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Contents

Introduction, 3
   ELAINE HEDGES AND SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

PART I

Circle of Women Artists: Tillie Olsen and Anne Sexton
   at the Radcliffe Institute, 17
   DIANE MIDDLEBROOK

Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic: The Lessons Silences Has Taught Us, 23
   SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

Rereading Tell Me a Riddle in the Age of Deconstruction, 49
   DEBORAH SILVERTON ROSENFELT

“No One’s Private Ground”: A Bakhtinian Reading of Tillie Olsen’s
   Tell Me a Riddle, 71
   CONSTANCE COINER

PART II

“Further Liftings of the Veil”: Gender, Class, and Labor in Frances E. W.
   Harper’s Iola Leroy, 97
   CARLA L. PETERSON

Attentive Silence in Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, 113
   KING-KOK CHEUNG

Northamerican Silences: History, Identity, and Witness in the Poetry of
   Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Leslie Marmon Silko, 130
   KATE ADAMS

Silences in Harriet “Linda Brent” Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave
   Girl, 146
   JOANNE M. BRAXTON AND SHARON ZUBER

Women’s Silence as a Ritual of Truth: A Study of Literary Expressions
   in Austen, Brontë and Woolf, 156
   PATRICIA LAURENCE

Reading Feminist Readings: Recuperative Reading and the Silent Heroine
   of Feminist Criticism, 168
   CARLA KAPLAN
PART III

Silent Parenting in the Academy, 197
    CONSTANCE COINER

"How Many of Us Can You Hold to Your Breast?": Mothering in the
    Academy, 225
    DIANA HUME GEORGE

Teaching from the Open Closet, 245
    REBECCA MARK

Cognitive Desires: An Allegory of/for Chicana Critics, 260
    NORMA ALARCÓN

Silences in the In-Between: Feminist Women Critics and the Canon, 274
    JUDITH L. SENSI BAR AND JUDITH BRYANT WITTENBERG

"The Great Unexamined": Silence, Speech, and Class, 287
    LILLIAN S. ROBINSON

Filling in the Silences: Tillie Olsen's Reading Lists, 295
    ROBIN DIZARD

Contributors, 311

Index, 315
Attentive Silence in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*

**King-Kok Cheung**

To the *issei*, honor and dignity is expressed through silence, the twig bending with the wind... The *sansei* view silence as a dangerous kind of cooperation with the enemy.

*Joy Kogawa*, interview with Susan Yim (D8)

Since the Civil Rights movement in the late 1960s, women and members of racial minorities have increasingly sworn off the silence imposed upon them by the dominant culture. Yet silence should also be given its due. Many Asian Americans, in their attempts to dispel the stereotype of the quiet and submissive Oriental, have either repressed or denied an important component of their heritage—the use of nonverbal expression. With many young Asian Americans turning against this aspect of their culture and non-Asians even less able to understand the allegedly “inscrutable” minority, it is not surprising that Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, an autobiographical novel, has been subject to tendentious reviews. To Edith Milton the book is “a study in painful silence, in unquestioning but troubled obedience to the inevitable” (8); to David Low it is “clearly a novel about the importance of communication and the danger of keeping silent” (22); to Joyce Wayne it is “a tale of the submissive silence of the oppressed” (23). The resounding condemnation of silence reflects the bias of “translation” or of language itself which, as Paula Gunn Allen tells us, “embodies the unspoken assumptions and orientations of the culture it belongs to” (225). In English, *silence* is often the opposite of *speech*, *language*, or *expression*. The Chinese and Japanese character for *silence*, on the other hand, is antonymous to *noise*, *motion*, and *commotion*. In the United States silence is generally looked upon as passive; in China and Japan it traditionally signals pensiveness, alertness, and sensitivity.

These differences are too often eclipsed by a Eurocentric perspective to which even revisionist critics may succumb. As Chandra Mohanty has argued, much of Western feminist representation of oppressed “third world” women is pitted against the implicit self-representation of Western women as educated, liberated and, I might add, verbally assertive: “These distinctions are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent” (337). A similar norm frequently governs the assessment of racial minorities in North America. Marilyn Russell Rose, a sophisticated critic keenly aware of the danger of Orientalist discourse, nevertheless places inordinate blame on the victims in *Obasan*: “‘Orientalism’ has been so internalized by this
Oriental minority, that their silence is an inadvertent bow to the occidental hegemony which legitimizes their abuse” (“Hawthorne” 293; see also Edward Said for a detailed discussion of Orientalism). Undeniably, nikkei have been subject to political exploitation, but to view their reticence as no more than the internalization of Occidental stereotypes is to tune out the “other” perceptions of silence in the novel. Countering Orientalism means challenging Western reduction or homogenization of Asian traits, but not necessarily denying or denouncing the traits themselves.

