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A Floating Homeland: (De)Constructing Canadianness from the Insider-Outsider Perspective of Japanese-Canadians

ABSTRACT: On the basis of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, the main objective of this paper is to take under the scrutinizing eye how the central protagonist retrieves a selective portion of her childhood memories during the Second World War in an effort to reshape her fragmented identity as a Japanese-Canadian and to deal with the feeling of displacement. Analyzing essential memories, conversations, and stories within the plotline, the aim is to demonstrate that Naomi, in order to fight her identity crisis and feeling of displacement — due to the Japanese community's sense of belonging in Canada being shuttered by the Canadian government — recasts her personal experiences to her own needs for the identity refashioning in-between cultures, therefore, in Homi Bhabha's terms, giving life to a sort of "Third Space." This paper will therefore demonstrate numerous ways in terms of which the protagonist intrudes upon iconic wilderness and rural landscapes in Canada — hitherto emptied of the indigenous and minorities and thus functioning as a sort of privileged sites of national identity — so as to transform them into heterogeneous and more inclusive spaces, breaking the binary opposition between away and home, a newcomer and native. Significantly, the protagonist's storytelling may be distinguished by great attention to nature, botanical imagery, and landscapes shaped by experiences of displacement, and it may be argued that the novel is targeted at re-visiting traditional sites of identity construction as well as bringing into tensions historicizing and idealizing visions of the natural environment to challenge the myths of Japanese-Canadians' identity that these sites were hitherto created to support. It brings into life a "Third Space" in the form of a personal island which will neither float to the Japanese Archipelago nor towards Canada, but it will be a separate entity including both. Hence, the dialogic relation between identity and rural and wilderness landscapes provides alternative forms of meaningful emplacement for the self — a personal "floating homeland" anchored in-between the two cultures.

KEY WORDS: Japanese-Canadian, diasporic self, feeling of displacement, sense of belonging, Third Space, nature, landscape

In the nomadic world, one — forced into exile to live the constant experience of life in transit and deprived of home as space for nurturing one's inner self and identity — may find oneself a subject to rootlessness and deprived of any well-organized identity. In particular, during the Second World War, Japanese immigrants and Canadian-born Japanese, trapped between the two cultures, between their heritage and the host cultural sphere, between Japanese traditions and Anglo-Canadian traditions, were treated as resident aliens in Canada and fell victim to a sense of a multiply-constructed identity which, under the influence of various contexts and forces, assumed its fragmented nature. With regard to the insider-outsider status imposed by the Canadian government, feeling a sort of home-ness in Canada, a birth-country for the majority of Japanese-Canadians, seemed to be unattainable. Thus, what was brought to the fore was the need to search for a sort of personal island providing stable emplacement and somewhat magically constructing a homely space within cultural wilderness — serving as a sort of microcosm of one's personal space and bringing about a sense of belonging and selfhood — by means of an imaginative exploration of the elements of nature, its spatial immensity and freedom.

Most distinctly, on the basis of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, the aim of this paper is to shed light upon the fact that just as Joy Kogawa's central protagonist Naomi Nakane embarks upon retrieving a selective portion of her childhood past during the Second World War for the purpose of delving into the issue of the unexplained disappearance of her mother, the emphasis is likewise placed upon the fact that these recollections may also be aimed at reshaping her personal fragmented identity as a Japanese-Canadian and coping with the feeling of displacement. By virtue of examining relevant memories and conversations within the plotline, the main objective is to present that Naomi, in an effort to overcome her identity crisis and feeling of displacement — due to the Japanese community's sense of belonging in Canada being shuttered by the Canadian government — recasts her personal experiences of her childhood to her own needs for the identity refashioning in-between cultures. More precisely, what ought to be taken under the scrutinizing eye is how the central protagonist embraces various images of diversified Canadian land and its natural environment surrounding her relocation from one internment camp to another and reconstructs these spaces step by step in order to relate herself to the nature around, which functions as a rooted place giving her shelter and sense of belonging. The objective is to show that Joy Kogawa's novel may be seen as an exploration of the individual's identity formation within the sphere of non-belonging as well as the dialogic relation between identity and nature.

