

MORAL—IN WHOSE SENSE?
JOY KOGAWA'S *OBASAN*
AND
JULIA KRISTEVA'S *POWERS OF HORROR*

Robin Potter

On the surface *Obasan* is the story told by a woman about her childhood as a Japanese Canadian during World War II, a time when the Japanese living in Canada were singled out by the Canadian Government as a threat to National Defense and were subsequently, through a series of edicts, removed from the West Coast and sent to Japan, or dispersed throughout the British Columbia interior and eventually through the Prairies. Naomi Nakane tells of the forced fragmentation of her family and community, and in doing so discloses a quest for the M/mother and an understanding of herself, both accomplished through reunification, purification, and the spirit of survival.

Surprisingly, below the surface, this story is the tale of a totem, a tribe, and the sacrificial victims—and the dialectic is one of abjection. The tribal totem is the Canadian ethos, while the high priests are figured as the various levels of government, its (pseudo and authentic) representatives of the people, and the documents by which it perpetuates its power. The tribe in the novel's context is made up of the Canadian people/s, while the Japanese Canadians, during World War II and after, can be viewed as the sacrificial victims. The continued current of abjection is based on the mystery of the absent mother and the need for a strong father, needs that do not become satisfied. In the novel, the mother or matriarchal powers are suppressed so much that abjection surfaces in her place. The object is prefigured in masculinist power structures; that is, those structures that form the foundation of law and order, such as religion, politics, and family/community. In order to appreciate fully the depth to which Kogawa has travelled within the psyche of both Naomi and the Japanese and Canadian ethos, a brief look at how these

power structures have been created and how their effectiveness is maintained is needed. This can best be done by adopting Julia Kristeva as our guide through the horrors of power as set forth in her *Powers of Horror*.

The Powers of Horror

Abjection, says Kristeva, results from an activity, event, thing, thought, or emotion that disturbs an identity, system, or order. As such, it is dependent on an implicitly or socially acceptable state of affairs. In *Obasan*, the fundamental identity construct as a Japanese Canadian is severely undermined and almost completely eliminated. In its place there is a consistent/continuous preoccupation with cleanliness and hygiene, excrement, death and decay, as though a whole cultural group is the source of corruptive and corruptible behavior and substances. We are all familiar with the things that we have been taught to avoid, usually that which is unsanitary, prohibited, feared, repulsive, dangerous, or immoral; and even in language although not exclusively, that which belongs to the in-between, ambiguous, or composite, such as the semiotic which is manifest through unconscious "pulsions," drives, and rhythms, through psychic, physiological/biological activity, and through more overt responses. When fully integrated into a community, taboos become secretive and almost invisible, but Naomi Nakane brings them to light. In *Obasan*, the target of abjection are human beings, often women, or a product or secretion from normal bodily functions. While the abject usually causes physical responses such as stomach spasms, increased heartbeat, perspiration, dizziness, and nausea for some, in the novel the abject is viewed as normal and community based. In addition, the object of abjection can be a range of religiously—or sociologically—instigated taboos, such as those instigated against the Japanese Canadians during World War II, or they can be created by individual psychotic or neurotic psyches; phobias are only one example of individually created taboos.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explodes the very foundations of taboos by searching for and demystifying the misuse of the feminine, more specifically the maternal, in language, rites, and religions, and in the establishment of prohibitions, for the prohibition of incest is posited by Freud and anthropologists as being the first taboo that can be traced to its origins. More

specifically, Kristeva revises the Freudian/Lacanian assumption that the mother is the source of abjection. Rather, she aims to prove that the problem arises in the transformation of drives into the manifest accepted order and disorder. She therefore challenges the rationales regarding the feminine.

Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1912-1918) is Kristeva's point of reference. In this work, he traces the origins of rituals and prohibitions to past and existent primitive societies. While the totem appears to be the controlling spirit of a clan, Freud's focus on the politics of exogamy and the prohibitions against mothers, mothers-in-law, and women in general only serves to signal his perception of the need for control over women by men. The women serve as objects of horror—the incest taboo sometimes being punishable by death. The prohibition included not only female blood-relatives in a clan, but all women and girls of that clan; these communities in fact replace "real blood relationship by totem kinship" (Freud 6). Freud's discussion is interesting because, by applying his Oedipal theory of the mode of succession of power within various tribes and across civilizations, he concludes that the Judeo-Christian God evolved through the elevation of a single totem and the subsequent empowerment attributed to that totem by worshippers; "totemic religion arose from the filial sense of guilt, in an attempt to allay that feeling and to appease the father by deferred obedience to him. All later religions are seen to be attempts at solving the same problem" (145).¹ The totem eventually becomes replaced by the patriarch and patriarchal power, which is attained only through the murder of the F/father in the struggle for the primary role and for access to the women in the clan.² There is no room for feminine deities in Freud's model; and he staunchly writes women out of their role in the perpetuation of the species by ignoring their procreative and spiritual contributions.³ This occurs in *Obasan* too, in the silence that swallows Obasan, the failed matriarch.

