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A Girlhood of Myth, Dreams, and Trauma: Redefining the Asian North American Female Bildungsroman

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A GIRLHOOD OF MYTH, DREAMS, AND TRAUMA:
REDEFINING THE ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Danielle Crawford

May 2013

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A GIRLHOOD OF MYTH, DREAMS, AND TRAUMA:
REDEFINING THE ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN

by

Danielle Crawford

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
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May 2013

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ABSTRACT

A GIRLHOOD OF MYTH, DREAMS, AND TRAUMA: REDEFINING THE ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN

by Danielle Crawford

This thesis examines the use of myth, dreams, and historical trauma within the genre of the Asian North American female bildungsroman. In an attempt to redefine the contested genre of the ethnic bildungsroman, this study analyzes three novels by Asian American and Asian Canadian female authors: Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* (1991), Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), and Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997). Each of these novels is an ethnic bildungsroman that highlights the identity formation of a female protagonist in the midst of historical trauma. This study focuses on the ways in which these texts resist the conventions of the European bildungsroman through the factors of myth, dreams, and historical trauma.

While Philippine folklore is the vehicle through which protagonist Yvonne matures in Brainard's *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, dreams and childhood tales in Kogawa's *Obasan* enable protagonist Naomi to develop and reconnect with her lost mother. Similarly, in Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, protagonist Mai uses the Vietnamese legend of the Trung sisters to develop a transnational identity and reconnect with her mother and motherland. In all three of these novels, myths and dreams function as alternative spaces of development that interrupt the immediate trauma of the texts. Myth, dreams, and trauma are thus integral to the project of redefining the Asian North American female bildungsroman.

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Introduction: Towards Redefining a Genre

The bildungsroman, or coming-of-age narrative, is a prevalent genre in Asian American literature. In particular, the female bildungsroman has been a dominant genre in the works of Asian American women authors, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996), and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1998). This emphasis on the female bildungsroman can be attributed to a preoccupation in Asian American literature with the self and the relation of the ethnic or ethnic American woman to the dominant social order. Patricia Chu asserts that "the bildungsroman is a contested site for Asian American authors seeking both to establish their own and their characters' Americanness and to create a narrative tradition that depicts and validates the Asian American experience on its own terms" (12). While Asian American works may utilize the form of the bildungsroman, they also significantly redefine this genre and position it within a non-Western context.

In her study of the ethnic female bildungsroman, Pin-chia Feng notes that the genre of the bildungsroman is of German origin and begins with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (2). Feng asserts that the traditional bildungsroman contains "a linear progression toward knowledge and social integration, and an upward movement toward spiritual fulfillment" (2). This German genre of linear development is "male-biased" (Feng 3). However, since its inception, the bildungsroman has often been redefined and resituated within literary scholarship. In their study of the female novel of development, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Landland assert that it is

“a tradition among critics of the *Bildungsroman* to expand the concept of the genre: first beyond the German prototypes, then beyond historical circumscription, now beyond the notion of *Bildung* as male and beyond the form of the developmental plot as a linear, foregrounded narrative structure” (13-4). This continual reinvention of the genre not only applies to gender and gender identity, but also to representations of ethnicity.

Working “from the premise that the *Bildungsroman* is not an outdated and exhausted form but one that can be detached from its initial context and used productively across different historical periods and cultures” (Bolaki 9), this study will focus on the ethnic female bildungsroman or, more specifically, the Asian North American female bildungsroman. This study will examine how the factors of myth, dreams, and historical trauma redefine the genre of the ethnic female bildungsroman, as evinced by three novels by Asian American and Asian Canadian female authors: Cecilia Manguerra Brainard’s *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* (1991), Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), and Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997). I argue that through the use of myth, dreams, and historical trauma, these novels significantly alter the traditional female coming-of-age narrative.

In studies of the ethnic bildungsroman, there has been some critical concern regarding the implications of classifying ethnic or ethnic American texts within a definitively European genre. Patricia Chu writes that within Asian American literature “the genre is inevitably transformed [...] because the Asian American subject’s relation to the social order is so different from that of the genre’s original European subjects” (12). In discussing the representation of the social order within this genre, Lisa Lowe

asserts that the “bildungsroman emerged as the primary form for narrating the development of the individual from youthful innocence to civilized maturity, the telos of which is the reconciliation of the individual with the social order” (98). According to Lowe, the bildungsroman is “a narrative of the individual’s relinquishing of particularity and difference through identification with an idealized ‘national’ form of subjectivity” (98). Indeed this reconciliation with the social order and the abolishment of differences can be achieved through the subject’s supposed assimilation within mainstream American society, the acceptance of conventional gender roles, or even the attainment of closure.

However, the texts I have chosen for this study specifically resist the conventions of the European bildungsroman, and instead present female protagonists who do not uphold the linear trajectory of development or assimilation. Each text disrupts any linear cycle through the use of folklore, myth, and dreams. These elements displace the narratives in both time and nation, as many of the myths and dreams pertain to a different locale than the immediate setting of the texts. Unlike the conventional bildungsroman, these novels do not provide a sense of closure, and the trauma of war and dislocation is continually relived and remembered. Such incidents can never be forgotten or wiped clean from the protagonists’ memories and the collective racial memory, and we are left with the sense that retelling these instances of trauma is the closest one can ever get to any type of closure. This form of anti-closure is evident at the end of Brainard’s novel when Yvonne states, “We had all experienced a story that needed to be told, that needed never to be forgotten” (216).

Associating an Asian American or Asian Canadian text with the traditional European genre of the bildungsroman indeed runs the risk of appropriating ethnic texts into a Eurocentric discourse. Lowe writes that “in privileging a nineteenth-century European genre as the model to be approximated, Asian American literature is cast as imitation, mimicry, the underdeveloped other” (45). However, we can abolish this form of mimicry if we expand the definition of the ethnic female bildungsroman itself, creating a definition that does not belong solely to the European, and often patriarchal, context of the genre’s initiation. Instead, I propose a redefining of this genre within a different cultural context that exists outside of the norms of linear development, integration, and closure. Instead of risking appropriation and mimicry by reading ethnic texts within the framework of a European genre, the novels of this study have the potential to both redefine and decolonize a contested genre. Thus, rather than essentializing Asian North American texts by making them fit into Eurocentric models, this study will aim to redefine the genre of the ethnic female bildungsroman by examining the factors of historical trauma, myth, and dreams. Building off of Chu’s assertion that “Asian American writers [...] turn to the bildungsroman for a repertoire of representational conventions that purport to transcend such political differences while providing an idiom for addressing them indirectly” (16), this thesis will focus on the subversive potential of the ethnic bildungsroman and its ability to rewrite and re-imagine historical trauma through the use of myths and dreams.

A number of critical studies have focused on the genre of the ethnic bildungsroman and attempted to define it. In her examination of the ethnic female

bildungsroman, Pin-chia Feng defines the genre as “any writing by an ethnic woman about the identity formation of an ethnic woman, whether fictional or autobiographical in form, chronologically or retrospectively in plot” (15). Feng’s definition is very inclusive, and has been critiqued by Jennifer Ann Ho in her study of the impact of consumption and food within the Asian American bildungsroman. Ho writes that “although I understand Feng’s project as a recuperation of a genre that has traditionally excluded both ethnic American and women writers, her widely inclusive definition of the genre [...] results in too broad an analysis” (9). Ho notes that Feng’s “readings preclude a nuanced understanding of how ethnicity—and Asian-ethnic subject formation in particular—transforms the traditional coming-of-age-narrative” (9). In a different study on this genre, Stella Bolaki asserts that the bildungsroman itself is a “notoriously slippery category,” and that genres are essentially “constructions whose literary and social functions change depending on who defines them and when” (10). Bolaki argues that the ethnic American bildungsroman is a “hybrid space” that “offers an appropriate site for the negotiation of a number of enduring and contentious tensions in ethnic American writing” (11).

This study will add to these definitions of the ethnic female bildungsroman by examining the genre through the specific lenses of historical trauma, myth, and dreams. The three novels of this study closely follow the coming of age of a female protagonist within the backdrop of historical trauma. In Brainard’s Filipina American novel, the young protagonist Yvonne Macaraig grows up amidst the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during WWII. Cao’s Vietnamese American text delineates the struggles of

dislocation and immigration, as adolescent protagonist Mai and her mother move to Virginia as Vietnam War refugees. Lastly, Joy Kogawa's Japanese Canadian novel, *Obasan*, depicts the nonlinear development of Naomi, a Canadian born *Nisei*, who must confront her painful memories of childhood during the internment and relocation of Japanese Canadians during WWII.

In addition to being grounded in the historical trauma of warfare, relocation, and displacement, all three of these texts heavily utilize myth, folklore, and dreams. This study will focus on the juxtaposition of myth and trauma in these novels, particularly emphasizing how these elements impact both the development of the female protagonists, as well as the definition of the ethnic bildungsroman itself. I argue that myths and dreams are subversive within these novels, as they are able to disrupt and dislocate instances of historical trauma—just as the female protagonists themselves are physically dislocated within the texts. Myth, folklore, and dreams enable the characters to construct an alternative selfhood, grounded in female resistance and strength, which starkly contrasts the oppression and hardship of their present situations.

The significance of trauma in ethnic and ethnic American literature has been noted in a number of critical studies. In her analysis of the works of Jamaica Kincaid, Bolaki asserts “that trauma plays an important role in the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*” (36). In her examination of trauma within Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, Michelle Balaev notes that trauma in the novel “is an experience defined by personal peculiarities and social contingencies, such as culture, family ties, national myths, and the relationship to a place, specifically the rural lands in the Mekong Delta” (xviii). Balaev warns against conflating

the individual and the whole in trauma theory, and states that a “central thematic dynamic in novels that describe suffering is thus located in representation of the individual experience of trauma that necessarily oscillates between the private and public meanings, between personal and social paradigms” (17). While historical trauma in ethnic literature indeed intersects with both the private and public spheres, the ethnic narrative can also be transgressive in its relationship to history. In his analysis of *Obasan*, David Palumbo-Liu asserts that the “ethnic narrative presents an occasion for a subversive revision of the dominant version of history; it gives voice to a text muted by dominant historical referents; and it makes possible an imaginative invention of a self beyond the limits of the historical representations available to the ethnic subject” (211). In this sense, Brainard, Kogawa, and Cao’s novels rewrite historical trauma, and counter the hegemonic narratives of history through the voices of their female protagonists.

While all three authors essentially revise the dominant historical record within the genre of a coming-of-age narrative, they also intertwine trauma with myth. In her interdisciplinary study of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and sexual abuse, Kalí Tal identifies “mythologization” as “cultural coping” (6). She states, “Mythologization works by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives (twice—and thrice—told tales that come to represent ‘the story’ of the trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative” (Tal 6). At first glance, one could assume that myth in these narratives works to stabilize and normalize trauma. However, upon examining the function of myth in these novels more deeply, I would contend that myth is utilized for an entirely different purpose. Instead of

containing trauma, myth is used as an alternative space for development and identity formation. While trauma exists and cannot be erased, myth nonetheless subverts trauma within a larger discourse of female development.

These novels are transgressive in their use of genre, but they are also transgressive in their use of myth. Each text utilizes myth and folklore, though to different extents. Brainard heavily intertwines Philippine folklore and the tradition of the oral epic within her novel, Kogawa's novel highlights the Japanese folktale of Momotaro, and Cao's text directly uses national myths and legends. This study will examine the transformative potential of myths when juxtaposed against the historical trauma of warfare, relocation, and displacement. I argue that myth itself is a gendered discourse in the texts that creates an alternative space of female resistance. Wenying Xu proposes a similar view in her study of the use of myth within Amy Tan's novels. Xu argues that women have the ability to "take possession of myths and make them produce truths that enable women to revise their self-understanding and thus gain a renewed sense of self. Their production of truths is an act of transgression against established norms and ideals, facilitating the loosening of the foundations of female subject constitution" (85-6). In accordance with Xu's analysis, this study will also situate myth as transgressive; as such, myth is able to disrupt historical trauma and is closely tied to the development of the female protagonists.

In addition to the importance of myth, dreams are also a significant factor within the three novels. In Brainard's text, the protagonist Yvonne has an eerie dream of death after the likelihood of the Japanese occupation is announced. In Cao's novel, Mai dreams

of her recently deceased mother on the night before her first day of college. Kogawa's *Obasan* perhaps focuses the most heavily on dreams, as Naomi experiences a series of dreams and nightmares throughout her attempt to retrace her childhood and her family's separation. In her study of the novel, Gurleen Grewal notes the importance of Naomi's Grand Inquisitor dream. Grewal asserts that this dream is closely connected to Naomi's own formation of selfhood: "The fact that Naomi is ready to attend to her mother's voicelessness is evident from her Grand Inquisitor dream in which her mother appears dancing in a flower ceremony holding in her mouth a rose" (153). In agreement with this study, I propose that like myth, dreams in all three of the novels also provide alternative spaces that disrupt the temporality and trauma of the narratives. They are another vehicle for the female protagonists' formation of selfhood and identity.

Within the framework of myth and dreams, this study will also focus on the significance of the mother-daughter relationship within the Asian North American bildungsroman. In all three of the narratives, the protagonists' relationships with their mothers directly impact their identity formation. While the cook Laydan functions as a type of second mother figure to Yvonne in Brainard's novel, Mai's relationship with her mother in Cao's novel is integral to her maturation and her discovery of her family's past secrets. In *Obasan* the absence of Naomi's mother resonates throughout the text, and it is the discovery of her mother's death during the Nagasaki atomic bombing that propels the protagonist's development. Feng writes that "for a woman writer, the return of the repressed mother figure plays an important role in her narrative of *Bildung*" (21). Wendy Ho also analyzes the significance of mother-daughter relations in Amy Tan's *The Joy*

Luck Club, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*. She asserts that these "mother-daughter stories [...] continue to challenge the politics of domination from multiple discursive communities and institutions—in other words, challenging that which makes difficult the building of political solidarities within and among diverse racial-ethnic groups, classes, genders, sexualities" (Ho 23). This study will also address how the mother-daughter relationships in these Asian American and Asian Canadian texts function as discursive spaces that are closely connected to the female characters' development and their various negotiations with trauma.

In examining these texts, it is necessary to ask how we define the genre of the ethnic female bildungsroman, and how it differs from the traditional European genre. In what ways do the Asian North American novels *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, *Obasan*, and *Monkey Bridge* help to redefine and resituate the contested space of the bildungsroman? In addressing these questions of genre, the factors of historical trauma, myth, and dreams are especially relevant. In each of the novels, the female protagonists utilize myths and dreams as forms of escape from trauma; they are elements which disrupt the temporality and locale of the different narratives. Furthermore, myths and dreams are transgressive in their ability to resist linear models of development, creating alternative spaces for the characters' formation of selfhood. Building off of other critical works, I intend to add to this ongoing debate on genre, while providing another framework from which to understand the implications of myth, dreams, and trauma within the Asian North American bildungsroman.

