Struggling with the Powerful (M) Other: Identity and Sexuality in Kogawa's *Obasan* and Kincaid's *Lucy*

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In psycho-linguistic theory, becoming a gendered subject entails a splitting off from the pre-oedipal, maternal bond and embracing the Law of the Father. Entry into language divides the child from the continuous link with the mother's body. Feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow, and Julia Kristeva[1] have questioned the privileging of the paternal in Western culture. While their approaches are different, they all see girls' relations to their mothers as slightly more problematic than boys'. Irigaray and Chodorow have pointed out, for example, that daughters who tend to identify closely with their mothers cannot reject their nurturers and relinquish those early infant bonds as easily as sons do in order to become full participants in the symbolic order.

For women of immigrant minorities, this difficulty of subjectivity is further exacerbated by another separation: mothers often represent a cultural or racial other, and hence, daughters are forced to grapple with a dual sense of racial and gendered otherness in their adopted fatherlands. The uneasiness caused by these breaches manifests itself in various ways. This paper will examine the ways in which two minority writers, Joy Kogawa, a Japanese Canadian, and Jamaica Kincaid, an American of Antiguan descent, handle the physical, psychic, and emotional separation of daughters from their mothers. In their novels, both Naomi in Kogawa's *Obasan* and the heroine from Kincaid's *Lucy*[2] have troubles with their sexuality as a result of their ambiguous relationships with their powerful (m)others. Naomi and Lucy both experience intense love, fear, and anger towards their mothers. These feelings, at times verging on what Adrienne Rich calls "matrophobia," or the wish to be purged "of our mothers' bondage,"[3] burden them with guilt, self-hatred, and sexual anxiety, yet paradoxically are the very bases of their selves and identity.

In both works, though the mothers are physically absent from their daughters, their bodies are frequently evoked through the young girls' memories. Maternal bodies are often linked with an other paradise, nostalgia for a cultural past, the pleasures of innocence, and the evanescent bliss of complete belonging. After the visit of a childhood girlfriend, Lucy remarks: ". . . she left behind her the smell of

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[1] See Luce Irigaray. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); and Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[2] Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); and Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York: Plume Penguin, 1991). Subsequent references are to these editions and will appear in the text after the abbreviations *L.* for Lucy, and *O.* for Obasan.

[3] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976) 236.

clove, lime, and rose oil, and this scent almost made me die of homesickness. My mother used to bathe me in water in which the leaves and flowers of these plants had been boiled" (*L.* 124). Lucy comes to realize: "My past was my mother; I could hear her voice, and she spoke to me not in English or the French patois that she sometimes spoke, or in any language that needed help from the tongue" (90). Similarly, Naomi remembers her mother through her voice: "We three, the goldfish and I, are the listeners in the room, as Mother sings and Stephen and Father play. Mother's voice is yasashi, soft and tender in the dimming daylight" (*O.* 51). Frequently, the child's tie with the mother is beyond the verbal or symbolic language, a wordlessness that is powerful and instructive.

Various readers have noted the strong imagery which evokes the pre-oedipal relation of mothers and daughters in both *Obasan* and Kincaid's early works.[4] What is more subtle and less frequently noted is that the mother also evokes an otherness fraught with sexual and racial implications for Naomi. As Susheila Nasta says, mothers, associated with motherlands, mother cultures, and mother tongues, "have provided a potent symbolic force in the writings of African Caribbean and Asian women with the need to demythologise the illusion of the colonial 'motherland' or 'mothercountry' as the parallel movement to rediscover, recreate and give birth to the genesis of new forms and new languages of expression."[5]

In *Obasan*, the fact that Naomi is born in Canada and her motherland is technically not Japan adds a level of irony to the situation. Though her father assures her that they are "Canadian," Stephen says: "We are both the enemy and not the enemy" (*O.* 70). Naomi is torn between her sense of Canadian and Japanese identities and their value systems. Again and again in the novel, Naomi and her family are forced to choose allegiances, between motherland, mother tongue, and father country. In Slocan, for example, Obasan and Uncle do not send Naomi and her brother to Japanese language classes because "the RCMP . . . are always looking for signs of disloyalty to Canada" (*O.* 138). The notion of "motherland" is questioned and rendered ironic for Naomi because she finds out later that the very bomb that enabled the Allied forces to win the war in 1945 was also the instrument that killed her mother in Nagasaki.