To begin with, the plotline of the novel is composed of the recollections of Naomi Nakane, a middle-aged Japanese-Canadian, who is a teacher with a shuttered sense of self. In the wake of the loss of her uncle, who brought her up after her father's death and mother's mysterious disappearance in Japan, Naomi

takes refuge in the path that has brought her to the present situation and to all places that her family have travelled to, mixing her personal memories with the history of Japanese-Canadians, formerly swept under the carpet of silence. Following her memories of childhood experiences, the novel travels back to the outbreak of the Second World War and presents the reader with the harsh situation of Japanese-Canadians in British Columbia at that time. Namely, largely due to Japan's alliance with Germany, Japanese-Canadians are allegedly accused of spying connections with Japan and therefore forced to leave their homes and sent to internment camps across British Columbia far away from cities. The attitude of the Canadian government towards evicting Japanese-Canadians from their homes upon their own native land to the detention site of the Slocan ghost town and finally to the Alberta prairies may function both literally and figuratively since not only the physical home, but also a fixed sense of belonging is lost. In the name of national defense, they are seen as foreigners in their own country and categorized as the Other. Significantly, it is then that Naomi and her community are unavoidably thrown into the experience of homelessness.

Interestingly, childhood seems to function here as a long lost dream place. What is responsible for that is the traumatic experiences in Naomi's coming into age, such as the confinement of Japanese-Canadians, the loss of her mother during her mysterious trip to the Land of the Rising Sun, the confiscation of her house as a sort of comfort space after the outbreak of the war, which inevitably results in her feeling of not only material homelessness, but more importantly, of personal displacement and longing for a safe shelter that has been all of a sudden torn down. Having been thrown into constant life in transit both physical and emotional, drifting between the two different cultural spheres, and deprived of fixed references to people and places, Naomi may be prevented from constructing an ideal unchanging personal island that would eventually provide her with a sense of belonging and stable identity. This traumatic experience of the disconnection from Canadian society lingers and brings about insecurity and dread.

Another reason for Naomi's displaced feeling of belonging and shuttered sense of identity that may be derived from the novel's plotline is an enormous and omnipresent discrepancy between the value system of the first generation and younger generations. To put it in starker terms, while the first generation (*Issei*) upholds the cultural ethos of Japan, the second (*Nissei*) and third (*Sansei*) generations of immigrants are educated in accordance with Western ideas of democracy; yet, the consecutive generations seem to be totally unable to make proper use of it in their daily life and therefore they fall victim to living in a state of paralysis. Although the *Issei* have taken matters into their own hands in terms of working hard to provide a good future for the sake of their descendants, they fall victim to disregarding the mores of the host land, which in effect brings about a certain trap for the next generations. Suffice it to say, educated

by Western ideas yet brought up in a makeshift Japanese world, the *Nissei* and *Sansei* find themselves trapped in-between the two universes, at the same time, having their feet securely grounded in none of them, being deprived of a fixed identity.

What seems to be of paramount importance here is the anxiety that stems from the fact that people in exile must live an “interstitial” existence in what Homi Bhabha calls the “Third Space,” a location in which people must find their identity between the mores of the old world they left behind and those of the new world they have yet to enter. According to Bhabha, reimagining a sense of home plays an essential role in securing the diasporic’s sense of belonging to a stable and definite place (BHABHA, 1994). This space may be acknowledged as an in-between one and therefore one’s hybrid identity is constructed out of the collective imagination of a community which has been somewhat structured out of the immigrant’s contact with the new cultural surrounding, thus increasingly moving away from the homeland culture alongside its established system of knowledge production (YAZDIHA, 2010: 31—32). Provided that the host land turns to a sort of hegemonic practice, the hybrid individual may strategically open up a third space in a concerted effort to renegotiate their identity and belonging. Another world may be brought into life.

Stuart Hall postulates that identity should not be perceived as a noun but as a verb, for it is a matter of becoming and of being. The concept is an element of the future and the past. The emphasis is placed upon the fact that it is not something that already exists, transcending time, place, history, and culture. An identity is characterized by its roots, its history which constantly undergoes alteration and transformation. Unlike being eternally placed in some essentialized past, identities appear to be subject to a continuous play of culture, power, and history (HALL, 1996: 2—3). Notably, Japanese-Canadians were somewhat caught in a double web since they were acknowledged as neither Canadian nor Japanese and consequently they found themselves in a state of limbo in which they had no other choice but to figure out to which cultural sphere they ought to adjust and how to behave in that particular culture.

