

# **The “Hidden Manna” That Breeds Hope: The Event of Resurrection in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan***

*Shounan Hsu*

## **ABSTRACT**

With Alain Badiou’s views on event as the major theoretical framework, this study of Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* is focused on Naomi Nakane’s reactions to her encounters with her mother. The mother’s undecidable existence, the appearance of motherly love in Naomi’s dreams, and Naomi’s subsequent inquiries constitute the event that transforms Naomi from an abandoned daughter who sees no hope for herself and for the Japanese Canadians into one that sees hope of salvation for all of them.

Between Aunt Emily, who tries to present the undistorted facts about the Japanese Canadians, and *Obasan*, who takes no action against racial persecution and accepts her life of invisibility, Naomi finds no hope at first. Through the unpredictable encounters with her mother’s volatile presence in her dreams, Naomi affirms her mother’s existence and inquires about that existence. Along with the dissolution of her belief in representation as a reliable means to present reality, Naomi sees that love that goes beyond representation should serve as the foundation for the use of representation. By having Naomi constitute herself as a subject in relation to the event and declare

\* Received: September 11, 2007; Accepted: March 25, 2008  
Shounan Hsu, Associate Professor, Department of English, National Tainan University,  
Tainan, Taiwan  
E-mail: shounan@mail.nutn.edu.tw

her new understandings so that the other people can know of her experience, Kogawa works for the realization in the future of a world in which people will all be subjects due to their fidelity to the event, and in which racial persecution cannot occur.

**KEY WORDS:** event, fidelity, the undead, representation, love

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) has attracted critics for its feminist, psychoanalytic, political, and narratological interests.<sup>1</sup> Studies have generally paid much attention to the central contrast between language and silence—between the white Canadians monopolizing language and the silent Japanese Canadians. However, the evental character of Naomi Nakane's unpredictable encounters with her mother's undecidable existence and the way these encounters generate Kogawa's answer to the Japanese Canadians' misfortune have not received their deserved attention. By establishing the relevance of Alain Badiou's views on event to the issue of Naomi's encounters with her mother in *Obasan* and the consequences of those encounters, I want to argue that, in view of racial discrimination and persecution in Canada, Kogawa proposes to base the implementation of identity on roles that people play and on love that goes beyond identity. Instead of simply declaring identity to be invalid or trying to integrate minority people as parts in a whole, through the event of Naomi's mother's resurrection that actually addresses everyone, Kogawa affirms a subjectivity available to whoever decides to work

---

<sup>1</sup> There are many instances. Christina Tourino connects the Canadian government's purpose of terminating Japanese Canadians to imageries of abortion. Rufus Cook uses the Lacanian orders to explain Naomi Nakane's changes through successive dreams. Jane Naomi Iwanura traces the opening excerpt to its biblical context, links the excerpt to the rest of the novel and discusses Kogawa's political purpose accordingly. Critics also touch on Kogawa's use of viewpoints, such as that of a child's.

for the production of a future of peaceful coexistence that starts from a belief in the reality beyond representation and in the omnipresence of love.

The following argument comes in three main sections. The first section presents Naomi's pre-evental world, the cause of Japanese Canadians' persecution, her feelings of hopelessness, and her attempt to bury her mother. The second section deals with the event of resurrection and Naomi's approach to her lost mother. Influences from Aunt Emily, Uncle Isamu, and Ayako Obasan, who do not want the dead to be dead, prepare and facilitate Naomi's inquiries of the past while Naomi's fidelity to the undecidable existence of her mother leads her to deny death. The last section explicates the consequences of Naomi's post-evental understandings for the issue of minority people. Her new understandings of reality construct a universal mother that is immanent to each person, hence merging all the people. Demarcation is retained and given an inflection through love that goes beyond identity. By having more and more people know of, be faithful to, and learn from their inquiries about the event of Naomi's mother's resurrection, Kogawa works for the realization in the future of a world in which people will all be subjects due to their fidelity to the event, and in which racial persecution cannot occur.

### **Vain Attempts to Bury the Undead: Naomi's Pre-Evental World of Racial Persecution**

For Badiou, ontologically, to exist is to belong to a situation. A situation is a "presented multiplicity" (*Being and Event* 24). Whatever composes a situation is not one but can be treated as one through the operation of presentation and re-presentation. Presentation designates there is some sort of multiplicity in the situation (*Infinite Thought* 127). Since it is through the counting operation—presentation—that ones appear, this count-as-one can be

the place where the un-counted resides. To ensure that nothing is left uncounted, there is re-presentation, a second count-as-one of the first count-as-one, which Badiou calls “the state of the situation” (*Being and Event* 93-95). Presentation deals with what belongs to a situation, and re-presentation with what is included in this situation. Just as the mathematical empty set, or the void, is contained in every set, every situation contains the uncounted (*Being and Event* 87). The uncounted “is neither presented nor represented” (*Being and Event* 108).

Put in a historical-social context, the state of the situation is “the law [of the ruling class] that guarantees that there is Oneness, not in the immediacy of society—that is always provided for by a non-state structure [the first count-as-one]—but amongst the set of its subsets” (*Being and Event* 105). For example, members of a family belong to a social situation while the family is included in this situation. Also, in a capitalist society the proletariat can find itself presented but not represented (*Being and Event* 109). Badiou states that the multiple that contains nothing other than the void is on the edge of the void (*Being and Event* 175). As a state does not tolerate the existence of the uncounted (the void), governments can prohibit “gatherings of more than three people” when “an emblem [such as ‘rioting crowds’] of their void wanders about” (*Being and Event* 109).

