

## Polyphonic Form and Effective Aesthetic in *Obasan*

The generally accepted reading of *Obasan* follows the surface of Naomi's telling to discover a therapeutic narrative in which a woman, pathologically silenced by the multiple traumas of sexual molestation, mother's abandonment, political internment and the condition of the Japanese culture of silence, finds her voice and comes to writing. *Obasan* and Aunt Emily are usually seen as antithetical, with *Obasan* representing Japanese values in her resolute silence and Emily representing the Canadian/Nisei culture of outspokenness: Naomi comes to voice through a dialectical synthesis of this opposition. However, this interpretation has been powerfully challenged by Donald Goellnicht's argument that the novel is a postmodern metafiction and that Naomi is not a pathologically muted subject but, rather, a postmodern historian one step ahead of Aunt Emily (293). In her attempt to recuperate the therapeutic narrative in the interest of a political reading, Barbara Kanefsky has accepted Goellnicht's description of Naomi as postmodern but argued that postmodernity itself is the sickness from which Naomi is cured at the end of the novel (11-23).

But the therapeutic model has dubious political value since, being structured on the binaries of therapist/patient and health/sickness (powerful/powerless, normal/abnormal) and producing a narrative of normalization (in which the reader is already positioned as normal), it erases the signature of marginalized agency in the novel and disables us from seeing the trace of power within relative "powerlessness." Instead, I would argue, we can produce a more transformative reading by using Michel de Certeau's notion of

the rhetoric of everyday life and by considering Naomi's dreams as allegories of theory and subject formation. I will also maintain that the novel is polyphonic in Bakhtin's sense, being distinguished from univocal dialectic on the one hand, and postmodern relativism, on the other: it is an exchange of valid voices that engage the reader in the ethical and political question of injustice and oppression.<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin describes polyphony as "a communion of unmerged souls" (26). In *Obasan*, the Christian communion of Nakayama sensei and the "loveless communion" of Aunt Emily's "white paper bread" (182) preside dialogically over the recovery of memory to produce the third communion of polyphony that enables effective remembering.

While the mimetic (Harris, Kanefsky, Willis, Rose) and formalist (Gottlieb, Merivale) readings of *Obasan* have variously uncovered the force of the novel as truth-telling and its coherence as an aesthetic object, Goellnicht has persuasively noted that *Obasan* is "not an organically whole, seamless, realistic novel, but a disruptive, or polyphonous, generic mixture" (288). But Goellnicht's further argument that the novel is an autoreferential postmodernist metafiction as theorized by Linda Hutcheon is seriously flawed. Kanefsky has raised a number of internal contradictions in Goellnicht's argument. To these I would add the implausible conclusion that the novel exposes the official version of history as a lie while at the same time maintaining that "history is relative" (291), and that "uncertainties in epistemology" (294) can somehow become "an urging to action" (302). But the more basic problem with the claim that the novel is postmodern is that the formulaic equation of "historiographic metafiction" with the postmodern ignores all specificity of production and reception and is theoretically meaningless. Challenges to realism or the authority of dominant historiography are not specifically postmodern, and apparently "postmodern" strategies often have very different origins and trajectories from the postmodern as a condition of Western knowledge as theorized by Lyotard or a condition of late capitalist culture as theorized by Jameson. Moreover, the imposition of the dominant values of the Western academic institution on heterogeneous productions is a hegemonic practice despite its claim to be anti-hegemonic.<sup>2</sup> *Obasan* is heterogenous, discordant, and polyphonic, but it is never in any doubt about truth and falsehood or justice and injustice; it challenges the authority of single-voiced discourse, but it does so not merely as an issue in epistemology but as a strategy for justice. Its heterogeneity of material, multiplicity of voices, metafictional reflexivity, perspectivism, and

narrative disjunction are brought into aesthetic coherence in a process that puts the reader into play and compels the construction of an ethical centre.

The heterogeneity of *Obasan* is foregrounded by its framing with a meta-linguistic poem before the beginning and a juridico-political document after the end. It is also obvious that the reflexive-poetic language of private experience and the languages of the public sphere appear dialogically throughout the novel, the first as an element of Naomi's subjective reflection and the second as the element of Aunt Emily's being as a "word warrior" and the documentation in her package of the past. Further, neither Naomi's private world nor Emily's public sphere is linguistically simple and homogenous. Naomi's zone of language encompasses the poetic, the oneiric, the everyday, irony, parody, quotation, muteness and stammering, while the languages of the public sphere range from the euphemistic lies of the state, through the racial mythologies of demagogues and ideological distortions of newspapers to the critical discourse of the few who opposed the internment and the indignant protest of Emily. In the sphere of everyday life Naomi's utterance meets at the outside the aggressive language of naming, othering and gazing of the dominant, while from within its culturally specific subaltern condition it adopts a hiding of speech and glance, a practice which allies it to the Native Indian, as seen in the shyness of children (2) and the muteness of the old Indian in Rough Lock's story (146-47), and of which *Obasan's* dense silence is the extreme pole. Naomi's "speaking dreams" use an even more hidden language to offer an alternative narrative of oppression, recognition and liberation.

