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Keepers of the Flame: Jane Kubota Critique

*Kodomo no tame:*  
Family History through the Lens of *Obasan*

Joy Kogawa's 1981 novel, *Obasan* was an emotional plea for reparations following Japanese Internment in Canada during WWII. A major theme of the novel is intergenerational relationships, and an exploration of family history. A few weeks after reading the novel, I embarked on my own journey of uncovering my family history through the Keepers of the Flame oral history project at the East San Gabriel Valley Japanese Community Center (ESGVJCC). I interviewed my grandparents, Mits and Jane Kubota, who are Nisei Japanese-Americans from Hawaii. The project left me with countless stories and questions; but for the purposes of this critique I am going to be focusing on my interview with my Grandmother, Jane Kubota through the framework of *Obasan*.

*Obasan* is told through the perspective of a young girl, Naomi as she is interned in Canada during World War II. One of the reasons *Obasan* is thought to be so effective in the quest for reparations, is because it is told, in part, through the eyes of a child. My grandmother was also a child during World War II, and when she spoke of the war, she seemed to take on the perspective of a nine-year-old, even at 83-years-old. My grandmother grew up in Waimea, O'ahu, and her father was interned in Santa Fe, New Mexico during the war. Even though her father was interned, my grandmother's experience growing up as a Japanese-American in Hawaii is distinct from the experience of mainland Japanese-Americans. Japanese-Americans were in the majority in Hawaii during WWII, and therefore did not experience some of the discrimination and racism that Japanese-Americans on the mainland experienced during the war. When I asked my grandmother about what she remembers from WWII, she kept repeating that

even if her father was taken away, she still had her friends. It was interesting how she focused so much on her social acceptance, which is often tied to well-being for a nine-year-old. Her recollection of the time was childlike, and focused on immediate social consequences rather than larger issues of identity.

Another major theme in *Obasan* was transnational relationships. As an adult, Naomi discovers that her mother was caught in Nagasaki, became physically deformed by the bomb, and died soon after. I was curious about how the war affected transnational relationships in my family. When I asked my grandma, she casually told me that one of her cousins died in the bombing of Hiroshima. I was surprised and asked if it affected her family's relationship with their family in Japan. She said, "no, not at all!". She said that they were just happy that the war was over. It was interesting to see the dichotomy between personal and political. In addition, when I asked my grandma about her reconciliation of her Japanese and American identities, without hesitation she exclaimed that she and her siblings were simply American without question. This reminded me of the section of *Obasan* when Aunt Emily crosses out "Japanese race", and writes "Canadian citizen" in its place. While Aunt Emily seemed to be defensive about the Canadian-ness of the interned individuals, my grandmother's assertion of her Americanness seemed to be simply matter of fact.

As I transcribed the interviews I reflected on why my grandmother seemed to have such an uncomplicated understanding of her identity. I always imagined that growing up as a Japanese American child during WWII would leave some sort of lasting impact or fragmented identity. Multiple factors most likely impacted my grandmothers' unwavering sense of identity. First of all, the context of growing up in Hawaii is a huge aspect of her identity. The Japanese were a majority in Hawaii, which anecdotally has been said to result in a sense of entitlement for the

Japanese children who grew up there<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, much of my grandparent's life is owed to an ability to assimilate. They moved to Indiana for my grandfather to attend graduate school, they moved to Claremont for my grandfather's job as a professor. A life in the sphere of academia from the 1960s-early 2000s was a life of pride, adventure, and travel, but also a life of assimilation and living in white spaces. Thirdly, Grandpa Taketa (my grandmother's father) was like Naomi's uncle, Ojisan, in *Obasan*. Although Ojisan would never fit in in the US, he had an unwavering faith in the American Dream and his family. Likewise, even though Grandpa Taketa was interned in Santa Fe, New Mexico and given the option to return to Japan, he refused and later became a US citizen.

The last reason my grandmother may have presented such an uncomplicated recollection of her experience during WWII and her American identity is the most personal to me. There is a phrase that recurs throughout *Obasan –kodomo no tame*, for the sake of the children, which in this case, is me. There was a question on the sheet from the ESGVJCC about how the elder felt if one of their children married someone outside of the Japanese American community. I am mixed race, and my father married a white woman. During the first interview session, the question felt too close to home. During the second interview, it came up in a natural way, and my grandmother's response was nothing but positive. She said that she was so happy that we have such a mixed family, and that everyone gets along so well without hesitation. My grandparents have worked hard, driving all over Los Angeles, to create a Japanese-American community for themselves. I know the comfort they find in other Japanese Americans, and in Japanese culture. I cannot help but wonder if they ever think of the future generations, and about the possibility of their heritage slipping into oblivion. But I am their granddaughter, and unlike my father and his

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Lynne Miyake, among others.

grandparents who were divided by a language barrier, we are close. We share Japanese food, and the feeling of being a part of the Claremont Consortium, in a way that even my parents don't quite understand. This experience allowed me to learn about my grandparents lives, and our family history, but I cannot help but wonder if their responses were censored in some way to protect me.

#### Works Cited

Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. New York: Anchor Books, 1981. Print.

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