

Citizenship, Interrupted: The Dialogic Interpreter in *Obasan*¹

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Introduction

Much discussion of translation has traditionally revolved around questions of fidelity and equivalence, or, more recently, notions of textual domestication or foreignization. Interpretation studies have looked elsewhere for theoretical underpinnings in communication studies and sociolinguistics, but like the notion of fidelity in translation, the idea of a “neutral” mediator in the field of interpreting has been a resilient one. Whereas loyalty has been demanded of the translator as it is of the citizen, the interpreter has been ethically bound to remain uninvolved. Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* offers an alternative model of an ad hoc community interpreter engaged in her practice as a committed activist. This paper will focus on how the novel’s dialogic dialogue interpreter, composed of authorial and fictional characters’ voices, attempts with singular intent to prove the legitimacy of the Japanese Canadian as a citizen and the governmental injustices of property seizure and internment as an abrogation of a citizen’s rights.

Obasan was published in 1981, a year before the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was added to the Canadian Constitution, recognizing the collective rights of linguistic and indigenous minorities. It was the first fictional treatment of the internment of Japanese Canadians by a Japanese Canadian writer,² and shaped by the autobiographical. *Obasan* relates the fictional history of Kogawa’s family in the wake of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, telling of their forced removal by the Canadian government from Vancouver to an internment camp in the interior of British Columbia, and further relocation eastward at the end of World War II, when Japanese Canadians were still not allowed to return to the West Coast. The “dialogic interpreter” in *Obasan* is a composite figure operating under linguistic and social constraints and amid the “intolerable confusion of finding the citizen and the alien in the same body” (Sinfield 35). The task of

¹ This paper is an abridged version of an article which appeared in *West Coast Line* 58 (2008).

² There are earlier literary treatments of the internment in English, such as “Call My People Home,” poet Dorothy Livesay’s 1950 documentary poem for radio. There is also Daphne Marlatt’s long poem, *Steveston* (1974) and the CBC radio adaptation *Steveston Recollected: A Japanese-Canadian History* (1975), which foregrounds the forced removal.

the translator³ in the novel is to tell the story of the internment, both the event and its afterlife, using different voices in two languages, namely, English in varying registers, and fragments of a Japanese language. Together, the voices redirect the story of internment and redraw the map of what constitutes “Canadian” identity.

In *Obasan*, the voices of this interpreter are “embodied” through the tongue, which functions as a border between body and language. They speak of the personal experiences of internment and its aftermath in a three-way performance by Obasan, Emily Kato, and their niece, Naomi Nakano. Laconic Obasan’s formulaic utterances have their basis in Japanese even when they are rendered in English. Naomi is an English speaker with little oral and no written Japanese. Strictly speaking, Aunt Emily has the linguistic means to be an interpreter with her access to both Japanese and English in oral and written form. As an activist, the renditions of the voices in her community she offers to the Canadian government are neither neutral nor faithful, and they often “co-exist with lack of renditions” (Wadensjö 362), as a counterpart to reticence, even silence. Emily Kato’s chosen task as a mediator is to prove the fidelity, or loyalty, of her community to Canada and seek equivalence in the official recognition that a Japanese Canadian and a Canadian citizen constitute the same thing. Because this task is to assert her own community as citizens, her agenda is committed, resistant, and domesticating.

Translator’s Block

The dialogic interpreter in *Obasan* is damaged and suffering from what I call “translator’s block.” This is not a reference to what gets lost in translation or an inability to find *le mot juste*, but rather a pained speech; an attempt at articulation that employs accent, stutter, awkward phrasing, or fragments of lost language as translation strategies to register the effects of history on identity, recorded in memory and imagination. Linguistic damage is registered on a sutured tongue, emphasizing the violence with which it was silenced, as well as the urgency with which the interpreter attempts to provisionally repair and use it again. Aunt Emily’s glued-on tongue struggles to articulate an identity beyond racialized borders. In both cases, the “ragged” body or language questions the neutrality of physical and linguistic norms, and challenges “the myriad structures and practices of material, daily life [that] enforce the cultural standard of a universal subject with a narrow range of corporeal variation” (Davis 24). At the same

³ I use the term “translator” here to encompass the agents in the process of textual translation and oral interpreting. The ‘task of the translator’ comes from the title of Harry Zohn’s English translation of Walter Benjamin’s famous 1923 essay, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers.”

time, it tangibly locates loss.