The many languages in *Obasan*, however, do not have the same status. Rather, the discourse of the subaltern in the narrative reverses the subject/object relation of the referent world, so that the languages of dominance become objects, quoted, parodied, and disempowered in the text, while a coalition of subaltern languages/ signifying practices emerges in a polyphony of resistance. It is this coalition, implicitly achieved through polyphony in *Obasan*, not through univocality (Kanefsky 16), that is explicitly thematized in *Itsuka*: "Although . . . we must speak with one voice, there is more than one view" (202).

The languages of bureaucrats, statesmen, journalists, and civic leaders embalmed in Emily's file are object languages that are examined and seen through, not dialogized: "Interior Housing Projects" (34); "Facts About Evacuees in Alberta' . . . 'Grinning and Happy'" (193). When the language of

domination appears internalized within the subaltern in the form of self-hatred, as in Stephen's rejection of Obasan's offer, "Not that kind of food" (115), it is distanced as an object by Naomi's voice but requires the reader's self-positioning in relation to assimilation for its evaluation. The internalized domination of the man at the conference who "applauded the wholesale imprisonment of Canadian and American Japanese" (35), produces a more complex interaction. Naomi responds to Emily's indignation with unmarked quotations of hegemonic discourse offering a series of subject positions: "Maybe . . . he's trying to be conciliatory and see the point of view of the other side . . . the welfare of the whole is more important than the welfare of the part . . . the collective can only be calmed by the sacrifice of the minority" (35). The dominant discourse, internally distanced in utterance by Naomi's own language consciousness ("I said feebly"), ranges from the liberal imperative, through oppressive populism to outright scapegoating, and is drawn from the archive of official arguments used to justify injustice. Emily's retort cuts through the liberal imperative, indicating its paralysing effect on the oppressed, but since the narration brackets Emily's criticism by a familiar mockery of her activist zeal, the burden of judgement falls on the reader, who must recognize the languages at play between Naomi and Emily and find his/her own position in the process. However, when Naomi engages in overt parody, as in, "Indian Chief from Canadian Prairie"—souvenir of Alberta, made in Japan" (2), her display of the language of domination, appropriation and commodification assumes an alignment with a critical reader. In other words the objectified language of domination is presented in *Obasan* with a shifting distance that demands the reader's active engagement in the process of ethical and political positioning.

Set against the languages of domination, the languages of the marginalized, ranging from the articulate oppositional rhetoric of Emily to the silence of Obasan and the dreams of Naomi, are different modes of resistance engaged in a conversation. Usually, Emily's language of the Hebrew prophet ("Write the vision and make it plain. Habakkuk 2:2" [31]) is taken as the standard by which Obasan's and Naomi's silence is judged, while their resistant practice of everyday life remains unrecognized. This neglect of the duality of silence and speech affirmed in the opening poem is no doubt based on the Western valorization of speech that Cheung has shown to be inapplicable in Chinese and Japanese cultures. But it is also based on the dominant notion of struggle as open, positional confrontation, for which the Hebrew prophet

provides the paradigm. However, Michel de Certeau's study of everyday practices as operations through which the marginalized manifest their agency and resistance to the domination they cannot challenge, offers a perspective that helps us to see what so far has remained invisible in *Obasan*.

De Certeau argues that in modern society marginality is the condition of the disempowered and silenced majority (xvii), but that this vast body of powerless consumer-immigrants (40), unable ever to escape the system that dominates them, nevertheless practice an ancient tactical "art," akin to Sophistic rhetoric, in which dwelling, moving about, speaking, cooking and similar activities become maneuvers, tricks on the adversary on his own turf, ways of producing a difference in what is given and expected. De Certeau also makes an important distinction between strategy and tactic that is particularly useful in the context of *Obasan*. "Strategy," de Certeau writes, is the calculation of forces between two adversarial identities that both possess territorial bases and a certain power. A "tactic" on the other hand, "is an art of the weak" (37), the operation of those who, powerless and without their proper space, must function within enemy territory, finding ingenious ways of making use of the strong, and thus lending "a political dimension to everyday practices" (xvii). With this distinction we can see that while Emily is engaged in building a strategic form of struggle by creating a base in the Japanese Canadian community around their identity as victims of injustice, the other Japanese Canadians in the book are engaged in tactical responses to their powerlessness, whose symbol may be Uncle's ambiguous stone bread. The trajectory of the narrative may then be read not simply as a transition from pathological silence to healing voice but also as a movement of dispersed tactics toward an empowered strategy.

