Re-forming the Globe:
Citizenship Reconfigured in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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Introduction

Once published in 1981, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* achieved instant canonical status.[1] The novel was received as a political indictment of Canada's maltreatment of the Japanese Canadians during and after the World War II, in alignment with the redress movement of the late 1970s and 1980s. The book became an instant best-seller and won several literary awards within two years. It won, in 1981, the Books in Canada's First Novel Award and Canadian Authors Association's Book of the Year Award; and in 1982, the Periodical Distributors of Canada's Best Paperback Fiction Award, the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award, and the American Library Association's Notable Book Award. Translated into Japanese in 1983, the book was entitled *Ushinawareta sokoku* [Lost Homeland], thus totally changing the meaning of the original title ("auntie" or "middle-aged woman") to the one that nostalgically gestures towards the native land (Canada or Japan). As if to compensate for the wartime ostracizing of Japanese Canadians, literary institution and critics have been eager to integrate, if not to assimilate, the novel authored by a third generation Canadian of Japanese ancestry into either one of the national literatures of Canada, America, or Japan.

"*Obasan* is," claimed Arnold Davidson in 1993, "one of the most important Canadian books to appear in recent decades" (13). He wrote the prescription for the present time drawing from the political message of *Obasan*: "But just as *Obasan* places us, as Canadians, in a hall of shame, it also shows us at least partly how to get out. The indictment of the book is, by extension, a call to action, a demand that something be done to oppose, to set right, as much as possible, the wrongs exposed" (14). However, this sort of nation-bound readings of *Obasan* from any nationalist perspective neglects the transnational dimension of this novel and the significance of Obasan's silence juxtaposed in opposition to Aunt Emily's political activism.

The protagonist-narrator of *Obasan*, Naomi Nakane, a third-generation Japanese Canadian, clearly attaches a higher value to Obasan's reticence over Aunt Emily's speech. It is the political stance of the author as well, for Kogawa told in an interview that she

entitled the novel *Obasan* for the title character's utter silence. She stated that disregarding the figure of Obasan is the same as oppressing those who cannot speak for themselves: "If we never really see Obasan, she will always be oppressed. How does society stop oppressing those who never speak up?" (Wayne 23; qtd in Cheung 120). Kogawa thus takes sides with Obasan, by dedicating the book to the first-generation Canadians of Japanese ancestry, to the *isseis*, "to those amazing people." Unfortunately, most critics continue to subjugate Obasan for her reticence and do not try to "see" her. They listen too much to another eloquent *obasan*, Aunt Emily, mistaking her speech as a liberating word that solves the questions raised in the novel and wrongly assuming her political activism—"a call to action" in Davidson's words—as the solution provided by the novel as a whole.

Writing the novel *Obasan* is, in parallel with the Naomi's act of narrating, Kogawa's struggle to "represent" and come to terms with the historical trauma of Japanese Canadians. "Through the power of the written word," argues Meredith L. Shoenut, "Kogawa strives to arrive at some truth by giving voice to those not in a position of power" (478). Yet, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has problematized in her 1988 seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," speaking for the subaltern is always a tenuous goal. Focusing on the narrator's two contrary aunts, Aunt Emily and Obasan, this paper attempts to demonstrate the narrating of Naomi as her endeavor to cope with the traumatic past and the present diasporic experience that cannot be delineated by national borders nor be resolved in nationalist terms. Against the grain of previous nation-bound readings, I will read *Obasan* as Kogawa's deep meditation on the realities of diasporic condition, a condition of double alienation in time and place. Although Shoenut argues that the act of writing is Kogawa's "struggles to reclaim her Japanese Canadian identity" (479), what Kogawa proposes in the novel is, I will argue, drawing on the notions of denationalized citizenship and hybridity, a new conceptualization of citizenship and cultural hybridity that will transcend the pre-existing modes of belonging and senses of solidarity.

