

“Words Like Buckshot”: Taking Aim at Notions of Nation in Hiromi Goto’s *A Chorus of Mushrooms*

Mari Sasano

I can never unzip my skin
and step into another.
I am happy with my colour until someone points
out it clashes with my costume.
I hold my culture in my hands and form it on my own,
so that no one else can shape the way
it lies upon my body. (Goto, “The Body Politic”220)

In the above quotation from “The Body Politic,” Hiromi Goto claims that her colour (in this case, her Japanese ancestry and physical appearance) clashes with her costume (her Canadian culture), but she refuses to allow others to dictate what precisely that costume ought to be. She has a hand in making it, or unmaking it. Her work thus grapples with the problems of assimilation, difference, and belonging in the face of the seemingly monolithic idea of a “nation” that excludes minority groups. Likewise, cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha writes in “DissemiNation: Time Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation” that the “people” of a nation are

the historical ‘objects’ of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an *authority* that is based on a pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the ‘subjects’ of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to *demonstrate* the prodigious, *living* principle of the people as that continual *process* by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a *repeating* and *reproductive process*. (297; emphasis added)

That Goto’s novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) is in part a response to Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) enables the imaginative recreation of the “traditions” of Japanese culture as well as the retelling and reproduction (i.e., “repeating and reproductive,” in the above quotation from Bhabha) of Canadian identity. In their struggle to find where they fit in between Canadian (read ‘white’) norms and (largely forgotten but always menacing) Japanese traditions, the Tonkatsu family in *Chorus of Mushrooms* inhabits Bhabha’s “limited space” within the nation, performing a different, acceptable, yet subversive Canadian identity. Goto’s characters experience marginalization, but ultimately dissolve the center/margin dichotomy upon which it relies, resisting the prescribed notions of Canadianness and Japaneseness in the Canadian context through the performative act of writing themselves into the nation. Guy Beauregard notes, “Through her revisions of the folk traditions and *Obasan*, Goto insists on the provisional nature of cultures and identities, and negotiates shifting and evasive Japanese Canadian feminist subject

positions” (47). Kogawa’s *Obasan*, on the other hand, emerges from a different historical moment: though the characters deal with similar issues, the kind of play with identity that Goto’s novel engages in is not yet possible. In *Obasan*, citizenship is your ticket in, racism is the way you’re kept out: by asserting the first and getting rid of the second, everything’s going to be OK.

Discussing the conditions that face “migrant cultures” in First World “host” countries, Sneja Gunew points to the trope on infantilization in migrants: “When they enter a new culture they are repositioned as children renegotiating language and the entry into the symbolic” (144). As a result of this assumed incompetence, the prospect of true assimilation is slim, if not impossible. Racial minorities especially are often saddled with the designation of *foreigner* regardless of the efforts made to fit in. Race visually marks one as different – a “visible minority.” Nonetheless, the virtues of assimilation remain unquestioned. In Japanese Canadian history, assimilation was a desirable goal, yet despite “commands to ‘assimilate,’ the impossibility of that process was underscored by ... patronizing praise¹ ...and the fervent ‘Keep BC White’ campaign of the early twentieth century” (Iwama 19).

Gunew adds that speaking as the voice of difference changes that voice from simply being a means of communication to something “representative of something else: the ‘richness’ of the cultural heritage, the many layers of cultural conditioning which comprises the host culture” (148-49). The center safely ghettoizes the margin, “affirming the dynamism of the center and its ability to accommodate change” (143). These differences help define the borders that demarcate ‘normality.’ Not only does this strategy limit minorities, but it is also self-congratulatory: “Nothing like a freak show to make you feel normal, safe by comparison” (*Chorus of Mushrooms* 89).