Lastly, the remainder of this introduction will provide a brief overview of the three chapters within this thesis. Chapter One, titled “Performing the Epic, Performing Identity: Negotiating Trauma through Folklore in Brainard’s *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*,” examines the intersections of historical trauma, Philippine myth and folklore, and the protagonist Yvonne’s development. Yvonne grows up amidst the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during WWII, and her experiences are saturated with violence. As her family joins the guerrilla forces of Ubec, Yvonne retells the Philippine oral epics that their cook Laydan teaches her. This chapter focuses on Yvonne’s use of folklore and Philippine oral epics as a means to escape the horrors of warfare. By performing these epics, Yvonne is able to construct an alternative identity that disrupts and displaces the trauma of her surroundings. She uses folklore to create a persona of female resistance that propels her own development and maturation.

Chapter Two, titled “Re-envisioning Loss and Dislocation: Interpreting Dreams and Childhood Tales in Kogawa’s *Obasan*,” discusses the significance of protagonist Naomi’s dreams, folktales, and fairy tales within the context of the character’s traumatic memories of her childhood, which takes place during the internment and relocation of Japanese Canadians during WWII. In this non-linear narrative, which begins 31 years after the internment, Naomi uses her memories, her Aunt Emily’s letters and historical documents, and her own poignant dreams and childhood tales to revisit the painful past of her family’s dispersal, relocation, and dispossession, as well as her own sexual molestation. In this chapter, I argue that Naomi’s dreams are a vehicle through which she expresses both the trauma of her loss as well as the burgeoning sense of her own identity.

While the tale of Momotaro reflects the personal trauma of her family's separation, Naomi uses other childhood fairy tales as a filter through which to explain and rationalize the traumatic events of her childhood. The culmination of Naomi's development is signified by the discovery of her mother's fate, wherein she learns that her mother was killed during the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Naomi is able to revive her long lost mother-daughter relationship in the text through a cycle of dreams. In this sense, dreams in Kogawa's text allow Naomi to recuperate her family and counteract the personal losses engendered by the internment and the bombing of WWII.

Chapter Three, titled "Developing a Transnational Identity, Reconnecting with the Motherland: The Trung Sisters and National Myths in Cao's *Monkey Bridge*," examines the connection between myth, legend, and the trauma of the Vietnam War. The protagonist Mai and her mother Thanh are war refugees who are forced to flee their homeland in South Vietnam and settle in Virginia. Although they are physically dislocated within the narrative, this chapter focuses on Mai's use of national myths and legends to connect with the land and culture she left behind. In particular, the legend of the Trung sisters enables adolescent Mai to develop a transnational identity that resists both the trauma of her displacement and the pressures of assimilation. Mai's development is also closely linked to her relationship with her mother. The mother-daughter relation in the text plays an active role in shaping Mai's connection to the motherland itself.

Chapter One

Performing the Epic, Performing Identity:

Negotiating Trauma through Folklore in Brainard's *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* is a historical novel set during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during WWII. Originally published in 1991 under the title *Song of Yvonne* and "written in the wake of the collapse of the Marcos regime" (Grice 185), Brainard's text depicts both the historical trauma of the war and the development and maturation of her protagonist, nine-year-old Yvonne Macaraig. Living with her family in the fictional city of Ubec, an analog for Cebu, Yvonne and her family flee their home when the Japanese invasion begins. Her father joins the guerrilla forces in Mindanao, and throughout the course of three years she and her family live a life of constant wandering on the outskirts of society. Helena Grice writes that while the novel "is about a national struggle of war, this is an individual girl's coming-of-age story, and is intimately bound up with Yvonne's emerging voice" (190). Indeed Brainard's text is a Filipina American bildungsroman that closely follows Yvonne's maturation in the midst of both personal and political trauma.

However, this text also deviates from the traditional genre of the bildungsroman in significant ways. While the course of events in the text is generally chronological, Yvonne's frequent use of myth and her retelling of Philippine oral epics displace the narrative in time and space. Yvonne's performance of folklore disrupts the "linear progression" (Feng 2) of the bildungsroman; most importantly, the protagonist's relationship to Philippine myths and oral epics is intimately tied to her development and

maturation. Brainard writes that Laydan, the family cook and a second mother figure for Yvonne, “used to be an epic singer, but [...] the gods and goddesses had punished her, and now she could only speak in a lifeless voice. Laydan had learned quickly from her teacher, Inuk, and she had entertained the notion that she could be as great as he was. For her vanity, the gods took away her gift. But her stories were still good” (30). While Laydan no longer performs and sings these epics herself, she often tells them to Yvonne. It is namely through these stories and myths that Yvonne both comes of age and negotiates with the trauma of her surroundings.

In her analysis of the novel, Helena Grice defines the oral interchange of stories between Laydan and Yvonne as “talk-story.” She notes that this form of communication “becomes almost a counter-narrative as it cuts across the historical narrative with more whimsical and optimistic versions of life experience at strategic moments in the text” (Grice 182). Grice asserts that this “talk-story” is a gendered discourse that is closely connected to Yvonne’s maturation: “Since it is women who share these songs and impart these stories, the burden of transmitting culture falls to them. Laydan’s stories become the medium through which the older woman teaches the younger defiance, strength of spirit, and resistance against all forms of subjugation” (191). Thus “talk-story” is a form of female defiance that serves as “therapeutic mythology” (Grice 191) during a time of extensive violence. Building off of Grice’s analysis of “talk-story” in the novel, I argue that the Philippine oral epics themselves are a gendered discourse that create an alternative space of female resistance and foster the character’s development.

Furthermore, Yvonne's performance of these epics allows her to mature as an individual, and embody the heroic and resilient personas of these stories.

In his study of the political significance of the performance of folklore during Pilipino Cultural Nights (PCN), Theodore Gonzalves states, "Performing a play or choreographing dances offers not only the possibility of entertainment, but also the chance to encounter the past in a corporeal fashion, to sustain an oblique critique of American assimilation, or to call a community into being" (18-9). In the case of Brainard's novel, Yvonne's performance of Philippine folklore is subversive in its ability to disrupt the historical trauma of the text and provide alternative identities of female resistance, as embodied in figures such as the woman warrior Bongkatolan. In addition to the transgressive nature of Yvonne's performance of oral epics, the character's reliance on myth also allows her to negotiate the violence and horrors of warfare. Grice writes that "Yvonne's storytelling inheritance from Laydan provides the means by which she is able to rationalize and process the inexplicably violent events of her daily life" (191). She states that "Yvonne's spirit takes refuge in the Philippine folktales and epic stories related to her by Laydan. These are narratives of resistance, of courage and resilience in the face of overwhelming odds, of the accomplishment of marvelous feats in the face of adversity, and blend mythic and magical elements in quasi-fairytale fashion" (Grice 190). This analysis will focus on Yvonne's relationship to and performance of Philippine oral epics, as she uses Laydan's stories as both a vehicle for her development and a means to subvert the trauma of warfare.

While myths constitute the most significant space of development in the text, dreams also hold an important function, as they foreshadow traumatic events. Towards the beginning of the novel, after the likelihood of the Japanese occupation is announced, Yvonne has an eerie dream that is saturated with imagery of death. She walks with her grandfather and cousin Esperanza “near a cemetery where [they] spotted a human skull. It sat on the white sand, so perfectly white itself that it was only the light and shadow pattern created by the sunlight streaming through the eyesockets that allowed [them] to recognize it” (22). In the dream, this skull is unearthed from a grave in the cemetery, and the family quickly reburies it. Yvonne’s dream of death foreshadows the impending trauma of the war. Just as the skull is unearthed, violence and death will similarly be unearthed in yet another war in the Philippines.

After Yvonne’s unsettling dream of death, Laydan has a more ambiguous dream regarding her relationship to her past teacher of the epics, Inuk. Laydan relates this dream to Esperanza and Yvonne, stating “‘I came across a mountain spring, flowing sideways from a cliff. I cupped my hands to collect water and taste it. [...] Then a strange thing happened—I found this mouth in my hands. It was wide open, singing the epic about the hero Tuwaang’” (30). Laydan reads this dream as a favorable sign, and hopes that it will help her understand Inuk’s enigmatic command to “‘become the epic’” (30). The character is troubled by these words throughout the novel, as she struggles to comprehend what they mean. This statement itself takes on particular significance with Yvonne, who essentially does become the epics that she retells. However, Laydan’s

dream is important because it marks her repressed desire to sing and perform the epic. It also foreshadows Laydan's pivotal performance later in the text.

Once Laydan is done discussing her dream with the girls, she recites a Filipino creation myth regarding the origin of the archipelago and the first man and woman:

In the beginning, there existed the Sky, the Water, and a magnificent bird. There were no islands and continents then, and the bird had to fly constantly. After flapping his wings and gliding about for a long time, the bird grew weary. He thought to himself: I need a rock or bit of land to rest on. He spread his wings and flew on and on, searching for a resting place, but found none. (31)

This bird incites a fight between the Water and Sky, which results in the creation of "islands and continents" (31), namely the archipelago of the Philippines. Later, the bird pecks at a bamboo that comes ashore one of the islands. Laydan states that the bird "peered inside and found a man sleeping. The man was a fine creature with strong limbs, and the bird became jealous" (31). Then another bamboo splits open that contains "a woman with gleaming brown skin and long hair shimmering depths of ebony" (31). Laydan concludes that the "woman and man lived on the beautiful island and became the parents of all people" (32). This creation myth can be directly juxtaposed with the Biblical tale of Adam and Eve. However, Herminia Meñez notes that this creation myth depicts decidedly different gender relations than "the Biblical narrative about Adam and Eve in which the male principle is clearly superior" (14). Meñez states that in "Philippine mythology, the simultaneous emergence of the archetypal pair of human beings appears to symbolize idealized gender relations" (14). In fact, the woman is the most active and defiant human in the myth, as she grabs the trickster "bird's colorful tail

and pull[s] with all her might” when she catches the animal “attacking the man” (32). The woman physically protects the man, and unlike Eve, she is not punished.

This creation myth denotes equality in gender relations, as well as a model of female defiance. Laydan’s first story of the text thus provides a framework of female strength and resistance in the narrative, a theme which reoccurs in later myths.

Moreover, Yvonne’s reaction to this creation myth is equally significant: “When Laydan had finished, I clapped my hands; I truly loved her tales. They brought me to places I had never been; they made me see people (and creatures) in a way that I could never see in my ordinary day-to-day life” (32). Yvonne views these myths as a type of fantastic escape from her own world. Her reaction demonstrates her affinity for Laydan’s stories, hinting that her development will be closely connected to these myths and the gendered identities that they portray.

When Yvonne’s family realizes that the Japanese will invade Ubec, her father decides that they will move to Mindanao, leaving her aunt, cousin, and grandfather behind in the city. In their new life, they are constantly travelling and in fear of coming across Japanese soldiers. Yvonne’s father joins the guerilla forces of the war, and their lives become permeated with the threat of death. One day, while Laydan and Yvonne are in the jungle gathering firewood, Laydan is reminded of her earlier dream. After climbing a rock, Yvonne notes that Laydan “began singing about Tuwaang. She sang in flawless pitch and tone. Everyone abandoned their tasks and we made our way back to Laydan. We found her up on the rock singing, and even her face became animated, and her hands gestured in the air” (48). Brainard writes that Laydan’s “voice travelled

through the jungle and for the longest time, we stood there mesmerized by her singing” (48). Laydan’s spontaneous performance of the epic disrupts the immediate trauma of the text, as the characters are mesmerized by her. Foreshadowed by her dream, Laydan’s song allows the family to experience a brief “reverie” (48). The character is able to recuperate her talents in this final performance.

As Yvonne listens to Laydan sing the epic of Tuwaang, she is able to visualize the events of the story: “I pictured in my head the epic hero, Tuwaang, on his journey to save the maiden who spun the rainbow. The beautiful maiden was fleeing from the evil giant with a fire-shooting wand. After a long battle, Tuwaang defeated the giant. Using his magic betel nut, Tuwaang restored life to the devastated places” (48). Laydan’s song reflects Yvonne’s later performance of this same epic. The epic itself reveals the desire of Yvonne and her family to also bring back “life to the devastated places” (48) caused by the war. In this sense, Laydan’s performance of folklore interrupts the linear progression of the narrative and the characters’ actions. It also implies a sense of hope and regeneration in the midst of destruction.

During this time period, Yvonne’s mother is pregnant with her second child. When the family is moving through the jungle to avoid approaching Japanese soldiers, her water suddenly breaks. The mother is forced to hide in a nearby bush and give birth, but her child is stillborn due to lack of medical attention. The family is forced to bury Yvonne’s little brother and keep moving. When they arrive at Doc Meñez’s house, they discover that his wife and children have been brutally murdered while the doctor was out. Yvonne is shocked by both the death of the doctor’s children as well as the death of her

little brother; she wonders what will happen to them in the afterlife. In order to comfort her, Laydan tells Yvonne of the goddess Meybuyan: ““She lives near the underworld river, do you recall? She has breasts all over her body. You see, she is a kind goddess, and she nurses the infants who are too young to cross the river to the land of the souls. I am sure that Meybuyan is taking care of your brother and the doctor’s children”” (61). Yvonne notes that Laydan’s “words were calm and soothing” (61). Laydan uses the maternal goddess Meybuyan to mitigate the trauma of Yvonne’s loss. Again, the character focuses on a female figure in Philippine mythology. Through this goddess/mother, Yvonne’s fear for the deceased children is partially alleviated.

Shortly after this incident, Yvonne and her family move to a hut higher up in the mountains, where Yvonne’s mother, Angeling, has a confrontation with a young Japanese soldier. The soldier demands to take one of their chickens in order to feed his captain. However, Angeling adamantly refuses to give him their chicken: “Mama stood there, with feet astride, left hand on her hip, right hand gripping the machete, head thrown back. Under her piercing gaze, the man wavered, then he stomped away without saying another word” (72). Yvonne watches her mother’s act of resistance with admiration, comparing her to the woman warrior Bongkatolan. She then retells the myth of this woman warrior:

Seeing Mama that way made me think of Bongkatolan, the woman warrior with dark hair reaching her ankles. In battle she wore clothes woven and beaded by the goddesses who loved her. Bamboo shield and sword in her hands, hair whipping in the wind, Bongkatolan equaled the finest men warriors. Once, her brother, Agyu, was captured by the enemy and she fearlessly ran into their midst. Swinging her sword to the left and to the right, Bongkatolan killed a dozen men, thus allowing her brother and herself to escape. (72)

Yvonne elevates her mother's act of defiance to mythic status, as she associates her with the heroic woman warrior. Angeling's confrontation with the Japanese soldier becomes an epic fight; the character identifies her mother as a persona of female strength who is equal, if not superior, to men in battle. However, unlike the fearless Bongkatolan, Angeling is deeply troubled by her encounter with the soldier: "After the Japanese soldier left, Mama threw up and shook violently for a long time. That night, fearful that the soldier would return with others, Nida and Mama slept with .45 revolvers under their pillows" (73). Nonetheless, Yvonne continues to connect this incident to the heroic and undefeatable Bongkatolan, revealing "a powerful juxtaposition, between the adult world of war and collision [...] and the compelling yet immature visionary and mythic realm of storytelling" (Grice 191).

