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Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*: Canadian multiculturalism and Japanese-Canadian internment

This article examines Joy Kogawa's popular Canadian novel, *Obasan* (1981), in the context of the establishment of the Canadian Constitution (1982), the official Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) and the history of Japanese-Canadian internment during the Second World War. It argues against the notion that the narrator of the novel, Naomi Nakane, moves from silence to speech and overcomes the traumas of her past. Likewise, the article argues that Canada does not move from a racist past to an anti-racist present. The article suggests that the novel's continual re-membering and re-assembling of past events and the way in which metonymic associations work to disrupt the symbolic order in the novel exemplify a powerful impetus toward resistance.

Keywords: multiculturalism, race, war, silence, memory, internment

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) is the story of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. It is also the story of an individual, Naomi Nakane, a survivor of an internment camp in Slocan, Canada. Naomi tells the story as a child, and as an adult looking back at her childhood. Critics have typically read *Obasan* as a novel that progresses from silence to speech – the silence of Naomi, and the silence of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. The epigraph to the novel, which is from the Bible, reads: 'To him that overcometh / will I give to eat / of the hidden manna / and will give him / a white stone / and in the stone / a new name written'. Many critics suggest that at the end of the novel, Naomi has 'overcometh' the traumas of her history, and, as the epigraph might be said to suggest, thus has 'a new name written' on the once silent 'stone'. This reading was popular in early scholarly work on *Obasan*, in such articles as Gary Willis's 'Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*' (1987). But the assumption that Naomi progresses from silence to speech, that she recovers from a traumatic past, has also continued in more contemporary scholarly work on the book. In 'The Penelope Work of Forgetting: Dreams, Memory, and the Recovery of Wholeness in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*', Rufus Cook argues that in the final chapter of the book,

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Naomi achieves 'vision of wholeness and integration' (2007: 55). Both implicitly and explicitly, critics also suggest that the Canadian state has overcome its racist and intolerant past. Canada, too, has a 'new name written'. This reading coincides with mainstream Canadian ideology in the 1970s and 1980s, when the novel takes place and was written: the establishment of the Canadian Constitution and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act suggest Canada's 'coming of age', the progression of Canada into a tolerant and diverse nation.

It is this popular reading of *Obasan* – that it progresses from silence to speech, from trauma to overcoming that trauma – that I find to be deeply problematic. It ignores ongoing racism in Canada and treats multiculturalism as if it is a mission accomplished. Some critics have noted this problem. Roy Miki, in *Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing*, states that critics read the novel as 'resolutionary' rather than 'revolutionary' – they suggest, in other words, that Naomi has 'resolved' her past, but they do not discuss a more revolutionary shift in thinking about the history of Japanese-Canadian internment (1998). Smaro Kamboureli, in *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*, states that 'Miki's distinction between "resolutionary" and "revolutionary" aesthetics is crucial. It articulates the problematic desire to embrace the all-consuming myth of progress' (2000: 175). Heather Zwicker, in 'Multiculturalism: Pied Piper of Canadian Nationalism (and Joy Kogawa's Ambivalent Antiphony)', discusses *Obasan* in relation to multiculturalism. Despite these three critics' enlightening discussions of the text, however, critics such as Rufus Cook continue to view *Obasan* as 'resolutionary'. Moreover, each of these critics has a different focus than my own: Kamboureli focuses on the body and sexuality; Miki focuses on *Obasan* in the larger context of Asian Canadian writing; and Zwicker engages in a comparison between *Obasan* and Kogawa's subsequent novel, *Itsuka*. My reading of the text provides a detailed analysis of *Obasan* that both works against the notion of progress and situates the novel within the historical context of Canadian multiculturalism and the Canadian constitution.

History, context, and Canadian multiculturalism

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the Canadian government ordered Japanese-Canadians to be relocated from the west coast of Canada to prisoner camps in the interior of British Columbia – ghost towns that were originally built for the gold rush. Family members were separated from one

another, and many of the men worked at road camps in the interior of British Columbia, sugar beet farms on the Canadian prairies, or prisoner-camps in Ontario (Chen 2007: 105). With her family, Joy Kogawa was interned and victimised during the Second World War. The narrator of *Obasan,* Naomi, is a sensei (a third-generation Japanese-Canadian) and a 36-year-old school teacher. The novel takes place over a three-day period in 1972. When Naomi receives news about the death of her uncle, she goes to visit her aunt Aya. Much of this trip, and the novel itself, involves a re-membering or re-assembling of the past: the private re-membering of Naomi's childhood in internment camps, and the public re-membering of the fate of the Japanese-Canadian people.

Obasan has become a classic Canadian text and has achieved great critical success. It has been called one of Canada's most important and influential works of literature. It won the Books in Canada First Novel Award (1981), the Canadian Authors Association Book of the Year Award (1982), and the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award (1982). Moreover, Kogawa received the Order of Canada in 1986, and the George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008. *Obasan* is standard reading in Canadian literature courses at universities, and it is in the high school curriculum in British Columbia.