Superficially, multiculturalism appears to encourage “tolerance” of difference, but it can also serve to galvanize the existence of the centre. There is an understanding that the category of ‘typical Canadian’ and especially ‘Albertan’ is a certain type of person, while ‘multiculturalism’ in the shallowest sense (dining, dance, and decorum) contains those minorities that are seen as additional to but outside of the typical white middle-class majority. Jon Stratton and Ien Ang note the distinction between American multicultural society (bottom up) and the Australian and Canadian government policies of multiculturalism (top down). On the surface, state-sanctioned multiculturalism seems to be desirable – entrenching the diversity of the population into law. However, the typically ‘Canadian’ idea of Canada still assumes that the ‘normal’ Canadian is white (witness, for example, the monochromatic Molson “I am” beer ads). Alternately, multiculturalism may serve to contain and manage difference: “Against the background of the state’s concern with the construction of (national) unity, multiculturalism can be seen not as a policy to foster cultural differences but, on the contrary, to direct them into safe channels” (Stratton and Ang 153). By delineating the borders into which difference is accepted as ‘tolerable,’ the Other is used to enrich the center, not the other way around. As Ghassan Hage argues, “tolerance is the practice of accepting and positioning the Other in the dominant’s sphere of influence according to their value (for the dominant)” (32). Specifically, Canadian multiculturalism was enacted

at an explicit level...to appease the mumblings of those ‘others’ standing on the sidelines of the bicultural and bilingual policy. Indeed, it was the latter policy that was so

necessary to solidify the English and French Canadian power base against the threat of growing demands for more recognition by Canadians who did not belong to those designated as charter ethnic groups. (Miki 137)

By creating the category of ‘different’ Canadian, implicitly, the boundary around the category of ‘ordinary’ Canadian is drawn (as in Conservative premier Ralph Klein’s appeal to the “ordinary” Albertan—damn those “special interests”!). This model Canadian exists as stereotype, if not in fact. However, since this stereotype “produces the effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which...must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed” (Bhabha, “The Other Question” 872), one is hard pressed to identify clearly what constitutes that stereotypic pattern of the Great White North: this uncertain thing that minorities are up against. Nothing has been *defined*. I propose that this firm fitting-in/marginalized binary is not an either/or situation; instead, these are categories that one slips into and out of, sometimes at will. The real-life inability to remain fixed at either the margins or the centre contests the racist pedagogical ideals of pure Canadianness, fictional ideals that say that to be Canadian means to be either British or French,² or to be categorized as a member of a tokenist ‘multicultural’ group. These entries-into are possible because of the slipperiness, in performance, of what is and what is not authentically Canadian.

Saloni Mathur says of her experience as a South Asian woman in urban Canada: “My difficulty with the label, ‘woman of colour,’ I have realized, is not the fixity it seems to imply but the fluidity of its strategic *practice*” (282; emphasis added). When expedient, Mathur uses her status as ‘woman of colour’ to get her voice heard, but at the same time she is keenly aware of her own relative normality and familiarity with white Canadian culture. As required, she can position herself as assimilated, an innocuous insider, but by doing so, she has invaded and inhabited the supposedly exclusively ‘normal’ space that she should not really be a part of.

Goto’s characters Muriel/Murasaki Tonkatsu and her grandmother Naoe illustrate this permeability of categories and the reality, as well as the fiction, of the difficulties of assimilation into an undefined norm. The characters in *Chorus of Mushrooms* all exhibit different degrees of consciousness as they perform this fluidity of identity. While Keiko Tonkatsu behaves as if there is nothing different about her, Muriel/Murasaki tries to reconcile her assimilative upbringing with her awareness of her distinctive family history. Meanwhile Naoe is the swashbuckling performer of whatever she feels like doing. Keiko Tonkatsu (the mother of Muriel/Murasaki, the narrator of most of the novel) exemplifies the hyper-assimilated new Canadian. “‘*Nanio yutteru ka wakarimasen. Nihongo de hanashite kudasai,*’³ I say and she grinds her teeth and refuses to understand the Japanese she spoke twenty years ago” (13), say Naoe, Keiko’s mother. Like Stephen Nakane in Kogawa’s *Obasan* (“He is always uncomfortable when anything is too Japanese” [216]), Keiko rejects “Japaneseness” in favour of a perceived Canadian norm in order to compensate for the impossibility of being white. “Keiko is a Nutra-sweet woman and doesn’t take any cream. She’s an Ivory girl with eyebrows plucked and penciled in darker” (68-69); she is more willing to accept the teacher’s requests for the Alice play (“Of course!” she says in agreement), seeing nothing wrong with trying to change her daughter into a white girl (177). Keiko attempts to be the perfect rural Albertan, but her perfection in itself is an abnormality. She does not make a spectacle of herself at church

