

The poetic spaces in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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RESUMO:

Este trabalho analisa a relação entre espaço e a formação do sujeito feminino em *Obasan*, de Joy Kogawa. Essa relação, tal como tratada no romance, oferece bases para o questionamento de conceitos como “identidade” e “lar” que cada vez mais vêm sendo problematizados devido à presente configuração global e o fluxo crescente de pessoas e informação ao redor do globo. Estando ao mesmo tempo na posição de sujeito diaspórico, racializado e gendrado, Naomi, nascida no Canadá e filha de imigrantes japoneses, se vê na condição de tentar conciliar múltiplas identidades.

Palavras-chave: Diáspora. Identidades. Gênero. Espaço. Escrita.

[W]e shall see the imagination building “walls” of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection – or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts. In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter.

Gaston Bachelard

Writing about the loss of home brings one home again. *You can't go home again* – except in *writing home*.

Susan Friedman

The house I built from that point on was made of wallpaper and paint.

Joy Kogawa

One recurrent theme in the novels by the Japanese-Canadian writer Joy Kogawa is the need human beings have to create a space which they can call home. In the case of her characters, it may be argued that the desire is to write a home, or even to rewrite an already written one. According to Rosemary George (1996, p. 3) and Susan Friedman (2004, p. 206), the (re)writing of home is also a way of (re)constructing the constantly changing subject – in Kogawa's case, a markedly female subject. Such a rewriting is carried out in *Obasan* (1981) by the central female character, Naomi, through pieces of memories that embody for her not only the sense of what home is, but also her own sense of identity. As a woman raised in a traditional Japanese family, Naomi lived the experience of mobility as a consequence of the expulsion of Japanese-Canadians to the interior of the country. Hence, it is due to this experience that she is able not only to “defamiliarize ‘home’” (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 110), but also to question preconceived impositions such as racial, historical, ethnic and gendered identities.

Kogawa's *Obasan* is composed of the memories of Naomi, a Canadian woman born in a Japanese family, who is entangled in a national tragedy during World War II. Her recollections are evoked throughout the story and are intertwined with the present that shows a more mature character, dealing with the loss of her uncle who raised her after her father's death and her mother's disappearance. The events that take place after Uncle's death trigger Naomi's questionings in relation to family, nationality, and home. In an attempt to find an answer to those questions, she turns to the path that has brought

her to her present situation and to all the places that she and her family have traveled to, mingling her own personal memories with the history of Japanese-Canadians and Canada itself. Her search for home becomes a personal journey in a quest for her own sense of self. The rewriting of those spaces transforms her memories in tools to understand history, to build a new sense of home, belonging, and an understanding of her subjectivity, especially in gender terms. Memory in this novel is closely attached to a remembrance of home, or of what constitutes a sense of home. Diana Brydon argues that home, as the self, is also “a mobile and unsettled concept. As an idea and as a reality, home requires renewal if it is to become a productive space for renegotiated relations of public and private in what we are calling our global times” (2007, p. 8). Through revisions of her past and the past of her community, Naomi is able to contest not only traditional concepts of home but also the forces that work to shape it. In Naomi’s story this process of remembering becomes similar to the process of creating poetry. For Friedman, memory becomes “the first rewriting of home, an act of re-presentation [...] [a] narrative of identity in motion fills the gap with sign symbols of homes lost and new homes in the making” (2004, p. 206). For Naomi, memories are not only recollections of images, but also recollections of sounds and textures, all imbued with the nostalgic longing to bring them to the present.

This paper focuses on the reconstructions of the multifaceted spaces in Kogawa’s *Obasan* and how they are relevant for the female character’s development and understanding of her identities and affiliations. Kogawa’s poetic narrative often recreates through memory an idealized home, often in contrast with a more critical view of the present physically inhabited place, which eventually changes in the end. Memory becomes Naomi’s main tool to construct and disrupt cultural differences, since as a woman she does not dispose of the same spatial freedom as her brother and other men do. In this way, her search for home and her means of relating to space become also a quest for a subjective language and a political voice that disrupts traditional concepts of identity in an attempt to find a new sense of space and home, and a new way of being in the world.

The significance of the house

Stephen and I have light wooden blocks with crinkly red celluloid windows and pointed roofs for building houses and gateways and castles. There are scissors, folding paper, Plasticine, huge picture books, a Meccano set, doll dishes, and a rocking horse with its mouth open wide in laughter. My dolls are not in this room but upstairs in a large bin in the kitchen. Later, it was the family dolls I missed more than anything else - the representatives of the ones I loved.

Joy Kogawa

Following Naomi’s and memories, the novel travels back to the outbreak of World War II and depicts the Japanese-Canadian situation during the period, when, because of the Japanese alliance with Germany, they were taken off their houses and sent to concentration camps far from the cities. Naomi, who is only a child then, undergoes the material experience of being homeless. This episode quickly becomes a much deeper and more problematic experience, since her mother is also lost in a mysterious journey to Japan, leaving Naomi and her brother Stephen to the care of their aunt, or as they call her in Japanese, *Obasan*. Thus, what would be home to the young Naomi has been lost twice and it will be continuously lost from that moment on.

