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**The Language of Redress:
The Memory of the Internment in
Japanese American and Canadian Literature**

Belo Horizonte

Faculdade de Letras

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

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by

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Abstract

This thesis is a comparative reading of the novels *No-No Boy* and *Obasan*, written respectively by the American author John Okada and the Canadian poet and novelist Joy Kogawa, both of Japanese descent. These novels discuss the Japanese American and Canadian internments during World War II. The object is to analyze how these two novels both reflect and contribute to making the collective and cultural memory of these groups by discussing the effects of the internment during the war and afterwards. First, I discuss concepts such as *collective memory*, a domain made up of individual memories which binds and determines them, and *cultural memory*, a set of cultural manifestations chosen as symbols of the memory of groups, be they nations or minorities. After that, I discuss how literature, more specifically prose fiction, can deal with memories by allowing different points of view and giving voice to individuals who might otherwise find no other means of expression. Based on that, I analyze how *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* use fiction to address the sequels of the internment by presenting characters that were directly affected by it. The narratives allow Japanese Americans and Canadians to present their views of the events, question the prejudices they faced and the “military necessity” alleged by the authorities, as well as to show their effort to be recognized as what they already considered themselves to be, Americans and Canadians in culture and loyalty. Okada's and Kogawa's narratives interfere directly with media and government discourses of the time by quoting and refuting them in order to bring to light the truth about the reasons of the internment and to humanize our knowledge of the its consequences. In this way, *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* contribute to the collective memory of Japanese Americans and Canadians and to our understanding of the struggle of ethnic minorities in the United States and Canada.

Key words: Japanese American, collective memory, trauma, redress

Resumo

Esta dissertação faz uma leitura comparada dos romances *No-No Boy* e *Obasan*, escritos respectivamente pelo norte-americano John Okada e pela canadense Joy Kogawa, ambos de descendência japonesa. Essas obras discutem o internamento da população nipo-descendente nos Estados Unidos e Canadá durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial. O objetivo é analisar como os dois romances refletem e contribuem para a construção da memória coletiva e cultural das comunidades nipônicas americana e canadense ao discutir os efeitos do internamento durante a guerra e após. Primeiramente, discutem-se conceitos como *memória coletiva*, um domínio que ao mesmo tempo é composto de memórias individuais e determina estas, e *memória cultural*, manifestações culturais eleitas como símbolos da memória coletiva dos grupos, sejam essas nações ou minorias. Em seguida, discute-se como a literatura, mais especificamente a narrativa ficcional, tem a capacidade de lidar com memórias ao permitir diversos pontos de vista e dar voz àqueles que não teriam outro canal de expressão. Com base nessa discussão, analisa-se como *No-No Boy* e *Obasan* usam a ficção para tratar das sequelas do internamento, usando para isso personagens diretamente afetados. As narrativas permitem aos nipo-americanos e canadenses apresentar a sua versão dos acontecimentos, questionar os preconceitos que sofriram e a “necessidade militar” alegada pelas autoridades, além de mostrarem o esforço dos nipo-descendentes, enquanto uma minoria étnica, para serem reconhecidos como aquilo que se consideravam, americanos e canadenses em cultura e lealdade. As narrativas de Okada e Kogawa interferem diretamente com os discursos midiáticos e governamentais da época, que são citados e refutados, para trazer à tona a verdade sobre os motivos do internamento e humanizar nosso conhecimento de suas consequências. Desta forma, *No-No Boy* e *Obasan* contribuem para a memória coletiva dos nipo-americanos e canadenses e para o entendimento das dificuldades enfrentadas por minorias étnicas nos EUA e Canadá.

Palavras-chave: Japanese American, collective memory, trauma, redress

Chapter 1: Introduction

I've heard it said that the Japanese are "one big tribe." Well, I don't know about that (...), I do know this much: Wherever, whenever we may meet, or simply encounter one another, there is something in the air between us, a "spark of recognition" that might be termed a "tribal connection."

Lawson Inada, *Legends from Camp*.

Hardly anyone would point out Asians as one of the major influences in the making of American culture alongside Europeans and Africans. Asians did not help define the United States in terms of history, religion, customs or politics, yet Japanese Americans today stand out as a "model minority" (Fugita and O'Brien 89) in the United States due to their success in becoming prosperous, educated citizens. Though the label is subject to criticism, it stands on solid evidence: Japanese Americans' statistics concerning their standard of living – education, work, marriage etc. – in the last decades have been satisfactory, and at times above average (84), which shows they have become full members of mainstream American society. But it was not always like this. Up until the end of World War II, the Nikkei – Japanese immigrants and their descendants – in America faced several hardships on their way to achieving their present status, the biggest of them having been the wartime internment, when virtually their every asset and every right were lost to Order 9066, signed by President Roosevelt in 1941. The internment, or incarceration, changed the dynamics of Japanese American and Japanese Canadian life dramatically and gave rise to a whole body of literature based on this unprecedented episode. This literature includes socio-historical accounts, memoirs, poetry, and fiction. These works discuss how a whole community paid the price for the fact that their original country, or of their ancestors, was waging

war on the country where they had chosen to live, with an emphasis on the postwar effects of the so-called “camp experience.”

The objective of this thesis is to analyze two of the works written by Japanese Americans and Canadians, who suffered similar treatment as described above, and discuss their place in the history and culture of their group. The works selected are novels, so the main concern of my analysis will be the role of narrative and the overlapping of fiction with fact, a crucial element in that literature. Sources for background information will shed light on allusions, references, and the depiction of the customs and concerns of the Japanese ethnic communities. The formal construction of these fictional narratives will be closely studied and the conclusions will hopefully show why these works constitute an important part of the Japanese heritage in North America. Through a combination of experience and imagination, the novels *No-No Boy*, by John Okada, and *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa, can be considered representatives of Japanese American and Canadian memory, works where reflection and understanding are possible not only because they help keep this memory, but also because they help redress the issues caused by the incarceration. Memory, therefore, stands out as both a concern and a method in these novels, and it is my focus in this thesis to show it. In this Introduction, I will provide a summary of the history of Japanese immigration to the United States and Canada for two reasons: first, to situate the literature that derived from it; second, because it will help clarify some points of the analysis, when reference to events and cultural aspects will be necessary. Following that, I provide a review of major publications about the Japanese ethnic experience in the US and Canada and the critical reception of both *No-No Boy* and *Obasan*.

The period of massive immigration from Japan to the United States was from 1885 to 1924, when the Immigration Exclusion Act ended it. Stephen Fugita and David O'Brien explain that this short window of entry made for “distinctive experiences of the first, second, and third generations” (15), which are respectively named Issei, Nisei, and Sansei. Another reason for such

distinctiveness is arguably the dynamics of the Japanese ethnic communities outside Japan, which was, especially for the early generations, determined by a set of cultural and legal restrictions. The vast majority of immigrants settled initially in Hawaii and then on the West Coast mainland, especially California. Most of these early immigrants planned their stay in America to be temporary, at least no longer than needed to save enough money to be well off in Japan, the so-called *sojourner's* mentality (11). According to Fugita and O'Brien, a key factor explaining the differences between Japanese immigration from those of other nationalities is that by the late nineteenth century the Japanese possessed a strong sense of peoplehood that loomed larger than regional identification. Their country had been a unified nation for centuries, unlike several European countries that sent waves of immigrants to America, so the Japanese had more facility in organizing self-supporting communities overseas, besides having close support from the Japanese government. Several other factors helped define their situation in America, such as not knowing English, the collectivistic nature of Asian societies, and the obvious lack of resemblance with the main ethnic component. The Japanese tended to form enclaves with intense organized activity: associations, Japanese-language newspapers and schools, religious temples, trade unions, and commercial establishments. Outside, this led to a general perception that the Japanese "were from such a different culture that they could never adopt American ways" (Hayashi 1), a misconception that would later influence the decision to incarcerate them.

The early immigrants worked mostly as hired labor force in big plantations or in their own small businesses using unpaid family labor, a strategy that yielded good crops at smaller cost, but displeased white competitors. Over the years, the Japanese would see legal restrictions imposed on their activity in the US, especially the Issei (first generation), who, to start with, were ineligible for citizenship. Fugita and O'Brien write that a bill passed in 1913 in California "prohibited the Issei from owning or leasing land, being corporation shareholders, or acting as guardians for minors owning or leasing land" (24). The solution was to look for loopholes in the

law or simply strengthen mutual trust within the group and with friendly outsiders. The second generation Nisei, who were looking for opportunities outside the ethnic community, often had to give up that pursuit to help run the family business as their parents needed help. Because of these circumstances, the laws against Japanese Americans only helped strengthen the general misconception about their inability to assimilate.

The US government started planning actions against the Japanese and other enemy minorities, such as the Italians and the Germans, before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The attack itself must have confirmed to many Americans their suspicions about the Japanese in their soil. The ethnic community felt betrayed and afraid of the consequences they could suffer. The phrase “once a Jap, always a Jap,” a staple of anti-Japanese propaganda, shows that the government deliberately used the misconception that race determines culture and loyalty to spread intolerance against all things Japanese, including American-born descendants. Hayashi claims the authorities “arrested a disproportionate number of Japanese Americans” (77) in relation to their total numbers and those of other ethnic groups and that Japanese Americans were arrested admittedly “on far slimmer evidence than German Americans” (77). Besides, assets were impounded (76) and freedom of speech curtailed (78) in the effort to dismantle the possibility of espionage. Eventually, “military necessity” led Washington to remove the entire Nikkei population from their homes into what were termed “assembly centers,” “relocation facilities” or, “internment camps,” hence commonly just “camp.” There were altogether ten camps located in California, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, Arkansas, and Utah. Fugita and O’Brien write, “No Japanese American was ever convicted of committing a single act of espionage or sabotage” (1) before or during internment, and Hayashi corroborates by adding that sociologists working in the camps knew Japanese Americans were loyal to the United States (9). The internment was seen as an opportunity to “know the enemy” and to have a sort of advantage in negotiations with the Japanese Empire (xiii).

In spite of how they were treated, the internees cooperated with the authorities by living relatively peacefully, serving bravely in the European front, and working in the US intelligence, a job that was described as having “saved a million lives and shortened the war by two years” (65). When the war ended, they were released to resume their lives, but not without huge losses and a significant change in their dynamics. After the internment, the Issei lost much of their leadership within the ethnic community (74) because they had to start over and because camp authorities had assigned most leadership positions inside the camps to the Nisei. This policy was meant precisely to decrease the power of the first generation aliens and secure the loyalty of the American-born generation. Slowly, Japanese Americans rebuilt their communities and made their way into mainstream society. Though they were more dispersed after the war, the network uniting them remained strong, so in the 1970s they started pressing for redress to their losses. In 1988, the redress movement was rewarded with the Civil Liberties Act, a formal apology from President Ronald Reagan plus monetary compensation for individuals incarcerated.

The history of Japanese Canadians is similar to that of their American counterparts. The first Japanese immigrants arrived in Canada in 1877 (Oiwa 9). The vast majority settled in British Columbia, where they “soon became an essential part of the fishing, mining, and lumber industries” (9). As their numbers increased, so did the resentment among whites and curtailment of civil rights for the Japanese (11). After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Canadian government took decisive measures to restrict the activities of Japanese Canadians, such as confiscation of property and registration under a special commission (12). Men were arrested and forced to join labor groups. The authorities then relocated the entire Japanese Canadian population to poorly improvised internment facilities in British Columbia and other places. They were forbidden to return to their homes or settle anywhere in British Columbia until 1949, by which time many were still living in similar conditions as they were during the internment. Because of this policy, the Japanese Canadian community was dispersed and its recovery was much slower than that of

Japanese Americans. For this reason, Oiwa argues that the Japanese Canadian internment was worse than the American one, with the government of Prime Minister McKenzie King having “allowed the destruction of pre-war Nikkei society” (14). As in the United States, the Canadian Nikkei achieved governmental redress in 1988.

Many of the issues pointed out in this brief summary will appear in the two novels selected, particularly in relation to the effects of the incarceration on individuals and to how they deal with them. Therefore, the specific objectives of my analysis are to discuss how *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* use language to redress the issues caused by that experience, especially through the voices of those who suffered losses and traumas. *No-No Boy* presents a young man who had his family torn apart by the evacuation and then was sent to federal prison for refusing draft. In *Obasan*, we follow the memories of a Nisei woman who was only a child during the Canadian internment. She and her older brother are left under the care of their granduncle and aunt while the harsh conditions in camp and the catastrophic end of the war shatter the rest of her family. In order to sort out their thoughts and come to terms with their present, the characters in Okada’s and Kogawa’s novels need to revisit the past, so I will argue that memory is the major driving force of both narratives, both as it takes place in the characters’ minds, thus influencing their actions, and as it relates to history. The results will allow me to claim that these literary works can contribute, in their own way, to build the memory and identity of Japanese Americans and Canadians.

Methodology

The following question will guide the analysis to be developed: how can literature, more specifically prose fiction, contribute with the specificities of its discourse to our understanding of the Japanese American and Canadian experience and be an important part of it? From the theoretical sources I will use concepts such as narrative, individual and collective memory, fiction,

history, and group identity. I will also resort to existing criticism of the two novels to know how it either supports or disagrees with the perspective proposed here. Finally, I will discuss the results of the analysis in relation to the current position of these theories, as well as studies on literatures of minorities and human rights.

The relation between experience and memory is evident from philosophical inquiry from Ancient Greece to our times. Aristotle, in *On Memory and Reminiscence*, writes that memory “is a function of the primary faculty of sense-perception” (Part 1§4), the senses being our channels to understand the world. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson corroborate by arguing that, “The ability to recover memories, in fact, depends upon the material body” (57), thus underscoring the empirical character of memory. They also maintain that what we understand as experience is “already an interpretation of the past” (24) because it depends on one’s retention power and how one manipulates them with language, another crucial element in what we understand as memory. Discussing feminist thought on experience as a category, Ernst Van Alphen concludes that discourse is not separate from experience as a means to express it; instead, discourse is the pool in which all experience and memory is contained. Van Alphen adds that “experience of an event or history is dependent on the terms the symbolic order offers” (27), in other words, through language we transpose living through something into making it an experience. We can conclude, then, that though memory is initially an individual, subjective act, it takes place within a shared background. Experience as interpretation is a key concept for understanding *No-No Boy* and *Obasan*, and I will show that this concept relates not only to the major events that the characters witness – the politics and war – but also to the small details of individual perception related to their politically charged present.

For Aristotle, reminiscence, or willful remembering, requires a certain logical sequence, either causal or chronological, through which memories are best recalled to mind (Part 2 §7). In other words, memory is the effort of organizing and understanding images (*phantasmata*). *No-No*

Boy and *Obasan* interweave two levels of memory: the first lies in the characters' efforts to deal with their issues by tracing back the origins of their suffering to where they stand at present; the second can be considered the overall achievement of these works, namely how they acquire a higher significance as fictional yet trustworthy representations of the struggles of Japanese Americans and Canadians. More than depicting this memory, these novels become part of it themselves.

Both *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* concern themselves with something as old as humanity and something as recent as postmodernism. The first is the simple need to tell a story, the need to be aware of whatever one wishes to convey. By telling about an incident or a series of events, is able to manipulate them with a certain amount of freedom even if that telling is one point of view among many. This, according to Hayden White, is the primary function of narration, "to translate *knowing* into *telling*" (5), in other words, to tell a story in order to make sense of experiences by reviving and organizing them, a process strictly related to rhetoric when it takes place in writing because it involves relations of cause and effect, among others. In Henry James's words in "The Art of Fiction," writing involves "[t]he power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern" (172), an essential ability for the writer. White contends that narrative is a universal through which "transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted" (6). This means that nearly anyone can partake in narrative, whether producing or receiving it, regardless of the cultural boundaries separating the two ends. This relates to the authors' experience writing books, especially in a contemporary world where many cultural barriers have fallen, but in Okada's and Kogawa's novels it also relates to the plots because what the characters are trying to achieve greatly depends on their capacity to narrate what they have been through. We could perhaps call this a twofold "translation" effort, in White's above-mentioned terms, because both the author and the characters and engaged in a similar task.

The second shared concern of *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* lies in their close relationship with history. As literary works that resulted from a specific event, and having been written by persons involved in it, *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* merge fiction and fact indissolubly. They are novels, but the way they interact with their historical backgrounds has an important role that takes place even on the language level. *No-No Boy* places great emphasis on psychologically representing the reactions of its protagonist in his postwar environment; *Obasan* does the same and includes excerpts from real wartime texts, which are confronted or illuminated by the narrator's subjective/poetic stance. To help understand this relationship we might think of Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction: Hutcheon writes that postmodern fiction blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, boundaries that, she reminds us, were only established as late as the nineteenth century (105). Historiographic metafiction is characterized by "intense self-consciousness" (113) of how it relativizes and deconstructs pivotal concepts. By doing this, it seeks to expose "the multiplicity of truth(s)" (108) underlying conceptual constructs like genre, gender, race, and history, among others. Based on this knowledge, one can consider Okada's and Kogawa's novels historiographic metafiction, a claim that Goellnicht has made for *Obasan* in his article "Minority History as Metafiction." Goellnicht argues that more than merely providing a mimetic account of events, Kogawa "problematizes the very act of reconstructing history by comparing it to the process of writing fiction" (287). That is to say, the two categories are merged by the essential features they share, the linguistic conventions of narrative, and ultimately their goals, to analyze events and their circumstances. It follows that the same would happen if it were the opposite, that is, fiction in comparison to the process of writing history.

Aristotle famously wrote in his *Poetics* (Section 1 Part 9) that poetry is superior to history because while the latter only deals with the real world, things that have actually happened, the former has no such limitations and therefore can embrace the whole of human experience, real and imaginary. Aristotle is known for his urge to describe and categorize, but when it comes to

literature it would be closer to the truth to say that history and poetry have been involved in such a complex exchange that they have often reached the point of inseparability. Many historical records are known today to be highly inaccurate and even fanciful, whereas many works of fiction are painstakingly accurate in describing their historical backgrounds. Having freed itself from the stylistic constraints of other genres, the novel, Ian Watt tells us, became the genre in which “truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses” (12). In other words, novels are explorations of individuals and their experiences, unique visions of the world, precious in their own right but not claiming to contain a universal truth.

Awareness of these relations will allow readers to understand how they come together in *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* to create vibrant, complex fictional narratives that occupy significant positions in contemporary American and Canadian literature.

Literature Review

Literature about Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians can be divided into scholarly works and memoirs, besides fiction, poetry, and drama. One finds a considerable number of works approaching the internment itself, particularly in the USA, but not as many covering the whole Nikkei experience in North America from the arrival of the first Issei to the fourth or fifth generations. One of the few works that focus on this topic is Stephen Fugita and David O’Brien’s short but comprehensive account entitled *The Japanese American Experience* (1991). Fugita and O’Brien explain the historic circumstances that led the Japanese to emigrate – growing urbanization and price of land among the main reasons – and why they chose the United States. They point out factors that made the Japanese immigration unique at the time. One of them is the claim that the Japanese were among the most homogenous peoples in the world in terms of language and politics: they spoke the same language and had been a unified nation for centuries (4), which was not the case of other countries sending emigrants to America, such as Italy and

Germany. This strong sense of peoplehood meant that the Japanese immigrants saw themselves as equals and in need to support each other in their enterprise. The Japanese government assisted the early emigrants by supervising immigration contracts and standing up against abuses and violations (12). The immigrant's capacity to organize themselves in groups of political, religious or other natures is also mentioned as a unique feature stemming from their national experience, but it was also due to the fact they were often forbidden to join non-Japanese associations, such as labor unions (84). About the internment, Fugita and O'Brien assert that no act of disloyalty was found among the Japanese to justify mass removal (1).