The stone bread is usually read as a sign of victimization, the transformation of food into stone, a symbol of immigrant life dominated by "necessity" (Wong). Yet, shifting our attention from the object in isolation to the context of its production, we notice that it is the product of a free recipe that Uncle has made his own, adding various leftovers over the years but continuing to produce a consistently hard bread, generative of family jokes, to his dying day. Since this is not a necessary act, how are we to read the operation of a superb craftsman continuing happily to produce his own version of an alien food distinctly different from the "real thing"? This bread of hardship is a product of pleasure, a transformation of the alien into the homely, a nourisher of humour. It is not only the bread that has been turned into

stone by oppression but the stone that has been turned into bread by the oppressed who refuse to be victims. It is precisely the kind of ruse that de Certeau describes as the “subtle art of ‘renters’ who know how to insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text” (xxii).

Obasan too, marked as she is by deprivation and old age, is tactically engaged in the organization of her domestic space and in the use of her deafness and silence. Resisting by her deafness any demand she does not care to acknowledge, she dwells in the home she has made within her deprivation:

She is deaf to my concern and begins to gouge out the black sticky mud wedged against the heel. . . . She takes a sheet of newspaper from the pile that is kept beside the entrance and the mud drops down in clumps. In a tin can are a blunt knife and a screwdriver. Everything else is in its place. She is altogether at home here. (15)

Naomi has learnt that Obasan “will do what she will do” (17) and that her answers are always oblique (18) when she decides to answer at all. Goellnicht’s suggestion that Obasan exemplifies the silence “that cannot speak” (294) is certainly mistaken because not only does Obasan speak with her resistant obliqueness and not speak when silence is more tactical, but she utters herself with her own profoundly expressive accent: “Everyone someday dies” (11). However, her primary mode of engagement with her world is through the practice of domestic life in which the constraints of poverty are met with conservation and order: “Obasan never discards anything. Besides the twine ball, there’s a ball of string full of knots, a number of balls of wool bits, and even short bits of thread twirled around popsickle sticks that are stacked up like soldiers in a black woven box” (44). The subtle excess of this order is perfectly aligned with the program of the paradigmatic anti-hero cited by de Certeau as representing a new politics of the marginalized: the production, under the conditions of severe constraint, of “very small, almost invisible pleasures, little extras” (xxiv). Arguing in a very different register toward the same effect, Linda Williams has demonstrated that the American sex-worker, pornographer and performance artist Annie Sprinkle affirms her agency within a system in which the female body is “saturated” with commodified sex (316), by neither denying that she is a whore nor fighting the system that names her but by affirming within the space of the discourse that constructs her “something that is not named in ‘whore’: her own desire, surprisingly new pleasures” (307).

Stephen, the one most crippled by the internment in having internalized

racism and rejected his community, wholly escapes his trapped condition through his musical talent, turning the bars of his prison into a xylophone (220). But for Naomi, whose hyphenated existence is represented in her shuttling between Cecil and Granton, daily life is a series of tactical combats, an aspect that is emphasized by placing the two scenes set in Cecil and Granton at the beginning and end of the novel. In the first (Chapter Two), as a minority teacher in a racist community, Naomi defends herself against students who proxy for that community, facing in Sigmund's aggressive speech the familiar attacks on her name, personal life and authority. Naomi meets this attack with silence and evasion and by pedagogically transforming it into a lesson, though she covers her tactical success with the camouflage of incompetence. (The display of weakness is a defensive gesture common to the powerless, though it has been cited specifically in relation to Asian-American writing [Wong 77]. In the narrator's address to the reader, the gesture locates the reader in the dominant position.) Responding to the question on love, Naomi records that Uncle's reaction to her own curiosity ("In ruv? What that?" 6) had staged the cultural specificity of "love" as she diverts the question toward the constructedness of the concept, "Why do you suppose, we use the preposition 'in' when we talk about love?" (6). In response to the question about marriage she goes behind the question to elicit the answer implied in her counter question, that it comes from a parental, racist denial of her authority: "'My mother says you don't look old enough to be a teacher'. . . It must be my size. . . Was it my youthfulness or my oriental face?" (6). With the proxy character of the attack becoming even clearer when Sigmund names Naomi as spinster and old maid (terms obviously picked up at home), Naomi responds by the ruse of naturalizing the condition of being unmarried: "'I suppose I am an old maid . . . So is my aunt in Toronto" (8). However, at the level of her self-representation in the text, Naomi both denigrates herself and subverts the dominant discourse of sexism ("spinster," "old maid") by identifying it parodically with pseudo-scientific racism: "Must be something in the blood. A crone-prone syndrome. We should hire ourselves out for a research study" (8).

