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Secrets, Silence and Family Narrative:

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*

By Jennifer Denomy

Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

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Acknowledgments

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Silence, Secrets and Family Narratives:

Joy Kogawa's Obasan and Sky Lee's Disappearing Moon Cafe

Both Joy Kogawa's Naomi Nakane and Sky Lee's Kae Ying Woo attempt to overcome silence and secrecy in order to reconstruct their families' histories, particularly their matrilinear histories. Their task is problematic: Naomi has no mother, and Kae has too many maternal figures battling for control. Both narrators approach their texts (and their searches for identity) with a degree of ambivalence. In Obasan, Naomi's uncertainty over the family identity she attempts to uncover manifests itself in the silences which pervade the text. Over the course of the novel, she pushes aside silence, in the process giving rise to two problematic issues at the work's centre: first, the adult Naomi who narrates must re-enter the experiences of her younger, silenced self; secondly, Naomi must overcome an oppressive silence in order to tell a story both centred around and driven by silence.

Whereas Naomi is reluctant to delve into her history, Kae is eager to recover what has been hidden from her. Instead of the numerous silences which pervade Obasan, Kae's growing ambivalence surfaces as narrative unreliability. Disappearing Moon Cafe is strongly mediated by Kae, who acknowledges the extent to which her authority is problematic; in reconstructing her past, she often reinvents it as well.

This paper explores the parallels between Naomi's and Kae's searches for family, and the ways in which similar journeys find radically different narrative expression. While the text of Obasan resists the tendency to inscribe the silences of its family narrative, Disappearing Moon Cafe battles its desire to fill in the blanks, to romanticize and invent.

Silence, Secrets, et Narrations en Famille:

Obasan de Joy Kogawa et Disappearing Moon Cafe de Sky Lee

Toutes les deux, Naomi Nakane de Joy Kogawa et Kae Ying Woo de Sky Lee tâchent de surmonter les secrets et le silence en vue de reconstruire l'histoire de leurs familles, accordant une considération particulière à l'histoire matrilinéaire. Un effort problématique: Naomi n'a pas de mère, et Kae doit confronter trop de personnages maternelles rivalisantes pour le contrôle. Tant Joy Kogawa que Sky Lee démontrent un certain dégré d'ambivalence dans leur traitement du thème, de même que dans leur quête d'identité. Dans Obasan, l'incertitude de Naomi envers l'identité de sa famille qu'elle essaye d'établir, se manifeste dans les silences dont son texte est empiété. Au cours du déroulement entier du roman, Naomi pousse loin d'elle le silence, donnant lieu à une double problématique centrale à son oeuvre: d'abord, d'adulte, elle doit s'enfoncer de nouveau dans les expériences de son soi muet, silencieux de sa jeunesse, et ensuite elle doit triompher d'un silence oppresif à fin de narrer une histoire dont le silence est le thème central et la force motrice à la fois.

Pendant que Naomi se répugne à la perspective de son histoire, Kae de l'autre côté se montre ardente de découvrir ce que lui a été caché. Au lieu de cette multitude de silences qui envahissent Obasan, l'accroissement d'ambivalence chez Kae remonte à la surface en forme de narration peu fiable. Tout en reconnaisant l'envergure de la dichotomie de son autorité, dans Disappearing Moon Cafe elle s'interpose à un dégré considérable, et ainsi la reconstruction de son passé souvent devient la réinvention.

Ce travail se pose comme but l'exploration de parallèlisme entre la quête de Naomi et de Kae, comme de la manière de laquelle ces deux quêtes similaires trouvent une expression narrative radicalement différente. Tandis que dans Obasan on remarque dans le texte une résistance à la tendance d'inscrire

les silences liés à la narration d'une histoire de famille, le texte de Disappearing Moon Cafe se bat contre le désir de remplir les espaces vides, et contre le penchant vers le romanticisme et la réinvention.

Introduction: Mothering Stories

By examining Joy Kogawa's Obasan and Sky Lee's Disappearing Moon Cafe, I will identify and analyze the processes by which the narrators gather and reveal their families' often unhappy histories. Both Joy Kogawa's Naomi Nakane and Sky Lee's Kae Ying Woo contextualize themselves, in terms of race and gender, by reconstructing their family identities, concentrating on the matrilineal side. In her article "Japanese Canadian Women's Life Stories," Shirley Geok-lin Lim states that, through her narrator, Kogawa "deliberately rewrites a body of communal stories" (291), namely the internment and dispersal of Japanese Canadians during World War II. Lim's description is equally applicable to Sky Lee's Disappearing Moon Cafe, a circular and fluid narrative which, like Obasan, tells and retells the stories of an immigrant family, this one Chinese, in an attempt to come to terms with racialized and gendered identity. But I argue that this process begins with the reconstruction of family history, and specifically of matrilinear history.

As Winfried Siemerling has observed, ethnic identity is passed on by the family unit, particularly by the mother. Because the mother usually stays at home, while the father often has access to another language and culture through his job, she is the primary force of acculturation for the children, and therefore teaches them her mother tongue (161). This model is challenged for both narrators: Naomi has no mother (when Naomi was four years old, her mother disappeared, and she was raised by her very traditional Issei aunt, the Obasan of the title[1]) and Kae has too many mother figures struggling for control. Naomi's

uncertainty over the family identity she is attempting to uncover, and further, the extent of her desire to clarify that knowledge, manifests itself in the silence which pervades the text. Though she is desperate to learn of her mother's fate, she is also afraid to break through the secrecy which has been imposed over her family's past. Over the course of the novel, Naomi slowly draws back the silence which she (and her family) has imposed over the past, excavating her long-buried memories to reconstruct her family's history. This process gives rise to two problematic issues central to Obasan, paradoxes which critics have acknowledged, but not sufficiently resolved: first, the adult Naomi in the novel's present attempts to narrate the experiences of her younger, silenced self; secondly, Naomi must broach a barrier of silence in order to tell a story both centred around and driven by silence. In effect, she attempts to speak silence.

Whereas Naomi is initially reluctant to disrupt the shield of silence surrounding her family narrative, Kae is eager to delve into the secrets which have accumulated over the preceding generations. Instead of the numerous silences that pervade Obasan, Kae's growing ambivalence and confusion over her racial and familial identity surfaces as narrative unreliability. Kae creates a series of contending, occasionally contradictory accounts, none of which can be traced back to a single, identifiable source. The narrative is overtly mediated by Kae, who eventually acknowledges that her authority is problematic; in retrieving her past, she often reinvents it as well.

In this paper, I will explore the parallels between Naomi's and Kae's searches for family by articulating and analyzing the considerable thematic similarities between Obasan and Disappearing Moon Cafe (and, to

a lesser extent, Itsuka[2]). At the same time, I will explore how similar journeys find narrative expression in radically different ways: while the text of Obasan resists its tendency to inscribe (and thereby fall victim to) the silences of the family narrative, Disappearing Moon Cafe battles its tendency to fill in the blanks, to romanticize and invent the family narrative. The ramifications of problematic issues of racial and gender identity manifest themselves as textual problems within the narrative (whereas, in Kogawa's Obasan, they manifest themselves in thematic terms). Silences and contradictions abound.

Many of these issues are highlighted by comparisons with other works by writers of Japanese and Chinese descent, particularly Maxine Hong Kingston, whose The Woman Warrior recounts her struggle to come to terms with her Chinese heritage and her American surroundings. Like Kae, Kingston's narrator is searching for the truth behind events which her family has shrouded in secrecy; like Obasan, The Woman Warrior traces the process of overcoming debilitating silence, and finding narrative voice.

The existing body of criticism on Obasan and Disappearing Moon Cafe consists largely of reviews (summaries), with only a few analytical essay-length studies. Most critical work on Obasan focusses on the subject matter, approaching it in one of two ways: as a work of historiographic metafiction, to use Linda Hutcheon's term (Canadian Postmodern 64-8; Narcissistic Narrative 41-2), in which case the novel is perceived to interrogate the construction of both fiction and history (Russell Rose, St. Andrews and Willis); as a cultural document, in which case the work is seen to explore the generational relations within an immigrant community and emphasizes the importance of ethnic heritage in self-exploration (Fujita, Gottlieb and Harris). Critical work by Marilyn

Russell Rose, B. A. St. Andrews and Gary Willis falls into the former category, while Gayle Fujita, Erika Gottlieb and Mason Harris follow the latter approach. Manina Jones and Shirley Geok-lin Lim have focussed on the process of narration rather than the problematics of what is narrated. Lim's exploration of Asian American women's texts is expanded in Jones's article, which deals with issues of authority, collective history and subjectivity. Taken together, these analyses account for many of the text's problematic issues; however, the connection between these issues, particularly with regards to the paradoxical nature of Naomi's attempts to narrate silence, remain largely unexplored.

The existing criticism on Disappearing Moon Cafe is even more sparse, and is similarly dominated by descriptive reviews. Two notable exceptions are Di Brandt's structural analysis and Graham Huggan's work on the connection between the romance genre and geneaology. Both of these critics agree that much of the narrative unreliability in Lee's work results from and reflects Kae's difficulty in coming to terms with her family's turbulent history. Brandt broaches issues of narrative process and racial construction, and offers a strong analysis of the trope of incest which pervades the work. She does not, however, link the complications caused by this incest with the complicity of generations of women, nor with the complexity of Kae's narrative--links which, I believe, need to be made. Huggan's genre study provides valuable insight into Disappearing Moon Cafe, particularly with regards to Lee's subversive use of chronology, but his analysis, too, falls short of sufficiently accounting for the difficulties in Lee's text, and is flawed by textual inaccuracies.

My project explores the fictionalized creation of racial and gender identity, filling in a critical gap in the existing commentary surrounding the two novels. Specifically, I explore the role of silence and secrecy, on both a thematic and technical level, and I trace Naomi and Kae's recovery and articulation of matrilinear history as a vehicle for their journeys through silence to knowledge and speech.

Notes to Introduction

[1] In immigrant communities, a generation is a measure of the distance between the present and the cultural past, a measure of the extent to which an individual identifies with a group or groups; the first, second and third generations constitute critical stages in the adjustment to the adopted culture. Overseas Japanese recognize the importance of these generations by giving each special designation: "Issei" (literally, first generation) are immigrants from Japan; "Nisei" (second generation) are children of the Issei; and "Sansei" (third generation) are children of the Nisei. Erika Gottlieb incorrectly identifies Naomi as a Nisei (35). She is actually a Sansei, by virtue of her Nisei parents, both of whom were born in Canada (Obasan 7, 35); she and Stephen were raised by their very traditional Issei aunt, Obasan, when their parents "were disappeared."

[2] Itsuka, published in 1992, is ostensibly a sequel to Obasan, following its precursor both thematically and chronologically. However, the process of healing through remembrance which began for Naomi in the first work prompts her to revisit in Itsuka many memories first described or alluded to in Obasan. Thus, I have incorporated material from Itsuka, using it to illustrate or reinforce the discussion of themes central to Obasan.

> The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy.
>
> Of Woman Born
> Adrienne Rich

A highly personal narrative directed against silence imposed by family, society, and self-imposed forgetfulness, Joy Kogawa's Obasan tells a story of loss and recovery and specifically, of female loss and recovery. Naomi Nakane, the novel's protagonist, begins her narrative to tackle the latter, as a way of accessing a painful personal history which she has attempted to bury. This is not a project undertaken wholly voluntarily; for years, her Aunt Emily has pushed her to delve into her past, but it is finally her Uncle Isamu's death which precipitates her exploration of memories long buried--the loss of her home in Vancouver, separation from her father and grandparents, and most devastating of all, the disappearance of her mother. Naomi has spent most of her life suspended between remembering and forgetting; at thirty-six, she still does not know what happened to her mother. But in the three days before her uncle's funeral, she pushes aside the silences which have dominated her life. She addresses both internally and externally imposed silences in her prologue when she describes "a silence that cannot speak" and "a silence that will not speak" (preceding 1). Except for Emily, who insists upon speaking loudly, authoritatively and constantly, each figure in Naomi's life participates in one of these two forms of nonspeech. King-kok Cheung praises Naomi's ability to convey "a spectrum of silence" (118), which encompasses silences both individual and collective, destructive and healing. At one end of this spectrum lies the shroud of silence which was placed over the traumatic events of Naomi's childhood

kodomo no tame ("for the sake of the children"). Her Issei relatives intended this to protect her; but instead, it plagues and paralyzes Naomi as an adult. Lacking any degree of closure to the unanswered questions which have endured since childhood, Naomi has subsequently buried and repressed the memories surrounding the trauma. Naomi herself participates in the "silence that will not speak," nursing the secret of her childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her neighbour, Old Man Gower. At the heart of Obasan is the self-imposed silence of Naomi's mother. The full power of the narrative is focussed first around the absence and then upon the reanimation of one figure: Naomi's mother. The writing project in Obasan is intricately tied to the reconstruction of the maternal.

Much of the critical material on Obasan engages with this issue of the nature and the role of silences within the text. Earlier essays tend to treat silence as a monolithic barrier to be overcome, a deficiency which will be obliterated by its opposite, speech. Gary Willis's 1987 article, "Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa's Obasan," makes an overly simplistic division between Eastern silence, equated with "grief" (Obasan 14) and "stone" (32), and aggressive Western speech (Willis 240). The limitations of such a simplistic view are evident when juxtaposed with the more subtle analyses found in later essays. Like Willis, Erika Gottlieb also sees silence as a limitation, but she recognizes that "silence speaks many tongues in this novel" (37). It is not through speech, but through understanding that which has been silent that Naomi will overcome her paralysis. Di Brandt's "Wild Mother Dancing" distinguishes between Obasan's "practised silence" (117) and the silencing which occurs in conjunction with violence and absence.

Marilyn Russell Rose's two articles deal extensively with the narrator's struggle to articulate the pain inflicted upon Japanese Canadians. In "Politics into Art" she envisions Naomi as a mouthpiece, verbalizing the wrongs inflicted upon her family and her community, but also explores the limitations of language to express experience (here read as historical experience; 224). In "Hawthorne's Custom House, Said's Orientalism and Kogawa's Obasan," she addresses the problem of Naomi's internalized feelings of victimhood, and her complicity in maintaining destructive silences. Her article is particularly strong in its comparison between Naomi's childhood silence and her inability to communicate as an adult.

Vietnamese theorist and filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha states: "Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored" (Trinh, "Not You/Like You" 373). The Oxford English Dictionary equates "silence" with "muteness, reticence, taciturnity" (V. VX 465), and further defines it as the "absence of all sound or noise". In English, "silence" is generally considered to be the opposite of speech or language, and is occasionally even equated with death. As King-kok Cheung notes, however, this is a decidedly Western view:

> The Chinese and Japanese character for silence, on the other hand, is autonymous to noise, motion, and commotion. In the U.S. silence is generally looked upon as passive; in China and Japan it traditionally signals pensiveness, alertness, and sensitivity. (113)

In contrast to the rather homogeneous Western perception, Kogawa depicts subtle and nuanced variations of silence, what Cheung describes as a "spectrum" (118). This spectrum embraces the attentive silence of

Naomi's community, her family's reluctance to speak of their losses and Naomi's own fear of articulating her pain and confusion: "Speech hides within me, watchful and afraid" (58). With the trauma of the camps, the dispersals and the war, many expressive, attentive silences shift into oppressive forms of noncommunication. Uncle's gratitude ("In the world, there is no better place. This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension" [42].) becomes a refusal to acknowledge suffering. Obasan's silent fortitude and endurance ossifies into pain. Hatred and fear have transformed attentive silence into a void: "We are the despised rendered voiceless," states Naomi (111).

Along with their inability to speak, Naomi and Obasan have participated in an active refusal to remember. The novel begins with an illustration of this process of forgetting which has turned Naomi into a diffident, lonely adult: during their annual August visit to the coulee, Naomi asks "'Uncle, . . . why do we come here every year?'" (Every year for eighteen years they have made this trip.) But Naomi expects no response from her reticent uncle: "This is the way it is whenever I ask questions. The answers are not answers at all" (135).[3] Though she is not yet aware of this, the answer to her question is at the heart of what she seeks: the date of their visits, August 9, 1972, is the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki, and when Naomi finally learns the importance of this event to her own family, she will be able to contextualize the losses she has suffered.

