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Abstract
In 1965 George Grant published Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism, a book asking Canadians whether they had 'the power and the desire to maintain some independence of the American empire' (p. vii). Underlying that question, Grant saw 'the deeper question of the fate of any particularity in the technological age' (p. ix). Grant's elegy looked backwards to Canada's origins in a vision of 'community which had a stronger sense of the common good and of public order than was possible under the individualism of the American capitalist dream' (p. x). By biking backward, he hoped to inspire Canadians to continue forward along a different route than that charted by American capitalism. Joy Kogawa's Obasan recreates the anguish of one particular community facing the faceless bureaucratic destruction created by the homogenizing impulse Grant feared. Obasan is an elegy for lost particularity, and a plea that the value of the particular be recognized and reasserted by the fragments that have survived its sundering.
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Obasan: Joy Kogawa’s ‘Lament for a Nation’

In 1965 George Grant published Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism, a book asking Canadians whether they had ‘the power and the desire to maintain some independence of the American empire’ (p. vii). Underlying that question, Grant saw ‘the deeper question of the fate of any particularity in the technological age’ (p. ix). Grant’s elegy looked backwards to Canada’s origins in a vision of ‘community which had a stronger sense of the common good and of public order than was possible under the individualism of the American capitalist dream’ (p. x). By looking backward, he hoped to inspire Canadians to continue forward along a different route than that charted by American capitalism. Joy Kogawa’s Obasan recreates the anguish of one particular community facing the faceless bureaucratic destruction created by the homogenizing impulse Grant feared. Obasan is an elegy for lost particularity, and a plea that the value of the particular be recognized and reasserted by the fragments that have survived its sundering. Kogawa continues Grant’s questioning of the future that we are building for ourselves through our increasing reliance on the spirit of technology to solve our immediate problems, while ignoring our eternal ones. More specifically, she extends Grant’s questioning of the power and desire of Canadian nationalism to promote a vision of the common good through respecting difference.

In ‘Storm Glass’, an article appearing elsewhere in this issue, Coral Ann Howells perceptively describes Obasan as ‘an elegy for a lost community’. Kogawa implies that the loss of the West Coast Japanese-Canadian community weakens the entire Canadian and indeed human community in their resistance to the deadening homogenization of imperial technological culture, a culture that reached its apotheosis in the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Like Grant’s Lament for a Nation, Kogawa’s Obasan recreates the spirit whose loss it laments, in the hope of reviving the potential for a differently directed future. Like Grant, Kogawa believes that ‘our private and public realities are coextensive, and that the accuracy of our actions is dependent on our being grounded in our spiritual resources’. Obasan explores the limits and strengths of those resources.
**Obasan** grips our imaginations through its juxtaposition of a lyric intensity of longing for a renewed community against a documentary realism that charts its loss. But by rewriting history from the perspective of the dispersed and defeated, it retrieves the memory that it hopes can once again become future-oriented. It describes the Canadian nation at a time of great collective sickness, showing how the disease of racism infecting the body politic spreads to emerge as the tuberculosis that kills Naomi’s father and cripples her brother. Naomi sees her Aunt Emily as ‘one of the world’s white blood cells, rushing from trouble spot to trouble spot with her medication pouring into wounds seen and not seen’ (O, p. 34). Memory and resistance become the medication necessary for a cure. Through their very victimization, Naomi’s people themselves have become part of the sickness to be cured, but paradoxically they will also be part of the cure. Their insistence on mattering, through silent demonstration and articulated affirmation, confirms the strength of the specific to resist dispersal and destruction, the command to disappear and the patronising welcoming back into the fold as ‘our Japanese’. But this survival comes at a cost to the psyche few would choose – had they the choice to pay.

**Obasan** enacts a dialogue that is never resolved between those who confront injustice through adopting the strategy of silent endurance and those who would try to change the world for the better through ‘lobbying and legislation, speech-making and story-telling’ (O, p. 199). Implicitly, through its own story-telling, it moves from silence into voice, but paradoxically into a voicing that includes the enigma of silence. Kogawa ignores simplistic oppositions between speech and silence, exploring instead the potential for the creative use and abuse of power in each.

