“None of Us Escaped the Naming”: Reclaiming Identities and Space in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*

Corinne Bigot

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/5289>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.5289
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2013
Number of pages: 81-91
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Corinne Bigot, "“None of Us Escaped the Naming”: Reclaiming Identities and Space in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 36.1 | 2013, Online since 16 April 2021, connection on 22 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/5289> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5289>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

“None of Us Escaped the Naming”: Reclaiming Identities and Space in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*

Obasan (1981) recalls how stigmatizing labels served to justify the evacuation of the Japanese-Canadian community from British Columbia. As the “renaming” of the community as enemy aliens entailed loss of home, citizenship and a sense of identity, *Obasan* explores means to reclaim identity. One way to do so is for the narrator to reclaim space as she inscribes the history of her community into the landscape.

From the moment of its publication in 1981, Joy Kogawa’s novel has enjoyed tremendous popularity. *Obasan* was one of the first books to describe the victimization of the Japanese-Canadian community from 1942 on. It documents the Canadian government’s decision in the early months of 1942 to move 22,000 residents out of British Columbia (including those born in Canada) after they were defined as “enemy aliens.” Thirty years after the events, one character states: “None of us [...] escaped the naming. We were defined and identified by the way we were seen” (126). As for the narrator, a third-generation Japanese-Canadian called Naomi, she confesses to being trapped by her past and her memories, wishing she could “break loose from the heavy identity, the evidence of rejection” (201). Much of the tension in the novel arises from these polarities: the desire to escape from a burdensome Japanese identity, which seems to characterize the Sansei or third generation, the urge to remember and to testify to the ills of the past, which for the Nisei (second generation) includes the need to reclaim their identity as Canadians, and the desire to forget, which is the choice of the Issei, the first generation. The novel, however, challenges unproblematic definitions or categorizations, foregrounding instead an “instability of identity” (Lee 32) as it explores the characters’ struggles to define who they are and their attempts to express cultural differences as “an on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities” (Bhabha 3). One striking example of such negotiation occurs within language, at the moments when the younger generation (the narrator and her brother) play with Japanese and English, suggesting that the language they use, and invent, is the one that can express their hybrid identities. As she foregrounds interactions between characters and landscape, the narrator attempts to inscribe the presence of the Japanese-Canadian community into the Canadian landscape and reclaim space. Doing so, she composes her original version of the Canadian landscape, and challenges the visions the nation might have of its past and of its space.

As she looks back at what happened in 1942, a second-generation Japanese-Canadian woman bluntly states the truth, highlighting the racial prejudice behind the official documents that decided the fate of her community: “None of us [...] escaped the naming, we were defined and identified by the way we were seen” (126). It is through Emily’s 1942 diary, which the narrator reads thirty years later, that the wartime internment and uprooting of the Japanese-Canadian community is recalled. The diary, which reproduces public and official discourses through quotes from political speeches and newspapers, also serves to expose how the community was branded as enemy aliens,

which justified the actions that were taken. Using Emily's diary,¹ Kogawa documents the escalating hostility towards the Japanese.² The first entry, dated the 25th of December 1941, reflects Emily's conflicting feelings. As a Canadian-born citizen who physically looks like the enemy, Emily is forced to be vocal in her support of the government and the war effort. Her impossible position is made clear as she writes:

there is this horrible feeling whenever I turn on the radio, or see a headline with the words "Japs" screaming at us. So long as they designate the enemy by that term and not us, it doesn't matter. But over here, they say, "Once a Jap always a Jap," and that means us. We're the enemy. (89)