In *Obasan*, the Japanese Canadians’ misfortune—and Naomi’s family’s—begins with Canada’s participation in the Pacific War. Then the Japanese Canadians inhabit “the edge of the void.” The white Canadians are socially and economically presented and re-presented by the state; the Japanese Canadians are presented but not re-presented. That is, individually, a Japanese Canadian counts for nothing, even though (s)he resides in Canada; collectively, they are taken to be neither the loyal Canadians nor the Japanese enemies. As a state does not tolerate the existence of the uncounted, the

Japanese Canadians, who contain nothing and are on the edge of the void, are either sent to Japan or forced to leave the coastal British Columbia for internment camps in the interior. In the process, the families of those who choose to stay are split apart.

The Canadian government's purpose to eradicate the presented yet un-represented Japanese Canadians is palpable. Since Canada's involvement in the Pacific War, the Japanese Canadians—Naomi's family among them—have been virtually imprisoned or deliberately denied existence. As Sau-ling Wang has cited "a cluster of images of crippling" to show, the Japanese Canadians are not allowed to choose their residence: the limpness of Naomi's brother, Stephen, Naomi's Japanese doll that cannot stand on her own, the maimed frog and the women in Naomi's dream whose feet are shot at (139-40). The government's deliberate denial of the Japanese Canadians' existence further appears in Aunt Emily's observation about the effect of forcefully breaking apart these people's families: "To a people for whom community was the essence of life, destruction of community was the destruction of life [. . .]" (*Obasan* 223). A newspaper says that this breaking apart of the family serves "to prevent further propagation of the species" (*Obasan* 116).

Naomi's family is also destroyed, and, just as the Japanese Canadians tend to become the void in Canada because of the destruction of their community and hence of their life, Naomi's mother gradually becomes for Naomi the void in her small world. Firstly, the mother disappears from the family talk. The mother has left for Japan to take care of Grandma Kato's ailing mother in Tokyo before the Pacific War breaks out. During the war, Naomi's mother is not allowed to return, even though, as Nisei, the second generation of Japanese immigrants, she is a Canadian. In the meantime, Naomi's family is eradicated from Vancouver and forced to move to Bayfarm

in Slokan and then to Mr. Barker's farm in Lethbridge, Alberta. Naomi, aged five, and Stephen live with Obasan and Uncle because the two children's father is forced to leave the family and work on road gangs elsewhere, and he finally dies of tuberculosis and poor medication in 1950. The atomic bombing of Nagasaki disfigures the mother and finally kills her, though, because of her injunction, the adults never let Naomi and Stephen know anything about their mother. Thus the mother gradually becomes a void for Naomi because the mother, while being present in the daughter's unconsciousness, has disappeared from the family's talk. She is neither presented nor represented.

Secondly, the mother becomes the void for Naomi because the daughter gradually resigns to her fate. After the Second World War, the Japanese Canadians remain presented but not re-presented. Naomi loses hope for her future and wants to be resigned to her fate. Thus the thirty-six-year-old Naomi—a teacher now—feels depressed and hopeless before she goes to stay with Obasan after Uncle's death. Ostensibly, students are interested in Naomi as an individual; actually, they just make fun of her, taking her to be nothing. In her class she is insulted by being called an old maid and ridiculed continually for her Japanese name annually (8). Her students' parents are surprised when they see a short teacher with an oriental face (8). She recalls the time when she had a date with a widower and saw that the widower had mistaken her to be Japanese. Though she dealt with the inquisitive widower politely, now she cannot refrain from saying to herself, "What else would anyone want to know? Personality: Tense. Is that past or present tense? It's perpetual tense" (9). Explanation after explanation has not been helpful. She says, "I'm bored to death with teaching and ready to retire" (9). In other words, she is resigned to her fate.

Naomi's resignation turns her mother into the void because her lack of interest in the Japanese Canadians' misfortune not only constitutes an act of

suicide but also one of murder: by resigning to her fate, she gives up her mother, too. She turns her mother from the disappeared to the dead. Robert Pogue Harrison observes that a mourning ritual for the dead objectifies and distances one's sadness over the loss of a loved one (56). Compared with the loss of the loved one, the disappearance of the loved one's corpse or the uncertainty about the loved one's death is still more painful. With the loved one turned into the undead, the suffering living one also becomes the undead (142-44). For Naomi, her mother belongs to the disappeared; however, Naomi wants to turn her uncertainty about her mother into a certainty.

Critics have pointed out Naomi's other feelings toward her mother. In addition to the pain of being one of the undead along with her mother, these feelings also account for Naomi's wish to forget her mother. Arnold Davidson observes that the five-year-old Naomi secretly takes upon herself the responsibility for her mother's disappearance: "She is being punished for her secret sin, and using the same childish prelogic, she thinks she is being further punished when the outbreak of the war brings the family still other losses in addition to that of the mother" (45). Because of this self-accusation, Naomi "hardly dare[d] to think, let alone ask, why [her mother] ha[d] to leave" (*Obasan* 78). Coupled with this self-accusation is Naomi's accusation of her mother. Talking of Naomi the child's strong selfhood, King-kok Cheung points out that she blames her mother for leaving her for Japan to take care of her great grandmother (157). As a way to relieve her longing, doubts, misgivings, and accusation, the thirty-six-year-old Naomi turns her mother and herself from the undead into the dead when she decides to be resigned to her fate since, by being resigned to her fate, she is resigned to her loss. Later she will say to herself, "The word for 'lost' also means 'dead'" (28). Now, being "bored to death" (9), she seeks spiritual self-annihilation.

## **The Dead, the Returned, and the Undead: Influences on Naomi and the Event of Resurrection**

### *The Dead and the Returned: Influence on Naomi from Aunt Emily, Obasan, and Uncle*

Teruyo Ueki claims that *Obasan* consists of a folder structure. Through Aunt Emily, Obasan, and Uncle, Naomi is led into the secret of the folder and to her mother (8-9). In terms of Badiou, one can see why Aunt Emily, Obasan, and Uncle help Naomi approach her mother. Talking about where the new comes from, Badiou notes the importance of the void since the void is the place out of control in a situation. In Naomi's case, this void is her memory of her mother because Naomi has been unwilling to think about her. The death of Uncle Isamu brings the void to Naomi's notice. At Obasan's place Naomi unexpectedly discovers Aunt Emily's letters and documents that shock her because of their unexpected content, and her observation and recollections of Obasan and Uncle's approach to reality can easily lead her to think of her mother because of the similarity of her mother's approach to reality to the couple's.