Kogawa's childhood home, on West 64th Avenue and Granville Street in Vancouver, British Columbia, was purchased by the Land Conservancy of British Columbia in 2006, at the request and activism of Canadian writers. The home has been made into a historical monument, and its writer in residence programme began in March of 2009. Other Canadian writers, such as Margaret Laurence, have had their homes made into historical monuments, but the controversy surrounding the Kogawa home was unusual. The government and a sector of the public in British Columbia were against using tax dollars to purchase the house, in part, perhaps, because of implicit racism – yet the purchase of the house was of utmost importance. In 1942, under the War Measures Act, the government seized Kogawa's family home and sold their possessions. This fact was recognised and financial compensation was given during the Redress movement in 1988 under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Kogawa's childhood home is the only one to be publicly recognised as being seized and unreturned by the Canadian government during the Second World War.

Kogawa, like many Japanese-Canadians, became actively involved in the Redress movement in the 1980s. In 1988, during Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's apology in the House of Commons to the Japanese-Canadians

who were interned, New Democratic Party Leader Ed Broadbent quoted a passage from *Obasan*. Kogawa's subsequent novel, *Itsuka* (1992), takes the Redress movement itself as its subject. *Obasan* is particularly important, not only because it shows how intertwined literature and politics are, but also because the issue of Redress has contemporary relevance. Many Canadians believe that Chinese-Canadians should be given compensation for the head tax that was imposed on Chinese immigrants when they came to Canada to help to construct the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s. This Redress movement, which has not yet been successful, began in 1984 and continues today. While the Chinese head tax has been understood as a racist policy that served to limit Chinese immigration to Canada, in 'Re-Reading Chinese Head Tax Racism', Lily Cho re-interprets the history of the head tax and suggests that the head tax 'was as much about the inclusion as it was about the exclusion of Chinese labour' (2002: 62). Cho argues that 'the contributions of Chinese immigrants were recognized from the beginning', and that 'the head tax might have been more ambivalent in its intention than one of simple and outright exclusion' (2002: 64). *Obasan*, as Roy Miki states, was 'called into being by the urgency to reclaim a suppressed history – the urgency to speak back to the barrier of a denied personal and communal past' (114). It is also urgent to re-think the novel, I argue, as a call to speak issues of Redress beyond the novel's own moment of historical specificity. Doing so places the novel and Japanese-Canadian internment within 'the context of Asian Canadian cultural history' (Beauregard 2008: 8).

Many critics who refer to *Obasan* and multiculturalism do so without contextualising the novel within its history. Fu-Jen Chen, in his article, 'A Lacanian Reading of *No-No Boy* and *Obasan*', states that 'the internment camps of World War Two question both the United States' and Canada's often-stated commitment to a multicultural society' (2007: 105). While certainly true in relation to the date *Obasan* was published, this assertion does not recognise that prior to the Second World War, English Canada's image of itself was that it exemplified British values: only after the war did that image change (Troper 1999: 1001). In fact, until the Canadian Citizenship Act took effect on 1 January 1947, Canadians were considered British subjects residing in Canada, not Canadian citizens. Early immigration in Canada was grounded in the idea that Canada was a 'Britain of the North'. This racialised 'Canadianness', as Eva Mackey explains, was mobilised by the Canada First Movement 'to create links between Canada and Britain and other northern and "civilized" nations' (2002: 31). Moreover, the Canadian Constitution, established by Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau in 1978, replaced the

British North America Act (or BNA Act) in which constitutional acts were made through Britain. Thus, even into the 1970s, English Canada still perceived itself, to a large extent, as tied to the history and practices of Britain.

Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau first introduced the idea of multiculturalism in his address to the House of Commons in 1971. This address, also known as the 'White Paper', responded to immigrants such as Germans and Ukrainians who were worried that their cultures would be subsumed into the two official cultures of Canada, English and French. Multiculturalism, at this time, emerged out of the 'Bilingualism and Biculturalism Act'. Subsequently, 'the Canadian government appointed a minister responsible for multiculturalism in 1972' (Davis 2010: 65; Knowles 2000: 93–5). In 1982, multiculturalism was first written into the Canadian Charter of Rights, and in 1988, the official Multiculturalism Act was established. The Multiculturalism Act of 1982, unlike the 'Bilingualism and Biculturalism Act', responded to the new open door immigration policy and promised to 'preserve' and 'enhance' the cultures of ethnic groups. Multiculturalism, as it is stated in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, seeks to value each and every 'culture' (1988).

Multiculturalism's introduction into Canadian politics and history is absolutely relevant to *Obasan*'s production, popularity and canonisation. The novel was published in 1981, one year prior to the year multiculturalism was written into the Canadian Charter of Rights, and it takes place in 1972, just one year after multiculturalism was first introduced by Prime Minister Trudeau. Multiculturalism became, for the first time in history, a state-implemented policy. What is more, the year that the official Canadian Multiculturalism Act was established, 1988, was the same year that Redress was given to Japanese-Canadians who survived internment during the Second World War. Canadian history and the production and reception of *Obasan* are intimately intertwined.

