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JULIE BANERJEE MEHTA  
*Loreto College*

# The Interned, the *Nikutai*, and the *Kokutai*: Triply Silenced Japanese in Canada and Japan

**Keywords:** Japanese Internment, Canada, bodies, silence, Kogawa, Sakamoto, Goto, Nagasaki

## ABSTRACT

This article argues that scholarly literature overlooks how the three Japanese-Canadian writers—Joy Kogawa, Kerri Sakamoto, and Hiromi Goto—address the representations of the treatment of Japanese-Canadians trapped in Japan, and Japanese victims of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In this article, the author attempts to fill some of the hollows and make some of the connections that she found missing. This interrogation ferrets out the utter complexity of tellings of egregious attempts at silencing in three ways—by the Anglo-Canadian State, by

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Japanese patriarchy and, more fascinatingly, by Japanese-Canadians themselves who wanted to forget the ignominy, stigma, and shame of being reduced to the abject, decimated, dispossessed body. This project excavates the literary representations of the horror of the 22,000 Japanese-Canadians whom the Canadian State terrorized by detention in internment camps through the Second World War, on the one hand, while simultaneously exploring how Japan “othered,” shunned, and stigmatized all Japanese, including Japanese-Canadian victims of the nuclear bomb who were caught between worlds in Japan during the war, on the other, as represented in the fictional works by the three Canadian authors.<sup>1</sup>

Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall are only pock marks on the earth. . . would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply.

- Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, preface.<sup>2</sup>

The girl with long ringlets who sits in front of Stephen said to him: “All the Jap kids at school are going to be sent away, and they’re bad and you’re a Jap.” And so, Stephen tells me, am I. “Are we?” I ask Father. “No,” Father says. “We’re Canadian.”

It is a riddle, Stephen tells me. We are both the enemy and not the enemy.

- Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, 67.

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<sup>1</sup> “Japanese Canadians: From Immigration to Deportation,” Library and Archives Canada, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/Pages/japanese-immigration.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Toronto: Penguin, 2006), preface.



Reiko had made up the bed with a quilt she had sewn herself. . . They fell into it as if it were the grass in the graveyard. Her body was the same, her muscular legs curling around and gripping his thighs.

“Let’s make another baby,” she whispered. A strong and healthy one.”

– Kerri Sakamoto, *Floating City*, 119.<sup>3</sup>

“We wanted only your happiness. We decided, your Mom and I, that we would put Japan behind us and fit more smoothly with the crowd. And since that day, when we decided neither of us could speak a word in Japanese. Not a word would pass our lips. We couldn’t even think it.”

– Hiromi Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, 207.<sup>4</sup>

**T**he critical scholarship on the fictional representations of the Japanese Internment in Canada is complex and rich though, surprisingly, not abundant. In my interrogation of the published material, I found a wealth of research on memory and trauma, identity and language, mourning and forgetting, and citizenship and belonging. The approach of the existing scholarship to analysis looks at the contested Japanese–Canadian identity, the affect and effect of the Internment on the community, the coping mechanisms, and redress strategies adopted by the Japanese who lived

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<sup>3</sup> Kerri Sakamoto, *Floating City* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2019), 119.

<sup>4</sup> Hiromi Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Press, 1994), 207.

in Canada. There is scope for more visceral engagement on how the three Japanese–Canadian writers address the representations of the treatment of Japanese–Canadians who were caught between worlds and were victims of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In critical observations on *Obasan* and *One Hundred Million Hearts*, the lives of Japanese–Canadians that are vehemently at stake in Japan find little excavation by scholars. This exploration is novel in the way it ferrets out the complexity of tellings of egregious attempts at silencing in three ways—by the Anglo–Canadian State, by Japanese patriarchy and, more fascinatingly, by Japanese–Canadians themselves who wanted to forget the ignominy, stigma, and shame of being reduced to the abject, decimated, dispossessed body.

The scholars Eglè Kačkutė, Roger Bromley, and Libe García Zarranz, have contributed important insights that address the Japanese–Canadian identity, epistemic violence, and the vexed history of the Japanese Internment that almost decimated an entire community, all of them citizens of Canada.<sup>5</sup> Vikki Visvis’ extensive research and scholarship on collective remembering and forgetting, and her invoking Laurence J. Kirmayer’s ideas of forgetting as a “strategic, conscious and collective act” is crucial to new ways of thinking about the coping mechanisms of Japanese–Canadians, particularly in Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field, One Hundred Million*

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<sup>5</sup> Eglė Kačkutė, “Mother Tongue as the Language of Mothering, and Homing Practice in Betty Quan’s *Mother Tongue* and Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*: Survival Strategies and Identity Construction of Migrant and Refugee Mothers,” in *The Migrant Maternal: “Birthing” New Lives Abroad*, ed. Anna Kuroczycka Schultes and Helen Vallianatos (Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press 2016), 56–73; Roger Bromley, “We Need to Speak Even with Our Mouths on the Ground: Becoming Asian Canadian—*Disappearing Moon Café, Diamond Grill, Chorus of Mushrooms*,” in *Narratives for a New Belonging: Diasporic Cultural Fictions* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000, 96–118; and Libe García Zarranz, “Unruly Corporealities: Hiromi Goto’s Hopeful Fictions,” in *Trans Canadian Feminist Fictions: New Cross-Border Ethics* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2017), 35–45.