In-Between White Sound and Stone Silence

Juxtaposed in Naomi's narrative are two riddles that are seemingly unlinked. "The protagonist-narrator's tale is interspersed with her own experience of the Japanese Canadian internment and dispersal, which parallels the repressed trauma of her mother's disappearance" (Iwamura 162). On the surface level, there is "a riddle" of the Japanese Canadians being "both the enemy and not the enemy" (84) within Canada.

During and after the war, silence is violently imposed upon them: "We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera, and every means of communication . . ." (132). But underneath this collective riddle there is a suppressed personal one, "the riddle of what has happened to Naomi's mother" (Cheung 115). Naomi keeps asking herself—"Why did my mother not return?" (31); "What I do not understand is Mother's total lack of communication with Stephen and me" (256). In both political and personal riddles communication became impossible. For Naomi, Aunt Emily and Obasan are the keys to solve the riddling past.

Throughout the novel, Naomi's narrative threads oscillate between "the polarization of values," speech against silence, protest against gratitude, remembering against forgetting (Cook 55), which are embodied in her contrary aunts. Naomi compares Aunt Emily and Obasan to "sound" and "stone" respectively: "How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior" (39). Naomi, as a result, "negotiate[s] between two distinct ways of coping with these events as exemplified by her two aunts: Aunt Emily, who engages in political action and harnesses the written word to fight racial oppression, and Aya Obasan, who suffers in silence" (Iwamura 162). Caught between Aunt Emily's political militancy and Obasan's tolerance, Naomi searches for the way out from this binary opposition. Yet, from the very beginning, Naomi writes, "But I fail the task. The word is stone" (Prologue, n. pag.). Paradoxically, in her failure, Naomi approaches the in-between space of "both/and" rather than "either/or," towards the new configuration of politics and poetics that does not be bound by speech nor silence, protest nor gratitude, remembering nor forgetting.

The narrative of Naomi, a thirty-six-year-old schoolteacher in 1972, is in a constant quarrel with Aunt Emily's "heap of words" (218). Aunt Emily, "a crusader, a little old gray-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes" (3), devotes herself to redress the past wrongs and to expose the repressed history of minority groups. "Injustice enrages Aunt Amy. Any injustice. Whether she's dealing with the Japanese-Canadian issue or women's rights or poverty, she's one of the world's white blood cells, rushing from trouble spot to trouble spot with her medication pouring into wounds seen and not seen" (41). She is a hard-core grass-roots activist calling for action, far different from those in academia whom she condemns as an unpractical theorist. "Some people," dismisses Aunt Emily, "are so busy seeing all sides of every issue that they neutralize concern and prevent necessary action. There's no strength in seeing all sides unless you can act where real measurable injustice exists.

A lot of academic talk just immobilizes the oppressed and maintains oppressors in their positions of power" (42). Thus she articulates the incommensurability of politics and theory in healing the historical trauma.

Aunt Emily is the figure of a nationalist activist. Although she travels worldwide taking no heed of the national borders (39), she demarcates the nation-state under the banner of "Democracy" (53). She claims her territorial ownership, "*This is my own, my native land!*" (47). Her cry for integration is not far from assimilative nationalism, as is revealed in the following lines: "Momotaro is a Canadian story. We're Canadian, aren't we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian" (68). Snaro Kanboureli recognizes the pitfall of Aunt Emily: "[S]he draws her energy and political will from her unproblematized notion of Canada as a democracy. Because Emily never concedes that racialization is embedded in the foundations of the Canadian state, she unwittingly reproduces the liberal ideology that justifies racism within a democratic framework" (188). Her cause for redress under the integrationist banner reiterates assimilative "white" nationalism that she is supposedly fighting against and let the national identity of Canada as a land of democracy go unchecked.

Naomi expresses her skepticism towards Aunt Emily's political activism. She undercuts Aunt Emily's alleged grass-roots movement as that of the privileged, whose activities have nothing to do with those of down-to-earth people like her: "All of Aunt Emily's words, all her papers, 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" (226). She notes Aunt Emily's privileged bird's-eye view on the whole country and her belief in the political solidarity of the second-generation Japanese Canadians: "She's the one with the vision. She believes in the Nisei, seeing them as networks and streamers of light dotting the country." Naomi, however, identifies herself with the ones on the ground spotted by Aunt Emily "vision." She says, "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" (38). Seen from down below, Aunt Emily's claimed comradeship to the Japanese Canadians is a mere "[w]hite sound" (Prologue, n. pag.) thundering at the sky.