In the chapter discussing the postwar situation of Japanese Americans, the authors distinguish between the effort of the children of immigrants to adopt the customs of the host society, namely *cultural assimilation* or *acculturation*, and the effort of an immigrant group to interact with the rest of society on equal terms, *structural assimilation* (83). Fugita and O'Brien describe the assimilation of Japanese Americans as highly successful because of factors like their focus on groups instead of individuals, their willingness to adopt outside customs and practices at the expense of their own as long as this is considered advantageous, and the high levels of education of the Nisei and Sansei, which helped them get good jobs after the collapse of the Issei-dominated ethnic economy.

Fugita and O'Brien also wrote *Japanese American Ethnicity: The Persistence of Community* (1994), which discusses the Japanese immigration to the USA in light of established concepts of identity and assimilation. While it contains much of the same information presented in *The Japanese American Experience*, it also provides sociological data on topics such as education, economy, marriage, and participation in politics, which they collected or compiled from other sources. One of the main points the authors address is how Japanese Americans have managed to retain their ethnic culture while assimilating into the mainstream of American society. For this, they discuss three main approaches to how and why minority groups lose or retain their ethnicity:

the *assimilationist perspective*, the *structural perspective*, and the *emergent ethnicity perspective*. The first approach holds that ethnicity and assimilation are incompatible: once assimilation occurs, ethnicity will supersede as if it were an inferior stage to the modern Western way of life. The second approach holds that assimilation depends on whether the host society is willing to accept the ethnic minority; if that is the case, assimilation will occur and ethnicity will wear off. The third approach holds that ethnicity is not a fixed condition brought from the original culture, but an ongoing process involving “adaptive responses and ethnic identifications whose specific cultural content will change as the ethnic groups faces different structural exigencies” (21). In other words, ethnic identification can increase or decrease because of the interaction with the mainstream culture. Fugita and O’Brien argue that assimilation and retention ought not to be seen as opposite phenomena. Instead, they use Jeffrey Reitz’s theory that ethnicity can persist in spite of assimilation in two ways: a sense of belonging in an ethnic group without involvement with actual entities, called “psychic” identification; and actual social interaction, in which members of an ethnic group interrelate and thus keep the practice of ethnic culture alive (23). While many ethnic segments of the American population retain a psychic membership, Japanese Americans retain group interaction as well, which makes them a persistent ethnic minority in America. In their two books, Fugita and O’Brien stress the fact that the Japanese started out under heavy restrictions, like other minorities, but managed to reach the living standards as white Americans without losing their ethnic identity.

A more recent book dealing with the Japanese American internment is Brian Masaru Hayashi’s *Democratizing the Enemy* (2004). Hayashi sets out to elucidate the politics behind the decision to evacuate 120,000 individuals to internment camps and how this experience was related to similar experiences taking place outside the USA. Hayashi argues at the beginning against the misconception that race determines loyalty. The belief in race as a determining factor in human behavior had been debunked in the American academia years before the internment.

Hayashi mentions anthropologist Franz Boas, among others, as one of the main scholars responsible for showing that loyalty derives from education and culture (2). Sociologists working in the camps shared that belief and, therefore, knew that the overwhelming majority of the internees were loyal to the United States, which proved the “military necessity” argument false. Instead, reasons such as “need for hostages, the harsh treatment of Japanese residents by other Allied governments, and the West Coast’s vulnerability to commando raids” (xiii), besides racism, led to mass incarceration. Before the removal of Japanese Americans started, several restrictive measures had already been put into effect: freedom of speech and movement were curtailed, assets were frozen, and individuals considered dangerous were arrested (77). Many Japanese Americans saw the camps as an inevitable result of the war while others even saw them as safety from the growing demonstrations of anti-Japanese sentiment, which occasionally resulted in deaths (86). Hayashi reviews the literature produced by sociologists who worked in the camps to reinforce what was already known, that the majority of Japanese Americans were loyal citizens of the United States. He argues that many acts of disloyalty were due not to real patriotism toward Japan, but to the anger of individuals who were raised to democratic principles and were then discriminated against and deprived of their livelihoods (4). The book also provides a detailed account of how camp life was structured – the interaction between the relocation authorities and the internees’ own organizations – how the internment camps affected those living around them, and how the “lessons” from the camp experience were used outside the United States.

The similar Canadian internment experience is depicted in *Stone Voices: Wartime Writings of Japanese Canadian Issei* (1991). Edited by Keibo Oiwa and with a foreword by Joy Kogawa, *Stone Voices* is a compilation of prewar and wartime accounts by four Issei, written in Japanese and discovered after decades in obscurity. According to Oiwa, “accounts of what the persecuted themselves felt, thought, wished to do, and actually did or failed to do” are hard to come by (15), so he gathered writings of Issei men and women expressing different reactions to the ordeals

they went through, including those of a man who makes clear that he supports Japan and would rather be a “beautiful prisoner” than fight his own country. By translating and publishing these writings, Oiwa and the History Committee of the Japanese Cultural Centre of Montreal rescue part of the Japanese Canadian memory that might otherwise be lost forever.

N. Rochelle Yamagishi does a comparable work in *Japanese Canadian Journey: The Nakagama Story* (2010), which merges history with the life story of Ryutaro Nakagama, a young Japanese immigrant who, unlike many of his fellows, went to Canada to stay and became an executive in Alberta. Nakagama’s story helps illustrate the history the author narrates and pays homage to one of the most prominent members of the Japanese Canadian community in Alberta. Yamagishi’s merit lies in the attention she pays to the Issei, where they came from in Japan, the circumstances that led to their emigrating, their families’ expectations and how they organized according to their trade in Canada. She explains that the government of Canada made no request for emigration of Japanese persons to the government of Japan, so private contractors undertook most of the immigration process. Also worthy of mention is the account of how the Japanese internees were received and treated in Alberta during the war, where they were needed to labor in the beet fields – as Kogawa depicts in *Obasan* – but rejected in the cities, where people saw their supposed incapacity to assimilate as a threat. Mr. Nakagama was the first Japanese to obtain permission to settle in an Albertan town, Lethbridge, where he opened a food supply business to cater for the Japanese scattered in the farms about the town. Slowly, more Japanese started moving into Alberta. Like Fugita and O’Brien, Yamagishi emphasizes that the Japanese are a persistent people because of their resilience, diligence, and need to remain together and achieve their goals collectively.

The scholarly and biographical works about the Nikkei provide different and, in many ways, complementary information and viewpoints. Surveys present formal data collected through careful research about facts and groups, which allows conclusions like Fugita and O’Brien’s

regarding how Japanese American assimilation took place. Autobiographies and memoirs, on the other hand, present real stories of individuals that show what they really went through and how they faced hardships and overcame them. Jinqi Ling explains the abundance of autobiographical writing about the internment in terms of reception: “it was the only commercially publishable form available” (361) in the 1950s and 1960s, when Asian Americans began to build a literature of their own. Books like *Stone Voices*, *Japanese American Journey*, and several others corroborate the results of research and correct misconceptions about the ethnic Japanese, especially those spread during the war in the anti-Japanese hysteria that preceded the evacuation. They also give voice to a minority group that was particularly discriminated from its arrival in North America and was harmfully involved in an unprecedented event in American and Canadian histories. Given these reasons, these works cannot be ignored by anyone studying the history and literature of Japanese Americans and Canadians: they must be seen as sources of valuable information.

“That Tiny Bit of America”

To understand *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* as well as their critical reception, readers must be aware of how the ideas discussed by the books mentioned above appear in the novels. For example, most articles about *No-No Boy* mention the allusion in the title, namely the 1943 loyalty questionnaire containing the two questions that Ichiro Yamada, Okada’s protagonist, answered no to, respectively if the internee would forswear allegiance to Japan and pledge allegiance to the United States, and if the internee would fight in the United States’ army if called. Failure to comply with both requests meant not only prison, but also a stigma to be borne later in the Japanese American community, that of a no-no boy, shameful deserter. For Dorothy McDonald, writing in the late 1970s, when *No-No Boy* was rediscovered, “It is difficult to see it as a shameful, treasonous act that most Japanese Americans thought it to be” (19). First, it should be noted that the novel does not portray the majority of the Japanese American community reproaching Ichiro,

but mostly the World War II veterans, who did not want their good record to be sullied by the presence of no-no boys. We can see that the naturalness in McDonald's reaction only highlights a situation that the novel itself exposes in the preface, and which is probably common to all war: what to fight for. In the preface, a separate anecdote from the main narrative, a Nisei soldier explains to a white lieutenant the circumstances in which he joined the army and insists, in spite of the lieutenant's surprise, that he had his reasons to fight. The Nisei soldier's reasons are more urgent and sensitive than his superior's: while the former is fighting to release his family and secure them respect when the war ends, the "giant blond from Nebraska" (x) is fighting for fabricated ideals of freedom and country that are not so easy to grasp. Besides, the very presence of a Nisei fellow disrupts those ideas even further, for he is Japanese – the enemy race – and the story of how the government uprooted his community startles the white American, who believes he is fighting for a country that does not do that sort of thing to its people.

One key aspect that criticism has not explained satisfactorily yet is to what extent Ichiro's refusal is an act of defiance stemming from his sense of injustice and to what extent he is merely obeying his mother, the most problematic person in his life. It is not clear whether his refusal was the result of both or purely Ichiro's choice, which he later tries to blame on his mother to alleviate his remorse. The novel portrays the crucial moment when the conscientious Nisei spoke to a judge about their double negatives, and there is no doubt that they are angry for being disenfranchised and confined in the desert. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that much of Ichiro's conflicts involve his mother's controlling posture before and after the war, which he holds responsible for his failure. Bryn Gribben takes a psychoanalytic approach to Ichiro and his mother's troubled relationship and situates their conflict in a nationwide climate of exacerbated chauvinism triggered by the wars in the 1950s. In that environment, mothers were accused of spoiling their sons in a supposed cultural flaw that was named *Momism*. Here, politics and cultural differences come into play: mothers are central figures in traditional Japanese families, which are

often extended, that is, children live with their spouses in their parents' household. Mrs. Yamada raises her sons according to Japanese customs because she expects to return to Japan one day, as most Issei did up to a certain point. Besides, in Asian societies individual failure is considered shameful to the entire group one belongs to, so Mrs. Yamada believes she must be active in guaranteeing her sons' success. With the start of the war, she finds it even more imperative to control Ichiro's and Taro's actions to avoid their being used by the enemy. Eventually, maternal love disappears entirely in Mrs. Yamada and that creates a lack that affects her family, as I will discuss later. Daniel Y. Kim also explores the psychoanalytic connections in Okada. He corroborates Gribben's argument on the role of *Momism* in the mother/son conflict and analyzes the loss of masculinity and exchange of gender roles in Ichiro's family. He argues that loyalty to the United States was associated to manhood, so Ichiro's failure to join the army was, as he saw it, harmful to his male identity, particularly because he gave in to his mother's commands to refuse. This conflict takes place in a context of "emasculatation and feminization of Asian American men" (69), a topic that Shirley Geok-Lin Lim also discusses in her analysis of *Obasan*.

Finally, Floyd Cheung and Bill Peterson analyze the novel according to the life-story model of identity developed by the psychologist Dan McAdams. Cheung and Peterson define it as a pattern containing "four major components: ideological setting, nuclear episodes, imagoes, and generativity scripts" (192). Ideological setting is "the backdrop for the emergence of an individual's life story" (192), nuclear episodes are "key moments in a person's life" (193), imagoes are "the dramatis personae of our individual dramas" (194), and generativity scripts are "the unwritten chapters of an individual's life story." From Ichiro's initial state of being "psychologically lost" (197), Cheung and Peterson use McAdams's scheme to provide an insight into the psychological complexities influencing *No-No Boy's* plot: the authors identify the nuclear episodes and opposing imagoes in Ichiro's psyche, namely his American and Japanese sides, or more specifically, his duty as an American against the reasons that made him say no. By

discussing and comparing the major characters based on the four components above, Cheung and Peterson explains how Ichiro reconstructs his identity and reconciles Japanese and American once again.

The politics of race is the recurrent topic in *No-No Boy* criticism. Although it had no recognition in Okada's day, *No-No Boy* (1957) stands today as an insightful work of fiction when it comes to understanding race conflicts in the mid twentieth century in the United States, particularly the case of Asian Americans. Its importance has been acknowledged since its rediscovery in the 1970s and, as Ling notes, *No-No Boy* has been included in anthologies of American literature as a work that helped open the American canon to writers of ethnic backgrounds. (359). Relying on Homi Bhabha's theory of nationalism and minority writing, Appolo Amoko explains that *nation* is a concept that comes alive through narratives that include the elements desired by those in power and excludes those elements that are not, including race: "The process of national homogenization necessarily elides historical, social and cultural differences among the peoples of the nation" (§2). In this light, minority narratives can be read as alternative sources that oppose nationalist rhetoric. *No-No Boy* does that by depicting the postwar struggles of a group that was temporarily elided from the American nation in a moment of political pressure and a nationalist rhetoric heavily based on race. Stan Yogi points to the exclusionary patterns of Americanness in the mid-1940s and 1950s as one of the major causes of the Japanese American plight. He argues that the term *American*, instead of indicating nationality, "took on extreme racial tones during the war" (64), thus marginalizing segments of the population such as Asian Americans. Kim also explains how American politics dictated race and gender norms at the time. With the end of World War II and the growth of the so-called communist threat, American ideals of culture were increasingly restricted to a white, heterosexual, middle-class image. Those who did not conform to that pattern were more likely to be considered political subversives (66). This partly explains why Japanese Americans were mass

incarcerated and German Americans or Italian Americans, for example, were not, as well as why racial struggles kept mounting even after the war.

Autobiography is another relevant aspect that *No-No Boy* criticism has often discussed. Most fiction written by Japanese Americans and Canadians is autobiographical to some degree, but Okada's case presents the question of why a veteran chose to write about a no-no boy: why not write about the brave Nisei soldier who earned recognition for Japanese America instead of the draft resister who sat out the war in a prison cell? According to one source, Okada got inspiration for Ichiro Yamada from a real no-no boy met and interviewed (§5), but besides Okada's story there is little information on how Japanese Americans really saw and treated no-no boys, except maybe the hint of the novel's poor reception and obscurity until the 1970s. Okada shows that no-no boys were harassed by veterans and ill regarded as a dirty secret that Japanese Americans would rather keep away from the country lest they lost their newly acquired status as model minority. The publication of a novel about this delicate topic can, therefore, be seen as an act of defiance that Okada was in the position to make. According to Ling, the fact that Okada was a veteran gave him "implicit license to deal with the no-no boy issue" (362), which is probably true although it did not change the fate his book had. McDonald suggests that the author appears in the novel's preface as the Nisei soldier, "patterned after himself" (19), talking to the white lieutenant. The logic behind this association is understandable due to the critical tone of the preface, which may sound like the author's own critique of the situation he is describing, but the problem is that the soldier's strongest reason to fight is that he would not want to be in prison like his no-no friend. He does not seem to sympathize with the draft resister, but the same is not true of Okada, as his novel shows. In summary, attempts to locate Okada in the novel do not succeed, but autobiographical readings shed light on the circumstances of the novel's conception and reception as well as Okada's position as a pioneering Japanese American novelist who was, in a way, ahead of his time.

Form is a side of *No-No Boy* that criticism has explored little so far, which is surprising since, I will argue, form is crucial to understanding the novel. Viewpoint, register, dialogue, and other devices come together to make *No-No Boy* a unique work of fiction. In a 1980 review, Gordon Hirabayashi points that *No-No Boy* was frowned upon for its “bad English,” meaning the realist depiction of the idiolect of youths, rude street talk, and, of course, the broken English of the Issei. Okada does indeed have no qualms about using bad language to reflect the way people in that milieu talk and what they talk about: racism, street dealings, brawls, even prostitution, make their way into the dialogues. Language is another reason why his book was rejected for many years: the tiny corner of America, as Ichiro calls the Japanese American community, was given an unedited, unflattering picture in a time of tension and struggle for acceptance in the mainstream. Joseph Entin corroborates that by asserting that *No-No Boy* contradicts the positive views that white America had of the Japanese as a particularly successful ethnic minority (86), which, as Amoko points out, “required the effacement of the experience of the Japanese American interment” (§21), or a premeditated forgetting of the past for the sake of a better present.

Entin contends that *No-No Boy* is, in many ways, a work of noir literature, as is evidenced by the presence of elements such as “hidden secrets, dark deeds, and social estrangement to convey the psychic torment Ichiro suffers” (86). As a reflection of racial anxieties afflicting the United States up until the 1950s, noir underlies Okada’s narrative, lending a tone of pessimism and gloom to a novel that might otherwise be read as a praise of America’s diversity. The noir atmosphere comes alive through the “bad English” discussed above and creates a picture of Japanese American communities living in the disordered margins of society, but Entin argues that Okada uses that image to disclose the “deep-seated, warping forms of psychic and physical injury wrought by prejudice against Japanese American individuals and communities” (92). In other

words, Okada subverts noir from a traditional form of white assertion into a denunciation of the powerless condition of ethnic minorities victimized by that assertion.

Because it is centered on Ichiro Yamada, a 25-year old Nisei just released from prison, *No-No Boy* has been called a novel about the experiences of a young man coming of age, or a *Bildungsroman* (Gribben 31, Yogi 63). Although this is a suitable description, it should be noted that *No-No Boy* does not have the conclusive ending to the protagonist's search that is typical of this kind of novel; instead, the ending leaves Ichiro's future, and by extension the future of the Japanese American community and the country, open to different interpretations. Before I discuss the implications of the ending any further, I will pay attention to the language of *No-No Boy* in detail in the coming section of this thesis. By doing so, I hope to help cover the gap criticism has left so far. My objective is to explain how this language addresses the issues of the internment, such as trauma and loss of identity, and how it contributes to building the memory of Japanese Americans.

“Undemanding as Dew”

Kogawa criticism has discussed the relation between the past portrayed in *Obasan* and the present concerns with acknowledging the role of minorities in multicultural Canada. In this relation, the way Naomi's story is developed is central as it creates an alternative version of history that is “doubly revealing” because told by “a doubly marginalized subject: a Japanese Canadian woman” (Goellnicht 288). This claim holds true not only because *Obasan's* main character and narrator is a woman from an ethnic minority, but also because she was a child during the internment, so the inaccessibility of her knowledge is caused by her age, her incapacity to fully understand what she went through and, consequently, her traumas. Lim agrees with Goellnicht on the “double” marginal status of race and gender and asserts that *Obasan* “announces the emergence of a group of writers” (309), to wit women writers of Asian descent.

Lim's only fault is that she refers to Kogawa and *Obasan* as Japanese American. This might be caused by her attempt to encompass writers from both the United States and Canada, but, according to Guy Beauregard, this tendency overlooks the differences between the American and Canadian internments as well as the space Nikkei writers have in each country's literary scenarios (9).

