Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*: A Study in Political Efficacy
(ジョイ・コガワ作「おばさん」をめぐって：政治意識の一研究)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE：ジョイ・コガワの「おばさん」は，政治的意味合いの大きな小説である。

「おばさん」はナオミという日系カナダ人2世の女性の人生を語る形で第2次世界大戦中に移住した，21,900人の日系カナダ人と2万人の日系アメリカ人の歴史に対する深い洞察をもたらすものである。この小説は，政治過程の主流から除外されていた人間が，いかにして政治上の力にめざめ政治への意識を培ったかを明らかにしている。

デビッド・ベルとローン・テパマンのいう Political efficacy（政治参加意識）とは「人間が個人として，政治に影響を与えることができ，発言することができ，実効をもつことができるという認識」のことをさすが，ナオミの政治参加意識を妨げもし，高めもした原動力は，家族関係，家庭外での人間関係，教育，文化的伝統，社会的なしきたり，歴史観の中にこそ見出すことができる。

著者のコガワは，適切な刺激があれば個人というものは，沈黙や消極性から脱却して，自らが住んでいる共同体の形成活動に，積極的に関わることができるようになるという登場人物の信念を伝えているのである。

At the conclusion of the novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's voice blends with that of his black American narrator as he directly speaks to his readers -- middle-class, educated Americans who might assume that they have nothing in common with the narrator. Ellison

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asks the rhetorical question, "Who knows but that on lower frequencies I speak for you?" (568). Joy Kogawa, looking across the 49th parallel at her American readers, could also say, "Who knows but that on lower frequencies I speak for you?" In *Obasan* she describes the experiences of 21,900 Japanese Canadians who were uprooted and dispersed in 1942. It parallels the experience of 20,000 Japanese Americans. In writing the novel, Kogawa, like Ellison, keeps her finger on the jagged grain[1], lest we repress the dehumanizing effects of racism in North America. Kogawa not only delineates a neglected aspect of North American history, she also teaches a lesson in political efficacy. Through her characters she explains why some outsiders remain silent while others shout through closed doors and push documents through the cracks--eventually forcing authorities to acknowledge their concerns.

At one point in *Obasan* a character, Emily, remarks that the Canadian government was more perverse in its treatment of Japanese-Canadians than the United States government. But Americans should not find much comfort in this fact; our responses to Japanese immigrants paralleled Canada's, and our discriminatory policies were only slightly less inhumane. In an article on Canadian and Japanese relations in the 1930s, Masako Iino identifies four factors associated with the persecution of Japanese Canadians: "(1) economic competition with immigrants as cheap labor; (2) fear of an increase in Japan's national power and in Japan's aggressive activity in the Pacific and among the Asian nations; (3) racism; [and] (4) anti-Japanese propaganda" (63). These factors were also present at the time in the United States.

In 1907 a race riot in Vancouver captured Canadian headlines;[2] in the same year the Hearst newspapers announced in bold headlines, "Japan May Seize the Pacific Coast." The papers thus emphasized the threat posed by the "Yellow Peril" (Okihiro and Sly 66). As Japanese sought relief from food shortages through emigration to North America, both the United States and Canada reacted with immigration restrictions. The United States enacted the Immigration Act of 1924 which aimed at "complete exclusion of Japanese immigrants"; Canada, after three years of negotiations, convinced the Japanese government

that they should "limit Japanese emigration to Canada to 150 annually, including ex-residents and wives and children of the residents of Canada." This meant there would be no more picture brides for the hundreds of Japanese men in Canada. From 1930-1941 Canada admitted even fewer than the quota allowed, an average of 101 immigrants per year (Iino 53-54). At the same time, of course, Caucasian immigrants were still being admitted from northern Europe.

After the 1931 Manchurian Incident[3], anti-Japanese sentiment increased on the West Coast. A 1933 article in *Maclean's* drew attention with its headline, "The Oriental Threat." Canadians were warned that the Japanese population was expanding along the Fraser Valley and that their intentions were clearly imperialistic. In addition, a number of Japanese fishermen were identified as former Japanese Naval officers. Whites in British Columbia were further enraged when the Canadian government refused to reprimand Japan following the Manchurian Incident because Britain, in an effort to maintain "Open Door" trade policies in China, refused to join the United States in admonishing the Japanese. In a December 1932 meeting of the League of Nations, attended by representatives of 32 nations, only Canada and Britain did not criticize Japan's military actions (Iino 59).

