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**Narrating Silences: Silence, Voice and History in the Prose
of Dionne Brand, M. Nourbese Philip, and Joy Kogawa**

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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ABSTRACT

Narrating Silences: Silence, Voice and History in the Prose
of Dionne Brand, M. Nourbese Philip, and Joy Kogawa

Kara Goodwin

Joy Kogawa's Obasan, M. Nourbese Philip's Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence and Dionne Brand's Sans Souci and Other Stories are compared to examine how these fictions explicate the relationship between silence, voice, and language through their revisions of history. Language is problematic to these writers because it is ideologically charged with their non-belonging on the basis of their race and gender. Contradictions in language divide concepts such as silence/ voice and past/ present and privilege certain ideas over others. The texts studied undertake to resolve their issues with language as part of the process of coming into voice. In various degrees, these texts acknowledge and revalue silence as a defense against a totalizing history and as a means of explicating the condition of language. In addition, the thesis compares how the revisionary projects that these fictions undertake map back to the material reality of the Canadian nation within which they were created.

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Introduction

To read Canadian literature is to read Canada, the nation. Robert Kroetsch hypothesized the relationship between nation and fiction when he wrote, “In a sense, we haven’t got an identity until someone tells our story. The fiction makes us real” (Creation, 63). The fictions created by Joy Kogawa, M. Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand tell the stories of racial minority women in Canada, thereby creating for them an identity that was previously absent from our nation’s literary and cultural landscape. The relationship between text and context is paramount in the writing of these three contemporary Canadian women. As both writers and political activists concerned with questions of race and gender, Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand have insisted that revising, rewriting, and revoicing history is crucial to the amelioration of Canadian society. By forging fictional identities, these women are attempting to create a new Canadian reality.

In the three texts I have chosen to examine, Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, M. Nourbese Philip’s Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence, and Dionne Brand’s collection of short fiction Sans Souci and Other Stories, the project of reconceptualizing Canadian identity takes place through a revision of history. All of these texts link the voicing of marginal history to the problem of voice itself. This dilemma is rooted in language, and ultimately it leads these women to writing about the significant silence from which, and with which, they speak. In exploring the boundaries between silence and voice, Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand probe the systems of language, history and Canadian culture. These writers create fictions which indicate that their silenced histories speak meaningfully about the nation and society within which we live.

The connection between our nation's literature and its identity has fueled the writing of several Canadian literary critics. Robert Lecker argues, in his book Making it Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature, that the Canadian literary canon was developed out of an overly zealous desire to have a literature that reflected what people perceived to be their national identity. He claims that, "The formation of the English-Canadian literary institution was driven by the desire to see literature as a force that verified one's sense of community and place" (4). But whose community and place were portrayed? Lecker identifies representative literature as the valued aesthetic; however, he fails to assess who was represented or why they were valued. Simply put, the Canadian canon did not (and does not) tell stories for all Canadians. Many are disenfranchised from our national literature by virtue of their absence. They are not made real. According to Arun Mukherjee's reading of Making it Real, the Canadian nation Lecker refers to is, without question, homogeneously white and English ("Canadian Nationalism, Canadian Literature and Racial Minority Women", 430). In examining Lecker's text, I found this to be not entirely true. While the writing of racial minority Canadians does not figure highly in Lecker's book, neither does the writing of racial majority (white) Canadians. Canon makers, as opposed to fiction makers, are Lecker's focus. When Lecker turns his attention to the practice of criticism he, in actuality, refers to Canadian writers of various ethnic origins. Lecker's concern, regardless of an author's race, is to ensure that Canadian literary criticism gets performed in a "new" way: a manner that discards the old templates from which Canadian literary criticism was generated and that justifies the criticism's existence.

. . . those involved in the study and teaching of Canadian literature need to reassert the Canadian aspect of what they do. This does not mean returning to the nationalistic cheerleading that blinkered so much early Canadian criticism. It does not mean finding Canadian themes in, say, The English Patient or Such a Long Journey. It does mean that we consider these books different because they are written by Canadians, and that one aspect of studying them involves an investigation of this difference. (237)

Lecker is vague about how Canadian critics can go about “making it real” but, contrary to what Mukherjee says, Lecker sees multi-ethnic writers in Canada as “real” Canadians.

Mukherjee is not alone in perceiving her relationship with the Canadian nation to be one of exclusion: other Canadian racial minority writers share this opinion. “Canadian national identity is predicated on whiteness,” says Dionne Brand (“Who Can Speak for Whom,” 18), summing up her exclusion from the fiction that is Canada. As Arun Mukherjee explains:

. . . the nationalist-universalist tradition ensures that it is white Anglo writing or Anglo-conformist writing that gets the lion’s share of attention. It is they who speak as Canadians. It is their experience, their version of history, their notions of literature, their vision of Canada that dominates. (430)

Of the three writers discussed in this thesis, Dionne Brand has been the most vocal on the issue of nation. Her 1996 video recording for the National Film Board, Listening for something: Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in conversation, addresses the relationship between women and nation in detail. In a letter Brand wrote to Rich in June 1994 while

planning the film, she admits “. . . I write for the people, believing in something other than the nation state in order to be sane . . .” (Listening for Something, 1996). Brand’s rejection of national identity comes in response to her exclusion, as a Black woman, from the national imagination. Brand clearly does not feel part of a Canadian identity. Is it possible then to read her writing as a revision of Canadian national identity based on her writing’s focus on silence, language, and revaluing of history? I would argue yes. Brand’s approach to nation is one that has been voiced by black women before her. As domestic worker Hannah Nelson told anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney in the 1970s: “We are a nation. The best of us have said it and everybody feels it. I know that will probably bother your white readers, but it is nonetheless true that black people think of themselves as an entity” (In “A Nation within a Nation,” in Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America, 2-23, qtd. in “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” 108). Virginia Woolf wrote “. . . as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (Three Guineas, 109). So, too, some blacks feel that the geographical boundaries of nations do not reflect their imagined community. Brand expresses this view when she discusses Woolf’s statement with Adrienne Rich.

I feel that in fact she [Woolf] might be right. The word “nation” is no longer useful. It has been so corrupted by the way which the states we live in are organized that it is no longer possible to use those to mean anything any more. And where I see an overarching kind of definition of nation, that is projected by the state everywhere I look, I see the ways in which those nation states that we live in are constructed by leaving out. So that even as

Black people belong geographically and consciously to, let us say, North America and the Caribbean you can still see a kind of —um—you can still see where that notion doesn't function for us really well. And in the states like in the Caribbean you can see that it doesn't function for women either and it doesn't function for women here either. (Listening for Something, 1996)

If Brand felt included in Canada, perhaps her approach to nation would be different. As it stands, Brand's understanding of Canada as a nation differs little from her understanding of the United States. This sentiment upsets the traditional Canadian fiction: the one that creates itself as a kinder, gentler nation and has even employed the multicultural mosaic as a central representation of itself. For these reasons, looking to Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand's writing offers an alternative perspective on Canadian national identity.

Malcolm Ross, the former editor of the New Canadian Library (NCL), had a clear understanding of our national character and literature, and who we are as Canadians. In his introduction to Our Sense of Identity, Ross credits Canadians with an aptitude for irony that allowed us to transcend the confines of subjectivity and time. Canadians, according to Ross, are ideological athletes capable of “a fence-leaping which is also, and necessarily, a fence-keeping” (x). Because we had to traverse our experience and understand the experiences of others, we have developed an ironic sense of our own identity and place. If the fence can be so readily crossed, why is it that many racial minority women writers in Canada feel that their fictions and realities are not valued—that they are isolated on their side of the fence? When E.D. Blodgett wrote in 1982 that our nation's literature suffers from “a bind of binarism” (25) it seems that he too understood

its exclusionary nature. The malady he describes is symptomatic of a country originally erected on the dualistic structure of two languages and two cultures to the exclusion of all other voices. Where Blodgett and racial minority women writers such as Mukherjee and Brand sense debilitating alienation, Ross sees vitality and opportunity. To Ross, our dual heritage has contributed to our literature and culture in a way that predisposes us to a dynamic appreciation of difference. An understanding and respect for experiences that lie beyond the frontier of bi-culturalism are our inheritance. We are “the people of the second thought” (Ross, ix), a nation constantly aware of our duality and, as a result, inclined to accepting diversity. Canadian literature, according to Ross, is as bifocal as its people, and irony is our natural mode (x). “Irony is the key to our identity” (x) writes Ross, as he describes how Canadians are negotiators between two opposites and how we thrive in the tension that lies between the two. From this dynamic middle-ground, multiple perspectives are readily understood. In Canadian writing Ross reads a “movement from the dual irony to the multiple irony” (xi). The “open irony of the multi-dimensional structure” (xi) that Ross describes is “an openness to the ‘the larger mosaic’” (xi). It was a mosaic that, at the time Ross was writing, included multi-ethnic writers such as A.M. Klein and Frederick Philip Grove.

It is worth noting that the multifocal perspective Ross attributes to Canadian identity encompasses time and distance as well:

The ghosts that walk our Canadian lanes crowd in on us from every nook of place and time. Our sense of time becomes multi-dimensional. Our sense of place, enlarged first by our own largeness, by the endless open horizon of our land, shatters all horizons. (xi)

The multidimensional sense of time and space is evident in much of contemporary English-Canadian literature. Rohinton Mistry's Governor General award-winning novel, Such a Long Journey, is set entirely outside of Canada and is still considered a Canadian novel. The writing of Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand also expands our sense of who we are and where we belong beyond our geographic boundaries. Looking for Livingstone and "At the Lisbon Plate" reach outside of present day Canada to times past and places distant (Africa and the Caribbean). As Ross explained, not only do Canadians comprehend diverse cultures by leaping the fence, they also accept different settings in time and space as within the realm of their own fiction—their sense of themselves.

Canadian writing and criticism that relate fiction to our material reality and national personality are exactly what Lecker is promoting in Making it Real. Lecker calls for criticism that reinserts Canadian identity into discussions of Canadian writing in order to reconcile the sense "that the fictions of Canadian literature and the fictions of Canadian culture have been divorced" (12). Oddly enough, Lecker pins the blame for the disrupted harmony between our literature and our culture on those so-called "canon-makers" who set out to establish a literature that reflected our culture. Malcolm Ross receives cruel treatment in Lecker's chapter on the NCL ("The New Canadian Library: A Classic Deal," 154-172)¹, yet the representational approach favored by Ross—the "assumption that valuable writing underwrites a national-referential aesthetic" (4)—is in line with Lecker's vision. The kind of criticism Ross compiled and contributed to in 1954 has fallen out of fashion in recent years, and a good deal of Canadian literary criticism has shifted away from the issue of Canadian identity. Lecker wants English-Canadian literary criticism to come down from the cloistered world of academia and reach the "real" people who both

constitute and consume Canadian culture. Lecker encourages criticism that makes it (“it” being Canadian literature) real. Lecker urges readers to understand the Canadian canon (and its making) before attempting to subvert it. “It is essential first to recognize and value the national-referential model, in order to devalue it and show that the vision it proposes (one nation: its textual reflection) is fundamentally deceptive” (Lecker, 11). Lecker finds it problematic that “we have not theorized a model that allows the central and the marginal to be seen as mutually dependent and constantly in play” (11). He advocates a kind of criticism that sounds a lot like a postcolonial approach to literature, and, at the same time, it is not unlike the appreciation of Canadian irony—the tension between two opposites—defined by Ross. Lecker retains an interest in nation, while acknowledging the “deceptiveness” of the national model. He fears that dismissing the relationship between text and reality will lead Canadian readers to ignore the real political contexts in which Canadian fiction was created, making them poor citizens and agents for social change. In institutionalizing CanLit, critics have delved too deeply into theory and further away from practice. Issues of nation are ignored because “the mimetic-nationalist values that informed earlier Canadian criticism have been undercut by contemporary theory” (Lecker, 13). Lecker suggests that the nation building project of founding our literature backfired—the institution has become so well established that nation has been forgotten. In response, he advocates a criticism that links nation and fiction and promotes citizenship. Lecker laments the fact that

. . . pedagogy and criticism in recent years have encouraged students to focus on texts at the expense of questions of nation and on theoretical speculation to the exclusion of real political involvement in the events of

national political life (although it is certainly true that some theory—especially feminist theory—does teach students to interrogate cultural norms, even though these may not be specifically Canadian norms). Today we seldom see examples of Canadian literary criticism that actually suggest a relation between the literature and the country. (12)

Although feminist theory is recognized as within the realm of the material, Lecker overlooks the whole realm of writing by and about racial minority Canadians that is very engaged with the Canadian nation. The likes of Rohinton Mistry, Austin Clarke, and Joy Kogawa seem to have slipped past Lecker's gaze. He does not mention them, let alone acknowledge how their writing and the criticism surrounding their writing maps back to Canadian experience and national identity. Multiculturalism is not an obscure part of Canadian national identity—at least not officially. The late eighties saw the Canadian Multiculturalism Act legislated and the concepts of the cultural mosaic and multicultural society paraded as emblems of national pride. Indicative of the engagement between text and context, literary production and social environment, increased critical attention has been devoted to the field of Canadian multicultural literature. Published in 1990, Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond's anthology Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions marks an important step towards recognizing and canonizing Canadian difference. The book voices Canada's multiple identities through a combination of stories and interviews centered on issues of racism, immigration and ethnicity. By highlighting the intersection between fiction and experience, this anthology typifies the contemporary literary approach to multicultural literature. It is an approach based on mapping the relationship between the state of the Canadian nation and the narrating multi-ethnic voice.

For both writers and critics the domain of multicultural literature has been an area of political activism directed towards a reconceptualizing of the Canadian state.

It is to this approach that I am indebted. The relationship between text and context is at the forefront of my reading of Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand. Arun Mukherjee's article, "Canadian Nationalism, Canadian Literature, and Racial Minority Women," exemplifies the approach by bringing together the topics of writing by racial minority women in Canada and nationalism. Like Lecker, Mukherjee chooses not entirely to disavow nationalism in the fashion of Western Marxist and postmodernist critics (Mukherjee, 422). Instead, she considers nationalism's positive aspects and sets out to reinsert an awareness of nation in discussions of Canadian racial minority women's writing. What Mukherjee observes is that ". . . alienation from a national entity called Canada and from 'Canadians' is quite commonplace in the writings of Aboriginal and racial minority Canadian women" (424).

Gender, as well as race, needs to be contemplated when exploring the relationship between racial minority women writers and the nation. According to Mukherjee, allegiances to gender do not supersede those to race. These two identities seem to be inextricably linked. Mohawk writer Patricia A. Monture-OKanee explains her position: "Gender does not transcend race. The voice that I have been given is the voice of a Mohawk woman and if you must talk to me about women, somewhere along the line you must talk about race I cannot and will not separate the two" (Monture-OKanee, 194)². Mukherjee's approach is informed by the belief that race takes primacy over gender when it comes to writing by Canadian racial minority women. Unlike Canadian women with "white privilege," racial minority women have a unique relationship with

Canada. They “cannot be unproblematically Canadian—or ‘just Canadian’—as those with privileged ethnicities claim to be—because their other identities put them at a disadvantage in a racist nation-state” (Mukherjee, 426). Mukherjee calls for “more inclusive theories of Canada and Canadian literature” (428) than those put forth in the dominant Canadian literary discourse on nationalism and identity, that is, the “Canadian literature—created, published, taught and critiqued under the aegis of Canadian nationalism” which “promotes the settler-colonial view of Canada” (Mukherjee, 428). Mukherjee sums up recent approaches to Canadian literature when she writes: “Now we hear talk about postmodernist irony and dominants and marginals, but we do not hear any concerted responses to what Aboriginals and racial minority writers tell us about Canada and Canadian literature” (Mukherjee, 428). Mukherjee’s arguments could be challenged by looking at the recognition racial minority writers have received from the English-Canadian literature establishment. It seems that in recent years, the representation of racial minority writers on prize lists is finally beginning to reflect the multiracial Canadian population³. The national literature is finally beginning to reflect the new wave of ethnically diverse Canadians who have immigrated from other, non-European countries.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen not to focus on the difference between so-called “immigrant” or “ethnic” writing and Canadian writing. This type of distinction re-enacts the very exclusionary tactics Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand are writing against, and these classifications are precarious and misleading. How long does it take for the transitional experience of immigrancy to pass? How long before citizenship sets in? And, are texts written by new Canadians any less representative than those by veteran citizens? Is the so-called “truth” about the country even an important

measurement of good writing? The questions could go on indefinitely. To me, there is strong evidence to support the fact that it is race, not immigrancy, that has contributed to Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand's experiences⁴. As immigrants now turned citizens, Nourbese Philip and Brand's attention to silence and history appears to be consistent with Canadian-born Kogawa's. Certainly, the texts they write are different in terms of the history they write back to in order to influence contemporary Canadian society. Obasan is rooted in Canadian history, and Kogawa constantly reminds readers that the racist internment policy was implemented by Canadians and caused the suffering of other Canadians. Kogawa makes it clear that the Japanese Canadians considered themselves Canadians, not ethnics, not immigrants. Nourbese Philip and Brand's writing differs in its approach to the Canadian nation. The history they focus on is Black history (not exclusive of black Canadian history), and their texts do not mimic reality in the manner of Obasan, but their writing is all about changing the exclusionary, racist practices they see as inherent to contemporary Canadian society. Implied in Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand's exploration of silence and use of history are a similar attention to challenging the way Canadians view their history and themselves as a nation. This approach that looks to the similarities between Canadian writers of different generations and birth places as opposed to their differences as "immigrants" or "ethnics" is one that was recently adopted by the editors of the Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature. An editorial in Canadian Literature observes that books by Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry, and M.G. Vassanji are in the "Novels in English, 1983-1996" category of the Companion in the 1997 edition (Kroller, 9). In the words of the Companion's editors, "the tendency for novelists born outside of Canada . . . to write Canadian novels (which win Canadian prizes) but yet not

write about Canada, has encouraged us to rethink our understanding of what it means to call something a Canadian text, to interrogate our assumptions about Canadian national identity and its relation to Canadian culture” (qtd. in Kroller, 9).

The focus on silence and history found in Obasan, Looking for Livingstone, and Sans Souci and Other Stories reflects a concern for language and the contradictions between silence/ voice and past/ present that it encompasses. Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand all present a reevaluation of silence as a defense against a totalizing history. In so doing, these three writers offer an awareness of the social and political context of the nation in which they are writing. The fact that Joy Kogawa is a native-born Canadian and M. Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand were immigrants to Canada does not change the reality that is their fiction. It is their position in terms of race and gender that has alerted them to the problem of deploying an ideologically charged language to come into voice. In response, Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand have chosen to recognize silence and its relationship to voice within the system of language as a means of countering language and the history/ reality it has inscribed for them.

Building on the early poststructuralist enterprise of problematizing the stability of language as a system, postcolonial and feminist theorists have taught us that language is not a politically neutral means of communication. It is the product and property of a dominant culture and is steeped in that culture’s ideologies. The belief that language is a politically charged obstacle is not new to Canadian writers. Some twenty years ago, in his essay “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space,” Dennis Lee was trying to come to terms with why language was betraying him. For Lee, writing in English in Canada was a problem because the language he had to use did not articulate his

experience and location as a Canadian working in a colonial domain. His challenge became to find a way to communicate his experience of silence in language. He writes:

Writing had become a full-fledged problem to itself; it had grown into a search for authenticity, but all it could manage to be was a symptom of inauthenticity. . . . And I only wanted to write, I said, if I could also convey the muteness that established—like a key in music—the particular inauthenticity of this word, and of that word. (158)

This desire to convey the silence in language is also evident in the fiction of Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand. Just like Lee, these women are writing in the colonial space of Canada. However, as women and ethnic minorities, they occupy a doubly colonized position in Canadian society. Whereas Lee had only to complain of Canada's history of British imperialism and the neo-colonizing cultural imperialism of the United States, Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand are writing against a language and a history that have oppressed them in terms of their race and gender as well. In his acknowledgment that a colonial writer is silenced not only by the overwhelming voice of the dominant culture but also by language itself, Lee is one of the first Canadians to theorize the complexity of silence for Canadian writers. His essay explains how coming into voice and challenging the overwhelming voice of the dominant culture can become a problem in itself. He argues that political oppression has infiltrated our culture so thoroughly that it has been internalized by the smallest unit of communication: words. The paradox of language, which makes it such a double-edged sword, is that the very words which our culture has invested with meaning also carry the negative value of the colonial's non-belonging and meaninglessness in society. Furthermore, Lee draws on the ideas of Canadian philosopher

George Grant who claims that to challenge the dominant discourse is to confront silence “for we now have no terms in which to speak that do not issue from the space we are trying to speak against” (Lee, 161). These conflicts with language, which Lee has so meaningfully described, are the source of the significant silence which figures as the subject matter of Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand’s fiction. Each of these women has paired her revision of history with an explicit awareness of the problematic relationship between silence and voice and the history of oppression carried by the language with which she speaks. In Obasan, the main character, Naomi, tries to come to terms with the silent/ silenced history of the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. In the process, she is caught between the silence of her Aunt Obasan and the radical voice of her Aunt Emily. In Looking for Livingstone, M. Nourbese Philip’s Traveller is undertaking a journey to discover and articulate her silence. Her “odyssey of silence” is inextricably linked to the history of slavery and colonial oppression that she challenges by discovering the discoverer “Dr. Livingstone-I-presume.” Lastly, Dionne Brand’s short stories “No rinsed blue sky, no red flower fences,” “Train to Montreal,” “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls,” and “At the Lisbon Plate” all feature female protagonists encountering a contemporary Canadian society secure in its historically based exclusionary attitudes. The consequent racialism is aligned with the negative concept of a forced silence. In order to overcome this, Brand’s characters reclaim a “forgotten” black history and culture, thus bringing themselves into an empowering sense of voice.

The recovering of histories and the voicing of silences that are taken up by Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand are always gender specific. All three of these writers

invoke a feminine history (often matrilineal) to bolster their present tense, female protagonists. The dedication to M. Nourbese Philip's book of poetry She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, the book from which Livingstone is an outcropping, is "For all the Mothers." More specifically, the wise old woman is a recurrent character in all of these texts. In Obasan, Naomi's mother, Obasan, and Aunt Emily are important figures in her flashbacks of the past. In Looking for Livingstone, the Traveller is assisted on her journey by the women of the many native communities she visits throughout Africa, and in Brand's stories memories of powerful ancient women encourage and mystically empower young Black women. In an interview with Beverly Daurio, Dionne Brand discusses her respect for old women, saying,

I've always liked old ladies, because they have endured. It must take a hell of a lot for a woman to grow old in this society, with all the discrimination against women, all the taking care of the world that you do. Part of my culture, too, is that when you grow old you gain respect. ("The Language of Resistance," 16)

For Brand, the importance of the elderly woman as a guide for young Black culture exists not only in the realm of fiction. In 1991 Brand edited a collection of oral narratives of black working women entitled No Burden to Carry. In her introduction she explains her revaluing of black feminist history:

I take the position that Black history has tended to excise the place of Black women in it and that to recover Black women as historical actors is not only to clarify the historical record but ultimately to recover a revolutionary method for feminist struggle and Black struggle. (13)

In the process of articulating silence and history, Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand call into question the stability and signification of language. Within the system of language established by the dominant culture, certain words and ideas have historically been privileged in relation to others. The words “female,” “silence,” and “minority history” have always been known in terms of their negative relationship to the weighty words “male,” “voice,” and “history,” which carry more presence and positive meaning. At various times in the past, to be female has been defined as not being male, lacking male physical superiority. Equally, silence has been known as an absence of voice, and the idea of alternative marginal histories exists only in relation to the authoritative singular concept of established history. In Obasan, Looking for Livingstone, and Sans Souci and Other Stories a number of these hierarchical relationships in language are neutralized and inverted. Or, as Malcolm Ross would argue, these writers revel in the ironic tension that lies between the two opposite meanings.

On the most general level, all these texts locate meaning in the perspective of ethnic women, their perceptions of history, and their silences. Yet, these texts do more than counter the privileged white male perspective with that of women of colour. They also demonstrate how meanings exist in a dependent relationship to one another. This is another example of the “fence-leaping” that is also a “fence-keeping” (Ross, x). In Obasan, Naomi’s understanding of silence is contingent upon her knowledge of voice. The novel’s title means “aunt” in Japanese, and Naomi has two aunts, even though only one (the silent one) is called Obasan. Naomi acknowledges their polarity when she says, “How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan’s language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior” (32).