The search for the lost mother, through aunt Emily’s diaries and letters, and through Naomi’s fragments of memories becomes also a search for the lost home, for the house as a “comfort zone” (KAMBOURELI, 2000, p. 184). The passage quoted in the epigraph above shows the (re)construction of this sense of home. Memories of the house in which her whole family used to live before the outbreak

of the war brings forth images of Naomi playing with her brother Stephen, and in this occasion they play of building houses. This childhood game becomes symbolic in the context of the narrative since it brings forth major motifs present in the story: childhood, home, memory, and family. What is most interesting in this passage is the parallel between the children's apparent ignorance of what they are doing and the importance these moments acquire later on in Naomi's memories. Later on those are not just toys, they become representatives of loved ones (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 63).

Childhood appears here, as in most works of literature, as a long lost dream place. The tragedies in Naomi's life, such as the loss of the house and of her parents, are reasons for her to long for that period when no tragedy was known (COOK, 2007, p. 54). Part of what she is going through can be seen as a necessary passage from childhood to adulthood. In this sense, her development follows the pattern of a female *bildungsroman*. This development, however, gets entangled with other crucial moments in her life, such as the war, the confinement of Japanese-Canadians, and her mother's disappearance. All these tragic happenings contribute to Naomi's feeling of displacement and to her longing for a safe and ideal image of "home." According to Friedman, diasporic narratives "often tell the story of travel to a new land where memory and desire produce an idealized image of the homeland" (2004, p. 200). Likewise, George, when analyzing Joseph Conrad's writings on "home," describes the narrative links with childhood as a way of "invoking desire" (1996, p. 81). Desire, in this sense, comes from the attempt to construct an ideal "unchanging home," which ends up constantly being denied, to both characters and readers. George also observes how "home" moves along several axes, and yet it is usually represented as fixed, rooted, stable – the very antithesis of travel" (1996, p. 2). In fact, this concept of home as a rooted place is questioned in *Obasan* for the same reasons that George points out. Living in constant transit, both physical and emotional, Naomi can never achieve this "stability" that the idea of "home" is supposed to bring.

When referring to this longing for the childhood home, Bachelard makes reference to words that oppose the notion of movement, such as "motionless" and "fixation":

After we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. We live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. [...] Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost (BACHELARD, 1969, p.6).

Bachelard comments on how people usually attempt somehow to freeze the memories of home, and he uses this imagery to explore the relation between making history and making poetry. When dealing with memory in *Obasan*, Kogawa also points to this subjective construction of history, and many times she does so in a highly poetic prose, mingling the recounting of history and the inspiration from poetry. According to Shirley Lim, the poetic writing of many Japanese-American/Canadian women writers comes from the fluidity of the many boundaries of their experience that they attempt to perform (1999, p. 291). Rufus Cook successfully reads the subversive potential of this poetic use of language as a powerful use of a feminine voice working against the authority of the patriarchal organization of language (2007, p. 58).

In this sense, Naomi's search for home becomes also a way of finding her own voice through the voice of her female ancestors, her mother and grandmother, who both had to face the obstacles of building, or (re)building, their own homes in a strange new land. More than the troubles and

prejudices suffered by being a Japanese-Canadian, she has to deal with the threats directed to women. In fact, her subjectivity and sexuality will become the major reasons for her first loss of “home”.

The house and the universe

It isn't true, of course, that I never speak as a child. Inside the house in Vancouver there is confidence and laughter, music and mealtimes, games and storytelling. But outside, even in the backyard, there is an infinitely unpredictable, unknown, and often dangerous world. Speech hides within me, watchful and afraid.

Joy Kogawa

While Naomi's memories remain inside the house in which they seem comforted and protected, they are also confronted with the threat that will soon be brought by the outside world. The first intruder to enter, literally and metaphorically, this intimate space is the figure of Old Man Gower, the Nakanes' white neighbor. He is a stranger who brings with him both knowledge and threat from the outside world. He brings knowledge because he is apparently the first person to introduce Naomi to sexuality, and threat because this contact is aggressive and creates a feeling of guilty she will later find hard to erase: “But here in Mr. Gower's hands I become other – a parasite on [my mother's] body, no longer of her mind. [...] In my childhood dreams, the mountain yawns apart as the chasm spreads. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half” (1981, p. 77). The knowledge of sexuality is part of Naomi's transition from childhood to maturity. This transition, however, gets interrupted by the real disappearance of the mother, which increases her feeling of guilty in relation to her own acts, since she begins to seek Mr. Gower's company. Cook reads this passage as a symbolic representation of what happens to Naomi's relation with language. The “phallic authority” is embodied by the figure of the Old Man Gower, who separates Naomi not only from her mother but also from her childhood language and its apparent freedom in which she has lived before (2007, p. 56). This interruption, then, seems to leave Naomi in an in-between space, afloat between her childhood notions of safety and her new perceptions of subjectivity and individuality. For Yi-Fu Tuan, the use of language as a connector between world and individual increases a person's sense of self and diminishes the feeling of unison between a child and her microcosm (1982, p. 141). Naomi's relationship with language can be seen as a struggle to understand her own self at the same time that she attempts to hold on to this childhood feeling of belonging to the people and the places that surround her. The constant variations in the narrative structure that shift between prose and poetry, memory and history, (LIM, 1990, p. 291) can be seen as emblematic of Naomi's shifting identities. This lack of fixed references in relation to culture, tradition, home, and everything that would embody a stable identity is what Naomi tries to achieve by returning to her past. This search, however, will be changed by the end of her journey.

The phallic authority that enters Naomi's childhood universe does not belong to her father. On the contrary, her father's authority in house is lost in relation to Old Man Gower's presence. In a passage of the novel, after the Canadian government campaigns against Japanese and Japanese descendants begin, Naomi enters the living room in a blackout night and is surprised to see Old Man Gower inside her house:

Although I am in the room, he acts as if I am not here. He seems more powerful than Father, larger and more at home even though this is our house. He sounds as if he is trying to comfort my father, but there is a falseness in the tone. The voice is too sure – too strong.

