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The Gull/Kamome: Intercultural Noh

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Abstract:

Amid the modernization of the Meiji period (1863-1912), traditional Japanese arts such as Noh were devalued in Japan, while in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there was keen interest in the west, with more than 40 Noh plays translated into English, French, and German. Literary figures such as William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound were excited by Noh's potential to inspire new ideas about performance and poetry. At the same time, the Fenollosa-Pound translations of Japan's 'noble' plays celebrated the ancient, unchanging quality of Noh; Fenollosa described the art form as an extant 'form of drama, as primitive, as intense, and almost as beautiful as the ancient Greek drama at Athens, still exists in the world' (Pound & Fenollosa, 1959, p. 59). Further, Pound approached the 'finishing' of Fenollosa's translations with a Modernist sensibility which demonstrated 'the extent to which formal knowledge of the source language no longer constituted a requirement for the practice of translation' (Yao, 2002, pp. 10-11). Partly as a result of translations into western languages, there was renewed critical interest in Noh among Japanese intellectuals in the 1930s, associating the traditional art with 'the myth of a "natural" nation that had no history but was timeless and composed of individual connected through natural bonds" (Tansman, 2009, p. 3). Theatre critic Uchino Tadashi suggests that theatre culture within Japan has continued to release Noh from historical context in order to operate as a confirmation of Japan's 'uninterrupted continuity and an endless present' (Uchino, 2009, p. 85), reinforcing Japan's past as myth rather than history.

But what happens to such stubborn ideas about translation and timeless, uniquely Japanese Noh if a play is written in English about the Japanese diaspora on the west coast of Canada and then translated into Japanese for bilingual performance? This paper will consider the implications of just such a cultural production, namely *The Gull*, a contemporary Noh play written by Canadian writer Daphne Marlatt, which grounds the Japanese dance drama in Canadian history, specifically the uprooting and internment of Japanese Canadians following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, but harnesses the emotional and somatic intensity of the stylized Noh movement and music to renew the story through performance. This paper will approach *The Gull* as an intercultural Noh play whose linguistic, cultural, and semiotic translations weave a web of sound and meaning that draws attention to multiple and contradictory roles that translation can play in all these interactions.

Introduction

Amid the modernization of the Meiji period (1863-1912), traditional Japanese arts such as Noh were devalued in Japan, while in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there was keen interest in the west, with more than 40 Noh plays translated into English, French, and German. Literary figures such as William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound were excited by Noh's potential to inspire new ideas about performance and poetry. At the same time, the Fenollosa-Pound translations of Japan's 'noble' plays celebrated the ancient, unchanging quality of Noh; Fenollosa described the art form as an extant 'form of drama, as primitive, as intense, and almost as beautiful as the ancient Greek drama at Athens, still exists in the world' (Pound & Fenollosa, 1959, p. 59). Further, Pound approached the 'finishing' of Fenollosa's translations with a Modernist sensibility which demonstrated 'the extent to which formal knowledge of the source language no longer constituted a requirement for the practice of translation' (Yao, 2002, pp. 10-11). Partly as a result of translations into western languages, there was renewed critical interest in Noh among Japanese intellectuals in the 1930s, associating the traditional art with 'the myth of a "natural" nation that had no history but was timeless and composed of individual connected through natural bonds" (Tansman, 2009, p. 3). Theatre critic Uchino Tadashi suggests that theatre culture within Japan has continued to release Noh from historical context in order to operate as a confirmation of Japan's 'uninterrupted continuity and an endless present' (Uchino, 2009, p. 85), reinforcing Japan's past as myth rather than history.

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include Japanese Canadian writers and introduces Noh as a viable form of Canadian cultural production. This paper will approach *The Gull* as an intercultural Noh play whose linguistic, cultural, and semiotic translations weave a web of sound and meaning that draws attention to 'the ways that the movements of groups always necessarily intersect, leading to exchange, assimilation, expropriation, coalition, or dissension' (Edwards, 2006, p. 92) and the multiple and contradictory roles that translation can play in all these interactions.