Although the United States had taken a firm position against Japanese aggression in Manchuria, this did not reduce the anti-Japanese feeling among the general public in California. In fact, anti-Japanese bills had been introduced in every session of the California legislature from 1907 to 1948 (Zich 517).

The next series of events is well-known: Japan formed an alliance with Italy and Germany in September 1940; on 7 December 1941 both the Canadian and the U. S. governments took immediate action against Japan after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King announced that "Japan's actions are a threat to the defence and freedom of Canada" and declared war on Japan. That same day Japanese Canadians were told to report to the Registrar of Enemy Aliens. Then on 26 February 1942, Japanese-Canadians were informed that they would be removed from what was called the "protected area" --one hundred miles of coastline-- to relocation camps

in the interior (Iino 63). A week later on 4 March 1942, Japanese-Americans were "encouraged" to evacuate. It was clear that they would not be allowed to remain in their homes in California, Oregon and Washington. Japanese Americans had known for several weeks that dispersal was inevitable: leading columnists such as Walter Lippmann and Drew Pearson had been feeding the fires of anti-Japanese feeling. For example, on February 9 Drew Pearson wrote:

> The United States has been and still is lax, tolerant and soft toward the Japanese who have violated American hospitality. Shinto Temples still operate, propaganda outlets still disseminate propaganda material and Japanese, both alien and American citizens, still spy for the Japanese government. (Okihiro and Sly 80)

On 19 February 1942, ten weeks after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, "justifying the evacuation of the Japanese from the Pacific Coast because of 'military necessity' " (Okihiro and Sly 72). The American Civil Liberties Union challenged the order but lost their case in the Supreme Court, even though they argued that Executive Order 9066 violated the Fourteenth Amendment that said "no person may be deprived of 'life, liberty or property without due process of law' " (Drinan 248). Twenty thousand Japanese Americans were confined for an average of two years and six months. On 2 January 1945 Executive Order 9066 was terminated when a new order brought an end to the "mass exclusion" policy (Okihiro and Sly 75). In Canada, 21,900 people of Japanese descent were sent to the interior; 17,000 were Canadian citizens (Burns 6). Prime Minister King, like President Roosevelt, justified the evacuation as a "military necessity" even though he had been informed by Major General Kenneth Stuart, Canada's highest-ranking army officer, that Japanese-Canadians in no way "constitute[d] the slightest menace to national security" (qtd. in Clugston 54). Japanese-Canadians were not allowed to seek new homes until 1949.

This overview of anti-Japanese sentiment in Canada and the

United States helps us understand the extent to which *Obasan* is indeed a North American novel. In fact, Kogawa emphasized our common history in an essay written for the 1986 Great Midwestern Book Show in which she participated in Minneapolis. She entitled the essay, "The Enemy Within." In this essay she wrote:

> The story of the Japanese in Canada tells us something about universal corruption, universal greed, universal ignorance, blindness, and fear. In Canada we have still not redressed the wrongs that were done to the Japanese-Canadian community. Among us are some who dread being reminded of the past and wish to hide in our continuing silence. There are others who believe we serve neither ourselves nor the country by such silence. In fact, by becoming part of the silent and oppressive majority, we show that yesterday's victims often become today's victimizers.
>
> In Canada the decision to send us to concentration camps was not a military but a political one. The decision to confiscate our property, to disenfranchise us, to deny us the freedom to work or to travel within this country, the decision to implement the dispersal policy, were all made by our elected politicians, who were supposedly voicing the will of those they served. Racism in Canada was therefore as official as ever it was in any racist regime in the world. (6)

Wherever Kogawa has used the word "Canada," one could accurately insert the words "the United States."

