

Voices of Stone:
The Power of Poetry in
Joy Kogawa's "Obasan"

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And some of the Pharisees from among the multitude said unto him, Master, rebuke thy disciples.

And Jesus answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.

LUKE 19:39-40

Silence is also
a two-edged sword.

JOY KOGAWA, "Jericho Road"

Obasan (1981), Joy Kogawa's award-winning novel about the World War II internment of Japanese Canadians, is an intriguing example of the imaginative intersecting of politics and poetry. A novel of great beauty as well as passionate outrage — the writing of which was an act of "exorcism" for the author (Wilkinson 229) — *Obasan* became part of a successful campaign to lobby the Canadian government both for recognition of its wrongdoing and for reparations, years after this shameful event in Canadian history. However, in *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993), King-Kok Cheung argues that most reviewers of the novel¹ have applied "the hierarchical opposition of language and silence to the very novel that disturbs the hierarchy" (126). In texts such as *Obasan*, she says, "modalities of silence need to be differentiated" (3)² by readers taking into account the different values attached to speech and silence within Asian and North American cultures. One of the positive forms of silence identified in Asian culture, Cheung points out, is "attentive" silence, or the silence of *listening*.³ I would like to build on Cheung's insight by

discussing the relationship of “attentive silence” to the novel’s stone imagery, the mythical subtext such imagery participates in — including the portrayal of Obasan, strongly identified with stone — and this subtext’s part in creating the novel’s final attitude towards silence.⁴

Although not explicitly political, my reading challenges the isolation of *Obasan*’s artistic qualities, “at the expense of its politics,” that Mason Harris rightly criticizes (55, n. 1). Such an isolation ignores the book’s courageous vision of a struggle for justice founded on a faith which can cross boundaries between East and West, personal and political.⁵ As Marilyn Russell Rose notes, Naomi, mothered by two polarized aunts, is destined for synthesis: Obasan’s attentive silence/Emily’s passionate activism, Obasan’s enduring faith/Emily’s political anger. In Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s words, Kogawa’s novel takes us on a journey from “silence to fact to poetry” (“Japanese American” 303). It is through the creation of this poetry that Naomi’s — and arguably Kogawa’s — personal vision of the Internment experience is enlarged, and a foundation for political action laid. Such action takes the form of the Japanese-Canadian redress movement, as dramatized in *Itsuka* (1992), Kogawa’s sequel to *Obasan*.

Many theorists of language and philosophy (for example, Tannen and Saviile-Troike; Dauenhauer; Cage) have drawn attention to the ambiguous value of silence, insisting that silence is more than a negative or passive event and is often a paradoxical, powerful speech act in itself — especially useful in communicating abstract, ethereal experiences, such as those associated with religious practices, philosophy, or poetry. As iconoclastic performer John Cage, in his “Lecture on Nothing,” wittily demonstrates, “I have nothing to say / and I am saying it / and that is / poetry” (109). Cage’s provocative “lectures” and performances depend upon using “intervals” and other surprising gaps to invert the presumed superiority of controlled cultural sounds over their framing silence (which is not always empty of sound); he argues that writing these as poetry allows “musical elements” such as time and sound “to be introduced into the world of words” (x).

The power of poetry — its intense and concise artistry in words — comes in part from its dancing with silence, both structurally (in verse forms, line breaks, or syllable counts, for example) and rhetorically, by its tendency — at least the lyrical tendency — to draw on brevity's heightened impact and to surround itself with attentive silences. As Dauenhauer notes, the "difference between muteness and silence is comparable to the difference between being without sight and having one's eyes closed" (4). Closing one's eyes, for instance, may represent an act of turning inward, the better to focus on an internal dialogue between aspects of the self or — if we accept the possibility (more attractive in an individualistic age) of unmediated knowledge of God — on a conversation with the divine. Naomi closes her eyes after learning of her mother's horrific fate in Nagasaki, saying, "Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you" (240). The art of listening is frequently passed over in daily life, associated as it is with allegedly passive or subordinate identities, such as "female" or "Japanese Canadian." And if these identities are readily ignored or dismissed, so too with listening.

Silence, however, is an effective cross-cultural means of communicating, which can be found in religious traditions as diverse as Buddhism, with its meditations, or Quakerism, with its silent worship. This widespread understanding of the communicative role — if not the content — of silence, whether "speaking" silence or "attentive" silence, is especially useful to Kogawa's avowed goal of bridging real differences between readers, and thus, at some level, undoing the largely linguistic acts of prejudice, fear, and discrimination, which led to the official victimization of Japanese Canadians. As Cheung argues, Kogawa "uses multivocal discourses to articulate the manifold nature of reality and employs a number of elliptical devices to harness the power of the unspoken" (152). Among these discourses, the language of images is prominent, while the "power of the unspoken" may be, for Kogawa, its ability to attune the reader to the metaphysical aspects of existence, suggested by the metaphorical stone in relation to the underground stream and the absent mother.