Aunt Emily's blatant violence in her righteousness is made apparent by Naomi's simile. Aunt Emily, "a word warrior" (39), is like a combat unit in the multinational airborne troops, overlooking from the above: "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" (95). Naomi hints that the activists' shootings of words might have unintended yet dire consequences: "Elsewhere, people like Aunt Emily clack away at their typewriters, spreading words like buckshot, aiming at the shadow in the sky" (225). For Naomi, the political activism of Aunt Emily makes her uneasy and "curiously numb" because she feels that Aunt Emily is utilizing "their suffering as weapons" (41).

Ironically, Aunt Emily's call for action is hardly a panacea. Flying from one conference after another, Aunt Emily, in her incessant fights against injustices, overdoses medication on the traumatic wounds of Naomi. Exposed to Aunt Emily's talks and conference papers, Naomi suffers from what Susan D. Moeller calls "compassion fatigue." Just as the repeated media coverage of atrocities numbs the mind of audiences and lessens their interests and sympathy, Aunt Emily's coverage of wartime sufferings of Japanese Canadians have the same numbing effects on Naomi: "'Read this, Nomi,' she said from time to time, handing me papers as if they were snapshots. I sometimes managed to catch half a paragraph on a page before she gave me something else. She must have thought I was speed-reading and listening to her at the same time, like switching back and forth between movies on television" (43). Naomi asks herself: "Do I really mind? Yes, I mind. I mind everything. Even the flies" (233). Not being able to care everything, Naomi declares that prejudice and discrimination directed at a minority group by the dominant group is the universal condition of humankind: "And no doubt it will al happen again, over and over with different faces and names, variations on the same theme" (238). She concludes what Aunt Emily is doing is "an unnecessary upheaval in the delicate ecology of this numb day" (55), a mere disturbing of the balance between remembering and forgetfulness. Rather than loitering around the bloodcurdling atrocities in human affairs, Naomi wants to leave the indigestible past untouched, following the steps of Obasan—"Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. Didn't Obasan once say, 'It is better to forget'? What purpose is served by hauling forth the jar of inedible food? If it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past pain." (54).

To learn how to forget, however, Naomi must first learn what has been there to forget. She wants to ignore the remnants of the past, but at the same time she knows that they nonetheless do not go away from her mind: "There are some indescribable items in the dark recesses of the fridge that never see the light of the day. But you realize when you open the door that they're there, lurking, too old for mold and past putrefaction" (54).

She must open the door of her closed heart and face the unspeakable, rescuing "[t]he memories . . . drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence" (26).

All through her life, Naomi's inquiries related to her mother have met with the mysterious silence of Aya Obasan and Uncle Isamu. When she asks Uncle why they have been making an annual visit to the coulee in the vicinity of Granton on August 9th since 1954, he does not give her an answer, saying that she is still too young to know, leaving her suffering from "a thin but persistent thirst" (4) for knowledge. Thus it is fitting that *Obasan* opens with an invocation to the unspeakable: "There is a silence that cannot speak. / There is a silence that will not speak." Nancy J. Peterson correctly argues that Aunt Emily represents the history of the oppressed, "the voice of history," while Obasan embodies the historical trauma, "the silences and wounds of history that cannot speak directly" (160-61). Conference papers handed by Aunt Emily records black-and-white historical facts, the "short harsh history" (40) of Japanese Canadians during and after WWII. However, Naomi wants to learn more nuanced details of "truth" about the experiences of Japanese Canadians: "The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and gray" (38). What Naomi wants to know is unofficial, personal histories of each Japanese Canadians. Yet, Naomi, as well as the reader, learns that in the figure of Obasan historical and personal traumas are intertwined. Obasan materializes the melancholic grief of the traumatized: "The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful" (17). Naomi/Kogawa, weighing Obasan's speechlessness against Aunt Emily's loquacity, wishes to listen to the suppressed voice: "If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word?" She yearns for the liberating word that frees oneself from the grip of the past: "The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence" (Prologue, n. pgn.). Thus, what the narrator-protagonist Naomi and, by extension, the author Kogawa attempt to do in the act of narration is to listen attentively and articulate the voiceless voice by representing the absent figure: Naomi's mother.

