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Hawthorne's "Custom House," Said's *Orientalism* and Kogawa's *Obasan*: An Intertextual Reading of an Historical Fiction

"Intertextuality" refers to a relationship between texts that is neither causal nor intentional. That is, the claim is not made that one text "influenced" the other in any direct way. Rather the connection made between the texts is entirely "readerly." In effect, as Linda Hutcheon points out, the reader "activates the intertext" by freely associating texts "more or less at random."¹ Thus there is in theory a virtually unlimited "corpus of texts" which the reader may legitimately connect with the "one before his eyes,"² for potential intertexts include all texts previously experienced by the reader which are then brought to mind by the current reading of another text.

Intertextuality then is related to reader response theory, for it assumes that texts are "created," to some extent, by readers who in the act of reading bring different reading experiences to them, and whose reading of a given text must therefore, by definition, be personal and idiosyncratic. There will indeed be as many "texts" as there are readers who read the same book.

To grant this much, however, is not to deny the compatibility of intertextual reading and close textual reading, despite the apparent polarity of "reader response" theory and "new critical" responses to literature. Indeed it is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate the validity of reading texts against other texts as a way of elucidating the primary text whose close reading is the aim of critical practice.

Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* is a Canadian historical novel which recounts the experience of Japanese-Canadians interned during World War II, but at the same time explores certain problems inherent in writing historical fiction: as self-conscious "historiographic metafiction" *Obasan* draws attention to the instability, the elusiveness, of "history" itself; as minority metafiction it draws attention specifically

to the difficulties implicit in any attempt to give voice to the silenced, underground histories of victimized and marginalized people. And in examining these two aspects of Kogawa's novel, two other texts can be seen to serve as "intertexts" which elucidate Kogawa's vision, Hawthorne's "Custom House" sketch and Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

Hawthorne's "Custom House," his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, is basically an explanation, of how he (for he presents himself as narrator) came to write the story of the scarlet letter and why he is an appropriate historian with respect to this particular tale. As a disaffected civil servant, he tells us, he once came upon a certain package, bound with string, while rooting around in a kind of bureaucratic lumber room in the second story of the custom house where he worked for some years. That package contained not only the scarlet letter itself, an object which he immediately perceived as mysterious (indeed mystical, for it seemed to burn his flesh when he placed it on his breast), but also a letter in the hand of his custom-house ancestor, Mr. Surveyor Pue, which provided him with the outline of the story of Hester Prynne. Moreover, as he read and thought about these documents, the narrator tells us, it began to seem to him that the ancient surveyor had materialized there in the custom house and handed him the materials, then enjoined him to write the history of Hester Prynne as a "filial" duty:

With his own ghostly voice he had exhorted me, on the sacred consideration of my filial duty and reverence towards him — who might reasonably regard himself as my official ancestor — to bring his mouldy and moth-eaten lucubrations before the public.³

In the face of this exhortation to write a "history," however, Hawthorne tells us that at first he seriously doubted his own ability to do so, on the grounds that although he was a writer, work for the custom house had so blunted his sensibility that it was as if he had "bartered" whatever "little power" "over the tribe of unrealities" he might have once possessed for "a pittance of the public gold" (34). In other words, Hawthorne was assuming that to write this history of Hester Prynne, and make it live, would require *imagination*, and his at that point was "a tarnished mirror" (33). Indeed it was only after he was dismissed from the custom house that he began to feel confident that he could write the story — at which point he does write it, freely drawing upon imagination and invention in doing so:

I must not be understood as affirming, that, in the dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced

the characters who figure in it I have invariably confined myself within the limits of the old Surveyor's half a dozen sheets of foolscap. On the contrary, I have allowed myself, as to such points, nearly or altogether as much licence as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline. (32)

Such a statement says much about the narrator's view of history as it informs his fiction. For Hawthorne there is no doubt that truth about the past can be known intuitively by the historian through the imagination. Nor is there constraint upon the teller to stick to "real" facts, for the writer's imagination is like "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (35). History itself is not problematic, for the history of Hester Prynne is readily accessible, intuitively accessible, to Hawthorne-as-narrator at any rate. In fact that relationship between teller and the history told is probably the crux of the matter.