Next Kogawa raises the question, "How do we today name the enemy?" This is her answer:

> We begin in our own backyards by plunging headlong together into our common mud. We begin by an examination of our own internal enemies -- our own Canadian system's own greed, our own personal greed, our own prejudice, and the ways in which we perpetuate the systems of thought through which we do violence to people. (6)

Then she shifts the focus : she speaks not just of Canada and individual Canadians but of North Americans and the need for all of us to identify those forces that will turn us away from despair. She asserts that the source of that despair is primarily racism. However, in both the essay and the novel Kogawa's final emphasis is on hope rooted in action. Because Kogawa repeatedly emphasizes political action, it is appropriate to examine *Obasan* from the perspective of political culture. How can people who have been cut off from political activity develop a sense of efficacy--a sense that they can become politically active and can influence decisions within the system? In *The Roots of Disunity : A Look at Canadian Political Culture*, authors David Bell and Lorne Tepperman explain that "Political efficacy refers to a sense that one can be personally influential in politics, can make one's voice heard, and can be effective" (191). Kogawa is an excellent example of a person with a highly developed sense of political efficacy. Over the past five years hers has been a dominant voice in discussions about the government's reparations to Japanese-Canadians.[4] On the other hand, she understands why others have remained silent. In *Obasan* she chose as the narrator and protagonist a woman named Naomi, a thirty-six year-old school teacher with a low degree of political efficacy. Born in the mid-thirties, Naomi was separated from her parents and raised by Uncle Isamu (Sam) and her aunt Ayako, whom she calls "Obasan."

But Naomi has another aunt, also represented in the title of the novel--her Aunt Emily who began pounding on government doors in 1939 and persisted in her efforts to effect change up to the time of the story, 1972. Thus Naomi has two immediate models for behavior : Emily who is active and vocal ; Obasan and Sam who are passive and silent.

Kogawa establishes the tragic nature of silence in the prologue to the novel, perhaps the most frequently quoted passage from *Obasan*. Nevertheless, to use Kogawa's term, one more "telling" is appropriate :

> There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that

> will not speak. Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone.
>
> I admit it.
>
> I hate the stillness. I hate the stone. I hate the sealed vault with its cold icon. I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes. Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream. If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply. (iv)

Kogawa, when speaking to the audience at the Minneapolis Book Show, described a reading where she was joined by her father and other friends. In unison they read this passage and then added the words "Oh Canada we come from you. We come from you!" In adding these lines, Kogawa reminds Canada of its failure to provide "peace, order and good government." Canada becomes the reason for the silence of the Japanese Canadians--and for the silence of her character, Naomi.

The novel begins in 1972 and, through flashbacks, covers the early years of Naomi's childhood in Vancouver, the evacuation to the prairies of Saskatchewan and Alberta during the 1940s, and a visit from Emily in the spring of 1972. In Chapter Two, Naomi receives word that her Uncle Sam has died and she drives to Granton, Alberta, 150 miles from where she teaches. During the next few days she relives significant moments in the past and tries to come to terms with the images in her dreams. On a personal level, the narration traces Naomi's quest for her lost mother. When her mother returned to Japan for a visit, Naomi, the child, became uprooted. On a

broader level, the novel traces the quest of Japanese-Canadians for an identity as Canadians with roots firmly fixed in Canadian soil.

Naomi's family, the Nakanes and Katos, have a strong identity with both Japan and Canada, integrating the traditions of both cultures into their lives. Neither culture is given precedence over the other. In the Vancouver home, prints by Maxwell Parrish and Rosa Bonheur hang on the walls; a statue of Ninomiya Kinjiro, a Japanese agriculturalist and teacher, sits on a table in the living room. Naomi grows up making paper cranes and listening to stories about Peter Rabbit as well as the favorite character among Japanese children, Momotaro, the peach boy. Grandmother Nakane plays traditional Japanese songs on the koto; her daughter-in-law, Naomi's mother, listens to her favorite record, "Silver Threads among the Gold." Slippers are placed beside the door and china mugs with pictures of King George and Queen Elizabeth sit on the shelf.[5]

When the family is forced to leave their Vancouver home, the china mugs are included among the few family treasures taken to the new location in Saskatchewan. The mugs symbolize the family's identity as Canadians; even more important, they serve as a tangible sign of their allegiance to Canada. Even during the war years Obasan maintains her scrapbook of the Royal family and participates in Japanese-style burials and bathhouse rituals without any sense of contradiction on her part. As schoolchildren Naomi and her brother Stephen belong to the Tillicum Club and enthusiastically recite its slogan: "Kla-How-Ya, we're all friends together."