*Hearts*, and *Floating City*.<sup>6</sup> In her exhaustive and incisive study of *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field*, Marlene Goldman writes compellingly about loss, memory, and mourning and how they have been “mobilised and reshaped” by Canadians of Japanese ancestry to give voice to their horror of being treated as the enemy, in Canada.<sup>7</sup> Magdalene Redekop’s seminal and trenchant analyses of the menacing State that used all its arsenal to victimize the racialized other, is a useful read, where she collapses the boundaries between history and literature.<sup>8</sup> Inquiries and interrogations of the works of Japanese writers by scholars such as Kimberly Kono, Julia C. Bullock, Yashikuni Igarashi, Hirotsugu Kashiwagi, Pamela Sugiman, and Ann Goman Sunahara have contributed substantially to the topic of the Japanese body in Japan, as represented in the fiction of Japanese writers.<sup>9</sup> This project’s contribution to the existing scholarship is that it draws Japan into the

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<sup>6</sup> Vikki Visvis, “Trauma Remembered and Forgotten: The Figure of the Hysteric in Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 40, no. 3 (September 2007): 67–83.

<sup>7</sup> Marlene Goldman, “A Dangerous Circuit: Loss and the Boundaries of Racialized Subjectivity in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 362–388.

<sup>8</sup> Magdalene Redekop, “The Literary Politics of the Victim,” *Canadian Forum* (November 1989): 14–17.

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Kono, “From the ‘Nikutai’ to the ‘Kokutai’: Nationalizing the Maternal Body in Ushijima Haruko’s ‘Woman,’” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal* 45 (2013): 69–88; Julia C. Bullock, *The Other Women’s Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women’s Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010); Yashikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945–1970* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Kashiwagi Hirotsugu, “Hayashi Kyoko’s ‘Procession on a Cloudy Day,’” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 25, no. 1 (1993): 58–69; Pamela Sugiman, “‘Life is Sweet’: Vulnerability and Composure in the Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadians,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 186–218; and Ann Goman Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War* (James Lorimer & Co, 1981).

lexicon and attempts to examine the menace of how Japan othered its own, who were betrayed not just by Canada but also their motherland.

This article argues, first, that the novels of the Japanese Internment experience in Canada has had a long gestation period before they entered the public sphere because both the novelist and her characters had to deal with complex issues that they must confront, problematize, and take a position on. These issues occurred at the local, national, and global levels, as well as the personal. Then, there were the barriers to their writing, mainly the impulse to let the past remain clouded, to not awaken sleeping demons, to assimilate in the new homeland. A second barrier was Japanese (and most East Asian) culture where shame occupies vast space in social life, where the failure to follow the norms of good behavior results in shame, creating a social environment that does not encourage speaking out, and lays the ground for self-censorship. The sense of shame was so profound that it caused several Japanese-Canadians to commit suicide after returning from their internment because they feared racialized stigmatization by the larger Canadian society. A third barrier was the pressure—subtle and overt—from the patriarchy and the State that wanted them to conform. Yet, barriers by their inherent nature do eventually collapse, allowing for the buried stories to be exhumed.

Secondly, the *nikutai* body can no longer be thought of as timid or as unable to speak truth to power because the three novels under discussion have demonstrated, to varying degrees, that the *nikutai* can, and does speak, recite, and write. The relationship between the *nikutai* and the *kokutai* in Japan was, of course, one of subject and master, where the national body, the *kokutai*, headed by the Emperor, shaped the identity of the *nikutai*, demanding complete loyalty, leaving little space for the *nikutai* to exercise agency. The only way that the *nikutai*



could express itself, in the novels under study, was by mouthing words of anguish, pain, and disappointment at the indifference and neglect they received by the Japanese State after they became victims of the American atomic bombings. The disfigured *nikutai*—with severe burns, physical and psychological deformities, generational impact on motherhood, and grief from their inability to locate family members who had died—remained appended to the body of the *kokutai*, which pushed them away to the fringes of Japanese society. In these ways, the novels are factual documentaries of history.

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Finally, the question of the retention or rejection of the mother tongue has proved to be contentious because some Japanese-Canadians have ticked the reject box, and others have ticked retain. The novels under study have shown a tendency for the older generation to discard their mother tongue in order to conform within white Canadian society, but the next generation has exhibited a greater desire to speak out.



The Oda family from Port Alice, British Columbia, is pictured in front of their new “home” in the Orchard internment camp for Japanese-Canadians in New Denver, British Columbia, in October 1942, in this image entitled “New Arrivals to New Denver.” Photo by the courtesy of the Nikkei National Museum.

Swift on the heels of America’s entry into the Second World War on December 8, 1941, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on the previous



day, Japanese-Canadians, citizens of Canada, were removed from the West Coast. The justification was “military necessity” for the corralling of over 22,000 Canadian citizens who looked “different.” Senior military leaders and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police registered their strong opposition to the incarceration, claiming that Japanese-Canadians were Canadian citizens and did not pose any threat to Canada’s security.