Situated on the crossroads of cultures, Kogawa in Obasan shows a mixed attitude toward both language and silence and reevaluates both in ways that undermine logocentrism. Certainly, language can liberate and heal, but it can also distort and hurt; and while silence may smother and obliterate, it can also minister, soothe, and communicate. The verbal restraint that informs Kogawa’s theme and style manifests not only the particular anguish of voicelessness but also what Gayle Fujita describes as the narrator’s specific nikkei legacy—“a nonverbal mode of apprehension summarized by the term ‘attendance’” (34). Where Fujita subsumes several forms of reticence under the rubric “attendance,” however, I find it necessary to distinguish among protective, stoic, and attentive silences, which Kogawa regards with varying attitudes. Kogawa also deplores negative manifestations of silence, such as political oppression through censorship and enforced invisibility, and the victims’ repression.2

The thematics and poetics of silence are tightly interwoven. On the thematic level, the narrator negotiates between voicelessness and vociferousness, embodied respectively by her two aunts. The style of the novel likewise evinces a double heritage. The biblical injunction to “write the vision and make it plain”—advocated by one of the aunts—is soft-pedaled by the narrator’s preference for indirection, a preference which sociologist Stanford Lyman associates with the nisei generally. Even as the narrator confronts the outrages committed during World War II, she resorts to elliptical devices, such as juvenile perspective, fragmented memories and reveries, devices which at once accentuate fictionality and proffer a “truth” that runs deeper than the official written records of the war years spilled into the novel. The gaps in the narrative demand from the reader a vigilance and receptivity that correspond to the narrator’s attentiveness.

I

Kogawa bases Obasan on her own experiences during World War II and on letters, journals, and documents of the time.3 After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, over 21,000 Canadians of Japanese ancestry (17,000 of whom were Canadian-born) were forced to leave their homes on the coast of British Columbia. They were sent first to Hastings Park in Vancouver and then to various ghost towns—hastily reconstituted by the wartime authorities—in the British Columbia interior. By 1944 Japanese Canadians who still remained in the British Columbia interior were made to choose between resettlement east of the Rockies or deportation to Japan—a country most of them had never seen. Unlike Japanese Americans, who could return to the West Coast after the war, Japanese Canadians were not allowed to return to British Columbia until 1949.

The novel is presented from the point of view of Naomi Nakane, a 36-year-old schoolteacher. It begins in 1972 when Naomi’s Uncle Isamu is still alive in Graniton, Alberta. A month later, Isamu dies and Naomi goes to comfort his widow Aunt Aya—the title character. Obasan is Aunt in Japanese, but it can also mean woman in general. The title thus implicitly “acknowledges the connectedness of all women’s lives—Naomi, her mother, her two aunts” (Fujita 41). At Obasan’s house Naomi finds a parcel from her Aunt Emily that contains wartime documents, letters, and Emily’s own journal written between December 1941 and May 1942. (Many of Emily’s letters of protest to the Canadian government are based on the real letters of Muriel Kitagawa, a Japanese-Canadian activist.) As Naomi sifts through the contents of this package, she reluctantly sinks into her own past. She recalls the uprooting and dissolution of her family during and after the war: her father died of tuberculosis; two of her grandparents died of physical and mental stress. Naomi and her older brother Stephen were brought up by Uncle Isamu and Obasan. Hovering over the tale is the riddle of what has happened to Naomi’s mother, who accompanied Grandma Kato (Naomi’s maternal grandmother) to Japan on a visit shortly before the war, when Naomi was five. Only at the end of the book do Naomi and Stephen (and the reader) discover that their mother had been totally disfigured during the nuclear blast in Nagasaki and died a few years later. Before her death she requested Obasan and Uncle to spare her children the truth. The adults succeed all too well in keeping the secret; Naomi does not find out about her mother’s fate for over thirty years.

The novel depicts Naomi’s plight of not knowing and not being able to tell. Naomi has been speechless and withdrawn throughout childhood and adolescence—her quiet disposition tied to her mother’s unexplained absence. As a girl she questions but receives no answer; as an adult she prefers to leave the question unspoken because she dreads knowing. As Magnusson has observed, “Naomi’s individual drama is closely caught up in her linguistic anxiety, which comes to serve as a synecdoche for her estrangement—from others, from her cultural origins, from the absent mother who preoccupies her thoughts, from her past” (58).