Father is as if he is not here. If my mother were back, she would move aside all the darkness with her hands and we would be safe and at home in our home (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 82).

Old Man Gower's invasion has diminished her father figure and presence, indicating the sudden loss of parental authority and safety in that space. "This situation of double powerlessness, of being woman and minority," states Donald Goellnicht, "is brought home to with the recognition that the 'fathers' of her racial and cultural group are silenced and degraded by the Laws of the Ruling Fathers (the white majority)" (1989, p. 299). He argues that this "emasculatation of minority fathers" creates the responsibility of preserving the "mother culture" through minority mothers' oral tradition (p. 299). Hence, the absence of the mother increases Naomi's sense of disruption. Without the protection of both parents, home, from this moment on, does not mean what it used to. "I understand later what it is about," Naomi narrates, "The darkness is everywhere, in the day as well as the night. It threatens us as it always has, in the streetcars, in the stores, on the streets, in all public places" (1981, p. 82). The racial prejudice enticed by the war turns the public spaces in a more threatening space than they already were for a child. Old Man Gower's presence in her house then symbolizes the imminent approach of this threat, and the impossibility of hiding in a safe space.

Kamboureli reads Old Man Gower's character as a representation of the Canadian society at that time, relating his threatening presence with the fear of the so-called "yellow peril" of Canadians in general (KAMBOURELI, 2000, p. 186). In this sense, war becomes also one of the external threats that enters Naomi's private space and disrupts it. The Canadian Government's attitude in taking Japanese and Japanese descendants from their houses is an emblematic gesture, and functions both literally and figuratively, since not only is the physical home lost, but also their sense of belonging. Through her experiences, Naomi develops an awareness of the conflict between individual self-awareness and the connection with a community and its cultural tradition. Naomi narrates a conversation with her Aunt Emily:

To people for whom community was the essence of life, destruction of community was the destruction of life, she [Aunt Emily] said. She described Nakayama-sensei as a deeply wounded shepherd trying to tend the flock in every way he could. But all the sheep were shorn and stampeded in the stockyards and slaughterhouses of prejudice (1981, p. 223).

This passage shows how racism and prejudice led Jaanese and Japanese-Canadians to deny their own traditional customs. When analyzing the classroom passage with Sigmund, Kamboureli describes how Naomi's self-awareness is defined many times through the racialization of her community (2000, p. 214). In her journey to self-knowledge, the awareness of the role the Japanese-Canadian community has in her formation as a subject becomes essential. The way her community was subjugated during the war becomes not only a reason for Naomi's sense of "otherness," but also a source of the political awareness her narrative ends up embodying. However, for her to achieve this political awareness, she has to find a voice of her own to do so. The quote in the epigraph above shows how the relation between the house and the outside influences Naomi's use of language. As long as she remains a child, however, she is "forever unable to speak" (1981, p. 291). While she remains entrapped in this in-between place, she will remain static, without a voice, her life interrupted by an eternal feeling of displacement.

Discussing the concept of identity in “late modern times,” Stuart Hall states:

[The “self”] accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation (1996, p. 4).

Hall points to how identities are influenced by several different forces and contexts and tend to assume a more “fractured” characteristic. In this sense, Naomi’s perception of her fragmented identity reflects her life in transit since in all places she has been and lived she experiences a dialogic relation between identity and space. Reconstructing spaces through memory becomes for Naomi an attempt to locate herself in the several movements of displacements.

The miniature

Above my bed with the powdery blue patchwork quilt is a picture of a little girl with a book in her lap, looking up into a tree where a bird sits. One of the child’s hands is half raised as she watches and listens, attending the bird. The picture is entirely in muted shades of green.

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The novel presents different ways of (re)constructing spaces: through memory, language, and history. Focusing on the child’s (re)construction, however, the novel points to different, and maybe even more primary, forms of relating oneself to the space around. For a child, home is her/his microcosm, her/his personal universe, which will eventually influence the shaping of the external world that will be met later on during a person’s adulthood. Apparently caught in this condition because of traumas experienced at that time (GOELLNICHT, 1989, p. 296), Naomi not only keeps the bad recollections, but also develops her capacity of imagining and magically building the world around her through the eyes of a child. Childish imagination and its constructive capacity in *Obasan* can be compared with the process of writing itself. The scene in which Stephen builds houses as he plays contrasts with Naomi’s (re)construction of her past through her imagination. The little girl in the quilt described in the quote above can be described as Naomi as a child. Her ability to hear attentively and to observe details is essential to her role as a narrator of the whole story, since it is only through her eyes and perception that the reader is aware of the facts that took place in the Nakanes’ household.

The scenes in which Naomi plays in the woods of Slocan are essential to the understanding of how space awareness functions in *Obasan*. In her reading of novels by Japanese-American women writers, Coral Ann Howells argues that the wilderness:

has provided a textual space for women writers’ exploration of female difference and a site of resistance to traditional structures of patriarchy and imperialism [...] Wilderness is the space outside ordered enclosures and so possesses all the doubleness of fascination and danger that being “off limits” connotes. Promises of freedom are linked to an awareness of transgression, for boundaries assume a new importance when they have to be crossed, and dislocation with its attendant doubleness of vision is always a feature of wilderness narratives (1986, p. 106-107).

