

“I don’t like that word,” I had to say in my bad, small-person’s voice that makes no impact. The boss never deigned to answer.

Kingston may have had a small-person, no-impact voice, but *The Woman Warrior* speaks with a verve, muscle, and energy befitting combat. Finally, the book pivots out of that girlhood among ghosts to a sterling grown-up-ness that prefigures the American Obama generation. To the mother, still lamenting after forty years in the US on the loss of their land in China, the American-born daughter says,

“We belong to the planet now, mama. Does it make sense to you that we are no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot.”

More than thirty years after *The Woman Warrior* appeared, this seemingly domestic fancy offers us a hard lesson in our common fate of species extinction, global-warming catastrophes, and increasing refugee movements. The US is the first model of a territorial space in which all incoming identities

enter the process of becoming an imagined community greater than their specific individual selves and communities. The “Chinese” in Kingston’s densely worked vision is only one piece in the planetary identity-imaginary to which, her book claims, every human owes fealty.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim is the author of Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands.

Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*: An Essential Asian American Text?

Donald C. Goellnicht

I first taught an Asian North American text in the mid-1980s in an “English for Engineers” course where the students were predominantly white and almost exclusively male. That text was Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), and I selected it for three reasons that I still remember distinctly: 1) it uncovers a part of Canadian history—the Internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War—that has been well documented by academic historians but that had been silenced in the Canadian public sphere and in school histories, so that Canadians are often ignorant of this significant manifestation of racism, intolerance, and human rights violations in the nation’s history; 2) it tackles a number of feminist issues, including mother-daughter relationships and the theme of silence and speech, and I wanted this overwhelmingly male class to engage with issues of gender as well as race; 3) aesthetically, it’s a powerful novel that blends genres—from documentary reportage, letters, and newspaper clippings to lyric poetry and adapted folklore—and employs complex narrative techniques that I wanted the students to grasp and appreciate. That an appreciation of these postmodern narrative techniques would clash with the humanist approach to history that underlay my first objective didn’t register with me at the time; only later did I take up the challenging issues of the relationship between history and fiction in Kogawa’s novel.

A quarter century later, I recognize that *Obasan* is the Asian North American text that I have taught most frequently—and that it does all the work I demanded of it in the mid-1980s and more. It has grown in richness and complexity over the years of teaching and learning (for I am constantly learning from the texts I teach) to the point where it resonates with many of the major issues and themes I consider necessary to explore in a course on Asian American literature. To that extent, it is an “essential” text. In the brief exploration that follows here, I will try to give a sense of the range of themes and issues it introduces, although I acknowledge from the outset that I cannot do justice to them in this limited space.

The internment of Japanese Americans and Canadians is one of the foundational narratives of Asian American studies, and Kogawa’s was the first full-scale novel published in either the US or Canada to deal directly with the Internment by an author who had experienced those events. John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) had dealt with the traumatic aftermath of the Internment in the US but had not treated the historical events directly; Hisaye Yamamoto’s short story “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950), set in an internment camp, explores the devastating physical and psychological effects of the Internment, but the story was not made widely available until King-Kok Cheung collected it in 1988; while memoirs like Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953) and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (1972) did not employ fictional techniques in their treatment of past events. Novels about the Internment by the post-Internment generation, like Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field* (1998) and Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002), come much later. Sakamoto acknowledges the impact of *Obasan* on the writing of her own novel, stating: “I really didn’t want to tell the story of internment...because I think it’s been done before, very beautifully, in Joy Kogawa’s book, *Obasan*, which is just seminal.”

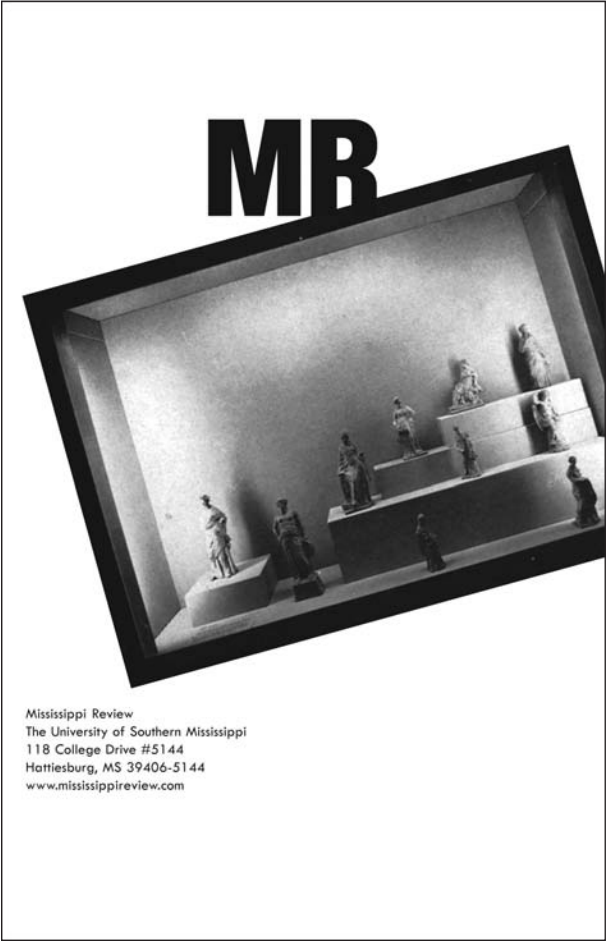
Kogawa’s is a groundbreaking novel for Asian North American studies; given its uniqueness and power, it is no surprise that this Asian Canadian text was quickly adopted by Asian Americanists as, in the words of Guy Beauregard in “Asian American Studies, Asian Canadian Questions,” “a canonical Japanese American text of internment.” *Obasan* won the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award (1982) and the American Library Association’s Notable Book Award (1982) and quickly appeared on Asian American course lists. It is the only Canadian novel to be included in the MLA’s *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature* (2001). Such an adoption is itself problematic, however, and leads to its own set of pedagogical opportunities. It raises the question