Naomi has not always been so indifferent to her surroundings; though a quiet child, she was attentive and inquisitive. In Vancouver, in Slocan, and even in Granton, Naomi's quiet nature had been balanced by her curiosity. But she rarely vocalizes her questions, because her

efforts are met with either Stephen's scorn or her family's obstinate silence: "After all these years I find myself wondering, but with the dullness of expecting no response" (26). The combination of her own refusal to remember and the reluctance of her family to explain has left her with a fractured and incoherent past. Naomi barely recognizes her childhood self: "The memories that are left seem barely real," she states (21). There is a tension created when Naomi the reticent adult narrates Naomi the inquisitive child. Four-year-old Naomi, though shy and quiet by nature, is far from uncommunicative: she expresses her strong bonds with her family members in "the language of eyes" (47), which she learned from Grandma Kato and her mother.[4]

Obasan contains frequent references to what King-kok Cheung refers to as "nonverbal expression" (116). Among her family, and with her mother in particular, silence represents a bond stronger than speech. During a disturbing childhood incident in which the family's chicken attacks their hatchlings, Naomi turns to her mother for support:

> Her eyes are steady and matter of fact--the eyes of Japanese motherhood. They do not invade and betray. They are the eyes that protect, shielding what is hidden most deeply in the heart of the child. . . . This [fear] that is in the belly is honoured when it is allowed to be, without fanfare, without reproach, without words. (59)

Naomi communicates with her mother in an almost completely nonverbal manner, and feels so close to her mother that she describes them as actually inhabiting the same physical body:

> I am clinging to my mother's leg, a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot--a

> young branch attached by right of flesh and blood. Where she is rooted, I am rooted. If she walks, I will walk. Her blood is whispering though my veins. The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts. (4)

From her mother, and later from Obasan, Naomi learns to practise an attentive silence. The community which surrounded Naomi during her childhood is characterized by this loving silence. Communication is possible because each person is carefully attuned to the others, and attentive to the needs of the others. Naomi recalls the simultaneity of response during her childhood:

> When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food. If I am weary, every place is a bed. . . . A sweater covers me before there is any chill and if there is pain there is care simultaneously. If Grandma shifts uncomfortably, I bring her a cushion. (56)

Naomi continues to learn this simultaneity from Obasan, and practises it herself:

> To try and meet one's own needs in spite of the wishes of others is to be 'wagamama'--selfish and inconsiderate. Obasan teaches me not to be wagamama by always heeding everyone's needs. (128)

Mason Harris observes that though powerful, this mode of interaction is also fragile. It requires a community in which everyone is accepted and known, and no one feels alienated (46). Such a community cannot respond to a drastic breach in continuity with the past.

As a child, Naomi understands only that her family had been disrupted, and the reasons remain inexplicable to her for years: "The

tension everywhere was not clear to me then and is not much clearer today. Time has solved few mysteries. . . . The reality of today is that Uncle is dead and Obasan is left alone" (77-8). What she clearly understands, however, are the effects of the disruption, rather than the disruption itself. In the absence of an understanding community, the loving silence of Naomi's childhood becomes the grief-laden silence of Obasan's "territory of stone" (Itsuka 185). Cheung states that "Naomi is wont to think of love in silent terms" (126), but when the sustaining connection with her family is broken, the effects are detrimental to Naomi's growth.

Thirty-six-year-old Naomi has lost the ability to communicate with glances and touch, and those who understood her silent speech are no longer present in her life. Now, she is unable to talk about her childhood, because she cannot even allow herself to remember what she has lost. The expressive silence of her childhood has become a barrier which hides her inability to comprehend. Silence has become a refuge, protecting her from her fear of speaking: "From both Obasan and Uncle I have learned that speech often hides like an animal in a storm" (3). When this inarticulate narrator attempts to communicate something she has relegated to the furthest reaches of her memory, something which, in addition, finds very little expression in English, the resulting textual tension foregrounds the extent to which Naomi has participated in the process of maintaining silence. The act of remembering, normally a natural and spontaneous process, is so difficult for Naomi that she must will herself to venture into her own memories. Naomi's struggle is reflected in the narrative's nonlinear, achronological form, in which she attempts to re-enter the trauma which so profoundly affected her; her

fragile and shifting state of mind is mirrored in the fragmented form of the text.

Symptomatic Silence: "The body will not tell"

When Naomi was four years old, Japanese forces invaded Pearl Harbor, unleashing a wave of racially motivated hatred and fear within North America. The ferocity of the government's policies regarding Canadians of Japanese descent was unprecedented in Canadian history, and unmatched in its destruction. Families were arbitrarily divided, homes were entered and seized without warrant and property was liquidated without the owners' consent.[5] The Japanese Canadian community which had existed before the dispersals was one based on harmony and unity. Emily states that "[t]o a people for whom community was the essence of life, destruction of that community was the destruction of life" (186). Members of Naomi's family were subjected to a variety of horrific policies, including extended imprisonment in animal pens. But four-year-old Naomi was sheltered by her family from the initial horrors, and as an adult, must endure the burden of an accumulation of half-concealed truths: "The sadness and the absence are like a long winter storm, the snow falling in an unrelieved colourlessness that settles and freezes, burying me beneath a growing monochromatic weight" (200). While Emily testifies to the political wrongs perpetrated upon her family, Naomi is possessed by the tiny, personal details--the dolls she was forced to leave in Vancouver, photographs of her mother, brief, remembered moments of domestic tranquillity. She describes the same destruction as her aunt, but on a much more personal level:

> We were the original 'togetherness' people. There were all the picnics in Kitsilano, and the concerts at Stanley Park . . . And after that?

> After that--there was the worrying letter from Grandma Kato's mother in Japan--and there were all the things that happened around that time. All the things . . . (20-1; punctuation Kogawa's)

Narrating this memory of happiness is so painful for Naomi that she cannot even bring the remembered events to a close, as indicated by the use of ellipses. The picnics and concerts came to an abrupt end shortly after the arrival of a letter from Japan, a "worrying letter" which was accompanied by worrying events, events so traumatic and confusing for Naomi that she still subsumes them under the unfinished and unfinishable phrase "All the things . . . ." Survivors of atrocities are doomed to carry knowledge of the unspeakable horrors they have witnessed for their entire lives. Auschwitz survivor Jean Amèry wrote that "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. Torture is ineradically burned into him, even when no clinically objective traces can be found" (34). Historian Lawrence Langer's analysis found that survivor testimony is marked by a distinctive lack of closure: "The narrator's imaginations are chained to memories that have little to do with sequence or chronology" (31). Obasan's narrative irregularity reflects Naomi's psychological state in the days preceding her uncle's funeral. On a thematic level, to free herself from the traumatic childhood events to which she is tethered, Naomi must allow herself to remember. Paradoxically, though, in order to forget she must first remember.

Naomi was very young when disaster befell her family, and she has spent the years since the war trapped between memories which linger just beyond her reach, and a reality to which she feels almost totally unconnected. Her Aunt Obasan at least has access to memories of a time

when the family was whole and together: "'This is the best time. These are the best memories,'" she says, showing Naomi a photograph taken before the war (46). She can look at photographs and remember, but Naomi cannot. The few positive memories she allows herself are those related to her mother, such as this domestic scene from her early childhood:

> We three, the goldfish and I, are the listeners in the room, as Mother sings and Stephen and Father play. Mother's voice is yasashi, soft and tender in the dimming twilight. She is altogether yasashi. She is singing a kindergarten song to entice me to join in. (51)

Mason Harris observes that one aspect of Naomi's resistance to Emily's urgings to remember the internment and dispersals is a desire to maintain "a memory of an ideal childhood provided by a traditional mother" (44). Naomi has idealized her childhood self as completely inseparable from her mother, and the absence of this maternal figure from her adult life seriously compromises her sense of her own reality and self-worth. In "Wild Mother Dancing," Di Brandt emphasizes that Obasan is entirely structured around the absence of Naomi's mother (109), whereas I argue that it is structured around her reconstruction.

When her mother, one of the "needles" which "knit the families carefully into one blanket" disappeared, the fabric of her family was torn to shreds (20). "If we were knit into a blanket once, it's become badly moth-eaten with time," Naomi remarks (21). This image is evocatively repeated after Naomi follows Obasan into the attic, where she actually finds a blanket that her mother had made: "The thin flowery patchwork quilt Mother made me for my bed when I was four years old is so frayed and moth-eaten it's only a rag" (25). If her mother was the

tailor who created and maintained the bonds within the family, it comes as no surprise that the loving, supportive environment of Naomi's childhood is "now no more than a few tangled skeins, the remains of what might once have been a fisherman's net" (21). She has lost her mother to forces she does not wish to remember or understand. "[L]ost" in Japanese, we have learned, is the same word as "dead" (24).

In 1972, domestic happiness exists only in faded black and white photographs, and Naomi can only laugh at her current situation with a hint of desperation: "Personality: tense. Is that past or present tense? It's perpetual tense" (7).

Silence and mystery have shrouded Naomi's memories so completely that her childhood ambivalence toward the past has developed into an adult fear. She perceives history as a malevolent force which propels her, against her will, to seek out painful, half-remembered events:

> What demon sends me clawing through the night, calling out to my brother, my mother, my loved ones in caves, in the graves, in the valley of dry bones singing the songs of childhood? (Itsuka 80)

She believes that to speak of the past is futile, and to dwell on her desire to remember happier times is merely self torture: "If I linger in the longing, I am drawn into a whirlpool. I can only skirt the edges after all" (53). This agony over her inability to know her past is evident sometimes in her restrained sadness, as here, and sometimes in her violent abhorrence of history in general. When she follows Obasan into the attic, Naomi betrays her deep-rooted disgust in her ghoulish description of the scene: she is startled by a spider, and

> [i]ts flight is so sudden I recoil, jerking my arm up, sending the beam of light over the ceiling and a whole cloudy scene of carnage. Ugh! What a sight! A graveyard and a feasting-ground combined. (25)

Marilyn Russell Rose states that the attic is threatening to Naomi because it houses part of her history, "a history she imagines as desirable, but also unsettled, unsettling and somehow predatory" (Rose, "Hawthorne, Said and Kogawa" 289). Indeed, she finds it difficult to conceive of history as anything other than a force which feeds upon the living. She envisions Obasan in the grips of some incarnation of history which consumes those who can no longer resist:

> The past hungers for her. Feasts on her. And when its feasting is complete? She will dance and dangle in the dark, like small insect bones, a fearful calligraphy--a dry reminder that once there was life flitting about in the weather. (26)

It is certainly not unusual, within the context of a wake for the dead, to be preoccupied with decline, decay and death. However, as Erika Gottlieb asserts, these traditional themes take on an added significance here because of their intense importance in the continuing life of the mourner (41). In fact, until her Uncle's death, Naomi's life has been significantly shaped by her <u>inability</u> to mourn. In her refusal to acknowledge her losses, she has suspended herself in time, mired in helpless grief.[6]

While it is certainly correct to say that Naomi is haunted by the past (as Mason Harris and Gary Willis do), this is only part of the truth. The past devours her, but not by its existence: what possesses

her totally is the silence which veils certain events from her, most particularly, the reason for her mother's disappearance and continued silence. This is a silence imposed both from without, by her family, and from within, by her fear that she is somehow to blame for the events which befell her mother. Her family, particularly Obasan, refuses to speak of her mother's fate. Even before the war, Obasan was incapable of expressing grief and pain (she never spoke of her two stillborn children or of her subsequent decision to remain childless [18-9]); but it is this silence which ultimately proves most harmful to Naomi: "The greater my need to know, the thicker her silences have always been" (45). Cheung observes that while trying to protect her from horrific facts, Obasan's silence infantalizes Naomi, creating an "enforced innocence" which has caused her immeasurable harm (Cheung 119). "'Please tell me about Mother,' I would say as a child to Obasan. I was consumed by the question. Devoured alive" (26). This is a particularly astute self-evaluation: when Naomi refers to any past event, it is invariably with images of consuming and predation. The present is "fleeting" and "fading" (25), and Naomi is "trapped," "consumed" and "devoured alive" by a past which "hungers," "feasts" and waits for her to "submit" (26).

While the young Naomi communicated with body language, particularly "the language of eyes" (47), the elder Naomi is surrounded by people who do not understand such forms of discourse. (Even Obasan is now almost completely blind and deaf.) Instead, thirty-six-year-old Naomi communicates in self-deprecating humour[7] and through metaphor. By her own admission, Naomi has great difficulty remembering events directly; instead she intimates, suggests, and infers. Metaphors allow her to continually skirt the memories of those she has lost. She is aware of

her own tendency towards inference, evident during her description of the house in Vancouver which was confiscated: "My dolls are not in this room but upstairs in a large bin in the kitchen. Later, it was the family of dolls I missed more than anything else--the representatives of the ones I loved" (52).

Clearly, it is this separation which is at the crux of Naomi's inability to reconcile herself with her past. She has not been freed by her separation from history; she has been orphaned by it. Recalling the period immediately following her mother's departure, Naomi remembers the importance she attached to maintaining the facts: "I rehearse the past faithfully in preparation for her return," says the child (68). But when Naomi realizes that her mother will not return, she refuses to remember any more. It is this realization of her mother's absence that makes her past threatening, predatory and ultimately unknowable. To this end, she willfully participates in the process of creating and maintaining silence, but she cannot forget, even though she cannot know.[8] Clearly, Naomi has not dealt with her mother's absence in any constructive way; by her own admission, she has simply stopped thinking about it, and the pain finally receded into the background of her conscious mind:

> At some point, I can't say when, my ache for my parents vanishes into the depths. All I remember is that there is a time when the aching is no longer there, as if it has fallen through a trap door. (Itsuka 34)

For years, she and Obasan have been telling themselves "What is past recall is past pain" (45). But they were wrong; years later, they are still haunted by ghosts which will not be laid to rest. Naomi is unable to free herself from what she describes as her "heavy identity," which

suffocates her under the weight of "the evidence of rejection, the unexpressed passion, the misunderstood politeness" (183). She lives in a house in which the past continuously infringes upon the present:

> Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery. Our attics and living rooms encroach on each other, deep into their invisible places. (25)

If the living room represents the daily activities which occur in the present, the attic can be seen as a spatial metaphor for the intrusive past.

Paradoxically, in attempting to narrate the experiences of her younger self, Naomi is struggling to break through silence, to tell a story which is both centred around and propelled by silence. The silence separates her from the events of her past, a past she is reluctant to even remember. Obasan and Naomi's refusal to confront the past tethers them to an existence dominated by loss and powerlessness. When Naomi describes herself as a prisoner of history, she herself explicitly attributes this state of captivity to the mystery surrounding her mother:

> we're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead--all our dead--those who refuse to bury themselves. Like threads of old spider webs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles. Just a glimpse of a worn-out patchwork quilt and the old question comes thudding out of the night

> again like a giant moth. *Why did my mother not return?* (26; emphasis mine)

The silence surrounding her mother's absence has plagued Naomi, but she has grown from the most silent and serious child Aunt Emily knew (56) into an adult who believes "[i]f I speak, I will split open and spill out" (63). Even as an adult, thirty years after the events which disrupted her life, Naomi is not entirely certain why her family was forced to move from their comfortable Vancouver home to progressively worse situations further inland. Silence was maintained *kodomo no tame*, "for the sake of the children," but at thirty-six, Naomi's past is still impenetrable.

In 1972, the novel's "present," Naomi is middle-aged, single and frustrated, "doubtful about her sexuality and ethnic identity, not attracted or attractive to either sex" (Gottlieb 39). She admits that 'None of my friends today are Japanese Canadians' but she also feels uncomfortable with white Canadians, who perceive her as a foreigner because of her Oriental features. At odds with herself and afraid of her surroundings, she is silent:

> How do I fear and fear. Let me count the ways.
>
> I fear glances and sneers. I fear judgement. I fear the corridors through which fear runs and the mazes of delusions that great fears create. I fear the cunning of the body's inner foes. I fear touch as much as the inability to touch. (Itsuka 2)

She is aware of her paralysis, but seems unable to alter the patterns of her life. When she refers to disturbed children in her classes, her analysis both describes her own unhappiness and diagnoses its symptoms:

"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). She acknowledges that her silence is evidence of her demoralizing and dehumanizing fear, and further, suggests that vocalizing her pain may be a solution, but she is not yet prepared to embark on that path.

Responding to Silence: Obasan's Attentive Silence

Naomi's response to her mother's absence was to seek out surrogate maternal figures (which she found in her mother's sister, Emily, and her father's sister-in-law, Ayako, whom Naomi addresses as Obasan). Obasan is accepted into Naomi's family home almost immediately following her mother's absence: "Aya Obasan is in the house every day now. She is gentle and quiet like Mother" (68). Emily, her other aunt, was never as comforting or nurturing as Obasan; but as Naomi grew, she became just as important as Obasan to Naomi's growth. The fundamental difference between her two aunts is illustrated in Naomi's observation that Japanese tools are designed differently than Western ones (Koo 213): implements of Japanese design "pull with control rather than push with force" (24). Obasan's power lies in her quiet endurance and fortitude, whereas Emily, born and raised in Canada, exerts her strength in her vigorous energy, in her ability to "push with force."

King-kok Cheung observes that despite the apparent irreconcilability of these two influences upon Naomi, both modes of thinking can find their roots in Japanese culture (115-6). Obasan's quiet acceptance and forgiveness bring to mind a combination of Buddhism and Catholicism; indeed, Obasan is equally at home in both Buddhist and Catholic funerary ceremonies (though she and her husband are practising Christians, Obasan presides over her Buddhist father-in-law's cremation [130-2]). In addition, the fact that she never discards anything is connected to her ability to preserve and maintain Japanese culture in the face of white hatred and the intense desire of many Japanese Canadians to

assimilate. Her collection of household objects is more than merely an accumulation of articles, for among the balls of twine and bundles of newspaper are "keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels" (16). Somehow, in Obasan's careful hands, these objects transcend their mundane qualities, because Obasan "is the possessor of life's infinite personal details" (16).

Emily, on the other hand, is a "crusader" (32), a "bulldozer" (35), "a tank of a woman with a Winston Churchill stoop" (33). Though her outspoken political activism is attributed to her Canadian schooling, it is also accounted for in the story of Momotaro, which Naomi recalls her mother telling her as a child. As a boy, Momotaro must defend his village against those who would hurt and dishonour his family. Like the fictional character (although female), Emily battles injustice in its various forms, travelling, as he does, throughout the countryside to do so. Unlike Momotaro, however, Emily's courage does not manifest itself in displays of physical violence; indeed it is the patriarchal militarism he represents that she directly opposes. Emily the female "word warrior" (32) meets her adversaries in "paper battles," "spreading words like buckshot" (189).

