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ATTENDING THE LANGUAGES OF THE OTHER: RECUPERATING “ASIA,”

ABJECT, OTHER IN ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program of Literatures in English

Written under the direction of

Abena P. A. Busia

And approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

January, 2009

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Attending the Languages of the Other: Recuperating “Asia,” Abject, Other in Asian North

American Literature

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This dissertation engages in an examination of three Asian North American authors’ acts of reclaiming “Asia.” I discuss the attempts made by Mitsuye Yamada, Joy Kogawa, and Nora Okja Keller to recuperate their ancestral land as a force that intervenes in their normative North American perceptions, discursive practices, and subject constructions. Despite the current popularities in the Asian North Americanists’ transnationalist, diasporic, and/or internationalist reclaimings of “Asia,” what has been rarely explored is the ways in which “Asia” emerges in these authors’ narratives as the Other that intervenes, disrupts, and problematizes their North *American* part of perceptions and experiences. It is this exploration I undertake.

My dissertation also investigates how my authors negotiate their need to seek recognitions from their dominant nations and to simultaneously disrupt the traditional and hegemonic narratives by which they procure those recognitions. In particular, I will look at the ways in which my authors reconstruct the memories of World War II: the North

American internment, the atomic bombing in Japan, Japanese colonialism and sexual enslavement of Korean women as well as the difficulties of narrativizing those memories within the North American context. Through these acts, my authors try to delineate, explore, and redress their present state of racial-ethnic experience and to seek the forms of political subjectivities in North America.

I submit that this process of negotiation, the simultaneous claiming and disclaiming each author engages, is closely connected with their endeavor to envision “Asia.” All three authors try to read, configure, and make sense of this signifier of Otherness and to attend the (non)languages of the Other which they initially dismissed as silence and/or noises. The dissertation explores how my three authors perceive, in their different ways, their Asian Other’s linguistic articulations as what makes them interrogate their normative North American perceptions and discursive practices. Consequently, I argue that the “two languages” the authors try to access enables them to destabilize their singular perspective and vision, allowing them to interrogate their own monolingualist normality. Finally, I investigate some instances in which this act of attending can also risk becoming an act of owning and possessing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to the persons who helped me with the completion of this project. First and foremost, this dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance, intellectual and other, of my director Professor Abena P.A. Busia. I am truly grateful to her amazing patience, grace, and intelligence as she helped me navigate through this long journey. My gratitude also to the other members of my committee: Professor Shuang Shen for her incisive comments and helpful suggestions as well as for her pioneering work in postcolonially based Asian American literary studies, which I looked to as a model. From the early days of my graduate school at Rutgers, Professor Kurt Spellmeyer inspired me and helped me think about the meanings of “literacies,” which had a special and peculiar significance for me as an ESL doctoral candidate and TA in the discipline of English. This dissertation owes one of its central theses to his teaching. As a specialist in Asian literature, Professor Paul Schalow has given me invaluable pieces of advice from his Asianist perspective and his years of commitment and deep engagement with East Asia.

I am indebted to the Asian Americanists whom I met at various conferences in Asia and in North America—AAAS and ASA in the United States, FSEL in South Korea, and JAAS in Japan—, particularly those who engage in the analyses of Asian North American literature from the perspectives of “Asia.” Thanks also to the members and friends of AALA Japan, the Asian American Literature Study group. The intellectual exchange I was privileged enough to have with these people has been crucial in the formulation of my work and bringing this project to fruition. Among them, I owe Gayle Fujita Sato for the

title of my dissertation, which makes an allusion to her work “‘To Attend the Sound of Stone’: The Sensibility of Silence in *Obasan*,” a piece which shifted the direction of Kogawa criticism in its incipient moment. And ultimately, I would like to thank my authors, Mitsuye Yamada, Joy Kogawa, and Nora Okja Keller for composing their wonderfully complex and beautiful works. My heartfelt thanks, finally, to my family, especially my sister Michiyo, and my friends and colleagues including those at Seijo University for their unfailing support and encouragement when I was losing faith.

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Introduction:
Asian American Literature in an International Frame

Reclaiming “Asia” in Asian North American Literature¹

In her Introduction to *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* (2005), Zhou Xiaojing refers to the “significant shift” in focus in Asian American studies that occurred during the late 1980s, a shift “away from the agendas and strategies of cultural nationalism and toward transnational perspective and diasporic positioning” (3). Concomitant with this “paradigm shift,” though perhaps less frequently acknowledged, is the change in the Asian North Americanists’ perceptions and constructions of their ancestral land in their writings. While “Asia” has traditionally signified the site of alterity, Otherness, or at least of ambivalence for Asian North American subjects, North Americans of Asian ancestries often confronted the need to disown this geo-political location as well as its heritages in their claims of inclusions in the national space as “legitimate” citizen-subjects. John Okada’s novel *No-No Boy* (1957), one of the founding texts of Asian American literature, for instance, can be seen as being paradigmatic of this model. With the rise of multiculturalism and more recently transnationalism, however, “Asia” became an object to be reclaimed, recuperated, and reconnected within the Asian North American subjects’ constitution of their subjectivities. As Elaine Kim puts it in her much cited phrase from her preface to the anthology *Charlie Chan Is Dead* (1993): “The lines between Asian and Asian American, so crucial to identity formations in the past, are increasingly blurred” (xiii).

While this act of reclaiming is often viewed in a celebratory mode, what is less frequently addressed is the question regarding the North American ethnic minority

subjects' racial *and* imperial positioning vis-à-vis their non-Western, once dispossessed and abject ancestral land. Or to rephrase my question, given the histories of American Orientalism and its accompanying imperialist constructions of "Asia," how do Asian North Americans as U.S. minority *and* imperial subjects participate in the representation and recuperation of this Other while challenging and disrupting the discursive model they inherit? To the extent they inhabit a discursive position which constructs them as Western subjects perceiving the rest of the world, how do Asian North Americans represent "Asia" which to them oftentimes constitutes a strange land, one which many of them are not necessarily familiar with? In what forms can the acts of recuperating the Other and constructing a dialogue with the previously dispossessed ancestral land take place?

If the current move for "internationalizing Asian American Studies" aims to construct a dialogue across the Pacific, across differences and (dis)continuities between "Asia" and "Asian North America"—with all their *internal* heterogeneities, differences, and power asymmetries—, critics in North America often eschew explorations of the unequal dynamics of power involved in the Asian North Americanists' endeavors for the construction of this "dialogue" as well as their attempts at "internationalization."² Yet as Laura Hyun Yi Kang points out in a rare moment of such explorations, the understanding of Asian North Americans in the global frame reveals their specific positionalities as "citizens of the (neo)colonial metropole" (2002, 269), while suggesting the "untenability of any innocent and self-effacing gesture of transnational diasporic or feminist affiliations" (2002, 262) between Asian and Asian North American subjects. How then do Asian North Americans perceive and negotiate with their North American part of their subject positions, as they engage with the recuperation and connection with "Asia"? In my dissertation,

rather than “blurring the lines” between Asia and Asian North America, thus flattening the difference and unequal relations of power between the two (as Kim herself later revises her formula³), I will explore the significance of what it means for North American ethnic minority *and* imperial subjects to reclaim and connect back to their ancestral land from their intersecting positions of being the domestic U.S./ Canadian racial minority and, when viewed within an international context, North American (potentially) imperial subjects.

To underscore the importance of this move, I would like to refer briefly to Shuang Shen’s critique of the modes of romanticization that often characterize the acts of Asian North Americanists’ reclaiming of “Asia.” In *Self, Nations, and the Diaspora—Re-reading Lin Yutang, Bai Xianyong, and Frank Chin* (1998), Shen points to the critical absence surrounding Frank Chin’s rapid change in his perceptions of “Asia” as well as the consequence of such critical absence:

I feel that the cultural basis of Chin’s nationalist politics, i.e. his rapid shift from alienation to romanticization of Asian culture [. . .] have remained unassessed by critics in spite of the attention given to this writer and his works. On a polemical level, this neglect might end up making “cross over” seem too easy, creating a false impression that “crossing over” is only a new phenomenon, and thereby losing the historical perspective to Asian American culture within a transnational perspective. (150)

Shen similarly interrogates the “feminist version of romanticization” (150) in a tendency in some feminist scholars’ celebration of trans-Pacific mother-daughter bonding. While critics such as King-kok Cheung and Elaine Kim are inclined to “glorify the attempts made by the [Asian North American] woman writer to radically ‘re-shape her ancestral past’ and establish a seamless bond between Chinese mother and the Chinese American daughter” (150), Shen cites this as “an example of over-stressing the bonding” (150). Indeed, as we think of the rising popularity of Asian North American daughter’s stories of discoveries

about their mothers' Asian past, these stories have come to serve as a convenient medium to delineate the North American daughters' reconnecting to their ancestral mother/land.

Yet, as Shen points out, without an adequate examination of the shift that has taken place as well as the *form* in which this shift has taken place, too easy celebration of an Asian North American daughter-oriented "crossing over" may end up blurring the lines between "crossing over" and uni-directional possessing and owning of other cultures, particularly when such acts are carried out under U.S. or Canadian-oriented multiculturalism and transnationalism. In this sense, the Asian North American authors' transnationalist reclaiming could simply replace the previous acts of disowning and dispossessing with those of owning and possessing the Other. Consequently, "Asia" remains a place to be owned/ disowned or claimed/ disclaimed by the Asian North American subject, while it itself remains deprived of its own agency.

Against such tendencies, I will engage in my dissertation in the examination of three Asian North American authors' acts of reclaiming "Asia" as a force that intervenes in their normative North American perceptions, discursive practices, and subject constructions. Despite the current popularity in the Asian North Americanists' reclaiming of "Asia" as their heritage, what has been rarely explored is the way "Asia" emerges in these authors' narratives as the Other that intervenes, disrupts, and problematizes their North *American* part of perceptions. More specifically, I will examine how the Asian mother figure's un-normative language, often perceived as silence and/or noise, challenges the view which the North American daughter initially held, as each author/ daughter begins to question and attribute her failure in deciphering the Other's languages to her own illiteracies in those languages.

In undertaking this exploration, my dissertation also examines how my three authors, Mitsuye Yamada, Joy Kogawa, and Nora Okja Keller, each seek to claim recognitions from their dominant nation while simultaneously disrupting the traditional and hegemonic narratives by which they procure those recognitions. I submit that this process is closely connected with each author's endeavor to envision Asia—to read, configure, and make sense of this signifier of Otherness, as they try to attend these (non)languages of the Other which they initially dismissed as silence and/or noises. My dissertation will explore how each of my three authors perceives, in their different ways, their Asian (m)other's linguistic articulations as what makes them interrogate their normative North American perceptions and discursive practices, where the “two languages” they try to access enable them to destabilize their singular perspective and vision, allowing them to problematize their own monolingualist normality. I will also investigate some instances in which this act of attending can risk becoming an act of owning and possessing.

While the current transnationalist and diasporic approaches as well as previous multiculturalist ones tend to place an emphasis on the *continuities* between “Asia” and “Asian North America,” my dissertation will explore not only the continuities but *discontinuities* between the two. Or put otherwise, while “Asia” has traditionally been disowned by Asian North Americans for their (perceived) differences or else reclaimed for their (supposed) commonalities with Asian North Americans, I will investigate how my authors reclaim “Asia” *for and through*, rather than despite, their differences. As I look at previous scholarships that deal with various Asian North American authors' reclaiming of “Asia,” I will first briefly map out its history, the roughly three phases in which Asian North Americanists' reconnecting efforts have taken place: firstly, through the so-called

“Third World movement” which dominated the 60s and 70s United States, then the 80s multiculturalism, and finally the current diasporic, transnationalist, and internationalist approaches and linkages. I will elucidate how my project, and my three authors’ acts of reclaiming, differs from those previous and current models.

The “Third World” Model:

Let us begin with what is known as the Third World alliance or solidarity movement, whereby minoritized subjects in the “First World” actively, though often also uncritically, construct identifications with the racial and colonial violence inflicted in the “Third World.” As Janice Mirikitani, one of its practitioners, enumerates the litany of atrocities and injustices against “Asians” which override national boundaries in her poem “We, the Dangerous” (1978), she writes:

We, who fill the secret bed
the sweat shops
the laundries.

And they would dress us in napalm,
Skin shred to clothe the earth,
Bodies filling pock marked fields.
Dead fish bloating our harbors.
[. . .]

Hiroshima
Vietnam
Tule Lake
(1995, 27)

Delineating the racial/ colonial violence that afflicts “Asians” both within the domestic U.S. and international contexts, the poem connects the North American internment, the atomic bombing in Japan, the Vietnam War, as well as the exploited and sexualized labor of minoritized Asian/ American subjects in and across national borders. As Shuang Shen

explains how the “critical paradigms of the ‘third world’” (143) affected some Asian North American writers’ constructions of their identities during the 60s and 70s, she writes: “[T]hose writers’ perspective toward Asian American identity is formulated not just in terms of the U.S. domestic context, but also in conjunction with a particular imagination of the ‘world,’ more specifically, the opposition between the ‘third world’ and ‘first world’” (143). “Asia” in this sense becomes recuperated in these writers’ imaginations as the site of identification *and* articulation of their own Asian *American* subjectivities and experiences, the violence which they themselves go through within the (here) U.S. domestic context.

As Mirikitani extends this pan-ethnic “Asian” identification and alliance to larger constituencies in her other poem “Ms.” (1978, 1995), she delineates a view in which the world is divided in the mutually exclusive binary between the First and Third World, and between white and non-white populations. In the poem, the speaker, a U.S. Japanese American woman responds to a white American feminist named “miss ann/ hearst/ rockefeller/ hughes” (95) who demands to be addressed as “Ms.” rather than “Miss” (hence the title), while the poem enumerates all the privileges accorded to this white woman where her “gender” intersects with, indeed is built upon, her positions of power:

white lace & satin was never soiled by sexism
sheltered as you are by mansion built on Indian land
your diamonds shipped with slaves from Africa
your underwear washed by Chinese laundries
your house cleaned by my grandmother
(1995, 95)

On the one hand, Mirikitani reminds—rightly, I believe—how this white middle-class feminist’s claim of her right in terms of her gender accrues on her class, race, and nation-based privileges. On the other hand, lumping together all the disprivileged, the

American Indians, African/ Americans, and Asian/ Americans, against this single white female figure, whom the poem makes epitomize all wealth, power, and privilege, erases the heterogeneities on both sides. The poem constructs the undifferentiated Third World in opposition to the equally undifferentiated First World, where any internal differences in terms of class, race, nationality, or even gender on either end of the binary become elided.

To be fair, I would like to emphasize that both Mirikitani and the Third World solidarity movement attempted to seek and construct active identifications rather than presume an automatic alliance or continuity between Western subjects of color and those residing in the “Third World” or the non-West (as those two terms are often conflated). Indeed, I believe it is important to acknowledge that such identification demonstrates an act of resistance on the side of U.S./ Western minority subjects to their blind nationalism as they refuse to participate, in exchange for their tickets for inclusion, in their nation’s imperialist actions. To borrow Kandice Chuh’s words, their act demonstrates an attempt to create consciousness and alliance that “evade [. . .] limits imposed by the nation-state” (1996, 53) while attempting to free minoritized Western subjects “from the assimilationist trajectory” (1996, 54).

Having said this, however, this alliance, which constructs each component of the First and Third World binary as one homogenous and monolithic category, essentializes both the Self and the Other while denying the historicities of their existence. As Mirikitani’s equation of Japan and Vietnam in her poem indicates, “Third World politics” rarely takes into consideration the implications of the fact that Japan was a U.S. ally during the Vietnam War.⁴ Instead, the poem in its denial of historicity essentializes Japan in its frozen and fixed identity as the (pure) victim of the bombing and of Western imperialism.

Similarly, the equation between “Asia” and “Asian America,” an assumption embedded in the identification, annuls the difference between the racialized subjects in the First World and those in the Third World (even if Japan could be categorized as such at this historical moment). Such unproblematized and uncritical identification the First World subjects seek to construct with the Third World Other belies, as it foregrounds a claim to a total separation from their material position. To the extent that Third World politics presumes the possibility that the First World subjects can separate themselves from the material and discursive position they occupy, such an assumption can risk a “refusal to accept responsibility for one’s implication in actual historical or social relation,” to borrow Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty’s words (208). The dehistoricized linkage and identification inherent in the Third World model of reclaiming “Asia” erases the heterogeneity and complex power relations among its Others, here “Asians” (including intra-Asian colonialism) as well as between “Asia” and “Asian North America.” (In addition, to the extent that “Asia” becomes subsumed in the “we” the poet articulates in her work, it can risk equating the Third World to an object that awaits the First World’s rescue operation.)

As I shall demonstrate in the below, my authors’ reclaiming of “Asia,” though they too seek active identifications with this Other, is considerably more complex. Instead of dividing the world into a clear binary between the Colonizer/ First World and the Colonized/ Third World and placing Japanese Americans exclusively with the latter as Mirikitani does in her poems, Yamada, for instance, examines the complex role which Japanese Americans played as “settlers of color.” Unlike Mirikitani who places the deterritorialized Native populations and Japanese Americans together into a single category of the colored/ “Third World” camp, Yamada explores the latter’s participation in

the U.S. colonization of indigenous land *as the racialized, exploited labor force*. In this sense, the term “the setter of color,” which represents their duality, seeks to explore the multiple and contradictory position which Japanese Americans embody as well as their specific trajectory within the U.S. nation and history in the global context.

Like Yamada, Keller’s novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) deconstructs this First World-Third World or East-West binary, as she examines the intra-Asian colonial domination, while questioning the idea of homogenous “East”/ “Asia”/ “Third World” as well as what it means to narrativize such intra-Asian domination and colonialism *within* the context of the United States/ First World. As Dorinne Kondo points out referring to the World War II controversies in the United States, “the critique of Japan or of any other racially marked nation” in the U.S. discursive context risks its appropriation by the dominant nation in its attempt “to buttress a sense of U.S. superiority” (2001, 33). Keller engages with this complex task of exploring the multiply layered forms of domination *within* “Asia”/ “Third World” as well as *across* the First World-Third World divide, into and upon which she places and writes the histories of Korean/ American exile and diaspora.

Finally, Kogawa’s novel *Obasan*, like Mirikitani’s poems, links Japanese Canadian internment to the atomic bombing. Yet, unlike Mirikitani who assumes she can separate herself and stand outside of the discursive terrain of the First World in her identification with the atomic bomb victims, Kogawa explores a more heterogeneous relation between the First and Third World, as she tries to incorporate the abject, inassimilable and unintegrable, Other/ “Asia”/ Third World *into* the Canadian national space within which she locates the experience and subjectivities of Japanese Canadians. In this way, Kogawa

shows how Canada, instead of constituting the other end of the mutually exclusive East-West, First World-Third World binary, is in fact “dispersed into all the lines of alterity that, in actuality, striate the [Canadian] social body,” to borrow Roy Miki’s words (1998, 131).

The Multiculturalist Reclaiming:

As I have discussed in the above, the Third World model of reclaiming “Asia” presupposes the Asian North Americanists’ identification with “Asia” which is predicated upon their “shared” sense of racial and colonial violence. To that extent, this model also posits a division, the unfathomable divide between the First and Third World where “Asia” remains in its traditional status of “an immutably foreign entity, always somehow threatening to America,” as Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa put it in their Introduction to *Orientations* (2001, 1). In this sense, Third World politics ironically reiterates (only in reverse) the dominant Orientalist logic of the incompatibility between the East and West, a logic which could very well have provided the basis for Asian North American cultural nationalists to disconnect from their ancestral land in their claim of national inclusion. It is this premise of incompatibility, then, that multiculturalism attempted to revise and rectify, as its practitioners tried to reconnect with “Asia” and recuperate this ancestral culture as the heritage that could be incorporated into the First World. To the extent that “Asia” is thus brought into a harmonious relationship with the dominant Western nation and its narration (at the expense of the former), the multiculturalist project enables Asian North Americanists to accomplish two goals that

initially seemed irreconcilable: to claim their U.S./ Canadian nation and to reclaim their ancestral “Asian” heritage at the same time.

In trying to make “Asia” compatible with the dominant U.S./ Canadian cultural narratives, however, multiculturalism also effects depoliticization of the relationship between the First and Third World, or better perhaps the East and West (since its pluralist world view assumes the de-hierarchized order). Unlike its Third World counterpart, it can be said that the multiculturalist reclaiming of “Asia” eschews elements that threaten the supposedly harmonious relations among cultures. It rarely takes into view colonialist violence such as the atomic bombing or the Vietnam War, as Mirikitani has favored to do, unless those violent events constitute what Rey Chow called “the violence in the other country” (1991) whereby those events are reduced to a spectacle, an object of consumption for the First World subjects to view from a safe distance. As Scott Toguri McFarlane critiques the official multiculturalist project of Canada, he argues how multiculturalism “provid[es] a rationale for the operation of the liberal nation while [. . .] obscuring a colonialist history of violence” (1995, 22) which implicate that nation. Instead it recuperates what can be incorporated into the dominant cultural/ national narratives without disturbing its fundamental, existing order where selective elements from the other world (here “Asia”) become *safely* contained in the national narratives, as they become perceived as contributing to the construction of “a multicultural nation,” celebrating its citizens’ “diverse heritage.”

As McFarlane further critiques multiculturalism’s “compartmentalization of cultures through the selection of certain traits,” he states: “The process of selection is pedagogical in that certain traits are discursively produced and classified as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ based

[. . .] on whether or not they promote social (read economic and political) harmony” (1995, 20). Hence, as I suggested in the above, multiculturalist projects rarely recuperate (imperialist) violence which implicates the multiculturalist nation itself. Similarly, McFarlane critiques how pluralism, which comprises multiculturalism’s governing principle, accomplishes its homogenizing effect in that “exterior signs of cultural difference” are deployed to “refer back to a homogenizing Canadian interiority or spirit,” where those “signs of cultural difference ultimately refer to an ideal, inclusive Canada” (1995, 22), the “pluralist tradition that homogenizes” (1995, 28) the nation. In this way, as Lisa Lowe argues, multiculturalism, while effecting the “liberal myth of pluralist inclusion” (1996, 92), actually erases the contradictions, conflicts, tensions, and material inequalities as well as the “historically differentiated forms of disempowerment” (1996, 96) that afflict various racialized and ethnicized subjects both inside and outside of the multiculturalist nation.

Perhaps it will be useful here to refer to Patricia Chu’s discussion of Amy Tan’s best-selling novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) which Chu offers in her book *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (2000). I find Chu’s reading helpful to explicate the multiculturalist model of recuperating “Asia.” As Chu explores the novel’s representations of China via its immigrant Chinese mothers, she suggests that the Chinese mothers in Tan’s novel are portrayed through the sameness and difference: “the mothers must be sufficiently alien to provide ‘diversity’ but sufficiently American to enter mainstream society without radically disturbing or transforming its flow” (165). I believe it is important, indeed crucial, here that Chu characterizes Tan’s representation of the mothers’ difference as one that does not pose real threats. To the extent that

multiculturalist recuperation of its others is deployed so as not to disturb or disrupt the existing cultural order, multiculturalism renders those differences and otherness non-threatening to the dominant nation. As Chu eloquently puts it, inasmuch as the “threat of radical difference [. . .] embodied by the Chinese mothers and their stories” is contained in the narrative, the novel renders the “alien in the manageable form” (167). The multiculturalist authors’ job then becomes one of containing the *potentially* threatening difference and otherness into this manageable form of difference, where the abjectness of the Other becomes eliminated. The question that arises here then is: At what and whose cost?

To attempt an answer to this question (at least partially), we could also consider how a multiculturalist project translates its others into that which is “knowable.” In her article “Re:locations —Rethinking Britain from Accra, New York, and the Map Room of the British Museum” (1998), Abena P. A. Busia makes that point:

At the heart of the multicultural project, however defined, is an assumption of a pluralistic world in which many peoples can live together in harmony if we but learn to respect, and learn about, one another. Embedded in that assumption is another, namely, that cultures can be known, quantified and somehow acquired, and that each cultural component of that pluralistic whole is in itself unified and representable. Even if the first assumption be true, the second must surely be questioned. (276)

Busia’s critique here, I believe, is directed to the way multiculturalism erases the complexities of cultures as well as its others, where the originally well-intentioned act of “learning about” other cultures collapses and becomes synonymous with epistemologically owning and possessing them, as those cultures become reduced to an object available for knowledge and acquisition by the multiculturalist subject.

In this sense, it seems worth considering how multiculturalist reclaiming of other cultures frequently occurs in the form of recuperating their literatures and folklores. In

particular, I would like to consider how Frank Chin's recuperation of China takes place through (what he believes to be) its "heroic tradition," as Chin attempts to retrieve a set of classical Chinese texts which he thinks are exemplary of "true"—rather than "fake"—Chinese tradition, and to incorporate them into the Asian American cultural repertoire (in part to combat the emasculinizing force of the dominant American culture). The problem, as Shen points out, is that Asian North American writers like Chin who "embrace some classical literary texts [. . .] generally ignore the hybrid cultures in the modern context" (15). In other words, rather than perceiving Chinese culture and its literature in and through its heterogeneous complexities, which necessarily involve modernized and/or Westernized elements, Chin recuperates the part of China which only conforms to *his* view, ideal, and definition of what China/ "Asia" should signify. Or to rephrase again, instead of perceiving his Other in its radical heterogeneities that cannot be completely incorporated into his epistemological system—his "knowing," as Busia might say—, Chin's multiculturalism reduces Chinese culture to a fixed, ready-made tradition (almost an ahistorical essence) which is both known and knowable. In this process, Chin's epistemological authority and centrality vis-à-vis his Other/ China never becomes interrogated.

In so arguing, I do not mean to deny Tan and Chin's efforts to recuperate China/ "Asia" whereby those Asian American subjects—the "American sons and daughters" as Patricia Chu phrases it—try to realize their "long-cherished wish of assimilating [their] Chinese past and [their] American future" (2002, 167). Yet in realizing those goals, China/ "Asia"/ Other becomes domesticated and integrated into the U.S./ Canadian national discourses and cultural systems. Consequently, the Otherness of its Other—the

heterogeneities and what eludes and escapes the full comprehension of the Western epistemological subject—becomes elided as they become consumed into the Western multiculturalist narratives and their “knowing.” As I shall elaborate more fully later on, this is where my authors’ reclaiming of “Asia” as the Other crucially differs, as they perceive “Asia” as what intervenes and disrupts their epistemological and linguistic *norm*.

The Transnational/ Diasporic/ Internationalist Models

As we turn our attention to the current transnationalist, diasporic, and internationalist approaches, however, we see authors and critics position themselves differently with “Asia” as they recuperate it through the (dis)continuities, if not as the more explicitly abject Other that cannot be easily incorporated into the dominant U.S. nation.⁵ Among those endeavors, I would in particular like to look at two contrasting cases: Laura Hyun Yi Kang’s examination of the historical constructions of “Asian women as/ not American citizens” (114) in her influential book *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/ American Women* (2002), and the so-called “traveling texts” often referred to as the medium for the current “internationalizing efforts” in Asian American studies. My purpose here is to examine how these two approaches differ from the already discussed Third World model, which presumes the binary opposition between the (each homogenized) First and Third World, and the multiculturalist paradigm of inclusionism which domesticates its Other.

But first, let me begin with Kang’s chapter “Historical Reconfigurations: Delineating Asian Women as/ not American Citizens” in her much acclaimed 2002 book *Compositional Subjects*. In this chapter, Kang tries to recuperate “Asia” through the

figures of the nineteenth-century Asian immigrant prostitutes who comprised the majority of early Asian female immigrants even though those women were also excluded from the acquisition of U.S. citizenship and sometimes from the entry into the territory. Rather than disown those immigrant women in her claim of U.S. citizenship and inclusion—where in Lisa Lowe’s words “the American *citizen* has been defined over against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically and culturally” (qt. in Kang 114, italics in the original)—, Kang reclaims those women as the ancestral figures for “the presently recognizable social category” (115) of Asian American women. What is significant about Kang’s recuperational effort here is that in reclaiming those women as the ancestral figures, Kang also tries to retain and underscore their Otherness and abjectness that cannot be smoothly inducted into the U.S. nation and narration. In this way, Kang claims and explores both the continuities and discontinuities between these women and the present Asian American female subjects, “as/ not American citizens.”

Indeed, Kang’s chapter questions the Asian Americanist scholarly move to retrieve those early immigrant women by repudiating and countering “their tenacious stereotyping as ‘prostitutes,’” who “threaten the moral and physiological health” of American nation (Kang 152). Kang critiques how those scholars perform “a historiographical redemption by reconfiguring these women from ‘prostitutes’ to nascent and desirous candidates for marriage and motherhood” (158). Put in other words, what Kang problematizes here is how Asian American scholars try to construct Asian American history as a heterosexual family romance of citizen-making while writing those women into its narrative as the agents of that history by conferring, if not imposing, on them “a heterosexual subjectivity

and reproductive orientation” (158), hence the “properly gendered criteria of U.S. citizenship” (152).

In fact, Kang’s effort demonstrates striking contrasts with that of Patricia P. Chu’s in her work *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (2000). In this book, Chu explicates the efforts of Asian American writers such as Edith Eaton who try to reclaim early immigrant Asian women as marriageable figures and “bourgeois sentimental heroines.” According to Chu, Eaton accomplishes this task by countering, and rescuing these women from, the “white stereotypes that confound Chinese femininity with moral, intellectual, and economic inferiority such as the stereotypes of Chinese women as prostitutes or thick-skinned peasants” (185). In other words, Asian American authors like Eaton attempt to underscore the Asian women’s assimilability and admissibility into the U.S. citizenship by constructing those women as figures who are incorporable into the mainstream American culture and value system: middle-class, bilingual, bicultural domestic heroines who can become proper wives and mothers—hence the “citizens.”

To be fair, I would like to point out that Eaton’s representational strategy, as Chu explicates it, embodies her effort to counter the Asian American authors’ tendency to disown their Asian heritage in claiming their national membership and inclusion. In order to make those Asian Others comprehensible and accessible to the U.S. audience, however, such works liken those Others to the familiar American heroines and narratives—by abjecting the abject, so to speak—rather than attempt to understand their racial and cultural Others as and through their Otherness.⁶ As Chu herself writes in her later work, in rendering “very alien experience accessible to a middle-class American readership in the interest of promoting intercultural understanding” (2004, 61), those Asian American

authors “emphasiz[e] the Asian women’s likeness to the (presumably middle-class) American reader” by manipulating the “convention for representing subjectivity in the Anglo-American literary tradition” (2004, 61) such as the *bildungsroman*. In their well-intentioned literary endeavors to “humanize” these early immigrant Asian women, their works betray how they accomplish their task through the “imposition of an accessible subjectivity” (Kang 157) and through their own Anglo-American notion of what counts as “human.”

As Kang critiques a similar move in the historiographical configurations in her chapter, she writes: “the challenge of writing these [early immigrant prostitute] women into history becomes a vexatious matter of domesticating these un-American bodies and sexualities into the properly gendered criteria of U.S. citizenship” (152), which “accents marriage and motherhood” (154). To that extent, such a move also attempts to “reform this sexually ambivalent population [. . .] within a teleological narrative that celebrates the gradual formation and survival of the Asian American ‘family’” (Kang 155). In this way, Kang’s recuperation of these women *both* as the Asian American ancestral figures *and* as “prostitutes” who *cannot* be incorporated into the U.S. national narrative of heterosexual family romance of nation-building and citizen-making (“a family album history” [159]) is significant. It attempts to (re)connect those early immigrant women and the present category of Asian American women through the continuities *and* discontinuities, and in so doing, problematizes the tendency to homogenize the category of Asian American women and their history.

It seems worthwhile here to recall that Kang’s chapter, which examines the history of legal exclusions, detention, segregation, deportation, and denaturalization of “Asian

female from the U.S. citizenry,” also questions the critical tendency to see those “exclusionary measures as what unifies and gives coherence to the category of ‘Asian American,’ [. . .] a panethnic, cross-gender conglomeration of bodies and identities” (141). Instead, Kang employs the figures of those women in order to explore the differences and “internal fissures” that are oftentimes elided or minimized in the construction of that history as a coherent entity. Thus, unlike the Third World and multiculturalist models, Kang’s attempt explores the differences and heterogeneities within each category—“Asia” and “Asian/ America”—while also interrogating the multiculturalist premise of inclusionism which tries to incorporate its Others by domesticating them. Here I would like to recall how Shuang Shen in her work *Self, Nations, and the Diaspora—Re-reading Lin Yutan, Bai Xianyong, and Frank Chin* (1998) explores and recuperates Asian/ America’s heterogeneous diasporic past which cannot be explained in terms of the evolutionary shift from “Asia to Asian America.” Similarly, I argue Kang’s recuperation of the early immigrant women *as* prostitutes and Other demonstrates her endeavor to explore a more heterogeneous past which constitutes “Asian/ America” even though such heterogeneities often become elided or minimized in the call to establish Asian American history as a heterosexual “family album history.”⁷

While Kang’s work thus tries to recuperate “Asia” through its continuities and discontinuities with Asian/ America, a rather different attempt to connect (back) to “Asia” also occurs and manifests itself in the current internationalizing move in Asian American studies. Although “internationalism” has been a buzz word for Asian American (as well as American) studies for the past several years, the question that concerns me here is where and how to draw a line between “internationalization” and a new form of colonialism.

Indeed, as Oscar Campomanes has critiqued the U.S. centrism of current transnationalist move (2007), I would add that “too easy celebration” of border-crossings and (re)claimings of the other cultures risk turning “internationalization” into the latest form of cultural colonialism.

To explore this issue and also to delineate the difference with my authors’ cross-cultural endeavors, I would like to take a brief look at what has come to be known as “traveling texts” in the recent move for “internationalizing Asian American studies.” In particular, I look at and challenge King-kok Cheung’s article “Pedagogies of Resonance: Teaching African American and Asian American Literature and Culture in Asia” collected in the anthology *Crossing Oceans: Reconfiguring American Literary Studies in the Pacific Rim* (2004). In the article in question, Cheung relates her experience as an Asian North American female academic having taught U.S. minority literature in various Asian nations and locations: Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Burma. One of the claims Cheung ostensibly makes in the article is how U.S. minority, especially Asian American, literary texts help various Asian subjects in Asia self-reflect upon their own cultural and racial practices including the race-related violences. As Cheung points out—rightly I believe—, these U.S. minority literatures help “Asians” in Asia learn about and reflect upon the racial and ethnic minority experiences in their own countries, which often become invisible for those “Asians” who comprise the dominant majority in their respective nation.⁸

While I do not deny her claim—indeed, this is where I strongly agree with her—, what is striking about her narrative is the conspicuous absence of the reverse move. That is, despite her cross-cultural contacts with “Asian” peoples and cultures, Cheung never goes through, or at least does not convey in her essay, an experience where she herself (is

compelled to) self-reflect upon her own *normative* (Asian) American perceptions, let alone questioning them. In this sense, Cheung and her Asian American texts remain the norm and the unmoving center as they (alone) perform the pedagogical work. In one striking account regarding her visit to Taiwan, for instance, Cheung imparts an episode that delineates the impact which the U.S. minority literature, here Maxine Hong Kingston's novel, has supposedly made in Taiwan. Citing "a Taiwanese scholar" who commented that the Taiwanese "should learn from Kingston's example and challenge the official history of the Republic of China, which has muffled the voices of its minorities" (2004 16), Cheung concludes: "In Taipei, I was thus made aware for the first time that American literature can hold a mirror to ethnic relations in Asia and can prompt an Asian audience to uncover repressed history concealed in its own soil" (2004, 16). What amazes me is that Cheung never seems to question, even though one would naturally assume, that such efforts had existed in Taiwan long before her introduction of Kingston and the importation of the Asian American model. Significantly, however, Cheung is less interested in learning about, let alone *from* those Taiwanese endeavors than simply teaching and transmitting the Asian American "example" to them. While Cheung (and Kingston) thus remains the one to teach her own Asian American norm to her Others, her cross-cultural pedagogical journey ends up in the one-way teaching if not also one-way internationalism.

Sau-ling Wong's similar journey to mainland China, where she examines Chinese receptions of a classical Asian American literary text, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), is described in her two articles, "When Asian American Literature Leaves 'Home': On Internationalizing Asian American Literary Studies" (2004) and "Maxine Hong Kingston in a Global Frame:

Reception, Institutional Mediation, and ‘World Literature’” (2005). While these pieces offer a slightly more complex version of Cheung’s article, they also reveal how Asian American authors and texts remain the unmoving center in the Asian North American critic’s interpretive assumptions. On the one hand, I would like to make it explicit that as with the case of Cheung’s article, I believe some of Wong’s critiques are just. In particular, I agree with her challenge to the de-centralization and erasure of racial issues which she says occur in the Chinese scholarly readings of *The Woman Warrior*. As Wong points out, despite China being a multi-racial and -ethnic nation, the racial minority discourse in the original text becomes eclipsed as it is translated into the heavily culturalized and de-racialized East-West relations and differences in the Chinese scholars’ readings of the novel.

On the other hand, I believe that Wong’s essays also reveal how Wong herself fails to question her own, and her text’s, original—i.e. U.S. racial minority-based—agendas and perspectives despite the fact that those texts and the critic “travel” to a different physical and cultural location. More specifically, Wong’s two articles show how Asian American texts and their authors, if not also the critic herself, *remain* in their original status as U.S. “racial minorities” even in their “travel” to China where they can also be perceived as Western imperial subjects. What I problematize here then is the way Wong’s trip to China never seems to have “prompted” her to re-examine Kingston’s text and its original agenda from this new perspective which she has supposedly gained through her cross-cultural contact with the Chinese. One would think, for instance, of the meaning which Kingston’s cultural nationalist claim of America would convey in this new context, or even the

internal fissures and contradiction between Kingston's critique of U.S. imperialism (such as the War in Vietnam) and her claiming of her status (citizenship) in that imperial nation.

Put in other words, what I question is that in Wong's articles as in Cheung's, neither the meanings of the Asian American texts nor the critics' interpretations of those texts go through any transformation after their visits to "Asia" and despite their transnational experience and encounters with various Asian readers. While the Asian American literary text's original U.S.-based agenda remains unquestioned in the Asian North American critic's reading of that classical text, Wong simply imposes her U.S.-based "correct" reading onto the Chinese audience whose interpretations Wong judges by her (Asian) American standard. As my discussion of my three authors' cross-cultural encounters with their "Asia"/ Others will show, this is precisely what they interrogate as they learn to see themselves through the perspectives of their Others while also critiquing the kind of monolingualism and one-way internationalism.

The authors and chapters:

In the following chapters, as I address my three authors' attempts to revise this monolingualist internationalism as well as the previous Third World and multiculturalist models of East-West encounters, this dissertation will explore mainly two projects which Yamada, Kogawa, and Keller commonly engage with in their works. First, I examine how my authors look back on the impact of World War II on their present states of racial-ethnic experiences in North America, as each author tries to recuperate and construct her memories of those war years in order to delineate, explore, make sense, and redress her present and future Asian American existence and forms of political subjectivities. The

first two chapters will examine how Yamada and Kogawa reflect back on their Japanese North American internment experiences which they themselves had gone through, as their works were also written as part of the movement that claimed redress to those historical injustices. (Yamada's second collection of poetry *Desert Run* [1988] was published in the year the Civil Liberties Act passed the U.S. Congress, while passages from Kogawa's *Obasan* [1981] were read aloud when the Japanese Canadians gained an official apology from the Canadian government.)

My particular interest here resides in the way in which Yamada and Kogawa negotiate their need to claim their political identities, their redressed U.S. and Canadian "citizenships" *and* simultaneously to problematize the dominant national narratives that construct and enable them. I argue that both authors revise the traditional Asian North American perceptions and relations with "Asia" in their efforts to procure those identities. Yamada reconfigures her prior Orientalist gaze toward and engagement with her ancestral land as she re-positions herself vis-à-vis Japan/ "Asia" as the racialized North American subject. Consequently, Yamada delineates Japanese American "redressed citizenship" upon their multiple and contradictory subjectivities and histories as the racially minoritized Western imperial subject. Kogawa, in turn, questions the traditional homogenous notion of "citizenship" as she recuperates her ancestral land as the abject Other that cannot be incorporated into the dominant Canadian national narratives. I will also explore the way in which both authors relate to the Native populations in delineating the experience of Japanese North Americans: Yamada by resituating Japanese Americans in the "desert" as "setters of color" and Kogawa by drawing affinities with their experience of uprooting.

As I revisit, and stick to, the contentious, if not outdated, notion of “citizenship,” a word of explanation is perhaps in order. To the extent I deal with the works that are written as part of the redress movement, which as Roy Miki (2005) points out in the Canadian context embodies the efforts for national reparations, it can be said that my authors’ claims of redress foreground the claims of “citizenship.” Here I would like to emphasize that I do not intend to deny the forms of political subjectivities that are not bound by the nation-state. Yet in my present work, I am more interested in exploring how my two authors try to revise and re-do the traditional notions of “citizenship” rather than let go of their desires for such political subjectivities and national inclusion—partly because those privileges had been denied to them in their generation. Although I do not intend to simply validate, or even romanticize, those desires, I will explore the meanings of those desires, and the attendant efforts on the side of those authors to reconceptualize their “citizenships” in ways that are different from the traditional inclusionist/ exclusionist models.

My third chapter will explore this process of negotiations with the work of Nora Okja Keller, a single Korean American author I deal with in my dissertation; her work demonstrates how Keller both shares and complicates the task of recuperating those World War II memories. (Reading the works of my three authors together will give us completely different pictures of “Asia” and of Japan in the same historical period.) In her novel *Comfort Woman* (1997), not only does Keller retrieve the memories of World War II and Japanese colonization of Korea as the source and origins of Korean diaspora, exile, and emigration to the United States; she further grapples with the task of representing those memories, the suffering of her ancestral land, within the discursive framework of the United States and between the two empires. While Keller shares the same concern with

my previous two authors—the need to gain dominant recognitions and to problematize them—, her novel negotiates the need to tell the stories of Japanese military sex slavery, and by extension the intra-Asian colonialism and violence, and also to subvert the dominant U.S. narratives that construct the U.S. intervention as being benevolent.

As all three authors thus explore the link between their past and present in order to seek and negotiate the forms of political subjectivities they delineate in their works, it is important to consider how they all share another concern, the interrogation of what I call “Eurocentric monolingualism.” All three authors’ texts show their protagonists who come to question their North American monolingualist premise through their interactions with their “Asian” immigrant mothers. Yamada’s 1988 short story “Mrs. Higashi Is Dead,” for instance, describes the shift of perception which a second-generation Japanese American protagonist goes through vis-à-vis her immigrant Japanese mother’s speech. While the daughter initially dismisses her mother’s language on the ground that her articulation deviates from the daughter’s Anglophonocentric standard, the story describes the process by which the daughter begins to question and reflect upon her own discursive practice: the English “way of talking” which the daughter initially assumed as the norm and global standard. The story demonstrates how the mother’s language emerges as what intervenes and destabilizes the daughter’s own assumed linguistic, cultural, and epistemological norm: what she unconsciously took, if not imposed upon her others, as the universal truth.

Similarly, Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* describes the operation of this Eurocentric monolingualism through the Japanese Canadian protagonist who has failed to understand her Japanese mother’s silent language because of her illiteracies in the Other’s language. As the protagonist Naomi refers to the “blue-lined rice-paper sheets with Japanese writing

which,” she says, she “cannot read” (55), it is worth recalling that one significant form of silence in the novel stems from the Sansei Canadian daughter’s inability to comprehend the letters that are written in Japanese. Thus while the biggest silence that surrounds with this text concerns the whereabouts of Naomi’s mother, Kogawa shows how the mother’s fate, which has in fact been recorded in those letters, becomes relegated to “silence” because Naomi the reader does not have the linguistic means to decode what was inscribed in those letters. In this way, the novel attributes “silence” which stems from the Western protagonist’s failure in deciphering her Asian Other’s (non)language to this Western subject’s illiteracies, her disabilities to comprehend the language of her Other.

Finally, Keller’s novel *Comfort Woman* describes the Korean American daughter’s inabilities to see and hear her Korean mother as she “truly” is, as the novel underscores the disparity between the mother’s ontological existence/ language and the daughter’s reception of her/ it. In particular, Keller juxtaposes the American daughter’s Orientalist perception of her mother and the mother’s own portrait of herself, which deconstructs the daughter’s delineation rendering the mother a pathetic and incomprehensible Orientalist figure. In this way, the novel not only underscores the limitation of the American daughter’s perspective toward the Other “Asian” woman. In maintaining the non-equivalence between the Asian immigrant woman’s speech (“what she said”) and the U.S. listener’s inevitable (mis)comprehension of it (“what they heard”), the novel also highlights the violence which the latter’s Eurocentric perception does to the former, the immigrant woman’s enunciation and language.

In this way, all my three authors interrogate their North American monolingualist normality and revise the singular memories of World War II; I believe it is important that

none of my authors belong to the mainstream Asian America. Both Yamada and Keller were born in “Asia” (Fukuoka, Japan and Seoul, Korea respectively) and immigrated to the United States when both were three years old. In addition, Yamada is also a “Kibei,” a (often U.S.-born) Japanese American who was sent back to Japan by her parents to complete her Japanese education there when she was at her high school age. As a result, Yamada states that she has experienced the sense of double displacement where she was perceived as American in Japan and Japanese in the United States.⁹ Unlike Yamada who is physically and culturally located on the U.S. West Coast, however, both Kogawa and Keller occupy more marginal geographical locations within North America: Kogawa resides in Toronto, Canada and Keller in Hawaii. In addition, Keller is also half white and has her bi-racial heritage. In this respect, all three authors occupy a somewhat marginalized position, and consequently a dual perspective, vis-à-vis the U.S.-centered Asian American studies. Although I do not mean to essentialize their positions and/or experiences, it is possible to surmise that their sense of marginality and the dual perspectives they earned have helped them identify with the marginal perspectives of their “Asian” mothers who constitute a different kind of Other for Asian America.

