HIROMI GOTO'S EMPLOYMENT OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE IN OBASAN, NAOMI'S ROAD AND ITSUKA

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyze Joy Nozomi Kogawa's treatment of Japanese language in Obasan, Naomi's Road and Itsuka. Her protagonists are indicative of the different attitudes adopted by the Japanese-Canadians subjected both to the Internment and to the later policy of dispersal. The use of Japanese words is aimed towards signaling cultural difference. It facilitates placing the white reader in contact with an unprivileged cone of marginality similar to that previously experienced by Japanese Canadians. However, this is not done excessively. In most cases the author accompanies these words with translations and explanations, aiming at including, rather than Othering the Eurocentric reader. I would like to analyze whether her linguistic choice is the result of desire to promote understanding of the Japanese within Canadian society or to indicate that literature is not homogenous and that linguistic and cultural distinction can constitute a barrier in decoding the text. I would also like to show how various characters' attitudes towards their multicultural heritage can be traced in their choice of using or rejecting the Japanese language.

Keywords: Japanese Canadians, Othering, Japanese Language, Linguistic Barrier, Cultural Difference.

The development of cross-cultural relational patterns within the Japanese diaspora in North America was greatly influenced by intersecting layers of ostracism and stereotyping. Subjected to isolationist, and later, dispersal policies as a result of being labeled alien threats, the first generation of Japanese immigrants struggled to maintain their cultural heritage intact while developing coping mechanisms to face the mainstream`s proclivity towards Othering. As circumstantial others, bound to this definition primarily because of their visual markers, the second generation perceived their marginality with increased acuteness. Having been raised according to the same principles as the rest of their generational segment in Canada, and to a great extent, being alienated from the Japanese culture and language, meant that they identified to a greater extent with their white generational segment than the Issei[1] ever did. Because of this, they perceived their isolation based on their minority status as unfair and lacking foundation. It also prompted cultural confusion and a sense of shame, particularly in those Nisei[2] who were adolescents or young adults when the Internment took place. Joy Nozomi Kogawa was only a child during her experience in Slocan and on the beet farms, but the memories were vivid enough to prompt her to focus on this episode in the lives of Japanese Canadians in her work.

This paper explores the specific employment of Japanese language in representative texts of the Japanese Canadian diaspora. In this respect I have chosen to focus on Joy Nozomi Kogawa who experienced both the post-Pearl Harbor incident Internment and the subsequent

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[1] Literally, the First Generation from the contracted form of the Ideogram "ichi" meaning one/first and "sei" meaning "generation". It is used to denominate A Japanese immigrant to North America.

[2] Literally, the Second Generation from the Ideograms "ni" meaning two/second and "sei" meaning "generation". It is used to denominate an American or Canadian whose parents were immigrants from Japan.

policy of dispersal. Joy Nozomi Kogawa's work centers on protagonists who primarily bow to the stereotypical constructs associated with the Japanese by the white segment of the population. Her 1981 novel *Obasan* is the first narrative focusing on the Internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. It was adapted as a children's book in 1986, under the title of Naomi's Road. *Itsuka* was initially intended to be published under the name of Emily Kato, its eponymous protagonist. It originally appeared in 1992 and was republished in revised form in 2005. The differences in the two editions are indicative of the political particularities of the periods in which they appeared, illustrating different degrees of interest in the question of citizenship and socio-cultural affiliation. The latter novel is representative not only for the identity struggle of Japanese Canadians, but it also focuses on problems originating within the Japanese community itself.

Regardless of what level they experience isolation and Othering, her protagonists exert different adaptive mechanisms to respond to their social circumstances. *Obasan* becomes ossified in her silence, bred both by her proclivity to accept difficulty as the guise of *shikata-ga-nai*[3] and by her inability to speak English. Thus, she can communicate neither with the mainstream, nor with her Nisei nephew and niece, Stephen and Naomi. The latter, raised to become model Canadian citizens, go to English-speaking schools and barely speak Japanese. Thus "Obasan . . . does not dance to the multicultural piper's tune or respond to the racist's slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands." (Kogawa *Obasan* 226). She is described as having "turned to stone" (198) and that "the language of her grief is silence" (14). She remains trapped in her inarticulateness when Stephen and Naomi leave and her last - and what Naomi describes as her only - "extreme and extravagant gesture" (Kogawa *Itsuka* 91) is to await for Stephen to come to see her on her deathbed. In the end, her long waiting becomes another "long last loneliness" (91). Thus Obasan deals with the continuous oppression by accepting it as unavoidable and unquestionable, hence her silence and retractile tendencies in social interactions. Her dialogue interventions consist entirely of native words and fragments of broken English, indicating the difficulties she had in communication throughout her personal history as an immigrant.