The Canadian administration turned a blind eye to the state machinery that terrorized Japanese-Canadians by herding them out of their homes in a few hours, separating and segregating families, and throwing them into abhorrent, unhygienic, over-crowded cesspools of waste and sewage that served as the Japanese Internment camps located in the interior of British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario. “From the army point of view, I cannot see that Japanese Canadians constitute the slightest menace to national security,” wrote Major-General Kenneth Stuart. Nevertheless, British Columbia politicians were in a rage. They spoke of the Japanese “in the way that the Nazis would have spoken about Jewish Germans,” said Escott Reid, a Canadian diplomat. “When they spoke I felt... the physical presence of evil.” On September 22, 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney delivered an apology, and the Canadian government announced a compensation package, one month after President Ronald Reagan made similar belated gestures in the United States following the internment of Japanese-Americans in the Second World War. Mulroney announced an agreement which included symbolic, individual redress payments of Canadian \$21,000 for each living Japanese-Canadian who had been expelled from the coast in 1942 or who was born before April 1, 1949.

Eighty years later, on May 5, 2021 British Columbia offered a token “recognition” of the historical wrongs caused by the province

when it helped to intern thousands of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War when the province announced a Canadian \$2-million fund for the Nikkei Seniors Health Care and Housing Society to enhance programming for seniors and local communities. A statement from the Ministry of Attorney General said the fund would be used to develop and deliver health and wellness programs to Japanese-Canadian internment survivors. The society and the National Association of Japanese Canadians plan to spread the funds to other organizations supporting survivors.

Over in Japan, the State laid claim to the bodies of its citizens during the Second World War. The body was at the center of the country's nationalistic discourse. The individual body, *nikutai*, that was seen as corporeal, was a foil with the *kokutai* or the national body. The scholar Slaymaker states, "The *kokutai* became a fascist construct, with the emperor at the top of the highly stratified society, and it morphed in the war years into a masculinist force that silenced any semblance of opposition or subversion."<sup>10</sup> Japan's ultra-nationalism pushed their citizens to contribute to collective nationalistic initiatives and abandon their personal needs. The state of the *nikutai* was the microcosm that represented the empire. The bond forged between the macrocosm of the nation and the microcosm of the individual was envisaged as a necessary mirror to each other. The rationale was quite simple: a powerful nation was made up of healthy, strong citizens. Japan employed this theory into praxis: by controlling individual bodies so that they served the interests of Japan was the key to success. The *kokutai* took precedence over the *nikutai*. The military used the bodies of Japanese soldiers and civilians as easily dispensable resources. The

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas N. Slaymaker, *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.



latter, too, had come to believe that they were dying a noble death by sacrificing their physical bodies for the state.

The *nikutai* could not assert themselves for the same reasons why a marginalized people are muzzled in the face of overwhelming patriarchy. The *nikutai* eventually began to speak, first, through the voice of Kogawa's *Obasan* in 1981—who broke the long silence—and then through the other Japanese-Canadians novelists.

### ***Obasan*: Terrorized into Silence**

Joy Kogawa's novel, *Obasan*, had a long gestation period. In an interview with the author on November 6, 2012, Kogawa thoughtfully explained the long timeline of *Obasan* which began as a short story in the 1970s, eventually to be published as a novel in 1981.

In the Sixties when I was writing poetry, hacking up the mountains with a pickaxe, I had written a short story, *Obasan*. After the war, I lived in Coaldale (like Stephen, in *Obasan*). Then, in the late 1970s, I had a very strange dream. In the dream I was told to go to Ottawa, and work in the archives. The article on Coaldale got accepted and someone gave me a sheaf of papers. There was a young woman, Muriel, who I met there, who was passionately upset. At the same time the short story, *Obasan*, was being strengthened. Emily in *Obasan* is based on Muriel. And Granton is Coaldale. At the time I was coming to terms with what happened to my Mother. I find it very hard to speak of my mother.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Joy Kogawa interview with Julie Banerjee Mehta on November 6, 2012, at University College, University of Toronto. In the interview, Kogawa also said, "Some very strange connections just came up while writing *Obasan*, the novel. The name Nakane, for instance. I don't know where it came from. Last year

The suffering of Joy Kogawa's mother in the internment camp and the seizure of the family's wealth by the Canadian State remained topics that were painful to talk about, and nearly impossible to write on. In *Obasan*, Kogawa recalls her own story as a child who had weathered the Japanese Internment during the Second World War, of being dispossessed of their homes and belongings, and thrown into internment camps where they were treated as the enemy, although they were Canadian citizens.<sup>12</sup> After the war they were dislocated and never even partly recompensed for the atrocities committed on them by the Canadian Government.

The barriers Kogawa faced in her writing about the episode can be seen in her own words, in an interview with her in *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*, where she says,

Of course [*Obasan*] relates to the way my family was traumatized and how my mother's and father's realities broke down...It is certainly related to the history of racism, but it goes beyond that. My mother used to be such an elegant woman. . . Debbie [Gorham] told me that I had made these two female characters, Naomi's idealized mother of childhood plus *Obasan* because I wasn't able to cope with the reality of what happened to my real mother. She had been a bourgeois, beautiful, elegant

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while I was in LA and was wandering around Japan Town, suddenly, I hear "Joy, it's you!" It was Arthur Nakane. I knew him when I was in my twenties. Nakane is a rare name in Japan. Arthur had a brother, Stephen. Arthur and Stephen's mother had lived in Nagasaki. That's where *Gently to Nagasaki* came from."