While my three authors share these important similarities, reading them together also helps us see their significant differences. Among them, I will briefly discuss their divergences in terms of their generations, poetics, and genres. To begin, unlike Yamada and Kogawa who were born prior to World War II (Yamada in 1923 and Kogawa 1935), Keller, born in 1965, is much younger than the other two who write about their own direct experiences about the war years. Keller retrieves the memories of her mother’s generation through the archival research, much like Kogawa who also (famously) engaged in such

archival work since she, like her protagonist Naomi, was not grown-up enough to remember the war experience in full details. In a sense, Keller and Kogawa's stance can be said to exemplify the kind of attitudes which the postwar generations take vis-à-vis their previous Asian North American generations' experiences and stories.

In addition, Keller distinguishes herself from the other two authors to the extent that she whose first major work was published in 1997 (as opposed to Kogawa's in 1981 and Yamada's in 1976) writes in the post-multiculturalist era. Unlike Yamada and Kogawa, Keller who is also Hawaii-based seems to be less hesitant about bringing in Korean cultural elements such as its customs and folklores into her novel, whereas Kogawa perceived such an inclusion—"Milk and Momotaro"—risking a "culture clash" (*Obasan* 68) in her 1981 Canadian context. Unlike Yamada and Kogawa, racial persecutions within the United States seem less of an issue for Keller as well, although this may also have to do with the fact that she is half white and is located in Hawaii where "Asians" constitute the racial and political majority. Consequently, in contrast to Yamada and Kogawa whose works are more concerned about the efforts Japanese North Americans engaged in to gain recognition from the mainstream nations, Keller's text appears to be past such concern.

The three authors I discuss also diverge in terms of their poetics. I believe Keller can be more allegorical, especially with certain characters, than the other two authors: both the Japanese soldiers and the protagonist's husband, for instance, are depicted as the allegorical evil rather than the full human characters with complex interiorities. In particular, I have found Keller's constructions of Japanese soldiers rather one-dimensional even in comparison with their representations in the accounts given by the actual survivors

of the military sex slavery.¹⁰ In contrast, Kogawa's portraits of her persecutors/ white Canadians do not show them as one monolithic category: her novel includes, indeed ends with the references to those white Canadians who expressed and acted upon their sympathies toward Japanese Canadians in terms of the predicament and struggles they had gone through. (This tendency becomes even stronger in Kogawa's more recent novel *Emily Kato* [2005], which works toward the delineation of multicultural Canada within which Kogawa places Japanese Canadian internment and the redress effort.)

Expressing her interest in deconstructing the binary between "good" and "evil" with her characters, Kogawa in her pioneering work *Obasan*, however, tends to draw an overtly idealized picture of Japanese as well as Japanese Canadians as (faultless) victims. In comparison, I believe that Keller's portrayals of "Akiko"/ Soon Hyo and her Korean family show them as less idealized figures (except perhaps for the protagonist "Akiko"/ Soon Hyo's mother). Similarly, in contrast with Yamada's portrayals of Japan, Kogawa's novel, I believe, demonstrates a more idealized and romanticized view of Japan, especially of Nagasaki. In a sense, we may say that in deconstructing the presumed homogeneity of Canada, Kogawa does not quite do so with "Japan," which remains a rather homogenous and static category. Read side by side with the two authors, Yamada's voice is more ironic and subtle. In addition, Yamada who is a Kibei with her bi-cultural experience has a more distinctly self-deconstructive voice where her dual perspectives often disrupt and destabilize each other. Like Yamada, Keller's narrative is often characterized with similar duality where her episodes are often open for two opposing interpretations.

Finally, there are differences in terms of the genres my three authors engage in. Yamada's works consist of lyrical poems, short stories, and autobiographical as well as

more polemical and explicitly political essays. Kogawa's and Keller's texts constitute full-length novels even though Kogawa's developed from "one long poem" and Keller's from a set of short stories.¹¹ In the body of my dissertation, I will also consider the ways in which those generic forms enable and disable my authors' political *and* aesthetic projects

Chapter 1:

“Unbecoming American”: Reconfiguring the Contradictory Subject and the Intervention of the Other/ “Japan” in Mitsuye Yamada’s Writings

Society caused us to feel ashamed of something that should have made us feel proud. Instead of directing anger at the society that excluded and diminished us, such was the climate of the times and so low our self-esteem that many of us Nisei tried to reject our own Japaneseness and the Japanese ways of our parents. We were sometimes ashamed of the Issei in their shabby clothes, [. . .] their inability to speak English, their habits, and the food they ate.

I would be embarrassed when my mother behaved in what seemed to me a non-American way. I would cringe when I was with her as she met a Japanese friend on the street and began a series of bows, speaking all the while in Japanese. [. . .] I felt disgraced in public.

Yoshiko Uchida, *Desert Exile* (1982, 42).

Negotiating the Binaries

This chapter examines how Mitsuye Yamada, a Nisei Japanese American poet, activist, literary scholar, and short-story writer, revises the terms of her “Asian”/ Japanese American engagement with her nation by questioning the relationships she had previously held with her ancestral land. I will discuss how Yamada interrogates and reconceives the notion of U.S. national space and subjectivity, as she envisions her “Asian”/ Japanese American engagement with her nation *differently* from the traditional Eurocentric model, where “Asia” has been designated as the United States’ Other which needs to be dispossessed in the Asian American subject’s “claim of America.” The purpose of this chapter, then, is to trace and outline the chronological development of her writings. I intend to show how Yamada struggles to come to terms with her ancestral land, which has traditionally served as a signifier of alterity for the formations of U.S. national space and subjectivities (Wong [1993], Lowe [1996], Palumbo-Liu [1999]). I will look at the shifting, sometimes conflicting and contradictory, representations Yamada gives of her “root”

culture, as I explore the tension that arises from her claiming the U.S. as her “home” and critiquing it as an “empire.”

I will begin with Yamada’s early writings, particularly those published in the 70s, in order to discuss how she starts out with the conventional notion of North Asian American engagement with their nation, which has foregrounded the binary between “Asia” and “America”—or what these two terms have traditionally been understood as signifying in the U.S. discursive contexts. Her later work, I submit, moves on to question this model. My argument here shows that Yamada’s *early* writings, her poetics and politics, rely on and reproduce the logic of her oppressors, most specifically that of the “loyalty questionnaire.” While the now notorious questionnaire was imposed on Japanese Americans during World War II, it constituted one particular discursive site that defined the terms of their U.S. Japanese American citizenship in such binary terms: either “a loyal American citizen” or “an enemy alien and Japanese.”

In exploring the logic of the binary embedded in Yamada’s early works, I am particularly interested in examining how her act of claiming an inclusion in the U.S. nation emerges in close proximity with the idea of social (in)justice and political resistance. Put in other words, Yamada’s early writings conceive (what have traditionally been considered as) Japanese cultural values, such as “endurance,” “reservation,” and “silence,” as obstacles which Japanese Americans needed to overcome in order to seek political justice, such as redress, and attain their legitimate U.S. national inclusion. While Yamada’s claim of U.S. nationality in this early stage, I argue, is manifested in her effort to *culturally* separate herself from the heritage of her ancestral land, thus re-making herself as culturally American, her acts of resistance take place in complicity with the dominant culture’s

construction of Japan as the Other. As a result, her early works, I argue, risk reproducing the dominant American discourses of nationalism and Orientalism, reinforcing the split between “Asia” and “North America.” In so arguing, however, I will also show how her acts of Othering take place in specific discursive contexts. As Yoshiko Uchida in the above cited passage offers her self-reflexive contemplation over the way the Nisei generation were instilled with racial and ethnic “self-hate,” this was (arguably) a problem particular to minority U.S. subjects in the era prior to the rise of multiculturalism and ethnic studies.¹ In the second part of the chapter, I will move on to discuss how Yamada’s later, particularly post-*Camp Notes* writings interrogate, revise, and move out of this binary model, as Yamada repositions herself, and Asian Americans in general, vis-à-vis “Asia/America.” My intention in this later section is to examine how Yamada reconceives herself and other Asian Americans as the U.S. national, imperial, *and* minority subjects, thus in their multiple *and* contradictory subjectivities and experiences.

One thing which I find of particular importance here is that Yamada in these later works endeavors to draw “translatibilities” between Japan and the United States, the two cultures and languages that have been conceived as “untranslatable” from the dominant U.S. perspectives. I submit that this idea of “untranslatability” is what sustains the assumption of the binary, “the orientalist geography of the antithetical East and West” (1998, 195), to borrow David Leiwei Li’s phrase. The notion has been inscribed in mainstream discourses such as the loyalty questionnaire and those of Japan Bashing, which, while dominating the time Yamada was composing her works, designated Japan as the essentially “inassimilable” and “incomprehensible” cultural Other that does not share U.S. and/or Western values.² By attempting to draw “translatibilities” between two cultural

and discursive practices that have been perceived as “untranslatable” within North American contexts, Yamada questions the very logic of the incommensurability—“the immutable split between Asia and America,” as Kandice Chuh puts it (2001, 278)—that has historically sustained the terms of North Asian American citizenship.³ It is my intention to examine how Yamada engages with the dominant U.S. narratives that have placed “Japan” as the site of alterity for the United States and Asian America, and works to offer narratives that deconstruct and recompose those binaries.

While my chapter attempts to analyze Yamada’s revised understanding of her ancestral land, it is important to emphasize that Yamada’s act of “reclaiming Asia” differs from the multiculturalist model of inclusion, pluralism, and celebration of diversity. In this model, not only “Asia” but cultural differences become appropriated, as they are consumed and incorporated into the dominant nationalist narratives of citizenship. While multiculturalism, thus, can contain differences in celebratory modes of discourse, it could effectively mask differences and inequalities, transforming them into the celebration of diversities. As Lisa Lowe (1996), Laura Hyun Yi Kang (2002), Kandice Chuh (2003), and others have pointed out, multiculturalism in this sense can contribute to the construction of the United States as the nation of immigrants, reinforcing the idea of American exceptionalism. Instead of contributing to U.S. multiculturalism, Yamada’s “Asia”/ Japan, I argue, figures as what propels Asian American subjects to re-examine their normalized U.S. Asian American subjectivities and discursive practices. Epitomized, among other things, by her immigrant mother, Yamada’s “Asia”/ Japan emerges as a force that intervenes and disrupts their normative, sometimes Eurocentric assumptions, challenging

Asian Americans to reconsider their relationship with “Asia” as U.S. Asian American subjects.

In the final section of my chapter, I will extend the above consideration and discuss how Yamada’s re-examination of her relationship with “Asia”—the U.S.’s “external other”—further triggers her revision of her understanding of its “internal other”—the indigenous land—, as Yamada relocates Japanese Americans vis-à-vis “the desert.” Yamada’s focusing on Japanese American relationship with the latter is important because it shows how her later works re-see Japanese Americans not only as the racial minority, the “internees” who were exiled and imprisoned in the desert camps, but also as “settler-farmers” who helped to build the U.S. nation and empire by “cultivating the desert.”⁴ In her attempt to reconceive Japanese American citizenship, Yamada thus examines the role which Japanese Americans have played, *though unwittingly*, in the U.S. national and imperial projects: in their relationships with “Asia” and with the native population. In this way, the process of revision for Yamada occurs not just through her interaction with her immigrant mother who, being both Asian *and* American, disrupts the notion of binary; it also takes place through her revised understanding of the desert, which constitutes an “interior frontier”—the simultaneous inside and outside—of the nation. What is significant in this process is that Yamada problematizes her own involvement as a colonizing subject, as she redefines herself and other Japanese Americans as complicit *and* contradictory subjects.

In the past Yamada criticisms, her involvement in the U.S. nationalist, imperialist, and Orientalist discourses as well as, *more importantly*, her efforts to interrogate, revise, and move out of those discursive practices have rarely been addressed.⁵ However,

Yamada's attempt to redefine Japanese/ Asian Americans as *both* the U.S. imperial subjects, such as the "settlers of color," *and* as the racial and ethnic minority *within* that empire resonates with recent critical endeavors made by some postcolonially-based Asian American critics. While Kandice Chuh (2001, 2003) and Laura Hyun Yi Kang (2002, 2003) seem to constitute two representative voices, Candice Fujikane (2000) and Eiko Kosasa (2000) also work to re-examine, though in the Hawaiian context, the role which Japanese Americans have played as "settlers of color" in the U.S. nation- and empire-buildings.

As these critics challenge the U.S. master narratives regarding the formations of Asian American "citizenships," they problematizes the construction of Asian American narratives that take place in accordance with the dominant nationalist discourse of "American dream," "a master narrative of hard work and triumph" (xvii), as Fujikane puts it. Yet what is significant about Yamada's works is that unlike Fujikane et al who redefine Japanese Americans primarily as "settlers of color," Yamada sees them as both as settlers of color *and* internees, thus as multiple and contradictory subjects who are located as both the subject and the subjected of American colonialism. While I believe that Yamada's works are rarely, if ever, discussed in dialogue with those critical moves that are currently taking place within Asian American studies, it is my intention to situate her writings in and along with such critical endeavors. While Yamada's story alerts us to the way in which we become constructed as historical subjects (which is what Uchida's quote is about), it also shows, perhaps more importantly, how we can work to move out of such constructions.

I. Disowning "Asia": An Early Politics and Poetics of Dispossession

An early attempt at disowning her Japanese cultural heritage in Yamada's writings is perhaps best illustrated in an excerpt from her often quoted 1979 prose work, "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman," collected in the ground-breaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). In the essay, Yamada points to Japanese cultural values as factors that have hindered Japanese Americans from taking political action, especially to protest their internment. In the following passage, for instance, Yamada attributes what she perceives as Japanese Americans' proclivity to passivity to the inherited Japanese cultural "attitudes of resigned acceptance" here represented (epitomized) by the word "Shikatanai." The passage suggests that this culturally inherited notion has served as psychological barriers for Japanese Americans to carry out political resistance and seek justice:

The Japanese have an all-purpose expression in their language for this attitude of resigned acceptance: "Shikatanai." "It cannot be helped." "There's nothing I can do about it." It is said with the shrug of the shoulders and tone of finality, perhaps not unlike the "those-were-my-orders" tone that was used at the Nuremberg trials. With all the sociological studies that have been made about the causes of the evacuations of the Japanese Americans during World War II, we should know by now that "they" knew that the West Coast Japanese Americans would go without too much protest, and of course, "they" were right, for most of us (with the exception of those notable few), resigned to our fate, albeit bewildered and not willingly. We were not perceived by our government as responsive Americans.

(1981, 40)

Employing a typical rhetoric of Othering that constructs the "we" against "they"/ "them," the passage simultaneously addresses two kinds of "Other": the mainstream white Americans and the Japanese (though the "theying" of the latter is perhaps more implicit), both of whom Yamada tries to separate herself from in order to establish the then newly emerging collective subjects who define and articulate themselves as "Japanese Americans."

It is notable then that the “we”/ “they” division, which Yamada initially sustained, breaks down in the phrase “*our* government” (emph. added) that appears in the final sentence. The word betrays her inclusionist desire in the multiculturalist-nationalist moment of this essay, and consequently, her ambivalent positioning toward American nationalism. The passage reveals that Japanese cultural inheritance is perceived as what Japanese Americans needed to overcome in order to achieve political justice and to realize full participation in the multiculturalist U.S. national arena. Establishing herself as a U.S. minority subject carrying out political resistance in this sense comes to mean untying herself from the negative inheritance of her “root culture” that prevents resistance, while its value is here represented by the word “Shikataganai.”⁶

To situate her argument in the contexts of its occurrence, however, it is important to note that Yamada’s articulation inhabits, as it is aligned with, a discursive tradition within which Japanese Americans have linked their predecessors’ so-called “lack of resistance” to their “original” cultural trainings. Indeed, the trope of “Shikataganai” abounds in Nisei and in some instances, Sansei Japanese American writings of Yamada’s contemporaries and immediate predecessors, signifying what was conceived as their culturally inherited passivity. A Sansei poet, Janice Mirikitani, for instance, uses the word in one of her early poems “Lullaby” collected in *Awake in the River* (1978), where the word is deployed to express the sense of resignation the Sansei speaker-daughter senses in her Nisei mother: “My mother merely shakes/ her head/ when we talk about the war,/ the camps,/ the bombs.// She won’t discuss/ the dying [. . .] // She wrapped her shell/ in kimono sleeves/ and stamped it third class/ delivery to Tule Lake.”

Her song:
shikata ga nai

it can't be helped

Like Yamada's, Mirikitani's use of the word here shows how the mother's "inaction" as well as her self-imposed and smothering silence are linked back to her Japanese cultural teaching—epitomized by her "kimono sleeves"—, the teaching in which the daughter thinks the mother has been inculcated.

Similarly, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973) employs the phrase to describe the sense of helplessness—the "quiet, desperate waiting" (16)—and the passive endurance which Japanese Americans were forced to go through during the World War II years. Houston explains that it is "a phrase that Japanese use in [. . .] situations, when something difficult must be endured" (16). As Stan Yogi further sums it up in his more recent 1996 critical essay "Yearning for the Past: The Dynamics of Memory in Sansei Internment Poetry," he writes: "The term *shikatanagai* conveys the Japanese concept that there are forces beyond the individual's control. Although it can be a realistic reaction, the *shikatanagai* response could also represent a relinquishing of responsibility [. . .], for it implies justification for inaction" (252). While all these authors, to a varying degree, link Japanese American attitudes of "quite resignation" to Japanese cultural attitudes expressed by the word "Shikatanagai," Yamada is in no way unique in attributing those behavioral patterns to the Japanese lingua-cultural "origin."

To be fair, one must also note that a critique of such a discursive practice, a "culturalist" explanation to borrow Ben Tong's term⁷ for the failure in taking political action also comes from Asian American critics. Indeed, one of the best known and perhaps most incisive critiques has been voiced by the *Aiiieeee!!!* school. In their "Introduction" to *The Big Aiiieeee!!!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*

(1991), the editors point out how Japanese culture was often held responsible for Japanese American “inaction,” which was believed to encourage passivity and obedience, and “creating pathological victims and patsies” (xiv). In critiquing Sansei’s negative perceptions of their parents’ generations in particular, the editors write: “Because of an overdose of Japanese culture, the Nisei, victims of their parents’ victim culture, were intimidated and overwhelmed by the gush of white racist rage and were short of the guts to resist the violation of their constitutional rights in the court” (xiv).⁸ Reminiscent of the way Ben Tong (1971) and Elaine Kim (1982) have critiqued such culturalist explanations (with Tong coining a term, “culturalism”), the *Aiiieeee!!!* critics interrogate how the “Japanese American lack of protest” has been explained through cultural rather than political, historical, and institutional causes within the United States.

What is similarly important, I think, is that Yamada’s objection to the Japanese word “Shikataganai” is intended as a critique of her own, and other Japanese *Americans*’, acts of forfeiting and evading her/their agencies for withholding action. A useful case of comparison here may be Roy Miki’s reading of the term which he offers in his chapter “‘Shikata Ga Nai’: A Note on Seeing/ Japanese Canadians” in *Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing* (1998, 29-33). In it, Miki conceive the phrase “shikata ga nai” as a distinctly *Japanese Canadian*, rather than a Japanese, “vernacular.” Not unlike Miki, Yamada’s essay also demonstrates a critique not so much of Japanese culture per se as of the tendency in which Japanese *Americans* utilized this Japanese term to make it appear as if they are powerless in the force of social injustice which they compared to “a natural disaster” (hence, the title of the essay). As Anita Patterson and other scholars writing on the subject of the internment have pointed out, such a rhetorical practice was common

among the internees⁹ (though this does not deny the numerous instances of resistance in the camp despite the internees' usage of those terms). In fact, it is worth recalling that Yamada's passage is intended as an objection to a particular Nisei writer who utilizes this "naturalizing" rhetoric, in which he equates racism and other hardships to "natural disaster." What Yamada problematizes in her passage, then, is how such a discursive practice equates social injustice to "inevitability" like "a natural disaster," even while the notion must have served as a necessary self-defense for the internees at the time. What Yamada apprehends is that such a concept deems Japanese Americans passive recipients of those injustices. As the title of her essay, "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster" indicates, Yamada's aim is to make it explicit that these "disasters" are "unnatural." Rather, they are social, political, and man-made, thus are not inevitable. In so doing, Yamada perhaps in a typically 70s manner acts to reclaim agency and responsibilities for her own political action.

While making social injustice "an *unnatural* disaster," however, Yamada's passage curiously and ultimately re-designates the issue as a *cultural* disaster. As is indicated in her critique of the word "Shikatanai," the act of forfeiting one's agency and responsibilities is seen as being characteristic of Japanese or Japanese American *cultural* practices, as these attitudes are traced back to their *lingua cultural* origin, perceived as the outcomes of linguistically transmitted Japanese cultural teachings. While Japanese cultural ethics are thus held responsible for preventing Japanese *Americans* from attaining political resistance, the acts of achieving social justice and regaining political agency—and by extension, claiming their citizenship—, become synonymous with overcoming the heritage of Japanese culture. As the editors of the *Aiiieeee!!!* explained how the "overdose of

Japanese culture,” rather than U.S. racism, was blamed for Japanese American failure to carry out political resistance—to “massively challenge the constitutionality of the camps in court” (xiv)—, what Yamada advocates in her passage is the need to exorcize this inheritance. In this sense, Yamada, too, ultimately holds Japanese cultural teachings responsible for “creating pathological victims” (xiv) who fail to take political action.¹⁰

Culturalism, Untranslatability, and the Idea of Social Injustice:

To further examine this point, I would like to look at another one of Yamada’s texts, a piece published twelve years after the above quoted work. Her 1988 short story, “Mrs. Higashi Is Dead” (*Desert Run: Poems and Stories* [1988]) both demonstrates *and* complicates the above discussed idea about how Japanese Americans have felt the need to disconnect from their Japanese cultural heritage in seeking justice and political resistance. The story, which is highly autobiographical, dramatizes a conflicting relationship between an Issei immigrant mother and her Nisei American daughter. The story seems to follow what Traise Yamamoto (1999) has called the Asian American master narrative of the mother-daughter generational conflicts.

In the story, the mother tells the daughter an anecdote about her ex-neighbor and friend, “Higashi no Okusan/ Mrs. Higashi” who committed suicide so that she would not “*jama*” (a Japanese word the mother uses to mean to “be a burden on”) her neighbors. The mother explains to the daughter the circumstances of Mrs. Higashi’s suicide in following terms:

“Those days. The Issei women were not as lucky as you [Nisei] are today. There was nobody to help us. No family. She [Mrs. Higashi] had all those little children. Only some help from a few friends. Not enough. The rest of us had our hands full

too. She was proud. She didn't want to *jama* anybody. She couldn't bring *haji* on her family by begging, could she? *Higashi no okusan shinde shimatta.*"

(DR 66)

Significantly, the last sentence "*Higashi no okusan shinde shimatta*" which is literally translated into English as "Mrs. Higashi is Dead," is also given as the title of the story. (I shall come back to this point.) Apart from this title sentence, however, Yamada's untranslated employment of Japanese words such as "*haji*" and "*jama*" indicates how, like the word *Shikataganai* in the previous quote, these concepts are attributed, as they are traced back, to their Japanese lingua cultural origin with no translatable equivalents in English. Indeed, Yamada conveys her belief in the non-equivalence of English and Japanese phrase "*haji*" and "shame," as she has her narrator declare the following: "Shame on you' doesn't sound quite as belittling as *haji shirazu*" (DR 64).

According to the mother's accounts, the widowed and impoverished Mrs. Higashi is driven to commit suicide because of her internalized Japanese cultural teachings, the virtue of not bringing "*haji*" (shame) on the family by being "*jama*" (a burden on) her co-immigrants. In this way, the story illustrates the self-destructive aspect of Japanese cultural ethics, as it endorses the virtue of not soliciting other people's favors, which the mother believes one needs to adhere to even at the cost of sacrificing one's own life. In this sense, the story actually takes the point of the previous essay further, as it suggests that Japanese cultural ethics do more than just being an obstacle to political resistance; they generate such injustice itself. Yamada's story associates such ethics with Japanese culture.

While the story is deployed as a verbal illustration of the need for the mother to unlearn the self-sacrificial teachings of her original culture, Yamada's construction of Mrs. Higashi's suicide seems to offer yet another instance in which social injustice becomes

equated to a “cultural disaster.” That is, by attempting to explain her suicide by cultural causes, Yamada’s story translates what can be a political issue into a cultural one, obscuring the political aspect of Mrs. Higashi’s suicide. In this respect, David Eng and Shinhee Han (2000) offer useful critiques of such culturalist practices. They explain how the “mental health issues” of Asian American students become perceived as resulting from cultural rather than political conflicts. In the following passage, they question the “segregation of Asian American health issues into the domain of cultural difference” (684):

The mental health issues [of Asian American students seeking therapy]—overwhelmingly perceived as intergenerational familial conflicts—are often diagnosed as being exclusively symptomatic of *cultural* (not political) conflicts. That is, by configuring Asian cultural difference as the source of all intergenerational dis-ease, Asian culture comes to serve as an alibi or a scapegoat for a panoply of mental health issues. These issues may in fact trace their etiology not to questions of Asian cultural difference but rather to forms of institutionalized racism and economic exploitation. (684)

Similarly, Yamada’s story, which attributes Mrs. Higashi’s suicide to the cultural rather than political cause, risks “displac[ing] social difference into a privatized familial opposition.”¹¹ It obliterates the political reading of Mrs. Higashi’s suicide: how her suicide can be a result, not of a “natural” or “cultural” but, of “a *political* disaster,” resulting from “institutionalized racism and economic exploitation” (Eng and Han 684). By attributing her suicide exclusively to cultural causes, the story risks masking the problem of the actual social system such as the inadequacies of U.S. welfare system that had failed to provide assistance to the immigrant woman in need.¹² In the end, Yamada’s culturalist critique of Mrs. Higashi’s suicide and the mother’s equally culturalist, though romanticized and idealized, version appear to constitute only different sides of the same coin; the daughter’s version, too, risks depoliticizing the cause of social injustice.

Orientalism, Culturalism, and the Acts of Resistance in an Immigrant Family

To sum up, Yamada's "Japan" in these early works operate as a discursive site of cultural and linguistic inheritance, represented by such terms as "Shikataganai," "enryo," "haji," "jama," words which Yamada employs in their untranslated forms. These terms serve as tropes that convey their untranslatably Japanese cultural characters (thus as "noises"). As is witnessed in "Mrs. Higashi Is Dead," Yamada's Japan also configures as a cluster of traditions, a collection of behaviors and values that are transmitted by the immigrant parents, which their American-born children may feel the need to disinherit in order to establish themselves as *culturally* American.¹³

To further explore this final point, I would like to look at Yamada's denunciation of Japanese cultural values specifically in terms of the power structure that is particular to an immigrant household. It has been noted that in immigrant families, parents often employ terms or tell stories or anecdotes to instill in, and to educate and control their American-born children with the ethics of the "root culture." Referring to Japanese American families, King-Kok Cheung points out that "[cultural] concepts such as *enryo* and *gaman*, terms associated with proper behavior" were "imparted early in a Japanese family, discouraging children from verbal confrontation and open protest" (1996, 321). In this respect, the American child's denunciation of her ancestral cultural values can be seen as occurring as her act of resistance.

Yamada's early short poem, entitled "Enryo" provides a useful illustration of this point. In the poem, which consists of a dialogue between a Nisei daughter and an Issei immigrant father regarding the Japanese word "enryo" (which means "reservation,"

“modesty,” or “humility”), the daughter-speaker plays with this signifier and deconstructs the term by changing its transliteration. In so doing, she tries to shift the word’s original meaning and to escape its discursive hold. The poem in its full text reads as follows:

Enryo is a Japanese word
 which sounds like
 in leo.
 What does being in a lion
 have to do with humility
 I asked Papa
 who said
 could be
 since lions are
 by tradition
 regally proud
 ENRYO is pride
 in disguise.

Even so
 it is holding back
 saying no
 thank you
 saying no
 trouble at all.
 (CN 9)

What is immediately noticeable in the poem is how the daughter changes the standard transliteration of the word, “enryo” (which is usually spelled as “e-n-r-y-o”) to “in leo”; in particular, a significant change occurs in the shift from an “r” to an “l.” To the extent that the “l” is the sound which most native Japanese speakers notoriously have difficulties pronouncing (apparently including her father), the daughter’s Anglicization of the word deserves particular attention.¹⁴ It shows how the daughter tries to draw a linguistic, thus by extension an epistemological, boundary away from her Japanese father, as such a distance is indicated in the latter part of the poem where the daughter expresses her disagreement with the father about the ethics of the “root culture.”

Notably, a similar effort at deconstructing the parental language, and through it its educational function, is also witnessed in the above-mentioned short story, “Mrs. Higashi Is Dead.” In the story, the daughter-narrator plays with the two Japanese words, “*haji*” and “*jama*,” words which she says her mother had used to “rule” her childhood years “so powerfully” (DR 62). The following passage shows how the daughter attempts to escape from their discursive hold by playing with these signifiers and depriving the words of their functions as signifieds, thereby evading the words’ original meanings:

Haji and *jama*, the two words that repeatedly appeared in different contexts in my young life. How many times had she [the mother] told me that it was shameful to bother other people? Had she not told me not to *jama* the white lady next door? For a long time I’d associated *jama* with jam, jam to put on my delicious bread. I would sit on the back steps and in spite of my guilt feelings, would enjoy Mrs. Sack’s still-warm home-made bread even without the jam. (DR 61)

To recall Cheung’s quote again, “[cultural] concepts such as *enryo* and *gaman*,” “terms that are associated with proper behavior” were employed by immigrant parents for the purpose of “discouraging children from verbal confrontation and open protest” (1996, 321)—just like Yamada’s *haji* and *jama*, words which the mother used to “rule” her childhood. Read in this way, Yamada’s daughter’s willful “mistransliteration” of her parents’ Japanese words—“*enryo*” to “in leo” and “*jama*” to “jam”—can be viewed as the manifestation of the daughter’s attempt to resist the parental impositions of “original” cultural values, such as the importance of “modesty” or the virtue of not bothering other people. Yamada’s daughter’s attempt at deconstructing the parental language by Anglicizing the word and transforming its meaning, thereby removing its original inscriptions, shows her ways of escaping and resisting the word’s “educational” function. In so doing, however, the daughter aligns herself with the dominant (here) Orientalist discourse.

In her influential essays on Yamada's works, Susan Schweik argues how Yamada's "father-daughter poems," like "Enryo," offer "narratives of failed translations, characterized by impasses between the storytelling father and the listening child" (1989, 235). Schweik explains how the father uses stories "to shape and dominate his daughter's behavior" (237) while the daughter resists the father's attempts of acculturation. What Schweik fails to consider, however, is that the daughter's "resistance" takes place in alignment with the dominant culture that denounces Japanese cultural ethics such as "enryo." Put in other words, the power relationship in an immigrant household, in which Yamada's "father-daughter poems" take place, is not as singular as Schweik seems to assume, as far as the parents in an immigrant family can act *both* as an ally and oppressor for the U.S.-born children. Moreover, seen from the perspective of the mainstream culture, the immigrant parents are oftentimes more culturally foreign; they can be more vulnerable and disadvantageous than their American-born children. As Lisa Lowe has shown in *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (1991), "Orientalisms" can act as a heterogeneous discourse that can be deployed by different parties for varying purposes. Yamada's daughter's alignment with the dominant Orientalist discourse in her denunciation of Japanese cultural values shows how the daughter resists the parental impositions of original cultural values by exploiting that discourse.¹⁵

Resistance and Reinscription of the Dominant Discourse

As I have discussed in the above, Yamada's denunciation of Japanese cultural values need to be interpreted in a specific discursive context, i.e. one of Japanese American immigrant family in the pre-multiculturalist era: the daughter's act of denunciation can be

viewed as a form of resistance by a Japanese American daughter. Having said this, however, I would nonetheless like to emphasize that Yamada's binarizing construction of Japanese and American cultural heritage would pose a problem inasmuch as it risks reinscribing the dominant American assumption about the incommensurability between the two cultural, linguistic, and discursive practices, a premise which is here exemplified in their presumed untranslatabilities.

In this respect, I would like to recall how this premise of binary has its resonance with the one inscribed in the "loyalty questionnaire" which, being imposed on Japanese Americans during World War II, had set the terms of their engagement with their nation. The now notorious question No. 28, in particular, establishes Japanese cultural heritage and American citizenship as mutually exclusive categories:

Question No. 28: "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attacks by foreign or domestic forces, *and* forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization?" (qtd. in Weglyn 1976, *emph. added*)

What is notable here is that the structural parallel, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America [. . .] *and* forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor" (*emph. added*) syntactically draws the separation of the one from the other. It induces the binary logic in that if one chooses to be (loyal to) America, one must deny any allegiance to Japan or its cultural heritage, which is here metonymically represented by the emperor.¹⁶ Defining oneself as "(Japanese) American" in this way then involves the exclusion of other allegiances and identities.

And it is in this sense of divisiveness and binarization that, I argue, Yamada's above use of the Japanese words in their untranslated forms reproduces the logic of the binary,

which is inscribed in the loyalty questionnaire. Needless to say, what the untranslated use of a language reveals is one's desire to keep it untranslatable rather than its actual untranslatabilities. Those terms and concepts are then deployed as to register their essential cultural and linguistic differences and Otherness. In this sense, it may be worth noting that a binarizing premise also characterizes the logic of Japan Bashing that dominated the eighties United States (when Yamada was composing her second volume of poetry), which constituted Japan as an essentially inassimilable cultural Other. As Kandice Chuh writes in her analysis of the production of difference in the narratives of internment, what matters are the ways "that certain peoples and cultural practices and products are made to mean Japanese, different, foreign, inassimilable, and so on, *without immanent reason for doing so*" (2003, 82 *emph. original*). In effect, Yamada's early works that mime the logic of the oppressors posit her ancestral land and the United States in their binarized, untranslatable terms with the "split" taking place as a linguistic and cultural one that lies across the Pacific.

II. Deconstructing the Binaries, Gesturing toward "Translatabilities":

What *is* significant about Yamada's story, "Mrs. Higashi Is Dead" as well as her later works, however, is that they demonstrate her efforts to move out of this binarizing logic and to draw "translatabilities" between two cultural and linguistic practices. As I have mentioned earlier, the title of the story, "Mrs. Higashi Is Dead" offers a *literal* translation of its original Japanese sentence "*Higashi no okusan shinde shimatta,*" the mother's words describing the immigrant woman's suicide for which the daughter initially claimed there is no English equivalent. In the following quote, the daughter first questions the mother's and then her own discursive practice:

“Shinde shimatta. That’s what you said when you first told me about Mrs. Higashi’s suicide. Isn’t that an odd way of putting it” I ask. It was as if death came to Mrs. Higashi, or as if death was simply a state of being. [. . .] “Do you know,” I tell her [the mother], “that in English there would be no other way of talking about her suicide except to say ‘she killed herself’” as if she willed it on herself, even if she didn’t? I am thinking of the phrase “committing suicide,” as if suicide were making a commitment. (*DR* 66)

Like in the previous quote, the passage begins with the daughter’s criticism of Japanese linguistic construction, here of Mrs. Higashi’s suicide: Yamada implies how the Japanese language evades the widow’s agency, equating her suicide to a “state of being” rather than a “willed” action she has taken as a subject. The daughter’s critique here then at first seems to recall and resonate with Yamada’s earlier denunciation of the Japanese word, “Shikatanai.” In both instances, the daughter and Yamada seem to insist that the Japanese language, unlike its English counterpart, erases the agency of the subject, turning the widow’s suicide, in this case, into another instance of a “natural disaster.”

Yet, what *is* significant about “Mrs. Higashi Is Dead” is that this story, unlike the previous examples, exhibits the process by which the daughter begins to question such normative Anglophonocentric beliefs.¹⁷ In the above quoted passage, for instance, the daughter’s initial critique of the mother’s language, which is based on the normalized view of her English linguistic practice—““Do you know [. . .] in English there would be no other way of talking about her [Mrs. Higashi’s] suicide except to say ‘she killed herself’””—yields to her self-reflexive contemplation and questioning of her *own* discursive practice: “as if she willed it on herself, even if she didn’t? I am thinking of the phrase ‘committing suicide,’ as if suicide were making a commitment” (*DR* 66). In other words, while the passage offers another moment in which language begins to get destabilized, it shows how the daughter-narrator begins to reflect upon her own normative

discursive practice through the intervention of her m/other's language, here her previous assumption that the English "way of talking" ("She killed herself") is the norm and (should be) the global standard. What follows is the daughter's realization that the English way of constructing suicide with its naturalized premise on the willed and liberal agency of the subject is in no way "natural" or universal. Rather, it is itself a construction, and perhaps an "odd" one, too, if seen from the perspective of the so-designated Other. As Yamada, thus, tries to draw "translatibilities" between the two linguistic, cultural, and discursive practices that have been conceived as untranslatable, what she attempts in a sense is to translate what, according to the dominant culture, does not "translate well." And through that act of translation, she exposes the constructed nature of both the original and new language into which the former becomes translated.

In this way, Yamada's *literal* translation of the mother's language ("*Higashi no okusan shinde shimatta*") into English ("Mrs. Higashi is dead") demonstrates her attempt to deconstruct the daughter's, as well as her own, sites of enunciation. Here the daughter takes the mother's linguistic and cultural intervention that destabilizes her own assumed linguistic and cultural normativity, as the daughter enters into the (m)other's language and looks back on her own discursive practice through this frame. As a result, the daughter comes to a realization that her Europhonocentric and singular notion of language—"Do you know," I tell her [the mother], 'that in English there would be no other way of talking about her suicide except to say "she killed herself"' (DR 66)—has reduced the immigrant mother's non-Western linguistic utterances to a non-language.

In this respect, David L. Eng offers an illuminating critique of a similar practice of Europhonocentric monolingualism in his discussion of *China Men*. Eng elucidates how

certain non-Western, here Chinese, linguistic articulations in Kingston's novel are equated to "strange noises," when they are placed in a Eurocentric interpretive framework, where the Western subject fails to comprehend "cultural codes such as the Chinese language" (2001, 47). Similarly, Yamada's critique is extended to the daughter's—which also means her own prior—practices and premises of Europhonocentric monolingualism. Yamada shows how the daughter's singular notion of *the* language had previously reduced the immigrant mother's utterances to a non-language, as the daughter, too, had failed to comprehend the "cultural codes" of the Other when those codes and utterances did not conform to her Western norm. The mother's language thus puts in question the daughter's normative belief that suicide *must* occur as a result of the subject's "willing."

In this way, Yamada's *literal* translation of the (m)other's language into English and placing it as the title of her story, as "Mrs. Higashi Is Dead" (rather than "Mrs. Higashi Killed Herself"), demonstrates not only her effort to deconstruct the singular and normative understanding of English language which she had previously held. It further exhibits her attempt to *reconstruct* English in a sense to "Asianize" and/or pidginize it to the extent Yamada tries to translate the immigrant mother's language while retaining its original Otherness and "agrammaticality," to borrow Palumbo-liu's term (1998, 410). Yamada's reconstructed English, which mimes the articulation of the immigrant mother's un-normative, if not de-formative, linguistic performance, shows how the daughter reconceives Japanese American English in its impure and hybrid, "Asian American," linguistic forms. Notable is that such an effort resonates with an attempt made by some postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe, as he tried to Africanize English by adjusting its syntax and modifying its vocabulary to reflect the needs of the so-colonized indigenous

languages.¹⁸ In so doing, Yamada like Achebe tries to disrupt the grammar of the dominant/ imperial language, as she endeavors to create a new communal language.¹⁹

Thus, to the extent that I have suggested that “the loyalty questionnaire” serves as Yamada’s dominant text, which she herself had signed at the age of twenty-one as her “only ticket out” of the internment (“The Question of Loyalty,” *CN* 29), the task she sets out to accomplish thirty years after she had conceded to its logic is to deconstruct the premise inscribed in that text. By translating the mother’s otherwise untranslatable language back into the dominant Anglophonic discourse, Yamada attempts to create a language that disrupts the logic and grammar of that dominant text. The task, then, imparts Yamada’s notion of what it means for her to claim “reparation” thirty years after. Yamada’s construction of Japan as a conflicting, contestatory site of negotiation and resistance informs how Yamada reconceives Japanese American linguistic and cultural practices in their impure and hybrid forms, as she resists the narrative and premise of assimilation. In this sense, it is worth recalling that Yamada’s second collection, *Desert Run*, in which these works are collected, appeared in 1988 at the height of Japanese American redress while the 1980s was also the period of Japan Bashing that designated her ancestral land as the U.S.’s Other. Yamada’s writings then show how she attempts to re-imagine the process by which Japanese Americans can seek to “become American” *differently* at an historical moment of claiming redress and reclaiming citizenship in the age of Japan Bashing.

“Asian/ Americanization of the Memories of World War II”

A similar, though also slightly different, attempt at drawing “translatibilities” between U.S. and Japanese cultural and discursive practices in Yamada’s work is also witnessed in her short poem entitled “My Cousin” (*DR* 71). The poem illustrates her effort to dismantle the popular U.S. view of Japanese soldiers known as “kamikaze” pilots. It is a piece collected in her second volume of poetry *Desert Run* (1988) and is placed symbolically in the section named “Connecting.” Here the speaker, presumably a Japanese American woman, describes her meeting with her Japanese “cousin”: “the failed kamikaze pilot/ who lived to miss only three fingers/ on his right hand” (*DR* 71). Like in the previous two texts, Yamada’s effort to examine her relationship with her ancestral land takes place in the speaker’s interactions with her blood relatives, even though this time it is a “cousin” who, unlike the parents, embodies both proximity and distance.²⁰

As this cousin “offers [the speaker] a sip of California wine” with “one hand resting/ on the arm of/ an imported chair” (*DR* 71), the speaker asks the question which she says she “could not/ ask for thirty years” (*DR* 71). The cousin’s reply goes as follows:

Of course I don’t
I don’t really believe
“it is sweet and fitting
to die for one’s country.”
(*DR* 71)

At first, the poem appears to *both* dismantle *and* reinscribe the dominant American image of the “kamikaze pilots,” the World War II Japanese suicide bombers infamous for their suicidal mission. On the one hand, by describing the cousin-soldier as an unwilling participant of the kamikaze mission, the poem rescues the cousin, and perhaps by extension Japanese soldiers in general, from this notorious stereotype. Yamada questions the way Japanese soldiers within American Orientalist imaginations have been perceived in their

monstrous otherness, which the stereotypical kamikaze pilot here signifies. On the other hand, Yamada's poem also risks re-inscribing the hegemonic U.S. notion that sees Japan as a nation of fanatic and monstrous ultra-nationalism which forces its soldiers to partake in the inhumane military missions and operations by turning them into self-destructive murdering machines (even though this is itself a just criticism). According to this latter reading, the cousin, who now enjoys the "sip of California wine" (*DR 71*) and sits comfortably "in an imported chair" (*DR 71*), is symbolically liberated from the constriction of his nation. As a consumer of global capitalism, culture, and democracy, he is now free to express his criticism of his inhumane nation to the audience in this seemingly global theatre.

Yamada's allusion to the originally Latinate lines, "'it is sweet and fitting/ to die for one's country'" (*DR 71*), however, questions this equation and points to the possibility of a different reading. That is, the cousin's quotation of these lines mirrors back, in a subtly ironic way, the same nationalist impulses and ideological operations that exist within Western nations including the United States. The citational lines suggest how these Western nations uphold and promote similar, if not identical, propagandistic beliefs, exemplified in those Latinate lines—"it is sweet and fitting/ to die for one's country" (*DR 71*)—, as they too encourage their own soldiers to die, if not kill, in the name of patriotism. (Indeed, the word "die" here seems to function only as a euphemism for the word "kill.") What Yamada challenges and interrogates in the poem, then, is how the mainstream U.S. society tries to distinguish "our" good nationalism from "their" bad ones, because the former, unlike the latter, upholds the principles of democracy, liberty, and equality, while these discursive practices displace all "bad nationalisms" beyond and outside the U.S.

national borders. As Dorinne Kondo (2001) writes referring to the controversies surrounding the memories of World War II: “the dominant [U.S. culture] deploys the critique of Japan or of any other racially marked nation *in order to buttress a sense of U.S. superiority*” (33, *emph. original*). Indeed, as Rey Chow has pointed out in “Violence in the Other Country: China as Crisis, Spectacle, and Woman” (1991), a critique of the violation of human rights in other unfavorable nations, of which “kamikaze pilot” here is exemplary, has been a familiar trope. In effect, Yamada’s poem reveals how the dominant American construction of Japan only projects its own (self-)destructive nationalist impulses onto this Other in order for such impulses to be disowned, displaced, and discarded.²¹

It seems also important here to consider the historical context in which Yamada’s poem was composed, i.e. during the time of Japan Bashing and the heated debates over the memories of World War II that accompanied it. The poem, which dismantles the popular American image of Japanese military servicemen, can also be read in terms of those historical implications. More specifically, I propose to read her poem as an implicit critique of what Lisa Yoneyama has called the Asian American participation in the “Americanization of Japan’s war crimes” (2003, 58). In her recent article, “Traveling Memories, Contagious Justice: Americanization of Japanese War Crimes at the End of the Post-Cold War” (2003), Yoneyama critiques what she calls the “familiar performance” on the side of some Japanese Americans, as they participate in the dominant U.S. national memories of the Second World War in their claim of their “legitimate” U.S. citizenship. Yoneyama views this “strategic disowning” of Japan as a means by which “the ambiguously nationalized others” attempt to “rehabilitate themselves as legitimate citizen-subjects” (2003, 69). She writes:

[E]ven as the state apparatus historically has subjected Asians to the position of the “unassimilable others,” its liberal premise simultaneously has proved a means by which the ambiguously nationalized others can rehabilitate themselves as legitimate citizen-subjects. [. . .] To disavow publicly suspect Asian origins by reiterating the nation’s official Cold War history—that is, the dominant memory of the Second World War as well as of other twentieth century U.S. wars against different Asian countries—has been one intelligible gesture aimed at proving effectively Asian ‘assimilability.’” (2003, 69)

Seen from this perspective, Yamada’s poem can be read as embodying her resistance to Japanese American participation in the recitation of dominant U.S. national(ist) narratives that construct such World War II memories. Furthermore, it can be read as an instance of what Yoneyama advocates as the “Asian/ Americanization of the memories of Japanese colonialism and militarism” (2003, 75), an alternative route which Yoneyama suggests that Asian Americans take in order to “obstruct” the “formation of National History” (2003, 75), both the U.S. and Japanese. As I have mentioned, it may be worth recalling again that this poem appears as the first piece in the section which Yamada names “Connecting.” In the end, Yamada’s effort at “connecting” takes place not only by questioning the tactics of disowning and displacing and the logic of the binary on which such tactics are grounded. It also occurs by “connecting” the kind of (self-)destructive nationalist forces and impulses that operate on *both* sides of the Pacific.²²

III. Decolonizing the Desert/ “Immigrants”/ “Asia”: Reconfiguring the Contradictory Subjects

Throughout history, we see instances of tragedy when people are unable to realize that they are no longer victims, yet act out of a victim mentality. It is so much easier to identify oneself as victim than as victimizer. The practice of that latter identity is lacking in the world today and having tragic consequences. The story of Japanese Canadians could be a case study of a community that has struggled for health.

