



DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA — DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR TRAUMA IN KERRI SAKAMOTO’S *THE ELECTRICAL FIELD* (1998)

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Introduction

The term ‘trauma’ originates from a Greek word for ‘wound’. Yet, as noted by Maria Orwid, the semantic understanding of the word is extended beyond its physical aspect — trauma can be experienced not only on the somatic level, but also on the psychological one.¹ Hence, trauma can be defined as a result of a painful event: “[trauma is] the result of a painful event, physical or mental, causing immediate damage to the body or shock to the mind. Psychological traumas include emotional shocks that have an enduring effect on the personality, such as rejection, divorce, combat experiences, civilian catastrophes, and racial or religious discrimination.”²

Raymond Corsini also highlights that the experience of trauma is not necessarily a singular result, but can have a more continuous impact on both body and mind of an individual.³ Psychiatrists distinguish two main types of trauma: collective trauma shared, simultaneously, by a group of people, and individual trauma which refers to feelings and emotions experienced by an individual.⁴ Nevertheless, both types of trauma are strongly intertwined as every group, even the biggest one, always consists

¹ Maria Orwid, *Trauma* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2009), 7.

² Raymond J. Corsini, *The Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1019.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Orwid, *Trauma*, 11.

of individuals, while the experiences of individuals can have a great impact not only on those closest to them, but also on the society as a whole.⁵ The source of trauma best illustrating the interconnectedness of these two types of trauma is war-time experience.

War trauma can be accompanied by other factors, fuelling each other and creating a vicious circle of psychological and physical damage. One of such factors is racial prejudice, experienced by the members of diasporic communities on almost everyday basis. Although as old as the first organized human societies themselves, racial prejudice did not become the foundation of legal policies until the nineteenth century.⁶ Yet, it was not until the early twentieth century that legislative state racism fully bloomed in the West, with the introduction of the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935 and numerous expulsion acts and other laws protecting racial purity issued in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and other states deemed democratic.

The aim of this paper is to discuss how the impact of the Second World War trauma on the Japanese Canadian diasporic identity is presented in literature by those whom it affects the most — the members of the Japanese diaspora in Canada. For this purpose, the author has decided to analyse *The Electrical Field*, a debut novel by Kerri Sakamoto depicting the lives of the Japanese minority in Canada from the 1940s to 1970s. In order to fully address the discussed issue, the paper has been divided into three sections. The first section discusses the notion of diasporic identity and the influence racial prejudice can have on its formation. The second section presents the situation of the Japanese Canadian community before, during, and after the Second World War. Finally, the third section focuses on the impact of the Second World War trauma on the Japanese Canadian diasporic identity as depicted in Kerri Sakamoto's 1998 novel *The Electrical Field*.

The Question of Diasporic Identity and Racial Prejudice

The term 'diaspora' proves to be particularly difficult to define in a clear and precise manner. In fact, even the etymological origins of the word seem to be problematic to establish: while Robin Cohen states that 'diaspora' can be derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (meaning 'to sow' or 'to disperse'),⁷ Stephane Dufoix claims that it comes from another Greek verb, *diaspeiro* (meaning 'to scatter abroad'),⁸ and Gabriel Sheffer states that it is a compound noun created out of two Greek words: *speiro* ('to sow') and *dia* ('over').⁹

The difficulty with defining diaspora stems from both the changes in the application of the term and the shifts within the scope of diaspora studies. The classical, or analytical, diaspora paradigm provides a list of key diaspora features, included in the widely quoted definition by William Safran:

the concept of diaspora [should] be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "centre" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign,

⁵ Ibid, 20.

⁶ Benjamin H. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 175.

⁷ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), xiv.

⁸ Stephane Dufoix, *Diasporas* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2008), 4.

⁹ Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland — its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not — and perhaps cannot be — fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return — when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.¹⁰

According to Safran, the diasporic community is solidified by the myth of returning home which becomes stronger the more the community is threatened with disintegration due to both external or internal factors.¹¹ Safran's list has been extended by Robin Cohen, who distinguishes nine common features of diaspora:

1. dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions;
2. alternatively or additionally, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;
3. a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, suffering and achievements;
4. an idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;
5. the frequent development of a return movement to the homeland that gains collective approbation even if many in the group are satisfied with only a vicarious relationship or intermittent visits to the homeland;
6. a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate;
7. a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group;
8. a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement even where home has become more vestigial;
and
9. the possibility of distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.¹²

In their definitions of diaspora, both Safran and Cohen describe diasporic identity as similar to national identity — it is based on the link between a group and a homeland (seen as a particular territory), while ignoring the possible influence of a host country. In turn, in more postmodern definitions of diaspora, diasporic identity is linked with individual everyday experiences. This approach to diaspora and diasporic identity is illustrated by Avtar Brah's claim that "at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey."¹³ Yet, this diasporic journey is an act of rooting oneself in a new environment as those individual stories of travel create one main narrative which serves as the foundation of

¹⁰ William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹² Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 17.