Thus, *Obasan* was published at the same time that Canada produced a particular kind of ideology, an image of itself as distinctly multicultural. And this, in part, is why the novel achieved such success. During the 1970s and 1980s, multiculturalism became part of and integral to Canada's national imaginary. I use the term 'imaginary' rather than 'identity' intentionally here. Benedict Anderson states that all nations are imagined 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members' (2006: 6). Jacques Lacan locates the identification of a self in an imagined, projected whole, which is always in danger of fragmentation. Canada, as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006), is, in Lacan's terms, imagined as

unified but always in danger of fragmentation (Lacan 1977: 2). Today, multiculturalism functions, in part, to secure Canada's national imaginary as a bilingual and bicultural country. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Charles Taylor asserts that the French in Canada should be given special rights and privileges apart from those given to ethnic minorities in Canada (1994). If they are not, he argues, then the French risk becoming like another ethnic minority. That Taylor makes this argument problematically suggests that he fears French culture will be subsumed – not by the English but by proliferating ethnic minorities. And yet, as Himani Bannerji asserts in *The Dark Side of the Nation*, multiculturalism, in Taylor's view, is that which holds Canada together as a country (2000). Multiculturalism is the moral mandate against any – and especially Quebec's – separation. No one must separate, the argument goes. Canada is a multicultural country and citizens therefore must stay together. Hence, multiculturalism itself becomes that upon which Canada is imagined. Canada's national imaginary – perhaps somewhat ironically – is that which is whole and yet continually in crisis, continually threatened to be fragmented into diverse and disparate cultures and identities.

The notion, as set forth by Charles Taylor and others, is that Canada has progressed from a racist society – evidenced, for example, by the internment of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War – to a tolerant and multicultural society. The moment in which Canada made this progression is marked by the dates in which multiculturalism was implemented as policy. This moment, significantly, also roughly coincides with the establishment of the Canadian Constitution in 1982, symbolising Canada's independence from Britain and Europe. Canada, as it were, has come into its own as a tolerant, multicultural and contemporary nation. At this very moment of celebration, *Obasan* surfaces: a testament to Canada's traumatic past, a return of the repressed. In the novel, Naomi's individual progression out of her traumatic past as a survivor of Canada's internment camps functions allegorically as Canada's progression out of its racist history. On this view, Canada, in its recognition of its racist past through its reception of the book and through Redress, can put this past to rest.

Such understandings of *Obasan* and Canadian history are fraught. While ethnic literature in Canada, as Kamboureli states, began 'to establish its own ground' in the 1980s (2000: vi), it did so under what Kamboureli calls 'sedative politics': 'a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them' (2000: 82). The mainstream understands Canadian multiculturalism as if it is a fait accompli, and this allows

the state 'to become self-congratulatory, if not complacent, about its handling of ethnicity' (pp. 82, 83). *Obasan* resists the notion that the individual, Naomi, has progressed beyond her traumatic past, and that Canada has progressed beyond its history – which includes the persecution and internment of Japanese-Canadians. Narrative strategies in *Obasan* work against the myth of progress and disrupt the dominant ideologies within which they are embedded.

Silence to speech: a flawed trajectory

The common reading of *Obasan* as a novel that progresses toward resolution in a move from silence to speech is problematic on a number of levels. For example, to regard silence as that which is to be overcome is to regard it as pathological. On this view, Naomi might be seen as progressing from sickness to health, from pathology to normalisation, while the reader is always already positioned as normal. Here, by arguing against the notion that *Obasan* proceeds from silence to speech, I do not mean to deny the silenced history of Japanese-Canadians, nor do I mean to say that voicing and narrative closure with regard to Japanese-Canadian history is not important or desirable. Rather, I suggest that silences need not always be read in direct opposition to that voicing. With regard to *Obasan*, as King-Kok Cheung suggests in *Articulate Silences* (1993), silences are often employed as a form of resistance in the text. While voicing one's traumatic history is important in a notion such as Freud's 'the talking cure', and while a movement from silence to speech might be desirable within that paradigm, I agree with Kamboureli's assertion that in *Obasan*, Naomi paradoxically 'practices the talking cure but does so in silence'. Often, Naomi's silence 'is a discourse that cures precisely because it simultaneously mimics and resists' (2000: 209).

If we adhere to a developmental narrative, then we adhere to a national myth of progress that the text works against. Through first-person narration, Naomi tells her story within a three-day period that takes place from the time of her uncle's death to the time when her family gathers and she comes to know her past. Yet that present-day narrative is continually juxtaposed with Naomi's memories of the past: the progressive narrative in the text is disrupted, challenging the straightforward linear progression across time. This disruption of the present by the past suggests that both Naomi's individual history of abuse and Canada's national history of racism are not over: 'The words are not made flesh. Trains do not carry us home. Ships do not return

again. All my prayers disappear into space' (1981: 189). If we read *Obasan* as a developmental narrative that moves from silence to speech, from the pathological to the normal, then we ignore the way memory works to disrupt the linear narrative in the text. To read the text in this way is to read it as a national narrative that moves from a troubled past to a multicultural present.