Because their commitment to Canada was so profound and obvious--at least to the Japanese community if not to the population at large--the constraints that began in December 1941 were met with shock and disbelief. Kogawa enumerates the offenses experienced by typical middle-class Japanese-Canadians. Grandpa Kato's Cadillac was confiscated and resold for $33.00; Uncle's fishing boat was seized and his means of livelihood eradicated. Bill 15 revoked their nationality. Japanese language newspapers were shut down. Even the end of the war brought little release from suffering because Japanese communities could not be reassembled. As Kogawa says in the novel, "To a people for whom community was the essence of life, destruction

of community was the destruction of life" (186). The Japanese were urged to and sometimes coerced into emigrating to Japan. Using Emily as a mouthpiece, Kogawa observes that Canadian racism was worse than that of the Americans: Emily says,

> "The American Japanese were interned as we were in Canada, and sent off to concentration camps, but their property wasn't liquidated as ours was. And look how quickly the communities reestablished themselves in Los Angeles and San Francisco. We weren't allowed to return to the West Coast like that. We've never recovered from the dispersal policy. But of course that was the government's whole idea--to make sure we'd never be visible again. Official racism was blatant in Canada. The Americans have a Bill of Rights, right? We don't." (33-34)[6]

In spite of Canada's crimes against citizens of Japanese descent, many like Naomi's uncle were steadfast in their loyalty to Canada after the war. When Emily visited the family in the spring of 1972, she shows Naomi and Sam a scrapbook with newspaper headlines and articles that outline Canada's illegal procedures during the war. Emily's scrapbook poses a significant contrast to Obasan's, which focuses on the Royal Family. Sam listens patiently as Emily and Naomi read the clippings. Then he says, "This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude" (42). This response is an appropriate one: Sam was born in Japan and raised on the concept of *giri*, duty to one's group and country.

Uncle's response indicates more than gratitude; he trusts the political process and the political leaders who, he believes, generally "mean well" and will initiate and carry out democratic policies under normal conditions. And Emily, while aggressively denouncing both past and present crimes on the part of the Canadian government, believes that the government is structured to accommodate changes in policies that will eventually help Japanese Canadians. In spite of three decades of frustrations and setbacks she is not willing to give up. Naomi

suggests that they put the issues recorded in the scrapbook behind them: "Shouldn't we turn the page and move on?" Emily emphatically disagrees: "The past is the future," she says (42). At a later point in the novel, Naomi pays tribute to Emily's activism: "In the face of growing bewilderment and distress, Aunt Emily roamed the landscape like an aircraft in a fog, looking for a place to land--a safe and sane strip of justice and reason. Not seeing these, she did not crash into the oblivion of either bitterness or futility but remained airborne" (79).

When we remind ourselves that Emily is, after all, a product of the Canadian educational system, we can better understand why she "remained airborne" and committed to political change. At the age of twelve Emily had memorized part of "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" and forever after was haunted by the words,

> Breathes there the man with soul so dead
> Who never to himself hath said
> This is my own, my native land!

At that time, Emily recalls that she "felt the first stirrings of identification with Canada" (39-40). In an essay on politics, Emily explains the significance of these lines: "So many times after that I repeated the lines: sadly, desperately and bitterly. But at first I was proud, knowing that I belonged" (39-40). Until the war struck, she had no reason to view the lines ironically. Emily grew up singing patriotic songs, saluting the Union Jack, adoring the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who were, at first, supportive of the Japanese. Gradually, her heroes succumbed to public pressure. In Emily's eyes, they no longer lived according to their motto, "Maintain the right"(100). Her disillusionment with both the RCMP and the government is profound. She points out that she and a small number of the politically-minded Nisei who "had faith in Canada [were] the most hurt" by the government's war-time policies (100).