In the religious context, the taboo dialectic shifts from the inside-outside of clan, or hierarchical boundaries, to the pure and impure. Impurity is indicative of a force that is rooted "historically (in the history of religions) and subjectively (in the structuration of the subject's identity), in the cathexis of the maternal function—mother, women, reproduction" (91).⁴ It is a dynamic that is based on the fear of matrilineal power and

duplicity. Even more significant, this fear of the abject is also a construct of language; it is therefore a concept created by man and not by a deity.⁵ In biblical texts, however, prohibitions take the form of metaphor. Christianity breaks with the sacrifice; the law of purity and holiness replaces it. Nevertheless, according to Kristeva, this law and the symbolic act of sacrificing food, such as in "This is my body" of the Eucharist is a method by which a person who speaks to his/her god is kept separate from the fecundity and power of the Archaic Mother. She becomes replaced by a dialectic of language and the theatre of ceremony. As Kristeva states, although communion gives back the state of grace by the eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of Christ, it also implies the act of murder, of transgression in ritualistic sacrifice. For is not the sacrifice by God of his own son parallel to the murders that also displaced the mother in the monotheistic tribes and clans? When Kristeva points to sacrifices as being a part of a sacred ritual, she is also stating that man has tried to transform what would otherwise be an act of murder and taboo into an act of atonement. With the ceremony that sanctifies and spiritualizes comes the permissibility to interiorize the abject. In this regard, it could be said that the burying of the maternal beneath taboos and rites created by men for men can signify the attempt to glorify death and to evade it all at the same time: "it becomes displaced and builds a logic" (Kristeva 112). The language used elevates, spiritualizes, and sublimates that which is abjectionable in every other context outside of religious ceremony. Abjection becomes absorbed by speech,⁶ and as such becomes signifiable, legislative, and subject to moral judgement.

Traditionally, women/mothers are associated with filth and defilement because they "constitute" a blurring of the borders between inside and outside. Men create borders in politics, in prohibition/taboo instituted by laws and religion; women erase them in their very roles as daughters, mothers, wives, and sexual beings. The very products of her body, such as blood, milk, an infant (jettisoned from within), belong to a chaotic and uncontrollable world, and embody the inside-outside merge. Mothers also prepare foods that go inside, prevent ingestion of harmful matter from the outside, and provide reinforcement, cleansing, and variants of dissuasion in weaning and toilet training.

According to Kristeva, however, the role of mother is paradoxical in that, while she teaches socially acceptable behavior and self-control, the mother is elaborating herself as an instrument of that which rejects and suppresses her. The situation is complicated further by the interception/interruption of the mother-child dyad by the father, whose set of laws and taboos treat the mother as though she were a source of harm, filth, and incestuous entrapments. Like Naomi in *Obasan*, the child learns a language that excludes the mother or the female self, and therefore her representation becomes distorted, wrought in the gap between the sign and the signifier, which excludes and silences her: "A representative of the paternal function takes the place of the good maternal object that is wanting. There is language instead of the good breast. Discourse is being substituted for maternal care" (Kristeva 45). The frustration and prohibitions generated and imposed by Authority become divided into territories: the desirable and terrifying, the nourishing and murderous, the fascinating and abject. The extremes shift from being based on the pure and impure to being based on inside and outside; now, as a result, the matrilineal powers become separated, and this institutes the Other. Problems arise in the subject when he/she cannot find an adequate manner, in the F/father's language, through which to express the drives or instincts representing the repressed M/mother. Kristeva's task has hence become an exposition of the changed dynamics within the subject upon entering the world/language of the F/father.

The Horrors of Power: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

Kristeva's theory of abjection and the excavation of the M/mother is particularly suited for application to Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, when the major players of the narrative are viewed as the primary components of a tribal structure that builds its power through the suppression of the many for the supposed good of the few. As in all A/acts (of legislation, actions) the good is a subjective attribute that depends on persons or systems that nominate a subject that has conformed to regulations, prohibitions, or standards that qualify goodness. The problem with judging what is considered good, bad, or evil is that ideally a body that makes that decision must be beyond the good, bad,

or evil. The ultimately objective position can only be made without the mediation or intervention of subjectivity. Unfortunately, consensus confirms that the objective is an untenable idea, and it follows that no law or legislative act can be instituted totally impartially. In "Contexture and Gesture: A Reading of Canadian Unity Policy," Loretta Czernis points out that government and other social organizations work very hard at hiding this fact, and they do so through the written official document: the Government Reports, Acts, Recommendations, Constitutions, and other Policy Documents. These are virtually authorless, having been composed, edited, revised, translated, and studied by sometimes 100 people or so. The voice of the good becomes universalized because no one author can be isolated, let alone questioned. The Government Document is as such an authorless piece of writing that is nevertheless implemented and reacted to as a given (Czernis). The individual, and we shall see from the work of Aunt Emily in *Obasan*, can do very little when faced with the Official Party Line and what I call the RRA (Royal Run-Around), in addition to dis- and misinformation. Furthermore, in order to maintain social order and to ensure that power remains in the hands of the few, centralized governments use the religious model of a "unifying body," and transform it into a moralizing body that functions through an infinitely powerful deity—Parliament. Mores become constituted according to lawful and moral conduct. Abjection occurs when the norm has been betrayed; breaking a Law can be compared to and/or equated with committing a Sin. Religious power is similarly maintained through terrorization and fear that is also communicated through language, the classic literary example being the purgatory segment in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Politicians instill fear in the population by referring to various forms of personally degrading punishments, from capital punishment to incarceration to public disgrace, with accompanying losses (status, home, family, occupation/profession). Religions do the same, but on a metaphorical level.⁷

The Totem

Canada during World War II was a fledgling on the international scene. According to Finlay and Sprague, Canada was considered third in industrial production and fourth in the

strength of her armed forces. This positive image, however, was severely marred by the rampant racism in British Columbia at the time:

For generations, the British Columbians had been looking for a means of eliminating "Orientals" from their province. Asian newcomers were the objects of mob violence in the nineteenth century and legal discrimination in the twentieth. First there were immigration restrictions and for those already in the country there was a denial of basic civil rights, such as the right to vote. Consequently when war broke out against Japan in December 1941, racism became "patriotic" and a golden opportunity was seized for the complete elimination of the hated minority. (Finlay and Sprague 385)

As Kogawa mentions, the RCMP clearly sided with the Japanese Canadians; and Sprague and Finlay quote the Chief of the General Staff, Ken Stuart, who said, "I cannot see that they constitute the slightest menace to national security," (386) especially after the Japanese Canadians were prevented from conducting any activities off the Coast of British Columbia by the seizure of their fishing licenses and boats.