According to Eva Karpinski, *Obasan* "has been credited with changing the Canadian literary canon, facilitating a practice of multicultural pedagogy and bridging the gap between writing and political activism" (46). Pedagogy is a key term standing out in *Obasan* criticism. One initial reason is that, quoting Goellnicht, *Obasan* is the "first full-scale" (5) novel about the internment itself – as opposed to *No-No Boy*, which is about the immediate postwar. Three decades later after its publication, it remains arguably the strongest both because of its poetic brilliance and because it is pedagogical: it contains basic information about the Japanese Canadian internment and controversial points about the wartime measures of the Canadian government, all presented in language that combines realistic responses and embeds real texts of the time for support, such as news and documents. Due to these pedagogical features, *Obasan* has been taught widely in secondary and higher education courses (Beauregard 5, Goellnicht 5, Karpinski 48, Lefebvre 155).

Another reason for *Obasan*'s prominence in Canadian minority writing is the combination of pioneering Japanese Canadian work and remarkable literary achievement. Beauregard argues that, because of those two characteristics, *Obasan* became the epicenter of an effort in Canadian criticism to "address a 'racist past' in a 'multicultural present'" (6). What this means, in Beauregard's view, is that critics tend to see the Japanese Canadian internment as a separate act of hysteric racism in a country where, otherwise, discrimination of ethnic minorities had not happened before and does not happen now (10). Whereas other readings focus on the Japanese Canadian experience during World War II as an unprecedented injustice Canada committed to its

own people, Beauregard argues that *Obasan* shows how ethnic minorities are still racIALIZED thirty years after the internment, which can be seen in how people treat Naomi as not Canadian.

Comparing the narrative structures of *No-No Boy* and *Obasan*, Amoko draws on Julia Kristeva's notion of "women's time" as a "double temporality, at once linear and recursive" (§32), as opposed to "man's time," strictly linear. Amoko points out that *Obasan* "unfolds within a double temporality in which scattered incidents from the past are superimposed onto the chronological unfolding of the present." While I disagree that most incidents in the novel are scattered, since they help us understand why Naomi the adult is the way she is, it is true that the narrative's power lies in looking back on the past with the critical stance of the present. This happens with both Naomi and Aunt Emily: the latter struggles to see justice done, the former tells us about tragic experiences she would rather not discuss. In Helena Grice's words, "Naomi's time is informal, mental time whereas Aunt Emily's papers represent a measured and formalized temporality" (95). Through this process of revisiting the past in private and public ways, Kogawa has built a narrative that appropriates history and illuminates dark spots in it. Goellnicht claims that Kogawa's "writing of history from the other side" (290) can be called a historiographic metafiction after Linda Hutcheon's theory. He reminds us of the self-conscious nature of metafictions, their design to interfere with historical records and not merely replicate them, and the reader's role in that process. Dee Horne counter argues that *Obasan* cannot be considered metafiction because it "is not linguistic, but based on empirical reality" or "not 'about' its own existence" (62). Instead, Horne calls *Obasan* a testimonial narrative, that is, one based on experience. While the latter definition seems suitable to me, I disagree that, because it is based on reality, *Obasan* cannot be considered "linguistic" in the sense that metafiction is: *Obasan* is a story about using language to knock down barriers of politics and trauma in which the characters are aware of how language affects them and how they can empower themselves with it. What is

more, what makes the narrative so poignant and pedagogic, as many critics have noted, is that it is crafted with lyric imagery and symbolism, which makes it self-conscious to a high degree.

Complementing Goellnicht's point on the role of the reader in historiographic metafiction, Karpinski argues that *Obasan* unsettles readers and "calls them "to recognize themselves as 'subjects of history'" (47). She argues further that *Obasan* serves as "an embattled contestatory site of different narratives of the nation's history." History is not a single monolithic discourse, but a myriad of discourses woven together and not necessarily agreeing with each other. This idea complements Amoko's argument, explained in the previous section, that nationalist narratives are often exclusionary to serve the interests of those in power. Multicultural studies try precisely to rescue excluded narratives and to incorporate them into the body of national texts.

Silence is the central motif in *Obasan* since it relates to the external circumstances discussed above and works as an opposing force to speech. The characters and the symbols are divided between those two, for example stone/water, Obasan/Aunt Emily, and East/West. According to Grice, Fujita, and Ueki analyze it, silence is as powerful a mode of communication as its opposite. Grice applies a theory of non-verbal forms of communication in her analysis of how Naomi understands people and situations around her. She argues that "Naomi learns how to read speech as throughout the novel she demonstrates her ability to read nonverbal communication" (94). As I will show later, that ability plays a crucial role at the end of the novel. Not only words, but sights, smells, touch, and even spatial configuration become forms of speech with important meanings filling in the novel's silence. This helps us understand Naomi's relationship with Aunt Emily, the very opposite of silence: because she is not so sensitive to the meanings of silence, Grice remarks accurately, Aunt Emily becomes an invasive presence for her niece (94) even if she eventually learns something from it.

Gayle K. Fujita also discusses silence as a mode of communication and describes it with the word “attendance,” which can be understood as “thoughtful silence,” also relevant in the Japanese culture. Since she was a child, Naomi had been a keen listener and observer. This can be seen when she remarks that it is the quiet children, not the talkative ones, that usually have problems. As her life is struck by several tragedies – rape, separation from mother, internment, father’s death and her guardians’ adamant silence – her keenness to attend almost turns into a physical incapacity to speak, “a sense of biological extinction” (36). Teruyo Ueki regards silence as a paradox grounded in Japanese rituals and aesthetic practices that conceal to enhance, the so-called “art of expression through subtraction” (5). Ueki explains that, from a Japanese perspective, silence can be “a positive force to bring about revelations” (6), so Naomi’s challenge is to learn to reconcile words and wordlessness. For Ueki, silence sets the major tone of the narrative (6), which matches Grice’s observation that “[t]he narrative is governed by Naomi’s memories” (97). While being the narrator means having control of speech, it is not the same as talking. By narrating her life, Naomi makes readers her witnesses, and though her story is fictional, it points to real stories that took place during the internment. In this way, the novel extrapolates the fictional realm to which it belongs and takes on an active role in the search for redress for Japanese Canadians. This extrapolation is enhanced through direct quotation of external sources, including an “Excerpt from the memorandum by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada, April 1946” (297), in which the government’s decisions to banish Japanese Canadians from British Columbia and to deport to Japan those who so wished – most of them being Canadian citizens despite their ethnic background – are vehemently attacked.

The topics discussed above are summarized in Chieko Irie Mulhern’s review published in 1982. “This is neither a nostalgic autobiography nor a shrill-voiced indictment of Canadian injustice” (171). Mulhern mentions autobiography because it is the genre in which most writing

about the internment took shape both in US and Canada (Ling 361). She acknowledges Kogawa's literary craft, the startling denunciation of the "inhumanity a modern state is capable of doing to its own people" (172) and clarifies, not long after the novel's publication, that the stories and characters in the novel were loosely based on real persons and experiences. She ends by asserting that *Obasan* "ought to be read and heeded, so that history can be prevented from repeating itself." This is what we certainly hope.

Chapter 2: Memory and the Language of Redress

Remember, remember the fifth of November
Gunpowder, treason, and plot
I see no reason why Gunpowder Treason
Should ever be forgot.

Thus go the popular lines that every English child knows about the failed assassination of King James I in 1605. Since then, the date has been remembered festively in England with bonfires and effigies of Guy Fawkes, the conspirator in charge of the exploding the Parliament and the king. At the peak of the celebrations, the ragged effigies are burned at the bonfires and the English subjects are reminded once again of the end the plotters had. But why remember at all, especially after four centuries? Did the memory grow spontaneously among the people or was it championed by those who found it interesting to keep it? A look at the context might help explain. In the early seventeenth century, England was still vulnerable to religious turmoil in spite Queen Elizabeth's strong defense of the Anglican Church and suppression of others. The ascension of James I meant that England would remain a Protestant country and Catholics a marginalized minority. After some of these Catholics were discovered attempting against James's life, Protestantism was strengthened and Catholics gained a reputation as being traitors, as Paul Yachnin (42) explains. We can assume that, to secure peace and loyalty, the English crown saw fit to sponsor the memory of the plot in the way they wanted it to be remembered, a treacherous attack on the monarch and his religion, major symbols of Englishness until today. After that, sermons were made on every fifth of November to remind and warn the subjects – John Donne composed one such sermon – and popular celebrations were probably encouraged throughout the kingdom, thus culminating in the verses above.

This episode of English history shows us that though memory is a free and complex phenomenon that can develop in multiple ways among people with different perceptions, it is can

also be constructed and perpetuated methodically. This duality has been the focus of intense debate in the last decades, mostly around the term *collective memory*. Jan Assmann defines it as “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that it obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (126). Collective memory, according to Susan Crane, is “a sense of the continuous presence of the past” (373) and differs from historical memory in that it is alive and creates a living bond with the past instead of just studying it. Similarly, Mieke Bal, in the introduction of *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, defines cultural memory as “an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously redescribed even as it continues to shape the future” (vii). Collective memory is said to depend on lived experience, but what is understood as such is debatable. For example, to what extent can contemporary Englishmen and women be said to *experience* the Gunpowder Plot four centuries later? Are today’s celebrations a bond between the past and the present, therefore an instance of collective memory?

Based on Crane’s and Bal’s reasoning, we can argue that such celebrations are collective memory, “an expression of historical consciousness that derives from individuals” (Crane 1381), so we can say that this consciousness can manifest after long lapses of time. This approach allows us to understand literature as one of these manifestations since it, too, is the product of an individual mind profoundly connected to historical circumstances. Such view finds support in Maurice Halbwachs’s influential book *The Collective Memory*. He illustrates how collective memory spreads beyond those with lived experience by arguing that a reader of Charles Dickens can partake in the memory of nineteenth century London contained in Dickens’s novels without having been there at that time (31). Resorting to his personal memories, Halbwachs writes that, when visiting London, it was as if he had taken a walk with Dickens and several other people whose mark he could identify in the city. He was able to immerse himself in the memory of that

place because he was conscious of the history behind specific locations and events. I believe a similar experience in collective memory is possible when one reads *No-No Boy* and *Obasan*.

Humankind has used devices to keep memories at hand since early times: the need and the ways to remember have been a major field of scholarship and a practice of societies for centuries, though at some periods they may have been considered less relevant. The Old Testament shows Noah, Abraham, and Moses building altars on specific sites where God commanded them so their people would remember the significance of those places. Even the verses on the Gunpowder Plot, silly though they are, show how memory is aided by industry: the rhymes “Remember” / “November” and “plot” / “forgot” are easy enough for a child to remember, and it is from childhood that citizens are best indoctrinated in the interests of their country. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “contexts are charged politically” (19), and so are the memories that arise in these contexts.

Literature is a privileged space for memory because of the rich possibilities it offers, including that of rewriting or expanding memory with fresh points of view. This has been a concern of literature for a long time. Whitehead explains that ancient epic poetry served as “a repository for cultural knowledge” (5), a medium in which a bard could record everything he found important about his people and culture. This could explain why most ancient civilizations have their epic poems, from India’s *Ramayana* to the Scandinavian sagas. Whitehead argues that besides using mnemonic techniques to facilitate memorization of poetry, a large part of the bard’s work composing – plot, style, rhetorical figures and so on – was related to his civic duty, so to speak, of “bringing the story into contact with current social conditions, preserving what was necessary for the present” (5), a role that was to remain important in future ages and include genres other than poetry.

Whitehead’s quote also describes neatly the relation of *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* with their own social conditions, which are part of broader contexts, namely World War II and the struggle

of minorities in North America, and yet are little known by the larger public. Interestingly, some of the most authoritative books to understand the Japanese ethnic experience in North America are memoirs and fiction, like Yoshiko Uchida's *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, a memoir published in 1982, and, of course, the novels *No-No Boy* in the United States and *Obasan* in Canada. In a 1978 review of *No-No Boy*, 21 years after its publication, Gordon Hirabayashi credited Okada with pioneering a "legitimate" Japanese American literature with "sensitivity and integrity" (177), which did not bring his book much recognition in the 1950s and early 1960s, when, according to Ling, Japanese Americans were trying to keep a low profile and the country was not in the right mood to discuss race (360). Perhaps because it was published much later, when the mood was set for talk, *Obasan* had better reception when it appeared in 1981, and today it features in The Literary Review of Canada lists Canada's most important books, where it is described as the novel that "stiffened" Canadians into watching their government's wrongdoings against its own citizens. *Obasan's* sequel *Itsuka* (1992) depicts the process of obtaining redress for Japanese Canadians, which will be discussed later.

For these reasons, it can be said that *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* are noteworthy literary works because of the relations they establish with contemporary fiction, memory studies, and cultural studies. By analyzing these relations, we can understand how these novels have helped carve out a place for ethnic writers in American and Canadian literature and how they help define the identity of Japanese Americans and Canadians today.

The effort to talk and let out restrained feelings can be followed closely in both novels. Both can be considered trauma narratives since they approach the issue of the failure of language to describe experience. Susan Brison argues, "[I]trauma victims are the objects of the perpetrators' speeches" and must try to find their own (39). This struggle can be perceived in both novels I will discuss, in which the traumatized individuals are constantly confronted by the speeches of others. *Obasan* is narrated in first person and *No-No Boy* consists mostly of free

indirect discourse and sometimes interior monologue. Both choices of viewpoint give readers the chance to know how the characters are reacting to the surrounding speeches more intimately. As the narratives progress, readers can notice that so do the protagonists Naomi and Ichiro in a certain way: by the end, both achieve something they lacked previously, a connection with their sense of self and belonging after the traumatic experience of camp.

Obasan

She is walking down thorny pathways of the past, picking up
forget-me-nots.

Joy Kogawa, *Itsuka*.

Obasan is the first-person story of Naomi Nakane, a single, middle-aged Nisei woman living in Cecil, a small town in Alberta, Canada. Her routine is interrupted by a phone call from Granton, a neighboring town, informing her that her elderly great-uncle Isamu Nakane has passed away. Naomi drives to Granton to meet the equally senile Ayako Nakane, called Obasan (Aunt), and wait for the rest of the family. There, Naomi reencounters things that make her remember her sorrow-stricken youth: her family had lived in Vancouver until the outbreak of war with Japan, when they were separated and sent to internment with the rest of Japanese Canadians. Her father dies from the harsh conditions of camp and her mother, who was in Japan at the time, never comes back, so she and her brother have to stay under the guard of their great-uncle and great-aunt Isamu and Ayako. This journey into Naomi's innermost memories is the main subject of Kogawa's novel, and it comes full circle with Naomi discovering what she had spent her whole life seeking to know, what happened to her mother.

The novel opens with a verse statement of its main motif, silence, and a proposal to deal with the issue of trauma and how to exorcize it. Kogawa's praised poetic language reflects the relation between history and memory for Japanese Canadians. It begins as follows:

There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams the sensate sea.

The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone. (i)

In Kogawa's imagery, nature predominates. Water symbolizes freedom, fluidity, and the ability to vent feelings through words and follow the course of life. On the other hand, stones symbolize silence, restrained feelings, and immobility. Kogawa compares the process taking place in her narrative, namely how her protagonist Naomi overcomes her traumas, to hail hitting the ground and melting into the underground: "If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word?" (i). It is a painful process that involves facing one's fears, but ultimately it heals. Kogawa believes people need external stimulus to better themselves, particularly when it comes to forgiving, as I will discuss later.

The symbolic imagery that runs through the narrative is deeply related to Naomi's and other Japanese Canadians' experiences. Chapter 1 opens with her and Uncle Sam in a coulee – a kind of valley typical of North American landscapes – that they visit every year in a sort of ritual. The wild prairie landscape has deep meanings for them: for Uncle Sam, a former fisherman and boat builder, the coulee's grass waving to the breeze is a reminder of the sea. Because Uncle Sam was never able to lay eyes on the sea again after the expulsion of Japanese Canadians from British Columbia, the coulee provides a soothing sight of a happier past. For Naomi, the effect is not so pleasant. As we find out later, she, her brother, their Uncle Sam and Obasan had lived and worked for some years in a similar place, and the harsh conditions she faced there as a child were

even more painful because she was away from her parents. This proves one of the hardest memories for Naomi to cope with even after such a long time. While they are there, Naomi has an insight about her uncle's resemblance to the legendary chief Sitting Bull because of uncle's "prairie-baked skin" and the "deep brown furrows" (2) on his face. Kogawa reminds us that these characters have an attachment to the land, almost as if they were its original inhabitants. When they leave, Naomi plucks a flower from the ground in a gesture that can be read as her need to use her own underground stream to blossom into words.

Naomi remembers that when they first visited the coulee, her uncle said she was too young (18 years old) to tell her something. Eighteen years later, she is still kept ignorant by Uncle Sam and Obasan, who, as they age, seem to have resolved to remain resolutely silent. This is where the stone imagery comes into play to illustrate Naomi's feelings. When she arrives at her old house, Naomi finds traces of the stony presence of the two elders. First, she sees what remains of her uncle's "stone bread," which he baked so hard she could not bite it. Naomi tells us that the black bread is "too big to be a bun but much smaller than regular 'store-bought' bread" (15), which suggests a stone-like shape. Because it looks fresh, Naomi wonders if cooking it was the last thing Uncle did, which is another important clue: bread symbolizes life, sharing, and the fact that Uncle Sam took care of Naomi and Stephen. On the other hand, the bread's hardness stands for Naomi's difficulty to deal with someone who refused to talk until death, someone who gave her an incomplete sharing experience. Naomi hints at her disappointment when she says that "if you can't even break it, it's not bread" (16), showing that she resented the lack of communication with Uncle Sam.

The next central figure in the topic of silence is Aunt Ayako Nakane, Obasan. Despite having raised Naomi when the girl's parents could not, Obasan can be said to have an ambiguous role in her niece's life, for Naomi had to learn the unspoken language of her guardians. As a symbolic clue, Obasan happens to have a peculiar health condition, clogged tear ducts, which makes it

literally impossible for her to cry. But that is not the only reason Obasan never cries: a series of personal tragedies and harsh circumstances slowly toughened her spirit. “The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, the silence within her small body has grown large and powerful” (17). Naomi tells us Obasan had two stillborn children and then gave up trying to be a mother and hid away her pain (22). In the Japanese culture, endurance is regarded as crucial to the welfare of the collective, but enduring becomes increasingly harder during the internment and after it.

While she waits for the others and keeps her aunt company, Naomi finds herself with plenty of time to reminisce. At this moment, we can see how *Obasan* reflects some major discussions on how memory is formed and maintained in the relationship of individuals to their backgrounds. One of the big issues in these discussions is the role of traces, things in the environment that activate individuals’ memories of specific events (Sutton 1.3 §2). Jeffrey Olick writes that memory is “cue-dependent” and “state-dependent” (340), that is, it can be triggered by these external factors. That is not to say, however, that the memories are contained in these traces. Instead, they are just reflections. In Naomi’s case, one of the strongest traces that set her recollecting is a photograph of her entire family, the Nakanes and the Katos. Photographies are important traces in *Obasan* because they provide glimpses of a life that is so distant that from Naomi’s present that, in Horne’s words, they “represent an unreality” (67). As Naomi looks at this precious memento, she is compelled to narrate her family’s history: her thoughts wander from the arrival of her ancestors in Canada in the late nineteenth century to how the two families were united through marriage, how the war affected their lives and up to the present day with Uncle Isamu’s death.

