

# BROKEN GENERATIONS IN "OBASAN"

## *Inner Conflict and the Destruction of Community*

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THE REMARKABLE SUCCESS of Joy Kogawa's documentary novel in weaving historical fact and subjective experience into a coherent whole is partly due to its ability to co-ordinate several layers of time around a single event: the internment and dispersal of the Japanese Canadians during and after the Second World War. The most obvious purpose of the novel is to reconstruct a suppressed chapter in Canadian history — this is Aunt Emily's special project. In counterpoint to Emily's facts and documents stands the intense personal history of Naomi's narrative, which reveals the damage inflicted on a child by the destruction of her community. As the narrative unfolds we become aware of another layer of history: that of the succeeding generations through which an immigrant community adjusts to a new culture, and the disruption of the relation between these generations by the dispersal of the Japanese Canadian community. Aunt Emily provides the essential facts, and Naomi's record of inner experience invites the reader to a strong emotional involvement in the narrative, but it is the history of the generations, as represented by the Kato and Nakane families, which binds together the various time-layers of the novel. Here I will stress the close connection between historical and psychological aspects of the novel by beginning with a discussion of the relation between generations, and then showing how this provides the basis for Naomi's relation to her two aunts and her absent mother, and also for some central imagery in which Naomi expresses both the fragmentation of her world and her final sense of resolution.<sup>1</sup>

In all immigrant communities the first, second, and third generations represent crucial stages in adjustment to the adopted culture. The importance of these generations in the Japanese Canadian community is indicated by the fact that they are given special names: *Issei* (immigrants from Japan), *Nisei* (the first generation born in Canada), and *Sansei* (the children of the *Nisei*). In the novel, Obasan and Uncle Isamu represent the *Issei*, while Emily comes from the political side of the *Nisei*. Though Naomi is a *Sansei* by birth, the fact that she was raised by an

immigrant aunt and uncle puts her more in the cultural situation of the Nisei, but without politics or community.<sup>2</sup>

Emily and Naomi are drawn together by a mutual need to heal the breach the destruction of their community has opened between Nisei and Sansei generations. Emily pursues this goal actively over twenty years, with amazing persistence considering her niece's lack of response, while in the course of the novel Naomi gradually comes to recognize her need for the values her aunt conveys to her from the ideals of her own generation, so cruelly defeated by history. I will first consider Emily's pursuit of Naomi as an attempt to re-establish a relationship between the Nisei and Sansei generations, and then Naomi's resistance as the attitude of a damaged Sansei who has repressed her actual history while becoming fixated on an ideal past before the internment — an attitude which has much in common with the traditional generation represented by her aunt and uncle. In reconstructing her past under Emily's influence, she must confront her affinity to both generations as a route to accepting her own situation; her development involves the resolution of conflicting attitudes towards language, the outside world, and the traditional concept of woman.

IN HIS COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY of the Japanese Canadian community, Ken Adachi describes the conflicts between Issei and Nisei generations. These conflicts are characteristic of any immigrant culture, but made sharper for Japanese Canadians by the conservatism of the Issei community and its rejection of the *mores* of western culture. Like many first-generation immigrants, the Issei sought a dignified accommodation with the surrounding society, but without joining it or altering their way of life. They saw western society as an alien world with which they sought only a peaceful coexistence, bolstered by an idealized memory of their homeland. In contrast, the Nisei, the first generation born in Canada, eagerly sought to identify with the new country — an attitude reinforced by the Japanese emphasis on education, which induced the Canadian-born quickly to acquire English as their first language. Thus the Nisei found themselves in conflict both with their parents' generation and with the larger society with which they identified, but which responded to their enthusiasm with social rejection and exclusion from most of the professions for which their Canadian education qualified them.

One response to this situation — a response vigorously condemned by the Issei — was the formation of a group of young Nisei activists to agitate for full citizenship including the right to vote. In the late 1930s, politically-minded Nisei founded their own newspaper, *The New Canadian*, and sent delegations to Ottawa. Adachi observes that their belief in the right to vote "grew into an exaggerated — and

illusory — sense of the importance of political rights in a modern democracy. The growing sense of grievance and injustice . . . was still mitigated by the belief that a society which professed democratic ideals would ultimately practise them.”<sup>3</sup> If ineffectual and doomed to disillusionment, however, these activities provided the Nisei with a sense of western identity very different from the world-view of their parents. Under normal circumstances the activities of the progressive Nisei, however ineffectual in the short run, would have transmitted the new identity to the next generation, the Sansei, who could be expected to enter into full membership in Canadian society. The internment and dispersal which destroyed the progressive Nisei movement developing in Vancouver in the 1930s left Emily an activist without a political community and Naomi a deracinated, depressed, and apolitical Sansei with the psychological conflicts of the Nisei and no ethnic community to mediate between her sense of alienness and the WASP world of rural Alberta.