The riddle of the unexplained absence of Mother lurks at the bottom of Naomi's heart. The delicate balance of remembering and forgetfulness shifts on September 13th, 1972, when Naomi visits Obasan after Uncle Isamu's death. At midnight, Obasan searches for Aunt Emily's package from the attic and passes it down to Naomi. The package from Aunt Emily, mediated by Obasan, is an indirect answer to Naomi's impulsive question—"What do you think happened to Mother and Grandma in Japan?" (222)—posed to Aunt Emily on last May 1972. Inside the package, along with Aunt

Emily's old diary and many correspondences, Naomi finds "a gray cardboard folder," which she remembers seeing before but cannot recall exactly when and where she had seen (55). Aunt Emily's package becomes the key to defrost Naomi's forgotten reveries and memories.

The wartime sufferings of Canadian Americans are most eloquently communicated to Naomi by the private diary of A. Emily Kato, aged 25, written thirty years ago. Dated from 25 December 1941 to 21 May 1942, the diary's each entry is addressed to her sister, Naomi's mother. In the absence of the addressee, Naomi reads the young Aunt Emily's personal letters on behalf of her mother. Belatedly, after all those years of imposed silence, Naomi listens to the torrent of "living word" (Prologue, n. pag.) affectionately written for her mother. Prompted by reading the indirect lived-experience of A. Emily Kato, the narrator Naomi recounts her childhood memories of relocation in the present tense from the limited perspective of a child. Naomi declares, "We are the silences that speak from stone" (132). As such, the personal/collective trauma of Japanese Canadians is given nonrepresentational expression in her polyphonic narrative of disjunction. Indeed, interspersed with her fragmentary memories, in Naomi's narrative, the personal and historical traumas were inseparably intertwined.[2]

Only at the very end of the narrative does Naomi confront with the unspeakable. All her close relatives, Uncle, Obasan, and Aunt Emily, had shielded Naomi and Stephen from knowing their mother's disfigurement by the atomic blast in Nagasaki. It was her mother's wish not to tell her fate to her children so that they would be spared of the horrors of the war. Also, even if she had tried to tell, it was impossible to frame the traumatic experience in words. Thus the way she coped with the trauma was the refusal "to speak," hoping that the trauma would heal someday. However, as Grandma Kato states in her letter, "however much the effort to forget, there is no forgetfulness" (281), the traumatic memory does not go away. When "the silence and the constancy of the nightmare had become unbearable for Grandma," she wrote two letters to her husband to share some of the details of her experience so that "she could be helped to extricate herself from the grip of the past" (282-83). For Grandma Kato, the act of framing a testimonial narrative was a life-surviving act.

"Naomi, . . . Stephen, your mother is speaking. Listen carefully to her voice," says the minister Nakayama-sensei. But what he reads aloud are the two letters written by Grandmother Kato addressed to her husband, "the letters that were never intended for Stephen and me" (279). Through the recitation of Grandmother Kato's letters, written in Japanese that Naomi cannot read (55), at last what happened to her mother twenty-

seven years ago is partially reported to Naomi. Naomi briefly depicts the disfigured figure of her mother: "The woman was utterly disfigured. Her nose and one cheek were almost gone. Great wounds and pustules covered her entire face and body. She was completely bald. She sat in a cloud of flies, and maggots wriggled among her wounds" (286). Although Naomi comments the second letter of Grandmother Kato is "an outpouring," twice-mediated, the letter is far from her mother's own "living word" overflowing to Naomi. She claims, "The letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only." (292). She wants to give flesh and blood to her mother's skeleton body, as she has indicated in the Prologue—"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" (n. pag.). As Naomi states that "[t]he sound of Sensei's voice grows as indistinct as the hum of distant traffic," for her, the recitation of Grandma Kato's letters by Nakayama-sensei is "[w]hite sound." She prays not to the God but to her mother—"Mother, I am listening. Assist me to hear you" (288). In her power of narration, Naomi wants to give shape to her mother's traumatic experience.[3]