In *Obasan*, Kogawa introduces a complex pattern of imagery through the novel's much-discussed three openings. The first opening is the epigraph taken from Revelations (2.17), promising those who "overcometh" the reward of "hidden manna," as well as the mysterious "white stone" which contains "a new name." The second is the prologue (n. pag.) which introduces the recurring meditation on speech and silence with the allegorical stone of silence and its landscape, including the underground stream associated with the "hidden voice." The third is Chapter One, where the elements of grass, sky, and underground stream reappear in the last of Naomi's unexplained visits to the Alberta coulee with Uncle, visits later understood by her as commemorating the bomb blast at Nagasaki in which her mother was caught. As the prologue suggests, the meaning of the stone is linked to its relationship to a natural setting of vegetation (here, grass; later, wild roses) and water (the underground stream). In the form of the "sensate sea," "amniotic deep," and "underground stream," which houses the "hidden voice" (opposed to the meaningless noise of "white sound"), water evokes associations with memory or the unconscious, both possible examples of "the speech that frees."

In the novel's final positioning of the "white stone" (the full moon's reflection) within a fertile setting of water and vegetation, the initial readings of the stone as a sterile "cold icon"⁶ representing only silent suffering and of Obasan herself as merely a passive victim, are untenable. For the "white stone" also heralds and harbours the "new name," a promise of spiritual rebirth.⁷ In an interview, Kogawa has defined herself as a "Christian humanist," but adds,

the values that I personally want to see go on are really universal values: the struggle for justice, all these things, they are universal values and my hope, whether they're expressed through the Christian mythology or whatever. It seems to me it doesn't matter what the vessel is." (Redekop 101)⁸

When the author's Christian humanist sympathies are taken into account, *Obasan's* stone symbolism becomes appropriately resonant and rich, inviting as it does both Japanese Buddhist and archetypal, Biblical interpretation.⁹ Associated with faith in

the Christian context¹⁰ — the church, Christ as rock or foundation stone — and with meditation in a Japanese Buddhist ambience,¹¹ the stone becomes a cross-cultural emblem for spiritual renewal. This renewal, underscored by the stone's final linking with water, is one which points simultaneously towards the promise of psychological rebirth and spiritual immortality. According to Jung and his followers, stones are among the sacred symbols that recur in the religions and myths of many cultures (the tree, also prominent in Kogawa's allegorical landscape, is another), leading Jungians to conclude that a "round stone is a symbol of the Self" (Jung 205). Consequently, stones are often viewed as carrying and evoking spirits of the dead, as is evidenced by statues, memorial stones, tombstones. Rooted in soil, testament, or memorial, these stones silently point to the possibility of life's endurance beyond, if not transcendence of, earthly existence.

Uncle's famous "stone bread" is a key element in the novel's stone symbolism. A reminder of Christ's temptation by the Devil in the wilderness (Luke 4.3) and an ironic allusion to the question asked by Christ, "[W]hat man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?" (Matt. 7.9), the oxymoronic bread suggests the same paradox implicit in a description of the Issei (first-generation Japanese Canadians, such as Uncle and Obasan) as possessing "stone voices."¹² As Cheng Lok Chua shows, Uncle's "stone bread" represents a denial both of his material sustenance (livelihood of fishing) and of his spiritual nourishment (his public identity as a Christian; for although Nakayama-sensei provides private Anglican services for Naomi's family, Uncle is denied communion in church [38]). Uncle learns to bake bread while "in exile" on the prairies, like the Israelites with their hastily-made "unleavened" bread (Exod. 12.39). At Uncle's wake, his last loaf of stone bread is brought out by Naomi, along with green Japanese tea, in an indigenous Japanese-Canadian version of the celebration of the Eucharist. The bread, with its connotations of both stoical silence and communion meditation, or "attentive" silence, is the same weight as Aunt Emily's package of documents, "white paper [Communion] bread for the mind's meal" (31, 182). Just as

neither Aunt's position is privileged over the other, neither is one "communion" loaf elevated above the other. But the very name "stone bread" suggests the white stone of the epigraph, associated with the "hidden manna" that will be the reward of those "that overcometh" through faith, even if they must first eat bread made "in the sweat of thy face" (Gen. 3.19).

