



# BREAKING SILENCE, CLAIMING VOICE: EXPLORING THEMES OF GENERATIONAL TRAUMA, COLONIZATION, IMMIGRATION, AND IDENTITY RECLAMATION IN OBASAN, CANE, AND POETICS OF RELATION

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## Introduction

When reading through the pieces of Obasan by Joy Kogawa, Poetics of Relation by Eduoard Glissant, and Cane by Jean Toomer, I was intrigued by the different stories and narratives that were told. I couldn't help but notice overlapping themes of Identity reclamation, (inter)generational trauma, and the trauma of colonization and immigration. I wanted to explore these themes on further detail and highlight how these three texts are connected.

# Generational Trauma

## In Obasan:

- In Chapter 7, Naomi talks to Aunt Emily about what Japanese people experienced during World War II in both America and Canada, with Aunt Emily claiming that racism in Canada is more prevalent and sinister than in America. Aunt Emily states "We've never recovered from the dispersal policy. But of course that was the government's whole idea- to make sure we'd never be visible again. This part really shows how detrimental the internment of Japanese-Canadians was, so much so that they struggled to reestablish their communities, culture, and way of life after the war ended, even now as time passed, and as new generations have been born.
- Throughout the novel, we see the elders in Naomi's life grieve and cope with their traumas and time in the internment camp through stoicism and silence, not talking about the horrors they endured. Naomi claims Obasan's "language of her grief is silence" (Chapter 3). This pattern of silence is continued with each generation including, Naomi's mother, with Naomi stating "Mother, for her part, continued her vigil of silence" (Chapter 37). Silence is a learned coping mechanism for the family and their trauma, however, their silence prevented them from being fully present with their loved ones.



## In Cane:

Throughout many sections in Cane, we see stories and prose about different Black women and their objectification, violence against them, sexualization, and expectations that are put upon them by others. This is something that many women of color experience throughout their lives, generation after generation; an endless cycle. Some examples include:

- Karintha: "Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down [...] God grant us youth, secretly prayed the old men. The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them. This interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her". "Karintha smiles, and indulges them when she is in the mood for it. She has contempt for them. Karintha is a woman."
- Fern: "Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy. When she was young, a few men took her, but got no joy from it. And then, once done, they felt bound to her (quite unlike their hit and run with other girls), felt as though it would take them a lifetime to fulfill an obligation which they could find no name for. They became attached to her, and hungered after finding the barest trace of what she might desire. As she grew up, new men who came to town felt as almost everyone did who ever saw her: that they would not be denied. Men were everlasting bringing her their bodies."

## In Poetics of Relation:

- In various essays throughout the book, Glissant reflects on the historical trauma of slavery and colonization in the Caribbean. He discusses how this trauma has left lasting scars on Caribbean societies and has shaped the collective consciousness of its people across generations.
- A quote that represents this from the text is "Memory in our works is not a calendar memory; our experience of time does not keep company with the rhythms of month and year alone; it is aggravated by the void, the final sentence of the Plantation; our generations are caught up within an extended family in which our root stocks have diffused and everyone had two names, an official one and an essential one-the nickname given by his community. And when in the end it all began to shift, or rather collapse, when the unstoppable evolution had emptied the enclosure of people to reassemble them in the margins of cities, what remained, what still remains, is the dark side of this impossible memory, which has a louder voice and one that carries farther than any chronicle or census."





## Identity Reclamation

### In Obasan:

- We can see through the character of Aunt Emily, that she copes with her trauma and her experiences as a Japanese-Canadian by fighting against injustices in Canada, no matter what they are targeted. It is her way of reclaiming her identity of being both Canadian and Japanese and showing that both can be true, which is further shown when Naomi says "Wherever the words 'Japanese race' appeared, Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written 'Canadian citizen'."
- Throughout the novel, Naomi reflects on her family's history in Canada, and we often see her compensating for her Canadian and Japanese identities by using both Japanese and then English to translate what was said in Japanese. In an attempt to satisfy both "sides" of her. However, as the novel progresses, Naomi reclaims her identity, and establishes her family as "com[ing] from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside [...] our feet rooted nowhere. We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting".