Aunt Emily and the couple adopt two different approaches to reality while they all are reluctant to let the dead be dead. Aunt Emily wants to bring the eclipsed past back to life. As Naomi now recalls, Aunt Emily was "a word-warrior" (39), who "toiled to tell of the lives of the Nisei in Canada in her effort to make familiar, to make knowable, the treacherous yellow peril that lived in the minds of the racially prejudiced" (49). She said to Naomi, "You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything" (60). Relying on representable facts, Aunt Emily hopes to ameliorate the Japanese Canadians' life through undistorted

representation. Like Aunt Emily, Obasan does not want to give up the dead. Obasan's house is cluttered with useless objects of the past. "The items are endless" (18). One night after Uncle's death, Obasan goes into her attic and deplores the loss of things lost and her forgetfulness (29-31). It is through her collections and her memory that she tries to retain the past. Confronted with her two aunts' reluctance to let the dead be dead, Naomi can very well be led to consider the nature of the dead that she wants to bury though it is through her observation of and emotional involvement in their efforts that she gradually comes to the edge of her void.

Naomi's attention paid to Aunt Emily first evokes her interest in the past and then makes her see the limitation of Aunt Emily's over-reliance on representation. A parcel moved out of Obasan's attic that was sent years ago from Aunt Emily and contains family papers, newspaper clippings, and Aunt Emily's journal is an instance of Aunt Emily's refusal to let the dead be dead, and it triggers Naomi's memory through the shocks its content causes. These documents reveal to Naomi that she did not really know what happened in the past. Talking of Aunt Emily's diary, "a journal of letters to my [Naomi's] mother" (95), Naomi says, "The handwriting in blue-black ink is firm and regular in the first few pages, but is a rapid scrawl later on. I feel like a burglar as I read, breaking into a private house only to discover it's my childhood house filled with corners and rooms I've never seen" (95). While she has been unwilling to reopen her memory and review the painful war-time past, the fact that she should be a stranger in her own past shocks her out of her self-imprisonment in a timeless present.

Aunt Emily's parcel foregrounds how the government distorted facts during the Pacific War, and it prepares Naomi for a more conscious reflection on what representation does not present. For example, there is a folder containing "one newspaper clipping and an index card with the words 'Facts

about evacuees in Alberta” (231). The clipping includes a photograph of a smiling Japanese Canadian family, and the article describes the Japanese Canadians as most efficient and happy with their life. Naomi’s comment unveils the lie: “Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot. I cannot bear the memory” (232). If photographs deceive, so can language. “‘Indifferent’ Jap Repats Start Homeward Trek” was the headline of a report dated June 1, 1946 (221). Manina Jones puts the irony here succinctly. She points out that “while the newspaper’s use of the word *Jap* indicates that those described are being sent ‘Homeward,’ they are, we know, being *de-patriated*, deprived of their Canadian ‘home and native land’” (220).<sup>2</sup> This distortion of facts and others can lead Naomi to yearn for the exposure of undistorted facts. Nevertheless, Naomi is not unaware of the ineffectuality of Aunt Emily’s efforts to help the Japanese Canadians, even though Aunt Emily’s documents help Naomi explore the past.

Naomi connects Aunt Emily’s failure to the latter’s approach to reality. Aunt Emily knows that the Japanese Canadians suffer from their silence, but she has not seen that it is not enough to grant the Japanese Canadians a collective representation. After all, in terms of Badiou, if one results from counting as one, representation always misses reality. Being “a word warrior” (39), Aunt Emily once said to Naomi, “None of us [. . .] escaped the naming. We were defined and identified by the way we were seen” (139). Naomi knows that Aunt Emily must have missed something and observes that, while “love is in Aunt Emily” (10), Aunt Emily has little influence over the white Canadians: she “aimed for the heart. But the heart was not there” (49). In other words, with all her words, Aunt Emily fails to convey the feelings of

---

<sup>2</sup> Another example about the distortion of facts is the government’s calling work camps Interior Housing Projects. Concerning the misnaming, Robin Potter observes that “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” (124).

love to the white Canadians because she misses reality, probably even the reality of love.

If Aunt Emily's documents start Naomi's recollection and bring to her notice the reality beyond representation, Obasan and Uncle's endurance of their invisibility and their tendency to keep their thoughts and emotions to themselves introduce Naomi to that realm overlooked by Aunt Emily. Though she was aware of the couple's approach to reality, Naomi begins to pay close attention to their approach when she comes to stay with Obasan. Indeed, she remarks on the difference between her two aunts not long after her stay with Obasan. Comparing her two aunts, Naomi says that, while Aunt Emily is a word warrior, Obasan speaks an "underground" language (39). This "underground" language implies its normal imperceptibility.

Naomi's new interest in Obasan comes from her pain caused by Aunt Emily's documents and from her awareness of Obasan's remarkable endurance. So when reading the documents drives her to the verge of breakdown, Naomi says, "I am tired, tired like Obasan, and what will she do now what will she do?" (218) Her consciousness of her tiredness reveals her awareness of her and Obasan's shared experience and her desire to put herself in Obasan's mind to learn the way to live on. After all, as Meredith Shoenuit observes about Obasan, silence "indicates a kind of strength, a refusal to retaliate, a survival strategy" (487).