In fact, it is in the wilderness that Naomi starts to have a more questioning attitude towards her own sense of space in the world. It is the first time that she is aware of “crossing boundaries” that “assume a new importance when they have to be crossed” (HOWELLS, 1986, p. 107). It is on the top of a bridge – a symbol of this crossing – that she feels for the first time a feeling of loss:

As we pass a wooden bridge over a creek, I think of the curved bridge over the goldfish pond at Obasan’s house, and the bridges Stephen and I made in the sand to the desolate sound of the sea, and the huge Lions’ Gate Bridge in Stanley Park, and the terrifying Capilano swinging bridge that trembled as we crossed it high up in the dangerous air. Perhaps it is because I first missed my doll while standing on this bridge that often in the evenings, when I cross it, I feel a certain sadness (1981, p. 141).

Here the symbolism that is attached to the bridge can be seen in relation to Naomi’s present state, which is marked by different but intertwined kinds of journeys. The first journey is the physical one. Slocan is the first place to which the character has moved after the Canadian government takes their house in Vancouver. Naomi starts at this point to see traces of what is familiar to her in those strange woods. The bridge is a sign of cross-over and connection between two different sides, and the fact that she loses her doll there becomes meaningful. The symbolism here does not stop with the bridge, for the doll itself says a great deal about Naomi’s own internal journey. Even before the Japanese expulsion, she already gives the reader hints of her maturing process. When she arrives at Slocan she is not a little child anymore, even though these identity concepts seem to blur in the character’s mind. “Secretly,” the narrator states, “I realize I am more fortunate than Stephen because I am younger and will therefore be a child for a longer time. That we must grow up is an unavoidable sadness” (1981, p. 67). This reflection comes when, as a child, Naomi hears her mother telling the traditional Japanese tale of Momotaro, the boy who is “golden and round as a peach” (1981, p. 67), and is adopted by an old couple, who loves him and takes care of him. She likes to hear her mother telling this story, but is bothered when Momotaro leaves home. In fact, Momotaro himself has to grow up, and in order for him to do that he must leave the comfort of home and go through his own personal journey. In this way, for Naomi, to be attached to her childhood becomes a way of not losing home. However, as she eventually recognizes, “grow[ing] up is an unavoidable sadness” (1981, p. 67).

During her years living in the woods, Naomi starts for the first time to locate herself in the world, building her own notions of space and learning how to experience it. When she goes out to play with Kenji, an interesting event takes place. Naomi describes the sand village near the lake: “There are twig chimneys, twig bridges, twig people, one plump twig dog with three legs and no head” (1981, p.170). The miniature city is a (re)constructed representation of space, which will become one of the major topics of the conversation between Naomi and Rough Lock Bill, a native man that lives in the woods of Slocan. The (re)construction of the miniature in the sand is meaningful, since the sand, with its symbolism of transitoriness, will also become the space in which Naomi tries to communicate with Rough Loch Bill. When asked about her name, it is in the sand that she writes: NAOMI. It is then that the native decides to make a map on the sand, in which he draws three hills and a “well,” which, according to him, should be the lake that runs across the mountains (1981, p. 172). The scene that follows explores the issue of representation: the miniature woods, Naomi’s name, and the story behind the word “Slocan” are all representations that are questioned, for, as Rough Loch Bill believes, names are empty of meanings unless the meaning is given to them. He says: “Birds could all talk once. Bird language. Now all they can say is their

own names. That's all. Can't say any more than their names. Just like some people. Specially in the city, eh? Me, me, me" (1981, p. 173). Names alone mean nothing, what really matters is what they represent. That is why he tells her the story of the word "Slocan." By retelling the myth regarding the word, he gives significance to it and invites her to do the same with her own name. What is "Naomi", and what does it represent? Why should that be enough for somebody to know her? Does she want to be known? Does she even know what her name mean or who, in fact, she is? "Without the discursive power of language," argues Goellnicht, "there can be no communication, no knowing, no identity, no self as a linguistically constituted subject" (1989, p. 296). He sees Rough Lock Bill as a foil to the silencing figure of Old Man Gower. According to him: "the written word appears as necessary to ensure self-preservation, and, significantly, Naomi inscribes her name, if only in the temporary medium of sand, as a means of overcoming her silence when she encounters Bill" (1989, p. 296). Both her identity and her sense of self are still drifting, and will continue to do so unless she realizes both concepts are not stable, but depend on several external forces. As Rough Lock Bill stresses, names do not necessarily point to an identity, unless there is a history (in this case her/story) attached to it.

When exploring the child's discovering of space, Tuan points to the importance and the role of language when it comes to the understanding of how to locate oneself in the world. This "possibility of location," however, becomes to the child much more than a geographical position, it becomes the relation between the child's growing sense of self and his/her relation to the world:

As soon as the child is able to speak with some fluency, he wants to know the name of things. Things are not quite real until they acquire names and can be classified in some way. Curiosity about places is part of a general curiosity about things, part of the need to label experiences so that they have a greater degree of permanence and fit into some conceptual scheme. According to Gesell, at two or two and a half the child comprehends "where." He has no clear image of the intervening space between here and there, but he acquires a sense of place and security when his "where?" is answered by "home", "office", or "big building" (1977, p. 29).

Giving names to things and experiences increases the feeling of permanence and stability, things that lack in Naomi's life. Her reluctance to name things should then be questioned. As a child, it should be a natural process of self-preservation, but she constantly refuses or is not able to do so. She cannot respond to the basic question Tuan raises, the question of "where?", and, most importantly, nobody gives her an answer, refusing to offer her a "sense of place and security" (TUAN, 1977, p. 29).