Translator's block also counters an exclusive view of the translator as a potent linguist, whose cultural currency and ability to capture a text is determined by "articulateness." Failure in this regard links faulty speech to somatic performance. George Steiner makes this connection explicit, but he has a male body in mind when he collates "[i]mpotence and speech-blocks, premature emission and stuttering, [and] ejaculation and the word-river of dreams" (44). Kogawa's fictional translator is antithetical to the articulate-and-thus-virile male translator Steiner constructs, and deliberately so. The novel offers a woman who acknowledges that her tongue has been maimed and only provisionally repaired, but who wishes to testify to the traumatic injustices of the internment of Japanese Canadians. Aunt Emily is aware that her attempts to utter evidence of the wrongs are stilted: "We're gluing our tongues back on [...] It takes a while for the nerves to grow back" (43). This is a communal subject in the process of healing.

The interpreter as linguistic and community activist counters both the idea of the model citizen, the "ideal servant" (*Obasan* 104) that has been a defining notion of Asian Canadians as well as notions of the faithful self-effacing translator or detached "neutral" interpreter. The performance anxieties of the composite interpreter in *Obasan* undo the "fluency fetish" (Cronin, *Translation* 135) that undermines the credibility of someone lacking language by means of a powerful performance of wounded words; a painful re-membering of what in the past has become "an impediment to speech" (Malouf 63). The task of this damaged translator serves to expose complacency about language and identity as ignorance rather than innocence of the existence of languages and lives in perpetual translation from person to person, tongue to tongue, word to world, and back.

Kogawa fictionalizes public and private narratives associated with the internment of Japanese-Canadians in *Obasan*. The novel had such an impact on the success of the actual outcome of the Redress movement that, on the day a comprehensive settlement was reached with the Japanese-Canadian community, excerpts were read aloud in the Canadian House of Commons. *Obasan* opens up the field of possibilities by unsettling assumed hierarchies not only within a given genre, but also in a social context. As Bakhtin has observed, the "boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven. Every specific situation is historical. And the growth of literature is not merely development and change within the fixed boundaries of any given definition; the boundaries themselves are changing" (Bakhtin, "Epic" 33). Definitions are under constant reconstruction in *Obasan*,

particularly the meanings of “Canadian citizen,” “Japanese Canadian,” and “enemy alien,” and so are linguistic boundaries, as Japanese is deliberately included as ancillary in their semantic iteration.

An “affective aesthetic” has been observed in *Obasan* akin to the polyphony Bakhtin finds in Dostoevsky’s writing and “[i]ts heterogeneity of material, multiplicity of voices, metafictional reflexivity, perspectivism, and narrative disjunction [which] are brought into aesthetic coherence in a process that puts the reader into play and compels the construction of an ethical centre” (Bannerjee 103). Chinmoy Bannerjee also includes the “the poetic, the oneiric, the everyday, irony, parody, quotation, muteness and stammering” (103) in the “zone of language” that is operating in Naomi Nakane’s narrative in *Obasan*, but stops short of mentioning the use of Japanese and how it affects English, and vice versa. Yet the linguistic code switching of the interpreter in the text as author and character foregrounds most powerfully the mistaken assumptions about who speaks as a Canadian. Any sense of linguistic tolerance implicit in an officially bilingual country (with a policy of multiculturalism) is belied by conditions that are not very different from those in the officially monolingual United States, where Standard English is “a mask which hides the loss of so many tongues, all those sounds of diverse native communities we will never hear [...] and so many unremembered tongues” (hooks 296). The fictional interpreter in *Obasan* is constituted and constrained by the English of the dominant national narrative, but her vocal presences suggest linguistic loss is neither beyond retrieval nor repair.