This is a chief moment in the novel because it shows that Naomi’s narrative progresses as she comes across several traces and sites. One could argue it is merely the way the novel is structured, a series of scattered episodes revisited (Amoko §32), but there is more to it: according

to Olick, memories are not simply stored whole and then retrieved; instead, they are always reconstructed from fragments in the brain (340). Remembering implies a narration effort that is never the same every time because individuals change and so does their environment. This gives them the chance to reinterpret their memories in ways they could not before, as Naomi does several times. “All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past” (30), she says. Now she understands, for example, that her family’s reservation at the outbreak of war – “Kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children ...” (26) – was an attempt to keep tranquility at home for her and Stephen.

A further example of this memory-driven narrative involves another family photograph found by Obasan. She hands the photo to Naomi saying “Mukashi, mukashi o-o mukashi” (65), in very ancient times, the traditional opening line of Japanese tales, as if, incapable of telling a story with words, she were doing it with the aid an image. The picture shows Naomi still a child posing with her family on a street corner in Vancouver, their hometown. Naomi starts by depicting the picture, naming who is to who and recalling that she felt “mortified by the attention” of a boy staring at her (55). Her bashfulness makes her wonder who taught her that staring at people’s eyes was disrespectful. Naomi retells her memories in the present tense, as the passage below shows:

My mother and I are on a streetcar. She boosts me up on the seat and I reach for the cord. We will be getting off soon. As I scramble down to the floor, I see a man sitting hunched forward, his elbows on his knees. He is looking around quizzically, one dark eyebrow higher than the other. When our eyes meet, he grins and winks. I turn away instantly, startled into discomfort again by eyes. (58)

The present tense gives Naomi’s memories a sense of proximity; it bridges past and present in the novel, thus corroborating the idea that memory is always recreated and Naomi’s belief that our stories are changed by the present, by our ability to look back with hindsight and find new

meanings. This is what Naomi does for the most part: she merges memory and reflection and, by doing that, she provides a critical view of the internment experience and a channel for her own issues to be sorted through.

By looking at Obasan's picture, Naomi revisits other critical moments of her life and reflects on how they affected her. The central person in her past is, of course, her mother, who was with her only for a few years. Naomi tells us that the strongest feeling her mother aroused in her was safety: she was always calm and firm whatever she was dealing with, her eyes never stared in anger or judgment or apprehension, but were always "steady and matter-of-fact – the eyes of Japanese motherhood" (71). Naomi's mother appears in a mildly traumatic episode: Naomi takes some recently purchased chicks and puts them in a cage with a hen. The hen charges and pecks some of them to death. Frightened, Naomi calls her mother and she rescues the chicks: "With swift deft fingers, Mother removes the live chicks first, placing them in her apron. All the while that she acts, there is calm efficiency in her face and she does not speak." This is the first time Naomi witnesses violence, apparently gratuitous violence, when she would expect the hen to treat the chicks with motherly affection. She also thinks it is her fault that the chicks are dead, but her mother's neutrality assures her she is not to blame:

"It was not good, was it?" Mother says. "Yoku nakatta ne." Three words. Good, negation of good in the past tense, agreement with statement. It is not a language that promotes hysteria. There is no blame or pity. I am not responsible. The hen is not responsible." (72)

This episode can also be read as an allegoric foreshadowing of how Naomi and others will be treated by their motherland. The chicks stand for Japanese Canadians and the hen for Canada itself, with the stereotypical colors yellow and white representing each. The chicks are small and vulnerable whereas the hen is big and in charge. Like the Japanese immigrants, the chicks arrive at a strange territory and eventually it proves hostile. This allegoric reading is not an accusation of

cruelty; instead, it agrees with Mother's neutrality: both the hen's attack and the incarceration are hard to accept by any standards, but nature and politics have reasons that justify them though one may never agree with them. This contradiction is shown in both *Obasan* and *No-No Boy*, in which the characters are compelled to feel grateful to those in power in spite of the ordeals they were subjected to.

Naomi's childhood memories show her as a shy, insecure girl who sought protection in her mother and other adults in her family. In the following episodes, we learn more about how she grew up to be the traumatized adult she is, particularly because of the way she was separated from her mother. This separation, as we will see, does not happen when her mother goes to Japan to visit relatives; it starts earlier in Naomi's psyche and is later completed with physical separation per se. The next episode she narrates is about how she was molested by a neighbor, Old Man Gower: "His belly is large and soft. His hair is thin and brown and the top of his head is a shiny skin cap. When he lifts me up in his arms, I smell something dank and unpleasant" (72). Predictably, the description of the molester's decadence hints at the decadence of his morals. Knowing he can easily manipulate Naomi, he traps her. She knows what he is doing is wrong and that her mother is not around to save her.

Naomi felt as if she were literally attached to her mother, "a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot" (77). After Old Man Gower's attack, she feels she was severed from her mother because she did not tell her anything. This is when her mother's presence starts to wane. Soon afterwards, physical separation occurs when mother and grandmother go to Japan to visit relatives. Naomi is five years old and she will never see her mother again. At first, she thinks it is her fault because she had severed the bond. From then on, her mother becomes an invisible presence shrouded in mystery. Years pass, the war is over, and still Uncle Isamu and Obasan deprive Naomi of the right to know her mother's fate. According to Lim, Naomi is trapped between her mother's and aunt's silences, which the novel's opening lines of the novel ("There is

a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak”) suggest. Lim argues that the former is Obasan’s whereas the latter is Mother’s (300), but I believe the opposite would be more accurate because Obasan is the one who refuses to speak, whereas Naomi’s mother is dead and, therefore, cannot speak.

To balance the weight of Obasan’s deadly silence, another character steps into the story to help Naomi blossom into words: Aunt Emily Kato, an activist for the rights of all those who were wronged. She introduces a stark contrast to the introspective tone of Naomi’s narrative. While Obasan believes, “The time of forgetting is now come” (35), Emily has as her personal motto the Biblical quote “Write the vision and make it plain” (Habakkuk 2:2), as if her quest for reparation for Japanese Canadians were a religious crusade. She is outspoken, restless, and well connected. Naomi calls her “a word warrior” (39), always ready for a fight whether this means attending conferences, taking an active role in organizations, or confronting prejudices of any kind. She knows that language can be manipulated to serve interests, as it was when the Canadian government named the internment camps “Interior Housing Projects.” But she also knows that with language she can seek justice to these crimes.

It is no surprise, then, that Aunt Emily’s appearance further underscores the importance of memory as recreation and reinterpretation. With her comes another precious object that helps propel the narrative. The morning after arriving at Obasan’s house, Naomi wakes up and finds a box containing papers from decades ago, all collected and kept by Aunt Emily, who had promised to send them. Out of the paper pile, one particular object calls Naomi’s attention: a diary dated from 1941, around the time when relocation began. It is as if the diary comes straight from the past to show Naomi what she does not know or remember about that period. The diary presents a more intimate side of Emily Kato, who is most of the time a public figure. Through her writings, we learn much about how Japanese Canadians reacted to their ordeal. Emily Kato is of course a fictional character, but her account should be seen as a representation based on

personal experiences of the author and other individuals. In Goellnicht's words, "the narrative ceases to be personal and becomes communal" (290) as it incorporates the collective memory of the Japanese Canadian internment.

In most of the diary entries, Emily addresses her older sister (Nesan), Naomi's mother, who is stranded in Japan and does not know what is happening at home. Naturally, Emily does not hope her sister will read the diary, at least not soon, but, by mentally talking to her, Emily can address her own anxieties and fears in writing, so in the end writing is more a sort of therapeutic exercise for herself than a way of keeping her sister posted. The following passage is an example of how this process happens:

Dearest Nesan,

I thought I would write to you every day, but, as you see, I haven't managed that. I felt so sad thinking about what the children are having to experience I didn't want to keep writing. But today I must tell you what's happening. (100)

Aunt Emily's diary embeds into the novel an account of the Japanese Canadian incarceration that is fictional, when she tells what is happening to her and her family, and partly based on facts.

With this combination, Kogawa gives readers an insight into what happened to the internees from an intimate and humane perspective. In Lim's words, "Kogawa's novel deliberately rewrites a body of communal stories ..., reweaving these old fibers into new cloths" (291). In these communal stories is the Japanese Canadians' sense of injustice at the fact that they received considerably worse treatment than did people of German or Italian ancestry. "I guess it's because we look different" (98), Emily writes. Race was, of course, one of the strongest factors determining the fate of the Japanese in both Canada and the United States. According to Hayashi, there was a tendency within the military and the government, unsupported by scientists working in the American camps, to associate the culture and loyalty of individuals to their race. Consequently, even Canadian-born and American-born persons of Japanese ancestry were

believed to be on Japan's side, which purportedly justified their internment (19). The government, moreover, flooded the media with anti-Japanese propaganda to inculcate fear and hatred in its citizens, as if the internment were a response to general sentiment and not a way of fueling it.

Obasan dramatizes this situation by depicting how Japanese Canadians suffer with the ordeals of the internment. Due to the amount of factual information contained Aunt Emily's diary, it could almost be read as separate from the plot, except Kogawa weaves that information together with her characters' stories. First, the community's economic viability collapses, then individuals start being relocated and the propaganda turns society against them. The children are particularly affected because they do not understand what is happening. Grandpa Nakane is forced to join labor groups and Uncle Isamu is "carted off" (100). In the meantime, the radio broadcasts racist messages like the infamous "Once a Jap, always a Jap" (99) that did not spare even the Japanese born and raised in Canada.

Gradually, Aunt Emily reveals more details of the incarceration in the several entries in her diary, so her writing can be seen as an alternative history that confronts the media reports and other sources cited in the novel. Among the measures taken, the authorities confiscate the fishing boats from Japanese fishermen, including Uncle Isamu's beautiful handcrafted ones, and give them to white fishermen. In the paranoia created over the fear of espionage, the authorities also confiscate radios and cameras, close down newspapers, and "search [their] homes without warrant" (102). She attacks the relocation authorities for moving the Japanese to precarious facilities and the press for not telling the truth about it: "The *Daily Province* reports that work on frames with tent coverings is progressing to house the 2,000 expected. Tent coverings where the snow is so deep?" (103). Although fictional, Aunt Emily's questions give us an idea of the hardships actual Japanese Canadian internees had to endure in the camps.

In short, Aunt Emily describes how a democratic nation used its apparatus to exclude and mistreat thousands of people for reasons related to their race. She quotes leading politicians of

the day to show how Canada's rulers were determined to obliterate the Japanese from their country – or at least to turn them into an invisible minority. Among those politicians is Ian McKenzie, quoted as having said, “These Japanese shall not come back here [British Columbia]” (112). The law is represented in the camps by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, one of Canada's most respected institutions. Aunt Emily accuses them of beating internees and “outraging” women (103). This is particularly painful because she used to be proud of Canada's symbols of democracy: “remember how I almost worshipped the Mounties? ... I'd go about saying their motto – *Maintiens le droit* – Maintain the right?” (118). For her, of course, what they are doing now is the opposite.

As time goes by, Aunt Emily's account becomes increasingly tenser: the relocation is closing in on her family and they are faced with tough choices. Eventually, she decides to head for Toronto with her father and Obasan takes Naomi and Stephen to Slocan, an abandoned mining town where the Japanese are settling down on authorities' orders. The last entry in the journal is May 21, 1942. From then on Naomi takes over as she can now tell what followed: “We are leaving the B.C. Coast – rain, cloud, mist – an air overladen with weeping. Behind us lies a salty sea within which swim our drowning specks of memory – our small waterlogged eulogies” (131). Naomi depicts the journey to her family's new residence with an emphasis on the sensory experience of relocating: she becomes the eyes and ears through which readers can witness the hardships Japanese Canadians went through, the general apprehension of not knowing what would happen, the discomfort of travelers deprived of their belongings and beloved ones, the sounds and smells of nature. These elements recreate vividly the discrete yet painful relocation of Japanese Canadians into the Canadian interior. As was discussed earlier, Naomi is as keen to meanings to be found in silence as she is to words, of which there were few.

This moment also shows the effort of Japanese Canadians to rebuild their communities, a moment that most historic records might never have known. The relocation to an old cabin in

the woods suggests a return to the state of nature, as if they had been expelled from society and left to their own luck. Thus, they needed to start again and remain united. As soon as Obasan jumps off the train, members of the new settlement meet her. First, a man helps her with her baggage. Then, when she arrives at her new home, Reverend Nakayama, who goes around making sure everybody is sufficiently comfortable, greets her. His dedication helps glue the people together once more, and he urges them to be resilient: ““while we breathe, we have gratitude”” (144). This illustrates the Japanese interactional style called *iemoto*, in which members of a group relate to each other in ““pseudo-kinship’ relationships” (Fugita and O’Brien 7) to assure mutual benefit. It can be seen in the friendly manner they call the man who offered help *ojisān* (uncle) and in Naomi’s observation that the reverend feels ““somehow responsible”” for their situation.

The following part covers the period Naomi spent in Slocan with her brother Stephen, Uncle and Obasan, from 1943 to 1945. By the end of this period, the evacuees have managed to turn the ghost town into a flourishing settlement, but the rewards are short-lived. The end of the war in 1945 brings little or no good change for the Japanese Canadians as it does for their American counterparts, who were allowed to return home. Instead, they are forced to be on the move again by the government’s policy to keep them ““east of the Rockies”” or to deport to Japan those who wish to leave. Slocan becomes a temporary residence for those who choose deportation, so Naomi’s family is told to relocate again, this time to a miserable cabin surrounded by beet crops in the prairies of Alberta.

At this point, the discourses of Aunt Emily and Naomi clash instead of complementing each other. The package with Emily’s newspaper clippings claims to contain ““Facts about evacuees in Alberta”” (231). The enclosed news, entitled ““Grinning and Happy,”” shows a family of Japanese Canadian farmers to represent the supposed achievement of other Japanese Canadians in Alberta, ““an important part in producing our all-time record crop of 363,000 tons

of beets” (232), which makes them “the most efficient beet workers.” Their overwhelming superiority gives them positive press at an opportune moment, but for Naomi the report misses the real experience of toil in the crops. While it shows Japanese Canadians’ good will, the story turns a blind eye on the fact that they worked in near slavery conditions, as she remembers doing:

... standing in the beet field under the maddening sun, standing with my black head a sun trap even though it’s covered, and lying down in the ditch, faint, and the nausea in waves and the cold sweat, and getting up and tackling the next row. The whole field is an oven and there’s not a tree within walking distance. We are tiny insects crawling along the grill and there is no protection anywhere. The eyes are lidded against the dust and the air cracks the skin, the lips crack, Stephen’s flutes crack and there is no energy to sing anymore anyway. (234)

Now what drives Naomi to revisit her memories is remorse at Aunt Emily for trying to sell her the supposed truth, for trying to find the underlying cause of what she did not know. While Aunt Emily relies on the cold decisions and figures of the Alberta experience, Naomi thinks nothing can make it worth the pain it caused her, neither the successful story narrated on the newspaper nor anything else. In those years, she had to endure physical and spiritual torment beyond her power to overcome, and she had to cope with the adults’ silence regarding her parents. Though she describes the experience in graphic detail, the point she is trying to make is that words cannot alter what has been done, which is the opposite of what Aunt Emily believes.

Naomi’s reaction shows that the experience was a traumatic one, hence her difficulty to talk about it. Susan Brison defines trauma as an event in which “a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening” (40). Besides the threat to life, trauma can also spring from an attack to one’s ethics or morality when one is unable to interfere, for example, when a person is forced to watch another suffer. According to Van Alphen, traumatic situations deprive the person of language because his/her subjectivity is overwhelmed to such an

extent that the perception of past, present and future is often damaged, so the traumatized person cannot narrate what he/she lived through (35). This explains why victims find it so hard to talk about their traumas and seem to live them as an eternal present. In Cathy Caruth's words, they "carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess." (5) Because of this impossibility, Van Alphen calls traumas failed experiences since language becomes the missing mediator that makes experiences what they are.

Naomi is aware of the weight of her traumas on the person she has become. She has developed "a sense of betrayal, a lack of self-esteem, a fear of the past, and a victim's acceptance of biological extinction" (Fujita 33) that shuts her off from deep contact with people because she is unable to open up. "If language shapes reality," Goellnicht argues, "then silence may amount to evasion and absence of reality" (294). This is the case when Naomi does use language in the position of narrator. As if to underscore the impossibility to speak, she seems to find eloquence in memory that is located in, and hurts, the body as well as the mind:

I mind the harvest time and the hands and the wrists bound in rags to keep the wrists from breaking open. I lift the heavy mud-clotted beets ... , thick and heavy as a nail attached to the top of the sugar-beet knife. Thwack. Into the beet and yank from the shoulder ... Then crack two beets together till most of the mud drops off and splat, the knife slices into the beet scalp and the green top is tossed into the pile, the beet heaved onto another (235)

Naomi's words cut her like the knife cuts the beets. Brison explains that traumatic memories are sensory more than chronologic, the reason they often remain long after the event. This self-infliction of pain, so to speak, might bring the narrative to a halt – "The body will not tell" (235) – and leave an unresolved opposition between Naomi's wordlessness and Emily's outspokenness. The last conflict in the plot pushes the narrative to an end when the people Naomi had been

waiting for arrive: her brother Stephen, Aunt Emily, and Reverend Nakayama. With them comes the resolution to the conflict in the shape of a letter that bears the knowledge she had pursued for so long.

At the end, the narrative's purpose as a means to release long-withheld feelings is fulfilled. The family gathers at Obasan's house while the rain outside signals that inside there will be an outpour of feelings. The rain hits the windowpanes just as hail hits the ground and melts, the metaphor used at the opening to illustrate how words can be painful at first, but nourishing later. Inside, the reverend notices a letter written in Japan a long time ago and finds that "there has been no telling," the contents of the letter were never conveyed to Naomi and Stephen in respect to their mother's wish. Like Aunt Emily and Naomi, Grandma Kato wrote to release what was too hard to talk about, and she apologizes as if breaking the silence were an offense in that situation: "For the burden of these words, forgive me." (283). Grandma Kato and Mother were in Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, when the US dropped an atomic bomb on that city and killed thousands in the most gruesome manner. She describes the horror on the streets and how she eventually found her daughter among the dead and the dying: "Great wounds and pustules covered her entire face and body. She was completely bald. She sat in a cloud of flies, and maggots wriggled among her wounds" (286). Naomi's mother survives until 1949, but because of the marks on her body, she decides not to return home and never to let her children know. Back in Canada, her husband dies around the same time.