On the contrary, Emily Kato, her sister, contrasts the practices of restraint and propriety expected of, and thus artificially constructed as the image of, the Japanese woman. She provides a much required counter-balance to the *Obasan* syndrome. She challenges long-standing stereotypical constructs of silence, being defined as a "fluke of nature" (117), a "megaphone" (118) who "never apologizes for anything" (108) and a member of the "get-the-work-done-and-let-'em-howl" school, which earns respect but not much love" (198). She is the embodiment of free-will and initiative-driven individual that mainstream accused the Japanese of being incapable of. But because of this, she is sometimes frowned upon by the members of the Japanese community, even by her niece who considers her tiresome and moves away from her apartment. For her both Japanese and English seem to come with ease. Not only that, she has come to accept her multicultural identity as an integral part of her identity, rather than a mere circumstantial development. Thus, she can militate for her rights as a Canadian citizen without letting her Japanese-ness become a hindrance or a source of bitterness. Her attempt to harmoniously integrate both becomes a source of amusement or embarrassment for her interlocutors, depending on her choice of linguistic puns: "Fee, fie, fiddle-i-o/ Strummin'on the old benjo" (*Itsuka* 18) or "O Susannah/ Cry all you want for me, /For I come from British Columbia with /a benjo on my knee" (*Itsuka* 19).

Naomi, their niece is described by Emily as a mere observer: "Naomi Watcher Nakane you're turning into a statue. The world is for living in, not for staring at" (109) and a: "Nonny

[3] The expression is literarily translated as "It cannot be helped" and it signals a renunciation of the self to a destiny which lies outside the influence of individual action.

mouse" (174). In *Obasan*, she is unable to develop adequate coping mechanisms to take her outside the cone of mediocrity and marginality Obasan's teachings have consigned her to. In *Naomi's Road* she again exhibits a tendency to react rather than act in getting answers to her questions. At the beginning of *Itsuka* she is still "silently staring at the world" (12) and generally avoids interactions that would imply relevant decision-making processes. Thus, when she finally participates to the JACL activity her aunt keeps urging her to get involved in, she feels insignificant as: "the cardboard box in her backseat, taken along in case I might be useful" (111). Morty, the editor of the Japanese Canadian publication "Bridge" recognizes this as a pathology in her: "People like you, Naomi, they really disappeared you good" (121) and urges her to action: "Come to a meeting of our Democracy group. Get undissapeared for a change" (121). Thus, initially, she is unable to integrate in either her cultural or mainstream community. As a second generation Japanese Canadian she was raised to fit in with her generational segment. Being perceived as different led her to experience racial shame and reject her heritage: "I'm not really part of the community," I say hesitantly. It's my guess that we don't really have a community at all. After all, as Aunt Emily puts it, we were all "deformed by the Dispersal Policy" and grew up striving to be "the only Jap in town." "No, I don't speak Japanese," we'd say proudly" (*Itsuka* 126). Naomi understands Japanese, as she often acts as a mediator between the Issei and the reader. Although she does not speak it, she attempts to ease the difference between herself and her generational segment for example by explaining the etymology of some of the words used to describe the minority group she belongs to: "Nisei, which means second-generation Japanese-Canadian, is pronounced "knee say" and sansei, third-generation, is "son say" (*Itsuka* 59).