After Rough Lock Bill is gone, Kenji invites Naomi to climb into a raft with him, but she is too afraid of the water. However, after some insistence she decides to go and this decision leads her to a crossroad. As the raft distances itself from the shore, Kenji is able to swim back, but Naomi is stuck because of her fear of water, which is "sharply dark and the bottom no longer visible" (1981, p. 175). The fear of the unknown appears again, and her resistance to jump can be seen as a metaphor for her incapacity of immersing into her own traumas, and of finding the meaning to those questions raised before. Suddenly she is lost in the middle of the lake, with nothing but dark water surrounding her. How can she find her way? She has to jump in order not to be lost in the middle of the lake, but she nearly drowns after doing so. The fact that she is saved by Rough Lock Bill reinforces his image of a kind of spiritual and geographic guide, helping Naomi locate herself in the world, define her own notions of space, and understand her sense of belonging and of selfhood.

Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes

All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery. Our attics and living rooms encroach on each other, deep into their invisible places.

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When following Obasan to a sudden visit to the attic in the middle of night, Naomi finds the starting point to her mental traveling to the past (KRUK, 1999, p. 84). While Obasan looks for a mysterious item, they find several other family objects: grandfather Nakane's canvas, that "he brought when he came to [that] country" (1981, p. 28), Uncle's ID card, magazines from the fifties, among other things. The dust she sees in all these objects makes her think about time and her own relation with the past: "Everything, I suppose, turns to dust eventually. A man's memories end up in some attic or in a Salvation Army bin" (1981, p. 30). Bachelard uses the wardrobe image to discuss the poetics of objects. According to him "[i]n the wardrobe there exists a center of order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder [...] Order is not merely geometrical; it can also remember the family history" (1969, p. 79). In this sense, objects act as triggers to Naomi's recollections. Not only photographs – commonly related to memory –, but also daily objects are transformed into representatives of past times. A gray cardboard becomes of major importance in the novel, since it contains the answer to Naomi's question if her mother will ever return. In this sense, her relatives' keeping of secrets and her slowly unraveling of them will be central aspects in the story. In this quest, objects become not only symbols of the past and memory, but also a clue to Naomi's own understanding of her family's hidden history.

As Naomi later concludes, "[o]ur attics and living rooms encroach on each other" (1981, p. 30), that is, even though there is an apparent separation between the space each one occupies, they are intertwined just as the past and the present are. As Bachelard observes, the "casket contains the things that are *unforgettable*, unforgettable for us, but also unforgettable for those to whom we are going to give our treasures. Here the past, the present and a future are condensed" (1969, p. 84). Then, for Naomi, revisiting this attic becomes a revisiting of the past, of her memories. This episode turns that space into "a graveyard and a feasting ground combined" (1981, p. 29). The graveyard imagery is very important to Naomi's memory. When in the attic, Naomi sees the leftovers of a spider's meal, a "whole scene of carnage" (1981, p. 29; UEKI, 1993, p. 18). This metaphor of the spider refers to Naomi's reluctance in revisiting the past, since the dead leftovers of the spider's "banquet" can be seen as people's insistence on "feeding" themselves with the past and with the memories – or the "leftovers" of their own dead. Hence, for her, at this point, the dead should stay buried, and there is no reason to rejoice in their memories. However, as if caught in a spider web, she concludes that both she and Obasan are trapped in the past. This conclusion results from the sight of her mother's flowery patchwork quilt kept at the attic (1981, p. 30):

Like threads of old spiderwebs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and snare me in old and complex puzzles. Just a glimpse of a worn-out patchwork quilt and the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return? After all these years, I find myself wondering, but with the dullness of expecting no response (1981, p. 31).

This time, Naomi expects “no response,” as if not willing to see what has been hidden from her for all these years. As Ueki argues, this knowledge can be seen in a biblical sense as the loss of paradise (1993, p. 16). Secrets have been kept from her by her aunts and uncle in order to protect her and her brother Stephen. However, as Naomi sees herself stuck with past issues and traumas that will not let her move on, she is led to face these secrets that have created an illusion of safeness and stability for a long time. These family secrets recall what Homi Bhabha refers to as the “stirring of the unhomely” (1994, p. 18). According to him, the “unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (1994, p. 15). Thus, the attic passage in *Obasan* can be read as the eruption of this “unhomely” moment for Naomi. The disruption of her safe notions of home initiates not only the revelations of traumatic historical events, but also her political engagement in social matters related to the history of her community. The sadness brought by her recollections puts into question the gains and pains of remembering: “Everything is forgetfulness. The time of forgetting is now come” (1981, p. 36). *Obasan*’s words can be read in light of this question. Does she want to forget? Or does she resent “everything is forgetfulness”? In Naomi’s case, the memory of her mother represents the tragedy that hunts her and from which she runs away until finally she decides to confront it. The reconstruction of the maternal implies Naomi’s own project of (re)construction of the self. Even though these new discoveries about her family at first seem to make Naomi quite uneasy, they change drastically the way she conceives her past and eventually the way she reconstruct her idea of home and of her subjectivity. The imagery of a tree “root” which appears throughout the novel has a special symbolism for the main character. The passages in which the young Naomi sits on the roots of a dead tree in the middle of the prairie (1981, p. 244) can be seen as the child’s insistence on belonging to a space, a home, even in a sterile place. This root imagery, however, will take different meanings as the character undergoes revealing experiences along the story.