Emily has to agree with what is essentially a racist label, so that she can be distinguished from the enemy. She also clearly anticipates what will happen to the whole community ("that means us") and even foresees the sleight of hand that will enable the government to take action against all of them. Although she sees through the government's arguments when she bluntly states "it's outright race persecution," (91) the entry on the 2nd of March reveals she has been affected by the rhetoric and has internalized the new label, "of the Japanese race,"³ which was given to the community: "we are all being forced to leave. All of us. Not a single person of the Japanese race who lives in the 'protected area' will escape" (92). The entry reveals that the government was branding every person of Japanese origin as a potential threat or traitor. The branding or renaming meant that such a person would be subject to suspicion, and would be a victim of drastic measures. A few weeks later the next step in the logic is recorded: "Nisei are called 'enemy aliens'" (99). The label "enemy aliens" served to justify the fact that they were stripped of their homes and businesses, interned, and then relocated, since they were forced to leave the B.C. coast. Emily pinpoints specific political speeches and acts, showing that prejudices were institutionalized and thus became law. The diary is complemented by the narrator's memories of the same period, and the echoes between political speeches, prejudiced media, and racist speech as expressed by ordinary people are striking. Kogawa exposes how racist speech works and circulates. Thus, the narrator recalls what happened to her brother at school:

The girl [...] who sits in front of Stephen said to him, "All the Jap kids at school are going to be sent away and they're bad and you're a Jap." And so, Stephen tells me, am I.

"Are we?" I ask Father.

"No," Father says. "We are Canadian."

It's a riddle, Stephen tells me. We are both the enemy and not the enemy. (76)

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler underlines how difficult it is to localize racist speech: "racist speech works through the invocation of convention, it circulates, and though it requires the subject for its speaking, it neither begins nor ends with the subject who speaks or with the specific name that is used" (34). The girl at school is repeating what she has heard – using the very words that invade the radio and newspapers. The structure of the sentence and the play on "and so" demonstrate that there is no escaping

1. Emily's diary was inspired by and is based on personal documents, letters written by Muriel Kitigawa, which Kogawa discovered in the Public Archives of Canada. Kitigawa's letters were subsequently published in 1985, probably thanks to the popularity of the novel.

2. Prejudice and hostility had long existed and had been loudly expressed, as documented by Ken Adashi in *The Enemy that Never Was*.

3. An order in Council PC 1486, dated the 24th of February 1942, ordered the removal of "all persons of Japanese racial origin," "every person of the Japanese race."

the logic. The power of hate speech is so strong that it does not need to be expressed in full: Stephen is left to complete what is left unsaid. The force of hate speech derives from the fact that the addressee is left to do the naming himself, which Stephen does when he tells his six-year-old sister she is “a Jap” and that they are “the enemy.” In the Slokan chapter, with the Yellow Peril Game which is given to Stephen, the violence of hate speech, which forces the addressees to hate themselves, is further denounced. The children understand that the yellow pawns represent Japanese soldiers, which forces identification with the blue pawns and entails self-hatred. Butler underlines that the force of the name that is flung at someone depends not on its iterability but on a form of repetition that is linked to trauma (36). Both the violence inherent in the name and the racist intent of the Yellow Peril Game haunt the memory of seven-year-old Naomi, prompting her to blurt out: “I am not yellow” (165).

Having been labelled “enemy aliens,” the community was bound to feel rejected and to reject their Japanese heritage. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, recalling the struggles of identities that she experienced as a Chicana, Gloria Anzaldúa recalls that “there are many defense strategies that the self uses to escape from the agony of inadequacy” (45). Changing their names in the hope of changing their identities is one of the strategies the Japanese-Canadian children resort to when they live in Alberta after the war: “Almost all of us have shortened names – Tak for Takao, Sue for Sumiko, Mary for Mariko. We all hide our long names as much as we can” (222). For her part, Naomi reduces her (Japanese) family name to its initial in her books (222). The desire to lose their names is shared by the Native girl called Annie Black Bear, who looks very pleased when a teacher calls her Annie Black by mistake (222). The children, who have literally cut through their names, “have split from and disowned those parts of [themselves] that others rejected” (Anzaldúa 45). By having a Native Canadian girl wishing to get rid of her name in the hope of being more Canadian, Kogawa highlights the insanity of what these communities experienced.

How to reclaim one’s identity is a key issue in *Obasan*. The diary shows Emily clinging to her identity as a Canadian national when the government started issuing its orders against the Japanese-Canadians, labelling them aliens and enemies. She keeps saying that she is Canadian, using logic in the face of the “insanity” war breeds: “that’s so ridiculous *since* we’re Canadian” (102, *italics mine*). In her manuscript she proudly asserts: “I am Canadian,” (42-3) concluding that “the answer cannot be changed” (43). Thirty years later, she is an activist in the redress movement,⁴ and her belief in the power of words to redress wrongs is unshakable. She exerts this power herself, doing the renaming herself: looking at documents Emily flings at her, Naomi notices that “wherever the words ‘Japanese race’ appeared Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written ‘Canadian Citizen’” (34).