Emily’s affiliation with the progressive Nisei of the 1930s is made clear in her diary, which also records her bitter disappointment as the justice and decency which she expected from Canadian society failed to appear. Emily does not, however, lose her confidence in what seems, for Naomi, a lost cause and a lost generation: “She believes in the Nisei, seeing them as networks and streamers of light dotting the country. For my part, I can only see a dark field with Aunt Emily beaming her flashlight to where the rest of us crouch and hide, our eyes downcast as we seek the safety of invisibility” (31-32).<sup>4</sup>

The frequency of Aunt Emily’s visits to the family in Alberta and her persistent bombardment of Naomi with political reading and exhortation, indicate a profound need to rescue her niece from her frustrated solitude, and to hand on to her the zeal of her own generation — to find a political successor in her own family. Because of the loss of her own parents, however, Naomi has been raised by a very conventional though well-intentioned pair of Issei. She seems to side with her aunt and uncle in their disapproval of Emily’s departure from female tradition — “‘Not like woman’” says Uncle, “‘Like that there can be no marriage’” (36) — and of the “agitation” which she always introduces into the domestic circle. Naomi implicitly agrees with her uncle when he insists that “‘This country is the best. . . . Gratitude. Gratitude.’ . . . He was right, I thought. If Aunt Emily with her billions of letters and articles and speeches . . . if all that couldn’t bring contentment, what was the point?” (42). This “contentment” which must exclude all “agitation” is a traditional Japanese ideal. Naomi’s passive acceptance of the *status quo* indicates that she has no real sense of membership in Canadian society: “‘But you can’t fight the whole country,’ I said. ‘We are the country,’ [Emily] answered” (42). Naomi seems to consider “the whole country” a hostile group to which she does not belong. Yet it is Emily’s diary describing the effects of the deportation in Vancouver — the living heart of the bundle of documents Emily has sent to her niece — that will launch Naomi on her own reconstruction of the past.

Despite her emphasis on “contentment,” Naomi reveals, in her “self-denigrating” self-presentation in chapter 2, an intense discontent with her way of life and personal appearance. A pun linking nervous tension with stoppage of time suggests a blocked sense of development: “Personality: Tense. Is that past or present tense? It’s perpetual tense” (7). A rather harsh observation from Emily provides objective confirmation of the sense of inner crippling which haunts Naomi through the narrative: “‘Look at you, Nomi, shuffling back and forth between Cecil and Granton, unable either to go or to stay in the world with even a semblance of grace or ease’” (50). Emily diagnoses Naomi’s psychic crippling as a case of repressed memory: “‘You have to remember. . . . You are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. . . . Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene’” (49-50).

While this diagnosis is amply confirmed by the imagery in which Naomi thinks of herself, there is a certain injustice in Emily’s exhortation to remember, for Naomi’s experience of the war and post-war years was far more traumatic than hers. As the internment was taking place Emily had the luck to get permission to move to Toronto with her father, while Naomi went with her aunt and uncle first to internment in Slocan and then to a kind of slave labour in appalling conditions in Alberta. Most important, Emily is twenty years older than her niece; at the time of the internment she was twenty-five, and had already established an identity as political activist and non-traditional woman. Naomi, on the other hand, experiences internment, orphaning and, worst of all, six years living in an uninsulated one-room shack on a beet farm, between the ages of five and fifteen. For Emily remembering means re-establishing the facts of history; for Naomi, it forces the reliving of a damaged development — an exploration of the self in an area beyond Emily’s experience and also beyond the limitations of her abstract, polemical discourse. Emily’s speech is external and rhetorical because she is trying to maintain and persuade others of values she developed in the past. Naomi’s narrative is subjective and connotative because she is trying to recover a past she experienced as a child, much of which, at the beginning of the novel, has been expelled from memory. In this exploration we encounter another aspect of Naomi’s resistance to Emily — a memory of an ideal childhood provided by a very traditional mother.

**B**EHIND THE STRONGLY EMPHASIZED CONTRAST between Naomi’s two aunts — Emily and Obasan — lies a related contrast between Emily and Naomi’s mother, pointed out by Naomi in her explanation of the family photograph: “Aunt Emily . . . definitely takes after Grandpa Kato — the round open face and the stocky build. . . . Not a beauty but, one might say, solid and intelligent-looking. Beside her, Mother is a fragile presence. Her face is oval as an egg and delicate” (19). In this case, contrasting appearance also represents a difference in

cultural values. Grandma Kato, a strong-minded but traditional woman, frequently returned to Japan and took her favourite daughter, Naomi's mother, with her, leaving Emily to stay with her father — eventually she would help him in his medical practice. Although born in Canada, Naomi's mother had a Japanese upbringing provided by Grandma Kato, while Emily's diary reveals her sense of closeness to her father.

Naomi's intense identification with her mother places her in a lineage of traditional women which includes Grandma Kato and Obasan. The leading characteristic of this concept of woman is defined by Obasan: "She has often spoken of my mother's 'yasashi kokoro', her tender, kind, and thoughtful heart" (46).<sup>5</sup> Naomi attributes the same quality to Obasan — she finds an "exquisite tenderness" in her expression in the family photograph (19). Naomi's intense memories of the perfect mother of her childhood make clear that for her this mother represents a feminine ideal: "Mother's voice is yasashi, soft and tender. . . . She is altogether yasashi" (51). In her own identification with the "yasashi kokoro" Naomi rejects Emily's brusque and angry discourse, but also finds it difficult to express or even acknowledge angry feelings of her own. (A use of the word "yasashi" by Emily implies an inability to survive outside the family circle. When the parents of Naomi's father are interned, Emily writes in her diary, "You know how yasashi Grandma is. This is too great a shock for her" [99]. Grandma Nakane is the first member of the family to die in exile.)