Naomi's observation of Obasan enables her to consciously grasp the insignificance of representational demarcation in the Japanese women's world and lead her into the realm beyond representation. An example about the insignificance of demarcation appears in the scene when she and Obasan bathe together. Naomi says of the scene, "Naked as prehistory, we lie together, the steam from the bath heavily misting the room" (94). Further, "[t]he bath is a place of deep bone warmth and rest. It is always filled with a slow steamy

chatter from women and girls and babies [. . .]. We are one flesh, one family, washing each other or submerged in the hot water [. . .]” (191). In this scene, not only the boundary between human beings but also that between things get blurred.

Naomi’s further grasp of Obasan’s world beyond representation appears in her notice paid to Obasan’s hand. Naomi observes that, when the Barkers come to offer consolations for Uncle’s death, Obasan separates herself from the Barkers: “[Obasan] remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands” (271). Obasan’s silence implies her attempt to make herself invisible, but the emphasis on her hand is significant in that this emphasis connotes a special way of perceiving reality. Hands are related to a different way of perceiving reality that blurs demarcation. For one thing, if eyes catch hold of the contour of their object all at once, tactile experience of objects goes from part to part, mediated by time, which results in a certain “blurring” between parts in the simultaneous presentation of the perceived whole that consists of the parts (Merleau-Ponty 224). Such a blurring of boundaries can result in a perception of reality different from that resulting from visual perception. Helena Grice contends that tactile awareness “dominates for Naomi, who constantly reads her surroundings through touch” (96). Naomi “repeatedly describes her and her uncle’s sensory engagement with their natural environment” (Grice 96). Probably Naomi has already sensed how Obasan approaches reality when she describes the way by which Obasan’s world is constructed.

The observation about the insignificance of demarcation in Obasan’s world and about the way Obasan approaches reality makes Naomi’s mother more accessible to her daughter since the mother also belongs to the Japanese women’s world. Elizabeth Kella has pointed out the gender distinction in Stephen and Naomi’s education. “Stephen learns to be expressive [. . .] while

Naomi is rewarded for her silent and unobtrusive attention and service to others in the home" (167). Kella also says, "Naomi learns [. . .] from her family [. . .] to honor other people's desires before her own" (166). This description about Naomi's education implies Obasan's and Naomi's mother's. However, Naomi's notice of the limitation in Obasan's attitude towards the outside world can also help her approach her mother.

Talking about the function of water in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari claim that earth has to do with territory while water and fire are functions of the earth and have to do with deterritorialization and reterritorialization (441). If water is connected to the erasure and the re-establishment of boundary in the bath scene, Obasan shows too much water in the way she conducts herself. In Naomi's comparison of her two aunts, she casts the latter in a poor light: "I can only see a dark field with Aunt Emily beaming her flashlight to where the rest of us crouch and hide, our eyes downcast as we seek the safety of invisibility" (38). Evidently neither Naomi nor Obasan has achieved the safety of invisibility. If they had, they would not have been persecuted during the war and discriminated against after the war.

As Naomi recollects, her mother also demonstrated such an inclination to make herself invisible. Naomi was once with her mother on a streetcar, and, when a man kept looking at Naomi, Naomi "turn[ed] away instantly" (58). She found that her mother did almost the same thing. The "mother's eyes look[ed] obliquely to the floor, declaring that on the streets, at all times, in all public places, even a glance can be indiscreet" (58).

Like Obasan's, Uncle's influence on Naomi also makes the mother more accessible to the daughter. It is not only because Uncle acts passively towards the white Canadians and takes reality to be beyond representation but also because he shows hope, faith, and love to a girl who despairs the loss of

her mother's love and return. Soon after Uncle's death, Naomi recalls the stone bread he made. Once she asked him how he could eat this kind of bread, and he replied that the stone bread, unlike what its appearance suggested, tasted very good (15). Like Obasan, Uncle lived with a memory in which the past and the present co-existed. At the coulee where he had gone annually with Naomi since 1954, he would point to objects before them and merge them with things in his past. Davidson observes that the view of the sea-like coulee can help Uncle recall "the life he has lost at the edge of and on the Pacific, the oceangoing heritage of his ancestors, and the boats he lovingly built" (30). For this reason, when Uncle pointed to the grass and said to Naomi in Japanese, "It's like the sea" (2), one witnesses a perception of reality that is not delimited by place and time.

Yet probably the more important influence exerted by Uncle on Naomi consists in his faith and love that plant a seed of hope in Naomi. After all, his annual visit to the coulee is highly suggestive, and Naomi can easily connect the visits to his memory of her mother even if she consciously tries not to think about her. Before Nakayama-sensei finally reads the two letters from Naomi's mother that reveal why the mother did not communicate with her children, Naomi has had no way of discovering what has happened between her mother and herself. Yet, she cannot be totally ignorant of the significance of the annual visit. Davidson notes that the time of Naomi and Uncle's annual visit to the coulee in August evokes "O-Bon, the Japanese Buddhist festival of the dead and a major tradition ceremony" (31). During this festival, the dead are supposed to return home "to share briefly in the world of the living" (31). Uncle's faithful return to the coulee implies a hidden love towards someone, and, when he constantly delays revealing his sorrow to Naomi and constantly promises to her that he will tell her of his sorrow someday, his procrastination can suggest to her that something terrible has happened to her dear one or

ones in Japan. Naomi has no definite proof to rely upon, but Uncle's faithful returns can reflect on the worthiness of the person or people he misses. There is consequently hope for Naomi, not necessarily hope for her mother's return, but hope for the love of the person that she has loved. Kogawa does not explain in *Obasan* why Naomi "always pick[s] at least one flower before [Uncle and she] [go] home" though, as Ueki and others have pointed out (10), the mother is repeatedly connected to flowers.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Naomi's constancy indicates that she unconsciously tries hard to remain faithful, loving, and hopeful.

With hope, faith, and love, however dimly grasped, with more knowledge about the past, and with new awareness of the inability of representation to present reality and the necessity of representation as means for self-protection, Naomi is better equipped than she was before Uncle's death to approach her mother. It is no less true that her new understandings can come to nothing. On the one hand, she has earlier intended to become resigned to her fate and stop longing for her mother. On the other hand, her mother's undecidable existence further makes Naomi's search unanchored because the search lacks a definite object. The mother's subsequent unpredictable appearances in her dreams that transform her into a happy person therefore both develop from, and are separated from, these people's influences.