<sup>12</sup> Joy Kogawa interview with Janice Williams, in *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 156-157.



woman, with a lovely house, lovely clothes, furs, and china and furniture and music lessons. She was a musician. She had all of that, and suddenly, she was out in the prairies, in this dusty place, and an important part of her gave up . . . She was always clean but so poor. Her clothes had patches, and she couldn't buy anything. That was one reality. She was also very, very tough inside . . . It is difficult for me to talk about her.

In 1981, through the distressing story of the narrator and main character in *Obasan*, Naomi Nakane, and the persecution of her family by the Canadian Government “the conscience of a whole nation was shaken up.” The “stone bread” that her uncle bakes and eats throughout the novel as a Japanese-Canadian is testimony to the pain and suffering of a people. Canadian theorist Annahid Dashtgard emphasizes the intersection between Exile and the Body with a luminosity that is abiding and unique: “In my book *Breaking the Ocean*, I wanted to blast open the idea that social rejection is somehow less impactful than other forms of harm. It’s a journey that’s written on and through the body. How do you reclaim wholeness in a system designed to keep you feeling less and othered, in exile?”<sup>13</sup>

In the interview with the author in November 2012, when asked if *Obasan* was a cathartic work, Kogawa confirmed the pain she felt. “The action of the pen precedes the understanding that follows it. If catharsis happens, it is by chance. The work is important. This story should be known. Although it is very painful, if we deny the truth, we cannot be free.” She added, “For the Japanese-Canadian redress to be

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<sup>13</sup> Annahid Dashtgard, talk at Concordia University, *The Walrus Talks* November 26, 2019.

felt and be effective, the story of the community has to be told. In my life I have been a truth-seeker to others' detriment."<sup>14</sup>

It was an illuminating moment for me during class in 2006, when two exchange students from Japan's Waseda University expressed surprise to learn of the Japanese Internment through Obasan—they mentioned that this was the first time that they had heard about the event: this part of history that affected Japanese people overseas was never taught in Japanese schools or universities. There was a huge national shame that would be associated with it.

The trauma of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombing finds Naomi Nakasone stupefied, watching the bright rain sparkling as it fell on the clear glass windows of their Granton house, as Nakayama-sensei reads Naomi's grandmother Kato's letter of the B-29 bombings of March 9, 1945, where Grandma Kato's sister, their mother, and her sister's husband were killed in a trice. Naomi's mother took on a vow of silence: "the horror would surely die sooner, they felt, if they refused to speak. But the silence and the constancy of the nightmare had become unbearable." And then, again, in her letter Grandma Kato apologizes for writing the horror: "For the burden of the past, forgive me."<sup>15</sup> It was Naomi's quest to know about her mother, a mother who had left before the Second World War and with whom there was little contact during and after the war, a mother whom she hungered for; a mother who wanted to protect the child mind so fiercely, that she had left instructions to Obasan, Aunt Emily, and Naomi and her brother Stephen's guardians never to divulge the nightmare of the atomic bombing which decimated her.

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<sup>14</sup> Joy Kogawa interview with Julie Banerjee Mehta on November 6, 2012, at University College, University of Toronto.

<sup>15</sup> Kogawa, *Obasan*, 212.



The tree is a dead tree in the middle of the prairies. I sit on its roots still as a stone. In my dream a small child sits with a wound on her knee. The wound on her knee is on the back of her skull. The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell . . . Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction.

- Kogawa, *Obasan*, 222.

As if it were not devastating enough to live in the violent cloud of silence that permeated the impossibility of contact with families which had gone to Japan and could not return to their home and children in Canada as the war bludgeoned their hearts, in Canada they were hauled out of their homes, separated from each other and flung into camps that were toilets of terror. No medical facilities, no privacy, freezing water, and subhuman conditions of complete abjectness were their lot. They were in exile in Canada, their “homeland,” in the same way that Sri Lankan writer Jean Arasanayagam observes in *Exile II*:<sup>16</sup>

You tell me to pack up my bags and go  
But where? I turn my face towards  
Country after country  
Silently I lip read their refusal  
What do I call myself?  
Exile émigré refugee?

Naomi, who is “motherless” since her mother is trapped in Japan, a victim of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombing, is schooled in

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Arasanayagam, *Trial by Error* (Hamilton, NZ: Rimu, 1987).

Canada and not fluent in Japanese. She is an illuminating parallel of conceptualizing displacement that might be found in the experience of another black Canadian writer, Austin Clarke, where the exile is “a beggar in the most sophisticated sense that he must know his place.”<sup>17</sup> Exile, here, continues to contribute to the depreciation of the Japanese community in the location of Naomi’s personality, her mores and her views, all of which the Anglo-Canadian majority is forced to evaluate through White Canada’s eyes, using White Canada’s sensibility. Naomi and her brother and Aunt Emily live in two cultures; and when her own culture is underpinned by a language she does not speak, her “existence” during her exile becomes schizophrenic.

Be willing to be torn apart.

God is where the struggle is.

Love is where the struggle is ...

– Joy Kogawa, recited to Julie Banerjee Mehta, November 6, 2012, University College, University of Toronto.