As for Naomi, she claims she does not share her aunt’s belief in the redress movement, or her faith in her unproblematic identity. For Naomi, loss of identity is also loss

4. The redress movement of the late 1970s and 1980s was the final phase in the struggle for justice as the Japanese-Canadian community sought an acknowledgement of, and financial compensation for, the injustices and sought recognition as full citizens of Canada. The National Association of Japanese Canadians negotiated the redress settlement on behalf of the community. The settlement was announced in Parliament on September the 22nd, 1988. Roy Miki (who took part in the redress movement) tells the story of the redress movement in *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice* (2004). In a more recent book, *In Flux: Transnational Shifts in Asian Canadian Writing* (2011), Miki contextualizes Kogawa’s novel (69-89).

of homeland (the family home in Vancouver) and a double exile, from Vancouver to Slocan and from there to Alberta. The trauma is recalled every time she is asked where she comes from. The question brands her as a foreigner, which angers and pains her, but it also forces her to remember traumatic episodes. In the 1970s, Naomi feels she still has to fight to reclaim the Canadian part of her identity and wishes she could be free of her “heavy identity,” (201) meaning the Japanese part of herself. Naomi also claims that she finds herself in a double bind: the demands made on her to either “dance to the multicultural piper’s tune” or to angrily respond to racist slurs (248). As Kamboureli shows, Naomi’s problematic identity is epitomized by the way her name is pronounced as “Nah Canny” (Kogawa 5, 243) by white people. It sounds more English but it reveals that “she is the Canadian uncanny: Canadian born and foreign at the same time” (Kamboureli 215).

Naomi seems to position herself as a bridge between two cultures, a position which is epitomized by her use of languages. She uses Japanese with Obasan, her elderly aunt, and as narrator she negotiates the transition between the two languages: “‘Umi no yo,’ Uncle says, pointing to the grass. ‘It’s like the sea’” (1). Generally speaking the Japanese comes first, followed by a translation. This facilitates comprehension for English-speaking readers but also emblemizes Naomi’s identity as a bridge between the two cultures, as most of the time the two languages are kept separate by a verb, as if to avoid friction: “‘Samishi, Obasan?’ I ask. ‘Lonely?’” (268) However, Japanese words are never formally marked as foreign by typography since they are not in italics. Furthermore, other instances where Japanese and English phrases come into contact show that Kogawa is engaging in complex language games. She uses hypotactic and paratactic structures, juxtaposing and subordinating at the same time. Thus the Japanese phrase “Kodomo no tame” is followed by its English translation, which is followed by another Japanese phrase, which is followed by its English translation. In other words, the English phrase is embedded within the Japanese sentence and the second Japanese phrase is embedded within the English translation, suggesting a complex process of incorporation: “Kodomo no tame – for the sake of the children – gaman shi masho – let us endure” (269). The first occurrence of a Japanese word in the novel is actually included in an English sentence, in the position of an English tag: “‘Nothing changes ne,’ I say as we walk towards the rise” (1). The very presence of this unobtrusive Japanese word at the outset of the novel suggests that the process of incorporation starts early in the narrative, and also suggests that since its opening *Obasan* has been designed as a hybrid text.

With the presence of the Japanese phrases that express the same realities as the English phrases, but from the minority perspective, the dominant language finds itself “open to the trace of the language of the other” (Young 22). In Bhabha’s reading, such moments define hybridity in the colonial discourse as “other ‘denied’ knowledges [that] enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (162). Although Bhabha primarily addressed the colonial context and its discourse, his vision of hybridity is relevant to twentieth-century concerns, as the preface to *The Location of Culture* shows: “the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (3). For instance, Françoise Krøl argues that “the hybrid” as it is defined by Bhabha is relevant when attempting to describe the experience of diasporic populations (45). As Young underlines, the term hybridity has been