In her quest for identity and for peace, Naomi is influenced by her two aunts’ contrary responses to their harrowing experiences during the war. Obasan, the reticent aunt who raises Naomi, counsels her to forget and to forgive. Aunt Emily, the political activist, pressures her to divulge the indignities endured by Japanese Canadians—to “write the vision and make it plain” (31). Emily brings to mind the Old Testament prophets who cry for justice; Obasan, the New Testament preaching of humility, forgiveness, and charity. But both sets of behavior also have roots in Japanese culture. As Michiko Lamberton points out, “There are two poles in the Japanese way
of thinking. One is a fatalistic attitude of acceptance, endurance, and stoicism and the other is a sense of justice, honour, and fair play” (94). Obasan’s attitude is as much Buddhist as Christian; she moves with equal ease in Christian and Buddhist burial ceremonies, always ready with her serving hands. Emily’s activism, though ascribed to her Canadian schooling, is also promoted in the Japanese tale, recounted in the novel, of Momotaro—the boy who defends his people valiantly against cruel bandits (see Fuji 40). Naomi remarks:

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

Naomi feels invaded by Emily’s words and frustrated by Obasan’s wordlessness. She undercuts Emily’s polemics with irony and strains to hear Obasan’s inner speech.

II

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.

JOY KOGAWA, OBAAN, prologue

Kogawa articulates her misgivings about language and history primarily through Naomi. When Naomi receives Emily’s package, filled with words, she at first resists reading its contents and reopening old wounds: “What is past recall is past pain” (45). Much as she tries to forget the past, however, it continues to haunt her, as in one of her dreams: “We’re trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves” (26). The dream echoes an argument that took place years before between Naomi and Emily:

“Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?”
“Dead?” she asked. “I’m not dead. You’re not dead. Who’s dead?”
“But you can’t fight the whole country,” I said.
“We are the country,” she answered (42).

Western readers are likely to agree with Emily and to view Obasan and Naomi as passive and timid. But the author’s allegiance is much more complex. Although her novel acknowledges the need to retrace the past and the importance of expression, it also exposes the many pitfalls of language (see Goellihnicht 291–94). To begin with, language is insidiously gendered so that synonymous words, such as “spinster” and “bachelor,” take on vastly different connotations. As Robin Lakoff has noted, “bachelor” is often used as a compliment, but “spinster” is normally used pejoratively: “The metaphorical connotations of ‘bachelor’ generally suggest sexual freedom; of ‘spinster,’ puritanism or celibacy” (33). When Naomi is called a “spinster” by one of her students, she recalls Emily’s objection to the epithet: “She says if we laundered the term properly she’d put it on, but it’s too covered with cultural accretions for comfort” (8). Laden with time-honored prejudice, words as inherited have a way of perpetuating patriarchal ideology.

Kogawa in Obaan is far more concerned with racist rhetoric than with sexist language, however. As Donald Goellihnicht points out, “Language shapes, rather than merely reflects, reality for both the victimizers and the victims, its manipulation resulting in empirical, concrete actions” (291). During the war the Canadian bureaucracy uses words to camouflage the most offensive actions against people of Japanese ancestry. Canadian-born citizens are dubbed “enemy aliens” (92); prison camps are dressed up as “Interior Housing Projects.” Emily fumes, “With language like that you can disguise any crime” (34). Language becomes especially treacherous when abusive slurs and oppressive edicts pass for “news” and “laws” respectively. Emily says that the newspapers are printing “outrage lies”; “There was a picture of a young nisei boy with a metal lunch box and it said he was a spy with a radio transmitter” (85). The very reason given by the government for the evacuation—that the Japanese residents pose a security risk—begs the question, for “not a single charge of treason was laid against a Japanese Canadian” (Goellihnicht 290).

Not only do white Canadian officials and nisei citizens hold opposite views about the evacuation, members of Naomi’s own family also diverge in their opinions. Where Aunt Emily wants to fight “fascist” Canada, Uncle and Obasan feel only “gratitude” to their adopted country (42). Even the perspective of one person may shift with time. Emily, who once “worshipped the Mounties” to the extent of brandishing their motto—Maintiens le droit [uphold the law]—is appalled by how rudely her erstwhile heroes treat her people during the war. Her former motto is translated literally into a sour question: “Maintain the right?” (100). Kogawa emphasizes that “facts” are often inseparable from interpretations, that even when intent to deceive is absent, language can only convey partial, often subjective, realities. The narrator observes her distance from her vociferous aunt: “For [Emily], the vision is the truth as she lives it. When she is called like Habakkuk to the witness stand, her testimony is to the light that shines in the lives of the nisei, in their desperation to prove themselves Canadian, in their tough and gentle spirit. The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey” (32).

Besides doubting the transparency of language, the narrator questions its efficacy. Naomi wonders whether anything tangible can come out of Emily’s polemics:

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—those little black
Listening to Silences

typewritten words—rain words, cloud droppings. They do not touch us where we are planted here in Alberta. . . . The words are not made flesh. . . . All my prayers disappear into space (189).

To Naomi, Emily's collections of data and didactic analysis are but so much "noise" that hardly alleviate actual suffering or inspire redeeming vision. The narrator wishes to find a verbal medium that can hold a listener without sounding coercive or dogmatic, that can transform "white sound" into "living word."

III

I do not wish to romanticize the Issei: but to humbly and gratefully acknowledge what it was that shone with such deep energy through their lives—in their hands, in their silences.