This ideal mother is the centre of a completely unified family life so perfect that it is painful to remember: "Every event was a warm-water wash, drawing us all closer till the fibre of our lives became an impenetrable mesh. . . . We were the original 'togetherness' people" (20). This absolute "togetherness" makes possible the positive "silence" of Japanese family life, exemplified by an understanding of the child by the mother so complete that words would only be an intrusion (59). This intuitive understanding which does not require words is characteristic of a family group where, as exemplified in the oft-told story of Momotaro, "Simply by existing a child is delight" (55). Family life is governed by a code of behaviour emphasizing self-restraint and consideration of others — a world of "sensitivity and appropriate gestures" (56). One of its leading injunctions is that one must never burden others with distressful feelings of one's own. When Momotaro leaves home, his grandparents "are careful, as he goes, not to weight his pack with their sorrow" (56). One must, like Momotaro, "behave with honour. . . . To do otherwise . . . brings dishonour to all" (56). The ability of relatives to anticipate the needs of the child without words also provides the child with the best example of this code of behaviour: "To travel with confidence down this route the most reliable map I am given is the example of my mother's and Grandma's alert and accurate knowing. When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food . . . and if there is pain there is care simultaneously" (56).

The loving "silence" of Naomi's childhood provides the basis for whatever sense of self-worth she retains despite the humiliation and dispersal of her community. Yet as an attitude towards life it is unable to provide an adequate response to this situation. To function, loving silence requires a community where everyone is perfectly known and from which no one feels alienated. A world where response is "simultaneous" and thus does not require words cannot deal with a drastic breach in continuity with the past. Without community, the loving silence of Naomi's childhood becomes the negative silence of Obasan — an inner "retreat" from which there is no return. Obasan's "silence that cannot speak" (proem) is a pathological response of the Issei world-view to permanent loss of community. She gives Naomi no direction into the outside world or the future.

The vulnerability of the language of silence lies in the dichotomy it fosters between an inner family world of complete togetherness and the hostile outer world of an alien society: "Inside the house in Vancouver there is confidence and laughter. . . . But outside . . . there is an infinitely unpredictable, unknown, and often dangerous world. Speech hides within me, watchful and afraid" (58). The western world of eye-contact, so alarming to a child whose mother knows only the code of downcast eyes with which the traditional Japanese woman is obliged to greet the public world, also represents a larger world of possible relationships outside the family. Like her mother Naomi hides from threatening eyes, but she knows from the example of her Canadian-educated relatives that entrance into the outer world is possible: "Aunt Emily and Father, born and raised in Canada, are visually bilingual. I too learn the second language" (47). Under the influence of her progressive Nisei relatives Naomi would have been able to make a natural transition from her supportive family life to the outside world, but the internment disrupts this process and separates her from those who would have provided the best guidance. While Naomi adapts externally to her life in exile, she, like the Issei, does not really trust the outer world or believe that it belongs to her. The political discourse which Emily brings from afar seems an alien language.

In Naomi's memory the language of silence represents the perfect childhood but its negative aspects are more evident from her point of view as adult narrator. The location of this language "in the belly" suggests a limitation as well as a childhood ideal. Circumscribed by a family womb, this language can deal neither with the relation between the self and the outside world, nor with conflicts within the self. The "language of eyes" is rejected not just because it represents an alien culture — even within the family the act of looking becomes suspect if it threatens to convey any consciousness which might be disturbing to family unity: "even a glance, if it is not matter of fact, is a betrayal" (59). Hence the calmness and perfect trust of family life must depend partly on the suppression of undesirable knowledge. Naomi idealizes a childhood self inseparable from the mother when she asserts, "There is nothing about me that my mother does not know, nothing that

is not safe to tell" (60), but immediately contradicts this by telling of her seduction by Old Man Gower. Of course, a child would naturally be reluctant to talk about this experience, but for Naomi disclosure is inconceivable, and thus her secret experience results in a deep sense of self-division and separation from the mother, manifested in nightmares of dismemberment.

Later Obasan and Uncle deliberately suppress knowledge that might link a disturbing past to the present when, "for the sake of the children" (219), they decide not to tell Naomi and Stephen why their mother has never communicated from Japan. Also, it appears that Naomi is never clearly informed of her father's death. The language "in the belly" is put in a negative context when, years later, she tries to mention her father's death in a matter-of-fact way and then collapses "with a sharp pain in my abdomen" (211). Internalization of pain and anger that cannot be acknowledged finds expression in a particularly gruesome image when Naomi imagines Aunt Emily, with her "insistence on knowing all," as a surgeon cutting growths from her abdomen (194). The silence that seemed ideal in childhood becomes pathological for the adult.

In the disruptions of the internment, Naomi increasingly experiences as a burden the ethic behind the silent language, though she continues to identify with it. When their grandparents are taken away in Slocan the children must imitate the stoicism of Momotaro's grandparents: "We will make the way smooth by restraining emotion" (128). The need to find verbal expression for the pain of separation is equated with selfishness: "To try to meet one's own needs in spite of the wishes of others is to be 'wagamama' — selfish and inconsiderate" (128). Here Naomi does her best, but begins to find the traditional ethic less satisfactory as the world of the extended family breaks up: "It is such a tangle trying to decipher the needs and intents of others" (128).<sup>6</sup> Only in the present, nearing the conclusion of her narrative, does Naomi openly express a desire to rebel against the "decorum" required by the language of silence: "I want to break loose from the heavy identity. . . . I am tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum, unable to shout or sing or dance, unable to scream or swear, unable to laugh, unable to breathe out loud" (183). Here Naomi's sense of psychic crippling is related to a taboo against expressing anger, imposed by the family culture which is also her childhood ideal.