The metaphorical stone's ability to link our world with a promised spiritual realm introduces a motif present in many cultures. The motif appears in the mythical subtext that enlarges Naomi's quest to understand her mother's silence. This is the underworld/underground journey which, supporting the case for Jung's "collective unconscious," has many cultural analogues. Kogawa is partially evoking a feminine version, the Greek myth of Demeter, goddess of agriculture, and her daughter Persephone,¹³ a story that offers an explanation for the cycle of the seasons and was the basis for the Eleusinian Mysteries, with their promise of life out of death (see Kerenyi). If we allow Kogawa's personal beliefs into our discussion of her novel, then it is clear that her insistence on the "universal value" of a "struggle for justice" is supported by the use of common motifs and symbols, including (but not limited to) Western archetypes. And without question, the separation of mother and daughter is the mythic heart of the book.

The absent mother certainly is figured transculturally and transgendered, as "a silent sufferer evoking the image of the Christian God and a tender comforter associated with the Buddhist Goddess," as Teruyo Ueki points out (13). However, I agree with Coral Ann Howells that *Obasan* is a "female quest narrative" (107), Naomi's deepest need being to restore, at some level, the mother-daughter tie. Descriptions of the mother as a living/dead tree, with Naomi a branch of that tree, and the mother's association with flowers (daffodils, the rose) put into play cyclical, natural imagery surrounding the mother-daughter relationship. Such imagery permits separation of mother and daughter to be read partly in terms of the abduction of Persephone by Hades, King of the Underworld, a loss which brings on winter, with Persephone's eventual return heralding spring. Naomi's own abduction and molestation by her neighbour, Old Man Gower, offers a mini-version of the rape of

Persephone. Yet following this primal scene of violation,¹⁴ mother and daughter reverse roles, with Naomi remaining in Canada and the mother disappearing into wartime Japan, where she is as if "underground" to her daughter, even when presumed living.¹⁵ Naomi's mother plays the part of Persephone, preserved in youthful beauty in a cherished photograph (46-47) and still awaited by her daughter, who, at thirty-six, seems to have aged prematurely.¹⁶ After reading the long-withheld letters telling of the horrific fate of Naomi's mother, Nakayama-sensei, the minister modelled on Kogawa's own father, offers a subtle Christian gloss on this submerged Demeter-Persephone imagery when he observes how "the whole earth groans till Love returns" (240). However, unlike Persephone and Demeter's reunion, Naomi's reunion is finally only with the message of love/Love, both human and divine, that her mother represents. But as Naomi now realizes, by her being receptive to the voices of stone, attentive as well as stoical, the message becomes the messenger: "Perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here" (243).¹⁷

However, it is Obasan, aunt and surrogate mother, who, in her stoical silence, best embodies a Demeter grieving for Persephone's loss and who initiates Naomi's necessary journey, as a Persephone figure, into the underworld of attentive silence. In Kerenyi's retelling of the myth, after the loss of her daughter, Demeter takes on "the form of an old woman who expects no more children but is still able to perform the duties of a nurse" (37). Like Naomi's mother, Obasan's place in the novel is complex. While realistically portrayed, she also inhabits a space in the novel that borders on myth. This archetypal aspect is drawn most forcibly to the reader's attention in the description of Obasan after Naomi has returned to her house to await her aunt's and brother's arrival for Uncle's funeral. Obasan performs the homely, caring act of scraping mud from her niece's shoes (perhaps a veiled allusion to Jesus's action of washing the feet of his apostles). Naomi observes:

Squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world. You see her on a street corner

in a village in southern France, in a black dress and black stockings. Or bent over *stone steps* in a Mexican mountain village. Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite personal details. (15-16)

Kogawa's description lifts Obasan, momentarily, out of her specific cultural identity and proposes her kinship with a universal, indeed essential, "old woman," the widow in "black dress and black stockings," who, while associated with death, is paradoxically "the true and rightful owner of the earth." By this allusive suggestiveness, Kogawa evokes not just Demeter in mourning but classical goddesses such as Hecate, Hera, Gaia or Mother Earth. Obasan's ball of string, onto which she winds the twine from Aunt Emily's package (44), establishes a link with the Three Fates of Greek and Norse mythology, who control the life-"lines" of individuals. Perhaps the knife suggests an affinity even with Hinduism's bloodthirsty Kali. The association of this particular old woman with the earth is made overt when Naomi, bathing with Obasan, describes her aged body in terms of geographic features: "the thin purple veins a scribbled maze, a skin map, her thick toenails, ancient rock formations. I am reminded of long-extinct volcanoes, the crust and rivulets of lava scars, crisscrossing down the bony hillside" (78). The Crone component of the Triple Goddess (Maiden/Mother/Crone), Obasan as old woman reminds us of Western culture's negative attitude — expressive of both contempt and fear — towards the elderly. The contempt results from the old woman's invisibility in a society that emphasizes youth and sexual vitality (and, in culturally-sanctioned circumstances, fertility). The fear results from the old woman's association with, and presumed knowledge of, death and the afterlife. By contrast, Japanese culture advocates a kind of ancestor worship, "the honour that is an old person's reward" (54); however, as Obasan is no longer living in a purely Japanese setting, she has forfeited that formalized type of respect.