Steveston Migrations

In November 2002, Heidi Specht, the Artistic Director of Vancouver-based Pangaea Arts, an intercultural theatre group, approached Marlatt about the possibility of writing a contemporary Noh play about Steveston, a fishing village located at the mouth of the Fraser River on the Pacific coast of British Columbia. According to Specht, she had been deeply moved by 'Unearthing the Silence,' an archaeological dig which had uncovered artifacts from the Japanese Canadian community there prior to WW II: 'Once a thriving fishing community, Steveston seemed to be the perfect setting for a Ghost Noh, common in the Noh play repertoire" (Programme, p. 7). She also wanted the play to make an historical link between Steveston and Mio, a small fishing community on the coast of Wakayama Prefecture in Japan. In the 1880s, villagers from Mio had begun emigrating to Steveston to fish the waters teeming with salmon and work in the cannery, which for a time was the busiest on the west coast.

Before WW II, Steveston was the second-largest Japanese Canadian community, with the majority tracing their roots back to Mio. From the onset, however, the Japanese residents in Steveston faced racist discrimination within and outside the fishing industry. In 1893, the white and First Nations fishermen went out on strike to demand a reduction in the number of fishing licences issued to Japanese fishermen; until the 1920s, it was illegal for them use motorized fishing boats. Things got much worse, however, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Canada immediately declared war on Japan, and under the War Measures Act, Canadian citizens and residents of Japanese ancestry found themselves officially translated into enemy aliens. On the west coast, houses, fishing boats, cars, and other property were seized, Japanese language schools closed, and Japanese Canadians forcibly removed from their homes and legally restricted from venturing within 100 miles of the coast. By the end of 1942, more than 12,000 Japanese Canadians were living in internment camps in the interior of British Columbia, and their property sold by the government to pay for their incarceration. When the war ended in 1945, they were

encouraged to 'repatriate' to Japan, regardless of whether they had been born in Canada, spoke only English, or had never seen Japan before. Travel restrictions were not lifted on Japanese Canadians until 1949, when 28 fishermen were allowed to return to Steveston to work after negotiations with the fishermen's union (Marlatt, 2009b, p. 16), with more following in 1950.

Initially, Specht had asked Joy Kogawa about writing a Noh play about Steveston; Kogawa's novel *Obasan* (1981) had been the first fictional treatment of the internment by a Japanese Canadian writer. Kogawa declined but suggested Marlatt because of the latter writer's literary engagement with the town over several decades. In the early 70s, Marlatt was hired as the editor of a small oral history project, and along with photographers Robert Minden and Rex Weyler, went to Steveston with Maya Koizumi, who was interviewing retired Japanese Canadian fishermen in Steveston to gather a history of the community. The uprooting and internment came as a shock to Marlatt as she listened to the first-hand accounts: 'in 1972, the internment and all the suffering it entailed was still a suppressed episode of Canadian history, not taught in the public school system and barely written about' (Marlatt, 2009a, p. 30). Koizumi translated the interviews she conducted in Japanese and in 1975 *Steveston Recollected: A Japanese Canadian History*, edited by Marlatt, was published the Aural History Division of the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. As Marlatt explains, 'Because of my introduction to Steveston was through oral history, voices have been an important part of my work there' (Marlatt, 2009a, p. 30), although later works creatively grounded in Steveston have added 'textual voices' to the vocal interweaving (Marlatt, 2009a, p. 45) and insisted on being told in more than one medium.