The Tribe and the High Priests

The tribe that was to be protected by the internment of the Japanese Canadians was Canadians generally and British Columbians specifically. The measures used to suppress Canadian Japanese culture were dictated by government officials. An act of legislation, Bill 135, ensured the anonymity of legislators before the public. All the proceedings remained within the institution of Government, and government records, government archives, and government language and procedures rendered any average member of the population powerless before such a mystifying and intimidating machine. Much like the use of Latin in church services and scriptures in the medieval era, the politicization and bureaucratization of language served to keep the power in the hands of the high priests of government who addressed the totem of the Canadian ethos in a dialectic infused with a sense of urgency and threat. In the context of wartime, the panjandrums could muster enough mystique to effectively gain the consensus of the tribal majority for the

persecution of the few, who quickly became taboo, the sacrificial victims.

When *Obasan* slides into the documentary mode, it is usually to provide historical facts in the form of journal entries that are written as letters from Aunt Emily to Naomi Nakane's, the narrator's, mother in Japan. In her letters, Aunt Emily describes not only the repressive measures taken by the government, which have been described briefly above, but also the manner in which these measures were successfully enacted. Basically, language was used in such a way as to deceive both Japanese and non-Japanese Canadians into believing that racism was not the motivating factor in the actions taken. For instance, "Interior Housing Projects" was a fancy term for work camps. What Aunt Emily called "academic talk" served to communicate a feeling that the views of the Japanese Canadians were being heard, but only by deaf ears, and that those Japanese Canadians who tried to see all sides of the issue were only becoming willing victims:

"Some people," Aunt Emily answered sharply, "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 a real measurable injustice exists. A lot of academic talk just immobilizes the oppressed and maintains oppressors in their positions of power." (35)

Ambiguities in the intentions of officials also illustrate the inconsistencies in the government policies and the varying individual interpretations of the law. For instance, while Japanese Canadians were rejected from the Home Defense training program, they were allowed to work on a volunteer basis for the Red Cross, and they bought War Savings bonds, and logged for the war industries. Essentially, the Japanese Canadians became a commodity to be sacrificed on the altar of the City Fathers.

"Although this novel is based on historical events, and many of the persons named are real, most of the characters are fictional." Appearing in the prefatory pages of *Obasan*, this disclaimer basks in its own ambiguity and serves to signal the blurring of the borders between fiction and reality, a blurring which is prevalent throughout the novel and which is manifest in the rhetorical/stylistic strategies chosen by the author and

displayed through references to actual government documents, newspaper clippings, letters, journal entries, and, of course, historical events. The blurring of the borders between fiction and reality is complemented by the dissolving margins that separate the inside from the outside, the pure from the impure, and these are qualified by oppositions between good and evil, life and death, sickness and health, here and there.

The Language of God

In *Obasan* religion serves as a method for or attempt at the unification of the family, especially after the departure of the mother, the subsequent departure and death of the father, and after other deaths. But in actuality religion gives a false sense of security and unity, which renders religion's function paradoxical. Kristeva views the use of religion as a method through which the state controls the population. In fact, in *Powers of Horror* Kristeva entitles one chapter on religious constructs "*Qui tollis peccata mundi*," "You who take away the sins of the world." This is a statement of faith in mercy—one that finds no outlet, and in the case of the Nakanes, with every prayer there is hope, but it is misdirected. Nakayama-sensei's power has been neutralized by the City Fathers. Kogawa therefore makes a harsh comment on the passivity of the Japanese Canadians. Only Aunt Emily, out of Naomi's extended family of about ten, attempts to understand the political maneuverings, protests the sanctions, and tries to rally others to action. Nonetheless, everyone prays to the God that has no power to change the course of events.

We humbly beseech Thee most mercifully to receive these our prayers which we offer unto Thy Divine Majesty; beseeching Thee to inspire continually the universal church with the spirit of truth, unity and concord; And grant, that all they that do confess Thy holy Name may agree in the truth of Thy holy word, and live in unity and godly love. We beseech Thee also to save and defend all Christian Kings, Princes and Governors; and specially Thy servant George, our King: that under him we may be godly and quietly governed. (176)

Language links Christianity to state law, which is how the horrors of power become explicit. It is significant that this passage appears just before the second move made by the

Nakane family to Lethbridge, Alberta where living conditions are far worse than in Slocan.

