

**BETRAYED BY HISTORY: REDRESSING A
WOUNDED COMMUNITY IN
KERRI SAKAMOTO'S *THE ELECTRICAL FIELD***

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Abstract:

What does it take to heal the scars of a traumatic experience? And is any kind of restoration even possible when the wound is larger than the single individual, afflicting an entire community? The now well-documented experience of internment that marred the cultural memory of the Japanese Canadian community is one such trauma still bidding for redress. The present paper therefore proposes to revisit this painful wound caused by history at both the personal and the community level, as it is reflected through the fictional lens of award-winning Japanese Canadian author Kerri Sakamoto, in her dark lyrical debut novel *The Electrical Field* (1998). Following the thread of possible alleviation, we will analyze the effect of war and injustice on the individual mind and heart, and look at how difficult to obtain is love, the only redress available to those betrayed by history.

Keywords: *trauma, memory, Japanese Canadian community, internment, intertextuality*

*“My bitterness belonged to no one but myself...
For these were private matters; family matters.”* (Sakamoto 110)

“Forgetting in the form of repression, denial and dissociation is a common reaction in the aftermath of traumatic experiences” (Van der Hart & Brom 2).

“All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery. Our attics and living rooms encroach on each other, deep into their invisible places” (Kogawa 30).

The intrusive dust of memory, around which Naomi Nakane, the organizing consciousness in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, articulates her narrative discourse, is meticulously wiped by the unreliable narrator of Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, who unobtrusively declares that "I happened to be dusting the front window-ledge" at the beginning of the novel. However mundane this act of dusting may seem, it is far from accidental, for the solitary Asako Saito is symbolically recuperating from the insidious particles of oblivion the traumatic history of internment inscribed upon the collective memory of the Japanese Canadian community. Sakamoto's book thus offers from the very first line a hermeneutical indication of its intertextuality. Coming almost two decades after Kogawa's lyrical chronicling of Canada's internment and persecution of its citizens of Japanese ancestry during World War II and after the traumatizing experience has been both fictionally captured by a number of writers, as well as politically redressed, *The Electrical Field* faces the danger of being labeled, unrightfully so, as "yet one more novel about internment." However, the book anticipates and answers such dismissive evaluations through its oblique references to *Obasan*. But the real strength of *The Electrical Field* lies in its conscious subversion of teleological narratives about the internment, discourses which ultimately encourage the erasure of the traumatic uprootings from communal memory. As Vikki Visvis appreciates, the novel

successfully resists a new and insidious form of social amnesia surrounding the Japanese-Canadian internment" by revising "representations of the victim [from a post-redress standpoint], and [focusing on] the need to move beyond sympathetic depictions in order to avoid the institutionalization of Japanese-Canadians as official victims of the internment (2).

Drawing on this confessed design which the novel masterfully realizes, we intend to show, in the present article, that the trauma of internment eludes any coherent re-construction or re-membrance, both at the personal and at the communal level, becoming a harrowing memory that cannot and should not be easily accessed or redressed, and for which no real closure is possible.

A hypnotic "tale of the murderous collisions of love, history and memory" (Chua, 1998) review on the hardcover edition of the novel, set in the 1970s in a small Ontario neighborhood, *The Electrical Field* can be seen as a psychological thriller in as much as it follows the unraveling of the mystery around the death of beautiful Chisako, who is found murdered in a park, together with her *hakujin* (white) Canadian lover, while her *Nisei* husband and the two twin children are missing. Told from the perspective of the solitary Asako Saito, the story knowingly breaks the conventions of the detective genre, shifting the focus from the enigma of who the perpetrator of the double murders is, to the ruinous effects of war on the ethnic community and on the individual psyche. A middle-aged *Nisei* living with her younger brother and bed-ridden father, Miss

Saito (as she is commonly referred to by the characters in the novel) appears to be, on the surface, just a passive observer. In reality, her own disturbed past and her craving for an emotional connection are revealed to have played a part in the events leading to the gruesome outcome, just as much as the rest of the community shares a common guilt for the mysterious murder. Scarred and embittered by internment and the forced relocation “to a place Papa could barely pronounce. ‘On-ta-ri-o’” (Sakamoto 3), Asako has gradually retreated within her own mind, so that when the novel begins she has already turned into a spinster who lives in the past, falling asleep every night by remembering scenes from her childhood and adolescence with her older brother, Eiji, a ghostly presence who haunts her life, just as he haunts the pages of Sakamoto’s narrative as a symbolic representative of a past both cherished and repressed.