Within the educational system, however, Emily absorbed the principles of duty to one's nation and participation in the democratic process. Looking back on the events of 1941, she says of Japanese-Canadians, "What a bunch of sheep we were. Polite. Meek.

All the way up the slaughterhouse ramp"(38).[7] But not Emily. While others obediently accepted governmental regulation of their lives, Emily was trying to negotiate passes, extensions or permits with whatever agency was in control. When it was clear that the family would be dispersed, she chose to go to live with friends in Toronto where she could confront government officials. After the war she worked obsessively to maintain a network among Nisei across the country.

Her efforts have not diminished in the early 1970s. When she returns to Alberta for Uncle's funeral, Naomi notes that Emily is still "the one with the vision. She believes in the Nisei, seeing them as networks and streamers of light dotting the country. For my part, I can only see a dark field with Aunt Emily beaming her flashlight to where the rest of us crouch and hide, our eyes downcast as we seek the safety of invisibility" (31-32).[8]

Unlike her aunt who was raised in a prosperous, well-educated, community-minded family, Naomi knew only a few years of security before her mother left for Japan and the war erupted. Emily's description of Naomi is apt: "Look at you, Naomi, shuffling back and forth between Cecil and Granton, unable either to go or to stay in the world with even a semblance of grace or ease" (50). Naomi is the victim of a painful, disrupted childhood in which she was deprived of parents and removed from her Vancouver home. She grew up in shacks in Saskatchewan and Alberta. No amount of tenderness and protective care on the part of Uncle and Obasan could makeup for the losses.

The segregated school in Slocan intensified her sense of isolation as she daily ran a gauntlet through the white children who taunted her. At the school for Japanese children, her teacher and principal conscientiously led the children through the lines of "O Canada" and the school song, despite the irony of a condemned group singing about "true patriot love" and, in the school song, rising up, fighting and striving for victory (157). No wonder Naomi grew up, as Emily says, with so little grace or ease. She became a teacher, a serious but safe commitment as a citizen.

Her brother Stephen chose an alternative different from Emily's

and Naomi's. He became a well-known musician, a citizen of the international world of music. Although physically one of the "visible minorities" of Canada, his reputation and lifestyle enabled him to move into a nonpolitical realm where nothing in particular was expected of him as a Sansei. He vacations in the Caribbean, keeps company with a French woman, and avoids all things Japanese, including --for the most part--his family. It is not difficult to reconcile this portrait of the man with the boy who, in 1945, ran home with the news that the war in Europe had ended: "We won, we won, we won!" He then proceeded to climb up on the roof of the house and nail a Union Jack into place, proclaiming his patriotism and identification with the Canadian war effort and victory. Although he would never be completely free of the stigma of being Japanese, he could become an ambassador for Canada on the concert stages of the world.

In contrast, Naomi has chosen the anonymity of a rural Alberta community where she teaches. She is a conscientious teacher, but when it comes to politics she argues with Emily that nothing can be done; she insists that "what is done is done." Then she adds, "And no doubt it will happen again, over and over with different faces and names, variations on the same theme" (199). This cynicism grows out of her fragmented childhood and uncertain adulthood.

Naomi is still plagued by her mother's disappearance. She asks Emily, "What do you think happened to Mother and Grandma in Japan? • • • • Did they starve, do you think?" (186). Emily, Obasan, and Uncle have known since 1949 that Naomi's mother was severely injured in the bombing at Nagasaki, but the mother had asked that the children be protected from the knowledge of her disfigurement and the psychic anguish resulting from the attack. Naomi and Stephen eventually decide their mother is dead.