In addition to her anger at Canadian society and government, Naomi struggles with a hidden ambivalence towards the traditional values of the family life from which she seeks to draw a sense of identity. The peculiar intensity of this conflict is also the result of the internment. Disruption of her natural emergence into Canadian society has pushed her back towards the values of the Issei, which she now attempts to re-evaluate under Emily's provocation. Early in her narrative, when she is still siding with Uncle and Obasan against Emily, Naomi defends the ethic of self-restraint in a manner so ambiguous that her dissatisfaction with it is already

evident. Accusing Emily of being one of those indecorous people “who talk a lot about their victimization” in order to “use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind,” Naomi concludes: “From my years of teaching I know it’s the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain” (34). Is this not an acknowledgement that talking is the cure, and that Naomi feels herself to be a child “in trouble”?

THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN AN INNER WORLD of silent warmth and a cold, threatening outer world finds expression in a central contrast in the imagery of the novel: the opposition between protecting and fertile combinations of earth and water, and the empty, hostile sky. Naomi compares the Japanese Canadians to plants torn up or trees cut down. They are represented as seeking safety in undergrowth, tunnels, or “a door on the forest floor” (151). The prairies are a dry land but may be rendered fertile by underground water, while Naomi associates her childhood with the rain forest and ocean of the west coast. A former fisherman, her uncle dreams of returning to the sea. Burrowing into the earth represents a regressive fixation on an ideal past as well as fear of the outer world. Naomi imagines her uncle’s state of mind just before death: “Had the world turned upside down? Perhaps everything was reversing rapidly and he was tunnelling backwards top to bottom, his feet in an upstairs attic of humus and memory, his hands groping down . . . to the water, down to the underground sea” (14).

Naomi adds a personal longing to the nostalgia of the Issei when she asks, in this fantasy, whether Uncle manages “to swim full circle back to that other shore and his mother’s arms, her round moon face glowing down at her firstborn?” (14). We hear nothing of Uncle’s childhood — this “moon face” must belong to Naomi’s ideally “yasashi” mother, lost forever in Japan.<sup>7</sup> Again, nostalgia as well as exile is suggested when Naomi describes her people as plants uprooted and planted upside down, with their roots exposed to the prairie wind (189, 226). The Issei aunt and uncle, and Naomi as well, bear the double burden of being immigrants in a strange land, and exiles from the community which might have provided a sense of home in that land.

Naomi’s dislike for the open sky of the prairies could be taken simply as hostility towards her land of exile. Eventually the winter sky over the beet farm becomes associated with a sense of strangled development in the midst of her adolescence. The devastating physical hardship of Alberta, especially after years in the closed community of Slocan, constitutes the most damaging aspect of Naomi’s experience, and the centre of her resistance to Emily’s injunction to remember: “There are some nightmares from which there is no waking. . . . my late childhood growing-up days are sleepwalk years. . . . The sadness and absence are like a long winter storm.



... Something dead is happening" (194, 200) — a sense of frozen process reflected in Naomi's present state of "perpetual tense."

The forced dispersal of the Japanese Canadian community after the war, which sent the family to forced labour in Alberta, was the most unjust and gratuitous aspect of the Canadian government's attack on Naomi's community.<sup>8</sup> In addition to negative personal associations, the open sky of the prairies comes to stand for the public world of a country whose government is represented as a series of hawks hunting the Japanese Canadians: "one hawk after another circles overhead till the chickens are unable to come out of hiding. . . . The seasons pass and the leghorns no longer lay eggs. The nests are fouled and crawl with lice" (189) — cultural continuity fails in an unhealthy enclosure imposed by fear of a hostile outer world.

Yet there is one benevolent influence in the sky — as a reward for her mastery of political discourse, Naomi consigns Aunt Emily to the upper air: "Love no doubt is in her. Love, like the coulee wind, rushing through her mind. . . . She never stays still long enough to hear the sound of her own voice" (8). Just before she opens the diary, Naomi describes Emily as a pilot in a fog, looking in vain for a landing place on a "safe and sane strip of justice and reason. Not seeing these, she did not crash into the oblivion of either bitterness or futility but remained airborne" (79). Since Naomi has little confidence that this airport will be found, the only cure for the dichotomy of earth and sky would be upward growth from Naomi's earthbound world. (The caring woman, bound by domestic ties, is also located in the earth and the house.) This growth occurs decisively in a series of images which transform the mother from a dead tree into a living forest in chapter 38 — Naomi's meditation after learning the fate of her mother in Japan.