Joy Kogawa
“The Cross-over Point When One Ceases to Be a Victim” (2002).

As I have discussed in the above, Yamada's effort to "connect" back with her ancestral land concurs with her re-examination of Japanese American relationships with "Japan." It also occurs through her exploration of their prior participation in the dominant U.S. discourses such as nationalism and Orientalism, as these discourses have placed their ancestral land as the U.S. nation-state's as well as Japanese America's Other. Yamada's effort to reconnect with Japan/ "Asia" thus, takes place in the act of relocating herself vis-à-vis her ancestral land and of examining the implications of the discursive practices she has participated as a U.S. Asian American subject. Significantly, then, Yamada's act of (re)connecting to the U.S. nation-state's Other in her later career takes place not just with "Asia," the U.S.'s external other (so to speak), but with its "internal" Other as well, as Yamada in her later works examines the role which Japanese Americans played as "farmer-settlers" in the U.S. history.

In this final section, I will discuss how Yamada's exploration of Japanese American relations with "Asia" leads to her examination of their relations with the indigenous population in the domestic U.S. terrain. That is, Yamada explores the implications of "Japanese American citizenship" by repositioning Japanese Americans as "farmers"/ "immigrants"/ "settlers of color." As Yamada's reconfiguration occurs as part of her claim of redressed citizenship, it is through those subject positions that she tries to reconsider Japanese American relationships with the native population, while resituating Japanese Americans in the history of U.S. nation-empire buildings.

In so arguing, my particular focus here will be on Yamada's representations of the "desert," as they appear in her five-poem "Desert" sequence in *Desert Run* (1988) as well

as in her more recent prose work, an autobiographical essay entitled “Unbecoming American” (2000). I will look closely at Yamada’s revised understandings of the desert—her renewed identifications *and* disidentifications—that are recorded in these works. But first I must note that the “desert” for Japanese Americans *specifically* has multiple significations. While the desert for them, first and perhaps foremost, invokes the sites of the internment, it is also connected with the “wilderness,” the “undeveloped” indigenous land, which Japanese Americans as “farmers” helped to conquer by turning it into agricultural farmland. That the desert in Yamada’s poems conjures up the land of the Native Americans before the conquest is made explicit in Yamada’s epigraph for “Hole in the Wall,” the second poem in the desert sequence. There Yamada refers to Geronimo who, as she writes citing Agnes Smedley, “*had fought for so long to hold/ the land he loved*” (*DR* 6, *emph. original*). In this way, the desert for Japanese Americans has at least a dual significance. On the one hand, as the site of the internment, it signifies the death of their citizenship; on the other hand, the desert also provided a means through which they could claim their U.S. citizenship on the basis of their “contributions” to the nation-building project as they transformed the desert into farmland. As Yamada redefines Japanese Americans as “victims” *and* “conquerors,” my analysis of Yamada’s desert explores the implications of their multiple and contradictory significations.

Desert, Silence, and “Asia”: Reconfiguring the Absences

To first examine Yamada’s revised understanding of the desert, I would like to look at the title poem of her second collection “Desert Run” (*DR* 1-5), a piece which recounts the speaker’s “return” to the internment site “forty years” after. The representational shift,

the process of revision the speaker goes through during this forty-year time span, is immediately noticeable in the following two quotations, as we compare how Yamada's construction of the desert shifts from her early pieces collected in *Camp Notes* (1976) to those witnessed in *Desert Run* (1988). Her early poem, "Desert Storm" (1976), for instance, describes the desert through the internees' encounter with a "twister." The desert, which is here composed solely of dust and storm, "Idaho dust/ persistent and seeping" (*CN* 20), has no significance except for being a nuisance to those who are forced to live their lives there:

Near the mess hall
 along the latrines
 by the laundry
 between the rows of
 black tar papered barracks the block captain galloped by.
 Take cover everyone he said
 here comes a twister.

Hundreds of windows
 slammed shut.
 five pairs of hands
 in our room with mess hall
 butter knives stuffed
 newspaper and rags
 between the cracks.
 But the Idaho dust
 persistent and seeping
 found us crouched
 under the covers.

This was not
 im
 prison
 ment.
 This was re
 location.
 "Desert Storm" (*CN* 20)

In stark contrast, her later poem, “Desert Run” draws out the serene beauty of the desert, while the stanzas cited below extol the musicality of silence in the desert, which the speaker says she had failed to “hear” before. The final two stanzas of the first section read as follows:

We approach the dunes while
the insistent flies bother our ears
the sound of crunching gravel under
our shoes cracks the desolate stillness
and opens our way.

Everything is done in silence here:
the wind fingers fluted stripes
over mounds and mounds of sand
the swinging grasses sweep
patterns on the slopes
the sidewinder passes out of sight.
I was too young to hear silence before.
(“I,” *DR* 1)

As is indicated in the final line, Yamada’s revised understanding of the desert coincides with her revised understanding of “silence.” Questioning the traditional association of silence with “absence,” the passage rereads silence as what deserves to be understood as its own presence. In so doing, Yamada also transfers the responsibility of deciphering its meaning and presence to the listener.

Perhaps, it may not be too far-fetched here to surmise that the passage makes an implicit reference to the notion of “silence” that has been understood in various U.S. minority—Asian American, redress, sexual minority, and women’s—movements, of which Yamada herself has been an active participant. More specifically, I suggest that her passage alludes to the way these movements, often upholding the slogan of “Breaking Silence,” have equated silence to an obstacle which minority subjects, including Japanese Americans, needed to overcome in their pursuits of civil rights. While this should not

[. . .]

but no matter
I am satisfied
I take a dry stick
and give myself
a ritual burial
(“II,” *DR 2*)

To an extent that the desert for Japanese Americans is inescapably connected with their internment that took place in that territorial space, the speaker’s “personal” death described here also signifies her death as an American citizen. It seems also useful then to recall that Yamada begins the poem with the list of “outcasts” (“I,” *DR 1*) that inhabit the desert, while the image of deaths permeates this opening stanza: “I return to the desert/ where criminals/ were abandoned to wander/ away to their deaths/ where scorpions/ spiders/ snakes/ lizards/ and rats/ live in outcast harmony” (“I,” *DR 1*). Significantly, Yamada revises this association in the later, fourth and fifth, sections of the poem, where she confers the desert with new associations and meanings. The following quotes from Sections IV and V exhibit her newly formed view of the desert as a life-generative force:

In the morning we find
kangaroo rats have
built mounds of messy homes
out of dry sticks and leavings
behind our wagon [. . .]
(“IV,” *DR 4*)

The desert is the lungs of the world.
(“V,” *DR 4*)

The “stick,” which was used in the previous section to compose the speaker’s “will,” is here symbolically transformed into materials, a means with which the desert creatures assemble their “homes.” Yamada endows with the desert a life-restoring power, as the creatures who inhabit the desert bring life out of residues of the speaker’s death.

Significantly, the time setting in these sections also shifts from that of “sunsets” in Section II to “the morning” in V., thus indicating rebirth.

While Yamada revises the traditional negative association of the desert as “lack,” “death,” and “absence,” it is significant that she tells how her renewed identification with the desert has been triggered by her own multiply marginalized subject positions in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, age, and “productivity.” In her autobiographical essay “Unbecoming American” (2000), she writes:

I have come to identify with the desert, as a woman, an Asian American, the other in white America most of my life. Now, I am an older woman who is no longer biologically fertile, a retired teacher who no longer works for a salary and therefore no longer productive in the eyes of society. I must redefine the much misunderstood desert just as I must redefine myself.

(“Unbecoming American” 209.)

What deserves an equal attention here is that Yamada’s effort to “redefine the much misunderstood desert” (209) occurs concomitantly with her revised understanding of her immigrant mother, and consequently of what it means to “become American.” In the following passage, which is quoted from her above mentioned essay “Unbecoming American,” Yamada draws an interesting analogy between the desert and her immigrant mother:

Through my explorations of the desert areas, I came to feel a strong kinship with this land which struggles to retain its essential character. I saw that great vast parts of the desert have had to succumb to human intrusions, but that some parts of the desert resisted development and stubbornly insists on retaining its integrity. It was this characteristic of the desert that reminded me of my mother. [. . .] I came to realize that my mother and I both live in a world that means to objectify us.

(“Unbecoming American” 208.)

The passage invokes the way in which both the desert and immigrants have been conceived in the traditional American imagination as objects of domestication, as both have been subjected to the dominant ideologies of assimilation, civilizing mission, and the narratives

of “development.” In other words, just as the desert in the dominant U.S. national(ist) discourse has been equated to absence, nothingness, or non-existence—in part to legitimize the settlers’ “ownership” of U.S. territory (Kosasa 90)—, the immigrants, particularly those who come from the non-Western world, have been perceived in similar terms of “lack” and “deficiency.”

As Yamada questions the notion that characterizes Asian immigrants as those needing “proper” cultural trainings to be assimilated into American civilization (despite their presumed inassimilability), her reworking with the desert also questions the tendency that constructs the desert as the *undeveloped* land. Such a notion, indeed, paradoxically constructs the desert as—revealing its premise that the desert is—the land *in need of* development. Notably, in the above-cited passage, Yamada equates the term “development” with “intrusions.” By reconceiving the desert as the decolonized territory and by conceiving it in its own terms, Yamada critiques the premise and politics of assimilation, as those beliefs construct the desert as the land that *awaits* development. As Yamada deconstructs the colonial ideology that has defined the prior readings of the desert, the interconnection among the cultivation of the desert, the civilization of the Other, and the Americanization of immigrants becomes explicit. What Yamada ultimately attempts to undo is the Eurocentric idea of “becoming American”—for both the desert and the immigrants—, as her work questions the traditional understanding of Americanization as a linear process of “development.”

It seems worth considering here, then, how Yamada’s revised understanding of the desert, as I have discussed earlier, concurs with her attempt to redefine silence, while I further suggest that those two revisionary processes also resonate with Yamada’s renewed

understanding of her immigrant mother which we have witnessed in “Mrs. Higashi Is Dead.” As I have illustrated in my reading of this story, Yamada’s daughter’s Eurocentric conception of language has initially prevented the daughter from comprehending the mother’s language, permitting the daughter to reduce the mother’s linguistic utterances to a non-language. Furthermore, as we recall the above cited line from “Desert Run” in which Yamada redefines silence, stating “I was too young to hear silence before” (“I,” *DR* 1), we can infer that Yamada’s rereading of silence, in which she transfers the cognitive responsibility to the listener/ recipient, proffers another instance of her critique of the practice of monolingualism.

Put in other words, the above quoted line from “Desert Run,” like the episode in “Mrs. Higashi Is Dead,” suggests how the articulation and presence of the Other can be erased to non-existence—such as “silence,” “noise,” or non-language, just as Yamada’s daughter has done—when the listener fails, or refuses, to “hear,” thus acknowledge, their presences. To refer to David Eng’s critique again, “silence” occurs as the result of what he calls ““reverse hallucination”” in auditory terms, as Eng, drawing on Ackbar Abbas, defines the term as “a refusal to see what is obviously there to be seen” (2001, 237). As I shall discuss in more depth in my next chapter on Kogawa, Yamada shares her understanding of silence with Kogawa, who also exposes the power structure within which silence becomes produced (especially) as a problem, as the result of the subject’s failure to comprehend the articulations of the Other. Notably, silence in Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* stems, among other things, from a Sansei Canadian protagonist Naomi’s inability to comprehend the letters that are written in Japanese. Consequently, both Yamada and Kogawa, much like Spivak’s

subaltern, conceptualize “silence” as deriving from the recipient’s monolingualist premise, his or her inability, if not also refusal, to comprehend the language of the Other.

To further refer back to my point about the connection between silence and the desert, what is unique about Yamada’s handling of the two is that she likens them in their shared history of (mis)representation. That is, both have been understood, or rather “misunderstood” to use Yamada’s word, primarily in terms of absence in Western discursive history. As I mentioned earlier, Western colonial discourse has frequently characterized the desert with the language of absence such as the “vacant lot” that needs to be filled out by Western civilization.²⁴ Similarly, it can be said that the Western conception of silence has more often than not equated silence to an *absence* of language or sound rather than a language or presence of its own. As Yamada rereads silence as what deserves its own meaning and existence rather than as “lack” and absence—something that needs *solely* to be broken—, Yamada insists that the desert be read apart from the developmental ideology, one that constructs the desert *as* the undeveloped land, thereby depriving it of its own *raison d’être*. (And it is in this sense that Yamada’s reconfiguration of the desert, her attempt to reread the desert from the previous “lifelessness,” “absence” and “death” to what deserves life and meaning of its own takes on a particular significance.)

Desert, “Farming,” and Japanese Americans—the Recofigurations

The question is an enormous one: What place did Asian immigrants occupy in the broadest picture of the conquest of both nature and natives in North America? If environmental history has now redefined much of this rearranging of the American landscape as disruption and injury, how do we appraise the Chinese “contribution” to that disruption?

Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Disorientation and Reorientation:

The American Landscape Discovered from the West” (1992, 1032).

If silence and desert are thus connected in Yamada’s writings, it seems not surprising that Yamada’s re-situating the desert outside “white America” also results in her questioning the traditional association of Japanese Americans as “farmers.” As I have mentioned earlier, the desert in Yamada’s work as well as in larger Japanese American discourses has signified not only the site of the internment but the indigenous land which Japanese Americans helped to “develop” into farmland. As an Issei immigrant expresses the implication of such accomplishments and the attendant “claim of America” in his haiku: “Deserts into farmlands/ Japanese-American/ Page in history.”²⁵ Ronald Takaki also suggests how the transformation of the desert into farmland was symbolic of settling and “becoming American” (1989, 195). While he writes that “[f]arming represented a path for transformation of many Europeans from immigrants to Americans” (1989, 195), he explains how this example provided a model to which Japanese Americans tried to emulate even while they, unlike their European counterparts, were barred from land ownership. What Yamada questions through her revised understanding of the desert is how Japanese Americans in their claim of symbolic citizenship have *unwittingly* participated in this Eurocentric, colonialist construction of the desert, as they took over the white mission of developing the desert into agricultural farmland, thus into “civilization.”

In fact, it is important to note that Yamada’s revisionary impulse toward the desert here resonates with recent critical reconfigurations of Japanese Americans as “farmer-settlers,” a move that is witnessed among some postcolonially-based Asian American scholars, especially those based in Hawai’i. As Candace Fujikane and Eiko Kosasa insist that the Asian American participations in the U.S. nation-building be reread

from the indigenous perspective, they call for a need to re-examine Asian American “contributions” in light of “settler colonialism” and U.S. imperialism. They point out how the placement of Japanese/ Asian American labor within the usual narratives of “immigration” and “nation-building” risks obscuring their complicity in U.S. colonialism and empire building, both in Hawai’i and in the mainland.²⁶

In the following often-cited passage which appeared in the special issue of *Amerasia Journal*, “Whose Vision? Asian Settler Colonialism in Hawai’i” (2000), Haunani-Kay Trask, a native Hawaiian activist and scholar, critiques what she calls Asian Americans’ “long collaboration” in the “continued dispossession” of the indigenous peoples:

Today, modern Hawai’i, like its colonial parent the United States, is a settler society. Our Native people and territories have been overrun by non-Natives, including Asians. [. . .] They claim Hawai’i as their own, denying indigenous history, their long collaboration in our continued dispossession, and the benefits therefrom. (2)

I believe Yamada’s work on the American desert both confirms and complicates Trask’s critique. For one thing, it is significant that “Desert Run,” published about a decade before Trask’s criticism in *Amerasia*, is filled with allusions and sometimes implicit references that suggest how Yamada reconceives Japanese Americans as complicitous subjects. In Section III, where the speaker directly recalls her internment memories, for instance, Yamada uses the collective first person pronoun to describe Japanese Americans, who were “transported” to the desert “doing what you put me here to do” (“III,” *DR* 3), as “predators”:

My skin turned pink brown
in the bright desert light
I slithered in the matching sand
doing what you put me here to do
we were predators at your service.
(“III,” *DR* 3)

Similarly, Yamada's revised understanding of the desert resonates with Trask's above cited critique in that Yamada, like Trask, questions the settlers' participation in the denial of indigenous history. In Section V., specifically, Yamada rewrites the usual colonialist understanding of the desert, referring to the desert in the following way:

This land of sudden lizards and nappy ants
is only useful when not used
We must leave before we feel we can
change it.
(“V,” *DR* 4)

While I must note that Yamada's desert here is curiously emptied of indigenous populations, these lines, nonetheless, question the traditional colonialist notion which denies the desert as the legitimate piece of land in and of itself: namely, it has its own existence before it is brought into the colonizer's “use,” thus into “civilization” and “development.” What is of further importance here is that Yamada redefines herself as a would-be intruder and colonizer, as the final lines show her apprehension about wishing to shape the desert into a landscape of her own desires.

As Yamada, thus, tries to re-see the desert from the perspective of the so-colonized Other, her revised understanding of Japanese Americans in the desert is perhaps most strongly pronounced in her *disidentification* with the desert. For one thing, Yamada is careful in avoiding the temptation to romanticize the desert as an Other, as she speaks of her relief for “the/ paved ride the rest of the way/ home” (“V,” *DR* 5). This sense of distance she maintains with the desert is further conveyed in her final symbolic act of departure, as she leaves the desert at the poem's end. (The desert, after all, never becomes her “home.”) As we recall the previously quoted line in which Yamada voices her need to depart the land: “We must leave before we feel we can/ change it” (“V,” *DR* 4). It is

important that the sense of distance she feels with the desert comes from her self-perception as a would-be colonizer (if not “predator”). The sense of disidentification she imparts here, then, indicates the distance which Yamada as a Japanese American woman “must” feel with the indigenous land. (Indeed, it is the *need* for her to leave the desert that she articulates in the above mentioned lines.) Yamada’s sense of disidentification with the desert reflects her awareness of the danger that such a sense of identification delivered on the side of the Japanese American woman will constitute another—this time, a discursive—act of appropriation of the indigenous land.

At the same time, however, I would like to emphasize that Yamada’s sense of disidentification with the desert also comes from her resistance to the forced identification between Japanese Americans and the desert, insomuch as the desert for Japanese Americans *was* the site of their internment. (This is, after all, what the title “Desert Run” refers to.) Yamada writes: “I cannot stay in the desert/ where you will have me” (“V,” *DR* 5). These lines indicate her anxiety that Japanese Americans, who were imprisoned in the desert concentration camps, also become discursively incarcerated in the desert as the racial Other. As Yamada writes,

I cannot stay in the desert
where you will have me nor
will I be brought back in a cage
to grace your need for exotica.
(“V,” *DR* 5)

While the passage shows that the desert here becomes not only a physical but discursive “cage”—a site of containment—, it is significant that the “cage” is located both inside and outside the desert. (Notably, Yamada runs a similar binary in Section III, writing “You will use me” in the desert as “predators at your service” or “you will honor me in a shrine/

to keep me pure” [“III,” *DR* 3].) In each instance, what Yamada critiques is the forced identification, the way the dominant culture defines Japanese Americans by discursively constructing them to “fit” to their “needs” (“V,” *DR* 5): either as the inassimilable racial Others that need to be imprisoned in the desert camps or the similarly inassimilable Others who become exotified and displayed in the multiculturalist “cage”/ “shrine.” Like the desert that has been constructed to “fit” the “needs” and desires of the dominant culture—either idealized or debased—, Yamada’s critique is directed to the ways the dominant uses its Others for their own purposes.

Notable in this sense is that Yamada expresses a similar sense of anxiety in her other poem “Enough” (*DR* 77), written around the same period, in which she critiques how white male poets appropriate her Asian American woman’s body for their own needs and purposes. She writes:

I see my body metaphored by
 peace-loving
 young-blooded
 eco-minded oversexed
 male poets.
 they protest that
 a forest of my pubic hair
 prolific, fertile, enticing
 is cut down
 mercilessly macheted. [. . .]
 (“Enough,” *DR* 77)

Her critique is directed to the discursive practice in which the dominant verbally appropriates the body of the Other in order to make their own claims—here anti-war, pro-environmental causes—, while making it “fit” to their “needs.” This critique, in turn, resonates with her own earlier anxiety about discursively appropriating the land of the Natives. Yamada’s refusal to be placed “in a cage/ to grace your need for exotica” (“V,”

DR 5) or to become “an image trapped in your mirror” (“III,” *DR 3*) reflects a similar sense of anxiety that she holds: “you will honor me in a shrine/ to keep me pure” (“III,” *DR 3*). In effect, being placed in the shrine becomes just another side of being interned in the desert, where those two aspects come to constitute only different sides of the same coin.

Yamada’s disidentification with the desert registers her refusal to be fixed—to be “trapped” in the mirror/ desert/ cage/ shrine—, where Japanese Americans are defined, whether romanticized or denounced, in their “pure” identity as the Other.

In sum, while the above reading demonstrates Yamada’s almost antithetical understandings of Japanese Americans in the desert—both as settler-colonizers *and* internees—, it is finally in this sense that Yamada’s reconstruction of Japanese Americans as impure and contradictory subjects takes on its full significance. And I believe that this is also here Yamada complicates Fujikane’s perception of Japanese Americans primarily as “settlers of color” (however admirable such self-critique may be). As I have suggested in the above, Yamada’s relocation of Japanese Americans vis-à-vis the desert illuminates their simultaneous and contradictory position: both as predators, colonizers, invaders *and* at the same time as racial and ethnic minority imprisoned in the desert internment camps, which also can turn into “a cage” and “a shrine.” Like the seemingly contradictory term, the “settlers of color,” which must mean two contradictory things at the same time, Yamada’s repositioning of Japanese Americans *in* the desert indicates how their subjectivities and citizenships occur at the intersection of two colonialisms, within which they are constituted both as the subjects and the subjected. Having participated, though unwittingly, in American imperialism where they were complicitous subjects, they were simultaneously subjected to colonialism that targeted them. As Yamada’s earlier quote

expresses her refusal to be pinned down in the dominant image of the Other—to be kept “pure” in the shrine/ desert (“III,” *DR* 3)—, Yamada’s relocation of Japanese Americans in the desert shows how she reconceives them in their contradiction *and* “impurity.”

It is important to note, finally, that Yamada’s rereading of Japanese American relationship with the desert does not deny the hard work and toiled labor of her precursors. As Maxine Hong Kingston in her second novel *China Men* (1980) has deplored the absence of the “record of how many [Chinese coulees] died building the railroad” (138), Yamada sees her precursors’ labor not so much as the “contribution” as the unacknowledged, exploited labor that has been erased from the mainstream U.S. history. What Yamada interrogates is first the ways in which Japanese American labor has been read, almost exclusively, through the nationalist-settlers’ narrative of “American dream,” the “master narrative of hard work and triumph,” as Fujikane puts it (2000, xvii).

What Yamada’s texts similarly put in question is the way “the desert,” as the U.S. nation-state’s internal Other, has been understood in the traditional Japanese American discourse on citizenship. Either as the site of the internment *or* as the *uncultivated* “wilderness” which Japanese Americans helped to conquer, the desert within Japanese American imagination has often been conceived as the land they needed to “conquer” in order to attain their full and legitimate U.S. citizenship. Likewise, according to the traditional model of citizenship, they were compelled to overcome their “immigrant” elements to become fully American.²⁷ Useful in this sense is to recall how in Yamada’s writings, the desert, silence, and Asian immigrants are equated in that they all signify what the dominant culture holds that Asian Americans need to conquer in order to attain their full symbolic inclusion in the United States. Yamada’s revision of the desert illuminates

how the same ideology that has constructed the desert as “lack” and “absence” has conceived Asian immigrants in those similar terms—as the inassimilable yet needing to be assimilated Other—, placing them both as the objects of American civilizing mission and of nation buildings.

By way of closing, I would like to quote a passage from Kandice Chuh’s essay, “‘Imaginary Borders’” (2001). In it Chuh invites Asian Americanists to explore their contradictory positions within the U.S. nation and empire as she poses the question:

[A]t what (or whose) expense are the rights and entitlements accruing to legitimized Americanness being materialized? By claiming ownership of U.S. national identity, Asian Americanists must also then claim responsibility for the cultural and material imperialism of this nation. To maintain some critical distance between possession of the nation and recognition of complicity in its deeply entrenched imperialist machinations, simultaneous to the work of realizing justice for Asian Americans must be confrontation of U.S. imperialism. (278)

The task which Chuh calls for here corresponds with Yamada’s, as Yamada, too, explores the multiple and contradictory meanings that are involved in the process by which Japanese and Asian Americans claim and un-claim their place within U.S. histories and nation.

Chapter 2:
Attending the Languages of the Other: Recuperating the Abject/ “Asia” in Joy Kogawa’s
Obasan

I. Questioning the Two Dichotomies

In my previous chapter, I have discussed how Mitsuye Yamada attempted to reconfigure the terms of her “Asian”/ Japanese American engagement with her nation, which was traditionally predicated upon the separation between “Asia” and “Asian North America.” In so doing, Yamada negotiates the need to claim recognitions within the dominant nation by procuring her political identity, her redressed Japanese American citizenship, and simultaneously to problematize the hegemonic narratives that construct and enable it. I have also discussed that this process is closely linked with her effort to connect back to her ancestral land, as Yamada examines the perceptions she previously held toward “Asia” and its language, thereby reinterpreting articulations that initially seemed to her just “noise” and/or illegitimate language. While Yamada’s works aim to deconstruct the dominant U.S. national narratives, they ultimately resituate Japanese Americans in the desert, thus at the intersection of two colonialisms, where they are perceived as multiple and contradictory subjects.

In this present chapter, I will discuss how Joy Kogawa in her novel *Obasan* (1981) similarly attempts to redefine her and other Japanese Canadian subjects’ collective engagement with the Canadian nation. Like Yamada, Kogawa seeks recognition from the dominant nation in the form of her “redressed Japanese Canadian citizenship” while questioning and revising the traditional assimilationist *and* multiculturalist narratives of procuring it. In particular, I will examine how Kogawa interrogates the assumption of Eurocentrism that informs the discourse of Canadian redress movement, which I suggest is

embodied in the novel by the protagonist's aunt, the redress activist Emily.¹ While Kogawa problematizes the traditional Japanese Canadian claim of citizenship through the figure of Emily, the novel illustrates how Emily's ideas of redress and citizenship are predicated upon two Eurocentric acts of "breaking": "breaking silence" (as a means of gaining recognition and political rights) and "breaking from Asia" (so as to be included in the mainstream Canadian nation). To the extent that these two concepts have served as the axiom for the redress movement (though the latter more implicitly), they constitute part of the conceptual basis for Japanese Canadian collective claims of their political subjectivities in the form of their "redressed citizenship."

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which Kogawa interrogates those two premises as she recuperates, rather than disown, "silence" and "Asia" *as* the abject—i.e. inassimilable and unintegrable—Other so that she can re-imagine the ways in which Japanese Canadians can claim their engagement with their nation. As Roy Miki states in his book *Redress* (2005), embodying an effort for national reparations, redress foreground the idea and claim of "citizenship." Consequently, Japanese Canadian claims of redress inherently had the danger of being subsumed into the discourse of the nation state while consolidating its narratives. In this respect, Kogawa's novel dramatizes how "Asia"/ Japan as the Canadian nation-state's Other intervenes in the process by which Japanese Canadians via redress seek their citizenship and national inclusion.

In examining the process by which Kogawa revises the traditional terms of Japanese Canadian engagement with their nation, I pay particular attention to her critique of (what I call) "Eurocentric monolingualism." For one thing, her novel casts doubt over the notion of "breaking silence" by illustrating how silence in her novel stems, among other things,

from the Western subject's inability to decipher the language of Other, as the process is dramatized here through the Sansei protagonist Naomi's inability to read the letters written in Japanese. Rather than blindly endorsing the notion of "breaking silence" by presuming that this inaudible and illegitimate language is translatable into a dominant linguistic act and form, Kogawa recuperates "silence" as the Other's language, in turn to further problematize the idea of a "legitimate language." Thus, while we have witnessed how Yamada's (m)Other's language has intervened in the Japanese American author's normative and Eurocentric perceptions, Kogawa also tries to "undo" the conventional narratives regarding the attainment of Japanese Canadian citizenship and national inclusion as she recuperates this abject, inassimilable language of the Other into her claim of the nation. In this way, Kogawa simultaneously claims and undercuts the nationalist resolutions by imagining their citizenship to be the site of (potential) disruption—what can disturb its unity.

While *Obasan* has received extensive scholarly attention, the novel's interrogation of Eurocentrism, especially Eurocentric monolingualism, within Japanese Canadian redress activism, has rarely been addressed. My chapter intends to supplement this shortcoming by offering explorations into those critical registers. It will address how Kogawa questions the notions of Eurocentrism that are embedded in the Canadian redress movement, represented here in the figure of Emily, in terms of their conceptualization and (de)mobilization of silence, speech, "Asia," and "citizenship." The first half of the chapter will explore the novel's interrogation and revision of the Eurocentric notion of "breaking silence." The questions I ask here include not only why but *how* the novel revises this concept. That is, if Kogawa believes that "breaking silence" is not enough, into what

(non)linguistic acts does she reconstitute this axiom? The latter half of the chapter will engage with the other premise, that of “breaking from Asia.” There I will examine how Kogawa’s novel reconceives Japanese Canadian citizenship which incorporates “Asia” as its abject, inassimilable Other into the Canadian national body, while disrupting the illusory idea of a homogenous nation upheld by the traditional models of citizenship.

(Un)breaking Silences: Silences in Kogawa Criticism

Before exploring how silence operates in Kogawa’s novel, I will first briefly map out past critical receptions of this novel, particularly those related to the interpretations of “silence” so that I can situate my own reading. According to Christina Tourino (2003, 138), early Kogawa critics tended to read the novel as a typical developmental narrative which traces the protagonist Naomi’s “progress from silence to speech.” According to these readings, silence functions not just as an absence, or the opposite, of speech. It is seen as a *pre-stage* of speech where the latter is perceived as the presumed goal and ultimate destination. Put otherwise, instead of understanding silence (though *not* silencing) in its own terms and as its own mode of signification, silence in these early scholarly readings tended to be perceived as “lack” and “absence,” which will thus eventually need to be “broken” and developed into verbal articulations.

This polarization and hierarchization of speech over silence becomes further more problematic when it is compounded with the other binary in the novel: one between “Asia” and “North America.” As Kogawa presents two contrasting aunts in the novel—“One [who] lives in sound, the other in stone” (*Obasan* 39)—, the Canadian Aunt Emily and the titular Aya Obasan personify the traits of each opposite end. In contrast to the

Canadian-born Aunt Emily described in the novel as a “word warrior” (*Obasan* 39) whose verbal militancy characterizes her acts of resistance, Aya Obasan, an Issei Japanese immigrant woman, embraces silence as a way of articulating her suffering, grief, and pain. While silence thus becomes equated to the cultural signifier of East and speech West, silence in Kogawa’s novel has come to be read, by some early critics, as embodying a distinctly Japanese cultural value and practice which Japanese Canadians needed to “break” in order to gain political agency and to realize their full participation in the political, cultural, and national arenas such as redress. (Hence, the slogan, “breaking silence.”) In this respect, Kogawa’s silence can be seen as functioning like Yamada’s culturally loaded Japanese terms—“enryo,” “haji,” “jama,” “Shikatanai,” etc.—which I argued in my previous chapter Yamada employed to convey cultural notions which she believed Japanese Americans needed to disinherit in order to claim their “legitimate” Asian American identities. Subsequently, in the early binarized readings of Kogawa’s novel, “breaking silence” and “breaking from Asia,” with whose values silence has been associated, become two necessary pre-requisites for Japanese Canadians to pursue their legitimate Canadian national inclusion, where the claim of redress, and by extension of their redressed Canadian citizenship, is based on those two Eurocentric acts of “breaking.”

More recently, critics have begun to read the seeming dichotomy of silence and speech (if not also between “Asia” and “North America”) in more complex terms, as they emphasize the multiple, layered, and sometimes contradictory meanings that are associated with those two terms and practices. Among them, King-kok Cheung perhaps has been most vocal in her reinterpretation of silence in this novel. In her influential book *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993), Cheung

critiques the early scholarly tendency by which critics privileged speech over silence as the novel's primary mode of signification. Cheung states: "most reviewers [. . .] have applied the hierarchical opposition of language and silence to the very novel that disturbs the hierarchy" (126). Drawing on Gayle Fujita's article, "'To Attend the Sound of Stone': The Sensibility of Silence in *Obasan*" (1985), whose initial intervention triggered what has developed into the biggest debate surrounding this novel, Cheung enumerates the whole list of meanings, both positive and negative, which the novel associates with silence: protective, inhibitive, stoic, oppressive, attentive, and other forms and acts of silences. Reinterpreting silences and speeches in their multiple, layered, and sometimes contradictory significations, Cheung questions the simple binarization where silence is dismissed as being inadequate to speech.²

As scholars revise the early polarized and hierarchized reading of silence and speech, silence in *Obasan* has come to be read not as an absence but its own mode of significations. Particularly significant are critics such as Betty Sasaki (1998), Robyn Morris (2000), Nancy Peterson (2001), and Heather Zwickler (1993, 2001) who propose to read silence in *Obasan* as a form of non-verbal articulation which questions and problematizes the traditional phallogo- and lingua-centric forms of expressions. Among them, Nancy Peterson's trauma-theory based reading of silence is especially noteworthy, as she suggests that silence in Kogawa be read as "a language of trauma" which challenges and disrupts the conventional linguistic forms of articulation. In *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory* (2001), a study based on Cathy Caruth's influential theories on trauma, Peterson reads silence as a language that articulates psychological wounds and traumas that "threaten to exceed clean lines of articulation" (7).

Silence in this sense signifies a (non)discourse that marks the crisis and “limits of articulation” (Peterson 102), the “wounds of history that cannot speak directly (Peterson 160). Far from being absent of meanings, silence in this sense becomes, like hysteria and other somatic languages, a means to speak “what is unspoken and unspeakable” (Peterson 157) linguistically. To borrow Heather Zwicker’s eloquent phrase, silence in this sense becomes a discourse that points to “what exceeds the expressive possibilities of language” (1993, 150). In this way, these critics suggest that Kogawa’s novel speaks for the need for Naomi and the reader to learn to decipher the meanings of articulations that do not take the dominant linguistic forms rather than just attempting to break silence. As these renewed understandings and insights disrupt the traditional polarized understanding of silence and speech, critics have come to show how Kogawa’s novel effectively challenges and revises the usual Eurocentric understanding of speech and silence in their binarized and hierarchal relations.³

My own reading and interpretation of silence in Kogawa is built upon those previous scholarships and arguments. What I would like to contribute with my own reading is to illuminate the colonial, particularly lingua-colonial dimensions that are involved in the production, deciphering, and especially the *failure* of deciphering the meanings of silences. While silence, as I said, has been a major critical preoccupation in reading this much acclaimed novel, the connection between silence and (what I call) “Eurocentric monolingualism” has not been adequately explored, if addressed at all. Yet, it is important, indeed, crucial I believe, to remember that one significant form of silence in Kogawa’s novel occurs because of the Asian North American daughter Naomi’s inability to decipher the language of the Other—here Japanese. As Naomi refers to the “blue-lined rice-paper

sheets with Japanese writing which,” she says, she “cannot read” (*Obasan* 55), the silence that surrounds the fate of Naomi’s mother stems from the Sansei Japanese Canadian daughter’s inability to comprehend the letters that are written in Japanese. Thus, while the biggest silence that surrounds with this text concerns the whereabouts of Naomi’s mother, whose sudden disappearance in Naomi’s childhood has haunted her into and throughout her adult years, the irony which Kogawa invokes in the novel is that the mother’s fate, her atomic bomb exposure in Nagasaki and the consequent demise, has in fact been recorded in the letters that were at one time in Naomi’s possession. It was only that those letters, in both senses of the term, were relegated to “silence” because Naomi did not have the linguistic means through which she can decode what was inscribed in those letters.

Put in other words, I contend that silence in *Obasan* needs to be read in relation to the lingua-colonial power structures. That is, to the extent that the above episode depicts how silence results from the Western subject’s Eurocentric monolingualism, Kogawa shows how silence as an absence of meanings becomes produced from the listener/ recipient’s illiteracy in the Other’s language. Indeed, it is important to remember that Aya Obasan’s silence, which can be attributed to various factors including her cultural and gender trainings, originates in the multiple states of political disempoweredness she inhabits. It is also *literal*, as her “silence” is derived from her linguistic “disability”—or what *makes* it a “disability,” the assumption and values—, as Aya Obasan’s silence stems from the fact that she as a first generation immigrant lives with a language which she does not have sufficient command of. Notable in this sense is that Kogawa makes silence an issue that pertains to the Issei generation. While silence is embodied by characters connected with Japan—, Grandma Kato, Obasan, Uncle, and, the protagonist’s mother, “[e]ach one, raised in Japan,

[and] speaks the same language” (*Obasan* 58), as Naomi describes it—, majority of them are first-generation immigrants who do not have sufficient linguistic skills to articulate themselves in the dominant English language.

What Kogawa engages with here, then, is a familiar concern in Asian North American literature, where the question of language, particularly the fluency in English, has been an important issue. This is in part due to the way linguistic fluency has constituted part of the basis and claims of U.S. citizenship (both literally and symbolically), distinguishing “Asian North Americans” from the indigenous “Asians.” To recall one famous example, Maxine Hong Kingston writes how her second-generation Chinese American heroine was assigned “a zero IQ” (*TWW* 183) by her first-grade American teacher because her immigrant mother had failed to teach the daughter sufficient English. As Maxine, the heroine, points the finger at her mother, she says: “‘It’s your fault I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn’t teach me English, and you gave me a zero IQ’” (*TWW* 201). As Patricia Chu points out, the U.S. immigration officials deemed Maxine’s parents, who were a classical scholar and a medical doctor in China, “illiterate” (2000, 2). This episode then also recalls David Eng’s similar critique of Eurocentric monolingualism, which I have quoted earlier, whereby the Chinese linguistic articulations in Kingston’s another novel, *China Men* (1980) are relegated to “strange noises” when they failed to register within the Eurocentric interpretive framework. In this way, these authors expose the mechanism in and through which “silence” and “noise” come to be produced and are made into a problem (“a zero IQ”), when such articulations fail to conform to the listener’s normative view of what constitutes a legitimate language and knowledge.

It is worth noting, then, that this equation of “silence” and/or “noise” to linguistic deviance also recalls Yamada’s daughter’s initial denunciation of her immigrant mother’s linguistic utterance as non-language. As I have discussed in my previous chapter, Yamada’s daughter dismisses the mother’s construction of Mrs. Higashi’s suicide which does not conform to her Anglophonocentric norm, even though Yamada’s story ultimately questions and deconstructs such a Eurocentric belief. As I shall discuss in more depth in my next chapter, this process is also symbolically illustrated in Nora Okja Keller’s novel, *Comfort Woman* (1997). In the novel, the Korean American daughter literally fails to recognize her mother’s tape-recorded Korean voice as a legitimate language (Korean), even though Keller’s novel also records the daughter’s efforts to listen to and—though somewhat too easily—make sense of the sounds which the daughter initially thought were just noise.

Put in other words, these authors’ works not only critique the operation of monolingualism but testify to the efforts of Asian North American daughters to listen to those illegitimate sounds as they endeavor to make sense of those absent, and sometimes inaudible, voices/ sounds/ noises that constitute her immigrant/ Asian mothers’ language. In Kogawa’s novel, this effort specifically takes place in the Japanese Canadian daughter’s act of attending, rather than breaking, silences. In so arguing, I intend to connect Kogawa’s recuperation of silence to what Nancy Peterson conceives as the language of trauma, as both Kogawa and Peterson problematize the normative conception of language by exposing what is considered as the “non-legitimate” linguistic acts. In turn, both Kogawa and Peterson offer alternative reading strategies that help to make sense of those “illegitimate languages” that constitute the voice of the Other.

II. Attending the Languages of “Asia”/ Other: Legitimate vs. Illegitimate Languages

To argue how Kogawa interrogates and revises the idea of “breaking silence,” it is useful to see how the novel maintains the tension between silences and speeches, as well as among various forms and manifestations of silences and speeches. To underscore this point, I would like to recall once again how the novel employs two contrasting aunts, Emily and Obasan. As Kogawa writes, unlike Aunt Emily who is “a word warrior,” Obasan “lives in stone,” where her “language remains deeply underground” (39 *Obasan*). While critics so far tended either to valorize Emily’s political voice or to embrace Aya Obasan’s silence as the novel’s primary mode of signification, my point is to show how Kogawa upholds the tension between these two modes of significations rather than resolve the tension by privileging one over the other, either by “breaking silence” or simply reversing the hierarchy. This section, then, examines how Emily’s verbal and Obasan’s silent language is each connected with the idea of “legitimate” and “illegitimate” voice that represents history.

To explore this point, Nancy Peterson’s reading of the two aunts is useful, as she sees Emily and Obasan as assuming contrasting roles of “preserver[s] of history” (Peterson 160). On the one hand, Aunt Emily, according to Peterson, represents “the voice of history in the novel” (158). Keeping a journal that informs “the step by step development of the interment program,” Emily also preserves documents such as newspaper clippings, official letters, conference papers, and “her own letters of inquiry and protest” (Peterson 158):

“It matters to get the facts straight,” Aunt Emily tells Naomi. [. . .] This insistence on facts signifies Aunt Emily’s investment in a concept of history aligned with documentation, a concept of history linked to a particular kind of articulation: Aunt

Emily relies on written words and explicit language to identify and rectify egregious wrongs. (Peterson 158-159)

Collecting historical facts in the form of the dominant languages—both in the sense that they are written and the majority of them are in English—, Emily believes in and practices what Shirley Geok-lin Lim has called “logocentric” (and I would add, Anglophonocentric) “documentation” (1990, 245). What has been less acknowledged in the past readings of this novel, however, is that Aya Obasan, who embodies silence—if not “aphasia” as Lim calls it (245)—, also “preserves objects from the past” (Peterson 161). As Naomi comments, “Obasan never discards anything” (*Obasan* 53). Apart from the straightforwardly metaphorical “strings of balls,” the “twines” which Obasan winds and collects, her house is filled with a variety of family objects which Obasan has preserved over the years: Uncle’s ID card from the World War II years, the patchwork kilt made by Naomi’s mother, the tools which “Grandfather Nakane brought” (*Obasan* 28) when he first came to Canada, and so on. As Laurie Krux (1999) observes, “in her old house [Obasan] has carefully preserved everything associated with the Nakane and Kato families” to the effect that (Krux cites Mason Harris’s words) “the accumulation of carefully preserved objects [. . .] makes the house a filing cabinet of the family’s past” (Krux 84).

It should not be surprising, then, that these “objects” Obasan collects are more explicitly compared to forms of memories. Naomi writes:

[Obasan] has preserved on shelves, in cupboards, under beds a box of marbles, half-filled coloring books, a red, white, and blue rubber ball. [. . .] Every short stub pencil, every cornflakes box stuffed with paper bags and old letters is of her ordering. They rest in the corners [. . .] tiny specks of memory. (*Obasan* 18)

Similarly, later on in the novel Naomi compares the left-over food, which Obasan accumulates in the fridge, to repressed internment “memories” (*Obasan* 54). Put in other

words, while critics in the past have linked Emily to “the voice of history” in contrast to Aya Obasan whom they read as embodying historical amnesia and forgetful silence, the two aunts, in fact, are preserving *and* articulating the past in different languages. It is only that unlike Emily, Obasan preserves and articulates the past in the forms of her non-verbal objects, such as food, toys, clothing, the seemingly “silent” objects that necessitate “decoding.”