Naomi's reaction to this appalling revelation is quiet but deeply felt: instantly, she senses the need to re-establish her bond with her mother, the bond that was broken in childhood after she was molested and Mother departed. "I put my hands around the teapot, feeling its round warmth against my palms. My skin feels hungry for warmth, for flesh," Naomi says (287). The teapot suggests clay, which suggests the human touch she longs for. Her filling the pot to make more tea could be a symbolic attempt to find the warmth she is looking for. Following the

revelation from Japan, Naomi has a poetic reverie that mixes her memories with images of the natural elements, which in her mind separate her from, and engulf, Mother as if Mother had become part of the earth, air, and water: “You are tide rushing moonward pulling back from the shore” (289). After knowledge comes understanding, when Naomi realizes that, though her mother is not there anymore, she can still feel her, in silence and the meanings it allows to be expressed. The letter, which represented their last physical contact, becomes the mere “skeleton” of a presence that now must be perceived in a different way. The next morning, at the dawn after the storm, Naomi goes back to the coulee and brings the story full circle: she walks through the wet land and dew-covered flowers until the riverbank, where she can see the moon reflected. By getting her shoes and clothes dirty with mud, Naomi is symbolically becoming part of the elements, reaching the underground stream where the promise of liberation lies. The meaning of water as freedom closes the narrative with the moon’s reflection “rippling in the river” (296), the victory of water over stone. Naomi states at the beginning that the freeing speech “comes from that amniotic deep” (i), an allusion to the womb – her mother’s specifically – as the place of supreme protection and nourishment. The loss of the womb as a symbol of maternal care is also inevitable, but at the end Naomi learns to accept this loss and removes the stones blocking her way to reach the coulee, the place Uncle thought was like the sea, the final destination of every water stream. Naomi smells the perfume of wild flowers, which, like her mother’s presence, cannot be seen or touched, but can be sensed all around.

Kogawa’s metaphors and symbols give *Obasan* a sense of fulfillment that might not be clear if we strip the narrative of them, especially because they also serve Kogawa’s main purpose of showing that language is the best means to resolve conflicts. *Obasan* reminds us that language can be used for such opposite intents as concealing and showing, restraining and releasing or hurting and healing. Also, the manner in which the novel merges fiction and history shows that the nature of both genres is unstable, and ultimately more dependent on convention and status

than on the properties of language. Memory is the driving force of the narrative: the characters' individual memories are fictional, but based on the collective memory of the Japanese Canadian internment, which allows these characters to take a critical stance about them. Because of that, *Obasan* can be considered a work of historiographic metafiction, a literary piece that, in Linda Hutcheon's definition, "incorporates, but rarely assimilates" (114) the historical circumstances to which it alludes, precisely because it wishes to undermine them.

Finally, another concern addressed in *Obasan* is forgiveness. It should be noted that the novel is careful not to take sides without considering the risk of falling into the victimization trap that minority writing usually falls into. Naomi is bothered by Aunt Emily's endless sermons and her readiness to point fingers: "People who talk a lot about their victimization make me uncomfortable. It's as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind" (41). In *Obasan*, this is an underlying issue, but it takes the foreground in its sequel *Itsuka*, which depicts the effort of Japanese Canadians to obtain government redress. Kogawa takes readers to the backstage of the negotiations and presents both sides of the debate on whether the Canadian Nikkei – Japanese immigrants and descendants – deserved redress. But *Obasan* goes beyond politics and formal apologies to look for forgiveness in a world where all are wrongdoers and victims.

In spite of how it mixes genres and reinterprets historical events, *Obasan* does not try to relativize what is believed to be an injustice committed against Canadian citizens who did nothing wrong to their country. On the contrary, the novel makes sure to focus on tangible suffering that remains after the politics is mended: the destruction of lives. Naomi may not wish to admit it, but she is the biggest victim in the novel because she was a child when the war took away her parents. In one way, she was also a victim of her great-uncle and great-aunt because they kept her ignorant of how her mother died. Naomi learns to accept the sorrows and evils of life without fighting back, but they haunt her. For her, so much talking and justice seeking seem futile because

it will all happen again. She asks, “Greed, selfishness, and hatred remain as constant as the human condition, do they not?” (238). It may be a rhetorical question, but it reminds readers that though they empathize with Naomi’s suffering, they, too, could be capable of wrongdoing to others.

The omnipresence of evil is hinted at in subtle ways. In the Granton internment, Stephen hits some butterflies with his crutch simply because “[t]hey eat holes in your clothes” (145). In another episode, Japanese Canadian boys slaughter a hen just to enjoy the slow agony. The fact that children are the wrongdoers in both cases reinforces Naomi’s belief that evil is part of human nature. To oppose it, Kogawa brings into play another distinctly human phenomenon, spirituality. Naomi’s family is Christian, and they express their faith with the help of Reverend Nakayama, a spiritual guide who appears at crucial moments of the story, for instance when Naomi’s family moves to Alberta – the last time Naomi sees her father – and at the end when he reads the letter from Nagasaki. His message is always of gratitude for life in spite of the burdens everyone must carry, but he is faced with a test. “To trust when life is easy is no trust” (212), he says, but trusting becomes almost impossible after they find out about Naomi’s mother and grandmother: how can they have hope in life after going through what was arguably the worst moment in the history of humankind?

The scale of World War II makes irrelevant any attempt to distinguish between the good and bad sides, except maybe in the case of individuals who could have been tried for their crimes. Reverend Nakayama’s answer is that people must forgive one another and themselves for causing such great suffering: “We are abandoned yet we are not abandoned. You are present in every hell. Teach us to see Love’s presence in our abandonment. Teach us to forgive” (292). His appeal equates victims and perpetrators as human beings all faced with the duty and the need of forgiveness. Julie McGonegal writes that, for Kogawa, forgiving is an act that empowers the victim and allows her to move out of this condition (59). She also explains that, unlike Julia Kristeva’s notion of forgiveness as an ahistorical act, Kogawa sees it as bound to time and

politics, Forgiveness and reconciliation *are*, in fact, what “ensures the continuity of time” (66) To put it another way, forgiveness allows people to move on.

Forgiveness is also an act motivated by religion in *Obasan*, as can be seen in Reverend Nakayama’s plea to God, but its value can be appreciated outside the religious sphere. For Paul Ricoeur, in *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, forgiving and being forgiven is a complex exchange from a philosophical viewpoint, but wholesome from a pragmatic one. To understand how it happens, he writes we must “[t]ake a step outside the circle of accusation and punishment” (478), a unilateral relationship that tends to exclude forgiveness. To include it, we must, as it were, drop charges and find a common ground once again, which is what Reverend Nakayama urges people to do.

Ricoeur asks three questions regarding the exchange of forgiveness in the contemporary context of government redress and requests of apology that help us understand the scope of forgiveness in *Obasan*: “Can one forgive someone who does not admit his fault? Must the one who pronounces forgiveness have himself been offended? Can one forgive oneself?” (478). About the first dilemma, Ricoeur only says that one should expect an admission from the guilty person (479), but he maintains that forgiveness should be unconditional and, moreover, that it is a liberating act, a speech act. In *Obasan*, it is invested with the Christian belief in that same unconditionality based on Christian love, *caritas*. That is why the reverend asks God to teach them to forgive, because it takes selflessness to make, in Ricoeur’s words, “a loan without expectation of return” (481), especially if one is called to give up what one believes to be a just cause. Ricoeur finds the love-your-enemies command extreme, but he sees in the act of forgiving a self-interested hope that it will “convert the enemy into a friend” (482), which nonetheless hints at a belief in self-denial as a potential means of reconciliation.

As for the second question, whether only those who were effectively wronged can forgive, Ricoeur remarks that what is understood as the victims of an offense often extends to

persons not directly offended: “The circle of victims continues to grow, taking into account relations of filiation, the existence of community ties” and “cultural proximity” (479). *Obasan* is all about filiation and community ties as Aunt Emily underscores, “To a people for whom community was the essence of life, destruction of community was the destruction of life.” (223). Today the Japanese Canadian internment is regarded as an offense not only to themselves, but also to other ethnic minorities in Canada and to the principles of democracy on which that country stands. Generally, World War II affected nearly every country, religion, and community on the globe, so, in a manner of speaking, the whole world would be in a position to grant and receive forgiveness at the same time.

The third question, “Can one forgive oneself?”, is by far the most complex. The major challenge to the idea of forgiving oneself for Ricoeur is that one would find it difficult to see oneself on both roles of offender and victim. To attempt a summary of Ricoeur’s extensive reasoning, we must bear in mind that he uses the notion of binding/unbinding borrowed from Hannah Arendt. Ricoeur explains that in the one-sided accusation/punishment logic, some thinkers contend that the wrong act and its doer are inseparable; by assuming a fault, one internalizes the guilt of it and in a way offers oneself to rectification: “what the courts punish are persons” (489), the argument goes. In other words, act and agent are bound by the admission of guilt as if the guilty person were saying, “I did it and I am aware that I deserve punishment.” Thus, the individual bound to his guilt is made incapable of further action until he is unbound again, presumably after punishment. Against this theory, Ricoeur argues that forgiveness can unbind agent and action in a manner “that expresses an act of faith, a credit addressed to the resources of self-regeneration” (490). Forgiving is, therefore, a way of saying, with Ricoeur, that “you are better than your actions” (493), specifically the one you are being forgiven for. While the forgiver may be let down in his faith on another, we can conclude that, when it comes to self-forgiveness, unbinding allows the individual to act again on the credit he gives himself. In *Obasan*,

self-forgiveness is not specifically called for because the characters have not committed any offense, but it springs from the Christian belief that all are sinners and need to be aware of their sins as they hope for God's ultimate forgiveness. I would also suggest that self-forgiveness becomes relevant in the context of World War II and crimes against humanity in which the novel takes place. Reverend Nakayama's plead to God to teach them to forgive can be said to include self-forgiveness since guilt and remorse can bind a person to the same inaction that makes regeneration impossible. As we will see in the following pages, this concern also appears in the second novel I will discuss, *No-No Boy*

No-No Boy

Published in 1957, John Okada's only novel *No-No Boy* tells the story of a young Nisei called Ichiro Yamada who, following the end of World War II, is finally allowed to go home after two years in an internment camp and another two in federal prison. His crime was to refuse to join the Army after authorities did not rejoin his mother and father, who had been sent to different internment facilities. The derisive nickname that serves as the novel's title alludes to a loyalty questionnaire Japanese Americans had to answer in camp. It asked, among other things, if they would willingly forswear allegiance to Japan and pledge allegiance to the United States, and if they would fight in the United States Army if they were called. The double negative is how some individuals answered the two questions because they were being treated worse than Italian or German Americans and that they had never sworn allegiance to the Japanese Empire in the first place, among other reasons. Ichiro and other no-no boys are ill regarded in their community, particularly by World War II veterans, because they believed that by fighting they would restore their credibility in the eyes of the country. Approaching conflicts of race, ideology, gender, cultural heritage, crime and punishment, Okada's novel has as its main subject Ichiro's efforts to come to terms with himself and postwar American society.

Okada portrays an experience that he never went through, that of a no-no boy, since he was a World War II veteran himself. As far as the protagonist's main conflicts go, *No-No Boy* is not an autobiographical novel; instead of focusing on the Nikkei soldier who fought with outstanding diligence and earned respect for Japanese Americans, as was the case of many, it focuses on the return of a demoralized individual who will face shame and rejection in his community. Okada's bringing back a delicate issue more than ten years after the internment is part of what is called the politics of remembering, i.e. the circumstances that favor some memories and suppress others. Smith and Watson remind us, "What is remembered and what is forgotten, and *why*, change over time" (18), and *No-No Boy* is an instance in point because it was purposefully forgotten for a long time. Gordon Hirabayashi wrote that after being ignored in the 1950s and 1960s, the novel was rediscovered in the 1970s as evidence that "important changes had occurred in the social and literary milieu" (176). The changes were the entrance of Japanese Americans into mainstream American society and the growing interest in minority writings.

No-No Boy's poor reception in the 1950s shows that, ten years later, the internment still was a sensitive issue. By that time, it had become part of the Japanese American collective memory and could be treated with critical distance in a literary work. Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is a construction of the past influenced by elements in the present and previous constructions of the same past (91). One way to evaluate how this influence takes place is to know how the past is accessed, whether by personal recollection or by accounts of others, among other means. One of Halbwachs's main contentions about collective memory is that it has to fit within the scope of time that a group can remember, but by that, he means memory that is related to experiences in which we have been involved somehow. But collective memory, as a cultural phenomenon, can go beyond Halbwachs's time constraints to become, as was said earlier, a cultural exchange with the past. Collective memory is, therefore, divided into two types, communicative and cultural. Communicative memory takes place in individual minds within a

group and temporal scope like Halbwachs postulated. Cultural memory is what Jan Assmann calls “forms of objectivized culture” (128), constructions and artifacts invested with cultural value that often last beyond the scope of living groups to shape the identities and perceptions of future groups. Paul Connerton writes that an individual’s consciousness of society’s continuity is the image that society creates of itself through such artifices (12) – and, we might add, over time in an ongoing process. Connerton underlines the role of rituals in creating a sense of continuity because they are deliberately crystalized forms of memory: ritualized acts are performed in the exact same way and the language used remains unchanged (59), a mnemonic device used to foster the memory of important events sometimes to a mimetic level, for example, in a Catholic mass.

Okada dramatizes a situation that, although unique, belongs in the context of race struggles in the United States at the time. There is an initial contrast between the Japanese American veterans who fought in what became of the most awarded regiments in US military history, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (“Presidential Unit Citations” §1), and the conscientious objectors called “no-no boys” like Ichiro Yamada, who considered themselves Americans but dared oppose their country because of how they were treated. With the end of the war, Japanese American veterans hope that their effort will be their ticket into more respect and opportunities in society, but the novel shows that this would not happen immediately: they would face more prejudice. An example of their struggle is seen when, at a restaurant, Ichiro meets a Nisei veteran wearing a discharge pin to show that he is a good American. Ichiro is annoyed at this conspicuous display, partly because he cannot boast a discharge pin, but he knows that his counterpart is more desperate than he is for acceptance. Ichiro finds himself in trouble with bullying veterans who say they did not fight their war for the lot of him, but he also finds support and understanding in Kenji, himself a veteran. Kenji assures Ichiro that the bullies’ behavior will subside when they realize that, no matter that they have fought their war, “they’ll be the same as you, a bunch of Japs” (163). Kenji’s forecast may be pessimistic, but it means that

anti-Japanese sentiment, fueled by massive propaganda during the war, was still strong, and since it was targeted at the racial aspect, persons influenced by it were likely to overlook the fact that the majority of Japanese Americans were loyal Americans.

No-No Boy begins with Ichiro Yamada arriving in Seattle four years after he left it to go to internment. By now, most Japanese Americans have been released and are resuming their lives. Okada depicts how some of them felt about the massive return to where they lived. One of Ichiro's old acquaintances and now a US Army veteran, Eto Minato, remarks that while most Japanese were returning to the West coast, "the smart ones" were trying their luck in the East: "Japs are funny that way. Gotta have their rice and saké and other Japs. Stupid, I say" (2). This reflects a major concern regarding whether Japanese Americans should resettle where they lived before their relocation. Some, including the government of the United States, believed that it would be best for them not to rebuild their communities in the West, but instead to scatter throughout the country, thus avoiding calling attention to themselves. As Fugita and O'Brien attest (31), the internment caused a great loss of authority to the Japan-born generation, the Issei, who had dominated the Japanese communities often to the detriment of their children's prospects. Many Nisei, US-born second generation, regarded the postwar situation as favorable because they finally had the opportunity to integrate mainstream society through jobs and relationships outside the ethnic communities. They also believed that going back to the old way would prove that they did not wish to become Americans.

Okada shows that in spite of the Japanese reorganizing themselves, unwillingness to be Americans was not the case. On the contrary, the novel depicts a clash between an ideal, pristine image of America and a troubled, fragmented reality where several ethnic groups, African, Asian, and others, antagonize each other for more space and opportunities under the oppressive racism of which they were all victims. Ichiro witnesses this on the streets of his hometown, where blacks tell him to "[g]o back to Tokyo" (5) and Asians in an Asian club strictly forbid admission

of blacks. The result is that these non-white populations despise each other and use against each other the same treatment white society gave them, “Japs,” “Chinks,” and “cotton pickers.” This situation reveals a color spectrum of American society where the darker one’s skin color, the worse one’s conditions are likely to be. Racial conflicts were, according to Ling, part of a context when “Cold War ideological drives toward U.S nationalism and legitimation of material abundance promoted tendencies to embrace a common national character and a ‘seamless’ American culture” (360), tendencies that excluded sectors of the population such as Asians and Africans.

Ichiro and other characters in *No-No Boy* show that, although they are among those excluded by the ideal of America, they are very much steeped in it and struggle to fit in. Ichiro finds that the image of a happy, prosperous family in a comfortable house is far from his reality, but he still needs to believe it is real: “Surely it must be around here some place, some place in America” (159). Because this image is strictly related to race, as explained by Ling’s quote above, the solution seems to lie in abandoning the Nikkei community, which would afford him the chance to erase his ethnicity. This is also Kenji’s view, who is about to die of a leg wound suffered in the war. Kenji’s advice to Ichiro is that he should move far from the Japanese and “[m]arry a white girl or a Negro or an Italian or even a Chinese. ... After a few generations, you’ve got the thing beat” (164). The “thing” Kenji is referring to is race: by intermarrying, they would be able to erase their Japanese identity and eventually become just American. Ichiro’s observations of how people are behaving after the war, particularly his fellow Japanese, lead him to the realization that they were “dealing themselves out” of America by buying into the ideal. Instead of being outsiders looking in, Ichiro thinks that “maybe the answer is that there is no in” (159), one of his most relevant conclusions on his way to becoming American again.

Another way *No-No Boy* counters the belief in the unwillingness of the Japanese to accept America is by showing the attitude of Issei after the internment. Okada depicts the change in

their mentality from an interest in amassing money and returning to Japan – the sojourner’s mentality – to a wish to stay and make America their home. This change is partly explained by the fact that the Issei lost almost everything, but financial loss was not the only reason: it would be for their best. Though the Issei were the maintainers of Japanese culture and identity, they were open to the customs and practices of the host country as long as they regarded them beneficial. Fugita and O’Brien write that this acceptance of foreign customs is part of the Japanese interactional style, which focuses on group stability and harmony above all (37). If adopting foreign dress, diet, language and even religion is seen as good for the group, it will be done. Ichiro’s and Kenji’s parents are among those immigrants who decide to stay, as the following passage with Kenji’s father illustrates:

He had long forgotten when it was that he had discarded the notion of a return to Japan but remembered only that it was the same time when this country which he had no intention of loving had suddenly begun to become a part of him because it was a part of his children Where else could a man, left alone with six small children, have found it possible to have had so much with so little? (120)

Mr. Nakamura exemplifies the Issei condition described above as well as the fact that the Japanese were among the minorities struggling for their place within the collective ideal of “America,” particularly after the war. In many ways, Mr. Nakamura can count himself successful, for now he has a comfortable house and enjoys a quiet retirement and a sense of accomplishment that, it is implied, were only possible because he accepted Americanness. This, however, comes with a price, his son Kenji.

Kenji appears as a short presence that yet helps Ichiro a great deal. Dialogue is the main method by which Kenji helps Ichiro soothe his inner turmoil and come to terms with himself, so Kenji is particularly useful in dissuading his friend that he would be better off if he had fought. Kenji’s strongest argument is his own body: he lost a leg in the war and is doomed to die because

the doctors cannot heal it. Kenji is the opposite of Ichiro in many ways, and their differences allow us to compare the situation of the veteran with that of the conscientious objector: Kenji answered the call of America while Ichiro, much to his frustration, did not; Kenji only had to inform his father of his decision while Ichiro had to abide by his imperious mother, who ordered him to refuse the draft. Kenji's family now lives by comfortable, middle-class standards while the Yamadas share cramped quarters in the back of a shop. Despite these differences, Kenji experiences some of the same conflicts as Ichiro since he, too, as Amoko points out, nurtures "a profound ambivalence about the moral superiority of his choices" (§25). That is what makes him able to empathize with Ichiro.