In Naomi's narrative and reconstruction of the events surrounding the persecution, internment, and dispersal of Japanese Canadians by the Canadian govern-

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[4] For *Obasan*, see Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, "Japanese American Women's Life Stories: Maternality in Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, "*Feminist Studies* 16.2 (Summer 1990): 289-312; Lynne A. Magnusson, "Language and Longing in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," *Canadian Literature* 116 (Spring 1988): 58-67; Robin Potter, "Moral—In Whose Sense? Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Julia Kristeva's *Power of Horror*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 15.1 (1990): 117-39; and Donald Goellnicht, "Father Land and/or Mother Tongue: The Divided Female Subject in Kogawa's *Obasan* and Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction: An Essay Collection*, eds. Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall (New York: Garland, 1991), 119-34. For Kincaid, see Roni Natov, "Mothers and Daughters: Jamaica Kincaid's Pre-Oedipal Narrative," *Children's Literature* 18, eds. Butler, Higonnet, and Rosen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 1-16; Patricia Ismond, "Jamaica Kincaid: 'First They Must Be Children,' "*World Literature Written In English* 18.2 (1988): 336-41; and Helen Pyne Timothy, "Adolescent Rebellion and Gender Relations an *At the Bottom of the River and Annie John*" *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Wellesley, Mass.: Calaloux Publications, 1990): 233-45.

[5] Susheila Nasta, ed., *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, The Caribbean and South Asia* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992) xix.

ment during and after the war, the figure of the mother appears only tangentially, evoked most frequently through sensual descriptions, nightmarish dreams, and imagery. Nevertheless her presence occurs at crucial points in the novel and helps to explain Naomi's undeveloped sexuality and identity. Early on in the novel, a student by the telling name of "Sigmund" taunts Naomi about her spinsterhood, suggesting that she has not "been in love" and is unlikely "to get married" (*O.* 6). Naomi thinks she is healthy, but calls herself an "old maid" and describes her personality as "tense" (*O.* 7).

Most readings of *Obasan* view Naomi's early relationship with her mother as ideal and idyllic. When Obasan shows Naomi her mother's picture she speaks of the mother's "yasashi kokoro, her tender, kind, and thoughtful heart" (*O.* 46) and encourages Naomi to think of the period as "the best time" and the "best memories" (*O.* 46). Naomi's recollections of her house in Vancouver are seemingly positive and Edenic. She describes her parents as "two needles" who "knit the families carefully into one blanket" (*O.* 20). However, there are numerous hints of the fragility and evanescent quality of this childhood paradise. The memories, bathed in hazy green colors of forests and oceans, are indicative of natural and life-giving forces, but may also suggest eventual change, aging, and decay. The mother who is "yasashi" and gentle may be too weak to fend off the turbulent forces outside the immediate family, as was the Grandma according to Aunt Emily (*O.* 99). The mother is described as "fragile," her "face is oval as an egg and delicate" (*O.* 19), suggesting vulnerability.

Indeed, early encounters between Naomi and people of the opposite sex mediated by her mother prove that the protective world created by the mother may be inadequate, or at least profoundly ambivalent. Naomi remembers an incident where she feels "an invasion and a reproach" through the eyes of a stranger. The scene takes place in a streetcar where a man with "one dark eyebrow higher than the other . . . grins and winks" at her (*O.* 47). Naomi is "startled into discomfort," but her mother's "eyes look obliquely to the floor" (*O.* 47). The mother's way of coping is not through confrontation or even acknowledgment, but through evasion. The vignette prepares us for the incidents with Old Man Gower, who physically invades Naomi with his groping hands and caresses. To the four-year-old child the molestation is both horrifying and exciting—"his hands are frightening and pleasurable" (*O.* 65). The secret separates her from her mother, and she uses the rather gruesome metaphor of her "legs . . . being sawn in half" (*O.* 65) to describe the rift in her body. This exploration of sexuality repeats with Percy in Slocan, with whom she also feels "strange terror and exhilaration" (*O.* 61). Sexuality, the fear and desire to transgress social and familial boundaries are partly the reasons for the "rift" and the "chasm" between mother and daughter.