Kogawa is able to reconcile the widely disparate approaches of these two surrogate mother figures by situating them within her own Catholic beliefs. In an interview with Andrew Garrod, Kogawa states that she believes Emily and Obasan to represent the two sides of the serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference" (148). Obasan embodies serenity, Emily possesses courage to enact change, and the wisdom involves combining these two approaches to life, as Naomi

learns. Marilyn Rose Russell emphasizes the importance of this when she writes that Naomi is "clearly destined for synthesis" ("Politics into Art" 220). Kogawa elaborates: "The day of Aunt Emily is always today; Obasan has tomorrow and yesterday in her hands. I think we need them both" (Garrod 148). Naomi finds that a synthesis of approaches is necessary both in her daily life, and in the recovery of her mother, whose influence pervades every aspect of Obasan. The interconnectedness of these three women in Naomi's life is further emphasized in the title of the work. While "obasan" means "aunt," King-kok Cheung states that it can also be translated to mean the more general *woman*: the title thus emphasizes the mutuality of women's lives--particularly of Naomi, her mother and her two aunts (Cheung 115).[9]

Obasan, the first surrogate mother in Naomi's life, is presented as a figure who sustains and maintains. Though almost completely silent, she is far from passive: she holds together what remains of Naomi's family when her mother disappears and her father dies in a labour camp, she presides over two traumatic relocations, directs the cremation of Naomi's grandmother, and raises Naomi and Stephen to adulthood. She is also able to instill in Naomi (though not in her brother, Stephen) a positive sense of ethnic identity. Her brother has the most difficulty with being labelled different. "None of us . . . escaped the naming," Aunt Emily says to Naomi at one point, but Stephen tried harder than anyone. "He is always uncomfortable when anything is 'too japanese'" (217), says Naomi, and later, "Stephen . . . [is] altogether unfamiliar with speaking Japanese" (231). Stephen, faced with the same choices as his sister, ultimately takes sides against himself, choosing a Canadian identity which excludes his Japanese heritage. In one telling passage,

Naomi describes the lunches which Obasan has prepared for them to eat at school:

> My lunch that Obasan made is two moist and sticky rice balls with a salty red plum in the centre of each, a boiled egg to the side with a tight square of lightly boiled greens. Stephen has peanut-butter sandwiches, an apple, and a thermos of soup. (153)

In his discomfort, Stephen seems to resemble Humpty Dumpty, in that his cultural fence-sitting renders him, as Naomi suggests, "half in and half out of his shell, . . . cracked and unable to move" (115). In her mind, Naomi turns to Obasan (who prepares both Japanese and Canadian food with equal facility), searching for relief for both Stephen and herself:

> I have seen Obasan at home sometimes take a single grain of cooked rice and squash it on paper, using it for paste to seal parcels or envelopes. If I could take all the cooked rice in all the rice pots in all the world, dump them into a heap and tromp all the bits to glue with my feet, there would be enough to stick anything, even Humpty Dumpty, together again. (115)

Naomi expresses in this passage a trace of hope for the future, a future founded upon a continuation of her family's rich cultural heritage; her hope springs in part from her faith in Obasan's ability to preserve this heritage, and to heal the deep rifts in the family.

Obasan's strength, Naomi believes, is derived in part from her strong sense of her own ethnicity. While Naomi gropes through each day, unsure of her purpose or her direction, Obasan lives secure in the strength of her beliefs. Ethnicity, as she learns it from Obasan, is

something which she absorbs passively, something she understands as her own, but in which she cannot actually participate. Though Naomi eats sticky rice balls and miso shiru soup, and speaks Japanese to her aunt and uncle, she has little connection to the rich cultural heritage her family shared. Her passivity is partially due to her intense preoccupation with her absent mother.

Shirley Lim has identified an intricate connection between the mother-daughter relationship and ethnic identity in Obasan: "the Japanese mother is the figure not only of maternality but also of racial consciousness" (293). Naomi's sense of her own Japaneseness finds its source in her relationship with her mother; since the loss of this maternal figure, Naomi has spent much of her life trying to escape the "hairshirt of ethnicity" that separates her from her white neighbours (Itsuka 264). Rather than embracing her Japaneseness as a key to her self-identification, she learns to fear and bury it. For Naomi to recover her identity as a Japanese Canadian, she must also recover her bond with her mother, if she cannot recover the mother herself. For her ethnicity to represent anything more than being "weak and small" (152), as the Japanese pieces are described in Stephen's Yellow Peril game, Naomi must reconstruct the racial/maternal figure she has lost.

Responding to Silence: Emily the "word-warrior"

It is significant that Naomi addresses her other maternal figure, Aunt Emily, by her English name and designation, though technically she too is Naomi's "obasan." During the dispersals, Emily went to Toronto with her father (Naomi's Grandpa Kato), while Naomi moved with Obasan and Uncle to Slocan, and then to terrible conditions in Alberta. Naomi spends a large part of the book assessing her opinion of Emily, a militant Nisei whom Uncle worries is unmarriageable because of her outspokenness. Always spare with his words, Stephen simply states "[s]he's not like them," pointing to Obasan and Uncle (215). But Naomi is more affected by Emily than Stephen, who simply flees from the prairie silence and the Toronto "word-warrior," neither of which he can understand, into a world of wordless sound which he can create and structure. A concert pianist, Stephen travels constantly: "Departure, for him, is as necessary as breath," observes Naomi, who has chosen to stay in Alberta near what remains of her family (15). Aunt Emily makes regular visits to Alberta, bombarding Naomi with political reading and attempting to rescue her from her solitude.

Naomi is faced with two powerful influences, whose ideas about coming to terms with personal history are diametrically opposed: where Obasan endures imposed hardships in "impenetrable . . . steadfast silence" (224-5), Emily brandishes facts and words like weapons in her fight against injustice. "How different my two aunts are," observes Naomi:

> One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground, but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a

> word-warrior. She's a crusader, a little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes. (32)

Emily has been vocal, discomfittingly and occasionally embarrassingly so, for most of Naomi's life. At one point, slightly intimidated by her extroverted aunt, Naomi remarks that Emily is "so non-Japanese in her exuberance" (Itsuka 3). As a Nisei, Emily is a member of a generation of politicized Japanese Canadians who eagerly sought to identify with their country. For Emily, identity can be as simple as this: her Japanese culture is part of her background, one she cannot and does not wish to escape, but since she is Canadian by virtue of her birth and upbringing, even her Japaneseness is Canadian:

> 'Milk and Momotaro?' I asked. 'Culture clash?'
>
> 'Not at all,' she said. 'Momotaro is a Canadian story. We're Canadian, aren't we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian.' (57)

The natural progression of generations would have allowed the Nisei to impart their combination of political zeal and strong community identity to the Sansei, but governmental policies enacted in Naomi's youth severed this course, leaving Naomi, a Sansei raised by an Issei, "a deracinated, depressed and apolitical Sansei" (Harris 43).

The cure for Naomi's malaise, according to Emily, is to remember, to recover the events which shattered her childhood, and in doing so, to free herself from them. Emily has been pressing her for years to recover her past, but until the week before her uncle's funeral, Naomi has been unable to see Emily's efforts as anything other than unwanted advances which infringe on her fragile peace. At one point, Naomi refers to

Emily's communicative barrage in the same threatening, military terms as she describes the British martinet in her dreams: "in between visits, there's the army, the navy, the air force of letters--all the Aunt Emily correspondence jamming up our little metal box in the Granton P. O." (32). With this analogy, Naomi betrays the depth of her fear: in the imagery of her dreams, the military represents the threat of oppression and violation. "Always, I dream of soldiers eager for murder, their weapons ready. We die again and again. In my dreams, we are never safe enough" (227). The prospect of actually seeking to uncover the past seems to Naomi as invasive as the actions of the martinet who menaces nameless Japanese women in her nightmares.

When the dispersals began, Emily was twenty years older than her niece, secure in her identity as an activist and a non-traditional woman. Mason Harris observes that, based in part on these circumstances, there exists a critical difference between Naomi's memories and Emily's: for Emily, the process of remembering means recovering a series of facts, mentally rehearsing a persecution which seems to her "like a bad dream" (88); for Naomi remembering forces the reliving of a nightmare of incomprehensible threats from which she cannot awaken, "a darkness" (69) which threatens to consume her (Harris 44). The facts upon which Emily relies do not afford any comfort and they have no power to ease her fear: only Naomi's mother could have done this. "If my mother were back, she would move the darkness aside with her hands and we would be safe" (69). Recalling paper photographs in which Japanese farm workers stand around piles of beets under the caption "Grinning and Happy," Naomi is skeptical of even the veracity of Emily's facts:

> Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep. (194)

Naomi has learned that the facts rarely represent reality with any accuracy. On one of the envelopes in the package, Emily has scrawled "'Write the vision and make it plain.' Habakkuk 2:2" (31). She imagines her aunt on a witness stand, testifying with words that shine like a beacon guiding the Nisei, but is unable to conceive of her own role in such a scenario: "The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey" (32). Coupled with the limitations of language to adequately convey experiences, particularly painful and traumatic experiences, Naomi's reluctance to commit "truth" to words and to speak them aloud is understandable.

She resists her aunt's efforts for years, asking her "Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?" (42). She endures Emily's insistence that "The past is the future" (42), not realizing the extent to which this describes the stifling circularity of her own life, trapped as she is by her past. On one of her visits to Alberta, Emily exclaims "Look at you, Naomi, shuffling back and forth between Cecil and Granton, unable to either stay or go in the world with even a semblance of grace or ease" (50). Travelling between the school in Cecil where she teaches and Uncle and Obasan's house in Granton, Naomi is cut off from her past and unable to stay with the older generation in their world, but in amputating her past, observes Gottlieb, she has cut herself off from her own future (38). Gottlieb is correct in her assessment, but only to a point. Naomi's paralysis stems from her inability to break through a silence

which she herself helped to establish, but none of the possible solutions (embodied in those around her) are found to be acceptable. Obasan's denial of the past is deadening; Emily's strident revisionism is found wanting. Naomi is searching for what Gurleen Grewall describes as "embodied truth" (148), a truth which begins with the facts, but surrounds and supports them with human intelligence, conscience and dignity. Naomi refers to this herself in the prologue, in which she longs for the "living word" which is absent from her life: "The sound I hear is only sound," she states. Central to the discovery/recovery of such a truth is the recovery of her mother: Naomi is able to find closure through an imaginative synthesis in which she approaches her mother not as a five year old, but as an adult. This synthesis is the culmination of a process which begins slowly, a process set in motion by the recovery of memory.

"'You have to remember,' Aunt Emily said. 'You are your history. If you cut any of it off, you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene'" (49-50). Emily frequently speaks in medical metaphors, prompting Naomi to describe her in similar terms. Emily is "one of the world's white blood cells" (34), and she is also one of the most direct healing forces in Naomi's life, attempting to personally remove that 'gangrene' to which she refers:

> Aunt Em, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn't enough, is it? It's your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the

> anesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over Aunt Em? (194)

Though Emily's is a violent and invasive process of healing, Naomi is finally able to acknowledge its true effect on her: in Itsuka, she refers to her aunt as "a minor surgeon of the soul" (81).

Emily's diagnosis is correct, a conclusion supported in the vivid descriptions of Naomi's nightmares: for years her dreams have been dominated by images of mutilation and death. Gottlieb states that the dreams which Naomi describes contain landscapes like those in the Book of Revelations, the prophetic vision which describes the Apocalypse.[10] They are dominated by images of power and punishment, most particularly rape, a metaphor for the violation and victimization which she and her family have experienced. These dreams are populated by uniformed white soldiers possessed of the power to degrade and violate. She has been having the same dreams for years, and describes a recurring one as "my childhood dream" (65). All of the destruction wrought upon her family was perpetrated by the vast, impersonal bureaucracy of war: the bombs which killed her mother, grandmother and hundreds of thousands of other civilians were dropped by politicians who signed official documents miles from the cities to be destroyed. The warrants which ordered her family's house and property seized were authorized by people like the ironically named Mr. B. Good, who informed Emily that her sister's property "vests in the Custodian" (37). The source of the hatred and racism was similarly removed and difficult to pinpoint. The nightmares which plague Naomi contain no bombs, no faceless bureaucrats, and no veiled hatred, for these things are almost abstractions to her. In her sleep, Naomi

distills the threats and the unarticulated terrors into one clearly recognized figure, the British martinet who, with his bayonet and rifle, situates Naomi's fears into a single locus.

As an adult, she is paralyzed by the same guilt and dread, tormented by the same nightmares. In her waking existence, she is plagued by illnesses which seem connected to the tension which she has carried since she was young: "My abominable abdomen. Something as vast as childhood lies hidden in the belly's wars" (Itsuka 119). It is significant that Naomi herself attributes her difficulty in speaking to a physical inability rather than to a mental or emotional one:

> Is it so bad?
>
> Yes.
>
> Do I really mind?
>
> Yes, I mind. I mind everything. Even the flies. . . It's the chicken coop "house" we live in that I mind. . . It's the bedbugs and my having to sleep on the table to escape the nightly attack, and the welts all over our bodies. . . It's so hard and hot that my tear glands burn out. . . I mind growing ugly. . . I cannot tell about this time, Aunt Emily. The body will not tell. (194-6)

She is sometimes incapable of separating the symptoms from the illness, framing the cause of her inability to speak in its own manifestation. A layer of forgetfulness has gathered around her, creating a barrier which prevents her from speaking. Earlier critics, such as B.A. St. Andrews and Gary Willis, perceived this as the problem itself; rather is only the symptom. Like Obasan, she has begun to turn to stone.

Naomi has blanketed herself in a protective silence, the only defense she could erect. But her wall begins to crumble when she is forced to remember, as she reads the contents of Aunt Emily's package, a collection of letters, documents and a diary, which act as catalysts for the slow, painful process of memory. On the day after her husband's death, Obasan gives Naomi this package, which has been in her attic for many months, saying "'Everything is forgetfulness. The time of forgetting is now come'" (30). Ironically this package, which contains extensive documentation of everything which Obasan has tried so hard to forget, becomes the catalyst for Naomi's process of remembering: "her papers are wind and fuel nudging my early morning thoughts to flame," she writes (32).

Earlier, she had commented that the package was as "heavy as a loaf of stone bread" (31), a description which evolves as the package takes on a greater significance. From bread, it is transformed into communion hosts: "In Aunt Emily's package, the papers are piled as neatly as the thin white wafers in Sensei's silver box--symbols of communion, the materials of communication, white paper for the mind's meal" (182). This is an apt description in which Naomi accepts and acknowledges the power of the past to save her. Once she has consumed the contents of the package, Naomi finally knows the significance of the August pilgrimage, of the rice paper letters written in Japanese and of the silence. She stills the ghosts which have dwelled for years in the family attic, among moth-eaten blankets and dusty photographs.

It is significant that she first accepts Emily's diary, an account with some personal signification, before she can examine the official version represented in the documents, which she keeps pushing away. (She

eventually grapples with an "official" version of the facts, evidenced by the inclusion of the government document as the last page of the novel. By placing it at the end, the official version stands almost as an endnote to the alternative telling presented by Naomi, and is strongly mediated by her narration.) In reading the contents of the package, Naomi is finally able to synthesize the two approaches she observes in her aunts. Emily's painstakingly gathered facts no longer counter but rather combine with Obasan's equally meticulous preservation of the past in her collection of objects which lack narratives to connect them to each other or to the present. During the day which she spends in the silent house, Naomi re-experiences the past both factually and poetically, combining the two into that "living word" which she sought.

Naomi finally internalizes what Emily has always asserted--that the past and present are <u>not</u> separated by distinct boundaries, and that an understanding of the past is vital to comprehending the present (Koo 214). Naomi acknowledges this interdependency when she writes: "All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past" (25). She is finally able to articulate this relationship between past, present and future in her own life when she describes her entire existence as an endless spiral concentrated around her mother's absence:

> For me, this year, a certain circular spinning stops. A cocoon disintegrates. The knowledge of death follows the knowledge of death, and gnaws its way through my shell. This is the time of unraveling the tales of distant, lonelier dyings. It's the year I learn that Mother and Grandma were trapped in Nagasaki when the bombs fell. (<u>Itsuka</u> 62)

These memories have been suppressed, but the lack of resolution has kept her spiralling around her mother's absence for years, and it is not until she has learned of her mother's fate that she is able to move forward.

