress the pain of their trauma. The culture of silence is embedded in Japanese culture, particularly in the *issei,* first Japanese immigrants to North America (Adachi 225). *Issei,* with their strong cultural traditions and respect for their roots were

accustomed to great *enryo* (restraint) and *gaman* (forbearance) which may help explain their compliance in the face of mistreatment during the war (Adachi 225). Their silence in reaction to widespread oppression was representative of their belief that "suffering and hard work were necessary ingredients of character building" (225). The intrinsic values of Japanese culture also stated *hito ni meiwaku wo kakete wa ikenai* ("one must not make a nuisance of oneself to other people"), therefore many of the Issei complied without protest (225). The *Nisei*, Canadian born Japanese, like Aunt Emily in the novel, were less silent about their loss of civil rights but were silenced by government oppression (232). The silence that *will not speak* may also imply an aversion to listening, because the pain of hearing the truth is too great. The metaphor of the stone in the introduction symbolizes, not only the silence of the word but also Naomi's unwillingness to listen as she admits that she "hates the stone" (Kogawa, epigraph). Her fear of the pain of her past makes her hesitant to hear the words or seek the answers to the questions about her family history, and her silence, rooted in denial, keeps her in a fragile state of not knowing and therefore not being able to move forward. Although Naomi has learned from a young age to retreat into silence to avoid the pain of talking, she eventually finds her place as the listener when the silence is broken by the sudden disclosure of letters sent years prior by her Grandmother Kato (Kogawa 234-240). Afterwards, she finds herself "listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as [she has] done all [her] life (240), only now she is ready to accept the truth and the stone (silence), that she once hated, is ruptured. Metaphorically, Naomi's return to Granton and the coulee have led her "down and down to the hidden voice" bringing her "at last to the freeing word"; the river of speech (Kogawa, epigraph).

The disparity between speech and silence is well demarcated in the metaphor of river and stone, but also in the dichotomous personalities of Naomi's aunts. Obasan Ayako (the stone) epitomizes silence while Aunt Emily (the river) is its antithesis. Naomi is accustomed to the absence of words from her Obasan. She recognizes that "the language of her grief is silence" and that silence "has grown large and powerful" from years of repressing her feelings and not speaking about her own trauma or sharing the truth of Naomi's mother with her (Kogawa 14). Obasan is following a directive to keep the details of the death of Naomi's absent mother concealed - *kodomo no tame* – for the sake of the children (219). Without knowing what happened to her mother, Naomi, in her youth, was left to fabricate, and was often overwhelmed with sorrow and longing. Naomi also hid her own pain and suffering under a veil of silence, instilled in her by her culture. After learning the truth from the box of letters, she contemplates a photographic memory and realizes so much of her identity has been lost to the silence as she reflects introspectively "gentle mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (243).

In distinct dissimilarity to Obasan, Aunt Emily is tireless in her effort to make the voices of Japanese Canadians heard, and she is unwilling to let Naomi forget her history and the government-imposed

mandates that altered their lives, separating them from their family. However, despite Aunt Emily's passionate activism and prolific letter writing, her letters to Nesan are never sent. Her voice is silenced in this instance because her intended audience is missing. Without a listener the words remain silent. Emily refuses to allow the memory of the traumatic events of the war become lost to time, and remains passionate in speaking the truth about their experience during the war even if her family refuses to hear her. Naomi is reluctant to listen to Aunt Emily because "people who talk a lot about their victimization" make her uncomfortable (Kogawa 34). She contends that "the children who say nothing are in trouble more than the ones who complain" having deduced this from her experiences of sexual abuse as a child (34). Naomi learned to live with her unspeakable truths about Old Man Gower's sexual abuse because she feared "if [she spoke, she would] split open and spill out," and she feared the possibility of her mother's shame and rejection (63-64). The capacity of veiled silences as a coping mechanism to navigate her difficult past lies in their ability to minimize any potential conflicts. She would experience being forcefully silenced again in Slocan by Percy, associating those silences with memories that shaped her past (61).

Silence is connected in our mind to forgetting, while speech is tied to remembering and for Naomi, the memories left unspoken are memories she does not wish to remember (Vinitzky 1118). Grandmother Kato powerfully states that no matter "the effort to forget, there is no forgetfulness" and sometimes we are forced to face our past (Kogawa 234). In her recollections of the past as well as the recollections of the other characters, certain elements are highlighted while other elements are ignored, but they all factor into identity. Immigrant identity is reflected in literature where words and meaning depend on voice/silence (Teleky 208). In literary theory silence has been linked to "the characteristic narrative of the ethnic experience" (Kroetch qtd in Teleky 206) where traumatic experience is argued to contribute to a division of self and a "change of consciousness caused by the experience" (Balaev 150). Kogawa uses her novel to show how the trauma shaped her own identity and the identity of many Japanese Canadians who had similar experiences.