These polar opposites strike a balance in Naomi who is influenced by both in her comprehension of the past. The novel's title, Obasan, is appropriate because it signifies both the silence and voice of both aunts at once. In Looking for Livingstone M. Nourbese Philip undermines the supremacy of the word by focusing the Traveller's recoveries/ discoveries in the realm of silence. However, no matter how much this novel questions the power of the word by communicating the richness of silence, the Traveller still only understands silence when she weaves it together with language. When Arwhal challenges the Traveller to weave something for the NEECLIS she advises her to use "word and silence—neither word alone, nor silence alone . . . to use your silence you have to use the word" (52). Lastly, in Brand's story "Train to Montreal" the silence of the black woman traveller is only comprehensible within the context of the white man's use of voice. When the white man insults the woman with words that refer to her race and gender she is stunned into silence: "She had let herself be humiliated without saying a word. She had been astonished, not known what to say. Astonishment. The moment on the escalator. The silence of the others. The voice spitting up" (28). In this instance the stinging insult of the man's voice is compounded by the silence and complacency of the other white people on the escalator. The black woman chastises herself for not speaking out. She says, "I should have yelled and screamed. I should have answered, cursed, smashed his mouth" (28). As readers, our understanding of her silence and desire to speak are premised on our knowledge of the white man's voice. The whole incident demonstrates the closely linked dependence of silence on voice and vice-versa.

Just as Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand expose the dependent relationship between the apparently opposite concepts of voice and silence, so too they demonstrate

the intimate connection between the past and the present. In all these women's texts knowledge of the past is crucial to effecting change in the present. In addition, these writers reveal how our perception of the past is determined by our current situation and the dominant politics and language that shape our understanding. In Obasan, it is sometimes difficult to tell the past from the present as Naomi intersperses flashbacks of the past with her present time narrative. Kogawa also reveals the constructed nature of history. By contrasting Naomi's experience of internment with the historical recording of internment in government letters and newspaper articles, Kogawa shows that the "facts" presented are not (in fact) objective. In writing Looking for Livingstone, a novel which looks back to re-assess Livingstone's accomplishments and reveal a history of colonial oppression, M. Nourbese Philip demonstrates that for her rectifying "history" is an important first step in effecting contemporary change. So, too, Dionne Brand's stories stress the importance of the past for present day characters. In her story "At the Lisbon Plate," the colonial exploits of Christopher Columbus are blended into the contemporary setting of the Kensington Market in Toronto by way of magic realism. The multidimensional sense of place and time that Ross described as characteristically Canadian is at work in these instances.

As these examples indicate, the destabilization of language is a basic element of Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand's fictions. By creating texts in which the opposite concepts of silence/ voice, past/ present and marginal history/ history are shown to be dependent on one another, these authors have revealed, and thereby neutralized, some of the ideological weight of language. This approach, focused in language, prepares the reader for an understanding of the ultimate paradox found in each of these texts: the

powerful, articulate voice of silence. In Looking for Livingstone and Obasan the concept of silence is shown to be not just an absence of voice (just as female is more than not male) but a complex entity all of its own. For Naomi, silence is encountered everywhere in many different forms, and for Obasan, silence is mysteriously powerful. In an interview with Janice Williamson, Kogawa values silence, saying, “Obasan’s voice goes beyond from yesterday and tomorrow and from the stone: she is the stone, and the stone can speak if you listen to it hard enough. You listen by watching. Her hands make enormous speech if you have the capacity to hear” (Williamson, 155). In Looking for Livingstone, the Traveller not only encounters many facets of her own silence through various rites of passage but she lives among indigenous peoples who have their own forms of silence and are named in anagrams of silence. In Brand’s stories, the silences of women and black culture are articulated by celebrating ancestry and turning silence into voice. Each of these texts offers a rich recognition of the devalued concepts of feminine minority histories and silences. As readers, our understanding of these ideas is premised on acknowledging that language is politically determined and has historically loaded certain ideas with absence and negativity. With this comprehension of language in mind, we can go on to explore other possible meanings located at these sites of former meaninglessness.

The practice of investing the negative concept of silence with meaning and of using it as a way of countering the dominant system of power is not new. It is a method of resistance that has readily been employed by postcolonial and feminist approaches to literature. Canadians such as Dennis Lee have made this evident. Both feminist and postcolonial critics have revalued the negative or blank space—the silent space—in direct response to the negative meaning and absence being imposed on their marginal position

outside of the center of power. By attributing absence and meaninglessness to their Other, colonizers and patriarchs operate in a system where their dominance and centrality are ensured. David Spurr identifies this tactic in the The Rhetoric of Empire. “The naming of an absence ultimately reveals itself as the presence of an ideological imperative” (92). Language enforces and reenacts these power structures.

. . . negation serves to reject the ambiguous object for which language and experience provide no adequate framework of interpretation; second, . . . negation acts as a kind of provisional erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire. In this way, the structures of discourse, in which language is divided, subordinated, and made into a working system, recapitulate the historical process of establishing and maintaining colonial rule. (92-93)

The role language has played in reinforcing colonial and patriarchal power structures can be understood in parallel. For both women and colonized people, the duality of meaning that exists in our language has facilitated their silencing. Located beyond the central dominant discourse—the site of meaning—they are silenced by being the opposite to what is meaningful and powerful. In addition, these people have quite literally been silenced by being denied access to the means of communication. “[T]he word leads to knowledge, which provokes questioning, which generates change” (Empire, 85). Since challenges to the system of power are not welcome, access to the word is denied.

When access to language and writing do become available, language itself may become suspect. In the same year Dennis Lee wrote “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing

in Colonial Space,” Robert Kroetsch also addressed the topic of being a Canadian writing in English:

At one time I considered it to be the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experience, to be the namer. I now suspect that, on the contrary, it is his task to un-name . . . the Canadian writer’s particular predicament is that he works with a language within a literature, that appears to be his own. . . . But . . . there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American. (“Unhiding the hidden: recent Canadian fiction”, 43)

After reading Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand, I would argue that the discomfort they express about language indicates that the “concealed other experience” in our language and literature can be that of white Canadians.

Feminist theory has also privileged the project of unnamings and recognizing silence as a means of resistance. In her analysis of Isak Dinesen’s story “The Blank Page,” Susan Gubar outlines the association between female creativity and images of absence. Gubar describes how women’s creativity has been circumscribed by a patriarchy which has viewed women as passive and pure. “Endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality” (Gubar, 247), women have historically been the blank page on which the creativity of men was inscribed. As Gubar writes: “woman has been defined symbolically in the patriarchy as a tabula rasa, a lack, a negation, an absence” (259). In defiance, images of absence and silence have been exploited by women writers to reveal and create possible meanings where previously meaning was denied. For Gubar, the blank sheet is “not a sign of innocence or purity or passivity, this blank page is a mysterious but

potent act of resistance” (259). Like Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand’s fictions, Dinesen’s story features a storyteller who is preserving a matrilineal heritage in her account of the blank page. “Look at this page, and recognize the wisdom of my grandmother and of all storytelling women!” (Dinesen, 104). By directing readers to apparent nothingness, Gubar argues the storyteller is telling readers that “the blank page contains all stories in no story, just as silence contains all potential sound and white contains all color” (259). The storyteller has recognized wisdom “in the place where the uninitiated see nothing” (259) by shifting her attention from the “traditional foreground to what is usually relegated to background” (259). This is a tactic feminist theory has encouraged. In 1971, Adrienne Rich guided feminist approaches to literature in her article “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.”

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh. (35)

The methods described by Rich can be employed as a means of revising the way our language and culture have alienated people on the basis of race too. Ultimately, the language that “has trapped as well as liberated” can be used to challenge negative representations of racial minorities. Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand’s writing is as much rooted in issues of race as it is in postcolonial and feminist approaches to language and silence. Part of the struggle is just getting heard. “[R]ace, per se, is not everything for African

Canadians” explains George Elliott Clarke, “No, it is the struggle against erasure that is everything” (Eyeing the North Star, xviii). The subtitle of a review of Clarke’s anthology Eyeing the North Star reads “Anthology’s contributors would like to have their writing considered for inclusion in the national canon” (Globe and Mail, March 15, 1997). With their inclusion on national prize lists, there is evidence that racial minority writers in Canada are being acknowledged as part of Canadian experience.

Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, published in 1981, marks a real shift. Before then, writers may well have been tempted to obscure their difference to reach a wider audience Kogawa’s work insisted that Canadianness extends to every citizen, not just those of British or European descent. (Fee, 1997)

In this thesis, I will explore how Nourbese Philip and Brand have positioned themselves with regard to inclusion in the fabric of Canadian society. I will also study how silence and history figure highly in the efforts of all three writers. Carol Morrell, editor of The Grammar of Dissent, says that Brand and Nourbese Philip “take up the black, feminist, signifying subject-position” and “become teachers of the white Canadian literary and political communities” (12). “They have proven that oppositional literature, literature that is formed from a context, that speaks directly and passionately about the contradictions in our society and its oppression of certain groups, can also be excellent, stunning not only thematically but technically” (Morrell, 23). The next few chapters take a narrower focus by looking closely at how silence, history, and a concern for language are focal (thematically and technically) in their writing. In addition, the scope will be broadened, to take a more panoramic view of how Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand, writers of different generations and racial origins, have taken up the same writing of resistance within

Canada. In the background of all of this is a strong awareness of the Canadian nation and the material reality within which these fictions were created.

The critical reception of Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand's prose fiction shows various levels of interest in their treatments of silence and history. Obasan has elicited a great deal of critical activity partly due to Kogawa's reputation as an older writer with a larger body of work than either Nourbese Philip or Brand. Two articles, written outside of Canada, have seized upon silence as a narrative strategy. King-Kok Cheung, in Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa, interprets Obasan from the context of Asian American and feminist approaches to literature. She builds on this scholarship by looking at the cultural significance of silence within Asian American communities and how Asian American women have employed silence as meaningful signifier in their fiction. "Since minority experiences have so often been distorted or altogether undocumented in mainstream 'history,' these writers have even greater reason than most women authors and poststructuralists to be leery of language as the purveyor of objective knowledge" (Cheung, 11). I take a stance very similar to Cheung's in reading Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand in that I look to language and history to understand the importance of silence in these authors' fictions. Cheung says that "In weaving historical and cultural background into my textual analysis, I try to show that these conventional categories are themselves unstable, and that the texts analyzed deliberately blur the distinction" (14). I agree; however, the cultural and historical background Cheung explores is largely American-centric and positioned within the genre of Asian literature. I depart from this in my examination of silence within a Canadian context—one that crosses ethnic categories to see how African Canadian writers such as

Nourbese Philip and Brand have employed silence and what this has to say about their shared perspectives as racial minority writers in Canada.

The second critic who has examined the writing of Joy Kogawa in terms of silence—this time in comparison with M. Nourbese Philip—is Kirstie McAlpine. As part of an anthology compiled outside of Canada, The Guises of Canadian Diversity: New European Perspectives, McAlpine's "Narratives of Silence: Marlene Nourbese Philip and Joy Kogawa" looks at silence in these women's texts through the lens of postcolonial criticism. "It is as negotiators between the polarities of word and silence" (133) that McAlpine examines Obasan and Looking for Livingstone.

Word as an encoding of the colonizer's world view subsumes the silence of the colonized into its hierarchy. Transgressions against that which the word does not represent are therefore made invisible. Writing those transgressions back into the symbolic order becomes more than a question of how to articulate what is presently beyond the word. It is necessary to move beyond the primacy of writing to challenge the ideologies inherent in attempting such articulation. (133)

By "actively questioning the notion of history" McAlpine sees Kogawa and Nourbese Philip as "reinstat[ing] the silences that these [historical] texts make invisible" (133). I concur that silence gains a new prominence in these texts: however, not by "questioning the notion of history" but by endorsing it. My reading of Obasan and Looking for Livingstone also brings Brand's writing into the comparison and draws on the Canadian context in which these texts were created.

While Cheung and McAlpine's criticism is the most pertinent to this thesis, a number of other critics have made notable contributions to the reading of Obasan. Arnold Davidson's Writing Against the Silence: Joy Kogawa's Obasan is an entire volume dedicated to summarizing the critical material on the novel and includes Davidson's reading of the text, which, as the title implies, reads Naomi's story as a discovery of voice. Most critics have been eager to praise Obasan as a revision of history, and several have discussed Kogawa's poetic prose. Few critics have examined the politics and poetics of Kogawa's fiction together. Donald C. Goellnicht's article "Minority History as Metafiction: Joy Kogawa's Obasan" is unique in its discussion of history in the text, in that it rigorously examines Kogawa's approach to history in light of the tenuous relationship between facts and fiction.

The critical material on Nourbese Philip and Brand's prose fictions is relatively small. Nourbese Philip herself remains the largest authority on her work. In her poetry, essays, and numerous interviews Nourbese Philip has explicated her unease with language and history. She is probably best known for writing the lines, "language/ /anguish / anguish/ english/ is a foreign anguish" ("Discourse on the Logic of Language," 58) from her book of poetry She Tries her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks. Doris Wolf and Wayne Defehr have each written articles on Looking for Livingstone and have seized on the colonial history in Nourbese Philip's work and its relationship to language. Finally, the scarce critical response that Dionne Brand's fiction has received has largely focused on her political activism in the area of racism. The few articles centered on Sans Souci and Other Stories are mainly concerned with what Brand has to say about Canada's treatment of ethnic minorities. More critics have written about the story "Blossom, Priestess of Oya"

than any other story in the volume. The story revolves around how the main character, Blossom, finds success and personal peace when she radically rejects her work for white Canadians, drives out her husband, and reconnects herself to the spiritual side of her Black history.

In the next three chapters, I examine and compare how Kogawa, Nourbese Philip, and Brand explicate the relationship between silence, voice, and language through their revisions of history. Specifically, I am interested in resolving the contradictions within language between silence/ voice and past/ present by studying how the revaluing of silence as a defense against a totalizing history informs these writers' approaches to literature. Throughout, I explore the challenge of using an ideologically charged language to come into voice and how, if at all, acknowledging silence counters this dilemma. In the background/ foreground of this study is a strong desire to see if and how Kogawa, Nourbese Philip and Brand's endeavors map back to their location as racial minority women writing in Canada and their part in writing or revising the fiction that is Canada.

Chapter I: Part I

Learning to Listen to Silence: Obasan's Critical Legacy

Obasan provides Canadians with a chapter of our nation's history that in 1981 had long been silenced and ignored. The internment and ultimate dispersal or deportation of thousands of Japanese Canadians during and after World War II was an act that stripped Canadian citizens of their rights and property based on their racial heritage. When Obasan was published in 1981, it was the first fictionalized account of the Japanese-Canadian experience (Rose, 218). Around the time Obasan was published, the National Association of Japanese Canadians was still lobbying the government for an official apology and compensation. When an agreement was reached in 1988, Joy Kogawa's fiction became part of the reality, as portions of the novel were read in the House of Commons on the day the settlement was announced. Kogawa's activism was registered throughout the country when she appeared on national television to praise the compensation deal (Goellnicht, 306).

Obasan's political effectiveness has not escaped the attention of critics. Despite the fact that Obasan treats language itself with suspicion and questions language's ability to tell one's story, critics unanimously agree that the novel communicates its political message with great skill. "Joy Kogawa's Obasan has rightly been celebrated for its power as a political speech act," wrote A. Lynne Magnusson. She goes on to add that "What has received less attention is Kogawa's pervasive concern with the act of speech itself" (Magnusson, 58). As I examine the body of criticism on Obasan, some 10 years after Magnusson's article, I see that the regard the novel shows for language and communication has, in fact, informed much of the critical work around the novel. This has

manifested itself in readings devoted to how speech, narrative, language, and telling relate to Obasan's "actual" story—Naomi's articulation of her past and her self-discovery via her renewed connection to her mother. Interestingly, the mother's absence coincides with the family's internment. As Naomi unearths the public history of Japanese Canadians, she also digs into her memory to find the mother of her childhood, a mother who by the end of the novel Naomi knows was a victim of the bombing at Nagasaki. In excavating this personal history, Naomi struggles with absence and the unknown, equipped only with memory and faith. Naomi is eventually successful in navigating the elusive past in order to find presence and resolution. The critical trend has been to link the dilemma Naomi has with language and history to an interpretation of the novel's outcome. Throughout the next few pages I will review how several critics have made this connection and I will analyze the conclusions that they draw about the role of language in the novel.

In Obasan, the retelling of history becomes a tale of telling itself. The revision of history and the revision of language are inseparable in this text. Poststructuralist thought has contributed to the widely held view that language is not a politically neutral means of communication. It is capable of carrying with it, either surreptitiously or overtly, the political, cultural, and social cargo of those who hold power over a society's official vehicles of communication. When language conveys history, it bears twice the political burden. History can be a selective telling, and the language with which it is told can be an accomplice in presenting "facts" with an authoritative voice that poses as objective. With this in mind, Donald C. Goellnicht reads Obasan as historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon explains that historiographic metafiction is "in some dominant and constitutive way, self-referring or autorepresentational: it provides, within itself, a commentary on its

own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own process of production and reception” (Hutcheon, qtd. in Goellnicht, 289). Goellnicht posits that Obasan compares the reconstruction of history with the writing of fiction. Language is integral to both.

Goellnicht is critical of the humanist or mimetic approach he has seen other critics bring to Obasan because it “accepts language as transparently referential and treats as unproblematic the notion that language can reconstruct past events, thus providing us with history” (287). This approach is applied to writing by racial minorities too often, according to Goellnicht. Humanist readings of the novel “. . .thank Kogawa for correcting history, for revealing what ‘really’ happened, for resurrecting a piece of Canada’s heritage, for setting the record straight” (Goellnicht, 287). However, as Goellnicht implies, these studies do not register the blatant questioning of history and language that takes place in Obasan. Naomi vacillates between endorsing and interrogating the facts as presented by historical sources and by her Aunt Emily, political activist extraordinaire. Contrary to Emily’s certitude about what happened, Naomi declares, “The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey” (193). Goellnicht’s interpretation acknowledges this questioning and embraces the promise it holds as an empowering means through which minority writers can attain voice⁵.

The fiction is didactic not in the traditional way of teaching a product, but in teaching an epistemological process, a way of knowing through telling and reading, and an existential process, a way of forming identity through discourse. (Goellnicht, 302)

Rachelle Kanefsky, on the other hand, reads Obasan with humanist values in mind and argues in favor of the ability of language to reflect an empirical reality. In fact,

Kanefsky sees Goellnicht's approach to the novel as "uncompromisingly postmodern" (14). Her somewhat weak argument against his approach is that his ". . . is not the prevalent understanding of the text" (14). In addition, she draws attention to Goellnicht's reliance on a set of historical data—some real facts about the internment—in an effort to prove that he too must rely on absolute referentiality at some point. Indeed, both Goellnicht's and Kanefsky's readings are uncompromisingly one-sided. It is with interest, however, that I examine how these critics have dealt with the issue of language and how they have explained Naomi's quandary with it and the importance of the past. Where Goellnicht reads historiographic metafiction, Kanefsky sees plain old relativism and sets out to prove that Kogawa shows that Naomi must overcome her uncertainty for the good of her self and her community. ". . . Naomi's initial distrust of historical truth and her suspicion of language result in a retreat into silence, an uneasiness with community, and a loss of faith in, and indifference to, social change" (Kanefsky, 15). Citing heavily from Linda Hutcheon's The Canadian Postmodern, Kanefsky explains what historiographic metafiction is, and why it threatens the truth expressed in Kogawa's novel. As Hutcheon says, "language . . . constitutes reality rather than merely reflecting it" (Canadian Postmodern, 65). By questioning the ability of language to represent history, historiographic metafiction opens a space for marginalized voices to present their alternate histories and contest master narratives put forth by those who hold power (Kanefsky, 17). While this would seem to reflect Obasan's position quite well, Kanefsky believes that Kogawa only brings Naomi's indeterminacy into the text in order to caution against it.

. . . Naomi's narrative reflects the exaggerated emphasis on subjectivity and the heightened sense of separateness articulated in postmodern conceptions

of history. However, while Kogawa explores historical perspectivism through Naomi's sense of indeterminacy, she also exposes the implications that underlie this outlook. Naomi's conception of history as unknowable in any accurate or verifiable way results in a radical individualism that serves to alienate her further from her community. (Kanefsky, 20)

Kanefsky concludes that both "textual evidence and critical commentary contradict Goellnicht's conviction that Naomi completely dismisses Aunt Emily's position as naive, ineffective, and thus futile" (Kanefsky, 23). She argues that Naomi, in the end, endorses voice and history in the manner of Aunt Emily, though she is also indebted to Aya Obasan. ". . . [W]hile it is from Aunt Emily's unrelenting activity that Naomi is encouraged to break the silence, it is from Obasan's utter humanity that she secures the strength to do so" (Kanefsky, 24). Goellnicht, in fact, comes to a very similar resolution. He too believes that Naomi must cast off silence in order to become vocal like Aunt Emily, and he believes that interrogation of language is part of the process. With "the words of Aunt Emily and the silence of Obasan" Naomi comes to realize "that to remain silent means the loss of any opportunity to shape personal and public history, . . . also that in shaping history through discourse or narrative one must be self-conscious, aware of the manipulative power of the word" (Goellnicht, 299). The essential difference between Kanefsky and Goellnicht's readings is their interpretation of language. Kanefsky argues that, for the sake of humanity, we must be able to trust language to convey truth. Goellnicht believes we must be critical of language's ability to convey a singular "truth" or fact because the nature of representation leaves so much unheard and unrepresented that some "truths" are obscured.

Historiographic metafiction aside, language has also played an important role in how many other critics have interpreted Obasan. According to A. Lynne Magnusson, “Naomi’s individual drama is closely caught up in her linguistic anxiety, which comes to serve as a synecdoche for her estrangement—from others, from her cultural origins, from the absent mother who preoccupies her thoughts, from her past” (Magnusson, 58). By closely reading Naomi’s encounters with language in relation to the novel’s action, Magnusson considers language’s inability to yield meaning and considers silence and absence to be potential sites of signification. “For the most part, Naomi feels Obasan’s silence and demeanour as lack or absence Yet this strict opposition is not consistently operative within the novel, for Naomi seems to honor Obasan’s silences above Emily’s words” (63). Magnusson develops her study of language only as it relates to Naomi’s relationship with her past and her absent mother. In the end, Magnusson concludes that the communicative powers of language prevail and offer redemption: “This revision of the past privileges speech over silence, language—with all its inadequacy—over a delusory wordless security” (66). When Naomi puts on Emily’s coat in the end of the novel, Magnusson sees the act as an indication that Naomi takes on Emily’s “wordy world” (Magnusson, 66).

Marilyn Russell Rose reads Obasan as a rhetorical work effective in bringing the past to bear on the present. Through fiction, the Japanese Canadian experience was made real: real in the sense that it appealed to people in a way that the several histories on the subject had not⁶. According to Rose, language is at the crux of the persuasion:

It [Obasan] assumes that ultimately language *can* convey actual human experience, whatever the complexity of the relationship between language

and social context. Moreover, it is overtly rhetorical in its assumptions that experiencing “real” human suffering, even indirectly, as when human experience is enacted in language, will radicalize the person who comes to know it, the reader. (215-216)

History is communicated through language, and from Rose’s humanist stance this language is capable of telling the truth—plain and simple. This does not keep Rose from tackling the obvious indecision about language and meaning that takes place in Obasan. The novel’s cryptic epigram alludes, in obscure terms, to ineffectual communication with stanzas such as “There is a silence that cannot speak./ There is a silence that will not speak” and “. . . The speech that frees/ comes forth, from that amniotic deep. To attend its/ voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence.” Rose does not read these lines as a problem with language but, rather, sees them as evidence of repression within Naomi. “Her problem is not with words per se, then, but with experience that is so frozen within her as the novel begins that it cannot be released into ‘freeing’ language—spoken language, *recorded words*, public speech” (Rose, 219).