### *The Disappeared and the Event of Mother's Resurrection*

Naomi's eventual encounter with her mother drastically changes her attitude towards life. For Badiou, an event comes as an unpredictable and

---

<sup>3</sup> In *Naomi's Road* Naomi picks a rose in the coulee because "[i]t smells a little like Mama's perfume" (108).

incalculable supplement to a situation (*Infinite Thought* 46). The event “compels [a person] to decide a *new* way of being” (*Ethics* 41), and an “evental rupture always constitutes its subject in the divided form of a ‘not . . . but’” (*Saint Paul* 63-64). The “not” is the “potential dissolution” of the belief in re-presentation while the “but” indicates “the faithful labor, in which the subjects of the process opened up by the event [. . .] are the coworkers” (*Saint Paul* 64). To be faithful to an event is to think “the situation ‘according to’ the event” (*Ethics* 41). In other words, a subject is constituted because of its decision to be faithful to an event, whose existence is otherwise undecidable. The process of being faithful to the event—making inquiries about how to transform a situation according to the revelation of the event—further constitutes subjective truth of the event, and since this subjective truth is a process, its completion remains in the future (*Theoretical Writings* 114-19).

In *Obasan* the event is the resurrection of Naomi’s mother in the daughter’s dreams. Naomi’s encounters with her mother in her dreams are unpredictable, and her mother’s living existence is undecidable. Unpredictable because Naomi never consciously seeks to understand her mother: she claims that “[w]hat is done [. . .] is done” and that “[d]ead bones do not take on flesh” (238). Undecidable because Naomi’s relatives have kept the news about the mother’s disfigurement in Nagasaki and her later death from the daughter: the mother belongs to the disappeared. If to be faithful to an event is to think “the situation ‘according to’ the event” (*Ethics* 41), Naomi proceeds to understand her past thereby when she decides to believe in the messages of her dreams. For example, Naomi claims that, in “early autumn in 1945” (198), something touched her in the night, something “not human, not animal, that masqueraded the way a tree in the night took on the contours of hair and fingers and arms” (198). Retrospectively, this something can only be a projection from the present and refers to her mother who suffered from the

atomic bombing in Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. Also, with her new distrust of the demarcation of reality, she says consequently, "I am sometimes not certain whether it is a cluttered attic in which I sit, a waiting room, a tunnel, a train" (131). Thus, despite her unreliable memory, it is through her unconscious faithfulness to her mother's dim presence that Naomi begins to see her situation differently until she finally sees a way out for herself and for the Japanese Canadians.

Naomi's inquiries about the event of her mother's resurrection unfold from the contents of and her reactions to her successive dreams.<sup>4</sup> In these successive dreams, along with the daughter's better understanding of the Japanese Canadians' past and hers, the presence of her mother becomes more and more palpable. In the first and the second dreams recorded, the mother's presence can barely be sensed. The first dream recorded occurs between Uncle's death and Naomi's discovery of Aunt Emily's parcel. In this dream there is in Uncle's mouth "a red red rose with an endless stem" (35). "Behind him, someone—I do not know who—is straining to speak, but rapidly, softly, a cloud overtakes everything" (35). Since in the fifth recorded dream her mother would appear with "a knotted string stem" in her mouth and "[f]rom the stem hung a rose" (273), and since in this fourth dream there would arise "a dark cloud" (273), it is not far-fetched to connect the unidentified figure in the first dream to Naomi's mother. In the second dream there are three unidentified oriental women lying "naked in the muddy road" and vainly trying to protect themselves from soldiers by being seductive (73). This dream happens after Naomi recalls how once a white hen picked a yellow chick to

---

<sup>4</sup> It is reasonable that Naomi should have a series of dreams about her mother. As Shlomo Breznitz observes, it is easier for survivors of the Holocaust "to enter the Holocaust state of mind than to exit from it" (49). After Aunt Emily's documents triggered Naomi's memory, Naomi can have difficulty forgetting about her past. What is important in her case, however, is that she decides to take her mother's presence seriously and thus constitutes it as an event.

death in her yard and how she submitted to Old Man Gower's and Percy's sexual attacks. The mother possesses a dim presence in the three women because she failed to protect the yellow chicks from the white hen, and Naomi from Old Man Gower.

The mother's facelessness might come from her early separation from Naomi, from Naomi's reluctance to recall her mother, or from Naomi's feelings of separation from her mother after Old Man Gower's attacks. As Naomi now sees it, what separates herself from her mother results from Old Man Gower's sexual molestation and her consequent guilty feelings over her mother's departure and the subsequent exclusion of the Japanese Canadians. Thus her third recorded dream—unlike the former two, one of her later childhood dreams—indirectly illuminates her mother's facelessness. Before Mr. Gower's sexual molestation, she and her mother are not separable: "I am clinging to my mother's leg, a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot—a young branch attached by right of flesh and blood. If she walks, I will walk. Her blood is whispering through my vein" (77). In the third recorded dream "the mountain yawns apart [. . .]. My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other" (77). Gower's action implies a white man's recognition of her, and it explains her enjoyment and separation from her mother. After all, in singling her out, Gower teaches her to demarcate reality, and in accepting the demarcation implied by Gower's choice, Naomi sets a boundary between herself and her mother. This incident also reveals that the feelings of separation are caused unilaterally, by the daughter.