**Obasan**, a silent presence, and Naomi’s mother, a silent absence, define the two poles of silence that structure the novel’s exploration of loss. Obasan pulls Naomi inward, toward the reduced community of Uncle, Aunt and two children that deafens itself to the slurs of the world. Naomi’s mother pulls her outward to recognise her solidarity, cemented through suffering, with the victims of Nagasaki and all other war atrocities. Appropriately, Naomi’s mother’s sister, her aunt Emily, the ‘word warrior’ (O, p. 32), also pulls Naomi outward from the potentially solipsistic world of Obasan’s nuclear family, a bulwark that cannot defend its members from the encroaching public world. Yet there is a wisdom and integrity in Obasan that anchor Naomi, preventing her from the flight that she both envies and fears in Stephen.

**Obasan** teaches that you can’t run away from your roots, but neither can you go home again. Naomi mourns the loss of innocent childhood security that she associates with home before her mother’s own call home to attend a sick grandparent. Yet even in her nostalgia for that lost perfect past before racism disrupted all certainties, Naomi recognizes another memory that contradicts her nostalgia. Old Man Gower stands for the disruption of community that was always there. The confidence of unproblematic
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belonging is forever denied us. Naomi asks herself: 'Is it the lie that first introduces me to the darkness?' (O, p. 63). She links the loss of Eden with the speaking of a lie and with its silent acceptance by she who knew it to be false yet did not speak to affirm the truth. Her complicity in Old Man Gower's lie shattered her first secure sense of belonging completely to her mother's world. He introduced her to a troubling difference, her own capacity to make moral decisions as an individual, however flawed her child's judgement might be, however confused her apprehension of the issues at stake. He split the coherence of her childhood world by introducing a gap between what she knew to be true and what was said. In this moment she learned that both speech and silence can deceive. Truth is no longer self-evident. It has become elusive. Choice has become a possibility.

The lie represents the breaking of the trust on which our sense of community is founded. Old Man Gower's lie parallels the government's lies that follow. Both say that their exploitation is for their victims' own good. These lies must be exposed before reconciliation can follow. Betty Lambert's powerful play Jennie's Story shows Jennie literally swallowing the lye/lie which has shattered her home and her community in order to take upon herself the symbolic cleansing necessary for spiritual renewal. Obasan too accepts this mythic rite of symbolic sacrifice that enables communal renewal. Naomi's mother has not died in vain. Her death, once accepted and understood, enables Naomi to turn from her own personal hurt to confront the hurt done the fabric of her nation, as outlined in the Memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians. She had avoided this document on earlier occasions. Obasan ends with its words, as if Naomi can only now accept its message that the government's actions against Japanese Canadians undermined the entire Canadian community. Naomi forgives, but refuses to tolerate, the prejudice that has weakened both victim and victimizer. In 'Is There a Just Cause?', Kogawa insists that 'as a Canadian I am embarrassed by my country's bureaucratic racism at home and its condemnation of racism in other countries...'. The lie must be repudiated: 'Let it not be said of our country that we preached democracy and practised racism until the very last Issei died' (p. 21). Consistency of word and deed, honesty and integrity are the individual values she wishes to see the nation validate, yet she knows how these very values may work against the acceptance of difference because of the challenge the particular always makes to the coherence of the whole.

Obasan reminds us of the complicating differences that nation, class and gender bring to the already problematic and culturally specific construction of race. It is not simply that the experience of racial oppression mirrors that of sexual oppression, but rather that the experience of racism changes the experiences of gender, nation and class. Richard Cavell argues that in insisting on the Canadianness of the
Japanese-Canadians, Aunt Emily’s manuscript thrusts ‘toward an assertion of sameness. Naomi, instead, is concerned with difference. She knows she is not Canadian because she is Japanese’. I interpret Aunt Emily’s arguments differently. When she goes through government documents crossing out the words ‘Japanese race’ and writing in ‘Canadian citizen’ (p. 33), she is refusing a societal representation of her identity that denies her the power of choice. She is not denying her Japanese race nor her Japanese culture, but she is insisting that race cannot be assumed to determine her communal loyalties. The community we choose through political affiliation supersedes that we are given through the accident of birth. We must create our own home, through the responsible practice of our citizenship.