One could say that although the events change for the worse, the family remains unified, and to a certain extent the use of religion by the individual members of the family is successful. The Japanese Canadians of British Columbia can be seen as a clan within the larger tribe of Canadians. Their religious practice has strong ritualistic qualities that partake of both Christianity and Buddhism. The cremation of grandmother Nakane's body on a pyre, for instance, signals a ritualistic offering to the spirits, a cleansing, a purification, a return to the seed-state: "The Buddhist tradition emphasizes the continuity between the dead and the living by affirming that death is also part of the nature cycle" (Gottlieb 45). This death occurs just after the move to Slocan and the description of the cremation is immediately followed by descriptions of lush and fertile natural surroundings: "Slocan greening in spring is vulnerable as birth, the bright yellow green turning steadily deeper into shades of blue. Uncle makes a rock garden in the front yard with a tiny stream and waterfall winding around the base to a small pool. At the top of the garden, Stephen digs a hole and plants a flagpole with an oversized Union Jack" (Kogawa 138). The family essentially moves out of a house in British Columbia in which the living room was the darkest room in the house, heavy with mementos. In Slocan the house is made very comfortable in a short period of time: wallpapered, painted, a house in an idyllic countryside.

This lush location, albeit close to the ghost town that is adjacent to an abandoned mine, is also followed by a shift in the cognitive capacities of the narrator, a point in her girlhood when she comes to understand racism and realizes her difference from others. Naomi's near-drowning serves to seal that within her psyche. The history her brother, she, and their friends learn is not the history of Japan or of Japanese Canadians, nor do they learn Japanese legends. The rock garden and the waterfall are observably planted in a territory that has a history of its own: the Canadian natives who sought a place of their own in a land that was being appropriated for the use and abuse of the white man. The historian is therefore not a member of the family nor of the tribe, and this historian supplants the power of the role of the tribal story teller, who in this case is Obasan, the matriarch.

Silence, "for the sake of the children," is the consensus decided upon by the family members, but this only serves to mystify and alienate Naomi and Stephen.

Sacrificial Offerings

The religion of the government is one of power and the commodification of patriotism. The assets, property, belongings, and labour of the Japanese Canadians are the objects of sacrifice for the good of the "whole country." The Japanese way is to honor the wishes of others:

It is always so. We must always honour the wishes of others before our own. We will make the way smooth by restraining emotion. Though we might wish Grandma and Grandpa to stay, we must watch them go. To try to meet one's own needs in spite of the wishes of others is to be "wagamama"—selfish and inconsiderate. Obasan teaches me not to be wagamama by always heeding everyone's needs. That is why she is waiting patiently beside me at the bridge. (128)

The problem lies in the misinterpretation of the intent of others.

Personal histories and communal/cultural traditions are sacrificed for the good of the whole. Personal belongings, artifacts that represent lifetimes, are abandoned, their sale being prohibited, their bulk prohibiting their move on limited resources. Uncle's handcrafted fishing boat, representing a traditional Japanese way of life, is seized along with cameras, vehicles, and radios. Finlay and Sprague also mention the seizure and destruction of family pets. These objects, seized for the use of others, indicate the corrupt flavor of the sanctions.

Commodification translates into the financial profit obtained from the seizure and use of businesses and objects needed to earn a living (such as fishing boats, licenses, quotas). Japanese men and boys were physically exploited by being sent to work camps. Bribes were accepted by officials from wealthy Japanese who could afford to buy their way out of sanctions and onto committees. The seizure of property and businesses and the dispersal of the Japanese Canadians ensured a lasting impact on the future Japanese population, in that the social hierarchies of Japanese Canadians were destroyed—there were no businesses, estates, or assets to be inherited. The Japanese Canadians would in this way remain powerless for years to come.

Taboos

Taboo in *Obasan* is paradoxical because it works in two ways. On the one hand the Japanese Canadians were ob[ab]jectionable to the white male politicians, and they were subsequently treated like animals in subhuman conditions. On the other hand, such treatment affected the Japanese Canadians themselves, especially children who did not have the capacity or perhaps were not given the information with which to understand the events. Such is the case of Naomi Nakane and her brother Stephen, who finally rejects Japanese culture altogether. Therefore, Kristeva's blurring of the boundaries of inside-outside has an added ramification with regard to this novel, for Naomi's story is really about the internalization of an abjection for her own family and ultimately for her own self and body. Naomi is preoccupied with memories of abjection, and her spinsterhood is, in my opinion, due to a categorical rejection of herself.

There is a litany of abjection to be found in the way in which the human body is treated, especially in the detention camps where people were forced to live in stables and to contend with disease, insects, excrement, and the lack of privacy or heat. "None of us...escaped the naming. We were defined and identified by the way we were seen. A newspaper in B.C. headlined, "They are a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada" (118). With a psychological climate of this sort, it is no wonder that Naomi attempts to come to terms with the bodies of herself and her aunt and with the memory of her mother's body. Here decay, aging, hygiene, and the like preoccupy the dialectic—feelings of undesirability, inconsequentiality, and impermanence, which are generally subsumed below the current of daily events, surface as icons set against the contrasts between the good and the bad, of tradition versus cultural assimilation and dispersion, and insecurity and loss.

At the beginning of the novel, we are told by a student named Sigmund that Naomi is a spinster. This choice of a name signals the presence of the deeper levels to which we must attend. It is my belief that Naomi's spinsterhood is caused by her very lack of understanding of her abandonment by her mother, the absence of her father, and the dispersal of the extended family and Japanese community, and of racism and her

(self)conceptualization based on difference and cultural abomination. The narrative serves to demystify the ambivalence of insecurity and cultural instability, and the fractured self-concept.