The oral history of Steveston began as taped interviews in Japanese, that were translated into English and edited, and supported by photographs taken during the project as well as historic photographs from the provincial archives. In *Steveston* (1974), a poem cycle paired with photographs by Robert Minden, Marlatt tried to write the 'motion of fluid space' (Kamboureli, 1991, p. 118) and locate the voices of the community in the context of the eco-system of river, ocean, and the migratory cycles of salmon and people. *Steveston* has been published twice since then by two different publishers, with poems and photographs rearranged, essays added, and even a new poem written for the 2000 edition. In her collection *Salvage* (1991), in which she rewrote selected *Steveston* poems, Marlatt turned to the language of photography to describe the poetic process of a first and second 'take' on poems written in two different decades. Rewriting earlier poems by viewing them through a feminist lens allowed Marlatt to foreground the background and make present what had

been absent or overlooked. In *The Gull*, as will be shown, the words move towards music and performance to 'sound some of the deeper emotional layers' (Downey, 2006, online) of the traumatic removal of Japanese Canadians from the west coast, their internment and delayed return. Noh's formal difference helps expose still hidden aspects of the story that go beyond a dark historical incident that has been officially redressed and laid to rest.

Noh Play, Replay, and Interplay

For Marlatt, the proposal to write a contemporary Noh play linked her long term literary engagement with Steveston with her interest in Noh, which had begun in the early 1960s with a course in Japanese literature in translation taught by Dr Kato Shuichi at the University of British Columbia; she was fascinated by Noh's mix of poetry music, and dance, and the 'otherworldly personages' and their poignancy (Marlatt, 2009b, p. 16). Nevertheless, there was much she needed to learn in order to write a Noh play so Specht introduced Marlatt to Richard Emmert, a Tokyo-based American deeply engaged in Noh as a certified instructor and performer of traditional Noh; artistic director of Theatre Nohgaku, a company of English-speaking Noh performers; and composer and musician.

To prepare for the project, Marlatt read and analyzed Noh plays in English translation and visited Japan to watch performances in Japanese and access Emmert's personal Noh library in Tokyo. Her research also took her to Mio in Wakayama Prefecture and the small museum there dedicated to the emigrants who went to live on the west coast of Canada. In Wakayama City, she also met Matsui Akira, a renowned Noh actor of the Kita School, who would agree to direct, choreograph and play the role of the *shite* in *The Gull*. Matsui's lifelong commitment to traditional Noh has not made him uneasy about innovative performances. He has written scripts and choreographed productions, and, with Emmert, co-directed three English-language Noh productions: Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* and Allan Marrett's *Eliza* in 1984 and 1989, respectively, at the University of Sydney; and Arthur Little's *St. Francis*, at Earlham College in Indiana in 1988.

Emmert collaborated with Marlatt as her dramaturge and was the composer and music director of *The Gull*. According to Emmert, thinking of Noh in terms of 'theatre' or 'play' is misleading: 'Noh is a dance drama where elements of highly stylized modes of music, song and dance are prominent and even dialogue is a stylized rendering which is more akin to singing than speaking' (Emmert, 2009, p.10). Further, the physicality of the performer and the relationship of movement, text, and music are primary to the art form: 'it is the physical aspects and their creation of a level of energy that builds and subsides but is always maintained that makes nô *nō*' (Emmert, 1997, p. 25). Workshops on chant and

movement led by Emmert acquainted participants, including Marlatt, with the musical structure of Noh. His thorough knowledge of Noh and ability to explain it in Japanese and English made him an essential liaison between the Noh musicians from Japan who played the traditional instruments – the *nôkan* (Noh flute), *kotsuzumi* (shoulder drum), *ôtsuzumi* (hip drum), and *taiko* (flat drum) – and the Canadian chorus singing in English.

Marlatt worked with Emmert to adapt the (mainly) English words of the script to the *waka* style of alternating seven- and five syllable lines set to an eight bar of music. The English script then had to be translated into Japanese for the purposes of rehearsal and performance. Although he speaks English, Matsui preferred to use Japanese in his performance of the *shite*. In terms of the story, this seemed apt as he plays the spirit of a Mio-born mother who speaks little English (Emmert, 2009, pp. 5-6). The task of script translation was given to Yoshihara Toyoshi, an experienced theatre translator responsible for the Japanese translations of most of the Canadian plays that have been performed in Japan. After completing the first draft, Yoshihara found collaboration with Matsui necessary to ensure the translation was rhythmically compatible with the dance and music of Noh.