According to Rose, language holds the power to heal. She contends that telling or retelling history is a cathartic process, a cure for the affliction which runs throughout the novel: rape. Rape, says Rose is “Kogawa’s most powerful rhetorical tool (because it most powerfully shapes our response to her discourse)” (Rose, 222). Publicly, Japanese Canadians were violated by the internment, and privately the young Naomi was sexually abused by Old Man Gower and suffered other unsolicited sexual advances (Rose, 222). “The abuse of Japanese-Canadians by white Canada is a kind of sociopathic rape in response to which victims can only reel in silent shame” (Rose, 222). By accepting the

“truth” as communicated through historical documentation (especially via Aunt Emily’s resources), Rose believes that Naomi overcomes her guilt-ridden silencing. In response to textual evidence that indicates that history, like language, is interrogated by Naomi and Kogawa, Rose insists that this questioning contributes to Naomi and Kogawa’s validity as “‘good’ and convincing historians” (224). Strong humanist values leave Rose with no choice but to take an approach similar to Kanefsky’s and argue that questions about language and history’s ability to convey meaning are only included in the text as temptations that Naomi must overcome. With almost religious fervor, Rose explains that Naomi and Kogawa resist temptation to perform the divine work of telling the truth.

. . . given her reservations about the objectivity of historical revision, she [Naomi] is thrown back upon the notion of responsible subjectivity: to speak of human experience, however fallibly, is our duty; we must be willing to be called, like Habakkuk (sic), to the stand to bear witness as best we can, despite the limitations of language . . . (Rose, 224)

Rose’s desire to see the power of the word upheld informs her study above all else. She sees Emily’s documents and hard facts as unquestionably redemptive even when the text indicates otherwise. Naomi complains, “We were the unwilling communicants receiving a less than holy nourishment, our eyes, cups filling with the bitter wine of a loveless communion” (182). Rose interprets Naomi’s response as “unfortunate” but “Naomi’s own salvation . . . comes through experiencing a document” (Rose, 224). Interrogation of language and meaning are, for Rose, rhetorical devices alone that allow readers to receive the ultimate truth of history.

Manina Jones employs poststructuralist theories of narratology to address Obasan's use of silence and the novel's struggle to define the essence of language. Jones sees language as a communicative continuum that includes silence and reception as complementary aspects to the act of speech. In so doing, Jones recognizes how the story is disassociated from its telling and concludes that Kogawa's process makes absence part of the novel's presence.

The novel thematizes and puts into play the narrative impulse both to search for a particular story and to search for an alternate, potentially redemptive form of telling that resists narrative closure, that both speaks out of historical silences and literally takes into account its own status as telling . . . (Jones, 223)

Silence and absence in Obasan are not empowered or intentionally meaningful, according to Jones. Instead, absence is a by-product of the problem of representation—that gap that can potentially dissociate the object from linguistic signifier and/ or offer up a propitious site for the proliferation of meaning between signified and signifier. Jones insists that the former is at work in Obasan. For her, the space between Emily's words and Naomi's lack of connection to them is a consequence of Naomi's "unwilling[ness] to make the leap of faith necessary to make the story Emily constructs fully meaningful" (226). This leaves Naomi "arrested at the level of signifier" (226). Underneath Jones' post-structuralist vocabulary is a reading that basically echoes humanist critics who also argue that Naomi's suspicion of language is an insecurity that must be overcome. Jones adds to the humanist position the belief that Kogawa's novel itself is a more effective narrative because silence is acknowledged as part of telling and part of language. By praising Kogawa for her

effective use of narrative gaps as a means of telling, Jones credits the rhetorical power of the text. "Obasan demonstrates the centrality of such absences, not simply to our fictional reconstruction of the world, but to its historical *construction*" (Jones, 227). Jones directs her readers to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's analogy of the relationship between language and the representation of reality through narrative. "How to make a bagel? . . . First you take a hole . . . And how to make a narrative text? In exactly the same way" (Rimmon-Kenan, 127 qtd. in Jones). Gaps are integral to narrative "because the materials the text provides for the reconstruction of a world (or a story) are insufficient for saturation" (Rimmon-Kenan, 127 qtd. in Jones). Contrary to humanist assumptions about narrative, the poststructuralist mindset that Jones adheres to is self-reflexively aware of narrative's condition. The gaps in narrative do not undermine the ability of the text to bear meaning. In fact, narrative's role in representing our world and our stories meditates and influences our reality. "We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling" (226), writes Kogawa. For Jones this means, "Narrative . . . is where we come from" (213) or, as Robert Kroetsch says, "The fiction makes us real" (Creation, 63). Representation becomes creation as Kogawa makes history real again in order to initiate hope for a nation that has wounded itself by dispossessing its own citizens. Kogawa manages this through a narrative that recognizes the gaps and absences inherent in language, and thus inherent in the ability of language to reconstruct the past.

In a sense, Obasan, "tells on" official history by revealing its guilty suppression of events in Canada (and similar events in the United States) during World War II, and by giving a version of history alternate in both

form and content that draws attention to the inscription and/ or suppression of difference. (Jones, 215)

Language is implicated in the narration of history to the extent that critics tie the success with which history is made real to language's ability to represent truth. Understanding how "facts" are conveyed by language is not a strictly academic pursuit. It is driven by a desire to bring about change through an activism targeted at real, present-day lives. For the most part, critics read the activism and initiation for change that Obasan incites, both in the text and in Kogawa's national context, solely as a product of the telling—the fact that history is told, articulated, spoken, communicated, and, finally, understood through words. Voice makes things happen. With critics such as Kanefsky, Rose, and Goellnicht, however, silence is considered a component of language which can augment the power of the word. Marilyn Russell Rose and Manina Jones, for example, consider silence in the novel to be a rhetorical device that ultimately aided the ability of Kogawa's words to convey their historical message. The power of the word is advocated, and the role of silence is at best acknowledged. In conjunction, the majority of critics link Kogawa's attention to language to her revision of history and conclude that vocality is at the heart of change. These changes are specific to the nation: Kogawa's historical message is an attempt to reconceptualize Canadian identity and Canadian history.

The past injustices revived by Kogawa (and Naomi) in Obasan trace their roots back to the Canadian nation. This is not to say that the internment of people of Japanese heritage did not also occur in the United States, or that there are not certain commonalities between the kind of racial oppression exercised against Japanese Canadians and those exercised against other racial minorities around the world. Obasan repeatedly

informs its readers that its characters are Canadian citizens, and the novel's resolution—Naomi's rediscovery of her past, her negotiation of silence and voice, and her reconciliation with her mother—is linked to images of Canada and metaphors that allude to the healing of a nation. (My reading of the text, as follows shortly, further expands on the connection between Kogawa's narration and her references to nation.) Unlike the other two writers studied in this thesis, Kogawa was born and raised a Canadian. This eliminates the possibility that her perspective on the nation may be influenced by the act of migration or the renegotiation of identity that is typical in immigrant writing. Entrenched in this perspective, Kogawa and her fiction speak with authority about the country. Through the voice of activist Aunt Emily, a nation of readers is told directly: "What this country did to us, it did to itself" (33). The novel is replete with references to the nation and citizenship, indicating that this text is all about context—Canadian context. Naomi, the novel's narrator, is the chief negotiator between the extremes of silence and voice presented by the novel's two Aunts, Aya-Obasan and Emily. Naomi presents the importance of history from the perspective of her two aunts. Aunt Emily's model of activism leaves Naomi with the impression that "For her, the injustice done to us in the past was still a live issue" (34). Emily advises that "The past is the future" (42). In contrast, Aunt Obasan tells Naomi that "It is better to forget" (45). Initially, Naomi subscribes to Aunt Obasan's rationalization that "What is past recall is past pain" (45). However, as the novel charts the territory between two extremes, Obasan shows that what Naomi does recall, though painful, leads her to a peaceful resolution with the past and gives her hope for the future.

Negotiating the significance of the past extends beyond the text in national proportions as Naomi's experience is a model for the nation to follow. Naomi's historical and present-day contexts are clearly Canadian, and the novel's revision of history is also a revision of Canadian national identity. Arnold Davidson's Writing Against the Silence: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* summarizes the predominant critical approach as one that links the text to the nation. "For Canadian critics, the novel is, not surprisingly, mostly about Canada" (20). Davidson takes this tack himself as he explains Obasan's importance:

The novel is socially significant because it tells us something about ourselves as a society that we long preferred not to hear. The novel is artistically significant because it tells us unpalatable truths with consummate art. The novel is culturally significant because, thanks to the very art with which it addresses large social questions, it claims a special place for the ethnic writer in the ostensibly bicultural context of Canada and thereby encourages us to rethink our paradigms for Canadian culture and literature. (Davidson, 13)

Davidson's observations are indeed born out in the criticism that I have read. Rachelle Kanefsky applies what she reads in Obasan to her experience as a Jewish woman living in Canada. She values Obasan and its sequel Itsuka not only because "they are the sole fictive narrativizations of important events in Canadian history, but also because they explore the process and reception of history writing" (11). Kanefsky admits that ultimately these are material to what she sees around her in Canada. History offers hope: ". . . in a world in which Nazism is resurfacing as surely as its victims, and their stories, are dying, it is our responsibility to reembrace an epistemological model that embraces belief

and meaning” (Kanefsky, 31). This fear is tied to Kanefsky’s sense of place. “Over the last decade, two of the most tireless and influential Holocaust deniers have been Canadian,” (12) she writes, indicating that her motivation in revaluing history is informed by threats she sees in her own country.

Donald C. Goellnicht also sees Obasan as national revisionism: “Kogawa’s historiographic metafiction enkindles our thought and action and helps us as a nation to come to terms with our identity” (Goellnicht, 302). Upholding the supremacy of voice, Goellnicht observes that Obasan “. . . enters the dialogical fray surrounding the ‘silenced’ subject of racism in Canada as a powerful, but self-conscious, ‘word warrior’” (Goellnicht, 302). Marilyn Russell Rose takes up Kogawa’s words as a mandate: “You have to remember. You are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene” (Obasan, 49-50). By speaking out, Rose believes we as a nation will counter negative, contemporary ideologies that perpetuate racism in Canada and threaten to allow national policies, like those implemented during World War II, to repeat themselves. Rose points an accusatory finger at Canadian historian J.L. Granatstein for his participation in scholarship “oblivious to human suffering” (Rose, 225). Granatstein argues that the treatment Japanese Canadians received was justifiable, given the political and military situation. He maintains: “In retrospect, thanks to the evidence that is now available, it even appears that the arguments in favor of evacuation were stronger than they seemed in early 1942” (qtd. in Rose, 225)⁷. In Obasan’s fiction Rose finds a voice truer than that of the institutional history she is used to encountering and more apt to effect change in Canada.

Canadian criticism of Obasan has praised how the novel promotes a nationally relevant revision of history by telling minority history and giving it voice. As we have seen, the role that silence plays in the novel is read as a rhetorical foil to the strength of voice and as an example of the type of communicative response to suffering that must be overcome in order to be effective. The predominance of silence in the novel has inspired several other critics, who are notably from outside of Canada, to consider silence's complexity in Obasan. Kirstie McAlpine is a European critic who compares Obasan to Looking for Livingstone on the basis that both "are writing against a polarized view of silence" (McAlpine, 139). McAlpine's study, in an anthology of "New European Perspectives" on Canadian literature, focuses on the relationship between silence and word as a model of colonialism. She implies that Kogawa and Nourbese Philip are writing from the marginalized position of the Other and through their focus on silence are trying to shift the balance of power to allow marginal voices a means with which to speak.

Word as an encoding of the colonizer's world view subsumes the silence of the colonized into its hierarchy. Transgressions against that which the word does not represent are therefore made invisible. Writing those transgressions back into the symbolic order becomes more than a question of how to articulate what is presently beyond the word. It is necessary to move beyond the primacy of writing to challenge the ideologies inherent in attempting such articulation. (McAlpine, 133)

McAlpine argues that Obasan negotiates between silence and language. Silence is represented in Obasan and Looking for Livingstone as a reconceptualization of language.

No longer do words stand on their own, but are understood as interdependent with silence.

Neither writer is working towards a remapping of absences into the dominant discourse. Instead, both texts attempt to inscribe their silences with a new textual framework. . . . It is not a question of transcending but of acknowledging the silence. . . (McAlpine, 134)

McAlpine also observes that there is a tendency by critics to focus on “the transcendent power of voice in Obasan” (134). She describes her own stance as one that “mitigates against this notion of transcendent voice” (134).

Among the five articles on Obasan that McAlpine cites is Gayle Fujita’s “‘To Attend the Sound of Stone’: The Sensibility of Silence in Obasan.” Fujita is a Japanese-American critic. Rightly, McAlpine understands her article as pro-voice⁸, but Fujita’s reading bears further discussion for the insight it offers on the importance of silence from a Japanese cultural perspective. It is from Fujita that we learn that Obasan means either “aunt” or “woman” in Japanese (33). Fujita’s mandate is to support Obasan’s presentation of “the rituals and sensibility of one’s ethnic heritage as a source of self-realization” (Fujita, 34). She argues that part of this heritage, and a contributing factor to the success of the novel, is “Naomi’s nonverbal mode of apprehension summarized by the term ‘attendance’” (34). This characteristic is traced back to Naomi’s *nikkei* culture⁹, an inheritance from what Fujita defines as an Asian Pacific Northwest community that spans the United States and Canada (Fujita, 42). By mining the personal details of her family’s pre-internment life, Naomi finds the key to her present and future happiness. Fujita reads Naomi’s trip into her past as a voyage that is informed by the importance and strength of

nonverbal modes of communication. Naomi rediscovers the cultural importance of “attendance,” the selfless, silent attention to the needs of others that was so valued by her culture. In the end, by attending her Mother silently and patiently, rather than acting as the Grand Inquisitor and demanding answers, Naomi attains comfort: “Attendance, the *nikkei* legacy, supports Naomi in her moment of greatest need” (Fujita, 39). Both of Naomi’s aunts play a role in returning her to this heritage. From Aya-Obasan, Naomi learns to respect that which often remains hidden and the minutiae of life’s personal details. Fujita argues that from this sensitivity Naomi was able to reconstruct history from a vast storehouse of personal memory. From Aunt Emily, Naomi receives the motivation to consider the implications of her personal history and to value the importance her personal history brings to bear on public history and the future. Fujita compellingly brings these two perspectives together through the story of Momotaro. Though it is Aunt Emily who says “Momotaro is a Canadian story” (Obasan, 57), Naomi makes it so by emulating the virtues of attendance and respect presented by Momotaro. Her capacity to do this was informed by Aya-Obasan’s influence (Fujita, 40-41).

King-Kok Cheung provides the most extensive study of silence in Obasan. Self-identified as an Asian American (22), Cheung’s comparative analysis of the writing of Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogawa addresses the logocentrism of North American culture and articulates the significance of reticence in Asian and Asian-American cultures. Silence has held negative connotations for both Asian minorities and women. Reticent Asians are perceived as “devious, timid, shrewd, and above all—‘inscrutable’—in much the same way that women are thought to be mysterious and unknowable” (Cheung, 2). As a result, the predominant means of speaking out against

these stereotypes has been to adopt a strong, vocal presence. Cheung delineates this trend within the realm of Asian-American culture and observes that Kogawa “challenge[s] blanket endorsements of speech and reductive perspectives on silence” (3). Silence, as employed in Obasan, is thus prone to misinterpretation because of the politics that privilege speech.

Monocultural criteria of competence and even feminist antipathy toward silence may run roughshod over the sensibilities of some ethnic groups.

While the importance of voice is indisputable, pronouncing silence as the converse of speech or as its subordinate can also be oppressively univocal.

(Cheung, 6)

Cheung acknowledges that an aversion to recognizing the importance of silence in Obasan has led to “tendentious readings” (8). She explains that “many revisionist critics have unwittingly accepted the vocal mandate in America, an acceptance that blinds them to the positive cultural and aesthetic manifestations of reticence” (8). Humanist approaches to ethnic fiction contribute to the reluctance to read silence as a valid part of Asian-American fiction. Silence is denied significance in the realm of communication because it complicates the belief in the straightforward transparency of language. “The subject of minority literature is social history” (qtd. in Cheung, 14), say the editors of Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers. This reiterates what Goellnicht identified as the humanist urge to examine minority texts only in relation to their real context. Cheung cautions against this practice as well. She strives for an approach that expands upon the formal aspects of ethnic literature but also considers the social contexts within which the

writing was created. “Crucial as the writers’ background is to our understanding, it is equally important not to drown Asian American texts in contexts . . .” (Cheung, 14).

Cheung’s focus on narrative strategies in Obasan identifies the full spectrum of meaning that silence can convey:

Like language, silence has many ugly faces. But even what I construe to be undesirable silences—the speechlessness induced by shame and guilt, the oppressive or protective withholding of words in the family, or the glaring oversight in official history—have all too scrutable motivations. . . . Then there are the enabling silences, . . . above all, the breathtaking rendition of soundless but ‘accurate and alert knowing’ in Kogawa. These silences, demanding the utmost vigilance from writers and readers alike, are the very antitheses of passivity. (Cheung, 20)

Cheung recognizes that, paradoxically, silence takes on the active voice. “Non-Asian readers,” writes Cheung “may learn from their [Yamamoto, Kingston and Kogawa’s] writing that silence can also be articulation” (Cheung, 21). Kogawa’s use of silence in Obasan demands attention in its own right. “To disregard the many gradations of silence in the novel would ‘colonize’ those very differences Kogawa meticulously depicts and perpetuate the kind of cultural and linguistic imperialism she deplors” (Cheung, 25). Like McAlpine, Cheung concludes that silence and the word operate together. She notices that by the end of the novel “silence and speech are increasingly imaged as complementary, as in Naomi’s inspections of the “two ideographs for the word, ‘love’. . . .” (Cheung, 165). With metaphors similar to those deployed in Looking for Livingstone, Cheung describes word and silence as two threads woven together to create an end product. The web

images that spin throughout the novel by the end “gather the seemingly disparate narrative threads into a web of verbal echoes and silences” (Cheung, 165). “By untangling her past, the narrator is able symbolically to reweave a family unraveled by the war and by extension, to restitch the scattered nikkei community into the tapestry of Canadian history” (166). Cheung recognizes the relationship Obasan has with its context, but her primary goal is to reveal how silence enables telling and works as part of language to make a more effective story. Using a carpentry analogy for Kogawa’s process, Cheung relates Obasan’s narrative strategy to that essential difference between Japanese building and Canadian building as defined by Naomi: the Japanese “pull with control rather than push with force” (24). “This observation implicitly contrasts nikkei and dominant Canadian modes of operation. Out of her own two-toned heritage Kogawa has carved a style that controls its force through the pull of silences” (Cheung, 167).

Cheung, Fujita, and McAlpine identify the importance of silence as a subversive, active component of Kogawa’s narrative. By recognizing the privileging of non-verbal modes of communication in Obasan, they have shown that silence is more than a rhetorical device. It, in fact, “speaks” volumes about the predicament of minority writers and minority history. And the attention Kogawa devotes to silence indicates that new ways of telling must be adopted if change is to be achieved. Although Canadian critics were also concerned with the way Kogawa explored language in her reconstruction of history, they did not concern themselves with how absence itself becomes a way of telling in Obasan. My own reading of Obasan strives to bring these two approaches together. How does Kogawa employ silence and absence as a narrative strategy that articulates a nation’s betrayal of its own citizens? I believe the answers come by considering how Kogawa

thematically and symbolically enforces the strength of absence as opposed to presence, female as opposed to male, past as opposed to present, minority history as opposed to history, and so on throughout her text. The whole novel, in effect, turns what is traditionally privileged in our society upside down and challenges the binary opposition of what is valued against that which is devalued. As Cheung and McAlpine argue, Kogawa shifts the balance of power and enables us to appreciate the significance of those entities whose presence was previously known to us predominantly through an opposition to a more privileged and powerful concept. In this way, silence takes on a meaning of its own—it is not just the lack of words. As I explicate this argument in the pages that follow, I expand on McAlpine, Fujita, and Cheung's assertions regarding Kogawa's articulate voice of silence. Repetitiously, Kogawa develops a pattern of inverting and playing on power structures in order to enable that which has been silenced to bear importance. I will link Kogawa's narrative strategies to an understanding of how her narration of history applies to the nation and activism. Although McAlpine, Fujita, and Cheung mention Obasan's relationship to the larger Canadian reality, neither they nor the Canadian critics I have read, discuss in detail how images of Canada and references to a renewal of the nation are embedded in the text and linked closely to the powerful voice that silence carries.

Chapter I: Part II

Silence Speaks to the Nation

In writing about the internment of Japanese Canadians, Kogawa gives voice to a story that could not be heard over the din of anti-Oriental propaganda that flooded Canadian media before and during World War II. “A vote for the Liberal candidate in your riding is a vote against Oriental enfranchisement. The Liberal party is opposed to giving the Orientals the vote” (qtd. in Adachi, 179), stated a campaign ad from 1935. In the same vein, a 1937 article against Oriental enfranchisement ran in Macleans with an image intended to strike fear in Canadians: “More than six hundred brown-skinned babies are opening their little black eyes for the first time in British Columbia every year” (Shaw, C. L., “The Oriental Wants to Vote”, Macleans April 1, 1937)¹⁰. The anti-Oriental feeling in BC became more defined as anti-Japanese sentiment as Japanese Canadians became stereotyped as an “aggressive” population (Adachi, 66) who were growing in numbers faster than other “Orientals” in the province (Chinese and Hindus) (Adachi, 154). The anti-Japanese rhetoric became more strident with the beginning of the war. The Japanese Canadians were referred to as “an insult and a stench in our nostrils” (Kelowna Courier, February 3, 1944)¹¹. It was difficult for Japanese Canadians to counter the racist ideology of the day from their position as a relatively powerless minority. The New Canadian was one of the few vehicles Japanese Canadians had to represent themselves. It was the only Japanese-Canadian newspaper written in English and, although censored, it was allowed to remain in print during the internment¹². However, the views of The New Canadian and other Japanese-Canadian supporters were barely audible while politicians were espousing such racist opinions as those articulated by BC Liberal A.W. Neill in the

House of Commons: “. . . we in British Columbia are firmly convinced that once a Jap always a Jap” (Canada, House of Commons Debates, 1941, p.1019)¹³. The subject of the expulsion and dispersal of Japanese Canadians also went unheard for many years after the war. Notably absent from Canadian publications—fiction and non-fiction—for decades after the internment, the Japanese Canadian story was, in effect, silent¹⁴. Kogawa creates an acclaimed novel by representing that which could not be heard and that which was not spoken. The version of history that Kogawa presents in fiction sharply counters the story that was heard—the historical “facts” about the internment. With a great deal of self-reflexivity, Kogawa chronicles her challenge to history in Obasan. Contrary to the official historical “facts about evacuees in Alberta” (193), Obasan shows that the interned Japanese Canadians were not “Grinning and Happy” (193). Naomi provides her own account of life in Alberta: “The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory. . . . There is a word for it, Hardship” (194).

As a supplement to Canadian history, Obasan refutes a central tenet of the nation’s justification for internment. The novel exposes a national identity crisis in the public hysteria and ensuing government policy aimed at protecting the nation against its Japanese-Canadian citizens. As Aunt Emily observes in the letters to the editor in the Vancouver Province:

Strange how these protesters are so much more vehement about Canadian-born Japanese than they are about German-born Germans. I guess it’s because we look different. What it boils down to is an undemocratic racial antagonism . . . (82)

Ken Adachi's non-fiction history, The Enemy That Never Was, also compares the status of Japanese Canadians with that of European Canadians, descended from countries that were also at war with Canada. Again, racism, as opposed to justifiable strategy, is blamed for determining government policy. Discrimination against Japanese Canadians for holding dual citizenship was not on par with the treatment doled out to other second-generation Canadians of European descent, says Adachi. "The imputation of disloyalty on the basis of dual citizenship made no sense, logically or morally, when it was applied only to Nisei and not to those of German or Italian descent in Canada" (Adachi, 176)¹⁵.