reactivated to describe a cultural phenomenon (6), and is commonly used to refer to the interaction of cultures. Furthermore, subversion and resistance are central to Bhabha’s initial concept and Kogawa systematically displaces Western discourse from within. Her references to fairy tales are a case in point. Two systems of reference and sets of values are brought together as *Obasan* interweaves the traditional Japanese tale of Momotaro with Western fairy tales. Thus Momotaro, a tale of courage, is meant to contrast with both Chicken Little and Goldilocks. As Slapkauskaite argues, the references to fairy tales are essential to the expression of Naomi’s “self-identification in Canadian society” (34). For instance, bringing together the Japanese and the Western tales enables Naomi to address the problematic identification of a dark-haired child with a blonde heroine as she concludes: “I am Goldilocks, I am Momotaro returning” (202). Her own experience of rejection and of being defined as “both the enemy and not the enemy” (76) makes the tale of Goldilocks even more relevant, as Naomi realizes that she is Baby Bear *and* Goldilocks (136), the insider and the outsider, the victim and the perpetrator. The tale of Chicken Little is also given new relevance in the context of the Yellow Peril propaganda, as Naomi decides that Chicken Little is “a large Yellow Peril puff” (165). Western fairy tales are both challenged and reclaimed by the Asian child.

In her preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa argues that “the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of the same race occupy the same territory” (i). Karen Quimby has shown the relevance of the concept of the Borderlands for the landscape (258-9), but it is also relevant to describe language as experienced by Stephen and Naomi. The presence of Japanese words and of Pidgin English resulting from the contact of Japanese, “white” and Native communities in Alberta, suggests that Naomi has found a way to reclaim her identity and that their “critical identity” (Král) may be defined as hybrid rather than hyphenated. The same holds true of her brother although Naomi suggests that Stephen denies his Japanese identity, claiming that he is “uncomfortable when anything is too Japanese,” (238) that “he has made himself altogether unfamiliar with speaking Japanese” (253). Stephen seems to have escaped the house, the family and his problematic identity by fleeing “to the other side of the earth” (15) as he lives in French-speaking Canada with a French woman. He seems to have found a transcultural identity allowing him to avoid his hyphenated identity. As a musician, Stephen further avoids the issue of language, and Shoenut argues that Stephen’s choice of classical music reflects his efforts to “remove the outer shell of his identity” and construct “what he considers to be a more powerful (*European*) shell” (483, my italics). However, Stephen’s connection to music cannot be separated from his Japanese identity since it is also his own way of connecting to his father, with whom he played the flute and the violin. What is more, Naomi reports that Stephen won first prize for an *original* composition (236), which suggests that he is capable of finding a voice of his own. Stephen’s ways of playing with language are particularly relevant. He calls margarine “Alberta” (13) – a play on sounds based on Uncle’s pronunciation of Alberta, resembling the Japanese word for butter. Naomi calls the language “our Japanese English,” (13) suggesting that this language resulting from interaction between English and Japanese is capable of communicating their own unique reality. With this response to his uncle’s difficulties with English, which brand him as a foreigner, Stephen is clearly reclaiming language. Naomi provides another instance of a Pidgin English when Stephen, who is back in Alberta on a visit, says “sakana

fish" (239). Naomi suggests this pidgin language has arisen from the contact between the languages of three communities: "[s]ome of the ripe pidgin English phrases *we pick up* are three-part inventions – part English, part Japanese, part Sasquatch" (239, my italics). Defining it as a "ripe" pidgin, Naomi gives it strength and vitality. It is clearly a language of the borderlands, as Anzaldúa sees it: "there at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and revitalize" (Preface). The phrase "sakana fish" results from a complex interaction: "sakana fish" might sound like a heavily-accented version of "sonuva bitch" but since "sakana" actually means "fish," the two languages are made to echo each other in the resulting phrase. Another phrase the children use "on occasion" is "golden sakana fish" (239) where the Japanese word finds itself embedded between two English words and it becomes unclear which language has influenced the other language since "golden," which seems to have been suggested by "fish," comes to evoke a special occasion, and turns the Pidgin phrase into an even richer find. Through the language of the borderlands, Naomi and Stephen can reclaim their hybrid identity.