For throughout the lengthy and apparently rambling Custom House sketch, Hawthorne has been establishing one central proposition, namely that the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* is authorized to tell this history of Hester Prynne because he stands in "filial" relation to the culture he records therein. Hawthorne has returned to his "native town" (43), Salem, to work in the dreaded custom house. There he has to face his "official ancestors" (which is to say his cultural ancestors), whom he then parades before us, a rogue's gallery, each of whom is condemned in turn for his greed, ineffectuality and venality. The narrator, moreover, sees himself as the "representative" of "these ancestors of mine," as one who must "take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them . . . may be now and henceforth removed" (9-10).

The Scarlet Letter, then, becomes the record of the accumulated cultural sin of his own people, the puritan population of Salem — a history which he can know because it is part of him, and a history whose discharge is a kind of exorcism of his own guilt as their venal descendent (that he lived, in guilt, in the public pocket for some years underscores his own share in their sin). Once having written *The Scarlet Letter*, moreover, he is free to leave Salem behind him utterly and become "a citizen of somewhere else" (43). Is it an accident that his valedictory statement, "The life of the Custom House lies like a dream behind me" (43), is an inversion of that line in *Paradise Lost* where Adam and Eve leave Paradise behind? Hawthorne now leaves a demonic time and place behind, and that judgmental certainty is his moral preface to the novelistic history which follows.

There is a passage in Kogawa's *Obasan* which quite remarkably parallels the scene in which Hawthorne discovers the scarlet letter and its attendant documents. In Chapter Five of *Obasan*, Naomi Nakane, who narrates the novel, has been brought back to the family home in Granton, Alberta, from Cecil several hours away, because the uncle who had raised her has died. Naomi is a thirty-six-year-old spinster for whom the internment experience, which began when she was five, had meant a decade of suffering: she had lost her home in Vancouver, lost both parents (her mother cut off in Japan at the outbreak of war, and her father dying of tuberculosis during his assignment to a road gang), lost extended family members like her Aunt Emily, who has fled to Toronto, as well as all the family friends she had known as a child; and she had been exiled finally, to a miserable beet farm and stoop labour in Alberta with the now-shrunken family unit, consisting of herself, her brother Stephen, and their aunt, Obasan, and Uncle Isamu.

Naomi's experience of the internment, then, has been direct, and she knows much of what happened to her family. But there is much more that she doesn't know. The novel opens, in fact, with the central historical question which confronts Naomi Nakane: why do she and her uncle make a pilgrimage to a particular coulee each August — the answer to which will enclose the even more central and more underground historical question for Naomi, "What happened to my mother?"

In Chapter Five, the movement toward answers to these historical questions begins as Obasan, whom Naomi has come to comfort, insists that Naomi accompany her to a second-floor attic, where a certain package, destined for Naomi, is supposed to be. That attic is not for Naomi, as it was for Hawthorne, a pleasant lumber room in which to while away an hour stolen from dismal labour. Rather, it is for her a threatening place because it houses history, and a history she imagines as desirable, but also as unsettled, unsettling, and somehow predatory:

I would like to . . . go downstairs and back to bed. But we're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead — all our dead — those who refuse to bury themselves. Like threads of old spider webs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles. Just a glimpse of a wornout patchwork quilt and the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return?⁴

Indeed, when she imagines past history, it is as a consumer of the living:

The past hungers for [Obasan]. Feasts on her. And when its feasting is complete? She will dance and dangle in the dark, like small insect bones, a fearful calligraphy — a dry reminder that once there was life flitting about in the weather. (26)

Given her terror of history, despite her longing for historical answers, it is not surprising that when the package turns up (not in the attic after all, because a forgetful Obasan had removed it and stashed it in a mandarin box under the kitchen table), Naomi resists it.