The Bathing Rituals

The underlying significance of the bathing rituals will be more easily understood by identifying the mothers in the text and their primordial functions according to an archetypal reading. Naomi embodies the paradigm of life and death, and this can most easily be seen in her observations of life-giving qualities and death-dealing occurrences. She can be viewed as the mythic Persephone who must be reconciled to both the fertile surface of the earth and to the underworld. In her search for understanding, she asks her oblique questions about the mysteries of the M/mother, of a mother who is at once represented by Grandmother Kato, by her mother proper (Nakane by marriage), and subsequently by Obasan, her aunt and surrogate mother. Aunt Emily functions as a mediator between those who rule and those who are victims, and fittingly she works through the medium of language, notably the English language—the one that is designated by man for the dissemination of his laws, H/his religious representations, and his activities.

The language of Grandmother Kato is of the body, of murmurs, gaps, and bliss; of survival, not of power structures. This becomes shockingly clear when we realize that she and her daughter (Naomi's mother) return to Japan to care for Naomi's great (grand)mother. They return to the mother country, back to origins. They belong to the power of blood-kinship, and not of commodification. Grandmother Kato's faith in this tie becomes evident upon the decimation of Nagasaki by the A-bomb and serves to illustrate her selflessness in the aid shown to her family members and in her determination to maintain contact with blood-kinship back in British Columbia through Aunt Emily, despite all odds.

Naomi's mother adopts a silence that is emotionally costly to her children. She is largely associated with death and the creation of silence as dense as stone. Her absence creates the enigma, the gap in the tale, that Naomi tries to fill with answers she cannot find to the questions she hesitates to ask. The mother

in this instance is the "averted gaze," the gap created by fragmentation and a fragmented recall. She is at the root of Naomi's inability to emotionally invest herself in anything—a lesson that is symbolized by the hen who pecks her chicks to death (59). The shaft, the mother's leg Naomi clings to in a photograph, disintegrates into the mystification. Kogawa is unmerciful in choosing to coincide the dissolution of the Japanese Canadian community (by edict) at the departure of the mother. But this correspondence is paradoxical, for, while Naomi resents the history and the story of the mother who killed something inside the child and the tribe, she also senses that the mother is closely associated with the grandmother, and the great (grand)mother, and therefore also to primordial origins.

In all this Obasan, Naomi's aunt and surrogate mother, is the extant enigma for Naomi. She represents the silence, the stone, from which grew life and to which the mystery of death settles, for she is the one who has had to force herself into silence, into a gap that permits the reconciliation between the forces of death and life; she leads Naomi to write: "If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply" (np). Through the course of the novel, as Naomi is finding her own voice, and is defining her own history, Obasan continues her physical decline: "She is the old woman of many Japanese legends, alone and waiting in her ancient time for the honour that is an old person's reward" (54). Over the course of the years Obasan disappears gradually into the silence, into the gaps of the narrative, a disappearance that could be viewed as a self-sacrifice: Obasan's silence becomes Naomi's voice and her growing knowledge of the M/mother.

That bathing is a time of utmost bliss for Naomi reveals a close identity with the Mother and with the semiotic. When the language of the F/father has interceded in usual communication, these scenes serve to unite the daughter to the pleasures of the (infant) body, to regenerative processes, to the real and primal M/mothers. This provides for Naomi an opportunity for the rebirth brought about in the healing process, but it can occur only following her admission of the pain of loss. The presence of the M/mother below the surface of abjection illustrates the extent to which Obasan's power is subsumed. This hidden power emerges through the semiotic, the drive of the narrator to

transform her loss into self-understanding, rather than lying helpless in the loss and resentment in which we initially find her.

Memories of the bathing rituals in the novel serve to salvage the remnants of a time during which neither the mother (or the grandmother in this case) nor the child have experienced separation and abjection:

She urges me down deeper into the liquid furnace and I go into the midst of the flames, obedient...for Grandma is an angel of the Lord and stands before me in the midst of the fire and has no hurt, neither is a hair of her body singed nor has the smell of fire passed on her. She is sitting directly beside the gushing boiling hot-water tap and the steaming froth plunges around her bony buttocks . . . I will suffer endless indignities of the flesh for the pleasure of my grandmother's pleasure. . . We lie in this state forever. (48)

This could very well be read as a birthing scene told from the point of view of the infant. This passage presents a state of purification, and the *aka* that rolls from the body when it is rubbed is a vehicle for "curiosity and amusement at this cleansing" (49).

This cleansing ritual displaces the power of the F/father in that the pleasure or bliss derived from cleansing a body in contexts outside religious ceremonies would be considered by him as taboo or a sin. In fact, when the power of the F/father is being exercised, usually there is suffering and abjection. Naomi therefore chooses to relive the state of infancy with its bodily and preverbal attachment to the mother: "The bathroom is steaming and I am languid as I am hoisted out, my body limp and capable of no objections" (49).

That nudity is acceptable in the house indicates an important difference between the self-concept of the characters and the precepts of Christianity. In the view of the church, the body both interiorizes and externalizes the abject, in that the body absorbs impurities from the external world and in turn excretes its own. In Christianity, for instance, the body is seen only as a vehicle for the soul; it remains forever imperfect because it is the container of fluids that are excreted and secreted through pores and other openings, fecal wastes being viewed as the first material separation that is controllable by man. This separation recalls the primary maternal separation according to Kristeva. The body is therefore regarded as the opposite of

spiritual, symbolic, and divine law. It is also connected to the mind/soul, object/subject split, which signals the blurring of the inside-outside boundaries.