Grandmother Kato’s surprise, shock and a kind of perilous relief in finding her daughter, Naomi’s mother, in Nagasaki, physically mutilated by the bomb, is perhaps one of the most haunting descriptions in *Obasan*. At first unrecognizable, the disfiguration makes it impossible for Grandma Kato to find her daughter. It is her daughter who finds her mother:

One evening, when she [Grandmother Kato] had given up her search for the day, she sat down beside a naked woman she has

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<sup>17</sup> Austin Clarke, “Exile,” in *Altogether Elsewhere: Writings on Exile*, ed. Marc Robinson (Winchester: Faber and Faber, 1994), 48.



seen earlier who was aimlessly chipping wood to make a pyre on which to cremate a dead baby. The woman was utterly disfigured. Her nose and one cheek were almost gone. 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. As Grandma watched her, the woman gave her a vacant gaze, then let out a cry. It was my mother.

- Kogawa, *Obasan*, 218–219.<sup>18</sup>

Kogawa's confronting a mixture of horror and beauty finds an interesting theoretical corollary in the connection Mircea Eliade makes between the religious and the profane. Eliade states that by its very hierophanic nature (manifestation of the sacred in the secular), the sacred can at any given moment catapult itself into the secular. "All nature is capable of revealing itself . . . the cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany."<sup>19</sup> And in the hands of gifted writers, the sacred can appear most naturally in the mundane. That is what makes the spiritual sutured to reality—like a jack-in-the-box the spiritual manifests itself to provide a continuum of itself, allowing for the best to be salvaged from the hopeless, hapless profanity of our jaded humanity.

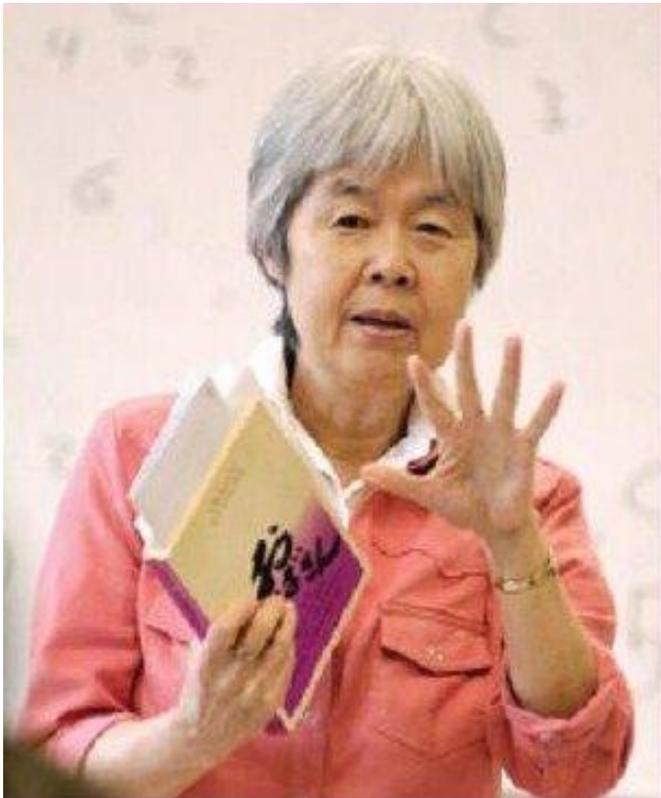
Kogawa's vision is elaborated both in the concept of hierophany and Julia Kristeva's concept of the "powers of horror" along with the idea of the "abject," something that is excreted (such as bodily fluids and blood), as an inherent part of the subject. The ultimate martyrdom

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<sup>18</sup> Joy Kogawa interview with Julie Banerjee Mehta on November 6, 2012, at University College, University of Toronto.

<sup>19</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return; Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 12.

of Christ and his transformation from flesh to spirit cannot be divorced from the palpability of his corporeal body with open, weeping wounds. Thus, in the course of what happens to Naomi Nakane's mother's body in Nagasaki during the atomic bombing is continuously a point of reference and her moment of epiphany holds in its space the image of a martyred Christ whose body is being received: "Martyr Mother, you pilot your powerful voicelessness over the ocean . . . You wish to protect us with lies, but the camouflage does not hide your cries. Beneath the hiding I am there with you. Silent mother, lost in the abandoning, you do not share the horror . . . Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there?"<sup>20</sup>



Joy Kogawa

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<sup>20</sup> Kogawa, *Obasan*, 221.



In *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva argues that the emergence of the “self” “depends on the constitution of the “not-self.”<sup>21</sup> In addition to excluding that which is ostensibly the “object,” or the other, the “subject” also needs to separate itself from what she terms “the abject.” To illustrate, she cites the example of “refuse” or waste. “Dung” signifies for Kristeva “the other side of the border, the place where I am not, and which permits me to be.” In this, the abject is understood as the part of ourselves that we wilfully discard. “I expel myself, I abject myself,” states Kristeva, “within the same motion through which I claim to establish myself.”<sup>22</sup>

## **Sakamoto: The “Enemy” Alien Here, and There**

Kerri Sakamoto, who worked for redress for Japanese-Canadians under Joy Kogawa’s tutelage, and who wrote the insightful, provocative introduction to Kogawa’s 1981 Penguin edition of *Obasan*, in her most recent novel *Floating City* presents the horror of the dispossessed, subjugated Japanese-Canadian body in the internment camps of Canada and the repatriated Japanese body in nuclear bomb hit-Nagasaki and Hiroshima.<sup>23</sup> In the narrative of Mr. Koga, who had