These tactics are repeated with variation in Naomi's encounter with the widower who takes her out on a date and asks where she comes from and how long she has been in the country. Naomi turns the tables on this aggression by making it an occasion for a lesson in the generational names of Japanese Canadians, underlining the ruse by ingenuously apologizing to

the reader for assuming pedagogical authority: "Sometimes I think I have been teaching school too long" (7). Her textual response to the widower's insistent interrogation, however, is a parody of the identity card that Japanese Canadians like Isamu had had to carry (24), that is, again, an act that is simultaneously self-denigrating and subversive. Finding herself positioned by her date's interrogation as an alien other who is already marked as inferior and required to display her inferiority, Naomi represents herself by miming what she is expected to be in order to turn the gaze itself into an object:

I should have something with my picture on it and a statement below that tells who I am. Megumi Naomi Nakane. Born June 18, 1936, Vancouver, British Columbia. Marital status. Old maid. Health: Fine, I suppose. Occupation: School teacher. I am bored to death with teaching and ready to retire. . . . Personality: Tense. Is that past or present tense? It's perpetual tense. I have the social graces of a common housefly. That's self-denigrating, isn't it. (7)

At the other end of the book, in chapter thirty-four, the Barkers' condolence visit is an invasion of Naomi's base in Obasan's home, and as such it produces a shift from tactical manoeuvre to strategic combat. On the surface Naomi's reluctance to let the Barkers in seems to illustrate what Naomi had called her "social graces of a common housefly," but this self-representation is undercut when the power relation displayed in the visit is exposed. While Mr. Barker "steps...unbidden" (222) into the house of his former labourers, Naomi remembers the occasion when, Penny having taken her to their house, Mrs. Barker had shut the door in her face. Placed within the context of this uneven relation of power, Naomi's reluctance to invite the Barkers reveals under its appearance of social awkwardness a resistance to domination based on race and class.

As one of the powerless being invaded by the powerful, Naomi treats the visit tactically at the level of represented action, employing her weakness as strength, but at the textual level, where she is empowered in her own space, she offers a strategic awareness of the dominant. Mrs. Barker, sitting like a flagpole, "represents the Barker kingdom, a tiny but confident country. But momentarily she is planted here on this soil beside Obasan's own dark flag" (224), while Obasan is "impenetrable" in her silence, "deaf and impassive, unavailable for questioning or their ministrations. . . . she remains inviolate" (224-25). (The sexual metaphor for invasion and domination, with the woman as an instrument of the male aggressor, and therefore the target of hostility, refers this episode to the first dream in the book, which I will take



up later). The very elements of Obasan's subaltern condition, the sedimentation of poverty, the kakimochi and the tea-stained cups with grease lines, become instruments for the discomfiture of the enemy as Mrs. Barker "shifts uncomfortably. . . breathing unevenly" (224). Mrs. Barker's absurdly "polite" question whether Obasan would be "all right on her own" (implying that she should be sent to the all-white old folks' home) meets the response of Naomi's throat-clearing and stammering, which make Mrs. Barker "uncomfortable that I do not speak" (224). Again underlining the tactical ruse of her behavior with a self-denigrating comment, "I lack communication skills," Naomi confronts the aggression strategically in textual space, enclosing the aggressor's gaze in her own and turning the dominator's subjectivity into an object: Mrs. Barker "sits like a bird poised for flight" (223).

Her eyes dart back and forth. I find myself donning her restless eyes like a pair of trick glasses. She must think the house is an obstacle course. (222)

What is it she smells? What foreign odour sends its message down into her body alerting her limbs? If only I could banish all that offends her delicate sensibilities. Especially the strong smell of miso and daicon and shoyu. Especially all the dust that Obasan and I are too short to see. Mrs. Barker's glance at Obasan is one of condescension. Or is it solicitude? We are dogs, she and I, sniffing for clues, our throats quivering with subliminal growls. (224)

I read these episodes as demonstrating that tactic and strategy are not antithetical practices but operations situated in different contours of power, so that the subaltern agency manifesting itself in the manoeuvres of everyday life can flow into a strategic position with the acquisition of power and a base of operation. Obasan, Uncle and Naomi are not the merely passive and silent antithesis to Emily's empowering speech, but already grounded in the political practice of everyday life, they are involved in a communion with Emily. Practice, de Certeau has argued, is a mode of enunciation: silent tactic can be in a dialogic relation to strategic speech.