In Obasan, Canada is depicted as a predominantly white nation steeped in British heritage. The nation asserts that there is an irreconcilable difference between Japanese Canadians and white Canadians because, as Kogawa puts it (echoing the actual words of A. W. Neill), "Once a Jap, always a Jap" (Obasan, 83). Emily documents this phenomenon in her diary: "One letter in the papers says that in order to preserve the 'British way of life', they should send us all away. We're a 'lower order of people'. In one breath we are damned for being 'inassimiliable' and the next there's fear we will assimilate" (87). Even children's games are vehicles for communicating the nationalist agenda of Canada's British colonial hegemony: "The Yellow Peril is a Somerville Game, Made in Canada" (152). In it, the Japanese are depicted as small, yellow pawns. Made in Canada, the game is a metaphor for what really happened in Canada—the Japanese are treated as insignificant pawns characterized exclusively by racial difference. The representation of Japanese Canadians as small and yellow is echoed in the symbolic scene in which the large, white hen brutalizes her baby chicks. The hen's treatment of her young is like the relationship between the dominant white Canadian nation and its Japanese-

Canadian citizens. Although they share a common identity, chicken or Canadian, the hen and the nation commit a sort of infanticide that destroys those who are like themselves. Kogawa aligns the two images to deliver a strong message: Canada's attempt to eliminate generations of its own citizens through policies of internment and dispersal is as unthinkably evil as a mother killing her own children. The bizarre, ill-conceived crime is founded on mistaking natural dependents as threatening aliens. The ability to perceive the Japanese Canadians as different from their fellow Canadian citizens justified the government's internment policy. It is a cruel logic that Kogawa presents as unfounded. "It was hard to think of Uncle as anyone's enemy. One Sunday when Uncle went to church, the clergyman turned him away from the communion rail. But there was no enemy there" (38).

Through Naomi's childhood perspective, Kogawa provides an alternative look at the nation, one that sees but cannot comprehend her exclusion. Naomi inherits the legacy in her adult life. Kogawa exposes an attitude of difference in the way that mainstream Canadian society approaches visible minorities, even Canadian citizens like Naomi. Naomi is aware that ". . . there were such surprised looks when parents came to the classroom door. Was it my youthfulness or my oriental face?" (6). Naomi is constantly forced to defend interrogations of her identity, even though she was born and raised in Canada. "Where do you come from?" she recalls a man asking. She is accustomed to the exclusion, "That's the one sure-fire question I always get from strangers. People assume when they meet me that I'm a foreigner" (7).

The Canadian nation that Kogawa presents in Obasan denies Canadian identity to those racial minority citizens who do not adhere to its construct as a homogeneously white

and Anglo nation. That which is different from the nation is not represented by the nation and is made absent from the Canadian landscape. Aunt Emily summarizes how effective the internment policy was at eradicating the Japanese-Canadian culture: “We’ve never recovered from the dispersal policy. But of course that was the government’s whole idea—to make sure we’d never be visible again. Official racism was blatant in Canada” (34). Images of the Canadian landscape represent the cultural erasure. Twenty years after the internment, Naomi and her family visit the interior of British Columbia, near Slocan. The land betrays the time they, and thousands of other Japanese Canadians, spent there. The only signs of civilization that remain document the lives of the white men who inhabited the area.

The first ghosts were still there, the miners, people of the woods, their white bones deep beneath the pine-needle floor, their flesh turned to earth, turned to air. Their buildings—hotels, abandoned mines, log cabins—still stood marking their stay. But what of the second wave? What remains of our time there? (117)

The Japanese Canadians are not acknowledged as part of the Canadian past. Naomi asks, “Where on the map or on the road was there any sign? Not a mark was left” (117).

Indeed, Obasan presents Canada as a vacuum for racial minorities. It is a place where their lives, their history, and their identity are rendered as a gapping absence. When Naomi thinks of where they spent their time interned, she says, “What a hole!” (118). With the conventional definition of silence, Kogawa depicts the Japanese Canadian as silenced. The war imposes a negative absence on them. Naomi recognizes the holes in the lives of her people: “If we were knit into a blanket once, it’s become badly moth-eaten

with time. We are now no more than a few tangled skeins—the remains of what might once have been a fisherman’s net” (21). Instead of catching the fish, the net that remains lets Naomi’s stories float in and out. Her memories are “grey shapes in the water. Fish swimming through the gaps in the net” (21). Rather than inheriting a substantial narrative of her past and of herself, Naomi is left with holes and absences that reflect the negated identity the nation has provided for its racial minority citizens. Their inheritance is absence from the nation and exclusion from its stories of itself. The absences are akin to silences.

Kogawa uses the allegorical King bird to communicate the image of silencing. Like the Canadian nation, with its monarchical figurehead the King, the King bird silences the other birds as punishment: “If you tell lies . . . the King bird cuts your tongue in half and you can’t talk. That’s what it did to the birds. All they can say now is ‘twit twit’” (142). Naomi associates pre-internment life and internment with the silencing that occurs when an interrupted bird song is, in her imagination, cut-off by the King bird.

The small chirp is like part of a trill that was cut off too soon. Somehow it reminds me of musicians tuning up at the outdoor theatre in the dusk at Stanley Park. Perhaps, I am thinking, the King bird was a conductor that called all the birds together to some auditorium in the woods where people couldn’t go. Perhaps they sang together, a great bird choir, each bird adding its part to the melody, till some catastrophe happened and the songs disappeared into chirps and tweets. (142)

Stanley Park meets the suddenly interrupted song of the bird choir. The silencing that takes place is analogous to Naomi’s family’s experience during the internment. Once they

enjoyed civic life in Vancouver, represented by Stanley Park. The “catastrophe” of war cuts them off from the communal voice and their songs “disappear into chirps and tweets”.

Kogawa challenges the nation’s exclusion and silencing of its citizens of Japanese descent by revealing the role that language plays in representing reality and history. Aunt Emily heads up the efforts to take charge of language. “We’re gluing our tongues back on” (36), she affirms. Aunt Emily is the opposite of Obasan. She is an advocate of the power of the word. “How different my two aunts are” says Naomi, “One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan’s language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior” (32). Language, according to Emily, is the purveyor of the nation’s ideologies and a stronghold of power. Her activism exposes how language has been deployed to undermine the Canadian identity of Japanese Canadians and to represent the truth as white Canada wants to tell it. While attempting to infuse Naomi with her passion for correcting the injustices of the past, she explains, “You know those prisons they sent us to? The government called them ‘Interior Housing Projects!’ With language like that you can disguise any crime” (34). Articulation determines reality: those who have the power to control representation also have the power to recreate reality. Language is power, Emily tells Naomi: “The power of print. . . . The power of government, Nomi. Power. See how palpable it is?” (36). To reverse the hold language has had in facilitating racist policies and the narrative of national identity, Emily redeploys the master’s tools and starts renaming. She combs through official government documents to replace the term “Japanese race” with “Canadian citizen” (33).

Kogawa describes the ideological weight that language carries through Emily’s activism but she does not whole-heartedly endorse Emily’s approach. Instead, she

questions language's ability to represent truth. Naomi is skeptical of Emily's words. Emily's vocal approach does not register the truth about the hardship Naomi and her family endured while beet farming in Alberta. For all of Emily's faith in language, Naomi's plight is not improved by acts of speech.

All of Aunt Emily's words, all her papers, the telegrams and petitions, are like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity, scaly claws hard at work. But what good they do, I do not know—those little black typewritten words — rain-words, cloud droppings. They do not touch us where we are planted here in Alberta, our roots clawing the sudden prairie air. The words are not made flesh. Trains do not carry us home. Ships do not return again. All my prayers disappear into space. (189)

Naomi associates Emily's efforts with those of chickens, like the weak and yellow chicks that Naomi is so loath to resemble. The connection indicates how futile Naomi perceives Emily's work to be. It is a state of Godlessness. If the "words are not made flesh" then there is no saviour. In Christianity, Jesus Christ is called the Word made flesh (Book of John). Kogawa also uses images of the Canadian landscape to explain how insufficient language is to remedy the suffering of the Japanese Canadians. As in the previous reference where Naomi refers to the Japanese Canadians as "the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting" (226), her people are again presented as a prairie plant or weed that struggles for life in the inclement Canadian terrain. Their roots receive no nourishment from Emily's words; her "rain-words" can't penetrate the dusty prairie. Kogawa's cryptic epigram provides a complementary image of the inability of words and voice to quench the thirst for change. "The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall,

are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream” (epigram). Outside of the text, Kogawa affirms her position on the limitations of language. In an interview with Magdalene Redekop, Joy Kogawa says, “Documents and facts are intended to direct our prejudiced heart but rarely provide direction themselves. . . . Facts bereft of love direct us nowhere” (“The Literary Politics of the Victim,” 15).

In Obasan, Kogawa chooses to supplement the facts with love through an approach that embraces silence, forgives its negativity, and redeploys it as a means of revising what has happened in the past. The novel reconceptualizes the relationship between voice and silence in order to metaphorically represent the relationship between the Canadian nation and the Japanese Canadians who were made absent from the national identity. Silence, the uncharted territory that is not represented by language, symbolizes the domain the Japanese Canadians have come to inhabit after internment. As Naomi says, “We are the silences that speak from stone. We are the despised rendered voiceless. . . .” (111). To reinforce the concept that power relationships are interdependent relationships, Kogawa’s narrative strategy continually plays on hierarchies that rely on suppressing the significance of one element to support another. In particular, Kogawa inverts traditional gender privilege and blurs distinctions in time. These defamiliarized perspectives reinforce Kogawa’s paradigm: insignificance can be richly significant.

Kogawa revalues women in Obasan to present a new power dynamic between the genders. Naomi’s quest for self-discovery is guided by matrilineal voices. The female members of Naomi’s family narrate history and provide her connection to the past. Their powerful and articulate role belies the position women have traditionally held in patriarchal societies as the silent opposition to men’s more powerful presence and voice. Aunt Emily

documents the past through her journal which was written in epistolary style for her sister, Naomi's mother, Nesan. Emily's narrative and the documents she has collected become the vehicle through which Naomi, Emily's second generation audience, and—with Naomi's additions—Kogawa's readers receive history. A generic female audience is suggested, as the entries read "Dearest Nesan" (46). Nesan means sister, and the title of the novel itself Obasan not only means aunt but also woman (Fujita, 41). Emily's narrative establishes Naomi's connection to the past. The public history she reads about is integrated with her personal history, a genealogy that connects her to the lives of her Mother, Grandmother and Aunts: "The book [Emily's diary] feels heavy with voices from the past—a connection to Mother and Grandmother Kato I did not know existed" (46). When Naomi finally finds out the fate of her mother, it is Grandma Kato's letter that provides the words. In *Aya Obasan*, Kogawa presents a woman who has earned respect. Yet as a racial minority and elderly woman, her power in society is limited. Kogawa reassigns power in her portrayal and unveils enduring strength as the universal privilege of older women:

. . . she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world. You see her on a street corner in a village in southern France, in a black dress and black stockings. Or bent over stone steps in a Mexican mountain village. Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite personal details.

(16)

Paradoxically, Kogawa depicts the power of the powerless. As insignificant as this elderly woman may seem, she is revealed as “the true and rightful owner of the earth” (16).

Consistent with her challenge to the distinctions that determine privilege, Kogawa depicts the past’s influence on the present in Obasan. There is interdependence in Kogawa’s conceptualization of the past and present, and boundaries are erased. It is a tack that supports Kogawa’s revision of history, because the importance of the past is imposed on present-day readers. “The past is the future” (42). Naomi describes Emily’s understanding of time: “For her, the injustice done to us in the past was still a live issue” (34). Naomi negotiates between her two aunts; Obasan’s approach to time is contrary to Emily’s. According to Obasan’s philosophy, “What is past recall is past pain” (45). The two extremes find a meeting ground in Naomi, whose narrative destabilizes chronology and co-opts linearity. Naomi’s story alternates flashbacks of the past with episodes of her present-day life in Granton. When Naomi relays events within a given time period, the sequence of events is often presented nonsequentially, such as when she says “the path is well worn like Rough Lock Bill’s porch floor where the rocking chair has worn a smooth grove. . .” (143), prior to disclosing any knowledge of her presence at Rough Lock’s cabin. Obasan’s narratives are similar: “Her answers are always oblique and the full story never emerges in a direct line” (18). The play between past and present, old and young is established in the first chapter of the novel when Kogawa introduces Uncle. Uncle, the very old man, makes “small smacking sounds as he sucks air” and “walks jerkily like a baby” (1). Old age and youth are juxtaposed when Uncle declares in his truncated, child-like speech that he is “too much old man” (1). Time’s boundaries are easily crossed in Obasan, as Naomi explains,

All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery. Our attics and living-rooms encroach on each other, deep into their invisible places. (25)

The past infiltrates the present and the truth about the past changes with the present. The past, present and future are like a finely balanced ecosystem. Emily's over-concentration on the past, as represented by her huge collection of documentation, ruins the harmony. Naomi says, "Questions from all these papers, questions referring to turbulence in the past, are an unnecessary upheaval in the delicate ecology of this numb day" (45).

Kogawa's narrative emphasizes the "delicate ecology": there can be no present or future without the past, as there can be no past without our present and future creations of it.

Ultimately, the process of blurring distinctions in hierarchical power relationships and revealing the presence that exists in the entity that is devalued, allows Kogawa to revise the wounded relationship between the Canadian nation and its Japanese-Canadian citizens. With its control of language and representation, the nation attributed absence, lack of Canadian identity and silence to the Japanese Canadians through the racist policy of internment. Taking language and representation into her own hands, Kogawa provides a rendition of history that undermines the Japanese Canadian's exclusion from national identity by questioning the alterity between Canada's white, Anglo majority and Japanese Canadians. The Japanese Canadians that Kogawa depicts are Canadian. As Emily says, "What this country did to us, it did to itself" (33). Kogawa's narrative shifts the power dynamic that designates racial minorities as Other and reveals the Japanese Canadians as

culturally akin to white, Anglo Canadians. Japanese Canadians, as portrayed in *Obasan*, straddle two cultures: they are part of the nation and they are not. Their identity is like one of Stephen's riddles that the young Naomi must try to decipher. According to Stephen, she is a "Jap" but her father tells her, "We're Canadian" (70). She concludes, "We are both the enemy and not the enemy" (70). She is right: Kogawa describes Japanese-Canadian lives as assimilated into the fabric of white Canadian identity and simultaneously denied Canadian identity by the nation's dominant power structures. Naomi's family conforms to the image of Canadians as loyal, British subjects. In their pre-internment family portrait "They all look straight ahead, carved and rigid, with their expressionless Japanese faces and their bodies pasted over with *Rule Britannia*" (18). Obasan serves miso soup alongside "the King George/ Queen Elizabeth mugs Mother bought to commemorate the royal visit" (133). Naomi herself is a child raised in two cultures, "fed on milk and Momotaro" (57). Quite literally her pre-internment life in Vancouver affirms a peaches and cream childhood that happily balances bi-culturalism. The equilibrium of the Japanese-Canadian hybrid identity is disrupted by the internment. In her diary, Emily reports on the kind of nationalism that results: "One letter in the papers says that in order to preserve the 'British way of life', they should send us all away. We're a 'lower order of people'" (87). Naomi's family affirm their "Canadianness" in the face of the nation's denial of their citizenship. While interned at Slocan, Naomi remembers that "Obasan keeps me busy making a scrapbook of the Royal Family" (138). The Canadian government's policy of internment also makes Obasan and Uncle mindful that preservation of their Japanese culture may be deemed proof that they really are enemies rather than Canadians. For this reason they do not allow Naomi and Stephen to attend the Japanese

language classes offered in Slocan: “The RCMP, they are saying, are always looking for signs of disloyalty to Canada” (138).

When Kogawa is not declaring the Canadian identity of her Japanese-Canadian characters overtly and vocally, she employs subtle strategies, such as symbolism, to allow silence to speak. Symbolically, the Japanese Canadians in Obasan are strategically aligned with Canada’s First Nation people to reinforce the very “nativeness” of the Japanese Canadians. Early on in the novel, Naomi observes that the two cultures are almost indistinguishable, physically and in their aversion to verbal modes of communication.

Some of the Native children I’ve had in my classes over the years could almost pass for Japanese, and vice-versa. There’s something in the animal-like shyness I recognize in the dark eyes. A quickness to look away. I remember, when I was a child in Slocan, seeing the same swift flick-of-a-cat’s-tail look in the eyes of my friends. (2)

Kogawa suggests that the two cultures are similar based on their experiences of victimization, as their silence would seem to indicate. “From my years of teaching I know it’s the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain” (34). Kogawa indicates that the Native Canadians, like the Japanese Canadians, were silenced. Only through Rough Lock Bill’s stories do we hear of the Native people who once inhabited Slocan. When Naomi compares Uncle to Chief Sitting Bull, the image suggests more than just physical similarities. “Uncle could be Chief Sitting Bull squatting here. . . . All he needs is a feather headdress, and he would be perfect for a picture postcard— ‘Indian Chief from Canadian Prairie’ —souvenir of Alberta, made in Japan” (2). The image evokes a history of exclusion from the nation. Sitting Bull’s people, like

the Japanese Canadians, were left to starve on the Canadian prairie and finally deported or “repatriated” back to the United States, from whence they came.

Although the similarity between the Japanese Canadians and Native Canadians in Obasan indicate their mutual alienation from the nation, ironically, the comparison enforces the “Canadianness” of the Japanese Canadians. Native Canadians are called First Nations because—contrary to the construct of the nation that privileges Canada’s white Anglo heritage—they are just that, the original citizens of Canada. When Kogawa compares the Japanese-Canadian experience to that of Canada’s Native people she emphasizes their cultural connection to Canada.

In the same manner, images of the Canadian landscape convey Kogawa’s revision of the relationships between Japanese Canadians and the nation, silence and voice, Naomi and her mother. As a quintessentially Canadian symbol of the nation, the Canadian landscape provides an appropriate means for Kogawa to reunite the Japanese Canadians with their Canadian heritage and Naomi with her lost mother. Naomi presents the Japanese-Canadian dispossession from the nation in terms of the land. Although they are denied inclusion in the national identity, the Japanese Canadians come

From the same soil, the slugs and slime and bogs and twigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and in sloughs, untended and spindly. . . . We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting. . . . We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. (226)

The complexly detailed landscape is not a hinterland. The “unlikely planting” inhabited by the Japanese Canadians is thick with significance. Naomi compares it to silence—“the untold tales that wait for their telling” (226). Kogawa assigns new privilege to the ex-centric territory, and silence, designated to the Japanese Canadians by the nation. In Obasan, the cultural undergrowth of racial minorities is emphasized as part of the ecosystem of the Canadian nation and silence is as much a part of language as words. Obasan’s silent realm is rich with meaning, “The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful” (14). Kogawa presents silence as a radical communicative strategy that is more than just the absence of words. In fact, Kogawa suggests that Obasan’s silent response to oppression transcends the here and now, and is analogous with the Christian concept of faith. “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).

Silence is to language what the subterranean stream is to the parched prairie landscape. It symbolizes the paradox that runs rampant in Obasan: Kogawa focuses on the life in death, the voice in silence, and the Canadian identity in the Japanese Canadians whom the nation deemed as Other. Obasan is framed by an image that illustrates this point. The novel’s first and last pages are set on the Canadian prairie. In its dry, barren landscape, Kogawa finds the potential to view it as the opposite—fluidity and life: “Umi no yo. . . It’s like the sea” (1 & 247). Elsewhere in the novel, the prairie is represented more typically as desolate and barren. Kogawa links the prairie landscape to the dispossessed Japanese Canadians and Native Canadians who inhabited it.

From the beginning of time, the grass along this stretch of prairie has not been cut. About a mile east is a spot which was once an Indian buffalo jump, a high steep cliff where the buffalo were stampeded and fell to their deaths. All of the bones are still there, some sticking right out of the side of a fresh landslide. (2)

The bone-dry prairie is a virtual burial ground for the absent history of Native Canadians and Japanese Canadians who lived and laboured there unacknowledged. Underneath the land that is embedded with death and bones is a stream that offers life and nourishment.

Kogawa shows that “. . . along the stretch where the side of the slope oozes wet from the surface seepage of the underground stream. Wild rose bushes, prickly and profuse with green, cluster along the edges of the trickle” (4). The coulee ecosystem is like the cryptic landscape described in the epigram to Obasan. The subterranean stream is like the “sensate sea.” It is a symbolic source under the physical landscape and under Naomi’s consciousness: “Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees come forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence” (epigram). Paradoxically, the “speech that frees” is not speech at all but silence; to hear it speak one has to “embrace its absence”. Kogawa’s underground stream finds its source in the “amniotic deep” of the mother. Each year, on the anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing, Naomi picks a rose that has managed to grow on the desolate prairie, fed by the underground stream. It symbolizes the paradoxical strength and life force that persist, despite hardship and an inhospitable environment.

Naomi's quest to know her mother and Kogawa's search to find a place for Japanese Canadians within national identity and history come together in the landscape's symbolic representation of silence. Naomi is one with the land in the first chapter. As a product of the prairie, she desperately tries to establish roots and seeks spiritual nourishment.

My fingers tunnel through a tangle of roots till the grass stands up from my knuckles, making it seem that my fingers are roots. I am part of this small forest. Like the grass, I search the earth and the sky with a thin but persistent thirst. (3)

Before being uprooted by the internment and separated from her mother, Naomi was part of a loving family and a more tolerant nation. The undated photo of Naomi and her mother shows Naomi clinging to her mother's leg. It is a physical representation of the relationship between mother and daughter: Naomi as her mother's offspring. Old Man Gower's abuse breaks this harmony, silencing the young Naomi and severing her bond with her mother. "Don't tell your mother" (46) he says, after bringing her to his house with the excuse that he has to fix the cut on her knee. The Gower incident severs the tie between mother and child.

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. Where she is rooted, I am rooted. If she walks, I will walk. Her blood is whispering through my veins. The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts. But here in Mr. Gower's hands I become other—a parasite on her body, no longer of her mind. . . .

If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I will be torn from her. But the secret has already separated us. (64)

Naomi's break with her mother coincides with her mother's departure for Japan and the beginning of the internment: "It is around this time that mother disappears" (64). Naomi's silencing at the hands of Gower and her estrangement from her mother are metaphors for the Japanese-Canadian experience in Canada. If once the Japanese Canadians had a vital identity in Canada, the internment served to deny them their community and to silence them as part of the nation.

Kogawa depicts the resolution of Naomi's personal silencing—the break in communion between her and her mother—as a discovery of silence. So, too, silence is Kogawa's radical narrative strategy to bring about change in the Canadian nation. To reunite the daughter with her mother, and the Japanese Canadians with the nation, Kogawa adopts an attentiveness to silence. What is not known, or is unspoken, must be attended to, or voiced via a new awareness to listening and an understanding of language, in order to effect a spiritual awakening. Grandma Kato's letter synopsis of the events surrounding Naomi's mother's disappearance does not provide Naomi with peace. Instead, a series of images refer to the daughter and mother's condition.

The tree is a dead tree in the middle of the prairies. I sit on its roots still as a stone. In my dreams, a small child sits with a wound on her knee. . . .

The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell. . . . I beg that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs may learn to

dance. But you stay in a black and white photograph, smiling your yasashi smile. (243)

Through Canadian landscape imagery, Kogawa presents the mother as the “dead tree in the middle of the prairies” (243). Disconnected from her mother by death, Naomi waits in silence, sitting on the roots like stone—a reference to Obasan’s silent world of stone (32). The wounded knee evokes the silencing imposed by Gower. It was an incident that introduced her to negative silence and she became the child who “fears to tell.” Naomi also feels alienated by her mother’s silence, “a silence that cannot speak. . . . a silence that will not speak” (epigram). Accessible only in photographs, the mother is untouchable to Naomi through vocal communication. Jointly the mother and daughter suffered in silence, severed from one another. “Gentle Mother,” says Naomi, “we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction” (243). Most critics have cited these two lines as evidence of Kogawa’s rejection of silence and her advocacy of voice. However, it is not a position supported by the rest of the text. Kogawa cautions against the efficacy of language and distinguishes between the demanding impatience for knowledge that would characterize silence as wordlessness and the patient spiritual attentiveness that awakens one to the power of silence. Naomi’s dream of the Grand Inquisitor illustrates that reliance on words alone has contributed to the break between mother and daughter. Naomi’s desire to know the facts makes her like the Grand Inquisitor. “Did I doubt her love? Am I her accuser?” (228) Naomi asks herself. Describing the mistakes of the Grand Inquisitor, Kogawa explains the interdependence between speech and silence, and encourages respect for silence.