Because the novel is not a chronological or linear narrative, but a piecing together, a "recollecting and re-contextualizing" of "documentary evidence,"[6] the Gower episode followed by the disappearance of the mother is "not temporal and causal sequence," as Magnusson has remarked.[7] I view the connection in terms of

[6] Manina Jones, "The Avenues of Speech and Silence: Telling Difference in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," in *Theory Between the Disciplines: Authority/Vision/ Politics*, eds. Martin Kreisworth and Mark A. Cheetham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990) 216.

[7] Magnusson, "Language and Longing" 65.

the anger and frustration of the daughter against the mother. Adrienne Rich observes: "Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough; the power of our mothers, whatever their love for us and their struggles on our behalf, is too restricted. And it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations."[8] For Naomi, the problem of proper feminine behavior taught by her mother is exacerbated by the Japanese notion of acceptance and submission. In her initial silence and resignation, she has internalized her mother's values. Rich believes that "many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, 'whatever comes.' A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman."[9] Naomi's guilty recollection of her complicity with the sexual assaults of Gower, which she sees paradoxically as acts against her mother and yet also as a replication of her mother's tendency to be passive or accepting, cripples her as an adult. Submission to her neighbor's molestation, like the submission of the Japanese Canadians to the government's edicts, brings her outward and temporary calm but does not bring her ultimate peace or understanding of herself.

There are important historical, social, and cultural elements in the works of Kogawa and Kincaid which differentiate the two novels. Unlike *Obasan*, which reacts to specific historical and political occurrences, *Lucy* seems to be less concerned with public events. Yet there are similarities in the way the novels deal with the disempowerment and the dispossession of a race of people and their effect on individuals, specifically on women. *Lucy*, too explores the psychic, emotional and social consequences of the loss of the mother and the motherland. In Kincaid's earlier works such as *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) and, especially, *Annie John* (1985) the close relationship between the mother and the adolescent daughter forms an integral part of the narrative. Edith Clarke has suggested that "the prevailing types of conjugal relationships in West-Indian society conspired to place the onus of responsibility for children on the mother, and left the father relatively free of parental obligation."[10] In an interview, Kincaid said that the man who fathered her is "sort of typical of West Indian men . . . they have children, but they never seem to connect themselves with these children."[11] In contrast, she states that "the way I am is solely owing to [my mother]."[12]

As an au pair girl in an affluent family in New York, nineteen-year-old Lucy desires to "put as much distance" between herself and her mother. For Lucy, her mother's love had become a "burden": "I had come to feel that my mother's love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her; and I didn't know why, but I felt that I would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone. That was not a figure of speech" (*L.* 36). A large part of the rebellion against the mother can be seen as typical adolescent behavior.

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[8] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 243.

[9] Rich, *Of Woman Born* 243.

[10] As quoted by Ismond, "Jamaica Kincaid" 337.

[11] Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview," in *Caribbean Women Writers* 219.

[12] Cudjoe, "Jamaica Kincaid" 219.