(Chapter 34)

### In Poetics of Relation:

In an attempt to preserve the culture and language, Glissant describes the colonized Creole people as creating an unconventional literature to get around the imposed censorship of the colonizers. He states "That is because, in addition to this obligation to get around something, the Creole language has another, internal obligation: to renew itself in every instance on the basis of a series of forgettings. Forgetting, that is, integration, of what it starts from: the multiplicity of African languages on the one hand and European ones on the other, the nostalgia, finally, for the Caribbean remains of these". In attempts to preserve their identity, culture, and customs, they created a new way to communicate and pass down bits and pieces of the languages at different times. In an act of resistance, they created a new dialect.

### In Cane:

In the poem "Seventh Street", a tale is told of African Americans asserting themselves and their culture into the city of Washington D.C. and "taking over". They are "breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington" and moving into the city making "White and whitewash disappear". The African Americans are reclaiming spaces and being themselves and practicing their cultures unapologetically. Pushing the white people out of Seventh Street is a means of reclaiming their identities and showing the world that they can not be erased or pushed to corners to be invisible.



# Colonization & Immigration

## In Obasan:

- When World War II ends, Naomi and her family are only given two choices: to either return to Japan, where her grandparents emigrated from to Canada and established themselves prior to the war, and a place that Naomi and her brother Stephen have never been or to work on a beet farm; they are not allowed to return to their homes. Naomi describes the "migration" to the beet farm as "We are hammers and chisels in the hands of would-be sculptors, battering the spirits of the sleeping mountain. We are those pioneers who cleared the bush and the forest with our hands, the gardeners tending and attending the soil with our tenderness, the fishermen who are flung from the sea to flounder in the prairies". Despite being forced, her family is still leaving their mark on the space, refusing to be erased, and establishing themselves as contributing to building the nation, despite the Canadian government (the colonizers) attempting to smite and erase them.

## In Cane:

In the poem "Georgia Dusk", the tale of a celebration of a community that has recently gained their freedom from slavery is told. However, as the poem progresses we can see that this community is holding onto the little pieces of their homelands and former cultures that their ancestors were taken from to be enslaved. This is shown in the lines "Where only chips and stumps are left to show / The solid proof of former domicile". There are only bits and pieces left of the original culture that has been passed down for generations as much of it has been erased through the cruelty of slavery/colonization. Additionally, this is shown when the community is reminiscing on the prosperity of their people before slavery and how there were "men, with vestiges of pomp, / Race memories of king and caravan, / Highpriests, an ostrich, and a juju-man".

## In Poetics of Relation:

In attempts to assimilate and erase the culture of the Caribbean slaves, Glissant states that "In contrast to arrowlike nomadism (discovery or conquest), in contrast to the situation of exile, errantry gives-on-and-with the negation of every pole and every metropolis, whether connected or not to a conqueror's voyaging act. We have repeatedly mentioned that the first thing exported by the conqueror was his language. Moreover, the great Western languages were supposedly vehicular languages, which often took the place of an actual metropolis. Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually. Going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent". The erasure of culture and connection is a tactic used by the colonizer to force the slaves/colonized into obedience and silence.





"Is there no valid language for chaos? Or  
does chaos only produce a sort of  
language that reduces and annihilates?  
Does its echo recede into a snarl of sabirs  
at the level of a roar?"  
- Poetics of Relation



## Personal Reflection

After creating this zine and the duration of this semester I have been able to make connections and realize how many of these themes that I touched on (immigration, colonization, generational trauma, and reclaiming identity) are not exclusive to just one specific group/race. These are themes and struggles that effect so many different kinds of people and have intersectionality. This class along with this final project have only kickstarted my interest and passion for these topics, which I hope to continue to explore throughout the rest of my college career and professional career.

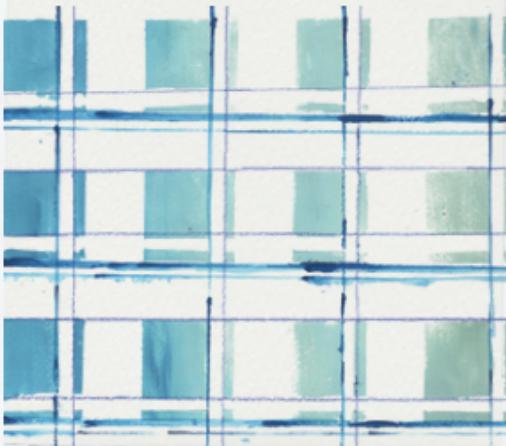
"They took us from the  
place where our songs are  
sung."

-"Karintha", cane



"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."

-Obasan, chapter 8





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