Near the beginning of the novel, when Naomi stands in front of her grade-five class, she seems to feel uncomfortable with her authoritative position as a teacher. 'As soon as [the children] learn I'm no disciplinarian, I lose control over classroom discussions', she says (1981: 6). On the one hand, we may read Naomi's inability to discipline the students in the classroom as a sign of weakness – she cannot and does not voice her role as the authoritative teacher. On the other hand, however, we may read her unauthoritative stance as a form of resistance. Kamboureli notes that 'there is no ideological difference between the City Fathers who … planned [Naomi's] family's evacuation, and traditional pedagogy, with its "apostolic function"' (2000: 214). Thus, Naomi's reluctance to take an authoritative role is a resistance to align herself with those who speak a single 'truth', with those who – like the people who interned the Japanese-Canadian community – speak in absolutes and with absolute authority.

Naomi's silent and evasive responses to the students in her class, and specifically to the troublesome boy Sigmund, also might be read as strategic rather than as a sign of weakness or incompetence. Naomi does not respond directly to Sigmund's question, 'Have you ever been in love?', but rather turns his question into a class lesson: '"Why do you suppose we use the preposition 'in' when we talk about love?" [she] asks evasively' (1981: 6). Likewise, she refuses to respond directly to his definition of her as a 'spinster'. Instead, she retorts, 'What does the word mean?' (p. 8). On the one hand, we may read Naomi's evasion of Sigmund's questions as an inability to confront others. On the other hand, we may also read it as a way of resisting the dominant ideologies that work to label her. Sigmund's name, invoking Sigmund Freud, is clearly significant. Kogawa reverses traditional roles of authority in psychoanalysis: here, Naomi, as Sigmund's elder and teacher, is in the authoritative position, even as she does not exemplify that authority. She denies Sigmund's questions, which are laden with masculine values. Just as Naomi resists taking on the authoritative position of a teacher that would align her with those authority figures who interned the Japanese-Canadians, those who spoke in singular, absolute truths, so she also resists being framed within a dominant ideology that would define her as a 'spinster'. Far from exemplifying a woman

who is paralyzed by her silence, Naomi already uses strategies of evasion and silence to resist dominant ideologies.

Interestingly, when Sigmund asks Naomi why her and Emily are spinsters, Naomi parodies the notion that spinsterhood is abnormal and unhealthy, rejecting the negative connotation of the word: 'Must be something in the blood. A crone-prone syndrome. We should hire ourselves out for a research study, Emily and I' (1981: 8). Naomi's response to Sigmund's labelling of her as a 'spinster' ('What does the word mean?'), as Cecily Devereux points out, evokes Mary Daly's reclaiming of that word. 'A woman whose occupation is to spin [Daly] says, "participates in the whirling movement of creation"' (1996: 242). That Naomi's question foregrounds the etymology of the word suggests that she might resist the negative connotations of it and embrace the notion of spinster as creator. It is particularly relevant that while theorising about narrative, Peter Brooks indicates that 'Narrative is … condemned to … spinning out its movement toward a meaning that would be the end of its movement' (1984: 56). Brooks's statement evokes the creation or spinning of Naomi's story through silence and speech. Naomi's personal story and the story of Japanese-Canadian internment subtly figure as the spinster's threads or cloths and are metonymically evoked throughout the novel, as Obasan's 'twine ball', the 'red string' that is wrapped around the grey folder in Emily's parcel, and the stem of a rose that is significantly described as a 'thread' and that in Naomi's dream her mother moves 'from knot to knot, drawing the flower closer to her lips' (1981: 228).

As well as employing strategies of silence and evasion to resist dominant ideologies, Naomi is also surrounded by the silences of her family members – silences to which she paradoxically must listen. For example, Naomi's two aunts, Emily and Obasan, are often seen as polar opposites: 'One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior' (1981: 32). Yet while Emily lives in sound, that sound might also be understood as a kind of debilitating silence. As Naomi says, 'All of Aunt Emily's words … are like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity … But what good they do, I do not know' (p. 189). It is as though Emily speaks, but is not necessarily heard. As Zwicker puts it, 'Aunt Emily presupposes that the story of internment can be told and, more problematically, that it can be heard and used to modify conventional histories of Canada' (1993: 149).