Diana Fuss has questioned the widespread rejection by feminist critics and theorists of "essentialist" approaches towards

women — those that identify women “on the basis of transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences” — noting that

the political investments of the sign “essence” are predicated on the subject’s complex positioning in a particular social field, and that the appraisal of this investment depends not on any interior values intrinsic to the sign itself but rather on the shifting and determinative discursive relations which produced it. (20)

In other words, an essentialist treatment of women need not *inevitably* serve the interests of patriarchal society. Kogawa’s “essentialist” portrayal here of Obasan as “every old woman in every hamlet in the world” not only lifts the old woman out of her personal context, thereby making her plight more accessible to more readers, but also gives her an almost mystical *feminine* power. This power is associated with the “Great Mother” archetype in Jungian psychology (see Neumann), and with the concept of “the goddess” in some archetypal feminist writing.¹⁸ Thus, I disagree with Mason Harris’s observation that Obasan aids Naomi’s healing by representing “the female ideal” (49) and “a traditional concept of woman inherited from the Issei” (52).

A large part of what is essentialized in this key description is *not* Obasan’s Japanese femininity, but her resistance, as “old woman,” to that very femininity — associated with young, attractive, potentially child-bearing women. In this portrayal, Obasan is *doubly* challenging to traditional social structures, situated as she is on the threshold not just between life and death, but also perhaps between masculine and feminine roles, being both owner/“father” and squatting servant or nurturer/“mother” of the earth. Obasan is associated on several levels with the underworld Naomi must explore on her quest to understand her mother’s silence; while Obasan is now a widow as well as an old woman, her two pregnancies, we are told, ended with the death of both children (Stephen and Naomi appear to replace those children).

Significantly located in Naomi’s reverie on “a street corner,” mediating “stone steps,” Obasan as “old woman” is caught between one level of existence and another. This transitional position suggests that she has the key to the meaning of life — its

“*unknown* doorways and . . . astonishing *tunnels*” (227; emphasis added) — as death and what follows are figured again as the underworld journey. In a dream that foreshadows the final revelation about her mother, Naomi dreams she is on stairs “leading into a courtyard and the place of the dead. . . . They were all there — my parents, my grandparents, and Obasan as well, small as a child. She was intent on being near me at the top of the stairs” (227). The placement of a magically small Obasan — near Naomi, at “the top of the stairs” — supports the interpretation that, in her archetypal Crone role, Obasan is a mediator between life (her niece/foster daughter, venturing into “the place of the dead”) and death (the deceased relatives). Finally, Obasan is certainly “the possessor of life’s infinite personal details,” as we are told that in her old house she has carefully preserved everything associated with the Nakane and Kato families, from photographs and clothing to toys and Emily’s package of documents, including the letters telling of the mother’s fate. Harris notes that as Naomi ponders “Emily’s documents in the silence of Obasan’s house,” she “has already responded to the silent discourse implicit in the accumulation of carefully preserved objects which makes the house a filing cabinet of the family’s past” (53).

Indeed, although silenced by her lack of political power and knowledge of the dominant language, English, which Aunt Emily wields as a “word warrior” (32), Obasan wordlessly initiates Naomi’s journey by bringing her into the attic graveyard of their shared past. In an inversion of the underground journey, they travel upwards, at the beginning of the novel (Chapter Five), to the attic of the house, there to make their “descent” into memory. This inversion perhaps follows from Naomi’s striking vision of her dying Uncle, “tunnelling backward top to bottom, his feet in an upstairs attic of humus and memory, his hands groping down through the cracks and walls to the damp cellar, to the water, down to the underground sea” (14). Uncle’s dying journey foreshadows Naomi’s own descent to the underworld, the place of silent communication (symbolized by stone), memory, and the unconscious, the mind’s own “underground sea.” Moving through the “evil laundry” of the spider

webs (25), Obasan and Naomi are linked as travellers in the underworld, just as they are in Naomi's dream of "the place of the dead." To journey willingly to the underworld, however, as myths from many cultures tell us, is not to die but to be reborn: as the world is reborn after Persephone's annually accepted exile, and as Naomi presumably is at the end of the novel — after attending to her mother's silence — with her vision of "water and stone dancing" (247).