At the time of Uncle's funeral, however, the family agrees that Naomi and Stephen should be told about Grandmother Kato's letter from Japan that describes the atomic explosion, its aftermath and, eventually, their mother's death. Their minister, Nakayama-sensei, reads the letter aloud, replaces it in its folder, and speaks: " 'That there is brokenness,' he says quietly. 'That this world is brokenness. But within brokenness is the unbreakable name. How the whole earth

groans till Love returns' " (240). Love--that unbreakable name--is what Naomi has needed from her mother: she has had no way of knowing to what degree her mother loved her. With the reading of the letter she understands that no matter how much she might disagree with her mother's decision to remain silent, the decision had been made out of love for the children. Naomi, finally in possession of the only knowledge that can bring her relief from the haunting questions, can begin the process of psychic healing. She has a vivid image of herself and her mother: "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 through my veins. The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts" (64). She has been severed from that trunk most of her life. The letter reaffirms what Naomi has always known: the separation is permanent.

At first Naomi sees herself as "a dead tree in the middle of the prairies" (243). Nevertheless, words have been spoken. She addresses her mother's spirit: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (243). And the reader recognizes that the inability to communicate was not the fault of mother and child but of hideous political events that fracture families and nations. As a child Naomi had yearned for the presence of her mother, her warm flesh. As an adult, however, she is able to make symbolic connections: the words of the letter connect her to the bones lying in a grave in Japan. She says, "The letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves" (243). This is an important step forward for Naomi who, earlier in the story, had expressed the belief that there would never be any kind of healing for the dispersed Japanese.

Although bones are still "only bones," they are associated, in Naomi's mind, with the surrounding earth and roots and blossoms. Earlier, when she recalls the grueling postwar years on the beet farm, she thought all bones were "dead bones" (198). Then rebirth of the spirit had seemed impossible. She had no symbol to nourish her spirit

and enable her to become a word warrior like her Aunt Emily ; rather, she remained a silent stone like Obasan.

In the final chapter we can see that Naomi's "brokenness" is already diminishing. The dominant image now is not of her mother as an isolated tree to which the child desperately clings; her mother is part of a forest: "Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight, to the place where the colours all meet--red and yellow and blue. We have turned and returned to your arms as you turn to earth and form the forest floor .... My loved ones, rest in your world of stone. Around you flows the underground stream. How bright in the darkness the brooding light. How gentle the colours of rain" (246). The disturbing image of the black rain which fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki has been replaced by a life-giving rain. This image of ancestors forming the forest floor which feeds the Nisei and the Sansei is the culmination of many root images in the novel. At the opening of the novel, a month before Uncle dies, Naomi watches his "root-like fingers poking the grass in front of him" as they sit on the prairie slope (2). She notices that her own fingers "tunnel through a tangle of roots till the grass stands up from my knuckles, making it seem that my fingers are the roots. I am part of this small forest. Like the grass, I search the earth and the sky with a thin but persistent thirst" (3).

A month later when Naomi has returned to Granton for Uncle's funeral, she awakens from a dream:

> I was dreaming just now, was I not? I drift back down into white windless dream. The distance approaches and the roots of trees are prayers descending. Fingers tunnelling. Wordlessness.
>
> The mist in the dream swarms like the foam of dry ice on the weatherless mountainside. Together, from out of another dream or from nowhere, the man and woman arrive. (28)

Naomi gradually realizes that she is the woman and that there are also another man and woman present: "They have been here before us,

forever in the forest." The woman's face is "square, a coarse golden brown. Her body, a matching squareness, is dense as earth." She is swinging a sickle. Then Naomi describes the man: "The man is taller, thinner and precise--a British martinet. It is evident that he is in command. They are clearing the land, and Naomi realizes that she and the man with her" are to help in the work at hand. "Then she sees a huge gentle beast--a lion or a dog or a lion dog." It belongs to the man. It is a robot, and the other woman, too, is mechanical; she approaches Naomi and "recites an ancient mythical contract made between herself and the man so long ago the language has been forgotten."