Although at the opening of the novel she takes pains to define the Japanese-Canadian community by categories (7), Naomi actually challenges any simplistic representations of the Issei by foregrounding complex interactions between her family and the Canadian landscape. At first sight, Naomi's Obasan seems to embody traditional Japanese values, her command of English is not very good, and she has chosen the traditional refuge of silence. Naomi compares her body to calligraphy (27) and defines her as "the old woman of many Japanese legends" (59). However, Naomi actually challenges this definition when she claims "she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world. You see her on a street corner in a village in Southern France [...] or bent over stone steps in a Mexican mountain village" (16). As an old woman who has toiled the land for a very long time, Obasan also stands as a figure of resilience. This is further suggested when Naomi describes Obasan's naked body, commenting on her scars (84). Furthermore, the description turns Obasan's body into a text, challenging Naomi's depiction of Obasan as a silent figure:

I rub the washcloth over her legs and feet, the thin purple veins a scribbled maze, a skin map, her thick toenails, ancient rock formations, I am reminded of long-extinct volcanoes, the crust and rivulets of lava scars, criss-crossing down the bony hillside. Naked as prehistory, we lie together. (84)

The body as text merges with another trope, the body as map, but it is the body as landscape that is given prominence. The main trope is a metaphor, and the absence of verbs separating the elements of the body from the elements of the landscape is striking. The one verb that apparently keeps the two worlds separate is "reminded," suggesting that the power of memory conjures up the landscape. Gradually body and landscape merge as Naomi chooses phrases such as "lava scars" or "bony hillsides," thereby combining both worlds. Naomi's gentle gesture of rubbing her aunt's body suggests an attempt to erase the present and let the ancient landscape appear. Since Obasan was born in Japan, this may be an attempt to conjure up the lost homeland; however, Naomi evokes extinct volcanoes, which can be found in Japan as well as in Naomi's native Canada, there in Alberta and British Columbia, in the mountains that join and separate the two provinces. Obasan's body as landscape is neither Japanese nor Canadian: it is both homeland and site of exile.

Obasan also problematizes the portraits of its characters and traditional representations of the landscape. This is true of the representation of Obasan’s house. When the white neighbors come to pay their respects after Uncle’s death, Naomi adopts their position in describing the house as foreign as she imagines their reactions to the Japanese odors (245). However, in the house, Japanese-language newspapers can be found next to cushions with a maple leaf fringe (244) – in other words, the house contains both cultures. Furthermore, the strong smells of Japanese food battle with the smell of dust, since dust has invaded the house. The various references to dust should be read in the context of the Canadian classic, *As for Me and My House* by Sinclair Ross, whose central character lives in a house in the Prairies and repeatedly complains about the smell in her house (12-3; 25), and complains about the dust and the wind (37; 38; 39; 45; 51; 54; 62; 63; 73), an intertextual reference that helps Kogawa claim a literary legitimacy.⁵ Furthermore, insisting on the dust in and around the house enables Kogawa to recall the Dust Bowl that hit the American and Canadian Prairies in the 1930s, and, as she depicts the family’s work on the beet farm, focusing on their battle with hostile elements (214-7), to recall and claim the literary tradition of Prairie realism.⁶

Strong connections between *Obasan* and the Albertan landscape are suggested. Naomi describes Obasan and her house as one and the same: “the house is now her blood and bones,” (16) and since the house is invaded by the prairie dust, the prairie dust is now part of Obasan’s very bones and blood. In the passages that describe work on the Albertan farm, Obasan is first compared to a cloud, “moving like a tiny earth cloud over the hard clay clods” (216). However, through metonymy, she turns into the earth, “her skin becoming the colour of earth, *through* spring wind and chinook, *through* sleet and hail” (269, my italics). Her body has now become part of the Canadian landscape, as the climate, from its wind to its dust, has worked its way into her. The mention of chinook, the wind that blows in the Prairies, is significant: the word refers to a Pidgin used for trade⁷ and evokes the Chinook Indian Nation, associating Obasan with the country’s history and with Canadian First Nations. The connection is also made with Uncle as Naomi notes that he could be Chief Sitting Bull, since he has “the same prairie-baked skin, the deep brown furrows like dry river beds creasing his cheeks” (2). Naomi chooses humor as she notes that with a feather headdress he would make a perfect picture postcard, a “souvenir of Alberta, made in Japan,” (2) but she also foregrounds the action of the elements, using the compound adjective “prairie-baked” to suggest that the prairie and its climate have affected and changed his body – the prairie landscape is engraved in Uncle’s face – as they have affected his wife’s body.