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<sup>21</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> In an interview with Julie Banerjee Mehta, at her class at University College, during a visit to the Chancellor Emerita Vivienne Poy’s course Asian Cultures in Canada at the Canadian Studies Program, Kerri Sakamoto said that her parents were interred in the Japanese Internment camp. It was a particularly traumatic experience for her mother, whose brother died in the camp in a horrible accident. “My mother was only fifteen, and her brother died without any medical attention. He died a painful death. My parents never spoke about the Internment.” In Sakamoto’s first novel, *The Electrical Field*, the beloved Eiji, elder brother of the Japanese-Canadian protagonist Saito Asako, and the decorated military man who is an omnipresent character long after his death,

weathered the war years “as a prisoner of war in a prisoner of war camp in northern Ontario, only to be deported to Japan with his wife and Port Alberni-born daughters,” the author offers a haunting, arresting history lesson about the fate of the Japanese-Canadian repatriated body and the Japanese body:

. . . it was unimaginable, un-dream-up-able: that flesh and bone might be melted by a ball dropped from the sky. Could the Japanese be so evil as to deserve such a fate? The people of Hiroshima, his mother’s left behind home? Could this evil have followed them here to the New World, to Canada, and survived the generations, survived in him?

– Sakamoto, *Floating City*, 63.<sup>24</sup>

The family of Mr. Koga from Canada joined his wife’s family in the Hiroshima Prefecture, outside of the city. We learn that in Hiroshima Mr. Koga and his family are malnourished and painfully constipated. Mr. Koga’s skin had flaked to a raw pink and he was rendered nail-less and hairless from radiation illness. Expatriated Japanese who were deported to Japan were identified as “traitors.” And as Sakamoto signposts their pariah state, in *Floating City*, they were “enemy alien here and there”—both in Canada and also Japan.<sup>25</sup> With characteristic humor that borders on bathos, Sakamoto invokes the specter of a frightening dislocation that comes from being dislocated

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resembles Sakamoto’s mother’s brother in real life. Eiji dies of pneumonia, having contracted it in the horrific conditions of the Japanese-Canadian internment camps in Canada.

<sup>24</sup> Sakamoto, *Floating City*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 74.



and being treated as an outcaste. Mr. Fujimoto's comment to Frankie, "Koga can't sleep even after two bottles of Sake," and Frankie's rejoinder, "He needs Canadian Club," are statements that make a powerful comment on the overwhelming issue of not belonging anywhere. The jest about Canadian Club and sake ensconce in them the terror that Japanese-Canadians were subject to, as Untouchables in Japan. Though worried about his daughters getting married, "Yet they had to be worried about suitors with radiation sickness, for fear of deformed offspring. Who knew how many generations would be tainted by the poison in their bodies?"<sup>26</sup>

Addressing the question of "embodiment" and "identification" within the "heterosexual hegemony," Judith Butler argues that the abject not only designates the "unliveable" and the "uninhabitable," but also "constitute[s] the defining limit of the subject's domain."<sup>27</sup> And, Iris Young describes abjection as a unique form of contemporary oppression that is executed not as a brutal state tyranny but as an underground, unconscious, yet structural immobilization and reduction of a group.<sup>28</sup> In her first-hand account, Yoko Ota describes scenes of horror in her 1948 book, *City of Corpses*: "Their bodies were distended. Like the bodies of people who have drowned. Their faces were fat and enormously puffed up. Their eyes were swollen shut, and the skin

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41-42.

around their eyes was crinkly and pink... and hanging down from both arms like rags was gray-colored skin.”<sup>29</sup>

The act of violence encrypted on the body is hauntingly explored in Sakamoto’s second novel, *One Hundred Million Hearts*. The fact that the protagonist Miyo Mori’s father was a soldier in the Japanese army before he migrated to Canada and might have been a surviving *kamikaze* pilot in Japan, are niggling and persistent details that drive the story. The man, Rinzo, whom she meets in Japan on her mission to know more about her father, becomes the interpreter of the unknowables in the harsh duality of Japanese-Canadian or Japanese-American identity. To make the story a highly textured unwrapping, Sakamoto invokes the shame and reality of the *Hibakusha*, the survivors of the atomic bomb, and approaches the alterity of Miyo with the question of whether she is an abhorrent body. Japan’s socio-cultural history has a pervading presence of the “untouchable” class, pockmarked with the abject outcast *Burakumin* in its highly stratified culture.<sup>30</sup> The creation of another untouchable strata, *Hibakusha*, seems an easy creation.<sup>31</sup> With an inventiveness that is rare, Sakamoto cracks

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<sup>29</sup> Yoko Ota, “City of Corpses,” in *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*, edited and translated by Richard H. Minear (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 188–89.