Just as she rejects a racially-determined label, so Aunt Emily also rejects the idea of ‘Canadian’ as a homogeneous and fixed identity. In her opinion, ‘the Canadian’ must prove flexible enough to accommodate ‘milk and Momotaro’ (O, p. 57). To be Canadian is not to be the same as other Canadians; it is to contribute collectively to the composite idea of creative community that Canada ideally could be. Similarly, Aunt Emily also rejects the gender-specific label of ‘old maid’ (p. 8); she insists on defining her own difference in her own way. Naomi, in contrast, finds herself both intimidated and angered by the power of such definitions to shape her own experience of herself. Choosing, for her, is not possible. She feels trapped by others’ needs and her own fears.

Nonetheless, I think it is a mistake to place Obasan within a pattern of women’s fiction that argues that women must first construct a self and assert selfhood before they can question that construction. Obasan shows that selfhood cannot be freely chosen; its constructions depend on the possibilities open to it. Naomi’s community has been disrupted; without it as a nurturing context, she finds herself only as alienated and wounded. Her experience makes her distrustful of strength, and even of the sure conviction of the rightness of one’s own actions. Paradoxically, she finds a different kind of strength in doubt, and in the ability to see and feel from several different perspectives. She experiences herself as both Little Bear and Goldilocks, intruded upon and intruder. She can give up neither identification without giving up an integral part of her growing self. She is uncomfortable with her role as teacher, knowing that her students have been conditioned to expect an authority that she will not exercise. Instead, she provides attentiveness to their difficulties and a tentativeness that implicitly questions traditional authority. She may feel a failure and remain consumed by doubt, but the novel implicitly endorses her decision to refuse the easy claiming of institutionalized authority open to her as a teacher. Similarly, she refuses the easy authority of the victim.

But this capacity for multiple imaginative identifications and its accompanying acknowledgement of the power relations implicit in the construction of identity do not lead to the suspension of values that Linda
Hutcheon believes characterizes postmodern fiction, and in particular what she calls historiographic metafiction. *Obasan*, like *Lament for a Nation*, is committed fiction. Its commitment avoids the Empire’s sure belief in the rightness of its manifest destiny. Instead, it affirms a commitment to a wholeness that ‘comes from joining and from sharing our brokenness’. Kogawa asserts that we ‘need to remember the paradoxical power in mutual vulnerability’. For her, ‘Life is a series of making and unmaking plans along a continuum of uncertainty (‘Just Cause?’*, p. 20). Such statements define a post-colonial awareness that in Wilson Harris’s words attempts ‘to define a deeper participation in themes of responsibility through a diversity of associations, however perilous, rather than through an apparent unity that conforms and remains static in the end’. The theme of responsibility is not abandoned but deepened and diversified.

Unlike Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, *Obasan* is not about the growth of an individual girlchild into an acceptance of the doubleness of her ethnic American identity. Naomi’s story is the story of her community. She defines herself through her relations to others. In *Obasan*, she probes the nature of her connection to her lost mother, and to Obasan, who both is and is not her mother. In the sequel, it appears that she will probe her relation to Stephen, the brother who seeks to deny his family connections. Constructing a self involves constructing a community that will enable a different conception of selfhood – as open rather than closed to the needs of others.

Francesco Loriggio argues that ‘even a writer so obstinately deprecatory towards technology and modernization as George Grant failed to see that filiation and descent, the hereditary, the small, the local, the intra-national were, when set against homogenization, affiliation or consent, some of the pockets of resistance he was looking for’. *Obasan* reaffirms Grant’s vision of an alternative model of community to that offered by the ‘technology of empire’ but qualifies our understanding of the nature of that alternative. Instead of locating it in the inherited traditions of British conservatism, Kogawa shows that the future of Canadian difference depends on our openness to difference generally. *Obasan* does much more than record a forgotten and misunderstood episode in our past. It does more than introduce yet another ‘ethnic’ voice into the Canadian mosaic. Through its questioning of the problematics of how history gets written and ethnicity gets defined, it draws our attention to the power relations that structure our thinking about what is possible and what is desirable in contemporary Canada. It challenges all Canadians to rethink their vision of our society and its values.
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