Conversely, although Obasan lives in silence, that silence can sometimes be heard. Obasan carries the knowledge of the family's past in her body. In the scene where Naomi and Obasan bathe together, for instance, Naomi

describes Obasan's body as if it is a map, a text that tells the story of the past: 'the thin purple veins a scribbled maze, a skin map, her thick toenails, ancient rock formations … Naked as prehistory, we lie together, the steam from the bath heavily misting the room' (1981: 78). While the heavy mist in the room might metaphorically suggest Naomi's inability to see, hear or know their history, her description of Obasan's body as a map represents that body as a text which one can read, or to which one can listen. As Devereux asserts, 'Deciphering [Obasan's] body's silent meaning is the text's impetus; her body is the text's text' (1996: 240). The description of Obasan's body as a map also conflates Obasan's body with the body of Canada: the 'scribbled maze' and 'skin map' may connect the place of Japan with the place of Canada; 'thick toe-nails, ancient rock formations' suggest that Obasan, an immigrant, is as 'Canadian' as the rock of the Canadian Shield. Kogawa here contests the notion that minority Canadians should be 'Other to the national imaginary' (Kamboureli 2000: 84). Resisting a simplistic binary opposition between silence and speech, the novel shows instead how complex and multifaceted silence and speech can be. Rather than regarding silence solely as pathological, as that which is to be overcome in a movement from silence to speech, Kogawa problematises the meanings of silence and speech and demonstrates how each is a part of the other.

The text's resistance to a simplistic binary between silence and speech is furthered with regard to Naomi's mother and Obasan. The novel opens with a poetic narrative that precedes chapter one. In this opening, the narrator begins: 'There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak.' Obasan and Naomi's mother cannot be determined as either one or the other. Both of them will not speak, and both of them cannot speak. Naomi's mother, for instance, will not speak of the tragedy that has befallen her in Nagasaki: 'Mother, for her part, continued her vigil of silence. She spoke with no one about her torment. She specifically requested that Stephen and I be spared the truth' (1981: 236). 'For the sake of the children', Naomi's mother chooses not to reveal her plight. Yet in the context of the three-day period through which the novel progresses, Naomi's mother, in her death, represents the silence that cannot speak. Paradoxically, that silence – like the silence of Obasan – is one that can be heard. Naomi listens and listens 'to the silent earth and the silent sky … I close my eyes', she says. 'Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you' (p. 240). Similarly, Obasan will not speak of the past because of the pain that speech would involve, and she cannot speak for the same reason. Paradoxically, however, Obasan's silence, as I have already mentioned, is also a silence that can be heard, for the history of Obasan

and her family is a text (a map), and a particularly Canadian one, that is written on her body. We may read both Naomi's mother's and Obasan's silence as a silence that speaks.

'The avenues of speech', Naomi indicates, 'are the avenues of silence' (1981: 228) in the sense that one's speech can often silence another. In *Obasan*, the 'Grand-Inquisitor', who is named near the end of the novel, and who symbolically stands for the Canadian government, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Old Man Gower, is the one who simultaneously speaks and silences others. Naomi, as a child, is sexually abused by her neighbour, Old Man Gower. Her statement that the abuse 'is not an isolated incident' (p. 61), and her citing of later sexual abuse by Percy in Slocan (p. 61), implies, allegorically, that the Canadian government's internment of Japanese-Canadians was not the only racist moment in Canada's history. Naomi's statement also implies that the victimisation of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War had effects that went well beyond the end of the war. Kogawa's symbolic association of Old Man Gower with the state – the RCMP and the Canadian government – solidifies the notion that the private shaming of Naomi by Gower is akin to the public shaming of Japanese-Canadians by the Canadian state. Naomi's point that the sexual abuse continues later in her life indicates that Canada's racism continues and is certainly not over in the wake of the Canadian Constitution and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

Kogawa further complicates the relation between silence and speech with regard to Naomi and her mother's histories. It is Naomi herself who cannot hear her mother because her own accusations of her mother and herself are too loud and overwhelming. Naomi accuses her mother of abandonment ('Where in the darkness has my mother gone?'; 1981: 64), and she accuses herself of her mother's abandonment. She believes that by keeping her physical abuse by Gower a secret, she has caused her mother to leave for Japan. As Kamboureli puts it, 'the Physical closeness of mother and daughter is replaced by contagion, [Old Man Gower], a plight that Naomi translates into … complicity' (p. 212). It is only when Naomi silences her own accusations of her mother and herself and when she begins to realise that she is not complicit with the Grand Inquisitor that she can begin to hear her mother and attend her mother's silence.

Naomi indicates at the end of the novel that her silence about her abuse by Gower parallels her mother's silence about her plight in Nagasaki: 'Gentle mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction' (1981: 243). She recognises their comparable strategies

of silence as she acknowledges how those silences have in part caused their separation. To put it in Sonia Snelling's words, 'The silence adopted by both mother and daughter links them thematically just as it separates them in narrative terms' (1997: 24). It is only when Naomi comes to know the shame that causes her mother's and her own silence for what it is – the Grand Inquisitor's contagion – that she begins to listen and to hear. And, significantly, it is Naomi's listening – rather than voicing – that occurs at the end of *Obasan*: 'Naomi finds the voices of others' "ghostly whisperings," of her mother, her uncle, her father' (Thiesmeyer 1991: 76).