<sup>30</sup> *Burakumin* (Japanese: “hamlet people”) also called *Eta* (“pollution abundant”) outcaste, or “untouchable,” Japanese minority, occupying the lowest level of the traditional Japanese social system. The Japanese term *Eta* is highly pejorative, but prejudice has tended even to tarnish the otherwise neutral term *Burakumin* itself. Although the class was officially abolished in 1871 (under the Emancipation Act of the Meiji period), vast numbers of *Burakumin* continue to live in ghettolike communities throughout Japan, and many are still relegated to unskilled and poorly paid occupations. Identification as a *Burakumin* is often sufficient to prevent or void participation in a marriage, a contract, or employment in any non-*Burakumin* occupation. No official census exists, but about 6,000 segregated communities of *Burakumin* contain a total population variously estimated at between 1,000,000 and 3,000,000.



open the gripping mysteries of identity of being Japanese and North American through Miyo's new found friend, Rinzo's, observations shared with Miyo: "Only because his father [Kunsuru Ryo] was a Japanese diplomat, like mine, and his mother was American, like mine. He was Ken to his friends in Harvard. I was Richard. . . but my mother was a Japanese-American, a nisei like your father. . .Kusuru-san fought for Japan and died right before the surrender."<sup>32</sup> Rinzo is the first person who asks Miyo directly if she is a *Hibakusha*, a title that was almost a taboo, given to children born of mothers who lived through the geography of suffering the atomic bomb. Rinzo surmises Miyo's deformities come from Miyo's mother being exposed to the nuclear bomb. "Your mother was in Hiroshima?... Nagasaki?"<sup>33</sup> The pathos of her dreadful situation is sharpened in Japan, as "she understood what he must take her for. She'd seen pictures, hideous ones; she'd read of deformities that might persist through generations. But she had never thought of her mother or herself. For how could she imagine such a flash in the sky, and what they called black rain pouring down? She'd never thought to ask her father."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Atomic Bomb survivors are referred to in Japanese as *Hibakusha*, which translates literally as "bomb-affected-people." According to the Atomic Bomb Survivors Relief Law, there are certain recognized categories of *Hibakusha*: people exposed directly to the bomb and its immediate aftermath; people exposed within a 2 kilometer radius who entered the sphere of destruction within two weeks of the explosion; people exposed to radioactive fallout generally; and those exposed in utero, whose mothers were pregnant and belonging to any of these defined categories. [www.hibakushastories.org](http://www.hibakushastories.org).

<sup>32</sup> Kerri Sakamoto, *One Hundred Million Hearts* (New York: Harcourt, 2003), 119-120.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 113-114.



Kerri Sakamoto.

In Hiroshima it was the body that was burned and bloated in the aftermath of the atomic bombings. It was so awful that the heat from the bombs melted the dead bodies. Even years later, *Hibakushas* survived under the fear of radiation, petrified that anything could happen to their bodies and their bodies could betray them with unerring unpredictability. In a society that laid stress on women's domestic and reproductive roles, what did it mean to be a woman who



fulfilled neither of the two roles of a wife and a mother?—first because female atomic survivors were not seen as ideal partners, and second because the bomb had altered their bodies.

Sakamoto shatters the myth of “glorious life or glorious death,” the mantra of the *kamikaze*.<sup>35</sup> Through the revelation in her conversation with Rinzo who points out often, the “divided heart” is “shattered like a beautiful jewel. Like Japan’s one hundred million hearts.” The *kamikaze* pilots who conducted suicide missions are perhaps the most popular example. The body was dedicated to the service of the nation and every Japanese was expected to sacrifice it if asked to do so by the empire. The individual body, according to Slaymaker, was “suppressed and pitted against the cause of the national body.”<sup>36</sup>

Sakamoto, in *One Hundred Million Hearts* and *Floating City* as well as her first arresting novel *The Electrical Field*, meditates upon this exclusionist national policy—whether Japan or Canada, so dazzlingly theorized by Étienne Balibar—as “the disposable human being.” Here, we can argue that the Japanese State apparatus produces an “other” who is a natural body, natural outside the social symbolic. Balibar posits that “this is indeed a social phenomenon, but it tends to look at least in some cases, like a ‘natural’ phenomenon, or a phenomenon of violence in which the boundaries between what is human and what is natural, or what is post-human and what is post-natural tend to become blurred.”<sup>37</sup> This disposable human being is frequently the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Slaymaker, *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson, and Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1998), 143.

object of the violence of the law and often, in war, genocide, slavery, attack—the object of armed violence, merely a body.

The biographical elements in the fictionalized tellings in all three writers is represented in stark reality. Eiji, the beloved elder brother of Saito-san in *The Electrical Field*, is created from the fragments of the life of Kerri Sakamoto's own uncle who died in the internment camp. Eiji was subjected to lack of medical attention and abhorrent living conditions, contracting pneumonia and dying in the camp.

### **Goto: Robbed of the Japanese Tongue**

Silence is a palpable presence in Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, a meticulously well told tale about a family in a paradigmatic geography of a mushroom farm in the foothills of Alberta, Canada, a tale she describes as a "personal myth." Prefaced with cautionary words about comprehending or not comprehending a language, the woman who is narrating the story to her lover, in bed, warns her lover and the reader, ". . . but bear with my language, won't you? My Japanese isn't as good as my English, and you might not get everything I say. But that doesn't mean the story's not there to understand. *Wakkate kureru kashira?* Can you listen before you hear?"<sup>38</sup>

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, epistemology is the underlying theme. The way in which language works to empower or censor the Japanese-Canadian in her desire to belong, erupts with a regularity. At the outset, the female character Obachan (not to be confused with Obasan), says: "How can a body live in this country for twenty years and not learn the language?" In a tone of self-mockery that is self-conscious and provocative to the reader, she says: "I speak my words in Japanese and

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<sup>38</sup> Hiromi Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Press, 1994), 1-2.



my daughter will not hear them. The words that come from our ears, our mouths, they collide in the space between us.”<sup>39</sup> Before she leaves home to find a life “outside” the “rural hell,” the moment of epiphany for Muriel comes with the conversation with her father, the owner of a mushroom farm.