In crossing from one language to another, the use of a residual Japanese in a predominantly English text resembles translation, but instead of mediating between distinct languages insists on the necessity of the narrative being told in more than one tongue. In *Obasan*, three characters configure the communal subject through dialogue: a silenced Japanese Canadian learning to speak again after having linguistic identity denied and ethnic identity rejected. The fictional translator models a reconstituted community identity, composed of a variety of voices, including those that challenged and silenced it. The fragments of Japanese employed by Kogawa are really no more than the singed feathers of a fragile phoenix of a lost language, but they float across the limits of official linguistic territory with surprising affect.

Mistaken Identities

In “‘Our Next Neighbour Across the Way’: Japan and Canadian Writers,” Susan Fisher notes, “Japan as a literary topic begins with *Obasan*” even though the novel “is not about

Japan" (29). Still, Fisher herself seems to conflate Japanese-Canadians with Japan when she says that Kogawa's novel "rehabilitated" the image of Japan and "humanized" the Japanese for "non-Japanese Canadian readers" (29) and her article then proceeds to discuss images of Japan in the writing of other Canadians. This presumption is similar to that which prompts a question that Naomi resents. Whenever she is asked, "Have you ever been back to Japan?" she thinks, "Back?" (271). The stubborn conflation of Japan and Canadians of Japanese heritage who have never been there indicates how easy it is to read the translation as the original, or inversely, to recognize the distinct nation rather than its altered transnational translation.

Naomi Nakane, like Kogawa, is an anglophone Canada-born citizen. She is employed as a teacher, but this indication of "fluency" does not mean Naomi is "comfortable" in the English language. Further, the range of linguistic presences in Naomi's family reminds us that whole generations of residents and citizens in multicultural Canada are not quite fluent in the hegemonic tongues that offer employment opportunities and wider social access, and cut off from the "living" first language, so that they find themselves stammering in both. The interior locus of Kogawa's translator is significant because the "alienation and subjective estrangement" of the translator theorized by Walter Benjamin and others is the voice of an outsider, that is, the émigré, or exile (Apter 87). *Obasan* is dealing with the experience and trauma of exodus (89) within national borders. The novel is not about Japan, although the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is recounted in Grandmother Kato's letter read in translation near the end of the novel. Rather it concerns Canadians citizens living in Canada and being so victimized by racism in official and daily manifestations that they reject their ancestry.

Two Obasan and Two Aunts

The title of Kogawa's novel is the Japanese word for 'aunt,' and so from the outset, Kogawa is asserting a Canadian subject using the Japanese language. "Obasan" means "aunt," and also is used to refer to a middle-aged woman, or one that is unknown or unfamiliar. Its *-san* marks it as a respectful term, but perhaps the most important thing to notice about the word is that it is a gendered mark of relationship. Using the term as both a title and to refer to a character, Kogawa threads gender and language into the weave of her story of national exclusion.

The two *obasan* oscillate, one the stone of silence within the novel, a "silence that will not speak," and the other, the story with its silences that cannot speak. In addition to

the two *obasan*, there are two “aunts” in the novel, the reticent (Ayako) Obasan, and the loquacious Aunt Emily, in whom activism and translation intermingle. Neither woman has been assimilated: Obasan has not ventured across linguistic and cultural barriers. Aunt Emily, born in Canada and bilingual, has made the crossing. Although she takes her Canadian citizenship seriously, she is unwilling to let her Japanese identity disappear. ‘Aunt Emily’ has been called a “strikingly Westernized appellation, a name as American-sounding as ‘Aunt Betty’” (Besemeres 135). It also evokes *The Wizard of Oz*, but we’re in Canada not Kansas, and it is internment and not a tornado that has ripped the citizen away from home. Further, ‘Emi’ or ‘Emiri’ are Japanese names, as well. Emily, then, is a Japanese name that can be recognized as “Canadian.” Aunt Emily’s surname also has a double identity. The usual Japanese character used for the ‘ka’ in Kato is the same character used to designate “Canada” in Japanese.