In this admission, she is able to begin the healing process, the process of remembering the past, not because "Aunt Emily insists that [she] must," but because to forgive and reconcile she must move beyond her own pain of abandonment and enter her mother's grief (198). This forgiveness requires the retrieval of memory, the recovery of the past. Forgetting was a mental and emotional process for Naomi, but one which manifested itself physically: she believed herself to be *physically* unable to speak ("the body will not tell" [196]). Remembering too is a process with physical symptoms ("the memory drains down the sides of my face" [194]). Occasionally, she is confused and disoriented: as she starts to remember, she is transported by what she finds, literally unable to discern where she is:

> I am sometimes not certain whether it is a cluttered attic in which I sit, a waiting room, a tunnel, a train. There is no beginning and no end to the forest, or the dust storm, no edge from which to know where the clearing begins. Here in this familiar density, beneath this cloak, within this carapace, is the longing within the darkness. (111)

The fragments of the past which remain for Naomi are elusive, even unfamiliar to her adult self as she is groping through a history which scarcely seems her own. Though Emily's journal describes events which Naomi too experienced, the <u>act</u> of remembering them feels unfamiliar: "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). These memories are accompanied by an inevitable sadness, as she remembers their family home in Vancouver. "It is more splendid than any house I have lived in since. It does not bear remembering. None of this bears remembering" (49). Educated in Obasan's silence, Naomi must struggle against the temptation to continue burying her memories. For years, forgetting has defined her. Remembering uncovers for Naomi both the historical facts collected by Aunt Emily and her own more subjective emotional truths. The facts are confusing, and have not been significantly clarified by the passage of time: "It is a riddle, Stephen tells me. We are both the enemy and not the enemy" (70). This ambiguity clings to the names and the dates, and even when Naomi begins to remember "facts," she recites these mechanically, usually filling her descriptions with visual details to postpone her emotional response to her own memories. Recalling the first deportation to the interior, she describes the clothes she wore and the toy umbrella she brought (112). Memories of the second relocation are dominated by descriptions of packing--the Mickey Mouse dishes wrapped in comics pages, and the train platform crowded with suitcases and trunks (174; 179). These physical details hold the real memories (i.e., the emotional impact of physical detail) at bay for a time, but only temporarily. Memory for Naomi is a visceral process, a capacity for experiencing emotions which she has suppressed. Memory is "turbulence" and "upheaval" (45), disorientation and "longing" (111), and a "nightmare from which there is no waking" (194). Most of all, memory houses the agony of unexplained and unresolved loss:

> It is around this time that Mother disappears. I hardly dare to think, let alone ask, why she has to leave. Questions are meaningless. What matters to my five-year-old mind is not

> the reason that she is required to leave, but the stillness of waiting for her to return. After a while, the stillness is so much with me that it takes the form of a shadow which grows and surrounds me like air. Time solidifies, ossifies the waiting into molecules of stone, dark microscopic planets that swirl through the universe of my body waiting for light and the morning. (66)

The first direct reference Naomi makes to her mother occurs after Obasan hands her a picture, a "familiar photograph" of herself as a very young child, clinging to her mother's leg (46). Naomi looks at the photo, and then suddenly displaces herself into it. She *becomes* her three-year-old self, looking out at things beyond the frame of the picture--the boy who is sucking his thumb and staring at her, the approaching streetcar which she and her mother will board for home. The montage of images which follows constitutes not simply the thirty-six-year-old narrator recalling events long past; the adult Naomi is remembering being a child. Naomi evokes "both a child's recollection and a recollection of childhood" (Gottlieb 38). Naomi's trauma at the indiscreet stares of the strangers on the streetcar are contrasted with the solace of home. She recalls the colours of rooms and the furniture within them, the toys spread on the floor and the musical instruments on their stands. Finally, after an extensive visual catalogue, she allows herself to populate the room with people: Stephen sits at the piano with their mother, "yasashi, soft and tender," beside him, their father, "precise and graceful," stands with his violin, and Naomi sits watching (54).

Recovering such memories is intensely painful, because contained within them is the knowledge of subsequent loss. As Obasan reminds her, the scenes which she remembers are "[m]ukashi, mukashi, o-o mukashi" ("In ancient times, in ancient times, in very very ancient times;" 54). The chapter which begins with the reawakening of Naomi's memories ends with the agonizing awareness of their intangibility: "Only fragments relate me to them now, to this young woman, my mother and me, her infant daughter. Fragments of fragments. Parts of a house. Segments of stories" (53). Caught between retaining and forgetting the past, Naomi wishes intensely to bury the pain of losing her home and her family; however, she is equally afraid of losing the tenuous ties she has with her mother.

Expressing Silence:

"The avenues of speech are the avenues of silence"

In The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston frequently refers to the transformative effects of "talking story," a potent process by which Brave Orchid, the narrator's mother, educates and empowers her children. In one particularly telling passage, the narrator describes the power of her mother's story:

> Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep. . . . At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story. . . . She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (19-20)

Naomi, lacking the guiding presence of a Brave Orchid in her childhood, was forced to discover for herself the power of imagination, which she eventually uses to counter Emily's empirical, fact-laden truth. Obasan's elliptical and deliberately disjunctive structure calls into question the notion that there might exist a direct relationship between representation of and reunion with the past. However, as Manina Jones argues, Obasan presents the possibility of narrative as "a relational bond" (136). This reproduction, or representation, is an important process, acknowledged even by Naomi's intensely pragmatic aunt: "In the end, Aunt Emily says, home is where the stories are, and that's not a

matter of ethnicity or even country" (Itsuka 168). The ability to represent, to "tell," is closely tied to memory, to the examination of beginnings and causes. Naomi asserts this connection between the creative process of narrative and the excavation of memory when she is able to frame the question which guides her search: "Where do we come from Obasan? We come from cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth. We come from our untold tales that wait for the telling" (226). Narrative, in other words, is "where we come from." The deferral of knowledge, which has been a constant in Naomi's life, is also present here, but for the first time, it is accompanied by the hope for resolution. In finally formulating the question which she hopes to answer, Naomi is able to move from absence and denial to the possibility of knowledge and understanding. It is in the act of narrating that Naomi will return 'home.'

Manina Jones states that storytelling, for Naomi, is "a strategic act of signification that conditions both individual and collective history and subjectivity" (120). Our origins, Naomi comes to believe, are closely tied not just to language, but to the narrative process by which she reconstructs her submerged childhood. In fact, one of her most significant memories is of her family's ability with narrative, and the degree to which it tied them to their past:

> Each night from the very beginning, before I could talk, there were the same stories, the voices of my mother or my father or Obasan or Grandma Kato, soft through the filter of my sleepiness, carrying me away to a shadowy ancestry. (54)

Naomi is, in effect, narrating her own history, inscribing herself into the text which she creates from newly recovered memories and from the

documents which she is finally capable of accepting. Naomi's engagement with her past has altered significantly: in telling her story, through the process of narration itself, she is finally able to remember, and in remembering, she re-experiences and recontextualizes events, in effect, reproducing them.

When Naomi finally finds herself able to speak, what she wants to articulate is the silence which has shrouded her past and her emotions toward that past: paradoxically, she wants to give voice to both "the silence that cannot speak" and "the silence that will not speak." Obasan, trapped "in a silent territory" (226), is the silence that cannot speak.[11] For her, Naomi wants to bear some of the emotional burden: "I can cry for Obasan who has turned to stone" (198). Raised by those who cannot speak, Naomi struggles most against the one figure who will not speak: her absent mother. Obasan's silent withdrawal into herself is markedly different from this willed absence of maternal speech.

More than simply absent from the text, Naomi's mother is completely under erasure. Jones observes that she has been literally and figuratively defaced. Discovered with part of her countenance fleshless, she has also been "disfigured, displaced from figuration, from signification" (137) because her story, like that of her family and community, has been concealed under the same official rhetoric which described their forced move to shacks in Slocan as 'Interior Housing Projects.' "With language like that you can disguise any crime," Aunt Emily contends (34).

Unable to participate in Emily's militant lobbying for Japanese Canadian rights, or in Obasan's silent, dignified service to her family, Naomi's sole identification with her Japanese Canadian heritage has been

through her 'yasashi' mother. Any positive development of racial identity, therefore, was halted when she was five, and since then she has learned to fear and hide from her Japaneseness. In his essay on South African apartheid, Jacques Derrida wrote that racism 'named' those whom it oppressed: "It institutes, declares, writes, inscribes, prescribes" (292). The Orders-in-Council deprived her of the means by which she had identified herself. Once a beloved member of a Canadian family of Japanese origin, she became a disenfranchised orphan, an Other. "People assume when they meet me that I'm a foreigner," states Naomi (7). Her deep awareness of the extent to which she is an outsider is closely tied to the loss of her mother, a connection which Shirley Geok-lin Lim identifies when she states that "bond/break of generation is intensified by the bond/break of race" (293). In other words, when Naomi lost the nurturing relationship she shared with her mother, she became cognizant of the differences which separated her from those around her. Further, she believed herself to be at fault when her mother did not return. (She connected her mother's disappearance with her own harbouring of a secret--her childhood abuse.[12] In her child's mind, one silence is the logical response to another.) Though one is clearly coincidental with, rather than the cause of the other, Naomi carries this guilt; and therefore the recovery of the maternal is the only means by which she can recover balance in her life. The act of telling, of figuring herself and her mother within narrative, disrupts the previously monologic and monolithic version of events. It is an act through which Naomi finally begins to recover for herself a positive identification with her Japanese heritage. In finally confronting history, she is able to engage with her story.

The absence is deeply inscribed into Kogawa's narrative. She gives very few visual images, focusing instead on tactile and auditory ones. Characters seem almost faceless, resembling sketches with only roughly drawn outlines. Gottlieb observes that even characters close to the narrator are represented as generalized, even allegorical figures (38). Though we hear of her eyes and hands (especially her hands), Obasan is elevated to an almost archetypal presence:

> squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world. . . . Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. (15-16)

This narrative technique is even more evident in its treatment of Naomi's mother. Initially, she exists only in relation to objects which Naomi associates with her: the once-colourful quilt in the attic (25), the diary which Emily kept during the war and addressed to her "dearest Nesan" ("elder sister;" 80), and a photograph in which the irises of her eyes were sketched in afterwards, because she always blinked when pictures were taken (19). Even during the dramatic centre of the book, when Naomi learns of her suffering in Nagasaki, there is still no individualized portrait of her: the mother's very absence is crucial to Naomi's narrative. Gottlieb argues that this detached mode of characterization foregrounds a collective depiction of human dignity, of a tradition founded upon respect for the vulnerabilities of others (38). Indeed the narrative accomplishes this, but it also deepens the parallel between Naomi's waking existence and the nightmarish one which inhabits her dream state. The narration shifts in and out of a realm of

unreality; nothing seems entirely real, or entirely tangible, but rather poised on the edge of horror.

Ironically, it is a dream which allows Naomi to recontextualize everything back into the realm of the tangible, waking world. As in her previous dreams, her third begins with the threat of violation, but this one ultimately resolves some of her confusion over her racial and gender identity. The ubiquitous soldiers fade quickly, to be replaced by Naomi's family, engaging in a flower ceremony with her mother standing at the centre of the circle they form. In her mouth, her mother holds a knotted string attached to a rose. The flower ceremony dissolves into a nightmare in which the Grand Inquisitor, dressed in a black cape and a shiny skin cap, pries open Naomi's eyes and her mother's mouth (227-8).

When she awakens with a start, Naomi attempts to interpret her dream. She is deeply affected by the memory that while her mother danced in celebration of love, she herself was unable to breathe. Despite her love for her mother, Naomi realizes that she has been guilty of acting as the Grand Inquisitor in her dream, questioning, prying and passing judgement on her mother. Such interrogation does not bring resolution, as Naomi learns from watching the Inquisitor: "[t]he more he questioned her, the more he was her accuser and murderer. The more he killed her, the deeper her silence became" (228). Relinquishing her search and her silent but persistent questioning, she resolves to place her faith in her mother's love. With this decision, she can finally embrace the paradox with which she has grappled since childhood:

> 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 silence of stone, he must first be silent. (228)

Naomi has often described "attending" silence as the most loving form of communication. In entering her mother's abandonment and accepting it without judgement, Naomi is finally prepared to attend, rather than to question, her mother's silence. As if in fulfillment of Nakayama's words, "[y]ou will be told what you are made ready to hear" (Itsuka 91), it is only after this dream, and its attendant revelations, that Naomi is prepared to receive proof of what she now believes to be true: that her mother's silence was loving. It was not a rejection of her.

Contained within Aunt Emily's package was an enigmatic grey cardboard folder, tied together with a red string. Earlier, when Naomi first returned home for her Uncle's funeral, she showed the letters inside the folder to Obasan, asking her to translate the Japanese script which she could not read. "'Everyone someday dies,'" had been Obasan's ambiguous response, but she had refused to break the silence and translate the letters which describe her mother's fate.

Written by Grandma Kato, in Japan with Naomi's mother in 1945, the letters immediately counter Obasan's insistence that "'Everything is forgetfulness'" (30). From a truly apocalyptic landscape, Grandma Kato writes:

> In the heat of the August sun, however much the effort to forget, there is no forgetfulness. As in a dream, I can still see the maggots crawling in the sockets of my niece's eyes. Her strong intelligent son helped me move a bonsai tree that very morning. There is no forgetfulness. (243)

The horror which she describes is graphic and devastating, the destruction a culmination of Naomi's deepest fears, hitherto enacted only in her dreams. The martinet has gained an awesome power and, backed by a pernicious and hateful bureaucracy, he has made real the landscapes of her nightmares.

After translating the letters, Nakayama begins to speak of divine love and forgiveness, but Naomi does not hear his consolations: "Gradually the room grows still and it is as if I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life" (240). But with the knowledge of her mother's fate, Naomi is now heeding more than the earth and the sky: she is attending the silence of her mother. The poetic meditation which follows enacts a reunion between Naomi and her beloved mother. She is able to accomplish what she challenged the Grand Inquisitor to do: she puts aside her own pain to enter her mother's suffering, and gently chides her for attempting to shelter her daughter from the knowledge of pain.

> You wish to protect us with lies, but the camouflage does not hide your cries. Beneath the hiding I am there with you. Silent Mother, lost in the abandoning, you do not share the horror. At first, stumbling and unaware of the pain, you open your eyes in the red mist and sheltering a dead child, you fled through the flames. Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there? (242)

The translation of the letters allows Naomi to approach her mother as an adult, in a loving but critical way. She affirms her regard for her mother's "tender heart," but moves beyond the silence which sought to protect by concealing: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our

silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (243). Naomi the adult narrator mentally displaces herself back in time, and inserts the memories of her mother's anguish into her four-year-old mind, to the photograph's scene on the street corner in Vancouver, and then into her Slocan nightmares. The powerful reaction that the photograph triggered a few days before is echoed here, with Naomi's description of the child being physically torn from the mother to whom she was joined:

> In the dark Slocan night, the bright light flares in my dreaming. I hear the screams and feel the mountain breaking. Your long black hair falls and falls into the chasm. My legs are sawn in half . . . The child is forever unable to speak. This child forever fears to tell . . . I beg that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs may learn to dance. But you stay in a photograph, smiling your yasashi smile. (242-3)

But now she views the photograph with the knowledge that her mother, too, kept a secret. And because she now knows of her mother's unequivocal love, Naomi is able to move beyond secrets and silence, beyond loss and abandonment, and recover a symbiotic connection with her mother: "I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here" (243).

Reading the documents in Aunt Emily's package, Naomi had remained ambivalent, even skeptical about the extent to which Emily's letters and lobbying, or words of any description, presented a solution. Words could not bring her mother back, she believed.

> All of Aunt Emily's words, all her paper, the telegrams and petitions, are like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity, scaly claws hard at work. But what good they do, I do not know--rain words, cloud droppings. They do not touch us where we are planted here in Alberta, our roots clawing the sudden prairie air. The words are not made flesh. Trains do not carry us home. Ships do not return again. All my prayers disappear into space. (189)

Taken literally, Naomi's words are correct. The trains which took her family to Slocan and to Granton can never return her to her childhood home; the ship bearing her mother and grandmother might well have "disappeared into space." Ultimately, and perhaps ironically, however, it is the "rain words" of Grandma Kato's letters which allow Naomi to reach across dimensions of pain, to reconnect with her mother.

In the final stages of a narrative act which is, as much as anything, an elegy and a requiesat, Naomi introduces a series of images which both enact and complete the cycle of grief she has experienced. In analyzing her dream, Naomi recalls the two ideographs which signify the word 'love.' The first is composed of the root words 'heart, 'hand,' and 'action,' and denote "love as hands and heart in action together" (228). The second, the ideograph for passionate love, is formed by 'heart,' 'to tell' and 'a long thread.' Naomi's narrative itself is analogous to the dance ceremony for the dead, performed in her dream by her family, which she describes as "a slow, courtly telling" (228). It is a telling which is mediated by the two dominant presences in her life, her two aunts, each of whom is represented in one ideograph of love. Silent Obasan's "resourceful hands" (160) which serve and guide, are "love as hands and

heart in action together." Emily embodies the ideograph for passionate love, the combination of 'heart,' 'to tell' and 'a long thread.' In Naomi's dream, the two images/influences are explicitly connected: the long thread is Obasan's ball of twine, painstakingly knotted together and saved, and it is attached to Aunt Emily's package, the collection of documents which allowed Naomi to begin her narrative. The result is the daughter's tale of the mother, whose "tale is a rose with a tangled stem" (228).

This narrative is presented as an act of love, in which Naomi combines Emily's vigorous search for truth with Obasan's lessons against being 'wagamama,' or 'selfish and inconsiderate.' As a child, faced by complex rituals of etiquette and respect, Naomi stated: "It is such a tangle trying to decipher the needs and intents of others" (128). Desperate most of all to understand her mother's absence, Naomi finally learns to translate her own silence of shame and abandonment into words. Gottlieb credits Naomi with "virtually reinventing language" (39), as the pervasive silence of a people, of family and of an individual becomes sound, in the unfolding of a narrative. That sound, in this novel, speaks of silence is a paradox which has troubled critics, many of whom have skirted the issue by discussing Obasan's poetic language. In an interview with Andrew Garrod, Kogawa states that in language "is an aspect of home" (151). It is only through the process of forming language into narrative, through articulating events covered by silence, and by actually speaking that silence that Naomi can free herself from the absence and longing of her childhood. Though she may still be silent, she is no longer silenced.