However consciously or unconsciously, Asako exceeds her own limitations as a character and comes to function as the sole organizing, or rather disorganizing device of the narrative, because it is only through the mediation of her jumbled consciousness that we gain access to the novel’s fictional universe and the individualities that populate it. It is in this character that Sakamoto has woven a truly unreliable narrator, whom the readers can never completely trust and must constantly question. The result is a complex discourse in which the relativity of memory has replaced structured chronology, and reality is periodically interspersed with flashbacks, introspections and dreams. The whole mystery of Chisako’s murder and her family’s disappearance is altogether unraveled by the police in the relatively short space of thirteen days, at the end of which our initial suspicion that Chisako’s husband Yano was indeed the author of the gruesome murders is confirmed. He has not only taken the lives of Chisako and her lover but also that of his two children, and then his own life. Nonetheless, Asako’s quiet reminiscences make flexible the temporal boundaries of the thirteen days, extending them to cover a disarray of more than three decades of recollected and reconstructed history.

The most challenging figure in the novel is, probably, Asako Saito. In her critical essay “Trauma Remembered and Forgotten: The Figure of the Hysteric in Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*,” Vikki Visvis offers a well-structured analysis of the novel’s narrating consciousness as a marked hysteric exhibiting all the particular signs of clinical hysteria in Freud’s understanding. The Freudian hysteric manifests such symptoms like “sensations of suffocation, choking, breathing and eating difficulties ... deceitfulness, shock, fits, death states, wanting (craving, longing),” (Juliet Mitchell in Visvis, 4) plus a rather carnivalesque fixation with genitalia and the lower body (cf. Allon White in Visvis). Asako, although a fictional construction, does indeed display such manifestations when she deceives by omission or by distortion of crucial details from her recounts of internment and childhood memories, thereby drawing admonitions from both Yano: “How long were you there, Saito-san? ... Each

time you say different” (Sakamoto 5), and the young Sachi: “Miss Saito, you’re leaving parts out again” (165). Asako even concedes that the “quiet clasp of the door by its frame swept away my breath so that the house, this cage with its unbearable loneliness, was suffocating” (143). And later in the novel she enters “death[-like] states” where she completely dissociates from reality for hours at a time, even to the point where she neglects the fundamental needs of her disabled father: “I struggled for some bit of memory of how this had come to be, how I could have made myself so absent” (191). Just like the Freudian hysteric, she also exhibits states of “wanting (craving, longing)”: “I sat by the window for hours into the night. I was waiting for a visitor; longing for company” (143). Finally, in keeping with White’s assessment of the hysterical symptom as inherently carnivalesque, Asako exhibits a constant preoccupation with the lower body. Bowel movements are rendered in detail on more than one occasion (36, 169), and Asako discusses genitalia throughout the text, particularly male genitalia, a fact that reveals a more or less conscious preoccupation with sexuality, as well as the arrested sexual development, which in many ways serves to affirm Asako’s status as grotesque, and so complicates the traditional role of Japanese-Canadians as sympathetic victims (Visvis 5).

The hysterical symptoms that manifest themselves in the narrator are, in Visvis’s estimation, a clear indication of psychological trauma as it was defined by Freud and Breuer, whose theory identified a tensional relationship between forgetting and remembering, the cause of which can be found in a “splitting of consciousness.” Indeed, this psychic splitting is manifested in the novel through Asako’s considerable difficulties in recalling aspects of her internment experience. She will fixate, for instance, on a memory of staring for hours, with her father, at a lost boot frozen in the muddy alley in front of her family’s shack, on sensations provoked by a ride on the front of her older brother Eiji’s bike, or similarly on Eiji’s gesture of offering her an apple-tree twig in bloom and uttering “Utsukushii” (“Beautiful”). But when questioned by Sachi about a ride she took at a fair during the internment, Asako confesses: “It exhausted me, calling up this memory, and I felt queasy all at once, as if from the motion of a dream, though I could not at the moment remember the ride itself, how the little cars moved. I found myself unable to continue; the words and pictures in my mind had vanished” (Sakamoto 80-81). For this very reason, i.e. Asako’s inability to “say what really happened,” and despite Sachi’s protesting indictment that “you keep telling that story when you know it isn’t true” (275), the trauma is almost never openly remembered in the novel and the event of internment remains just as inaccessible as the narrator’s memory.