This cycle of collaborative learning about Noh was repeated at every stage in the development of *The Gull* in workshops, training sessions, and rehearsals. It extended to the public, who received information about Noh through open workshops and exhibits, such as the Noh Mask exhibit and lecture demonstration on making a Noh mask held at the Richmond Museum, to display the work and share the expertise of Hakuzan Kubo, the Wakayama artist and Noh mask maker who carved special masks for *The Gull*. In short, before a Noh play could tell a Canadian story, there was a need for actors, musicians, and viewers to understand at least some of the history of the art and the principles on which its stylized structure is based. Yet in the development and performance of *The Gull*, the historical context of the west coast was always present, too, whether by staging two public readings of *The Gull* at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site and National Nikkei Museum & Heritage Centre and inviting critical feedback from the audiences, or in the multicultural background of the people involved.

Translation and the Traditional

The repertory of traditional Noh plays consists mostly of plays from the Muromachi period (1336-1573), with most of these written by Kannami and his son Zeami. The language is archaic but the stories are familiar to Japanese viewers. According to Nogami Toyoichirô, there are many ways to build a programme, but the fundamental principle that governs

the order of the plays in a programme is that of *jo* (initial part), *ha* (middle part), and *kyû* (final part), which is related to the tempo and tension of music, movement, and voice during performance: 'The initial part is to be represented solemnly and powerfully; the middle part finely and delicately; the final part briefly and rapidly. The middle part is the substance of the programme and the longest' (Nogami, 1934, p. 41). Between the plays, it is customary to relieve the emotional intensity with a comic interlude of *kyôgen*, performed by actors trained in this separate art. A Noh play is more focused on the visual and auditory than plot and character development. Working with levels of association, it weaves phrases and images from classical Japanese poetry and other plays into its texture; these are 'replayed over and over from play to play, and each time they accrue a slightly different meaning' (Marlatt, 2008). In *The Gull*, there was 'a kind of space' Marlatt was trying to reach through words as Noh's highly metaphorical and symbolic nature, and 'zen feeling' allowed her to approach 'a large view of life and death' (Marlatt, 2008) in the telling of a story of a suffering spirit 'that revolves around contested notions of what constitutes home as that place where one belongs' (Marlatt, 2009a, p. 49).

In performance, *The Gull* was not presented as part of a multiple-play programme, but like a traditional play, was presented in two acts, the *maeba* and *nochiba*, simply called Act 1 and Act II in the performance programme. Between the two acts was a prose interlude, which borrowed the comic aspects from *kyogen* but was 'both longer and more conversational' (Marlatt, Programme, p. 5), and an integral part of the play. *The Gull* conforms to the order of a Noh play, but tradition is translated when the *waki* and *wakitsure* begin their entrance song in English: 'in late spring's drenching sea-mist we return at last…" (Marlatt 2009b, p. 41), a familiar language in an unfamiliar style for most in the audience. Although the *waki* is usually the first to appear, the focus of a Noh play is on the *shite*, or doer. The *waki* and *wakitsure*, who witness the action of the *shite* are strictly secondary actors. The *shite*, usually in a different kimono and mask in each act of the play, is visually the most important presence on the stage: 'On stage the *waki* is relegated to an inferior place in relation to the *shite*, clad in a drab costume, back to the audience and half hidden by the [downstage left] *waki* pillar' (Brandon, 1997, p.13). In *The Gull*, the relationship between the *shite* and *waki*/*wakitsure* is played out in provocative ways that involve language, sound, and image. As mentioned, the *shite* is a Japanese-speaking woman from Mio, while the *waki* and wakitsure are two Japanese-Canadian brothers, born in Canada and English-speaking. As '*nisei* fishermen heading up the coast from Steveston' (Marlatt, 2009b, p. 42), they identify themselves as the Canadian-born children of the *issei* generation, who emigrated from Japan. Many of

the *Nisei* as well as third-generation *Sansei* experienced internment and felt inferior and ancillary to both cultures. In Canada they were estranged from their Japanese heritage through the process of assimilation that was accelerated by endemic racism and the trauma of internment. They spoke English but were racially marked. In Japan, where the population had little knowledge or interest in the foreign-born Nikkei and their experiences elsewhere, the Japanese Canadian was visually inconspicuous but culturally and linguistically different. In Canada, they were considered Japanese; in Japan, foreigners. *The Gull* does not blur the formal distinctions between *shite* and *waki*, and closely follows the structure and stylized sequencing of Noh, but by giving the *waki* and *wakitsure* greater prominence, and a distinct voice, it not only nudges Noh conventions but politicizes the performance.