That parcel bears a certain resemblance to Hawthorne's discovery: it is a bundle of documents concerning the Japanese-Canadian internment experience, bound with string as his was, and, like his, these documents are accompanied by a cover letter from the "sender" — in this case Naomi's Aunt Emily, the crusader for recognition and redress for Japanese-Canadians, who has sent them to Naomi with these instructions, "Write the vision and make it plain, Habakkuk 2:2." Naomi, like Hawthorne, has been nudged by her package: "In seven canonical words," Naomi says, "[Emily] exhorts, cajoles, commands someone — herself? me? to carry on the fight, to be a credit to the family, to strive onwards to the goal. She's the one with the vision" (31).

Like Hawthorne's narrator, then, Naomi has a filial relationship with the documents, for they are about her family and her culture. Indeed, she will prove to be galvanized by certain of the documents even as he was by the scarlet letter; Emily's wartime diary, for example, is said at one point to pierce her "with a peculiar sensation of pain and tenderness" (46), even as the scarlet letter had seemed to sear Hawthorne with "a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat . . ." (31). And, again like Hawthorne's narrator who denies at first that he has the imagination to do this task, Naomi also begins by denying that she possesses the "vision" to write her history, that she can do as bidden.

But the reasons for assuming that the narrator "cannot tell the vision and make it plain," cannot tell the story of an historical injustice, are very different in *Obasan* than they are in the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, and this is crucial to understanding Kogawa's novel: for Naomi doubts not only that she can tell history, but that history can be told at all.

Even before she faces the documents, Naomi protests that historical truth can never be known, that the "ordinary stories" that comprise history are lost, "changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past" (25). When she does read Aunt Emily's

directive, she denies that one can know truth: while Emily may believe that her "vision is truth," Naomi finds the "truth . . . more murky, shadowy and grey" (32), and what is implied is that if there can be no confirmation of *subjective visions* of truth, there can be no faith in *historical versions* of truth. Indeed, the central problem is what Emily herself admits later, that "language . . . can disguise any crime" (34) which means, by extension, that language itself is so unstable, so capable of distortion, that history itself, when the medium is language, is untrustworthy.

There are other reasons for avoiding history, too: it causes pain, says Naomi, to dredge up the suppressed suffering of the past, and "what is past recall is past pain" (45). Besides, it is useless to identify historical injustices: what good does it do "to tell myself the facts," and to endure that pain,

. . . what then? Uncle does not rise up and return to his boats. Dead bones do not take on flesh. What is done, Aunt Emily, is done, is it not? And no doubt it will all happen again, over and over with different faces and names, variations on the same theme. (198-199)

Besides, ought we not to concentrate on present evils rather than those of the past: "Crimes of history, I thought to myself, can stay in history. What we need is to concern ourselves with the injustices of today" (41). All of which seems to endorse silence as a proper response to the demand for reconstructive history — the very silence which Aunt Emily, that intrepid "word warrior," is attempting to displace with her crusade for justice.

Now to this point it is possible to see *Obasan* as rather uncomplicated "historiographic metafiction," a novel in which Kogawa sets up and exploits a point of view which explores the problematics of history-writing even as it writes history.⁵ Naomi's reluctance to write history, her distrust of history, her insistence upon the subjectivity of all that passes for history, dramatizes a modern historiographic position — that history is never unmuddied and never unbiased, and that the present shapes the past even as the past shapes the present, as Naomi herself says so clearly. In a sense then, the difference between Hawthorne's confidence that he can imagine history and thereby reconstruct history authentically, and Kogawa's insistence, through Naomi, that such faith is unjustified, is a simple difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century beliefs about history.

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But to stop there is to stop short, for the structures of the novels signify more complex differences in their views of history. Hawthorne's novel is structured logically, and in linear fashion: the preface records the process by which a particular history became known and the author became confident enough to write it, and, that out of the way, the novel follows. Chronology, implying a simple belief in causal relations, inheres in the form of the novel. In *Obasan*, however, there is a complex synchronicity, for the structure is non-linear and a-chronological, shaped by the consciousness of the narrator as she acts in the present, remembers much from the past, reads (in the present) Emily's documents from the past, and records dreams from both past and present, zig-zagging back and forth through time. The structure implies that history is not simple, and in fact the debate about history permeates the entire novel, Naomi's resistance to history persisting almost until the close of the novel,⁶ even though history has begun to emerge against that resistance as early as the novel's first chapter.