Notes to Chapter 1

[3] This refusal to remember is an echo of a larger silence which surrounds the events of the war. Within the Japanese Canadian community, there is a great reluctance to remember, but this is echoed in the attitudes of many white Canadians, particularly the government. On a visit to British Columbia, Naomi's family returns to the site of their internment twenty years later, only to find that all evidence of their time there, their houses, shops and churches, have been destroyed. Their entire existence in Slocan has been erased:

> The first ghosts were still there, the miners, people of the woods, their white bones deep beneath the pine-needled floor, their flesh turned to air. Their buildings--hotels, abandoned mines, log cabins--still stood marking their stay. But what of the second wave? What remains of our time there? . . . We looked for evidence of our having been in [the towns] . . . Where on the map or on the road was there any sign? Not a mark was left. (117)

Standing at the edge of a large hole where the town once stood, Aunt Emily states: "It was an evacuation all right. . . Just plopped here in the wilderness. Flushed out of Vancouver. Like dung drops. Maggot bait" (118). Emily's comment, while observing this site of her family's relocation, echoes an earlier scene in which the floorboards of a temporary internment residence are torn up to reveal a mass of maggots living in the manure under the foundations. The parallels to Naomi's adult life are clear: she has attempted to create an existence shored up by shaky foundations, which barely conceal secrets and unhealed wounds.

[4] What Naomi refers to as "the language of eyes" (47) is one way in which silence "speaks" in Obasan. But it is difficult for the reader to access such nonverbal communication in a textual medium. Nonverbal communication is a persistant theme in Obasan; see pages 56, 59, 128 and 170 for other examples.

[5] The scope and virulence of the Canadian governmental policies surpassed those of the neighbouring American government. While Americans of Japanese descent were also forcibly gathered and interned after the invasion of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans families were permitted to stay together, and they were able to return to the coast immediately following the war. Fearing reprisals from Japanese Canadians who had lost homes and property, Mackenzie King did not allow them to return to British Columbia until 1949, four years after the end of the war. For a more detailed account of the treatment of Japanese Canadians between 1941 and 1949, see Ken Adachi's The Enemy Within.

[6] Gurleen Grewall describes the excavations of memory which occur in Obasan as "[c]eremonial performances . . . [which] enact the process of loss and recovery" (142). In the past, Naomi was trapped by her inability to mourn; in the days preceding her uncle's funeral, she finally allows herself to remember, which enables her to mourn, and ultimately to forgive.

[7] For examples of Naomi's self-deprecating humour, see Obasan pages 7, 8 and 31-2.

[8] Is is the older Naomi who narrates these memories of her younger, naive and silent self. The central paradox of Obasan lies in Naomi's struggle to break through silence, at the same time as telling a story based on and driven by silence. In narrating the events of her childhood, Naomi is attempting to literally speak silence.

[9] The crisis of Obasan is precipitated by the death of an elderly woman's husband, and by the reality of that woman's own mortality. Naomi must acknowledge the looming possibility that she will soon lose another maternal figure, upon whom she has relied heavily: "She is tired today because of Uncle's death and because so many others are dying or have already died and the time is approaching for her" (182-3).

[10] Gottlieb argues that Naomi's dreams are reflective of her struggle for self-understanding. Gottlieb describes the progression which occurs in the dreams, from the monotony of repetitive physical labour in the first dream, to paralyzing fear in the second, to comprehension and resolution in the third. Each dream contains loss, alienation and the threat of violation which, Gottlieb argues, are described in terms of physical landscapes in Naomi's dreams, landscapes reminiscent of those in the Book of Revelation.

[11] King-kok Cheung refers to an article in which Kogawa states that she chose to place Obasan's name as the title of the book for precisely this reason: "If we never really see Obasan, she will always be oppressed" (qtd in Cheung 119). Her silent strength makes Obasan's suffering easy to overlook, particularly for those like Stephen, who scorns her traditional ways, or Mrs. Barker, who regards her with condescension (224). To disregard her pain, however, would be legitimate her victimization. Kogawa has made this impossible by foregrounding her importance.

[12] Shortly before her mother left, their loving, symbiotic relationship was dramatically ruptured by a secret. "I tell her everything," says four-year-old Naomi. "There is nothing about me that my mother does not know, nothing that is not safe to tell" (60). But this confident assertion is followed directly by a qualification: "Except that there is the one secret thing that emerges even now" (61). Old Man Gower insists that she not tell her mother, and her complicity in keeping this secret of her abuse at his hands severs her from her mother: "the mountain yawns as the chasm spreads. My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half" (65). It is not the physical separation of her mother's absence which divides them, so much as the barrier created by the silence which covers a secret.

Let me tell you a story. For all I have is a story.

Woman, Native, Other
Trinh T. Minh-ha

If Obasan depicts Naomi's struggle to overcome and articulate traumas hidden by silence (as well as that silence itself), then Disappearing Moon Cafe is Kae Ying Woo's attempt to cobble together her family history from a clamourous body of contradictory stories, rumours and archival fact. Silence, a dominant trope in Obasan, is present here too, though it manifests itself in Disappearing Moon Cafe in tightly controlled islands of secrecy, rather than the pervasive covering which shrouds Naomi's past. A fragmented and unchronological narrative told from numerous perspectives, Sky Lee's Disappearing Moon Cafe tells the story of four generations of a Canadian family with Chinese origins. The narrative is anchored in the present by Kae Ying Woo, a new mother whose previous concerns about her family identity intensify after the birth of her first child. Previously, she was able to exist in an uncertain middle ground: on one hand the only child of two devoted, if slightly distracted parents, on the other hand, the lightning rod for years of inter- and intragenerational conflict. For her son, however, she would like a more complete, coherent version of the past. Kae writes as both a mother and a daughter, the latter of which is fairly common, as Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy state in their introduction to Narrating Mothers: "we frequently learn less about what it is like to mother than about what it is like to be mothered, even when the author has both experiences" (2). Only after she becomes a mother does Kae write, but even then she does

not write as much about her experience of being a mother as of being the latest descendent in a line of vivid and passionate women.[13] (She refers to herself as "a newly delivered mother," possibly in reference to her decision to write.) Di Brandt describes Disappearing Moon Cafe as "an extended dialogue between Kae and her maternal ancestors" (130). Indeed, in her search to uncover the buried facets of her family's past, Kae focusses almost exclusively on her maternal history. Her experience of birth was terrifying, forcing her to reconsider the constructs of personal history as she has learned them: "A close scrape with death always makes us want to rethink our lives, or, to be more candid, to rewrite it wherever possible" (21), she states, candidly asserting one of the central tenets of this work--the slippery nature of truth. As narrator, Kae unites disparate elements into a cohesive story, but she also engages in a high degree of interpretation and manipulation. Her involvement in her own text increases, until finally her decisions and the decisions of the ancestors she describes become wholly interdependent. Like Naomi, Kae dramatically alters her engagement with history, allowing decisions made in the past to affect her life, and causing her own personal growth to reverberate backwards in time.

Like Obasan's Naomi, Kae has been waiting for something unknown, and her life has been dominated by the sense that the truth is being held just beyond her grasp:

> Ever since I can remember, I've been plagued with the feeling that something was going on that I didn't know about . . . when I was little, I refused to go to sleep because I had to stay up to wait for...it, I guess [sic]! . . . Now at 36, I'm

> still waiting. In fact, the feeling is even stronger. I am obsessed by it. 'It' makes me feel quite restless. I roam around my house and peer out of windows. I am quite uncertain as to what I need to see behind the blind slats which hide and hold me in. (121)

Naomi's question plagues her too, but she sees it as a devouring presence, rather than an itch at the corner of her consciousness. Naomi was able to frame her question much earlier in her life and much more clearly, but unlike Kae, could not articulate it until the age of thirty-six. Both narrators have lived their lives in constant deferral of their questions, Naomi by Obasan's silence, Kae by Beatrice and Keeman's refusal to answer.[14] (Only Morgan is eager to speak, but his facts are mired in vitriolic rants, steeped in two generations of hatred.) Kae underlines this sense of deferral by entitling the first chapter rather unambiguously "Waiting for Enlightenment."

"Why is it so hard to get answers to questions I've been asking all my life?" Kae demands (121). Her parents are reticent to discuss the unusual circumstances surrounding certain events in her family's past, such as Kae's Aunt Suzanne's death, or Morgan's tumultuous connection to the Wongs; and they have discouraged her from asking questions. Kae's mother flatly refuses to speak of the past, and her father will only "say a few words" (180). They have reinforced in Kae the impropriety of discussing personal events which are not happy and harmonious: "Maybe this is a chinese-in-Canada trait, a part of the great wall of silence and invisibility we have built around us" (180). Or, as Morgan sneers, "[t]hat's not very pristine chinese! Remember, if nobody speaks of it, then it never existed" (161). The deferral of knowledge, which has

"plagued" Kae since her childhood, is accompanied by the ominous underpinnings of a deliberate and elaborate network of secrets:

> I have a misgiving that the telling of our history is forbidden. . . . There is power in silence, as this is the way we have always maintained strict control against the more disturbing aspects in our human nature. (180)

But confined to a hospital room, and then to her home, after giving birth to her son Bobby, Kae begins to defy this generations-old dictum of silence.

During her convalescence, Kae pieces together an account of her family's carefully guarded past. She is alarmed at the extent to which her identity is tied to that of her family, and further alarmed at what that might mean, as she has long suspected herself to be possessed of "rather dubious parentage" (132). However, while claiming membership in a family whose past is so shrouded is frightening, the alternative is even more terrifying for Kae. In the chapter entitled "Feeding the Dead" (a section entirely scripted by the narrator), Kae has Suzanne begin by attributing Fong Mei's actions to her fear of being ejected from the comfort and security of the Wong family: "What can I say? She sold out to a generation of vipers...*She got scared of being with an orphan*" (185; emphasis mine). Even rebellious Suzanne, who wants nothing more than to "break out" (175), understands the importance of family in this structure. While studying with Hermia Chow in China, Kae imagines what it would be like to be her closest friend's sister, but when she thinks about being "the misplaced bastard daughter of a gangster and his moll," she decides "I would be afraid of an identity like that" (41). Greater than her fear of a being part of a potentially notorious family, Kae

worries that she is among those who condemn Hermia for her heritage because of her fears surrounding her own identity:

> What a coward I was! I was afraid of risks, and I had to cling to the ground, pebbly and jagged. I wallowed in petty detail and ignored the essence. Legitimate, traditional and conventional were the adjectives to wear in those days, especially when I suspected my own identity might be as defective. (41)

The irony is that while Hermia is openly regarded as illegitimate, Kae's supposedly respectable family has committed numerous subterfuges to preserve the external trappings of family honour, stretching thin the veneer of integrity. Kae will expose the charade.

Upon consideration, Kae concludes that her family is actually the sum of its secrets: "I also know by now that people are almost never what they seem. Some take longer than others to reveal themselves; some a whole lifetime; some never--they have that much to hide" (122). Morgan has already reached a similar conclusion, though in his bitterness he frames it more crudely: "A story full of holes . . . no wait! A family full of assholes . . . assholes plugged with little secrets" (160). After examining her new grandson closely (for what, Kae is still not sure), Beatrice finally tells Kae a complete version of the Wong family history, a story of the consequences of overreaching patriarchy, of inter- and intragenerational conflict, the details of which Kae claims to have already discovered: "The story--the well-kept secret I had actually unearthed years ago--finally begins to end for me with the birth of my son" (23). Kae's choice of words is indicative here: the story of her family does not merely contain secrets; it *is* secrets. Her history is

analogous to that which has been kept from her. Armed with this rather ominous definition, Kae's trepidation toward her kin is understandable.

A strong, legitimate family line lies at the heart of traditional Chinese society. In The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston states "a family must be whole, faithfully keeping the descent line by having sons to feed the old and the dead, who in turn look after the family" (13). Brought up within this custom, Kae still believes "it is important to keep a family strong and together, especially in this day and age" (20), but she has gradually seen her conception of a family, of her family, unravel. Despite what Kae has been taught, her family is not the sum total of its members, nor even of the carefully structured system of relationships which tie them together. "I'm so very disappointed," she writes, almost as an introduction to the story she is to tell:

> I've been brought up to believe in kinship or those with whom we share. I thought that by applying attention to all the important events such as the births and the deaths, the intricate complexities of a family with chinese roots could be massaged into a suant, digestible unit. Like a herbal pill--I thought I could swallow it and my mind would be enlightened. . . . So, having swallowed the pill, here I am, still waiting. For enlightenment. (19-20)

Previously, she had been able to find order and cohesion in her family by placing relatives in a carefully constructed family tree, a map of relationships both biological and social. But the order this had once offered is gone by the time Kae relates her story, and she resorts to various rhetorical stances designed to disguise or to deflect her growing ambivalence and confusion. In her rising fear, she focusses on the

women and almost entirely ignores the men. Tracing her own descent through the women rather than the men in her family, Kae asserts a personal heritage which is more matrilineally based. In his discussion of Asian Canadian women's writing, Bennett Lee attempts to account for this tendency in terms of values transplanted from China:

> Husbands and fathers do not fare well because of the prevailing cultural bias in favour of male heirs and what this meant for women, who were expected to conduct their lives accordingly--that is, to defer to their fathers, obey their husbands and give birth to sons. Not surprisingly, men are alternately portrayed as abusive, authoritarian, arrogant, demanding, irresponsible and childish. (6)

But while this observation is generally true of the men in Disappearing Cafe Moon, any of Bennett Lee's adjectives may be equally attributed to the women: if Gwei Chang is aloof, Mui Lan is domineering; Chuk Foy's immaturity is balanced by Fong Mei's maliciousness; and Keeman's credulity is matched by Beatrice's romanticism.

Kae goes one step further than Lee's description suggests: she marginalizes the men completely. With the possible exception of Gwei Chang, whose story provides the narrative's frame, men are eclipsed in textual importance by their female counterparts. Beatrice and Suzanne are prominent, while their brother John is barely mentioned, despite the fact that he is "the coveted boy" (135). Keeman's father remains at the shadowy edge of the narrative, and his first name is never revealed. Kae's son and husband are also almost entirely invisible. Though she does state "[a]t least what they say about childbirth is true--that it's always worth it no matter how hard it was" (23), even this apparently

straightforward statement is rather enigmatic. While it is not under debate whether or not Kae loves her son, he is named, and that is all. Both Kae's husband Henry and their newborn, Bobby, act more as catalysts than as actual characters in her narrative. Henry appears in only one scene, as the object of her frustration.[15] In "Silent Mothers/Noisy Daughters," Di Brandt makes the important observation that that Kae's emphasis on the emotions and motivations of the female characters threatens to invert the narrative structure (130). Disappearing Moon Cafe is contained within the framing prologue and epilogue, both dominated by Gwei Chang, and initially the avaricious and scheming Mui Lan and Fong Mei are contrasted with this calm and balanced patriarchal figure. However, Kae's increasing empathy for her grandmother and great-grandmother dismantles this dichotomy.

When discussing her ancestry, Kae attempts to trace her family back through a line of women, relating herself to her mother, her mother's sister and her maternal grandmother (19). Kae is distancing herself from a familial structure that demands male progeny, valuing women only for ability to produce such, and attempting to redress the balance in her emphasis on her female relatives. In discussing the branches of the family as two such distinct entities, she also draws attention to the unavoidable comparisons between them. Her paternal lineage is disjointed and incomplete, and it is significant that when she enacts the ritual of cataloguing her relatives, she here refers to them only their formal titles, conspicuously omitting their names:

> My paternal grandmother, or Ngen Ngen, had three children--only my father survived. Both Ngen Ngen and my paternal grandfather, or Lo Yeh, came from destitute backgrounds, torn

> from starving families too feeble to stay together--but since they had lost contact with those left for dead in China over half a century ago, there isn't much for me to remember about that side of the family. (19-20)

This description stands in stark contrast to the continuity which informs Kae's description of her mother's lineage (see my page 60). It is not surpassing, therefore, that Kae sees herself as the product of a family of women: "My mother's side is more vibrant to my way of thinking" (20), she states.

The process of tracing and reciting one's maternal lineage is a theme which Nan Bauer Maglin identifies as characteristic of "the literature of matrilineage" (258). But Kae cannot claim a strong guiding maternal presence, like Maxine Hong Kingston's mother Brave Orchid, nor has she access to an unbroken (if somewhat mythical) ancestry of women, like Hiromi Goto's narrator in A Chorus of Mushrooms. Kingston is negotiating a path between her desire for individuality (in opposition to her dominating mother, Brave Orchid, who preserves and passes on the chinese cultural heritage) and her need for acceptance within a family and a culture which devalues women. She retells a sequence of stories which she has received from Brave Orchid, who is recognized as a "champion talker" (202). Kingston's revision and reinterpretation of these stories is on one hand a rejection of her mother's version of reality; but equally, it is an acknowledgment that she has inherited her skill in the "talk story" from her mother. Their stories are interdependent, and when Kingston states "I am practically the first daughter of a first daughter" (109), she is claiming her place among the warrior woman of her real and mythic families.