As the variety of languages and practices in Obasan produce discriminating positioning, the existence of a number of perspectives in the novel does not imply any general scepticism either, but rather generates the construction of a more adequate perspective through the integration of the fragmentary. At the political level, where perspective is related to power, the lies of the dominant are objectified and exposed while the silenced truth of the subaltern is legitimated ("Facts About evacuees in Alberta'. . . 'Grinning and Happy'. . . The fact is . . . I cannot bear the memory" 193-94). Even at the epistemological level, where perspectival openness is a basic feature of

the novel as a metafiction, it does not produce the kind of postmodern scepticism that Goellnicht and Kanefsky find. Both Naomi's memory and Emily's documents offer fragments that require the other for completion, Emily's wider view situating Naomi's experiential perspective within the history of the community and Naomi's experience adding the force of testimony to Emily's documentation. When Naomi writes that "Aunt Emily's Christmas in 1941 is not the Christmas I remember" (79), it is not, as Goellnicht affirms, an example of "the textualised nature of facts" (293), but the recognition of the need to complete partial individual experience through dialogue with others: "I feel like a burglar as I read, breaking into a private house only to discover it's my childhood house filled with corners and rooms I've never seen" (79). Indeed, Naomi's lack of authority as a narrator, with the limited knowledge of a protected child within a situation that was largely incomprehensible to adults in her community, is a device for engaging and empowering the reader in the construction of the narrative. Diminishing the authority of the narrator and fragmenting the narrative lead in *Obasan* not to relativism but to an engagement of the reader in totalisation, the process of producing a coherent, inclusive and dynamic understanding of the world.

Naomi's text also uses perspective to ethically centre and historically contextualise the internment within the contiguous catastrophes of the Native Indian genocide in North America and the nuclear bombing of Japan. The otherwise redundant invocation of Sitting Bull in the first chapter ("Uncle could be Chief Sitting Bull squatting here." 2), Naomi's own identification with Rough Lock Bill in her dream (to which I will return later), and the recognition of similarity between Native and Japanese children (2), place the internment on a scale of injustice in the history of North America, affirming both an identity of the oppressed and the priority of the Native's dispossession. The foundational erasure of the Native in Canada is thematized in the first dream in the book, which opens with an ideological version of history that naturalizes the colonial as the indigene and provides the discursive ground for the subsequent racism in British Columbia: "They also are here, the other man and woman. They have been here before us, forever in the forest." (28). Seen in the context of this dream, Naomi's text is a revision that puts the Native back into the history from which they have been erased, recognizing their prior displacement in the remembrance of the Japanese Canadian dispersal.

The structure of *Obasan* engages the reader in the positioned production of several narratives. The framing narrative of Naomi's reluctant remembering and the framed fragments of remembered and documented past are stitched together by narratives moving between the present and the past. The first of these is the enigma of the mother, for whose absence Naomi seeks answers she is denied, and the knowledge of whose death brings the narrative to a conclusion. This is a literal narrative of plenitude, loss, search, denial, and discovery, though its association with the theme of presence, absence and coming to language invites the psychoanalytical narrative of the move from the pre-Oedipal through the resolution of the Oedipal phase (Magnusson). The enigma of Naomi's resistance to memory also generates a mimetic narrative guided by Naomi's explicit recognition of the pain of remembering lost happiness and intense unhappiness, which functions rhetorically to make the loss and the suffering all the more expressive. But this enigma (seeking in the past the determination of the present) also creates the space for a psychological narrative of victimization originating in the Old Man Gower episode, while the complex of betrayal, lie, abuse, silencing, and ambivalence in the episode invites a metonymic reading in which the personal becomes an allegory of the history of the community. These narratives of psychological crippling brought about by the internment and healed through the coming to voice have been traced by most readings of the novel.

But the narrative thread that follows the enigma of the "speaking dreams" has received little attention, perhaps because it offers a very different narrative than do realistic readings. The oneiric language, to which the opening poem draws particular attention, presents an achronous narrative in which a vision of the overthrow of colonial history is followed by a processive emergence of the political subject through the binary opposition of the oppressor and the oppressed to a final passage beyond the binary. It offers a larger history than the immediate one documented in the novel, an implicit, gendered theory of patriarchal, colonial domination and liberation, a refusal of the victim position apparently presented at the realistic level, and a going beyond the necessary political level of opposing external oppression.

Although, in a reading that is generally accepted, Gottlieb has found Naomi's initial dream to be "ominous, but . . . not yet openly horrible" (43), the dream is actually a prophetic vision of immigration, colonial oppression, resistance, and liberation. The first stage of the dream is a scene of