In her study of Philippine folklore, Herminia Meñez notes the importance of woman warrior figures, such as Matabagka and Bolak Sunday, as they reflect the equality of gender relations in pre-colonial Philippines:

An animist religion which makes available magical power and spiritual potency to both sexes, an economy based on cooperative production between men and women, and a bilateral social system which provides for their equal access to economic resources, constitute the framework for interpreting the Philippine warrior heroine, and her significant departure from European and Anglo-American counterparts. (28-9)

Indeed the woman warrior found in Philippine mythology is significantly different from warrior heroines in Anglo-American folklore. In her analysis of Anglo-American female warrior ballads, Dianne Dugaw notes that this female warrior is an "engagingly indecorous heroine, who disguising herself as a man, ventures off to sea or battle" (23). Dugaw asserts, "There are 115 Anglo-American ballads about women soldiers and

sailors” (25). The critic references ballads such as “Jack Monroe,” wherein the heroine Mollie, a merchant’s daughter who is in love with a seaman, becomes separated from him and “undertakes her disguise, passes muster with a recruiting officer, sets off in search of her love, tests his loyalty [...] rescues and nurses him when he is wounded, returns with him [...] and, in this version, marries her Jack” (Dugaw 27). However, heroines such as Mollie decidedly differ from Philippine warrior heroines, as they are only granted access to heroism “at the expense of their sexual identity, for it is only in their male disguise that they can act the heroic part” (Meñez 26). In contrast, Bongkatolan does not disguise herself as a man when fighting. Instead, she has “dark hair reaching her ankles” and her “hair whip[s] in the wind” (72) while in battle. This open display of her hair emphasizes her female sexual identity, an identity which she does not need to hide during battle. Brainard thus uses a myth of female resistance that diverges significantly from Western folklore. In doing so, she provides Yvonne with a different model of gender identity, and also grounds her bildungsroman within a cultural context outside of the Western tradition. Brainard uses such Philippine folklore to influence Yvonne’s development, as well as revise the genre of the bildungsroman in terms of non-Western cultural values and gender relations.

The figure of Bongkatolan assumes more significance when Yvonne reenacts her mother’s confrontation for Governor Alvarez: “I stood up and told the story, gesturing to show where the man had stood, making guttural sounds to show how the Japanese soldier had made his demands, standing defiantly as Mama had done, with the machete in her hand” (89). Yvonne remarks to Alvarez that her mother was like Bongkatolan in that

instant. Interestingly enough, while Yvonne reenacts this moment, she takes on the identity of the woman warrior herself: “I twirled around, waving an imaginary sword in my hand. I completed my turn with my feet astride, the way Mama had stood, the way Bongkatolan might have stood; and for a fraction of a lifetime, I *was* Mama, I *was* Bongkatolan” (89). In this scene, Yvonne’s performance of her mother’s act of resistance is again connected to the mythic figure of the woman warrior. In performing this myth, we see Yvonne take on a new identity. Not only does she become her mother, but she becomes Bongkatolan herself. Yvonne’s performance of myth, as initiated by her mother’s defiance, becomes a performance of identity itself. By taking on the female warrior persona of Bongkatolan, Yvonne both performs and adopts an identity of female resistance that counteracts the ongoing trauma of the war and influences her own subjectivity.

Yvonne’s performance for Governor Alvarez is soon followed by a more dramatic and pivotal performance of a Philippine folk epic. When Laydan dies, she urges Yvonne never to forget her stories. Yvonne responds, “I will always remember your stories, Laydan” (94). After her family buries Laydan, Yvonne realizes that “what Laydan would have really wanted me to do was to tell one of her stories. To ease my grief and to honor Laydan I told the story about her beloved epic hero, Tuwaang, and the Maiden of the Buhong Sky” (94-5). In this scene, Yvonne directly uses her performance of the epic to ease the trauma of her loss. The story itself is based on a central conflict in which a giant destroys the sky because the Maiden disappears and refuses to marry him. Yvonne states that the “Maiden of the Buhong Sky had taken refuge on earth. She astonished

Lord Batooy and his people when one day she appeared clothed in spun fragments of the rainbow. She was weeping and before Lord Batooy could decide what to do, she made herself invisible and hid in the castle” (95). The mortal Tuwaang comes to Lord Batooy’s kingdom and defeats the giant in a battle. Afterwards, Tuwaang restores life to the kingdom by using the juice of a magic betel nut. He “rubbed betel juice on the dead, who miraculously came back to life. He squeezed the juice onto the ground, trees, and bushes so life returned to Lord Batooy’s kingdom” (97). We can view this epic tale as a metaphor for the devastation and destruction caused by the war, and its impact on the Philippine landscape. The story provides a sense of hope, mirroring Yvonne’s own desire to undo the damage done by the war. Yvonne’s performance also interrupts the immediate trauma of the text.

However, most importantly, Yvonne’s performance of this oral epic is integral to her development as an individual. After finishing the story, Yvonne describes how her performance affects those around her:

Before I started telling the story, the people around me had been weeping. It was not just Laydan’s death that they cried about; there were many reasons for us to shed tears. But when I finished, I could feel that some peace or hope had settled in them. Perhaps they were thinking that one day soon our sun would shine over us. I myself was surprised that I remembered all of Laydan’s story; I did not forget a single line. I could not sing it, as Inuk must have, but I said all of it, and I told it well. Laydan would have been proud of me. (97)

Yvonne’s oral retelling of the epic marks a pivotal point in her development. The character forges her own identity through her “storytelling inheritance from Laydan” (Grice 191). Helena Grice asserts that this moment in the text is “a truly communal experience” (192). She states that “when Yvonne begins to continue Laydan’s ‘talk-

story' legacy, she comes of age" (Grice 192). As such, Yvonne's performance of this epic is the catalyst for her maturation. She assumes Laydan's role as story teller, and takes pride in her ability to flawlessly recite the epic. Yvonne essentially comes of age through her performance of myth and her relationship with Laydan.

While this performance is a pivotal moment in her maturation, Yvonne continues to value and retell Laydan's epics as the war progresses. She states, "I remembered Laydan as she lay dying, telling me not to forget the stories. Her stories—how could any person forget Laydan's wonderful stories? Her stories were part of my soul; they sustained my spirit" (123). Yvonne acknowledges the importance of these myths and epic tales in relation to her development and identity. The protagonist uses the tales as a means of escape from the war, and a vehicle through which to negotiate the trauma around her. When the character "Nida is forced to offer her body to the Japanese for sex" (Grice 190), her liaison results in pregnancy. In order to explain this incident, Yvonne compares Nida's situation to the Maiden of Monawon: "That afternoon, Nida and her problem made me imagine she was the Maiden of Monawon under the evil clutches of the Deathless Man. Laydan's long and beautiful story was about how Tuwaang saved the Maiden" (123). Such narratives provide Yvonne with a foundation of strength and defiance that allows her to explain and negotiate circumstances of hardship.

In addition to the importance of these myths, Yvonne's relationship with Laydan is also a significant factor in her development. While Laydan provides Yvonne with the epics that she increasingly relies on, the character also acts as a second mother figure to her:

In bed alone, I liked to think of Laydan's stories, and I would run them through my head one by one, picturing Laydan as she looked when she told them to me. I missed Laydan, her stories, her constancy, her soothing presence. Her absence made me feel askew, like a blind person without his guide. All my life there had been Laydan. When Esperanza and I were small, Laydan had changed our diapers; she taught us to eat crisp green onions and sautéed garlic. I could see her cooking in the dirty kitchen or bargaining at the rowdy open market, or applying some pultice to Esperanza's cut or bruise. She had always been there for me to observe, to follow around. (148)

Yvonne greatly misses Laydan and reveals that in addition to her stories, she has depended on Laydan for nurture and care. While Yvonne's biological mother is indeed important to her, it is clear that the character also views Laydan as a mother figure. Yvonne has a very close, maternal connection with Laydan. Even after her death, Laydan continues to comfort her with the legacy of her epics. In this sense, Yvonne's relationship with Laydan is integral to her development as a character. The relationship forms the basis of Yvonne's identity formation, and is the source of the mythic stories she depends on.

As the narrative progresses, Yvonne becomes increasingly reliant on Laydan's epics. The character uses them to counter the violence and uncertainty of their daily lives:

And so in the silence of my imagination, I brought Laydan and her stories back to life. But I was careful to keep all these secret. These imaginings were the one thing that no one could ever take away from me, and I guarded them jealously. The Japanese could storm into our house and kill everybody, including me—there was nothing definite in our lives, life was riddled with uncertainties—but Laydan's beautiful stories, and her memory, would always be with me. No one, not the cruelest Japanese, could ever take them away, ever destroy them. (148-9)

Laydan's stories are thus essential to Yvonne's identity and her coping with trauma. They are her one vehicle of escape from the war, and provide an alternative space for her development that transmutes the threats of her everyday life. Yvonne derives a comfort and security from myths that directly juxtapose the instability of her surroundings. Furthermore, as Grice asserts that "talk-story" in the text is "often non-linear or non-objective" (192), myths are also able to disrupt the linear progression of trauma in the novel. Thus, Yvonne's reliance on myth is also connected to its ability to displace or dislocate the trauma of warfare.

Later in the narrative, Yvonne's father goes away on a dangerous mission. When he does not return, she and her mother think he might be dead. In order to deal with this possible loss, Yvonne remembers the story of the mythic woman Bolak Sunday, who had to search for her husband's soul in the underworld:

The thought entered my head that if Papa were dead, we would have to find his spirit, just as Bolak Sunday did. Laydan had a story about this brave and faithful woman, Bolak Sunday. Her husband, Sandayo, died on their wedding night. He had gotten a wicked witch angry at him, and she had put a sleeping potion in his rice wine. The moment he tasted the wine, he felt life flowing from him. He fell into a deep sleep. He stayed asleep for days and no one could wake him, not even his bride, Bolak Sunday. (186)

Bolak Sunday decides to search for her husband's spirit in the underworld, and discovers that "the Amazon Woman, Tinayobo" (187) is keeping his spirit captive in her house. The two women battle for his spirit: "Bolak Sunday drew her own dagger, and the women started fighting. While Tinayobo was big and strong, Bolak Sunday was agile and quick. [...] Their battle lasted for days. Underworld creatures gathered around them

to witness this spectacle” (188). However, Bolak Sunday wins the battle, and she and her husband “lived a long and happy life together and they shared many adventures” (188).

This epic tale reflects Yvonne’s desire to save her father from death and bring him back to the world of the living. Moreover, the character again utilizes a female warrior persona in order to mitigate her perceived loss. Like the woman warrior Bongkatolan, Bolak Sunday is also courageous and defiant, as she is willing to engage in an epic battle for her husband’s spirit. Bolak Sunday is another figure of female resistance that influences Yvonne’s development. Her re-imagining of this epic allows her to cope with trauma and furthers her maturation as an individual.

In her analysis of the warrior heroine Bolak Sunday, Herminia Meñez asserts, “Unlike Matabagka who borrows her brother’s attire and spear to launch her attack, Bolak Sunday fashions her own warrior persona. Also, unlike European heroines in male disguise, Bolak Sunday transforms her costume not to assume a masculine role but to demonstrate her magical potency” (32). Thus, Brainard’s novel continues to utilize warrior heroines, such as Bolak Sunday and Bongkatolan, who are decidedly different from Western warrior heroines, such as Susan in the Anglo-American ballad “Susan’s Adventures in a British Man-of-War” (Dugaw 27). This ballad highlights “the heroine’s ability to carry off her masquerade” (Dugaw 27). Dugaw notes, “Although Susan’s initial motivation implies the *topos* of courtship and separation, the ballad opens almost immediately with the disguise” (27). However, unlike Susan, Bolak Sunday and Bongkatolan do not have to disguise their feminine identities in order to be warriors. Brainard thus uses Philippine warrior heroines who diverge from Anglo-American

heroines, demonstrating that Yvonne's development exists outside of Western cultural contexts. Instead, Yvonne develops in an alternative space of folklore that is heavily grounded in Philippine mythology, and based on a "fairly sexually egalitarian society, as opposed to a patriarchy" (Meñez 26).

As the narrative progresses, Yvonne's father does eventually return, and shortly afterwards the city of Ubec is liberated. As the war comes to a close, Yvonne gets her period for the first time. The end of the war coincides with her physical maturation into womanhood: "My mother's Madonna's eyes glinted when she spotted the bloodstains. She checked me, then smiled. 'You're all right. It's just your period. You're now a woman. Everything's all right. And the Americans have returned, with tanks and guns. It took a long time, but the war's over'" (202). In this dialogue, Yvonne's mother conflates her daughter's menses with the end of the war and the arrival of American aid. This conflation signifies that Yvonne's maturation and the trauma of the war are closely connected. In her discussion of this moment in the text, Grice states that "when the war has ended, Yvonne begins to menstruate, and so symbolically also leaves the world of childhood behind" (193). While Yvonne matures emotionally through Laydan's epics, she matures physically through the war itself—revealing an intimate link between trauma, folklore, and development in Brainard's version of the bildungsroman.

However, despite Yvonne's physical maturation and the end of the war, the novel does not end with the closure of the traditional bildungsroman. When the family returns to their home in Ubec, they find the city in ruins. Yvonne states, "I should have known that Ubec would be different" (207). Nonetheless, she is shocked when she sees the

reality of the destruction: “I had never seen a city destroyed as Ubec was destroyed.

When we drove into the city we—all of us—could not hold back our weeping” (208).

Before the family arrives in Ubec, Yvonne compares their homecoming to the epic tale of the Ilianons returning to their promised home of Nalandangan. Upon their arrival, the Ilianons find a land provided by the deities:

On and on they traveled and just when they thought they would never reach Nalandangan, Agyu spotted two enormous boulders banging fiercely against each other. When the boulders were apart, the ship floated through with ease. Beyond, the Ilianons saw a river with lush bamboos and balete trees lining the banks. And they knew that the deities had not forsaken them, that they had arrived at Nalandangan. (207)

However, the Edenic home of the Ilianons is juxtaposed against the mournful homecoming of Yvonne and her family, as they approach a city that has been utterly destroyed. Yvonne compares her situation to the Maiden of the Buhong Sky, as she states, “I felt as lost as the Maiden of the Buhong Sky must have felt when the wicked Giant destroyed her castle and robbed her of the starlight and moonrays from which she spun rainbows” (208). In contrast to the hopeful return of the Ilianons, Yvonne and her family are devastated upon arriving at their home, and Yvonne once again uses myth to explain her feelings regarding the situation. Although there is a note of hopefulness as Yvonne’s father exclaims that the city can be rebuilt, the characters are still left with the overwhelming aftermath of the war’s destruction; trauma is not readily erased, but physically embodied by the ruins of the city.