However, another part of Lucy's reaction to her mother has to do with her struggles with cultural differences and identity. The mother is associated with the customs and landscapes of her island home of Antigua: with the rain-forest and rivers (*L.* 56), with the wisdom of an herbalist (*L.* 69), and with an obeah woman (*L.* 80). The thoughts of mother invoke the sun-drenched islands of Lucy's "motherland," but these memories are also ironically linked to the loss of culture and the loss of this mother country. About her childhood and her mother, Jamaica Kincaid said, "I was always being told that I should be something, and then my whole upbringing was something I was not: it was English. It was sort of a middle-class English upbringing . . . the best table manners you ever saw."[13] In the novel Kincaid depicts Lucy's resentful attitudes towards the colonial inheritance of Antigua. As a child she is made to memorize Wordsworth's poem about daffodils at Queen Victoria Girls' School though she would not actually have a chance to see this flower until she is an adult in America. At one point Lucy recalls refusing to sing "Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves" at the age of fourteen (*L.* 135). Though the mother is not directly invoked in these scenes, as in *Obasan*, by not dissenting, the mother is seen by the daughter to be in tacit acceptance of the imperialistic invasion of their culture.

Similar to Naomi in *Obasan*, Lucy reacts to the erosion of heritage or "mother culture" by rebelling against her mother. One way the anger is manifested and one way she attempts to establish a separate identity is through an exploration of her sexual self. Lucy feels severed from her mother at nine years old when she ceases to be an only child and the three male children usurp her mother's affections. She later describes the loss of her mother's love as the "end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life I would ever know" (*L.* 132). She retaliates by refusing to be the proper, clean, and chaste girl her mother idealizes, as in her goddaughter Maude. Lucy rejects all her mother's lessons to be ladylike and deliberately sets out to be a "slut."

The betrayal of the "only true love" in Lucy's life makes her seem cold and brittle as a young girl. Because of the heartbreak she experiences with her mother, she steels herself against other emotional bonds. When she loses her virginity, for example, she tells the boy that the blood stain was merely her period because she did not want him to feel triumphant: "I could not give him such a hold over me" (*L.* 83). When she has sex with other men, she thinks of her childhood, and scenes with her mother flit before her frequently, as with Hugh. Similarly with Paul, who later becomes her lover, she says, "Paul's hands, moving about in the fish tank—reminded me of some other hands lost forever in a warm sea" (*L.* 109). Lucy uses her sexual experiences as a way of eliciting the haunting memories of her past, confronting the bitterness she feels towards her mother.

Because of these strong bonds with mothers who are no longer present in their lives, both Naomi and Lucy struggle as adults with feelings of loss, rejection, and anguish. Irigaray believes that the difficulty women experience with their mothers is widespread—"when I speak of the *relation to the mother*, I mean that in our patriarchal culture the daughter is absolutely unable to control her relation to the mother. . . . strictly speaking, they make neither one nor two, neither has a

[13] Cudjoe, "Jamaica Kincaid" 219-20.

name, meaning, sex of her own, neither can be 'identified' with respect to the other."[14] For Irigaray, identity for women is problematic because at present, the social and symbolic order does not allow for a positive symbolization of women's relationships to each other. This predicament is explored by Kogawa and Kincaid through the daughters' conflicting desires to reject and at the same time fuse with their mothers. Since our culture at present has no means of representing and naming this relationship, daughters seek the closeness that they once experienced with mothers mainly through positive or negative heterosexual encounters, the only legitimate and acceptable form of female desire. However, that the novels asserts the primacy of the mother-daughter bond is demonstrated by the number of maternal figures that crop up in the actual and the dream level of both works.

In *Obasan,* the character called by that name functions as a substitute mother. Obasan intensifies Naomi's sense of racial otherness since she clings so tenaciously to the Japanese way of life and to the past. Obasan is the sacrificial mother who suppresses her own needs, instructing Naomi to "honour the wishes of others before our own" (*O.* 128). As the surrogate mother, Obasan is the one that holds the family together by deliberately forgetting the unbearable, the horror, and the atrocities suffered by the Japanese Canadians. However, what Obasan tries to keep from Naomi—the disruptive, the unstable, the violence, particularly in relation to her mother—erupts as nightmares in Naomi's life.