arrival in a “forest” or “a heavily treed slope,” where “the other man and woman” are already there, “been here before us, forever in the forest” (28). This, as I have already pointed out is colonial history in which the Native has been erased, the colonialist naturalized and the immigrant defined as the only late comer. In the first glimpse of arrival, for a “flickering moment,” the colonial woman, engaged in labour “appears as she once was, naked, youthful, voluptuous” (28). But in the next stage of the dream this vision of original beauty is replaced by a more usual sense of deformation, as the initial vision becomes a “mirage” and the woman’s “face is now harsh again and angular as quartz—square, a coarse golden brown” (28). The man, clearly the patriarchal colonial, “a British martinet,” commands all into the service of his labour of cutting trees, “His glance is a raised baton” (29). The affect of this stage is “Weariness,” symbolized in the “smoky curtain continuously rising” (29). But in the next stage, “at the heart of the forest,” there is an epiphany, “a realization is airborne . . . a flock of birds in sudden flight” (29). A fraction of a second’s delay in the yawn of the man’s pet lion-dog, whose “obedience is phenomenal,” leads to the awareness that it is not natural but a robot, a man-made thing. In this instant “a house of cards silently collapses. Instantly in our telepathic world, the knowing spreads and the great boulder enclosing change splits apart” (29). A faulty operation of a hinge in the machine demythologizes colonial domination, exposing its construction and enabling its overthrow. At this revolutionary point, the colonial woman, now deformed further into a cyborg, attempts to retard change by “reciting” to the dreamer in an archaic language “an ancient mythical contract made between herself and the man,” but is ineffective because “the language has been forgotten” (30). This woman, incrementally deformed in the service of colonial patriarchy, is the prophetic type (since Naomi has this dream before reading Emily’s document) of the “National President of the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire” (82) who accused all Japanese Canadians of being spies and saboteurs and whose progeny appear in the Mrs. Barkers of Naomi’s experience. However, the cyborg woman’s failure to contain change opens the last and happy stage of the dream, in which Uncle “stands in the depth of the forest” (suggesting his legitimated presence, at the centre, the “heart”), performing a ritual dance, while “someone,” who will turn out to be the mother in later dreams, is trying to speak, and the man who had claimed aboriginal status, now a “British officer . . . wearing an army uniform” is “disappearing to the left” (30).

This overarching dream is followed by a group of three related and iterative dreams connected with the experience of being molested, first by Old Man Gower and then, “over and over again” (61), by others. In the earliest of these, the child’s ambivalence of desire—“I clamber unbidden onto his lap. His hands are frightening and pleasurable” (65)—splits her body apart, creating a chasm in the pre-Oedipal body she shared with her mother, and producing her separateness as “I”: “In the centre of my body is a rift. . . . the mountain yawns apart as the chasm spreads. My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. . . . My legs are being sawn in half” (65). While the splitting of the body images the separation from the mother through ambivalence, the “I” is mutilated into immobility by the sense of complicity in an act of violation. As a result there is no sense of the agency of violation in this dream, only the grammatical mark of passivity: “legs are being sawn.”

In the later dreams, this wholly passive image of violent rupture changes to one of “flight, terror and pursuit,” in which a space is opened for the subject and agency, even if it is for complicity under duress: “The only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive” (61). The pre-subjective ambivalence of terror-pleasure in the initial dream of rupture is replaced in these dreams by the clarity of the symbolic (the domain of language founded on binary oppositions such as pursuer/pursued, saved/harmed) with the emergence of the subject and agency. In the final version the dream moves even further toward the symbolic-social in identifying the individual with the collective oppressed subject, representing it in an extremity of victim position literally prone under its oppressor, and producing through its “terrible ending” the political knowledge that the ambiguous agency of seduction is futile:

. . . three beautiful oriental women lay naked in the muddy road, flat on their backs . . . Several soldiers stood . . . in front of them . . . guarding these . . . prisoners captured from a nearby village.

The woman closest by made a simpering coy gesture with her hands. She touched her hair and wiggled her body slightly—seductively. An almost inaudible whimper or sob was drowned in her chest. She was trying to use the only weapon she had—her desirability. This is what a punished dog feels—this abject longing, wretchedness, fear, and utter helplessness. She lay on the edge of nausea, stretched between hatred and lust.

The soldiers lifted their rifles . . . A few inches from the body, the first woman’s right foot lay like a solid wooden boot neatly severed . . . The soldiers could not be won. Dread and deathly loathing cut through the women. (61-62)

This group of dreams speaks a subject in process moving from ambivalent passivity toward an increasingly clear emergence of the subject as agent positioned in loathing against the oppressor. Its language converges with Emily's in producing a political subject.