As a result, they were relegated to live in a no man’s space, Bhabha’s Third Space. It directly leads to an ambiguity that stems from a struggle for strategies targeted at enunciating a new self-identity. As Bhabha puts forward, “these in-between spaces provide a terrain for elaborating strategies aimed at initiating news signs of identity” (BHABHA, 1994: 15). The concept of Third Space then is emancipatory since its existence is crucial for liberating the individual from a haunting sense of non-belonging, dislocation and alienation and partial participation within the culture. It likewise provides a certain understanding of various chameleon-like changes necessary for the hybrid individual (KALSCHUEER, 2009: 39—42). Providing that the individual is given a space wherein they are able to experience a sense of home, a sense of stable identity may be attained.

Armed with the provided theoretical background, one may put forward that one of the venues of dealing with this problem by means of constructing the so-called Third Space that would give coherence to Naomi's shattered identity and fill in the lack of home may be her interaction with and readings of the Canadian landscape in its natural and mythic forms. Indeed, the Canadian landscape may be employed by Naomi not only as a sort of medium recording the passage of history of Japanese-Canadians in British Columbia but, largely due to the emotional load attached to it, a certain metonymic link between identity, home, and Canadian nature may also be created as a Third Space. While Western ideas and education can be regarded as the first space and the "makeshift" of Japanese cultural values as the second space, Canadian land in which Western ideas and Japanese ethos meet can be seen as the third space. Therefore, it is useful to investigate the ways in which the central protagonist embarks upon constructing new meanings of her identity and home through landscape imagery fostered upon this physical terrain.

Focusing on the child's (re)construction, a very good illustration of the strategy of relating herself to the landscape around may be the following excerpt from the very first chapter of the novel in which Naomi, having a conversation with her Uncle who intends to yet withdraws from revealing the mysterious case of her mother's fate in Nagasaki, turns to an interior discourse in which the coulee in Alberta occupies a central position:

The tall grasses stand without quivering. The tops flow this way and that. [...] The hill surface [...] undulates suddenly in a breeze, with ripple after ripple of grass shadows, rhythmical as ocean waves. [...] From the beginning of time, the grass along this stretch of prairie has not been cut. About a mile east is a spot which once was an Indian buffalo jump [...] where the buffalo were stampeded and fell to their deaths. All the bones are still there, some sticking right out of the side of a fresh landslide. [...] My fingers tunnel through a tangle of roots till the grass stands from my knuckles, making it seem that my fingers are the roots. I am part of this small forest. Like the grass, I search the earth and the sky with a thin but persistent thirst.

KOGAWA, 1983: 1—2

Significantly, after the deportation from their home in British Columbia to Alberta beet farms, Naomi and her Uncle like to visit the coulee once every year around the anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing. It is a place to which they are exiled as a community during the internment period. For Naomi's Uncle, not only do the prairie grasslands seem to bring back the memories of his boat-building business and the sea, which used to function as the home for Uncle when he was a fisherman, but they also seem to suggest the distance from their home. The scene may likewise take on greater importance because the hill surface surrounded by the endless grass prairie may symbolize a sort of personal

island in the desolate land of Alberta prairies, a new place of belonging that provides space both for coming to terms with the unjust suffering and for searching stable identity.

Moreover, Karen Quimby suggests that Naomi, by virtue of touching the blades of the grass and its roots, strives to root herself to the land. This mechanism may suggest the need to ground both her self and her identity in the Canadian land (QUIMBY, 1996: 261). One may likewise put forward that while the central protagonist burrows her fingers into the grass, simultaneously uniting herself with the land, claims a position for herself on the landscape as home. It may be argued that it is her integration with the land, connecting her with the pre-colonial image of the land (QUIMBY, 1996: 261—262), which strongly acknowledges her identity evolving from the landscape, as it is also the case with native people. Bringing her identity rooted in the land along the native identity may open a window for another possibility of identity in opposition to ethnic and national ones.