To further delve into this issue, I would like to turn to Chapter 8 of the novel, where the two aunts’ collections of the past are placed in direct juxtaposition. Delineating the two aunts’ practices of accumulating objects from the past, Kogawa underscores their differences in terms of the form and content, thus, the kind of “language” which each aunt relies on to articulate the past. Indeed, worth noting in this sense is that this chapter presents four different sets of “letters,” each written, collected, and/or handed on by the elderly female figures of the novel, Emily, Obasan, and Grandma Kato respectively. Firstly, Emily’s collection of letters, her “package” of verbal and predominantly written documents, brings together “letters” that are both public and personal. Naomi finds in Emily’s package, which itself is called “correspondence” (*Obasan* 52), “a copy of a letter to Mackenzie King; one to Mr. Glen, Minister of Mines and Resources; one from General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers; another from H. L. Keenleyside, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources” (*Obasan* 53). Alongside those official correspondences is also a more personal record, an epistolary journal which Emily addressed to her sister in Japan during the war (though this is a one-way correspondence since Emily was never able to send those “letters”). While these two groups of “letters” are written materials that are composed in the official English language of Canada, they can be

seen as representing both the official and unofficial historical, archival materials which Emily keeps as “the preserver of history.” (Indeed, as Kogawa acknowledges in her prefatory note as well as in some of her interviews, many of the words in Emily’s letters are drawn from the actual historical documents housed in the Public Archives of Canada [1993b, 219]).

In direct contrast to Emily’s collection of *verbal* materials—what Naomi later calls the “heap of words” (*Obasan* 218)—, Obasan’s collection, as I said, is comprised predominantly of non-verbal, “silent” objects: clothing, toys, food, strings, and other miscellaneous family items. Particularly notable among those items is the old photograph which Kogawa refers to in this chapter, a photograph Obasan hands to Naomi specifically *as a “letter.”* In other words, this non-verbal object, another family item, is equated to a form of correspondence and is described as something comparable to a language. While I intend to discuss this point, along with the significance of the four letters, in more depth later, I would first like to draw attention to another non-verbal item, the food which Obasan accumulates in the fridge, as I believe it functions as Obasan’s language. In the following quote, Naomi describes how Obasan habitually stores “food bits” in the fridge: “The refrigerator is packed with boxes of food bits, a slice of celery, a square of spinach, half a hardboiled egg” (*Obasan* 54). Referring to Obasan’s left-over food, Naomi provides a following description, comparing the food to the repressed memories of the internment:

There are some indescribable items in the dark recesses of the fridge that never sees the light of day. But you realize when you open the door that they’re there, lurking, too old for mold and past putrefaction.

Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. Didn’t Obasan once say, “It is better to forget”? What purpose is served by hauling forth the jar of inedible food? If it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past pain. Questions from all these papers [in Emily’s package], questions referring to turbulence in the past, are an unnecessary upheaval in the delicate ecology of this numb day. (*Obasan* 54-55)

While Naomi's narrative here is charged with highly metaphorical meanings and psychic resonance, the latter part of the quote more explicitly compares the food to the repressed internment memories as well as to Emily's collection of documents that testify to that experience. Like the memories of the forced relocation, which must have been accumulating in "the dark recesses" of Obasan's mind, Obasan can neither discard nor consume the food, as she is unable to confront it. As a result, the food keeps piling up and becomes deteriorated, just as the repressed traumatic memories accumulated in Obasan's psyche disintegrate her body and mind. (Notably, Kogawa begins this chapter with a reference to Obasan's feeble body, illustrating how Obasan suffers from a multiple form of physical and mental dysfunctions including cataracts, deafness, and forgetfulness.)

In this way, the passage suggests how the food, like the photograph which Obasan calls a "letter," functions as Obasan's "language," her way of speaking out the pain of her traumatic past. The passage then also illustrates how the two aunts employ different "languages" to enunciate the injustices of the forced relocation. While Emily assembles verbal documents as evidence that records the unjust treatments of Japanese Canadians, Obasan articulates those same injustices through the impact they have made, thus inscribed, on her body and psyche. To this end, if Emily's package represents "the documentary realm of public facts" (47), as Gurleen Grewal eloquently phrases it, Obasan's food and other non-verbal items can be seen as the testimonies of "the undocumented [. . .] shadowy world of memories, of the lived and livid history that eludes documentation" (147). The novel's narrative, as Grewal suggests, "alternates between these two modes of understanding the past" (147), registering and articulating the tension between the two.

Yet, if the food here serves as Obasan's way of imparting her pain and traumatic memories, the quote also implies how Obasan's "language" escapes Naomi's full understanding, as Naomi here seems to misinterpret Obasan's peculiar behavior as a sign of forgetfulness. Or put differently, Naomi seems to take Obasan's outspoken belief, "'It is better to forget'" literally, even though the language Naomi employs to describe Obasan's behavior, which is charged with psychic resonance, suggests otherwise. Naomi, then, seems to both understand and fail to understand Obasan's traumatic language: how the food is an articulation of Obasan's unresolved pain, as Obasan's unconscious trauma erupts into this non-verbal language, finding its expression in the compulsory, repetitive, and obsessive behavior—the "return of what has been repressed" (155), to borrow Peterson's characterization of trauma. Conversely, the passage also seems to suggest that to the extent that Obasan, unlike Emily, employs an unconventional, illegitimate language to express herself, Obasan's non-verbal articulation eludes a clear understanding of the reading subject, here Naomi.

In this sense, it is worth considering how two other "letters" also appear in this chapter that are equally, if not more, illegible as Obasan's food-language. One is a set of letters written in Japanese by Grandma Kato; the other is the photograph which Obasan calls a "letter" and hands to Naomi in its place. Immediately following the above episode, Naomi discovers another set of letters in Emily's package; this time, however, those are the ones she cannot read because they are composed in Japanese. Naomi explains: "Inside the [Emily's] folder are two envelopes about as narrow and long as bank checks, and inside each envelope are blue-lined rice-paper sheets with Japanese writing which I cannot read" (*Obasan* 55). As these documents later turn out to be Grandma Kato's correspondence

addressing her own as well as her daughter's (that is Naomi's mother's) atomic bomb exposure in Nagasaki, these verbal objects, when they are finally read and translated, are to articulate the biggest silence in the novel, one concerning the fate of Naomi's mother. In this early chapter, however, Kogawa describes how Naomi, unable to read their contents, asks Obasan to translate, to which Obasan does not respond—or rather responds with silence.

The following passage illustrates Naomi's frustration with Obasan's (lack of) response to her queries, while the quote gives a repeated emphasis on the illegibility of both the Japanese letters and Obasan's silence:

“What is this about, Obasan?” I ask. [. . .]
 “Who are the letters from?” I ask loudly.
 She does not respond. Her face is *expressionless*. [. . .] But I ask once more,
 “Who are the letters from?”
 She stares steadily at the table. The greater my urgency to know, the thicker her silences have always been. No prodding will elicit clues.
 Her hand moves on the table like an electrocardiograph needle, delicate and *unreadable*. Then, with her back bent forward, she stands up and shuffles out of the room.

(*Obasan* 55, emphasis added)

As Naomi gives up her questioning and the chapter moves toward the end, however, Obasan returns to the room with an old photograph, which she calls a “letter.” Naomi describes the chapter's closing moment as follows:

In her [Obasan's] hands is a familiar photograph. I am about two or three years of age and clinging to my mother's leg with one arm. My mother's face is childlike and wistful. Her head leans shyly to the side and her hair is tucked under her wide-brimmed hat. [. . .]
 She [Obasan] places the picture in my hand. “Here is the best *letter*. This is the best time. These are the best memories.”

(*Obasan* 56, emphasis added)

While Naomi wonders about “any identification” of the photograph and finds none, the chapter closes with a recurrent and prolonging note of “silence” associated with the Japanese letters, the photograph, and Obasan’s “response.”

Like the previous episode, then, the chapter ends with Naomi once again being left unable to fully grasp the meanings of Obasan’s “language,” this time of her silent “letter.” That is, while Naomi seems to interpret Obasan’s silence as an absence of response to her questioning—i.e. Obasan’s refusal to translate the letters—, it becomes clear, as we reread this episode in our second reading of the novel, that the photograph/ “letter” is, indeed, Obasan’s response to Naomi’s “plodding.” Obasan knows exactly why Naomi wants to know the content of the letters: she wants to know what happened to her mother. The young mother’s photograph, which preserves her sound image prior to her atomic bomb exposure and consequent disfigurement, then, is Obasan’s response and willful “translation” of the original letter, which records the mother’s disfigurement and demise, rather than her refusal to translate the letters, as Naomi interprets it. Yet once again, this message fails to convey, as Obasan’s unconventional language, here including her silence, exceeds Naomi’s full comprehension.

While this episode suggests how silence as an absence of meanings becomes produced as the result of the listener’s inability to decode the Other, here Obasan’s language, what is particularly significant here is that alongside Obasan’s silent “letter,” the chapter presents the other set of letters in Japanese which similarly eludes Naomi’s understanding. In other words, while Naomi’s failure to understand Obasan’s silent response/ “letter” is linked to her inability to comprehend the other letters in Japanese, her illiteracy in the latter metaphorically describes her failed performance in the former. The

passage, in other words, hints at a possibility that what Naomi has (mis)interpreted as an absence of Obasan's response/ "letter" is in fact due to, as it results from, Naomi's illiteracy in Obasan's unconventional language. Notably in the above quote, Naomi's description of Obasan's silence shifts from the initial "Her face is *expressionless*" to "Her hand moves [. . .] delicate and *unreadable*." In contrast to the initial term "expressionless," which designates the absence of meanings and attributes this absence to the speaking subject—Obasan's failure to express herself—the second term, "unreadable" transfers the cognitive responsibility to the reader/ recipient, Naomi herself. (Consequently, the passage records a mixed response on the side of Naomi: while recording her pain and frustration which come from her unintelligibility, it also suggests that this sense of incomprehension may result from Naomi's own shortcomings.)

Insomuch as the chapter, thus, points to the link between "silences" as (mis)interpreted as an absence of meaning and the illegibility of letters (in both senses of the term), Japanese language here plays a crucially symbolic role. The Japanese letters, which articulate themselves as unreadable linguistic objects, occupy the role of a border linguistic entity, as the kind of linguistic absent presence in the novel. That is, while presented as a language, Japanese here also becomes a cluster of empty signifiers—"some black squiggles I cannot read" (*Obasan* 63) as Naomi later describes them—, when the reader fails to comprehend and decipher its meanings. To recall David L. Eng's critique once again, certain *linguistic* articulations can be relegated to noise—and I would add silence—when those articulations fail to make sense within Eurocentric interpretive frameworks, thus are dismissed as "noises" or silence (2001, 47). In a similar way, I argue that Kogawa's novel demonstrates how the meaning of "silence" becomes erased when the

reading subject fails to decode its meaning.⁴ In this case specifically, Obasan's articulated silence cannot convey its meaning not only because of the speaking subject, Obasan's inability to express herself in a conventional, i.e. official and dominant language. The incomprehension is also due to the listening/ reading subject, Naomi's inability to make sense of those unconventional, non-verbal languages—her lack of knowledge in that “illegitimate language.” In this way, the Japanese letters point to the presence of languages and articulations that become undecipherable *because* the reader/ listener/ recipient is illiterate in those languages. As the kind of linguistic absent presence in the novel, Japanese language serves as a powerful reminder of that operation. (After all, the subaltern “cannot speak” because the dominant do not possess a means to “attend” her speech. Similarly, it may be worth recalling that certain sounds are perceived as silence because they are inaudible to human ears.)

In this respect, it is also important that the chapter juxtaposes Japanese and the official English language which Emily utilizes for her “correspondence,” as Emily sends her letters of protests and inquiries in the dominant English language. As I have discussed earlier, unlike Emily who relies on the official English language to verbalize her protest, Obasan employs the unofficial, “illegitimate” language of trauma, which, like Japanese, often eludes the comprehension of the reading subject, where her language is relegated to silence. In this sense, it is symbolic that the Issei immigrant Obasan's first language, unlike the Canadian-born Aunt Emily's, is not English. It metaphorically describes Obasan's lack of access to the dominant, official linguistic medium. (Indeed, Kogawa fills her novel with Japanese words/ sounds which Obasan utters—“ara,” “o,” sa”—, short vowel sounds

which are, similar to what Maxine Hong Kingston has called “almost words” (*TWW* 178), not granted the status of a full language.⁵⁾

In this light, the silence generated from Naomi’s inability to understand the language of the Other here takes on a metaphorical significance. That is, rather than encouraging Obasan to “break her silence”—by emulating Emily in her official and dominant linguistic act and by learning to “talk properly” (*Obasan* 97) as Stephen would command her—, the novel, instead, puts the idea of a “legitimate language” in question. Kogawa demonstrates how such a notion becomes generated and enforced by eliminating as silences (or else noise) the articulations that do not conform to the dominant linguistic and epistemological norm. Consequently, the novel points to the need for Naomi and the reader to acquire listening skills that enable them to “attend” languages that do not take the “legitimate,” which only means the hegemonic, forms of expressions.

The Tension between Silences and Speeches

As I thus problematize the presumed hierarchy between official and unofficial languages, however, I would like to emphasize that I do not undermine the importance of articulations in the “official” English language which Emily utilizes. Needless to say, the documents Emily collects and preserves serve as an invaluable political tool and historical evidence. To this end, it is important that Kogawa ends her novel with an excerpt from the historical “memorandum” submitted by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada in April 1946. This political document, an official letter of protest against the dispersal orders, serves to pay homage to (Emily’s) language of activism. As Gurleen Grewal puts it, the novel’s ending citation honors “the

impact of the paper missiles aimed at the government. The countless letters and untiring acts of conscience of the Emilys of the world do make a difference” (154). Indeed, such forms of verbal and political efficacy is also manifested in Naomi’s own act of verbal resistance, as she disputes in her “official” English language the newspaper accounts of the Japanese Canadian “evacuation”: “Facts about evacuees in Alberta” (*Obasan* 231).⁶

Similarly important is that Kogawa never blindly embraces Obasan’s silent language as the novel delineates its harmful aspects, articulating the enormous pain and deep wounding which Naomi suffers because of Obasan’s silence that never directly explains the reason of Naomi’s mother’s disappearance. Notably in the above citation as well as elsewhere in the novel, Kogawa places the reader in Naomi’s position of incomprehension so that s/he can share Naomi’s pain and frustration which Obasan’s (Mother and Uncle’s) “silent response” has caused for her. Overburdened by her own grief and pain, thus shutting herself up in her protective world of silence—“turn[ing] to stone” (*Obasan* 238)—, Obasan never understands Naomi’s pain and anguish which her silence has caused for her. By depicting the pain and violence which these traumatic silences have inflicted on Naomi, the novel does not simply reverse the hierarchy and romanticize silence.

As the novel thus sheds light on some detrimental aspects of silence, however, it does not blindly endorse or celebrate speech either. (Both silence and speech occur in pluralized forms.) For one thing, it is important that Kogawa begins her novel with an episode of an outspoken white male student in Naomi’s classroom, Sigmund who verbally harasses his young female Asian teacher. While Sigmund’s speech in this scene is conceived as an act of intrusion, his verbal act of aggression is linked with his white Western male privilege and power. Particularly significant in this respect is that the chapter juxtaposes the verbal

impertinence of this “freckle-faced redhead” (*Obasan* 7) with the silence of “the Native girl,” Lori who, Naomi writes, “sits at the back [of the classroom] and never says anything” (*Obasan* 10).

What is significant about the classroom episode is that it not only illuminates the relationships between existing power structures and one’s (in)access to speech and languages; it further illustrates the (potential) danger by which speech *can* intrude upon, thus erase and *silence* other people’s voices. That is, to the extent that everyone cannot speak at the same time and that every verbal utterance is, thus, accompanied with the (absent) presence of (other people’s) silences, those who have the most privilege and power can have the voice while imposing silence on the rest of the population. The short classroom episode placed at the very beginning of the novel casts doubt over the notion of linguistic agency and legitimacy, while posing a question as to whether this patriarchal, Eurocentric, and imperialist mode of self-articulation can be the model for minority subjects who have been deprived of their voices. Kogawa seems to ask if “the problem” can be solved *just* by “breaking silence”—that is, with Lori and Obasan getting to speak like Sigmund—or if it might, in fact, create a new group of oppressors who may end up silencing others who are less privileged than they are. In this respect, I would like to recall how Emily’s militant use of language often drives others to silence. As Grewal points out, “Emily’s confrontational mode leaves Naomi speechless” (148). Indeed, instead of using speech to initiate a dialogue, Emily typically employs it to impose her own truth often in an effort to enlighten others even about their own victimization. In this way, the novel seems to search for a different form of articulation than the model which simply endorses the evolutionary shift from silence to speech.

In her article “Multiculturalism: Pied Piper of Canadian Nationalism (And Joy Kogawa’s Ambivalent Antiphony)” (2001), Heather Zwicker contrasts Emily’s “pro-speech position” (155) with silence which other characters including Obasan employ in the novel. Questioning the therapeutic assumption of speech which has long dominated the interpretation of this novel, Zwicker critiques Emily’s “commonsensical pro-history position that talking is good, that it lessens pain and aids healing” (1993, 149): Emily believes that “problems can be resolved by finding a voice with which to understand and represent the past” (2001, 155). In contrast to Emily who thus embraces language as a political as well as a psycho-therapeutic tool, Zwicker argues: “Those who lived through it [the uprooting], represented by the deaf Obasan in her world of silence, add important correctives to Emily’s valorization of speech. [. . .] Their position is that there are some wounds that never heal, some things too painful to talk about” (1993, 148-149). In other words, silence which signifies an absence of language serves as a means to paradoxically underscore the enormity of (unverbalizable) pain which the subject goes through. As I suggested earlier, silence occurs because the person is in too much pain and is unable to express his/her suffering in the conventional language. Indeed, Naomi herself testifies from her observation of her students: “From my years of teaching I know it’s the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain” (*Obasan* 41). Likewise, Obasan’s silence, like her accumulated food, not only speaks the depth of her wound and the resultant trauma she has suffered over the years. Moreover, silence emerges as a form of articulation that imparts her pain, grief, and suffering in ways that exceed linguistic articulations. In this sense, her silence imparts the inadequacy of

language as a representational tool, inasmuch as it points to the inability and failure of words to represent her pain.

In this sense, Obasan's silent language of "grief" can also be contrasted with Emily's outspoken language of "grievance." Gayle Sato has recently discussed the emergence of literature which she calls "the post-redress narratives of the internment" (2006). Drawing on Anne Anlin Cheng's theory of racial melancholy, Sato underscores the sense of wounding that cannot be completely healed even after the issues of the internment were politically resolved via redress. I find Sato's argument useful to address the question of Obasan's silent speech, as Obasan's silent language of "grief," unlike Emily's "grievance," articulates the pain of the uprooting in ways that exceed the discourse (and premise) of political and linguistic resolution. By stating this, I do not in any way mean to undermine the importance of seeking political solution via verbal resistance. Nevertheless, I believe that Obasan's silent language of grief articulates the presence of pain that cannot be completely resolved via political *or* linguistic means, highlighting what remains *beyond* those acts and efforts. That is, if pain and injury are untranslatable into language, "breaking silence" into speech does not solve the problem. As Obasan's silence expresses the injuries that cannot be completely grasped by words, Kogawa invites the reader to attend her silent language of grief.

Or perhaps to look at this from a slightly different perspective, we can say that Obasan's silence, her non-verbal testimonies, also points to the limits of Emily's archival efforts, what Nancy Peterson calls the "limits of documentation and archives for repairing historical memory" (9). That is, to the extent that Obasan speaks in silence, her experience recorded in that silent language slips through Emily's predominantly verbal archives of

documents. As Peterson states, “the poetics of absence and silence” as literary device is often deployed to emphasize the limits of such recovery efforts: “What has gone unrecorded in the documents and archives that sustain official history myths remain undocumented no matter how much good will an individual historian might have” (9). In this way, Kogawa presents Obasan’s silent language of grief in her novel in order to make audible the silences which must unavoidably accompany every official (and unofficial) counter-history—those Emily endeavors at constructing—, where the act of articulating one version of history must necessarily and paradoxically highlight the absent presence of numerous other versions that remain silent/ced.

Speaking through Silences: Attending the Language of Issei

“[Obasan] *is* the stone, and the stone can speak if you listen to it hard enough. You listen by watching. Her hands make enormous speech if you have the capacity to hear.”

Joy Kogawa (1993a, 155 italics original).

Indeed, instances of such an articulation of silence occur most conspicuously in the form of the silent language which Issei characters speak in the novel. As Kogawa calls her novel “the Issei story, the Obasan story, the story of silence,” she states that her novel depicts the “story of the first-generation group”: “Though told by Naomi, it is still Obasan’s primary reality. The reality of the [Japanese Canadian] community [. . .] for that entire period of time has been a reality of silence” (1993b, 218). One of the central themes and challenges of *Obasan*, one can say, is how to attend the Issei’s silent language.

The difficult task of attending this silent language of Issei, which frequently eludes the understanding of the reading subject, becomes exemplified for the reader, as Kogawa

embeds in her narrative Uncle's dual attitudes toward the uprooting. That is, the novel presents two forms of response on the side of Uncle, with a notable split between his verbal and non-verbal articulations. In Chapter 7, for instance, Kogawa shows how Uncle verbalizes his feelings about the internment in his conversation with Emily, when she visits the Nakane family at their Granton home. The chapter describes how Emily attempts, i.e. unsuccessfully, to provoke Uncle and Obasan's anger, while she rails against the injustice that targeted Japanese Canadian community during and after World War II. Through Naomi's eyes, Kogawa illustrates how Obasan and Uncle reacted to Emily's provocation:

Obasan was not taking part in the conversation. *When pressed*, finally she said that she was grateful for life. "Arigatai. Gratitude only."

Uncle, who had been listening *tensely* up to this point, relaxed his jaws and slapped his lap with both hands. "In the world, there is no better place," he said. "This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude." (*Obasan* 50, *emph. added*)

I believe this passage presents one of the challenges which Kogawa poses for the reader in this novel: namely, how to interpret Uncle's and Obasan's seemingly naïve response to the state-imposed violence. So far critics have read these Issei attitudes—their unwillingness to comply with Emily's justifiable anger—as a negative instance of silence, silence which these critics, including someone like King-kok Cheung who played a vital role in revising the meaning of silence in this novel, insisted needs to be overcome.

Among those critics, Helen Grice, for instance, refers to an absence of Issei's critique of the internment—what she calls "the almost complete *issei* silence about internment in the novel" (90)—as evidence of "self-negation." Citing Kali Tal, Grice states how their "taciturnity"

may be a form of cultural coping, as Kali Tal suggests in her study, *Worlds of Hurt*; the "disappearance strategy" as she names it, whereby "a refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma," coupled with the difficulties of speaking in

spite of official silencing of the relocation story, may result in taciturnity on the subject. (Grice 90-91)

Similarly, Laurie Krux, who otherwise attends the more nuanced meanings of silences in Kogawa's novel, maintains how the former internees' "complicitous silence" (Krux's words) results from the sense of "shame that continues to paralyze the victims of the Internment" (87). Expressing her agreement with "activist Emily," Krux concludes: "Such shame, Kogawa reveals, must be challenged; such silence finally broken" (87). While I agree with Krux's contention about the need to challenge silence which results from the victims' erroneous sense of shame, I, nonetheless, raise the question which Krux does not address: that is, "broken into" what language or articulation? If Krux believes that the victims' silence must be broken singularly into the dominant mode of linguistic articulation, the official, Emily's linguistic act, then we are back in the evolutionary model. Equally, I interrogate Grice and Krux's contention that Uncle and Obasan's silences result solely from the absences of their recognition of trauma or that their silences are simply the outcomes of their sense of shame, even though I admit that "shame" certainly constitutes part of their difficulties. What I argue rather is that Uncle and Obasan's silence operates as an act and form of its own articulation, testifying to the fact that they employ "silence" to express themselves. As Kogawa allows Uncle to "speak" his silent language of protest, her novel demonstrates what it means for Uncle and Obasan to speak through silence—and for the reader to attend those silent voices.

What is significant about Uncle's response to the forced relocation is that Kogawa, as I said, presents two forms of articulations, verbal and non-verbal, with a conspicuous split between the two. On the one hand, Uncle does not *verbally* express his negative emotions about his experience of the uprooting or toward Canadian government's racist policies that

instituted it. Indeed, as I have quoted in the above, Uncle speaks only of “gratitude,” “this country is the best”: ““In the world, there is no better place. [. . .] There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude.”” (*Obasan* 50). On the other hand, however, the novel also enunciates his other emotions which Uncle conveys in his silent voice, here through the vigil which he performs every August for Naomi’s mother. Particularly important is that this annual vigil is held on the land which, the novel explicitly states, once belonged to the First Nations. Put in other words, Kogawa *makes* Uncle choose this particular piece of land—the land of the indigenous Canadians—for the site of the mourning for his sister-in-law who died from the atomic bomb exposure in Nagasaki.

Indeed, Chapter One, which depicts the scene of this vigil, is filled with references to the Native Canadians, where Uncle is even compared to the Native chief. Naomi describes the scene of the vigil which she and Uncle perform on the prairie:

Everything in front of us is virgin land. From the beginning of time, the grass along this stretch of prairie has not been cut. About a mile east is a spot which was once an Indian buffalo jump, a high steep cliff where the buffalo were stampeded and fell to their deaths. [. . .]

Uncle could be Chief Sitting Bull squatting here. He has the same prairie-baked skin, the deep brown furrows like dry riverbeds creasing his cheeks. All he needs is a feather headdress, and he would be perfect for a picture postcard—“Indian Chief from Canadian Prairie”—souvenir of Alberta, made in Japan. Some of the Native children I’ve had in my classes over the years could almost pass for Japanese, and vice versa. There’s something in the animal-like shyness I recognize in the dark eyes. A quickness to look away. I remember, when I was a child in Slocan, seeing the same swift flick-of-a-cat’s-tail look in the eyes of my friends. (*Obasan* 2-3)

In view of the discussion I have given in my previous chapter, the analogy here is not without a problem, when compared with Yamada’s conception of Japanese North Americans as “settlers” (though Kogawa depicts this particular ground as the “hard untilled soil” [*Obasan* 4]). By making Uncle perform his annual vigil on the land once owned by the indigenous peoples, however, Kogawa allows Uncle to voice his painful

identification with the Natives who have been subjected to the histories of colonial and racial violence in Canada before the Japanese Canadians.

Despite Uncle's verbal pretension, his choice of the land thus speaks a different story. The passage exhibits how Uncle perceives the violence inflicted on his sister-in-law, thus implicitly one on himself, in terms of the larger racial and colonial violence.⁷ Thus, despite the not unproblematic nature of this identification, which reveals a universalizing impulse, Uncle's choice of the land speaks what he does not speak verbally. It not only informs us of his awareness about the racist nature of those violence; it tells us of his pain, sense of victimization, suffering, sorrow, as well as perhaps his anger toward the Canadian government. Behind Uncle's facile words of "gratitude only, this country is the best" (*Obasan* 42), Kogawa encourages the reader to "attend," as the novel articulates, his silent language of protest.⁸

What is equally important here is that Uncle's silent language "speaks" *why* he cannot voice his protest verbally and openly. As I have mentioned earlier, Uncle's silent mourning in Chapter One is placed in direct juxtaposition with Sigmund's open verbal aggression in Chapter Two. While placing the outspoken white male Sigmund in contrast with the silent Native girl Lori in the same chapter, Kogawa also compares Uncle to the Native chief in the chapter that immediately precedes this juxtaposition. By comparing Uncle to the Native chief, thus by extension to Lori who, unlike Sigmund, remains silent in the same classroom, these chapters invite the reader to consider *why* Uncle and Lori, *unlike* Sigmund and Aunt Emily, choose silence as their means of articulation. Why, the novel asks, Lori sits silently at the back of the classroom while "Sigmund, the freckle-faced redhead" (*Obasan* 7) feels free to verbally harass his young Asian-looking female teacher

in the open classroom space. In the same way, the novel questions why Uncle and Obasan do not find it safe to resort to the kind of open verbal resistance which the Canadian-born and -raised activist Emily does. Significantly, Naomi tells us: “From both Obasan and Uncle I have learned that speech often hides like an animal in a storm” (*Obasan* 4). It should not be an accident that the “animal-like shyness” (*Obasan* 3), as I have cited in my previous quote, is the quality which Naomi recognizes in Japanese and the Natives mutually.

As Betty Sasaki points out Emily’s frequent use of the collective pronoun, “we” in the novel: “Always speaking in the ‘we’ rather than ‘I,’ Aunt Emily transforms the pain of her personal experiences into political indignation for her community” (132). Gathering “the collective history of her people” (Sasaki 131), Emily declares: “‘We’re gluing our tongues back on’” (*Obasan* 43). While I do agree with Sasaki’s point, I also believe that Emily expects the community to conform to her “we” rather than make this pronoun a discursive position that is to be negotiated among its radically heterogeneous members, including Isseis who may not speak the same “tongue.” With our present case specifically, Emily seems to assume that everyone in Japanese Canadian community, including Isseis like Uncle and Obasan, are actually able to comply with Emily’s method of open verbal resistance, whereas in reality the stakes were obviously quite different for them. Unlike the Canadian-born and -raised Nisei Emily, Isseis such as Uncle and Obasan did not have the same political and linguistic means—and perhaps more importantly, the sense of security—with which to speak out against the injustice, particularly at this historical juncture of the pre-redress period. (It is not difficult to surmise that Emily’s method must

have been way too risky for them.) In this way, silence imparts what words and language cannot—that is, as Kogawa states, “if you have the capacity to hear” (1993a, 155).

In this way, silence articulates, to borrow Heather Zwicker’s eloquent phrase, “what exceeds the expressive possibilities of language” (1993, 150). That is, by articulating the very absence of words and language, and pointing to the subject’s inability and/or refusal for verbalization—what Kogawa calls the “silence that cannot speak” and “silence that will not speak” (n.p.)—, silence *tells* why the subject in question remains “silent.” What produces this silence? Is it because the speaker does not have access to a language? —what is considered as the legitimate language? Or does her/ his silence *speak* of the distrust of the listeners? —as Uncle and Obasan’s silence articulates, perhaps rightly, their distrust of the Canadian government? (Obviously, they would need the pension money to survive and to protect themselves from further injuries.) Or does their silence occur because the listener dismisses their “language,” in the widest sense of the term, as silence or noise when she or he fails to hear or decipher their voice? Does it speak Uncle and Obasan’s anxiety or fear that people will not listen to them? What states of political disempoweredness does it tell they are in? In consequence, while silence speaks what language cannot, the question Kogawa poses in the novel is how, and what it means, to attend those indetermined, overdetermined significations which this “absent” language imparts—and how we can attend those absent presences. While positing these questions, I want to emphasize once again that I do not deny the importance of verbal articulation or the acts of “breaking silence.” Yet, the novel, I insist, highlights the need for the reader to listen to and attend those silent and seemingly absent voices which we often fail to hear and dismiss, even though these voices, which are oftentimes the sole language of the

disprivileged, are everywhere in their absent presences. Emily's valorization of speech, though certainly important, needs to be read within these frames of references.

Claiming the Simultaneous Need and Failure of Language

As Kogawa thus redefines the medium of redress, she revises the axiom of "breaking silence" into the need for breaking *and* attending silences while placing them in tension. Or put differently, Kogawa does not deny linguistic agency but problematizes it, as she draws the tension between the need for a language to speak and represent *and* the problematic belief in its representational abilities. In this final section, I would like to look at the way her novel dramatizes the critical importance for minority subjects to "correct history" via verbal activism, while at the same time problematizing the belief, even an arrogance, to assume that language *can* reproduce the pain, hurt, and wound of the original experience. The novel, thus, alternates between those two imperatives, the need to articulate and translate suffering into words on the one hand, and the problematic assumption in such translatability on the other. In registering and negotiating the need for both, the novel makes visible the violence that such an act of translation/ articulation does to the original text/ experience.

In order to discuss this tension in more specific terms, I would like to turn briefly to Chapter 27 where Naomi first learns, through Emily's package of letters, about the efforts which others had made during and after the war to fight the injustice against Japanese Canadians. Naomi writes: "Throughout the country, here and there, were a few people doing what they could [. . .] missionaries, sending telegrams, drafting petitions" (*Obasan* 223), the "young Nisei men and women, the idealists, the thinkers, the leaders" (*Obasan*

223), the “people on the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians” submitting the memorandum for the House of Commons and Senate, protesting the orders of the deportation: “‘It is urgently submitted,’ they state in the memorandum, ‘that the Orders-in-Council are wrong and indefensible. . . .’” (*Obasan* 225). Similarly, Naomi finds in “the copy of a telegram sent to Mackenzie King from some concerned missionaries in Slokan” (*Obasan* 220), words of condemnation against the “dispersal policies.” They write: “‘Conditions worse than evacuation. Repatriation and dispersal policies the cruelest cut of all. [. . .] Not even a semblance of democracy or common sense in this latest racial persecution’” (*Obasan* 220). In other words, these documents serve as testimonies of people, including Niseis such as Emily, trying to “spread words” (*Obasan* 225) in the middle of the bigotry to translate the suffering of Japanese Canadians into linguistic terms. It is not surprising, in this sense, that these endeavors made specifically via linguistic means become culminated in Naomi’s own act of verbal resistance that takes place two chapters later, in Chapter 29, where Naomi declares her own facts against the dominant construction of “Facts about the evacuees in Alberta,” as I have discussed earlier.

Yet, these acts of discovery, verbal protests, and refusal of historical relativism (as Naomi claims her own truth and facts) are also accompanied with, and mediated by, Naomi’s insistence on the insufficiency of language, as Naomi insists how language fails the task of replicating her experience and pain during the uprooting. Indeed, the sections ranging from Chapters 27 to 29 demonstrate how Naomi vacillates between her ambivalent feelings: her desire for verbal reparations of the past on the one hand and her doubts about the efficacy of such protests made in linguistic terms on the other. What is significant, however, is that in the middle of her long and emotional counter-testimony regarding the

“facts about the evacuees in Alberta,” Naomi voices not just her inability but her body’s refusal to verbalize its experience and pain. In an imaginary dialogue with Emily, Naomi states: “I cannot tell about this time, Aunt Emily. The body will not tell” (*Obasan* 235). In other words, to Emily’s urge to vocalize the pain and speak out against the injustice, Naomi responds with an articulation of willed silence, whereby her articulated silence testifies how words *fail* to convey the pain of her body, since language, for her, is inadequate for replicating what her body has gone through in the Alberta sugar-beet fields.

I believe the reference to the body here is of particular importance. While articulating its refusal to “tell,” the body becomes the ultimate site of signification of Naomi’s pain, which is both irreducible and verbally irreproducible (it “cannot” and “will not speak”). Significant in this sense is that throughout the novel Kogawa describes Naomi’s trauma as bodily injury that cannot speak. As Marlene Goldman states: “Naomi describes her legs being ‘sawn apart’ by Old Man Gower (70) and, later, her own brain being cut open (214). In [the novel], the wounds inflicted to the body represent the hurts of history” (380).

To the extent that Naomi pronounces her body’s refusal to verbally replicate the experience, as I have shown in the above citation, Heather Zwicker similarly states how “bodies, and especially bodily pain” in *Obasan* “are irreducible and resist transparent representation in language” (2001, 154). Notably in this respect, Kogawa describes Naomi’s mother and grandmother’s experience of the atomic bomb exposure through the marks it left on their bodies: “the visible evidence of horror written on their skin, in their blood, carved in every mirror they passed” (*Obasan* 218). Once again, if it is on the body where one’s experience becomes inscribed and scarred and the body which records its

effects becomes the primary and irreducible site of significations, the novel seems to suggest the impossibility of understanding the pain of other people/ bodies. That is, if the bodily wound is beyond representation, one need to inhabit that body in order to truly know the pain that body has gone through. In this sense, it is important that this passage is addressed to Aunt Emily who, having escaped to Toronto, never experienced the forced relocation herself.⁹ What the novel puts in question, ultimately, then seems to be the notion—even the arrogance—that certain experience is verbally reproducible and one can understand that experience through its linguistic reproduction. The novel undermines the possibility for the reader to know and understand the experience of the Other, even while, as I have discussed, it acknowledges the crucial need, efforts, and importance to record and translate such experience, here the Japanese Canadian suffering, into linguistic terms.

Attending the Languages of the Other

This tension between the simultaneous need for *and* the failure or inadequacy of language is perhaps best exemplified in the novel by Grandma Kato's letters, which serve to illustrate the violence of articulation even while they exhibit the critical necessity of such articulation. It is important that Grandma Kato's letters are described as both illegible and unintelligible, that they escape full comprehension of the reading subject even when those letters finally become read and translated at the novel's end. As Naomi describes Grandma's second letter depicting the aftermath of the bombing as "chaotic," with "the details interspersed without chronological consistency" (*Obasan* 282), the letter's language disrupts the usual, normative discursive function. Significant in this sense is that the letter is filled with images of haze, mist, and dust—"a thick dust," "heavy dusk and

smoke,” “eerie twilight,” “haze” (*Obasan* 284)—images that suggest the uncertainty of perceptions and the unknowability of the event, of “what happened” at the site of the bombing. In this respect, the disfigurement of the mother is also symbolic. As the letter describes the scene of the bombing as one where “the landmarks were gone” (*Obasan* 284), the discursive chaos that characterizes Grandma’s letter is mimetic of the real, physical chaos at the site of the Ground Zero.

The fragmented and chaotic language that characterizes Grandma Kato’s letter, then, is also significant in that it reflects the impossibility of discursively retrieving the catastrophic event as a whole, thus achieving the full comprehension of the event. Nancy Peterson, for instance, speaks of the appropriateness of fragmented narrative that characterizes much of the Holocaust writings: “It is my argument that Holocaust history written today must speak a language of fragments—fragments of evidence, fragments of knowledge, fragments of stories—to articulate a vital and appropriate response to these crises. [. . .] Fragments and gaps serve to disrupt neat lines of narrative” (100). According to Peterson, the fragmented narrative informs the reader of the “limits of articulation” of “unprecedented trauma” (102), here the Holocaust, marking instead the “spaces, gaps, aporias” (9) that can never be filled, since such an event constantly “exceeds straightforward understanding” (13). In the same way, I argue that the shattered language which epitomizes Grandma Kato’s letter articulates the impossibility for the speaker to fully capture the event, and in turn to replicate the event in a “neat” and coherent narrative. The fragmented narrative then also shows how it resists, and refuses, the reader’s full and complete grasp of the event, as it places the reader in the position of incomprehension. Even more than those directly involved, the reader who was absent at the scene of the

catastrophe cannot have the whole and complete picture of “what happened”—except in fragments of stories that are transmitted to her/ him. The story she or he receives then is fragmented *by nature*, involving uncertainties, incomprehension, and ambiguities. In this sense, the unintelligibility that characterizes Grandma Kato’s letter is the inevitable and inescapable outcome of attempting to attend the Other’s experience and language, which (as such) can never be fully comprehensible.

What *is* significant here, however, is that the novel does not reproduce the original “chaotic” language of Grandma’s letter, to which it makes a self-conscious reference. Instead, Kogawa offers a “translated version” in that the original illegible Japanese letter is converted both into English and into a coherent, legible narrative, where the confusion and “chronological inconsistency” are smoothed over. In this way, Kogawa seems to underscore the contradiction. On the one hand, the novel explicitly points to the need for the letter to be read—and by extension, the experience to be articulated—so that people who otherwise are unable to read those Japanese letters, or else have not experienced the event firsthand, can learn about the atrocities recorded in those letters. At the same time, however, Kogawa’s presentation of the letter demonstrates how the novel problematizes the very act and process of translation, inasmuch as these discursive acts erase the violence which was inscribed in the original text—the discursive violence which, as I said, reflects the physical violence at the scene of the bombing.

To this extent, James E. Young offers useful insights in his discussion of the representations of the Holocaust. In his book *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequence of Interpretation* (1988), Young notes how the act of “writing” assimilates the violence of the original experience:

[U]pon entering narrative, violent events [. . .] are totalized by it, and thus seem to lose their ‘violent quality. Inasmuch as violence is “resolved” in narrative, the violent event seems also to lose its particularity—i.e., its facthood—once it is written. For once written, events assume the mantle of coherence that narrative necessarily imposes on them, and the trauma of their unassimilability is relieved. (14-15)

Although this passage alludes to an act of writing rather than translating, I think it is nonetheless useful to discuss Kogawa’s text, which exhibits how writing/ translating can assimilate the violence recorded in the original experience/ text. (In a sense, “writing” can be conceived as an act of translating in a broader sense in that writing transposes an object into linguistic representation). Seen from this frame, it is significant that instead of presenting the original illegible letter in its incoherent and unintelligible form, Kogawa makes Naomi re-narrate Grandma’s letter, where Naomi’s act of retelling of the event flattens the discursive chaos and confusion of the original letter. Notable in this sense is that unlike the numerous other letters which are quoted in this text in their literal and original forms, including Emily’s epistolary journal, this particular piece of correspondence—a single document written in a non-Western language—does not appear verbatim in its original Japanese form, in the Other’s language. In this way, Kogawa conveys the unrepresentability of the Other’s language.

To repeat my point, instead of utilizing a method which would retain *and* rearticulate the discursive violence—the confusion and incongruence that characterize the language of the original letter—the novel presents Grandma’s letter, thus the atomic blast, *as* Naomi understands it and converts into her own words and narrative. What this representational and translational act implies then is the violence which the act of representation and “understanding” can wield upon its object inasmuch as it can convert and consume, in our present case, the Other’s experience and text into one’s own. By making sense of the

original incomprehensible letter and attempting to (re)transmit its content to the reader, Naomi's act of retelling, however well-intentioned, assimilates and "resolves" the discursive violence, where, to borrow Young's words, "the trauma of [. . .] unassimilability" that characterized Grandma Kato's letter becomes "relieved" and lost.

In this sense, I argue that Naomi's reference to the formal disarray of the original letter is crucial in that it reminds the reader of the gap between the original text and her "translated" version. Similarly important is that Naomi refers to the presence of many Japanese words which remain incomprehensible to her—"Many of the Japanese words sound strange" (279)—, even while her retelling smoothes over those gaps and absences. Through these discrepancies, Kogawa self-reflexively illustrates the outcome of translating the Other's language into a dominant Anglophonic discourse. The novel underscores the violence which Naomi's acts of understanding and retelling have done to the original text/ experience, and by extension the violence that the act of telling itself can do to the original experience. In this way, the novel testifies to the consequence of understanding and speaking about the Others' experience, even while it insists upon the very imperative of such understanding and speaking.

III. Recuperating the Abject/ Other/ "Asia": Reconfigurations of Japanese Canadian Redress and "Citizenship"

As Kogawa's novel, thus, both claims referentiality/ "truth" *and* problematizes them, a similar sense of disjuncture is also witnessed in her conceptualization of Japanese Canadian citizenship and national inclusion which one can say "redress" attempted to actualize. Put in other words, Kogawa's revision of Japanese Canadian redress occurs not just in the realm of "breaking silence," as I have discussed. It questions the other premise,

that of “breaking from Asia” as well. In this final section, I will discuss how Kogawa reconceptualizes Japanese Canadian “citizenship,” and how that reconceptualization occurs through her revision of Japanese Canadian relationship with their ancestral land.

In his recent book *Redress: Inside Japanese Canadian Call for Justice* (2005), Roy Miki writes how Japanese Canadian redress movement utilized the language of citizenship and civil rights: “Now two decades later, it is clearer just how dependent the 1988 redress agreement was on the language of citizenship and human rights. As a social justice issue, redress drew from the language of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s” (319). Drawing on Kirsten Emiko McAllister’s work, Miki further states that for the redress to happen, it was politically necessary for Japanese Canadians to “write themselves into the Canadian nation” (323); and in so doing, “they had to situate themselves in the narrative of nation building as a collective ‘citizen’ to which they belonged through the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (323).

While Miki self-reflexively elucidates the tactics which Japanese Canadians employed (the dominant citizenship discourse) to mobilize the movement—an act which itself must be historically contextualized—, the question Miki does not quite explore is the meaning and nature of the citizenship, which he says has constituted the language of redress. This is, I submit, what Kogawa asks in *Obasan*: Is the citizenship which Japanese Canadians claimed and regained through redress *the same* citizenship that had previously excluded them? —and deemed them “enemy aliens” forty six years before? Or does the inclusion of Japanese Canadians, and the redress of past injustice including the violation of their citizenship, change and challenge the very nature of (Canadian) citizenship? To put in a question Miki himself asks about the impact which the canonization of *Obasan* can

make on “CanLit”: “Are formerly ethnocentric institutions, such as CanLit, being radically transformed by the inclusion of a racialized text” such as *Obasan* (Miki 1998, 136)? Or does the mobilization of the dominant citizenship discourse in Japanese Canadian redress reinstate its exclusionary logic? —where redress may end up simply expanding the recipients of Canadian citizenship to more diverse groups, while retaining a division between (national) “us” and (non-national) “them”? While the multiculturalist model of pluralist citizenship sustains the “diversely homogenous we” (so to speak), this collective national subject/ body is often predicated upon the exclusion of yet non-citizen Others. In this sense, Japanese Canadians emerge as newly admitted insiders at the cost of still excluded—or, as I shall argue, “multiculturalized”—Others. I contend that these are the questions *Obasan* poses. Like Yamada in the previous chapter, Kogawa in her turn of claiming redress asks what the “redressed citizenship” that Japanese Canadians sought may *and* should look like.

In this final section, I will look at three different forms in which Japanese Canadians collectively claim their engagement with the Canadian nation: the traditional assimilationist, and the then emergent multiculturalist models, both of which the redress activist Emily upholds. In contrast with the above two models, I will show how Kogawa conceptualizes her own idea of Japanese Canadian citizenship, which both claims *and* disrupts Japanese Canadian subjects’ national inclusion. I will argue that Kogawa’s notion of citizenship incorporates “Asia” into the Canadian national body as the abject Other that (can) potentially disrupt national unity and racial harmony, the illusory states of ideals which the above two, assimilationist and multiculturalist, models of citizenship are often deployed to sustain.