After Yvonne returns home, she again reflects on Laydan and her relationship with the epic. She states, “Laydan’s words came back to me: *You are the epic*. I thought about this with great seriousness. Inuk’s bidding to her had been: Become the epic. Now

she was telling me that I was the epic? How could I, a young girl, *be* the epic? I wrestled with these words for a long time. It was almost dawn when it came to me” (216).

Yvonne eventually comes to a realization: “What she meant was, *All of you are the epic*” (216). As Yvonne has retold and performed various epics, she realizes that in this process she and those around her have essentially become the epic; or, rather, she and her family have endured an epic battle and overcome the obstacles of the war.

In the last passage of the novel, Yvonne remembers the course of her development and comes to a final stage in her maturation:

I remembered the time after Laydan’s death when I felt compelled to relate the tale about Tuwaang and the Maiden of the Buhong Sky. I could feel a similar stirring inside me. I knew someday I would have to tell still another story, and this time in my own words—not Laydan’s nor Inuk’s but all mine. We had all experienced a story that needed to be told, that needed never to be forgotten. (216)

Harkening back to her initial coming of age through her performance of Laydan’s epic, Yvonne realizes that she will now tell and perform stories of her own. Namely, this will be the story of her experience with the war and the trauma they endured. Yvonne portrays a sense of independence as she notes that the story will be in her own words. While the character once relied on the words of others for her stories, Yvonne will now rely on herself. Furthermore, Yvonne’s desire to retell the story of the war demonstrates the anti-closure of this bildungsroman. Instead of trying to forget or erase trauma, Yvonne instead wishes to retell it so that the war remains in the collective racial memory.

Brainard’s *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* thus revises the genre of the bildungsroman through her use of Philippine myth and folklore within a narrative of trauma. Yvonne’s maturation is greatly influenced by her relationship with Laydan and

the oral epics she retells and performs. These epic stories provide an alternative space for her development, and a means to negotiate the trauma of warfare. Folklore disrupts trauma, as well as the linear structure of the traditional bildungsroman. Furthermore, Yvonne's epics represent a discourse of female strength that diverges from Western cultural norms and gender relations. Brainard places her coming-of-narrative within a non-Western cultural context, as her female protagonist comes to embody and adopt the female warrior identities of Philippine mythology.

Chapter Two

Re-envisioning Loss and Dislocation:

Interpreting Dreams and Childhood Tales in Kogawa's *Obasan*

Since its publication in 1981, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* has received a great amount of critical attention. Set in 1972, 31 years after the internment of Japanese Canadians, the text documents 36-year-old Naomi's non-linear attempt to recuperate and relive the memories of her childhood, the separation of her family, and the internment, dislocation, and dispossession of the Japanese community in Canada during WWII. Kogawa utilizes memories, dreams, childhood tales, personal documents, such as Aunt Emily's letters and diary, and historical documents in her fragmented narrative that emphasizes "the necessity of both facts and the subjective truths of memory—the novel alternates between these two modes of understanding the past" (Grewal 147). Throughout the pervasive silence of the text, which surrounds both the family's trauma and the disappearance of Naomi's mother, Kogawa highlights the relationship between Naomi, a Canadian born *Nisei*, and her aunt Obasan, a Japanese born *Issei*, who acts as her surrogate mother in the absence of the biological mother. Naomi's development is dislocated and impeded by the unexplained disappearance of her mother. Grewal notes that the "breaking of the long-held protective silence regarding her mother's terrible fate is what finally enables Naomi to come to terms with the past" (143) and develop as an individual.

While Naomi's connection to the absent mother is pivotal to her self-understanding and identity, Naomi's fragmented development has raised a number of

critical concerns regarding the relationship of the novel to the genre of the bildungsroman. In her study of this genre, Pin-chia Feng asserts that Kogawa's text essentially revises and subverts the traditional concept of the bildungsroman:

In her retrieval of a personal story of *Bildung* and a political story about the possibility of growth of an oppressed race, Kogawa's *Bildungsroman* subverts the almost hegemonic imperative of breaking silence endorsed by most feminist theorists. Kogawa's subversive narrative thus speaks for the power in the writing of women of color to unsettle any critical hegemony. As such, *Obasan* warns contemporary theorists against any totalizing impulse while theorizing the narrative of *Bildung* by women of color in general. (35-6)

Feng emphasizes the text's conflation of political and personal loss, which "reiterates the axiom that 'the personal is political'" (33). Moreover, she asserts that the novel repositions the traditional genre of the bildungsroman by demonstrating "the courage of silent forbearance" (Feng 35), thus placing the narrative within a different cultural and theoretical context.

In further discussing the novel's connection to the bildungsroman, Lisa Lowe notes that *Obasan* does not follow the model of closure and reconciliation that is typically attributed to the genre:

The violences to the narrator and her family, figured throughout *Obasan* in metaphors of abuse, silence, darkness, and disease, cannot be lightened or healed; they can only be revealed, narrated, and reconfigured. Out of the fragmentations of subject, family, and community, there emerges nothing like a direct retrieval of unified wholeness. Rather, the narrator retraces and recomposes an alternative "history" out of flashes of memory, tattered photographs, recollections of the mother's silence, and an aunt's notes and correspondence: dreams, loss, and mourning. (51)

Indeed Kogawa's novel does not provide the reader with a sense of closure, nor does Naomi attain "unified wholeness" (Lowe 51) from the disjointed and scattered

remembrances of her and her family's traumatic past. Instead, the narrative exhibits anti-closure, in which historical trauma is continually relived and remembered by the protagonist.

Naomi's development also significantly deviates from the linear trajectory of the German bildungsroman, as her "education," or development, occurs in reverse. Because Naomi is too young to understand the events of her childhood, she must be educated in the present tense regarding the persecution and internment of Japanese Canadians by the Canadian government. When the character Aunt Emily tells Naomi she will mail her a memorandum and Uncle's documents, she tells Naomi it's "For your education" (225). Naomi then states, "I don't know what use Uncle's documents are to him now that he's dead. As for me, I suppose I do need to be educated. I've never understood how these things happen" (225). Although Naomi is explicitly referring to a memorandum "by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians" (225), we can view this interaction between the characters as symbolic of Naomi's development itself, which is done within a reversed trajectory. Naomi must revisit the past in the present tense in order to understand the trauma she and other Japanese Canadians endured; it is through this personal and political education that Naomi develops as an individual.

Using both Lowe's and Feng's analyses as a guiding point, this chapter will also focus on the ways in which *Obasan* pushes the boundaries of the bildungsroman, and thus stakes out a different formal space and cultural context for the ethnic female coming-of-age narrative. Namely, this analysis will examine Kogawa's utilization of dreams and childhood tales, and particularly the relationship between these elements and Naomi's

development. I argue that childhood fairy tales and folktales are the medium through which young Naomi filters much of her immediate experiences of trauma. Unable to understand the dislocation and separation of her family, Naomi uses these tales in order to rationalize and explain the seemingly incoherent occurrences in her life. On the other hand, dreams function as a vehicle through which Naomi both relives and reinterprets her trauma. Dreams dislocate the narrative in temporal space, and allow Naomi to reinvestigate the personal, political, and familial trauma that continues to haunt her. Dreams thus function as an important space for Naomi's development in the present tense, as she reexamines her repressed memories and ultimately reunites with her mother. Naomi is empowered by her revived connection to her mother, which is largely manifested through a network of dreams.

Dreams thus constitute a significant portion of the novel, as "the work of memory is best expressed in the language of dreams" (Lim 307). Shirley Geok-Lin Lim asserts, "Numerous dreams interrupt the narrative, suggesting that the experience of Japanese Canadian dislocation in the 1940s and 1950s, that forms the basic narrative action, shares the surrealistic and arbitrary nature of dreams" (307). In addition, I would also contend that the interruption of dreams in the text mirrors the physical dislocation of Japanese Canadians during this period. Dreams are a medium through which Naomi reinterprets and reexamines her traumatic memories, which is evident in the beginning of the novel, after the death of Naomi's uncle. Upon hearing of his death, Naomi returns to Obasan's house in Granton, where she has an unsettling dream regarding a man and woman in the forest.

In this first dream of the text, Naomi is a woman who walks into the forest with a nameless man. Naomi and the man find another man and elderly woman in the forest. The woman has a sickle and “is harvesting the forest’s debris, gathering the branches into piles” (34). The man is “a British martinet” (34) who is cutting the trees with shears. Naomi notes, “They may be trying to make a clearing or gather brush or search for food. Basic survival activities. We do not know what the effort is” (34). Although they do not know the motivation for such labor, Naomi and the man are ordered by the British martinet to join the work effort:

We do not greet them but the man looks at us. We are to help in the work at hand. His glance is a raised baton. Like an orchestra of fog we join them and toil together in the timelessness. We move without question or references in an interminable unknowing without rules, without direction. No incident alerts us to an awareness of time. But at some subtle hour, the white mist is known to be gray, and the endlessness of labor has entered our limbs. (34)

The tiresome labor in this dream, which is done for no visible reason, can be viewed as a reenactment of the years of toil that Naomi, her brother Stephen, Obasan, and Uncle endure as beet farmers in Alberta, where they are forced to relocate after being exiled in Slocan. The family lives in a one room hut and has to work under extreme and inhumane conditions in a field like “an oven” where “there’s not a tree within walking distance” (234). Later in the narrative, Naomi expresses her anger regarding this period in her life: “Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep” (232). In this sense, Naomi’s dream of labor, which is conducted under the command of a white man, is symbolic of the family’s seemingly

arbitrary exile in Alberta and their endless work in the beet fields, a move that is also prompted by the jurisdiction of white males, or the Canadian government.

However, as the dream progresses, Naomi's reenactment of this memory is interrupted by the revelation of a beast in the forest that is owned by the British man. When Naomi realizes that this beast is in fact a robot, the scene of labor quickly disintegrates: "when the mechanism that hinges the jaw has proven faulty, a house of cards suddenly collapses. Instantly in our telepathic world, the knowing spreads and the great boulder enclosing change splits apart" (35). Naomi notes that the action of the dream now dramatically shifts:

The dream changes now and Uncle stands in the depth of the forest. He bows a deep ceremonial bow. In his mouth is a red red rose with an endless stem. He turns around slowly in a flower dance—a ritual of the dead. Behind him, someone—I do not know who—is straining to speak, but rapidly, softly, a cloud overtakes everything. Is it the British officer with his pruning shears disappearing to the left? He is wearing an army uniform. (35)

Unlike the stark reality of her family's labor in Alberta, Naomi is able to revise and renegotiate her surroundings in this dream. When she discovers that the man's beast is a robot, "the knowing spreads" (35), and she realizes that the British officer's source of authority is both false and artificial. In his analysis of this dream, Rufus Cook asserts, "Only after her realization occurs do the barriers to change and spiritual development [...] begin to collapse" (59). Indeed this realization is the catalyst for change in the dream, as the male force compelling their labor is quickly replaced with the image of Naomi's uncle performing a ceremonial flower dance. With his dance, Uncle counteracts the dominance of the British officer, who disappears into the boundaries of the forest.

This first dream in the text thus evokes the senseless nature of the family's labor, and provides a space in which Naomi can ceremoniously mourn the death of her uncle. However, it also signifies Naomi's revision of trauma; in the dream Naomi is able to seek out and expose the false source of the white man's authority, as she subverts the power of the British officer through the ceremonial dance of her uncle. The dream is an active space in which Naomi can reexamine and re-envision her traumatic memories.

Later in the narrative, Naomi begins to delve through Aunt Emily's documents, which record numerous acts of racial persecution against Japanese Canadians, such as "Seizure and government sale of fishing boats. Suspension of fishing licenses. Relocation camps. Liquidation of property. Letter to General MacArthur. Bill 15. Deportation. Revocation of nationality'" (40). In addition to the historical documents she provides, Naomi also reads through Aunt Emily's diary and personal letters. Through these documents, Aunt Emily's voice urges her to remember her past, and so Naomi begins to think of her early childhood and childhood home: "All right, Aunt Emily, all right! The house then—the house, if I must remember it today, was large and beautiful" (60). These memories are the beginning of Naomi's lengthy and fragmented remembrance of the traumatic past, which ultimately results in the character's development and her broader understanding of the past itself.

Within this recollection of her happy childhood, Naomi remembers her favorite bedtime story, the Japanese folktale of Momotaro. As a child, Naomi views this tale as a form of fantastic escape, in which she and her mother are "transport[ed] to the gray-green woods where [they] hover and spread like tree spirits, [their] ears and [their] eyes,

raindrops resting on leaves and grass stems” (66). In this story, a childless grandmother and grandfather find a peach that contains a boy inside it. The boy “leaps onto the table from the heart of the fruit before their astonished eyes” (67), and he is named Momotaro. However, one day, Momotaro must leave their home:

The time comes when Momotaro must go and silence falls like feathers of snow all over the rice-paper hut. Inside, the hands are slow. Grandmother kneels at the table forming round rice balls, pressing the sticky rice together with her moist fingertips. She wraps them in a small square cloth and, holding them before her in her cupped hands, she offers him the lunch for his journey. There are no tears and no touch. Grandfather and Grandmother are careful, as he goes, not to weight his pack with their sorrow. (67)

This tale represents Naomi’s early childhood, during which she was “‘a serious baby—fed on milk and Momotaro’” (68). Gurleen Grewal compares both Naomi and Aunt Emily to the character Momotaro: “Naomi, not Stephen, is Momotaro, the fabled Japanese hero who returns to his old foster parents after recovering the treasures that the ogres stole from their village. Momotaro’s role of redressing the wrongs is shared by her brave aunt Emily, who refuses to heed the message of disappearance” (144). In her discussion of the theme of childlessness in the novel, Christina Tourino also asserts that the “subject of Naomi’s favorite childhood story, ‘Momotaro,’ provides a magical solution to the problem of childlessness: miraculous procreation” (136). While both Grewal and Tourino offer valid interpretations of this story and its significance in relation to the novel, I would also argue that Momotaro’s departure from the grandparents’ house and the consequential rupture of the family unit foreshadows the impending rupture of Naomi’s own family. Like Momotaro, Naomi is also separated from her parents at a young age.