In *Obasan,* Naomi's dreams reveal her insecurities about her identity and her self. Issues of race, sexuality, and maternal loss are linked and brought to the surface repeatedly in the nightmares. The consequences of being labeled the "enemy" because of race, and suffering under the hands of arbitrary authority figures become debilitating as Naomi is obsessed by images of violence and destruction throughout her life: "Always, I dream of soldiers eager for murder, their weapons ready. We die again and again. In my dreams, we are never safe enough" (*O.* 227). These dreams are linked to the silencing of the mother or a mother figure.

In *Lucy,* maternal figures also appear frequently in the heroine's "real" life as well as in her dreams. Mariah, whom Lucy works for, represents a type of mother, as her name suggests. Her perfection both attracts and repulses Lucy: "The times that I loved Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother. The times that I did not love Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother" (*L.* 58). What disturbs Lucy about Mariah, however, is that she reminds her of loss, of the perfection that could have been between her and her mother: "Mariah was superior to my mother, for my mother would never come to see that perhaps my needs were more important than her wishes" (*L.* 63-64). Lucy blames her mother for accepting patriarchal culture's hierarchical gender distinctions, for replicating its value systems in the unequal treatment of her and her brothers. She also scorns her mother for wasting her life on a man "who would die and leave her in debt even for his own burial," believing that her mother "had betrayed herself" (*L.* 127) in her devotion to him. Yet, ironically, she also realizes that she is already irresistibly implicated in her family narrative and structure: "I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother—I was my mother" (*L.* 90). Much of the anger she directs to her (m)other is

[14] Irigaray, *This Sex* 143.

in response to the fear of becoming like her, someone she views as having "thrown away her intelligence" (*L.* 123).

Though the circumstances surrounding the rift between the mother and daughter in *Lucy* are different from those in *Obasan*, there are similarities in the way the loss of the maternal and the "motherland" affect daughters who have to negotiate their lives in a world where they are deemed foreign or "other." Like Naomi, Lucy too is haunted by dreams which disclose her fears about the power of mothers, her sexuality, and cultural disempowerment. The most revealing dream involves Mariah's husband Lewis chasing her around the house while she is naked. Mariah urges him by saying, "Catch her, Lewis, catch her" (*L.* 14). The dream ends with Lucy falling "down a hole, at the bottom of which were some silver and blue snakes" (*L.* 14). The surrogate mother figure here is shown to be in complicity with the male aggressor causing Lucy to fall down to sexuality, or to her unconscious. This dream, in which the ground is yellow, is also linked to Lucy's earlier dream of being chased "down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of . . . daffodils" and being "buried deep underneath them" (*L.* 18). Because yellow is the color Lucy associates with Lewis and Mariah and their four children, pictured like "a bouquet of flowers tied together by an unseen string" (*L.* 12), the dream suggests her association of the family with the cultural imperialism of England, as well as revealing her sexual fears.

Morris and Dunn stress that for the Caribbean woman, the notion of a motherland encompasses connotations of "her island home and its unique culture as well as the body of tropes, talismans, and female bonding that is a woman's heritage through her own and other mothers." A woman needs to claim a connection to both the land and one's mothers in order to be "well prepared for the journey toward self-identity and fulfillment."[15] We could apply this necessity for connection to mothers to both Naomi and Lucy, who feel severed from their mothers and their motherland. As I have tried to show, many of their problems with their identity and sexuality have to do with this loss. Subjectivity and identity for both heroines become even more complicated because of racial and cultural differences. The woman who is a racial minority in North America has to contend with feelings of self-effacement and a desire for assimilation, as well as what bell hooks calls the "commodification of Otherness."[16] In their own ways, Lucy and Naomi grapple with the many implications of otherness in their new "motherlands." However, this sense of "otherness," being so closely associated with the maternal, often manifests itself as a mythic conflict and struggle with their real or bodily mothers.

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[15] Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn, "'The Bloodstream of Our Inheritance': Female Identity and the Caribbean Mothers'—Land," in *Motherlands* 219.

[16] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992) 21.