(102). She is extremely alarmed that Muriel may be turning yellow after consuming far too many Japanese oranges at Christmas (92). She is, in Naoe's words, "My daughter who has forsaken identity. Forsaken! So biblical, but it suits her, my little convert" (13). Keiko's adoption of Christianity is another way that she attempts to fit in with the rest of the people of the fictional southern Alberta town of Nanton.⁴ She assumes that she must always behave like the majority of people in order not to stand out, and she attempts to erase any differences that can be erased. She disapproves of other Japanese people "who wish they were in Japan... You have to live like everyone else" (189). This woman is in denial: in spite of her personal history being unique and quite different from her rural Albertan neighbours, she refuses to acknowledge the potential strengths of retaining some of her past experiences and habits. As Bhabha says, "the disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit—a grotesque mimicry or 'doubling' that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego" ("The Other Question" 881). The question remains: how to go about fusing the split? Keiko, writing in her testimonial, accepts only one solution: "You can't be everything at once. It is too confusing for a child to juggle two cultures" (189). Sadly, she misses the whole point of being different: there are ways that difference will be excluded no matter how hard one tries to deny, avoid, or wish it away. Keiko embodies this internalized racism, which she shares with characters in Kogawa's *Obasan*: Stephen and even Naomi Nakane know all too well that they will always be "too Japanese." As children, "Nomi [i.e. Naomi] thinks she's the same as the neighbours, but Stephen knows the difference" (83-84), and this *known* difference, rather than making Stephen more actively resistant to Canadian racism, makes him lose his Japanese language ability as well as contact with that community.

While Keiko in *Chorus of Mushrooms* and Naomi in *Obasan* behave 'properly' in order to pre-empt potential disapproval by non-Japanese people for retaining a Japanese identity, Muriel/Murasaki and her grandmother Naoe eventually accept and embrace the fact that they are not normal in 'pure' notions of either Canadianness or Japaneseness. In Naoe's and Muriel's/Murasaki's ideology it is better to be a fierce fightin' freak than a meek freak. As a result, Muriel/Murasaki has two lives: one is unselfconsciously Canadian; the other very conscious of her difference. She has two names, Muriel (from her mother) and Murasaki (from Naoe, her Obachan). Naoe calls herself "Purple," which is the English translation of "murasaki," which in turn is the given name of the world's first novelist.⁴ However, renaming does not necessarily reflect a character's synthesized new identity. The other characters in both Goto's novel and *Obasan* also take a second name. Muriel's/Murasaki's mother has two names, Keiko and Kay ("but please call me Kay" [189]), and Isamu Tonkatsu has shortened his name to "Sam." Likewise, the children in *Obasan* rename themselves: "Almost all of us have shorten names—Tak for Takao, Sue for Sumiko, Mary for Mariko. We all hide our long names as well as we can" (202). But for these children, the new names signal a wish to become invisible from those who already have identified them as foreign: "none of us escaped the naming. We were defined by the way we were seen" (*Obasan* 118). Naoe and Muriel/Murasaki, rather than hiding behind new names, adopt new names to suit their identities, creating a movement between what each is born with and what each eventually chooses to become: Muriel rejects her mother's straightforward assimilation (Keiko to Kay) by adopting the Japanese name⁶ given to her by her unassimilated grandmother. Naoe, in turn, takes her granddaughter's Japanese name and translates it into English. The children in *Obasan*,

under extreme pressure to conform, all prefer their English names. Naomi, more ambivalent than Aunt Emily or her Obasan about where she stands, has an ambiguous name that is biblical and Japanese at the same time.