Moreover, as Naomi's mother habitually recites the tale of Momotaro, the story also represents the character's close connection with her mother as a child. Naomi associates the tale with her mother's voice: "My mother's voice is quiet and the telling is a chant. I snuggle into her arms, listening and watching the shadows of the peach tree outside my window. 'Early every morning,' she murmurs, 'Grandfather goes to the mountain to gather firewood. Grandmother goes to the stream to wash clothes'" (66). As the mother continues her rendition of the story, Naomi states, "My arms are flung around my mother as she lies beside me and I breathe in her powdery perfume as she continues her chant" (67). Naomi connects the tale to her mother's presence and the physical protection she derives from the mother's body. The tale thus symbolizes Naomi's relationship with her mother in its nascent stages—a relationship that is critical to Naomi's development and the novel as a whole. Interestingly enough, while the mother is telling the story, Naomi notes, "Secretly, I realize I am more fortunate than Stephen because I am younger and will therefore be a child for a longer time. That we must grow up is an unavoidable sadness" (67). Through the story, a young Naomi realizes that she does not want to grow up, or mature. This childhood tale therefore carries a number of meanings within the context of the novel. While it foreshadows the family's separation and portrays a once healthy relationship with the mother, it also evinces Naomi's paradoxical relationship with her self-development—a development which is in fact hindered by the disappearance of the mother.

Moving from the happy recollections of her mother and her favorite bedtime story, Naomi's begins to remember painful and traumatic incidents in her childhood; she

recounts being sexually molested by the family's neighbor, Old Man Gower. It is this sexual trauma that creates the first rupture in Naomi's relationship with her mother: "I do not wish him to lift me up but I do not know what it is to struggle. Every time he carries me away, he tells me I must not tell my mother. He asks me questions as he holds me but I do not answer" (73). As a young child, Naomi is repeatedly molested by Old Man Gower. However, she states that this "is not an isolated incident" and that "years later there is Percy in Slocan, pressing me against the cave wall during hide-and-go-seek, warning me against crying out" (73). While Naomi continues to be sexually violated, even after Old Man Gower, it is this first "secret abuse that mark[s] for the four-year-old Naomi the first and permanent separation from her mother" (Grewal 151).

Naomi's memory of Old Man Gower and the sexual abuse she experienced is juxtaposed against a recurring dream she has as an adult:

there was that dream again. The dream had a new and terrible ending. In earlier versions, there was flight, terror, and pursuit. The only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive. In this latest dream, three beautiful oriental women lay naked in the muddy road, flat on their backs, their faces turned to the sky. They were lying straight as coffins, spaced several feet apart, perpendicular to the road like railway ties. Several soldiers stood or shuffled in front of them in the foreground. It appeared they were guarding these women, who were probably prisoners captured from a nearby village. (73)

The dream continues, and the soldiers mercilessly begin to shoot and torture the women. Naomi states that the "first shots were aimed at the toes of the women, the second at their feet. A few inches from the body, the first woman's right foot lay like a solid wooden boot neatly severed above the ankles. It was too late. There was no hope. The soldiers could not be won. Dread and a deathly loathing cut through the women" (74).

Immediately after relating this dream, Naomi reverts to her memories of Old Man Gower: “Does Old Man Gower still walk through the hedges between our houses in Vancouver, in Slokan, in Granton and Cecil?” (74). By juxtaposing a dream of implied sexual abuse and violence with her vivid memory of sexual violation as a child, Naomi demonstrates that there is a close tie between the dream and her experience of sexual trauma.

In her analysis of this dream, Julie Tharp asserts that the “Japanese mother/woman is suppressed in the dream as in waking life and replaced with the dangerous presence of white men” (218). Similarly, in Naomi’s memories of sexual trauma, she is silenced and abused by the white Old Man Gower. As such, this dream is another vehicle through which she can imagine the trauma of her sexual abuse. However, the dream extends the abuse to Japanese women in general, who are oppressed and silenced by the Canadian government—embodied by the shooting soldiers. Naomi imbues the dream with both a political and personal significance, as it metaphorically represents both her sexual abuse as a child as well as the abuse of Japanese women under the Canadian government. In exploring this connection between personal, political, and national trauma, Tharp asserts that by “placing the childhood sexual abuse and separation from the mother at the center of Naomi’s illness, Kogawa invites connections between sexual and nationalist assaults. Kogawa does not explicitly delineate a vision of Canada and the United States as raping Japan; she’s more subtle” (223-4). Thus, this dream of personal and national rape differs from the first dream of the novel, as Naomi is not able to counteract the power and authority of the white male soldiers. She is not an active participant in the dream, but instead seems to watch the women’s abuse from a third

person vantage point. Nonetheless, this dream is subversive in its ability to represent a sexual trauma that is at once deeply personal and communal. While overtly signifying her violation as a child, the dream is also a critique of the cruelty and violence of the Canadian government, as it relentlessly oppresses Japanese women and the Japanese Canadian community as a whole.

After relating the dream, Naomi continues to reflect on her memory of Old Man Gower. She directly equates the secret of her sexual abuse with a growing distance between her and her mother:

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. The secret is this: I go to seek Old Man Gower in his hideaway. I clamber unbidden onto his lap. His hands are frightening and pleasurable. In the center of my body is a rift. (77)

Naomi is shamed by her sexual violation, and deeply troubled by her reaction to it.

Grewal examines this connection between the abuse Naomi experiences and the disappearance of the mother: “For Naomi the unexplained permanent disappearance of her mother is guiltily connected with the secret incident of the childhood sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of a neighbor, Old Man Gower. This self-inflicted guilt is strengthened by the absence of knowledge about her mother” (151). In the mind of Naomi, the trauma of her sexual molestation and the disappearance of the mother, who leaves for Japan to care for her great grandmother, are directly related. As a child, Naomi imagines this rupture between her and her mother within the landscape of dreams: “In my childhood dreams, the mountain yawns apart as the chasm spreads. My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn

in half” (77). This dream recreates the separation from the mother within a physical context. Mountains move the two characters apart, and Naomi’s body is literally torn in half by this forced division. Naomi’s dream evokes the physical and bodily trauma that is caused by the disappearance of the mother—a trauma that greatly hinders Naomi’s development and her understanding of the past.

Naomi is five years old when her mother leaves for Japan with her maternal grandmother, Grandma Kato. However, the mother is unable to return because of the war, and later she chooses not to return because of her disfigurement—a fact that is hidden from Naomi until she is 36 years old. In addition to the shock of the mother’s seemingly inexplicable absence, Naomi’s paternal grandparents are sent to internment camps, and the rest of the family is forced to leave their home in Vancouver. While Aunt Emily and Uncle get a permit to move to Toronto, Naomi, her brother Stephen, and Obasan move to the ghost town of Slocan. They live together in a small house in the woods, which Naomi compares to the house in the fairy tale of Goldilocks:

In one of Stephen’s books, there is a story of a child with long golden ringlets called Goldilocks who one day comes to a quaint house in the woods lived in by a family of bears. Clearly, we are that bear family in this strange house in the middle of the woods. I am Baby Bear, whose chair Goldilocks breaks, whose porridge Goldilocks eats, whose bed Goldilocks sleeps in. Or perhaps this is not true and I am really Goldilocks after all. In the morning, will I not find my way out of the forest and back to my room where the picture bird sings above my bed and the real bird sings in the real peach tree by my open bedroom window in Marpole? (149)

Naomi uses this fairy tale in order to explain her family’s forced exile in Slocan. As she is too young to understand the implications of their move, Naomi uses this childhood story to rationalize and understand their situation. By comparing herself to Baby Bear,

Naomi reveals what she has lost. While Baby Bear loses his porridge, chair, and bed, Naomi loses her childhood home and most of her family. However, like Goldilocks, Naomi also desires to return home and leave the woods of Slocan. The young protagonist thus filters her experience through the fairy tale of Goldilocks, and uses its narrative in an attempt to understand the separation of her family and the loss of her home.

As the narrative progresses, Naomi continues to live in the small house in Slocan. When her father comes to visit them, she describes their reunion in terms of the fairy tales she has come to rely on:

We do not talk. His hands cup my face. I wrap my arms around his neck. The button of his pajama top presses into my cheek. I can feel his heart's steady thump thump thump. I am Minnie and Winnie in a seashell, resting on a calm seashore. I am Goldilocks, I am Momotaro returning. I am leaf in the wind restored to its branch, child of my father come home. The world is safe once more and Chicken Little is wrong. The sky is not falling down after all. (202)

In this scene, Naomi creates a collage of fairy tales and folktales in order to express the joy she feels upon reuniting with her father. Naomi views the return of her father as the “happy ending” of a fairy tale. She is the hero or heroine of these tales, who is finally reunited with her family. This is evident in her statement “I am Goldilocks, I am Momotaro returning” (202). While in the past Naomi used these tales to express the loss of her home and family, she now uses them to express her recovery of family and a type of home. This multifaceted purpose of childhood stories demonstrates the fluidity of these narratives, as they help Naomi to understand instances of both joy and sorrow.

However, after this reunion, the father soon disappears: “Then one day suddenly Father is not here again and I do not know what is happening” (215). Although WWII

ends in 1945, Naomi, Stephen, Uncle, and Obasan are still forced to move from their place of exile in Slocan. Naomi states, “The fact is that families already fractured and separated were permanently destroyed. The choice to go east of the Rockies or to Japan was presented without time for consultation with separated parents and children. Failure to choose was labeled noncooperation” (219). Naomi and her family move to Granton, Alberta, where they live in “a small hut, like a toolshed, smaller even than the one we lived in in Slocan” (229). They farm beets for a living, and work under extreme conditions. Naomi lives out the rest of her childhood in Alberta, which she describes as “sleepwalk years, a time of half dream. There is no word from Mother” (239). Naomi directly associates her continual relocation and exile with the language and temporality of dreams.

During spring in Granton, Naomi catches a frog in the swamp near her house.

The frog instantly reminds her of the fairy tale regarding the frog and the prince:

“Tad” is what I think I’ll call my frog—short for Tadpole or Tadashi, my father’s name. There was a fairy tale I read in Slocan about a frog who became a prince. Hah! Well, what, after all, might not be possible? Tad is a frog prince. Prince Tadashi. He wears a dark green suit, not the rough green army garb, but a smooth suit, silky and cool as leaves. He is from the mountains. Certainly not from Granton. He was hidden under the tree roots waiting for me, a messenger from my father. (246)

Naomi revises the tale of the frog prince in order to explain and negotiate the absence of her father. She uses a childhood tale to mitigate the personal loss of her father, and deal with her changing surroundings. The frog directly represents her father, as Naomi names the animal after him and imagines that it carries a message from him. Interestingly enough, the frog’s escape coincides with silence from her father: “One morning, the frog

is on the rim of the bowl, sitting there ready to leap. Another time it is on the table. Once I find it in a corner of the room covered in fluff. And then it is nowhere. The bowl sits empty on the table” (249). After describing the frog’s disappearance, Naomi states, “My last letter to Father has received no answer” (249). Naomi later finds out that he is dead, and so we can view the disappearance of the frog as a metaphor for the father’s death. Naomi thus uses the fairy tale of the frog to understand the absence of her father, and later to symbolize his death.

While Naomi uses a fairy tale to understand the fate of her father, the absence and pervasive silence of her mother continues to trouble her: “What I do not understand is Mother’s total lack of communication with Stephen and me. Aunt Emily has said nothing more on the subject. I assume nothing more is known” (256). Later, the narrative shifts to the present tense, in the wake of Uncle’s death. As Naomi and Obasan wait for Stephen and Aunt Emily to arrive, Naomi describes a nightmare she had concerning death, which takes place on “Stairs leading into a courtyard and the place of the dead” (272). As in her other dreams, there are soldiers present. However, Naomi’s mother also appears in this dream:

In the courtyard, a flower ceremony was underway, like the one in my dream yesterday morning. Mother stood in the center. In her mouth she held a knotted string stem, like the twine and string of Obasan’s ball which she keeps in the pantry. From the stem hung a rose, red as a heart. I moved toward her from the top of the stairs, a cloud falling to earth, heavy and full of rain. (273)

Naomi’s mother continues to perform a flower ceremony dance, similar to the dance that Uncle performs in the first dream of the text. As the rain cloud continues to descend, Naomi’s dream quickly becomes a nightmare: “Was it then that the nightmare began?

[...] Up from a valley there rose a dark cloud—a great cape. It was the Grand Inquisitor descending over us, the top of his head a shiny skin cap. With his large hands he was prying open my mother’s lips, prying open my eyes” (273). This Grand Inquisitor dream is pivotal to Naomi’s recuperation of her relationship with her mother, as well as her development as an individual. However, at this point in the narrative, the looming presence of the Grand Inquisitor prevents Naomi from reuniting with her mother.

After waking from this dream, Naomi endeavors to interpret its significance:

The dance ceremony of the dead was a slow courtly telling, the heart declaring a long thread knotted to Obasan’s twine, knotted to Aunt Emily’s package. Why, I wonder as she danced her love, should I find myself unable to breathe? The Grand Inquisitor was carnivorous and full of murder. His demand to know was both a judgment 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. (273-4)

In this passage, Naomi tries to understand the motivations of the Grand Inquisitor in relation to her mother. Rufus Cook asserts that the “first step in overcoming the Inquisitor is Naomi’s realization that he is really not serious about communicating with her mother” (64). However, although she defends her mother’s silence, Naomi wonders if she herself is the Grand Inquisitor: “How the Grand Inquisitor gnaws at my bones. 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? Did I doubt her love? Am I her accuser?” (274). Naomi realizes that she has been accusing her silent mother throughout the years; she is the Grand Inquisitor who demands to know her mother’s fate, and desires to make her

speak through force. This realization is the first step in Naomi's reconciliation with her lost mother. Naomi asks, "My mother hid her love, but hidden in life does she speak through dream?" (274). This dream is a catalyst for Naomi's development and her reunion with her mother.

Naomi's self-identification as the Grand Inquisitor also reveals the multiple roles of silence in the novel. Pin-chia Feng notes that the novel "maintains an indeterminacy regarding the breaking of silence by juxtaposing a Japanese discourse, represented by the stony silence of her Japanese-born aunt Obasan and a (Japanese-) Canadian discourse embodied by her Canadian-born aunt Emily" (33). Feng asserts that it "is easy for [...] feminist readers to identify with the articulate warrior figure in Emily. But Kogawa's *Obasan* also contains an alternative perspective through a culturally specific Japanese narrative, which validates the courage of silent forbearance" (35). As such, Naomi's relationship to silence is rather ambiguous. Naomi's mother and Obasan are silent characters who essentially uphold silence as a valid form of discourse. Paradoxically, Naomi both defends her mother's silence and urges her to break it, as in the Grand Inquisitor dream. Indeed much of the novel is based on Naomi's desire to find a voice and break the destructive silence that pervades the family. Kogawa's text thus presents us with multiple readings of the workings of silence, both as a form of courage that exists outside of Western feminist norms, and as a potentially destructive force.