Goto's narrator, raised by a mother who refused to speak anything but her adopted English, could not communicate with her Japanese grandmother until adulthood. Like Kingston's Maxine, she both asserts her individuality and reclaims her heritage by retelling and reinterpreting stories she has been given, allowing her to claim with assurance that she is "[t]he daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter. . . . the list is endless" (52; punctuation Goto's). Kingston and Goto are situating themselves within a strong matrilineal lineage, particularly asserting the connection between mother and daughter. This bond is embodied in the interrelated acts of remembering and of telling. Trinh Minh-ha identifies the connection between these creative acts and the bond they forge among women:

> I memorize, recognize and name my source(s), not to validate my voice through the voice of authority (for we, women, have little authority in the History of Literature, and wise women never draw their powers from authority), but to evoke her and sing. The bond between women and word. Among women themselves. To produce their full effect, words must, indeed, be chanted rhythmically, in cadences, off cadences. (Woman, Native, Other 122)

Kae attempts to create such a bond, reciting her history in a map of relationships. (Interestingly enough, she will later follow Trinh's directive even more completely: in the section entitled "Feeding the Dead," she evokes the spirits of her maternal relatives, alive and deceased, and binds them together with a chant.) However, her desire to feel connected to these women is still at odds with her suspicion that

she is not in possession of the full story, and this results in an account laden with ambiguity:

> All my life I have been faithfully told, and I have also respectfully remembered. My maternal grandmother, for whom the chinese term is Poh Poh, had one son and two daughters. Her son, my uncle, whom I must address as A Queu, married a girl from Jung Saan district, whom I must call A Queu-Mu, to indicate that she is my auntie by marriage. She had three walloping huge baby girls. Poh Poh's eldest daughter, my mother, had me--her only child and a scrawny one at that. Poh Poh's younger daughter, my blood aunt, died of pneumonia as a young woman, when I was still a baby. She didn't ever marry or multiply. (19)

While most of this paragraph consists of a factual and objective listing of family members, the final two statements are more suspect in their veracity: Kae's aunt, her mother's younger sister, died neither childless, nor entirely due to pneumonia. In fact, as Kae is well aware by this point in her life/narration, her Aunt Suzanne gave birth to what Kae describes as "the final irony--the last male Wong child," who died shortly after the delivery (146), and Suzanne's own death was due to complications contracted after her subsequent suicide attempt (214). Kae frequently engages in such provisional truths, purposely omitting or altering facts. Such statements are surely for the reader's benefit, possibly underlining the elusive nature of truth in the novel.[16] As this paper will discuss in more detail later, these instances of narrative ambiguity mirror the complexity and secrecy of the relationships within the Wong family.

Family Secrets: "There is power in silence"

All of Kae's complex chronologies and interwoven tales, her melodramatic outbursts and her rationalizations are merely tactics to forestall the dramatic revelations which lie at the heart of the story. The achronological narrative circles around carefully hidden decisions which precipitate the events within the story. The first secret, belonging to Gwei Chang, is rooted in the prologue. As a young man, newly arrived in Canada, he is summoned by the Benevolent Associations and sent on a mission to recover the bones of Chinese railway workers which are scattered throughout the forested mountains. Almost delirious after days of wandering without food or shelter, he meets Kelora Chen, who nurses him back to health, and with whom he lives for three years. When he eventually leaves for Victoria, it is ostensibly to return the bones for proper burial, but Gwei Chang is also responding to a letter from his mother in China, exhorting him to fulfill his duty as the eldest son and choose a wife from his village.

The first secret is Gwei Chang's: he tells no one of his love for Kelora, and his subsequent abandonment of her and of their son, Ting An. His decision to hide these years of his life comes to bear upon his children with serious consequences, and the generations which follow begin the complicated and destructive series of liaisons and relationships which form the maze of Kae's family plot.

In her essay entitled "Chant of the Storyteller," Patricia Linton observes that "[i]n each generation, the possibility of love is corrupted by familial obligation" (6). Gwei Chang returns to China to marry Mui

Lan, who also bears him a son (this one "legitimate"), but he spends the rest of his life regretting his decision to leave Kelora. Fong Mei bears three children by Ting An over a period of eight years (their affair continues even after Ting An marries, for his son Morgan is a year older than Fong Mei's youngest daughter Suzanne), but she remains with her husband to raise her family. Of all the Wong women, Suzanne is the least compromising, the least complicit.[17] To her sister Beatrice, she is adamant about her independence: "Remember when Mom told us to smile, you used to smile the widest? Nope, for me it was too much like selling my soul!" (172). But Suzanne's affair with Morgan is betrayed by decisions made before their birth. Even Kae has played her part, marrying a man the family (presumably) approves of, and being the "token, pregnant, ethnic woman" at work (123).

Love is certainly sacrificed in the interests of the family. But these women do more than simply conform; they actively work towards the goals which secure their continued subjugation. Linton attributes this to "the ways ideology makes individuals, particularly women, complicit in their own oppression" (2). Eager, desperate even, to preserve the honour of the Wong family, Mui Lan and the matriarchs that follow participate in a series of subterfuges which bind them to silence. (Complicity in patriarchy creates secrets, and a secret begets more secrets.) Despite the heavy burdens the Wong name imposes upon the women of Kae's family, each makes significant sacrifices to uphold its status, perhaps understanding what Fong Mei's sister once wrote to her in a letter: "Our lives belong to strangers" (45). Each has internalized Mui Lan's malicious assertion that women are only vessels to bear male children to continue the name: "The daughters-in-law who bore them were unidentified

receptacles" (31). From Kelora's abandonment to Mui Lan's uncompromising rule to Fong Mei, whom Kae states "had an ostentatious way of being secretive" (52), to Beatrice's withdrawal from the world, each generation of women is trapped in circumstances only partially of their own making. (Hence Kae takes on the role of storyteller, rather than as a vehicle or conduit for story.) Kae's friend Hermia asks:

> Grown women are children, are we not? We have been broken from our mother's arms too soon and made to cling to a man's world--which refuses to accept us--as best we can, any how we can. And of course, let me tell you, many of us are just clinging on by the skin of our teeth. (138)

Linton encapsulates this process of entrapment: "if each of them has been a victim, each has also been complicit in her own oppression--and worse, an agent by whom other women were oppressed" (7). The women in Kae's family have been co-opted into continuing the cycle of oppression, or, as Suzanne states, "[t]hey just want to con you into the same crap they got conned into" (176).[18]

The complicity begins with Mui Lan, who is silenced even before her arrival in Canada: "She was simply the mother of Gwei Chang's only son. Stamped on her entry papers: 'A merchant's wife'" (28). Of course, the most painful irony is that she cannot even lay claim to this title, for she not the mother of Gwei Chang's only son, nor even of his eldest son. "A wife in name only, she relied heavily on him for her identity in this land" (28); her relationship with her husband is more comparable to a business partnership than a love match, despite her desire for mutual understanding, if not passion. After only six months together, they are separated for sixteen years until he sends for her. Her excitement at

the prospect of joining her husband in Canada is comparable to being a "new bride all over again," but she is unprepared for the solitude of the new world:

> She looked around for women to tell her what was happening, but there were none. By herself she lacked the means to know what to do next. Without her society of women, Mui Lan lost substance. Over the years, she became bodiless, or was it soulless, and the only way she could come back was by being noisy and demanding--because if she was nothing else, she was still the boss's wife, wasn't she? (26)

Lacking the company of other women, Mui Lan realizes that she can control those who share her exile in the new world; she struggles against them, and enslaves them, most directly Fong Mei.[19]

Still childless after five years of marriage to Choy Fuk, Fong Mei is frequently subjected to her mother-in-law's wrath over her supposed barrenness: "You definitely have no right to stand in the way of my son's son," Mui Lan hisses at her (59). As her mother-in-law repeatedly reminds her, Fong Mei was brought to Canada at considerable risk and expense, and has still not fulfilled her primary function in the family. "What are you but just a woman!" Mui Lan shrieks at her.

> But my great-grandmother was a woman too. What did she mean by that? Was she referring to the substance we as women have to barter away in order to live? In order to live with men? In the male order? Then what was I referring to? How we turn on ourselves, squabbling desperately among ourselves about our common debasement? Branding self-hatred across our foreheads--I wonder how deeply it seared into Fong Mei's

> flesh. And how willingly we fuel the white fire with which to scar other women. What choices did she have? Like so many hoards of women, didn't my grandmother consent to give away her own destiny? Who but women would do that? (63)

In Of Woman Born, Adrienne Rich considers the extent to which women's identities are subsumed into their capacity to bear children. After Kelora, all of the Wong women are defined in relation to their husbands and children, but the notable exception is Old Man Chen, who is known as "Father of Little Kelora" (73). Kelora is the last woman in the family to marry completely for love (she is also not Chinese); because she exists outside of the family's linear (respectable) structure, she is deliberately forgotten, written out, until she is merely an elusive but haunting spectre.[20]

Mui Lan is able to control her daughter-in-law entirely, because until Fong Mei has a child, Mui Lan is the sole mother in the household. "No matter how much you do, you have done nothing until you have given a son to us" (61), she states emphatically. "Fong Mei was being punished, not for something she had done, but for some apparent blank part of her" (61). Rich examines the notion, encoded into the very language of gender differentiation, that it is almost impossible to describe a woman without referring in some way to her relationship (or lack thereof) to a family:

> In the interstices of language lie powerful secrets of the culture. Throughout this book I have been thrown back on terms like 'unchilded,' 'childless,' or 'child-free;' we have no familiar, ready-made name for a woman who defines herself, by choice, neither in relation to children or men, who is self-identified, who has chosen herself.

> 'Unchilded,' 'childless' simply define her in terms of a lack; even 'child-free' suggests only that she has refused motherhood, not what she is about *in and of herself*. The notion of the 'free woman' is strongly tinged with the suggestion of sexual promiscuity, of 'free love.' (249)

"What do you call a childless woman?" asks Adrienne Rich. Mui Lan frames her answer in slightly different terms, isolating the childless part of her daughter-in-law, and making a rather lewd reference to "your stinky thing" (59).

There must be children to carry on the name, but since the possibility of male sterility cannot be acknowledged (by the mothers, interestingly enough), offspring must be acquired through alternate means. Mui Lan pushes both her son and her daughter-in-law into clandestine relationships which produce progeny whose true parentage cannot be admitted. With the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act preventing any new immigration for a whole generation, it becomes increasingly difficult to prevent the children of these secret liaisons from intermarrying: "The rapidly diminishing chinese-canadian community had withdrawn into itself, ripe for incest," states Kae (147). However, because none of this can be acknowledged, sterility, illegitimacy and incest remain unspoken.

Attempting to understand her great-grandmother's elaborate machinations, Kae identifies the patriarchal imperative which drives Mui Lan:

> My dumb great-granny! I don't know why she wasn't asking more relevant questions, like where does one go for comfort and relief from such a barren life? . . . Besides, her

> motives were ordinary enough. She wanted a grandson to fulfill the most fundamental purpose to her life. A baby with a brow as clear and as promising as his future. A boy who came from her son, who came from her husband, who also came lineally from that golden chain of male to male. (31)

The irony is sharp and cruel when it is revealed to the reader that this "clear" and "golden" line that Mui Lan is desperate to continue is considerably more twisted and tarnished than she could possibly know, even before she takes a hand in its progress. The "golden chain," ironically does not exist at all among the men, whose birthright is tangled, tainted and concealed. It is the women who have forged a chain, but at great cost (and it is Kae who tells of it, thereby revealing and strengthening the chain). "What is this Wong male lineage that had to be upheld at such a human toll?" demands Fong Mei (189). She knows the price that women pay for their complicity: "Women, whose beauty and truth were bartered away, could only be mirrored, hand-held by husbands and men; they don't even like to think that they can claim their children to be totally their own" (189). And she herself is not spared. While still young and in love, Fong Mei looks with contempt upon Song Ang, her husband's unwilling mistress:

> To Fong Mei, the waitress belonged to that other class of women--the one without male patronage, barely existing, mute in their misery. It never occurred to her to think how she herself was silenced by luxury. (92)

Years later, she does consider this, trapped in an unhappy marriage in a country she detests. Years later, she is painfully aware of the price she paid for her complicity:

> I was given the rare opportunity to claim [my children] for myself, but I sold them, each and every one, for property and respectability. I tainted their innocence with fraud. Even more contemptible, in order to do that, I had to corrupt the one chance at true love I ever had. (189)

Kae remembers visiting her grandmother when she was a child, and observes that "even then I could feel how trapped she was as an old woman" (174).

The desire for prosperity and posterity which fuels this complicity generates a madness--a madness which reaches through generations, to all branches of the family. It is born out of the silence which shrouds Kae's past and is fueled by the ongoing complicity which strives to ensure that those secrets remain hidden:

> I wonder too, about the volatile lunacy that wasn't my great-grandmother's alone, but lurks in our peasant backgrounds, in our rustic language. This craziness that drove many beyond the brink of destruction. Agonizing passion worth more than life itself, then dragging still more along that black road of anguish and quiet after the suicide. (63)

The pressure of maintaining these secrets feeds the madness; in her confusion, Kae dryly states:

> Too bad for my family that money couldn't buy long life (prosperity couldn't buy posterity either); too bad for me, I could have simply asked. Instead of dead, silent ancestors who kept hanging by a million possible threads, someone would have told me, I'm sure. Instead of Morgan busy fraying the

> tapestry, I could have claimed my righteous inheritance to a pure bloodline. (66)

As demonstrated earlier, Obasan's silences also profoundly affect Naomi's mental health. However, whereas Naomi has grown into a tightly reserved, even dysfunctional adult, Kae has inherited her grandmother and great-grandmother's susceptibility to explosive, even violent outburst. (Rita Wong observes that Kae's "full-of-exclamation-marks language" may make one "wince," but acknowledges that she effectively conveys a sense of urgency in telling her story [135].) Naomi's quiet, intensely private breakdown preceding her uncle's funeral contrasts starkly with Kae's highly vocal struggle to know her past, but their goals are comparable: both strive to articulate events long silenced.

This madness is one of the primary catalysts behind the narrative, which is structured around four generations of men and women who struggle with frustration, fear and ultimately mental instability. It is Gwei Chang's fear, terror even, of poverty and starvation that leads him to leave Kelora.[21] He becomes wealthy and respected in Vancouver's Chinese community, but he pays for this prosperity with his own happiness:

> For a brief moment, he remembered a time when he soared beyond all human reach. But the feeling passed, as it always did, and he was left again behind, always disappointed, always dazed. He couldn't bring himself to face what his life had come to. A roomful of anxious men. (78)

The epilogue opens with Gwei Chang sitting in his sun-warmed garden, surrounded by his great-grandchildren, but this scene of domesticity offers him no peace. He is plagued by remorse, and when he closes his eyes, he sees only "submerged violence," turbulence which he himself has

set in motion (218). The subsequent generations swing closer to the precipice, verging on and even descending into madness. When Beatrice and Keeman announce their engagement, Suzanne describes Fong Mei's reaction: "my eyes riveted onto my mother's face. There was insanity there. Without one speck of doubt in my mind, I could see it clear as day" (193). Even Beatrice, outwardly calm and competent, is affected by the madness:

> As a child, I used to look up from my play when [Beatrice's] music stopped, to watch her at the piano. And there, behind her shut eyelids, was a kind of insanity--sometimes bleak but also full of creativity and possibilities. I knew she was happiest there, in that faraway place she had finally escaped to. (145)

This madness, which Kae refers to as the family's "volatile lunacy," culminates in Suzanne's attempted suicide, an event which is raised obliquely on a number of occasions, but which is never entirely reconstructed during the narrative. A comparable, and equally prevalent madness pervades The Woman Warrior.[22] In her study entitled Maternity, Mortality and the Literature of Madness, Marilyn Yalom argues that Maxine Hong Kingston finds her sanity by assembling and narrating her family's stories, literally "talk[ing] her way out of madness" (100), a description which can equally be applied to Kae.

The secrets and, Kae fears, the madness, have reached into her life like "evil tentacles" (23), making her, too, complicit in the ongoing struggle to maintain the patriarchal lineage. She perceives her childhood as a series of coercions: "I get tricked all the time. Now I've found out nobody has told me the truth about anything!" (20) She

was "conned" into getting good marks in school, into finding a husband, and finally into having children. She refers to newborn Bobby as he is related to her mother, rather than to herself; he is a continuation of that golden chain: "Great melodrama, a stiffened mother, a stoned daughter and a sleeping newborn grandson together in a hospital room" (22). Timidly battling an identity crisis which has plagued her since childhood, Kae finally makes a decision when her son is born. She vows to smooth her tangled relationship with her present by coming to terms with her past:

> At home, I must work at unravelling knots--knots in hair, knots in my stomach. Knots of guilt; knots of indecision. Knots in our dainty gold chains. Figurative knots in our children's shoelaces. Do not panic lest we get more tangled! We must pick, trace, coax and cajole each knot out. One at a time, even when we know there are hundreds more. (123)

Paradoxically, Kae forges a chain by unravelling knots.

Kae chooses to fight both her personal identity crisis and her complicity in the family's ongoing silence by becoming a writer. Her "most precious secret," for everyone in Disappearing Moon Cafe has one, is that she has wanted for years to write (160). In doing so, she hopes to give voice to the silent and silenced women who have been erased from signification as surely as Maxine Hong Kingston's No Name Woman. That Kae's decision is made after the delivery of her son is not coincidental: motherhood is frightening, and messy in ways she could not have even imagined, but art gives her a degree of control and of choice. After a series of hints, it is made explicitly clear that the text we are reading is her novel in progress, a book entitled Disappearing Moon Cafe:

> To see one woman disintegrate is tragic, but to watch an entire house fall--that has the makings of a great chinese tragedy. I know I've had to turn my face away many times. In front of me, there is nothing to speak of except torpid text and a throbbing cursor on a black and white computer screen--electric shadows. (197)

As narrator, she has immense privilege: editing, interpreting and mediating five generations of her family's relationships.