Ichiro, who would rather die with the right to call himself American, is caught among issues of race, patriotism, and loyalty that hinder his identification with his country. According to Stan Yogi, the general behavior of American society toward the Nikkei imposed on them "binary choices" (63) that did not allow them to reconcile their double cultural heritage. Yogi goes on to explain that while "most Americans distinguished between Americans of German and Italian descent and the German and Italian enemy," they did not do so with the Japanese (64). Some of the people Ichiro meets, including the Nikkei veterans, question his Americanness, but few critics underline that his refusal was to great extent based on American ideals of freedom and justice: the Nikkei community was uprooted and disenfranchised on unfounded suspicions, yet they were required to prove their loyalty with a blood sacrifice. The absurdity of this predicament is illustrated in the prologue, as I explain above. The officer's reaction – "They could kiss my ass" (xi) – shows a sense of injustice that is deeply rooted in what he expects from country, the values on which his nation stands. It was, therefore, based on the same expectations that Ichiro and other Nisei men became no-no boys.

Ichiro's release from prison means he is a free man again, but going back home is another kind of imprisonment since he will have to deal with his lack of prospects and with how others

see him. Right on his arrival, he is confronted by an unfriendly presence, the veteran Eto. He does not take long to find out that Ichiro is a no-no boy, which changes his attitude completely. “No-no boy, huh?” he asks Ichiro, and ironically this time Ichiro’s answer would have to be “yes,” but cannot muster the strength to say it: “He wanted to return the look of despising hatred and simply say yes, but it was too much to say. The walls had closed in and were crushing all the unspoken words down into his stomach” (3). Confronted again as he had been by the authorities, Ichiro feels oppressed to the point of being unable to talk. I will argue in the following pages that, like Naomi in *Obasan*, though in different circumstances, Ichiro is another trauma victim struggling to become the subject of his own speech, so we must look closely into the narrative of *No-No Boy* to know how it reflects his struggle.

Ichiro is not the only one who finds it difficult to talk about touchy subjects. His home environment favors repression because his family is unwilling to talk about anything at length. To begin with, there is a minor communication barrier in the fact that the Issei know little English while many Nisei know only little Japanese, which is Ichiro’s case. Besides, the notion that the Japanese do not show their feelings openly disappoints Ichiro in his return home because he would like to be welcomed back with hugs and kind words, like American families do when they reunite. Here, as in other respects, Ichiro shows himself imbued with an idea of his country that glosses over him and the variety of cultures and interactional styles that the novel celebrates as essential to what America is. His father tries to prompt him to talk, but he refuses and Mr. Yamada, who feels guilty for causing his son to be jailed, is relieved to let go of the attempt for the time being: “it is done and there is no use to talk” (10).

Because of this lack of dialogue between certain people, the narrative resorts of different levels of proximity to the characters’ thoughts. Sometimes there is an omniscient third-person narrator disclosing information about the characters as they occur to them. In this manner, the reader learns more about their experiences than they would have the chance to tell, for example,

when Mr. Nakamura recalls the impact on the Issei of a lecture given by a Nisei sociologist in camp. The message to the Issei is that they are strangers to their own children, and the reaction is the following:

Always before, they had found something to say about the decadent ways of an amoral nation, but, on this evening, they watched longer than usual and searched longingly to recognize their own daughter, whom they knew to be at the dance but who was only an unrecognizable shadow among other shadows ... (125)

This passage illustrates a piece of camp life that is very close to the kind of social activity the internees had there. Besides, it depicts the generation gap between the Issei and their children as an problem the former had difficulty to approach, partly because they saw their children behaving according to the customs of the country that imprisoned them, partly because of their different culture and expectations regarding that country: while the Issei never saw the United States as their homeland because they could not be citizens, the Nisei did so as any other American did. *No-No Boy* suggests that the Nisei are partly responsible for the Issei's abandoning the wish to return to Japan.

Another narrative device used in *No-No Boy* to make the characters' thoughts accessible is a combination of free indirect discourse with interior monologue in which the narrator's presence gradually disappears, thus leaving the character to his own speech as if he were talking. By means of this technique, the reader learns more in retrospect about the characters and the events that have led to the present conflicts. The following example presents Mr. Yamada, a man repressed by his insane wife and unable to establish communication with his two sons. A conventional third-person narrator describes the scene; then the focus moves into Mr. Yamada's mind and the points of view start to mingle as if by the effect of the alcohol he is drinking. The narrator's and the character's voices are not clearly separated: "Why doesn't she turn the faucets on full he thought impatiently. Turn it on like you always do. Quick and efficient and impatient,

which is the way you have always been” (176). Soon after that, the narrator is gone and Mr. Yamada’s thoughts take over: “Kin-chan, that is what your sister calls you now. Now that life has become too hard for her to bear, she once again calls you Kin-chan, for then she thinks of the days when we were young and strong and brave and crazy” (177). Although Mr. Yamada is not talking, the narrative’s floating viewpoints allow us to reach into hidden feelings and memories that enrich our understanding of this character.

Given the key role of this variety of narrative techniques employed in Okada’s novel to make silent speeches known, it is surprising that little or no critical attention has been paid to it. Instead, Okada’s style has been called faulty and amateur, especially because he died before he could publish a second work, but, however unruly the prose may often sound, there is in it an attempt to represent the anxieties of different people sharing difficult times. Having explained that Ichiro is not the only person in this struggle, we can focus on how and with whom he undergoes the process of understanding the experiences he went through and where he stands at present. In comparison with *Obasan*, whose protagonist tells us what she and her family went through during the war years in detail, *No-No Boy* is a much more uneventful story. Little is said about Ichiro’s years in camp and prison, which leads to the conclusion that nothing extraordinary happened. Also, back in Seattle there are few incidents taking place with the exception of three losses, so the conflicts in the novel are mainly ideological, hence the influence of language on them.

Ichiro’s memories include the day when he and his fellows stood before a judge to justify their refusal of the military draft. Many reasons are alleged and many attitudes are discernible: some are openly defiant; others are willing to cooperate if the government meets their conditions, which is Ichiro’s case, so we cannot reduce all no-no boys to a single pattern of behavior. That, however, does not make the scene less critical of the way the US government handled the situation. This moment causes Ichiro’s whole world to crumble because his identity

is shattered by his reasons for being there: he wants to prove his loyalty, but his mother's wish that he stay, even at the cost of being jailed, prevails upon him. His mother is a pro-Japan fanatic who would rather die than let her son fight for her enemy, so Ichiro's safety is not her main concern in forbidding him to join the army. Divided between a sense of duty to his parents, his country *and* his race, since it does not reflect his culture, Ichiro is deprived of his subjectivity in a way that is similar to the traumatic loss explained by Van Alphen, when an individual suffers an attack that he is unable to ward off. Being in jail is a form of loss of the self since the prisoner loses his will and role in society. When Ichiro is finally released, he must readjust himself to significant changes in his community to find his role in it again.

As we have seen, individual memory derives from an individual narrative that encompasses past, present and future. Because humans are social beings, this personal narrative depends on interaction with other individuals and can be disrupted by traumatic experiences. Although I do not contend that *No-No Boy* is mainly a trauma narrative, it matches some of the effects of trauma described by Ernst Van Alphen and Susan Brison, namely incapacity to narrate an event in which the individual was deprived of individuality and subjected to physical/psychological harm. Ichiro's main task is to rebuild his bonds with society, so *No-No Boy's* plot consists of his meetings with several people representing different spheres of social and intimate life that help him, whether directly or indirectly, to achieve that. *No-No Boy* can be considered a testimonial narrative, which, in Horne's definition, is when "someone' who tells 'someone else' bears witness because he/she has either first hand experience of the event or first hand observation of it, or can claim to have some special knowledge of the situation as in expert testimony" (62). According to Brison, bearing witness helps the traumatized individual find his way back into community and recover selfhood (40), and Ichiro, who also has to resume his disrupted narrative, does so mainly by talking through his doubts and learning to accept his failures and those of others.

Because of the need to bear witness, McDonald uses the terms “friendly encounters” (26) to name the meetings that produce a positive outcome in Ichiro’s resettlement, although not all of the encounters are friendly. They begin at home, where they are also the most complicated. Ichiro is upset by what he sees as a reversal of roles in his family: his mother is the strong, dominating presence, while his father is gentle and self-effacing. Ichiro shows a patriarchal notion of family in that he thinks his father should be the prevailing voice in the house, but this is due to his mother’s unreasonable, indeed insane, behavior. In a novel that discusses how ideologies can overwhelm the individual, Mrs. Yamada is the extreme example: her fanaticism has driven her insane and she refuses to accept Japan’s defeat. In her mind, hoaxes and traitors surround her, and she is waiting for Japanese ships to take loyal subjects in America back to triumphant Japan. She believes a son is like the extension of his mother and his success or failure depends on her, so Ichiro’s refusal of the draft is imperative. She sees him as way to obtain what she desires and express her thoughts in situations where she cannot be. As a result, when her son returns home, Mrs. Yamada is for him more of an enemy than a mother and a friendly, encouraging presence. Ichiro’s resentment of his mother’s power over him is clear when he says, “It was she who opened my mouth and made it sound the words which got me two years in prison” (12), a reflection of his mother’s belief that a son must do what his mother finds best for him.

The troubled mother/son relationship in *No-No Boy* is caused by the clash between Mrs. Yamada’s view of motherhood and Ichiro’s feeling curtailed and, worse than that, emasculated. He thinks that, because of his father is meek, “[h]e should have been Ma and she should have been Pa. Things would have worked out differently then” (112). Again, Ichiro reveals a patriarchal understanding of gender roles, but it is inserted in a World War II/Cold War context of exacerbated sexism in which mothers were accused of doing the country a disservice by “spoiling” their sons. According to Gribben, the cult of and dependence on mother, or “Momism,” as it became known, was thought be an American invention that the writer Philip

Wylie criticized (33). Gribben explains, “Wylie’s ostensible concern was that ‘Momism’ weakens national identity and depletes masculine energy” (34). That is, mothers were softening their sons and rendering them unfit to serve the nation. *No-No Boy* captures part of this issue through Ichiro’s conflict with his mother. He expects his mother to conform to the stereotype of loving American mother, but Mrs. Yamada is the opposite: rather than spoil her son with love, she toughens him with her lack of feelings and unreasonable requests. Since mothers are seen as crucial in shaping citizens and advancing the state’s interests, we can perceive a mother/motherland analogy in *No-No Boy* in which the United States is compared to a generous mother, illustrating the country’s abundance and openness to all cultures and creeds, while Mrs. Yamada represents Japan, a hard country plunged in fanaticism. This analogy is underscored when Emi, a Nisei woman whom Ichiro befriends, says that America is “a big country with a big heart” (95), endorsing the female representation of the country. Ichiro’s relationship with his mother can be called a distorted version of Momism, or Japanese Momism in the context of World War II, because the way he sees himself in terms of his nationality and culture is influenced significantly by the values it is based on:

But I did not love [*America*] enough, for you were still half my mother and I was still thereby half Japanese when the war came and they told me to fight for America, I was not strong enough to fight you and I was not strong enough to fight the bitterness which made the half of me which was you bigger than the half of me which was America and really the whole of me that I could not see or feel. (16)

Ichiro’s split self is visible again not only in the opposition between mother and country, but also in the way he vents his frustration, in the angry tone with which his thoughts are disclosed. Mrs. Yamada appears as a male figure, or, in the words of Daniel Kim, in the role of a “fertilizing agency” – in the sense that she fertilizes her son’s mind – “that is traditionally a prerogative of

fathers” (69). Mrs. Yamada expects that Ichiro may reward her one day for being a right mother, but for him she is not a mother anymore. The solution he finds is to sever all ties with his mother to become the master of his own actions. Within the home environment, his father would be the first figure in which to look for support and a role model, but he is old, alcoholic, and incapable of dealing with his wife’s insanity. His younger brother Taro thinks him a coward and hates him because Ichiro made him a no-no boy’s brother. Taro is undergoing the same rejection of family that Ichiro is experiencing, so he joins the army when he turns 18 to detach himself from his brother’s reputation and assert his will over his mother’s.

So far, I have attempted to show that in *No-No Boy* the war and generational differences between the Issei and the Nisei are portrayed as sources of conflict. Especially for Ichiro, family is not a prop to individual identification with country, but rather a hindrance. His next step is to try to rebuild his connections with the outside world, but that does not prove any easier because he is trapped in thoughts about his supposed mistake. He acknowledges that, but at first sees no way out: “The prison which he had carved out of his own stupidity granted no paroles or pardons. It was a prison of forever” (40). It can be said, with Ricoeur, that Ichiro’s admission of guilt makes him incapable of acting and, therefore, moving on with his life. This can be seen when he visits college to see about the possibility of resuming his studies. He thinks that, “To be a student in America was a wonderful thing” (53), certainly worth defending with his life, so going back to that idyllic environment without having fought to defend it arouses guilt. The conversation with Professor Brown accentuates that guilt because he receives his former pupil warmly and encourages him to go back. Unaware that Ichiro is a no-no boy, Professor Brown says that “every bit helps” (56), assuming that Ichiro helped the war effort in another way. That confirms to Ichiro that he failed his duty to his country, and it makes him feel undeserving of the reception and of being a student again: “... Brown is of that life which I have forfeited, and forfeiting it, have lost the right to see and hear and become excited over things which are of that

wonderful past” (57). By thinking that, Ichiro makes himself incapable of moving on; what could be his chance to resettle becomes a lost link in his personal narrative because it is as hard for him to go back to his life before the war as it is to speak about his current condition. The Ichiro who used to go to college and the Ichiro who spent two years locked up are not the same, so he is living in a moment that, despite being part of his life chronologically, seems detached from the sense of personal identity his past gives him. In other words, Ichiro cannot connect his present to his past and, consequently, cannot find the ways to move into the future.

Kenji Nakamura, who meets Ichiro on campus, also had his personal narrative, or sense of selfhood, disrupted by his war experiences. He asks Ichiro, “Can you start back to school tomorrow and pick up just where you left off?” (58). Though they have the means to do it and would benefit from it, the answer is that it would simply not make sense: they miss a connection between who they used to be before the war and who they will be from now on. Because Kenji is a veteran, the government gives him money to facilitate his reinsertion – “A medal, a car, a pension, and even an education. Just for packing a rifle. Is that good?” (60) –, but money cannot solve his problems: he has both psychological and physical traumas, the former is having killed enemy soldiers, the latter is the leg wound that will kill him soon. He does not find it painful to talk about it, but every visit to the hospital shortens his lifetime prospects a little, and he knows that the next visit will be the last. What is left for him to do is what I propose to call a “non-narrative.” He cannot resume the thread of his personal narrative as it was before the war, and he will not have time to start over and build himself a new identity, so all he does is live in anticipation of death by not caring about the duties, rules and expectations people have to cope with. He goes to a club with Ichiro, sits at the bar with drinks and says, “If I didn’t have to sleep or eat, I’d stay right here. I’d work up to a nice, lazy feeling and keep it there by hoisting one arm every once in a while” (72). In other words, Kenji would like not to be reminded of the small needs to life so that he could stay suspended from time, in forgetfulness, until he died.

Whereas Kenji can call himself a true American but is fated to die, Ichiro has his entire life ahead, but must first rid himself of the burden of shame and discrimination he thinks his country has in store for him. The next encounters he goes through help him realize how America sees him, how he should see it, and how he can claim his place in it again. First, she meets Kenji's friend Emi, a Nisei woman of his age. Her husband is away with the army and has decided not to come back for a while, so Kenji's design is that she and Ichiro may find in each other what they need.

Emi's kindness and empathy give her a double role for Ichiro: she is both a mother figure and a lover. A curious fact about the couple is that, as McDonald points out, their physical description is not (stereo)typical: Ichiro is tall and well-built – he played basketball at school – and Emi is also tall, “with heavy breasts” and legs “strong and shapely like a white woman's” (83). For McDonald, this physique approximates them to “white American standards” (22), suggesting that they are Americans not only culturally, but also, to some extent, physically. Emi's generous body also matches her generosity of spirit and emphasizes her femininity in a male-dominated context that does not encourage dialogue. Ichiro and Emi bond immediately, and Emi, who is more mature, tells Ichiro to stop indulging in self-pity: “Admit your mistake and do something about it” (95). Here, Emi seems to speak from the assumption that, because Ichiro needs to change his attitude, he has made a mistake, but I find it debatable whether Ichiro's refusal should be called a mistake. She is right, though, when she says that, when the war broke out, to be Japanese and American at the same time was not possible: “You had to be one or the other” (91), as opposed to being Italian American or German American. It is interesting that Emi should make this critical remark and not Ichiro or Kenji. In my reading, Emi's saying it underlines her maternal attitude toward Ichiro since it attenuates Ichiro's supposed mistake by implying that Japanese Americans in general, and not only Ichiro, were put in a complicated situation.

Emi and Ichiro's dialogue brings up the issue of reconciliation. If Emi said earlier that Ichiro had made a mistake, she acknowledges now that so did the country by misjudging him, but she remarks that the country made it right by releasing him, so Ichiro must forgive it in order to become American. Emi's rhetoric is, again, a mixture of mother/motherland attitudes that see Ichiro as a prodigal son of sorts:

“They made a mistake when they doubted you. They made a mistake when they made you do what you did and they admit it by letting you run around loose. Try, if you can, to be equally big and forgive them and be grateful to them and prove to them that you can be an American worthy of the frailties of the country as well as its strengths.” (96)

To reconcile himself with his country as Emi, the mother figure, urges him to do, Ichiro must first do it with his real mother, who stands for the other motherland, Japan: “I’m not your son and I’m not Japanese and I’m not American” (16). Mrs. Yamada is a fanatic who lost the love of both her sons. In a fine remark about symbolism in *No-No Boy*, of which there are few, Ling notes that when Mrs. Yamada drops milk cans on the shop floor and then piles up back up repeatedly, the “evaporated milk” is symbolic of her failure both as a mother and to her motherland: “she can no longer nourish her family’s identity” (39), which, for her, should be a Japanese identity. The other side of this symbolic act happens when Emi takes Ichiro’s hand and places it on her breast, not in a moment of lust, but when Ichiro breaks down. As opposed to dry, resourceless Japan represented by Mrs. Yamada, Emi is the soft, plentiful land of America taking Ichiro as one of its own. In her fanaticism, Mrs. Yamada drowns herself in the bathtub, which, if taken to be suicide, also symbolizes her failure to Japan since suicide was what Japanese, especially in the military, chose as punishment for their supposed failure in the war.

Okada does Mrs. Yamada justice by showing her side of the story at her funeral, a story of self-denial, deprivation and disillusion. Curiously, it takes place at her funeral; while funerals

are solemn occasions where the memories of individuals are usually paid homage to, it suggests that remembering Mrs. Yamada's life required her to sacrifice it. Dialogue being a problem, the plot resorts to an alternative way: a testimony of her life is read by an attendant. We learn that she was an ambitious, educated young woman who gave up her family and prospects to follow her husband in his American adventure. As the years pass and the prospects of returning reduce, especially due to the war, the only way Mrs. Yamada must have conceived to return was through Japan winning. This is why she holds on to the belief that Japan did win, as in fact many Japanese overseas did, and expects Japanese ships to come and take her home. Her illusion is shattered when her family sends desperate letters begging for food and clothes. She forces herself to believe they are hoaxes and refuses to send aid because, if she does, she will accept that Japan is defeated and her hopes are dashed. Losing her sons proves to be last straw. Ichiro would not have known any of this if it had not been read at her mother's funeral, so the testimony can be seen as her last words to him, what he needed to know about her that she was unable to tell and he unable to listen: "he could not believe that she had ever been any of these things the man was saying about her" (194). This is how he comes to terms with his mother. His father also seems freed by his wife's death, and that prompts him to talk to Ichiro more freely and rebuild what is left of their family.