KOGAWA, preface to Issei, by Gordon Nakayama, 7

If skepticism about language and interrogation of majority consensus aligns Kogawa with many a woman writer and postmodernist thinker, her ability to project a spectrum of silence is, as Fujita suggests, traceable to her bicultural heritage. To monitor this peculiar sensibility, one must avoid gliding over the tonalities of silence in the novel, or seeing them all negatively as destructive. The protagonist, to be sure, struggles against oppressive and inhibitive silence. She also feels divided about the protective and the stoic silence of the issei which has sheltered her as a child but paralyzes her as an adult. She continues nevertheless to cherish the communicative and attentive silence she has learned from several female forerunners.

Oppressive silence in the novel takes both individual and collective forms, inflicted on women and men alike. As a child Naomi was sexually abused by a neighbor—Old Man Gower—who forbade her to tell of the violation: "Don't tell your mother" (64). Later, it is the Canadian government that harasses the Japanese Canadians and suppresses the victims. Emily notes: "All cards and letters are censored. . . . Not a word from the camps makes the papers. Everything is hushed up" (101). Naomi tells: "We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication" (111).

Not an uncommon reaction to suppression is repression on the part of the victims. Instead of voicing anger at the subjugators, they seal their lips in shame. Child Naomi, whose relationship with her mother has been one of mutual trust, begins to nurse a secret that separates them after her molestation. Racial abuse similarly gags the victim. When Stephen is beaten up by white boys, he refuses to tell Naomi what has caused his injury. Naomi intuits, "Is he ashamed, as I was in Old Man Gower's bathroom?" (70). Rape, Erika Gottlieb points out, is used here as "metaphor for any kind of violation" (45). Like Stephen, many Japanese Canadians also refuse to speak about what Rose calls their "political and spiritual rape" by the Canadian government ("Politics" 224). Naomi, for one, wishes to leave the past behind: "Crimes of history . . . can stay in history" (41). Her attitude of acceptance is, however, ultimately complicit with social oppression: her self-imposed silence feeds the one imposed from without. Naomi nonetheless learns that she cannot bracket the past, not only because it is impossible to do so, but also because it is self-destructive. "If you cut any of [your history] off you're an amputee," Emily warns. "Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream!" (49–50).

What makes it especially difficult for Naomi to "scream" is her schooling in the protective and stoic silence of the issei, which she is gradually coming to regard with ambivalence. She appreciates the efforts of Mother and Obasan to create a soothing environment for the children. She recollects Mother's reassuring manner during a childhood crisis, after she tells her that a big white hen is pecking a batch of infant yellow chicks to death (an event that clearly foreshadows the pending interracial dynamics). Mother comes immediately to the rescue: "With swift deft fingers, Mother removes the live chicks first, placing them in her apron. All the while that she acts, there is calm efficiency in her face and she does not speak" (59). Obasan also exhibits serenity in the face of commotion. Even on the eve of the evacuation, "Aya is being very calm and she doesn't want any discussion in front of the kids. All she's told them is that they're going for a train ride" (108). An involuntary exodus is recast as a pleasant excursion—for the children's sake.

A point comes when such protective silence—a form of enforced innocence—infantilizes. Naomi, now an adult, is constantly frustrated by tight-lipped Obasan: "The greater my urgency to know, the thicker her silences have always been" (45). When Naomi asks her about the letters written in Japanese—letters describing the bombing in Nagasaki—Obasan produces instead an old photograph of Naomi and her mother, once more substituting a sweet image for harsh facts. Her silence can be as misleading as words.

The stoic silence of the issei is presented with a similar mixture of appreciation and criticism. The issei believe in quiet forbearance, in dignified silence. During the war they mustered enormous strength to swallow white prejudices, weather the ravages of the internment, and, above all, shelter the young as much as possible from physical and psychological harm. To the dominant culture their silence suggested passivity and weakness, and encouraged open season on them. Kogawa capitulates these divergent perceptions of silence in two successive images from nature: "We are the silences that speak from stone. . . . We disappear into the future undemanding as dew" (111–12). Stone connotes sturdiness, endurance, and impregnability; dew, by contrast, suggests fragility, evanescence, and vulnerability. Placed side by side, the two figures for silence reveal the complex attitude of the Japanese-Canadian narrator. She acknowledges the physical and inner strength of the issei: their sturdiness is a requisite to survival in taxing environments such as the ghost town of Slocan and the beet farm of Alberta. The silence exemplified by Uncle and Obasan attests at once to their strength of endurance and their power to forgive. At the same time, the narrator knows all too well that their magnanimity—redoubled by their Christian belief in turning the other
appeals openly to the reader to see Obasan and to hear “the silence that cannot speak” (epigraph). But she does not enjoin Obasan to emulat Emily. As readers, we must be wary of adopting the attitude of Stephen, who scorns Obasan’s Japanese ways; or that of the chilling Mrs. Barker, whose “glance at Obasan is one of condescension” (224). Or we may be guilty of the very blindness that the author attempts to cure. Dismissing Obasan as a victim would legitimize her victimization.