In this chapter the emotional turbulence generated by Naomi's ambivalence towards the female ideal represented by Obasan and, especially, the memory of her mother, finds a climax and a resolution. In the case of her mother, this ambivalence is complicated by the mother's departure for Japan when Naomi was five years old and had been seduced by a neighbour. Any child might feel resentment at her mother's disappearance, but Naomi, burdened with secret guilt, might also imagine that her mother had rejected her because she had done something bad.<sup>9</sup> Naomi's later discovery that her mother was alive in Japan after the war, along with the fact that the mother had never attempted to communicate with her, reinforces her sense of abandonment to the point where the mystery of the mother's fate becomes a persistent obsession. This ambivalence is concealed behind the image of the ideal mother of infancy, and Naomi's fixation on this image binds her to the traditional image of woman as represented by the mother and Obasan. The translation of her mother's letters from Japan enables Naomi to relate to her mother as an adult in a loving but also critical way, and thus she can affirm her allegiance to the "tender heart" while moving beyond the "silence" this ideal imposes on her in its traditional form. The account of the mother's fate provided by the letters

enables Naomi to interpret her failure to communicate as a loving silence rather than the silence of rejection. At the same time as Naomi gains a new sense of relation to her mother, however, she also places the mother's silence in a critical perspective and thus distinguishes her own consciousness from her mother's traditional values.

This change in her sense of relation to her mother is accompanied by complex changes in a central image associated with her attitude towards her mother in early childhood. The warmth and security of Naomi's early relation to her mother and the communal world she represents are repeatedly symbolized by the image of the mother as a tree, beginning with the peach tree associated with the mother's telling of the story of Momotaro (54-55) and the photo Obasan presents showing Naomi at the age of two or three clinging to her mother's leg (46); here Naomi sees the mother as a tree from which the child is growing as a branch, an extension of the mother both in body and consciousness: "Where she is rooted, I am rooted. . . . The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts" (64). Because of the disappearance of her mother and the disruption of her family life, however, Naomi's relation to her mother fails to develop as she grows older; the tree image also comes to represent her fixation on the ideal mother of childhood, by whom she now feels abandoned. After the mother's departure the tree becomes ambivalent: just before the internment Naomi becomes frightened of the peach tree (80), and in Slocan she has a nightmare in which the mother appears as a tree which deserts the child (167). Finally, the failure of the childhood image of the mother to give her strength is represented by the change of the living maternal tree of the photo into a dead tree on the prairie.<sup>10</sup>

In the final paragraphs of chapter 38 (243) Naomi re-emphasizes the image, derived from the photo, of mother and child as tree and branch, and then moves to an image of herself as a crippled child sitting beside a dead tree: "The tree is a dead tree in the middle of the prairies. I sit on its roots still as a stone." Her paralysis is linked to her inability to communicate with the childhood, "yasashi" image of the mother in the photo: "The child is forever unable to speak. . . . I beg that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs may learn to dance. But you stay in a black and white photograph, smiling your yasashi smile." Then, with a sudden change of tone, Naomi addresses her mother as an adult, rejecting the code of silence for both of them — "we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" — to finish with an image of a forest growing out of the graves of her family: "But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves. . . . [W]e have come to the forest tonight . . . you turn to earth and form the forest floor" (243, 246). The conversion of a single tree into a forest suggests that she has found a new relationship to the outside world as well as to her mother, while the fact that this forest

grows from graves suggests that she has accepted the permanent loss of relatives and community.

This sense of resolution is preceded by a violent image which combines the pain both of excessive attachment and separation. In a variant of the tree image, Naomi sometimes thinks of her mother as a maypole around which the child dances holding a ribbon attached to the pole — suggested by the streamers held both by the passengers on the ship which will take her mother to Japan and by the relatives on the dock (66-67, 167). Towards the end of chapter 38 this image becomes the self-mutilating Sun Dance of the Sioux warriors, in which thongs attached to a pole were hooked into the chest muscles, then torn out as the initiate danced backwards: “Maypole Mother, I dance with a paper streamer in my hand. But the words of the May Day song are words of distress. The unknown is a hook that pierces the bone. Thongs hang down in the hot prairie air. Silence attends the long sun dance” (242).<sup>11</sup>

The pain of acknowledging physical separation from the mother frees Naomi to exist independently in the outside world, associated with the hostile emptiness of the prairie. As she imagines the mother as an adult, irreparably separated from her in a loving but mistaken silence, Naomi also experiences herself as an adult, freed from fixation on the ideal mother of childhood: “I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child that I can know your presence though you are not here” (243). By internalizing the family life of her childhood in a more mature way, Naomi can draw on the sense of self-worth that she found there, while moving beyond the limitations imposed by its language of silence. Thus the vanished mother becomes the focal point for an arrested, and finally completed, process of mourning for the whole communal world of her childhood.

The image of the forest, further developed in the next chapter, also indicates a new sense of identification with Canada. Naomi’s first genuine sense of Canadian identity appears in a burst of anger in which she reproaches Canada as “a cold country”: “Oh Canada, whether it is admitted or not, we come from you we come from you. From the same soil, the slugs and slime and bogs and twigs and roots” (226). After recovering her past, she is able to end with a warmer image of trees growing around the graves of her lost relatives (243, 246).

In her grandmother’s description of the bombing of Nagasaki, Naomi finds the ultimate form of death inflicted from the sky and destruction of community — a much more visible example of racist atrocity than the hypocritical policies of the Canadian government. The grandmother’s account of nuclear horror makes possible a release of inner rage which Naomi has never been able fully to acknowledge in relation to her own experience. In confronting the “catastrophes . . . possible in human affairs” (234) and the fragmentation of time implied in the letter’s long journey to reach her, Naomi enters the public world of injustice, genocide, and

isolation which until now has been the exclusive domain of Aunt Emily. This enlarging of Naomi's vision prevents the final resolution from becoming sentimental — otherwise all too possible for a narrator of such "tender heart."