Shortly after the Grand Inquisitor dream, Naomi finally learns what happened to her mother. Stephen, Aunt Emily, and Nakayama-sensei arrive at Obasan's house. During this time, Nakayama-sensei reads the family an old letter from Grandma Kato,

which describes her and the mother's experience during the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Naomi's mother is horribly disfigured from the bombing. Though she survives this traumatic event, she insists on wearing a cloth "mask from morning to night" (286). The mother tells the family to keep her disfigurement a secret from both Stephen and Naomi, and she later dies in Japan. Through both this new knowledge and the Grand Inquisitor dream, Naomi realizes that her "silent but relentless and accusing inquisition of her mother is over" (Grewal 153). Naomi is no longer the Grand Inquisitor, and "is ready to attend to her mother's voicelessness" (Grewal 153). Grewal notes the significance of the mother's dance in the dream: "The entire novel is summed up in this series of images. The whole narrative is like the 'dance ceremony of the dead' attempting to realize the vocal presence of the silent absent mother, whose love is received by the abandoned daughter only after she has shed her accusing role of Grand Inquisitor" (Grewal 154). Thus, the space of Naomi's dream, combined with the knowledge of her family's secret, allows her to finally reconcile with her mother. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim states that "as an adult, empowered with knowledge long kept secret from her and with enabling speech, the narrator/Naomi is able to 'know' the mother's presence" (306). Indeed it is through this reconciliation, which is prompted by a dream, that Naomi is finally able to develop as an individual and understand her family's traumatic past.

After Naomi learns of her mother's fate, she dedicates an invocation to her, in which she tries to share the trauma of her experience: "Beneath the hiding I am there with you. Silent Mother, lost in the abandoning, you do not share the horror. At first, stumbling and unaware of pain, you open your eyes in the red mist [...] you flee through

the flames. Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there?" (290). In this section, Naomi speaks directly to her mother, and "weaves the paradoxes of absence and presence, loss and recovery, to conclude in an emotional, internal reconciliation" (Lim 306). The two women are now reunited, and Naomi is able to come of age through this new understanding of her mother. Naomi's voice at last emerges from the pervasive silence of the text: "What we hear finally is Naomi's own voice, freed at last through knowledge, coming from the breaking of silence, and leading to an internal reconciliation with the absent mother" (Lim 307). Naomi is now "empowered with knowledge" (Lim 306), and able to break free from the constraining silence between her and her mother, which leads to a type of female empowerment. She states, "I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here. [...] Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves" (292). The protagonist has moved past the accusations and painful absence engendered by her childhood. She is now able to understand her mother's silence, and attain a sense of female strength from their spiritual union. Naomi's reconciliation with her mother is her coming of age. While she is able to find her own voice, she is also able to understand the meaning of her mother's silence.

However, although Naomi is able to reconnect with her absent mother, the novel does not end with the closure of the traditional bildungsroman. Like the ending of Brainard's novel, *Obasan* also unearths historical trauma by closing with a memorandum that documents the multiple injustices Japanese Canadians endured under the Canadian government. This document "attests to the utter failure to revise history" (Palumbo-Liu

224), and also reminds the reader that this historical trauma can never be forgotten.

Tharp discusses the significance of this memorandum within the context of the novel:

The memorandum cited there in full is an expression of the governmental struggle over the status of the offending bodies and loyalties of Japanese-Canadian citizens. Read within the narrative of Naomi's life it takes the place of the mother's story, the mother's voice. It more or less becomes Naomi's nursery tale, since it was foisted upon her at the same time that her mother was taken from her by the same institutional powers. Unjust government ideologies of racial discrimination and dehumanization were the lessons she learned in childhood. It is, however, only in being reconciled with her mother, only in knowing her mother's story that she has the strength to recognize this, to claim the damage and to begin over from that starting point. (221)

As such, Naomi's new understanding of her mother is coupled with a new understanding of the persecution and racial discrimination she and other Japanese Canadians were subjected to. The end of the novel reasserts the presence and significance of these injustices, and so deviates from an attainment of closure. Naomi has experienced a political and personal awakening, but the damage of the past cannot be undone, nor can her family ever be whole again.

Kogawa's *Obasan* is thus an ethnic female bildungsroman that radically breaks with the boundaries and narrative patterns of the European bildungsroman. Set within a disjointed and fragmented narrative, Naomi's non-linear education is closely tied to her family's experience of dislocation and dispossession during the internment of Japanese Canadians. Naomi must revisit the past in order to understand the significance of her losses. However, the trauma of her childhood is never mended. Instead, Naomi attempts to interpret and understand it through childhood tales and the unsettling narratives of her dreams. While childhood tales allow her to rationalize the hardships of her youth, dreams

allow Naomi to reinterpret and unearth trauma. It is through her dreams that Naomi is finally able to connect with her lost mother. Naomi at last recognizes the silent strength of her mother, and so exhibits a strength of her own by disrupting the silence of the text. However, Naomi's development is not paired with an attainment of closure, in which the pain of her past is erased. Instead, her maturation results in an understanding of her personal loss and the trauma endured by her community.

Chapter Three

Developing a Transnational Identity, Reconnecting with the Motherland:

The Trung Sisters and National Myths in Cao's *Monkey Bridge*

Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* depicts the devastation and aftermath of the Vietnam War, as experienced by adolescent protagonist Mai and her mother Thanh. Mai and her mother are war refugees who must flee their homeland in South Vietnam to settle in Virginia, where they live in the Vietnamese immigrant community known as Little Saigon. While Cao's debut novel documents the development of Mai, who must struggle with the pressures of assimilation and her memories of the war, the text also delves into the story of the mother Thanh, who is dealing with the trauma of her family's history in the rural region of the Mekong Delta. Thanh attempts to hide her family's past from Mai, choosing not to tell her daughter of the murderous deed of her father, Baba Quan, and his affiliation as a Vietcong. Throughout the text, Mai explores her mother's journal in an effort to understand her familial and cultural heritage. In her analysis of the novel, Michelle Balaev asserts that "Mai's search for the 'truth' of her mother's past becomes a search not only for an articulation of her own identity, but also an exploration of the contours of her relationship to her mother" (41). Mai's relationship with Thanh is central to her development, and, in a larger sense, the mother and her stories and memories of Vietnam represent the motherland itself.

As the novel mediates between Thanh's journal of the family's past in Vietnam and the narrative of Mai's new life in the U.S., the text creates a double consciousness that moves fluidly between national and cultural boundaries. While the formal structure

of the novel denotes a transnational perspective, Mai's development also moves towards a transnational identity. Tina Lynn Powell notes the significance of transnationalism within Vietnamese American narratives: "In trying to maintain [...] ties with their 'homeland,' Vietnamese American writers often incorporate nostalgic descriptions of Viet Nam and place emphasis on cultural practices or stories in order to form their transnational identity" (135). This construction of a transnational identity is often achieved through "the negotiation between the Vietnamese heroic past and narratives of flight and resettlement" and "the invocation of the legend of the Trung sisters" (Powell 135). Building off of Powell's analysis of *Monkey Bridge*, I argue that Mai uses national myths, such as the legend of the Trung sisters, to further her development of a transnational identity. Such Vietnamese myths and legends, which form a part of her cultural and familial heritage, allow Mai to connect with her homeland and counteract the pressures of assimilation. Myths and legends in the text are thus used as a "discursive strategy to control [...] identity formation", as "Lan Cao's work [...] relies on the mythologizing of culture to map the struggles of Mai [...] to form a transnational, bicultural identity" (Powell 136).

This chapter will examine Mai's development of a transnational identity within the context of the Asian American bildungsroman. As trauma in the text "is situated within the contexts of immigration and social assimilation" (Balaev 41), national myths and legends disrupt the seemingly linear trajectory of assimilation and allow Mai to maintain a connection to her cultural heritage. Balaev asserts, "Traumatic experience is portrayed in the novel from a non-Western perspective that values trauma in terms of

personal, global, and even mythic contexts” (54). Likewise, Mai’s coming of age is also portrayed within a non-Western cultural context that resists the linear and national stability of the traditional bildungsroman. Mai’s experiences move in and out of national boundaries, and it is her development of a transnational identity, which moves between cultures, that marks her maturation. Mai derives models of female strength and resistance from Vietnamese lore, such as the legend of the Trung sisters, in order to counteract the dominance of U.S. cultural influence and thus maintain her hybridity.

In addition to the significance of myths and transnationalism in relation to Mai’s development, the adolescent protagonist’s relationship with her mother is also central to her identify formation. Throughout the novel, Mai desires to know more about her mother and her past. She reiterates this desire as she revisits Thanh’s journal: “There was something about my mother’s Vietnam past that I would like to understand, the molten fluidness of the rice fields, the graceful sanctuary of a convent, and the blinding purple of bougainvilleas. I was merely a child trying to understand and save her mother” (168). Mai yearns to comprehend the various layers of her mother’s history, which encompasses Vietnam’s colonial past as well as the immediate memories of the war. The mother’s writing plays an active role in shaping Mai’s identity; this is most evident when Mai reads her mother’s suicide letter, which reveals the secret of her grandfather’s identity and her family’s history. Mai’s discovery of Thanh’s secret past definitively propels her maturation.

In her study of the role of consumption within the Asian American bildungsroman, Jennifer Ann Ho analyzes the connection between the mother and the

motherland in the text: “Like her mother, Mai also shares the losses of family and country; however, her true mourning in *Monkey Bridge* is not for the motherland but for her mother. Home, for Mai, is not bound to a geographic location; rather, home is the familial space that her mother created through her role as nurturer and caregiver” (85). In accordance with Ho’s analysis, the mother stands in for the motherland itself—further emphasizing the instability of “home” in the text, which is not grounded in a singular locale or region. Within the context of Mai’s displacement, her attempts to reconnect with her mother signify a reconnection with the motherland from a transnational vantage point.

In the beginning of the novel, three years after Mai has left Vietnam, her mother is hospitalized in Arlington after having a stroke. As Thanh calls out her father’s name repeatedly, Mai thinks she is distressed because Baba Quan, Mai’s grandfather, was not able to leave Saigon with Thanh. In an attempt to alleviate her mother’s anguish, “Mai and her best friend, Bobbie, decide they need to track down Thanh’s father [...] in Viet Nam and bring him to the United States” (Powell 144). Mai cannot call her grandfather from the U.S. “because of the embargo of Viet Nam” (Powell 144), and so she and her friend drive to the Canadian border in order to contact him from Canada.

However, as Mai and Bobbie approach the U.S.-Canadian border, Mai is filled with anxiety regarding the implications of crossing this border. She fears losing her U.S. residency status, as the “Americans, rumors had it, could forbid us to return if we stuck so much as half a foot outside the perimeters of their country” (14). While Mai waits and

deliberates at the border, she remembers a myth regarding how the Vietnamese defeated the Mongols:

“When the Mongols rode into the country like thunder on horseback, the people knew their army was too strong to oppose head-on. So they devised a plan,” my mother used to say as we sat by our backyard bamboo grove in Saigon. “Everyone in the country painted, on each leaf of each tree, the following message with a brush dipped in honey: ‘It is the will of Heaven. The invaders must leave.’ When the caterpillars and ants ate the honey, they engraved and seared this message onto the leaves, holy tablets wrought from the heart of the land itself. The words looked supernatural, a spontaneous declaration by the forces of nature that terrified the Mongolians. Like ghosts conquered by an even greater spirit, they fled across the border and disappeared into the night.” (18)

This national myth is directly juxtaposed against Mai’s immediate experience at the U.S.-Canadian border. Interestingly enough, the myth is also associated with borders, as the Vietnamese cause the Mongols to flee the national border through the pacifist tactic of painting leaves with honey. The tale thus mirrors Mai’s desire to cross the U.S.-Canadian border, and demonstrates Mai’s use of myth to negotiate her immediate experiences and surroundings.

Moreover, this national myth is also connected to Mai’s familial and cultural heritage. Mai notes that her mother used to tell her the story “as we sat by our backyard bamboo grove in Saigon” (18). This reference immediately grounds the myth in the landscape of Vietnam, and Mai’s own memories of her childhood home. While her retelling of the tale creates a link between national landscapes, Mai’s grandfather also relates the myth to the Vietnam War itself: “The moment the first American soldiers set foot on Vietnamese soil, they should have been told the story of how Vietnam had conquered the Mongols, I remembered Baba Quan’s hushed refrain” (18). Baba Quan’s

remark endows the myth with a political significance, equating the American troops of the Vietnam War with the Mongol invaders. When read within the context of the Vietnam War, this myth of pacifist defiance signifies a desire to resist American military forces.

While this myth holds a political significance, Mai also uses it to navigate her present circumstances. She continues to contemplate whether or not she should cross the border, and looks for divine signs in the scenery surrounding her:

I tried to concentrate. Street lights bouncing off a row of poplars lining the parking lot . . . Could they be punching me secret Morse code, a supernatural response to my call for help? What magical message could the leaves spin? What caterpillars and ants would be my spirit guides? I looked through the windshield and saw only my mother's imperfect universe and exit signs pointing south. (18)

In accordance with the myth of the Mongol invaders, Mai also looks for signs in the landscape. She desires a definitive message, such as leaves carved with words by caterpillars and ants. However, unlike the myth of the Mongol invaders, Mai is not able to derive any signs or codes from the immediate landscape. There is a divergence between myth and reality, and Mai is once again faced with the task of making a decision. However, although she is unable to directly compare her surroundings to that of the myth, her reliance on it nonetheless signifies her use of national myths to negotiate her present experiences and dilemmas. While such incidents occur within the boundaries of the U.S., the character uses national myths to connect to her homeland and its mythic past. As such, Mai's experience is positioned within a transnational context that moves between borders and nations.

After much deliberation, Mai finally decides not to cross the U.S.-Canadian border. She does not want to risk losing her residency, “despite the callings of filial duty” (Powell 144). As Mai comes to terms with her decision, she compares her situation to the heroic Trung sisters of Vietnamese legend:

Canada was impossible to tackle tonight. We would have to turn around and head back to Virginia. I would have to find another way to contact my grandfather. What good would I be to my mother, I tried to comfort myself, if I were to go to Canada only to be turned away when we tried to return to the United States? I was, after all, without the protection of American citizenship. In another age, perhaps in my most wishful and magnanimous daydream, Bobbie’s Chevy could become an elephant, and I a sword-wielding Trung sister, the greatest warrior of all Vietnamese warriors, fearlessly defying danger and death to lead a charging army against a brigade of Chinese invaders. But Vietnam had been neither a pioneering nor an empire-building country. Ours, I had learned in school, had been primarily a history of defending, not crossing borders. (29)

To connect to her present surroundings, Mai imagines herself as a fearless Trung sister, a woman warrior of Vietnamese folklore. Mai imagines this mythic, alternative identity of female defiance in order to subvert her doubts and anxiety. However, Mai is reminded of the political reality of her status as refugee, and even the national history of her country. While Powell notes that “the mythic homeland is a form of remembering the past that a refugee can control” (145), Mai also uses myth to cut across her experiences in the United States. Myths are a destabilizing force, and although they starkly diverge from reality, they provide a space for Mai’s development—a space which is grounded in her homeland and culture.