Indeed, Naomi's exile into the interior of British Columbia and strive for a sort of stable personal island responsible for giving nurturing shelter resembles the condition of her identity via the language and imagery of the landscape. For instance, the central protagonist brings up the recollection of her house in the detention camp in Slocan and its central feature that strikes immediately is its earthlike structure. That is to say, Naomi relates that it is

a small grey hut with a broken porch camouflaged by shrubbery and trees. The colour of the house is that of sand and earth. It seems more like a giant toadstool than a building. [...] From the road, the house is invisible, and the path to it is overgrown with weeds. [...] We wade through the weeds to the few grey fenceposts still standing beside a gate flat on the ground, anchored to the earth by a web of vines.

KOGAWA, 1983: 121

Reading the above passage, one should be immediately struck by the fact that the house grows from the forest floor which may suggest to the reader that it occupies a figurative space beneath the earth. By means of perceiving the house as if submerged into the ground, which eventually transforms into a toadstool, Naomi wants to extend the idea of home, enriching it with the forest. She stresses the idea that just as the house, as an embodiment of stability and belonging, the blood and bones of the character, is deeply connected to the ground and its layers of history, so does Naomi's identity somewhat meld into the land. In effect, the house in Slocan along its blurred boundaries with the land may be a device aimed at strengthening the metonymic link between the landscape and Naomi's identity, at least temporarily, providing her with a sense of belonging in a sort of homely sphere. Needless to say, the structure of home, this third space where Naomi is capable of renegotiating her self, is not the four metaphorical walls but

more importantly the land itself, which paradoxically increases the probability of another displacement and in turn, as Quimby interestingly observes, forces her to “constantly resist submersion and reassert her rightful position on her native Canadian land. Thus, the Canadian landscape becomes both the concrete and metaphorical notion of home with which Naomi struggles” (QUIMBY, 1996: 266).

In fact, after three years of living in Slocan, Naomi and her family are relocated again. QUIMBY (1996: 263) touches upon the fact that Naomi, on the verge of leaving the internment camp in Slocan, makes use of forest imagery to describe this process:

The day we leave, the train station is a forest of legs and bodies waiting. [...] We are all standing still, as thick and full of rushing as trees in a forest storm, waiting for the giant woodsman with his mighty axe. He is in my grade-two reader, the giant woodcutter, standing, leaning on his giant axe after felling the giant tree.

KOGAWA, 1983: 179

Taking this story at face value, one may notice that Naomi imagines herself and other Japanese-Canadians as trees while the giant woodsman may be the embodiment of the Canadian government and Western values, attempting to uproot Japanese-Canadians from the Canadian soil. They are objects violently acted upon and displaced. Indeed, their victim status may resemble the fact that trees are an enormous part of the Canadian land. Thus, meeting in the temporal third space, it may be argued that the fact that these trees are about to be cut down by the giant woodsman symbolizes both a destruction of the Canadian land and the attack on the Japanese-Canadians. Deciphering a metonymic link between one's belonging and the land along dismantling Naomi's status as pure victim, one may significantly perceive a rewriting of this scene as also an assault on Canadian national identity (QUIMBY, 1996: 267—268).

Another Naomi's experience with the landscape worth paying attention to, which can be identified within the narrative of the novel, is the second exile that relocates her family on the Alberta prairie. Right from the very beginning, the reader is informed that living on this desolate land is considered as a debilitating experience fraught with hardship. She complains

that the hardship is pervasive, so inescapable, so thorough it's a noose around my chest and I cannot move any more. [...] I have been invaded by dust and grit from the field [...]. In summer it's a heat trap, an incubator, a dry sauna from which there is no relief. [...] The whole field is an oven and there's not a tree within walking distance. We are tiny as insects crawling along the grill and there is no protection.

KOGAWA, 1983: 194—195

It is obvious from this account that Naomi feels overwhelmed by the oppressive condition of living in the province of Alberta. She extends herself to the hostile land like an insect that can hardly survive the imposed hardships. Nature here does not serve as a mechanism of home for the protagonist but as a prison (LOUSLEY, 2012: 88). Yet, the land — which initially should function for Naomi as a third space giving shelter from the racist attitude of white Canadians — appears this time to be serving as the Canadian government's mechanism of repression, directly invading the body of Japanese-Canadians and the destruction of her family similarly to the racist government orders. This may give a hint to the reader that Naomi's experience with the Canadian land is complex and even in her third space, resembling a floating homeland, she is constantly under the pressure of non-belonging and renegotiating her self.