The landscape is also given prominence when Naomi finally responds to Emily’s command that she “write the vision” (32). She attempts to highlight and historicize the presence of the Japanese-Canadian community, challenging traditional representations in the process. In the chapter describing the family’s exile to the ghost town, Naomi defines her community:

5. See Sturgess (*Redefining* 21), where she shows that another Asian-Canadian writer, Hiromi Goto, challenges the *topos* of the old woman in the house.

6. In his study of Prairie realism, Colin Hill recalls how various critics have foregrounded the characters’ battle against the hostile elements as the main characteristic of Prairie realism (126).

7. I am grateful to Claire Omhøvre for having pointed out that Chinook was a Pidgin language used in trade. See *Dictionary of the Chinook Jargon or Trade Language of Oregon*, by George Gibbs, 1863. Gutenberg Project. 29 October 2013 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/15672/pg15672.html>>.

We are hammers and chisels in the hands of would-be sculptors, battering the spirits of the sleeping mountain. We are the chips and sand, the fragments of fragments that fly like arrows from the heart of the rock. [...] We are those pioneers who cleared the bush and the forest with our hands, the gardeners tending and attending the soil with our tenderness, the fishermen who are flung from the sea to flounder in the prairies. (119-20)

Naomi apparently resorts to metaphors to convey her vision, yet since hammers and chisels are the very tools her grandfather, a boat builder, brought to Canada (24), the first metaphors are metonymies – one of her favorite devices and one that suggests inclusion and connectedness rather than juxtaposition. She is creating and maintaining an unbroken connection with the family's Japanese and Canadian pasts (her uncle, grandfather and father worked as boat builders in B.C.). Naomi is reclaiming her family's past and inscribing it into Canadian history as she carves it into Canadian space. These tools are associated with the sculptors and the mountains, so through metonymy and metaphor the Japanese-Canadian community is included in the construction of the nation. Their role as nation builders is made even clearer towards the end of the passage as they are "pioneers" and "gardeners." By claiming that the tools are "battering" the mountain, Naomi evokes the fact that the nation was built through violence, but the community is both colonizer and victim as the fragments evoke the fate of a community which was "destroyed." However, Naomi also places them deep inside the Canadian landscape when she defines them as "the chips and sand" that fly from the heart of the mountain. As they are said to be tools (hammers and chisels) and actors (pioneers and gardeners, fishermen) and eventually the land itself, Naomi reclaims space completely. Furthermore, the present tense in the last sentence suggests that their present fate and plight should not be forgotten. As the next chapter shows, her attempt at re-inscribing the presence of her ancestors into Canadian history and landscape is a necessary gesture. The family revisits Slocan twenty years later, hoping to find traces of their presence there, only to see that "not a mark was left" (125).

Naomi will then be prompted by the question she is always asked ("where do you come from?") to provide a second definition or vision. Its structure is somewhat similar to the earlier passage as here the anaphoric pronoun "we" is the subject of verbs of actions. This vision conveys the experience of relocation in Alberta:

we come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and sloughs, untended and spindly. We erupt in the valleys and mountainsides, in small towns and back alleys, sprouting upside down on the prairies [...] our feet rooted nowhere. We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting. (247-8)

Naomi pretends to accept the assumption that the presence of the Japanese-Canadian community was an oddity, but reverses it, recalling that the prairie was essentially a foreign ("unlikely") soil for these people who came from the sea or the coast. The vision of the uprooted community recalls the first pages describing Naomi's and Uncle's fingers as root-like (1; 3), a gesture that Quimby has interpreted as an attempt to root themselves into the Canadian soil (261). The vision of the community growing upside down echoes yet another passage, where Naomi challenges Emily's attempts to obtain redress by sending petitions: "[Emily's words] do not touch us where we are planted here in Alberta, our roots clawing the sudden prairie air" (208). The dialectical images of the roots planted in the air and of plants growing upside down enable Naomi

to convey the experience of the Japanese-Canadians who were forced to resettle in Southern Alberta and, in the second instance, to reclaim language, since she turns the derogatory image of the community as weeds into an image of resilience with verbs such as sprout, grow, or flourish.