The two aunts are related to Naomi Nakane, whose name also gestures in double directions. “Naomi” is a Japanese name, which sounds familiar to many English readers because it is also a Hebrew name found in the Bible.⁴ Kogawa does not suppress the religious dimension of her own reading of history, that is, the Christian orientation that guides her perspective. However, she sees that a shared vocabulary does not ensure common meaning. Struggles over a ‘pure’ identity insist on singular readings, but Kogawa prefers dialogue, with competing voices heard and multiple identities acknowledged.

Nakane, Naomi’s surname, does not appear in Japanese characters, but the most common writing of this surname pairs two Japanese characters, *naka*, which means “middle” or “inside”; and *ne*, which means “root,” in both the organic and original sense. I point this out because very early in the book, the issue of Naomi’s surname comes up in the classroom, although the discussion concerns its pronunciation rather than its meaning. It is the beginning of a new school year, and Naomi hears Sigmund, one of the students, address her as “Miss Nah Canny.” Naomi immediately corrects his mistake:

“Not Nah Canny, “ I tell him, printing my name on the blackboard: NAKANE. “The a’s are short as in ‘among’ –Na Ka Neh – and not as in ‘apron’ or ‘hat’.” (7)

⁴ The epigraph of *Obasan*, as Smaro Kamboureli points out, is from Revelation 2:17, and serves as the epigraph for Kogawa’s novel, *Itsuka* (Kamboureli n.2 239), as well. It is part of Kogawa’s project to “look for the roots of your values in your mythology” (“Cross-Over Point”), which in her case is a Christian one.

She does not identify her name as Japanese, but incorporates its pronunciation into an English phonic system. The repression in this explanation of her name is indicative of what Smaro Kamboureli sees as the shape of the story. It is, Kamboureli observes, “a narrative of repression. Repression, psychological and political, is at the heart of the story this novel tells, both at the collective level of the Japanese Canadian community and at the specific level of Naomi’s family” (177). Kamboureli takes a critical interest in the classroom scene, and drawn in perhaps by the overdetermined name of Sigmund, she makes her case that “[i]n addressing her as ‘Miss Nah Canny’, Sigmund parodies, while acknowledging, Naomi’s cultural specificity and pedagogical authority. Yet by misappropriating her name, but declaring in effect that she is uncanny, Sigmund of Cecil, Alberta, signs himself as Sigmund of Vienna, father of psychoanalysis, and Naomi ‘Nah Canny’ is inscribed as a woman whose alterity is distorted and restrained” (215). While I agree that repression is operating in this story, in this scene where Kamboureli sees parody in Sigmund’s mispronunciation, I read monolingualism unable to produce a name in a different language system.

The teacher’s Japanese name being adapted and distorted in its English pronunciation by a student is a reversal of the usual performance of assimilation that takes place in the classroom. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa remembers “being set to the corner of the classroom for ‘talking back’ to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name” (53). In this instance, it is not clear that Sigmund recognizes his teacher’s name as a mark of Japanese ancestry and thus does not necessarily acknowledge Naomi’s cultural specificity, as Kamboureli suggests, nor consciously parody her name. Naomi’s own awareness of how her name *should* be pronounced is obviously not shared by her Anglophone pupil. Indeed, much later in the novel, Mr and Mrs Barker both pronounce the surname in the same way, under rather different circumstances, when they address Obasan as “Mrs Nah Canny.” In the case of Sigmund or the Barkers, the linguistic failure is the anglophone’s inept pronunciation of Japanese. This inverts the convention of the “funny foreigner” in anglophone travel literature (Cronin, *Lines* 46), where the accent and mistakes of a foreign speaker of English amuse but also accommodate the English reader.