The “world-traveling” advocated by María Lugones proves instructive here:

Through traveling to other people’s “worlds” we discover that there are “worlds” in which those who are the victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable (402).

The narrator herself, unlike Stephen and Mrs. Barker, never regards Obasan arrogantly. She does not view her through Eurocentric or even revisionist eyes: “Obasan . . . does not come from this glamorous climate. She does not dance to the multi-cultural piper’s tune or respond to the racist’s slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands” (226). In portraying her aunt she pointedly departs from the view of silence as absence or as impotence. She divines unspoken meanings beneath Obasan’s reticence and wishes to enter “the vault of her thoughts” (26). She textualizes the inaudible: “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” (14). The quietest character in the novel, Obasan is also the most attentive. (She performs what Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” eulogizes as those “little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.”.) One marked achievement of this novel is the finesse by which the author renders a wordless figure into an unforgettable character.

The destructive and enabling aspects of silence are recapitulated together in the climax of the novel. Naomi finally learns (from her grandma’s letters) about her mother’s disfigurement. Bewildered, she at first can only deplore her mother’s protective silence: “Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction” (243). Yet almost in the same breath that remonstrates against protective silence the narrator is invoking attendance which, as Fujita observes, “supports Naomi in her moment of greatest need” (39). The act ushers in the process of healing: “Gradually the room grows still and it is as if I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life. . . . Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you” (240).

In this receptive state she hears “the sigh of . . . remembered breath, a wordless word” (241). She is able to conjure up her mother’s presence, and empathy restores the original bond: “Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there?” (242). The communion continues:
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. 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).

Naomi breathes life into the verbal knowledge transmitted by the letters (“bones only”) by means of a nonverbal mode of apprehension. Her ability to grasp an absent presence through imaginative empathy is fostered by her sedulous heedfulness. She finally discovers the key to the cryptic epigraph: “To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence.”

IV

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea.

Obasan, prologue

Attuned to the contradictory potential of both language and silence, Kagawa uses multivocal discourses to articulate the manifold nature of reality and employs a number of elliptical devices to harness the power of the unspoken. The polyglossia of Obasan has often been noted (see Merivale 68; Goellnicht 294). Here I would call attention to the author’s muted rhetoric, to her way of punctuating words with silences. Kagawa deploys fables and dreams to spin a web of associations, of verbal and emotional echoes. She alerts us to the associative impact of words through Naomi’s response to the honorific “Nesan” in Emily’s journal:

The sight of the word...cuts into me with a peculiar sensation of pain and tenderness. It means “older sister,” and was what Aunt Emily always called Mother. Grandma Kato also called Mother “Nesan” from time to time especially if she was talking to Aunt Emily. I remember one time I called Mother “Nesan” and Grandma Kato laughed and laughed (46).

The word agitates Naomi not because of its denotative meaning but because of its connections with her mother and grandmother, with a time too blissful for memory. Of all the words in Emily’s journals this one steals its way most readily into Naomi’s heart.

Shattered imagery pervades Naomi’s own reminiscences, described at one point as “fragments of fragments,” as “segments of stories” (53); at another as “dream images” (112). The reader must attend to the unarticulated linkages and piece together the broken parts; meaning permeates the spaces between what is said. A simple fable may set off a rippling effect. Fujita has shown that “attendance is clearly linked to...the story of Momotaro” (38), which Naomi is told as a child. The tale also reverberates poignantly in Naomi’s own life. It is at the sight of Obasan that Naomi recalls “the old woman of many Japanese legends” (54) and the fable about a boy who emerges from a peach, to the delight of an old childless couple. When Momotaro grows up, he travels to a neighboring island to fight bandits; he wins the battle and brings honor to his aged foster parents. The plot is simple enough, yet each detail summoned by the narrator elicits in the reader a response to what has not been stated. The joy of the old couple at the sight of Momotaro has parallels in Naomi’s own happy prewar childhood when all the adults lavish love and attention on her, when simply “by existing a child is delight” (55). The description of the day when Momotaro must leave his parents to go on the long and perilous journey also has analogues in Naomi’s experience. Both the sadness of separation and the suppression of that emotion are delicately sketched:

The time comes when Momotaro must go and silence falls like feathers of snow all over the rice-paper hut. Inside, the hands are slow. Grandmother kneels at the table forming round rice balls, pressing the sticky rice together with her moist fingertips. She wraps them in a small square cloth and holding them before her in her cupped hands, she offers him the lunch for his journey. There are no tears and no words. Grandfather and Grandmother are careful, as he goes, not to weight his pack with their sorrow.

Alone in the misty mountains once more, the old folks wait (56).