With her question about her mother, 'Am I her accuser?' (1981: 228), Naomi places herself alongside the Grand Inquisitor, again positing herself as complicit with him. Naomi further associates herself with the Grand Inquisitor when she calls herself Goldilocks (p. 152), a figure who intrudes upon one's home as Old Man Gower intrudes upon Naomi's family's home: 'He [Gower] seems more powerful than Father, larger and more at home even though this is our house' (p. 69). Also, when Naomi is in the hospital, she dreams that her 'neck and chin are covered with a thick red stubble of hair' (p. 150). This stubble is both the stubble of the lurking man in the café in Slocan, whose 'stubbly red-blotched face' is 'hanging down' (p. 190), and Gower's moustache, 'scratchy as a Christmas tree' (p. 61). Yet this stubble that scratches not only exemplifies Naomi's feelings of shame and complicity with the Grand Inquisitor, but is also metonymically associated with the attempt to speak against the Grand Inquisitor. The 'scratchy stubble' is also the 'scratch-scratch' of the telephone line that impedes communication about Naomi's uncle's death (p. 9), and the 'scratchings in the barnyard' that are 'All of Aunt Emily's words, all her papers' (p. 189). In other words, 'scratchings' in the text are at once the realm of the dominant and the accusing and the frustrating attempt to communicate and to speak back against those who dominate and accuse.

Resisting dominant ideologies: against the myth of progress

It is within the context of Naomi's feelings of shame and complicity that we might begin to understand the novel's critique of dominant ideologies; and it is within this context that the novel simultaneously addresses Naomi's private past and public discourse about Japanese-Canadian internment. When the text addresses public discourse about Japanese-Canadian internment, it does so by citing, parodying and ironising it. Government documents and

letters are presented as objects to be parodied, as in the letter to Emily from a custodian regarding the 'property that was supposedly being kept safe' for the family: the custodian's signature on the letter – 'B. Good' – literally acts as an order of obedience to Emily and her family (1981: 37). Likewise, while pointing to how race is constructed, Naomi parodies the dominant discourse when she says that her uncle 'would be perfect for a picture postcard – "Indian Chief from Canadian Prairie" – souvenir of Alberta, made in Japan' (p. 2).

The newspaper article that Naomi discusses and that is entitled '"Indifferent" Jap Repats Start Homeward Trek' (1981: 185) – to give a further example of how dominant discourses are presented in the text – might be read as a site of irony. As Manina Jones suggests, 'while the newspaper's derogatory use of the word *Jap* indicates that those described are being sent "Homeward," they are, we know, being de-patriated, deprived of their Canadian "home and native land"' (1990: 220). The idea that Japanese-Canadians are being depatriated rather than going 'home' is significant not only in relation to the public discourse of the newspaper article but also in relation to Naomi's personal story. Naomi's story is repeatedly told in terms of an invasion of and separation from home. Her question, 'Does Old Man Gower still walk through the hedges between our houses in Vancouver, in Slocan, in Granton and Cecil?' (1981: 62), for instance, foregrounds Gower's part in the invasion and separation from her homes or 'houses' and also her separation from the 'home' of the body. With Gower's presence, Naomi can make neither her house nor her body her own.

Naomi also juxtaposes the newspaper clipping about Japanese-Canadian beet workers working in Alberta with a telling of her own experience as a beet worker: 'Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory' (1981: 194). In this instance, Naomi draws upon her personal experience to rewrite and revise the 'truth' of dominant, public discourse; in this way, she re-members and re-assembles the past. Naomi's discussion of her personal experience and the experience of Japanese-Canadians, in Jones's words, 'is both the documentary filling in of an untold story and a comment on the way the truth of that story has been excluded from the documents of history' (1990: 219). The telling of her personal story is a distrust and disruption of 'meta' or 'master' narratives, 'of the received wisdom or the grand narrative systems that once made sense for us (Hutcheon 1988: 15).

Although the novel parodies government documents and mainstream national narratives, it ends, as Roy Miki points out, with 'a matter of fact document asking the government not to deport Japanese-Canadians, signed

by three white men' (1988: 116). This document, 'Excerpt from the Memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese-Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada, April 1946', excludes Japanese-Canadian voices and it is left unparodied – without comment. The silence of Naomi's mother at the end of the novel parallels the silence of Japanese-Canadian voices in the document that concludes the novel. This government document can be compared with the government documents that emerged during the publication and reception of *Obasan*: documents regarding Canadian multiculturalism as state implemented policy. Trudeau's 'White Paper' (1971) states that 'although there are two official languages, there is no official culture' (cited in Kamboureli 2000: 98). Japanese-Canadian voices are subsumed within the various 'cultures' upon which Canada is imagined. In the official Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988), 'cultures' are articulated within Canada's two official languages. The legal document that concludes *Obasan* states, 'Many Japanese-Canadians have already settled in the Prairie Provinces and in Eastern Canada and have no desire to return to B.C. There is therefore no need for fear of concentration of the Pacific Coast as in the past' (1981: 249). This statement suggests that the assimilation of Japanese-Canadians into mainstream English-Canadian culture has 'worked'; likewise, the 'White Paper' and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act now value, now subsume 'minorities' into the two official languages that define the Canadian nation.