Indeed Kogawa's model for the experience of reconstructing a suppressed history (a history which one carries within one, like a cold white stone, as the epilogue puts it) is a violent one, an invasive one:

Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn't enough, is it? It's your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the anaesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over Aunt Em?
(194)

In contrast to Hawthorne's view of history as a kind of intellectual exercise, then, Kogawa sees this kind of historical experience — minority history which is about something forced upon a people — as visceral, as something which if repressed will be experienced as a growth inside of that people, and which must be painfully excised if health is to be restored.

That pain will be intensified, moreover, if one's culture demands silence of the sufferer. In *Obasan* silence is seen as the alternative to history, as (in the eyes of the Japanese-Canadian community, which includes Naomi at first) a legitimate response to Aunt Emily's demands that they speak out about their collective history. That silence is so painful, however (Naomi says at the outset that she lacks "freeing speech," that the "word is stone," that she hates "the stillness," and "the stone," and "the sealed vault" inside her), that the reader can

only wonder *why* the cultural demand for silence, *why* the denial of history.

One reason is the nature of the crime against the Japanese-Canadian community. As I have argued elsewhere,⁷ Kogawa treats the internment experience as "political rape." And silence is the natural response to the kind of crime wherein such shame is attached to being a victim that victims take refuge in silence and must be coerced to speak out against their assailants.

But quite beyond that, silence, we are told again and again, is Naomi's way, and the Japanese way: as an infant, Naomi is taught silence by her mother, a silence so rigorous that even "the language of eyes" was to be withheld from strangers; she is taught silence by *Obasan*, who rarely speaks, and by Uncle, who goes to his grave with his silence about their mother's fate intact; indeed her dead mother has gone to her grave forbidding that anyone tell her children how she died. No wonder Naomi is the most silent child that Emily has ever known (105) and an adult who believes that "if I speak, I will split open and spill out" (63). And no wonder Aunt Emily, that "tank" (33), that bulldozer of a woman (35), is assumed to be unmarried because she speaks too much, too loud, and incessantly: to want to "[glue] our tongues back on" (36) is shamefully *occidental* in tenor.

And this brings me to my second intertext, Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Clearly *Obasan* is historical fiction which is minority fiction, but as sophisticated minority fiction it offers not only a critique of injustice to a racial minority, but a critique of values within that minority which have tended to reinforce abusive majority attitudes. Kogawa through Naomi makes it clear that Japanese-Canadians are silent largely because it is the "Oriental" way to be silent. In other words, what Edward Said calls "Orientalism" has been so internalized by this Oriental minority, that their silence is an inadvertent bow to the occidental hegemony which legitimizes their abuse.

In *Orientalism*, Said argues that "Orientalism," a set of beliefs about the nature of the "Oriental," is an idea which was very much the creation of western European experience, and particularly the western will to power over the Orient. Thus "Orientalism" is a set of useful ideas, a "discourse" in Foucault's sense, by which the West has long managed, or attempted to manage, the East.⁸ It has been very useful to western hegemony for the West to believe, for example, that Orientals are, in their benign manifestation, passive, tractable and submissive, even as in their malign manifestation they are devious, malevolent and aggressive and needful of containment.

But this set of attitudes toward the Oriental is not only held by the West. Ironically, and perversely, it is also all too often held by the Oriental who lives in the West, where "the electronic, postmodern world" has reinforced these centuries-old "stereotypes" of the Oriental (26-27), and especially certain "latent" assumptions about the "silent indifference," "feminine penetrability," and "supine malleability" (206) of Oriental peoples.