The trauma of the experience and particularly Asako’s presumed complicity in the death of her brother Eiji are so overwhelmingly devastating that she can rarely access it willingly. And when she does, Asako is forced to distort the narrative in order to cope with the hurt. According to Visvis, Asako’s

fractured subject position serves not only to pathologize her, but also as social and political commentary through which Sakamoto makes the powerful statement that “the social wounds of the internment have yet to be resolved and remain an ongoing reality [so that] facile notions of closure and reconciliation, which have contributed to a new kind of social amnesia surrounding the internment, are ultimately disallowed” (6).

Extrapolating to the macro-level of the community, we find the same disjointed fragmentation that defines Asako, coupled with an inability, or rather a more or less conscious determination of communal memory not to acknowledge the (past) traumatisation: “‘These things... Our life is not so bad here. We’ve made our way.’ I kept smiling. ‘These things that happened are behind us now. And they are... *private*, ne?’” (Sakamoto 110). This apparent willingness to move past debilitating victimization can be attributed to that “strategic,” conscious and collective act of forgetting. Because in the end, forgetting is as much a social act as is remembering (Kirmayer 191). Remembering presupposes, on the one hand, willful exposure to hurt and pain that can hardly be contained within the limits of the individual self; and on the other hand, it requires the forging of communal bonds to act as protective barrier against inimical factors, insulating the wounds and facilitating the healing/redress process. This need is obsessively voiced by Yano’s character in what becomes almost his driving litany: “Gotta stick together, right?” Like Aunt Emily’s constant word battles and agitation to connect the dispersed in *Obasan*, Yano’s the harrowing exhortation nevertheless fails to fulfill its intended unifying function, since it propels itself on reasons of ethnicity and geography alone: “*As if being nihonjin in the same neighbourhood could melt every disagreeable difference between us [emphasis added]*” (Sakamoto 108), contends Asako.

No real community can be built from fractured selves. The survival of this discontinuous medley of scarred and fractured individual consciousnesses appears to be possible only through (deliberate) forgetting, the only act with any kind of social dimension in the novel. The community seems fragilely linked by the determination to relegate into oblivion the ordeal they survived. We may be tempted to see this state as symbolically evoked in the image of the interconnected electrical towers. However, the power cables that traverse from one solitary station to another fail dismally to achieve true connectedness. They are only remnants of a short-circuited tenuous community, in which individuals have retained only ethnical and spatial contingencies. Betrayed by history, by their chosen or birth land and ultimately by their ethnicity, they have become entrapped, displaced and disjointed psyches, “foolish and clinging, insignificant beneath those monstrous beams” (286). The electrical towers, Asako’s giants and Chisako’s cages, function rather as tropes of loneliness and disjointedness in a dreary and empty space permanently overshadowed by an unsightly “mound of

garbage that [has] filled in a green field" (157), the Mackenzie Hill. An unforgiving remainder of the trauma incurred, created and named by an undissociated inimical other ("*they* [emphasis added] said the garbage would make a natural fertilizer, but the grasses and trees *they* [emphasis added] planted on it years ago were still patchy, ashen and frail" [157]), the hill can barely sustain feeble nature, its sight serving only to fester past wounds. The real government authorities of lived history similarly tried to justify the illegal internment of their citizens by disguising the racist-motivated practice under claims of national security and a "genuine" preoccupation for the well-being and future of those descending from "the Japanese race," which otherwise would have been left to the devouring anger of the white society. The community's impossibility to see past the hilly obstruction is indicative of the failure to recuperate and reconstruct maimed identities, to narrativize traumatic memories in an effort of healing that appears inaccessible and futile. Once inscribed, "the electrical field in winter" cannot be returned to its uncorrupted state, the slate wiped clean can only be a fool's dream as the hysterical Ms. Saito concludes: "There is no return... Hadn't I fooled myself into believing it possible? ...Almost pristine... before I sank my footprints into it. And when I did, how I'd wanted to take them back, to somehow erase them" (244).

Just like the symbolic snowed fields, victimized memory is defined by the impossibility of erasure, so that the self turns to *privacy* as the only device to make bearable what it cannot obliterate. The dimension of privacy is invoked as an insulating barrier as soon as the hurt threatens to be brought out into the open, making it impossible to share the stigmatizing trauma, on the one hand due to an arrested state of the psyche and, on the other, as the result of a misrepresented sense of personal accountability for the victimization endured. In assuming a certain degree of responsibility, however, there is also a silent admittance of guilt for the inability or failure to oppose dislocation. The shame therefore is integrated in the entire identity fabric, prior to incurring as a consequence of violence imposed externally:

I had no wish to share in his anger, or to make others share in mine; to blame the government, the camps, the war, the man they may or may not have named that hill after, for what life did or did not give me. There would be no end to it. *My bitterness belonged to no one but myself. I did not share it with strangers; I did not hold them accountable. For these were private matters; family matters* [emphasis added] (110).