When analyzing a poem by Charles Cros, Bachelard states: “He who buries a treasure buries himself with it. A secret is a grave, and it is not for nothing that a man who can be trusted with a secret boasts that he is ‘like the grave’” (1969, p. 88). At the beginning, Naomi does not seem interested in “being like a grave,” so she uses the spider and graveyard metaphor as a way of saying that is wrong to “feed” on the dead. Stuck to the past, she realizes the need to question the safety of her past. The secrets that are exposed in this quest become necessary changes for her (re)construction of her sense of home and of her subjectivity. “I feel like a burglar as I read [Grandmother’s letter]”, says Naomi, “breaking into a private house only to discover it’s my childhood house filled with corners and rooms I’ve never seen” (1981, p. 95). By finally being able to see the “hidden corners” of her childhood home, Naomi seems at the end of the story aware of this need to create for herself a new idea of what home should be.

Nests

Could she, I wonder, come to live with me? I cannot imagine her more comfortable in any other house.

“This house,” *Obasan* says as if she has read my mind. “This body. Everything old.” The house is indeed old, as she is also old. Every home-made piece of furniture, each pot holder and paper doily is a link in her lifeline. She has preserved in shelves, in cupboards, under beds – a rubber ball. The items are endless. Every short stub pencil, every cornflakes box stuffed with paper bags and old letters is of her ordering. They rest in the corners like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory. This house is now her blood and bones.

Joy Kogawa

If Obasan's house has become "her blood and bones," as Naomi notices, where is Naomi's own self? Where did she build her life, which place gave her a shelter throughout her grief? Tuan states that:

The primary meaning of home is nurturing shelter. It is the one place in which we can openly and comfortably admit our frailty and our bodily needs. Home is devoted to the sustenance of the body. In the home we feed, wash, and rest; to it we go when we are tired and sick, that is, when we can no longer maintain a brave front before the world (1981, p. 154).

Repressing all those feelings that need to burst, Naomi sees herself having to play that "brave front" all the time. She gets fed, washed and all her basic needs taken care of, but does she really feel accepted? What about the other characters? Aunt Emily's political activism can be seen as a struggle for acceptance. Does that not mean she herself feel like an outsider? What about Stephen and his constant denial of Japanese culture? The only character that seems to accept her own condition, even though we do not hear much of her voice and can only read her acts, is Obasan. That is why when the war starts, she has shelter and a home to offer. Much of Obasan's knowledge comes from the fact that she keeps her sense of cultural identity, and that becomes a key element to build a nurturing shelter which defines home in the novel: "Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite personal details" (1981, p. 18). Here, the Japanese belief on elders as the main source of knowledge of a culture is reaffirmed, although Naomi recognizes that her hybrid cultural background makes it difficult for her to communicate with Obasan. Naomi, in fact, not only seems confused in relation to her sense of rootedness and identity, but she is also completely lost in the spaces through which she transits. In the following passage, she makes an intimate statement to the reader:

I am sometimes not certain whether it is a cluttered attic in which I sit, a waiting room, a tunnel, a train. There is no beginning and no end to the forest, or the dust storm, no edge from which to know where the clearing begins. Here, in this familiar density, beneath this cloak, within this carapace, is the longing within the darkness (1981, p. 131).

Despite the changes she has been through, Naomi still seems to be unable to locate herself, to know where things are. She seems displaced both in public and private spaces, and the only thing that brings familiarity is hiding from this scary world in the darkness of not knowing. This estrangement becomes even more disturbing to Naomi when, years after the war is over, she returns to Slocan, to the place where she used to live with many Japanese that were forced to leave their houses. When she arrives at the place, she does not find evidence that they were there once:

Where on the map or on the road was there any sign? Not a mark was left. All our huts had been removed long before the forest had returned to take over the clearings.[...] But the Slocan that we knew in the forties was no longer there, except for the small white community which had existed before we arrived and which watched us come with a mixture of curiosity and fear. Now, down on the shore of Slocan Lake, on the most beautiful part of the sandy beach, where we used to swim, there was a large new sawmill owned by someone who lived in New York (1981, p. 139).

Physical evidences of Naomi's past are erased, as are the past of all Japanese descents in Canadian history. Only the white community remains. The passage above shows the reconstruction of history through space. The owner of that space ("someone who lives in New York" [1981, p. 139]) can be compared with the writers of the "official" history, who erase what, according to them, should not be remembered. However, this historical site is shown as a much more complex subject, which resists the power of such attempts of erasure. By writing back, and telling her own experience of that space and of that history, Naomi will be capable of recreating them, redefining spaces and questioning the "truth" of history (GOELLNIGHT, 1989, p. 290). In *Obasan*, when Naomi says that "[t]his body of grief is not fit for human habitation. [...] The song of mourning is not a lifelong song" (1981, p. 295), she recognizes this need to move, both physically and mentally, for her to achieve finally some sense of freedom.

Shells

"Without moving, there is not eating," says Uncle to Naomi when she wonders what her frog will eat when the insects supply ends during winter (1981, p. 248). In this chapter, Naomi decides to take care of a wounded frog in which she sees the figure of her father, hoping that as in fairy tales, the frog might one day turn into her prince and father:

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 (1981, p. 247).