Initially, anger and confusion are Kae's primary motivations, and as such, she must resist the temptation to assign blame, particularly to Mui Lan: "I should reexamine my own motives. Why do I need to make this ancestress the tip of the funnelling storm, the pinnacle that anchored chaos and destruction close to earth?" (31) On one hand, she is ravenously curious about "the smut and the guilt. And who is to blame for the little lost babies" (132). She believes Suzie's death occurs as a direct result of the "layer upon layer of filigreed lies" (163): "I've landed up paying dearly for their deeds, and I know of others who've paid with their lives" (31-2), she states accusingly. But she moves beyond needing to assign guilt to any one person for the pain she has inherited.

> Funny how I can get so protective of the women in my family, how I can give them all sorts of excuses for their littering. In the telling of their stories, I get sucked into criticizing their actions, but how can I allow my grandmother and great-grandmother to stay maligned? Perhaps, as Hermia suggested, they were ungrounded women, living with displaced chinamen, and everyone trapped by circumstances. I prefer to romanticize them as a lineage of women with passion and

> fierceness in their veins. In each of their woman-hating worlds, each did what she could. (145)

As she is keenly aware, the "lost babies grow up. . . . And when they do, they come back with those little-gotten-big baby urges, looking for those who had lost them to begin with" (132). Kae's project in writing her family's story is an attempt to unravel "year after year of tightly knotted lies" (149). This image is revealed to be more and more appropriate as the narrative progresses, as lies cause the storylines/family lines to do exactly that: they double back upon themselves, become entangled with each other, become irrevocably bound in a complex network of half-revealed truths and unspeakable lies.

Narrative Intrusion: "This I do imagine"

The story being told is rooted in 1986, what for Kae is the present, and is gradually revealed through a series of flashbacks to scenes of her past and that of her family. The distance of the story from the narrative present is immediately asserted: "This was in 1892, the beginning of the retrieval of bones, which lasted well into the 1930s" (16). In emphasizing her own temporal distance from events, even those in which she was personally involved, Kae is foregrounding the degree to which memory influences the text. Told almost one hundred years after the events which begin it, Disappearing Moon Cafe is strongly mediated by Kae's memories, as well as her own understanding of the stories as they are told to her.

She is aware, as narrator, that she must rely on the memories of others to construct much of the story; she must also (like Naomi) contend with the problems inherent in attempting to narrate, as an adult, events which involved her younger, more naive self. In the section entitled "Hermia Chow (1971)," Kae recalls "I was terribly young and brittle then" (39). Describing her attraction to Morgan Wong, she writes "Nineteen years ago, I had just arrived at home, dripping wet from school when the phone rang. . . . I was seventeen at the time and of course frightfully sentimental" (64). In making such statements, Kae is raising the possiblity of her own unreliability as a narrator, and calling into question the authenticity of her text, or at very least, sections of it. This is a narrative heavily informed by the memories of those involved, and Kae struggles with the degree to which memory is a creative act rather than an objective recreation.

Because of the scope encompassed in her narrative, Kae has compiled her material from several sources, sources with differing and occasionally conflicting agenda. Kae has learned some of the story from Morgan, who is obsessed with uncovering and sermonizing on his past. She recognizes his strong bias, and labels one of the sections he tells her simply "Story," clearly identifying him as the source, and separating it from the surrounding text (136-7).[23] Seto Chi, her childhood nanny (whom Kae refers to as "my other mother" [127]), is uncomfortable discussing "old wounds," but she is an important source of information for Kae, and her version of events is sometimes privileged within the narrative: "I prefer Chi's version of the story. With Chi, there is no discussion; reality is what it is. Very imperfect, like our perception of it" (132). When Beatrice finally tells her version of the story in the hospital, this marks the beginning of the synthesis for Kae, but even here, the account is incomplete. "It took quite the sentimental occasion for my mother to finally loosen a little of her iron grip on her emotions to reveal a little of the past that she thought so shameful," Kae writes (23). She must rely on her own understanding of the stories she gathers, and further, on her ability to assess and incorporate each of the versions into her narrative. Storytelling, after all, is a creative act, as Kae herself acknowledges early in the text (21).

In addition to these partially unreliable sources, there are sections of the story about which she simply cannot be versant. Though she resists the tendency to fill in these blanks, she does occasionally take imaginative leaps, inventing what she was not present to witness. She maintains a careful balance between retrieving and reinventing the facts. The result is a narrative disruption not seen in Obasan. With

varying degrees of intrusion, Kae interprets events and stories, and speaks about and even for her ancestors until they fit into her version of her family's past, providing a narrative which accounts for what she perceives to be inconsistencies and incompatibilities in what she knows of the past.

Although occasionally Kae calls attention to her own fabrication, and to the necessity of each invention,[24] she generally steps back from the narrative in these instances, allowing a third person voice to surface. This occurs during the chapters which focus on Gwei Chang, but most vividly in the prologue and epilogue, sections whose tone is markedly different from the rest of the book. These are the only two segments which Kae does not overtly narrate. Rather, Kae focalizes the narrative entirely from Gwei Chang's perspective (the prologue opens "He remembered . . ."), and it is his memories and desires which provide the frame for Kae's text. Generations of silence, held in place by a network of complicity, result in a series of shifting, occasionally contending and contradictory stories; from this patchwork emerges Kae's narrative, her response to secrecy.

It is appropriate, if ironic, that when Kae begins to tell this story, gathered from widely varying sources and pieced together over many years, she begins by actively participating in the family's cycle of secrets:

> The story began, I guess, with my great-grandmother, Lee Mui Lan, sometime in June 1924, as she stood behind the counter of the even now famous Disappearing Moon Cafe, 50 East Pender Street, Vancouver, BC. (23)

However, as her introduction has already illustrated, the story actually begins thirty years before Mui Lan's appearance in Canada, and before the establishment of the Disappearing Moon Cafe; it actually begins in the wilderness of the Rocky Mountains, in "the forests of 'the hidden place'" (13). But Kelora is Gwei Chang's well-kept secret, and with the exception of the prologue and epilogue, she is almost completely absent from the text. In formally beginning her telling of the story in this way, Kae temporarily maintains the oldest secret in her family, containing it within the frame of her narrative; but in doing so, she also calls attention to the extent of the secrecy. June 1924 is when the "official" story begins, but like Naomi, Kae battles against accepted and patently false narratives, against secrets which have been maintained for generations.

From a narrative perspective, Kae must resolve the overriding problem of the silence which surrounds key events in her family's past. She immediately engages with the secrecy, hinting at the tangle that is to come when she begins to describe her lineage: "[Fong Mei's] husband, my maternal grandfather, or Gong Gong, puts me in a bit of a dilemma, because the family tree gets tricky here. Let's just say for now that Gong Gong died in 1972, maybe 1942" (20). (At this point, the reader has no way of knowing what Kae is alluding to: that her biological grandfather is her grandmother's lover, Ting An, not her husband, Choy Fuk.) As narrator, Kae maintains this balance for much of the text, providing clues but carefully withholding facts, developing her labyrinthine plot to echo the entangled relationships of her family tree. Chi's response to the nurse in Suzanne's hospital ward is only half

mocking: "If the nurse-in-charge asks you, say you're related," to which Chi answers "All chinese are" (207).

In her review for West Coast Line, Rita Wong observes that "Disappearing Moon Cafe is structurally as intricate as its characters' relationships" (135). Kae further compounds this complexity by her subtle blending of voice and perspective. Even those segments of the text which are apparently told in a neutral, third-person voice are actually propelled and mediated by Kae. She often scripts thoughts or words for Mui Lan or Fong Mei which allow her to add a layer of irony to the secret she is simultaneously revealing, as in the passage in which Mui Lan worries: "If Keeman, then who else! No, she made herself stop though. She could see for herself that her grandson John was the splitting image of Gwei Chang. It was obvious that John was his grandson" (168). Of course, John's grandfather is Gwei Chang, but his biological father is Kelora's son Ting An, not Mui Lan's son Choy Fuk. An even subtler example of this ironic commentary occurs earlier: "[Fong Mei] used to say that there was absolutely no future for Beatrice, John and Suzanne in Vancouver, growing up dark-skinned and as wild as indians in this backwater settlement" (140). Though the reader is not yet aware of this (and Fong Mei and Beatrice are similarly ignorant), the three children are actually a quarter native.[25] The layers of Kae's mediation become increasingly intricate, to the point that even some critics cannot distinguish who is speaking. Graham Huggan, whose article is otherwise notable for its relative complexity, mistakenly attributes Kae's "I" for Beatrice's in an extended passage in which the narrator discusses her motivations (Huggan 41). (Ironically, this error occurs immediately

prior to Huggan's conclusion that Kae's text lacks reliability and authenticity, seriously undermining his criticism of the text.)

Kae's overt, occasionally obtruding narrative style forces an examination of the extent to which her consciousness informs the narrative. She has already admitted that perceptions of reality are imperfect (132), and acknowledges that memory and storytelling are both creative acts: the retrieval of facts is balanced by narrative reinvention, history by melodrama. She is clearly not an impartial narrator, frequently referring to people as they are related to her. She writes that "Fong Mei had two more children, including the coveted boy, my uncle John" (135). Beatrice is often referred to as "my mother" (131, 140, 180) and Fong Mei is "my mother's mother" (140). At one point, she even switches registers within the same passage: "Privilege would always be Beatrice's divine right because she had no concept of mediocrity, neither her own nor the rest of the world's. Mother never understood poverty" (145). Qualifiers such as "I've often wondered" and "I understand as follows" occur more and more frequently as the novel progresses, as she interrupts to qualify or comment upon others' actions.

The first indication of her strong narrative presence occurs at the beginning of the section entitled "Lee Mui Lan": Mui Lan greets two laundresses, both of whom have babies strapped to their backs, who come to pick up linen from Disappearing Moon Cafe. They converse about the restaurant business, but the conversation inevitably turns to babies. When the women leave, Kae's narrative resumes: "With a drawn out sigh, [Mui Lan] deflated until her head dropped onto her chest again. After five years, three months and eighteen days, you'd think the old bag would

get tired of the same old remark" (25). Kae's description of Fong Mei is similarly startling in its intrusion:

> This I do imagine. She was once a woman with finely tuned instincts, like cat's ears pointed in what I still believe were the right directions. She also had her own pure motives; at least mother-in-law and daughter-in-law shared that. In fact, I like to think of her in these terms: every rule has its own exception, right? Well if Mui Lan was the overbearing rule, then Fong Mei was her pretty little exception. (38)

These interruptions become increasingly jarring and judgemental as the narrative progresses, and as such, approximate the diagetic register of Chinese in the novel.

In such instances, Kae often adopts a tone of melodrama and mock outrage. Morgan, in particular, evokes this response from her, and many of their scenes together are characterized by frenetically emotional, almost hysterical narration. Reviewers such as Joshua Mostow have observed that this melodramatic tone may present difficulties for a Western audience. However, as Rita Wong argues, the exclamation-ridden urgency is a balanced, even necessary reaction for a narrator struggling so hard to overcome generations of secrets and silence (136). Bennett Lee also broaches this issue, locating the origins of Kae's melodrama in the Chinese popular oral tradition (4). He praises her ability to combine a soap opera aesthetic with both Cantonese opera and the Chinese Canadian experience, blending them into a "domestic melodrama" (4). But Graham Huggan is the only critic to explore this issue in any depth, examining the effects of melodrama on the narrative. In "The Latitudes

of Romance," Huggan argues that melodrama is a function of the romantic excesses found in both Chinese and Canadian popular culture, and that this extravagance allows the narrator to overstep proscribed limits which others have imposed upon her life (38). It is in precisely these instances that Kae goes beyond merely relating facts; in these sections of the narrative, she struggles most vigorously to overcome silences, and in doing so, to integrate what she believes with what she knows.

Kae carefully sets her scenes, establishing real and symbolic links between generations and describing events in her ancestors' lives with clarity and sensitivity. On a number of occasions, however, she closes these vignettes with brutally abrupt statements which border on blithe dismissal. In the section entitled "Hermia Chow 1971," Kae shows her friend a box of letters she has retrieved--Fong Mei's letters to her sister back in China:

> In her carefully constructed schoolgirl calligraphy, my grandmother poured out all of her feelings but only some of her secrets to her older, married sister. At the time, Fong Mei was not quite 17, and her sister barely 19. They were very close to each other. I used to hear much about the huge fortune Poh Poh spent travelling back to see her, and the big risks she took, first with Canadian immigration, then with chinese communists, trying to get her sister out. *Then one died and the other got too old, didn't want to leave the village.* (41; emphasis mine)

A comparable narrative intrusion occurs much later in the work, when Kae describes both the beginning and end of Fong Mei and Ting An's

relationship, collapsing years of suffering into a single flippant observation:

> Like the ten courses at a wedding banquet, Ting An surrendered his whole being to her. In childlike delight, he exposed his most tender parts to her alone. And Fong Mei, perhaps already a woman of the flesh, supped and drank and utterly gorged. *And yet, in the end, she never did leave her husband for Ting An.* (184; emphasis mine)

In this case, possibly due to her increasing awareness of her own privilege as narrator, Kae admits to the intrusion, and to its effect on her text: "See there, another example of the unpredictable power of language! A glib sort of statement to sum up decades of suffering out of a man's life" (184). She has learned the power that she holds, in telling this story, and the extent to which her consciousness informs the act of telling:

> In writing, I feel like a drunk weaving all over the road. The air can be made wavy and warped, hot with tension, full of mirages. Or details can be made to distract extravagantly, cling possessively. Information can cringe from pain, or reply in a cold, detached manner. How many ways are there to tell stories? Let me count the ways! (185)

Kae becomes bolder about articulating her privilege within the text, experimenting with the extent to which her ancestors are now also her characters:

> Life is always tragic in the end. So I should give Ting An famous last words, like, "But what do I know of women?"

> Well then, I should try to tell him. Ting An is my grandfather, after all. . . . That's the advantage of fantasy that writers have at their disposal, plucked right out of life itself. On the other hand, we also have some distinct drawbacks, like emotions shrinking and expanding between people and themselves, between people and others, between people and their stories. (184-5)

Ting An, in particular, becomes a narrative device for Kae. He is an embodiment of all that Gwei Chang has sacrificed: "[his father] used to watch for [Kelora's] shadow on his face, like a witch haunting" (220). Ting An's very presence is thus a constant reminder of Kelora's absence from the text.

Narrative Cohesion: Kae's "Search for Bones"

Why are Kae's narrative intrusions made quite so obvious? Telling these stories forces Kae to examine her motives as she enters and re-enters the lives of her ancestors. As she reaches sympathy for many of their decisions and actions, she also understands that the individual circumstances are less important than the story as a whole. The narrative begins to take on a life of its own, and as Kae increasingly treats her ancestors as characters, she too becomes more involved in the story; her own importance as narrator collapses as she takes a role within her story. In Woman, Native, Other, Trinh Minh-ha firmly asserts the interdependence of the story and its teller:

> What is taken for stories, only stories, are fragments of/in life, fragments that never stop interacting while being complete in themselves. . . . The woman makes of her story a continuation of her mother's, which was left with no ending. (143-4)[26]

The literal "truth" of Kae's narrative (i.e., the accuracy of dates and details) is called into question by her strongly mediated telling, but her interruptions and her admissions of possible inexactitudes actually add to her credibility as narrator. Further, her increasing awareness and acknowledgement of her own role in her story gives the narrative greater authenticity.

As Kae intrudes upon her narrative, the story she tells also increasingly infringes upon her own life. The line between retrieval and invention of the past is almost erased during the passage in which Kae describes Suzanne announcing her pregnancy to her mother. Though some

version of this confrontation surely did occur, Kae places it purely within the realm of fiction, as if the pregnancy were more a narrative contrivance of her own rather than an actual event:

> What a mean writer's trick, to drag Fong Mei kicking and fighting back again, this time to face the day she had sworn everlasting love to Ting An. Especially now, when she thought she had gotten far enough away from her own days of torrid passion that they should never have caught up to her. She was young then, and she still thought she had that promise of purity to life. It wasn't until later, when the love affair ran aground and she callously abandoned ship like a drowning rat, that she stopped looking at what she had become! (181)

As Kae pieces the facts together, it is Suzanne's story in which she becomes most involved, possibly because of its proximity to her own life. Suzanne dies the same year that Kae is born, a coincidence which Kae notes with some irony while describing a group photograph:

> Back then, all the faces shone like freshly washed porcelain, but if you look really closely, you'll see that Suzie's face is crumbling, chipped stoneware. It was the year she died. I used to half-heartedly wonder if this photograph had been taken before, during or after all the horrendous events of that year, but I guess the important point is that a lot happened in that one year, not the least of which was my birth. (192)

In relating the events of Suzie's short life, Kae begins to assume her aunt's persona. Kae's carefully mediated layers of discourse are

suddenly condensed in the section in which Suzie tells Morgan she is pregnant. "That seemed so long ago; maybe I imagined the whole thing," Suzie recalls. In using the first person voice from Suzie's perspective, Kae is imagining her aunt's story. Within the narrative, she imagines that Suzie may be imagining herself. On one notable occasion, Kae's appropriation of Suzie's voice is literalized within the narrative: "Suzie is on the verge of death again; her labour long and hard. Suzie is worn out, gasping for air; I got slurped in" (206). After the delivery, Kae removes herself from Suzie's consciousness, but remains present, observing (Gobert 7). When this section ends, it is immediately contrasted with Kae (in 1986) announcing to Chi that she has made progress with her writing:

> And I. I flit back to Suzie's drugged sleep. I hover over her limp form for a while, and then whisper into her ear, "Strike three, you're out!"
>
> **Kae 1986**
>
> "Chi," I am ecstatic. "I've got the perfect title . . . *House Hexed by Woe*. What do you think?" (208)

Kae has literally become part of her narrative, and her exploration of Suzanne's life helps her to move forward in her own. (This point in the text finds an equivalent in Obasan when Naomi is finally able to communicate with her absent mother, after hearing the letter which describes her fate.)