I pay close attention to the way each model of citizenship is defined, as it configures, through the relationship Japanese Canadians have (or imagine) with their ancestral and home land. As Lisa Lowe has critiqued the formation of racialized citizenship albeit in the U.S. context, she writes: “[The racialized subject] becomes a citizen when he identifies with the paternal state and accepts the terms of this identification by subordinating his racial difference and denying his ties with the feminized and racialized ‘motherland’” (1996, 56). I will argue that Kogawa likewise interrogates the notion of Japanese Canadian citizenship upheld by Emily, which is predicated upon the North Asian American subject’s dispossession of her “motherland” (Japan) with her identification with and desire for the “fatherland” (Canada).

Yet, the sense of identification with the paternal state (“fatherland”) takes place not just in the traditional assimilationist form of citizenship, which is based on the North Asian American subject’s disowning of “Asia.” Low’s critique can also apply to the multiculturalist model of citizenship, with the North Asian American subject’s selective appropriation, “owning,” and incorporation of “Asia” into his/ her U.S. or Canadian national/ cultural context. In *Self, Nations, and the Diaspora—Re-reading Lin Yutang, Bai Xianyong, and Frank Chin* (1998), Shuang Shen discusses how Frank Chin’s perception of Asia shifts from his earlier blank dismissal to the later romanticist appropriation and embracing of selective Asian cultural heritage. Like Shen, I read that Emily’s shift from her earlier disowning of “Asia” to her multiculturalist embracing of it marks a similar trajectory and a problem. As I shall discuss in more depth later, Emily’s changed attitude toward her ancestral land betrays her unchanged self-centrality, where the North Asian American subject’s possession or dispossession of her ancestral land is determined through

the dominant nation's need to define itself (while that need itself is defined through its relation with its (non-)national Others). As Miki explains the shift in racial climate that took place in Canada which involved Japanese Canadians:

By the early 1970s, the wartime group whose members had been stripped of their rights because they were "of the Japanese race" found themselves in quite different social relations with Other Canadians. No longer considered "enemy aliens" who had to be expunged from the nation, they had emerged as an exemplary minority, still racialized but now seen through a new concern called "multiculturalism."

(2005, 307-8)

Emily disowns or else reclaims her Asian cultural heritage according to this dominant cultural need, and for her own need to gain admission into the Canadian national sphere, in the ambivalent state of the "still racialized" yet emergent "exemplary minority."

In this way, the earlier assimilationist and the later multiculturalist modes of citizenship which Emily embraces exhibit only different sides of the same coin. As Heather Zwicker remarks: "hers [Emily's] is an unarguable position, as far as it goes: if oppression takes the form of exclusion, the appropriate solution is inclusion" (1993, 149). While I myself believe that Emily's inclusionist claim understandably constitutes (part of) indispensable need for minority subjects, the *exclusionary* (and Eurocentric) assumption inherent in Emily's *inclusionist* claim—in her quests of justice and citizenship—has rarely been examined. On the contrary, as I shall discuss later, similar inclusionist/ exclusionist logic is uncritically repeated by critics of *Obasan*. To phrase the problem in Kandice Chuh's terms once again: "at what (or whose) expense are the rights and entitlements" of North American minority citizenship "being materialized" (2001, 278)?

Against these notions, I will elucidate how Kogawa envisions a different form of "solution" for the exclusion—hence, imagining a different kind of "citizenship" for Japanese Canadians. To put in Amy Kaplan's words: "Where Aunt Emily claims

Canadian citizenship as a resolution to past crimes against Japanese Canadians, Nomi's melancholia links the ghost towns of Central Canada to which Japanese Canadians were exiled to the burning cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (2004, 17). Significantly, I would like to add that "the ghost towns" to which Japanese Canadians were exiled are also the place onto which the Native populations were previously displaced. Similarly important is that Kogawa connects the atomic bombing of Nagasaki to the genocide of the Natives. As I mentioned earlier, Naomi's mother's vigil takes place on the land which formerly belonged to the First Nations.

Thus, while critics of *Obasan* recently debate whether the novel makes a larger nationalist appeal or not (McFarlane [1995], Miki [1998], Amoko [2000], Zwicker [2001], Beauregard [2001], McGonegal [2005]), I intend to intervene in this debate by arguing that the novel's claims of citizenship and national inclusion simultaneously undercut those nationalist (re)solutions, articulating a potential rupture in those narratives. Drawing on the theories of "racial melancholia" by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, I will show that the abject and demonized Japanese Canadian mother who becomes exposed in Nagasaki epitomizes the "feminized and racialized motherland"—the absent presence of the Other—which Kogawa recuperates into her conceptualization of Japanese Canadian citizenship. Worth remembering in this sense is that the novel's memorialization of the multiple forms of violence—the triangulation of the internment, atomic bombing, and the genocides of the Natives—takes place, as the novel opens with Uncle's silent vigil on the Canadian prairie, the land that was once owned by the indigenous people. By narrating Japanese Canadian internment in this bracketed structure, with allusions to those genocides that are silently conveyed at the novel's opening and closing moments, Kogawa calls forth

the (absent) presence of those Others that refuse to be assimilated into the dominant national narratives. Consequently, I shall argue that Kogawa reconfigures the term of Japanese Canadian citizenship as a sign of potential disruption.

“We’re Canadian”: the Traditional Assimilationist Model

Given the novel’s emphasis and claim of “citizenship,” it is not surprising that the novel repeatedly returns to the question about the constitution of Japanese Canadians as national subjects, especially when the definition risks being “compromised” by their Japanese ancestry. In the novel, the need to define oneself as “Canadian” occurs precisely because not to do so indicates the danger of being termed as an “enemy alien.” This is particularly poignant in the period surrounding World War II. Naomi describes the following family conversation:

The girl with the long ringlets who sits in front of Stephen said to him, “All the Jap kids at school are going to be sent away and they’re bad and you’re a Jap.” And so, Stephen tells me, am I.

“Are we?” I ask the Father.

“No,” Father says. “We’re Canadian.” (*Obasan* 83-4)

Notably, this binarized notion becomes immediately complicated with Stephen’s remark that follows the above citation: “It is a riddle,” he says, “We are both the enemy and not the enemy” (*Obasan* 84). I would like to emphasize here that the above cited binarized idea, therefore, is not necessarily identical with the novel’s position. For one thing, it is worth remembering that throughout the novel, Kogawa places Japanese Canadian national “we” in question and (sometimes) in irony. This is, for instance, displayed in Stephen’s declaration, “We won [the war], we won, we won!” (*Obasan* 199), words he utters while

still being in exile in Slocan before Japanese Canadians were ordered for further displacement.

It is vis-à-vis this ambivalent position which the novel holds that I would like to explore Emily's recurrent claim of Canadian nationality, which confirms the traditional binary between "Asia" and "North America." Emily continues to uphold such a notion long after the war ends. In her conversation with Uncle upon her visit to his Granton home, for instance, Emily responds to his remark, "'Nisei, not very Japanese-like'" (*Obasan* 48) with her usual clarity: "'Why should we be?' [. . .] 'We're Canadian'" (*Obasan* 49). The symbolic erasure of her Japanese ancestry further accelerates into and results in a literal deletion, as Emily corrects the Canadian government's description of Japanese Canadians in a document, "Racial Discrimination by Orders-in-Council." Naomi writes: "Whenever the words 'Japanese race' appeared [in the document], Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written 'Canadian citizen.' 'What this country did to us, it did to itself,' she said" (*Obasan* 40). Emily's effort to establish herself as a legitimate Canadian national takes place conspicuously through the erasure of any trace of her Japanese raciality and ancestry.

What I want to emphasize here is that Emily's efforts for de-racialization takes place precisely because she sees "race" as the determining factor that has caused differentiating treatments among "enemy aliens." This is particularly true during the war years. In her wartime diary, Emily expresses her anger about the way white Canadians feel "more loyalty toward white foreigners than they do toward us Canadians" (*Obasan* 112); she exposes the hypocrisy that the "protesters are so much more vehement about Canadian-born Japanese than they are about German-born Germans" (*Obasan* 98). Consequently, Emily ascribes the different treatments to different physiologies: "I guess

it's because we look different. What it boils down to is an undemocratic racial antagonism—which is exactly what our democratic country is supposed to be fighting against” (*Obasan* 98). While we must remember that Emily's anger is grounded in the real racial injustice, her argument for justice, nonetheless, betrays a logic of its own racism. That is, what her condemnatory remark in the above implies is that Japanese Canadians deserve a better treatment than the “real ‘enemy aliens,’” such as Japanese or even Germans, because the former group, unlike the latter, are accorded with “proper” Canadian citizenship if only in judicial terms. Her implicit claim is that white Canadians *should* feel more loyalty toward Japanese Canadians than toward other white “foreigners,” because she feels citizens should stick together. Similarly, when Emily insists that Naomi and Stephen be spared because “they are so thoroughly Canadian” (*Obasan* 100), such a remark risks justifying ill-treatments of those who are deemed as “(real) enemy aliens.”

It is not surprising, in this sense, that Emily tries to procure her Canadian citizenship, and along with it a legitimate treatment, by divorcing herself from “Japs.” In her wartime epistolary journal to her sister, she writes:

[T]here's this horrible feeling whenever I turn on the radio, or see a headline with the word “Japs” screaming at us. So long as they designate the enemy by that term and not us, it doesn't matter. But over here, they say ‘Once a Jap always a Jap,’ and that means us. We're the enemy. (*Obasan* 99)

It needs to be taken into consideration that these lines are written immediately after the outbreak of the war, in the middle of the wartime “racial hysteria” in which Japanese Canadians were placed. Nor do I contest Emily's challenge to the racist statement, “‘Once a Jap always a Jap.’” Yet, Emily's critique of that statement betrays her own racism, which implies one can ideally cease and escape from being a “Jap” by reconstituting oneself as “a Canadian citizen.” In this respect, it is useful to recall how the Canadian government's

“repatriation policy” tried to expel Japanese Canadians beyond its national borders, and from the constitution of Canadian citizenship. Emily’s effort to dispel Japanese raciality from the constitution of Japanese Canadian citizenship mimes this racist logic, reiterating the same “undemocratic racial antagonism” (*Obasan* 98) which she herself has charged the Canadian government of. (Indeed, it is ironic that she starts sounding like a white Canadian Jap hater.) Emily’s conceptualization of citizenship, which, too, ultimately reveals its reliance on the logic of alterity, shows how her effort to establish Japanese Canadians as “insiders” takes place at the cost of designating the new group as “outsiders.” These passages show how she attempts to accomplish her aim, such as justice and citizenship, only by reconstituting the boundaries—from the previous racial to national—and by changing the allegiances accordingly, rather than questioning and doing away with such boundaries.

Here once again I would like to stress that Emily’s denunciation of her ancestral land takes place in a specific historical context: the pre-redress, even pre-multiculturalist Canada. As Kogawa herself recalls the ethnic and racial “self-hate” that was prevalent among her generation, she states: “In Canada, to be Japanese was so shameful for my generation that we did everything we could to erase it from our consciousness and from the consciousness of our kids” (Kogawa 1996, 209). Similarly, Sau-ling Wong notes in her conceptualization of “racial shadow” in her classic study, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993): the act of disowning “Asia” in the form of “racial shadowing” occurs as “[o]ne of the bitterest Necessities for Asian Americans [. . .] having to contend with total devaluation of their Asian ethnicity” (77). While Emily’s effort to separate herself from the “Jap” can be seen as a broader form of

what Wong conceptualizes as “racial shadowing,” it may be worth recalling how Wong attributes the operation to its specific historical contexts, here in our present case, the pre-multiculturalist Canada.

“‘Momotaro is a Canadian story’”: the Multiculturalist Model

My point, then, is not so much to critique Emily’s “historical limitations” as (at least) the absence of such critique in contemporary Kogawa criticism. As I mentioned earlier, critics who take pro-Emily stance or even those who charge Kogawa of operating within the framework of the larger nationalist narrative rarely examine Emily’s nationalist-assimilationist premise.¹⁰ Moreover, Emily’s changed attitude, her newly adapted multiculturalist reclaiming of her ancestral land and culture, demonstrates an uncanny resemblance to her previous assimilationist stance, in terms of the erasure of the prefix “Japan” and her unchanged valorization of Canada.

But before going into further discussions, I would first like to refer to Shuang Shen’s critique in which she questions some Asian American writers’ unexamined reclaiming of their ancestral land. In *Self, Nations, and the Diaspora—Re-reading Lin Yutang, Bai Xianyong, and Frank Chin* (1998), Shen discusses the critical absence surrounding Frank Chin’s changed perceptions of “Asia” as well as the consequence of such absence:

I feel that the cultural basis of Chin’s nationalist politics, i.e. his rapid shift from alienation to romanticization of Asian culture [. . .] have remained unassessed by critics in spite of the attention given to this writer and his works. On a polemical level, this neglect might end up making “cross over” seem too easy, creating a false impression that “crossing over” is only a new phenomenon, and thereby losing the historical perspective to Asian American culture within a transnational perspective. (150)

Shen similarly critiques the “feminist version of romanticization with regard to the transnational context” (150) in a tendency among feminist scholars such as King-kok Cheung and Elaine Kim to “glorify the attempts made by the [Asian American] woman writer to radically ‘re-shape her ancestral past’ and establish a seamless bond between Chinese mother and the Chinese American daughter” (150). Referring to Elaine Kim who extols Amy Tan’s novel, *The Joy Luck Club* which (Kim says) blurs “[t]he lines between ‘Chinese,’ ‘America,’ and ‘Chinese American’” (83, qtd in Shen 151), Shen cites this as “an example of over-stressing the bonding between Chinese mother and Chinese American daughter” (150). I agree with Shen that such an unexamined celebration of “transnational bonding” in the guise of a trans-Pacific mother-daughter romance may, indeed, end up “making ‘cross over’ seem too easy” (150). In addition, I would also like to point out that too easy celebration of a North Asian American daughter-oriented crossing-over may blur the line between “crossing over” and uni-directional possessing and owning of other cultures, particularly when such acts are carried out under U.S. or Canadian-oriented multiculturalisms. To explore this point, I will look at Emily’s reclaiming of a Japanese folktale “Momotaro” as “a Canadian story.”

What is significant about Emily’s embracing of “Momotaro” is that it revises her earlier assimilationist stance of disowning her ancestral cultural heritage while asserting the compatibility of two cultures. To Naomi’s anxiety that “milk and Momotaro” would constitute a “culture clash” (*Obasan* 68), Emily responds by stressing the *Canadian* nature of the folktale. She says: “‘Momotaro is a Canadian story. We’re Canadian, aren’t we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian’” (*Obasan* 68). Critics such as Gayle Sato (1992) and King-kok Cheung (1993) have cited this episode to point out Emily’s, and the novel’s,

multiculturalist and pro-Asian adaptationist stance. Sato, for instance, compares Kogawa's treatment with that of another Japanese North American novel, John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), in which "Momotaro" emerges as a negative cultural signifier which Okada's protagonist feels the need to disclaim. Indeed, if, as Miki says, "the term 'Japanese' became a barrier" for Japanese Canadians of his generation, and their "incorporation" into "white Canada" required the act of "distancing from their 'Japanese' ancestry, from that cultural and linguistic matrix of values" (1998, 202), Emily's assertion of Momotaro as a Canadian story seems to revise her prior position regarding the incompatibility of two cultural heritages.

What critics have failed to examine, and what I find problematic about this episode, however, is that in Emily's assertion, the word "Japan," the signifier of the story's "origin," disappears (it is not even mentioned once), as it becomes erased, if not consumed and appropriated into a distinctly Canadian national narrative. Put in other words, with the aforementioned shift to multiculturalism in Canada, the Japanese folktale Momotaro now gains the status of a discourse which can be safely incorporated and contained into the dominant Canadian national narrative and cultural repertoire. It can even contribute to "the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society," as Canada's "Multiculturalism Act" puts it (qtd. in Miki 1998, 149), while celebrating its citizens' "diverse heritage." As Scott Toguri McFarlane explains, certain cultural traits "are discursively produced and classified as 'good' or 'bad,' based [. . .] on whether or not they promote social (read economic and political) harmony" (1995, 20). In such a sense, multiculturalism deploys "exterior signs of cultural difference" that "refer back to a homogenizing Canadian interiority or spirit," where those "signs of cultural difference ultimately refer to an ideal, inclusive Canada"

(McFarlane 1995, 22). Emily's celebration of Momotaro as a Canadian story works to achieve this function, the "pluralist tradition that homogenizes" (1995, 28) the nation, to borrow McFarlane's words again.

In this sense, it seems worth recalling that another similarly (and seemingly) "multiculturalist" episode appears in the novel in which the racial/ cultural difference or otherness becomes tamed and domesticated for the mainstream culture, for the latter's interest and consumption. In Chapter 21 of the novel, Naomi encounters a figure of an unidentified racial origin, "Rough Lock Bill" who tells the story of the Natives' "relocation" to Slocan, and how their experience provided an origin of the name of the town. Upon discovering a place which is now known as Slocan as a possible site of their asylum—"A good place with lots of good food—deer, fish, berries" (*Obasan* 172)—, Rough Lock tells that the "Indian brave" who found the place returns to his people and informs them of his discovery. In Rough Lock's words:

"So he [the brave Native] goes all the way back to where his people are, back past these mountains, and he says to them, 'If you go slow, you can go.' [. . .] 'If you go slow,' he says, 'you can go. Slow can go. Slow can go.' [. . .]

"We call it Slocan now. Real name is Slow-can-go. When my Granddad came, there was a whole tribe here. [. . .] Right there was the chief's tepee. But last I saw—one old guy up past the mine—be dead now probably."

(*Obasan* 172-173)

On the one hand, this episode draws an interesting implicit parallel between Japanese Canadians and the First Nations in that both groups are revealed to have been exiled to Slocan. What is striking about this latter instance, however, is that Rough Lock's narrative depoliticizes, even exotifies, the history of the Natives' displacement, as he explains the cause of their "evacuation" in terms of their mysterious mass demise: "Long time ago these people [the First Nations] were dying. All these people here. Don't know what it

was. Smallpox maybe. Tribe wars. Starvation. Maybe it was a hex, who knows?”

(*Obasan* 172). In other words, despite the fact that Rough Lock’s story describes the event that occurred in the post-conquest era (to the extent that the Natives are speaking English), his narrative implies no hint of such violence, where all traces of racism and colonialism are, indeed, erased. Consequently, his retelling turns the Natives’ exile into a pathetic rather than a tragic story.

Like the previous instance of Momotaro, then, this episode demonstrates the process by which the story of racial and/or cultural Other becomes domesticated, as it is de-racialized and incorporated into a mainstream national/ cultural narrative. Here more specifically, the history of the Natives’ uprooting is turned into an innocuous “local legend” (an innocent tale), which would add the flavor of an exotic Other, but is deprived of any trace of racism or colonial violence. In such a sense, their otherness becomes reduced to a cultural commodity, which would neither disturb nor threaten the dominant national order. As Loretta Todd critiques mainstream Canadian writers’ appropriations of Native stories in her article “Notes on Appropriation” (1990), Todd states how the First Nation’s “threat of difference is disavowed” while their “difference is covered over by becoming a symbol, a fetish” (30)—and I would add, the name of a town. As Todd continues: “By fetishizing us, we become mere objects of consumption, which initiates a production of desire: we become style, fashion, commodity; a source of script material, of choreographic inspiration” (30).

Indeed, the absurdity of such acts of fetishizing and appropriation, as Todd critiques, is underscored in Kogawa’s retelling, as her novel describes how the town’s name becomes inscribed in (the pidginized) English which the Natives purportedly spoke—even though

one naturally wonders why the Natives needed to speak among one another in English, and in the pidginized English, too.¹¹ In this way, Kogawa shows how this story, like the previous Momotaro, becomes appropriated and Canadianized, as it is owned and possessed as part of the Canadian national folkloric collection, here in this case memorialized in the form of a name of a (Canadian) town. Also significant in this sense is that in the above cited quote, Rough Lock identifies himself as the naming subject: ““We call it Slocan now”” (*Obasan* 173). Thus while the Natives remain the objects that are named, (whoever) the “we” Rough Lock represents enacts the role of the namer, the agent who engages in the act of naming the territory. It seems also typical in this sense that the Natives are dead, while the name of the town remains. As I shall elaborate later, the story provides a striking contrast with the silent history of their genocide with which Kogawa begins her novel. (It seems then that Kogawa here is parodying what Lenore Keeshig-Tobias called the “white Canada’s obsession” with native stories.)

To return to my previous concern first, however, it seems no accident that Emily’s erasure of the term “Japan” in her “Canadianization of Momotaro” coincides with her prior act of deleting her ancestral linkage. As I have cited Naomi’s description, Emily had corrected the Canadian government’s description of Japanese Canadians: “Whenever the words ‘Japanese race’ appeared [in the document], Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written ‘Canadian citizen’” (*Obasan* 40). While Emily has previously erased the word “Japan” and replaced it with “Canada” in order to claim her proper status within the Canadian nation, she does the same thing here with her citation of the cultural signifier, Momotaro. In this sense, the erasure in Emily’s act of reclaiming Momotaro here is symbolic; it betrays her unchanged self-interest—or perhaps to be more accurate, *lack* of

interest in the Other/ Japan, as her primary preoccupation remains in establishing a proper relationship between herself and the Canadian nation. (Her failure to acknowledge the story's origin betrays her lack of respect to that origin culture.)

As Amy Tan satirizes a similar attitude of self-interest albeit in the U.S. context, Lindo Jong, one of Tan's "mothers" in *Joy Luck Club* (1989), pokes fun at her Chinese American daughter, Waverly's shifting perceptions and subsequent reclaiming of China. Lindo says, "[M]aybe ten years ago, [Waverly] would have clapped her hands" to know that she would not be identified as Chinese: "But now, she wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable" (253).¹² Similarly, then, Emily's shift from the previous dismissal to the multiculturalist embracing of her ancestral heritage constitutes only different sides of the same coin. It is merely that if the traditional assimilationist model was built upon the act of disowning, the newly emergent multiculturalist model is predicated upon that of (selective) owning and possessing, if not appropriating. Emily's attitudes toward her ancestral culture shifts from the above mentioned traditional assimilationist stance to an equally problematic multiculturalist appropriation of her ancestral culture, as she attempts to incorporate such a heritage into her Canadian citizenship.¹³

Recuperating the Abject/ Other/ Japan

What is significant about Kogawa's own reclaiming of her ancestral land, which differs crucially from the above two models, is that hers takes place through the atomic bombing of Nagasaki where Naomi's mother becomes exposed. Or to look at it from an opposite way, Kogawa's claim of *Canadian citizenship*, unlike Emily's, is linked with, as it invokes the racial violence against this *abject* Other that resides outside of the Canadian

national borders. In this way, Kogawa's reconfiguration of Japanese Canadian citizenship disrupts rather than confirms the imagined unity of Canadian nation, which the above discussed multiculturalist model is deployed to sustain.

In his critique of *Obasan*, Roy Miki charges the novel's representation of the atomic bombing, stating that it serves "to relativize and universalize the particularity of Japanese Canadian internment," while this "doubled recontextualization [. . .] deflects the political ramifications of its site-specific 'Canadian' conditions" (1998, 141). Despite Miki's contention, however, I believe that Kogawa's "recontextualization" needs to be read, as it occurs as her response to the traditional Japanese Canadian perceptions of their ancestral land, particularly their dispossessional attitudes. As I have discussed earlier, such "myopia" has characterized Emily's quest of citizenship and national inclusion. While Naomi calls the bombing "catastrophes" which she says she could not understand "were possible in human affairs" (*Obasan* 280), her narrative challenges Emily's above cited statement, "So long as they designate the enemy by that term ["Japs"] and not us, it doesn't matter" (*Obasan* 99). What the novel articulates through its recuperation and connection to the atrocities is that it *does* matter.

Equally important here is that Kogawa's effort to link Japanese Canadian internment to the atomic bombing complicates the traditional "Third World alliance or solidarity," where issues of racism within U.S. or Canadian domestic contexts are, often uncritically, linked to those in the global and imperial frame. Indeed, such universalization is demonstrated in *Itsuka* (1992), a sequel to *Obasan*, in which Japanese Canadian internment is compared to the holocaust in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*Itsuka* 72). But before going into more details, I would like to take a closer look at Miki's critique of the novel which he

offers in his much-cited and influential chapter, “Sliding the Scale of Elision: ‘Race’ Constructs/ Cultural Praxis” (1998).

On the whole, Miki’s critique takes place and is directed toward the following two accounts, the novel’s (in his words) “aestheticization” and “universalization.” In Miki’s assessment, Kogawa privileges literary treatments and universalizes Japanese Canadian internment to a degree to “de-politicize” and de-racialize their suffering. Grounding itself in the position of a liberal humanist subject, where the “individual” and “national” healings are made to coincide, the novel, according to Miki, “elides the materiality of history,” while it “valorizes the humanist allegory of suffering as a ‘universal’ condition” (1998, 142). As a result, “Japanese Canadian internment loses its phenomenological edges” and is framed as “‘a moral tale’” (Miki 1998 142) that is heavily referenced with and embedded in Biblical allusions. For instance, Miki suggests that the novel employs a “symbolic overlay of exodus” so that Japanese Canadian internment becomes narrativized “as ritual banishment, wandering, and eventual salvation” (1998, 138).

While I do not disagree with Miki’s point that Kogawa constructs “suffering” as a “‘universal’ condition,” I nonetheless believe that her novel keeps the tension between the universal(ized) form of suffering and its specific racial manifestation and violence. For one thing, it is important to remember that the novel articulates the racial implication of the bombing through its reference to the victims’ exposed bodies: while the scene of the blast culminates all the suffering and violence that have previously taken place in the novel, the bombing inscribes “the visible evidence of horror” on the bodies of the victims, “in their skin, in their blood, carved in every mirror they passed” (*Obasan* 281). Perceiving the incident as a racially inflicted form of violence, Kogawa, like Miki himself, understands

“the appearance of the semiotic body as inscribed by the constructed signs of ‘race’” (Miki 1998, 140).

Moreover, what I find important here is that Kogawa’s representation of the atomic bombing gestures toward the presence of an abject, racialized Other which stands outside of Canadian national boundaries, with the bombing pointing to the kind of Otherness (an alien body) that is unassimilable in the national body. Significant to this connection, as I shall elaborate later, is that the atomic blast in Nagasaki is linked to the genocides of the First Nations whose history of violence is silently conveyed through the vigil which Naomi performs for her mother.

To discuss the signification of Japan as an abject Other in the novel first, however, I find it necessary, indeed essential, to investigate the meanings which Kogawa accords to the disfigured Japanese Canadian mother who becomes exposed in Nagasaki. Into the figure of the mother, Kogawa projects Naomi’s conflicting, ambivalent, and unresolved feelings toward her ancestral land in terms of the racial, cultural and national ties. On the one hand, some Japanese cultural practices, for Naomi, are connected with the sense of love and security which Naomi receives through her mother in her Vancouver childhood home. (The mother enacts an agent here.) On the other hand, Japan, particularly through the dominant culture’s perceptions, comes to be associated with the deprivation of that love, security, and home, as those cultural practices become stigmatized, while Japan racialized and demonized. In this sense, then, Naomi’s loss of the mother is symbolic. It signifies her loss of love, home, and security which is deeply associated with Japan. (It seems no accident that the mother’s disappearance concurs with the family’s forced removal from their Vancouver home, the place of love and safety.)

To elaborate upon this point, I would like to refer to the concept of “racial melancholia” theorized by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han in their article, “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” (2000). Through a case study of a Japanese American male patient Nelson, they offer an illuminating discussion about the process of maternal loss and deformation which takes place as the result of the dominant culture’s racialization of (here the patient Nelson’s) Japanese mother. Describing the patient’s psychic experience involving the maternal loss, they write:

What was once a loved and safe object is retroactively transformed into an object of insecurity and shame. To the extent that the mother originally represented the safe notion of “home,” Nelson’s estrangement from his mother, and from his mother tongue, renders it *unheimlich*—unhomely, unfamiliar, uncanny.¹⁴ (686)

As we turn to Kogawa’s novel with this insight, we can surmise a similar transformation in Naomi’s perception of her mother. That is, to the extent that Naomi’s mother, much like Nelson’s, “originally represented the safe notion of ‘home’” (Eng and Han 686), the initially “good” Japanese Canadian mother—what was once Naomi’s primary object of love and care—becomes turned into an “object of insecurity and shame,” a figure that is associated with “racial difference—Japaneseness itself” (Eng and Han 689). Hence, she becomes (in Klein’s term) “a bad mother,” a demonized, tainted, and racialized Japanese mother from whom the child needs to dissociate herself in order to establish her full Canadian subjectivity. What is significant about Kogawa’s novel, then, is that instead of seeing this figure—the “dreaded” and “disfigured” Japanese mother—as a “bad mother,” as Klein has conceptualized it in her original thesis, Kogawa makes Naomi see her as an “injured” and suffering figure whom Naomi can empathize with rather than disown.

As Eng and Han further theorize their concept of “racial melancholia,” it is significant that they revise the conventional interpretation of melancholia in which “the

melancholic's inability to 'get over' loss" has been read, unlike the acts of mourning, "in rather negative terms" (694). Instead, they perceive "the melancholic's absolute refusal to relinquish the other—to forfeit alterity" as their aggressive and militant effort to preserve "the loved and lost object" (694). In such a sense, the melancholic process becomes one

in which socially disparaged objects—racially and sexually deprivileged others—live on in the psychic realm [. . .]. [This behavior] displays the ego's melancholic yet militant refusal to allow certain objects to disappear into oblivion. [. . .] This preservation of the threatened object might be seen, then, as a type of ethical hold on the part of the melancholic ego. (Eng and Han 695)

Read from this frame, it is symbolic that at the end of Kogawa's novel, the Japanese Canadian daughter not only recuperates but reclaims the debased, injured, demonized, hence the abject Japanese Canadian mother and attempts to connect with this figure through the experience of suffering. To the extent that the mother here is symbolically assigned the role of a reproductive figure, one of giving birth to her race, the mother's disfigurement bears a larger racial, national significance and (concomitantly) punitive meanings. That is, while the mother here embodies, as she suffers from, the consequence of racialization, she can be seen as standing for what Lowe has called the "feminized and racialized 'motherland'" (56). As Patricia P. Chu suggests, "Asian mothers" often appear to personify abject Asian homelands in some male Asian American authors' texts, which those authors disavow in their claims of their Asian North American subjectivities (2000).¹⁵ Ultimately in Kogawa's novel, then, the disfigured Japanese mother represents the racialized and demonized, the abject ancestral land which the Canadian daughter tries to connect and recuperate rather than disavow.

In this regard, I find José Esteban Muñoz's redefinition of melancholia (quoted in Eng and Han) also worth citing. As Muñoz proposes to read melancholia as "a mechanism

that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names [p. 74]” (qtd. in Eng and Han 694), it is as if Naomi and Kogawa, too, are to “take the dead with” them for their battles. Kogawa and Naomi, thus, refuse to forgo the kinship with this abject Other, their ties with the feminized and racialized “‘Asian’ motherland” in their claims of Canadian citizenship. Consequently, this is the kind of abjection and Otherness which Kogawa incorporates into her conception of “Japanese Canadian citizenship.”

Similarly, I find it important that Kogawa’s treatment of the atomic blast differs from the traditional “Third World model”—what Shen calls the “‘old’ forms of ‘cross over’” (143)—, whereby various instances of racial atrocities, the North American internment, the atomic bombing in Japan, the Vietnam War, etc., become linked to one another without historically specific linkages.¹⁶ As Shen discusses how the “critical paradigms of the ‘third world’” (Shen 143) affected some Asian American writers’ constructions of their identities during the 60s and 70s, she writes: “[T]hose writers’ perspectives toward Asian American identity is formulated not just in terms of the U.S. domestic context, but also in conjunction with a particular imagination of the ‘world,’ more specifically, the opposition between the ‘third world’ and ‘first world’” (143). In other words, these authors’ conceptualization of their Asian North American subjectivities is predicated upon the binary which assumes a clear distinction between the (reified) East and West, where each category is assumed to constitute a homogenous entity. To borrow Josephine Park’s critique of Said’s *Orientalism* which she extends in *The Forms of Cathay: Modernism, the Orient, and Asian American Poetry* (2003), this First/ Third World binary, like Orientalism, “locks in a self/other divide that ultimately essentializes both sides” (10). In contrast, I argue that Kogawa’s notion of

Japanese Canadian citizenship takes in and incorporates the abject—inassimilable and unintegrable—Other *into* the national space/ terrain, thus imagining a more heterogeneous relation between the First and Third World within which Japanese Canadians come to constitute their subjectivities and experiences.

In his influential article “Covering *Obasan* and the Narrative of Internment” (1995), Scott McFarlane critiques that Kogawa’s novel operates as a “national *bildungsroman*” (407) for Canada. That is, the novel establishes a perspective that affirms the redemption and maturation of its heroine and the nation, which, according to McFarlane, occur hand in hand. Yet to function as such, the novel, McFarlane critiques, posits Japanese Canadian culture in a way which “forces it to stand as a sign for a violated *Canadian culture and past*” (408, *emph. original*). In this way, he continues:

The interests of the homogenous “we” [of the nation] have been extended to include Japanese Canadians at the latter’s expense. The cost of inclusion is evident in the national *bildungsroman* in which “Japanese Canadian” has come to signify an identity category of a developing Canada. (408)

McFarlane thus critiques that in Kogawa’s novel Japanese Canadians as minority subjects become consumed into a larger national subject position while their experience absorbed into the homogenized national history. I find this argument both useful and problematic. On the one hand, I agree with McFarlane that Kogawa does gesture toward the larger Canadian national “we,” in which Japanese Canadians become included (forcibly or not). Significant in this respect is to recall how Kogawa ends her novel with an excerpt from the memorandum by the Cooperative Committee on Japanese Canadians—a group of white Canadians who opposed “the federal government’s unjust deportation proposal” (Miki 1998, 139)—rather than with documents that represent a distinctly *Japanese Canadian* voice, such as of an activist Muriel Kitagawa whose letters Kogawa cites in the novel.

Kogawa, thus, places the issue of Japanese Canadian internment within the realm of “a nation,” seeking to present it as part of “larger Canadian” concern. In this way, I believe that the novel does make an appeal to a larger national audience and community as well as to the presumed unity of Canada, where Japanese Canadians come to constitute its part.¹⁷

What McFarlane’s critique does not take into consideration, however, is that Kogawa also questions and problematizes this seemingly homogenous national “we,” the imagined community of Canada, inasmuch as the novel references to and recuperates its abject Other(s) into the process of its national formation. Thus while the novel promotes a seemingly homogenous national subject position, it simultaneously imagines this position to be a site of (potential) difference and disruption, what *can* disturb its unity. To this extent, Viet Thanh Nguyen offers a useful discussion about the heterogeneity which he says characterizes the genre of “Asian American bildungsroman.” Drawing on Lisa Lowe, Nguyen suggests how the idea of ““autonomous selfhood”” which constitutes an end product of a conventional bildungsroman “is complicated [. . .] by the heterogeneities and contradictions found within Asian American texts often classified as bildungsromane” (2002, 93). Likewise, Kogawa’s “national bildungsroman” complicates its seeming homogeneity by eschewing the “narrative closure” often associated with the genre.

Worth considering in this respect is that Kogawa deploys two endings for her novel that are placed in tension: the above-mentioned brief by the Cooperative Committee which is juxtaposed with the narrative of the atomic blast—and along with it the genocide of the First Nations—which precedes this excerpt. On the one hand, it is important to note how the memorandum, which posits “citizenship” as an ideological basis for contesting the unjust deportation of Japanese Canadians, is characterized with the discourse of the nation

state. “It is urgently submitted,” the memorandum states, “that the Orders-in-Council [. . .] are wrong and indefensible and constitute a grave threat to the right and liberties of Canadian citizens” (*Obasan* 297). Similarly, it accuses the Orders-in-Council of how the deportation proposal has “put the value of Canadian citizenship into contempt” (*Obasan* 298). Indeed, phrases such as “the injustice of treating Canadian citizens” (*Obasan* 298), etc. recur throughout the brief. Out of the total ten indexes, six of them cite “citizenship” as the ground for contesting the illegality of the deportation.

What is significant here, however, is that this same discourse that endorses the notion of citizenship is challenged and contradicted by the scene of the bombing, which precedes this excerpt, insofar as the bombing epitomizes the violence which targets those without the entitlements of such citizenship rights. In other words, through the juxtaposition of the two endings—the memorandum and the atomic blast—, Kogawa shows how the memorandum’s logic of citizenship and nation state excludes the human rights of those beyond the protection of Canadian nation, which the memorandum calls for as the guardian of Japanese Canadians’ rights. In this way, the novel points to the limit of the logic that characterizes the memorandum, one which endorses liberal citizenship, rather than naïvely authorizing this logic.

Indeed, the tension and contradiction between those two endings become even more striking as we turn to the novel’s silent allusion to the genocide of the First Nations, which is embedded in the narrative of the atomic blast. As I have discussed earlier, the novel begins and ends with a scene of a vigil which Uncle and Naomi perform for Naomi’s deceased mother, while Kogawa locates the scene on the land which the novel describes once belonged to the First Nations. Much like “the underground stream” (*Obasan* 5)

which the novel depicts runs through the prairie, the buried history of the First Nations' genocide runs through the narrative in these opening and closing chapters. What this silent allusion renders visible is the violence which is inherent in the logic of the memorandum. That is, by presenting the memorandum in juxtaposition with the narrative which conjures up the genocide of First Nations, Kogawa shows not only the limit of the memorandum's logic. She further exposes the *consequence*, the violence which this logic of citizenship has caused for its (nation state's) Others, here the First Nations, insofar as the Canadian nation state came into existence as the result of the atrocities committed against this population. To borrow Miki's words, the formation of the Canadian nation "is a formation that cannot be separated from the [. . .] territorialization of space that accompanies the colonization process," the "violent appropriation of First Nations lands and cultures" (1998, 131).

In this way, Kogawa places her novel's two endings in tension and direct juxtaposition.¹⁸ On the one hand, I believe it is important to note that Kogawa's closing citation inscribes her desire for the "larger" national solution and inclusion. Yet, the novel's claim of that Canadian nation, we must also note, is articulated through its allusion to the genocide of the First Nations. By questioning the exclusionary premise inscribed in the memorandum's logic of citizenship and nation state, the novel articulates the violence—the absent presences of those alien bodies—that cannot be assimilated and integrated into the national discourse. In this way, Kogawa's claim of "redressed citizenship" simultaneously makes visible the irresolvable violence upon which the Canadian nation state is built, violence which the supposedly unified Canadian national "we" have repressed and continue to repress.

Thus, contrary to McFarlane's contention, I argue that Kogawa's narrative of the internment not only confirms but also problematizes the conventional nationalist resolution: most notably one where Manzanar, albeit in the U.S. context, becomes a national historic site. While such a move is undoubtedly important *and* necessary, with it redress can end up establishing a new, yet equally homogenizing, national memory, where the violence against Japanese Canadians becomes integrated and contained within the dominant narrative. As Guy Beaugarde critiques the mainstream Canada's effort to contain the memory/ history of Japanese Canadian internment, he draws on Lisa Yoneyama's theoretical work and explicates the issues at stake: "The key challenge is to recognize how various hegemonic discourses have, in the words of Yoneyama, moved away from active suppression of racist histories to attempts to 'contain and domesticate unreconciled discourses on the nation's past' (*Memory* 501)" (18). Consequently, Beaugarde suggests how those memories come to be incorporated into the mainstream narrative "in a manner that does not threaten the present order of knowledge" (15). In this sense, Japanese Canadian internment can safely be resolved as a past error which "we" as the nation can overcome if not already have done so. To put in Yoneyama's words: "the past is tamed through the reinscription of memories" (1999, 32). Conversely, Kogawa's narrative of the internment challenges the multiculturalist-nationalist resolution, where the past violence becomes enshrined and incorporated into a unified national narrative, being consumed into a national history and territory, contained within its borders.

In her book *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (1999), Yoneyama asks questions concerning the stakes that are involved in the *reconstruction* of historical memories. She asks "how acts of remembering can fill the void of knowledge

without reestablishing yet another regime of totality, stability, confidence, and universal truthfulness. How can memories once recuperated remain self-critically unsettling” (5)? Yoneyama’s questions concerning the (re)construction of historical memories can also speak for Kogawa’s about citizenship and resistance. To the extent that redress embodies an effort for national reparations, redress, like civil rights, can be said to foreground the claims of citizenship. As such, there is an inherent danger by which the discourse of redress can be subsumed into the discourse of the nation states, while consolidating their narratives. What Kogawa attempts in her novel, then, is to dramatize how those nation-state’s Others intervene and unsettle the process by which Japanese Canadians, via redress, claim their citizenship and national inclusion.

As Miki refers to the heterogeneities that exist, often unseen, within national borders, he states how terms such as “‘Canadian’ may allow for gestures towards those ‘differences’ outside,” while functioning “to prevent them from infiltrating the rhetorical borders of inquiry” (1998, 131). He asks, “What would happen, for example, if the term ‘Canadian’ were dispersed into all the lines of alterity that, in actuality, striate the social body” (131)? This is, I believe, what Kogawa demonstrates through her reconfiguration of the term “Japanese Canadian” as well as the *terms* of their redressed citizenship. With the recuperation of its Others, Kogawa redefines the term “Japanese Canadian” as the signs of potential difference and dislocation—the “contradictions and contestations that threaten to unravel” (Miki 1988, 134) and disrupt national borders.

To conclude, I would like to turn briefly to the notion of “home” and the tension and suppressions it creates in the imagined community of a nation state. In their now classic article “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do With It?” (1986), Biddy Martin and

Chandra Talpade Mohanty illuminate such a “tension” as they see exist between one’s “desire for home, for synchrony, for sameness, and the realization of the repressions and violence that make home, harmony, sameness imaginable, and that enforce it” (208).

While Martin and Mohanty suggest that narratives that incorporate such a tension “do not erase the positive desire for unity,” but “destabilize and undercut it” (208), Kogawa’s claim and desire for the nation and citizenship simultaneously articulate the repressions and violence that enable *and* enforce them. In so doing, Kogawa also destabilizes those desires as well as the ideas of nation, home, and Japanese Canadian citizenship.

Chapter 3

Reclaiming the Suffering of Her Ancestral Land: Attendance and Possession in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*

In my previous two chapters, I have discussed how Mitsuye Yamada and Joy Kogawa negotiate their need to claim recognitions within their U.S. and Canadian nations by procuring their political identities, their redressed North American citizenships, and simultaneously to problematize the dominant narratives that construct and enable them. Yamada does so by reconfiguring Japanese American redressed citizenship upon their contradictory subjectivities and experience while Kogawa by questioning the traditional homogenous notion of citizenship. As I have also discussed, this process of simultaneous claiming and disclaiming involves each author's endeavor to re-envision "Asia," where both Yamada and Kogawa try to recuperate and connect back to their ancestral land by attending articulations which initially sounded to them just "noise" or "silence." Consequently, I argue that this act of attending the Other's language enables them to disrupt and destabilize their singular perception and monolingual vision.

In this final chapter, I will extend my discussion by examining how Nora Okja Keller narrativizes the story of Korean diaspora in the United States by addressing two forms of imperialism, Japanese and American, which have constituted Korean American exile and emigration to the United States. Although Keller shares the same concern with my two authors—the need to gain dominant recognitions and problematize them—, it is crucial that her novel portrays a completely different "Asia" from the one we have seen in Yamada and Kogawa's works. That is, Keller's novel which depicts "Asia"/ Japan in the same historical period as Kogawa does in *Obasan* sheds light on the colonialist aspect of Japan that remains hidden in Kogawa's novel. By portraying Japan as the colonial

aggressor rather than the atomic bomb victims as Kogawa does, Keller's *Comfort Woman* deconstructs Kogawa's perception of "Asia"/ Japan which we have seen in our previous chapter. In this way, Keller's text both confirms and complicates the process of negotiation we have seen so far, as Keller deals with the added burden and difficulty of representing the suffering of her ancestral land, the intra-Asian colonialism and violence, within the context of the United States.

In this chapter, I will approach this difficulty and the subsequent process of negotiation by examining the way Keller tells the stories of the Korean "comfort woman"¹—women who were drafted into Japanese military sex slavery during World War II—, even while Keller's novel also subverts the dominant American deployment of those narratives. In this respect, it is important to recall that Keller's novel emerged in the socio-historical context of the mid-1990s United States when controversies erupted about the memories of World War II, which included Japanese colonialism and military occupations of Korea. This chapter explores how Keller's text responds to this particular difficulty, what Lisa Yoneyama has called the "Americanization of Japanese war crimes" (2003). By this term, Yoneyama means the multifaceted difficulties involved in narrating the memories of Asia-Pacific Wars—especially the atrocities committed by Japanese imperialism in and against other Asian nations and peoples—within the discursive framework of the U.S. nation and empire. I will argue that Keller's novel negotiates the need to tell the story of Japanese military sex slavery, and by extension, of Korean diaspora under Japanese colonialism and military rules, and to subvert the dominant U.S. narrative (the "Americanization") that constructs the U.S. intervention as being benevolent and paternalistic, one that liberates "Asia"/ Korea from Japanese colonial power.

I discuss that Keller's novel manages this difficult task of re-staging the issue of Japanese military sex slavery in the United States, as Keller presents her protagonist "Akiko"/ Soon Hyo's² story as an "anti-escape narrative" which both exploits and subverts the hegemonic scenario. Drawing on past critical interpretations, I will explore how Keller employs what appears to be an "escape/ rescue narrative," a story of a former Korean "comfort woman" being rescued by a white male missionary who later becomes her husband, as the couple immigrate to the United States. While posing as a typical heteronormative immigrant romance—an "Asian" woman "fleeing an unremittingly oppressive society into full emancipation in the West," to borrow Aihwa Ong's description (350)³—, Keller's novel disrupts the promise and premise of U.S.-led rescue mission, as it interrogates the United States' neo-colonialist involvement in "Asia." Thus, just as Yamada and Kogawa rewrite the dominant narratives of minority citizenship which they claim in their North American contexts, Keller also reconfigures the familiar narrative constructed and circulated within mainstream U.S. discourses, in order to turn it into a different story. Significantly, the novel which begins with "Akiko"/ Soon Hyo's confession to a murder of her rescuer-missionary husband exposes the underlying mechanism of domination embedded in what the missionary husband claims to be a rescuing, civilizing mission of "Asia" and of his Korean wife.