The trip to the attic, which represents a journey into the underworld of Naomi's silenced past, parallels significant journeys in the novel. For instance, the train trip from Vancouver to the interior of British Columbia is described in the following way: "We are going down to the middle of the earth with pick-axe eyes, tunnelling by train to the Interior, carried along by the momentum of the expulsion into the waiting wilderness" (111). Alluding both to the Exile of the Israelites and to the text's recurring motif of the underground journey, Naomi's poetic meditation on this trip includes a reference as well to the ubiquitous stone; Naomi declares that "We are the silences that speak from stone" (111). Foreshadowing the silent speaking of her mother — through the letters and Naomi's dreams and intuitions — this declaration points both to Naomi's political oppression and to a powerful, witnessing faith in love/Love. Both are symbolized by the stone, which finally stands not just for silently stoical suffering but also for spiritual attentiveness. Naomi's first impression of the run-down house they move into, following their train trip, is another hint of the underworld journey she must eventually take in the name of personal and spiritual wholeness: "Although it is not dark or cool, it feels underground" (121).

While living in Slokan, Naomi almost drowns; she dreams in hospital of being led by a fairy to "the moss-covered door on the forest floor that opens to the tunnel that leads to the place where my mother and father [sent to a work camp] are hiding" (151). Originating in Naomi's unconscious, this allusion to an underworld inhabited by her absent parents offers glimpses of spiritual consolation which culminate in the thirty-six-year-old Naomi's vision that the imagined graveyard holding her loved

ones is a “forest . . . where all the colours meet” (246). The imposition of the forest’s natural cycles onto the graveyard — like the mystical interpretation of the Demeter and Persephone story — allows Naomi to reconcile herself to the final loss of her mother. She is comforted by the vision’s images of rebirth, both spiritual and psychological:

The letters tonight [telling of her mother’s fate] 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 vision is made all the more moving by the various meanings collected, as Naomi’s journey unfolds, by the absent, loving, silent mother whose presence is nevertheless felt by her daughter. These meanings allow for a reading of the absent mother as an absent God, Naomi’s mother’s “love” reflecting divine “Love.” As a child, Naomi is visited by a ghostly vision of her mother during “early autumn in 1945” — shortly after the bomb blast which almost killed her — a mother who is both “here” and “not here” (167).

The psychological and spiritual rebirth promised by Naomi’s final epiphany is foreshadowed by recurring visions of the stone within a natural landscape. For instance, the mother is associated consistently with a tree to which Naomi is attached, recalling the Bible’s Tree of Life (Gen. 2.9) as well as the more homely “family tree.”¹⁹ After absorbing the shocking story of her mother’s maimed survival of the atomic bomb blast, Naomi conjures up the image of the dead tree she used to visit in Granton, with herself sitting on its roots “still as a stone” (243). But this acceptance of death as merely silent suffering is ultimately overturned by Kogawa’s re-embracing of natural imagery to describe the mother-daughter relationship such that it re-incorporates or re-interprets the silent stone. The mother’s grave marker in Japan consists of a name on a “memorial stone” or plaque near a Canadian maple (241). By extension, her grave becomes a figure for all of Naomi’s lost relatives, the maple tree in Japan becoming a forest where “We have turned and returned to your arms as you [the relatives] turn to earth and form the forest floor” (246).²⁰ Through this metaphoric

transformation, the place of death, sealed with the "cold icon" of the stone, becomes a place of life — both natural *and* meta-physical. The "roots of trees are prayers descending," Naomi realizes in a dream (28). The stone marker, which is presumed to stand in for or to contain the dead person's soul or spirit,²¹ becomes part of a forest/rock garden²² that, in a description which plays with the conventional depiction of an outward-growing "family tree," transmits the "love" of the deceased family members through still-vital roots. Thus, the long-delayed message of love/Love from Naomi's mother is passed on from dead to living in imitation of the forest cycle of growth/decay/new growth. The stone, like Obasan, stands not only for silent suffering but also for attentiveness to faith, a faith which permits communication between living and dead, when Naomi finally attends to the silent message of love/Love, after the letters have been read: "Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you" (240).

In the end, "the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence" (228), politically as well as personally, for Kogawa's depiction of the aftermath of the bomb blast at Nagasaki is a witnessing, essential to action which may lead to justice. Listening facilitates a deeper seeing, an empathic envisioning of what was formerly "other." As Naomi imaginatively enters the terrifying scene at Nagasaki, she says simply and movingly, "Mother, I see your face. Do not turn aside" (242). By requesting that her formerly beautiful mother not avert her terribly disfigured face, Naomi signals her refusal to endorse her mother's shame as a victim of the atrocity. This is a shame she once experienced herself, in a smaller but no less potent violation of her person: the sexual abuse she suffered from both her neighbour, Old Man Gower, and the older boy, Percy, in Slocan. As activist Aunt Emily points out, this is a shame that continues to paralyze the victims of the Internment into complicitous silence. Such shame, Kogawa reveals, must be challenged; such silence finally broken.