Kogawa seems to recognize such distortions are not unilateral. The mispronunciation of Nakane by the English-speaking pupil is almost immediately followed by Naomi’s recollection of her uncle responding to her question about whether he and Obasan were “in love.” “In ruv? What that?” (7). There is mispronunciation here, too, as the English word “love” is fitted into the sound system available in Japanese.

For Naomi's uncle, the semantic dimension of the English expression is also missing and, from a cultural perspective, its romantic meaning seems untranslatable as Naomi recalls, "I've never once seen them caressing" (7). Kogawa, then, is letting voices in English and Japanese attempt words in the other language, showing the difficulty of expressing other ideas, even at the level of phonic mimicry, and the cultural assumptions being made on both sides, as well. For example, one can hear in Sigmund's name, as Kamboureli does, the specific evocation of Sigmund Freud, but in a broader sense, the name points to a possible German heritage, also implicated in the war that interned the Japanese, but which by 1972, signifies a "freckle-faced redhead" who is indubitably Canadian, at least to Naomi Nakane.

For Naomi, then, it is race that marks Sigmund as Canadian, then, and not his name. Yet she resents the same assumption being made to set her apart:

"Where do you come from? [...] That's the one surefire question I always get from strangers. People assume when they meet me that I'm a foreigner" (8).

This ubiquitous Canadian question seems to grow out of an interest in origins from times when, as Mavis Gallant describes it, "there was almost no such thing as a 'Canadian.' You were Canadian-born, and a British subject, too, and you had a third label with no consular reality, like the racial tag that on Soviet passports will make a German of someone who has never been to Germany" (220). Visible difference may reside at the heart of the question of origins when it is addressed to Naomi, but it is also a question that tacitly indicates that most people in Canada are not from there, and whether or not a person is born or living in Canada, their personal or collective past must lie elsewhere.

With the knowledge that both linguistic and cultural mistakes will be made, Kogawa nevertheless recognizes that in order for the story of *Obasan* to unfold, the reader needs to acquire some specific vocabulary. The translator here is Naomi Nakane operating as a language teacher at the elementary level, in and outside the classroom, correcting pronunciation and teaching new vocabulary crucial to a radical re-reading of a historical period that overshadows names like "Nakane" with those of "Pearl Harbor" and "Yellow Peril." The term *nisei*, for example, provokes the repetition of the classroom ritual of explanation during a dinner date as Naomi reaches for a napkin to spell the word, pronounce it as "knee-say," and explain its meaning (9). Like "knee-grow," the spelling of the approximate pronunciation of the Japanese word for "a second-generation" Japanese Canadian mimics the voice of a white anglophone, and suggests this particular pronunciation is accompanied by other more serious cultural errors related to the term.

There is, then, a specific vocabulary necessary to tell the story of internment, and by incorporating *nisei* into the novel, Kogawa not only inserts Japanese into the English text, but also makes clear that its reference is to post-immigrant Japanese born in Canada. There is a further claim being made by “pronouncing” these words on the page. Kogawa subverts the hegemony of English but also the hegemony of Japanese, both of which in different contexts have been languages of imperialism. Her interest is in the Japanese Canadians who are missing a tongue and have been denied a place to call their own in the particular passage of history that she traces.

Formally, Kogawa seamlessly inserts Japanese into the English text and “domesticates” it. Although she offers explicit and implicit explanations of the Japanese terms she uses, she does not place the Japanese words in italics to identify them as foreign terms. That is, she introduces another language into English, writing her own relationship to both languages. The Dominican author Junot Diaz, who does not italicize Spanish words when he writes in English, says, “I don’t speak in italics” (Danticat 123) and like Diaz, Kogawa’s resistance to italics puts both languages on a more equal footing. In a literary work, says Bakhtin, dialogism may be performed or repressed, resulting in a polyphonic or monologic discourse. *Obasan* can be read as a ‘narrative of repression,’ but its dialogism is not repressed, and as Kogawa and the characters within the text perform word play born of cultural difference and deliberate distortion, a composite parodic translator is heard.