The Gull as webwork

The creation of a Noh play by a west coast anglophone author and local performers in collaboration with professional Noh artists from Japan not only offers an innovative approach to Noh, but also initiates its recognition as an art form that can that can tell Canadian stories. Growing up on the west coast, Specht feels that Asian elements are integral to the narratives of all who live there, regardless of their ancestry (Specht, 2008). The multicultural makeup of the west coast was apparent in the casting. There were four Japanese Canadians, including the *waki*, Simon Hayama, whose hometown is Steveston, and David Fujino, who plays the role of an older Japanese-born fisherman in the comic *kyogen* interlude, who was born in an internment camp. The *wakitsure* Alvin Catacutan was born in the Philippines and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Specht felt the lead characters should be played by actors of Asian ancestry to 'really get at the underlying racism against the […] Asian population in a white dominated society' (Specht 2008), which is a part of west coast history embedded in the specific historical themes of the play.

The story takes place on the west coast of British Columbia in the summer of 1950. In the first act, two Japanese Canadian brothers (the *waki* and *wakitsure*) have returned to the coast to resume fishing now that the restrictions on their movement have been lifted. Their parents died during internment, and their father's boat had been seized, but as they head up the coast in a rented fishing boat, the two brothers enjoy resuming their lives and livelihood. When it looks like a storm is coming, the brothers seek shelter at the coastal village of China Hat (Klemtu). As the brothers tie up to wait out the storm, a creature (the *shite*, wearing the mask of a young woman/gull) appears. To the *waki*, it seems to be a young woman, 'hiding her face in the fold of her sleeve'; the *wakitsure* sees a gull, 'tucking

its head under a wing'. As the *shite* sings in Japanese of Mio, her lost home, and pities the brothers as Mio birds the *waki* listens: 'Listening to her is like listening to our mother – I understand only part of her *Nihongo* [the Japanese language]' (Marlatt, 2009b, p. 47). Still he must translate for the *wakitsure*, who as younger brother, has even less Japanese. The chorus sings a song of the young woman arriving in Steveston as a picture bride, expecting a better life and a younger husband, but finding she has been deceived. The initial disappointments and hardships of her life on the west coast are followed by the internment.

In the *kyôgen* interlude, an older fishermen (the *aikyôgen*) visits the brothers on their boat. As they drink and talk together, the *aikyôgen* asks after the boys' parents, and learns that their mother died of tuberculosis in New Denver shortly after the end of the war. He remembers her fondly: 'she was quite a woman. She had that old Wakayama spirit. What a catch!' (p. 59). As they talk about the mother and the seagull on the wharf, the boat rocks but when they look outside, there is no sign of a real storm. The *aikyôgen* suggests that the young woman/gull they saw on the wharf might be a ghost. 'There are stories about China Hat, you know. Some men have seen ghosts on their boats' (p. 59).

As the second act begins, the *nochijite* (or *shite* of the second act), wearing the mask of a middle-aged woman, appears again before the groggy brothers dozing on the wharf. This time they recognize their mother, who speaks of her sense of abandonment in Canada and tells them to go home, back to Wakayama. The *waki* asks for forgiveness, but resists his mother's order (the English script says the *shite* speaks in English 'home – you must go!' but this line is actually rendered in Japanese, except for the word 'home') with his answer, 'what was home to you/ Mother, is not home to us' (p. 71), revealing within the bilingual dialogue of the play the linguistic and cultural drift that has taken place between the generations. The *shite* then does a powerful dance of 'grief, anger and confusion' (Downey, 2006, online) but, as the chorus sings of her understanding of the ocean as connection, of 'joining here and there' (Marlatt, 2009b, p.73), the spirit is released from its suffering and 'quick as a bird' (p. 74) she disappears.