The dreams of the Slocan period trace an intermediary stage of this emergence, in which there is a growing recognition of the self as identified with a series of victims, while the oppressor takes shape as the British doctor and the nurse who transform the hospital to a place of torture. In the first hospital dream, father, the butchered chicken, Rough Lock Bill ("Redskins" [147] being displaced metonymically by "red stubble" in Naomi's statement, "my neck and chin are covered with a thick red stubble") and "I" are identified metaphorically with a book whose content has been erased (150). At this stage there is only the identity of erased victims but neither oppressor nor agency. But in the later repetitions of the dream, a series of tortured and wounded creatures, including one racially marked by colour—the baby with yellow ("fried-egg") eyes and yellow excrement and a wound on his head—are opposed to the torturing agency of the angry British doctor and the nurse, who "combs and combs my hair, the sharp teeth scraping the top of my head" (158). At the same time, however, the dreams indicate the agency of endurance in the dreamer that refers back to her refusal to cry ("weeds . . . do not moan . . . Nor do the trees cry," 150), and her reflection on heroic endurance, "Could I hide in a wagon of hay and not cry out if I were stabbed by a bayonet?" (72).

The last two dreams (167 and 227-28), narrate the progressive emergence of mother from the initial "straining to speak" (30) in the forest. In the first dream, mother is still only a feeling (": is here . . . not here"), "reaching out to me" in a reversal of the dream of separation in childhood (167). While in the earlier dream the dreamer had her legs sawn, here she dances round the mother-as-Maypole, moving but retaining connection. The other half of the dream similarly modifies the actual departure scene, with the mother-ship leaving but remaining "tied to me" by streamers, which break but become the wake "that reaches out with tentacles to embrace me" (167). The dream's promise of a lost wholeness wakes Naomi to the return of her father and a recovery of plenitude: "I am in my father's arms again my father's arms" (170).

In the last dream, the memory recovered in the novel condenses into the development of the initial dream. The first scene takes the dreamer to a

courtyard/graveyard, “the place of the dead,” but not, Naomi insists remembering Marvell, “a ‘fine and private place’” (227). It is a house that is not a place of security, “we are never safe enough” (227). All the dead in Naomi’s family, including Obasan as a child (since she is not yet matured in death) appear in the courtyard, where the soldiers, ever present in Naomi’s dreams, are “eager for murder” (227), and “We die again and again” (227). The scene enacts the ongoing cycle of oppression, of forever being in an unsafe place.

The second stage of the dream is very different in emotional colour. Now the courtyard, as the centre of the house (domestic space), seems to displace the “depth of the forest” (strange, outside space) in which Uncle had performed his dance in the opening dream (30), as mother, who had only been “someone” in the earlier dream, fully appears performing the same dance. Within this centred space, “Mother stood in the centre” (227), symbolising love in the most conventional way: the rose in her mouth is “red as a heart,” and her mouth itself is shaped as a heart. The banality of the symbol, however, is interestingly disturbed by the stem of the rose in mother’s mouth, which is a knotted string “like the twine and string of Obasan’s ball” (227), an emblem of a life of deprivation marked by the care with which it is lived. So that, mother and Obasan turn out to be paradoxically identical, not only through the metonymy of the dream but in the contrast, when Naomi finds her dream mother’s “heart-shaped mouth” displaced by Obasan’s “skin-coloured mouth open—a short dry cave” (228). This shift from mother to Obasan at the point of mother’s fullest appearance seems to indicate Naomi’s transition from the need of an imaginary condition of presence to the recognition of symbolic substitution as the path to her lost mother. The dream, then, offers a pre-knowledge of what Naomi will understand after the news of her mother’s death: that “for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here” (243).

In the final stage of the dream, Naomi’s access to her mother is barred by the appearance of the Grand Inquisitor, the composite figure of invasion, interrogation, prejudice, silencing, murder, and torture in the novel: “he was prying open my mother’s lips, prying open my eyes” (228). Bringing together all the figures of oppression in the novel, the Inquisitor is specifically identified with the Old Man Gower, “the top of his head a shiny skin cap” (61; 228). The agent of violation and silencing is also the interrogator

who coerces speech and compels visibility, so that the position of the oppressor occupies both the production of silence and speech. The Inquisitor's demand to know is already "a judgment and a refusal to hear" (228), his interrogation is already an accusation, his demand for speech already a silencing. However, in perhaps the most radical move in the novel Naomi discovers her own identity with the Inquisitor:

What the Grand Inquisitor has never learned is that the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence. To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone, he must first become silent. Only when he enters her abandonment will he be released from his own. (228)

Obviously, the oppressor figure of patriarchal authority in the novel neither needs to attend to Naomi's mother nor to be released from abandonment: what is addressed to it is the product of Naomi's identification across the binary oppositions of oppressor/oppressed and man/woman. Having moved from the ambivalence of the victim position to a clear, political hatred of the oppressor, Naomi discovers in this dream her double positioning as oppressor and oppressed: "the Grand Inquisitor gnaws at my bones. . . Am I her accuser?" (228). (There is a foreshadowing of this double positioning in Naomi's seeing herself as both Goldilocks and Baby Bear [126]). Naomi recognizes that the silenced subaltern cannot be reached by a demand for speech but has to be approached through the silence itself by attending to the conditions of her "abandonment," which in this case will turn out to be both the horror of the war and the code of not communicating suffering in Japanese culture. This has a theoretical parallel in Spivak's argument that the demand of the radical Western intellectual for the speech of the subaltern is blind to the fact that, caught between patriarchy and imperialism, the Third World woman has no discursive space from which to speak and can be reached only by articulating the conditions of her silence.