In *Obasan* Kogawa points to the very attitudes toward the Oriental that Said has identified. The novel is about overt and orientally specific racism on the part of white Canadians who interned Japanese-Canadians (but not the descendants of European Axis nations). But what is more important is Kogawa's exploration of latent racism on the part of occidental Canadians, which is then internalized and paralleled by the Orientals' view of themselves. Why does Old Man Gower choose silent, malleable Oriental Naomi as his sexual victim as do the men in the diner and "Percy" in Slokan? Why does Naomi dream of "British" soldiers who forever rape anew, and beautiful Oriental women, naked and bound, whose "only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive" (61)? The one is an internalized imaginative response to the reality of the other, as is further signified by the silence Naomi chooses to keep about her sexual victimization: at the age of five, when she cannot possibly be held responsible for her seduction by this white elder, she does hold herself responsible, saying that the secret she cannot tell her mother "is this: I go to seek Old Man Gower . . . unbidden" (65). The victim has internalized, has become, the perpetrator, and so must remain silent.

And that is why the matter of silence is so central to *Obasan* — it amounts to masochism, to consenting to abuse. The novel is the attempt to reconstruct the microcosmic history of Naomi Nakane, whose mother disappeared and about whose disappearance there is a conspiracy of silence on the part of both living and dead elders. "Kodomo no tame," Uncle says, "for the sake of the children . . .," and because their mother wished it, and because "calmness must be maintained," Naomi and Stephen cannot be told the truth (21). That microcosm, however, signifies a certain macrocosm — Orientalism, in Said's sense, in North America.

Naomi, then, is presented as an incomplete person and a sterile person in the opening lines of the novel, and her journey in *Obasan* is toward seeing the error of the ways of these elders with their false code of silence. When she finally hears translated the words of her grandmother about her mother (how tortuous is the access to history in this

novel), Naomi's response is to chide her dead mother for that silence, because she now knows that historical knowledge engenders compassion — "Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there?" (242) — and without such history generations are empathetically severed from each other: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (243).

In such cases, then, *only* history can set us free, and so in the end Aunt Emily's papers come to be seen by Naomi as communion wafers, instruments of transcendence, however unwilling the communicants (182). And after consuming them Naomi, who finally knows the significance of that yearly August pilgrimage, is finally able to lay to rest those restless ghosts in the family attic:

"My loved ones, rest in your world of stone. Around you flows the underground stream. How bright in the darkness the brooding light. How gentle the colours of rain." (246)

Thus in *Obasan* Kogawa attacks a central and ingrained Japanese-Canadian value, silence, because it has impeded the opening of the floodgates of history. The painful but successful emergence of Naomi Nakane from that cocoon of silence into healing speech, in the monologue which is the novel, authorizes Emily's statements that "the past is the future" (42) and that

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. (49-50)

And this is Kogawa's endorsement of history in the end, for she shows us that despite its problematics history is the instrument of de-marginalization through which minorities may find their voices and challenge whatever oppressive hegemony has delimited them.

Said would approve, of course, as he would of the premise of this paper: that intertextual reading can supplement, and substantively enhance the close critical reading of texts. Indeed intertextuality is one means by which the "text," and "the critic," can be caused to intersect meaningfully with "the world"⁹ — which is the mission of history, whether fictionalized or not.

NOTES

1. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teaching of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 37.
2. Michael Riffaterre, as quoted in Hutcheon, 87.
3. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 33.
4. Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Toronto: Penguin, 1981), 26.
5. Donald C. Goellnicht, in an unpublished conference paper, "Minority History as Metafiction: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," deals very fully with the novel as self-conscious fiction focused on history and historiography. I am grateful to him for permitting me to read this paper during the preparation of my own work on *Obasan*.
6. In Chapter 35, only 20 pages from the end of the novel, Naomi is still resisting the full knowledge of her history: "All this questioning, this clawing at [mother's] grave, is an unseemly thing. Let the inquisition rest tonight. In the week of my Uncle's departure, let there be peace" (229).
7. Marilyn Russell Rose, "Politics into Art: Kogawa's *Obasan* and the Rhetoric of Fiction," *Mosaic* 21. 2-3 (1988): 215-226.
8. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 3.
9. My phrasing here alludes to the title of another of Said's books: in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). Said argues for critical recognition of the "worldliness" of texts, their inevitable moral engagement with the real world of politics and society from which they emerge.