Before that happens, Ichiro keeps on his journey to rebuild his bonds to the collective. Emi's attempts to help prove ineffective possibly because she is peer, a Nisei who went through similar troubles, so he goes beyond the confines of the Japanese American community to confront America. After he leaves Kenji at hospital, Ichiro starts looking for a job in Portland, where no one knows him. One of his attempts leads him to a company owned by a Mr. Carrick, who helps set Ichiro on the right path. Mr. Carrick is friendly to the point of trying a sentence in Japanese and, without Ichiro touching the subject, expresses his sympathies for the internment and apologizes. "I've always been a big-mouthed, loud-talking, back-slapping American," he says,

“but, when that happened, I lost a little of my wind” (150). Yet, he is confident enough that America can make up for its mistake and offers Ichiro a very good job. Ichiro is reassured by this unexpected show of sympathy, but it only makes him feel undeserving of America’s generosity, when upon hearing that he was not to blame for his choice.

The appearance of a benevolent man like who acknowledges his country’s mistake and is willing to set a good example can be considered an attempt of Okada’s to be didactic, as Kogawa is said to be. Mr. Carrick embodies the virtues that people in his position ought to show to help a country move past the kind of conflict depicted in *No-No Boy*. This can be seen, too, when he tells Ichiro that he had previous experience with Japanese Americans and they were “fine people” and “the best tenants [he] ever had” (149), a testimony that contradicts anti-Japanese propaganda. The imagery used in this part also seems to sustain this claim in figurative terms as Ichiro thinks of Mr. Carrick as a man whose generosity is “continually nursing and worrying the infant America into the greatness of its inheritance” (151), an image of promise, a country that can grow to be the finest in the world, in a similar analogy of country as motherland that we saw with Emi and Mrs. Yamada.

Mr. Carrick, therefore, contradicts Ichiro’s expectations that America would certainly condemn him even after he had served his sentence. He also makes Ichiro want to set things right with his family, and he comes to the important realization that “[i]f he wants to find his back to that point of wholeness and belonging, he must do so in the place where he had begun to lose it” (154), that is, in Seattle, among family, friends and hostile veterans. Going back means recovering his sense of self, instead of running away from it, by rebuilding his network inside community.

The end brings Ichiro to three decisive encounters. First, he meets Mr. Morrison about a job with the Christian Rehabilitation Center. Mr. Morrison is as friendly as Mr. Carrick is, but not as patient. He tells Ichiro there is nothing wrong with him and that he should not be looking for

help, but making the most of his potential: “[Ichiro] could step into a hundred jobs out in this city this very minute ... Unfortunately, they never told me about a therapy for your kind of illness” (220). The therapy he mentions could be what he is doing, i.e. talking sense into Ichiro’s mind and showing him that he is not an outsider looking in despite the prejudice he is bound to face. Second, Ichiro meets a fellow no-no boy called Gary. Gary is a painter and, in a telling coincidence, is just finishing the word *rehabilitation* on a bus, a hint to his and Ichiro’s status at the end of the novel. He tells Ichiro that becoming a no-no boy was the best thing that happened to him because it gave him the strength to pursue his ambition, to paint: “The picture I want is inside of me. I’m groping for it and it gives me peace and satisfaction. For me, the cup is overflowing” (224). Thus, Gary shows his friend that, despite the challenges, being a no-no boy is not a reason in itself for being hopeless. It is interesting that Ichiro should learn this from an artist because, as such, Gary shows a strong sense of purpose that serves as a model for one who must find his. Besides, he makes the point that, contrary to Ichiro’s belief, they are better off than many veterans “who had it real tough” (233), that is, the ones who are haunted by what they did and saw in the war like Kenji himself, who regretted having killed Germans simply because they were of a different nationality.

By now, Ichiro’s evolution is noticeable also in the language that shapes his thoughts. The hot-toned interior monologue with long, erratic sentences venting his inner turmoil makes room for more conversation and, when it does occur, we see that it has subsided into a quiet tone. Now, he thinks with the clarity of one who has reached conclusions: “I have been guilty of a serious error. I have paid for my crime as prescribed by law. I have been forgiven and it is only right for me to feel this way ...” (232). Ichiro is no longer trying to blame others or himself and finally realizes that he is a citizen like any other.

The third encounter is also the final scene. Freddie is another no-no boy who is lost like Ichiro was, but instead of looking for answers, fills his time “livin’ it up,” going after cheap thrills

and feeding the veterans' hatred. As McDonald points out, he is Ichiro's foil (23) in the sense that both start out in the same condition, but develop different reactions. Ichiro notices that Freddie's answer to discrimination and lack of prospects is to seek "relief in total, hateful rejection of self, family and society" (244). Ichiro experiences the same rejection at first, but witnessing his friend gives him the certainty that he has worked through that problem. They go to a bar and there Freddie picks a fight with Bull, the bullying veteran. In the hurry to escape, Freddie crashes his car and kills himself, causing Bull, who wanted to beat him unconscious, to break down and cry "like a baby in loud, gasping, beseeching howls" (260). Like Mrs. Yamada's suicide, Freddie's death works as a sacrifice that brings about reconciliation by purging hostility and false hopes. Bull's unexpected reaction is a sign of recognition that no-no boys and veterans are the same in spite of their different trajectories. Ichiro's patting his head in agreement seems to settle the matter between them. Despite this reconciliation, *No-No Boy* ends on an ambiguous note. On the one hand, Ichiro walks out of the scene strengthened and resolved to pursue the "faint and elusive insinuation of promise" (251) that he glimpses in the future. On the other hand, toward the end of the novel Okada forecasts a pessimistic picture of ongoing racial strife following the war. For example, Gary tells Ichiro that the Nikkei veterans would not see their hoped-for rewards:

"They'll find that they still can't buy a house in Broadmoor even with a million stones in the bank. They'll see themselves getting passed up for jobs by white fellows not quite so bright but white. They'll take a trip up to some resort, thinking this is God's green land of democracy for which I killed a dozen Krauts, and get kicked in the face with the unfortunate mistake about the reservation story because he'd signed Ohara and the guy at the resort though it was good old Irish O'Hara." (227)

Bull's reaction to Freddie's death seems to prove that Gary was right about veterans losing "cocksureness," not only because they would not have material rewards above, but because they were fracturing their community and themselves. Okada also makes sure to include blacks in his picture to show that he was concerned not only with Asians, but with the whole of America in which Asians claimed to belong. Ichiro recollects how he and a fellow internee joined a white congregation near the camp because they were acceptable, but a black man was not and was tacitly commanded to leave. Ichiro's friend begs him to overlook that because they not are in the position to refuse acceptance, but for Ichiro the situation is absurd. Witnessing this individual struggle for acceptance in a vicious system is one of the reasons he feels an outcast for a long time, because "[o]ne had only to look about to see all the hatred in the world" (229).

Because of that gloomy attitude and the fact that we do not have clues regarding Ichiro's future steps, I argue that *No-No Boy's* ending leaves an unresolved state of affairs that is not typical of the *Bildungsroman* such as we find, for example, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which Stephen Dedalus flees Ireland to fulfill his artistic aptitude, or even *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which Werther chooses the ultimate act of killing himself. Nevertheless, Ichiro does achieve his rehabilitation by reasoning with those around him and concluding that America is not the clean, utopic vision that he imagined, but fragments in conflict. Okada shows how individuals are shaped by discourses of collectivity such as nation and race – which are shown to go against each other – and how this affects individuals. Finally, *No-No Boy* helps build the collective memory of Japanese Americans in an intimate, critical, and didactic manner. Like *Obasan*, it is based on real circumstances, corrects misconceptions about Japanese Americans existing at the time and addresses internment issues through language in a way that, quoting Potolski's words about fiction, "provides insights into human action and character that we might not otherwise have" (37). From being ignored and unheard of for approximately two decades, today *No-No Boy*

occupies a distinct place in Asian American letters and in the literature of minorities in the United States.

Chapter 3: Sites of Memory in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*

Our attics and living rooms encroach on each other, deep
into their invisible places.

Obasan

One of the main ways in which memory is presented and organized in *Obasan* and its sequel *Itsuka* is through places. These include not only real places, but also psychological or ideological ones, those that are projections of the characters' experiences, emotions, and need to fit in ordinary notions of belonging like family, "race" and country. They play an important role in how the narratives unfold and in the protagonists' searches for a way out of their predicaments. They also relate to the concern of collective memory studies with institutionalizing, and in a way immortalizing, locations considered of special value for the memory and identity of groups, as I discuss below.

The relation between memory and place dates back to ancient classical culture and it is still relevant in our days. In both basic meanings of the term memory, namely the faculty to remember and the shared knowledge and experience of a group that often characterize this group, places have been used as containers of meaning and parts of the very basis that sustains memories. This is no less true for Japanese Americans and Canadians because of the particular sites where they were interned. The American poet Lawson Fusao Inada wrote in the poem "Concentration Constellation" that the camps were a kind of constellation drawn on the American soil:

It's all right there on the map

It's all right there on the mind.

Find it. If you care to look for. (27)

The poem shows that the camps are as much mental creations as they are actual locations, which illustrates the point above about their psychological importance. More than sixty years after the internment, the camps, or what remains of them, still have a strong effect on the minds of Japanese Americans, and their mark can still be found on the country:

Now regard what sort of shape
 this constellation takes.
 It sits there like a jagged scar,
 massive, on the massive landscape.
 It lies there like the rusted wire
 of a twisted and remembered face. (28)

As constellations are an imaginary shape drawn by human beings based on the position of the stars, so does Inada, who sees his constellation as a metaphorical scar tearing the American soil like an old wire fence swirling its way across the vast expanse where the camps lie, a witness to what happened there decades ago. As Inada looks back on the American camps to reflect on their significance now, so does Kogawa discuss the role of the key sites of the Japanese Canadian internment in shaping Japanese Canadian memory and identity. In *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, Kogawa gives readers a complex and intimate view of how places become sites of memory after the events and how they continue to influence individuals and groups related to them.

One way to analyze the relation between memory and places in Kogawa's novels is the concept of sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), created by the French historian Pierre Nora. In Nora's words, a site of memory is anything "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (7), that is, anything that represents part of a group's collective memory and identity in a conscious manner, in a deliberate effort to invest these sites with symbolic value. Nora coined the term for his extensive research of French memory and identity, but it has been used outside this sphere since the publication of his *Realms of Memory*. Hue-Tam Ho Tai explains that Nora included

among his *lieux de mémoire* “real people (René Descartes and Joan of Arc), mythic ones (the Good Soldier, Nicolas Chauvin), battles (Verdun), competitions (the Tour de France), and novels (Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*)” (907), which shows that collective memory can take several different shapes as it is perceived by the groups in which the sites are immersed.

According to Patrick Hutton, Nora had great influence from Maurice Halbwachs (88) although the latter thought *nation* was too large to be considered as a group sharing memories in a cohesive way. Whitehead points out this apparent discrepancy between the two thinkers (138) – which is not my focus here – but explains that Nora’s concept of memory as different from history comes from his predecessor (141). For Nora, “Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded on its name. It remains in permanent evolution ... History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (8). Thus, Nora sees memory as something spontaneous, taking place in the interaction of the individuals that make up a group and independent from history, which supposedly lacks that interaction. Similarly, Hutton writes that, for Halbwachs, history “establishes differences between the past and the present” (76) instead of similarities. Connerton adds to that dichotomy that “[h]istorical reconstruction is thus not dependent on social memory” (14) because it works by analyzing and classifying traces according to its own criteria. Nora contends that real memory lies not in material remains of the past, or traces, but in gestures, thoughts, habits, skills, etc. ingrained in members of a group and passed on through generations (13), as opposed to modern memory, “experienced as a duty.”

As we can see, Nora’s relationship with sites of memory is complex to a certain extent because he is the first to acknowledge their “voluntary” nature as opposed to the spontaneity of what he regards as true memory. In spite of this, *Obasan* and *Itsuka* still afford us the chance to see how places can be sites of memory, not in the strict sense discussed above, but because

Kogawa puts individual memories – which are the basis of the narrative – in traces found in those places and makes them speak on behalf of the Japanese Canadians that were there at some point of their history. It has been said that *Obasan* is divided into random episodes of Naomi's past (Amoko 32). Another way to divide it is into places. Chronologically, Naomi's story starts in Vancouver, then it moves to Slocan, the Albertan beet farm and the towns of Cecil and Granton after the internment. *Itsuka* focuses on these last two places and Naomi's eventual move to Toronto. All these places are meaningful not only to her, but also to Japanese Canadians in general because many of them, if not most, were there at some point given their tendency to stay together. Therefore, Naomi's topical memories reflect her group membership as well as her individuality.

The first place we should discuss is Naomi's house in Vancouver because of what it means to her. She spent little time there with her family, before the internment, so for her home was the place of innocence and joy that she associates with her parents and life as it should be for a child. Because of the traumatic way in which she was separated from home and her parents, and because of the painful experiences that followed, she now sees home as an ideal place, almost as if home were not the memory of a real time, but a utopia, or a non-place, where she goes to escape a dull present. In *Itsuka*, she says, "I tramp about the prairies never speaking of our days in Vancouver. Somehow I know we will never return to the house where Happiness lived" (22). The contrast between the vast open prairies and the comfort of home is meaningful because it underscores the fact that her attachment to the past stops her being happy in the present. That attachment persists because home connects her to her family – her closest group – which was shattered by the internment, thus leaving her having to cope with loneliness and silence since Obasan and Uncle Sam were unwilling to share their memory of the painful wartime events.

Naomi's careful description of her home in *Obasan* displays a spatial organization that relies on spaces to build her memory in an accurately, but ultimately idealized, way, much in the same way that photographs are often the result of a careful manipulation of images. Her method is strikingly similar to the *ars memoriae* developed in ancient Greece, particularly the technique known as method of loci. We know it thanks to surviving classical texts such as the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero's *De Oratore* and Quintilian's *De Institutio Oratoria*. The method of loci uses places, real or imaginary, to contain individual memories or parts of larger memories one wishes to remember, in order to facilitate memorizing. According to Frances Yates, mnemonic devices like this were developed in Greece and Rome to aid rhetoric; memory was considered one of the parts of rhetoric that the Greek or Roman man had to master to be an effective speaker. Therefore, the art of memory lay at the basis of Greco-Roman politics and culture and "travelled down the European tradition" (Yates 2).

The author of *Rhetorica* states that there are two kinds of memory, "one natural and the other the product or art" (207), and then explains that the latter kind consists of "backgrounds and images" (209). Backgrounds can be "a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, and an arch or the like." As a rule, they should be conspicuous and sequential to make themselves and their respective images more striking to the mind. The images, which are what one wishes to remember, work by association: they should stand for a specific subject matter or words, in the case of a speech or poem. Memorizing images surrounded by backgrounds is, thus, like walking around in a building – or past several buildings – looking at many images stored in them and being aroused into remembering by their carefully designed power. According to Yates, in Greece and Rome the method of loci found support in Aristotle's theory that apprehending knowledge requires turning sensory input into images: "Imagination is intermediary between perception and thought" (Yates 32). The need for order also matches Aristotle in *On Memory and Reminiscence*, where he argues that "in order of succession, the mnemonic movements are to one another as

objective facts” (Part 2 §), that is, images make more sense, and are more easily recalled, when arranged in a sequence. A notable example how this technique is applied nowadays is the British memory expert and author Dominic O’Brien. He can memorize sequences of hundreds of playing cards and other objects using his Journey Method. This method consists of associating each card or object to an individual and then mentally placing them in particular places that O’Brien chooses. Then, O’Brien goes on an imaginary journey to these places and meets each individual, thus recalling the items (*O’Brien*). The way to connect each individual/card is by creating a story, however strange, so the Journey Method also relies on narrative to help commit data to memory.

Although there is not mention to the “memory palace” method in Kogawa, Naomi’s mental tour of her house bears a great resemblance with it because of how we see her memories as images or scenes taking place in specific rooms. Oddly, Naomi thinks her childhood house “does not bear remembering” (60) – maybe not in the traumatic way she is used to – since she is able to recall it vividly. Her memories of home are like the walk described above, separate backgrounds with striking images in each. Her observation, “If I search the caverns of my mind, I come to a collage of images” (61), provides more evidence of the similarity between how she organizes her memories and the ancient *ars memoriae*, for she uses a cavern, a dark deep place, as a metaphor for the storage capacity of the human brain and the human ability to retrieve memories even a time after it experience becomes memory. She describes each room in detail and finds something whose prominence in that background produces images of human presence. In the living room, she finds, among other objects, toys that remind her of Stephen and herself playing. From the living room, Naomi goes to the music room and there she finds her musical instruments that conjure images of her parents’ music sessions and her father teaching Stephen. A statue of a legendary Japanese teacher standing out in the room evokes her father’s storytelling. Next, she goes to the study and then upstairs to her bedroom, thus covering the parts of the

house that are the most significant. Aunt Emily laments abandoning her house due to the internment because of the “irreplaceable mementos” she gathered over time (102) and will lose.

Applying the theory of *loci memoriae* to *Obasan* highlights the way in which it explores memory not only as it is instituted commemoratively, but also how it influences the narrative itself. It is also an insight into how and why individuals remember. Aunt Emily’s claim that one must remember everything – otherwise, one is an amputee – suggests that collective and cultural memory can only exist if individuals sustain it by contributing their own stories. Read in this light, *Obasan* resonates with criticism of what seems an overwhelming power of the collective in memory studies. According to Whitehead, Halbwachs was criticized for his “emphasis on the collective memory, at the expense of individual acts of recollection,” which led critics to try to refine his categories and cover deficiencies in his theory (129). As for Kogawa, we can see that most of her narrative in *Obasan* and *Itsuka* has the shape of individual recollection and yet it does not fail to relate to the collective around it. Kogawa’s sites of memory bring together different personal narratives into interchange, thus overlapping different collective memories, as is the case of the internment site depicted in *Obasan*, Slocan.

According to an Internet source, the Slocan Valley in British Columbia was settled in the 1890s when the region saw the growth of a mining industry (*Slocan*). By the 1940s, the town of Slocan had been abandoned and today what remains has become a tourist attraction. In *Obasan*, we follow the struggle of Japanese Canadians to survive and thrive in the harsh conditions of an uninhabited location, bringing Slocan back to life and trying to remain together when everyday people are relocated, arrested or sent to labor camps. Again, as they try to turn an old, rustic hut into a proper home, the house is a place of communion, safety and strengthening of ties. Two decades later, Naomi and her family revisit Slocan and find that there are no traces of their presence left: “The first ghosts were still there, the miners ... But what of the second wave? What remains of our time here?” (138). Though they still knew what they had gone through

there, Naomi is sorry about the removal of traces that helped tell their story and would still do it after she and the others were gone. Instead, their huts were removed and the area left to be reclaimed by its original cover in a deliberate attempt of erasure. What one finds there now is a lumber operation “owned by someone who lived in New York” (139), a suggestion that further human interference in the land might erase the traces and the memory of the internment altogether.