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

Naomi and her mother were destroyed by their wordlessness. Their relationship was compromised by Naomi's blind faith in words. Her overwhelming desire for the facts and just the facts about her mother allowed her to lose faith in the more important truth of her mother's love. Naomi admits: "At the age of questioning my mother disappeared. Why, I have asked ever since, did she not write? Why, I ask now, must I know?" (22). By attending the "avenues of silence," Naomi gains access to the "avenues of speech" and finally understands her mother. It is a model for the nation's reconciliation with the Japanese Canadians: following the path of their silence leads to their voice, for those who wish to hear. Naomi's experience lays out the relationship between silence and voice with symbolic landscape imagery:

I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child that I can know your presence though you are not here. The letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves. (243)

Kogawa presents the embrace of absence symbolically through the prairie. The words of the letter are bones only, like the buffalo bones—a sign of cultural extinction—embedded in the Canadian landscape. Yet in this death, and in the absence and silence Naomi associates with her mother, Kogawa shows life and hope. The underground stream continues to feed the desolate prairie, bringing to life “dormant blooms” and feeding the roots of the trees near the graves. There is renewal in death, and Naomi finds her mother even in death’s absence. Nakayama-sensei’s prayer encapsulates the divine model that paradoxically embraces absence and silent faith: “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”(243).

In interview with Magdalene Redekop, Kogawa acknowledges that the absent mother is a metaphor for God.

. . . she was, in a way, the analogy for the absent God, the God that is not seen, the powerless God, the love that is there but cannot do anything except love. How do we then receive empowerment from such an image of an absent love? (“The Literary Politics of the Victim”, 16)

Christian sensibilities also inform the redemptive silence that Kogawa uses to restore the Japanese Canadians to the Canadian nation. Referring to the uprooted Japanese, Kogawa combines images of the Canadian landscape with Christian imagery to suggest that in their silence the Japanese Canadians bring the Word. The Word is Jesus Christ, the “word made flesh” and ultimate figure of forgiveness and love. The following Christian images sharply contrast the negative images of the words “not made flesh” (189); as in Aunt Emily’s use of language.

We are the silences that speak from stone. We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication, a trainload of eyes covered with mud and spittle. We are the man in the Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of the light. We are sent to Siloam, the pool called "Sent". We are sent to the sending, that we may bring sight. . . . We are those pioneers who cleared the bush and the forest with our hands, . . . the fishermen who are flung from the sea to flounder in the dust of the prairies. . . . We are the Issei and the Nesei and the Sansei, the Japanese Canadians. We disappear into the future as undemanding as dew. (111)

Kogawa's pioneers deliver the divine message of their Canadian identity. The repetition of the Issei, Nesei, and Sansei evokes the holy trinity. Even miracles seem possible as Kogawa refers to Siloam, the site where, according to the Gospel of John, Chapter 9, Christ healed a blind man. The source of the Japanese Canadian strength lies paradoxically in their weakness. They speak from their voicelessness and silence; they show the way after being sent away. Like Christ himself, Kogawa presents the Japanese Canadians as sacrificial lambs whose suffering and silence promise to bring redemption and new hope to the loveless Canadian nation. Romans 11:15 best reflects Kogawa's Christian message: "For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead."

Silence, in Obasan, represents the Japanese Canadians' patient faith. Kogawa suggests that Word alone cannot induce the nation to embrace its racial minorities and include them in its created identity. Instead, Kogawa's Christian ethic associates silence

with love, and presents it as a force that promises to rectify the injustices of the past and offer hope for the future. Emily's activism is driven by the biblical mandate to "Write the vision and make it plain" (Habukkuk, 2:2). However, through Naomi's perspective Kogawa communicates a reluctance to fully endorsing language's ability to represent reality.

Write the vision and make it plain? For her, the vision is the truth as she lives it. When she is called like Habukkuk to the witness stand, her testimony is to the light that shines in the lives of the Nesei, in their desperation to prove themselves Canadian, in their tough and gentle spirit.

The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey. (32)

Words alone cannot induce change. The middle ground between the black and white issues of truth is "shadowy and grey". It is the place where Kogawa illustrates how silence supplements the word and language loses its privilege as the sole purveyor of meaning. Christian imagery enforces silence's strength by aligning it with the powers of faith and love. Kogawa's allusions to the Book of Habukkuk invites readers to draw parallels between the persecution by the Babylonians against the nation of Judah and that against the Japanese Canadians in Canada. Merivale has observed the similarities, and has noticed how Habukkuk too was pitted against "A bitter and hasty nation/ Which marches through the breadth of the earth,/ To possess dwelling places that are not theirs" (Habukkuk, 1:6). Merivale pairs this verse with bits from several others in the second chapter of Habbukuk to argue on behalf of the power of voice in the novel. Merivale quotes "For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak For the stone shall cry out of the wall" (Habukkuk, 2: 3, 11). What Merivale fails to

acknowledge is that the language spoken from the stone is the language of silence. The Book of Habukkuk is an endorsement to live by faith and trust in God even during the nation's trials. One preface to the Book of Habukkuk reads:

Although repeatedly called to repentance, the nation stubbornly refuses to change her (sic) sinful ways. Habukkuk, knowing the hardheartedness of his countrymen, asks God how long this intolerable condition can continue. God replies that the Babylonians will be His chastening rod upon the nation He acknowledges that the just in any generation shall live by faith (2:4) not by sight. (The New King James Version Slimline Reference Edition, 823)

Obasan, who lives completely in stone (32), lives by God's mandate to Habukkuk. She "does not come from this clamorous climateShe remains in a silent territory" (226). Kogawa refers to a stone that has two meanings. When "the word is stone" (epigram) it is like Uncle's stone bread, indigestible, incomprehensible. Emily's facts and words are like the hailstones in the epigram that pock the earth but fail to nourish the seeds. Kogawa states that the living word will continue to elude "Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless seed flowers with speech" (epigram). When the seed does flower in Obasan, it is fed—like the roses on the coulee—by the underground stream, not the hailstone words. Metaphorically the underground stream is silent faith, that secret resource that comes from within. Naomi finds her mother by employing the same paradigm. Her solution lay deep within: facts alone could not bring her understanding. Like Habbukuk, whose name means to cling to or embrace, Naomi is the child who clung to her mother's leg (46). When tribulations sever their ties, Naomi must, like Habukkuk,

learn to rely on faith and embrace an inner knowledge of her mother's love in order to thrive and bloom again.

Resolute faith guides Kogawa's approach to reuniting the Japanese Canadians with the nation that excluded their citizenship. Emily's words cannot address or redress their victimization. Kogawa uses the sacrament of communion to explain:

In Aunt Emily's package, the papers are piled as neatly as the thin white wafers in Sensei's silver box—symbols of communion, the materials of communication, white paper bread for the mind's meal.

We were the unwilling communicants receiving and consuming a less than holy nourishment, our eyes, cups filling with the bitter wine of a loveless communion. (182)

Communion and communication are enhanced when faith and love meet Emily's facts.

Habukkuk is told to keep silent faith: "But the Lord is in His holy temple/ Let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Habukkuk, 2:20) and to bear witness to the injustices as a warning to the nation:

Write the vision and make it plain on the tablets, that he may run who reads it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. (Habukkuk, 2: 2-3)

Kogawa's witness to the Canadian identity of the Japanese Canadians leaves as indelible an impression as the exclamation in Emily's journal "underlined and circled in red: *I am Canadian*" (39). In making this statement Kogawa's revalued concept of silence transcends the boundaries of power relationships, especially language's logocentric

privilege of voice, to find an alternative source from which to speak. Her hope is symbolized by the “wild roses and tiny wildflowers” (247) that grow along the stream in the last chapter, nourished by what lays below the inhospitable land, a secret source of life and strength. Kogawa closes with an image of attentiveness to the balance she strives to achieve, “Above the trees, the moon is pure a white stone. The reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing. It’s a quiet ballet, soundless as breath” (247).

Chapter 2: The Interdependence of Silence and Words

In her postmodern narrative, Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence, M. Nourbese Philip rewrites the history of Dr. David Livingstone's explorations into Africa. Paradoxically, Dr. David Livingstone's centrality to the novel is relegated to the margins of the narrative: the Traveller's journey to find her "Silence" would be purposeless without his legacy of "discovery", yet Livingstone's actual appearances are infrequent. The relative absence of Livingstone himself, in a book that appears to be focused on him, is just the first of many inversions of dominant meanings that Nourbese Philip undertakes. The novel challenges colonial history with postcolonial revisions, the masculine world of exploration with a feminist journey supported by women guides, and language's political disposition with an approach that seeks to balance dominant narratives with those that have gone unheard.

The Traveller begins her quest by describing the accomplishments of Livingstone:

Dr. David Livingstone, 1813-73—Scottish, not English, and one of the first Europeans to cross the Kalahari—with the help of Bushmen; was shown the Zambezi by the indigenous African and 'discovered' it; was shown the falls of Mosioatunya—the smoke that thunders—by the indigenous African, 'discovered' it and renamed it. Victoria Falls. (7)

The Traveller's chronicle of Livingstone's exploits (and exploitative they truly were) reveals how Livingstone created a legacy for himself by denying the culture and the history of the indigenous African people who went before him. The recasting of what has been accepted as significant discovery into a tale of ethnocentric, colonial arrogance earns Livingstone the title "Livingstone-I-presume" in the novel. In renaming Livingstone, Nourbese Philip pokes fun at both an English expression and the presumption she sees as characteristic of colonial ideology.

Livingstone's assumptions, according to Nourbese Philip, privileged European culture to the virtual elimination of that of the African. Drawing on the work of Livingstone's biographer, Tim Jeal, she explains,

an African workforce that had no cultural base or resource to rely on would be a more pliable, less rebellious one. David Livingstone understood this when he reasoned that he first had to destroy the customs and mores of continental Africans before he could bring commerce and religion. (Frontiers, 13-14)

Livingstone followed a pattern that was typical of imperial exploration. As Nourbese Philip observes, the colonial encounter provided the "origination" of African history; all that came before it was considered non-existent and absent:

[W]hen the European went overseas, whether to North America or Africa, he assumed that the people he encountered were silent in the sense they didn't have a history. That silence can be seen as a metaphor for . . . 'nothingness' . . . These people had to be 'discovered,' and their history began with the coming of the European. ("Secrecy and Silence," 19)

Looking for Livingstone inverts the dominant map of Africa laid out by Livingstone. Rather than crediting Livingstone's fame for navigating the "dark continent", Nourbese Philip's text hones in on the fact that Livingstone erased and obscured what was already in Africa. He made African culture irrelevant and incomprehensible to everyone, including the Africans themselves who were robbed of their heritage. In place of their thriving and sophisticated native culture, they were left with an emptiness and absence, something akin to a blank page. The tangibility of "absence" becomes the theme in Nourbese Philip's rewriting of the imperial adventure. Just as Livingstone "discovered" Mosiatunya when it was shown to

him by the indigenous African and renamed it Victoria Falls, Nourbese Philip lays claim to the “nothingness” attributed to her black ancestry and renames it Silence. Counter to the imperialist disregard for indigenous African culture, Nourbese Philip’s symbolic Silence is recast as valuable and complex.

When the Traveller encounters Livingstone, her sarcastic tribute exemplifies how the term silence conveys the absence imposed by imperialism:

Over coffee I gave him credit for discovering my silence, and bringing it out for all the world to see and cherish and love; I told him how indispensable he had been to this, that were it not for him, I would never have set out on my travels to find my interior—the source of my silence—which was he perhaps. This cheered him up, and he grew visibly happier; he puffed himself up—if he didn’t have Africa, at least he had my silence. (63)

True to the colonial mentality that saw Livingstone appropriate Mosiatunya and “discover” it as Victoria Falls, Nourbese Philip depicts how Livingstone imposes silence, then takes pride in his “discovery”. She inverts Livingstone’s legacy by appropriating Silence for her own means. The Traveller, in looking for her Silence, reclaims and affirms the black history that was negated through colonialism. Silence, in Nourbese Philip’s context, is silent no longer; it serves to represent the culture that was stolen through its denial, and in its new incarnation acknowledges the value and power in that which was lost. When the Traveller encounters Livingstone-I-presume, she challenges his reputation and the idea that Africa was “blank” before he “charted and mapped” (69). With the confident voice she has gained after completing her journey, she tells Livingstone what he really did:

You captured and seized the Silence you found—possessed it like the true discoverer you were—dissected and analysed it; labelled it—you took their Silence—the Silence of the African—and replaced it with your own—the silence of your word. (69-70)

Juxtaposed to silence is the essence of imperial power—the word. Nourbese Philip characterizes the word as the next degree of imperialistic absence-making. The Traveller accuses Livingstone of bringing the “silence of your word” as if it is another imposition of European power. The paradox is that Nourbese Philip plays on the traditional definitions of the terms—word and silence. In her new lexicon, silence is the absence attributed to the native culture by imperialism. While initially silence represents the negative appropriation of voice that historically took place, Nourbese Philip develops the concept to promote agency and a revised approach to the power-politics inherent in language. The word is language which, as deployed by the dominant European “discoverers,” facilitated the devaluation of Africa. So, when the Traveller refers to Livingstone replacing silence with the “silence of your word”, Nourbese Philip engages in a play on the traditional perception of word as more meaningful than silence. Then she further confounds our understanding by using the word silence to describe the negative implications of Livingstone’s word. In all, the thrust of Nourbese Philip’s argument is that Livingstone brought silence, then more silence. The fact that the Traveller begins her journey with dreams of using blank maps shows how Nourbese Philip revises her historical predicament by embracing the silent legacy of the colonial encounter.

I often dreamed I was showing someone my maps, one by one taking them from my bag. Each “map” is blank—faster and faster I keep discarding them,

becoming more and more upset. The last one I take out is an old piece of parchment, covered with markings, drawings and words, none of which I understand. (10)

As the dreams suggest, black women like the Traveller have inherited a negative geography. Their history has been made into a blank map by privileged European narratives that have denied the relevance of African culture. Even the map filled with signifiers of meaning, “markings, drawings and words,” is alien to the Traveller. The incomprehensible map symbolizes the disassociation that has separated contemporary black women such as the Traveller from their history. Nourbese Philip’s depiction of the Museum of Silence explains how European exploration and appropriation of native culture isolated indigenous people from their past, rendering it meaningless. The accusation is voiced by the Traveller when she summarizes the feats of famous explorers saying, “Discover and possess—one and the same thing. And destroy” (15). Under the innocuous guise of preservation, the Museum of Silence does just that, destroy. Representative of actual museums which, following imperialist assumptions, steal, analyze, and display elements of so-called “primitive” cultures, the Museum of Silence leaves the original owners of the artifacts unable to tell their own story. As the Traveller pleads with the proprietors, “You must return these silences to their owners. Without their silence, these people are less than whole” (57). The Museum of Silence is named to expose what is really held in those museums: the decontextualized cultures that are denied their own voice, the silences of the powerless. Fragments of indigenous African culture are on display in the Museum of Silence’s sterile, secure environment, a location removed from its original significance and context. “Remove a thing—a person—from its source . . .” says the Traveller, “from where it belongs naturally, and it will lose meaning—our silence has lost all

meaning” (58). Like its non-fiction models, the Museum of Silence houses dismembered bits of history in “carefully regulated, climate-controlled rooms” that provide an artificial, plexiglass environment for peoples’ experiences.

The Museum of Silence’s display of Africa’s silence is reminiscent of a real exhibition of African art installed at the Royal Ontario Museum in 1991. Notably, the show met with overwhelming criticism from Toronto’s black community, and specifically from the vocal M. Nourbese Philip. The fact that silence can be displayed furthers the illusion that Looking for Livingstone puts forth: silence is something real. As the Traveller observes:

My silence—our silence—carefully guarded and cherished by them! My silence was now a structure, an edifice I could walk around, touch, feel, lick even—and I did—it was cold, cold to the tongue. I could if I wanted, even pee on it, though that would be difficult, contained as it was behind plexiglass. (57-58)

Nourbese Philip exposes the corollary of imperialism when she delineates the ironic justification that sees “silence” first imposed upon the indigenous culture by imperialist ideology, then commodified as “silence”. Self-righteously, imperialism seizes upon artefacts of the culture it deemed worthless and profits for collecting and preserving that which it used its power to render “primitive”. Through the Traveller, Nourbese Philip expresses her opinion on cultural ownership: “It was ours after all, I told them, and upon it *their* speech, *their* language, and *their* talk was built—. . . . “Ours! Ours! Ours!” I screamed, “to do with as we choose” (58). With the Museum of Silence, Nourbese Philip inverts dominant, white patriarchal culture’s conventions as she privileges her metaphoric silence over the prevailing narratives of imperialist ideology—that which she labels the word.

As we have seen, then, silence can be possessed, is quantifiable, and can be “labeled” and “dissected”. In contrast, Nourbese Philip undermines the substantiality and supremacy of the word in a manner reminiscent of the interrogation of the value of language that took place in Obasan as Naomi questioned the value of Aunt Emily’s words. To punish the owners of the Museum of Silence, the Traveller gives them a taste of their own medicine. She curses them “to an eternity of ‘Words! Words! Words!—empty words, lacking that most precious of qualities—Silence’” (58). Words are more than just units of language in Looking for Livingstone. Words symbolize language and its condition as a subjective vehicle of communication. Nourbese Philip’s text scorns the word as conveyor of imperialist politics and especially for the manner in which language poses as objective truth. To challenge the omnipresence of language, Nourbese Philip writes a new creation myth for the ECNELIS which privileges the primal nature of silence as opposed to the word.

God first created silence: whole, indivisible, complete. All creatures—man, woman, beast, insect, bird and fish—lived happily together within this silence, until one day man and woman lay down together and between them created the first word. This displeased God deeply and in anger she shook out her bag of words over the world They were condemned to words while knowing the superior quality of silence. (11)

Nourbese Philip continues to undermine the universality of language through her portrayal of the ECNELIS who view the “word-believers” such as Livingstone as alien and foolish. From the perspective of the ECNELIS girl,

These people—the word-believers—believe in the power of words—to do magic, solve problems, grow crops; words to live by and die, and more than anything else to banish silence. (11)

Nourbese Philip mockingly explains the imperialist justification for spreading the word through her revision of Christian parables:

. . . God, feeling bored, came down to earth one day in the shape and form of a man and offered a choice to the first person he saw—a poor peasant: the word of God or silence. . . . the poor man chose the word of God—believing that silence was the same as being one of the dumb animals he cared for. God laughed, believed himself vindicated, and rewarded the earth with words and more words. And so their ancestors, so their stories tell, mounted armies of words to colonise the many and various silences of the peoples round about, spreading and infecting with word where before there was silence. (12)

The play on word evokes the Christian belief that Christ is the son of god and is the “word made flesh”. Nourbese Philip, like Joy Kogawa, suggests that indeed, for her, “the words are not made flesh” (*Obasan*, 189).

Nourbese Philip’s use of silence and word—the components of language—as metaphors to retell colonial history incriminates language for the role it plays in communicating power. The Traveller makes this assertion plain when she challenges Livingstone’s faith in language’s ability to communicate truth. Again Nourbese Philip takes imagery from the Christian faith to invert the imperialist ideology. The dream of temptation that the Traveller recounts to Livingstone parallels the biblical scene in which Christ is tempted by Satan. The

revision of this encounter, as it appears in Looking for Livingstone, has Livingstone tempting the Traveller in exchange for her silence. The Traveller recalls,

Suddenly I heard a voice behind me telling me that everything before me was mine. I turned to see who had spoken: a tall white man in a pith helmet and freshly pressed white ducks stood there smiling at me. Now that I think about it, Livingstone-I-presume, he looked a lot like you. (64)

In contrast to the biblical temptation, Nourbese Philip's version has the Traveller confront her tempter: "I didn't tell him to 'Get thee behind me, Satan'" says the Traveller, "I wanted him right up front where I could keep my eyes on him" (65). What the Traveller hypothesizes is that her Satan, Livingstone, wanted her silence and tried to trick her out of it by convincing her of the greater value of the word.

He was offering me words . . . if I had words . . . I could be witness to all that had gone wrong. I could speak out, condemn—I could even blame them. I couldn't do that with silence, he told me. I was just silent with silence. . . . I remember thinking that if he wanted my silence so much, there had to be some value in it . . . (65)

The widely accepted logic that "words" are crucially valuable in communication is inverted through the scene where Livingstone tempts the Traveller. When Livingstone points out the "obvious" truth: "you're so much more powerful with words . . ." (65), Nourbese Philip brings the issue back to ownership and appropriation. The Traveller asks, "And whose words are you—am I—powerful with?" (65). Nourbese Philip links the question of authority to power and the creation of truth. The Traveller effectively removes Livingstone's power

when she exposes that the foundation of his “discoveries” is his ability to wield language and that language itself is suspect because it is so influenced by power. The Traveller asks,

“Do you know what a fact is, Livingstone-I- presume?”

“Yes—of course.”

“No you don’t—a fact is whatever anyone, having the power to enforce it, says is a fact. Power—that is the distinguishing mark of a fact. Fact—Livingstone discovered Victoria Falls.”

“That is a fact.”

“That, Livingstone-I-presume, is a lie, and a fact, because you and your supporters, your nation of liars, had the power to change a lie into a fact.

Those falls had a name long before you got to them” (67-68)

Dispelling the illusion that language transparently communicates truth, then, Nourbese Philip addresses language’s role in systemic oppression. Kogawa too questioned the way language communicated so-called facts when she compared the documentation on the Japanese Canadian internment against Naomi’s memories. Nourbese Philip takes a more granular look at the English lexicon to unveil its internal contradictions. The English language is an offense to those marginal to mainstream society on the basis of their race or gender because it communicates their negative and absent status within that society. As Nourbese Philip has commented in her non-fiction essays: “Language . . . succeeded in pushing the African further away from the expression of her experience . . . and the meaning of it” (15) and it “served to articulate the non-being of the African” (16). Our language, which acts as the conduit of knowledge, is based on oppositional meanings that bespeak the dominance of white, patriarchal culture.

Furthermore, because these relationships are locked into language in a complex set of meanings, it is difficult to challenge our understanding of these concepts as anything other than what they appear to be in our system of communication. Nourbese Philip testifies to this being the case for Africans struggling to voice their difference from how they were perceived by white society: “this process would take place through a language that was not only experientially foreign, but also etymologically hostile and expressive of the non-being of the African” (15). According to Nourbese Philip, black women in the past and in the present have had to struggle to make themselves known with a language “fashioned through a particular history of empire and savagery” (18). Indeed, in Looking for Livingstone, Nourbese Philip presents the dichotomous nature of language; in verse she writes: “black/ Victoria/ Queen or Jemimah/ whore-wife/ virgin-slut” (13). Language is depicted as bound by duality; it stretches across opposite meanings, “across/ the ache in chasm/stretched the word” (13). Its condition is to be “grounded/ in the or of either” (13).

In her introduction to She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, Nourbese Philip admits that her goal is to “use the language in such a way that the historical realities are not erased or obliterated, so that English is revealed as the tainted tongue it truly is” (She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, 19)¹⁶. This seems to hold true for Looking for Livingstone as well. To further convince readers of the polluted nature of language, Nourbese Philip depicts the purge of words that takes place when the Traveller goes to the CLEENIS (even sounds like “clean”) sweat lodge. The scene shows how the Traveller is liberated from the language which Nourbese Philip contends is virulently public, abrasively oppositional, and bloated with political ideology. What the Traveller holds on to is pure:

her birth, death, and silence. Nourbese Philip describes these three things as all one can rely on because they are truly private and not tainted by mass culture.