Furthermore, the treatment of the prairie landscape in *Obasan* enables Kogawa to challenge the representations of the Canadian nation, as she reclaims and reconfigures space. The opening page describes Naomi and her uncle walking in the grasslands, not far from the beet farm where the family was sent to work in 1946. Although they worked on this farm for many years, it was a place of exile for these people who came from Japan and the coast of British Columbia, it was “hardly inviting” (Quimby 260) and essentially foreign to them. However, Naomi reclaims the site and turns it into her uncle’s natural space as his words turn the prairie into the sea:

“Umi no yo,” Uncle says, pointing to the grass. “It’s like the sea.”

The hill surface, as if responding to a command from Uncle’s outstretched hand, undulates suddenly in a breeze, with ripple after ripple of grass shadow, rhythmical as ocean waves. We waded through the dry surf, the flecks of grass hitting us like spray. (1)

The comparison with the sea is both a cliché, a “familiar metaphor” used by landscape lyricists from Melville to Wiebe (Ricou 111)⁸ and, as John O’Connor has shown, a *topos*, a literary motif in Canadian literature.⁹ Uncle’s gesture as a *command* to the sea to rise is foregrounded, suggesting that the Japanese words changed the grass into the sea, which enables Naomi to give them new vitality and to reclaim them as her own. The cliché and *topos* are shown to be relevant to Uncle as Naomi recalls he used to be a fisherman (247) and a boat builder (18). The sea that Uncle dreams of going back to is the Pacific ocean, which stretches between Japan and British Columbia, in other words between Uncle’s and Naomi’s homelands. The prairie as sea is therefore both Canadian and Japanese.

A few pages later Naomi explains that one mile east, one can find a Native buffalo jump, recalling a Native presence, and the fact that this was a cemetery. The prairie turns into a burial ground, which a remark by their white neighbor suggests when he recalls that a lot of Japanese-Canadians are now buried there (247). Since the prairie used to be a sea – which Uncle realized when he saw fossils (247) – it is a natural space for a fisherman to be buried. As she reclaims the cliché of the prairie as sea and as cemetery, Naomi reclaims space in a particularly complex way since she simultaneously reconfigures the prairie as a burial ground and as a place of *birth* when she recalls that “Uncle was a child of the waves,” (14) and calls her grandfather “a son of the sea that tossed and cobbled the Nakanes for centuries” (18). This is later conveyed by the striking vision of the Japanese-Canadian community as skeletons seizing the emblem of the province of Alberta: “we *come from* cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth” (248, my italics). Naomi evokes the fate of those who, like Uncle and Obasan, were forced to settle in Alberta, a fate which, she suggests, they embraced, uncomplainingly – Barker recalls that Uncle “never once said a bitter word” (246) – and

8. In journalism too, as this excerpt from the 6th of October, 1900 issue of the *Manitoba Free Press* shows: “In sight of Lethbridge, this westward-winged crow, posed like a black sea gull above ocean-like expanse of prairie [...]” *Water Works Wonders. A History of the White, Wilson, McManon, River Junction School Districts*. 8 August 2013 < <http://www.telusplanet.net/public/mtoll/irsoab.htm> >.

9. A good example of its enduring popularity would be Sarah Ellis’s *A Prairie as Wide as the Sea*, both for its title and description of the immigrants’ first sighting of the prairie: “I knew he was thinking of the sea – that the prairie was like the sea” (Ellis 17).

in silence, as Naomi adds: “we come from our untold tales that wait for their telling” (248). Using one of the official emblems of Alberta (the wild rose was adopted as the floral emblem of the province in 1930), she firmly asserts the community’s rights as Canadian citizens. As the prairie is simultaneously envisioned as burial ground and place of birth, she recalls the hardships of their lives in postwar Canada and praises their ability to make a life for their families in Alberta (Stephen’s successful career for instance is often evoked, as is the fact that it is mentioned in the local press). Secondly, as Naomi highlights the transformations of the prairie in terms of time (prehistory) and through poetical language, she also debunks the vision of the Albertan prairie as a place where nothing changes (1). Finally, she also challenges the vision that Canada has of itself since her second attempt at defining her community is not only prompted by the question “where do you come from,” it is also, more importantly, framed by one assertion: “Oh Canada, we come from you,” “We come from Canada” (247; 248). She is therefore claiming that any attempt to define the Japanese-Canadian community is also an attempt to define Canada.