Whether or not Emily will be successful in her political project, the fact that Naomi has become able to acknowledge the validity of Emily's concerns indicates that Emily has succeeded in establishing a parental relation with her Sansei niece.<sup>12</sup> In moving towards resolution, Naomi responds to two disturbing voices which represent different aspects of female strength — to Emily's polemic is added the "outpouring" of Grandma Kato, the most tough-minded of the traditional women, who breaks the code of silence to send her husband in Toronto "the burden of these words" (236). Naomi's final sense of wholeness arises from her ability to reconcile Emily's Nisei activism with a traditional concept of woman inherited from the Issei, thus showing that the preceding generations can become a source of strength despite her isolation and the disruption of her community. It is on this sense of progressive change within continuity that the final affirmation of the novel depends.

THE REMARKABLE FUSION of historical and psychological time in *Obasan* is facilitated by a clear distinction between the attitudes of the different generations towards the past, the public world, and the role of woman. Thus the history of the community is implicit in the various kinds of discourse with which the characters signify these attitudes. Uncle and Obasan are entirely oriented towards an idealized past, while Emily represents her generation's orientation towards a delayed future, only now she demands that the future acknowledge the unjust past which thwarted the aspirations of the Nisei. Uncle and Obasan represent conventional acceptance, Emily the revolt against tradition of the activists of her generation. If the Issei idealize their homeland, or family life in Vancouver before the internment, she is still looking for the ideal Canada which the Nisei longed to join. The image of the circling airplane suggests that since leaving Vancouver she has never found a new community. In her initial arguments with Aunt Emily, Naomi claims to have no interest in the past, but the images of the ideal mother with which her memories begin show that she is far more attached than Emily to the past and its values. This can be an advantage as well as a vulnerability, because once she deals with her own past Naomi will be in a position to appreciate the strengths of both generations.

Although Naomi at first rejects Emily's angry discourse, we cannot fully understand the changing dynamic of Naomi's memory unless we realize that within the "sealed vault" guarded by the "cold icon" of a decorous silence (proem) lies a profound if wordless anger. Naomi's identification with the "yasashi" ideal of

woman should not blind us to the bitter sense of injury which gradually rises in her narrative, reaching a climax with her permanent exile in Alberta. The gentle underground stream of the proem and the first chapter changes to a torrent of anger and grief: "I must . . . release the flood gates one by one" (198).

Finally the "outpouring" of pain and implied anger in Grandma Kato's letter provides a public object for indignation, while the hideous physical injuries it describes correspond to Naomi's sense of an inner injury which has resulted in psychic crippling. Near the beginning of her narrative Naomi sees Emily as crusading to bring medicine to all injuries inflicted by injustice — "wounds seen and not seen" (34). Actually, Naomi knows more than Emily about unseen wounds and the difficulty of healing them. Beginning with her stay in hospital in Slokan, Naomi increasingly represents her sense of psychic injury through grotesque imagery involving crippling, head injuries, and growths which must be cut away.

The universal destruction and maiming revealed in the letter provides an objective correlative to Naomi's repressed feelings — a graphic physical wounding which corresponds to her sense of inner injury. The wounds "not seen" may be almost as damaging as the wounds made horribly visible in the letter. Because of war and racism the mother suffers physical disfigurement in Japan, her daughter a more subtle kind of psychic disfigurement in Canada. The mother's feeling that disfigurement is a disgrace which renders her unfit for family life represents a conventional Japanese response to nuclear injuries, while Naomi's acknowledgement of her psychological injuries enables her to regain her family life in memory and to establish a strongly felt if angry identity as a Canadian.<sup>13</sup> In her narrative she discovers a capacity for self-expression and communication with others which is necessary for psychic survival in a culturally fragmented world where the individual may be isolated and cut off from the past.

Naomi's narrative could be seen as a synthesis of two opposing kinds of discourse present in her situation as she begins to remember.<sup>14</sup> As she ponders Emily's documents in the silence of Obasan's house, Naomi has already responded to the silent discourse implicit in the accumulation of carefully preserved objects which makes the house a filing cabinet of the family's past. Naomi praises her aunt as the characteristic "old woman" who preserves the past — "the bearer of keys to unknown doorways. . . . the possessor of life's infinite personal details" (15-16) — but here the doorways remain unknown because Obasan refuses to supply any narrative which could link these objects to the present. Rather, she insists that all her objects be viewed in the timeless togetherness of a family photo album; in response to Naomi's interest in the family group-photo, Obasan says only, "'Such a time there was once'" (20). When Naomi asks about some sheets of paper covered with Japanese writing (the grandmother's letters) Obasan deliberately suppresses narrative in favour of image when in reply she brings Naomi the photo of herself as a child clutching her mother's leg and insists, "'Here is the best letter. This is the

best time. These are the best memories'" (46). Meanwhile, Naomi's memories of the family past remain as depressing and incoherent as the spider webs and shredded blanket in Obasan's attic (25-26).

Emily's polemical view of the past, on the other hand, does not at first reveal to Naomi any concrete reason why, as she thinks early in the novel, "Crimes of history" should not "stay in history" (41). Naomi and her two aunts represent three different ways of dealing with the past: Emily seeks to research historical fact and to publicize moral issues arising from it; Obasan preserves the past in objects but uses these only to reinforce a narrativeless ideal of family unity; making use of the material supplied by both aunts, Naomi, in her day in the silent house, relives the past in a narrative both poetic and factual, establishing a conscious relation to the past while freeing herself from the secret burden it imposed.