This speaking picture prefigures several scenes of farewell in Obasan: that of Mother and Grandmother Kato when they leave for Japan, that of Father when he leaves Slocan, that of Grandpa and Grandma Nakane when they leave for the hospital, and that of Stephen when he leaves for Toronto. No tears are shed on any of these occasions. And few words. Unlike Momotaro, none of these leave-takers returns.

It is with respect to Obasan, who is now “older than the grandmother [Naomi] knew as a child, older than any person [she knows] today” (54), that the fable has multiple bearings. Obasan and Uncle are also a childless couple. When Obasan becomes the guardian aunt of Stephen and Naomi, she too treats them as her own offspring. The couple’s love for Momotaro is expressed neither in words nor by touch, but through the slow movement of the old woman’s hands; Obasan is similarly “defined by her serving hands.” The couple’s considerable silence resonates in the actions of Mother, Grandpa, Uncle, and Obasan, all of whom try to shield Stephen and Naomi from grief.

But there is a contrasting analogue. The rice balls offered by the old woman to Momotaro directly evoke a scene on the train. Obasan offers Stephen a rice ball. “Not that kind of food,” Stephen sulks, rejecting her offer (115). The episode foreshadows Stephen’s rejection of everything Japanese, including his own foster mother, who “mends and remends his old socks and shirts which he never wears and sets the table with food which he often does not eat” (215). He ends up avoiding Obasan altogether: “Stephen, unable to bear the density of her inner retreat and the rebuke he felt in her silences, fled to the ends of the earth” (14). On the day of his departure, Naomi thinks with pride of her brother as “Momotaro going off to conquer the world” (214). But the motivation of his long journey is a far cry from that of Momotaro’s. He
may obtain laurels in the musical world (for he becomes a concert pianist), but bringing honor to his aged foster parents could not be further from his mind. Stephen, who is “always uncomfortable when anything is ‘too Japanese’ ” (217), has missed a point succinctly enunciated by Emily: “Momotaro is a Canadian story. We’re Canadian, aren’t we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian” (57).

Finally, the lonely waiting of the legendary grandparents foreshadows Naomi’s own pain of anticipating her mother’s return: “What matters to my five-year-old mind is not the reason that she is required to leave, but the stillness of waiting... After a while, the stillness is so much with me that it takes the form of a shadow which grows and surrounds me like air. Time solidifies, ossifies the waiting into molecules of stone, dark microscopic planets that whirl through the universe of my body waiting for light and the morning” (66). Naomi, being little at the time, is finding it much more difficult than do the old couple to heed the needs of others before one’s own: “My great-grandmother [who is very ill] has need of my mother. Does my mother have need of me? In what market-place of the universe are the bargains made that have traded my need for my great-grandmother’s?” (67). This child must come to attendance the hard way.

Kogawa thus captures in less than half a page a montage of emotions that the characters hide from each other and traces such self-restraint to a formative childhood tale. The author herself has learned the lesson well. Her evocative style provides a counterpart to the dry official papers and Emily’s effusive rhetoric. The reader must probe beneath the surface of the lapidary prose to catch the inexpressible.

Kogawa also conveys the deflected emotions of the narrator— who “never spoke” as a child (57)— through “speaking dreams.” Three in particular mark Naomi’s growth. The child is waylaid by a recurrent nightmare after her encounters with Old Man Gower: “In my childhood dreams, the mountains yawn apart as the chasm spreads. My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half” (64–65). The dream conveys the sense of physical mutilation experienced by the victim and her resulting psychological alienation from her mother. We are told in the following chapter that it is “around this time that Mother disappears” (66). For good. The successive placement of Naomi’s nightmare and her mother’s disappearance suggests that the child connects her sexual arousal with her mother’s departure: “She feels that her abandonment by Mother must be punishment for her unmentionable offence, her fall from innocence” (Gottlieb 46).

That the victim is plagued by guilt and shame is further signified in another nightmare that recurs even after Naomi has turned adult. In this dream three beautiful oriental women, captured and guarded by several British soldiers, lie naked in a muddy road. When one of the three—“stretched between hatred and lust”—tries to seduce the soldiers, they make a sport of shooting at the women’s toes and feet. Naomi writes: “The soldiers could not be won. Dread and a deathly loathing cut through the women” (62). The dream, which couples sexual overtones with punishment and underlines the victims’ self-contempt, takes us into the dreamer’s tormented psyche.

The most instructive dream—one that alludes to the “Grand Inquisitor” in Dostoyevsky’s Brothers Karamazov—occurs just before Naomi finally learns about her mother’s ordeal in Nagasaki. In her dream the Grand Inquisitor (who resembles Old Man Gower) is prying open her eyes and her mother’s mouth.

His demand to know was both a judgement and a refusal to hear. The more he questioned [Mother], the more he was her accuser and murderer. The more he killed her, the deeper her silence became. What the Grand Inquisitor has never learned is that the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence. To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone, he must first become silent. Only when he enters her abandonment will he be released from his own (228; my emphasis).