Yet for Naomi, finally knowing her mother's presence first demands an affirmation of the "attentive" silence symbolized by the stone, which houses love/Love's "unbreakable name," as Nakayama-sensei puts it, despite this world's "brokenness" (240). Referring to the cemeteries where her relatives —

mother, father, uncle, grandparents — are buried, Naomi embraces the stone at the centre of the graveyard forest: “My loved ones, rest in your world of stone. Around you flows the underground stream” (246). In another instance of displacement, stone replaces trees and underground stream replaces roots, but the message remains the same: that love/Love outlives the end of life. “*How the whole earth groans till Love returns*” (240). Naomi’s return alone to the coulee she visited in Chapter One becomes the final underworld descent she must make for her fullest encounter with this love/Love. As she walks down the path to the underground stream, she sees “at the very bottom” a vision of the moon’s stone-like reflection in the river: “water and stone dancing” (247). The word (or Word) is no longer either lifeless stone or “white sound,” reminiscent of “white noise.” The attentive silence represented by the stone here unites with the “underground stream” and its “hidden voice,” the compassionate voice of love/Love which is best embodied by, but no longer restricted to, Naomi’s mother. Both the hidden voice and the perfume of the wild roses, significantly present but not seen — like the mother — speak of a love, human *and* divine, that supports Naomi’s need to speak fully and wholly, to burst with telling and flower with speech. Cheung observes that

Gary Willis attributes the “affect” of the novel to the power of narrative, “a power much greater than that of discursive argument” (249). But I believe the power derives more specifically from the author’s muted rhetoric, from her way of punctuating words with silences. . . . The reader must attend to the unarticulated linkages and piece together the broken parts; meaning permeates the spaces between words. (155)

By giving space in her political novel to these “unarticulated linkages” or moments of archetypal allusion, Kogawa assures her story of a wide, attentive audience that is prepared to enter its silences.

In its combined plea for political action and spiritual hope, *Obasan* presents us with a fully human quest for wholeness, for the possibility of “universal values” towards which her imagery flows. In Joy Kogawa’s compassionate view, “Inadequacy is a uni-

versal experience and we are all broken and incomplete like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Our wholeness comes from joining and from sharing our brokenness" ("Is There a Just Cause?" 20). With its honouring of the voices of the stone — its attentive, as well as stoic, silences — *Obasan's* portrayal of Naomi's struggle both to listen and speak reveals the power of poetry, and the poetry of power.

NOTES

¹ The novel has attracted considerable critical interest. Donald Goellnicht has drawn attention to the text's metafictional aspects, its suggestion of the impossibility of claiming "absolute truth for one's vision" (299-300). Manina Jones has taken a similar position, regarding the novel as a work of "documentary-collage," which focuses on the "material documentation of history and story, refusing to see either as simply pretextual events unconditioned by specific, contextualized 'tellings'" (122). Marilyn Russell Rose, on the other hand, while acknowledging the contributions of postmodern critical readings, adheres to a humanist position in claiming that the text, through its skillful use of rhetoric, enacts its belief in the possibility of communication with a wider audience. Goellnicht points out the text's questioning of the nature and process of history-writing; Russell Rose sees in *Obasan* an insistence on a "shared or social reality as something that can be known and must be reacted to" (n. 1). More recently, Rachelle Kanefsky has made the same case.

Recognizing the complexity of its methods, Jones also observes that "*Obasan* is a novel that both evokes and resists the appeal of naturalism or realism" (122). Such blending of scepticism and faith — faith both political and personal — is intrinsic to the novel's lasting impact, while the protagonist Naomi's tentative movements towards a personal faith are supported by the suggested "pre-textual" attentive silence evoked by the novel's poetry, especially by the recurring stone imagery. Kogawa sums up her philosophical position in the title of a recent interview: "Every Certainty Must Be Surrounded By Doubt" (with Val Ross). Goellnicht's point is that through the use of "multiple discursive modes, tenses, and narrative points-of-view — from the soaring lyricism of Naomi's narrative, through the 'factual' reportage of Emily's diaries, to the authoritarian, third-person stance of government documents and newspaper articles — Kogawa disrupts and contests the dominant culture's totalizing, omniscient voice of history" (294). He goes on to observe that the "rupture constitutes both a break and an opening for re-vision" (294). Goellnicht's optical metaphor presupposes that, however much Kogawa problematizes the "dominant culture's" methods of communication, there is a truth beyond them, which, albeit partial, is humanly compelling and tied, in Kogawa's Christian humanist perspective, to a larger spiritual truth. Attending to her own, no-longer-silenced perspective, I offer a feminist humanist reading of *Obasan*.