There is a sense of unification in the public bathing scene that takes place in Slocan, which is comparable to the traditional view of the city square, where information about members of the community is exchanged. More importantly, the bath is described in ritualistic terms, perhaps a sign of the unity of the community in a common persecution:

The bath is a place of deep bone warmth and rest. It is always filled with slow steamy chatter from women and girls and babies. It smells of wet cloth and wet wood and wet skin. We are one flesh, one family, washing each other or submerged in the hot water, half awake, half asleep. The bath times are like a hazy happy dream. (160)

This ritualistic scene is reminiscent of the pre-verbal, primordial M/mother-child dyad; it is also the scene of renewal and cleansing for the extended family or clan.

When attempting to contextualize the absence and sublimated presence of Naomi's mother, I am confronted with ambiguous associations. On the one hand, the mother is firmly rooted as a second generation Canadian to Canada and to her family in that country. On the other hand, she is drawn by love or a sense of tradition or obligation to the mother country, Japan, to take care of her own aging grandmother. This choice places her neither here nor there, since Naomi is constantly calling forth her presence, and leads me to believe that the mother in this story belongs to what Kristeva would call the semiotic. The semiotic refers to the "actual organization or disposition, within the body, of instinctual drives as they affect language and its practice in dialectical conflict with the symbolic" (Roudiez 17). There is a strong feeling of betrayal in Naomi's discourse, and the entire novel is an attempt at an understanding and a belated self-reconciliation. While Naomi remembers the pleasure she had in the presence of her mother in her infancy, which was comparable to that felt when bathing with her grandmother, her mother, when first introduced, is also the person who teaches the averted gaze, "who teaches me that in the language of eyes a stare is an invasion and a reproach" (47). After the departure of Naomi's mother to Japan, Naomi goes through the feelings of loss, mystification, and resentment for being abandoned, but she

doesn't realize that she is doing so; and in the present Naomi resists inquiring about and learning the real fate of her mother.

Murmurs (of) the Mother

The absence of the mother is a significant factor in the kind of symbol-formation the subject will develop. She is not the devouring mother, archaic and dangerous—she is the breast, arms and womb, and hence subject. Given that the chora, the place and process of the transformation of drives through “rupture and articulations (rhythm)” (Kristeva 26), resolves itself in the thetic, that is, in the positing or naming of the subject, we can perhaps view the semiotic as those drives that lead Naomi to relate (to) the M/mother. She gradually reconciles herself to the absence of her real mother by calling forth ancient rhythms that mimic the mother's body's before birth and during infancy. Traces of the M/mother can be seen in incantations, silence and legends, and through dreams. In this poetic language the Law of the F/father is subverted through a restructuration of syntax, rhythm, and, of course, meaning, and this occurs in the chora, where impulses and drives translate into acceptable cathexes. The M/mother must be called upon, as one calls upon a divinity that is not near at hand, that has not been known well enough or long enough to be easily recognized or to have been allotted either a prayer or a well-defined and defining ritual. To contrast, the influence of (Naomi's) F/father is always present; he is near at hand and constantly consulted about the upbringing of H/his children: “Everything about father is precise” (51).

The language of the F/father posits a split between the object and subject, a separation of the sign. Unlike the body of the mother at the primeval moment of separation, signs are unable to maintain coherence in the state of the disruption and hence fail to support the idiolect of the self. As Kristeva states, language disturbances become the abyss to be filled with echoes, funny sounds, yells, but never the M/mother's murmur. Kristeva's discussion of symbol-formation continues to posit the “body” as the body of perishability, the skin appearing as a tactile topography of signs and semantic chains. The missing connector is the M/mother who has been forced by the F/father out of bounds to the subterranean shelf.

Incantations open the gap of silence created by the mother, and it becomes filled with knowledge and reconciliation as

Obasan progresses. Naomi's quest is not to find her mother but to know her and to know about her, and this is achieved through language; "I hate the stillness. I hate the stone. I hate the sealed vault with its cold icon. I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes" (np). Naomi is devoured not by the mother, therefore, but by the question(s) that create a void. Immediately preceding the opening page of the novel, this incantation indicates the type of process that will be adopted by the narrator: disturbing the stillness, cracking open the stone, and defying the familiar icons that have failed her. Staring into the darkness of the psyche, of the embattled world, she is absorbing the echoes, the half-formed phrases that allude to the taboo, what cannot be said, the M/mother.

For Naomi, *Obasan* acts as a totem that holds the truth and the spirits of the dead. Although Naomi focusses on *Obasan's* aged body, her language of silence, of grief indicates the weight of the burden *Obasan* carries. Or does she carry any burden but servility?

Where do we come from *Obasan*? We come from cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth. We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. We come from Canada, this land that is like every land, filled with the wise, the fearful, the compassionate, the corrupt.

Obasan, however, does not come from this clamorous 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)

Obasan remains separate from the politics, the hate, the bloodshed, the dead. Interestingly, this passage demonstrates a split in the voice of the narrator, which addresses *Obasan* passionately at first and then in a more weary voice that seems to mitigate what precedes it. This illustrates the on-going mediation between the metaphorical or allegorical and the literal. The primordial mother tends to disappear in the gap between.