So before the fourth recorded dream, Naomi has already a good chance to extricate herself from her earlier despair. Knowing that only she is responsible for the feelings of separation and that separation has to do with her acceptance of representational demarcation of reality, she has begun to

undermine her earlier suspicion about the cause for her separation from her mother. Indeed, the self-conscious tone in which she relates her childhood guilty feelings over hiding Gower's molestation from her mother and over the supposed consequences of this lie implies a woman who is reflecting on and analyzing her childhood past. Now that she has begun to think and inquire about her past and the relationship between herself and her mother, she sees things differently. As a result, before the fourth recorded dream, Naomi has already changed her opinions about dreams. Earlier, memories are "barely real" (25); now she says, "I am sometimes not certain whether it is a cluttered attic in which I sit, a waiting room, a tunnel, a train. There is no beginning and no end to the forest, or the dust storm, no edge from which to know where the clearing begins" (131). In other words, she is finally able to admit her mother's continuing presence in her mind and now consciously believes that dreams are not necessarily less real than the world outside them.

It is therefore understandable that in the fourth dream recorded the mother's presence is explicitly identified for the first time. The fourth recorded is dated: one night in early autumn in 1945. In this dream the mother's hair is falling. Next she becomes a maypole woman around whom Naomi dances, and to whom Naomi is connected with "apron-string streamers" (199). Then the mother is a leaving ship connected to Naomi by "colored paper streamers" (199). "The wake is a thin black pencil line that deepens and widens and fills with a grayness that reaches with tentacles to embrace me" (199). Probably Naomi can guess at the possible reason of her mother's continuing physical absence as she has by now read the documents contained in Aunt Emily's parcel that reveal the factual past concerning the Japanese Canadians. Accordingly, even with the scene of her mother's departure as a ship, the connection between the mother and the daughter remains. With the mother merging with the ship and the wake of "thin black

pencil” suggesting writing that supplements the mother’s lost presence, the embracing waves not only imply Naomi’s new perception of her mother as not limited by fixed representations but also indicate the connection between the mother and the daughter and the welling forth of her and her mother’s love.

Thus, the fifth recorded dream shows that Naomi experiences the obstacle that keeps separating them. After the departure of Barker, who came to offer condolences for Uncle’s death, and who treated the Japanese Canadians patronizingly, Naomi dreams of her mother “danc[ing] her love” and of the Grand Inquisitor who tries to force open her mother’s mouth (272-73). An incident that Naomi recalls between the fourth recorded dream and the fifth can contribute to Naomi’s ability to see the cause of her separation to be her own fault. She recalls that in her Slocan days there was a black-haired girl in her class called Annie Black Bear. “Once the teacher called her Annie Black by mistake. Annie looked so pleased—throwing a furtive happy swift glance at me [Naomi]” (242). This incident echoes Naomi’s first separation from her mother. By going willingly to Old Man Gower’s place, Naomi is like Annie who willingly separates herself from her native people. So on awakening, Naomi identifies herself with the Grand Inquisitor who has stopped her mother’s dancing of love by forcing her to speak. In other words, Naomi now recognizes that her over-reliance on representable facts has eclipsed her mother’s silent talk of love to her.

Naomi’s last lesson from her inquiries about her mother comes with the discovery of the actual reason for her mother’s physical absence. After she has learned to go beyond representation, now she re-affirms the use of representation. When Aunt Emily, Stephen and Nakayama-sensei have arrived at Obasan’s place, with Obasan and Aunt Emily’s permission, Nakayama-sensei reads two letters from Naomi’s mother and reveals the mother’s misfortune and her injunction that her children not be told of her

misfortune. The two letters do not continue to teach Naomi the inability of representation to present reality. She says after she has learned the facts about her mother, "I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here" (292). Through the two letters she discovers the indispensability of representation.

Naomi sees the indispensability of representation because, with her mourning for her mother's physical death and the concomitant relief of her accumulated pain, she sees why she had tried to kill her mother and herself before she came to Obasan's house: Naomi's own inability to ask about her mother's disappearance during the time of war first turned both into the undead and subsequently made the mother's unaccountable disappearance unbearable. As a result, now Naomi says, "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (291).

No wonder that, in her present re-telling of the maypole part of the fourth recorded dream, Naomi's dance around the maypole is attended by the gushing forth of distress and silent pain (290). Also, in the sixth—the last—recorded dream, while the mother remains physically ungraspable, Naomi's childhood feelings of separation and helplessness predominate. In this last recorded dream, the mother is again separated from her daughter and turned into a smiling picture, ignorant of the helpless little girl's wounds (291). As a way to pacify the dead and objectify her sorrow for her mother's physical death, Naomi's mourning does not invalidate her earlier decision to believe in her mother's transformed existence.

Keeping in mind Naomi's remark about the adult's and the child's different perceptions of reality, one can see that Naomi is now affirming the necessity of both the reality beyond representation (in terms of Badiou, the void) and representation. Indeed, immediately before her re-telling of the

maypole part of the fourth recorded dream, she also retells her dream vision of her mother's suffering in Nagasaki. She affirms her presence there with her mother (290). In addition to the merger of the past and the present, and the merger of different places, the image here of the merger of her mother's falling hair with Naomi's sawn legs comes from Naomi's consciousness of her love that can go beyond representation now.

Naomi's recognition of her mother's love and continuing presence explains why she ends her search for her mother in a happy tone; yet, her happiness also stems from her understanding that her learning has a wide application. Thus, she compares her mother to Jesus Christ and bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, known to the Japanese as Kuan Yin. Both Jesus Christ and Kuan Yin are universal saviors. They take loving action and are connected to the defiance against the demarcation of sex or life and death.<sup>5</sup> The comparison of the mother to Jesus Christ becomes palpable when, after reading the two letters and revealing the mother's sacrifice for her children, Nakayama-sensei offers a prayer: "We are abandoned yet we are not abandoned. You are present in every hell. Teach us to see Love's presence in our abandonment. Teach us to forgive" (292). One then recalls that earlier Naomi has called her mother "Martyr Mother" (290). The comparison of the mother to Kuan Yin appears near the end of the story when Naomi talks of her mother as if the latter were beside her and the other people and can endow them with a different perception of reality: "Tonight we picked berries with the help of your sighted hands" (295). The comparison of the mother to one with "sighted hands" recalls the Buddhist bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, who "has 1,000 arms and 1,000 hands, and has an eye in the palm of each hand" (Nhat Hanh 157). The eyes represent understanding and the hands action

---

<sup>5</sup> For Saint Paul, there is neither male nor female in Christ (Badiou, *Saint Paul* 104). Avalokitesvara is portrayed as both male and female.