¹³ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 179.

diasporic identity: “these multiple journeys may configure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. It is within this confluence of narrativity the ‘diasporic community’ is differently imagined under different historical circumstances. [...] The identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively.”¹⁴

Brah and other contemporary diasporic theorists such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and James Clifford, base diasporic identity on “the idea of roots and notions of ethnic and national belonging”¹⁵; furthermore, diasporic identity is also seen as “awareness of decentred attachments, of being simultaneously ‘home away from home’ or ‘here and there’ or awareness of multi-locality”¹⁶ as well as a mode of cultural production resulting from and contributing to the global exchange of cultural objects, images and meanings.¹⁷ Hence, diasporic identity can be described as a complex structure of intertwined cultural influences, ethnicity, elements of everyday life, and individual and communal experiences and memories.

The main question is, therefore, how the formation of diasporic identity is influenced by racial prejudice. Diasporic identity can be described as a type of social identity used by people to define themselves and be identified — and defined — by other members of their group.¹⁸ According to Henri Tajfel and John Turner, a social group can be defined as “a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it.”¹⁹ Hence, within the framework of the social identity theory, every action undertaken by an individual should be seen as a way of gaining social identification and, through that, finding their own place in society. However, in order for that to take place, the individual needs to incorporate their group membership into their self-concept.²⁰

Gabriel Sheffer notes that the governments would at least attempt to assimilate and integrate the members of diasporas through introduction of various policies. However, this may prove to be particularly problematic due to the strong sense of diasporic and ethnic identity shared by the members of those communities.²¹ This refusal of full integration may result in the emergence and subsequent spread of prejudice — defined as “a negative attitude toward a socially defined group and toward any person perceived to be a member of that group”²² — directed towards members of diasporic

¹⁴ Ibid, 180.

¹⁵ Paola Toninato, “The Making of Gypsy Diaspora,” *Translocations: Migration and Social Change* 4, no. 20 (2009): 3.

¹⁶ Steven Vertovec, “Three Meanings of ‘Diaspora’ Exemplified Among South Asian Religions,” *Diaspora* 6, no. 3 (1997): 281–282.

¹⁷ Ibid, 298.

¹⁸ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour,” in *Political Psychology: Key Readings*, ed. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), 283.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 284.

²¹ Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics*, 92.

²² Richard D. Ashmore, “Prejudice: Causes and Cures,” in *Social Psychology: Social Influence, Attitude Change, Group Processes, and Prejudice*, ed. Barry E. Collins and Richard D. Ashmore (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1970), 253.

communities. However, in many cases, racial and ethnic prejudice predates the arrival of immigrants and establishment of diasporas; as a result, migrants find themselves establishing their new homes in societies already prejudiced against them. To counteract the negative effects of prejudice, the members of diaspora may turn to their diasporic identity as a source of psychological stability. This tendency of greater ingroup identification in face of discrimination is known as rejection-identification model:

the social identification process is enhanced when there is a stable and pervasive perceived threat or rejection from an outside group, because people have a natural tendency to seek a sense of belonging and connectedness to sustain their self-esteem and well-being. [...] For example, individuals who are members of an ethnic minority group are more likely to identify with their group when they perceive discrimination from the majority group. In this situation, ethnic identity additionally serves as a protective factor to offset the deleterious effects of discrimination on well-being and adjustment.²³

Therefore, diasporic communities whose members are met with prejudice in the host societies are more likely to turn to their ingroups and build their diasporic identity on the connection with those who share similar experiences because of their race and ethnicity; this further promotes and justifies the need to isolate the diaspora from the host society.

Japanese Canadians and the Second World War Trauma

Japanese Canadians had been victims of racial and ethnic prejudice long before the Second World War — due to their expansionism, they were identified as one of the faces of the Yellow Peril, “a complex of fears and prejudices associated with the sense of variously understood threat from the expansion and domination of representatives of the yellow race, felt and expressed by the white people identifying themselves with the Western civilization.”²⁴ The term itself was coined and popularised by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1895 during the discussion of the Japanese victory in the First Sino-Japanese War.²⁵ After the war, the number of immigrants from East Asia to the Western countries increased significantly, stirring in the Westerners fear of “the vast, faceless, nameless yellow horde, the rising tide, indeed, of colour.”²⁶ The potential threat of the Others from Asia became the justification for the Western colonial expansion to the East as it was believed that divided Asia would be less of a military threat.²⁷

The Yellow Peril contributed significantly to the growing resentment towards Asian immigrants in Western countries — initially directed towards Chinese labourers brought to the United States and Canada to build roads and railroads, it was soon transferred onto the Japanese who travelled to North America to fill the gap in the

²³ Richard Lee, Hyung Chol Yoo, Chi-Young Noh, and Hyun-Sim Doh, “The Psychology of Diaspora Experiences: Intergroup Contact, Perceived Discrimination, and the Ethnic Identity of Koreans in China,” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13, no. 2 (2007): 115–116.

²⁴ Aleksandra Łopiąńska, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ Syndrome in Contemporary Russia,” *Sensus Historiae* 8 (2012): 42.

²⁵ Daniel A. Metraux, “Jack London and The Yellow Peril,” *Education About Asia* 1, no. 14 (2009): 29.

²⁶ David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840–1949: Power, Presence, and Perception in a Century of Humiliation* (Albany: State of New York Press, 2008), 6.