That was all I had—birth, death, and in between silence—all I could call my own—my birth, my death, and most of all, my silence. My words were not really mine—bought, sold, owned and stolen as they were by others. But silence! —such devalued coinage to some—no one cared about it and it was all mine. (43)

A similar moral about language is presented when, through the example of the CESLIENS, Nourbese Philip again lauds the virtues of silence over the word. The Traveller explains,

. . . I remembered the CESLIENS—they had kept and cherished their Silence—given up the word and kept their Silence. They were the richer for it. None of their silence was on display in the Museum of Silence. (58)

To advocate casting away words in favor of silence flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Nourbese Philip is self-reflexively aware of the conceptual leap that she demands of readers. The Traveller's initial naiveté illustrates the existence of a widely held faith in language. Nourbese Philip uses the Traveller's journey to unveil how issues with language can be resolved by recovering its silenced aspects. Specifically, Nourbese Philip deploys hyperbole to humorously play with the universal acceptance of language's ability to transparently represent reality. In so doing she inverts the traditional definition of silence. The Traveller's paradigms of significance are useless on her journey. When she tries to find a concrete definition of the term silence her mode of inquiry is rebuffed by the ECNELIS.

The men were silent; the women laughed at my questions I showed them maps—asked them to show me the way— they laughed even more. “What colour is it?” I asked, pointing to the outlines of various strange lands— “green like the fields? blue like the sea or rivers? and how will I recognize it?” (10)

The ECNELIS’ sense of humor stems from the Traveller’s innocent, simplistic belief in language. At this point in the text, the Traveller has yet to see the whole picture with regard to language. Nourbese Philip contends that to recognize only that which is represented through language is to receive only a half-truth. The full picture is unveiled as the Traveller finds her silence. Despite their laughter, the ECNELIS bring the Traveller considerably closer to her goal. The ECNELIS women cease their laughter when the Traveller asks, “how will I recognize it?” (10). “Suddenly the women stopped laughing and withdrew to their huts” (10) says the Traveller. Their retreat to their huts is symbolic. It introduces the direction in which the Traveller must travel to find silence and sets up Nourbese Philip’s revision of colonial exploration and her challenge to language.

The ECNELIS women withdraw *within* their huts when the Traveller asks how she will recognize silence. So, too, Nourbese Philip recognizes or rethinks the colonial, patriarchal power structure that silenced her black history through a revisionary narrative that inverts the known history of imperialist exploration, thus, working *within* our familiar framework. Nourbese Philip’s approach to challenging language also works *within*. Silence is the term Nourbese Philip uses to symbolize that which has gone unheard and the redemptive counter-narrative she introduces. In its literal definition, silence operates *within* language as the devalued opposite of that which is voiced through words. Nourbese Philip’s approach conceptualizes the devalued aspects which she privileges in

her text—feminocentric, black history—as silenced counterparts to what language has represented as central and significant to society. As Nourbese Philip explains in interview, language is key to redrawing the boundaries of what is considered important: “[I]t takes a learning of the language to understand what is beyond the margin. What I’m trying to do in my writing is to find a language to explain or maybe read the ‘nothing’ beyond the boundary” (18). In contrast to imperial exploration which imposed “something” by creating “nothing”, Nourbese Philip rethinks the map laid out by colonial explorers, such as Livingstone. She works within the system to bring what was formerly denied meaning back into focus. As the women of the ECNELIS tell the Traveller, Silence is “not a thing to be discovered, so much as recovered” (10).

Gender, according to Nourbese Philip, cannot be ignored in rewriting the imperial adventure. The Traveller is supported in her quest by the native African women she encounters. Historically, femininity has been as devalued a concept by our largely patriarchal society as native culture was by imperialist ideology. Nourbese Philip shows the parallel between the two silencings and conveys the position of black women who have been doubly marginalized on the basis of race and gender. Contrary to the discoveries of imperialist explorers like Livingstone, the Traveller and her foremothers continually engage in an act of self-preservation and restoration that reclaims power. Like Naomi, in Obasan, who undertakes a personal, internal quest to know her mother and herself—a quest led by her aunts—the Traveller too partakes in a matrilineally guided, personal journey within herself. Looking for Livingstone embodies Kogawa’s philosophy that “Facts bereft of love direct us nowhere” (28). The LENSECI woman directs the Traveller to use her heart:

she reached out and touched my chest—over my heart. She repeated this gesture several times—touching the map, then touching the heart area of my chest. She meant for me to go where she pointed—that much I now knew, but where it was and how to get there, I still didn't know. (15)

The Traveller's quest inward to find her silence (or exclusionary silencing) overturns imperialist methodology. Mocking the kind of appropriation of "external" territories that is at the base of Livingstone's legacy, the Traveller initiates her journey by taking on Livingstone's own words. She claims: "I will open a way to the interior or perish." Livingstone's own words—I took them now as my own—my motto" (7). Nourbese Philip brings together the great white explorer and the hitherto inexperienced black woman to play off their oppositional domains. Her practice of connecting polar ideas in order to deconstruct their difference provides fertile ground where new meanings can flourish. Dr. Livingstone's motto gains new significance in the hands of the Traveller because it now suggests that the search for Africa's silence and history is an internal, personal voyage, an opening to the interior. The silence which the Traveller is searching for has both public and private significance. All the tribes the Traveller visits are named in anagrams of silence but ultimately the Traveller must look within herself to discover her silence. Contrary to the extensive accoutrement of Livingstone's expedition—native guides, ammunition and compasses (16)—the Traveller is equipped with a few primitive maps on animal skin and bark, given to her by the natives, and a mirror (7). Presumably, like the maps which guide the way, the mirror is intended to lead the Traveller to what she sees in it—her self. Later in the expedition the Traveller's supplies are restated in comparison to those of Livingstone. She claims, "With my maps, my body, and my silence, I followed Livingstone—" (16). Here, the

reflection in the mirror has been broken down and named as the “body” and “silence:” two personal tools that indicate that Livingstone and the silence of black history can be found by looking within as much as by searching without. The difference between the Traveller and Livingstone’s exploration methods shows the opposition of public and private spheres. Historically, these domains have carried a gender bias which associated men with the outside world of adventure and women with the insular domestic realm. The divisions are charged with sexual significance, in that women belonged in the protected space of the home because of their role in sexual reproduction and, ultimately, their bodies’ composition for this function. Philip’s text follows twentieth-century feminism by exploding these restrictive boundaries.

The odyssey of silence travels inward to “re-cognize” what the Traveller already knows: her own body. It acts as a map that inverts Livingstone’s exploration in the public domain. In the first set of poetry in the novel, the narrator relates the experience of giving birth to something : “I re/ cognize it/ in its belonging/ know it again” (9). The images used to describe silence (the “it” referred to in the verse) show that silence is like a child in the womb. It is both foreign and familiar, part of a woman’s anatomy, yet a surprise in and of itself that springs forth from the private space of the womb.

I have -
stroked the kin
the stranger
within it
taken it to places secret
with within
from the between of thighs

expelled

I have

with the force of full

driven it

- a giant birthing -

from the hiding of its

place (9)

The birth poem's narrator invokes a maternal heritage, when she calls "oh my mothers" (8). By beginning the Traveller's travels with the birth experience, supported by foremothers, Nourbese Philip symbolically prefaces the journey to find silence. Birth, a uniquely female endeavor, brings that which comes from the internal space of the female womb out into the open. Silence is depicted in much the same way in the text. In its positive incarnation it is something reclaimed through the Traveller's personal experience, yet in its negative incarnation it is the legacy of colonialism. The birth poem foreshadows the Traveller's discovery of silence: colonialism conceived her silence, it grew within her; in reclaiming silence as a revolutionary tool it is brought back out in the open.

Against the progressive linearity of Livingstone's colonial discoveries, the Traveller reaches her destiny by circumnavigating the absence that is her silence. "I had been travelling in circles these past hundred years—circle upon circle—ever widening . . ." (10), she writes. The Traveller's procession in circles sounds non-progressive compared to linear, professional charting and mapping of an explorer like Livingstone. And the differing paths evoke sexual opposition. Birth is a voyage that progresses through an "ever-widening" circle and is thus an image tied to the female body. The growing circle also implies that the Traveller is already

looking in the right vicinity (her self) and her progress then proceeds outward. Like birth, the voyage to come into voice goes from the inside out. Nourbese Philip's resolution with language begins with acknowledging the internalized absence of black history, then moving outward to reclaim language in order to come into voice.

Using birth as a metaphor for how the Traveller "recovers" her silence, Nourbese Philip articulates the genealogy of the silence she presents. Silence, as articulated in Looking For Livingstone and in Philip's non-fiction, has become a very intimate part of black, postcolonial identity but is paradoxically a foreign concept that was imposed by colonial encounters. Sexual intercourse is an apt metaphor for the meeting of the indigenous African and the imperialist European. Through the Traveller's dreams, Nourbese Philip explains how the silence the Traveller recovers was conceived:

HE—LIVINGSTONE—AND I COPULATE LIKE TWO BEASTS—HE
RIDES ME—HIS WORD SLIPPING IN AND OUT OF THE WET MOIST
SPACES OF MY SILENCE . . . (25)

In another dream, the Traveller is giving birth to the result of their union:

IN MY SECOND DREAM I AM HUGE AND HEAVY, BLOWN UP LIKE
A SOW ABOUT TO FARROW—THE FRUIT OF HIS WORD.
PREGNANT FOR ONE THOUSAND AND TWO YEARS—MY LABOUR
AN AGONY THAT LASTS FOREVER AS I STRUGGLE TO BIRTH . . . I
TRY TO BIRTH THE MONSTROUS PRODUCT OF HIS WORD AND
MY SILENCE—CONCEIVED IN THE SILENCE OF MY OWN, MY
VERY OWN WOMB. (26)

The sexual encounter between Livingstone and the Traveller that takes place in her dream symbolically re-enacts the historical silencing of imperialism that Nourbese Philip seeks to revise. The Africa which Livingstone discovered “AWAITS US—EAGERLY—LIKE A WHORE!” (25) according to Livingstone’s cohort, Stanley. By association, the black woman Traveller is aligned with the feminine African nation, which in being called a “whore” is devalued and defiled. Metaphorically, the Traveller’s body—like Africa—provides the fertile ground upon which Livingstone asserts his imperial ideology. Like the colonial history it represents, the sex act Nourbese Philip presents is characterized by violent domination; Livingstone and his word “WILL NOT BE DENIED IN ITS SEARCH TO FILL EVERY CREVICE OF MY SILENCE” (25). And although in the dream Livingstone impregnates the Traveller, Nourbese Philip undermines the virility of the word when she has Livingstone confess to Stanley that “MY WORD, MY WORD IS IMPOTENT—” (25). Nourbese Philip links the very sex organs that determine gender to her symbolic representation of the concepts silence and word. However, whereas images of Livingstone’s penis are clearly associated with the “word” — “your turgid phallused word” (27) , the Traveller’s body takes on several definitions of silence. The female sex organs, and specifically the womb, represent both the negative and positive manifestations of Nourbese Philip’s conceptual silences. The paradox is appropriate, considering the history and politics around the female body. It is a perfect example of how politics can change perception and how ideology can taint meaning. Before the revelations of science, the prevailing understanding of sexual roles compared the female body to the fertile ground upon which the active, male seed fell and grew. The fact that women actually provide half of the mix in the form of an egg, in addition to their nurturing womb, was

overlooked. Negative meaning was allocated to the female body, to the privilege of the male. Feminism revised the devaluation of the women's bodies and replaced negative stereotypes with positive information about female sexuality. Nourbese Philip aligns her definition of the term silence with images of female sexuality to communicate a parallel paradigm shift with regard to black history. Black history and culture were like the female body in that they were perceived to be the passive emptiness, the fertile ground upon which the more important imperial ideology made itself known. When the Traveller refers to "the paps, the dried dug of my silence that haunt your turgid phallused word—" (27), she evokes the negative aspect of silence, the silence and absence imposed by colonial ideology, the native culture upon which Europeans feasted and drank dry of meaning, the kind of silence that would "haunt" them. The womb, too, represents this kind of negative silence. Images of Elizabeth, the biblical mother of John the Baptist who was infertile before a miracle gave her a child, depict a negative conceptualization of the womb and silence: "In the desert that was/ Elizabeth/ Seeded with Silence/ Barren/ Shriveled womb/ Refusing/ The swell and/ Split/ In seed until/ Silence/ Welcomes/ The hungry word/ In again" (28). Elizabeth's barren womb is "Seeded with Silence", infertile and useless. The legacy of silence or historical silencing, as was the case with the indigenous Africans, is associated with the negative depiction of the female body. Elizabeth's silent womb doesn't bring forth fruit until it welcomes "the hungry word". The positive ramifications of their union cause the formerly desert-like womb to flower: "The womb/ Oasis of Silence/ Blooms" (28).

Although Nourbese Philip uses birthing imagery throughout the text, the union between word and silence does not create a new entity, that is half-word, half-silence.

Rather, the birth that takes place is a metaphor for the new, positive definition of silence that Nourbese Philip is putting forth. The old and the new silence are one and the same. Like the optical illusion picture which shows both an old woman and a young lady, Nourbese Philip's use of the term silence conveys the negative absence of black history as imposed by imperialism, and it holds the promise of revision that lies in re-appropriating language to regain power. And so the empty womb "blooms" when it takes agency to work with the "word" and "welcome" it (28). Like the female elephants who, according to the Traveller, "send out mating calls to the males at frequencies so low humans can't hear (73), it is significant that the silent party, the Traveller and her silence, sought after Livingstone:

. . . just think, your Word, My Silence—matching frequencies so low , so precise only we could hear. Word and Silence—which of the two sent out the mating call, Livingstone, *your* Word or *my* Silence? Have you thought of that?
(73)

In the end, Nourbese Philip indicates that those who have been silenced must take agency to come into voice with language in such a way as to reveal its ideological weight—the silence of its words. It is with the last tribe that the Traveller visits, the NEECLIS, that she learns to employ silence and the word together. After hearing the metaphoric parable of the girl who had to work in silence in order to save her foolish brothers, the Traveller (and autobiographically perhaps Nourbese Philip too) learns to put aside her bitterness over the injustice of her past in order to piece together the words of her silence (51). Arwhal reminds the Traveller of the paradox that Nourbese Philip puts forth, "silence does not necessarily mean an absence of sound" (51). Arwhal advises her to weave something "using what you have,

what is yours” (52). What the Traveller has, and ultimately what Nourbese Philip insists all black women have, is their silence: “It is the only thing I have that is not contaminated. My Silence—my very own Silence” (65).

Nourbese Philip’s approach is to use silence with the word to come into voice, just as Arwhal tells the Traveller: “word and silence—neither word alone, nor silence alone . . . weave, patch, sew together and remember it is your silence—all yours, untouched and uncorrupted But to use your silence, you have to use the word” (52). The Traveller quickly learns that word and silence must work together. It is a revelation that shows Nourbese Philip admitting that, in the end, you must use language to be heard however clever the concept of silence may be. However, one must recover silence and correct history first.

. . . I began to understand what she was trying to teach me —that there were two separate strands or threads—word and silence—each as important as the other. To weave anything I first had to make the separation, and before I could do that, I needed to find my own Silence. (54)

Indeed, the lessons the Traveller learns represent the approach Nourbese Philip advocates with regard to coming into voice. When the Traveller is tried by Mama Ohnce (yet another sagely timeless woman guide whose name is “pronounced wonce” (36)) by her imprisonment in the circle of string, the solution lies in resigning herself to the fact that she cannot break the power structure that holds her prisoner. Instead, in this scene as in the scene with Arwhal, the Traveller must use what is hers, her silence, to gain liberation:

I crawled over to the edge of the circle—tried to erase it—if I could only break it, I told myself, I could get out Each time I brought my hand to the line . . . a force pushed my hand back, curling it up close to my heart. . . . [N]one of

my earlier knowledge was of any use to me—all I had was the language of the
CESLIENS—the language of silence. (38)

The Traveller's success, then, relies on looking within rather than without. Just as we cannot step out of the system of language to avoid its political baggage, Nourbese Philip suggests that challenges to power via language must come through working within the system of communication we already know. The Traveller reclaims her own space within the larger system. "Now I was safe. Within my own circle contained by theirs," she claims (38). At this point, the Traveller solves the anagrams given to her by a previous tribe, the SCENILE. In the soil she writes "SURRENDER" and "WITHIN," and soon she is free to step over the boundary. On the opposite page, a poem explains how acknowledgment of silence offers the Traveller a means of undermining the word. Nourbese Philip writes, "The traveller seeks/ contentment/ in silence/ containment/ of press of circle upon circle/ that cleanses/ the pollute/ the profane in word/ to confine within small/ large/ —a universe of silence" (39). Silence is found by searching "within/ body/ cell/ atom" and "within/ word" (39).

The road to an empowered, positive silence lies within the territory of language and the system of communication with which we are familiar. However, Nourbese Philip's positive revaluation of silence also transcends the boundaries of language as we know it. Silence follows a ". . . thread along the black/ stretch of ever/ into Silence," (39). It is portrayed as eternal and timeless, in the same way that Joy Kogawa depicted silence in Obasan. The dedication to Looking For Livingstone highlights the permanence of silence and emphasizes the relevance of what is past to what is present: "For the ancestors who have been silent for too long and whose Silence is. Always". The dedication plays

the negative absence traditionally associated with silence against the positive reconstruction of “Silence” that Nourbese Philip creates in her text. The lower case “s” silence of the ancestors is a lack of voice that has gone on, regretfully, “too long”. However, silence takes on a positive permanence as Nourbese Philip alludes to a “Silence” that endures “Always”; it is the latter embodiment of silence that Nourbese Philip’s Traveller explores for its potential to open up a new territory of resistance to language’s totalizing authority. The silence that the Traveller recovers exists “Beyond the beckon in/ beyond/ the last sea/ the ultima Thule/ where space is/ the page/ blank/ ignorance made monstrous” (17), “where meet/ Alpha and Omega/ in one beginning” (17). It exists both in the past, before oppression, and optimistically in the future, as Philip seeks to re-introduce the importance of African history. Thus, the Traveller must journey in two directions, past and present, “beyond/ the side of other we call/ nether/ and nothing” (17). As the Traveller’s odyssey progresses, past and present are united through a project that seeks to balance the relationship between silence and the word. “In the beginning was/ not/ word/ but Silence/ and a future rampant/ with possibility/ and Word” (40), writes Nourbese Philip. Paradoxically, the word that made silence a negative concept in the past, becomes a vehicle for voicing the strength of silence in the future. As the Traveller tells Livingstone, “. . . while you thought you were discovering Africa, it was Africa that was discovering you” (62). Just as recovering her silence is integral to the Traveller’s success, so too Nourbese Philip’s readers must buy into the conceit that her symbolic term “silence” is not merely silent; it brings readers a revaluation of what is marginal to our society’s dominant discourses. Revalued silence brings the possibility of change: “in finding my own Silence I was finding my own power—of transformation” (54), claims the

Traveller. She explicates the duality of silence: the fact that it comes into voice because of Nourbese Philip's contemporary revision and that it is historically an absence of voice.

I . . . came to understand how Silence could speak and be silent—how Silence could be filled with noise and also be still. And finally I understood . . . that Silence does not always mean the absence of sound, because in all that sound—of my own voice—I was able to find and hear my own Silence. (54)

The relationship between silence and the word is further explicated in the Traveller's symbolic trials with the NEECLIS. The needlework that the Traveller creates intertwines her knowledge of silence and voice: "I had woven a tapestry, and had pieced together a multicolored quilt—of Silence—my many silences—held together by the most invisible of stitches—the invisible but necessary word" (55). The variations of her silence—that which is truly her own—becomes a completed whole when held together by the tiny threads of words. It is significant the Traveller's silences are plural, similar to the CESLIENS. CESLIENS are distinct from other tribes because their name does not spell SILENCE but SILENCES (Wolf, 112). The CESLIENS keep their silence (58) and avoid falling victim to the predominant power structures, such as the Museum of Silence. They exemplify the agency that remains with those who have been silenced. When you understand silence, you see the challenge it can pose to language. It is a conceptual inversion that sees oppressive discourse (word) as just half of the equation with silence.

It was with the CESLIENS I learnt about silence Nothing in nature is silent, they taught me, naturally silent, that is. Everything has its own sound, speech, or language, even if it is only the language of silence (there I go again—'even if'), and if you were willing to learn the sound of what appeared

to be silence, you understood then that the word was but another sound—of silence. (35)

The hierarchy of word over silence is reconfigured in Nourbese Philip's activist vision. The "language of silence" is depicted as a means of communication that is not "less than" the word or a "lack of" of the word; the Traveller corrects herself when she slips into the old hierarchical speak of "even if" (35). Instead, silence is introduced as a rich and varied complement to the word. Silence has no words with which to speak, but its potential lays in challenging readers to explore that which goes unsaid, the territory that surrounds words, and to understand that word is "but another sound of silence". In other words, that which is said using words articulates what goes unsaid—the silence—too. Colonial rhetoric, for example, communicates more than just the European colonial perspective; upon careful examination it also contains within it the absent narrative of the indigenous Africans. Critical studies, such as those performed under the category of postcolonialism, show this duality to be true. The Traveller's claim to a part of language that promises to free her from the corruption of imperialist ideology is what Doris Wolf has recognized as Nourbese Philip's "deconstructive and reconstructive process" (Wolf, 108). Language as we know it is taken apart and reassembled in a restorative fashion. Wolf focuses on this approach for the potential it offers to all women as a means of altering a patriarchal language weighted with the exclusion of women.

Looking for Livingstone started as the last poem in She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, a volume in which Nourbese Philip set out to "put the poem back in its morass, back in the historical, racial, and patriarchal mess it came out of" (20). The form that Looking for Livingstone takes supports Nourbese Philip's message with regard to revising language and

history. As Wayne Defehr notes, “The act of story-telling is sometimes as significant as the story itself” (Defehr, 45). Indeed, the use of non-chronological time, particularly in the Traveller’s journal entries, shows form imitating content. One entry states: “Somewhere, Africa/ 0000 Hours” (60). The absence of time and place undermines the authority of conventional ways of knowing, such as language. At other times Nourbese Philip’s form literally reinserts silence back into language:

Finally (silence) Dr. Livingstone, I presume? (silence) we meet (silence) he and
I (silence) in a clearing (silence) in a forest (silence) somewhere (silence) in
time (silence) it doesn’t matter (silence) . . . (60)

Looking for Livingstone demonstrates that what is on the outside of the story is as important as the story itself. In form and in content, Nourbese Philip admits her narrative engages in “encrusting [the text] with the grit and grime of despoilation that men like Livingstone represent” (21). In the essay “Ignoring Poetry,” Philip writes that she is “trying to fill all that white space, negative space, blank space—where the silence is and never was silent” (127).

M. Nourbese Philip’s approach to “silence”, voice and history is very much related to her experience as a black woman writing in Canada. The geographical imagery and boundaries that fill Looking For Livingstone not only reflect the historical division generated by colonialism but also Philip’s perception of being exterior to central Canadian society on the basis of her race and gender. In a 1991 interview for Books in Canada, Philip admits that she sees Canada as a place which has “nothing, the bush, the wilderness” beyond its predominantly white centers. “Nothing in quotation marks” she says, “[f]or me, as a Black woman writing here, that boundary or margin beyond which there seems to be ‘nothing’ is not only out there - it is also within me” (“Secrecy and Silence,” 18). The

internalization of this exclusion or silencing echoes the silence that the Traveller explores within herself. Throughout Looking For Livingstone, marginal territories are given the utmost importance and are revised in light of white society's power to determine locations of meaning.

Philip attributes her awareness of boundaries and the hierarchical relationship between margins and centers to her experience in Canada. She states:

You won't find Canada in my work in that sense of 'wilderness,' but I think that the work could only have been written here. I feel I'm constantly pushing against some kind of margin, beyond which I don't know what there is. It's important for me to say that I don't really believe that there is 'nothing' beyond. I feel very strongly that there is something beyond . . . The Europeans often approached countries in this way: where they settled they believed that they created 'something,' and beyond that was 'nothing,' where the Other was . . . ("Secrecy and Silence", 18)

In Looking For Livingstone, Philip has purposely attempted to replenish the falsely created "nothing," that is the legacy of colonialism, with silence. As she communicates to the interviewer, language is central to this project. "[I]t takes a learning of the language to understand what is beyond the margin. What I'm trying to do in my writing is to find a language to explain or maybe read the 'nothing' beyond the boundary" (18). Indeed, Looking for Livingstone succeeds in showing that what has been historically silenced is not silent, and with her revolutionary appropriation of silence itself Nourbese Philip guides readers to a reconciliation with language.