Naomi as a child was a "Grand Inquisitor" (273), secretly accusing of her mother's abandonment and non-communication. Yet, with her newly acquired knowledge, the mature Naomi chants the invocation to her mother. She now understands her mother's silence as the proof of her love and not of her abandonment: "Martyr Mother, you pilot your powerful voicelessness over the ocean and across the mountain, straight as a missile to our hut on the edge of a sugar-beet field. 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" (290). But she gently argues that the protective silence was indeed destructive for the traumatized: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (291). She tries to feel her mother's presence: "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" (292). In her act of imagination, she embraces her mother's absent presence.

In her effort to attend her mother's pain, Naomi experiences vicariously what she has not experienced directly. "At first, stumbling and unaware of pain, you open your eyes in the red mist and, sheltering a dead child, you flee through the flames. Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there?" (290). Here, in her genuine compassion, Naomi synchronizes with her mother and with all of the "Young Mother at Nagasaki," transcending spatial and temporal intervals in her imagination. She attempts to

experience for herself what her mother has gone through and to share her pain and grief: "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 skin on your face bubbles like lava and melts from your bones. Mother, I see your face. Do not turn aside" (290). Here, her mother's traumatic experience is connected to her own trauma of childhood sexual abuse by a neighbor. Bearing witness to someone else's trauma requires taking the burden of pain as one's own. Doubly traumatized from the sexual abuse and her mother's disappearance, the two discrete events occurred around the same time where she mistakenly framed in causal relationship, Naomi has indeed been a speechless child with "[a] double wound" of her dream sitting "still as a stone" (291). Paradoxically, bearing witness to her mother's trauma leads Naomi to be free from the intertwining grip of her childhood traumas and to acknowledge the trauma of her own.[4]

A dream-memory of Naomi, inserted haphazardly in the earlier narrative, whose significance the reader realizes at the very end, uncannily bears witness to the traumatic experience of her mother. On August 15th, 1945, Naomi wakes up in the middle of the night sensing the uncanny presence of her mother: "She is here. She is not here. She is reaching out to me with a touch deceptive as dawn, with hands and fingers that wave like grass around my feet, and her hair falls and falls and falls from her head like streamers of paper rain." The day before, with "his fingers in the V-for-Victory sign," her brother Stephen rushed towards home shouting, "We won, we won, we won!" (199). Unbeknown to her son and daughter in a victorious country, a presumably pregnant young mother was enduring the radiation sickness "in a bombed country" (290), severely injured—her skin burnt and the blisters blooming, her facial bones dissolved, her hair completely depilated, and the blood bleeding from her bodily wounds, while maggots crawling and flies circulating her body—with her tremendously decreased white blood cells.

Naomi's dream memory designates the moment of what Homi K. Bhabha calls "the unhomeliness." The unhomeliness is "the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations." In her reverie, the synchronous happenings in two spatially distant locales becomes interconnected and displaced at the same time. "In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha 13). In her dream-memory, her "in-between" experience of waking and sleeping, converge the scattered pieces of the two riddles in the novel into a larger

puzzle of the world: one "minority" group of the citizens are confiscated and incarcerated by their own nation; the citizens visiting a foreign country are bombed by an ally of their nation to which they supposedly belong.[5] These riddles signify that the nation-centered concept of citizenship and the state regulation do not necessarily correspond with each other and that the nation-bound citizenship cannot grasp the reality of the transnational mobility of people. Instead, *Obasan* proposes a new conception of citizenship itself, longing for an "aspiration toward a multiple, pluralized understanding of citizenship identity and citizen solidarity" (Bosniak 506). Only in-between time and space, the disfigurement of Mother and, by extension, myriad lived-experiences of the Young Mother at Nagasaki become imaginable.