²⁷ Łopiąńska, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ Syndrome,” 42.

labour market, particularly in the agricultural sector and fishing industry.²⁸

Furthermore, Japanese immigrants were seen by many Americans and Canadians as a potential fifth column, infiltrating the Western countries and studying their weaknesses for expansionist purposes. They became even more suspicious and threatening in the eyes of the Westerners in 1905 when Japan defeated the Russian Empire during the Russo-Japanese War.²⁹

Initially, the fear of the Yellow Peril in Canada was directed predominantly at Chinese immigrants. In fact, the Janet Smith Bill — aiming at banning “the employment of white women and ‘Oriental’ men as domestic servants in the same household”³⁰ in the aftermath of the suspicious death of a young white nursemaid — was not passed as it violated the provisions of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1911 which prohibited the Canadian government from introducing any discriminatory legislation against the Japanese.³¹ Yet, despite the protection granted to Japanese Canadians by the aforementioned Treaty, the political leaders of British Columbia continued to express their concerns, worried about the high birth rate of the Japanese immigrants and the possibility of British Columbia becoming “inundated by the Yellow Peril if the White population did not quickly increase.”³² However, it was the events which transpired during the Second World War that became a tipping point in the relations between the white Canadians and the Canadians of Japanese descent.

Before the Second World War, 22,000 Japanese Canadians were living on the coast of British Columbia with 75 per cent of them being born in Canada and never leaving the country.³³ Despite being the victims of racial prejudice for years, Japanese Canadians lived alongside the white Canadians, filling a labour gap in the fishing industry. However, when, in the act of solidarity with the United States, Canada declared the war on Japan in December 1941, the situation of Japanese immigrants changed drastically. On 14 January 1942, the federal government of Canada announced *Statement of the Policy of the Government in Relations to the Japanese Problem in British Columbia* which postulated the removal of all men of Japanese descent aged between 18 and 45 from the coast of British Columbia. The act was activated in its full capacity on 25 February and extended to all people of Japanese origin.³⁴ As a result, over 20,000 Japanese-Canadians were relocated from the protected coastal area to the internment camps located deep in the mainland and to sugar beet farms in southern Alberta and Manitoba. The families were separated and adults were stripped of their rights and labelled as ‘enemy aliens’ while their properties and belongings were confiscated and then sold to the Custodian of Enemy Property in order to pay for the expenses of building the internment camps.³⁵

²⁸ Keith Aoki, “The Yellow Pacific: Transnational Identities, Diasporic Racialization and Myth(s) of the ‘Asian Century’,” *University of California Davis Law Review* 3, no. 44 (2011): 913–914.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 920.

³⁰ Scott Kerwin, “The Janet Smith Bill of 1924 and the Language of Race and Nation in British Columbia,” *BC Studies* 121 (1999): 83.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

³² *Ibid.*, 92.

³³ Maryka Omatsu, *Bittersweet Passage: Redress and the Japanese Canadian Experience* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992), 93.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

Yet, the discriminatory treatment of Japanese immigrants and Canadians of Japanese descent did not end with the surrender of the Empire of Japan and the subsequent end of the Second World War. After the war, the internees were given the choice of either settling east of the Rocky Mountains or being deported to Japan. The latter option was chosen by 4,000 Japanese Canadians, out of whom over 2,000 had never been to Japan before.³⁶ Meanwhile, over 13,000 people who agreed to resettlement were restricted in their numbers and distribution in cities such as Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal. In 1947, only 6,766 Japanese Canadians remained in British Columbia, less than one-third of the 1942 population. The last wartime restrictions were lifted in 1949 when Japanese Canadians were finally allowed to travel freely. However, by this time it was too late for them to rebuild their pre-war lives.³⁷

Relocation and imprisonment in the internment camps were undoubtedly a traumatic experience for Japanese Canadians, “an experience that [was] emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking and one that often ha[d] long-term negative mental and physical consequences.”³⁸ Yet, the experience of trauma is subjective — factors such as “prior racism experiences, the political climate before and after the event, psychological coping capacity, socioeconomic status, and age and health status”³⁹ determine the extent of trauma for each individual. To discuss the Second World War experiences of Japanese Canadians, it is necessary to treat them as examples of collective trauma, discussed earlier in this article, and transgenerational trauma, “a transmission of trauma from one generation to the next that can include cultural and political factors, as well as psychological and biological [ones].”⁴⁰ Transgenerational trauma can be passed from one generation to another through stories as well as through projecting “already formed self or object image [of the generation suffering from trauma] to the developing self-representation of a child [where it] then becomes like a psychological gene that influences the child’s identity.”⁴¹

The lasting effects of collective trauma include: the lack of trust in the world and people in general, feelings of powerlessness, the lack of empowerment, and feelings of unpredictability towards the world;⁴² mental health problems may also arise.⁴³ Furthermore, collective trauma affects the memory of those who suffer from it: “problems with traumatic memory can range from an inability to recall parts of the event, inconsistent recall of certain aspects, difficulties in finding words for the experience or difficulty with presenting a coherent narrative. [Therefore], [t]raumatic memories are often described as fragmented, disorganised, lacking narrative, incoherent [or] incomplete.”⁴⁴ Meanwhile, transgenerational trauma has the greatest

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 95.