While critics agree on the subversive nature of "Akiko"/ Soon Hyo, the mother's plot, Keller's novel is in fact constituted as a double-voiced narrative, which alternates between the mother ("Akiko"/ Soon Hyo) and the daughter's (Beccah's) stories. And it is here that substantial scholarly disagreement remains, as critics assess Beccah's role in the novel and interrogate her specifically *Asian American* involvement in the recuperation of this history

from her U.S. American position. Indeed, what I find significant about the novel is that Keller embeds the story of the military sex slavery, which took place in “Asia,” in the Korean American (hapa) daughter’s growing-up narrative in Hawaii. In other words, Keller does not set the story of Japanese military sex slavery in the singular context of “Asia,” a place of its occurrence, as she does with her second novel *Fox Girl* (2002) which deals with the American camptown prostitutions in South Korea.⁴ Instead, she underscores how the novel serves as the Korean *American* daughter’s discovery narrative, where Beccah learns and recuperates the history of Korean colonial subjugations, and reclaims, much like Kogawa’s *Obasan*, the suffering of this emblematic mother/land. In this sense, the story of Korean women’s sexual enslavement also serves as a larger, paradigmatic symbol of the colonization of Korea. To the extent that the novel emphasizes the process by which the Korean American daughter reclaims this political heritage through her (re)telling of the story of Japanese military sex slavery, this is where critics vary their views (Chuh [2003a], Kang [2003], Yoneyama [2003], Duncan [2004], Lee [2004], Chen [2005]).

In “Princess Pari in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*” (2004), Kun Jong Lee for instance extols the above narrative structure which traces the movement of discovery and recuperation whereby the Korean American daughter comes to terms with, as she bears witness to, her Korean mother’s past. As Lee writes, by the end of the novel, Beccah who had initially dissociated herself from the Korean tradition “claim[s] her mother’s cultural heritage” (452). (And I would add the *political* heritage, too.) On the other hand, it is precisely about this act of “reclaiming” that several other Asian American critics, most notably, Kandice Chuh, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, and Lisa Yoneyama, have expressed their

skepticism. In the special edition of *JAAS: Journal of Asian American Studies* entitled “On Korean ‘Comfort Women’” (2003), Kandice Chuh, for instance, casts doubt about the U.S.-centeredness which she says characterizes this act of retrieval: “the importance of recovering the history of ‘comfort women’ [in Keller’s novel] locates not to those who were so conscripted, but to us,” the U.S. Korean Americans, “to satisfy our will to knowledge” (2003a, 19). Similarly, Kang critiques the frequent elision of the subject position of “American” in the (often uncritical) identifications which Korean American authors and artists construct with their objects of representations.

In this chapter, I intend to intervene in this debate by paying particular attention to the final revelation scene which occurs in Chapter 17 in which Beccah literally attends her dead mother’s tape-recorded message. This revelation scene suggests how the Korean American daughter assumes the role of a medium, as she listens to the voice of her dead mother and through it the voices and stories of numerous other Korean women who were forced into the sexual enslavement for the Japanese army. The scene then metaphorically implies how Beccah succeeds her diseased mother’s vocation as a “shaman” to bear witness to the unrecorded subjugations and atrocities which her mother and numerous other victim-survivors of sexual slavery had gone through under Japanese military and colonial rules.

I would like to discuss both the merit and danger of this final act of mediation. On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge that this scene, much like the similar episodes in Yamada and Kogawa’s texts, dramatizes the Asian North American daughter’s endeavor to attend the language of her Other/ “Asia.” While much of Keller’s novel illustrates the Korean American daughter’s inability to comprehend her Korean immigrant

mother, this final scene illustrates how Beccah endeavors to listen to and understand what has been incomprehensible to her: i.e. her mother's language which the novel at one point referred to as "the language of animals" (*CW* 16). At the same time, this same scene also inadvertently reveals how the act of attending can *risk* turning into the act of owning and possessing. While the novel, as I said, traces a trajectory of the Korean American daughter's inability to understand her Korean mother to her final understanding, by the end of the novel, it *seems* as if Beccah has achieved a total comprehension of this (m)Other, in terms of her languages, stories, and histories. To explore the point, I will compare this scene with a similar scene of revelation in *Obasan* in which another North Asian American daughter, Naomi learns of her mother's atomic bomb exposure that took place in Nagasaki. I will also read this final revelation scene in relation to an earlier schoolyard episode in *Comfort Woman*, where Keller gives a more complex and self-reflexive rendition of Beccah's inability and failure to perceive her mother's language. Ultimately, I suggest that the novel's final act of recuperation of the mother/ Other's language and stories betrays the Korean American daughter-author's desire to own and possess their Other/ "Asia"—and their rather facile assumption about the possibility of transnational "reclaiming" of her ancestral land—, while the novel, I argue, simultaneously places this Korean American author-daughter's attitude and desire in question.

I. The Mother's Stories: Narrating the Two Empires, Re-narrating "Rescue/ Escape Narratives"

But first, I will begin with "Akiko"/ Soon Hyo, the mother's narrative which both exploits and subverts the imperialist scenario of "rescue/ escape narratives." In her novel, Keller negotiates the need to tell the stories of Japanese military sex slavery and to

problematize its receptions vis-à-vis the largely Western (especially the U.S.) audience who were unfamiliar with its history at the time of her novel's composition. As Dai Sil Kim-Gibson writes in her article "They Are Our Grandmas" (1997), issues concerning Japanese military sex slavery were not just unknown but ignored and often deemed insignificant in the United States prior to the mid-1990s, around the time of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.⁵ Keller's use of the seemingly multiculturalist rescue plot—a white American missionary rescuing a Korean "comfort woman" by marrying her—reflects the author's strong need to be heard and to transmit this atrocious history, even while she also subverts its conventional deployment. I will look at the ways the novel contrives to negotiate those two needs.

To begin, it is important to note that Keller's novel operates as a self-conscious parody of a conventional rescue romance with its installation of racial and gender politics, where the masculinized West enacts a self-appointed and benevolent liberator of the feminized Third World. For instance, when Beccah inquires after her parents' initial meeting in the novel, Keller makes "Akiko" respond with a story which the novel alludes to is an "adaptation" (*CW* 32) of a classic utopian escape narrative. Employing a conventional fairytale opening "'Once was a hard time [. . .] but a happy time'" (*CW* 31) for what is supposed to constitute her personal "recollection" (thus underscoring her citational gesture), "Akiko" offers an idealistic portrait where her husband enacts a generous and brave guardian of the war-trodden Korea while she a maternal care-taker of the orphans. "Akiko" tells Beccah:

"Your father was one of the missionaries that gave us food and clothing. When he saw how good I was with the children, he fell in love with me, because he knew I would make a good mother. [. . .] When the war moved into my village, he helped us all, everyone, even the old mamasans, escape. We walked and walked, trying to

escape from the communists. We hid in cemeteries and walked over the mountains of Korea until we were free to build a new home. In America.” (CW 31)

Notably, Keller juxtaposes this idealistic quote with “Akiko’s” own internal narrative, which reveals a quite different story of their meeting as well as the husband’s rather self-centered motive for carrying out his rescue missions. As Yoneyama points out, “Akiko’s” first-person narrative exposes the husband’s “narcissistic humanism” where “Akiko” is deployed only as “a tool with which to prove his own salvation” (2003, 71).

Equally significant then is that the above quote is immediately followed and challenged by Beccah herself who questions its reliability, as she pokes fun at her mother’s thinly veiled reference to a classic text-book escape narrative that frames her story. Seeing through the fictitious nature of her recollection, Beccah tells how she has contested some of the several variants of her mother’s story, if not this particular version: “I don’t recall if I challenged this new story or her old one. Sometimes I think I must have said, ‘Wait! That’s not what you told me before! What’s the truth?’ because even then I must have recognized her story as an adaptation of *The Sound of Music*” (CW 32). With its self-reflexive allusion to a classic text such as *The Sound of Music*, the novel underscores its borrowing from the pre-existing utopian narratives that place the United States as an archetypal, and here also multicultural, “promised land.” Keller casts doubt on the premise of utopianism which underlies such popular Hollywood tales.

Indeed, the novel delineates the gap between this Hollywood fairytale and the “reality,” as Keller exposes the hypocrisy of the husband who is supposed to be an ideal rescuer, a role which he himself assumes. (As I mentioned earlier, it is worth remembering that Keller begins her novel with “Akiko’s” confession to his murder.) The novel condemns his disingenuousness, for instance, when Richard, the husband calls “Akiko” “a

prostitute” and forces her to keep quiet about (what he conceives to be) her “shame” (*CW* 196). As “Akiko” blurts about her past subjugation as a Japanese military sex slave in an open courtyard of their missionary residence one night, he orders her to keep silent while physically attempting to “cover her mouth”:

“Quiet! What if someone hears you speaking like this? The boys, the brothers? What if Beccah hears you? Think of how she would feel, knowing her mother was a prostitute. [. . .] ‘The sins of the parent shall fall upon their children and their grandchildren.’ I ask you to protect our daughter, with your silence, from that shame.” (*CW* 196)

The quote reveals Richard’s patriarchal attitudes toward “Akiko” in that he believes that her violation is *her* problem, a “shame” which she needs to hide, rather than the crime the Japanese soldiers committed against her. (In a typically sexist manner, he blames the victims rather than the rapists.) Similarly, instead of worrying about his wife’s traumatic feelings and psychic injury, he is only concerned about the possible disclosure of her past so that he would lose face as husband and minister. In this way, Keller shows how the rescuer-husband is complicit in the oppressive patriarchal system, as he participates in the silencing of “Akiko’s” subjugation and pain as a Japanese military sex slave. The novel suggests an analogy between the husband and the Japanese soldiers, who inculcated in the victim-survivors an erroneous sense of “shame” and discouraged them from indicting the crimes, even while those Japanese men forced the Korean women to serve as sex slaves and exploited their sexualities.

The husband’s hypocrisy and assumed superiority toward “Akiko” as well as toward “Asia” as a whole become revealed in more explicitly colonialist terms when he uses his Korean wife as a proof of his successful mission toward the East. “Akiko” recounts the role she was assigned to when the couple gave their lecture tours after they returned to the

United States. She states: “from the Larchmont Presbyterian Church in New York to the Florida Chain of Missionary Assembly, wherever we could obtain an invitation to teach or study or speak [. . . ,] I would stand by my husband’s side in my Korean dress as he lectured on *Spreading the Light: My Experiences in the Obscure Orient*” (*CW* 107). The quote illustrates how both “Akiko” and “Asia” are deemed as the objects to be enlightened by him (rather than his equals). The “Asian woman” here is deployed as a docile and obedient proof of his civilizing missions, a display object, where “Asia” itself becomes feminized to establish his benevolent, imperial masculinity. “Akiko’s” account which serves as “a reverse missionary narrative” exposes the arrogance of the husband’s civilizing missions, from the perspective of the so-civilized Other.

In this sense, it is not surprising that the novel repeatedly emphasizes the similarities between the American husband and the Japanese soldiers, to the extent that both enact the agents of masculinized empires. In fact, it seems worth recalling that Japanese colonization of Korea itself was the domination in the guise of “rescue missions” as it was carried out, like the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, under the banner of liberating “Asia” from the Western imperial powers. What I find particularly significant here is that Keller highlights the role the colonized women’s sexed bodies play in this imperialist-masculinist power structure, where both Japanese colonization and the U.S. neocolonial intervention in Korea symbolically take the form of sexual dominations. While the Japanese soldiers’ colonial aggression concurs with their exploitation of Korean women’s sexualized bodies, the husband’s rescue mission, too, comes hand in hand with his desire to sexually dominate the Other woman and domesticate her body. In both case, Korean women’s sexualities become “visible signifier of control” (179), as Patti Duncan

puts it. Notable in this sense is that “Akiko” compares her husband’s sexual dominance over her to that of the Japanese soldiers, as she recalls “his [the husband’s] shouts that sounded too much like the shouts the men at the camps gave as they collapsed over the women in release and triumph” (*CW* 146). Similarly, she recollects “the lust, dark and heavy and animal” in her husband’s eyes which she says “[she]’d seen in the eyes of men at the camps” (*CW* 146). Later on in the novel, “Akiko” also asserts that she will not allow her husband to “use” her body (*CW* 148). As Kandice Chuh points out, the Korean woman’s body thus comes to “function but a vessel for the desires of gendered empire” (2003a 17) for both Japanese and American men.

In this way, the novel can also be read as a political allegory in which the commonalities between Japanese colonialism and the seemingly benevolent and paternalistic U.S. neocolonial intervention in Korea become invoked. Particularly notable is that Keller portrays Richard’s late father as a soldier. In her deceased mother-in-law’s apartment at Cuyahoga Falls Sunnyside Retirement Community, “Akiko” discovers the photographs of her husband’s family: among them “a grey-haired, thin-lipped man with heavy eyebrows, dressed in a military uniform” (*CW* 112). Keller’s specific allusion to the father’s occupation here makes visible the history of U.S. military interventions in the other nations including one of “Akiko’s” homeland. The analogy between the two forms of interventions, religious and military, of which the father and son each enact an agent is implied through their kinship. In this respect, the presence of a magazine, the “thigh-high stacks of *National Geographics*” (*CW* 111) in the mother’s apartment is also noteworthy. As critics have pointed out, the journal has long contributed to the commodification of the rest of the world for Western consumptions.⁶

With these details, it is significant that Keller ends this scene with an idea of the United States as “Akiko’s” “new home.” At the closing moment of this chapter, Keller describes that Induk, a former Japanese sex slave and “Akiko’s” guardian spirit, speaks to “Akiko” and encourages her to make the United States her new home: “Induk told me to suck, to taste, to make this—the [mother-in-law’s] apartment, the city, the state, and America—home my own” (*CW* 113). Clearly, this passage evokes the earlier citation in which “Akiko” herself, adapting the narrative of *The Sound of Music*, refers to the idea of “‘build[ing] a new home. [. . .] In America’” (*CW* 31). Through the juxtaposition of these two passages, then, Keller problematizes the concept of “home,” as she implies that the “new home” “Akiko” is supposed to “build” in America is a colonial complex with the military, cultural, and capitalist interests compounded. In this sense, her name “Akiko Bradley” which she assumes after her marriage and immigration to the United States is also symbolic. It inscribes the dual histories of domination which she suffers—“much like Korea itself” as Keller puts it (2003b, 154)—under Japanese colonialism and American occupation.⁷ The novel interrogates the adequacy of U.S. interventions in Korea as well as of its “hegemonic narrative that explains Korean freedom from Japanese occupation as gifted by U.S. forces” (2003a, 15), to borrow Kandice Chuh’s words in her remarks on Chang-rae Lee’s novel *A Gesture Life* (1999).

With its characterization of the white missionary husband as an anti-hero, the novel thus disrupts the conventional assimilationist and multiculturalist narratives, particularly their manifestations as “family romance,” which depicts a society where various racial others coexist harmoniously and peacefully under a white patriarch. In her book *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (2000), Patricia

Chu suggests that to the extent that “white romantic partners function both as symbols for America and as agents for [. . .] ethnic subjects’ Americanization,” the tragic outcomes of “the *interracial* stories imply the culture’s greater resistance to the full integration of subjects perceived as racial others” (199).⁸ Seen in this light, the novel which opens with “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo’s confession to a murder of the white rescuer husband may be read as its own act of “resistance” to the forced assimilation and integration into the mainstream culture.⁹

In this respect, we can also say that Keller’s construction of “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo’s narrative serves as an illustration of what Dorinne Kondo has termed as the “politics of reception,” as Kondo interrogates the ways Asian Americans participate in the construction of World War II memories in the United States. In her essay “(Un)Disciplined Subjects: (De)Colonizing the Academy?” (2001), Kondo advocates “the necessity for strategic deployment of certain kinds of arguments”—and I would add narratives—that attempt to “account for certain kinds of predictable readings” in the context of the United States, where “the dominant deploys the critique of Japan or of any other racially marked nation *in order to buttress a sense of U.S. superiority*” (33, *emph. original*). Worth recalling here again is that Keller’s novel was published in the mid-1990s United States at the time of the 50th anniversary of the end of Asia-Pacific Wars when various controversies, the atomic bombs, the cancellation of Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute, etc., erupted. Frequently, it was within those discursive contexts the atrocities committed by the Japanese imperial forces such as the Rape of Nanjing and the military sex slavery of Korean and other “Asian women” were evoked within the U.S. discursive terrains, even though by saying this, I do not intend to justify those crimes

committed by the Japanese empire. Keller's "strategic deployment" of "Akiko"/ Soon Hyo's story in *Comfort Woman* performs the crucial task of remembering the atrocious histories of Japanese imperialism against "Asian" nations and peoples and honoring its victim-survivors while doing it differently from the way the hegemonic U.S. discourse often constructs them. The "mother's story" in Keller's novel then illustrates how an Asian American author can narrate Japanese imperialism while resisting the lure of multiculturalist participation in what Lisa Yoneyama has called "the Americanization of Japan's war crimes" (2003).¹⁰

II. Performing the Medium: The Daughter's Narrative of Attending/ Translating/ Possessing the Languages of the (M)other

While the "mother's story," thus, depicts the Korean American author's anti-imperialist struggle against the *two* empires, my other interest in this chapter lies in analyzing how Keller makes Beccah, the American daughter, retell this same (hi)story. As I mentioned earlier, Beccah's narrative illustrates the process by which the Korean American daughter discovers and reclaims the history of her motherland's subjugations to Japanese imperialism from her Asian American position. In what follows, I will first examine how Beccah, like my two previous authors and their protagonists, tries to make sense of her ancestral land, here epitomized by her immigrant mother who remains beyond the comprehension of the Asian American daughter. I argue that the novel illustrates the American daughter's initial failure to understand her "Asian" mother because of her Eurocentrism as well as her subsequent efforts to attend this language of the (m)other. As Beccah finally succeeds in comprehending her dead mother's language through her shamanistic rite, however, her act of mediation also reveals a problem. This section will

discuss how Beccah's efforts to make sense of her "Asian" mother/land illustrate an act of attending the Other's language while also disclosing the danger of appropriation.

Throughout the novel, Keller depicts how the Korean American daughter struggles to make sense of her Korean mother, especially her erratic behaviors and oriental customs, often in vain. Like Naomi who was unable to read Obasan's peculiar habit, her accumulation of food in the fridge as an expression of Obasan's pain and trauma, Beccah fails to see anything beyond the surface of her mother's eccentric behaviors. In this sense, the revelation occurs at the end of the novel when the cause and source of such behaviors become known to the daughter. By attending her dead mother's tape-recorded message, Beccah learns that "her mother's spell of possession," which she witnessed as a child, was in fact a result and "an extreme manifestation of her concealed past" (Chu 2004, 74), her traumatic experience of having been forced to serve as a military sex slave for the Japanese army. The novel delineates the process by which the daughter comes to understand the mother's past experience in "Asia," which constitutes her U.S. present and "madness." Much like Kogawa's *Obasan*, then Keller's novel illustrates the process by which the daughter discovers what was unknown and incomprehensible to her because she was ignorant of the history.

The opening chapter depicts Beccah's (mis)perceptions of her mother as a pathological—rather than a tragic—figure who suffers from occasional mental breakdowns while practicing some strange oriental customs. Beccah sees the mother "slipping into one of her trances" (*CW* 2), "twirling in her see-through clothes": "A spider's line of spittle swung from my mother's gasping mouth as she swayed from the top of the coffee table. When she finally dropped to the ground, her chest heaving as she

gulped air” (*CW* 7). Unlike in “Akiko’s” own narrative, the mother seen here from the eyes of a twelve-year old American (hapa) child is depicted as an incomprehensible and pathetic figure, who, to borrow Patricia Chu’s words, is “subjected to unpredictable shamanistic practices that range from comic to terrifying” (2004, 74). Describing the mother singularly from the daughter’s perspective, this first chapter gives a melodramatic, rather than a tragic, rendition of “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo’s “illness.” Beccah writes: “During these times in which she [the mother] shouted and punched at the air above her head, dancing as if to duck return jabs, I was afraid to let her out of the house” (*CW* 5). In Beccah’s portrait, “Akiko” is not accorded her full subjectivity.

Yet what is important about this novel is that Keller immediately undercuts this semi-orientalist portrait drawn by the American daughter, as her novel juxtaposes Beccah’s delineation of the mother and “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo’s own self-perception, which the latter conveys in her poetic and fluid interior monologues. In contrast to the previous portraits drawn by Beccah, these monologues conjure up and attest to the depth of “Akiko’s” inner psyche and subjectivities. Offering the recollection of her past experience as a military sex slave for Japanese in “Asia,” Chapter Two which gives “Akiko’s” version of the story immediately challenges and supplements Beccah’s limited portrait of her mother that precedes it. The second chapter opens with “Akiko’s” recollection: “I was twelve when I was murdered, fourteen when I looked into the Yalu River and, finding no face looking back at me, knew that I was dead. I wanted to let the Yalu’s currents carry my body to where it might find my spirit again, but the Japanese soldiers hurried me across the bridge before I could jump” (*CW* 16). The juxtaposition shows a startling contrast with the previous portrait of “Akiko” drawn by Beccah and underscores Beccah’s limited

understanding of her “Asian” mother. In her reading of the novel, Patricia Chu refers to the discrepancy between the mother and the daughter’s narratives and states that “Keller uses Beccah’s perspective to *deromanticize* Akiko’s idealized view of her relationship to her daughter, showing Akiko’s limits” (2004, 74, *emph. original*). Yet I would argue that the novel also hints at the limitation of *Beccah*’s perspective and perception as they are juxtaposed with the mother’s, to the extent that Beccah cannot make out in “Akiko” anything more than what her American schoolmates call her: “a crazy old bag lady.”

Indeed, I argue that this gap or discrepancy becomes most strongly pronounced in the daughter’s perception of her mother’s language, which in the novel is dramatized through the schoolyard episode in Chapter 8. Concerned about her daughter’s “safe passage through the critical year” (*CW* 86) when Beccah turns twelve—the age “Akiko” was drafted into the military sex slavery—, “Akiko” visits Beccah’s school “to purify the campus” (*CW* 86). What I find especially noticeable about this episode is that the novel for the first time depicts “Akiko” speaking in explicit pidgin. As Beccah describes how “Akiko” becomes taunted by the gang of kids who mimic her: “The rest of the children edged in closer, howling with laughter at each word my mother spoke. ‘Shame-u, shame-u!’ they mimicked in singsong voices. ‘You maddahs mustu be so sad-u’” (*CW* 87). I find this scene of particular importance. Not only does Keller expose the gap, linguistic and otherwise, between “Akiko’s” inner self—her complex emotional and psychic self composed in her fluid and poetic inner narrative—and the external perceptions imposed upon her, here through the listeners’ reception of her speech as “pidgin.” Furthermore, for the first time do we realize that this is, indeed, the way the Korean woman must actually and normally be seen and heard by others in the United States, including (most probably)

the readers themselves. As the novel reproduces “Akiko’s” speech at the closing moment of the chapter, Beccah describes how she hears “Akiko” speaking to Vice President Pili in her overt pidgin: “‘Yes, sir,’ she said. ‘I looking for daughteh. Name is Roh-beccah Blad-u-ley’” (*CW* 88). The chapter, thus, thrusts upon us, in the form of an intrusion, a linguistic portrait of “Akiko” which differs from the one we have by then become familiar with from her own previous first-person narratives.

In this way, the schoolyard episode offers a self-reflexive and deconstructive moment of the novel, which puts into question the readers’ inabilities and limitations of perceptions. The scene intervenes into our own normative Eurocentric views regarding this apparently illiterate “Asian” immigrant woman, as the novel forces us to re-perceive her speech (i.e. pidgin) through the frame of her prior monologues which illustrate her interior psyche, emotional experience, and subjectivity. By juxtaposing “Akiko’s” two linguistic portraits, Keller makes us reflect upon our own stereotypical vision and associations, that we tend to think people who speak pidginized English do not possess complex inner thoughts or subjectivities. In fact, the scene implies how a majority of readers would most likely see, or rather fail to see a former “comfort woman” as a *tragic* figure if she appeared in the street of Hawaii as an illiterate Asian immigrant bag lady speaking in her pidginized English—even though this is her likely portrait if she had actually emigrated to the United States as “Akiko” does. In this respect, it is useful to recall Sau-ling Wong’s analysis of the linguistic strategy which Wong says Amy Tan employs in her novel in depicting Asian immigrant characters’ speech. Wong argues that Tan’s use of standard American, “fluent if simple” English rather than “the ‘comic,’ pidginized ‘Asian English’ found in Anglo-American writing on Asians” is designed to

“better articulate their subjectivities, do full justice to their native intelligence, and restore them to the dignity they deserve” (1995, 189). By juxtaposing those two modes of linguistic representations, Keller underscores how we can be blinded in our normative perceptions. (I shall come back to the problematic aspect of employing the conventional, grammatically correct English to illustrate “Akiko’s” internal self.)

As the novel thus exposes Beccah and other school kids’ inability and failure to hear “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo “properly,” the schoolyard scene highlights the epistemological and perceptual violence they do to her. As Beccah comments: “for the first time, as I watched and listened to the children taunting my mother, using their tongues to mangle what she said into what they heard, I saw and heard what they did. And I was ashamed” (*CW* 88). Significantly, the quote highlights the nonequivalence between “Akiko’s” own speech (“what she said”) and the U.S. listeners’ reception of it (“what they heard”) while underscoring the violence the latter’s Eurocentric perception does to the former, the immigrant woman’s speech, enunciation, and language. To recall David L. Eng’s remarks on Kingston’s *China Men* (1977) once again, certain linguistic articulations become relegated to “strange noises” when the Western subject fails to comprehend those cultural codes such as the Chinese language (2001). Like Yamada and Kogawa, the two previous authors I have discussed so far, Keller also implies that it involves the listening subjects to produce this “noise,” as the listeners reduce the Other’s language (“what she said”) to one’s own (“what they heard”).

Worth recalling also then is how the U.S. missionaries perceived and described “Akiko” when they first found her in “Asia”: “Physically human but able to speak only in the language of animals” (*CW* 16). While the phrase also applies to the people’s

perception of “Akiko” in the United States as is witnessed in the previous schoolyard scene, this is, I argue, what the novel challenges, as Keller interrogates the traditional Eurocentric perception regarding this “illiterate” immigrant woman of color. Put in other words, the novel makes visible not just the inner psyche and subjectivity of the “Asian” immigrant woman who is depicted as articulating herself in “the ‘comic,’ pidginized ‘Asian English’ found in Anglo-American writing on Asians” (Wong 1995, 189). What it exposes is the viewer’s disability, the limitation of *their* comprehensive capacities, as her speech intervenes in their normative Eurocentric perceptions, whereby the missionaries and school kids are equated in their failures to see/ hear/ comprehend this woman—to attend her speech *in her terms*.

As I have discussed in my previous chapters, Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* similarly illustrates the process by which people’s illiteracy had reduced Obasan’s silent “Asian” language to “aphasia”; or Naomi’s ignorance of the Japanese language had relegated her mother’s “letters” to silence, which is here equated to absence. I have also discussed how Yamada’s daughter’s initial Eurocentric assumption had denied her mother’s speech, enunciated in her non-standard American English, as deviance if not non-language. Like these two authors, Keller similarly suggests how “Akiko’s” speech comes to be recognized as “the language of animals”—sounding like an insane, exotic, oriental “noise”—because of the listeners’ Eurocentric linguistic assumption that hinders them from deciphering this language of the Other. (As Beccah describes her mother’s utterance as “long stretches of thumping accentuated by occasional shouts to a spirit named Induk” [*CW* 4], Beccah seems to share the missionaries’ perceptions.)

It is also important here then that the U.S. missionaries' inabilities to comprehend "Akiko's" language in her own terms resonate with the Japanese soldiers' failure to recognize the silent languages which "Akiko" and her fellow military sex slaves employ at the camp as their means of communication. To the extent that the women were "forbidden to speak, any language at all" at the Japanese military "'comfort' station," "Akiko" explains that the women "taught [themselves] to communicate through eye movements, body posture, tilts of the head, or—when [they] could not see each other—through rhythmic rustlings between [their] stalls" (*CW* 16). "[I]n this way," "Akiko" asserts, "we could speak" and the Japanese soldiers "never knew what we were saying" (*CW* 16). Notably, Keller places these two episodes, the Japanese soldiers' and the U.S. missionaries' failures to comprehend "Akiko" and the other "comfort women's" languages, immediately after the other (*CW* 16).

In sum, what I want to stress is that the novel hints at the continuity between Beccah's and the school kids' inabilities to comprehend "Akiko" (delineated in Chapter One and Eight respectively) and the U.S. missionaries' and the Japanese soldiers' more explicitly colonialist failures to recognize her and her fellow "comfort women's" speeches. The equation between the two groups, I believe, is important since it further invokes the continuity between Beccah (et al) and the American readers in general's incapacities of perceptions, which the novel ultimately challenges. As I suggested earlier, Keller begins her novel with Beccah's Orientalist portraits of her mother, the portraits which a majority of U.S. readers probably find familiar. The novel then juxtaposes these Eurocentric portraits with "Akiko's" own monologues so that the latter can challenge and subvert the former, the pictures which the former group probably can identify. In this way, the novel

implicates the American readers, who are accustomed to the kind of Orientalist portraits drawn here by the American daughter, portraits which Keller ultimately associates with the more explicitly colonialist ones drawn by the Japanese soldiers. As these earlier chapters provide Orientalist portraits of the mother drawn by the American daughter, they do so deliberately and intentionally, in order to deconstruct those pictures as well as the viewers' perceptions of them.

In this sense, it is also notable that Keller deliberately dis-ennobles "Akiko," who is presented in the novel as a half-crazed, pathetic "bag lady" who speaks pidginized English rather than an evidently tragic figure of an historical "comfort woman." As I mentioned earlier, Keller portrays the figure of a former "comfort woman" just as the readers would most likely see, or rather fail to see her (as she is) as a tragic figure if she had actually emigrated to the United States and appeared in the streets of Hawaii as "Akiko" does. The novel thus challenges the readers' perceptions, their normative views that prevent them from perceiving in this illiterate "Asian crazy bag lady" her tragic past, just as Beccah was hindered in her perception.

Interesting in this sense is that Keller has Beccah voice her uncertainty about her own vision and perception. Discovering how her own childhood memories collide with those of her schoolmate, Tiffi Sugimoto's, Beccah begins to wonder: "[Tiffi's] sincerity made me doubt my own version of events. Perhaps what I thought was true had been colored by the insecurities of a ten-year-old girl" (*CW* 34). Significantly, this quote, along with several others, offers a moment in which the novel puts the reliability of its first-person narratives in question. Furthermore, if we extend this remark to the whole novel—and to our previous consideration about the (im)possibility of understanding the Others and their

language—, we may surmise that Beccah’s quote provides a more general and self-reflexive commentary on what the novel assumes to be the limitation of one’s vision, the inability to see the external world and to hear/ comprehend the Other’s speech without having one’s perception “colored” by their subjective vision. To put in terms of our previous discussion, the novel ultimately seems to point to the impossibility of perceiving and reproducing the Other’s language (“what she said”) without having it mediated through one’s own (“what they heard”)—thus without “mangling” it, as Keller phrases it. In this sense, the novel exposes how our perceptions do violence to Others.

What I find notable here, however, is that the novel does not just end to deconstruct Beccah’s limitation of vision. It further delineates her effort to attend and recuperate her (m)other’s language, while this effort significantly takes place in her adoption of shamanism, which itself is an act of mediation. Put in other words, if Keller’s novel, as I suggested, comments on the impossibility of perceiving and reproducing the Other’s language (“what she said”) without having it *mediated* through one’s own (“what they heard”)—*and* the violence which this act of mediation does to the original enunciation (“to mangle what she said”)—, what does Keller’s use of “shamanism,” *which itself constitutes an act of mediation*, tell about the nature of Beccah’s act of attending her mother/ Other’s language? What kind of violence does Keller attribute—or fail to attribute to Beccah’s shamanistic *mediation* of her “Asian” mother’s speech? Put in other words, how does Keller conceive the act of attending the Other’s language?

Perhaps, it may be useful to look at this question from a slightly different perspective and return to our previous consideration about Keller’s use of standard American English to depict “Akiko’s” inner world. That is, if Keller believes “Akiko’s” inner psyche and

subjectivity cannot be captured and reproduced in the pidginized English (in the language the reader hears in her), she, nonetheless, seems to believe that her use of standard American English *can*. In her article, Gayle Sato refers to the presence of “three unrelated languages” which “Akiko” employs in the novel: “broken English for basic communication with others, trance-induced dialogue with the spirit world, and the native-speaking voice of her first-person narrative” (2001, 24). Sato seems to suggest that Keller’s deployment of standard American English shows how the “standard *English* speech” serves as an equivalent of “Akiko’s” native language. Yet, despite Sato’s contention, “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo was a peasant girl who never had any formal education even in Korea. “Akiko” would have spoken a Korean version of pidgin rather than a standard (Korean) speech.¹¹

As I have suggested earlier, it is important to acknowledge that Keller’s reconstruction of “Akiko’s” inner thought in standard American English works to problematize the readers’ stereotypical vision and association toward this Korean immigrant woman. To borrow Sau-ling Wong’s comments once again, such a linguistic construction is designed to do “justice to [her] native intelligence, and restore [her] to the dignity” she deserves (1995, 189), a reading I completely agree. (This is, I believe, also Sato’s point.) Nevertheless, reproducing “Akiko’s” inner thought in the standard English speech, in a language which is explicitly *not* her own—but, in fact, Beccah’s and the readers’—suggests an act of appropriation in a different way. If our perception of “Akiko’s” speech as *traditional* “pidgin” violates her inner subjectivity and self (if not her humanity itself), reproducing her thought in the standard English idioms risks erasing her

own speech while having it consumed into the language that ultimately belongs to the Korean *American* author herself.¹²

Given these considerations, the questions I would like to explore for the remaining sections of this chapter include: How does Keller's novel depict what it means for Beccah to (be able to) "attend" her mother *as* the Other's language, particularly through "shamanism"? Does Keller's use of shamanism maintain or else collapse the boundary between the subject and object of enunciation? —between "what she said" and "what [the shaman] hears" and reproduces? (As is indicated in the above citation, Beccah is at least aware of the discrepancy, the non-equivalence between the two languages.) Furthermore, if shamanism constitutes a metaphor which Keller employs to describe her own creative engagement (Keller 1997b), what does it tell about her assumed position as the author-subject vis-à-vis her object of representations? In the next section, I will explore the implications of what it means for the novel to engage in the act of "attending" the Other's language through shamanism. But first I will consider the significance of this practice both in the context of Korean cultural tradition and for the survivors of Japanese military sex slavery.

Shamanism and the Recuperation of the Voice of the Dead/ Other

According to Kung Jong Lee, Keller's choice of shamanism is both historical and cultural, to the extent that it derives from the indigenous Korean cultural practice and reflects an historical fact regarding the survivors of Japanese military sex slavery. Like "Akiko"/ Soon Hyo in the novel, some Korean survivors of sexual enslavement engaged in shamanistic practices in order to "deal with their psychological scars" (Lee 432) and to

mourn for their fellow victims who could not survive the atrocities. Lee offers the following explanation concerning the significance of shamanism in Korean cultural traditions:

Koreans have usually held a shamanistic rite to send a *yongson* to the other world when a person has died unnaturally and violently, far from home, with “many unresolved grudges (*han*) in his or her life.” In such a rite, the spirit of the dead airs its grievances through the mouth of a shaman and the living relatives negotiate with the spirit, promising to settle any disputes and to remember the dead with proper offerings. The main function of such “a cathartic ritual confrontation”¹³ is to resolve the spirit’s *han* and send the spirit to the other world. (444)

Lee’s quote helps us see why shamanism offers an appropriate means for representing the voices and experiences of the victims of Japanese military sex slavery, a majority of whom did not have the opportunity to tell their stories alive. (In one account, about ninety percent of the victims died, killed either directly or indirectly, at the camps.¹⁴)

In her article “Military Sex Slaves: A Korean American Woman Writer’s Theme” (2001), haeng-wul Shin points out that to the extent the murdered victims, unlike the murderers, are usually deprived of their voices, history often becomes composed of the accounts provided by the surviving murderers. In this respect, Shin argues that Keller’s choice of shamanism serves as a literary device to enable those slaughtered women to speak and impart their sides of the stories while correcting the historical inequity whereby the perpetrators’ versions of events often prevail. A shaman helps retrieve the stories/ “grievances” of those women made into military sex slaves that are otherwise unavailable. Keller’s use of shamanism aims to rectify the historical inequity even while she follows the historical fact and honors what is considered as the distinctly Korean cultural tradition.¹⁵

To the extent the majority of victims were also denied their rights to proper funerals, one important shamanistic function, according to Lee, was to give a “proper rite of

mourning” (452). Indeed, a scene occurs in Keller’s novel where a former military sex slave, Induk rebukes “Akiko” for her failure to proffer an adequate burial. Prohibited by Japanese soldiers, “Akiko” leaves Induk’s body putrefied “in the open air, as food for the wild animals just as if,” Induk claims, “I were an animal myself” (*CW* 96). Demanding a respectable rite of mourning which she deserves, Induk’s spirit addresses “Akiko” as follows:

No one performed the proper rites of the dead. For me. For you. Who was there to cry for us in kok, announcing our death? Or to fulfill the duties of yom: bathing and dressing our bodies, combing our hair, trimming our nails, laying us out? Who was there to write our names, to even know our names and to remember us? (*CW* 38).

In this quote, Keller suggests that shamanistic funeral rites involve the acts of preparing the victims’ bodies by cleansing and dressing them for the departure *and* recording (“writing and remembering”) their names while announcing their deaths. Notably, Beccah at the end of Keller’s novel acts “[l]ike a practiced shaman preparing for a *shinogwi-kut*,” as she “refills the offering bowls, places water and oranges for the Seven Stars [. . .] prepares her mother’s body prior to cremation and performs a proper rite of mourning in accordance with” (Lee 452) her mother’s instructions. Beccah, thus, performs her “shamanistic rite” for her mother who was both a *yongson* and survivor of the military sex slavery, thereby assisting her spirit’s transition to the other world.

In addition, Beccah further fulfils her shamanistic duty in the final revelation scene in Chapter 17, this time by literally attending her dead mother’s tape-recorded message where “Akiko” reveals her past and gives an account of having been forced to serve as a military sex slave for Japanese soldiers. Attending her dead mother’s “grievances,” Beccah not only records them, but as an obituary writer for a local newspaper, she further “announces the funeral service” to give “a rite for proper mourning” (Lee 452). While it is

significant that Keller makes Beccah a professional obituary writer, Beccah imagines and writes her mother's life story and makes it public. Beccah's shamanistic act of "remembrance" thus becomes a means to "write [the] names" of the victims of sexual enslavement (where her mother is an epitome) and "to remember" them. As the shaman attends and delivers the messages of the dead, Beccah fulfils those duties, performing the rites which Induk has demanded in the above quote, to write their names and remember them.

Significantly, then, Beccah's act of writing her mother's obituary becomes parallel to the author's act of writing her novel, where both women enact the mediums to attend, bear witness, and transmit the stories of military sex slavery. Notably, Keller herself uses the metaphor of shamanism to describe her creative engagement, as she explains in an interview how she sometimes felt like having "entered a type of trance" where she "was almost like a medium" (1997a) to transcribe the voices and experience of those women. To the extent that attending the voice of the dead is what Keller does in her novel, her text serves as a testimony that records their experience and stories. Indeed, speaking of the determination for her novel to enact the witness for this atrocious history, Keller asserts how the victims of Japanese military sex slavery "will not die unknown and unrecognized, lost in history" (2003a, 155). In this way, Beccah's writing her mother's obituary and Keller's writing her novel become metaphorical acts of "shamanism," where the novel itself practices the shamanistic act of attending the voice of the dead, bearing witness to and passing on their stories by attending their *han* and by "writ[ing] their names and remember[ing] them."

In this respect, the novel can also be said to demonstrate the two Korean American daughters' attempts to recuperate, through shamanism, their mother/ Other's languages which have been previously dismissed in the novel as "the language of the animal" (*CW* 116). (Note in the above quote, Induk refers to her body, left putrefied in the open air, as that of "an animal" [*CW* 96].) Significantly, in the final revelation scene where Beccah discovers her mother's cassette tape and listens to her voice, the daughter tries to make sense of what she initially thought were just pounding noises. Beccah recounts that when she first began playing the tape, she could identify "only senseless wails, a high-pitched keening relieved by the occasional gunshot of drums" (*CW* 191), until she realizes those sounds actually constitute her mother's testimony, her "singing words, calling out names, telling a story" (*CW* 191). Like Naomi in Kogawa's *Obasan* who strives to "hear" the silent language of "Asia"/ Other through her deceased mother's unspoken voice ("Mother, I am listening. Assist me to hear you" [*Obasan* 288]), Beccah/ Keller also attend the inaudible language voiced by "Akiko," as they seek to hear this Korean woman whose language Beccah had previously failed to hear. Shamanism thus provides a (culturally rooted) means for Beccah and Keller to attend the language of the Other/ "Asia" and to retrieve the voices of those Korean women who did not have the luxuries to tell their stories alive.

"Attending"/ Mediating/ Possessing the Language of the Other

While the ending chapters illustrate how Beccah performs her shamanistic rite for her dead mother, where shamanism contributes to the understanding of "Asia"/ Other's language, these chapters also reveal a more problematic aspect of the novel's premise of

attending the language of “Asia”/ Other. In particular, I would like to draw my attention to the above mentioned revelation scene in Chap. 17 where Beccah listens to and deciphers her dead mother’s language. While critics rarely discuss this scene as Beccah practicing her shamanistic act of mediation, it is here she literally attends and mediates the voice of the dead. But first, I will discuss what I conceive to be a problem in this scene where Beccah “attends” her dead mother’s language.

To recapitulate, in the scene in question, Beccah plays and listens to the cassette tape her mother left for her, a tape which was composed “primarily in English” (*CW* 192) with occasional references in Korean. In her endeavor to decipher its content, Beccah transcribes the words she hears first in her notebook and then “[n]eeding a bigger canvas” (*CW* 192), on a bed sheet; she turns up the volume “as if the louder the words, the easier [she] would be able to understand the story” (*CW* 191). As Beccah slowly begins to identify the content, she realizes that her mother is performing a “death anniversary *chesa*” (*CW* 192) for her own mother as well as other women whose “*true names unknown, dead in the heart*”: “*Induk. Miyoko. Kimiko. [. . .] So many bodies left unprepared, lost in the river*” (*CW* 192, *emph. original*).

As Beccah continues to listen to her mother’s chanting, however, she comes across a Korean word she does not recognize. In the following passage, Keller describes how Beccah manages to deal with the problem:

Wishing I could turn up the volume even more, I added my own voice, an echo until I stumbled over a term I did not recognize: *Chongshindae*. I fit the words into my mouth, syllable by syllable, and flipped through my Korean-English dictionary, sounding out a rough, possible translation: Battalion slave.
(*CW* 193, *emph. in the original*).

In the passage, Beccah performs her miraculous feat, as she identifies, immediately and almost automatically, the clusters of (what to her unfamiliar) sounds “*Chongshindae*” as constituting one distinct term which indicates her mother’s wartime role. This rather facile solution which Keller provides for Beccah’s encounter with a foreign word is surprising, I think, if one has experience struggling with a foreign language, having engaged in dictation exercises, for instance. In fact, this is particularly true when the term “*Chongshindae*,” which literally translates as “Voluntarily Committing Body Corps,” is not an ordinary noun but an historically specific proper noun which Japanese coined to designate the Koreans whom they forced into sexual enslavement for the Japanese army.¹⁶ However, what I intend to problematize here is not just the (in)accuracy or (im)plausibility of the literal dictation practice. Rather, what I find disturbing is the *ease* with which Keller permits Beccah to locate the correct meaning of the word in (what to her *is*) a foreign language, as Beccah finally succeeds in hearing her mother’s speech. I believe something deeper than a mere linguistic practice is at issue.

To underscore my point, I would like to compare this scene with a similar episode rendered by another Asian American author. In her novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), Maxine Hong Kingston describes how her Chinese American narrator struggles to detect the meaning of a Chinese word “Ho Chi Kuei,” which her mother and other immigrants use to address the U.S.-born generation. Knowing no Chinese whom Maxine “can ask without getting [herself] scolded or teased” (*TWW* 204), she decides to find its meaning “in books.” In the following quote, Maxine gives a whole list of “possible translations” she can come up with:

So far I have the following translations for *ho* and/or *chi*: “centipede,” “grub,” “bastard carp,” “chirping insect,” “jujube tree,” “pied wagtail,” “grain sieve,”

“casket sacrifice,” “water lily,” “good frying,” “non-eater,” “dustpan-and-broom” (but that’s a synonym for “wife”). (*TWW* 204)

Maxine then becomes even unsure about the Romanization she has created and begins to ponder: “Or perhaps I’ve Romanized the spelling wrong and it is *Hao Chi Kuei*, which could mean they are calling us ‘Good Foundation Ghosts.’ The immigrants could be saying that we were born on Gold Mountain and have advantages” (*TWW* 204-205, *emph. original*). Kingston’s repeated use of the word “could” here indicates the prolonging sense of uncertainty that surrounds the “true meaning” of the term, as Maxine never reaches her final signified (or for that matter, even the signifier).