Kogawa has written her own “original composition,” a hybrid text that contrasts personal memories with official documents, exploring the struggle of identities and slowly bringing the two languages into contact. It is no coincidence that she has chosen a Japanese word (meaning A/aunt)¹⁰ as a title. The contact between Japanese and English, sometimes resulting in a hybrid language, plays a key role in the overall impression that *Obasan* is a hybrid text, which its collage structure already suggests. It also emblemizes the narrator’s attempt to find her own unique voice, born out of her critical identity, and her attempts to account for her past and to pay tribute to her family. This has not prevented the novel from being extremely popular and from being hailed as a token of Canadian multiculturalism. However, as she documents her characters’ struggles with their identities, Kogawa keeps reminding her readers that any attempt at defining the Japanese-Canadian community results in an attempt to define Canadianess. Kogawa challenges any hegemonic visions of Canada. Her use of landscape imagery and the interrelations she traces between her characters and the Canadian landscape make fascinating reading, and deserve more critical attention. Space, and more precisely landscape in *Obasan* are keys to understanding Kogawa’s attempts to address the issue of identity for her characters, and more largely, for her community.

Corinne BIGOT

University Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

Works Cited

- ADASHI, Ken. *The Enemy that Never Was*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.
 ANZALDÚA, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.
 BHABHA, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
 BUTLER, Judith. *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
 ELLIS, Sarah. *A Prairie as Wide as the Sea: the Immigrant Diary of Ivy Weatherall*. Toronto: Scholastic Canada, 2001.

10. Naomi uses the word “Obasan,” when she speaks to, and refers to, her aunt, turning the title into a proper noun. The title of the novel may read as a proper noun, but it is actually a common noun.

- HILL, Colin. *The Modern-Realist Movement in English-Canadian Fiction, 1919-1950*. Ph.D. Dissertation. McGill University. 2003 <http://digitool.Library.McGill.CA:80/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=19471&silo_library=GEN01>.
- KAMBOURELI, Smaro. *Scandalous Bodies*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- KITIGAWA, Muriel. *This is My Own*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1985.
- KOGAWA, Joy. *Obasan*. 1981. Toronto: Penguin, 1983.
- KRÄL, Françoise. *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- LEE, Chris. “Enacting the Asian Canadian.” *Canadian Literature* 199 (2008): 28-44.
- O’CONNOR, John J. “Saskatchewan Sirens: The Prairie as Sea in Western Canadian Literature.” *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 28-29 (1980): 157-71.
- MIKI, ROY. *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice*. Vancouver: Raincoast, 2004.
- . *In Flux: Transnational Shifts in Asian Canadian Writing*. Edmonton: NeWest P, 2011.
- QUIMBY, Karin. “‘This is My Own, My Native Land’: Constructions of Identities and Landscapes in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*.” *Cross-Addressing. Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*. Ed. John C. Hawley. State U of New York P, 1996. 257-73.
- RICOU, Laurie. “Prairie Poetry and Metaphors of Plain/s Space.” *Great Plains Quarterly* 3.2 (1983): 109-119.
- ROSS, Sinclair James. *As For Me and My House*. 1941. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957.
- SHOENUT, Meredith. “‘I am Canadian’: Truth of Citizenship in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*.” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 36 (2006): 486-97.
- SLAPKAUSKAITE, Ruta. “The Fairy Tale Motifs in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*.” *Literary Environments. Canada and the New World*. Ed. Britta Olinder. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2006. 29-38.
- STURGESS, Charlotte. *Redefining the Subject. Sites of Play in Canadian Women’s Writing*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003.
- YOUNG, Robert. *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.