Regardless of the degree of alienation Naomi experiences, it is implied that Stephen was the most deeply affected by the Internment and the racial prejudice he faced long before Pearl Harbor. He desires to escape his community bonds and the isolation it implied and acquire what he believes to be the image of a cosmopolitan lifestyle: living in hotels, appearing on television as a success story, becoming detached from everything but his personal aspirations. He was an adolescent during Internment, and thus shared in the older Nisei's fear at the time that their future prospects would be compromised. Naomi sees him at the beginning of *Itsuka* as walking "the tight-rope of adolescence buffeted by the winds of a fierce emptiness" (20). After the Internment he "remains in the rubble" (22) and becomes "quick to anger" (22), a trait highly uncharacteristic for the Japanese. He starts having discriminatory tendencies. At first, he stops associating with those with "Narrow and slanted Japanese eyes" (38), and later he will "hate everything Japanese. Our horsetail hair. The way we fold paper" (39). However, like all such metonymic and minimalistic approaches - his pursue of a successful career and maintaining the appearance of a high-end lifestyle – his choices alienate him from his ancestral community.

He is later portrayed as distinctly unable to achieve a sense of belonging: "For Stephen, the rootlessness must be even worse. I've managed to be potted in the sticky prairie soil, but he's wandering the world, a cut flower drinking in the fleeting applause of concert tours" (53). It is repeatedly suggested throughout the text that Stephen is the embodiment of the maladapted individual, rather than of a successfully integrated multi-cultural personality. He becomes a mere passenger in the life of the Japanese community, carrying its visual markers but profoundly rejecting its form and content. Thus, he ignores his sister's pleas for him to return to his aunt's deathbed and Emily's suggestion that he help with the redress movement. He refers to the latter as the result of "a North American pathology" (221) and refers to the "so-called little liberation movement" (221) [as h]e waves his hand dismissing us"(221-222) as the absurdity of "A bunch of myopic crybabies" (222). He becomes alienated from both communities, rejecting one and never to be fully accepted in the other. Even to his sister Naomi, he becomes: "so aloof that he`s vaporized himself onto a glass screen and at the

flick of a switch he vanishes. He`s turned himself into one of those unreal TV people. There he was, like so many of them, wearing a decapitated rose on the lapel of his jacket. No stem. No thorn. No roots" (292). He limits his contact with his ethnic group to the bare minimum and obstinately refuses to use the Japanese language in his interactions.

Thus, the protagonists' perception of ethnic dissonance can be tracked to a certain degree in their choice to employ native words within various communicational circumstances in order to signal cultural difference. While the author does wish to signal cultural difference, she does not wish to allow this to interfere with the reception of the text. In order to do that she generally accompanies the native words with translations within the same sentence or paragraph. I consider this as an acknowledgement of difference, but at the same time, an indicative of a desire towards inclusion, rather than exclusion of the mainstream white reader. She is aware that cultural difference can constitute a barrier, but that it ultimately should not impede communication. Instead, she chooses to indicate her cultural heritage without placing her readers in a cone of marginality. This is done perhaps to avoid generating feelings of displacement similar to what she herself had experienced but also to minimize the perception of cultural duality by doing what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "absorbing the margin into the center" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 11).

Besides her obvious employment of native words, the author attempts to draw attention to other elements relevant to Japanese dialogism and synergy. Thus, *Obasan* begins by raising awareness to the omnipresence of silence: "There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak" (preceding 1). Japanese immigrants to North America were circumstantially led to perpetuate "a nonverbal mode of apprehension summarized by the term attendance" (Gayle 34). Attendance in the case of the *Issei* and the *Nisei* takes the form of silence, represented by communicational anxiety or voicelessness which evinces different attitudes towards the mainstream and the Japanese minority group. According to King-Kok Cheung these silences can be: "oppressive, inhibitive, protective, stoic and attentive" (26). They are identifiable to different degrees in the interactional patterns adopted by each generation of Japanese immigrants towards members of both the *Uchi*[4] and the *Soto*[5] groups.