Conclusion: Towards A New Configuration of Citizenship

At the end of the novel Naomi revisits the coulee alone, where Naomi and Uncle used to visit annually. Recalling Uncle's voice, "Umi no yo" ("It's like the sea"), she brings the reader back to the place where the novel initially started. She figuratively conducts a sort of burial ceremony, offering elegiac prayers to the deceased: "Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight, to the place where the colors all meet—red and yellow and blue" (295). Unsatisfied with the trope of "Benetton-like 'United Colors' solution," Kanboureli disputes that "the utopian, if not stereotypical, image of a rainbow . . . is hardly a political answer to the ravages of the past, or of the view of present as 'this new hour filled with emptiness'" (176). Although Kanboureli sees "resolution" and "forgetting" in the novel's cyclic structure (221), the final scene is far from an easy reconciliation with the past.[6] Naomi's return is her acknowledgement of Uncle's previously untold purpose of visiting the prairie around August 9, the day when the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki in 1945. The consoling, pastoral scene of the coulee at the opening chapter screens the post-nuclear landscape of Nagasaki. In her mind's eye, Naomi tries to visualize what Uncle was envisaging "beyond" the grassy sea. Just as Uncle was doing, Naomi came to console the dead, to re-member the loved ones. She wishes the dead a peaceful rest, "My loved ones, rest in your world of stone" (295), which is her offering of "a political answer" as well. Not knowing her mother's fate, Naomi had cynically dropped any effort to change the world altogether, reacting against Aunt Emily's political activism. Naomi does not fall back into her cynicism or "compassion fatigue" in the end. She tries to re-member the dead in her compassion, crossing the time-space borderlands, "free[ing] herself from the constrictions of a time-bound phenomenal existence and the divisive binary language that goes with it" (Cook

55).

It is surely not in the "synthesis" (Kanboureli 176) of Aunt Emily's white sound and Obasan's stone silence that Naomi/Kogawa tries to find the alternative solution. Jane Naomi Iwamura argues that Naomi attains "a perspective that draws from, yet transcends both these ethical responses" (162). What she strives for instead is something "in-between," what Bhabha calls the Third Space. "[T]o dwell 'in the beyond' is . . . to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to re-inscribe our human, historic commonality; to *touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now" (Bhabha 10). Naomi indicates that "[s]omewhere between speech and hearing is a transmutation of sound" (295). In this "transmutation of sound" between testimony and sharing does Naomi/Kogawa find the possibility of representing the voices of the oppressed.

Naomi finds the potency of "transmutation" in Obasan's extra-territorial and cross-cultural domestic figure, a housewife firmly rooted in her house, which is "now her blood and bones" (18). Her topos is opaque and not mastered yet: "Her land is impenetrable, so thick that even the sound of mourning is swallowed up. In her steadfast silence, she remains inviolate" (270). While remaining silent, Obasan's hands attend to some household chores, always caring for others. She dwells not in nation-state boundary but "in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands" (271). Obasan's hand summons the reader to decipher the riddle of the world: "Her hand moves on the table like an electrocardiograph needle, delicate and unreadable" (55). Obasan's hand gestures towards a new, unnamed topography of the global formation: "Obasan has picked up the twine ball again and her fingers move along the hemisphere of the globe, carefully forming and re-forming the shape. All her movements this morning are in a different dimension of time" (54). That Obasan's hands "re-forming" the terrestrial globe puns on the reforming of the global world, the call for the conceptual alteration of our mode of time and space. We have delineated an immense, cosmic space into the horizontal plane of terrestrial borders; we have limited an infinite time to the finite segments of linear, progressive time.