Hiromi Goto.

Goto skilfully weaves the consternation and conundrum most first generation Japanese feel when they are confronted by choices—should they obliterate the Japanese language from their Canadian-born children’s lives, in order to help them in the acculturation process to “become completely Canadian?” Muriel’s anger and confusion about being robbed of the Japanese tongue is the explosive near-conclusion of the novel. When she asks her father why he barred Japanese to be spoken at their home, he argues that he wanted his daughter to be as

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 4.

Canadian as possible, and the fact that she was the only child only made him more resolved to ensure that she would blend in: “We only wanted your happiness. We decided, your Mom and I, that we would put Japan behind us and fit more smoothly with the crowd. And from that day, when we decided, neither of us could speak a word in Japanese. . . I used to talk a lot in my youth . . . but after the day I lost my words, my home words, I didn’t have the heart to talk so much.”<sup>40</sup> The self-censorship and cultural effacement practiced in *Chorus of Mushrooms* is typical of those living on the fringes. The dual impulse of the need to acculturate into an adopted homeland and to cling to the language of the homeland left behind becomes the focus of much of Linda Hutcheon’s exploration in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Hutcheon posits that the postmodern writer is almost always in a “marginal or ‘excentric’ position with regard to the dominant culture, because the duality of underlining and undermining cultural ‘universals’ [...] challenges any notions of centrality.”<sup>41</sup> With the perilously perched author, writing from the margins, as a member of an ethnic minority, this becomes an undeniable truth. Like Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, Hutcheon too, points out that the fringes are a location for both subversion and revolution, but also, the place of possibility.<sup>42</sup> In their “tellings,” writers try “to trouble, to question, to make both problematic and provisional any [...] desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination.”<sup>43</sup> So the articulation of truth is particularly difficult, as Kogawa, Sakamoto, and Goto’s texts point out.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>41</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 3.



## Conclusion

As for the Japanese body in Canada, the scholar Roy Miki concurs in *Broken Entries* that “racialization applies to the imposition of race constructs and hierarchies on marked and unmarked ‘groups’ whose members come to signify divergence from the normative body inscribed by whiteness.”<sup>44</sup> And further arguing that “the subject racialized is identified by systemic categories that winnow the body, according privilege to the glossed with dominance, and privation to those digressed with subordination.”

The realization about the racialized other that emerges out of this exploration is that it was not just the Canadian State that treated the Japanese-Canadians as the enemy, but Japan as a nation ostracized their ethnic own with impunity, when for no fault of their own they became the victims of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, as clearly represented in the works of Sakamoto and Kogawa.

As discussed above, a lacuna exists in the scholarship that represents the Japanese body in Japan—and the Japanese-Canadian bodies trapped in Japan during the war—in the works of Kogawa and Sakamoto. This exploration has attempted to fill those gaps and has begun a new conversation about looking at how Japanese-Canadian writers engaged with the ideas of identity, belonging, human rights, and social ostracization of Japanese, both in Japan and in Canada, during this turbulent period in their history.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Roy Miki, *Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1998), 303.

***Note on the Author***

**Julie Banerjee Mehta** holds M.A. and PhD degrees in English Literature and South Asian Studies from the University of Toronto. Her Master's thesis entitled "Being Gaijin and Being Female in the *Sakoku* Culture of Japan" explores the Japanese works by Meira Chand, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Pico Iyer. Julie was born in Calcutta and educated at Irish convents—Loreto House and Loreto College—and then at Jadavpur University Calcutta, where she received her first Master's degree in English Literature. She worked as a literary reviewer and features editor in Australia, Singapore, and Bangkok. A specialist in Postcolonial and World Literatures, she conceptualized and taught the Chancellor Emerita Vivienne Poy-endowed course on Asian Literatures and Cultures in Asia for nearly a decade in the Canadian Studies Program, and in the Department of English at the University of Toronto, and received several prestigious fellowships. Her translation of Tagore's play *Dak Ghar/Post Office* was performed by Pleiades Theatre, Toronto, in 2010 to critical acclaim and earned her the title of "One of Sixteen most Influential South Asians in Canada." She is the author of *Dance of Life: The Mythology, History, and Politics of Cambodian Culture*, and the best-selling biography of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (with Harish Mehta). Her major publications are "Toronto's Multicultural Tongues: Stories of South Asian Cuisines," in *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History*, University of Toronto Press, 2012; "Hybrid Brown *Gaijin* is a 'Distinguished Alien' in *Sakoku* Japan" in *Narrating Race: Asia, (Trans)Nationalism, Social Change*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2011; "Ondaatje's Impertinent Voices: Tracking Family Ties to Remember History," in *Australasia-Asia: Change, Conflict and Convergence*, Swan-Longmans, 2010; "Reconfiguring the Feminine: The Real, Reel, and Riel Life of Neang Seda (Sita) in the Khmer Ramayana,"



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