When the Internment uprooted and relocated the entire Japanese segment of the population of Canada and The United States, the authorities faced a cooperative group, adhering to their given label of "model minority". This was translated as lack of assertiveness and race-specific docility, being later perpetuated as justification for the *Issei*'s refusal to discuss the matter. As a people, the Japanese favor: "Indirect communication, which is achieved through tacit understanding" (Iritani 90). Furthermore the Japanese rely on phatic communication almost as much as they do on the semantic element, leading to a form of dialogism which cannot be fully understood outside the sphere of the contextual. Thus, Obasan manages to communicate more than a mere acceptance when she "nods her silent non-answer" (Kogawa *Itsuka* 66). She indicates *Gaman*[6] and *Enryou*[7], the honed forms of endurance and stoicism. When she does choose to speak English, she uses it to illustrate the

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[4] The term refers to one's closest group. Translatable as "home" or "inside", it defines the group whose actions reflects most on the individual, and at the same time, the group whose face the individual is trying to uphold. It is usually comprised of relatives and very close friends, and in some cases, of members of one's institutional affiliation.

[5] The term refers to everyone besides one's closest group. It is translated as "outside" and it comprises all those outside one's inner group.

[6] The concept is derived from the practices of Zen Buddhism. It encompasses behaviors such as endurance, tolerance and self-denial, and refers to facing difficulties with patience and dignity.

[7] It is translated as "hesitation" or "reserve". It is the hesitation of speaking in a manner or taking a course of action that would inconvenience the people around you. At the same time it is the "forethought" or "foresight" characteristic to one's social position in a complicated hierarchical system based on age, gender, social class, the Uchi-Soto dichotomy, etc., and the awareness of social consequences in case of a failure to act according to one's station. It is quintessential to the Japanese system of thought and offers a manner to avoid conflict by practicing self-restraint.

Japanese-specific sense of *On*[8] and *Giri*[9]. The word she chooses to repeat: "Thank you." Obasan says her all-purpose response. Thank you (you are kind). Thank you (I do not know what you mean)" (ibid 68) is indicative of her yasashii[10] and her tendency to placate, rather than impose. As "Arigato, arigato." It's the constant habitual word of the issei" (*Itsuka* 149), she does nothing more than maintain the liaison with her generational segment which is primarily distinguished from the generally more assertive mainstream by means of an apparently (by contrast) behavioral passiveness. Through their choice of actions, the Issei are described as those who seek to serve. Limited by their inconsequential knowledge of English, they resort to a language of gestures and offering. Thus, in the case of Obasan: "Even in her last days, her hands, confused in the air, still tremble to serve" (*Itsuka* 85). Mrs. Makino, another Issei: "makes bobbing bows as she approaches. Such decorousness. The dance of humility and peace" (147). An old issei they visit: "offers his half-eaten bun – offers and offers in the way of the issei. Like my obasan in Cecil, he will offer all the way to the end of the road" (*Itsuka* 147). The language of offering and non-verbal communication thus become just as important aspects of dialogism as verbal interaction. It makes the reader, much like their interlocutors, "never quite able to penetrate the sound barrier behind which the issei move, nodding attentively, eyes politely downcast" (*Itsuka* 37). This is why I consider it to be just as relevant for signaling cultural difference as actual incorporation of native words is:

How well I know the issei, who will never ever complain. It's their code of honour requiring them to gaman, to endure without flinching, that makes them the silent people of Canadian nursing homes. From their early childhood in Meiji Japan, they witnessed the poverty and the beyond-exhaustion labour of their fellow villagers, who bore suffering without words, for the love of old parents, for the honour of ancestors, for the sake of the whole. 148

The choice to employ native words rather than equivalents in the mainstream language is both linguistic and cultural. Either one language does not have expressive mechanisms that the author considers adequate vehicles for his ideas or one wishes to draw attention to the presence of cultural heterogeneity. Rather than a source of interpretative difficulty for the reader, these elements are seen as necessary to convey a particular cultural formation and heritage. Thus they became staples of texts with multicultural background. Muna Shafiq, referring to several texts which employ native words considers that "this strategy obliges the unilingual dominant language reader to seek meaning outside the dominant language" (8). It also signals the presence of the heterogeneous element within the socio-political homogenizing framework. Furthermore, it allows multiple interpretations of discourse depending on the degree of familiarity the reader has with the Japanese linguistic and cultural element. As Diana Fuss points out: "there is no 'natural' way to read a text: ways of reading are historically specific and culturally variable, and reading positions are always constructed, assigned, or mapped" (35).