Naomi's choice of word in this passage is significant. She goes back to the house – Obasan and Uncle's house. However, what she builds for the frog she also calls home. Again, she constructs a home, but now using elements of nature, such as earth, stone, and water. For her, the frog seems safe, and in her mind, happy there. The image for her represents stability, so that when everything seems "strange and discomfiting," "only the frog remains unchanged" (1981, p. 248). After this day, Naomi starts feeding the frog insects, for its bad leg does not allow it to move around. The bad leg becomes a major motif in this chapter, for it makes it impossible for the frog to leave the home created by Naomi. It is stuck there, and even though she feeds it, one day that place will not have what it needs to survive. Moving is necessary, and that is what Uncle answers when she asks about the insects that disappear during winter. Eventually, the frog's leg heals and it also disappears when winter comes.

This passage can also be analyzed in relation to the subjectivity of the concept of home. What may symbolize home to Naomi does not apply to the frog/her father. These differences can also be read in terms of gender. While home for Naomi seems to be associated with stability and shelter, for the frog/father it means mobility and survival. When discussing Tony Bennett's definitions of home, Brydon comments on the gendered ideologies behind it:

Home seems always, however, to carry a strong emotive punch and to be both devalued and over-valued in ways that reflect the gendered values of a society. Home is fairly consistently both "devalued as limiting and confining," when

seen as a feminized zone in contrast to a male world of “risk and danger,” and simultaneously “sentimentally over-valued as a sequestered zone,” where male movement may find temporary rest and renewal (2007, p. 4).

Brydon shows how reading home in gendered terms can expose ideologies behind preconceived gender roles and dynamics. The “feminized zone,” like the shelter built by Naomi, represents confinement and stasis, while the frog’s need for change and her uncle’s statement evoke a supposedly male need for mobility. This connection explains why Stephen, Naomi’s brother, remains constantly traveling while Naomi sees herself in the position to take care of Obasan. Naomi’s growing awareness of this gendered situation, however, will change how she perceives her brother’s attitudes. Naomi starts to question repressive ideologies and preconceived ideas of home and blurs these gendered divisions of how to experience space.

A home defined by outside forces is often repressive and hostile. Bachelard remembers a house suggested by Michelet: “a house built by and for the body, taking form from the inside, like a shell, an intimacy that works physically” (1969, p. 101). This description brings to mind Naomi’s own perception of Obasan’s relation to her house: “this house now is her blood and bones” (1981, p. 18). What Naomi constructs throughout her narrative is an intimate house, a house “from the inside,” built by her and which will be able to shelter her constantly changing self.

Intimate immensity

The letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves.

Joy Kogawa

Obasan not only destabilizes the patriarchal language in function of the fluidity of what can be seen as a more feminine language, but also changes the preconceived gendered forms of experiencing space. In this sense, language, space, and gender become more clearly connected in the end of the novel, as Naomi seems to gain a higher understanding of her power of reading the landscape and her own self. The most representative space in the novel ends up being not any of the houses, but nature itself, and the spatial immensity and freedom it represents. The natural landscape seen both at the beginning and at the end of the novel seems to offer a dialogic relation with the intimate immensity Naomi builds and finally seems to achieve, when she sits at the coulee and smells “the sweet perfume in the air” (1981, p. 296). She is now able to see not only how the space influences her being, but how she herself influences the space around her.

Discussing Naomi’s constant comparison between the inner deeps of the grounds of the forest with her ancestors, Laurie Kruk refers to nature’s lifecycle, with its constant birth, growth and death. In this case, the tree becomes a symbol of Naomi’s mother, for it offers comfort and roots. The acceptance of this natural cycle is part of Naomi’s acceptance of her own losses (KRUK, 1999, p. 87). Following this line of thought, Kruk also associates the recurrent imagery of stone with Obasan’s role in the novel: “The stone, like Obasan, stands not only for silent suffering but also for attentiveness to faith, a faith which permits communication between living and dead” (1999, p.87). Adding to Kruk’s interpretation, another relation between the imagery of forest, tree and stone can be drawn. If Naomi’s ancestors are linked to the lifecycle of nature, and the tree stands for Naomi’s own feelings in relation to her mother, the stone is a permanent static element, unchangeable, always present, serving as a link between Naomi and nature, standing as the recipient of past, present, and future experiences

for Naomi and her kin. Both Uncle and Obasan represent the permanence of tradition, and become mythical figures (KRUK, 1999, p. 81). Like myths, they remain suspended in time, connecting the present with the past.

Similar to Naomi's visit to Obasan, Jung narrates in his recollections a visit he pays to his aunt:

In Stuttgart I paid a farewell visit to my aunt, Frau Reimer-Jung, whose husband was a psychiatrist. She was the daughter of my paternal grandfather's first marriage to Virginia de Lassaulx. She was an enchanting old lady with sparkling blue eyes and a vivacious temperament. She seemed to me immersed in a world of impalpable fantasies and of memories that refused to go home – the last breath of a vanishing, irrevocable past. This visit was a final farewell to the nostalgias of my childhood (1961, p. 11).

The image of an old lady trapped in her past causes the narrator to say goodbye to his own nostalgic feelings in relation to his early years. In a similar conclusion, Naomi decides it is best to say goodbye to this fearful and silent childhood of hers: "The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell" (1981, p. 291). Naomi, who used to be trapped between Obasan and Aunt Emily's different relation with discourse (UEKI, 1993, p. 6) now is able to surpass this duality: "Somewhere, between speech and hearing is a transmutation of sound" (1981, p. 295).