³⁸ Shulamith L. Ashenberg Straussner and Alexandra J. Calnan, “Trauma Through the Life Cycle: A Review of Current Literature,” *Clinical Social Work Journal* 42 (2014): 323.

³⁹ Donna K. Nagata and Wendy J. Y. Cheng, “Intergenerational Communication of Race-Related Trauma by Japanese American Former Internees,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 7, no. 3 (2003): 267.

⁴⁰ Vamik D. Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-group Identity,” *Sage Journals* 34, no. 1 (2001): 86.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ashenberg Straussner and Calnan, “Trauma Through the Life Cycle,” 324.

⁴³ Thema Bryant-Davis and Carlota Ocampo, “The Trauma of Racism: Implications for Counselling, Research, and Education,” *The Counselling Psychologist* 33, no. 4 (2005): 576.

⁴⁴ Juliet Cohen, “Questions of Credibility: Omissions, Discrepancies and Errors of Recall in the Testimony of Asylum Seekers,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 13, no. 3 (2001): 300.

impact on the relationships between the trauma survivors and their families.⁴⁵ Hence, transgenerational trauma results in “[the] lack of genuine connection or true closeness within the family [where] boundaries are fixed and problem solving is impaired.”⁴⁶

Collective and transgenerational traumas manifest themselves in the Japanese Canadian community in a very specific manner. One of those manifestations takes the form of collective silence as those Japanese Canadians who were in the internment camps refuse to talk about their experiences with others; as a result, “many children of internees have grown up knowing nothing of their own parents’ traumatic experiences.”⁴⁷ This need to maintain silence stems from the Japanese concepts of *shikata ga nai* (‘it cannot be helped’), *gaman* (‘perseverance’), and *kodomo no tame ni* (‘for the sake of the children’), as well as Japanese stoicism.⁴⁸ The defence mechanism of collective silence kept by the generation affected by trauma also influences next generations which become ‘cultural orphans’ who do not know all the parts of their family history and, as a result, are unable to fully form and shape their identities.⁴⁹ Finally, collective trauma affects the way in which the Japanese Canadian parents approach their children. Some parents encourage their children to limit their interactions with the white Canadians and, in turn, focus on forming relationships with other Japanese Canadians. This usually occurs through cultural socialization during which parents emphasize racial or ethnic culture, pride, and traditions. Meanwhile, other parents want to “socialize their children to blend into the dominant society; therefore, they do not actively pass on the Japanese language and culture, and rarely talk about their discriminatory experiences.”⁵⁰ This behaviour is motivated by the need to prevent their children from becoming victims of discrimination and prejudice.

Diasporic Identity and the Second World War Trauma in Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*

The Electrical Field is the debut novel of Kerri Sakamoto, a Canadian novelist of Japanese descent. The novel deals with the effects, aftermaths and consequences of the internment of the Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. Set in the 1970s, the story presented in *The Electrical Field* is told by Asako Saito, a middle-aged woman living with her bedridden father and younger brother on the outskirts of Toronto. The main focus of the novel is the lives of Japanese Canadian families (*nihonjin*) living in Miss Saito’s neighbourhood. However, as Asako is an unreliable narrator, it is impossible to determine whether the picture of the small community she paints is true. The starting point of the novel is the murder of Saito’s friend, Chisako, and her *hakujin* lover, Mr Spears, and the subsequent disappearance of Yano, Chisako’s husband, and their two children, Kimi and Tam. This thriller-esque plot serves as

⁴⁵ Sarah Gangi, Alessandra Talamo, and Stefano Ferracuti, “The Long-term Effects of Extreme War-related Trauma on the Second Generation of Holocaust Survivors,” *Violence and Victims* 24, no. 5 (2009): 688.

⁴⁶ Madeleine S. Abrams, “Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma: Recent Contributions from the Literature of Family Systems Approaches to Treatment,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 53, no. 2 (1999): 230.

⁴⁷ Nancy J. Peterson, *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 138–139.

⁴⁸ Małgorzata Bobowska, “Remembering Historical Violence: The Role of Photography in the Japanese Canadian Community and in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*,” *TransCanadiana* 8 (2016): 295.

⁴⁹ Huang Suhuai, “A ‘Cultural Orphan’ Lost in 2015,” *The Practice Journal* 8 (2015): 3–4.

⁵⁰ Nagata and Cheng, “Intergenerational Communication of Race-Related Trauma,” 269.

a background for exploring the impact of internment trauma not only on those Japanese-Canadians who experienced it, but also on the next generation.