In her non-fiction, Nourbese Philip has characterized the Canadian literary climate as harsh and challenging for the voices of ethnic minorities. She testifies that “we have had to wrest our writing out of what has been in most respects a very unfriendly environment. Maybe this is where the metaphorical Canadian landscape comes in—the nothingness, the void, where you go to the frontier and seemingly there is nothing beyond it” (*Sounding Differences*, 231). This kind of pioneering is necessitated by a lack of tradition of black (and other minority) writing in Canada. “As a Black writer, it has been very painful to survive here—where there was nothing that you could either resist or go along with as a tradition. There is a danger of falling into the void and just giving up” (*Sounding Differences*, 231).

In her active promotion of other voices in Canada, M. Nourbese Philip has generated a number of essays on racism and access to voice, through the arts, in our nation. Appropriately, her volume of essays on this topic is titled Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture. These frontiers represent the area of “nothingness” encountered by those exterior to the territory of dominant Canadian writing. In one essay from this collection, Nourbese Philip demands that publishers “open the Can in Canlit to allow all the other voices that make up Canada to be heard” (“Publish + Be Damned”, 167). Nourbese Philip’s concern for the images represented in Canadian writing stems from her desire to provide a future for ethnic minorities in Canada free from racism and colonial oppression. She encourages Canada to acknowledge the diversity of its society and envisions a better future for blacks in Canada, strengthened by an understanding of their past. In her “mother tongue” Philip claims:

'We ent going nowhere. We here and is right here we staying.' In this world so new. To criticize, needle and demand; to work hard for; to give to; to love; to hate—for better or for worse—till death do we part. And even after—in the African tradition of our ancestral role after death of advising and guiding our offspring—our descendants. African Canadians— Canadians. ("Echoes in a Stranger Land," 20-21)

By giving voice to a silenced history, Looking For Livingstone bears relevance to the context of Canadian society within which it was written. Boundaries are overstepped and barren ground is given new meaning as Philip shows that black history, women, and their silences are not really exterior to our central locations of meaning.

Chapter 3: Voicing Silence

Dionne Brand's Sans Souci and Other Stories is a collection of short fiction about the lives of black women, in Canada and abroad. In this chapter I will discuss the following stories: "No rinsed blue sky, no red flower fences", "Train to Montreal", "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls", and "At the Lisbon Plate". All of the narratives I've selected happen to be located in Canada, but that was not the primary reason for their inclusion in this thesis. Rather, like Obasan and Looking for Livingstone (a text which is definitely not set in Canada), the stories were chosen because silencing is their central focus and, regardless of where the fictions are located, they suggest that the marginalization they document is the result of their relationship to the Canadian nation. Sans Souci and Other Stories conforms with the two novels already addressed in this thesis. It exposes the negativity of being on the outside of dominant discourses of power because of race and gender, implicates language's role in the process of exclusion, and revalues feminocentric history as a means of resistance.

Like M. Nourbese Philip, Dionne Brand is a first-generation immigrant to Canada. Immigrant writing has become a popular domain of Canadian literary criticism. In her review of the book, Precarious Present/ Promising Future?: Ethnicity and Identities in Canadian Literature, Tseen-Ling Khoo writes, "Studies focusing on cultural politics and national identity with regard to pluralism or multiculturalism have characterized much of 1990s literary criticism" (Khoo, 159-60). Immigrant writers, such as Brand and Nourbese Philip, are valued for their unique perspective that straddles cultures. The illusion is that their writing is somehow documentary and more transparently comments on the

relationship between text and context. Khoo asserts that “perversion” and “evasion” typify multicultural literary criticism.

Evasion evokes the ongoing denial (or dismissal) of “literari-ness” in “multi-cultural” material through concentration on sociological and historical aspects. Perversion might refer to the stereotypical response to migrant writing as “bad” or distorted forms of proper English literature (160)

She posits that idealized approaches to immigrant writing assume an authentic, realistic voice for the author that privileges them as a cultural ambassador and avoids “the fraught and ongoing discussions about treating multicultural literature as voices of “Native informants” (160). Indeed, the 1990 preface to Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions chose to explore “both the *lived* experience and the *literary* expression of multiculturalism in Canada” (1) by alternating fiction with non-fiction interviews.

Accordingly, John Clement Ball’s comparative study of Austin Clarke and Dionne Brand’s short fiction observes that both writers are activists that “document a broad range of immigrant experiences” (9). Ball cites Harold Head’s introduction to Canada In Us Now (1976) for its explanation of the relationship between black writing and activism:

the Black artist as liberator . . . means that we are confronted with an artistic sensibility that assumes the artist is responsible not only for documenting and interpreting cultural experience, but also for projecting and expanding the soul of his people. (Canada In Us Now, 8)

It would seem that black Canadians (and presumably other racial minorities) are expected to bring their racial identity to their writing more readily than they would their

citizenship. The line that divides immigrant from Canadian is an obscure one. At what point do immigrant writers stop speaking from their bi-cultural perspective? To what extent is their sense of non-belonging a function of their new exposure to the culture? Does a "Canadian" writer ever speak from a homogenous cultural perspective? These questions are far too ambitious for the scope of this thesis. Let it be observed though that the trend, as evidenced by recently published anthologies (such as, Precarious Present/Promising Future?: Ethnicity and Identities in Canadian Literature), is to lump together racial minority writers who were born and raised in Canada with those who have immigrated to the country. The assumption is that race and not immigrancy influences their voice. It is with this framework in mind that I attempt to understand Dionne Brand's prose in comparison to that of Joy Kogawa and Marlene Nourbese Philip.

If Sans Souci and Other Stories were to suggest that its characters negotiate a hybrid identity and accept, at least in part, the role of Canadian, it could be classified as typical immigrant writing. As it is, the text documents the experiences of newcomers and the material reality of their lives in Canada in a manner consistent with the immigrant writing genre, but it also conveys a resistance to the inhospitable racialism and sexism that Brand's characters find in Canada. Brand came to Canada from Trinidad at age 17. Aside from building a strong reputation as a poet, and more recently as a novelist, she has devoted her time in this country to tireless activism for Toronto's Black community and feminist concerns. Her political conscience is apparent in Sans Souci. The racism, sexism, and white imperialism that Brand sees around her are exposed in narratives that chronicle how black women struggle to maintain their humanity within a national culture that devalues their gender and race. The experience is not a transitory one limited to

immigrants. Brand consciously speaks from the position of “native informant” as a form of resistance to the predominant cultural identifications of the Canadian nation. From her perspective it seems that no matter how long blacks live in Canada, they are immaterial to the national, read “white”, identity. “Racism was the focus of my encounter with Canada, not immigrancy” says Brand (Other Solitudes, 272). She explains that

. . . I really didn't think of myself as an immigrant *per se*. Yes, I came from another country, but I didn't think that the worlds were that far apart, and I knew that the problems that I would have would not stem from my being an immigrant, but would stem from my being black. If I had been white, within a generation my family would have been assimilated. I could escape being an immigrant, but along with the black people who have lived in this country for three centuries, I would not escape my race at any point.

(Other Solitudes, 272)

Brand's opposition to the “white” cultural hegemony in Canada engages her in an interrogation of the nation itself. For her, the predominant construct of nation is based on exclusion. “I write for the people believing in something other than the nation state in order to be sane . . .” writes Brand in her correspondence to Adrienne Rich (Brand, Listening for Something). Brand explains that

. . . the word nation is no longer useful . . . it has been so corrupted by the way which the states we live in are organized . . . I see an overarching kind of definition of nation that is projected by the state. Everywhere I look I see the ways in which those nation states that we live in are constructed by leaving out. (Brand, Listening for Something)

To respond to her exclusion from the nation, Brand writes about black experience on an international and ahistorical scale. The stories in Sans Souci are set in the Caribbean, in Canada, and in transit between the two. The present-tense action of some of the stories is infiltrated by flashbacks to the past, as is the case in “At the Lisbon Plate”. Rather than be confined within the boundaries of a wholly Canadian context which negates her experience, Brand reestablishes the landscape of meaning to privilege that which has been silenced and erased from Canadian meaning-making. In an interview with Dagmar Novak, Brand explains how she renegotiates the territory: “. . . I’ve heard other writers talk about being on the margins of Canadian writing. I find myself in the middle of black writing . . .” (Other Solitudes, 273). When asked what kind of future she sees for non-white writers in Canada, Brand predicts, “We are the new wave of Canadian writing. We will write about the internal contradictions” (Other Solitudes, 277). Exposing the “internal contradictions” was Kogawa’s project in Obasan too. Yet, in comparison to Kogawa’s writing which employs many nationally specific locales and images to challenge the Japanese Canadians’ disenfranchisement from the nation, Brand’s narrative strategies are almost indifferent to Canada. Brand pays attention to specific Canadian locations—Toronto and Montreal—yet her text is not as heavy with Canadian images and symbols as Kogawa’s. Outside the text, Brand’s activism is concerned with black experience beyond Canada’s borders, as exemplified by her decision to join the revolution in Grenada, and is engaged in illuminating black experience in Canada. Her non-fiction work alone, such as No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s, the National Film Board documentaries Older Stronger Wiser, Sisters in Struggle, and Long Time Comin’, and some of her essays in Bread Out of Stone, has contributed to revising

our nation's history and revaluating black narratives. These contributions parallel those that Joy Kogawa and Marlene Nourbese Philip make in Obasan and Looking for Livingstone. In the vein of these writers, Brand alters the conceptualization of privilege to destabilize the power structures inherent in oppositional constructs of meaning. Kogawa and Philip deploy this tactic to represent silence as a powerful narrative strategy. By revaluating the silent territory that is usually perceived as an absence of language and meaning, these writers reveal and thereby critique hierarchical power relationships and open up new ground from which to voice their concerns. Brand's decision to interrogate the categories of meaning, such as "nation" and "Canadian literature", stems from the same desire to resist negation and erasure. To undermine the powers that would silence her on the basis of race and gender, Brand consciously chooses to embrace the "absent" definition of black writing by positioning herself in the middle of it and privileging it as the center of meaning, rather than accepting a space on the outside of Canadian literature or the Canadian nation.

I write out of a literature, a genre, a tradition, and that tradition is the tradition of black writing. And whether that black writing comes from the United States as African American writing or African Caribbean writing or African writing from the continent, it's in that tradition that I work. I grew up under a colonial system of education, where I read English literature and liked it because I love words. But within that writing, there was never my presence. I was absent from that writing. That writing was predicated on imperial history and imperial aspirations—British or American. That imperial history included black slavery. It included the decimation of native peoples. And if the literature nurtured on this is presented to you as great

art and you are absent, or the forms or shapes in which you are included are derided, then you know that this literature means to erase you or to kill you. Then you write yourself. (Other Solitudes, 273)

Interestingly, Brand engages in a bit of exclusion herself in that she fails to mention Black Canadians as part of her tradition.

Brand, like Kogawa and Philip, writes to give voice to her experience. Her voice attempts to fill the absence left by the legacy of colonialism and racialism. “No rinsed blue sky, no red flower fences,” in Sans Souci, conveys the sheer inconsequentiality of the life of a black woman living in Canada. Brand’s character is working “illegal” in Canada, which accounts for some of her invisibility to the system; however, her isolation and anxiety are attributed to more than immigrant status alone. Race, gender, and class work together against Brand’s character. Scared of creditors and her own loneliness, the character has “pity for her blackness and her woman’s body, and hopelessness at how foolish she was in not even being able to pay the rent, or fix her teeth, which she dreamt nightly fell out in her hands, bloodless” (86). In contrast to white Canadians, Brand’s character in “No rinsed blue sky, no red flower fences” is made absent. Her poverty is only the first aspect of her insignificance in the capitalist society. Without money, “you feel as if you’d never done a thing in your life” (86). Compared to the small white children whom the woman minds, she also has no value:

Taking care of children, holding their hands across busy streets, standing with them at corners which were incongruous to her colour, she herself incongruous to the little hands, held as if they were more precious than she, made of gold, and she just the black earth around. (86-87)

Brand hones in on her character's situation in relation to the white children who are in her charge to illustrate the power relationship that is premised on race. The black woman in this story lives in a culture where she is devoid of meaning. She is as worthless as "black earth" and she is like the background on which white lives and meaning take place. Compared to the white child who is "tugging and laughing, or whining" (87), she is "black, silent and unsmiling" (87). Access to the power of voice seems to be inaccessible to Brand's character because of her exclusion from participation in society on the basis of race. In fact, her silence is so totalizing that her presence is almost erased. She feels "uncomfortable under the passing gazes. . . she knew, they didn't have to tell her that she was out of place here" (87): presumably, the gazes come from the white Torontonians that the black woman lives amongst.

Brand portrays a culture that privileges white skin and makes black women absent. The main character in "No rinsed blue sky, no red flower fences" remains nameless throughout the story, thus accentuating her lack of presence and representation through language. So too the baby she has in Canada is not acknowledged in Canadian society. To protect her secret, illegal status the woman uses an alias and the child is not registered. The fact that the child and the mother do not legally exist is a metaphor for the kind of erasure from society that Brand suggests Canadian culture supports based on race and gender. The woman and her baby are ostensibly invisible. When the baby is born ". . . no one was there, no one knew, and the name she had used was not hers. Nor did the baby exist. No papers" (89). The baby's description, too, bespeaks insignificance: "So small and wiry and no papers" (89). The mother and the child's physical stature reinforces the lack of presence that Brand suggests they have in society. The two are slight and small;

the mother has a “thin, unvoluptuous body” (91). Repeated images of woman’s thinness, emptiness, and the limited space that she occupies, emphasize her inconsequentiality. She sleeps on “the corner of the floor” (91), and her insubstantiality is alluded to with references to her hunger and her empty stomach. The woman has internalized her insignificance in society to the point that she seems to travel around Toronto like a ghost. She feels so worthless that she often keeps her eyes lowered on the street (88). When she travels on the bus, she attempts to make herself transparent:

. . . when she had the fare, she always stood, trying to appear thinner than she was, bent, staring out the window. She did not ask for apologies when people jostled her; she pretended that it did not happen. She did try sometimes. Sitting in two seats and ignoring people coming in, but by the time two or three stops had passed she would ring the bell, get off the bus, and walk quickly home. (88)

Contrasted sharply with the woman’s insubstantiality and fearfulness in Canada is her memory of an old black woman from home. When the woman was a child, she saw an elderly woman bathing. She was struck by the woman’s confidence, nakedness, and impressive agedness.

How bold, she thought, then walked past and turned slightly to see her again, still there, her face sucked to her bones, her eyes watery from age, unblinking. The woman, the gesture had stayed with her, marked her own breasts, her eyes. She willed herself not to feel hungry but to stay alive, present. . . . She would become the old woman. But how could she, so far from there. (90)

Despite the woman's admiration for and determination to become the old woman, she is filled with self-doubt because of the negation she feels in Canada¹⁷.

Brand associates the woman's negative experiences in Canada with images of whiteness and erasure. In the woman's apartment, the walls are painted a blinding white. Her justification is that white allows her to be "alone" (85). "She told her friends that it was so that she could fill the rooms with her own self, so that she could breathe and put up her own paintings, her own landscapes on the walls" (85). Ostensibly, she wants to resist the sense that the run-down apartments looked "with their tatty walls and nothing in them as if no one ever lived there" (85). Paradoxically, the apartment becomes an environment of effacement with its "blinding white" (85) walls. Brand's character never does fill the apartment with herself and her own landscapes; instead she is intimidated by the space. The white walls are personified as antagonistic, like Brand's white Canadians. When the woman is feeling lowest and is most in debt, ". . . the white walls came alive, glaring at her, watching her as she slept fitfully" (91). Later in the story, the woman is threatened by whiteness again in the form of Canadian people: ". . . the smell of whiteness around her, a dull choking smell" (92). Whiteness, be it in the form of walls, or associated with the Canadian nation, fails to provide a blank canvas for Brand's character. Rather than positively expressing herself in the space of her apartment or in the new country, she is instead erased and made silent. Brand even rules out the positive aspects of erasure as a reprieve from suffering; the walls fail to protect the woman from the creditors she fears: "she thought that the creditors, the mornings full of bills, would go away or she could feel them gone in the blinding white" (85). Instead, "the apartment scared her" (85). Like Canada, the great white north which offers immigrants the promise of a fresh new canvas

on which to reinvent themselves, the apartment that Brand describes serves to do the opposite. White takes on negative connotations as blinding and erasing Brand's black woman character, but it does nothing to obliterate her suffering. There is no peace or purity in the white that Brand presents. Brand depicts the white nation of Canada as failing to provide the black woman with a context within which she can endure and make meaning. As much as the woman desires to find the rinsed blue sky and red flower fences outside her window (87), they are—not surprisingly—not provided by Toronto in winter. Brand links Canada's failure to yield a rinsed blue sky and red flower fences to her character's ultimate erasure. She suggests that the oppressiveness of whiteness leads her woman character to ending her life.

. . . this day if the sky could not move, if the heavy angle of the air would not shift to some other colour, at the corner she would knead a headache from her brow, walk to the middle of the street, the glowing centre of the wide lewd road and kneel down. . . . Rushing to the window she looked at the street below, empty of people, still dark. Not sea and blue, no red flower fence and high sky. Midday found her on the street corner, a little white hand in hers, her other hand kneading a headache from her brow. (93)

In "Train to Montreal", Brand continues the theme of how designified black life is in Canada. Race and gender are the basis on which Brand's black woman character is erased and made absent by the overwhelming power of white culture. The black woman in "Train to Montreal" brings colonial history and black history to bear on how temporal and insignificant she feels in comparison to white Canadians. She reflects on the

difference between herself and the white hippy who sits beside her on the train in terms of their place in time and history.

He was so sure. Of what? she wondered. He had a calmness in his body, as if he counted on being in the world forever. He was right, she supposed. Looking at him made her feel temporary, volatile. These people, she thought, they have more patience than I. She was always afraid of bursting, a thin flame, burnt out, quickly. In his look of firmness and belonging, she understood that she owned nothing. There would always be a sadness with her; a desire to have it destroyed. It seemed hundreds of years long. It was a plump, well-fed torturer. It smacked its lips, drinking her like water, distilling her. His face was clean of any such memory. (22)

Even though they are traveling together in modern-day Canada, Brand's character sees the man sitting beside her on the train as a colonial oppressor who is oblivious to her sadness because he is so securely ensconced in his station in life. Compared to his past, hers is transient and temporal: "a thin flame, burnt out, quickly" (22). Her claim to the past is characterized by absence as "she understood that she owned nothing" (22). His claim to the past is characterized by presence and permanence: "firmness and belonging" (22). White Canadians are depicted as unwitting participants in oppression based on their skin color. Brand's character observes: "He [is]. . . so settled in the comfort of his skin—his camouflage here, in the train, and in the city" (23). When her train partner departs without a word to her, she judges the power relationship between them based on race and, specifically, on how power over time and history is controlled by race.

How like these people to suddenly turn and be strangers, as if conversation only filled up time through something which they were sure belonged to them and was unchangeable. They could return to it; she looked to nothing, an emptiness to be made or to fall into. (23)

Through her black woman character, Brand continues to delineate how power determines one's hold on time and history. Racial privilege allows Brand's white characters to seem like they own time and history, whereas her black woman character feels that her history is a void. Unlike the white hippy, she cannot return to a solid "unchangeable" past; instead her legacy is "nothing, an emptiness to be made or to fall into" (23). In "Train to Montreal", Brand follows the advice of her character. Her activism takes shape by "making the emptiness". She does this by acknowledging the absence of black history and exploring the activism in its mute voice. Rather than "fall into" the negativity and designification that Brand suggests is systemic in Canadian society her writing takes pains to give substance to the absence by exposing its presence. As Brand has said, "I believe . . . that it is important to rewrite history in a way that saves our humanity. Black people and women have to make their humanity every goddamned day, because every day we are faced with the unmaking of us" ("Language of Resistance", 14).

The jazz the black woman in "Train to Montreal" listens to, prior to her trip to Montreal, is filled with the sound of black oppression, a history of being emptied of meaning. The absent black history that the black woman refers to on the train as "an emptiness to be made" (23), is first introduced in the jazz concert scene. Brand's black woman character is the conduit through which the music becomes known to readers as a voice of absence. The reason the woman impatiently disapproves of her boyfriend's lack

of appreciation for the music has more to do with her valuation of history than with his musical tastes. For the black woman, jazz paradoxically speaks the silence of black history.

The problem with you is that everything passed you by. I heard Malcolm. Angela went to jail. Now, all of it is in this little room and that is what you're listening to and you don't understand. (16)

The music is a narrative of the woman's silenced past and its struggle for acknowledgment. The jazz allows her to tap into the tragedy of her past. When she listens, "A sadness enveloped her. It was the sadness of knowing this thing which she learnt a moment ago [listening to the music]. It was all laid out. To plunge into the theorem was to go mad" (16). The maddening paradox is that the music conveys black history with an elusive, emotive voice rather than with words, yet to the woman it is obvious that the music is steeped in the past.

The word used to describe the voice of jazz is "theorem". By definition, a theorem represents a logical outcome or a mathematical problem that can be proven through other means. In this case, the sounds convey both the unjust historical facts of slavery and racial oppression and the silence imposed upon black history. Music is an appropriate theorem for Brand's message because it is sound and silence interspersed, each element dependent on the other for communicating the unique sound of the music. The image is reminiscent of Nourbese Philip's approach for coming into voice in Looking for Livingstone. The jazz heard by Brand's character is angry with facts and action and more moderated tones of restraint. It is a metaphor for how activism is presented in the story: a struggle between the desire for action and the tendency, specifically on behalf of white characters, to thwart

action by ignoring or silencing the injustice with their tolerant inaction. “The clusters sounded angry, more than angry, disturbed. Lone notes, deterring them in the middle, tolerant; patience darkened by the clustered ruptures” (15). In her desire for radical change, the woman joins in the music “. . . she heard the sound of her voice saying something, joining the note” (15). However, the tendency towards inaction perpetuates the “nothing”—that hole that must not be fallen into—it is a reality that depresses Brand’s character and leaves her longing for change.

Jazz concerts always threw her into a pit of a mood. . . . as if some accustomed tragedy had occurred. It had been replayed; an escape had been rehearsed and outside nothing had changed. She would emerge looking at the city, shouting, sometimes aloud. (17)

The activism that Brand espouses in “Train to Montreal” consists of acknowledging negated black history—a making of the emptiness—in order to avoid being silenced in the present tense and perpetuates the undoing of people of African heritage: it is a warning against falling into the nothingness. In “Train to Montreal” inaction is a crime of omission. Not only does Brand’s activism prescribe recognizing absence and exploration of its very real presence; she also cautions against the danger that lies in tolerance and complacency. The white hippy passenger who sits on the train with the black woman typifies, to her, the kind of inaction that she has come to expect from white people. Even though he may not personally be responsible for the injustice, she feels he is indicted by his lack of action. Her stereotypes dictate that “White liberals . . . when the shit starts to fly, they’ll leave you in the street” (20). The co-traveller’s pacifist politics act as a backdrop against which Brand’s woman character reveals her stance on

activism. Her approach abhors inaction. For this reason, the woman condemns the United States as a more evil oppressor than the Soviet Union: “. . . who supported us in Africa? The United States never gave us any weapons. It’s them that we’re fighting” (20). When the pacifist co-traveller condemns violence, Brand’s character, frustrated, asks the following question: “I guess anything is useless in the face of brute strength. So I suppose we can’t do anything right?” (21).

The incident at the train station in Montreal fulfills Brand’s character’s prophecy: nothing is done in the face of brute strength. When the woman is verbally assaulted in terms of her race and gender by the drunk, white businessman, Brand focuses on the tolerance and silence of the fellow passengers. The scene shows how black experience is made absent by society’s complacency and silence in the face of injustice. By telling the story, Brand “makes the emptiness” a form of resistance. The inaction of the crowd, rather than the offensive action of the man, is presented as the grossest atrocity. The woman tries to escape the man’s verbal assault by joining the safety of the crowd leaving the platform.