However, despite this connection to her cultural heritage, Mai must still deal with the pressures of assimilation. When Mai first leaves Saigon, she temporarily lives in

Farmington, Connecticut with Uncle Michael, a family friend from the war, and his wife Aunt Mary. Mai describes her process of learning English while living in Connecticut:

the new language Uncle Michael and Aunt Mary were teaching me began gathering momentum, like tumbleweed in a storm. This was my realization: we have only to let one thing go—the language we think in, or the composition of our dreams, the grass roots clinging underneath its rocks—and all at once everything goes. [...] Suddenly, out of that difficult space between here and there, English revealed itself to me with the ease of thread unspooled. I began to understand the levity and weight of its sentences. [...] New terminologies were not difficult to master, and gradually the possibility of perfection began edging its way into my life. How did those numerous Chinatowns and Little Italys sustain the will to maintain a distance, the desire to inhabit the edge and margin of American life? A mere eight weeks into Farmington, and the American Dream was exerting a sly but seductive pull. (36-7)

As Mai attains fluency in English, she is aware of her desire to assimilate within American society, and so reach the elusive “American Dream.” Unlike her mother, who does not readily learn English or adapt to her surroundings in Virginia, Mai is conscious of the pressures of assimilation. Jennifer Ann Ho notes that Mai’s “desire to integrate herself into American society, reflects the strain of first generation children and their immigrant parents” (85).

However, despite the “seductive pull” (37) of assimilation, Mai’s memories of the past in Vietnam inhibit her from fully conforming to mainstream American society. Mai states, “Even without papers and identifications, all of us in Little Saigon had left too long a trail of history to erase. Ours, after all, was an inescapable history that continued to be dissected and remodeled by a slew of commentators and experts months after April 1975” (42). Here Mai directly identifies herself with the refugee community of Little Saigon in contrast to the U.S. commentators who discuss the 1975 collapse of Saigon, an

opposition which exposes the “clash over who has authority to narrate Viet Nam” (Powell 146-7). As Mai watches the appropriation of her country’s story by the American media, she feels lost and disconnected from U.S. society: “Against a clenched and complicated landscape, the picture continued to be played and replayed, glowering from the curved glass pane of the television set, a silent rage that careened through the buzzing darkness of our new lives” (42). While the U.S. continues to narrate her country’s history, Mai feels a sense of disassociation that counteracts her initial desires to fully assimilate. Mai continues to be connected to her history and culture. Moreover, the various national myths in the novel allow Mai to actively resist the pressure to blend “into the American melting pot” (37), as she is able to develop a transnational identity that transcends borders and national spaces.

While Thanh is still in the hospital, Mai finds her journal in her room. She begins to read the narrative of her mother’s past in Vietnam, as well as the story of her maternal grandmother’s marriage. In contrast to this familial history, Thanh also writes of a national myth regarding the Chinese governor and the emperor of Vietnam. In this tale, Thanh writes that “*the Chinese governor, a chess champion, proposed a chess match between himself and our emperor to test our national learning*” (57). However, the emperor is not skilled at playing chess, and so finds a peasant who is excellent at playing the game:

“The peasant told the emperor to agree to the match, on the condition that it begin at noon. The peasant then [...] became one of the emperor’s guards, standing behind him with a giant parasol [...]. This parasol had been pierced beforehand with a tiny hole through which only a miniscule ray of sunlight could pass. By tilting the parasol and moving it in such a

way as to illuminate the precise piece the emperor should move, the peasant was able to shepherd the emperor's play and guide him toward victory, saving the country from yet another Chinese invasion.” (57)

As in the first myth of the Mongol invaders, this myth also denotes a pacifist tactic for avoiding military conflict, such as the invasion of the Chinese. However, Thanh also compares this national myth to her relationship with Mai: *“All my daughter's life, I have played the part of this peasant, pointing my magic finger so my daughter will know which route to follow, shining my light on her bishops, [...] preempting attacks from the other side's invisible soldiers, teaching her how to protect her king and her queen” (57-8).* Thanh thus uses this tale as a metaphor for her relationship with her daughter. Like the peasant from the chess match, Thanh also tries to subtly guide Mai through life. This myth is able to dislocate the narrative in time and national space, as it is grounded in the landscape of Vietnam. Most importantly, this national myth symbolizes the mother-daughter relationship itself—a relation that is pivotal to Mai's development throughout the novel.

In the present tense of the narrative, Mai takes a train to Connecticut for a college interview. While on the train, she reverts to her memories of Vietnam and the war. She remembers the trauma of the Tet Offensive, as well as the death of her father, who died in his sleep during the war. Mai states, *“We consoled ourselves with the fact that my father had been blessed, a man who had been bestowed the luxury of dying nonviolently in the middle of a war” (82).* During her father's funeral, Baba Quan comes and prepares betel nuts for the father's body. Throughout this preparation, Baba Quan retells the national myth of the betel nut:

“The betel-nut story begins with two men in love with the same woman. When the woman marries the older brother, younger brother is heartbroken. He leaves home, unaware that his spirit, which has to watch over his ancestors’ graves and can only live in the village land, cannot make the trip with him. He wanders until he reaches a river and collapses with exhaustion by the river’s edge. His body, barren of his soul, becomes cold, and his heart, which is equally barren, turns into a dry limestone by the waters of the river, among a bed of jagged pebbles.” (84)

When the older brother leaves the village to search for his brother, he also loses his soul and ends up ““at the same spot by the river’s edge. But his heart is filled with warmth for his wife, and when he dies, he turns not into a limestone but a tall, roof-rimming areca tree that bears thick clusters of green betel nuts”” (84). The same fate happens to the wife when she leaves the village to look for her husband. However, she becomes ““a twisted betel vine that has to wrap itself around the betel tree for support and nurturance”” (84).

Later in the story, the betel tree and vine continue to thrive near the lime stone, and the king of the village discovers them:

“The king wraps a betel nut into the betel leaf, which he oils with ground-lime paste from the limestone, and chews this new concoction. A bright-red liquid, redder than blood pumped from the human heart, flows from this mixture. The incident is passed on so that, over time, the betel nut becomes a symbol of eternal regeneration and devotion. And when old people like your grandfather chew it, we pray for our family blessings and for our ancestral souls. We think of our loved ones and of the inextricable connections that keep them tied forever to our souls. There is no death,” my grandfather whispered. “There’s your father, right here among us.” (85)

This myth is used to mitigate the loss of Mai’s father. However, it also perpetuates a cultural belief regarding the permanence of one’s ancestors. In her analysis of this tale, Balaev asserts that every “symbol in the myth conveys the ideology of regeneration through family devotion that requires inhabitation of local lands. The tree produces an

abundance of fruit all year regardless of drought, thus representing the possibility of regeneration found in devotion to family, community, and land” (43). As such, this “myth asserts that a person’s soul cannot live outside its homeland because one must protect the spirits of ancestors” (Balaev 42). This tale helps to ease the trauma of the father’s death, as Mai notes, “I could adopt my grandfather’s view. It could be gorgeous, death, a sacred and benevolent beginning beyond the bend of this earth” (85). Moreover, although Mai is no longer living in the land of her ancestors, she is nonetheless able to remember and uphold her culture’s beliefs regarding family and death. As Mai travels towards Connecticut, this myth both connects her to her homeland and directly reminds her of her grandfather.

After arriving in Connecticut, Mai goes to a college interview at Mount Holyoke College. Before starting the interview, she imagines she is the fierce woman warrior, Trung Trac, going to battle:

If the dreaded college interview was to be a battle, and the interviewer my opponent, this would be the battlefield strategy my parents taught me. I would follow the luminous motion of history, with all its implications and possibilities of victory. I would enter the realm that had delivered Vietnam into a history of brilliant battlefield maneuvers that I could imitate to win over the interviewer. (118)

Mai consciously decides to adopt her country’s national and mythic history in order to “combat” her interviewer, Amy Layton. In doing so, she assumes the defiant warrior identity of the Trung sister, Trung Trac: “In this world, I was Trung Trac, the first fighter, along with her sister, to elevate guerrilla warfare and hit-and-run tactics into an art of war, the first Vietnamese to lead a rebellion of peasants against the Chinese empire” (118-9). As Mai continues the legend of the Trung sisters, which was “imparted [by her

parents] with a wave of the hand” (119), she deliberately uses the first person. She states, “There, in the year 40 A.D., I became an expert pole- and-swords fighter, and my sister a skilled empty-hand-and-dagger warrior” (119). Powell asserts that because Mai’s parents taught her the legend, the tale is “part of Mai’s cultural heritage, something ‘handed down’ by her forebears” (146). Moreover, Powell notes that “Mai’s use of ‘I’ is not just a child’s game; it signifies her sense of self as vested in the cultural heritage and the mythic past that the Trung myth represents” (146). As such, we can view Mai’s strategy of adopting the identity of Trung Trac as a means of resisting the trauma of the college interview and maintaining a tie to her culture. Mai becomes Trung Trac, and thus counters any impulses to assimilate within the dominant culture.

As Mai waits for her interview, she continues to relate the legend of the Trung sisters. Trung Trac, or in this case Mai, fights and kills a tiger that was terrorizing her village. She becomes a general, and is in charge of a predominately female army: “The villagers applauded my bravery and proclaimed me their general. I carved our oath to liberate the country into the tiger’s skin and used the parchment as a proclamation [...]. Of the generals my sister and I chose to lead our units, thirty-six were women” (120). Trung Trac trains her army in evasive battle tactics as they prepare to fight against the Chinese. Mai states that they defeat the Chinese “by focusing on our strong points—our fluidity and softness—and exploiting their weak points—their brute force and unyielding hardness” (123). Trung Trac and her female army thus use the softness stereotypically associated with women to overcome the Chinese forces. As Mai explicitly connects herself to Trung Trac, she adopts an identity of female defiance and strength. This

mythic identity is enacted within a transnational context, as Mai is physically in the U.S., but mentally connected to Vietnam. Ironically, Mai's adopted identity also enables her to succeed within the traditional "American Dream" of attending a four-year university. However, although Mai is conforming to the dominant U.S. society on some level, she is doing so on her own terms by maintaining her cultural identity and heritage.

Mai's adoption of this woman warrior persona provides an alternative space of development that directly grounds her in her country's mythic past. Mai states, "My sister and I continued to be venerated by our people, who built shrines and declared national holidays in our honor. Both North and South Vietnam had claimed us as their own" (123). Indeed the legend of the Trung sisters transcends the boundaries of North and South Vietnam. Powell asserts that the "legend is one of the few cultural narratives that transcend political affiliations. Their importance as symbols of Viet Nam [...] and its nostalgic past resound in the struggle of refugees to form an identity that negotiates loss of home with life in the United States" (138). As such, it is no coincidence that Mai deliberately chooses to adopt a mythic identity that is at once a woman warrior and a national heroine. Mai's use of this legend symbolizes a national unity that transcends the politics of the Vietnam War.

Mai's retelling of this legend is directly juxtaposed against her college interview with Amy Layton. Powell asserts that during the interview "Amy Layton, immediately undermines Mai's strategy and reclaims America's authority to speak of Viet Nam" (146). Throughout the interview, Mai desires to give Layton a different image of the country, one that exists apart from the war: "I wanted to tell her: It was not all about

rocket fires and body bags. I could lead her through my neighborhood, at the Midautumn Festival. I could walk her to the bakeries, where bakers pulled from their oven trays of moon cakes, fat with stuffings of cashews, lotus and watermelon seed” (128). However, despite Mai’s desire to re-appropriate the U.S. narrative of Vietnam, she soon realizes that Layton will not acknowledge her authority: “But I couldn’t manage even a meek description of the house or the festival for Amy Layton. The Vietnam delivered to America had truly passed beyond reclamation. It was no longer mine to explain” (128). In this instance, Mai realizes that “Viet Nam is replaced by America’s Vietnam, which is strictly told through American history, racism, the media, and Hollywood” (Powell 148). Powell asserts that “the Trung sisters’ strategy of guarding the weak points doesn’t work; Amy finds and exposes each of Mai’s weak points. So the Trung sisters’ strategy transforms into one of evasion” (148).

In her discussion of this interview, Powell argues that “Mai cannot form her own identity; it becomes dictated by Americans” (148). The critic asserts that the Trung legend “reminds her that she should never have crossed a border; to cross boundaries, to leave home, is unsettling and disrupts a sense of self” (Powell 149). However, although Mai is ultimately unable to control the American appropriation of Vietnam through the Trung legend, the tale is nonetheless significant, as it molds Mai’s transnational identity. By using the first person, Mai claims authority over her own identity in opposition to Amy Layton’s desire to “reinforce Mai’s status as other” (Powell 148). Mai cannot control national narratives within the U.S. imagination, but she does assert control over personal narratives that shape her conception of self.

Moreover, despite the apparent failure of the legend to effectively navigate the interview, Mai's retelling of the Trung sisters' battle strategies assumes a subversive undertone when examined more closely. Mai describes Trung Trac's strategy of attacking the Chinese in detail: "My army would strike physically and psychically at the enemy. We would turn the country into a narcotized landscape haunted by shadows from above and tunnels from below, creating a night voice that would spook the invaders" (120). Later, Mai notes that their "aim was not to win every battle, but to confound the enemies and make them paranoid after every encounter" (122). In her analysis of the novel, Michele Janette discusses the subversive politics of these evasive battle strategies: "As Trung Trac's battles continue, she develops more and more into a figure for Vietnam's millennium-long struggle for independence, combining centuries-old martial arts with the tactics of the National Liberation Front. Her strategies become set-piece descriptions of the tactics of the Vietcong against the U.S." (63). Although Mai states that these strategies were "used one thousand years later to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu" (122), Janette asserts that this deflection is simply part of the text's "guerrilla irony" (64). She notes that the battle strategies are "a pastiche of familiar depictions and analyses of the VC. But Cao deflects it. Rather than overtly linking Vietnam's revered warrior heroine with the VC who fought against American soldiers, she directs us to America's predecessors in Vietnam" (Janette 64). As such, "*Monkey Bridge* appears to avoid endorsing the Vietcong who fought against the Americans, by staying with a less fraught target" (Janette 64). Janette asserts that by "making the point through ironic misleadings, Cao turns discursive hegemony against itself" (64).