The small Japanese Canadian community lives in the state of collective silence and collective amnesia. Asako and her neighbours, the Nakamuras, do not talk about their past in the internment camps; in fact, they appear to want to erase the part of their identity — the Japanese part — which was the main cause of their trauma. The Nakamuras adopt the English versions of their names, Tom and Key (although Asako still refers to her as Keiko) and Asako herself uses what she calls her “Christian name” — Anna — when she interacts with *hakujins*, such as the white detectives investigating Yano’s disappearance and Angel, her brother’s Jamaican Canadian girlfriend. To hide her identity, Asako even changes the way she speaks, the decision of which she is reminded when she meets Yano for the first time:

“Saw you walking,” [Yano] said in a stilted way [...]. It was the way so many *nisei* spoke, their Japanese no better, with that halting rhythm I’d worked hard to rid myself of; no grace et all. I remember that feeling, the hated awkwardness of my speech; the lumpiness of my tongue. I cringed to hear it come back to me out of another’s mouth.⁵¹

It is the appearance of Yano and his family in the neighbourhood that challenges the amnesiac *status quo* as he forces Asako and the Nakamuras to discuss “thing[s] [they] long ago left behind and made [their] peace with”⁵² for the sake of his redress campaign.

While Yano’s arrival challenges the *status quo*, the murder of his wife, Chisako, breaks it. Chisako’s death triggers Asako’s memory and makes her relieve her trauma of internment — she suffers from nightmares, flashbacks, and hallucinations as the ghosts of her older brother, Eiji, and Chisako haunt her. The memories of life in the internment camp become more vivid, with smells, sounds, and emotions still strong, even after thirty years:

[...] I recalled how dizzy I’d felt from the ferry ride over, my first; sick from being inside a hulk that moved against the current while you stayed still. There was the smell in the livestock building that made me more sick — a disinfectant used on the stalls where we slept, and the musty stink of cows and their businesses lurking under it. It almost hurt to smell, a sharp but burning sweet that made me press my nose to the floor the first night and sniff until my head ached.⁵³

Asako’s memories of the camp are those of a child — she did not seem to fully understand what was happening and while she was upset about leaving her home behind, the camp was just another adventure for her:

My memory was blank [...]. There were so many families [in the camp], all living in tumbledown shacks, one no shabbier than the next. It was just another adventure to me at my tender age. I was little more than a child when we first got there. Of course, after four years I was still young, barley older than Sachi was now.⁵⁴

Yet, although her memories are vague, Asako recalls the appalling conditions in which the Japanese were forced to live as well as the initial separation of families — “Papa

⁵¹ Kerri Sakamoto, *The Electrical Field* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998), 67.

⁵² *Ibid*, 71.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 79.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 177.

and Eiji had been there for weeks already”⁵⁵ — and the constant need to occupy oneself with work to avoid thinking about the current situation.

Asako’s memories of leaving the internment camp are also quite vivid. She remembers her and her father being forced to leave the camp, together with her mother and baby brother, and move further inland — just like many Japanese Canadians who decided to stay in Canada, they could not return to their house on the coast of British Columbia:

[Papa and I were] leaving the internment camp after the war [...] I was unhappy that day as I recall, because we were not going to the sea, I would not see Japan; we were staying in Canada. Leaving the mountains, going deeper in to a place that Papa could barely pronounce. “On-ta-ri-o.”⁵⁶

Asako misses her home in Port Dover on Vancouver Island and she sees staying in British Columbia as the end of her life as she knows it. Furthermore, trauma caused by being uprooted again and losing her older brother Eiji numbs Asako and isolates her from her family. Yet, this isolation is shared by other members of the community who are unwilling to live close to each other as if afraid of creating another camp, this time of their own making.⁵⁷

However, the memories Asako keeps for herself — mostly of her time with Eiji — are fragmented, incoherent, incomplete, and lack a proper narrative. When Sachi, a teenage daughter of Tom and Keiko, asks her about her wartime experiences, Asako instead talks about sneaking out to the fairground located next to the camp.⁵⁸ Yet, every time she tells the story, Asako changes some of its elements while omitting and forgetting others which is immediately noticed by her young listener. The older woman mixes and intertwines her memories with fiction while purposefully avoiding talking about Eiji’s death, the real source of her trauma. She becomes ready to reveal the truth about Eiji’s last days only when she is forced to relive her trauma — after she saves Sachi from drowning in the river, Asako finally tells the teenage girl that Eiji died of pneumonia he caught after doing the same for her.

While she manages to share her memories with Sachi, Asako is unable to do the same with Yano and Stum, her younger brother. She justifies her inability to talk about her internment experiences to Yano, stating that it is her private matter:

“Yano-san,” I said, lowering my voice to indicate the seriousness of what I was about to say. “These things,” I went on. I smiled pleasantly; I felt the steadiness of my own wisdom in the words poised on my tongue. “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?” [...] 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 [McKenzie] they may or may not named that hill after. For what life did or did not give to me. There would be no end to it. My bitterness belong 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.⁵⁹

In a very Japanese manner, Asako and the Nakamuras do not want to talk about the past — mentioning the experiences of internment is seen by them as an act of cowardice and “blaming everything on the war, the camps [instead of] fac[ing] [one’s] own

⁵⁵ Ibid, 79.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 124.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 79–81.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 110.

personal troubles.”⁶⁰ Trauma is private and intimate and should stay this way. Yet, this insistence on keeping traumatic experiences private and seeing talking about them as the act of cowardice allows Asako and the Nakamuras to ignore the fact that Yano is, to a certain extent, right — if it was not for the camps, their lives might have looked completely different:

If things had been different, if it weren't for the war, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. Pressing collars and cuffs all day, cleaning other people's dirty clothes. [...] Same with your papa, sweeping up on that chicken farm. Your brother, all those years. We'd be doing something else. Something important, ne? [...] We were too good. We were doing too well, so they had to set us back, didn't they?⁶¹

However, apart from trauma, both Yano and Asako feel ashamed of their past as if what happened to them was their fault; it is this shame that, according to Yano, makes Japanese Canadians afraid of speaking up and drawing attention to themselves.⁶²

Furthermore, Asako's inability to discuss her traumatic memories of life in the camp has a profound impact on Stum who, due to the oppressive wall of silence built by his loved ones, cannot recreate his family history and form a healthy emotional connection with his sister:

I looked up to find Stum at the foot of the stairs, holding Eiji's picture. [...] “Wish I'd known him,” Stum said, coming closer [...]. “You did. You did know him. I've told you.” “Not the way you did,” he insisted. [...] “I was a baby. I hardly remember. [...] But there was something. [...] I remember the two of you, [...] I remember how well you got along,” he said. “Sometimes ne-san... [...] Sometimes I was jealous.” [...] Then it occurred to me, seeing him stand there in the middle of the room, empty-handed. A doughy boy, little islands in his face, born too early, too late, born at all. [...] Jealous of someone he could never catch up with, not now.⁶³

Collective amnesia and silence sustained by Asako and the Nakamuras stuns the development of Stum's identity. It is only when he befriends Yano, the only person who speaks openly about the fate of Japanese Canadians during the war, that he starts to change and reinvent himself.

While Asako and the Nakamuras try to at least partially erase the Japanese part of their identity, they do so only when they interact with the white Others, the Outsiders. In the safety of their own hearths, they place great emphasis on cultivating Japanese traditions, customs, and values — Asako cooks traditional Japanese food using the same cooking techniques her mother taught her when she was a child and the members of this small diasporic community often speak Japanese or a mix of English and Japanese when communicating with each other. The only person who challenges this separation of spheres — with public non-Japanese sphere and private Japanese one — is Yano who openly manifests his Japaneseness and proudly announces that his wife, Chisako, is a ‘real’ Japanese: “‘Married her over there,’ he said. ‘In a temple, even.’ He laughed. I had to hold back my own smile; I could not imagine Yano in such a place, such a serene and sacred place. But it was unmistakable what he was conveying: pride

⁶⁰ Ibid, 123.

⁶¹ Ibid, 121–122.

⁶² Ibid, 231.

⁶³ Ibid, 58–59.

that he'd got himself a Japanese girl from Japan. Not like the rest of us homegrown nisei; not like him and me, neither-here-nor-there stock."⁶⁴

For Yano, Chisako is not only the woman he married, but also a status symbol which makes him stand out in the Japanese Canadian community and, simultaneously, strengthens his attachment to Japanese customs and values. To further highlight his wife's Japaneseness, Yano reveals to Asako that Chisako comes from Hiroshima: "'On her passport it says she's still Japanese' [...]. After moment he added: 'Hiroshima-ken.' 'I see,' I said, wondering if from that I was to understand what Chisako had left behind."⁶⁵ Yano uses the tragic history of Hiroshima and the associations it brings to play on Asako's sympathies. Therefore, it is not surprising that when Asako learns that Chisako was not directly affected by the bombing of Hiroshima, she feels betrayed and manipulated:

"I'm so sorry, Chisako," I stammered. "Your family, your parents, they were in Hiroshima..." [...]

"Asako, you are confused," she said. "My parents died before the war. I never saw those things, but of course I heard." Her eyes shut.

I was about to repeat what Yano had said on one of our walks. How he'd told me she was from Hiroshima, what he implied about her family. I could not have mistaken his meaning. For I had, I believe, in some way held in my heart all this time, through the endless confiding [...]. I was on the verge of blurting how betrayed I felt, having my sympathies played upon [...].⁶⁶

While he tries to keep his friendly façade when interacting with other Japanese Canadians, Yano is very hostile towards the host white Canadian society — he calls for the unification of all the members of the Japanese diaspora, claiming that only united they can pressure the Canadian government to finally address the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. However, Yano differs too much from other members of the small Japanese diaspora — disgusted with the way in which he was treated during the war, he agreed to the relocation to Japan: "I went [to Japan] after the war, after the camps shut down. That's how it was, they shipped you back to where you'd never been."⁶⁷ Neither Asako nor the Nakamuras understand his decision and sympathise with it, believing that through the relocation Yano chose the easier option to live without the reminders of their collective trauma: "They gave you a choice [...] even if you couldn't go home. You could have come east like the rest of us."⁶⁸ As a result, Yano's aggressive activism for redress is seen by other members of the diaspora as a sign of madness; only Chisako tries to justify her husband's actions:⁶⁹

My wish is for the bomb to drop on the ones who did it. [...] Just because we're nihonjin, they think they can do anything to us. [...] That is the reason for Yano's meetings and letters, the petitions to government. He isn't crazy. He wants to change things.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Ibid, 92–93.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 93–94.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 212–213.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 93.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 124.

⁶⁹ Japanese-born Chisako does not fully understand fears and worries which drive Asako and the Nakamuras to reject Yano's activism.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 213.