The dream changes: "Uncle stands in the depth of the forest. He bows a deep ceremonial bow. In his mouth is a red red rose with an endless stem. He turns around slowly in a flower dance--a ritual of the dead. Behind him, someone--I do not know who--is straining to speak, but rapidly, softly, a cloud overtakes everything. Is it the British officer with his pruning shears disappearing to the left? He is wearing an army uniform" (30). Like most dreams, certain elements in this one cannot be deciphered. But the golden brown woman--certainly an Indian--and the British officer clearly represent aspects of Canadian history that are embedded in Naomi's subconscious. The contract recited by the woman could refer to Anglo-Indian treaties. Significantly, the words cannot be understood: When promises are broken and trust shattered, communication ceases. Uncle, the new immigrant, bows respectfully before the authorities of his chosen land, signifying his gratitude and commitment. The rose in his mouth suggests the rose of the British empire and perhaps even the wild rose of the Province of Alberta, the home that Uncle did not choose but accepted. The rose also represents words, or the need for words, although this interpretation depends on a later dream sequence in which Naomi sees her mother with a rose in her mouth--a mouth that must be pried open so that words can be spoken.

The lion in the dream may be one of the three lions from Canada's coat of arms, which bears the motto 'A mari usque ad mare (From sea to sea).' The meaning of the motto is ominous for the native peoples whose population has steadily declined. The Japanese community,

like the Native Americans tribes before them, were dispersed. Unquestionably this cluster of dream images emphasizes Naomi's deep-rooted ambivalence about being a Canadian and serves as yet another reminder that it is through words and speech that barriers are crossed and justice restored.

The dream images emphasize the fact that Kogawa, in writing about Japanese-Canadians, is speaking for all minority groups in North America. Another passage in the novel complements this dream sequence and reiterates the parallel situations of the Indians and the Japanese. When Naomi is a seven-year-old playing with a friend by the stream, an Indian named Rough Lock Bill joins them and, using their sand village as a stage setting, tells the story of the first Indians who settled Slocan and gave the town its name. Rough Lock, also a "word warrior," wants to comfort the children with a story about survival and heroism. He tells them about a young Indian man who set out to find a better place for his people to live. When he returned to his dying people he told them, "If you go slow, you can go." The young man knew that if he could give his people a few words to cling to, they would survive. So the people set off for the new location, travelling for months, carrying the sick and the aged, saying "slow can go." And when they arrived at the new place, they called it Slow-can-go--Slocan--the valley that eventually became home-in-exile for Japanese Canadians (145-46).

In another scene, Rough Rock saves Naomi from drowning. He is a protector, a symbolic figure dramatically contrasted with another male figure from Naomi's childhood, Old Man Gower, the violator. This white man, a neighbor in Vancouver, entices the little girl into his yard with toffees and a band-aid for a scratched knee. He gently, perniciously, molests her. Naomi, looking back on the situation, defines old Man Gower in symbolic term: "He is the tree root that trips Snow White" (64). He has yet another symbolic function, as noted by Hilda L. Thomas in her review of *Obasan*: "Old Man Gower has his counterpart in the Canadian government which, using the excuse that they are protecting them, uproots men, women, and children and interns them in the abandoned ghost towns of the B.C. interior" (104). The incident with Old Man Gower takes on further meaning

when we look at the relationship between the man and the child in terms of political efficacy: Naomi, as an adult, admits that she did not resist but passively complied to his requests.

Rough Lock Bill and Old Man Gower represent two extremes of the Canadian psyche. As Kogawa notes, "this land... is like every land, filled with the wise, the fearful, the compassionate, the corrupt" (226). All, Kogawa insists, come from the same source:

> Oh Canada, whether it is admitted or not, we come from you, we come from you. From the same soil, the slugs and slime and bogs and twigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and sloughs, untended and spindly. We erupt in the valleys and mountainsides, in small towns and back alleys, sprouting upside-down on the prairies, our hair wild as spiders' legs, our feet rooted nowhere. We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting. 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 their telling. We come from Canada..... (226)

In the novel, Kogawa accuses and forgives, shocks and comforts while challenging us to see, to speak, and to act. In her 1984 essay, "Is There a Just Cause?", Kogawa reinforces the restrained optimism with which she concludes *Obasan*: "As we move towards the naming of our public friends and our public enemies, I trust and believe that the energy for healing, for reconciliation, for forgiveness and for mutuality are endlessly, endlessly accessible to us" (24).