At the end, when the adult Naomi refers to her mother as the dead tree and herself as a branch, she seems able to recognize the necessity to act differently in relation to the past "wearing Emily's protective coat implies Naomi's new determination to don the language of Aunt Emily to commit herself to transmitting the legacy of history" (UEKI, 1993, p.19) and stop grieving: "I beg that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs may learn to dance. But you [Mother] stay in a black-and-white photograph, smiling your yasashi smile" (1981, p. 291). The dead tree with its dead roots can still be a sign of rootedness, as the black-and-white photograph of Mother's smile will remain forever the same, but no life can come out of it anymore. Neither the tree, nor the photograph, nor the past will be able to provide Naomi with the change she needs. As a branch of the tree/mother, Naomi now sees herself in the need of a continuation, but a continuation through change. Friedman states that:

A poetics of dislocation may begin for some in recognizing "home" as *no place* they want to be, as a place where the heart may be, but a place that must be left, as a place whose leaving is the source of speech and writing. Fragments of each place remain as locations to which memories are attached, out of which identities are formed (2004, p. 205).

For Naomi, this recognition comes at this moment, when, after seeing the static and unchangeable image of her Mother's photograph, she decides it is time for her to change. From this change comes Naomi's voice as a way of exposing history and creating some type of political awareness. It is then that the symbolic image of the root appears again in more positive shapes. When in the coulee prairie with her uncle, Naomi thinks of her fingers as roots: "I am part of this small forest. Like the grass I search the earth and the sky with a thin but persistent thirst" (1981, p. 4). In this passage, Naomi seems to feel a sense of belonging to the space surrounding her. The significance of the fingers tracing this connection can be related to the act of writing, which will be essential to Naomi's "talking cure," to her continuation through change, and to her possibility of (re)constructing her ancestors' stories.

The novel then ends with questionings similar to those Brydon makes in relation to contemporary diaspora studies. In her opinion “the temptation of diaspora studies may be to privilege mourning over losses above the need for new beginnings. Finding an appropriate balance between the demands of the dead and the living remains a challenge that may be best negotiated through literature” (2007, p. 7). This is exactly the situation in which Naomi finds herself at the end of story, having to find a place between the story of her dead ancestors and her present. It is almost as if Kogawa’s novel were able to foresee such issues raised much later by Brydon. Both of them hint that it is through literature, through writing, that the diasporic experience can be best explored, discussed, and above all healed.

The dialectics of outside and inside

To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalencies and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity.

Homi Bhabha

The need to build a house, from the inside, like a shell (BACHELARD, 1969, p. 101), demands first an understanding of the outside forces that will act upon this house. If the shell is a shelter, it is necessary to know from what it protects people. The dialectics of the outside and inside, the public and the private are significant in the process of building the house and the subject, for the transformation does not happens at the extremities, but in their points of intersection:

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an “in-between” temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history (BHABHA, 1994, p. 19).

For Bhabha, home is “measured” by these in-between spaces that create possibilities of being, of existing. In *Obasan*, extremes show to be equally limiting. For Naomi, it is not enough to use her voice to insist on the dichotomy of “us” and “them”. This would lead her back to the entrapment of a “collective and true” cultural identity (HALL, 1996, p. 4). The knowledge of the Japanese-Canadian’s history becomes part of Naomi’s self awareness, but as the novel develops Naomi seems to achieve a much broader perception of existence. It is the now of time and here of space that constantly work in the construction of the subject. Home is both nowhere and now here (BODEN, 1994 apud FRIEDMAN, 2004, p. 192).

As Naomi’s perception changes, she becomes what Bhabha refers to as the subject “inhabit[ing] the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (1994, p. 19). “And the inscription of this borderline existence,” he continues, “inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive image at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world” (1994, p. 19). In the end, Naomi does not see herself standing in the middle of a bridge anymore. She herself becomes a bridge between past, present and future.

Naomi’s final message of love does not refer only to her ancestors but it also appeals to a sense of global harmony. According to Diana Brydon, what calls her attention to literary texts when it comes to diaspora studies is their capacity to create “affective responses” and in this “imagine new ways of being at home” (2007, p. 5). As Bhabha argues, to live in the “unhomely world” and to see

its “ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction [...] is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity” (1994, p. 27). In this sense, *Obasan* points to the impossibility of sometimes choosing sides. When it happens, it is important to see the world’s ambiguities and how enriching they can be when one builds “new ways of being at home”. As Naomi learns the importance of being present “here,” she is not attached to the past or to only imagining the future anymore. She realizes that one is always being shaped in relation to the space and the time into which one is inserted. In this way, spatial dislocation can be, as in Naomi’s case, an act of self-knowledge. This “talking cure” brought by language and poetry is probably the reason why in the end, the dead roots become alive again, through which love flows by her dead relatives’ graves (1981, p.292). She goes beyond a “narrative of origins and subjectivities [...] to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of [...] differences” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 2). Hence, memory and language become Naomi’s major tools to rebuild her dislocations through intimate spaces and to acquire a sense of self in the world. Like the healed frog in winter, she also needs to overcome her wounds and move to a new concept of home, an idea which encompasses the complexities of a female subject like Naomi, with multiple attachments and always in transit.

Os espaços do poético em *Obasan*, de Joy Kogawa

ABSTRACT:

This paper analyzes the relation between space and the female subjects’ formation in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*. This relation, such as it is presented in the novel, offers a basis for questioning concepts such as “identity” and “home,” which that more and more become problematized in the present new global configuration and the increasing flux of people and information throughout the globe. Being at the same time in the position of a diasporic, racialized and gendered subject, Naomi, born in Canada from Japanese immigrant parents, sees the need to conciliate multiple identities.

Keywords: Diaspora. Identities. Gender. Space. Writing.

Notas explicativas

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