Yet, it is Chisako herself who, despite being of ‘pure’ Japanese breed, is torn between Japanese traditions and values cultivated by her husband and freedom offered by the Western culture. When Yano invites Asako to an *ikebana* lesson with Chisako, she can see that her neighbour is not particularly enthusiastic about the whole endeavour; in fact, Chisako admits that she prefers the Western way of putting all the flowers together in a vase.⁷¹ Later, when Asako asks Chisako if she misses Japan, the woman immediately says ‘no,’ explaining that the Japanese people are too stiff, too formal, too cold, and too restricted by the social rules.⁷² Finally, she starts an affair with her *hakujin* boss, choosing Western culture over the Japanese one.

As Yano places great emphasis on celebrating Japaneseness and shows disdain for the white Canadian society, he sees Chisako’s affair with Mr Spears not only as an act of adultery, but also as the betrayal of the whole Canadian Japanese community. In Yano’s eyes, Chisako’s behaviour brings shame to the whole family and the only way of restoring family honour is through spilling blood. His actions — killing his wife and her lover and later murdering his children before taking his own life — seem to stem from his traumatic experiences in the internment camp: “‘They were hoping we’d all commit hara-kiri in the camps, don’t you think, Saito-san?’ [...] He cleared his throat. ‘You know, Saito-san, there were a few who did kill themselves. Out of shame. [...] I thought about it myself,’ he murmured, ‘Once or twice.’”⁷³ Shame brought by his Japanese wife’s affair with a white man and a sense of personal and cultural betrayal combined with his traumatic past push Yano to honour killing. Surprisingly, Stum supports Yano’s decision, stating that Chisako shamed Yano and deserved to die, punished for becoming too familiar with the host culture.

The aforementioned collective trauma and collective amnesia become transgenerational trauma, shaping the new diasporic identity superimposed on the youngest generation represented by Sachi. The young girl has a particularly strong — albeit complicated — relationship with Asako who sees her as a victim, a collateral damage of her parents’ internment trauma which left her uncared for and isolated. Sachi’s victimhood is highlighted in the opening scene of the book in which Asako draws parallels between Sachi and a street urchin she and her father saw when leaving the camp:

Suddenly Sachi was at the bottom of my steps again, peering up at me. Like a child with no mother to clean her up: crumbs scabbing her chin, and her skin dirty in the light. She made me think of a scraggly urchin we’d passed on the road leaving the internment camp after the war, Papa and me, long ago. [...] Standing in the back of that crowded, rattling truck, I gazed down at the urchin, her lost eyes. Left behind. I was glad at least not to be left behind.⁷⁴

Although Sachi was born over a decade after the dissolution of the internment camps, she is left behind by her parents who are unable to take care of her, especially in the face of another traumatic event looming over their small community: “The Nakamuras’ front drapes remained closed. She was in there, shut inside her room. I worried about her alone, trapped there, her nerves squeezed tight. I wondered if she might hurt herself. I had no faith in Keiko or Tom to prevent it, much less help her, I knew the way

⁷¹ Ibid, 117.

⁷² Ibid, 118.

⁷³ Ibid, 258–259.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 2–3.

they were with her, she didn't have to tell me. They'd come home to her tired, with no patience, no understanding to coax her still, no word."⁷⁵

This lack of emotional support from her parents pushes Sachi into self-mutilation as a way of controlling and dealing with her emotions: "As I took the flower-tops from her I noticed small cuts on the backs of her hands. They were too long to be pricks from thorn; some were fresh. I winced. It had started back then, the small tortures in the kitchen at night while her parents slept."⁷⁶

Sachi is therefore the victim of the new diasporic identity formed through the avoidance of the past which still haunts the community. Throughout the whole novel, Sachi is unable to fill the blank spaces marring her identity as there is no one who can tell her the truth about the past: Mr Saito, regressed to the childlike state of wails and meaningless babbling, is unable to talk about his experiences; her parents are too detached from the past to even start sharing their memories with her; Yano's monologues are filled with great but ultimately empty words; and Asako's narratives are always fractured and disjointed.

However, it all seems to change by the end of the novel, when Asako saves Sachi's life. It is not until they are faced with the possible loss of their daughter that the Nakamuras realise their errors: "[Sachi] was on the bank of the creek, bundled in a blanket [...] with Keiko and Tom holding her. Holding her as a mother and father should. Their faces opened by the light, the lingering terror, like walnuts cracked from their shells."⁷⁷ However, despite Keiko's epiphany and her reconciliation with Asako, it remains unknown whether Sachi's mother will manage to overcome her trauma for the sake of her daughter.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to discuss how diasporic identity and the Second World War trauma are intertwined in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*. In her novel, Sakamoto shows and highlights how collective trauma experienced by Japanese Canadians during the Second World War continues to affect them even over thirty years later. The memories of years spent in the internment camps are still vivid in the minds of those who survived them and continue to haunt them on everyday basis as even the most common object can trigger a flashback. The severity of trauma paralyses the small community, rendering it unable to function properly. Asako and the Nakamuras do not want to talk about their traumatic experiences, even if it would mean drawing the attention of the Canadian population to their fate — the mixture of shame of what happened to them and fear of reliving their traumatic past once again forces them into the state of collective silence.