of US cultural imperialism, a question that in Asian American studies usually gets raised in relation to US relations with Asia, but almost never in relation to US cultural relations with Canada. That *Obasan* was so quickly absorbed into Asian American studies speaks to the deep need for such a text in US academic institutions, but it is a need that has been filled at a price. As Henry Yu points out in “Towards a Pacific History of the Americas,” we must guard against “rely[ing] on Kogawa’s novel for details about Japanese American internment,” must acknowledge that the Japanese Canadian internment was not the same as the Japanese American internment. *Obasan*, then, opens up opportunities for discussions of what constitutes the boundaries of Asian American studies, of how we define the field itself—Asian North American? Asian in the Americas? Asian diasporic literatures?—as well as of the relationship between Asian American and Asian Canadian studies. What is gained and lost by employing a comparative model across national borders?

Obasan has also fulfilled an important function in Canadian literary studies as an exemplary test case for examining the complex relationship between the writing of history and fiction. Kogawa skillfully weaves historical narrative and documentary evidence into her autobiographical novel in such a way that the text can be taken up as enacting theoretical ideas about historiography. In particular, it has emerged as a site of debate between postmodern/poststructuralist theories of history, especially those of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra—whether Kogawa is writing what Linda Hutcheon classifies as “historiographic metafiction” in which the past is knowable only through its textual traces and “truth” is seen as discursively constructed—and liberal humanist/realist views of history as being able to reproduce the objective truth about the past.

As well as functioning as an exemplary site for examining questions of how we might know the past, *Obasan* also raises important questions about the efficacy and power of literary texts to influence the present and change the future. After the success of *Obasan*, Kogawa herself took on an important role in the Japanese Canadian Redress Movement, and some critics have argued that *Obasan*, as a widely read and frequently taught text (both in schools and universities), had a profound influence on changing the Canadian public’s attitudes toward Japanese Canadian Redress in particular and histories of racial injury more generally. The national significance of this text for the Redress movement is evident in the fact that passages from *Obasan* were read in the Canadian House of Commons on September 22, 1988

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when the Redress settlement was announced by the government of Brian Mulroney.

Further questions about the extra-textual effects of *Obasan* can be teased out. Roy Miki and Scott Toguri McFarlane have raised the truly critical matter of “institutional readings that consistently fail to account for issues of appropriation and misrepresentation.” They assert that Kogawa’s is a text that enables white readers and critics alike to focus on an individual’s transcendence over racism and injustice, thus depoliticizing the narrative and transforming it into a “universal” story. The novel thus becomes a critical site for us to examine how texts by racialized minorities get marketed and received. Has *Obasan* been marketed in such a way as to alleviate white guilt over the Internment by catering to white readers’ desire to read for multicultural reconciliation and resolution, an approach that enables “us” to relegate racism in Canada to the past, and to see it as an aberration that has been replaced by tolerant multiculturalism rather than as a constitutive part of the founding of the Canadian nation?

Obasan is also an excellent text for exploring a number of other important issues in Asian American literature. Kogawa’s treatment of Naomi’s (the protagonist’s) and the Japanese Canadian

community’s struggles between silence and speech, in part represented by her two aunt’s, Obasan and Emily, is especially subtle, drawing as it does on Japanese as well as Western attitudes towards these seemingly opposed concepts. As King-Kok Cheung’s equally subtle analysis of this aspect of the novel in *Articulate Silences* makes clear, Kogawa doesn’t privilege either condition, but uncovers the strengths and weaknesses of each, maintaining a tension between the two rather than asserting the triumph of one over the other. The related theme of mother-daughter relationships, with the added complexity of surrogate mothers, is also particularly well handled. In dealing with both of these topics, valuable comparisons can be made to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Kogawa’s treatment of trauma and its after-effects, the psychic wounds left with the individual (Naomi’s sexual abuse by white Old Man Gower and the loss of her Mother in the Nagasaki bombing) and with the community (the Internment and the resulting losses), is also particularly rich and resonates profoundly with the treatment of trauma and loss in a host of other Asian American texts.