Building off of Janette's reading of Trung Trac's battle strategies, I also argue that Mai's retelling of the Trung legend retains an underlying subversive message. While on the surface it seems that Amy Layton is able to successfully appropriate the story and image of Vietnam, it is really Mai who is able to undermine Layton's appropriation by assuming discursive and tactical strategies that are emblematic of the Vietcong. Mai subtly identifies herself with forces that are in direct opposition to the U.S.—a move which aligns her against the seemingly dominant presence of her American interviewer. She is able to operate within the discourse of her oppressor, which is evident when Amy Layton praises her for her fluency in English. However, from this vantage point, Mai is able to counteract Layton's authority through "camouflaged irony" (Janette 64) and her use of a national legend. While the persona of Trung Trac is pivotal to Mai's development of a transnational identity, the legend is also politically subversive in its ability to subtly undermine Layton and her attempts to dominate the general conception of Vietnam.

Towards the end of the narrative, Thanh commits suicide due to depression. Mai discovers her mother's suicide letter, which reveals the truth of their family's past and Thanh's traumatic experience during the war. As Mai reads this letter, her attainment of knowledge regarding her family history furthers her development as an individual. Mai finds out that her grandfather, Baba Quan, is actually a Vietcong. Thanh writes to her daughter: *"While you imagined your grandfather as a phantom figure lingering in the shadows of a black statue, waiting to escape from a country on the verge of collapse, he was in fact part of a conquering army whose tanks [...] stormed down Saigon's*

boulevards” (228). Thanh also reveals that Baba Quan asked “*his wife to prostitute herself to a rich landlord known in the Mekong Delta as Uncle Khan and, in the process, set in motion a sequence of events that continues to loom large in my heart today*” (229). Thanh was conceived from her mother’s liaisons with Uncle Khan, which resulted in Baba Quan’s desire to attain revenge. During the war, Thanh’s family is forced to leave their village, and her mother, Mama Tuyet, dies shortly afterwards. Despite the dangers of going back to her family’s village in the Mekong Delta, Thanh decides that she must bury her mother there: “*though our old village had been declared a free-fire zone, [...] I knew I would have to find a way back there, [...] back to the sacred land where my mother’s placenta and umbilical cord had been buried and where her body would have to be buried as well*” (248).

As the letter continues, Thanh writes that she travels by boat down the river with her mother’s body. When she comes to the village burial grounds, she finds Uncle Khan visiting his mother’s grave. In an instant, Thanh witnesses Baba Quan murder Uncle Khan, her biological father: “*While another man pinned Uncle Khan to the ground, Baba Quan plunged a knife through Uncle Khan’s throat. Right there, on sacred earth, our village burial ground, a murder was being committed before my eyes*” (249). After watching this traumatic and irreversible event, Thanh is severely injured by napalm. She goes into a coma for six months; when she wakes up in the hospital, she discovers that her mother’s body was never found, and so she is unable to fulfill her familial duty.

Thanh imagines her mother’s body as “*soulless, forever hungry and forever wandering by the waters of the Mekong where I had abandoned her*” (251). Balaev

discusses Thanh's unsuccessful attempt to bury her mother within the context of the betel nut myth:

[Thanh] cannot maintain loyalty to her ancestors or land as dictated by the national mythology encapsulated in the betel nut story due to her traumatic experience and forced departure, thus foreclosing any possible redemptive return to her homeland. The disjunction between the past and present is caused by the inability to reconcile on the one hand, mythic notions of a cultural identity defined by inhabitation of native homelands and loyalty to ancestors' spirits, and, on the other hand, a traumatic departure and modern diasporic life in which return to the native land is impossible. (42)

Thanh is both physically and mentally scarred by the dual trauma of her experience by the river, as well as her permanent displacement from Vietnam. She is haunted by her inability to follow the familial duty prescribed by the betel nut myth, and decides to commit suicide in an effort to escape her loss of both family and homeland. Thanh's suicide and the revelation of her traumatic past decidedly resist the closure of the traditional bildungsroman. While Thanh is unable to fulfill her familial duties, Mai is also unable to forget the trauma of her family's past.

However, although the text "doesn't forgive, it doesn't heal, and it doesn't nurture" (Janette 51), Thanh nonetheless attains a sense of peace through composing the letter. She notes that she is able to reconnect with the landscape of the Mekong Delta by writing to her daughter:

Years ago, I followed your grandmother into that phantom world by the river's edge, across from the dead world of our village, and I have never found my way back. But as I am sitting here writing to you, I feel something that I haven't felt in a long time, an unburdened sense of tranquility palpable enough that I can almost run through it with my hands. And for the first time since our arrival in Virginia, I can almost feel the geometric shape of the shimmering rice fields outside, a rebirthed expanse of flat, flat green, answering the call of my heart. (253)

Thanh is finally able to envision the landscape of her birthplace by exposing the truth of her family's history to Mai. In this sense, Mai not only inherits the real history of her family's past, but also the land of her mother's village. This cultural inheritance from her mother shapes her identity and provides her with a connection to the motherland in the wake of Thanh's death. Balaev asserts that the "beauty of the land substantiates an identity rooted in a national, pastoralized, and mythic landscape that precludes trauma" (50). As such, the landscape of the Mekong Delta is able to counter trauma and actively shape Mai's relation with the motherland, despite her displacement on American soil.

At the end of the letter, Thanh explicitly outlines Mai's cultural and familial inheritance:

you will also have a different inheritance, an unburdened past, the seductive powers of an American future, a mother's true memories of Ba Xuyen—its warm breast, a lone water buffalo amid a shimmer of liquid green, a solitary leaf turning its belly toward the direction of the full sun. When all is done, it is all yours, the nerve tissue of your family's past, the labor and loop of your mother's life, and the blood that pumps its own imperishable future through the chambers of your heart. (254)

In this passage, Thanh juxtaposes imagery of the Mekong Delta with both memories of family and the prospective of Mai's "American future." Mai has directly inherited her family's history, the land of her mother's birthplace, her mother's memories, and the story of her grandfather. As the mother's blood continues to circulate through Mai's veins, the protagonist is inextricably connected to her family, culture, and homeland. Her relationship with the mother once again symbolizes a relation with the motherland. The end of Thanh's letter reestablishes their mother-daughter relationship—a relation that actively shapes Mai's transnational identity.

At the end of the novel, Mai dreams of her mother on the night before her first day of college. The dream depicts her mother climbing “a beautiful ladder” (258), the top of which represents “what every seeker seeks through all the ages to achieve: nirvana itself” (259). As she climbs with a “secret creature” (258), Mai states that the creature goes up the ladder “a second time, with my mother leading the way, step by step, into perfection” (259). It is through this dream of Thanh ascending the ladder to nirvana that Mai finally mourns the loss of her mother, and also realizes their intimate and eternal connection:

This was the first time since the funeral that her death had seemed final, final enough for me to imagine her climbing something like a ladder toward Heaven. I could feel a part of me, the part that had always wanted to break loose from my mother, make a sudden turn in reverse to rush backward into the folds of my mother’s womb. We had inhabited the same flesh, and as I discovered that night, like the special kind of DNA which is inherited exclusively from the mother and transmitted flawlessly only to the female child—the daughter—part of her would always pass itself through me. (259)

This dream is thus pivotal to Mai’s maturation, as she discovers the female connection that she will always share with her mother, despite her previous desires to break away from Thanh. While Thanh’s letter openly defines their relationship and Mai’s cultural inheritance, it is in this dream that Mai actively realizes her connection to the mother and motherland. This realization signifies Mai’s maturation. While the protagonist will be starting a new life in college, it is clear that she can never forget the trauma of her family’s past, nor can she dismiss her cultural heritage. Complete assimilation is not possible, and Mai will always be tied to the mother/motherland through her past memories, national myths, and her inextricable connection to the mother.

Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* thus resists the traditional bildungsroman of female development. Through a non-linear narrative that moves fluidly between national spaces, Cao presents us with a protagonist who counteracts the pressures of assimilation through her adoption of mythic identities and retelling of national legends. Instead of following the trajectory of the conventional immigrant coming-of-age narrative, which results in integration within the dominant culture, Mai resists assimilation through her reliance on national myths and her shared identity with the Vietnamese warrior heroine Trung Trac. Through these strategies, she develops a transnational identity that is able to navigate between cultures and nations. However, Mai's forging of a transnational identity is not always a straightforward process, and is at times complicated by her gifted abilities in English, her achievement of the "American Dream" through attending a four-year university, and the fact that she is actually not biologically related to her Vietcong grandfather. Cao demonstrates that the adoption of a transnational identity is not a simple process, and that there are some inevitable ambiguities that link the protagonist to the dominant culture. However, despite inherent signs of assimilation, Mai is nonetheless able to maintain a connection to her cultural heritage through her relationship with the mother and motherland. While the trauma of the family's past, the mother's suicide, and the memories of the Vietnam War can never be forgotten, Mai's cultural heritage is also ineradicable, despite her continued residency in America.

Conclusion

The novels *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, *Obasan*, and *Monkey Bridge* can be read within a tradition of Asian American works that are evolving the genre of the bildungsroman, such as the novels of Maxine Hong Kingston, Nora Okja Keller, Amy Tan, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka. However, the texts of this study utilize the specific lenses of historical trauma, myth, and dreams to further redefine the genre of the ethnic female bildungsroman. Brainard, Kogawa, and Cao's novels revise the structural form of the traditional bildungsroman by presenting us with non-linear narratives of development. *Obasan* is the most radically non-linear text of this study, as Naomi's development occurs within a reversed trajectory, in which the character's education of her past occurs in the present tense. Cao's *Monkey Bridge* also resists the linear trajectory and national stability of the conventional bildungsroman, as the novel moves between different time periods and the national spaces of Vietnam and the United States. Brainard's novel is the most linear text of this study, since the events of the narrative are given in chronological order. However, Yvonne's use of Philippine folklore nonetheless disrupts the linear progression of time in the text.

While these novels revise the formal structure of the bildungsroman, their use of historical trauma also disrupts the closure of the traditional bildungsroman. Each text is based on a historically traumatic event, though the novels explore different forms of trauma. In Brainard's *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, the protagonist's homeland is occupied and invaded. While Yvonne essentially loses her home, Naomi in Kogawa's *Obasan* is also physically dislocated from her home as a result of the internment of

Japanese Canadians. In Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, the protagonist Mai loses her original home in Vietnam. The character must forge a new home in the U.S., while negotiating her cultural identity and the pressures of assimilation. While these novels are based on different historical events and even span different time periods, they are all centered on the trauma of losing one's home. In reaction to this loss of home, each protagonist must rely on an alternative space of development through which to negotiate their hardship. These texts identify the concept of homelessness as integral to the larger project of staking out a different formal and cultural context for the ethnic female bildungsroman.

Moreover, these three novels re-imagine and rewrite historical trauma from the marginalized perspective of a minority female protagonist. The authors' reformulation of the bildungsroman is used to undermine the dominant narratives of history, as the texts resist the closure of the traditional bildungsroman. In examining these three novels, the intricacies of trauma and its intersections with memory, history, identity, ethnicity, and gender are highlighted. While these texts reassert the impact of historical trauma within the collective racial memory, they also establish the relationship between trauma and development within the ethnic female coming-of-age narrative.

Within this re-imagining of historical trauma, Brainard, Cao, and Kogawa's texts utilize myth, folklore, and dreams as alternative spaces for the development of their female protagonists. While *Obasan* relies heavily on dreams as a means to interpret and re-envision Naomi's traumatic past, both Brainard and Cao's novels utilize myth and folklore in order to propel the development of their protagonists. Interestingly enough, Cao and Brainard's texts both evoke the mythic figure of the woman warrior. While

Yvonne imagines she is the woman warrior, Bongkatolan, from the Philippine oral epic tradition, Mai imagines that she is the woman warrior, Trung Trac, from Vietnamese national legend. Both invocations of the woman warrior provide models of female strength and resistance, and result in the empowerment of Mai and Yvonne. This adoption of a female warrior identity is reminiscent of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, in which the narrator adopts the identity of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan. Janette writes that "Cao's tale continues to invoke and revise Kingston's. In both Kingston's retelling of the Fa Mu Lan legend and Cao's retelling of the Trung sisters' history, we see women generals trained in a variety of martial arts" (62). Thus, Brainard and Cao's use of the mythic woman warrior follows the tradition of Kingston's canonical Asian American bildungsroman. However, the texts of this study expand on this tradition by relying exclusively on Philippine and Vietnamese folklore and legend. Such uses of the woman warrior figure reveal mythic parallels between disparate cultural mythologies, while also emphasizing the connection between mythic warrior heroines and female development within this genre.

While all three novels focus on the alternative space of myth, folklore, and dreams, the texts also emphasize the development of the female protagonists' respective voices. While Yvonne quite literally comes of age through the development of her voice and her performance of Philippine oral epics, Naomi's relationship to voice in *Obasan* is much more complex. Kogawa's *Obasan* highlights the paradigms of silence and speech, as Naomi navigates through the silence of her family and eventually breaks this silence when she learns of the fate of her mother. In discussing the construction of the female

voice in these novels, it is necessary to ask who the story belongs to. Or rather, who is given the authority to narrate the various stories of these texts? At the end of Brainard's novel, Yvonne directly assumes the task of narrating the story of the war and the occupation of the Philippines. However, throughout *Obasan*, Naomi struggles with her extensive gaps in knowledge regarding her family's history, and her inability to effectively narrate the story of her childhood and family. It is only through her discovery of her mother's fate that Naomi is able to understand her family's past and assume direct authority over the narrative through her invocation of her mother. The issue of who has authority to narrate the past is also directly implicated in Cao's *Monkey Bridge*. Mai desires to narrate the history of her country and assume control over the U.S. narrative of Vietnam. However, she realizes that the story of her country and the story of the Vietnam War have been appropriated by the dominant U.S. media. As such, these novels raise questions regarding who has the authority to narrate, and how the narratives of these protagonists subvert the dominant records of history.

Lastly, the novels in this study highlight the significance of the mother-daughter relationship within the genre of the Asian North American female bildungsroman. Within each of the novels, the protagonist's relationship with her mother is pivotal to her development. The mother-daughter relationship is a discursive space that actively shapes the respective subjectivities of Yvonne, Naomi, and Mai. While Laydan teaches Yvonne the oral epics she will later perform, Naomi develops by figuratively reuniting with her absent and silent mother. In Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, Mai's mother stands in for the motherland itself, as Thanh represents Mai's cultural heritage and the character's

connection to her past in Vietnam. The novels of this study thus demonstrate the importance of the mother-daughter relationship within the ethnic female bildungsroman, and build off of a tradition of mother-daughter relationships in Asian American writing. This study demonstrates that mother-daughter relationships are intimately tied to the larger discourse of female development in the ethnic bildungsroman. While Brainard, Kogawa, and Cao's texts significantly deviate from the traditional European bildungsroman, they also demonstrate how the factors of myth, dreams, and historical trauma definitively shape the genre of the Asian North American female bildungsroman.

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