Dismemberment: self and nation

Near the end of the novel, Naomi listens to the story of her family's past and her mother's death at the bombing of Nagasaki. The voicing of the family's history suggests a connection with the past, but the silence implicit within that voicing implies an ongoing severance from the past. Because her mother is deceased, Naomi will never fully know her or her history. The words that explain her history are only words. They 'are not made flesh' (1981: 189). Naomi's separation from her mother is not the only instance in which Naomi is dismembered from her past in the novel. The novel is, in fact, filled with instances that demonstrate how Naomi and other members of her family and community are severed from their histories. When Obasan shows Naomi a photograph of Naomi and her mother, Naomi turns 'the photo around to see if there is any identification on the back, but there is none' (p. 46). While the photograph invokes Naomi's memories of her mother, there is no mark that

might determine when and where the events she remembers take place. Similarly, Obasan's answers to Naomi's questions – like the story of Naomi and her mother's histories and the narrative of *Obasan* itself – 'are always oblique and the full story never emerges in a direct line' (p. 18), preventing Naomi from direct access to her history. Naomi's relationship to the 'blue-lines rice-paper sheets with Japanese writing which [she] cannot read' (p. 45) also exemplifies her severance from the past, for she does not know that the letters are written by her grandmother and are about her mother's fate. Naomi is not only separated from her mother, but also from her mother's mother tongue.

Perhaps the most interesting example of Naomi, her family and her community's severance from the past occurs when Uncle, Aunt Emily, Obasan and Naomi go to Slocan in 1962, twenty years after internment there. Naomi's description of Slocan in this instance is telling: 'the Slocan that we knew in the forties was no longer there, except the small white community which had existed before we arrived' (1981: 185). If, as Jones suggests, 'The novel's *main narrative* … is composed of the act of literally reading the past' (1990: 215; emphasis Jones's), then this particular attempt to read the past is a frustrated one – it is met with absence. Furthermore, the family cannot find the actual location of their internment: 'Where on the map or on the road was there any sign? Not a mark was left … What a hole!' (1981: 117–18). The lack of any road sign echoes the absence of a mark indicating the time and place of the photo Naomi previously regards and the absence Naomi feels in her inability to read the letters in Japanese. The phrase 'What a hole!' plays upon the double meaning of the word 'hole' and thus demonstrates both the poor conditions of the family's internment and the gap or 'hole' they find in the absence of a marker indicating their history there. It is significant that the Canadian state has not marked this place as an important one in Canadian history. The place of internment in Slocan, like the place of Kogawa's childhood home – which was under threat of demolition before the Conservancy of British Columbia purchased it – was denied its right in Canadian history as the state attempts to erase its racist past.

The novel not only discusses dismemberment from the past, but also the dismemberment of a community. Much of the novel, for example, takes the form of Aunt Emily's letters to her sister (Naomi's mother), which are part of her diary. Yet those letters never reach Naomi's mother: 'All cards and letters are censored – even to the Nisei camps' (1981: 101). As Lynn Thiesmeyer indicates, 'Emily's diary remains a diary, never sent to Naomi's mother, never received by its intended audience, never read until 1972 when Naomi

opens it' (1991: 69). Further dismemberment of the family occurs when family members begin to be separated during internment. One of Emily's letters explains how Emily receives permission from the government to go to Ontario, and then discovers that she cannot bring other members of the family with her: 'I assumed that included Dad and Aya and the kids … The whole point of our extensions was to find a way to keep together, but now at the last minute everything has exploded' (1981: 108). In an interview, Kogawa speaks to the separation of community during Japanese-Canadian internment, thus connecting community dismemberment in *Obasan* to historical fact: 'The identity that we had given to us as we were growing up was that we couldn't associate with one another … we had to be "the only Jap in town"' (1990: 98). In the novel, the family's and the community's separation and their attempt to stay together are imaged in 'The thin flowery patchwork quilt' that Naomi's mother 'made for [her] bed' and that 'is so frayed and moth-eaten it's only a rag' (1981: 25), and in Obasan's clothing, which consists of 'rags' that are just barely 'held together with safety pins' (p. 78). As Naomi puts it, 'If we [the family] were knit into a blanket once, it's become badly moth-eaten over time' (p. 21).