In my more recent teaching of Kogawa’s novel, I also find it useful to point out the connections it

makes between Japanese Canadians and First Nations people, in particular the use of Rough Lock Bill as a guide and mentor to Naomi. The portrayal here is one of sympathetic understanding and mutual respect between two persecuted, racialized groups, although there is a tendency towards romanticizing First Nations people, which Kogawa develops further in *Itsuka* (1993), the sequel to *Obasan*. There is in the novel no consideration of Asian Canadians as possible settlers who have participated in the displacement of First Nations from their land, a topic that develops in later texts like SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990) in a Canadian context and in a number of texts by Asian American writers in Hawai’i; but that discussion, so pressing in the current moment, can profitably be introduced.

It is for the range of issues it raises and the Canadian perspective it brings to Asian (North) American literary studies that I still find *Obasan* a compelling and “essential” text to teach.

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Old Landmarks, New Landscapes

Donatella Izzo

In his introductory story to *The Piazza Tales* (1856), Herman Melville’s narrator needs to decide the best geographical orientation for the piazza he intends to add to his house in the Berkshires. Mesmerized by the majesty of Mount Greylock, lying among the northern hills like Charlemagne among his peers, he weighs the pros and cons of east, west, and south, but after listing the presumable advantages of each, he goes back to the same refrain: “But, to the north is Charlemagne.”

This episode kept coming to my mind as I was trying to determine which Asian American text I should choose as the indispensable one. Over the years, I have read, enjoyed, and taught many, by authors as diverse as Hisaye Yamamoto and Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Chang-rae Lee and Fae Myenne Ng, Jessica Hagedorn and R. Zamora Linmark, David Henry Hwang and Gish Jen, Monique Truong and Nam Le. Some of these authors’ books are among those that, over the last few years, I have more deeply loved and admired as a reader, and have been more intrigued and stimulated by as a scholar. Indeed, my shortlist for this essay included Ng’s *Bone* (1993) (as well as her recent *Steer Towards Rock* [2008]), Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1995), and Truong’s *The Book*

of Salt (2003) as books deserving, or rather demanding, mention as *the* Asian American novel to be reckoned with in a course. All three, each in its own way, share a thrust that I find especially generative in contemporary Asian American literature (and indeed, in contemporary literature as a whole): a capacity to create the complexity of structure, richness of texture, subtlety of signification, and evocativeness of prose that produce a nuanced, multilayered, and deeply involving reading experience in aesthetic terms, while simultaneously sustaining a relentless investigation of the Asian American condition both in its historical and social specificity *and* in its potential capacity to stand for numberless other alienations and self-alienations. Additionally, each of these novels conducts a self-aware interrogation of the very literary tradition from which it draws, and brings to Asian American literature a new twist that changes, so to speak, the rules of the game, widening and complicating the received image of the field, and creating new and exciting possibilities.

And yet, while both my tastes as a reader and my convictions as a scholar lean towards the most ambitious and innovative works of the last couple of decades, when faced with the choice of only one text, I find myself almost automatically endowing Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) with the same landmark function in the Asian American landscape that Mount Greylock acquires in Melville’s “The Piazza.”

This may have something to do with my own personal history: a gift from a very dear friend, received and read at a special juncture in my life, when I was going to give birth to my son, that book spoke to me not just as an American literature critic and teacher, whom the book was introducing to a whole new and up to that point unsuspected field, but also as a feminist, as a daughter and a would-be mother, and as part of a supportive female continuum capable of addressing my frailties and of evoking my strengths in new and empowering ways. My copy of the old 1977 paperback—its pages yellowed by age and heavily marked, its cover deplorably gnarled by the traumas of an overly adventurous life—still

carries to this day a wealth of affective overtones, which it is capable of eliciting at sight.

Quite apart from these intimate resonances, though, my choice of *The Woman Warrior* as the *sine qua non* of an Asian American syllabus is also grounded in a number of wider considerations that can be argued in scholarly rather than in personal ways. The first consideration is general and historiographic: while certainly not the first, and possibly not the best, text of Asian American literature, *The Woman Warrior* is the book that inaugurated it as a recognizable field, intervening in the pre-existing literary space in ways that gave it visibility and established its reputation, as much by its nation-wide success as through the polemics it originated within the Asian American community. In many ways, the Asian American literary field has defined itself around *The Woman Warrior*, whether by imitation, competition, or opposition—in “orthodox” or “heretical” ways, as Pierre Bourdieu would put it—with the effect of reinscribing its landmark function even while it tried to subvert it or leave it behind. In other words, *The Woman Warrior* has an unassailable canonical status within both Asian American literature and contemporary US literature as a whole. This very circumstance endows it with an added value: in its successful crossover to the general reading public and to a diversity of syllabi unrelated to Asian American concerns, *The Woman Warrior* stands as a reminder both of the potentialities and of the dangers of a racially unmarked effect. By standing at the intersection of the “ethnic canon” with the canon *tout court*, it marks the site both of a confluence and of a contradiction.

But then, the notion of canon is of course highly suspicious, and a text’s canonical status can hardly be taken as sufficient ground for inclusion in a syllabus. Why should we reinscribe the canon in our teaching, thus embracing and reproducing the assumptions that have produced it, with an inevitably immobilizing effect? Let me proceed, at this point, from the more general to more specific

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