An example of how memory can perish with individuals is the native Canadian Rough Lock Bill, descendant of a nation that once lived there. He tells Naomi the origin of the name Slocan (from the wrong phrase “Slow can go”) from a story of how native Canadians first arrived in that area. The story is probably fictional since the name is said to come from a native Canadian language (*Our Local History*), but regardless of that Rough Lock Bill stands out as the bearer of a less known memory of a place once inhabited by three different peoples – natives, whites, and Japanese – that can disappear if it is not preserved and passed on. *Obasan* suggests that the memories of a specific group can go beyond its boundaries to reach other groups sharing the same space, thus creating a larger collective related to that space, in this case Slocan. Evidence of this is Naomi saying to Obasan “Slow can go” when the elderly woman climbs up the stairs of the attic, something that both of them know because they became part of the collective memory of Slocan.

Kogawa continues to explore Naomi’s relationship with houses in *Itsuka*. A year and a half after Uncle Sam dies in *Obasan*, Naomi brings her elderly aunt to live with her and sells her old house, but not without immense regret. Though only Obasan had remained there, Naomi thinks of the house as a family member given life by the countless objects and the stories they told:

Obasan has spent has spent her lifetime treasuring these things that I am now throwing away ... I’m an undertaker disemboweling and embalming a still

breathing body, removing heart, limbs, lifeblood, all the arteries, memories that keep one connected to the world, transforming this comatose little family into a corpse. (83)

Finally, the house is knocked down and Naomi thinks, “Our shack of memories disappears forever” (84). With Uncle Sam and Obasan dead and Stephen far away, she is left as an individual without ties to the places she inhabits. Though this uprooting is painful, I argue that by ridding herself of the sites and traces she was emotionally bound to, Naomi releases herself to move on to a new life. She also visits her mother’s grave in Japan, another site tying her to the past that she finally comes to terms with. Signaling a clear break, she moves to Toronto, Aunt Emily’s city, and gradually finds herself engaged with the Japanese Canadian redress movement. Toronto is not heavy with memories as the previous places had been, so it serves as the stage where she can leave aside her individuality to help the collective cause of redress.

This drastic change of setting also reflects in the language of *Itsuka*, in which the reader can notice a break in Kogawa’s narrative aesthetics. Before Naomi moves to Toronto, the prose style is very similar to that of *Obasan*, with metaphors, symbolism and imagery related to the landscapes Naomi knew, especially the prairies. Once she is in Toronto, the language is stripped of those features and becomes more matter-of-fact as the novel takes readers to the politics of the Japanese Canadian redress movement, of which matter-of-fact Aunt Emily Kato is one of the leaders. This change in style probably accounts for the less favorable criticism *Itsuka* received in comparison to its predecessor (Lefebvre 163). That notwithstanding, *Itsuka* accomplishes what it is supposed to, namely to give Naomi’s story a conclusion and to show readers, albeit through the lens of fiction, what outcome the redress movement had and how it was achieved. In this process, Kogawa continues to develop the relation between memory and spaces that we see in *Obasan*. As I attempted to show, places are a major constituent of Japanese American and Japanese Canadian memory, and in Kogawa they influence the narrative itself. In fact, it is even

possible to divide *Obasan* and *Itsuka* by places, or stations, in which certain parts of the story take place. Because Naomi's story is embedded in a larger context, the Japanese Canadian internment, the places and their respective memories that appear therein are representative of the collective memory of Japanese Canadians, collective memory being the product of individual memories supporting and adding to each other like separate threads make sense when woven together into a pattern.

Chapter 4: Someday

The literature of the internment depicts an exceptional moment in American and Canadian histories: the uprooting and incarceration of thousands of individuals, most of them citizens, whose only fault was being ethnically Japanese, “the enemy race” in World War II. *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* were published many years before the appearance of scholarly literature about the internment such as used in this thesis, yet they remain authoritative sources for understanding the causes and consequences of this unprecedented event. This is partly because they are accurate to their historical backgrounds, but mostly because, in those backgrounds, they explore human complexities of feeling and character that are possible in fiction, and by doing so they give readers unique insights into the real experience. Their worth lies precisely in how they use invention to portray and discuss the internment with a humane perspective. In a way, these novels give the victims, who did not have a say in what befell them, the opportunity to bear witness to their ordeals and to show their countries that they remained American and Canadian citizens despite the harsh treatment they received. Hence, *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* can be considered valuable alternative sources of knowledge of a little known chapter of the history of World War II, for they contradict the wartime misconceptions of the “yellow peril,” which derived from the misbelief in the incapacity of the Japanese to assimilate into the American and Canadian ways of life. Both novels illustrate the difficulties that Japanese immigrants and their descendants encountered to become Americans and Canadians when these terms were in fact exclusionary constructions of nationhood reflecting the dominant culture of these two countries, a situation which applies to other ethnic minorities as well.

Central to how *Obasan* and *No-No Boy* fictionalize the internment experience is what I call “the language of redress,” or the self-consciousness both novels display in the fact that language

is the instrument the characters use to deal with the psychological scars of the internment. Both are testimonial narratives in which the silenced subjects are empowered once again with speech, which they use to redeem themselves and come to terms. *Obasan* shows us that language can be used to distort and hide facts, but also to cause empathy and reach understanding. On the other hand, it also reminds us that the kind of damage Naomi suffers cannot be undone or repaired, not even by governmental redress although it is a necessary acknowledgement of guilt. In an interesting turn of events, *Obasan* ends with an excerpt from a petition sent to the Canadian Congress in 1946 demanding the end of the internment, and in 1988 the novel itself was read in the same Congress when it finally gave Japanese Canadians redress (Goellnicht 5), which shows that *Obasan* had significant influence in leading to this outcome. As regards *No-No Boy*, Okada's narrative attempts to portray the process of readjustment that Ichiro undergoes in a linguistic/psychological manner. Ichiro's recreating his self – or his personal narrative – is visible in the language of his thoughts and how they influence his actions. Caught among exclusionary ideologies of race and loyalty, Ichiro says no to the draft thinking that he has renounced his right to call himself American, but throughout the novel he reasons with himself and those around him that his act was not morally reproachable and that he and his country must find a compromise and learn from each other's mistakes. The result is a unique narrative whose formal aspects have been largely ignored by criticism, much to its own loss since it bears witness to Ichiro's struggle in a way that allows insights into the anxieties and concerns of the Japanese American community at the time.

In connection to the aspect of the language, the main topic developed in this thesis is the relation of the two novels with the collective memory of Japanese Americans and Canadians. *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* can be considered works of collective memory because both draw from and contribute to it. By using their experiences to write fiction, Okada and Kogawa helped to create the postwar identity of their ethnic groups and to increase general awareness of the

internment in the United States and Canada. Readers from their groups can relate to many elements in the depiction of the internment experience and Nikkei culture. *No-No Boy* is a multi-faceted picture of Japanese America after World War II that shows how different groups felt about their current situation, such as the Issei not feeling American although their children did, the Nisei's anger and sense of betrayal by their own country – yet feeling that more than never that they must prove their loyalty – and even how whites, blacks, and Asians felt about each other, which makes *No-No Boy* an remarkable portrayal of ethnic tensions in the United States in the 1940s. *Obasan* also portrays the sense of injustice that Japanese Canadians felt as well as the open demonstration of racial prejudice coming from the Canadian government that incarcerated them. *Itsuka*, which means “someday” in Japanese, brings this story of endurance and hope to a close by narrating the struggle for redress, which came in Canada in the same year as it did in the United States, 1988. *No-No Boy* and *Obasan* can be called memory sites, creations where living memory of shared language, habits, gestures, and stories is crystallized into cultural memory and identity that everyone can appreciate. Their relevance to contemporary American and Canadian literary studies also shows that literature can take part in discussions of major political and historical issues without losing its essence of aesthetic value, story-telling, and insight into humanity.

Embedded in the memory discussed above is the lesson that events such as the internment are much more than just technicality, that is, measures disguised under the term “necessity,” involving relatively few people and supposedly causing no major harm to them. The ordeals Japanese Americans and Canadians went through remind us of how harmful racial prejudice can be, especially when fomented by those who should stand against it: governments.

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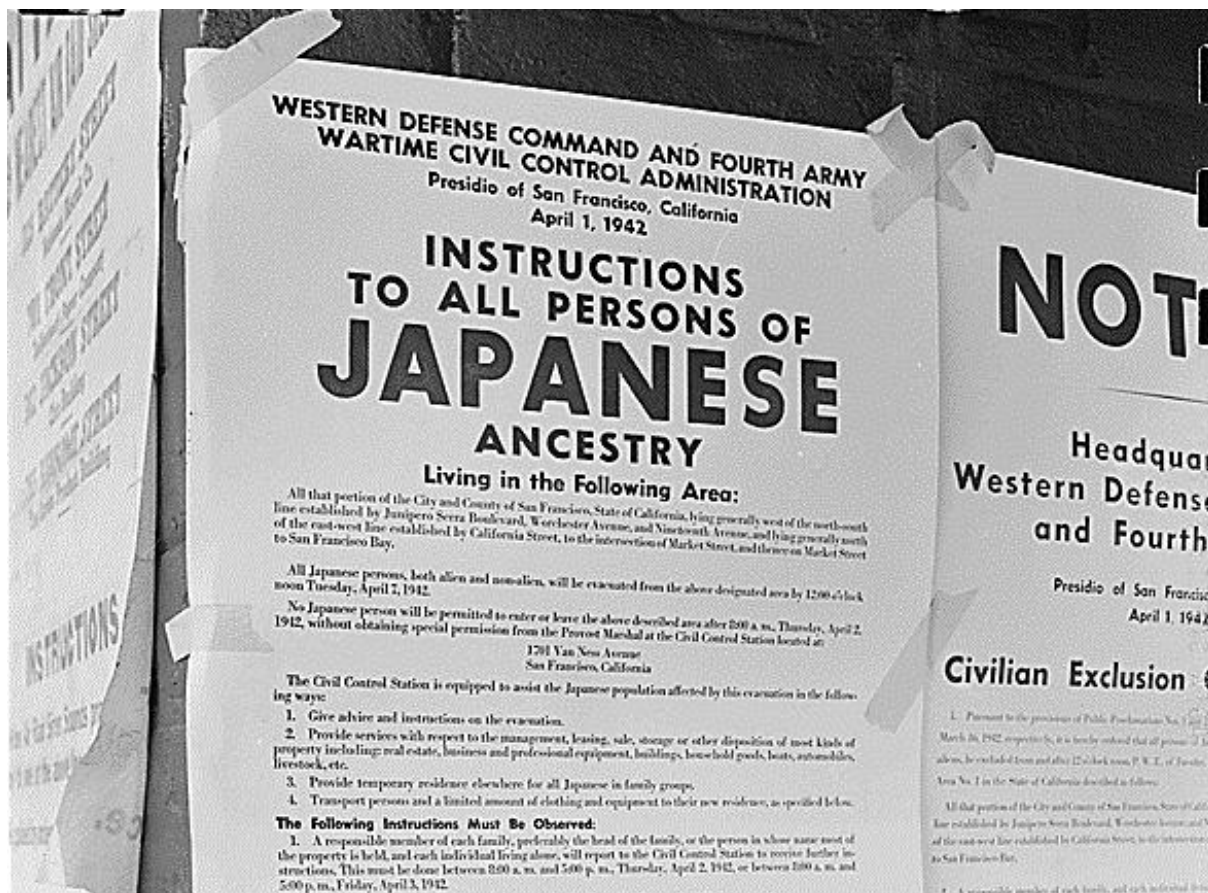
Appendix: Internment Photographs

Map of relocation camps and further War Relocation Authority institutions



Source: "Japanese American internment." *Wikipedia*. Web. Access 10 Jun 2012.

Poster with instructions to Japanese Americans before relocation



Source: "Japanese American internment." *Wikipedia*. Web. Access 10 Jun 2012.

“Manzanar from Guard Tower, view west”



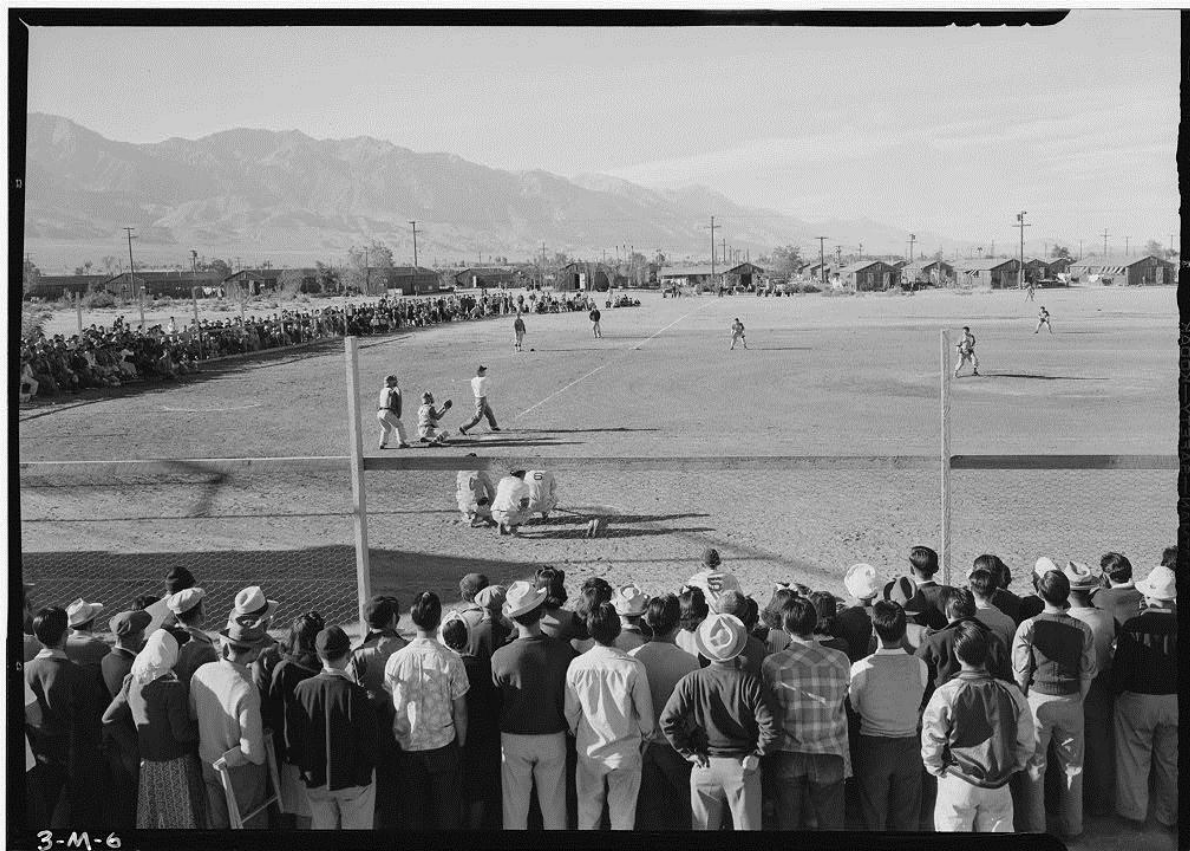
Source: “Ansel's Adams Photographs of Japanese-American Internment at Manzanar.” *The Library of Congress*. Web. Access 10 Jun 2012.

“Farm, farm workers, Mount Williamson in background”



Source: “Ansel's Adams Photographs of Japanese-American Internment at Manzanar.” *The Library of Congress*. Web. Access 10 Jun 2012.

“Baseball”



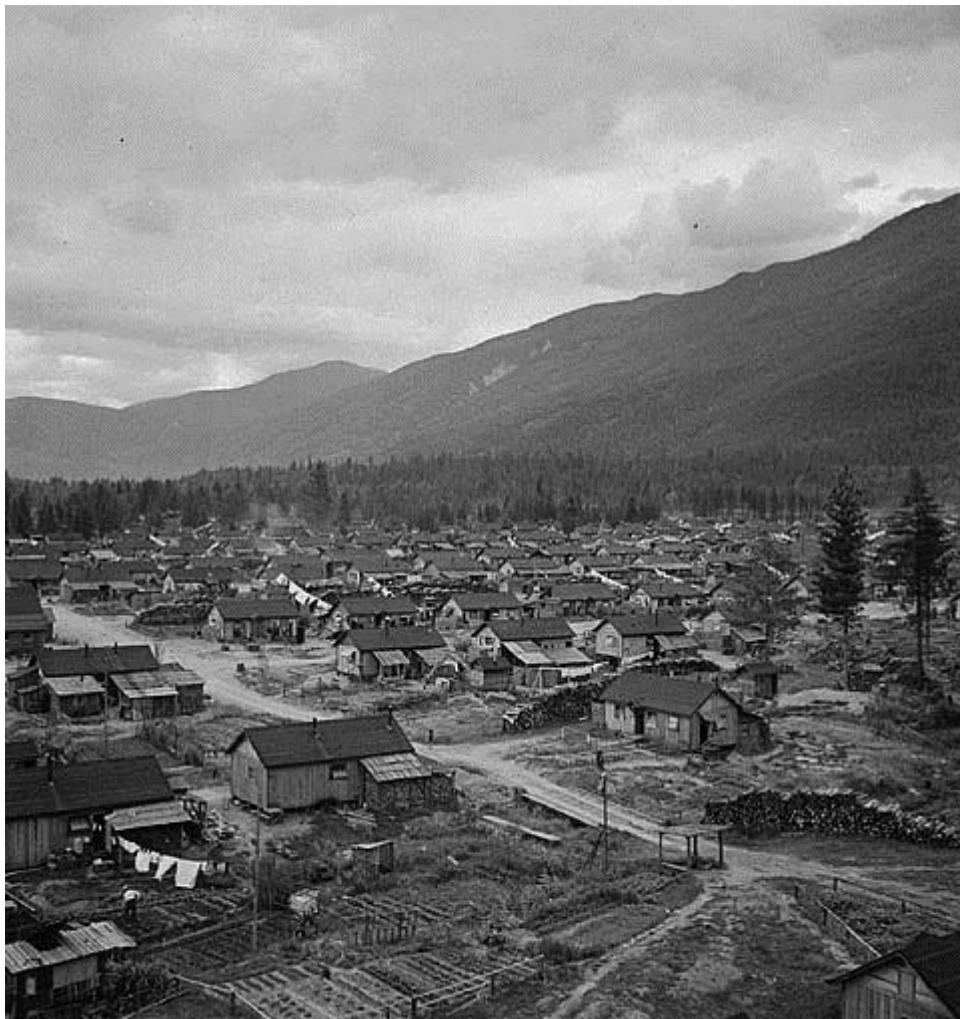
Source: “Ansel's Adams Photographs of Japanese-American Internment at Manzanar.” *The Library of Congress*. Web. Access 10 Jun 2012.

Canadian officer confiscates Japanese Canadian boat



Source: "Japanese Canadian internment." *Wikipedia*. Web. Access 10 Jun 2012.

Japanese Canadian internment camp



Source: "Japanese Canadian internment." *Wikipedia*. Web. Access 10 Jun 2012.