That the M/mother is safely imbued with the semiotic is apparent in the legend of "Momotaro," a story that the narrator remembers by words and their rhythm: "Night after night I asked for Momotaro. What remains as I remember the story, beyond the rhythm of the words and the comfort and closeness, is our transport to the grey-green woods where we hover and

spread like tree spirits, our ears and our eyes, raindrops resting on leaves and grass stems" (54). Here is a direct link with the fertile and comforting body of the mother (earth). The Law of Gravity, of Man, has been defied, and even the spirits defy the "Laws of Anatomy," whereby the ears and eyes "rest on the leaves and grass stems," attentive to the voice of the earth. Correspondingly, Momotaro is a legend about a great respect of the earth and its fruit, which sustain life. This sustenance lies, not only in the edibility of the peach, but also in its regenerative capacities, represented in the figure of a young boy who jumps out of the heart of the peach. This occurs in the legend after a scene in which the peach is ritually presented to the grandfather and treated as both totem and ritualistic offering: "Grandmother shows [the grandfather] the huge peach. 'Ah, such a fine momo,' Grandfather says. And carefully they lift it up, feeling its ripe lush flesh in their hands" (55). What is most remarkable about the telling of the legend to Naomi when she was a child is that her mother would not end the narrative at the appearance of the gift/boy from the fruit, but instead "offers the whole telling before she rolls up the tale once more, round and complete as an unopened peach ready for a fresh feasting" (55). Whole.

In contrast, Rough Lock Bill's own legend is fragmented and has no ending, no sense of wholeness. He can be viewed as the stereotypical primitive and legendary figure of the backwoods of Canada. He contains the history of the region of Slokan, and imparts to Naomi, her brother, and some friends, the origins of SLOCAN, and the meaning of racism.

"So he goes all the way back to where his people [Indians] are,...and he says to them, 'If you go slow, you can go.' So off we go, these few here, some so weak they have to be carried. Took all of them together—how long? Months? A year? 'If you go slow,' he says, 'you can go....'" "When my Grandad came, there was a whole tribe here...." "Right there was the chief's teepee. But last I saw—one old guy up past the mine—be dead now probably." (146)

This citation illustrates how Rough Lock Bill describes the extinction of a tribe, let alone a way of life. First, he parodies the native Indian language by distorting it—or telling about its distortion. Next, he mocks their means of transport, ignores the possible reasons for the relocation of an entire tribe, and finally treats the disappearance of the tribe altogether as though it were

a matter of fact, and nothing more than an interesting tidbit. There is no regeneration, no unifying force, such as the semiotic; the focus is centered on the act of telling, rather than in the meaning.

Dreaming is another method by which the F/father's language and law are transgressed by the semiotic. Naomi's dreams illustrate the effects of entering into the Symbolic Order on the psyche; they are violent, dehumanizing, and abominable, and are based on the murders of women and the crimes against the feminine (regenerative) principle. "There is no language" in the dream of the exploitation of the earth's resources and the use of humans as tools or objects of commodification. A British martinet is in command. Naomi hypothesizes: "They may be trying to make a clearing or gather brush or search for food. Basic survival activities" (28, 29). This dream occurs on the morning after Naomi's Uncle has died and signals her quest to understand the events surrounding the fate of her mother. Naomi is moving back in time, exploring the violent and dangerous ways. The death of her Uncle, Naomi's surrogate father, represents the release of patriarchal control, Uncle being the only man in the "family" unit that had consisted of Obasan, Uncle, and Naomi—after Stephen had moved from the home. In another dream, Naomi witnesses the torture, dismemberment, and murder of three women by soldiers. These three women could be viewed as the three mothers: Obasan, Grandmother Kato, and Naomi's mother, whose lives are shattered by an inflexible power. Naomi states "There was no hope. The soldiers could not be won. Dread and a deathly loathing cut through the women," as one would cut through regenerative capacities. Naomi's mother appears in another dream of death. She is the totem, the centre of the flower ceremony of the dead. In that dream, Naomi is a figure who dies and meets her ancestors in the place of the dead. Fragments of a life, those leftovers and string, connect the dreamer to the real and to the chora. The mother forms the center of the narrative and represents the quest of the daughter to understand, to accept the rain, the sadness.

When assessing my readings of the dreams, on the one hand I recognize the reading that relies upon the traditional symbolic reading that is traditionally applied to texts. It is the interconnection of these dreams with manifestations of the M/mother on primal and literal levels that for me expresses the

semiotic current, or through what Jung refers to as the collective unconscious. It is a philosophy of wholeness that serves to unify the dreams, the memories, the rhythms and incantations. The mother, in her own right, remains invisible, in a dimension that is pre-verbal and prior to the thetic, and the best example of this occurs when Naomi experiences an unexplainable physical sensation that is directly tied to the Mother:

It is early autumn in 1945, several months after the evening of the late-night bath. I waken suddenly . . . something has touched me but I do not know what it is. Something not human, not animal, that masquerades . . . She is here. She is not here. Something is happening but I do not know what it is. I listen intently, all my senses alert. (167)

This feeling refers to the decimation of Nagasaki and the sacrifice of the Japanese when the United States dropped the atom bomb on Japan. While there are the traditional representations of the mother as a ship and maiden, these are disrupted by references to the semiotic—drives and pulsations that Naomi *feels*, she and her mother are united by the same invisible current.

Naomi senses the universally significant event, when all innocence and purity and the view of the inevitability and permanence of life, globally and individually, were forever destroyed. Naomi *feels* it, as one senses the closeness of a loved or even a hated person. The point being made here is that there is a phenomenon that even the most rational mind cannot explain or express, and this lies in the semiotic, and the chora.