Western hierarchal opposition of speech and silence are here reconfigured. It dawns on Naomi that by her incessant questioning she has unwittingly assumed the role of the Grand Inquisitor, who seeks to extort an answer from her mother. She now asks herself, “Did I doubt her love? Am I her accuser?” (228). The dream prompts Naomi to recognize her “culpability... through a deliberate attendance” (Fujita 39) and to enter her mother’s suffering. At the point Naomi decides to give up her “inquisition,” to have faith in her mother’s love for her despite the apparent desertion, she learns the truth. The avenues of silence do coincide with the avenues of speech.

These dreams hark back to the various forms of silence discussed earlier. The first dream plays out what Naomi is forbidden to tell. The second traces her repression to childhood shame and guilt. The third yields a parable counseling attentive silence. The victims in the first two dreams concentrate on their own torments; in the last Naomi sees her mother as a fellow sufferer. Once she has ceased to focus on her own vulnerability, she becomes aware of her mother’s ordeal; she sees she has been wagamama—guilty of making self-centered demands. In noticing and placing another’s need alongside her own, in remaining solicitous of others despite her own buried grief, Naomi is being true to her Japanese upbringing and faithful to the example of Obasan. Paradoxically, it is through Naomi’s willingness to “attend the sound of stone” that the “stone bursts open.” In the next chapter she is apprised of the horror of Nagasaki. Staggering as it is, the knowledge frees Naomi from her years of gnawing doubt and unspeakable guilt.

The reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing.

Obasan 247
nonverbal and verbal modes of expression embodied in Obasan and Emily. Naomi learns about her mother’s face from Grandma Kato’s letters, addressed to Grandpa Kato. The letters, as noted earlier, come across to her as “skeletons” unanimated by “love.” And Naomi is wont to think of love in silent terms. “Did you not know that people hide their love / Like a flower that seems too precious to be picked?” she quotes a Chinese poem (228). This turn of thought accounts in part for her uneasiness about words. Grandma, too, apologizes for writing: “For the burden of these words, forgive me” (236).

But in fact the letters belie the binary opposition of stoical, protective, and considerate silence and self-lacerating or selfish telling. Grandma, whom Naomi remembers as “thin and tough, not given to melodrama or overstatement of any kind,” describes the aftermath of the conflagration in an “outpouring” (234). Her letters show Naomi that jotting down unbearable thoughts, however excruciating at the time, can also release sorrow and help the writer “extricate herself from the grip of the past” (236). Such heartfelt expression is surely more than merely the “vigil of silence” observed by Mother (236), whose protective silence has been long misinterpreted by Naomi as the absence of love, as evidence of abandonment. Ironically, it is through Grandma’s presumably inconsiderate telling that Naomi learns of her grandmother’s and mother’s “deep love” (233).

For something other than deafening horror emerges from Grandma’s letters. Through them Naomi learns that as soon as Grandma regains consciousness after the blast, she focuses wholeheartedly on rescuing her niece’s two children: “At no point does Grandma Kato mention the injuries she herself must have sustained” (238). Mother, totally defaced and severely wounded, is found making a pyre for a dead baby. These examples of compassion in the face of atrocity provide an affirmative answer to Naomi’s earlier questioning in her imaginary dialogue with Emily: “Greed, selfishness, and hatred remain as constant as the human condition, do they not? Or are you thinking that through lobbying and legislation, speech-making and story-telling, we can extricate ourselves from our foolish ways? Is there evidence for optimism?” (199). Despite human shortcomings, Naomi can now break her silence by saying yes—there is evidence indeed.

Grandma’s letters thus provide Naomi with both a personal reason (“extricate herself from the grip of the past”) and a political reason (through “story-telling, we can extricate ourselves from our foolish ways”) to write, to transform her personal silence and that of her family into words. Yet her (or Kagawa’s) effectiveness as a “historian” lies precisely in her skepticism about historical authority. Naomi proceeds tentatively, insists that facts alone do not history make, and refuses to see things in terms of black and white. She traverses the historical landscape in slow motion and delivers a microscopic worm’s eye view in terms of the muted sufferers. Her prose registers not only observable phenomena but emotional stirring unseen by the naked eye and unheard by the ordinary ear.

Toward the end of the novel, silence and speech are increasingly imaged as complementary rather than antithetical, as in Naomi’s inspection of the two Japanese ideographs for the word love: “The first contained the root words ‘heart’ and ‘hand’ and ‘action’—love as hands and heart in action together. The other ideograph, for ‘passionate love,’ was formed of ‘heart,’ ‘to tell,’ and ‘a long thread’” (228). Love may take the form of Obasan’s serving hands or Emily’s (and Grandma’s) passionate telling: “the heart declaring a long thread knotted to Obasan’s twine, knotted to Aunt Emily’s package” (228). The novel itself unwinds as a long thread that ties the variously strong women together.