In response to Emily's exhortation to remember and the associations aroused by Obasan's file of objects, Naomi discovers a "living language" which can give a narrative to the family photographs, revealing the full depth of her psychic injury while animating the "infinite personal details" of family life still contained in Obasan's house. Through a loving disclosure of family life which ruthlessly violates all the taboos of silence, Naomi revives the living content of the silence with which her community endured injustice, thus finding a speech within silence (228). Naomi also resolves the conflict between her identification both with Emily and with the traditional "yasashi" concept of woman through a narrative in which sympathy becomes a mode of vision, including her understanding of Emily, yet which also expresses a deep anger, perhaps even deeper than is openly admitted.

IN CONCLUSION, I should like to review the history of Naomi's development and to consider some implications of her changing relation with Emily. Naomi begins with an apparent acceptance of her present world and a professed lack of interest in her past as a Japanese Canadian. In fact, however, she is ill at ease with herself in the present while, in her resistance to Emily, remaining loyal to the most conservative values of her former community. Her ideally communal childhood, repressed from conscious memory because of its contrast to later experience, continues to influence her identity, blocking acknowledgement of the pain and anger caused by her brutal separation from it. A period of intense recall enables Naomi to relive her past while retaining an adult perspective informed by Emily's documents and advice. While much of the past returns readily, the emotional impact of her most painful and ambivalent experiences finds expression only in symbolic terms; to complete her task she must confront a layer of grotesque images involving inner wounding, dismemberment, conflict between inner and outer reality, and between ideal togetherness and self-mutilating separa-

tion. The final transformation of these into images of a growing forest suggests a new sense of rootedness in that hostile outer world which Emily has forced her to acknowledge, but where Emily herself never seems to have found a landing place.

Since Naomi has experienced the full impact of the internment and dispersal in her formative years, she can render in personal detail a period which Emily — aside from her diary — presents in moral abstractions; thus Naomi reinforces Emily's argument by showing that the psychological consequences of this experience extend into the present. The depth and convincingness with which Naomi's inner conflicts are presented provide the basis for an intensely personal narrative which can assimilate the objective, historical elements presented by Emily. The novel emphasizes a fracture between inner and outer worlds as a central problem for Naomi and her community, but also suggests a resolution in the very effectiveness with which it combines historical and subjective reality.

The difference in discourse between Emily and Naomi also suggests a conflict between the literary and political consciousness. Naomi's awareness of the connotative value of words, which makes possible the poetic aspects of the novel, also provides a part of the motivation for her resistance to Emily and the purely political world her discourse implies. Emily's rapid-fire, exhortatory and rather indiscriminate use of language suggests a lack of sensitivity to the subjective self: "she never stays still long enough to hear the sound of her own voice (8) . . . from the moment we met, I was caught in the rush-hour traffic jam of her non-stop conference talk" (32). As she begins to appreciate Emily's values, however, Naomi moves towards a vision where the public and private life — political activism and poetic sensibility — are no longer irrelevant to each other. Naomi remains sceptical of the effectiveness of her aunt's activities, but in her painful sense of growing from Canadian soil she affirms Emily's assertion that "We are the country."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some recently published, pioneering studies of *Obasan* define essential aspects of the novel but also reveal the difficulty of doing justice, within any one critical perspective, to Kogawa's combination of historical-political discourse and fictional narrative. Erika Gottlieb — "The Riddle of Concentric Worlds in *Obasan*," *Canadian Literature*, 109 (Summer 1986), 34-53 — makes a comprehensive study of style and imagery, finding in the novel's conclusion an affirmation of a "transcendental love in the cosmos" related to Buddhism (48). A. Lynne Magnusson, in an approach based on the psychology of Jacques Lacan, discusses Naomi's creative "fall" into language from a "pre-linguistic paradise" (66) — "Language and Longing in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," *Canadian Literature*, 116 (Spring 1988), 58-66. In a comparison of *Obasan* and Anne Hébert's *Les fous de Bassan*, P. Merivale interprets the novel as a lament for a lost community, emphasizing its effectiveness as elegy — "Framed Voices: The Polyphonic Elegies of Hébert and Kogawa," *Canadian Literature*, 116 (Spring 1988), 68-82. I agree with many points in these interpretations, but all of them tend to some extent to emphasize the novel's literary qualities at the expense of its politics. Marilyn Russell Rose does justice to Kogawa's political intent

in an essay which discusses the novel's successful blending of the rhetorical strategies of history, documentary, and fiction — "Politics into Art: Kogawa's *Obasan* and the Rhetoric of Fiction," *Mosaic*, 21/2-3 (Spring 1988), 215-26. My object in the present essay is to show how the history of Naomi's community is re-enacted in her inner conflicts and her attitudes towards others. I will argue that Kogawa gives unity to her novel through a successful combination of history and politics with psychological fiction, thus making her novel's intent as political protest an integral part of its literary coherence.