Arun P. Mukherjee underlines that this strategy is aimed at promoting the readership's awareness to the multi-cultural environment of which they are a part. It also presents diversity as a necessary tool for improving acceptance of ethnicities and minorities on the one hand and the leveling out of excessive "arrogance and smugness about one's own culture" ("Teaching Ethnic" 170). Reading thus becomes an increasingly active process because the signs will not reveal themselves according to traditional patterns of interpretation. The choice to encode the text with native words represents the writer's active attempt to indicate his distinct cultural heritage. While complete and accurate decoding of the entire message thus may become

[8] Translates as the "debt of gratitude" and implies a social obligation to return a favor.
[9] Translates as the moral "Duty "or "Obligation" one inherently has towards elders, authority, spiritual deities, family, etc.
[10] Translates as calm, composed and warm-hearted.

impossible for a reader who is not a member of the author's cultural background, the practice of incorporating words from the authors' native language remains a wide-spread mechanism of indicating cultural difference and at the same time fighting against the socio-political elements which try to condemn them to silence.

For example, in the work of Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* presents several instances of such linguistic incorporation. The title of the work itself provides a first barrier to understanding the novel. In translation, the word "obasan" approximates the English word "aunt". Because of the Japanese language's minimal grammatical inflexion and the fact that there are no flectional ways of indicating plurality, obasan can be used to refer to either one of Naomi's aunts, or to both of them. At the same time, through extension "obasan' can be used to refer to all women, either in the novel or outside it, which leads to multiple possibilities of interpretation. "*Yasashi*", a characteristic repeatedly associated with Naomi's mother indicates one of the most important characteristics of the ideal Japanese woman incorporating the notions of tenderness, kindness and gentleness. These characteristics can be distinguished to a certain degree from the depiction of her actions. However, the entire dimension of this personality trait will remain hidden for the reader who is not familiar with Japanese culture. The title *Itsuka* can literally be translated as "someday". It is foreshadowed in "Naomi's Road" as the time when the Japanese Canadians will have regained their rights. But the notion of "*itsuka*" involves more than mere expectation for change. It means endurance and the ability to distance oneself from present circumstances, a behavioral trait which prompts one to acknowledge the cultural gap between the Japanese and the mainstream:

The difficulty Pastor Jim has with the Issei seems to have something to do with a sense of time. For Pastor Jim, the moment is "now". "Now (…) is the hour of decision." The past with its sorrows is to be redeemed in the present. Truth is spontaneous. We are to stand straight, look forthrightly in each other's eyes and the more transparent our feelings, the more we are trusted. But the issei! To them such demonstrations are aggressive, arrogant and, at least, extremely rude. Pastor Jim, I suppose, must think they are mentally retarded or emotionally dead. I know, however, that they are acutely sensitive and that their feelings are all the more intense for being contained. It isn't that their emotions are being denied in the present. It's that they're not being squandered. The moment's joy is being conserved, like everything else, for tomorrow's need. The moment's pain is being attended to in light of time's healing. Itsuka, someday, things will be all right. We can endure. The slow-rolling locomotive of their emotions bears a "made in Japan" label on it (37-38)

These emotional patterns become all the more relevant when reconstructing intended meanings through a language of ambiguity and enclitics. Naomi's half answers to Hank's invitations for example are the perfect example of the use of Japanese specific evasiveness and non-imposition. Her: "Uh,"(…) which is neither yes nor no" (49) as well as her acknowledgement "Nh. I've never been adept at the art of conversation" (39) may seem the result of indecision. However, if one were to analyze the Japanese language specific patterns of ambiguity in formulating an invitation and answering to it, one would notice constructs aimed at putting neither speaker nor interlocutor in a delicate position. For the Japanese, Hank's invitation would seem to direct, too familiar and consequently, slightly improper. For Naomi, so used to being in a position of communicational inferiority as a Japanese woman, it is unusual, even difficult, to rapport to Hank as an equal. She does not wish to offend him but at the same time, she is hesitant for fear that her behavior is too conspicuous within the rigid social regulations of Japanese society. She describes her feelings at being invited out as an: "impulse is to look over my shoulder to see if anyone is in hearing distance. I'm feeling mildly mortified though I can't think why I should" (*Itsuka* 49).