Privacy functions thus as a double mechanism in the fictional space of the novel. Extending from its role as protective veil for the scarred individual, it comes to define the family microcosms and becomes deeply ingrained in the cultural and community ethos of the entire Japanese Canadian group. Between the social and the closely intimate there is to be a clear dissociation dictated by

the valued notion of privacy. Once violently disrupted by the historical events of forced dislocation, cramped incarceration and disempowerment, privacy has become in the aftermath of the trauma one of the few valuable possessions and instruments for returning a minimal measure of dignity to the ruptured individual. If the self has been reduced almost to insignificance, it might then resort to privacy as a means of veiling its own sense of powerlessness. And it is this very sense of intimacy that Chisako will be guilty of trespassing by not equipping her home with curtains and disclosing what should be private to the scrutinizing public eye.

The combination of the two dimensions of shame and privacy can then act as hindering factors in the effort to narrativize and redress trauma. The beautiful Chisako and her murderous husband are both guilty of breaking such boundaries of privacy and shame. Pieced together only through the individual consciousness of the hysterical Asako, Yano, her neighbor, is rendered as even more grotesque than the solitary spinster. Disagreeable, boisterous, frustrated, “angry at himself and the rest of the world” (Sakamoto 66), he taints by association and therefore is often avoided. His “mean stubbornness” raises blinds that were long since kept closed, “loosing a flurry of dust,” and futilely calls to action “hands sticky with secrets” (283). At the same time, though, Yano’s bitterness and ugliness sully and contort his own identity, condemning him from the start. His haunting litany “Everything was ruined... Everything went wrong. It was no good anymore. No good” (283-4) is still a lingering memory after his disappearance, after “every last thing [goes] against him” (282) as self-predicted. With his “broad, ugly hands in tight fists of frustration,” (66) with “his face ...red and contorted” (283) and “things [going] more wrong for him than for anybody else,” (66) Yano comes to resemble either the war mask of a samurai, or the crimson mask of an enraged evil spirit or god in traditional Japanese theatre. He appears, moreover, as a vilified, more grotesque version of the outspoken and militating Aunt Emily in Kogawa’s *Obasan*. Activism is thus weighed and dismissed in the novel as no real solution—activism presupposes putting blame, sharing in the anger that offers no real cleansing and is ultimately destructive.

Stemming from his frustration and sense of ethnical inferiority, Yano’s attempt to redeem himself and validate his identity through marriage with the beautiful Chisako fails miserably. Born and educated in Japan, Chisako is perceived as the “original,” the genuine Japanese whose elegance, sophistication and established identity will transfer themselves onto the invalidated self of Yano and other members of the neighborhood. A wife and a mother, Chisako is invested with beauty by external observers like Asako, she becomes “beautiful in anyone’s eyes,” (28) though still exotic, an outsider in the patched up Japanese-Canadian community. But Chisako carries her own scars and burden of guilt. As a survivor of the War and the Hiroshima bombing, Chisako looks in

turn to Yano and later to her *hakujin* (white) Canadian lover for escape from the devastated and ossified society of Second World War Japan and for protection from her own ghosts. Neither of the two is able to find the redemption and validation they seek and the ultimate result can only be total annihilation.

Nevertheless, one has to question whether the killing of Chisako is merely the result of her adulterous liaison, or whether there is a deeper reason: on the one hand, beauty has no place in such a tinted environment, and, on the other, neither the Japanese Canadian individual, nor the community can simply re-absorb and return to a “original” Japanese identity. If anything, the novel leaves an open alternative in place of a finite answer, but it does so by intertextually deconstructing *Obasan*’s more optimistic ending. The red roses that are there indicative of a possible brighter future and hope become in *The Electric Field* imbued with a dying prettiness, and the dropping petals can only signify the dissolution of ideals and efforts of community from the moment the cut rose offering is rejected by another member of the neighborhood. So that the only place for “the prettiness of a thing that will soon die” is “into the heap of weeds” (289-90). Similarly, there is little worth in looking for validation in the ancestral homeland of Japan and even less good in the outspoken struggle to repair and resolve an irreversible traumatisation. After efforts of “making sense of all that has happened, of the unspeakable act... committed” (261) “the hysteria still lurk[s]... [and] nothing, nothing [is] settled” (286).

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