“Write the vision to make it plain.” Naomi finds this motto from Habakkuk amongst Aunt Emily’s documents. This statement refers to Aunt Emily’s own project in recording events for future reference, and, more specifically to write in order to understand. This has been Aunt Emily’s crusade, and Naomi adopts this philosophy in writing the story. By extending the vision of wholeness and universal accountability, Aunt Emily plays a very important role in contributing to the unifying forces by viewing the Nisei “as networks and streamers of light dotting the country” (31). More importantly, this vision has been passed on to Naomi, who writes, “The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey. But on my lap, her papers are wind and fuel nudging my early morning thoughts to flame” (32).

The novel closes with an incantation that calls upon the mother directly, not through metaphor. The mother is “the sigh

of remembered breath, a wordless word . . . a tide rushing moonward . . . I sit on the raft begging for a tide to land me safely on the sand but you draw me to the white distance, skyward and away from this blood-drugged earth" (241). Naomi alludes to the raft from which she jumped and nearly drowned. This reference indicates a coming to terms with one's race and gender (body as a sign). These words for me contain faith in the power of the feminine, and her saving grace, despite the continuous ebb and flow. The semiotic that Kristeva hypothesizes can only be attained by reaching below the surface of our learned feelings of repulsion for the M/mother(s) body.

NOTES

¹ The distinctions between the sacred and the unclean, Freud maintains, occur in the transition from the focus upon demons to the focus upon gods. This transition eventually led to the concepts of worship and sin, purification and sacrifice.

² The Oedipal complex, that is, the killing of the father and having sex with the mother, is a sociological complex with anthropological ramifications. This anthropological and psychoanalytical view serves to fuse the metaphor of the Mother to the literal mom, of the Father to the literal dad. This fused identity will be signalled in this paper through the use of "M/mother" and "F/father."

³ See Claude Lévi-Strauss' *La Pensée sauvage* and *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui*. An investigation of these works with respect to Freud's and Kristeva's work must be set aside for a subsequent paper.

⁴ Cathexis refers to the investment of mental or emotional energy in a person, place, or thing, and acts through a system of withdrawal, retention, or replacement. In other words, the psychical material in general becomes transmitted to an alternate position depending on the level of energy invested in the content. See Sigmund Freud's "Theory of the Unconscious" for a detailed discussion of the topic.

⁵ In Kristeva's opinion monotheism has been made to function according to a dialectic that instills fear in the abominable-made-women and awe in the mystique of the Father. This is largely presented in relation to the biblical text of Leviticus. Christian practice absolves, but only after the subject relives and repeats his/her transgressions in the confessional. Confession is therefore the vehicle that re-enacts imperfection within the dialectic of perfectibility. Furthermore, the very act of confession institutes the split that fractures wholeness; subjectivity therefore guarantees binary logic and existence. One must sin in order to be absolved, sin being reinforced by its re-presentation in language and ceremony. This very paradox is illustrated by Kristeva in her discussion on God's dialectic when instructing Adam to seek knowledge. In order for him to gain knowledge, he must eat of the fruit, but the fruit is forbidden. Adam chooses knowledge because it is offered to him by woman, which certainly invests Eve with a measure of power previously overlooked. It is not Eve who brings or causes sin. It is God and his faulty reasoning.

⁶ The etymology and meaning of "sublimate" may further reveal the dynamics of this rhetorical paradox. "Sublimate" is a beautiful and potent word, all the while embodying the concepts of filth and defilement and the dynamics that differentiate the two. While on the one hand sublimate refers to a psychoanalytic process that involves the diversion of "the expression of (an instinctual desire or impulse) from its primitive form to one that is considered more socially or culturally acceptable" (Webster's Dictionary, 9th Collegiate Edition), this can be maneuvered with conscious intent, and when placed in the context of a religious practice sublimate becomes the abject transformed from filth to defilement. Sublimate is closely connected with religion, as it is a cognate of "sublime," which carries with it the sense of exaltedness in "thought, expression, or manner; of outstanding spiritual, intellectual, or moral worth" (Webster's). Sublimation in cultural contexts, therefore, actually becomes a territory wherein certain actions become prohibited and endowed with varying degrees of abomination, and what becomes crucial is the border or margin that must be crossed in order to be considered as having acted either within acceptable conventions or not. It is not the act in itself that determines the degree of defilement, but the degree of prohibition and guilt. Sublimation is what happens when the infant's desire for the mother is intercepted by language. The desire for the mother has therefore been transformed into the desire for the abject; hence when the margin or boundary is recognized, to desire the mother is to become taboo and punishable. And in Christianity, to desire is ob[ab]jectionable.

⁷ Correspondence between Kristeva's *Powers* and Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* would provide fertile ground for investigations that are beyond the scope of this paper.

WORKS CITED

- Czernis, Loretta. "Contexture and Gesture: A Reading of Canadian Unity Policy." Ph.D. dissertation, York University, 1988.
- Finlay, J.L. and Sprague, D.N. *The Structure of Canadian History*. 1979. Scarborough, Ont: Prentice-Hall, 1984.
- Freud, Sigmund. *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis. Beyond the Pleasure Principle, the Ego and Id, and Other Works*. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Angela Richards. 1955. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1984.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Totem and Taboo." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 13. Ed. James Strachey. 1955. London: Hogarth Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1986.
- Gottlieb, Erika. "The Riddle of Concentric Worlds in *Obasan*." *Canadian Literature* 109 (Summer 1986): 34-53.
- Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. 1981. Markham, Ont: Penguin, 1983.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. 1980. New York: Columbia U P, 1982.
- Roudiez, Leon S. "Introduction." *Desire in Language*. 1977. New York: Columbia U P, 1980.