In the last scene of *Obasan*, Naomi gets up just before dawn, puts on Emily's warm coat, and drives to the coulee that she had visited so often with Uncle. Rain is falling gently as she follows the path "where the underground stream seeps through the earth" (247). In the prologue Naomi had asked the question, "If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing

word?" (iv). In this final scene the images suggest that she has found the source and is experiencing a rebirth: she no longer experiences "a thin but persistent thirst" (3). Moreover she wears Emily's coat--her mantle. She has come to the freeing word: "the stone is ready to burst with telling; the seed is about to flower with speech."

There are parallels between Naomi and her beloved Momotaro, the peach boy whose adventures delighted her as a child. Momotaro burst forth from the peach stone and brought joy into the lives of the old couple who raised him. There was only one problem: he refused to talk. Many years went by and suddenly, one day, he spoke for the first time: "Grandma, Grandpa," he said, "I'm going to go and conquer demons" (Kiwauchi 71-72).

Like Momotaro, Naomi is poised on the edge of a new adventure. In recording her story she has conquered personal demons and named some of the demons in society. In a 1987 interview, Kogawa pointed out "that there's something better than what we're in; that there is more vision available to us than what we have. So there is something compelling us, some distant light, that draws us in some way" (qtd. in Komori 64). Naomi has been drawn out of her silence; she is overcoming her fears and her sense of inadequacy. She recognizes, as Kogawa says in her essay, "that there's something better than what we're in" and Naomi is willing to join with others and work for it.

Notes

1 In the essay "Richard Wright a Blues," Ellison notes that the blues "is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near tragic, near comic lyricism." *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1954, p. 78).

2 In 1907 a white mob rampaged through the Chinese and Japanese sections of Vancouver.

3 On 18 September 1931 Japanese military forces initiated the occupation of

Manchuria. They established military control and called the new state Manchuko.

4 See Robert Fulford's discussion of reparations in "Unfinished Business," *Saturday Night* July 1984: 3-5. On 22 September 1988 the Canadian government "agreed to pay the equivalent of $17,325 in compensation to each of about 12,000 surviving Japanese-Canadians who were forcibly uprooted from their homes in British Columbia..." (Burns 6). In September 1989 the U.S. Senate voted $500 million dollars in reparation: $20,000 payments will be available to an estimated 60,000 eligible Japanese-Americans beginning in October 1990.

5 In her doctoral dissertation, "The Ceremonial Self in Japanese-American Literature" (Brown University, 1986) Gayle Kimi Fujita examines the meshing of Japanese and Buddhist themes and images in *Obasan*. She says, "What becomes clear in this examination of Christian themes and images... is that religion and morality in Nikkei society derive from both Buddhism and Christianity to form a Japanese life neither schizophrenic nor a disabling blend" (127).

6 The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the eqivalent of the American Bill of Rights, was not enacted until 1982.

7 Marilyn Russell Rose analyzes the passive behavior of Japanese-Canadians by examining what she calls the central metaphor of *Obasan*, "the concept of rape-- that crime in which the victim inevitably feels shame and suspects her own complicity, that she has indeed 'invited' the attack." (*Mosaic* 21 (1980): 215-26. Ann Comer Sunahara uses the same metaphor in her conclusion to her book *The Politics of Racism:The Uprooting of Japanese-Canadians During the Second World War* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1981). For a discussion of the passiveness of Japanese-Americans during the dispersement period in the United States, see Ann Rayson's "Beneath the Mask: Autobiographies of Japanese-American Women," *MELUS* (*Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*) 14 (1987): 43-57.

8 In the *Canadian Forum* essay "Is There a Just Cause?" Kogawa identifies two fears that contribute to the desire to remain invisible: 1) fear of not being liked--Kogawa says she was "vilified, lied about and identified by some Japanese Canadians as an enemy of Japanese Canadians because of her belief in the need for a democratic and open dialogue"; 2) fear of "being unable to see or recognize the friend within the ones who name her as an enemy." But these two fears, she notes, gave way before a third fear--"the tyranny of silence itself" (24). Hence Kogawa became one of those driven to act in spite of the accompanying ordeals.

9 Although there is a substantial body of criticism available on *Obasan*, I have

not yet found any other discussion of this dream sequence and its relation to the meaning of the novel.

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