Naomi and her family's and community's dismemberment from the past, as well as the community's internal dismemberment, are figured as bodily dismemberment. Naomi's separation from her mother, for instance (implicitly a separation from her history and a separation of family and community), is described in terms of her body: 'In the centre of my body is a rift … My legs are being sawn in half' (1981: 65). In the context in which this passage appears, Naomi experiences this bodily severance because of her sexual abuse by Old Man Gower. The 'rift' that she experiences in her body that is caused by Old Man Gower and implicitly by the Grand Inquisitor (the Canadian government, the RCMP and so on), is also the cut on Naomi's knee that Gower pretends to fix (p. 64), and the Pacific ocean that literally separates Naomi from her mother. Figuratively, the 'rift' indicates how Naomi is depatriated and separated from her home and her body. The image of her legs 'being sawn in half' echoes the bodily dismemberment of the 'oriental women' by soldiers in Naomi's dream (p. 62). By recalling that image, Naomi 'points to the ideological symmetry that links her sexual abuse with master hegemonic narratives' (Kamboureli 2000: 211).

Naomi's separation from the past, then, is depicted as bodily dismemberment, and to be separated from the past, the novel suggests, is to be separated from one's own body. This is true not just for Naomi but also for Obasan herself, for as descriptions of Obasan suggest, her personal and familial history

are expressed by her body. Old letters, pencils, and paper bags 'rest in corners' of Obasan's house, 'like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory. This house is now her blood and bones' (1981: 15). Both Obasan's body and her house hold and contain the past, even if that past is presented as fragmentary, as 'tiny specks of memory' that struggle to be held together like the 'rags' that Obasan wears and that are pieced together with safety pins. Obasan's body is paralleled by Aunt Emily's parcel of documents, for they both know or contain the family's history. Obasan is 'heavy' with the past: 'Her head is tilted to the side as if it's all too heavy inside' (p. 11), and she is 'weighted with her mortality' (p. 54). Likewise, Emily's parcel is 'as heavy as a loaf of uncle's stone bread' and her diary is 'heavy with voices from the past' (p. 45). Just as Obasan's clothing consists of 'rags held together with safety pins' (p. 78), so Emily's parcel is held together – like Obasan's 'twine ball' – with 'loose twine' (p. 31).

Yet it is Naomi's mother's body that signifies most explicitly the body of the past. Figured as disfigurement, Naomi's mother is 'displaced from figuration, from signification, because her story, like the story of Japanese-Canadians, has been suppressed' (Jones 1990: 225). Naomi's return to the past – to the knowledge of her mother's plight in Nagasaki and to her own memories of internment – is a return to the maternal body in *Obasan*. Read in psychoanalytic terms, the return to her mother's body is not a movement of progression from silence to speech but rather a movement back to a pre-linguistic moment, 'one that is aligned with the pre-Oedipal realm of the semiotic, that, with the mother, is repressed on entry into the symbolic' (Smith 1987: 12). Naomi both literally and figuratively returns to the mother in order to exhume what has been suppressed – the history of her mother, herself, her body and her community. This movement back to a pre-linguistic moment in time, in which the child was at one with the mother, might be viewed positively. The return to the maternal exemplifies the inability of the father (read: the symbolic order, Old Man Gower, the Grand Inquisitor) to separate the mother/daughter union. It also exemplifies a return to the body, a return 'home'.

Yet Naomi does not completely return to her mother at the end of the novel. Her return home to the maternal body can never be fully achieved because her mother has deceased: she does not actually come back to her mother's body but only to the telling of that body. Paradoxically, Naomi returns to the pre-symbolic, maternal realm through language, by listening, that is, to her mother's story. While *Obasan* might be thought to move toward a union with the mother, that union is not a 'resolutionary' one, but is clearly

ambiguous. Neither separated from nor connected to her mother and her mother's past, Naomi can only listen to her mother's silence. Neither fully present nor absent, Naomi's mother seems to be both present and absent – present in the story Naomi hears yet physically absent from it.

My reading of *Obasan* resists the terms of the myth of progress and instead foregrounds the modes of resistance in which the novel engages. These modes of resistance occur even at the beginning of the novel, when Naomi engages in silence and evasion while teaching her grade-five class. We need not view the return to the mother as a return to the mother-land. Rather, a return 'home' might be viewed more positively as a return to the safety of 'a place one makes one's own' (Zwicker 1993: 143) – a place that is both geographical and corporeal. We also need not read Naomi's return to the maternal as an 'orientalist understanding of Asian women's identity' (Hattori 1998: 133). To do so would be to accede to a myth of progress that posits the maternal and semiotic realm as the underdeveloped counterpart to the symbolic law of the father.

There is little evidence in the novel that would support a 'resolutionary' reading of it. The present-day narrative in the text takes place over a three-day period, and at the end, Naomi has only just found out about her mother's past: she has not yet had time to absorb that knowledge. Moreover, to come back to Miki's point, the inclusion of the document at the end of the novel that excludes Japanese-Canadian voices suggests that the fight for Japanese-Canadian Redress still has a long way to go. Yet the way in which the three-day narrative of *Obasan* is continually interrupted by a re-membering and re-assembling of past events and the way in which metonymic associations work to disrupt the symbolic order in the text exemplify a powerful impetus toward resistance. That re-membering and those associations disrupt the homogeneity of the Grand-Inquisitor with the heterogeneity of Japanese-Canadian histories. It is in this way that the novel works against forgetting and attempts to undo a progressive view of history.

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