(Nhat Hanh 157). In sum, the reference to forgiveness makes Jesus Christ's resurrection and the saving of human beings resonate with the saving of Naomi from death when she recognizes her mother's immortality and the imposition of the demarcation of reality. In the love and action of Christ and Kuan Yin, Naomi sees the importance of love that goes beyond identity as a foundation for representation and action. Beyond her aunts' and uncle's approaches to reality, she has discovered a way to regain paradise.

### **Construction of a Collective Subjectivity and the Future Truth**

Kogawa connects Naomi's new understandings to the Japanese Canadians' predicament in the last scene of *Obasan*, in which Naomi returns to the coulee where Uncle and she went annually. Uncle's personal misfortune gives Naomi's visit a broad dimension because the Nakanes are "ship-builders and salmon fishermen, traditional Japanese Canadian occupation" (Chua 99). Naomi's answer to the Japanese Canadians' misfortune is implied in the scene in which she reaches the coulee: she puts on Aunt Emily's coat because it is warmer than her own, and then, the bottom of the coat is soaked by "dew and the late-night rain" (296). At the bank of "the underground stream" she sees "the moon" as "a pure white stone" and "a quiet ballet" of "water and stone dancing" (296). The connection of Aunt Emily to water that has often been connected to Naomi's mother and Obasan indicates Naomi's affirmation of both representation and the reality beyond representation. In assigning images connected to Uncle, Obasan, and Naomi's mother to an underground stream, Kogawa turns their influences on Naomi into a context that embraces and transforms the use of representation. Just as the last scene echoes the first and brings the whole book back to the reader's mind, an examination of this final affirmation along with the Japanese Canadians' misfortune can make

Kogawa's answer to the issue of racial persecution clearer.

Through Naomi's experience, Kogawa has demonstrated the inability of Aunt Emily's and Obasan's approaches to meet racial persecution. If she affirms both, her affirmation cannot simply be a synthesis of the two approaches. Kogawa's affirmation stems from three reasons. Firstly, representation must not be overlooked because the lack of representation can suffocate the persecuted people even though representation involves misrepresentation. As Naomi says, while now she knows her mother's presence without the latter's being physically present, in her childhood she could not know of her mother's presence when the latter was physically absent (292). It is through her discovery of Aunt Emily's documents and her observation of Obasan's way of approaching reality that Naomi becomes able to take her dreams about her mother to be significant. Before she learns to go beyond representation, the lack of news from her mother and the refusal of her relatives to talk about her mother have greatly contributed to Naomi's despair.

Secondly, the affirmation of representation means that representation has a provisional value. This provisional value lies not only in that without representation Naomi could not have reached the reality beyond representation but also in that identity should be replaced by role. At the beginning of her stay with Obasan, Naomi has already sensed that role should precede identity. She sees Obasan as not limited by nationality: "she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world. You see her on a street corner in a village in southern France [ . . . ]. Or bend over stone steps in a Mexican mountain village" (17). Aunt Emily believes that identity precedes role. When Naomi asks Aunt Emily whether or not the story of Momotaro is a Japanese story, the latter answers, "Momotaro is a Canadian story. We're Canadian, aren't we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian" (68). Yet by having identity precede role, Aunt Emily is self-defeating because she would not be

able to persuade the white Canadians to accept the Japanese Canadians as an integral part of Canada, whatever the latter do.

Instead, Kogawa proposes that role should precede identity. One example that demonstrates this replacement of identity by role is Naomi's affirmation of her mother's presence. Naomi finally affirms that presence because she feels her mother's love everywhere. The mother can be turned into a leaving ship, a maypole, or "tide rushing moonward" (289). Elsewhere instances of adoption abound and question the referential validity of identity. In her childhood Naomi enjoys the story of Momotaro. An old couple takes Momotaro to be their child after he was born from a peach. After the departure of Naomi's mother, Obasan and Uncle have raised her, and "[t]he Barkers and everyone else have assumed that Uncle and Obasan are [Naomi and Stephen's] parents [ . . .]" (252). When Nakayama-sensei finally reads the two letters to Stephen and Naomi, Naomi learns that her grandmother calls a granddaughter—Chieko— Naomi because the two girls look alike (283). Naomi also learns that her mother "was aimlessly chipping wood to make a pyre on which to cremate a dead baby" when grandmother finds her among the ruins caused by the atomic bomb (286). The connection between adoption and the end of racial persecution looms large in a government letter sent to Aunt Emily after the Second World War. The letter reveals that Naomi's mother has adopted a daughter in Japan, and the writer hopes that one day the Canadian government will allow both the mother and her adopted child to live in Canada (255).