Yet, the central protagonist and *Obasan* stay and make the prairie their home by finding a shelter from these hostile and repressive forces; a shelter for the body and the self which takes its form from the inside like a shell. It is done by virtue of the recollection of her (per)formative experience with the land during her second relocation to southern Alberta (ALMEIDA, 2009: 76). Living on the farm, on the desolate land, and oppressed by the extreme heat and cold, which may suggest Naomi's captivity in the landscape, the central protagonist makes up her mind to look after a frog that resembles her father and launches into creating a shelter for it:

When I get back to the house, I remove my muddy shoes and set to work making and unmaking a home for the frog in the glass bowl. Eventually I settle on one arrangement — water in half the bowl, land in the other half. The rock forms the base of the land section and mud, grass, earth, and stones are poled on and around the rock. Near the top of the earth hill, I poke my thumb in to form a cave about the size of the frog. After the water settles, I plop the frog in. [...] A quick turnabout and the frog's nose protrudes from the home, its tiny black needle-point nostrils facing the water. A good lookout place.

KOGAWA, 1983: 247

In this long passage, Naomi starts carefully building home for the frog so that the animal is given a feeling of safety and stability. After this scene, the central protagonist keeps nursing the frog back to health and freedom and feeding it as its broken leg has not healed yet (ALMEIDA, 2009: 76). Just as the frog is provided with shelter so does Naomi's feeling of stability seem to gradually take shape. Notably, the aim of the relocation to the Alberta prairie is to impose upon Japanese-Canadians a life in transit so that a feeling of displacement will be instilled within them as a result. Yet, it may be argued that Naomi throws the aim of the Canadian government policy of uprooting Japanese-Canadians by relocating them into the desolate interior of Canada into doubt via physically interacting with this landscape, thus creating a figurative homeland out of

this wilderness. It is important to note that Naomi, instead of taking refuge in Japanese ethos or Western values in an effort to deal with her identity problem and lack of home, turns to the third space of the Canadian land that posits itself in-between within which, much to the reader's surprise, she is able to somewhat renegotiate this repressive and grief-stricken process of internment and the hostile "edge of the world, [...] a place of angry air" (KOGAWA, 1983: 191) of Alberta prairie into something stable.

Building on this progression, Cheryl Lousley observes that it is not only the wilderness that influences or even invades at times her being, but it is also Naomi who claims her position on and as part of the landscape, simultaneously influencing it and naturalizing the presence of Japanese-Canadians on the Alberta prairie (LOUSLEY, 2012: 88—89). She reconciles herself to this desolate land, which is "like the sea." From the vantage point of Bhabba's theory of the unhomely, it begs to be emphasized that Naomi's sense of homeland is measured by these in-between spaces of the land that create a possibility of being, of existing, of belonging as a transformation or renegotiation of identity can take place when the two spaces start intersecting. She becomes an individual "inhabiting the rim of an 'in-between' reality [...] and building new ways of being at home" (BHABHA, 1994: 19). Following this line of thought, her spatial displacement onto the Canadian soil may turn out to be the central protagonist's act of self-knowledge due to her power of reading the landscape which substantially locates her at the intersection of the outside, which is the homeland in this case, and the outside, occupied by the host land.

For all that, Naomi, by locating herself in the several movements of displacements and somewhat submerging herself in the floating homeland of her own making within which both human and environment are dependent upon each other, realizes that one is always shaped in relation to nature and further asserts on behalf of Japanese-Canadians her hyphenated identity located within nature. Exposing the multiple representations of the Canadian nature and its physical terrain, which acts as a maze through which she has to travel in order to acquire a sense of self in the world, she satisfies her need for a figurative third space only upon which can she construct her identity and feel a sense of belonging. It is the memory of her childhood experiences that functions as the major tool to rebuild and renegotiate her dislocations through the prism of the Canadian natural surrounding. In effect, albeit being subject to constant relocation and life in transit allegedly precluding stable selfhood, Naomi is capable of creating a new idea of what a homeland should be and renegotiating her sense of self out of the memories and emotional load attached to the different sites to which she and her family were forced to move. Life in transit within the floating homeland of Canadian territory may be emblematic of the constant development of Naomi's self.

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