Between April and June of 1942, approximately 4000 Japanese were evacuated from British Columbia to the provinces of Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario in a relocation decree called "The Sugar Beet Projects (*A Dream of Riches* 111). The working and living conditions were atrocious and the families were isolated even further from their friends and extended family while being shunned by their new communities and forced to perform slave labour (112). Kogawa describes her own time on the prairies of Southern Alberta in her novel and although the names and characters are fictitious, the facts and memories are very real. Kogawa details the hardships they endured as a memory she could not even bear (194). She revisits the chicken coup "house" that they lived in, the bitter cold and sweltering summer heat, the dust, the flies, and bedbugs, all contributing to the trauma she (Naomi) has tried to erase from her memory by not speaking

it out loud (194-95). Aunt Emily's newspaper clippings trigger these memories that she has buried for so long (193-94). Kogawa employs a variety of narrative devices to highlight the trauma in the novel. The places she describes are central to the representation of the trauma that has an influence on racial and ethnic identity and are representations of places and events she personally experienced (Kogawa *Gently to Nagasaki* 88). Kogawa's intentional gaps in silence prior to chapter twenty-nine, convey her agency as a writer to "express painful, incoherent and transcendent emotional states" through memory and dissociation in the novel, both her own and of her protagonist (Balaev 162). The narrative innovations that Kogawa writes with, support the assertion that "response to traumatic events in fiction often cause the protagonist to turn inward and struggle with the past" as Naomi does upon her return to Granton when her uncle dies (Balaev 164). Silence, up until this point, has been used effectively as a narrative device which accentuates the emotion and heightens the impact of the moment when it is finally broken. The novel itself can be seen as Kogawa's own way of fracturing her stone of silence and healing her personal trauma.

The Redress Agreement between Japanese Canadians and the Canadian Government was signed on September 22nd, 1988 (Canadian Race Relations Foundation). The government acknowledged the events as a wrongful injustice and promised compensation to individuals and communities who were affected (CRRF). Kogawa's *Obasan* was published only seven years prior, in 1981, and drew attention to the long silence between the events of the war and the *river* of speech that developed, due, in part to her work. The characters of her novel cracked opened the silent stone with stories which other Japanese Canadians, who endured the same struggles and trauma, could relate to. Kogawa writes with stunning prose and poetic imagery, creating relatable characters and exposing the human condition in heart-wrenching ways, but the work that her novel does is even more meaningful than simply a work of fiction. Through the thoughtful representation of human emotions and experiences, *Obasan* also serves as a reminder that "the past is the future" (Kogawa 42). Kogawa concludes her novel, not with fiction, but with facts, in a memorandum from the House of Commons, April 1946, to connect her story back to the real-life impact that those historical events had on generations of Canadians (248-250). Unfortunately, as Ken Adachi, writes, there is no guarantee that we will not repeat the past as "Canadian law still provides for repetition (preface). Adachi expresses that what the Japanese Canadians experience exposed was the "fragility of democratic ideals in times of crisis," also stating that "given the right circumstances, people so easily lose their perspectives on civil liberties" (preface). While the silence of Naomi's story, that *would not* and *could not* speak, opened the proverbial floodgates for the continued healing of Japanese Canadians marginalized by deeply unjust war measures and racial discrimination, the author had her own healing path to pursue. Kogawa neatly bookends her own healing journey, thirty-five years after the first publication of *Obasan* in the conclusion to her memoir of 2016, *Gently to Nagasaki.* Her reflective response to her epigraph in *Obasan* acts as an echo towards a more hopeful future for racial harmony. Kogawa gracefully

acknowledges the impact of Naomi's story as "a song that *can* be heard" and "a song that *will* be heard" (Kogawa, Nagasaki 204). After finally unearthing her own "hidden voice" and arriving "at last to the freeing word" (Kogawa epigraph), Joy Kogawa inscribes her final words on metaphorical monoliths for "the listening from beyond our universe, for the Knowing that hears our sorrows" and for the power of the story to mobilize "the healing of our nations" (Kogawa, Nagasaki 205).

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