Not dissimilar to the notions of "denationalized citizenship" or "hybridity," Obasan, who "does not dance to the multicultural piper's tune or respond to the racist's slur" (271), epitomizes the figure of cross-cultural diasporic existence.[7] Naomi designates Obasan as the representative of many other obasans here and there, who mediate cultural differences and open the door to the new citizenship solidarities yet to be imagined:

"Squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, [Obasan] is every old woman in every hamlet in the world. . . . 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" (19). What is proposed here is an "aspiration toward, plural and denationalized membership forms" (Bosniak 491) and "a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities" (Bhabha 7). Naomi/Kogawa seems to say that, not by ethnicity or nationality or any other pre-existing norms but by genuine compassion, we can erase the line between private/public, personal/historical, and domestic/international in our imagination.

In this sense, Kogawa's *Obasan* is what Bhabha calls "the borderline work of culture," the work that "does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (Bhabha 10). Visionary as she might be, Kogawa firmly believes in the power of compassion to re-forming the globe. With all her care not to fall into the pitfall of the binary opposition of political activism and academic theory, Kogawa mediates and intervene politics and poetics in her act of imagination.

"Would I come at last to the freeing word?," Kogawa asked in the Prologue. It is not clear whether her question will be answered positively in the end, for the silence is so engulfing ("I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply") (Prologue n. pag.). The question is still pending in the space, in the space "beyond." However, despite her reluctance to excavate the past, Naomi/Kogawa nevertheless made the effort to decipher the words of liberation from the undercurrent maternal voices, as she offered her chapters to us. Kogawa is never an optimist, but she believes in the possibility of mutation and summons the reader to envisage the new world configuration themselves and hopes that the dormant seeds of the transnational conceptualization of citizenship and cultural hybridity that she disseminates by the novel *Obasan* will someday blossom everywhere in this globalized world: "But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves" (292). The re-formation of the globe is immanent in our imagination, which transmutes time and space into something yet to come.

Notes

1. Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (New York: Anchor Books, 1981). All quotations are to this edition and hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

2. In her narrative, Naomi assembles various disjointed and fragmentary discourses of the past, which Kanboureli calls "a montage . . . of different historical discourses" (176). The "fragments of fragments" (64, 132) she re-collects are photographs, diaries, letters, memories, and dreams. This parallels with Kogawa's own act of "montage," in which she appropriates the personal/historical "documents and letters from the files of Muriel Kitagawa, Grace Tucker, T. Buck Suzuki and Gordon Nakayama" in the Public Archives of Canada (Acknowledgement).

3. King-Kok Cheung argues that "Grandma's letters thus provide Naomi with both a personal reason ('extricate herself from the grip of the past') and a political reason (through 'storytelling, we can extricate ourselves from our foolish ways') to write, to transform her personal silence and that of her family into words" (126).

4. My denationalized reading of this scene departs radically from Shoenut's. Reading symbolism in the traumatic experiences of Mother and Naomi, she writes: "[t]he presence of her mother represents the cultural values of a 'mother country'" (485); "The violation of Naomi's body parallels the violation of Japanese Canadian identity by the Canadian government" (486).

5. According to the response letter to Aunt Emily's inquiry in 1950, Naomi's mother "retained her Canadian citizenship" (255).

6. Following Roy Miki's contention that critics "all tend to incorporate a *resolutionary* (not revolutionary) aesthetics in their overall critical framing of the novel" (115), Benjamin Lefebvre proposes "to resist taking at face value the apparent resolution to the individual and cultural stories depicted in *Obasan*" (156). Kanboureli argues that "'revolutionary' potential . . . is suggested by the way the novel reconstructs history and, above all, by the way Naomi's character operates as a montage—not a 'synthesis'—of different historical discourses" (176).

7. The "de-nationalized citizenship" should not be confused with the notion of "world citizenship," which, according to Bosniak, has "a cosmopolitan outlook that expresses loyalty and moral commitment to humanity at large, rather than any particular community of persons" and that "embrace[s] of some form of moral universalism" (448). The world citizenship is best exemplified by Naomi's cosmopolitan brother Stephen who rejects both Obasan's endurance and Aunt Emily's political activism altogether.

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