The story Kae writes opens with the chapter title "Search for Bones" (not *The* Search or *A* Search, but simply *Search*, suggesting that the heading is an imperative). Kae's great-grandfather is the first bone

seeker, but Kae inherits this legacy, metaphorically gathering the fragments into a whole, assembling skeletons and fleshing them out into human shapes. Like Gwei Chang, she is initially disgusted, horrified even, at the grisly prospect of unearthing the past, but her motivation in writing is ultimately the same as Gwei Chang's in gathering the bones, and both realize a sense of wonder at the power of this process:

> At first, he actually dreaded the macabre work. What were a few dried bones to him except disgusting? . . . The bones gathered themselves into the human shapes of young men, each dashing and bold. . . . How could he not be touched by the spirit of these wilderness uncles who had trekked on an incredible journey and pitted their lives against mountain rocks and human cruelty? . . . Like them, he would piece himself together again from scattered, shattered bone and then endure. (12-3)

In the most narratively radical segment of the novel, Kae abandons any pretense at authorial objectivity in order to literalize her role as the bone seeker of the family. While most of Disappearing Moon Cafe occurs in Kae's imaginative reconstruction, the section entitled "Feeding the Dead" exists totally in the narrator's imagination. She gathers the important women from her past and present, summoning her closest friend, her mother, her mysterious aunt, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother. Many of characters have hitherto existed only in memories, stories and rumours, but in assembling them together in an imaginary room, Kae arbitrates and records the ghosts' accusations and justifications, allowing them to reconcile the choices they made with the resulting consequences, and to make peace with each other and themselves.

She imagines the women huddled together in a misty circle, chanting together:

> Mui Lan lived a lie, so Fong Mei got sly.
> Suzie slipped away; Beatrice made to stay,
> Kae to tell the story,
> all that's left of
> vainglory. (188)

As previously mentioned, Brandt describes Disappearing Moon Cafe as "an extended dialogue between Kae and her maternal ancestors" (130); until this chapter, however, the text has more closely resembled a monologue, with Kae assembling, describing and judging. Her life has been proscribed by the actions and desires of these women, but the "Identity Crisis" which gave birth to "The Writer" has forced her to examine her motivations. Here, at last, she has reached understanding. Like Naomi, who must enter her mother's suffering in order to forgive her, Kae must allow herself to experience her grandmother's and great-grandmother's lives in order to accept the choices they made.

As arbiter of the story, Kae has wielded great power, but she finally allows herself to enter her narrative, rather than manipulating it from beyond the margins. Once she believes herself to be part of the story, she places her own life (and thus the process of narration) as the culmination of generations of searching: "I'm the fourth generation. My actual life, and what I do in it, is the real resolution to this story. The onus is entirely on me" (210). Kae argues in favour of Trinh Minh-ha's assertion that lives are stories, and that she, therefore is the subject of both her life and her narrative. Having acknowledged the ways ideologies, often unarticulated, shape experiences, Kae understands that

the narrative she has been constructing not only informs and explains her own history up to the point of her writing, but also extends into the future. It is not yet complete, though she has placed it together; rather, it is still dependent on her for its eventual meaning. In the final section of her story, Kae demonstrates the capacity of narrative to negotiate meaning.

When Kae decides that she herself gives import and purpose to the story, she states: "By now I know I am ready to make another journey" (210). Kae has always maintained a degree of emotional and physical distance from Hermia Chow, but this journey will take her back to her old friend. She rejects the traditional, conventional choices she has made, in favour of happiness. This liberation is not solely hers: her choice reverberates backwards, altering the story of her ancestors as she alters her own. The epilogue closes with Gwei Chang, who lies ill and dying in his bed, summoning a vision of Kelora, whom he left almost a lifetime earlier. Though she died before he was able to return to her, he is reunited with her in the wake of Kae's decision. Having freed herself, Kae allows two of her ancestors to step out of linear time, and out of the consequences of choices they made. The tangles have been unraveled back to their source, back to the first secret: Kelora, the "healer and retriever of lost souls," is restored to her place within the family (7). With the hope of resolution in Kae's own life, there is the possibility of reconciliation in the lives of her ancestors.

Notes to Chapter 2

[13] This is a common phenomenon, as Nan Bauer Maglin describes in her essay entitled "The Literature of Matrilineage." She emphasizes the difficulty in seeing and listening objectively to someone with whom one lives. Maglin describes a number of incidences in literature in which women first identify with their mothers after having children of their own (261-2).

[14] Expectation and deferral actually dominate the story from the prologue. Old Man Chen states to Gwei Chang: "I've been waiting for someone like you to come along for many years--so many that I even forgot I was waiting" (10). The prologue closes with Gwei Chang sailing down the river on a raft laden with bones; Kelora, in effect, waits the rest of the novel for him to return.

[15] Her opinion on the importance of babies changes dramatically through the course of the narrative. The birth of her son is terrifying, not the "calm and dignified" event she had expected (21), and possibly out of fear of this memory, Kae speaks little of either the delivery or of the baby himself. But birth is a theme to which she returns repeatedly. She is deeply affected by Hermia Chow, with whom she studies in China in 1971: "Hermia gives you so much power over her, like a bare and naked newborn" (39). One of the Wong secrets, as Kae learns, is the power that these apparently defenseless newborns wield, or perhaps more accurately, the power they bestow upon their mothers. The machinations and schemes of Kae's predecessors are aimed at producing one single result: progeny.

[16] For other examples of this phenomenon, see Lee, pages 20 and 114.

[17] Suzanne's story bears striking similarities to that of No Name Woman, Maxine Hong Kingston's disgraced and disowned aunt in <u>The Woman Warrior</u>. In bearing an illegitimate child, and further, in refusing to reveal the identity of the father, Kingston's aunt commits a grave transgression, and is punished accordingly. In the communally-oriented society of rural early twentieth century China, she is un-named, literally removed from her family's memory because of her refusal to conform. Kingston opens her novel by revealing the secret which was never to be told, recalling her mother's whispered words: "In China, your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say your father has only brothers because it is as if she had never been born" (3). Kae seeks to render her own rebellious aunt a similar service, breaking the cycle of silence which surrounds Suzanne's death.

[18] If the insidious strength of patriarchy comes from its co-opting of women in their own enslavement, its weakness lies in the fact that it must depend upon the complicity of women to continue in its dominance. For example, when Choy Fuk suspects that Song Ang is having an affair with Woo, he is angry that the paternity of the father may be compromised (101), but later, when he considers the possibility of his own sterility, he urges her to do exactly that (111).

[19] Maxine Hong Kingston's warrior woman learns that there is a chinese word for the female "I," and that this article is synonymous with the word for "slave" (47). In her article entitled "Mother/Daughter

Writing," Wendy Ho states that this word in chinese is "mui" (229). Ironically, though she seeks to subjugate those around her, Mui Lan is herself a slave to circumstances beyond her control, and ultimately a slave to her own twisted priorities.

[20] The family's erasure of Kelora from their history is also comparable to Kingston's story of her disgraced aunt. Kae later uses her family's deliberate nonremembrance to ironic effect in "Feeding the Dead," when she has Fong Mei say regretfully "[t]his was a land of fresh starts; I could have lived in the mountain like an indian woman of legend" (188). Kae knows what Fong Mei could not: that this "legend" is actually an intimate and integral part of her own family.

[21] There is some critical debate over Gwei Chang's motivations. Di Brandt states that he leaves Kelora and abandons Ting An "largely for racist and capitalist reasons" (127), but this is a rather simplistic view. While it is true that he gives in to his mother's pressure to find a "real wife from China" (233), there is little textual evidence to suggest that his reasons are motivated by greed or prejudice. In fact, he describes his life before he met her as the period "[b]efore he became a human being himself" (14). Patricia Linton argues that Gwei Chang gave up love because of his obligations to his family, a "faithlessness that, viewed another way, is keeping faith [with family expectations]" (6). He is forced to choose against himself and his own desires. Kae suggests that the same defense also applies to Gwei Chang's daughter-in-law:

> How unfortunate to make Fong Mei reflect on her infidelity twenty years after such a simple fact! If one were to argue her case at the gates of heaven, one could say that she had not been disloyal to her husband and lord. Three beautifully behaved children who brought nothing but delight and distinction to their parents and grandparents could not possibly be used to condemn their mother. (154)

[22] Maxine Hong Kingston presents an array of characters who possess only a tenuous grasp on reality: there is Aunt Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid's delicate sister from Hong Kong, who loses her sanity in California; a madwoman is stoned to death in the village while trying to signal Japanese planes with a mirrored headdress; Crazy Mary is beyond her family's help when they finally summon her after leaving her behind in China for twenty years; and Kingston describes the witchwoman Pee-A-Nah as "the village idiot, the public one." (188) Possibly most telling is her description of herself: "I thought that every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It in our house? Probably me" (189).

[23] Kae frequently qualifies Morgan's accounts: "Was his story the same as my story? Or should I have said, is history the same as mystery?" (66) For other examples, see Lee, pages 86, 160, 163 and 174.

[24] Occasionally Kae calls attention to the extent to which she is forced to invent. After describing one of Mui Lan's diatribes against her as-yet childless daughter-in-law, Kae muses "I myself was not there, but I've often wondered" (62).

[25] For these and other examples of Kae's narrative duplicity, I am indebted to R.D. Gobert, "'This I do imagine': Disappearing Moon Cafe's Problematic Author(ity)."

[26] In a passage curiously reminiscent of Obasan's definition of love as a "long thread," Trinh describes the transmission of stories from generation to generation:

> The story is beautiful, because or therefore it unwinds like a thread. A long thread, for there is no end in sight. Or the end she reaches leads actually to another end, another opening . . . Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and transmission--in other words, of creation. (Woman, Native, Other 149)

Conclusion: Narrating the Self

Joy Kogawa's Obasan and Sky Lee's Disappearing Moon Cafe offer accounts of highly personal journeys toward self-realization. Both narrators realize the importance of contextualizing themselves within the history of their families, but in order to do so, both must reconstruct (and occasionally reinvent) this history. Additionally, both women struggle to tell of events which have been hidden from them by members of their families; the retrieval of these pasts results in the creation of complex texts, centred around problematic, even paradoxical narrative structures. Naomi struggles to narrate the story of her childhood self, an act which requires her not only to speak silence, but to break silence while telling a story based on and driven by silence. (Cultural difference makes comprehension of silence in Obasan even more difficult.) Kae too contends with silence and secrecy while she attempts to articulate her matrilinear history as a vehicle for coming to voice and knowledge. Unlike Naomi, Kae engages in a degree of narrative disruption, even intrusion, that calls into question the authenticity of the text she is creating. Critics have acknowledged (to varying degrees) but not sufficiently explained these problematic aspects of the texts.

The obstacles with which Naomi must contend in her struggle to come to voice are myriad. She was raised by silent relatives, and surrounded for years by secrets; she has become silent herself, and can only broach her voicelessness indirectly, through metaphor and self-deprecating humour. Naomi is blocked from the past by her own refusal to remember, but the retrieval of memory is a vital process, one which will allow her to translate her silence of shame and loss into understanding, and

ultimately, into words. Her connection to the past is tenuous and its retrieval is a tortuous process, reflected in the elliptical and deliberately nonlinear structure of her narrative. When Naomi finally understands her mother's fate, she is able to put aside her own pain, and alter her engagement with her past: Naomi the adult narrator mentally displaces herself in time, inserting the awareness of her mother's anguish into her four-year-old mind. As a child, she envisioned herself as a part of her mother's physical body; as an adult, she overcomes silence to recover a symbiotic relationship with her mother. The words in Grandma Kato's letter prompt Naomi to articulate the pain and grief which has been silent. In articulating that pain, she also gives voice to the silence itself.

Kae, too, struggles to counter silence, but her search for family finds narrative expression in very different ways. The pervasive silence in Obasan is manifested in thematic terms, whereas in Disappearing Moon Cafe, the ramifications of Kae's search are evident in the textual problems which arise. Kae mediates, and occasionally manipulates, the stories she has gathered into a nonlinear text, which, like Obasan, has a high degree of fragmentation; Patricia Linton notes that Disappearing Moon Cafe contains forty-nine distinct achronological sections (1). This structure reflects the degree to which memory informs the text. In creating her narrative, Kae has excavated not only her own memories, but also the memories of generations of her ancestors.

She interprets events and stories, and speaks about and even for her ancestors, creating a narrative which accounts for and enacts what she perceives to be the inconsistencies in her past. Her reconstruction of her narrative history enables her to assert her own subjectivity as

both an extension of this lineage of women and as separate from it. As she treates her ancestors more like characters in her fiction, she herself becomes increasingly involved in the interrelated system of choice and consequences. Her own decisions impact upon the lives of her ancestors, even those long dead--at least as they are presented by her.

The two works share a similar temporal structure, both ending more or less where they began. But while Naomi's narrative originates and closes in the present, focussing on her examination of the past and her desire to find a connection to it, Disappearing Moon Cafe begins and ends in 1892, with the meeting of Gwei Chang and Kelora. Where Naomi finds closure in the past, that is, Kae imposes closure on her past. It is a difference of narrative technique rather than of family history.

Bibiography

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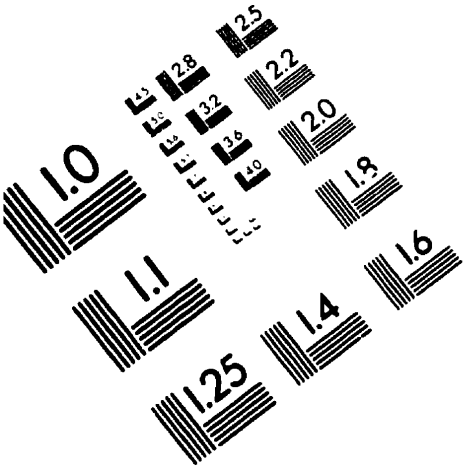

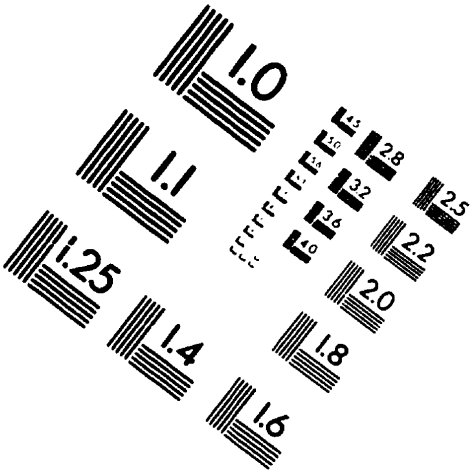

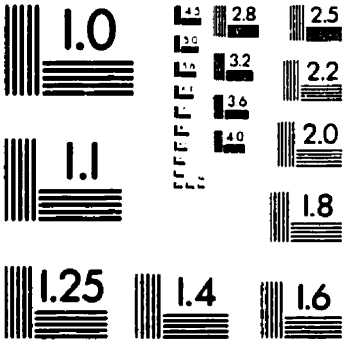

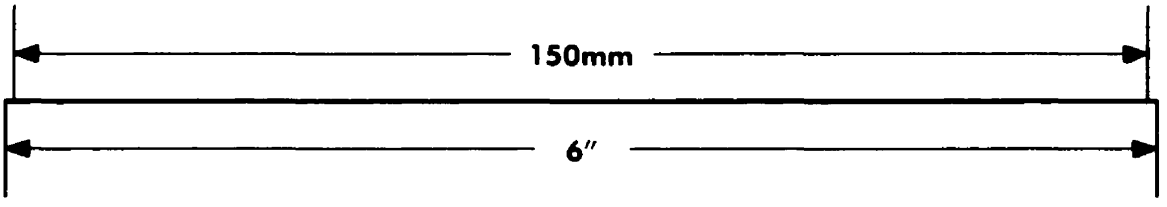

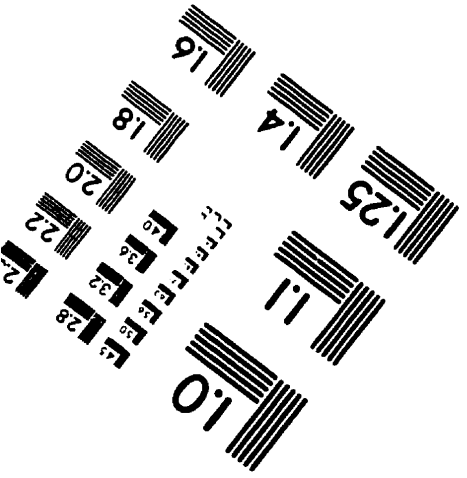

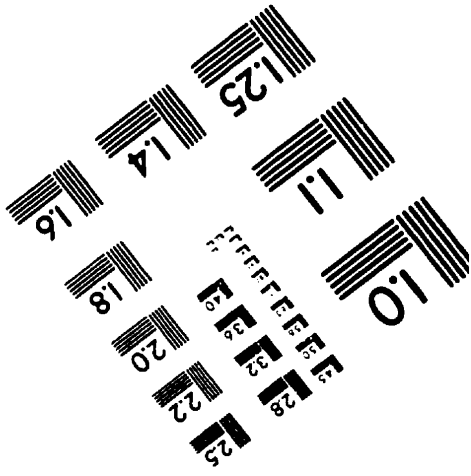

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