Employing Bakhtin, Sherrill Grace identifies *Obasan*, as “inseparable” from a consideration of the strategies that “dialogize thought [and] carry it into the open, turn it into a *rejoinder*” (121). It can be said then that the novel itself performs the role of dialogic interpreter, by taking the form of an *otvet*, or answer, “but with retroactive and proactive properties” (Wadensjö 356) that interacts, qualifies and challenges the voices within it. The linguistic play in *Obasan* is serious; the novel’s irony is meant to “wither the apparent stability of the ruling structure” (Sommer 135) and thus shift the uncertainty of “a life dependent on what is, fundamentally, an undependable language” (Grizans online) to a surer rather than purer linguistic terrain. Japanese seeps into the novel “umi no yo, like the sea” (2), and leaves its residue on English terms when it ebbs.

Rights and Responsibilities

So far, the dialogic interpreter has been described in terms of a composite play of voices, but there are written documents involved, as well. As Naomi looks through the bundles of papers Aunt Emily has given her to read, she sees the “ugly facts” of “our short harsh

history” and reads “our” as both “Canadian” or “Japanese Canadian.” Embedded in each is the seizure and government sale of fishing boats; the suspension of fishing licences and liquidation of personal property; and the revocation of nationality that was part of the “mass uprooting” of Japanese Canadians: “The movements of all Japanese Canadians were controlled, monitored and policed” (Miki 3) until 1 April 1949, several years after the end of WWII.

Naomi notes the corrections her aunt has made in the documents she has collected. “Wherever the words ‘Japanese race’ appeared, Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written ‘Canadian citizen’ (40), making a palimpsest of identity by not erasing the mistake but correcting it and then allowing both to remain, testifying to double identities. Her reading and re-writing is an assertion of her right to read these documents on and in her own terms. Obasan, on the other hand, prefers the protection of silence and “has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances” (17). The linguistic fissures in the family turn this fiction towards translation, rewriting the historical romance of Canada as an inclusive community. Aunt Emily represents a call for both rights and responsibilities; her performance of translation foregrounds the ethical responsibilities which have always been attached to that praxis. Translation within fiction admits a responsibility that exceeds the creative freedom of the text. Sheldon Pollock calls literature “an especially sensitive gauge of sentiments of belonging: creating or consuming literature meant for large world or small places is a declaration of affiliation with that world or place” (18). Aunt Emily’s editing prioritizes a national identity without erasing a cultural one.

Like Kogawa, Aunt Emily recognizes the translation of her life and the lives of other Japanese Canadians in the changing lexicon used to describe their situation in English language newspapers and government records. Reading and writing as a “word warrior,” Aunt Emily attends conferences, listens with excitement, and then instigates broader discussion. She shows Naomi, for example, a paper from a conference on “The Asian Experience in North America” and exclaims:

You know those prisons they sent us to? The government called them ‘Interior Housing Projects’! With language like that you can disguise any crime. (41)

The lexical spin of the records points to the imaginative manipulation of language, but Aunt Emily reads like a translator as she considers the range and mutation of meaning possible in each word. Noticing difference and attending to the unfamiliar in language is what every reader should be doing “since Russian formalism sensed the strangeness that distinguished literature from ordinary language, and especially since deconstruction

blurred the distinction. Then we noticed that ordinary speech, and even philosophical reasoning, are surprisingly unstable” (Sommer 5). The translator can testify to this.

The translator in *Obasan* has, like the novel, an ethical centre, which “challenges the authority of single-voiced discourse [...] as a strategy for justice” (Bannerjee 102). The Bible is open alongside the novel from its epigraph as well as offering a guiding strategy for Aunt Emily’s journals and writing: “ ‘Write the vision and make it plain. Habakkuk 2:2’ ” (38). The fidelity of translation is here insisted on as a way to re-read history and remark its injustices. The Bible is taken as an authority and documents are scrutinized for accuracy. However, the accuracy of a translation does not produce truth; and the apparent simplicity of the biblical rubric is complicated by the realization that the “plainest” translation can be misleading. Kogawa uses the Bible as a touchstone of truth, but recognizes that it is open to endless interpretation, and is aware of the “metadiscursive capacity” of religion “to translate any content into its own terms” (Brown 746). Authorial agency and ethical inquiry are supported instead by the performance of the dialogue interpreter within the literary text, which calls for responsible listening in the processes of writing or reading a text.