Against Emily's activist vision, necessarily based on the clear demarcation of binary oppositions—"Write the vision and make it plain" (31)—Naomi presents a sense of truth "more murky, shadowy and grey" (32). This difference is revealed in the pattern of their narratives, Emily's showing a simple opposition of the oppressor and the oppressed and a unidirectional development of trust, betrayal, lies, injustice, and protest. Naomi's narrative, by contrast, shows a pattern of plenitude, loss, and reconstruction with the recognition that although the loss is a result of external oppression, the experience of plenitude (in the idylls of both Vancouver and Slokan) is



already contaminated with violence (the hen episode in Vancouver), cruelty (the chicken episode in Slocan), scapegoating (the butterflies and bath episodes in Slocan), and betrayal (the episode of drowning). Emily's political view sees the oppressor outside while Naomi's ethical view also sees the oppressor within. But this is not a contradiction because, as Naomi's dreams indicate, the passage to the ethical is through the political. Naomi's murkiness introduces ethical complexity into the binary clarity of political vision, acknowledging the necessity of maintaining the oppressed/oppressor, us/them oppositions while at the same time dissolving them in the recognition that there are others more oppressed than us, that the oppressing other is also within, that Baby Bear and Goldilocks are sisters under the skin. In my reading the languages and narratives in *Obasan* interact and combine in a polyphony to activate the memory of injustice toward the practice of an ethical politics that is not only oppositional but also reflexive.

#### NOTES

- 1 The polyphonic novel, Bakhtin writes, contains a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices . . . a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (6) in an "unfinalized dialogue" (32). "The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through. Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of the novelistic structure" (40). Polyphony does not follow the dialectical path of "thesis, antithesis and synthesis" (26). It is "pluralistic" (26). But it "has nothing in common with relativism (or dogmatism). . . . both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)" (69). The emphasis is Bakhtin's.
- 2 This criticism of hegemonic postmodernism has been argued from different points by Sangari and Appiah. Sangari writes: "the postmodern obsession with antimimetic form is always on the lookout for new modes of 'self' fracture. . . . Postmodern skepticism is the complex product of a historical conjuncture and is constructed as both symptom and critique of the contemporary economic and social formation of the West" (144-45). Referring to the anti-realist and sceptical delegitimation of Western and nationalist historiography in the work of Yambo Ouologuem, whom he considers typical of the "post-colonial stage" in African writing, Appiah writes that though such work may seem postmodern, "the basis for the project of delegitimation is very much not the postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal . . . in an appeal to a certain simple respect for human suffering" (152).

Diana Brydon has offered some useful distinctions between the post-modern and the post-colonial in arguing for a variety of post-colonial voices in Canada. "Perhaps the clearest difference between a post-modernist practice and a post-colonial practice emerges through their different uses of history. . . . Without denying that things hap-

pened, post-modernism focuses on the problems raised by history's textualised accessibility: on the problems of representation, and on the impossibility of retrieving truth. Post-colonialism, in contrast, without denying history's textualized accessibility, focuses on the reality of a past that has influenced the present" (201). Though Brydon is arguing specifically for Mordecai Richler and Kristjana Gunnars as post-colonial voices, her argument clearly would encompass Kogawa.

- 3 Kristeva's concept of the "subject in process/ on trial" provides a useful gloss on the signifying practices in *Obasan*. Kristeva argues that the "subject in process/ on trial" is the cross-roads of the fluid mobility of the semiotic chora—the space of the drives—and the regulated (semantic-syntactical) stability of the symbolic domain of language—the space of the social. The subject in process, as the space between the free-flowing energy of the drives and the hierarchized regulations governing language is the space of the creative, the ethical and the subversive, where genuine change takes place. Categorizing signifying practices into four types, narrative, metalanguage, contemplation and "the text," which is a practice of "poetic language," Kristeva argues that the last is the most heterogeneous, being the destabilizing (of meaning and the subject) utterance of the semiotic within the symbolic. *Obasan* clearly presents Naomi's subjectivity in process as it is articulated in the intersection (dialogue) of heterogeneous signifying practices including the poetic, the narrative and the metalanguage of mastery, to which both the language of the Canadian state and its challenge in Aunt Emily belong. There is also a suggestive parallelism between Kristeva's emphasis on "irruption" as the characteristic of the subject in process, marking its mobility and creative potentiality, and Kogawa's metaphor of the bursting stone for the "living word" and change.

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