She placed herself among the others, climbing the escalator. They were silent. She, trying to hide, to be invisible, turning her head to see where he was, wondering how to move herself, her head, without being noticed. . . . she saw the crowd, some smiling at the obscene cough, others looking straight ahead. (27)

Her panic and discomfort are accentuated by the calmness of the other passengers that surround her on the elevator. Unlike her, they have nothing to worry about; they choose to ridicule or ignore her dilemma. Interestingly, the woman’s anger at the incident is not

only directed towards the man whose vocality offended her. Her wrath is also against the silence of those fellow passengers on the escalator.

She looked back to say something, but only said it in looking. Apologizing to her past for not striking him or cursing back, for not hurting, wounding all of them standing on the escalator. (27)

The corollary of the people's silence not only offends the woman, it insults her heritage. Black history is synonymous with the contemporary character's self-respect. Brand's approach stresses the important lessons that history provides to encourage modern-day black women: to forget these lessons is almost sacrilege. "She had let herself be humiliated without saying a word. . . . The silence of the others. The voice spitting up" (28). The woman's lack of voice is just as bad as the silence of the others. While both the woman and the passengers lacked action, Brand ultimately leaves readers with a sense that the silence of the other passengers is the kind of crime that erases black experience and has led to black history being a legacy of nothingness. The security of the white passengers in terms of their time and place in history and the ease with which they can resume their lives after the train incident allow Brand to convey how easily black history is made into nothing. As the black woman character leaves the station, Brand "makes the emptiness" one last time:

She scanned the crowd, wondering if they remembered now, greeting their friends. They looked safe, as clothed in their friendships as the man who got off at Kingston. He had forgotten their conversation and gone back to his life. They had forgotten her humiliation. (28)

As an antidote to injustice and silenced black history, Brand provides a model of vocality, joy, and action through the story “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls”. Blossom taps into a matrilineal, spiritual, African heritage in order to do battle with the personification of Suffering and overcome her own hardships in contemporary Toronto. When Blossom comes to Canada as an immigrant from Trinidad, she struggles under difficult circumstances that Brand attributes to Blossom’s race and gender. Her economic prosperity is presented as circumscribed by race. Blossom first babysits “some snot-nosed children on Oriole Parkway” (32), but she objects to “steady cleaning up after white people” (32). Her decision to learn the upholstery trade is abandoned when she and her friends realize that “where was they going to find white people who like old furniture, and who was going to buy old furniture from Black women anyway” (32). The domestic work Blossom finds on Balmoral for the “white man boss-man” (33) doctor turns sour when her gender and her position as a black domestic worker serve to place her in a position where the doctor feels at liberty to grab her while she’s working in the basement. After the incident on Balmoral, Blossom takes day-to-day work “so that no white man would be over she” (34).

Even Blossom’s marriage to Victor, a heavy-drinking freeloader, is presented as another form of oppression. Blossom says Victor “was really lacking in kindness and had a streak of meanness when it come to woman” (36). Their marriage “start a long line of misery the likes of which Blossom never see before and never intend to see again” (36). By the time Blossom undergoes her transformation into the Goddess Oya she is able to sum up her time in Canada as “Ten years she here now, and nothing shaking, just getting

older and older, watching white people live. She, sheself living underneath all the time” (37).

Blossom’s resistance to the powers that oppress her on the basis of her race and gender takes place in a transformation that remembers black history, embraces spirituality, and draws on the strength of women. Brand depicts Blossom’s attack on suffering (both her own and the personification of Suffering) as a process through which Blossom develops a mad and joyful strategy that makes her weakness her strength. The paradox is that despite her devalued race and gender, these very aspects of her identity provide Blossom with her inspiration for strength, resistance, and happiness. It is a strategy that parallels Joy Kogawa and M. Nourbese Philip’s methodologies in Obasan and Looking for Livingstone. Brand transforms those things that would seem to keep Blossom silent and downtrodden in Canadian society into the source of her vocality and transcendence. The incident with the doctor on Balmoral foreshadows Blossom’s ultimate initiation into becoming the Goddess Oya. On Balmoral, Blossom decries the doctor’s actions with a strong voice motivated by her spirituality and the lessons of Black history. Blossom is not silent when assaulted by the doctor; instead she “start to scream like hell” (33). Her most dramatic response to her treatment on Balmoral comes in response to the wife’s implied retelling of the assault and the shadows cast on Blossom’s moral character by the wife’s “cut eye” (33) looks. Blossom’s spiritual frame of reference is clearly Christian in this instance: “Well look at my cross nah Lord, Blossom think, here this dog trying to abuse me and she watching *me* cut eye! Me! a church-going woman!” (33). Spirit takes over reason in Blossom: “A craziness fly up in Blossom head and she start to go mad on them” (33). Her spirituality drives her action: “Make me a weapon in thine hand, oh Lord!”

(33)¹⁸. The protest that Blossom and her friends stage the next day draws on the black civil rights movement. The women organize themselves and march carrying the Black Power flag and placards “saying the Dr. So-and-So was a white rapist” (34). The women also chant and sing “We Shall Not Be Moved” (34). Finally, Brand shows that Blossom and her friends celebrate their activism: “That night, at Peg house, they laugh and they eat and they drink and dance and laugh more . . .” (34).

The pattern of resistance is repeated when Blossom casts out Victor and takes in the spirit of Oya. Again, “Something just fly up in Blossom head” (37). Blossom’s actions are driven by a spirit external to her self.

Next thing Blossom know, she running Victor down Vaughan Road screaming and waving the bread knife. She hear somebody screaming loud, loud. At first she didn’t know who it is, and is then she realize that the scream was coming from she and she couldn’t stop it. (38)

Brand presents Blossom’s spiritual awakening as a hybrid of fundamental Christian and pagan African beliefs. For the first weeks of Blossom’s transformation she visits the Pentecostal church and eventually starts speaking in tongues. Later, her spiritual journey takes her back to the beliefs of her ancestors.

She come to the place where *legahoo* and *lajabless* is not even dog and where *soucouyant*, the fireball, burn up in the bigger fire of an infinite sun, where none of the ordinary spirit Blossom know is nothing. (39)

Blossom’s spiritual awakening allows Oya to come into Blossom’s body. “This Oya was a big spirit Blossom know from home” (39). By taking in this spirit from Blossom’s black heritage she is able to overcome Suffering in her dream and her own real-life suffering.

Brand identifies the absence-creating power of suffering when, through Blossom's dream, she presents the long history of Black suffering. Blossom is reduced to almost nothing, physically, in her dream when she faces suffering. It is a process that parallels how Blossom's real-life hardships in Toronto threatened to silence her on the basis of her race and gender.

In the dream, Oya make Blossom look at Black people suffering. The face of Black people suffering was so old and hoary that Blossom nearly dead. . . . Pain dry out Blossom soul, until it turn to nothing. (40)

Blossom overcomes suffering even in her nothingness. It is when Blossom is at her weakest and most insignificant that Brand shows her as a force that threatens suffering:

Blossom start to dry away, and melt away, until it only had one grain of she left. And Suffering still descending. Blossom scream for Oya and Oya didn't come and Suffering keep coming. . . . So she roll and dance she grain-self into a hate so hard, she chisel sheself into a sharp, hot prickle and fly in Suffering face. . . . The more Blossom spin and dance, the more Suffering back back; the more Suffering back back, the bigger Blossom get, until Blossom was Oya with she warrior knife, advancing. (40)

Brand's hero transforms herself from being minute as a grain to being a threatening warrior. Blossom's ferocious hate is also paradoxically fed by joy and celebration. Dance makes Blossom strong in the manner of the maternal Oya who exemplifies triumph over pain through love and joy.

Blossom climb into Oya lovely womb of strength and fearlessness. Full of joy when Oya show she the warrior dance where heart and blood burst open. Freeness, Oya call that dance. . . . In this dance Oya had such a sweet laugh, it make she black skin shake and it full up Blossom and shake she too. (40)

Brand brings the relevance of Blossom's transformation back to Blossom's material reality in Canada by reminding readers that Oya, the black spiritual mother, helped Blossom right here in this cold, white land: "Quite here, Oya did search for Blossom. Quite here, she find she" (41). In the end, Oya gets all the credit for Blossom's triumph over oppression, "It was Oya who run Victor out and it was Oya who plague the doctor and laugh and drink afterwards" (41).

In "At the Lisbon Plate," Brand offers yet another narrative that enunciates how minority history—specifically, black history—has been made silent. This time, Brand's story is set in a Portuguese bar overlooking the Kensington Market in Toronto. The Lisbon Plate acts as the departure point from which Brand's narrative uses magic realism to span time and geography to revisit the past. "At the Lisbon Plate" Brand's black woman character finds a host of ghosts.

. . . when Elaine found this bar I knew it was my greatest opportunity. All of the signs were there. The expatriates from the colonial wars, the moneychangers and the skin dealers, the whip handlers, the coffle makers and the boatswains. Their faces leathery from the African sun and the tropical winter. They were swilling beer like day had no end. (105)

Brand's black woman character exorcises the ghosts at the Lisbon Plate by giving voice to their crimes and exposing the silence that has plagued her past. It is a process that the black woman is led to by her acquaintance with the sage old woman.

She was a dangerous woman. I knew it the moment I saw her and I should have left her sitting there, the old gravedigger. But no. Me, I had to go and look. I had to follow that sack of dust into places I had no right being.

(98)

The old woman links the young black woman to the past through her narratives. Her stories are the ones told by the young black woman "At the Lisbon Plate". They are a source of power because they counter dominant European history and give voice to the horrors that have been silenced. "It was one of her stories which led me here", says the young black woman, "in search of something I will recognize, once I see it" (98). The "something" she seems to recognize is the cast of regulars who have committed crimes in the past. She sees them reveling in their horrible deeds around the statue of Christopher Columbus in the park: ". . . they gathered around Columbus, the whoremaster, and sang a few old songs" (105). To take revenge, the young black woman undergoes a spiritual transformation that invests her with the old black woman's strengths. The young woman becomes like the old woman—ageless and spirit-like—and she gains the power of knowing the secrets of the past. The young black woman explains the strength of age when she identifies Rosa and "the big white boy" as part of the reason she is at the Lisbon Plate:

I suppose they're wondering who I am. Wonder away you carrion! I wonder if they recognize me as quickly as I, them. I saw them do their

ablutions on the foot of the statue in the parkette. How lovingly they fondled his bloody hands. They have their rituals, but I've lived longer than they. (108)

The young black woman has "lived longer", because as the story progresses she becomes more and more like the old woman. With the old woman's attributes she becomes more and more formidable against silenced history. The illusion of transformation extends to the physical too, as the young black woman takes on the old black woman's features, as well as her stories, voyeurism, and spirit-like powers. "I have watched myself here, waiting. A woman so old her skin turned to water, her eyes blazing like a dead candle. I'm starting to resemble that bag of dust, the longer I live" (103). And with the old woman's physical characteristics, the young woman also inherits her powerful stories.

. . . I look like a woman I met many years ago. As old as dirt, she sat by the roadside waiting her time, an ivory pipe stuck in her withered lips and naked as she was born. That woman had stories, more lucid than mine and more frightening for that. (98)

One of the terrifying stories that the black woman inherits from the old woman allows her to recognize the "big white boy" at the Lisbon Plate as a former slave handler. Through the old woman's eyes, the young black woman recalls life as a slave held in the slave handler's cargo.

I would know those eyes anywhere. The last time I saw them, I was lying in the hold of a great ship leaving Conakry for the new world. It was just a glimpse, but I remember as if it were yesterday. I am a woman with a lot of time and I have waited, like shrimp wait for tide. . . . For days I lived

with my body rotting and the glare of those eyes keeping me alive, as I begged to die and follow my carcass. This is the story the old road woman told me. (107)

The stories that are inherited from the old woman stress the erasure of black culture that took place, both physically and more subtly through language. Brand's emphasis on the motif of erasure communicates that more than representation is at stake in her retelling; her activism is mindful of the material realities that oppression on the basis of race inflict. The stories she chooses to tell show how the legacy of absence caused by race silences black people through their death, their suffering, and their lack of control over language. In the "big white boy" story the black woman's life is so painfully stripped of value that she opts to take her own life rather than continue on as worthless chattel.

His pitiless hands placed me on a block of wood like a yoke, when my carcass could not stand any more, for the worms had eaten my soul.

Running, running a long journey over hot bush, I found a cliff one day at the top of an island and jumped—jumped into the jagged blue water of an ocean, swimming, swimming to Conakry. (107)

Brand also addresses how language devalues black life. In its representation, language carries the political weight of the dominant society, and as pertains to this story, Brand argues that it contributes to the absence-making of black experience. The black woman character in the story acknowledges how this takes place in contemporary media.

One Polish priest had been killed and the press was going wild. At the same time, I don't know how many African labourers got killed and, besides that, fell to their deaths from third-floor police detention rooms in

Johannesburg; and all that the scribes talked about was how moderate the Broderbond is. (106)

The fact that the story of black lives is often not told, prompts the black woman character to suggest that “truth” as presented through language is informed by power: “It occurred to me that death, its frequency, causes, sequence and application to written history, favors, even anticipates, certain latitudes” (106).

Language’s ability to silence certain categories of experience in favor of representing others can be quite a subtle undertaking. The type of authoritative and euphemistic language used by the man “who looks like a professor” is an example of the type of language that obfuscates the “truth” as Brand retells it. Brand’s black woman character identifies the academic as synonymous with the rest of the thieves who frequent the Lisbon Plate. The blood on the academic’s hands, though, was earned solely through stealing black culture and making it worthless through his use of language. His “white-collar” crimes, as recounted by the black woman character, consist of pillaging black art—“he rifled the gold statues and masks” and deploying language to negate black culture: “. . . his true love was phrase-making, he made up ‘museum of primitive art,’ elaborating his former success ‘Dark Ages’” (111). When the academic exclaims that Camus’ Outsider is “the ultimate alienation!” (111), Brand takes the opportunity to revise yet another narrative that makes absent minority experience. The real alienation in the Outsider, according to Brand’s black woman character, comes from the perspective of the Arab characters who are silenced. Racial privilege determines from whose perspective the alienation is perceived, as Brand’s black woman character asks “Didn’t it ever strike you that Meursault was a European and the Arab on the beach was an Arab?” (111). The revised story provided in “At the Lisbon Plate” presents the narrative from the perspective

of the Arab characters. Her revision highlights how language participates in silencing by carrying the cultural baggage of the narrator. Brand's character warns readers of the silencing she exposes through her narrative, "You want to hear a story? Let me tell you a real story. I have no art for phraseology, I'll warn you" (112). The story she tells is laden with the material realities of the Arab characters' lives. Their race has determined their working conditions and their position in society. Ahmed, we are told, is docked pay at the bicycle factory when he must take his little brother to the beach to relieve his headache. Ahmed's murder is the ultimate alienation because his life is considered so valueless, in Camus' version, that he is completely expendable. Camus' story silences minority experience whereas Brand's consciously exposes the silencing.

How language communicates the power and privilege of the narrator's perspective is central to "At the Lisbon Plate". The black woman character in the story points out how revolution is seen as trouble for some and opportunity for others: "'When the trouble started,' indeed. These European sons of bitches always say 'when the trouble started' when *their* life in the colonies begins to get miserable" (101). Even when the black woman deals with Rosa, the Portuguese hostess, Rosa's language denotes a historical relationship of dominance. When the black woman asks if the fish on the menu is "From the lake or from the sea" and Rosa responds, "Ah the sea, of course" (95). To the black woman, Rosa's language implies power. "This would be our conversation every time I would come to the bar, her "of course" informing me of her status in our relationship" (95).

Brand's narrative presents the erasure of voice that has historically plagued black culture. Her black woman character and her mentor the old woman reclaim voice by revealing the silencing and valuing their ability to tell the stories they know of the past. By

straddling past and present, Africa and Canada, Brand opens her black characters' silenced baggage on Canadian turf and implies that acknowledging devalued black history is a form of activism relevant to contemporary Canadian society. Even though the Lisbon Plate is situated in downtown Toronto, the black woman character is "A woman in enemy territory" (97). It is a place "where we cannot understand the language most of the time" (105), according to the black woman character. Instead, she and the old woman counter the language they do not understand with their own version of events, filling the story with their own language. As was the case in "Blossom", the old woman provides a spiritual guidance that celebrates revoicing history and exposing silence. In the end of "At the Lisbon Plate" she and the black woman character exact their ultimate revenge: making the offenders tell their own deeds. "Then we sang 'Jingay . . . ' and made them call out everything that they had done over and over again, as they choked on the oceans of blood from the old hag's juju" (114).

Conclusion

The texts discussed in this thesis take silenced histories and revalue them as a means of improving contemporary society. Joy Kogawa, M. Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand thematize the very silence that has excluded them from mainstream Canadian society as a means of coming into voice. Their voice, however, is complicated by language. As a system of communication wielded by those who have power, language carries ideological baggage. The politics that have excluded these writers on the basis of race and gender is embedded in the language with which they must tell their stories. There are notable differences in the way in which these writers have tackled the dilemma of language to allow their silences to speak and how they position themselves in relation to the nation.

The conventional definition of silence as an absence of words gets revamped in Obasan, Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence, and Sans Souci and Other Stories. As we have seen, Kogawa's novel reconsiders silence as a metaphor for the spiritual attentiveness and quiet faith that is presented as the foundation of real change. Obasan warns against the simplistic belief that words alone constitute activism. That which is on the surface fails to tell the whole story. Silence represents that which goes unsaid and is depicted as an essential supplement to that which is documented. As told through Kogawa's landscape imagery, the underground stream that symbolizes silence nourishes the plants that grow on the prairies. Metaphorically, the Japanese Canadians are those plants seeking to lay down their roots in the native soil. They are sustained more by the underground stream than by the words that fall and pock the earth (Obasan, epigram).

M. Nourbese Philip defines silence in two ways. Looking for Livingstone presents silence as the negative legacy of imperialism. As such, silence communicates how the history and culture of the indigenous Africans were denied by the European encounter. In its positive incarnation, silence is the key to repossessing Black history and gaining voice. The Traveller takes ownership of her own silence. In so doing, she revalues the past and articulates her own subjectivity. The revised concept of silence works within the system of language and stresses the interdependence of silence and words.

In Dionne Brand's fiction silence does not come into its own in the same way it did in the narratives written by Joy Kogawa and M. Nourbese Philip. For Brand, silence describes how Black history and culture have been devalued in white societies. Her stories voice the silence and acknowledge the fact of racial and gender privilege. The past is a "nothing, an emptiness to be made or to fall into" ("Train to Montreal", 23). Silence has to be spoken or it further threatens Brand and her contemporary black women characters.

As Canadian writers, Joy Kogawa, M. Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand's fictions relate back to the nation. Obasan's concern with silence is integrated with its civic concern. The Japanese Canadians in the novel struggle to prove that they are Canadians. Silenced and excluded from the nation's concept of itself through policies of internment and racism, the Japanese Canadians search for a means to gain acceptance and resolve the wounds of the past.

In Looking for Livingstone and Sans Souci and Other Stories, specifically Black history and colonial history are revised rather than Canadian history. Even though there is no mention of the Canadian nation in which M. Nourbese Philip writes in Looking for

Livingstone, the concern the text shows for boundaries and racial and gender privilege write back to the nation. Nourbese Philip's non-fiction has made it clear that as a black writer in Canada she feels external to the nation's mainstream culture. The perception of Canada as a colonial stronghold is evident in Dionne Brand's writing as well. Although Brand has more clearly positioned herself within the larger context of international Black writing as opposed to the tradition of black writing in Canada, her fiction remains quite vocal and specific to the Canadian reality in which her stories are set. Brand contends that unless Blacks speak against the silencing of the past their contemporary situation in Canada is threatened by erasure and silencing. Ultimately, this motivation applies to all the texts discussed in this thesis. They advocate telling even if it means using their silence.

Endnotes

¹ Lecker's portrayal of Ross in this chapter is vicious and personal, but he does offer some words of credit. He writes that "He [Ross] also wanted to make available earlier works of Canadian literature, French-Canadian works in translation, and books by Jews, immigrants, and other minority writers. He succeeded in doing this, and Canadian literature as we know it would scarcely exist without his efforts" (156).

² Quoted in Mukherjee, p. 426.

³ The following prizewinners reflect the diversity of the Canadian population: Governor General's Award: Anne Szumigalski (Poetry, 1995), Dionne Brand (Poetry, 1997), Rohinton Mistry (Fiction, 1991). Winners of the Giller Prize include, Rohinton Mistry (1995) and M.G. Vassanji (1994).

⁴ In an interview published in Other Solitudes Dionne Brand says, "Racism was the focus of my encounter with Canada, not immigrancy" (Other Solitudes, 272).

⁵ Goellnicht cites Claudia Tate's article, "On Black Literary Women and the Evolution of Critical Discourse" in Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, as an example of criticism that interrogates the tendency of literary critics to apply a predominantly humanistic approach to the study of racial minority writing.

⁶ See how Marilyn Russell Rose's article, "Politics into Art: Kogawa's Obasan and the Rhetoric of Fiction," looks at how the Japanese Canadian experience was told by Ken Adachi, Ann Gomer Sunahara, and Barry Broadfoot through non-fiction.

⁷ J. L. Granatstein's article entitled "The Enemy Within?" in Saturday Night (Nov: 1986) justifies the internment of the Japanese based on the context of the Second World War and Canada's political situation.

⁸ The culturally specific "attendance" that Fujita describes is manifested in "silence". Fujita's text is devoted to delineating the strength in this silent attendance. However, almost paradoxically, Fujita concludes by stating that Naomi "clearly chooses speaking over silence" (Fujita, 40).

⁹ Gayle Fujita notes that "'Nikkei' means 'of Japanese ancestry.' Recently it has been used interchangeably with 'Japanese American' by other *nikkei*" (Fujita, 41).

¹⁰ Quoted in Adachi, p. 154.

¹¹ Quoted in Adachi, p. 255.

¹² According to Adachi's research, Vancouver's mayor Cornett and the Royal City Loyal Orange Association called for the suspension of The New Canadian's publication

saying it “exercises a subversive influence and breeds dissatisfaction among the Japanese” (The New Canadian, July 22, 1944, qtd. in Adachi, p. 267). The Justice Department allowed the paper to remain in print.

¹³ Quoted in Adachi, p. 195.

¹⁴ In surveying the writing available on the Japanese internment in Canada, it is evident that during the 1950’s and 1960’s there is a real dearth of published writing on the topic. According to Ann Gomer Sunahara’s extensive bibliography for The Politics of Racism (1981), academic interest in the internment resurfaced in the mid-1970’s and has since produced notable non-fiction texts such as Ken Adachi’s The Enemy That Never Was (1976). Obasan is the first significant account of the internment to appear in Canadian fiction.

¹⁵ Under the War Measures Act, some 60 German Canadians were arrested in Canada (Iino et al., 41).

¹⁶ Nourbese Philip has extended her interrogation of language to the spelling of her own name. Since the publication of Looking for Livingstone Nourbese Philip has changed the spelling of her own name to M. NourbeSe Philip. She explains in A Genealogy of Resistance, “Marlene Philip to M. NourbeSe Philip. As if we are all somehow uncomfortable in these names; wearing them like strange and foreign clothes that generation after generation we keep changing and adjusting for a better fit” (qtd. in “The Outraged Citizen-Poet Speaks Out”, George Elliot Clarke, Globe and Mail, March 28, 1998).

¹⁷ This is one story of the four discussed in this chapter in which the old woman does not succeed as spiritual guide to the past. As Carol Morrell has noted, Brand’s use of the old woman is a form of activism aimed at restoring history and the power of representation through language to young black women: “The examination of old black women’s lives and voices is, like every other topic in Brand’s work, a conscious and overt political challenge. By recording their voices, she frees them into speech long-denied and also provides younger black women with a new source of their own history of oppression and strength” (Morrell, 21).

¹⁸ Sylvia M. Priestley-Brown argues that Blossom’s transformation entails “throwing off the domination of a European, Christian inheritance and language” (98) in favour of her native African spirituality and language.

¹⁹ Brand feels that critics use the word anger all too often to describe black writing and “make absent” the full range of complex emotions that exist in a text. See Other Solitudes, p. 276. At the risk of re-enacting this kind of racist behaviour, I remain convinced that “angrily” is the best word to describe how Brand has depicted white Canada. It is definitely different from the more mournful way Joy Kogawa has described it.

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