² For instance, *to be* silent is not the same thing as *being* silenced. Jane Campion's 1993 film, *The Piano*, demonstrates the potentially subversive force of a woman's voluntary silence.

³ Fujita makes a similar observation — if less fully developed — when she describes Naomi's *nikkei* (of Japanese ancestry) "nonverbal mode of apprehension" as "attendance" (34).

- 4 Titrating her novel *Obasan* is an example of Kogawa's own act of attentive listening — to Obasan and “those amazing people, the Issei [first generation Japanese Canadians],” to whom the novel is dedicated. Listening is also identified — in a common shift of metaphor — with political visibility, for if “we never really see Obasan,” Kogawa notes, “she will always be oppressed” (Wayne 149).
- 5 The precise nature of the faith that sustains Naomi at the end of the novel is difficult to define. While Christian ritual and symbolism are prominent throughout the novel, Kogawa is careful not to delimit her protagonist's faith too narrowly, using the absent mother as a figure for the God who has, she suggests, “abandoned us that we might not abandon each other.” In the same interview, Kogawa notes, “I have a horror of militant Christianity” (“Every Certainty” C15). Consequently, the only label ever applied by Kogawa's novel to this vision of God is “Love.” Most critics have noted the presence in the novel of Zen Buddhist philosophy, upon which the Christian iconography is often superimposed (Davidson; Willis; Gottlieb; Ueki). But I do not agree with Geok-lin Lim that “*Obasan* carries a bitter critique of Christian discourse. The images offered in the use of biblical language are contextually ‘ironized’ and depleted of their significance” (“Japanese American” 305). Rather, the Christian images and rituals are re-interpreted, and enlarged, within a new, non-Western context, as in the novel's use of Easter, Nebuchadnezzar's fire, Eucharist, and the transformation of stone into bread. As Cheng Lok Chua shows, “Kogawa has ‘displaced’ (Frye 136ff) [these Christian motifs] into an ironic narrative mode that makes for a critique of the professed ethics of her structuring majority culture” (101). Kogawa's irony, I agree, is directed not at the Christian-based message of transcendent “Love” but at its manipulation by Western, and Canadian, society for self-serving ends.
- 6 Davidson, in a perceptive discussion of the prologue, points out that the “conjunction of a stone and a sealed vault, particularly in the presence of a cold icon, emphasizes the larger Christian iconography of the whole passage. . . . New life . . . can be born from the grave” (27-28).
- 7 See Ueki, n. 7, for the Buddhist and Christian possibilities.
- 8 These comments are part of an interview that accompanies an excerpt from *Obasan* in Hutcheon and Richmond — or what appears to be an excerpt until it is looked at more closely. The piece, entitled “Obasan,” is a different (possibly earlier) version of Naomi's first meeting with Obasan — who has two daughters here — after Uncle's death (Chapters 3-5). The prose is markedly different — more expository, more abstract, more dense, and thus less affecting. To observe the role that brevity, pauses, and understatement — rhetorical “silences” — play in creating Kogawa's distinctive style in the novel, we have just to compare the two openings. In the excerpt, we find: “‘O,’ she says, and the sound is short and dry as if *there is no energy left to put any inflection into her voice*. She begins to *rise* but falters and her hands outstretched *in greeting*, fall to the table” (qtd. in Hutcheon and Richmond 87; emphasis added). In the novel: “‘O,’ she says. The sound is short and dry as if she has no energy left. She begins to stand but falters and her hands, outstretched to greet me, fall to the table” (11). I believe we get a clearer picture of what is happening in the novel, where what is left *unsaid* is also a part of the communication.
- 9 Gottlieb has discussed in detail the novel's “coincidence of Buddhist and Christian symbols,” which often “present the effect of superimposition or double exposure” (50). Another example of this “double exposure” may be found in the detail that the current action of the novel, where the family reacts to Uncle's death, lasts three days. Gottlieb draws attention to the Buddhist tradi-

tion of watching by the dead in silence; according to Christianity, three days elapse between Christ's crucifixion and his resurrection. Similarly, Naomi's meditative wait for Emily and Stephen's arrival, in Obasan's house, with its "underground" associations, ends with her tentatively unifying vision of "water and stone dancing" at the coulee and the promise of her own personal, as well as political, resurrection.