Certainly, it needs to be remembered that Korean language has an alphabet that is more phonetic than Chinese. Yet in the above quoted passage, Beccah recognizes, immediately and without any difficulties, the clusters of sounds “*Chongshindae*” as constituting one distinct term rather than, say, a few separate words. Beccah has no trouble detecting their boundary even though those sounds are unfamiliar to her. (And this despite her rather poor command of Korean.) Moreover, unlike Maxine, Beccah does not even doubt her discovery, the stability of her signified after she finds out (what she thinks is) the correct meaning of the term. In this sense, it is an almost automatic rendition and translation, where Keller’s episode assumes a one to one direct correspondence of meanings, where the meanings are also fixed and stable.

To reiterate my point, what I problematize here is not the veritability of the actual dictation practice but the assumption that is embedded in Keller’s rendition of the episode. Unlike Kingston, Keller’s passage shows no uncertainty, trace of struggle, or ambiguity on the side of the Korean American daughter as she attempts to reach out and make sense of her ancestral heritage, which is here metonymically represented by the term she deciphers.

Beccah can figure out the “true” meaning of that term simply by “flipping through [her] Korean-English dictionary.” As Abena P. A. Busia eloquently puts it in her critique of multiculturalism and its professed goal for “a pluralistic world,” she writes: “Embedded in that assumption is [. . .] that [other] cultures can be known, quantified and somehow acquired, and that each cultural component of that pluralistic whole is in itself unified and representable” (1998, 276). Indeed, I believe it is important to remember that the kind of uncertainty Kingston’s narrator fumbles at is the uncertainty she feels toward her ancestral/ Other culture, which escapes the complete knowledge and understanding, hence the acquisition and representation, of an Asian American subject. Conversely, Keller’s episode equates “Asia” to an object that is “knowable.”

Or put differently, what I find problematic about this episode is the way Keller smoothes over the “noise” (so to speak) of her “Asian”/ Other’s language by eliminating elements that are unintelligible to the American daughter: here the Korean word Beccah “does not recognize” and “stumbles over” (*CW* 193) in her mother’s speech. And this, I insist, *despite* Keller’s laudatory effort to subvert the dominant notion that Asian languages constitute such unintelligible noises. As I discussed earlier, Keller juxtaposes “Akiko’s” two languages: the “fluent if simple” English and “the ‘comic,’ pidginized ‘Asian English’” (Wong 1995, 189) so that the former can subvert the hegemonic association of Asian speech with the latter, which is often perceived as noises. In this respect, it is worth recalling Sau-ling Wong’s remark once again: the Asian American author’s use of the standard English speech instead of what is considered as the “noises” is intended to “better articulate” the Asian immigrant characters’ subjectivities, do “justice to their native intelligence, and restore them to the dignity they deserve” (1995, 189).

While I am in full agreement with Wong's analysis, I nonetheless believe that Keller's construction of "Akiko's" inner thought in the standard, "fluent if simple" English also works to *domesticate* her language, eradicating the noises or what remains (inevitably) incomprehensible in her (as the Other's) speech. To borrow Loretta Todd's critique of mainstream Canadian writers' appropriations of First Nation's stories, the "threat of difference is disavowed" (30). Similarly, the sense of alterity and heterogeneity that *necessarily* composes "Akiko's" voice as an Asian immigrant woman becomes erased and contained, as her language is reduced to an object available for total knowledge by an (Asian) American subject. In this way, while Keller employs two apparently opposed linguistic styles, the pidginized *and* standard English speeches, to depict "Akiko's" linguistic practice, those two representations ultimately comprise different sides of the same coin. To the extent that Keller's novel represents "Akiko's" language as that which is only (too) easily comprehensible to the general American readers, both representations embody an instance of what Gayatri Spivak called "selfing Other" (1985).

To elaborate upon this point, David Palumbo-liu offers an insightful argument. In *Asian/ American: Historical Crossing of a Racial Frontier* (1998), Palumbo-liu discusses how the mainstream U.S. culture lauds the second generation, U.S.-born and -bred Asian American writers as "Fresh Voices Above the Noisy Din" (qtd. from the *Time* magazine [June 3, 1991, pages 66-67]). That is, while literary texts by the U.S.-born and "better educated" writers are extolled as "'New works . . . [that] splendidly illustrate the frustration, humor and eternal wonder of the immigrant's life'" (qtd. from *Time*), texts by the "noisy din," the "uneducated, unassimilated, agrammatical writers," remain "ignored and marginalized by the culture industry" (1998, 410-411). As Palumbo-liu suggests, this

move “at once exploits its ‘exotic’ potential [. . .] put at a distance by focusing on the ‘educated’ second-generation writer’s representations of immigration” (1998, 411). Put in other words, the irregularities and aberrations—in short, the “noise”—of the immigrant writers’ voices and experience articulated in their “laborious, grammatically mangled, often malapropic English” to borrow Wong’s words (1995, 189) become smoothed over in the second-generation writers’ “translations” of their languages, as they are tamed and domesticated for the mainstream readers’ consumptions. Similarly, I argue that Keller’s “translation” of “Akiko’s” inner thought into the standard English speech, however well-intentioned, eliminates the Otherness of the Other (so to speak), as the novel assimilates her language, integrating what is *necessarily* and inescapably abject in her speech into the U.S. linguistic norm.

Indeed, if part of the problem Palumbo-liu delineates in the above is how the American-born and bred authors become the subject-agents speaking in *their* language for and on behalf of their Asian (m)others, it is useful to return to our previous consideration about Keller’s employment of a shamanistic metaphor to describe her and Beccah’s linguistic engagement with Other women. What are the ramifications *and problems* of Keller’s use of this metaphor to depict the Korean American daughter’s attending her “Asian”/ Other’s voice? While “shamanism” enables the American daughter to represent the voice of her Korean mother, does it also annul the difference between the Korean victim/ mother and the Korean American shaman/ daughter in terms of their languages, voices, and subjectivities? Put in other words, while the Korean American shaman-daughter “airs grievances” on behalf of her Korean victim-mother, does she

necessarily reproduce, as she translates, the Korean victim/ mother's voice and language ("what she said") as and into her own ("what [the daughter] heard")? The question that arises here then is how the novel maintains its initial premise of non-equivalence between the Other's language/ enunciation ("what she said") and the American daughter/ listener's reception/ reproduction of it ("what they heard").

In her article "Conjuring 'Comfort Woman': Mediated Affiliations and Disciplined Subjects in Korean/ American Transnationality" (2003), Laura Kang expresses her objection to the act of (shamanistic) re-presentation; she critiques how a Korean American playwright Chungmi Kim is praised by the mainstream U.S. media as "'dedicated to her role as the voice of the silent comfort women.'" ¹⁷ Kang is particularly disapproving of the idea of "giving voice" which is inherent in the role of a (shamanistic) medium, as she insists that such an act is predicated upon the figuration of "'comfort women' as voiceless and needing to be given a voice"; it in turn "works to necessitate and authorize the Korean American writer/ artist/ scholar to assert her own voice or vision" (2003, 31). (Indeed, one wonders if a voice is given through shamanism, *whose* voice is it that is spoken?) By presuming to speak for the Korean victims, the self-assigned Korean American shaman can convey the victims' voice by "asserting," if not inserting and imposing her own voice onto the (silenced) voice of the victims. As a result, the daughter/ author/ shaman may take over and hijack the voice of the Other women/ victims. (In Keller's novel, the Korean mother who is dead when she airs her grievances cannot tell the story without the mediation of her American daughter, who plays the heroine-savior.)

Perhaps it will be useful here to recall Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* to make a brief comparison with the way Kogawa handles the issue. As I have discussed in my previous

chapter, Kogawa's novel, which deals with Japanese Canadian internment during World War II, presents the internee's body as constituting an irreducible and irreproducible site of both pain *and* agency. As Naomi articulates her body's refusal to verbally replicate her experience and pain during the uprooting—"The body will not tell" (*Obasan* 235)—, her body becomes the primary site of significations of her wound (psychological and otherwise) on which her experience is inscribed (like a scar). In this way, Kogawa's novel privileges the original wounded body as the site of knowledge which others (impossibly) need to inhabit in order to truly know the pain and suffering of that body. In contrast, Keller's use of the shamanistic metaphor seems to impart her idea that the pain and suffering of the victims are transferable to a different body—here the shaman's which can house the victims' pain and become the site of its enunciation.

What is problematic about Keller's rendition here, then, is that this transference takes place despite, as Lisa Yoneyama phrases it, "the absence of experiential truth and the apriority of identity" (2003, 71) on the side of the Korean American daughter-shaman. Or to put in Kang's words, the Korean American daughter's assumption of the victims' voice masks "the insurmountable alienation" which the daughter suffers "from her Korean immigrant mother's past experiences as a sex slave for the Japanese army and the consequent inaccessibility of that history for this 'Korean American' daughter" (2003, 27). Indeed, I believe this is where the problem of shamanistic metaphor articulates itself in this novel. Assuming a direct continuity between the Korean American shaman and the Korean victims, thus collapsing the boundary between the subject and object of enunciation, representation, and identification, the novel's employment of the shamanistic metaphor seems to occlude "the inaccessibility" for Beccah, the Korean American

daughter to this particular experience and knowledge as well as to the original pained body on which the victim's experience is inscribed and scarred.

Perhaps, some critics may contest my reading of shamanism. As Kathleen Brogan (1998) and Tina Chen (2005) point out in their readings of Keller's novel, shamanism as an indigenous Korean cultural practice assumes that the shaman relinquishes and yields her body, subjectivity, and voice to the spirit who possesses her.¹⁸ In short, it is the spirit of the victim, rather than the shaman, who takes on the position of a speaking subject. Certainly, it is not my intention to either challenge or support this idea. What I question here rather is the non-Korean authors' unwarranted use, if not appropriation, of this culturally rooted Korean practice to describe their artistic engagement and to convey their sense of identifications with the victims. As Kang suggests, shamanism as a metaphor is often deployed to connote a strong and intimate "sense of connection" (2003, 29) which several Korean American cultural producers have felt and claimed with the Korean victims. Similarly, I would like to emphasize once again that shamanism in Keller's novel operates as a literary device, reflecting the author's strong need and desire, to retrieve and represent the voices of those victims who do not have the luxuries to tell their stories alive.

Certainly, I do not intend to deny those motives that lie behind the Korean American author-daughters' shamanistic identifications. Yet an uncritical and unproblematic identification which they assume with the victims and articulate through their use of shamanistic metaphor can mask their subjective interventions, where it is the self-assumed American shaman/ author/ daughter who acts as the subject-agent speaking *for* those "Other women."¹⁹ As Kang states, "a seemingly shared identity or experience is a particularly interested and constrained—that is, mediated—affiliation between a subject

and object of representation/ knowledge production”; as such, she insists on the need to interrogate “the presumed intimacies and seeming transparencies that identification enables, but also the critical knowledges that it can eclipse” (2003, 37). In the end, such an unexamined identification elides, on the side of Korean American daughter-shamans, their American part of subjectivity and interventions. As Kandice Chuh sates, Keller’s novel, which assumes an unproblematic continuity between Korean and Korean American women, “inclines toward eliding [. . .] specificity in favor of foregrounding [. . .] women’s strength across space and time” (2003, 19). The problem of shamanism in Keller’s novel as I see it is that it can act as a powerful “feminist” metaphor for such transnational “female” bonding.

Here I would like to recall once again my previous discussion of Keller’s “translation” of “Akiko’s” speech into the standard American English, and compare it briefly with the representations Kogawa and Yamada give to their Asian (m)others’ voices. In their efforts to portray “Asia”/ Other’s languages, all three authors juxtapose their (m)others’ pidginized English (the external or conventional perceptions) with other forms of linguistic representations which they deploy in order to challenge the dominant North American view regarding the immigrant “Asian” (wo)men’s speeches. For instance, while Keller portrays her Korean mother’s inner subjectivity, emotion, and “humanity” in the standard English narrative, Kogawa conveys her “Asian” characters such as Obasan and Uncle’s inner psyche and emotional experience through the non-verbal languages they employ.²⁰ As I have discussed in the previous chapter, Kogawa renders Obasan’s silent psychic pain and trauma through the food she accumulates in the fridge. Similarly, Uncle’s silent protest and other emotions are articulated in her novel through the

indigenous land which Uncle chooses for the site of his mourning for his sister-in-law who died of the atomic bomb exposure in Nagasaki. In other words, instead of translating Obasan and Uncle's inner psyches into the first-person standard English narratives—i.e. into the author/ narrator's own language, as Keller does—, Kogawa delivers them as Naomi, a second-generation Japanese Canadian protagonist, hears *and* fails to hear them. In this way, Kogawa undermines the notion of complete accessibility of their language for the Canadian daughter.

Equally significant is that the same differentiation occurs at the end of both novels when Beccah and Naomi “attend” the ancestral voices of their “Asian” mother and grandmother respectively. Unlike Beccah who with the help of her “Korean-English dictionary” decodes all of her mother's Korean words, Naomi acknowledges the presence of many Japanese words which she finds incomprehensible in Grandma Kato's letters. As she says: “Many of the Japanese words sound strange” (*Obasan* 279). Thus, unlike Beccah who seemingly demonstrates a complete grasp of her (m)other's words, Kogawa's novel acknowledges the elusive nature of the Other's language where “Asia” for her signifies that which the Canadian daughter cannot fully capture and decipher. In this sense, it is also worth recalling that unlike Keller who literally reproduces “Akiko's” tape-recorded words in her novel, Kogawa never *directly* cites the content of Grandma Kato's letters. This absence seems striking in the novel which is filled with such epistolary citations. Indeed, it seems no accident that this single item of correspondence which does not appear verbatim in her novel are the letters written in Japanese. In this way, Kogawa underscores her belief in the unrepresentability of the Other's language, which never becomes fully “accessible” either to the Japanese Canadian protagonist or to the readers.

Worth exploring also here is how Yamada and Keller compare with each other in rendering their “Asian” immigrant mothers’ voices. While both Keller and Yamada’s daughters translate into English their mothers’ linguistic articulations which they both initially dismissed as “noise” (or non-language), the end products of their “translations” are quite different. Unlike Keller who, as I said, smoothes over, and domesticates, “the noise” of her mother’s language into the standard—“fluent if simple”—English narrative, Yamada’s daughter’s final “translation” of her mother’s Japanese words into English acknowledges, as it retains, its original Otherness and noise. As I have discussed in Chapter One, Yamada’s short story “Mrs. Higashi Is Dead” (1988) describes the shift which a second-generation Japanese American protagonist goes through vis-à-vis her perceptions of her immigrant mother’s speech. While the daughter initially dismisses her mother’s words describing her neighbor woman’s suicide “‘*Higashi no okusan shinde shimatta*’” (DR 65), the daughter critiques her mother’s language which she insists has no English equivalent. She asserts: “‘Do you know [. . .] ‘that in English there would be no other way of talking about [Mrs. Higashi’s] suicide except to say “she killed herself”’” (DR 66). The daughter’s critique is based on her belief that the Japanese “way of talking,” unlike its English counterpart, deprives the suicidal woman of her subjectivity and agency.

What is notable about the story, then, is that it describes the process by which Yamada’s daughter begins to question and reflect upon her *own* discursive practice, her normalized view that the English “way of talking” (“she killed herself”), which presumes the subject’s willed and liberal agency, should be the norm and global standard. Further significant then is that the daughter gives a *literal* “translation” of her mother’s words as “Mrs. Higashi is dead”—which Yamada uses for the title of her story—instead of

transposing her mother's words into what she initially believed to be the normal—"fluent if simple"—English sentence: "Mrs. Higashi killed herself." In this way, the daughter's translation demonstrates how she acknowledges the mother's language as what intervenes and destabilizes her own assumed linguistic, cultural, and epistemological norm: what she initially took as the universal truth that a suicide *must* occur as the result of the subject's willed action. To recall Palumbo-liu's term, Yamada's translation here inscribes and retains the "agrammaticality" of the original immigrant mother's enunciation, as it disrupts the grammar of the dominant language by inscribing on it the linguistic and epistemological interventions her mother makes. Compared with it, Keller's rendition of her mother's words into the standard English narrative does not quite destabilize the dominant norm where Beccah seems to assume that she can know and transpose her mother's language into her own without disrupting her own discursivity and norm.

What warrants attention, and challenges this above reading of mine, however, is that Keller's novel does place in question the transparency and centrality of Beccah's vision—and by extension her discursive practice and translational act—, as the novel in its several meta-narrative moments implies how Beccah's portraits of her mother are products of her subjective vision. To provide one example, Beccah tells how she "often looked at [her] mother through the finger frame" she made, as she was instructed to do so by her "high school art teacher": "I liked the way my fingers captured [my mother], making her manageable. Squinting my eye through my lens, I could make her any size I wanted" (*CW* 198). In this way, Keller underscores the constructed nature of Beccah's, and by extension possibly her own, portrait of "Akiko." The novel hints at the gap, the non-equivalence,

between “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo as an ontological being and “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo as a representation, just as it had made a similar distinction in linguistic terms between “Akiko’s” language/ enunciation (“what she said”) and the listeners’ perception and representation of it (“what they heard”).

Notable in this sense is that the novel discloses parts of “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo which Beccah never knew, including her past and her “true name.” Keller thus underscores the unreliability of Beccah’s perception and understanding of her mother. After “Akiko’s” death for instance, Beccah discovers, to her surprise, the aspects of her mother which she had never known while she was alive: that “Akiko” was a “tough” business woman instead of being a “puppet” on Aunt Reno’s strings, as Beccah had imagined. As Aunt Reno, who was “Akiko’s” business partner, tells Beccah, her ““maddah was one survivah”” (*CW* 203), which was ““her other self”” (*CW* 206) that Beccah (and for that matter the reader) never knew. In this sense, it is interesting that Beccah shouts to Aunt Reno who has dressed “Akiko’s” corpse in a gaudy dress and make-up for the preparation of “Akiko’s” funeral: ““This isn’t my mother. [. . .] ‘This is you. Just like it’s always been you’”” (*CW* 199). The novel invites a question if this critique also applies to Beccah’s own practice, her discursive fashioning of her mother.

In this way, the novel seems to suggest two contrary and opposing readings. On the one hand, it seems to imply, as I have discussed, that Beccah *has* ultimately reached and attained the “truth” in terms of her Korean mother and her ancestral culture, just as she has reached the final signified of her mother’s word “*Chongshindae*.” (In this sense, the Korean word, her mother, and “Asia”/ Other are all assumed to be knowable.) On the other hand, by disrupting the centrality of Beccah’s vision and underscoring her

perceptual limitations—her inability to know/ see/ hear her mother as she “truly” is—, Keller highlights the gap, the non-equivalence, between the mother as she is and as Beccah understands her. In suggesting the distinction between the two, Keller puts Beccah’s claim to knowledge in question.

To attempt for the exploration of this reading, I would like to return to the previous episode regarding Beccah’s decoding of her mother’s Korean word. In particular, I would like to consider why Keller lets “Akiko” leave that one crucial (Korean) term “*Chongshindae*” untranslated even though she makes her compose the whole message in English for her American daughter. I would like to offer and explore two possible readings. On the one hand, it is useful to consider how this final episode resonates with Keller’s deployment of the story of “Princess Pari,” a Korean epic song whose adapted version “Akiko” tells Beccah in the novel (*CW* 48-50). As Keller offers her version of the story, Princess Pari rescues her mother trapped in a fish body by recognizing her through “the river song” the mother sings, which the princess remembers from the time she was in her womb. Upon hearing this story, Beccah declares to “Akiko” that she will be like Princess Pari: “You sing that song, and no matter what, I’ll find you [. . .]. I’ll be like Princess Pari, and I’ll rescue you” (*CW* 50).

Read in this way, Beccah’s successful decoding of her mother’s Korean word in the tape-recorded message suggests that like Princess Pari in the story, Beccah identifies the “river song” her own mother sings, here by recognizing the right meaning of her message. Consequently, Beccah, like the princess, passes “the test” and proves herself to be a filial daughter-rescuer. As Kun Jong Lee tells us, the “river song,” which is Keller’s addition to the original epic, was a popular Korean folk song of the 1930s, which reflected the

“feelings of sorrow, frustration, and resentment” (439) the Korean people felt under Japanese colonial rule. Worth recalling then is that “Akiko’s” mother, who was a student protestor during the March First movement, also sang the “river song,” which she passed on to her daughter, “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo. As “Akiko” says: “A song [my mother] gave to me and one that I will give to my daughter” (*CW* 71). While the river song thus serves as a tool that connects the mothers and daughters in their resistance to Japanese colonial domination, it also serves as a symbol of this mother-daughter bonding.²¹ Earlier I referred to a tendency to glorify and romanticize the Asian North American daughter’s bonding with her Asian mother, which often serves as a symbol of her reconstructed ties with her ancestral culture. Keller’s rendition of the Princess Pari episode celebrates and idealizes this trans-Pacific mother-daughter bonding even to a degree to make it overcome any material, including linguistic, barriers. We may surmise that Keller lets “Akiko” leave that Korean term untranslated so that Beccah, the American daughter, can figure out its meaning and prove herself to be a filial daughter and heir.

In this respect, it is useful to recall once again Keller’s rendition of “Akiko’s” inner thought in the standard American diction, and consider how this representational act relates to, as it works in parallel with, Beccah’s successful decoding of her mother’s Korean word which she hears in the tape-recorded message. As Beccah feels she can reach and identify the final signified of her mother’s Korean tongue through the English translation, Keller also seems to assume she can know and represent the Korean woman’s inner psyche in her own standard American English, thus again through the “translation.” Both seem to assume that their objects/ Others are ultimately knowable and accessible to the American daughters.

What disrupts this reading is that the novel, as I said, repeatedly returns to the gap, the disparity between the mother “as she is” and the daughter’s perception of her, while Keller underscores the daughter’s constant failure to reach the final and complete “truth” and signified about her mother through the various facts Beccah discovers about “Akiko.” Indeed, at the novel’s very end, when confronted with her mother’s corpse and asked by Reno ““Who you see?,”” Beccah professes her uncertainty about “Akiko’s” “true identity” and responds ““I don’t know”” (*CW* 205). Similarly in the same scene, Beccah lets go her initial claim to *the* truth about her mother and admits that her knowledge and memory of her is a product of her subjective vision, constituting only one version of “Akiko”: ““how *I* knew her or want to remember her”” (*CW* 205, *emph. added*). The passage thus resonates with the earlier schoolyard scene, as well as several self-reflexive meta-narrative moments in the novel, where Keller draws a distinction between Beccah’s perception of her mother and the “original” ontological “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo. The novel maintains its initial premise of unknowability about the Other, whose being Keller distinguishes from her and Beccah’s representation.

Read in this light, the mother’s untranslated use of the Korean word in her message conveys a rather different meaning and interpretation, one that interrogates and problematizes the assumed continuity and equivalence between the original Korean term (“what [‘Akiko’] said”) and Beccah’s English translation (what Beccah “heard” and understood of it). To borrow Abena Busia’s insightful reading, what the untranslated word indicates in this sense is its very untranslatability: that is, the word “*Chongshindae*” remains untranslated in the mother’s message precisely because it is for “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo untranslatable. The term inscribes on it the suffering “Akiko” had gone through as a

military sex slave for the Japanese army, which is inaccessible to the daughter—or for that matter, anyone else who does not have the same experience.²² Keller’s use of the *original* Korean word then points to the non-equivalence between the two terms, “*Chongshindae*” (“what [the mother] said”) and what the daughter claims to have understood through her English translation, the “battalion slave” which does not carry the same material history or pain. The literal linguistic difference between the English and Korean words then points to the more symbolic difference of meanings as well as the term’s inaccessibility in its original form and meaning to those (including Beccah) who do not share “Akiko’s” experience as “*Chongshindae*.”

In this sense, the use of the Korean word serves as an implicit critique of Beccah’s initial claim to knowledge and full comprehension. While the American daughter initially believes that she can (and has) understand her mother’s experience, suffering, and pain through her successful decoding of her mother’s word—which Beccah assumes to be translatable and knowable—the novel once again reminds and highlights the gap between the original Korean word (“what she said”) and the daughter’s reception and translation of it into English (“what they heard”), just as it has maintained the disparity between “Akiko” as an ontological being and how Beccah, the author, and the reader understand her. This then seems to be the place where the mother’s Korean voice intervenes into the daughter’s, distinguishing itself from that of the Korean American daughter-shaman’s, inasmuch as the mother speaks the language which is inaccessible to the American daughter-shaman. To the extent that the novel depicts how the mother’s Korean language erupts and intervenes into the Korean American author-daughter’s text in the form of the Other that is

untranslatable, this then also (at least) implicitly puts in question Keller's own rendition of "Akiko's" inner psyche in English.

In so arguing, however, I do not intend to deny my previous reading where I argued how the daughter-author's efforts to attend the Other's language can risk turning into an act of possession and owning. Rather I believe that the novel depicts the Korean American daughter-author's desire for and claim to her knowledge about the Other/ "Asia" while *simultaneously* placing such desire and claim in question.

Conclusion

“Almost Words”: Re-narrating “Asia” in Asian North American Literature

“Why won’t you talk?” I started to cry. [. . .] “And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? That’s all you are if you don’t talk. If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality. You’ll have no personality and no hair. You’ve got to let people know you have a personality and a brain.”

The Woman Warrior (1976, 180).

Sounds did come out of her mouth, sobs, chokes, noises that were almost words.

The Woman Warrior (1976, 178).

In a famous schoolyard episode in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), Maxine Hong Kingston’s heroine-narrator declares as above to her “silent” Chinese classmate, who, as Sau-ling Wong suggests, constitutes the child Maxine’s “racial shadow” (1993)—her abject “Asian” other who also comprises her self.¹ As “Maxine” forces this silent Chinese girl to speak, she grounds her claim on the following: “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality” (*TWW* 180). This episode encapsulates important issues surrounding Asian North American literature: namely, those of language, Otherness (both internal and external), acts of projection and disowning vis-à-vis “Asia,” and the assumption that the “legitimate” speech constitutes a means and basis for claiming one’s personality, intellect (“a brain”), political identity (hence the slogan “breaking silence”), if not humanity itself.

What is striking about the above episode to me, however, is that Kingston’s protagonist, the child Maxine recognizes the near-linguistic significance of the Chinese girl’s sobbing (and other sounds)—as “almost words” (*TWW* 178)—, yet refuses to accept them as the legitimate expression of her emotions or the articulation of her subjectivity. Indeed, particularly important is that this episode appears in the book’s final chapter in

which Kingston interrogates the meanings and boundaries that constitute “a legitimate language”: words, non-words, and “*almost* words.” While Maxine insists on the articulation that takes place in a “legitimate,” i.e. dominant, linguistic form, the novel juxtaposes the no-name girl’s “almost words” with other “legitimate” and “illegitimate” (non)languages such as secret signs and codes (like the alleged raising of the flags in Chinatown [TWW 183]), unspoken communications which the Chinese employ (in part to evade the secrets and to prevent their exposure to immigration authorities), as well as “sounds” like “growls” (TWW 187) and “sobs” (TWW 178) which disrupt the clear boundaries between “language” and “non-language”— including Maxine’s own “quacking” (TWW 192). As Maxine refers to her own non-verbal articulation as an act of “self-assertion,” which she sees as (almost) an equivalent of words: “At times shaking my head no is more self-assertion than I can manage” (TWW 172). In addition, the novel makes it explicit how “silence” becomes produced as the minoritized Chinese *American* discourse within and in relation to the dominant U.S. society, where one’s linguistic enunciation, or its failure, emerges in accordance with the existing structures and operations of power. In this way, Kingston places her protagonist’s dismissal of (what Maxine deems as) “non-words” within the larger framework in which the author and her narrator explore the meanings and boundaries of “a legitimate language” while problematizing those very ideas and conceptions.

I begin my concluding chapter with this famous, indeed classical episode in Asian North American literature because it sums up one of the major concerns which I have explored in my project. That is, my dissertation argues, as it has looked at the way this classical scene becomes *re-staged* in my three authors’ works as each author depicts her

Asian North American daughter's interactions with her mother's (non)languages which the daughter, like Maxine, initially failed to attend and thus dismissed as noise and/or silence. While one can argue that those "Asian" mothers embody different manifestations and configurations of "racial shadows" for the American/ Canadian daughters, each mother's utterance destabilizes the daughter's normative Eurocentric perceptions. The mother's language challenges the view which the daughter initially held, that the constitution of one's subjectivity depends upon the acquisition of "legitimate" speech, a belief which can be summarized in Maxine's "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality"—even while Kingston also destabilizes the notion of a singular language in depicting Maxine's insistence on the need to "talk."

As I argue that each of my three authors revisits this classical moment in Asian North American literature, it is important that all three re-interrogate the above equation in Kingston's text by attributing their protagonists' initial failures in deciphering (what to them constitutes) a non-language to their own illiteracies in the Other's languages. For instance, we recall how Kogawa's novel *Obasan* ascribes the mother's "silence," interpreted there as an absence of words, to a Sansei Japanese Canadian daughter Naomi's failure to read the letters written in Japanese. In this way, Kogawa shows how the Other's language, here Japanese, becomes relegated to "silence" (as linguistic absence) when the reader fails to possess a means to decipher the language of her Other. To this extent, it is also worth recalling Kogawa's insistence that "Obasan's hands make enormous speech" if the listener has "the capacity to hear" (1993a, 155). Kogawa conveys her belief that it is up to the recipient to "hear" those non-normative languages as equivalents of words. Similarly, Yamada states in her poem "Desert Run" (1988): "I was too young to hear

silence before” (*DR* 1). Yamada, like Kogawa, transfers the responsibility to decipher the language of the Other to the Asian North American recipient’s listening capabilities. Finally, Keller’s novel puts in question the U.S. American missionaries’ view that “Akiko”/ Soon Hyo is “able to speak only in the language of animals” (*CW* 16). While this is the perception both Beccah and the reader share in regard to the “Asian” immigrant woman speaking in her pidginized English, Keller suggests that it is the listener’s unfamiliarity with the Other’s language that relegates it to “the language of animals.” Consequently, these episodes suggest how “Asia” in the form of the (m)Other’s (non)languages intervenes and disrupts the Asian North American daughter-subjects’ normative Anglophonocentric assumption and linguistic practices while exposing their Eurocentric limitations.

Here I would like to emphasize that I do not suggest that Kingston’s text excludes a possibility of such interventions as Kingston, like my authors, interrogates the notion of “a singular language.” Nevertheless, I believe that my three authors’ re-working of this episode illustrates an important departure from Kingston’s novel where each author questions and revises Kingston’s belief that the constitution of one’s “personality” or subjectivity requires the acquisition of “proper speech” or else, as I shall elaborate later, the translation of an original enunciation into a dominant linguistic act/ form. Put in other words, while the Other’s language challenges Maxine’s idea of the singular language and linguisticity, it does not quite disrupt her normative linguistic view where Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior* at least, cannot quite seem to let go of the hierarchy between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” languages. Here in this text, Kingston believes in the need for the Asian American subjects to articulate in the dominant Anglophonocentric language

(or else have their articulation translated into it) in order to gain their “proper” social recognitions. In stark contrast, my three authors try to conceive and represent a form of subjectivity that becomes generated from the absence of “proper speech.” To borrow David Palumbo-liu’s words, while Kingston’s novel ultimately ends with Maxine’s “declaration of monolingualism”—where subjectivity becomes “evinced in language” and is achieved through the rejection of “the ‘bilingual split’” (1998, 405)—, my authors try to attend the (non)languages of the Other/ “Asia.” In turn, this act enables them to destabilize their singular perspectives, allowing them to interrogate their own monolingualist normality.

In this respect, it seems also worth considering that Maxine’s attempt to demarcate a line between “sanity” and “insanity” occurs along the subject’s access (or the lack thereof) to a dominant language. Notably, both Kingston and my three authors explore the relationship between (in)sanity and the subject’s (lack of) access to “proper speech.” Maxine states: “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves” (*TWW* 186). The quote suggests that Maxine does not seem to consider that insane people were unable to “explain themselves” only in the *official* language as Maxine fails to acknowledge how their “growling” (*TWW* 187) and “roaring” (*TWW* 187), sounds which “insane people” like Crazy Mary and “the mentally retarded boy” utter, constitute their acts of “talking.”² To be fair, I would like to emphasize that this limited notion and understanding of language becomes questioned later in the novel when Kingston describes how Maxine’s own speech becomes dismissed by her mother as an instance of “craziness” (*TWW* 200) and a deformity of speech (“whispering”). In this way, Kingston, like my authors, implies that

whether a particular enunciation can be considered as “legitimate language” or not depends upon the listener’s capacity to “hear.” Nevertheless, if Kingston ultimately questions Maxine’s initial claim that “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality,” the novel does not quite explore a form of “personality” or subjectivity that is generated from the absence of “proper speech”—except in the form of “madness.”

And it is precisely this delineation, I argue, that my authors attempt to construct, as they insist that these are the languages one need to attend. To recall one example, Kogawa deploys Obasan’s non-normative, non-verbal language as a means to question and problematize the traditional lingua-centric forms of expressions. As we have seen in Chapter Two, Obasan’s “(non)language of trauma” disrupts, as it points to the limitation of, the conventional form of linguistic articulations. Similarly, Kogawa’s novel delineates how Obasan and Uncle’s silence, which *speaks* where and what words cannot, points to (in Heather Zwicker’s words) “what exceeds the expressive possibilities of language” (1993, 150). In this sense, silence operates where language cannot, signifying precisely that which is *untranslatable* into a dominant language. In this way, Kogawa’s novel deconstructs the hierarchy between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” languages where the Other’s language allows her to question and challenge the dominant linguistic perceptions. In contrast, none of the figures who comprise Maxine’s “racial shadows”—Crazy Mary, the FOBs, or the mentally retarded Chinese boy—are given such agencies, subjectivities, or “voices,” as the sounds which they utter remain “noises” when those sounds fail to translate into a dominant/ recognizable language.

Or to look at this from a slightly different perspective, it is useful to consider how Kingston’s acts, ideas, and efforts of *translating* the Other’s language differ from those of

my authors'. Kingston ends *The Woman Warrior* with Maxine's talk-story on Ts'ai Yen, the second-century Chinese poetess, with the famous line of declaration: "It translated well" (209). By this line, Maxine/ Kingston asserts how Ts'ai Yen's song, which was articulated in a foreign tongue—the "singsong words" which her children initially found laughable (208)—, surpasses cultural and linguistic differences as it conveys the emotions which peoples share despite and across such differences. By suggesting how Ts'ai Yen's song conveys emotions which translate into other cultures—"sadness and anger" (209) or the sense of "forever wandering" (209)—, this then seems to be the solution which Maxine/ Kingston ultimately reaches at the end of their linguistic muddle. In other words, Kingston allows Maxine's linguistic dilemma to resolve as Ts'ai Yen's song transposes alien sounds into a universally recognizable and sharable form of emotions and experiences, where their "common humanity" transcends linguistic and cultural differences to acquire meanings and values. However, if "translation," which in this context signifies the correspondence of meanings across cultures and languages, becomes Kingston's way of resolving the dilemma, the question which arises here is: what happens to the Otherness of the original enunciation, to the "growls" and "quacking"? —the aberration, noise, or "madness"? (Do they become "translated"? If so, how?)

Put in other words, while Ts'ai Yen's song is recuperated in Kingston's novel because of the universal appeal it makes to different peoples (rather than its differences or abjectness), my three authors' acts of translation acknowledge the Otherness of the Other's language as they underscore what remains *untranslatable* in their acts and efforts of translation. As I have discussed in Chapter One, for instance, Yamada's attempt to translate the immigrant mother's language ("*Higashi no okusan shinde shimatta*") into

English (as “Mrs. Higashi is dead” rather than “Mrs. Higashi killed herself”) retains its original “agrammaticality.” Rather than converting the mother’s words into a standard, “fluent if simple” English sentence (Wong 1995, 189), Yamada offers that which disrupts the grammar of the dominant English language, as her translation acknowledges the Otherness, the aberration and/or noise, in the original enunciation.

Similarly, both Kogawa and Keller highlight the excess in the Other’s language that remains and cannot be translated. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, Kogawa does so by demonstrating the violence which the act of translation wields upon the original articulation. In the novel, Naomi’s translation of Grandma Kato’s letters describing her atomic bomb exposure erases the traumatic experience inscribed in the original enunciation, as Naomi’s retelling flattens the discursive chaos and confusion, the illegibility of the original letter, even though such linguistic incongruence is reflexive of the violence of the experience. In this way, Kogawa dramatizes the very impossibility *as well as* the imperative of the translational act. Likewise, Keller addresses the problem in her novel *Comfort Woman*. While the Korean American daughter comes up with an easy translation of the Korean word “*Chongshindae*” which the mother employs in her tape-recorded message, the novel suggests how the mother’s experience of pain and violence as a military sex slave which is inscribed in the original Korean term “*Chongshindae*” remains untranslated/ untranslatable in the English term into which the daughter converts the original word, insomuch as Keller emphasizes the non-equivalence between the mother’s word (“what she said”) and the daughter’s reception/ translation of it (“what [she] heard”). For Keller, the act of translation thus involves the gap between the

two. In contrast, Kingston's translation of Ts'ai Yen's songs does not seem to underscore such excess, noise, or aberrations that cannot—and remain untranslated.

Thus while all four authors stress the need to translate the Other's language into recognizable linguistic forms, only my authors emphasize the necessary *and* problematic aspects of translation. Put in other words, unlike Yamada, Kogawa, and Keller, Kingston's act of translation does not quite reclaim or recuperate "the noise" which is not incorporable into the mainstream U.S. culture. In effect, Ts'ai Yen's song loses its original agrammaticality, noise, or otherness (if not madness), and along with it the interventional power. To rephrase again, instead of conceiving an alien language as that which acquires *and* fails to acquire meanings as *both* noise and language as my authors do, Kingston's translational effort ends up instituting "a common language" where she tries to establish translatability without noise. To this end, one wonders if the novel's final line which asserts the possibility of translation among different cultures and languages suggests that the two disparate perspectives—one inscribed in the original articulation and the other on the receptive side—become "translated" into one. The act of translation in this sense can risk collapsing the difference.

In this respect, I believe it is important to recall that the act of attending the Other's language for my authors is also implicitly connected with their engagement with their nation: the efforts to obtain recognitions from the mainstream nation and to subvert the dominant narratives on procuring such recognitions. In other words, while my authors revise Kingston's cultural nationalist project of "claiming America" whereby a minoritized U.S. subject seeks her inclusion without radically disturbing the dominant U.S. cultural order, Yamada, Kogawa, and Keller utilize the "two perspectives" they gain in

order to destabilize their nation's dominant perspective and monolingualist normality. In contrast, the translated version of Ts'ai Yen's song in Kingston's novel does not seem to intervene or disrupt the dominant U.S. norm or language, as Kingston's idea of translation is predicated upon the premise of universalism. In this way, my authors not only continue the work which Kingston began in her foundational Asian North American literary text; they also revise and move beyond what appears to constitute Kingston's historical limitation at the time of her composition of *The Woman Warrior*.

Equally significant to recall in this sense is that Kingston's episode, Maxine's confrontation with the silent Chinese girl, has been read as what exemplifies the traditional Asian North American ambivalence toward "Asia," which is epitomized in the figures of the "racial shadow." As Sau-ling Wong, who coined the term, explains, "racial shadow" is a psychological operation of disowning, a "defense mechanism of repression and projection" (1993, 78) whereby "a highly assimilated American-born Asian is troubled by a version of himself/ herself that serves as a reminder of disowned Asian descent" (92). "Racial Shadow," thus, signifies the concept of a double, "the simultaneous sameness and difference" (Wong 84), the self that the Asian North American subject needs to dispossess. Significantly then, Yamada, Kogawa, and Keller are also re-narrating the terms of their engagements with their ancestral land as well as their "Asian-ness" which they inherit, as those (dis)inheritances are inscribed in this classical episode in Asian North American literature. As I suggested earlier, this schoolyard scene has been interpreted as a prime example of traditional Asian North American attitudes of disinheriting "Asia" which is carried out through Maxine's confrontation with her "racial shadow." To cite Wong's words again, the act of disowning "Asia" in the form of "racial shadowing" occurs as

“[o]ne of the bitterest Necessities for Asian Americans [. . .] having to contend with total devaluation of their Asian ethnicity” (77).

In this light, I would also like to emphasize that Kingston’s episode dramatizes what Anne Anlin Cheng called “the repetition of a violence (against an other that is also the self),” whereby a racially minoritized U.S. subject reiterates the violence of Othering, the imposition of the dominant norm, onto “an other that is also the self” (2001, 75), as the Asian North American subject identifies with the dominant pedagogical position. In the end, then, it is this vicious cycle of identifications and disidentifications that Yamada, Kogawa, and Keller are revising in their respective work, as they try to move out of its cycle, and to do it differently from the traditional Asian North American models of engagement with “Asia” as well as its forms of negotiations.

My own project, which began almost ten years ago, indeed, started with such a question with a reading of David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1986), a play which depicts a story of a French diplomat, Rene Gallimard who, through his encounter with his Other, confronts a reality which he thought he knew. The play dramatizes how his Other—an “Asian” man whom the protagonist believed to be his female Chinese lover—intervenes and disrupts the French protagonist’s normative perceptions and realities, one in which “the West” is equated to masculine and “the East” feminine (“being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man” [62], as the lover, Song Liling puts it in his famously quoted lines). My initial interest resided in exploring how this story, and its formula, applies not just to the mainstream white Westerners’ Eurocentric vision but to one of Asian North American subjects as well, particularly in their perceptions toward and encounters with

“Asia.” Just as Gallimard’s normative Orientalist vision has “blinded” him from perceiving Song’s “true” gender as Hwang dramatizes it in his play, my authors—Yamada, Kogawa, and Keller—portray their North American daughters’ initial failures, and their subsequent struggles, in recognizing their mother/ Other’s languages which do not conform to their Western norm.

Thus, initially, my project began aiming to explore the discourse of Orientalism and other rhetorics of alterities in Asian North American literature where I saw “Asia” being frequently perceived and constructed as their Other, what is to be disowned and discarded, or else owned, possessed, and/or appropriated. (After all, those two acts constitute different sides of the same coin.) While my initial interest, in other words, was to examine how the discourse of Othering and Orientalism is employed by and within the texts of U.S. and Canadian racial and ethnic minority authors, one of the issues which concerned me then was how these authors, who belong to racial minorities in their respective nation, reiterate the violence of Othering onto their own sets of Others when those Asian North American authors themselves are designated as such albeit in their U.S. and Canadian domestic contexts. To refer to Anne Anlin Cheng’s phrase again, I was interested in exploring “the repetition of a violence” which is carried out by an Asian North American subject “against an other that is also the self” (2001, 75), the vicious cycle of violence which Cheng argues is premised on the mechanism of “disidentification predicated on identification” (2001, 75).³ (Indeed, this is what characterizes Wong’s definition of “racial shadowing.”) In particular, I came to be interested in stories which not only reiterate the violence but struggle to move out of this cycle.

My dissertation traces the trajectories, the discoveries that I made along the way, the most important of which is a gradual recognition that there are far greater complexities in my authors' texts than I had initially presumed or been able to see. Put in other words, while my dissertation explores the Asian North American authors' endeavors to attend the non-normative "Asian languages" which manifest themselves as "noise" and/or "silence," I myself confronted the need to attend in my authors' texts what appeared to be similarly un-normative sounds—things that remain unsaid, unspoken, or cloaked—rather than dismiss those seemingly discordant sounds simply as non-existent or else as manifestations of their Orientalisms. I became aware of the need to attend the complexities—the contradictions, conflicts, and ambiguities—behind my authors' articulations, their seemingly Orientalist construction of "Asia" and/or their claims of their "nation" and "citizenship."

On a personal note, one of the things which assisted me toward this shift in perception was the perspectival shift that occurred on my side. While I was working on my dissertation, I gained a teaching position and returned to Japan, where I came to occupy a different positionality from the one I assumed in the United States. This physical and perspectival shift helped me look at U.S. racial minority issues in a strangely displaced manner: i.e. through the lens of, and in relation to, the racial and ethnic minority issues in Japan. Put in other words, this new location permitted me to look at the U.S. minority literature, and the experience inscribed in it, from the point of view of the racial *majority* (albeit in a different nation) whose perspective I assumed in Japan, as well as that of the marginalized population. The act of studying Asian North American literature, while

residing in Japan, allowed me to assume a position which is both inside and outside of each nation.

Initially, while I was in the United States, as a Japanese woman born and brought up in Japan, I was approaching Asian North American literature from the perspective of an “outsider” to the Asian North American community as well as to the dominant U.S. nation. On the one hand, this “external perspective” was useful in that it enabled me to see things where an “insider’s vision” may have barred the perception: how U.S. minority literature can figure its meanings in an international context especially when viewed from the non-Western positions. On the other hand, the outsider’s perspective also prevented me from having a more engaged understanding of their difficulties, the negotiations which these minority subjects need to make in their respective nation.

As I returned to Japan and began to look for “equivalents” and corresponding realities there—to consider how ethnic Koreans in Japan must negotiate their need to critique the dominant Japanese nation and to survive in the racist society—, however, I was forced to take on a more engaged look and analysis about the relationship which those racial minority subjects must assume vis-à-vis their dominant, imperial nation.⁴ I came to imagine, for instance, the difficulties Yamada must have gone through in reconfiguring Japanese Americans as dual subjects—as settlers of color *and* the victims of the same imperial force that made them the settlers—, as I think of similar difficulties and duality which Japanese atomic bomb victim-survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki must have gone through to come out and admit their participation in Japanese imperialism and militarism.⁵ Indeed, both cases illustrate the poignant difficulties of acknowledging “the complicities” when one also occupies the position of a victim. While this does not mean that one should

cease to explore the complex terms in which the racial minorities' claim of their "citizenship" occurs and operates within an imperial nation (either Japan or United States), recognizing such difficulties certainly encouraged me to strive for a critical engagement that is different from the one I assumed before. In this sense, the act of looking at Asian North American literature from the perspectives of both inside and outside of each nation proves to be useful in that this position, *at its best*, enables one to have two perspectives that can disrupt and destabilize each other. My dissertation has attempted and explored the possibility of such a reading, as it interrogates the question of what it means to read Asian North American literature from this particular perspective and what becomes visible from this location.