Just the Facts, Ma’am?

Kogawa is also interested in the disjunction between the image and its commentary, particularly the photograph and how it is framed in private or public record. In *Obasan* there is, for example, the newspaper clipping with the photograph of a smiling family and a pile of beets. The caption reads “Grinning and Happy” while the headline of the related article manages to praise and to slur as it identifies the cause of the merriment: “Find Jap Evacuees Best Beet Workers” (231). The article is in Aunt Emily’s file, but the experience of beet farming belongs to Naomi and Obasan. Naomi looks at the photograph and its caption: “That is one telling. It’s not how it was” (236). This rejection of the facts of the newspaper article and its photograph speak of a larger disavowal of the notion of a national archive as a “unified conceptual space represent[ing] a shared interest in the importance of institution, a shared sense of prominent actors, a shared view of seminal events, and a shared sense of national boundaries and definitions” (Blouin 296). The newspaper’s public record presents the ‘Jap evacuees’ as happy and productive workers, whereas Naomi’s memories are of backbreaking labour in freezing or sweltering weather, growing ugly.

In her quest to expose hidden injustice, Aunt Emily passes documents to Naomi to read, “handing me papers as if they were snapshots” (43). Like a journalist with a

mission and a deadline, Aunt Emily is intent on speed and accuracy in order to rectify the mistaken records and notions that have resulted in injustices against the Japanese Canadians being unaddressed. In doing so, she seems to conflate writing with photography in order to 'make plain' her vision and preserve it in its full integrity. There is urgency in her use of the power of language and image "to shock or startle, to surprise and expose attitudes so intimate they had remained unknown" (North 1379) in order to narrate those lives lost through "mistranslation and visual underexposure" (Sommer 93). The memory and the newspaper article, like Emily Kato's penciled corrections over typeprint, indicate the shortfall between the real and representation, or the gap between the accuracy of fact and the realization of truth. The earnest drive of Aunt Emily, the cryptic silence of Obasan, and the ambivalence and self-conscious irony of Naomi are heard not as cacophony but rather a coalition of voices struggling to assert a complex ethical position.

Photographs, official documents, or a novel offering the details of Japanese-Canadian lives ravaged by internment may provoke or assume an ethical posture, but they fail to "capture" the sudden dislocation and its haunting resonance. As James Agee suggests, "A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point" (13). Certainly in *Obasan*, it is not Aunt Emily's talk and energy but the compromised bodies of Obasan and Naomi that signify what cannot be bridged by even the most sensitive selection of words in any language. As Naomi wearily states, looking at the photograph of the smiling beet farmers, "I cannot tell about this time, Aunt Emily. The body will not tell" (235). This somatic refusal counters the possibilities of recovery with the performance of unavailability, a deliberate withholding. These women's bodies locate linguistic trauma and a melancholic consciousness which may also be present when registering the less sudden loss of language through assimilation. The body longs for its missing tongue, like a phantom limb. This can be extended to the language that is no longer available. The use of Japanese and the presence of a dialogue interpreter to indicate mediation suggests how the "nonlinguistic, 'the nightmare of real things,' can take linguistic form" (Berger 355) through the mediation of the imprint of lost language.

In *Obasan* there is no endorsement of a single authoritative voice, including that of the author or dialogue interpreter. The ownership or origin of the words on any page becomes less certain. Aunt Emily inscribes a double identity into official documents on Japanese Canadians by writing "Canadian citizen" over the words "Japanese race." Naomi's eyes see a "yellowing manuscript" (46) of what had been taken to be a white

Canadian history. With tongues glued back on and visually bilingual, Japanese Canadians like Kogawa or Aunt Emily approach the national narrative from different angles and in or with other tongues in mind, to register their own and collective accounts of a traumatic historical event and its continuing afterlife.