Thirdly, it is Naomi's duty to declare her experience and her new understandings about reality and about the way for people to coexist to other people so that they can profit from her and spread these new understandings. When Naomi affirms representation, this affirmation stems from her clinging, or fidelity, to her mother's presence, however dim. If Aunt Emily aims for the

heart and misses it (49), it is because she does not have a chance for her to feel a strong attachment to such an undecidable event. Naomi has such a chance, but she also has a duty to spread her new understandings because, as she has unconsciously turned her mother into different things and shapeless things, the mother's loving presence gains at the same time a universal dimension that is greater than her physical presence. By declaring the untenability of representation as reality and by sharing the universal mother as Naomi does, people can constitute themselves into subjects and Naomi's co-workers. They would be brothers and sisters to one another, working to produce the truth of the event of resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

With these three reasons for affirming both representation and the reality beyond it, and with love that goes beyond identity as basis for the use of representation, the appended excerpt becomes integrated into *Obasan* because the excerpt exemplifies Kogawa's political concern. In the appended "memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada" the Canadian government's persecution of the Japanese Canadians is compared with the American government's and the British government's practices (298). The Canadian government's persecution "constitute[s] a threat to the security of every minority in Canada" (299), and it is "Nazism" (300). These several comparisons, while condemning the Canadian government, make the justice of national law relative since the law of laws here is love that goes beyond identity, a simple concern for the life of the living. It is also noteworthy that "the Co-operative Committee" echoes the above argument about the constitution of subjects faithful to the event of resurrection. Davidson has noted: "three Anglo names

---

<sup>6</sup> For Badiou, "the Marxist proposes the revolutionary suppression of the State; thus the end of representation and the universality of simple presentation" (*Being and Event* 108). In comparison, the future world Kogawa envisions also points to one of simple presentation though she has recognition of omnipresent love and the reality beyond reality as the major motivating force.

are appended to the 'respectfully submitted' postscript document" (81). The cooperation of the white Canadians with the Japanese Canadians in ameliorating the misfortune of the minority people, especially the Japanese Canadians, indicates not only the blurring of the demarcation between people but also the presence of a love that has no specific object and works through representation to promote a reality that lies beyond representation.

Finally, the incomplete feature of the political struggle indicated by this excerpt and Naomi's lack of a clear-cut political vision foreground the fact that *Obasan* is a book of hope. As Iwamura notes, the excerpt is taken out of Aunt Emily's parcel (176). By placing this excerpt at the end of *Obasan*, Kogawa turns her novel into one of those documents that succeed one another for the purpose of transforming the society. Badiou's views on truth also shed light on the incompleteness of Kogawa's political efforts. For Badiou the truth of an event waits for its completion in the future (*Theoretical Writings* 114-19). The ethics of a truth consists in not forcing a name onto the developing truth (*Theoretical Writings* 119). Works resulting from inquiries about the event can follow one another randomly, and each one contributes its share in transforming the world. Very probably that is why *Obasan* is followed by *Itsuka*, another book about the Japanese Canadians' sufferings.

### Works Cited

- Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. New York: Continuum, 2005.
- . *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Trans. Peter Hallward. New York: Verso, 2001.
- . *Infinite Thought*. Ed. & Trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens.

- London: Continuum, 2005.
- . *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Trans. Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.
- . *Theoretical Writings*. Ed. & Trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano. New York: Continuum Press, 2004.
- Breznitz, Shlomo. "The Advantages of Delay: A Psychological Perspective on Memoirs of Trauma." *Obliged by Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics*. Ed. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2006. 43-54.
- Cheung, King-kok. *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*. London: Cornell UP, 1993.
- Chua, Cheng Lok. "Witnessing the Japanese Canadian Experience in World War II: Processual Structure, Symbolism, and Irony in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*." *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992. 97-110.
- Cook, Rufus. "'The Penelope Work of Forgetting': Dreams, Memory, and the Recovery of Wholeness in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*." *College Literature* 34.3 (Summer 2007): 54-69.
- Davidson, Arnold. *Writing Against the Silence: Joy Kogawa's Obasan*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1980.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Grice, Helena. "Reading the Nonverbal: The Indices of Space, Time, Tactility and Taciturnity in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*." *MELUS* 24.4 (Winter 1999): 93-105.
- Harrison, Robert Pogue. *The Dominion of the Dead*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.

- Iwamura, Jane Naomi. "The 'Hidden Manna' That Sustains: Reading Revelation 2:17 in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*." *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 161-79.
- Jones, Manina. "The Avenues of Speech and Silence: Telling Difference in Kogawa's *Obasan*." *Theory between the Disciplines: Authority/Vision/Politics*. Ed. Martin Kreiswirth and Mark Cheetham. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990. 213-29.
- Kella, Elizabeth. *Beloved Communities: Solidarity and Difference in Fiction by Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Joy Kogawa*. Uppsala, Sweden: S. Academiae Ubsaliensis, 2000.
- Kogawa, Joy. *Naomi's Road*. Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005.
- . *Itsuka*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
- . *Obasan*. 1981. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. "Ahimsa: The Path of Harmlessness." *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*. Ed. David W. Chappell. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999. 155-64.
- Potter, Robin. "Moral—in Whose Sense? Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 15.1 (1990): 117-39.
- Shoenut, Meredith L. "'I am Canadian': Truth of Citizenship in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 36.3 (Fall 2006): 478-97.
- Tourino, Christina. "Ethnic Reproduction and the Amniotic Deep: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*." *Frontiers* 24.1 (2003): 134-45.
- Ueki, Teruyo. "*Obasan*: Revelations in a Paradoxical Scheme." *MELUS* 18.4

(Winter 1993): 5-20.

Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

# 帶來希望的 「潛在的嗎哪 (Manna)」： 小川樂《歐巴桑》裏的復活事件

許綬南\*

## 摘 要

本文以巴迪烏 (Alain Badiou) 對事件的陳述為主要理論架構，探索小川樂 (Joy Kogawa)《歐巴桑》(*Obasan*) 書裏中川直美 (Naomi Nakane) 和她母親的夢中相遇及其影響。儘管母親的存活不確定，直美對母親存活的執著與探索，構成使直美從絕望走向希望的事件。從夢中跟母親的遭遇，直美學到再現應該是流變的，要建立在超越各種界限的愛之上，更因而明白行動的重要。小川樂以直美的事件為中心，尋求使更多人能因為忠於此一事件，而構成共同互助的主體，終結種族迫害。

**關鍵詞：**事件、執著、未逝、再現、愛

---

\* 許綬南，國立臺南大學英美語文學系副教授。  
E-mail: shounan@mail.nutn.edu.tw