The production of *The Gull* localized the Noh stage, costumes, and masks. Set designer Phillip Tidd used Noh stage building specifications (Knutson, 2008, p.8) but replaced the traditional painting of a pine tree usually found on the backdrop of the Noh stage with a photograph of the island and harbour of Klemtu, foregrounding the background of the story with this image of the distinctive coastal landform that had given China Hat one of its names. The *hashigakari*, or bridge, which is used to enter or exit the Noh stage was draped with fishing nets to resemble a wharf, with wooden pilings marked the four performance pillars of the stage.

Margaret McKea, the costume designer, dressed the *waki*, *wakitsure*, and the *aikyôgen* in clothing actually worn by fishermen in the 1950s, and the *waki* and *wakitsure* make their entrance carrying lantern, gaff, and net. Even the *shite*, clad in the mask and kimono associated with traditional Noh, had to adapt to conditions on the west coast: the mask worn in the first act is framed by fishing net and the *shite* wears a kimono and a grey rain cape. The *waki* wears a Cowichan sweater, an iconic symbol of the west coast associated with the First Nations, which visually serves to not only locate the story, but also to overlap the identity of the Steveston-born *waki*, who calls the west coast home, with the First Nations who called the west coast home prior to colonization and immigration, and are a fundamental but silent part of the story unfolding on the Noh stage.

The webwork of languages

Marlatt calls the title of her play *The Gull* a 'tragic pun' based on the idea of being a 'gull' or gulled, and the image of sea bird/woman, who feels she has been deceived. The writer felt, however, that she did not play nearly enough with language. Just as Nogami saw the dense intertextual construction of the classic works of Noh as an obstacle to translation, Marlatt found it an obstacle to writing Noh because she could find nothing in the 'classic' Canadian canon that matched the wealth of allusion inscribed in Japanese Noh plays nor a local geography of place-names imbued with symbolic association. There was a longstanding and rich oral tradition among the First Nations of the coast, but like much on the colonized coast, what did not exist in English did not exist at all. The lack of foundational literary texts and allusions marks gap and absence as an integral part of the history of the west coast in general, and of Japanese Canadians, in particular. In fact, part of the 'accumulating weight of histories, memoirs, novels, photo exhibits, historic sites' (Marlatt, 2009b, p.24) and poetry by Nikkei writers comes from the stones of silence that are necessarily part of the story. Within *The Gull*, it is the spare but strategic use of a Japanese word, such as *nisei* or *nihongo* in the English text, as well as the terms of Noh themselves, operate as stones thrown in the 'fluent drifts of culture' (Marlatt, 1998, p. 71), creating ripples that may redirect ideas in different directions and towards an awareness of all the languages operating unofficially in bilingual Canada.

Conclusion

The Gull as successful intercultural theatre – it won the prestigious Uchimura Naoya Prize in 2008 – was a complex collaborative performance of linguistic, cultural, and semiotic translation. Noh as a 'traditional' form of Japanese theatre offered a new way to

tell a Canadian story; the story of the west coast repositioned Noh as a style of performance that was neither 'essentially' Japanese nor outside history. In the process, it drew attention to Japanese, and more broadly Asian languages and cultural practices and productions, which have shaped and been shaped by the history of the west coast; it also showed how a cultural practice such as Noh, which uses stylistic rigour, sound, and the intensity of a thoroughly trained body to move beyond language, draws attention to the way that translation operates in multi-sensory productions. The vocal and somatic iterations and elaborations of what is said in two languages renders *The Gull* exemplary of how the 'same' narrative can be framed in very different ways and be embedded in larger narratives (Baker, 2010, p. 119), and provides a model for collaborative translation, especially where partial cultural and linguistic knowledge must be pooled.

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