Two groups of people I have encountered along the way kept me going. The first consists of people who I discovered held similar interest in exploring Asian North American literature's, sometimes problematic, constructions of "Asia" including its participation in Orientalist and other rhetorics of alterities. At Women's Worlds 2005, the 9th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women which was held in Seoul, Korea in June 2005, for instance, the FSEL (Feminist Studies in English Literature) board, comprised of Korean feminist scholars, hosted several panels including one entitled "Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*."⁶ I was struck when several Korean women, one of whom being the moderator, raised a question regarding and contesting the historical representations of Korea in Keller's novel. Much like the case of "Kingston controversies" which erupted on her novel *The Woman Warrior* and its construction of China, what these women challenged was not so much the "(in)accuracies" of

representations or the actual (lack of) knowledge about this particular geographical and cultural site as *the degree of engagement* which the Asian North American author in question, Keller or Kingston, takes on with her object of representation. (How much research she had done in Korea was another question posed for the author by another, albeit Western, scholar.) To put in Laura Kang's words, what was being interrogated, I believe, was the assumption, the inherent "claim to know" (2001, 266) and represent one's ancestral land which Asian North American authors sometimes assume toward their objects of representation even though they as U.S. minority subjects may not always and necessarily be familiar with their materials.⁷

As the moderator, Professor Hyungji Park went on to explain the motivation behind her contestation, she stated how questions like hers, which usually do not become an issue within the U.S. Asian North American studies circles, may become a "relevant" topic of discussion with the physical and perspectival shift, to the extent that Asian North American literature becomes discussed in "Asia," here the peninsula. Indeed, I agree with Professor Park that such issues more often than not fail to provoke an exploration, or even attention, let alone the interrogation within the mainstream U.S. Asian North American studies. What Professor Park interrogated and critiqued then was the seeming fixity of assumptions and the taken-for-grantedness of their agendas, which scholars of U.S. Asian North American studies often presume in their interpretive practices and critical engagements with their objects of investigations. Her question, in turn, attempted to destabilize the normative ideas regarding what interpretive tools, practices, and assumptions are considered "(ir)relevant" in discussing Asian North American literature, while proposing a possibility, and asking the consequences, of approaching this literature

from a different positionality, physical and otherwise. Now I would like to make sure that I do not intend to essentialize or homogenize this perspective (indeed, there was a heated debate among the participants that followed). Nor do I suggest that any reading practice has an innate connection to the physical location of its occurrence. The panel, nonetheless, made me think about the possibility of interventions that can be made by re-situating Asian North American literature in a different physical location, in terms of questioning and re-visioning its interpretive assumptions often considered normative in the North American context.

Aside from the FSEL panel, I have also come to know people who engage in the explorations of Asian North American literature *both* as racial minority discourse and as part of the dominant Western, if not imperial, texts, as I met those people at conferences that were held in Japan and in North America, including the annual meetings of AAAS, the Association for Asian American Studies. Oftentimes, these people were “(East) Asians”—Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, etc.—*in* North America: i.e. “Asians” originally from “Asia” but residing or having resided in North America. (Judging from her accents, I presume that Professor Park also belongs to this category.) Unlike those “Asians in Asia” or Asian North Americans whose experiences and perspectives are limited either to the North American continent (where they are the racial minority) or to “Asia” (where many stay “safely ‘Asian’” within their respective nation as the racial majority—though of course this does not deny the presence of ethnic minority “‘Asians’ in Asia”), the kind of interest and perspective shared by those “Asians in North America” I came to know are generated from this doubly displaced position rather than the singular perspective which the aforementioned two groups tend to assume. Although I do not mean to homogenize the

interest that could be generated from this position or to assume an automatic link between one's position/ experience and her/his interpretive acts, I came to realize that a certain "shared" perspective or "common" interest could emerge vis-à-vis Asian North American literature from particular interstice, as these people explore the question of what it means to engage with Asian North American literature from this intersection. Their presence also confirmed my belief that issues and questions that arise from reading Asian North American literature from this "'Asian' in America" perspective need and deserve to be addressed even though our concerns rarely become an issue within mainstream Asian North American studies.

Alongside with the first group, however, I also had the luck to be acquainted with several Asian North American scholars who try to engage with their ancestral and other Asian lands differently from the previous and traditional models. In particular, I think of those Asian Americanists—Professors Stephen Sumida, Elaine Kim, Viet Nguyen— who, through their frequent visits and direct engagements with various Asian nations and peoples, try to learn about their Others by listening to their sometimes inaudible and incomprehensible voices and attending what might not always make sense to them. Rather than dismiss the realities which do not correspond with their desires and/or norms—as Song and Gallimard do—, these Asian North Americanists, like my authors, attempt to engage with their Others/ "Asia," thereby trying to construct a dialogue, albeit perhaps in their sometimes imperfect ways.

I was also inspired and encouraged by the intellectual and political presence of young postcolonially based Asian North American scholars in the United States. Although I know them only through their works, I learned much from the writings of Laura Hyun Yi

Kang, Kandice Chuh, Candice Fujikane, and others, who situate Asian North American studies within the global and international frames, thus exploring their complexities and contradictions. While such an effort may be best summarized by the term, what Kandice Chuh called “Asian American postcolonial studies” (1996, 2), their works also reflect the kind of change that has been taking place in the U.S. academy as well as Asian North American Studies over the past few decades. Closer to home, this dissertation would not have been possible without two such scholars on my committee, Professors Abena P. A. Busia and Shuang Shen who engage in U.S. racial minority, African and Asian American, studies with their distinctly postcolonial theoretical basis.

Of those North Americanists and their endeavors, I would like to end my work by referring to Risa Morimoto and Linda Hoaglund’s film, *Wings of Defeat (Tokko)* which was released in Japan and the United States during the summer of 2007 around the time of the 62nd anniversary of the end of the Asia-Pacific Wars—and four years after the outbreak of American War in Iraq. Morimoto, the director, is a second generation Japanese American woman born and brought up in New York, while Hoaglund, her co-producer, is a bilingual white American born and spent her adolescent years in Japan. The film tells the story of a U.S.-born and raised Japanese American woman, Morimoto herself, who begins to question the dominant U.S. constructions of Japanese kamikaze pilots (*tokkotai*) upon learning the fact that her uncle trained as one during World War II. Morimoto states, “Growing up in America, I never questioned that kamikaze were fanatics, suicide attacks, self-immolation” until she discovered that those words she “associate[d] with terrorists now appl[ied] to [her] own family” to the extent that her own “uncle Sunada Toshio trained as a kamikaze pilot.”

As Morimoto explains how she came across the fact in the spring of 2005 during her conversation with her cousin, she describes how her moment of discovery constituted a moment of disruption of her familiar U.S. norm and reality:

It just dawned on me at that moment [. . .] that all those negative American propaganda images of who these men were, suicide fanatics, these terrorists, and these dive bombers with no care for human life. This was something that was *atarimae* [taken for granted] for me. This was something that was, you know, I never questioned who these men were until my own uncle, someone from my own family had trained to be one. (Interview 2008)

Troubled by the gap between the two images—one she was brought up with in the United States where kamikaze are “suicide fanatics,” “terrorists,” and “dive bombers with no care for human life” (2008) and her own personal memories of her uncle as a kind and “good-natured” man—, Morimoto was also struck by the silence her uncle kept about his war-time mission until his death which took place twenty years before. She began her search which constituted the visits to Japan where she conducted an archival research as well as interviews with former kamikaze pilots and other Japanese, including her relatives, several scholars and journalists, and other parties involved: “the journey for me started there, started researching on the internet, and I started reading books and watching movies” (2008).

Consequently, *Wings of Defeat* demonstrates Morimoto’s efforts to “reframe one-dimensional images [she] had about who those men were,” as the Japanese American woman tries to decipher the meanings of her uncle’s, and his fellow pilots’, silences. Not surprising in this sense is that the film traces the perspectival shift which the filmmaker herself has gone through. *Wings of Defeat* opens with a familiar American image of kamikaze pilots, through the footage of kamikaze attack on the USS Drexler which was sunk by two kamikaze planes on May 28, 1945. While the footage is accompanied with

the testimonies given by some surviving members of the USS Drexler, the film moves on to juxtapose the U.S. veterans' stories with those of surviving Japanese kamikaze pilots, in order to provide their sides of the stories, thus to disrupt a singular vision.⁸

In one sense, I have found the film lacking in sufficient explorations of the complexities of history, the most obvious of which has to do with Japanese colonialism and military aggressions in "Asia." While their film makes only a brief reference to these histories within which the two authors situate kamikaze mission and operations, it risks reproducing the memories of Asia-Pacific Wars only in the binarized, U.S.-Japan, terms and relations. In particular, I was disappointed that *Wings of Defeat* does not deal with the contested issue of *Korean* kamikaze/ *tokko* pilots even though, according to a Japanese TV documentary *Arirang Tokkohei* (2008), out of 3,900 kamikaze pilots who died from the operation, seventeen were identified as being from the Korean peninsula.⁹ While many of the Korean *tokko* pilots, like their Japanese counterparts, were forced into volunteering for the mission, the stories of the former differ considerably from the latter inasmuch as the Korean soldiers were made to serve for the war whose victory would have only continued the subjugation of their home country. According to *Arirang Tokkohei*, some Korean pilots explicitly stated that they would not sacrifice their lives for the Japanese emperor; others allegedly volunteered because they did not want Koreans to appear cowardly in the eyes of the Japanese. Even after the war ended and to this day, many of the surviving Korean *tokko* pilots and the families of those deceased still suffer from their "disgraceful past" where many of them were perceived as traitors and collaborators of Japanese imperialism rather than its victims by their fellow country people. Their stories would

certainly put the one-dimensional, Japan-centered view of kamikaze/ *tokko* operations in question.¹⁰

On the other hand, Morimoto and Hoaglund's film, which makes a deliberate reference to "kamikaze" as "terrorists" while opening with a scene which shows explicit visual resonances with those of 9.11, is a barely disguised effort on the side of the two U.S. women to try to reach out and capture the absent images of the different kind of "suicide bombers" in the aftermath of American war in Iraq and its continued occupation. For instance, in its opening moments, the film quotes one survivor from the USS Drexler testifying in words that invoke the 9.11 attack: "Second one [plane] hit, then all of a sudden, a tremendous explosion." In the background of the film is a scene of the burned ruins of the ship, which is reminiscent of the similar scene of ruins of the collapsed and burnt to the ground World Trade Center buildings in the aftermath of the attack.

As Hoaglund further states how she and Morimoto draw deliberate parallels between the Asia-Pacific wars and the current American war in Iraq, she explains how they utilized the contemporary U.S. war terminology such as "homeland" in translating the Japanese phrase "*kuni no tame*" (for the sake of one's country/ "for our homeland") which appears in a famous Japanese military song "Doki no Sakura" cited in the film:

Instead of using the usual translational phrases such as "our country" or "our nation" for the phrase "*okuni no tameni*" [for the sake of one's country] in "Doki no Sakura," we used the contemporary U.S. war terminology such as "homeland," words which are supposed to be beautiful, words which the United States employs in order to justify and romanticize its war activities.

(My translation from her interview in Japanese.)

As Hoaglund explains that the sense of anger she and Morimoto felt toward the "unjustifiable war" was part of what motivated them into making the film, their film attempts to situate and re-view the stories of Japanese kamikaze pilots through the absent

presence of those current suicide bombers/ terrorists, thus within the frame of the two imperialist wars. In this sense, *Wings of Defeat* demonstrates an attempt made by the two Asia-related U.S. American women to recuperate their nation's former and current enemies as they question their own normalized American perceptions about Japan/ "Asia," the United States, and the rest of the world. In this way, we can see that Morimoto and Hoaglund are continuing the task begun by my three authors a few decades prior to them. Together their works demonstrate how the minoritized subjects in the imperial nations can engage with, and attend, their ancestral and other worlds differently from the perspectives offered and constructed by their dominant nations.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I put the term “Asia(n)” in inverted commas to highlight the internal differences and power asymmetries within this geopolitical category. The history of Japanese colonial domination in “Asia” both in the past and present, for instance, calls for a critical interrogation of the use of the term “Asia(n),” which risks eliding the histories of intra-Asian colonialism.

² See essays by Sau-ling Wong and King-kok Cheung in Brada-Williams and Chow, eds *Crossing Oceans: Reconfiguring American Literary Studies in the Pacific Rim* (2004); Patricia Chu, “Asian American Narratives of Return: Nisei Representations of Prewar and Wartime Japan” (2007); Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Memories of the Bad War: Ethnicity and Empathy in Viet Nam” (2007); as well as various recent “return narratives” by Asian North American authors including David Mura’s *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991) and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles* (2001). An exception to this is Kuan-Hsing Chen’s “Missile Internationalism” collected in Chuh and Shimakawa, eds., *Orientations* (2001). Chen critiques the kind of “imperial nationalism” in the current internationalizing move for its characteristic lack of acknowledgement of its own enunciating site which he says “blocks out reflexivity to utter its own geocolonial location in the nation-state” (172). A more innocuous example of “internationalization” can be seen in Rocio Davis’s anthology *Asian American Literature in the International Context* (2002) with its distinctly “international” contributors yet the striking absence in the shift and challenge to the existing critical paradigm.

³ JAAS (Japanese Association for American Studies) annual meeting at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan, June 1st, 2008.

⁴ To make things even more complicated, U.S. military bases in Japan are concentrated in Okinawa, which remains a semi-colonized territory of Japan.

⁵ See, for instance, David Eng and Shinhee Han, “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” (2000).

⁶ In particular, I find it disturbing that Chu does not problematize Eaton’s drawing a link between “the Chinese laundryman” (Chu 103) in whom Chu explains the child Eaton felt a shocking and horrifying sense of (dis)identification, and her own bilingual, bicultural, highly educated and Westernized mother who “dresses and behaves like an educated Englishwoman” (Chu 103). The question which arises here is: What happened to the Otherness of the “rough-looking, queue-adorned, working class” Chinese laundry man? The act of recuperation which Chu endorses occurs through the act of transforming the Other into what is incorporable into the mainstream American culture, thus abjecting the abject.

⁷ The term originally belongs to Gary Okihiro (cited in Kang).

⁸ It has been often remarked that Asian North Americans feel a stronger sense of identification and affinities with the racial and ethnic minorities in a given “Asian” nation than with the mainstream “Asian” population who comprise a dominant majority in that nation.

⁹ See her autobiographical essay “Unbecoming American” (2000), and her poems “Here” and “There” collected in *Camp Notes and Other Poems* (1976).

¹⁰ See, for instance, *Witness of the Victims of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan* (Seoul: The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan, 1992); the English version is available in Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (1995).

¹¹ Q&A session at the meeting of Canadian Literature Association of Japan, Tokyo, June, 2002.

CHAPTER 1

¹ Rajini Srikanth, Susan Koshy, and others have pointed out that the degree of identification which Asian Americans feel with “Asian” cultures depends on the time period they are raised. Srikanth writes: “American-born Asians attending college during the years following the ethnic studies and multiculturalism movements have been encouraged to find their ethnic and racial ‘roots’” (96). See Srikanth “Unsettling Asian American Literature: When More than America is in the Heart” (2003).

² For a useful analysis of the discourse of Japan Bashing, see Masao Miyoshi, “Bashers and Bashing in the World,” *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991) 62-94.

³ For a critique of this binary model, see David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/ American: Historical crossing of a Racial Frontier* (1999). In turn, his book proposes a more transnational model of “Asian/ American” interactions where the solidus signals “instances in which a liaison between ‘Asian’ and ‘American,’ a sliding over between two seemingly separate terms, is constituted” (1).

⁴ See Fujikane and Trask’s critiques. Fujikane, *Introduction*, “Asian Settler Colonialism in Hawai’i”; Trask, “” Both pieces appear in the special edition of *Amerasia Journal* “Whose Vision? Asian Settler Colonialism in Hawai’i,” Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, guest editors, 26.2 (2000).

⁵ See, for instance, Traise Yamamoto, *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999), especially Chapter Five. Susan Shweik, “A Needle with Mama’s Voice: Mitsuye Yamada’s *Camp Notes* and the American Canon of War Poetry,” in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation*, ed. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P) 1989; *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Madison; U of Wisconsin P, 1991); Patricia L. Duncan, *Tell this Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2004).

⁶ It should also be noted that Yamada deals with “the lack of protest” differently at different instances. Her poem “To the Lady” (*Camp Notes*), for instance, treats the issue with heavy irony and anger. It is written in the form of a response “to the lady” who asks “Why did the Japanese Americans let/ the government put them in/ those camps without protest?” (CN 40). The poem enumerates the impossible actions which Japanese Americans could theoretically have taken under such difficult and politically charged circumstances. The poem, thus, paradoxically highlights the limited recourses they actually had. On the other hand, her other prose piece “Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism,” also collected in *This Bridge*, emphasizes the historical fact of “resistance,” critiquing the mainstream U.S. society’s failure to recognize the role which women of Japanese descent played in protesting the internment. Yamada writes: “It is too bad not many people remember that one of the two persons in Seattle who stood up to contest the constitutionality of the Evacuation Order in 1942 was a young Japanese American woman” (71).

⁷ See Ben Tong, "The Ghetto of the Mind: Notes on the Historical Psychology of Chinese America," *Amerasia Journal* 1.3 (1971): 1-31. Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982).

⁸ This passage is intended as a critique of Bill Hosokawa, Budd Fukui, and Daniel Okimoto.

⁹ See, for instance, Anita Haya Patterson, "Resistance to Images of the Internment: Mitsuye Yamada's Camp Notes," *MELUS* 23.3 (1998): 111.

¹⁰ In this sense, it is also notable that Sarie Sachie Hylkema, who co-edited with Yamada a multicultural women's anthology, *Sewing Ti Leaves: Writings by Multicultural Women*, makes an interesting slip of a tongue, even though she, like Yamada, is more conscientious elsewhere. In her essay "Victim of Nice," Hylkema describes her sense of "ambivalence" to her "cultural baggage" (126), and in so doing, refers to her psychological split as a cultural split: "There is the Japanese Sarie who still wants to be nice and to serve others. And there is the *Japanese American* Sarie who has learned that she can be expressive, independent, responsible and committed to her own dreams without feeling like a bad person" (126, *emph. added*). While "Japaneseness" for Hylkema is, thus, perceived as what creates her servility and selflessness, "resistance" is typically linked to her American heritage.

¹¹ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (63), also qtd. in Eng and Han. Lowe also questions the practice of translating "familial conflicts as/ into cultural conflicts into the domain of cultural difference."

¹² Needless to say, such an understanding also risks erasing the actual histories of resistance both among Japanese in Japan and Japanese Americans in the United States, as they participated in various acts of resistance despite "the all-purpose expressions" of Shikataganai" or "haji," "jama," etc., which were in their cultural teaching.

¹³ Or to look at it from a slightly different perspective, Traise Yamamoto, also drawing on Lisa Lowe, points to the problematic way in which the mother-daughter relationship has served as a master-narrative of Asian American intergenerational conflict. As Yamamoto explains how this generational model "encodes generation as culture," thus, obfuscating the understanding of "culture as a process of contestation and resistance," Yamada's use of the mother-daughter plot points to this danger. In her story not only are the "generational difference" and "intergenerational conflict" treated as "emblematic of cultural and national difference" (Yamamoto 143). They reveal the "unspoken reliance on assimilation narrative" (Yamamoto 143), where the mother's need to awaken to feminist values and thinking are seen to take place as part of the process of overcoming her original cultural training and "becoming American."

¹⁴ It must also be noted that Chinese ideograph also appears next to the poem to deconstruct the English transcription of the term.

¹⁵ To look at this from another point of view, what is equally notable here is that Yamada as "a Kibei" (U.S. born Japanese Americans who were sent back to Japan by their parents to complete their Japanese education there) had lived in Japan where she had multiple, and foreign, linguistic exposures. Having inhabited such a linguistic environment, Yamada must have experienced the way language could become a cluster of signifiers, being separated from the signifieds. In this sense, it is also worth recalling that Yamada refers to Gertrude Stein as one of the poets from whom she had received influence. Needless to say, Stein, too, composed her work in France surrounded with a foreign language. Yamada employs a Steinian method of breaking up a language into

signifiers, thereby depriving the words of their functions as signifieds. See Amy Ling, ed., *Yellow Light: The Flowering of Asian American Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999) 30.

¹⁶ Although the binarization applies to the constitution of Asian American citizenships in general, this was particularly true with the case of Japanese Americans since Japan and the U.S. entered into the war.

¹⁷ See also Yamada's essay, "The Cult of the 'Perfect Language': Censorship by Class, Gender and Race" (1990). In Yamada and Hylkema, eds., *Sewing Ti Leaves*.

¹⁸ Similarly, Janice Mirikitani receneptualizes Japanese American voice as "noise" in her poem "Breaking Silence" (1987), while both claiming and disturbing the notion of linguistic legitimacy associated with Japanese American vocalization.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Anchor/ Doubleday, 1975).

²⁰ Risa Morimoto's 2007 film *Wings of Defeat (Tokko)* shows another, more recent example in which a Japanese American woman artist questions the dominant U.S. perception regarding the Japanese World War II suicide bombers.

²¹ Janice Mirikitani's poem, "Breaking Silence" (1987) invokes a similar effect. As Mirikitani writes, "We were told/ that silence was better/ golden like our skin." She points to the way in which the West upholds and promotes the same ideological belief that valorizes silence, only projecting it into the East. Her poem also demonstrates how such a culturalist explanation had been used for political purposes such as policing (silencing) Japanese American voices against speaking out the injustices. See "Breaking Silence" in *Shedding Silence: Poetry and Prose* (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1987) 33-36.

²² Yamada provides a similar critique of Japanese and U.S. imperialisms in her essay, "A Cave with no Exit," *The Witness* (Dec. 1999): 23-5. I would like to thank Professor Helen Jaskoski for letting me know the existence of this essay and sending me the copy.

²³ While the notion of "silence" in Asian American literature has been a contested one, the equation of silence to a problem has had its particular danger for Asian Americans when silence has often been erroneously linked with Asia, interpreted as its cultural signifier. See also Kandice Chuh's argument on the problematic emphasis on "breaking silence" in Asian American literature and Laura Kang's problematization of valorizing "visibility." Chuh, "Discomforting Knowledge, or Korean 'comfort women' and Asian Americanist cultural practice" *JAAS* 6.1 (February 2003): 5-23; Kang, Introduction, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/ American Women* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

²⁴ Eiko Kosasa attributes this construction of the desert to the need of the settler states to "create foundation myths in order to legitimize their ownership of the land" (90). Kosasa explains that the U.S. continent has characteristically been depicted as being "empty" so that such characterization can serve for the interest of the settlers, reconstructing the continent as the "the land of opportunity, equality, and freedom" (71).

²⁵ Qtd. in Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989, 1998) 487. For further discussion, see, especially, Chapter 5, "Ethnic Solidarity: The Settling of Japanese America."

²⁶ See Fujikane, Trask, and Kosasa respectively in *Amerasia*, 26.2 (2000).

²⁷ Both Yamada and Fujikane, thus, question the way the dominant ideology of immigration has constructed American history from the immigrants/ settlers' points of view, erasing Asian American participation in colonialist nation-buildings.

CHAPTER 2

¹ It is well known that Kogawa has based Emily's character on an actual historical figure, a Japanese Canadian activist Muriel Kitagawa, using the words from her letters. For the historical accounts of Japanese Canadian redress, see Miki and Kobayashi (1991), Maryka Omatsu (1992), Roy Miki (2005), among others.

² While silences in Kogawa's novel often occur as overlapping—multiple and contradictory—entities, their epistemological boundaries are not always as clearly distinguishable as Cheung seems to assume. For instance, while Obasan's silence concerning the death of Naomi's mother was meant to be "protective" toward the children, Naomi feels its effect as oppressive. Likewise, what appears to Naomi as the mother's inhibitive silence, "your word, 'Do not tell . . .'" (*Obasan* 291) was intended on the side of the mother to protect her daughter from the unspeakable horrors which the mother had suffered from the atomic bomb exposure in Nagasaki.

Thus, rather than just reversing the conventional hierarchy in which speech is accorded a privileged position, the novel, instead, keeps a tension between silences and speeches in their pluralized, layered, and sometimes contradictory significations. The novel keeps the tension between and among various acts and forms of silences and verbal articulations, just as it does between various forms of seeming opposites in the novel: Japan/ Canada, East/ West, art/ politics, history as facts/ history as construction, etc. Ultimately, those seeming opposites are exemplified by the two contrasting aunts, Emily and Aya Obasan. In this sense, it may be worth recalling that the novel embraces Obasan as its title figure, while honoring Emily, as the novel closes with an excerpt from the memorandum by the Cooperative Committee on Japanese Canadians, which we cansay represents Emily's language of activism.

³ Other critics also revise this traditional formula by equating silence to an act of listening (Fujita [1985], Cheung [1993], Yamamoto [1999], Zwicker [1993, 2001], Krux [1999], Sasaki [1998], Duncan [2004]). In *Making Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity and the Body* (1999), Traise Yamamoto, for instance, extends what Fujita called "attendance"—the "nonverbal mode of apprehension" (Fujita 34)—, to reinterpret Kogawa's silence not as an "absence" but a "listening presence" (195). If silence is thus understood as an act of listening, it can also become a *form* rather than an absence of response. Silence and speech in this sense cease to constitute the binary opposite as they comprise necessary segments to construct "a dialogue."

⁴ Worth recalling is that Kogawa even inserts a short episode in this chapter that illustrates Naomi's faltering knowledge of Japanese: the child Naomi misuses certain Japanese word and addresses her mother as "Nesan" (which means "an elderly sister") to cause her grandmother's loving laughter (*Obasan* 56).

⁵ As I equate Canadian Emily's English to the official historical voice and Obasan's silent Japanese language to historical silence, I do not intend with this binarization to reinstitute an orientalist typology. Tomo Hattori, for instance, critiques the evolutionary assumption in some critics' readings of Obasan's silence, whereby those critics locate Obasan's "muteness or aphasia" within

“the narrative of female discursive progress” (Hattori 131). In Hattori’s words: “The least articulated female character, Aya Obasan, is the one most closely associated by [. . .] critics with the ancestral culture, Japan, and ‘Oriental’ tradition” (131). In effect, Obasan “as the least assimilated Canadian” becomes “the least progressive speaking subject” (131). What I intend is not to support this kind of Orientalist binarization. Rather, I suggest how Obasan’s “aphasia” is created by the reader’s, including those above critics’, illiteracies of Obasan’s language. Put in other words, whereas those critics read Obasan’s “silence/ muteness” as *her* problem—her lack of legitimate voice—I argue that it is also due to *their* lack of this particular linguistic knowledge. To this end, Betty Sasaki also perceptively points out that the confusion and lack of communication between Obasan and the nurses at a hospital upon Uncle’s death is brought about not only because of “Obasan’s inability to communicate, but also by the nurses’ inability to understand” (126). Similarly, Obasan’s (and the Japanese) language becomes “noise” or “silence” because of the Anglophonocentric readers’ lack of comprehension, which turns this linguistic body into a cluster of empty signifiers.

⁶ In Chapter 29, Kogawa describes how Naomi discovers the “newspaper clipping,” which Aunt Emily had sent to her, of “a photograph of one [Japanese Canadian] family, all smiles, standing around a pile of beets. The caption reads: ‘Grinning and Happy’” (*Obasan* 231). The rest of the chapter offers Naomi’s emotional counter-testimony, an outburst, as she contests the official version of those “facts,” substituting them with her own terms and accounts. Thus, while the novel, as critics have pointed out, elucidates the destructive and treacherous nature of language, which can disguise and “camouflage the most offensive actions against people of Japanese ancestry” (Cheung 1993, 135), the novel shows how language *can* also expose such disguise. In this sense, the novel does endorse a move toward “breaking silence” in an official (English) language, even when it simultaneously complicates this narrative movement.

⁷ In fact, Kogawa makes similar analogies throughout the novel. At one point, Naomi compares Obasan to “a Zulu warrior.” Responding to Mrs. Barker’s suggestion to send Obasan to “the Sunnydale Lodge,” a predominantly “white old folks’ home,” Naomi retorts: “Obasan would be as welcome there as a Zulu warrior” (*Obasan* 269). In her own recurrent nightmares, Naomi identifies with three “oriental women,” who she imagines are “prisoners captured from a nearby village”; these women “lay naked in the muddy road” while soldiers shuffle with their rifles (*Obasan* 73). Considering the time frame of 1972, this passage may very well be an allusion to the war in Vietnam. Finally, referring back to the analogy which Mr. Barker makes between Japanese and the Natives, Naomi mockingly states: “Ah, here we go again. ‘Our Indians.’ ‘Our Japanese’” (*Obasan* 270).

⁸ Like Obasan in the previous quote, Uncle responds to Naomi’s query with silence. Naomi writes: “‘Uncle,’ I whisper, ‘why do we come here every year?’ He does not respond” (*Obasan* 4). So again, the novel depicts how Uncle’s silent message fails to convey since Naomi cannot grasp its meaning.

⁹ While Emily tells Naomi, “Cry it out! Scream” (*Obasan* 60), the novel seems to suggest that “being bitter” and “crying out,” though certainly necessary, is not enough.

¹⁰ While the past critical assessments of Emily have been split, indeed polarized, critics who take pro-Emily stance often neglect or fail to pay attention to the nationalist and Eurocentric attitudes which Emily assumes toward her home (Canada) and her ancestral land (Japan). See, for instance, McFarlane (1995), Palumbo-Liu (1996), and Miki (1998) among others. For Kogawa’s own assessment of Emily, see her interview “In writing I keep breathing, I keep living . . .” (1993a).

¹¹ Ana I. Parejo Vadillo, however, testifies that it is natural for the *contemporary* native writers to use pidgin English among themselves and their family members. See Vadillo, “Collective Auto/Biographies: Native Women and Resistance Literature” (2000).

¹² Apollo O. Amoko, however, points out that Kogawa’s novel must be distinguished from Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957), which was written and published during the assimilationist period.

¹³ I would like to add, however, that Kogawa’s use of “Momotaro” in her novel differs and must be distinguished from Emily’s usage in that Kogawa’s does not obliterate Japanese cultural heritage. As Gayle Sato rightly points out, Kogawa’s Momotaro is “rooted in Japanese tradition” (1992, 256); it provides a “basis for an enduring, positive bond” (1992, 254) between Japanese Canadians and their ancestral culture, even while the folktale also functions, in Sato’s words, as “a ‘Canadian story’ of value in the Western world through adaptation to new situation” (1992, 254).

¹⁴ Drawing on Melanie Klein, Eng and Han discuss how the patient tries to cope with the psychological damage of maternal loss by splitting the mother into a “good” and “bad” figure: in Klein’s words, between a highly idealized and beautiful image of a “good mother” and the “real object” that was “‘felt to be unattractive—really an injured, incurable and therefore dreaded person’” (689 qtd. in Eng and Han).

¹⁵ Chu suggests, however, that female authors such as Edith Eaton, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan, etc. resist this formulation (2000, 90-91; 100). See *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (2000), especially Part Two “Constructing Chinese American Ethnicity.”

¹⁶ For instance, this alliance rarely takes into consideration the significance of the fact that Japan was a U.S. ally during the Vietnam War. I am aware that the Third World solidarity movement attempts to construct an active identification rather than presume an automatic alliance between Western subjects of color and those residing in the “Third World.” Nonetheless, the presumed binary between the First and Third World foregrounds a claim to a total separation from one’s positionality, if not a “refusal to accept responsibility for one’s implication in actual historical or social relation” (208), to borrow Billy Martin and Chandra Mohanty’s words.

¹⁷ Miki critiques how Kogawa chooses to end her novel with “a group of white liberals who spoke for—in the absence of—Japanese Canadians” (1998, 139) rather than Japanese Canadians themselves who spoke for and protested their own deportation. Although I agree with Miki, I also think this choice reflects Kogawa’s altruistic stance. Like Grandma Kato who mentions “the injuries” of others but not her own (*Obasan* 285), this ending exemplifies Kogawa’s belief in the importance of speaking for the suffering of others.

¹⁸ I find the novel’s allusion to the genocides of the First Nations of crucial importance. To the extent that the novel’s reference to the atomic bombing can point its fingers to the U.S. while exonerating Canada—or even inciting Canadian nationalist sentiments against U.S. imperialism—it is critical that Kogawa connects the bombing to the genocide of the Natives, which implicates the latter.

CHAPTER 3

¹ As critics have pointed out, the term “comfort woman” is a euphemism to refer to women drafted by the Japanese Imperial Army to serve as military sex slaves. Chizuko UENO (1998) critiques the

way the term inscribes the oppressor's logic rather than the victim-survivors', as she raises the question which the use of the term masks: i.e. for whom it was "comfort" and for whom it was rape. See Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender* (1998) 99-100.

² "Akiko" (or "Akiko 41" to be exact) is a Japanese name which was forced upon the Korean protagonist when she was made into a sex slave for the Japanese army. Throughout the novel, Keller uses the name "Akiko" which the protagonist herself continues to employ even after her escape from the "comfort" camp and her immigration to the United States. I will use the name "Akiko" in inverted commas when I refer to the protagonist after she is placed in the camp. This is in part because her true name, Kim Soon Hyo will not be revealed until the very end of the novel. In addition, the name "Akiko" bears witness to her subjugation which the protagonist suffers under Japanese colonial and military rules.

³ Ong's description here is directed to a set of narratives, and their "extraordinary receptions" in the West, about the stories of Chinese women escaping, albeit their own, oppressive society "into full emancipation in the West" (350). See also Shirley Geok-lin Lim's discussion of immigrant stories as an American epic in "Immigration and Diaspora" (1997).

⁴ As Young-Oak Lee points out in her interview, however, *Fox Girl* ends with its heroine's salvation in the U.S., which is presented "as dreamland" (163).

⁵ Keller herself offers an episode which attests to the term's unfamiliarity in the English speaking world then. In an interview, Keller says that when she was writing her novel, she would "type in" the word "comfort woman" in the internet search engines and "would only get things like 'home making' back" (2003, 155).

⁶ See Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (1993); Linda Steet, *Veils and Daggers: A Century of National Geographic's Representation of the Arab World* (2000), among others.

⁷ In an interview by Yong-Oak Lee, Keller makes this analogy explicit as she states: "much like Korea itself, you know, [Soon Hyo] suffered under colonialism from Korea [*sic*, Japan?], and then, you know, American occupation" (2003b, 154). See "Nora Okja Keller and the Silenced Woman: An Interview" in *MELUS* (2003).

⁸ Chu draws on the works by Werner Sollers and Mary Dearborn. See Chu (2000).

⁹ Similarly, one can say that the novel also interrogates the kind of multiculturalist alliance which John Kwang, a Korean American statesman in Chang-Rae Lee's *The Native Speaker* (1995) invokes by alluding to the common history of oppression the black and Korean Americans share in the United States.

¹⁰ See Yoneyama, "Traveling Memories" (2003). However, it should be noted that Yoneyama's reading of Keller's novel differs from my own provided here.

¹¹ SHIN haeng-wul (2001) points out that "Akiko's" illiteracy in both English and Korean is one of the reasons why she left the tape-recorded message rather than a written transcript.

¹² In so suggesting, I am not denying a more complex and provocative usage and/or representation of pidgin. Here I am referring more to its conventional and hegemonic representations, what

Sau-ling Wong describes as “the ‘comic,’ pidginized ‘Asian English’ found in Anglo-American writing on Asians” (1995, 189).

¹³ Words in quotation marks are cited in Lee from Michael J. Pettid, “From Abandoned Daughter to Shaman Matriarch: An Analysis of the *Pari Kongju Muga*, a Korean Shamanistic Song” (PhD diss., U of Hawai’i, 1999) 173; and Laurel Kendal, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life* (1985; rpt., Honolulu: U of Hawai’i P, 1987) 149 respectively.

¹⁴ See Keller interview (1997).

¹⁵ According to critics, shamanism as a Korean cultural and national practice is linked with the history of colonial resistance; it played an important role in the resistance movement against Japanese colonial rule. See Lee (2004) and Chen (2005). In her *MELUS* interview (2003a), however, Keller states that she was more influenced by the Korean Hawaiian adaptation of the practice than the traditional Korean shamanism.

¹⁶ Drawing on Dail Sil Kim-Gibson’s article (1997), Patti Duncan explains that the term “*chongshinde*” literally translates as “‘Voluntarily Committing Body Corps’” and means “devoting one’s entire being to the cause of the emperor” (2004, 188-189). According to Yun Chung-Ok (1992), the term refers to the women drafted into Japanese military sex slavery in Korea.

¹⁷ Qtd. in Kang (2003, 31) from a 1999 *Los Angeles Times* article: Diane Haithman, “Bearing the Scars of Shame: In ‘Hanako,’ playwright Chungmi Kim gives voice to the plight of Korean ‘comfort women’ who still cannot talk about their World War II ordeal” (April 4, 1999) 8.

¹⁸ See Brogan, “‘Your Body in Mine’: Shamanic Ethnicity in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*” (1998); Chen, “Shamanism and the Subject(s) of History in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*” (2005).

¹⁹ While shamanism in this sense *can* collapse the boundary between the victim/ Other’s language (“what she said”) and the shaman/ listener’s reception of it (“what they heard”)—the distinction the novel initially upheld—, it can risk an act of appropriation.

²⁰ To be precise, Obasan is Naomi’s aunt and not her mother. Yet, I include her in my discussion of “Asian” maternal figures in part because Obasan’s character, according to Kogawa, was modeled after the author’s own mother (Kogawa 1993b, 218). In addition, Obasan in the novel acts as Naomi’s surrogate mother.

²¹ The novel itself may be perceived as a version of the river song.

²² I thank Prof. Busia for suggesting this alternative reading. Private conversation, May 5th, 2008.

CONCLUSION

¹ In her classic study *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993), Wong defines the term “racial shadow” as a psychological operation of disowning which is predicated upon the “defense mechanism of repression and projection” (78), whereby “a highly assimilated American-born Asian is troubled by a version of himself/ herself that serves as a reminder of disowned Asian descent” (92). By projecting undesirable “Asianness” outward onto an external figure of the same racial background, she or he renders “alien what is, in fact, literally inalienable, thereby disowning and distancing it” (78). According to Wong, racial shadow is

“symptomatic of a crisis” (82), where the “concept of the double with disowning captures the simultaneous sameness and difference” where “the double is ‘the Other who is also the I’” (84).

² Kingston revises this equation in her subsequent novel *China Man* (1980). While “Maxine,” the protagonist of *The Woman Warrior* is much harsher on the male (rather than female) version of “racial shadows” such as the FOBs and the mentally retarded boy, Kingston questions this characterization in *China Man*. As David Eng points out, the novel critiques how a male Chinese immigrant’s speech becomes relegated to “noises” when the Western subject failed to understand his Chinese linguistic utterance (2001). In *The Woman Warrior*, the physical, mental, and intellectual “deformity” is directly connected with the “deformity” of speech.

³ Cheng’s analysis here, I believe, also applies to the history of Japanese colonialist disowning of “Asia,” where the nation with its “*Datsua Nyuo* (Out of Asia, Into the West)” ideology tried to distance itself from other “Asian” nations in order to construct its identification with the Western imperial powers. Such disidentification is predicated precisely upon the fear and anxiety of identification.

⁴ When I teach about hate crimes targeting Arab and Islamic populations that occurred in the United States after 9.11, I try to encourage my students to consider how similar hate crimes had taken place in Japan against ethnic Koreans after the North Korean government admitted their role in the abduction of Japanese citizens.

⁵ In the 1992 Peace Declaration, MOTOSHIMA Hitoshi, the then mayor of Nagasaki City publicly acknowledged and apologized for Japan’s colonial and wartime aggressions against people in the Asia-Pacific region. A similar apology was included in the 1995 Hiroshima Peace Declaration. See <http://www1.city.nagasaki.nagasaki.jp/abm/heiwasengen/oldsengen/oldsengen_1992_j.htm> (in Japanese); <<http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp/declaration/English/history.html>> (in English).

For the controversies surrounding the memorial of Korean atomic bomb victims, see Lisa Yoneyama “Ethnic and Colonial Memories: The Korean Atom Bomb Memorial” in *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (1999) among others.

⁶ The session in question is Panel 5, which was held on June 21, 2005.

⁷ I myself have similar concerns about the representations of Japanese characters in Chang-rae Lee’s novel *A Gesture Life* (1999), in which Japanese soldiers are depicted as speaking in their highly Westernized, Hollywood-style Japanese. Scenes I find particularly disturbing include those in which young Japanese soldiers address each other by their first rather than their last names (106-107). In another scene, a high-ranking officer uses an honorific form to refer to a Japanese prostitute woman (“Matsui-san” rather than “Matsui” [268]). These Hollywood-form Japanese which Lee employs in his novel makes me wonder if he has done proper research via reliable sources, or he has decided to sacrifice “cultural accuracies” for the appeal he can make to the U.S. audience by utilizing those familiar Hollywood-style representations.

⁸ Clint Eastwood’s film *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and its companion piece *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) demonstrate similar efforts in that the films portray the battle of Iwo Jima during World War Two from the point of view of the American and Japanese soldiers. For the analysis of the shifting representations of Japanese soldiers in the current post-9.11 climate, see Rika Nakamura, “‘Allied Masculinities’ and the Absent Presences of the Others: Rehabilitation/ Re-humanization of Japanese Soldiers in the Age of American War in Iraq: *Flags of Our Fathers*

and *Letters from Iwo Jima*,” paper presented at JAAS annual conference, Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan, June 1, 2008.

⁹ According to other sources, the number of the pilots is eighteen. See “Opponents try to block unveiling of memorial for a Korean kamikaze pilot” in *International Herald Tribune* (May 8, 2008). According to *Arirang Tokkohei*, Japanese imperial government started recruiting volunteers from the peninsula in 1938 while the draft was imposed in 1944. Altogether, some 240,000 Korean men were made to serve for the Japanese imperial force.

¹⁰ See HYUN Chang Il, dir., *Arirang Tokkohei: Nihon to Chosenhanto no Hazamade* [*Arirang Tokkohei: In-Between Japan and the Korean Peninsula*], Nihon Television Network (Aug. 31, 2008); KURODA Katsuhiko, “Karakuni Dayori: Chosenjin Tokkotaiin no Kokoro [Letters from Korea: What was on the Mind of the Korean Tokko Pilots]” *Sankei Shimbun* (June 3, 2008); KURODA Fukumi, “Point of View: Korean kamikaze pilots cannot rest in peace” *Asahi Shimbun* (June 12, 2008) among others. The two KURODA articles address the controversies surrounding the effort made collaboratively by some Japanese and South Koreans to commemorate a Korean tokko pilot, Tak Kyung Hyun, who died from the operation during the Asia-Pacific War, by building a cenotaph in his hometown in Sacheon, southern South Korea. According to the articles, a strong opposition led by a group of local activists, comprised of “leftist municipal assembly members and descendants of activists for independence from Japanese colonial rule,” resulted in “the cancellation of the ceremony to unveil the stone monument,” while the monument itself was removed from the city thereafter. Those Koreans who opposed the memorial project insisted that the “decision to support [the monument] was made arbitrarily by the mayor without the assembly’s approval” and that the erection of the monument without “a formal apology from Japan is questionable and must not be tolerated” (F. Kuroda). Other South Koreans including a historian Hong Jong-pil believe that “the pilots should be seen as victims” of Japanese colonial rule rather than traitors since they were forced into accepting the mission. See “Opponents try to block unveiling of memorial for a Korean kamikaze pilot” in *International Herald Tribune* (May 8, 2008) <<http://www.ihf.com/bin/printfriendly.php?id=12686268>>; For the KURODA Katsuhiko article, see <<http://sankei.jp.msn.com/world/korea/080603/kor0806030251000-n1.htm>>; for KURODA Fukumi article, <<http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200806120045.html>>; For the viewing of the actual TV documentary *Arirang Tokkohei* (in Japanese): <<http://veohdownload.blog37.fc2.com/blog-entry-848.html>>. I thank the director Hyun Chang Il for his kind permission to quote from the film.

See also FURUHATA Yasuo dir., *Hotaru* (2001), a Japanese film that deals with Tak’s life; and a non-fictional work by IIO Kenshi, *Kaimondake: Bakuon to Arirang no Utaga Kieteiku* [*Kaimondake: I Hear the Jet Roaring and the Song of Arirang*] (1985), which deals with the life of another pilot Choi Chung [Jeong?]-kun.

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- Oct. 1997 M.A. in Literatures in English.
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- 2004 "Seiji Gensetsu toshiteno Shosetsu Tekusuto: Joy Kogawa *Obasan* niokeru Akutibizumu, Bungaku, Kokka [Literature, Advocacy, and Dis/claiming the Nation: Reading the Politics of Aesthetics in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*]." *The American Review* (The Publication of Japanese Association for American Studies) 38 (2004): 219-236.
- 2005 "Onna, Kazoku, Kokka/ Diasupora: Nora Okja Keller no *Jugun Ianfu* niokeru 'Futatsuno Teikoku' to Dasshutsuki no Kakuran [Narrating the Two Empires and Re-narrating the Rescue/ Escape Narratives in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*]." *Ekkyo, Shu'en, Diasupora: Mittsuno Amerika Bungaku [Border-Crossings, Marginalities, and Diaspora in American Literatures]*. Eds. MATSUMOTO Noboru,

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