<sup>2</sup> Gottlieb errs in making Naomi a Nisei (second generation) (35). Naomi is a Sansei (third generation) because both her parents were Nisei, born in Canada (*Obasan*, 7 and 47). Her mother was partly brought up in Japan and hence shared some cultural traits with the Issei (first generation), but her father had entered fully into Canadian culture (*Obasan*, 47). Naomi's grandparents and Uncle Isamu and Obasan are Issei, her parents and Aunt Emily are Nisei, and Naomi and Stephen are Sansei.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), 158. My sense of the conflict between Issei and Nisei is based largely on Adachi's book, especially chapter 7 ("Generations"). In her dislike for her physical appearance and her feeling that life has passed her by, Naomi, though a Sansei, displays some of the psychological problems that Adachi attributes to the young Nisei (169-71).

The spirit of Nisei idealism can be found in Roy Miki's edition of the writings of Muriel Kitagawa: *This is My Own: Letters to Wes & Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941-48*, ed. Roy Miki (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1985). Kitagawa's writings provided Joy Kogawa with a source for the manuscripts of Aunt Emily and may have helped her in creating for Emily a style very different from Naomi's narrative. (Naomi seems to have an affinity with Kogawa's sensibility as poet.)

<sup>4</sup> Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (1981; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 31-32.

<sup>5</sup> *Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1954) gives the following range of English equivalents for "yasashi": "gentle; tender; soft; meek; graceful; delicate; affectionate; sweet; mild-mannered; kind-hearted; suave; quiet; amiable." Thus Mother's "fragile" and "delicate" beauty seems appropriate to a woman who is ideally "yasashi" — as opposed to Emily's "stocky build."

<sup>6</sup> Magnusson argues that Naomi found the traditional code of behaviour ideal with her mother but less so in Slokan because in early childhood the code "served the narcissism of the child, before any differentiation of the self and the other emerged to constitute the required behaviour as self-denial" (64). I would suggest that the problem here is not so much self-denial as that the internment has disrupted the communal world in which the code effectively defined the relation between self and other. In forbidding Naomi to express or acknowledge her sense of loss, the code denies the needs of the self but no longer provide a supportive community.

<sup>7</sup> Merivale notes that the quest of Naomi's uncle, as defined here, becomes "an emblem for hers" (79).

<sup>8</sup> When the war ended, the U.S. government assisted interned Japanese-Americans to resettle on the west coast, while the government of Canada maintained all the wartime regulations, including exclusion from the west coast and restrictions on employment and place of residence, until March 31, 1949 — see Adachi, ch. 14, and Ann Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1981), ch. 7. The forced dispersal after the war was a deliberate attempt by Mackenzie King to destroy the Japanese Canadian community and, unsuccessfully, to win votes by



placating a bigotry in British Columbia which he overestimated (Adachi, 335; Sunahara, 149-50). Sunahara notes the widespread influence, even among liberal-minded sympathizers and the Japanese Canadians themselves, of the "assimilationist" belief that racism is caused mainly by the tendency of ethnic groups to gather in communities. After the war the Japanese Canadians were forced to move east of the Rockies, not allowed to live near each other, discouraged from social contact, and influenced to forget their cultural heritage and devote themselves to assimilating into Anglo-Saxon culture (Sunahara, 131-33; 142-45).

In this context, it is significant that the worst of Naomi's experience begins after the war, with the family's forced relocation to Alberta. At the beginning of her narrative, Naomi's rejection of the past is the result of forced assimilation. She can only establish conscious contact with the different role-models her community provided through a prolonged struggle with memory.

<sup>9</sup> This possibility is lucidly explained by Erika Gottlieb (46-47).

<sup>10</sup> In his discussion of the significance of the tree Cinderella plants on her mother's grave in the German version of the story, and related imagery of death and rebirth in folk tales, Bruno Bettelheim argues that the tree represents the child's need to internalize a symbol of the mother as a replacement for the sense of physical proximity needed in early childhood. Bettelheim distinguishes two stages of this process of internalization which enables the child to gain independence from the immediate relation to the parent. The first involves the "basic trust" granted by a good early childhood, but the inner image of the parent must continue to develop as the child matures: it is not enough "simply to retain the internalized image of the mother of a past period. . . . As the child grows up, this internalized mother must undergo changes, too, as he does" (*The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976], 259). In Naomi's case, the death and rebirth of the tree could represent a partial failure and finally a completion of this process.

<sup>11</sup> The Sun Dance is described by Erik Erikson in *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963), 147-49. Erikson links this ceremony to the loss of the "paradise of orality" and suggests that the injury to the chest may represent the turning against the self of an anger originally directed at the mother as an inadequate nourisher. Such imagery could be relevant to Naomi's ambivalence towards the lost mother, who, she feels, abandoned her.

<sup>12</sup> Magnusson notes that when Naomi revisits the coulee in the final scene she wears Emily's coat, suggesting an acceptance of her aunt's world (66).

<sup>13</sup> In his detailed account of the psychological effects of the bomb, Robert Jay Lifton describes the sense of shame and inferiority experienced by the survivors, and especially by disfigured women, "in a culture which places such great stress upon aesthetic presentation and 'appearance' in every sense" (*Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* [New York: Basic Books, 1967], 174-77).

<sup>14</sup> Merivale observes that the "seemingly incompatible voices" of Obasan and Emily are essential to Naomi's "eventual synthesis of herself, which is also her novel" (70). I would add that Obasan's presence consists not so much of a "voice" as an attitude towards the past manifested in her love for her family objects and her refusal to tell their stories.