Murasaki/Muriel, the supposed narrator of Goto's novel, tries not to allow identity to be inscribed onto her: her T-shirt has no logo (12). In her childhood and adolescence, however, she attempts to masquerade in others' normality. She behaves, like Keiko, how she believes her white neighbours would. Muriel has a boyfriend in junior high, which is OK Canadian but precocious Japanese behaviour (123). She avoids the other "Oriental families," including the Vietnamese labourers who work on her father's farm, because she knows that "Oriental people in single doses were well enough, but any hint of a group it was all over" (125). She helps rename the Vietnamese workers on her father's farm because Keiko finds their real names too hard to pronounce—erasing aural indicators of their foreignness (34). She knows what is expected of her. Earlier in the narrative, Muriel compares herself unfavourably to Patricia, "the most popular girl in class" (93). When Patricia compliments her backhandedly, commenting that she's "Japanese," but still "pretty" (96), Muriel is grateful but puzzled. She, like Joe the Vietnamese refugee, could not be attractive, could she? She feels ashamed of her father's employees ("boatpeople"), and when it is pointed out to her that her house "smells,"⁷ she is embarrassed. She understands through her mother's rejection of her Japanese culture that being Japanese is somehow inferior and abnormal. In the narrator's present, however, Muriel/Murasaki is completely aware of her differences thank you, and doesn't need to measure up to anyone else's standards.

Rather than being suspended half-in-half-out of two cultures, Murasaki actually has an edge over either: she slips between them as easily as a salamander inhabits water and land. This cultural amphibianism is best seen in the way that Goto uses language in her novel. Murasaki's eventual knowledge of both English and Japanese allows her access to words in both languages to compensate for the absence of proficiency in either. "I'm glad I learned Japanese because now I can juggle two languages..." (54). She can tell her Obachan that she loves her only in English (54). Contrary to Keiko's philosophy of childraising, Murasaki benefits from, instead of being confused by, the juggling of two cultures. Naoe also notices the limits of unilingualism when she compares the English "water" to the Japanese distinction between "mizu" and "oyu": there are precisions of meanings in each language (170). This difference is an advantage, allowing for extra nuances to be felt in both languages. In *Obasan*, the relative unilingualism of the Nakeanes is supplemented by Japanese puns like "aru bata" becoming "Alberta" at the dinner table (13), or "golden sakana fish" (218) becoming a family vernacular curse. The puns are silly, but impossible without the knowledge of both languages. Obachan ponders a butterfly dreaming he was a man, or was it a man dreaming he was a butterfly? "What nonsense. This need to differentiate. Why, he was both, of course" (44). This "of course" seems easy and natural, unforced.

The Tonkatsus' aphasia⁸ shows that language is easily slipped into and out of. Naoe repeatedly claims that she understands English, but she refuses to use it. Choice, rather than ignorance, is her justification. Yet Murasaki somehow knows what her Obachan is saying. Keiko slips into Japaneseness when she is cleaning Muriel's ears (155-57) and remembers enough to understand what "Murasaki" means (165). She even begins to slip into Japanese, though she still denies it when her daughter accuses her:

“Didn’t you just say ‘*Mattaku*?’” (199). Obviously her performance of the perfectly assimilated immigrant takes a tremendous amount of energy to keep up, since only in times of weakness does she allow her Japanese to slip out. Sam Tonkatsu, Muriel’s/Murasaki’s father reads Japanese well (207) and craves salted seaweed paste (135) even though he has forgotten how to speak Japanese: language and culture are not inherent; they can be learned and unlearned. But listening and silence are as important as talking. “Canada wa hiroi. Jitto mimi o sumashite goran, ironna koe ga kikoreru kara” (190): Canada is vast. Let your ear listen for a while, you can hear all kinds of voices. Tacitly, everyone seems to communicate without being conscious of language. Murasaki and Naoe. Keiko and Naoe. Tengu and Naoe. Murasaki and her lover. Language becomes unconscious. When Murasaki or Naoe are really communicating they do not notice frivolities like what language they are actually using. Murasaki complements her lover on his accentless English, and apologizes for her weak Japanese, but after all they had been speaking Japanese all along, with no trouble at all: “I didn’t notice an accent when we’ve been talking together” (187). Naoe, when she has developed more of a rapport with Tengu, remarks that his cowboy accent is gone, but in fact he didn’t have one to begin with (197); she has inserted the accent to fit with her preconceptions of him. Naoe says, “the words are different, but in translation they come together” (174).