The emotional coldness of the older generation, their inability and refusal to talk about trauma, and collective history filled with blank spaces results in the formation of the new diasporic identity, superimposed on the younger generation. However, this incomplete identity leaves the young Japanese Canadians confused and lost as they become the next victims of the Second World War trauma. Interestingly enough, this new diasporic identity can be found both in those who did not experience the internment directly, regardless of their age — Stum, who was born in the internment camp, and Sachi, born over fifteen years after the war, are both kept in the dark and

⁷⁵ Ibid, 30.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 33.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 281.

grew up with unexplained blank spaces in their collective identity. As a result, they are unable to build unfragmented and coherent identities.

More interestingly, though, *The Electrical Field* also depicts the emergence of transgenerational trauma and its impact on the Japanese Canadian identity. Sakamoto suggests that the diasporic identity is shaped and transformed through fragmented, disjointed, and unspeakable memories of the internment — it is collective amnesia that influences the emergence of a new diasporic identity. Yet, this new diasporic identity creates individuals who are emotionally and psychologically handicapped, robbed of all the elements necessary for building a proper, functional identity. Furthermore, diasporic identity shaped by the Second World War trauma seems to follow the dichotomy of separate spheres — while it is expressed through Japanese traditions, values, and customs in the private sphere, the public sphere is characterised by the attempts of hiding one's Japaneseness. Such a separation of one's identity into two spheres is a defence mechanism: on the one hand, it allows those who suffered to, at least partially, hide those elements of their identity which were the source of their trauma; on the other hand, it serves as a way of ensuring that the next generation will not suffer because of their Japaneseness just like their ancestors did.

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DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA — DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR TRAUMA IN KERRI SAKAMOTO'S *THE ELECTRICAL FIELD* (1998)

The Electrical Field is the debut novel of Kerri Sakamoto, a Canadian novelist of Japanese descent. The novel deals with the effects, aftermath, and consequences of the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. Set in the 1970s, the story presented in the novel is told by Asako Saito, a middle-aged woman living with her bedridden father and younger brother on the outskirts of Toronto. The starting point of the novel is the murder of Saito's friend, Chisako, and her *hakujin* lover, Mr Spears, and the subsequent disappearance of Yano, Chisako's husband, and their two children, Kimi and Tam. These two events not only disrupt the peaceful existence of the small community, but also trigger the influx of memories from the internment camp which soon overwhelms Saito, blurring the boundaries between the past and the present. The aim of this article is to discuss how Sakamoto's novel depicts the complexity of the impact of internment trauma not only on those Japanese Canadians who were directly affected by it, but also on the next generation. Using the combination of trauma theory — especially the notions of

collective and transgenerational trauma — and historical data about the Japanese diaspora in Canada before, during and after the Second World War, the author will discuss the impact of the internment trauma on the diasporic identities of the members of three Japanese Canadian families portrayed in the novel.

KEY WORDS: internment trauma, Japanese Canadian literature, Kerri Sakamoto, *The Electrical Field*

DIASPORYCZNA TOŻSAMOŚĆ W OBLICZU TRAUMY — TOŻSAMOŚĆ DIASPORYCZNA I TRAUMA DRUGIEJ WOJNY ŚWIATOWEJ W *THE ELECTRICAL FIELD* (1998) KERRI SAKAMOTO

The Electrical Field to debiutancka powieść Kerri Sakamoto, kanadyjskiej pisarki o japońskich korzeniach. Powieść opisuje efekty i konsekwencje internowania Kanadyjczyków japońskiego pochodzenia w czasie drugiej wojny światowej. Osadzona w latach 70. XX stulecia historia opowiedziana jest z perspektywy Asako Saito, kobiety w średnim wieku mieszkającej na obrzeżach Toronto ze swoim przykutym do łóżka ojcem i młodszym bratem. Spokojne życie Asako i jej rodziny zostaje zburzone, gdy kobieta dowiaduje się, że jej przyjaciółka Chisako została zamordowana wraz ze swoim białym kochankiem, panem Spearsem, a jej mąż, Yano, i dwójka ich dzieci zaginęła. Wydarzenia te nie tylko wstrząsają spokojną społecznością, ale również przywołują wspomnienia z okresu internowania, które przytłaczają Asako, zacierając granicę pomiędzy przeszłością i teraźniejszością. Celem artykułu jest omówienie sposobu, w jaki Sakamoto przedstawia wpływ traumy nie tylko na tych Kanadyjczyków japońskiego pochodzenia, którzy byli internowani, ale również na kolejne pokolenia. Posługując się teorią traumy — odwołując się zwłaszcza do konceptów traumy zbiorowej i transpokoleniowej — i danych historycznych na temat sytuacji japońskiej diaspory w Kanadzie przed, w czasie i po drugiej wojnie światowej, autorka omawia wpływ traumy na tożsamości diasporyczne członków trzech japońsko-kanadyjskich rodzin przedstawionych w powieści.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: trauma, literatura japońsko-kanadyjska, Kerri Sakamoto, *The Electrical Field*