Her Mastered Voice

Lyotard has said that what the West thinks its history “progresses because it accumulates” (Bhabha 57), but *Obasan*’s cocoon of belongings and silence is protective and hermetic. In her house, nothing is discarded; even a single grain of cooked rice is saved. There are newspapers stacked by the door and unidentifiable foodstuffs fossilized in the refrigerator. *Obasan*’s silence will not give up its contents no matter how closely scrutinized. She is a most unwilling translator; no words are offered in explanation. This has been read as “tactical silence” in the manner of Michel de Certeau’s anti-hero (Bannerjee 106). When, for example, and, the Barkers pay a sympathy call after Uncle’s death, *Obasan* is unable to prevent their entry into her home, but her silent passivity makes her “unavailable for questioning or their ministrations. Her land is impenetrable, so thick that even the sound of mourning is swallowed up. In her steadfast silence, she remains inviolate” (269-70). She “does not dance to the multicultural piper’s tune or respond to the racist’s slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands” (271). In other words, *Obasan*’s life is choreographed by a gender role acquired long ago. For example, when Naomi arrives at *Obasan*’s home after hearing of her uncle’s death, her aunt greets her with no more than an “O.” Naomi hangs up her own coat, and takes her aunt’s hands in her own. “My aunt is not one for hugs and kisses” (14), she explains to the reader or herself. However, when Naomi’s brother arrives a few days later, *Obasan* rises to greet him and, brushing the shoulders of his coat, directs her comments to him, even chuckling. She repeats her formulaic “Everyone someday dies,” and helps Stephen out of his coat with her ‘serving hands’. The same two-tier gender system is at work metaphorically in translation; recognized as a reproduction rather than production, translation, like women, has less cultural capital.

Obasan’s story of three women elaborates the role that gender identity has in countering or complying with other enforced identities. *Obasan* is silent and enduring, Naomi is ambivalent and reticent. Aunt Emily, however, is opinionated, and thus rendered, in *Obasan*’s husband’s words, “[n]ot like woman.” Kogawa thus recognizes the power of a “traditional” gendered silence for its complicity with other practices that repress identity and her novel implies that the hold of that gender obligation must be

broken in order to articulate other power imbalances. Translation rather than tradition, is the preferred mode of passing meaning forward, informed by careful choice, and where necessary, transgression.

Conclusion

Obasan allows a range of critical positions to be assumed and a number of voices to be heard. At its heart, though, Kogawa's novel is a determined quest for justice that confronts its Canadian readership with a hidden history. The task of the fictional translator is to offer testimony to support the recognition of Japanese Canadians as citizens whose civil rights were blatantly abrogated. Its own construction and incorporation of heteroglossia releases a sense of a multiplicity of languages, and lets Japanese words find their way into a Canadian vocabulary. Read alongside the personal accounts of Japanese Canadians, the "official" languages of government and the English-language press are found to be "false, hypocritical, greedy, limited, narrowly rationalistic, [and] inadequate to reality" (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 311-312). Their reactionary authority is punctured and opened up to admit unfamiliar words spoken by people who turn out to be Canadian.

The multiple voices as well as the disabled tongues in *Obasan* exceed the "unity" of an imagined citizenry by voicing "rival stories that are current, though not equally authorized" (Sinfield 64) and thus inform the novel's readers that the formulation of "Canadian citizen" needs reexamination in order to include without hyphenated qualification those whose ancestry is not European and whose tongues are neither officially recognized nor widely spoken. At the same time, the use of voices and mutating language demonstrates resistance to the imposition of "absolute, reductive and imprisoning meanings" (Berger 354) by installing a dialogue that examines the multiple semantic possibilities of citizenship.

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