Silence and words unite again figuratively in the lyrical ending of the novel, when Naomi decides to go to the couple she and Uncle visited every year on the anniversary of the Nagasaki’s bombing (though the reason for the pilgrimage was previously hidden from her). There she undergoes a symbolic baptism and enters a beatific vision: “Above the trees, the moon is a pure white stone. The reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing. It’s a quiet ballet, soundless as breath” (247). This epiphany, as Goellnicht observes, “holds in harmoniously negotiated tension the ‘stone’ of silence and the ‘stream’ of language” (297).

Such harmony infuses the style of the novel as well. In recollecting and recording the past, Naomi/Kagawa answers Emily’s/Kitagawa’s call for public expression. In writing a quiet book, one that is attentive to detail and images, and to nuances of feeling, expressed or repressed, the author also vindicates Obasan’s silence. The most trenchant passages in the novel are not the expository and explosive entries reproduced from Emily’s diary, but the pages of Naomi’s understated prose. Kagawa suggests that open accusations and outspoken demands, while necessary, are insufficiently effective: “Thundering for justice will not alone solve any problem until people genuinely care. By heeding the poetry in the narrative, by witnessing the quiet strength of isssei such as Obasan, the reader may well experience a change of heart.”

Speaking of carpentry, Naomi observes: “There is a fundamental difference in Japanese workmanship—to pull with control rather than push with force” (24). Kagawa herself has carved a style that controls its force through the pull of silences.

NOTES

1. This essay is adapted from a chapter of my book Articulate Silences. Hisaye Yamomoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kagawa (Cornell, 1993). A version of the essay was presented at the first MELUS Conference at U.C. Irvine (25 April 1987). Since then it has benefited from the insights of other critics: I am particularly indebted to Gayle Fujita for her explication of the “sensibility of silence,” and to A. Lynne Magnusson and Donald C. Goellnicht for their analyses of Kagawa’s ambivalence toward language. I would also like to thank Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin for their suggestions.

Several terms appear frequently in the text. Nikkei refers to people of Japanese
ancestry living outside Japan; issei (literally first generation), to Japanese immigrants; nisei (literally second generation), to children of the issei; sansei (literally third generation), to children of the nisei.

2. Though my essay stresses the positive uses of nonverbal behavior as a “corrective” to the prevailing critical trend, I do not mean to endorse all kinds of silences.

3. In real life Ogawa, one year older than the novel’s narrator, Naomi, was six when her family was relocated. Her family, unlike Naomi’s, was not separated: “Her minister father, mother and brother survived the relocation together and then moved to a small town in Alberta” (Yim D1).

4. Similar silencing after sexual molestation by a father figure occurs in Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple.

5. Fujita translates the Japanese words as follows: “You really notice/are aware/are attentive, aren’t you?” (39). She notes that the phrase “looks back to the painting of the girl ‘attending’ the bird” (39).

6. Commenting on the limits and strengths of Obasan and on her influence on Naomi, Fujita writes: “Her steadfast love notwithstanding, she represents the inevitability of corrosion when silence means withheld knowledge. . . . But Obasan’s destructive silence is part of a larger conception of her character as the embodiment of a vital nikoeki culture including the positive use of silence exemplified by Naomi’s attendance” (40). Erika Gottlieb similarly observes, “Powerful in her silence, Obasan is indeed in charge of ‘life’s infinite details,’ as if the ball of string [she has] accumulated over the years would have somehow absorbed the wisdom and experience of those years themselves. . . . Struggling to overcome Obasan’s silence, yet also inspired by its depth, Naomi has grappled with her task faithfully, unravelling her yarn in all its intricate patterns” (52).

7. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston notes that Japanese Americans and white Americans frequently hold different attitudes about serving: “In my family, to serve another could be uplifting, a gracious gesture that elevated oneself. For many white Americans it seems that serving another is degrading, an indication of dependency or weakness in character, or a low place in the social ladder. To be ardently considerate is to be ‘self-effacing’ or apologetic” (20). The dominance of such an attitude perhaps explains why Obasan has so often been reproved by critics.

8. Emily herself, as Fujita has noted, exemplifies the spirit of Momotaro who, in the original Japanese tale, “leaves home to battle ogres” (38). Emily likewise travels all over Canada and the States to fight against injustice. However, in transferring Momotaro’s courage to Emily, Kogawa has also redefined traditional heroism in accordance with the pacifist tenor of her novel. Instead of glorifying martial valor, she omits all descriptions of physical combat in Naomi’s version of the fable. Just as Maxine Hong Kingston in The Woman Warrior transforms a swordswoman into a wordswoman, Kogawa turns Momotaro’s physical combat into Emily’s “paper battles” (189). The change allows women to enter the public arena without subscribing to the military ethos of patriarchal societies.

WORKS CITED