However, the reader is not always fortunate enough to receive a detailed depiction of the thought process behind such an apparently ambivalent response. When asked to give an opinion, the Japanese start off with – and often limit themselves to – an exhaling onomatopoeia like: "Maa" (*Itsuka* 140) or "Saa" (69), described as: "A punctuation sound. A beginning of a thought. Or an ending" (ibid). The latter in particular is used extensively to mark an acknowledgement of what is being said and as a substitute for an argumentative answer. It signals the interlocutor's desire to keep silent over his thought process. To prompt for further information would be considered impolite.

Kogawa also employs equivalents of sensory onomatopoeia in her texts. These are words characteristic to the Japanese language which, without being directly imitative, indicate one's perception of physical events, or the emotional impact a specific event carries over to the interlocutor. Such examples are most obvious in *Naomi's Road*, where there are several instantiations of such attempts at translation: "Clackity – clack, clackity – clack, clackity – clack" (92), "Bumpitty bump" (93), "Rumble rumble" (93), "Croak breep, Croak breep" (100), "Plip, plop" (101)

Kogawa's use of the Japanese linguistic element serves as a marker of difference but also as a necessary statement of cultural variability. Her texts, emblematic for the Japanese immigrant prairie fiction, do meet the readers' horizon of expectation by focusing on characters with stereotypical, and thus predictable, shortcomings. I am primarily referring to Obasan, Naomi (in *Obasan*) and Stephen. However, she also presents characters who challenge stereotypes and are capable of liberating themselves from the constraints imposed by cultural specific linguistic and behavioral practices. In this respect, Aunt Emily and, in the latter part of *Itsuka*, Naomi exhibit a resourcefulness and assertiveness which challenged pre-construed notions of racial docility and passiveness. They represent cultural amphibians, capable of operating with relative efficiency within their multicultural environment. Although Naomi initially risks falling in the same self-imposed linguistic fast as Obasan and despite her socially-retractile tendencies, she eventually manages to overcome her racial and gender related inhibitions. Aunt Emily is the epitome of entrepreneurship and fluidity, contrasting the *Yasashii* construct of the traditional Japanese women.

While these characters can cautiously be considered examples of multicultural success stories, Obasan and Stephen fail in managing both perspectives their socio-cultural circumstances would entail. Obasan, while loyal to Canada, fails to learn English and to adopt the set of mentalities characteristic to the white mainstream. Because of this, she remains isolated, but not at all begrudging her ostracism. For her circumstances are the result of *shikata ga nai*, and because of this they are simply best forgotten. On the other hand, Stephen chooses to abandon his community and deny involvement in any form of political action. He considers that a radical break with his ancestry would allow him to better integrate within the mainstream. While Obasan could barely speak English, Stephen refuses to speak Japanese. They remain in this respect, Outsiders, on the margins of one group or other. The author's choice in depicting their linguistic patterns also indicates the severe limitation of their multicultural perspectives. Naomi and Aunt Emily are able to employ both communicational codes are also comfortable with their amphibian/ multicultural identity. They are best able to gauge the success and perspectives offered by the Redress movement. While the latter's desire to achieve citizenship as a Japanese Canadian becomes almost an obsession, it can hardly be considered as having the same debilitating effect on her as the lack of multicultural porousness had on Obasan and Stephen.

In conclusion, Joy Nozomi Kogawa portrays characters with different attitudes towards the Japanese language and their distinct cultural heritage. In extreme cases, they employ the Japanese language to indicate belongingness or reject it altogether in the hopes of

escaping prejudice. Middle ground representatives illustrate the best adaptive strategies and are thus capable of successfully function within the mainstream, despite pervasive cultural differences. Just as in the case of Stephen and Obasan, language represents a barrier, the use of native words in the text aims at showing that cultural distance does exist in spite of overarching homogenizing tendencies. It signals difference, identity assumption, as well as successful integration of the margins in the center, without sacrificing the distancing effect characteristic to multicultural literature.

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