- 10 See, for instance, Matt. 21.42, Matt. 16.18, I. Cor. 3.9-11. There is also a suggestion of the moment in the desert when Moses is commanded by God to "smite the rock and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink" (Exod. 17.6) in the same miraculous pairing of contrary elements that Kogawa draws upon for similar effects. In I. Cor. 10.4, Christ is called "the spiritual Rock" from which the people drink.
- 11 Relevant here is the Zen Buddhist rock and sand garden, where naturally shaped rocks are arranged on raked sand, and the combination is viewed as an aid to meditation. The most famous example is the garden at Ryoanji, Kyoto, Japan; it is pictured in Jung's *Man and His Symbols* and also in Watts's *The Way of Zen*. Although he is a Christian, Uncle sets up a Buddhist-style rock garden in Slocan, modelled after the original structure at his island home. In keeping with Kogawa's stone/water juxtaposition, it has a "tiny stream and waterfall winding around the base to a small pool" (138).
- 12 A collection of "Wartime Writings of Japanese Canadian Issei" draws on the stone's metaphoric association with silence and consequently with the Japanese Canadian community, through its revealing title, *Stone Voices* (Oiwa). The paradox here, as in *Obasan*, suggests the possibility of "attentive, as much as stoical, silence, an attentiveness that in Buddhism allows for an apprehension of a something (or a nothing) that 'cannot be put into words'" (Willis 243).
- 13 Geok-lin Lim has made this link, arguing that the "novel's theme . . . is profoundly mythopoeic; Naomi's search for her lost mother echoes in a sharp-edged ironic reversal of the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone" ("Asian American Daughters" 244).
- 14 The episode with Old Man Gower (Chapter 11) has been a source of much controversy. Although it is possible to read her molestation, which she (belatedly) admits to enjoying, as a psychoanalytic allegory of the rupture of the pre-Oedipal bond with the mother through the appearance of rival sexual feelings, I agree with Di Brandt that the political framing of the episode — with memories of the older boy, Percy, and his sexual assaults in Slocan, and the dream of the "beautiful oriental women" who fail to seduce the soldiers — indicates instead Naomi's acceptance, perhaps rationalization, of the victim role. Naomi's gender role compounds her vulnerability as cultural "Other," and her legitimate sexual feelings are here being turned against her own self-interest, leading to the "dread and . . . deadly loathing" she attributes to her dream alter egos, the oriental women who believed, as many victimized women do, that "the only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive" (62, 61).
- 15 Davidson notes that the Japanese fairy tale of Momotaro offers another version of Naomi's loss, by telling of a separation from both parents, for the magical child must leave behind his aged foster-parents, reminiscent of Obasan and Uncle (41).
- 16 As if to emphasize the spiritual "winter" she is living, Naomi describes herself at the beginning of the novel as an "old maid," a term Naomi applies to Aunt Emily as well, musing wryly that their family is a "crone-prone" one (8).
- 17 Like Nakayama-sensei, Kogawa also makes the link between earthly love and divine Love (a link signified in my essay by the notation "love/Love"). Discussing this climactic line, she says "It's about the death of God" ("Every Certainty" C15).

- 18 I am thinking, for example, of the work of Annis Pratt and Carol P. Christ. For an example of feminist psychology which draws on archetypes, see Nor Hall, *The Moon and the Virgin*.
- 19 The attack on Naomi's family and community is appropriately dramatized through the cutting of the trees by the "British martinet" in Naomi's dream of mechanized enslavement, clearly alluding to the Internment (28-30). As well, a childhood memory of a Grade Two Reader rhyme about "the giant woodsman" is recalled for a more sinister effect as Naomi is about to leave the relative comfort of Slocan for the hardship and further exile of the prairies. As they wait for the train, she thinks, "we are all standing still, as thick and full of rushing as trees in a forest storm, waiting for the giant woodsmen with his mighty axe" (179).
- 20 Other subtle associations of family members with trees include mention of Uncle's "root-like fingers" poking the coulee grass, and the description of him, dying in hospital, with tubes stuck into his wrists like "grafting on a tree" (2, 14). Naomi, in her final visit to the coulee with Uncle, shares his association with roots: "My fingers tunnel through a tangle of roots till the grass stands up from my knuckles, making it seem that my fingers are the roots." She adds, "I am part of this small forest" (3). Trees will return in the dream-like image of the forest representing the collectivity of Naomi's dead relatives.
- 21 "The ancient Germans . . . believed that the spirits of the dead continued to live in their tombstones. The custom of placing stones on graves may spring partly from the symbolic idea that something eternal of the dead person remains, which can be most fittingly represented by a stone" (Jung 209).
- 22 In his memoir, *Inside Memory*, Findley notes the unintended meaning of the name he gave to his farm in Cannington, Ontario, "Stone Orchard," which, "in local terms, means graveyard" (88). The colourful image implied — of (grave)stones as fruit — is a subtle example of the long-standing investment of the stone and what it memorializes with connotations of spiritual renewal.

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