Both novels mix Japanese words into the English text. However, Goto does not always translate herself and, at times, even uses Japanese characters without providing romanization or translation (51, 187). Kogawa’s characters will often say something in Japanese; written in italicized roman script (another marker for difference) and the text will repeat immediately the same phrase in English. “Umi no yo....It’s like the sea” (1). This provides non-Japanese readers with a way to understand the language. However, Goto’s strategy of not facilitating easy translation marks her refusal always to cater to those who are the majority. There is no reason that someone who does not understand Japanese could not do some research and find out what these sections mean, as non-English speaking immigrants have had to do with English. In a recent article called “Translating the Self: Moving between Cultures,” Goto explains:

Text is also a place of colonization. And I wanted to highlight that difference exists, all cannot be understood, language could and can be a barrier. This is based on my assumption that most of my readers are English-speaking and do not understand Japanese. This is the audience the book is mainly speaking to, [these are] my assumptions while translating my self. (112)

Goto is marking out her liminal territory to her readers and making sure that they see it. For example, in her acknowledgements, Goto writes a thank-you to a list of people, “for their always encouragement.” This construction is (can I say this?) very Japanese. It is ‘bad’ English, but she has such control of this language that she can access Japanese grammar if she chooses, for effect, because it’s there: she shapes her cultures to her own ends.

Despite the difficulties of assimilation, Goto’s novel demonstrates the numerous entries into or exits out of an adopted culture. Food, popular culture, and language are intersecting points where identity is consumed, regurgitated, reshaped, and discussed. For example, Naoe craves ‘choices’ in food for so many years (not something out of a

box) and is finally drawn to Chinatown in Calgary for the only “ethnic food” she has had in years (146-78). Muriel saves her mother through cooking and reconnects her to her ‘other’ parts this way. As Sushi (!), the Oriental food store clerk says. “Eating is a part of being, after all” (139). While eating Muriel’s first midnight meal, “There wasn’t a sudden wellspring of words, as if everything we never said burst forth and we forgave each other for all our shortcomings” (153). The Tonkatsus finally become relaxed about what they are going to consume, or better, digest and assimilate into themselves. Tonkatsu (the food itself) is a hybridized food, yet totally Japanese (209).⁹ Hybridity is an ambivalent experience. You can be one and/or/not the other, all at the same time. Popular culture is also a shared culture, between difference. “Shogun” is mentioned as an event that is shared by her family as well as (albeit distorted) a way that familiarized Japanese culture to a North American TV audience: “Obachan laughed when she saw it. I thought it was a good story” (121). Muriel’s response proves that, at times, her place in this culture isn’t too far from ‘normal’ after all. Naoe makes references to Shakespeare and “The Cremation of Sam McGee” (mattaku!) as easily as she does to Japanese folktales and *The Tale of Genji*. Mild Sevens¹⁰ unite Naoe and Tengu when they first meet (110). Tengu compares Japanese *enka*¹¹ to country and western music (111), despite their differences. This is a form of convergent evolution,¹² where two disparate sources produce similar organisms: they come together in translation.

Kiyokawa Naoe is seen as a clueless immigrant, but she demonstrates the provisional nature of cultural literacy as well as anyone else in the novel. “Solly, Obachan no speeku Eenglishu” (4), she says, mocking the kind of pidgin English she is expected to speak. Not only does she understand the language, she knows how to mock those who are taken in by her act of ignorance. “I could nod and smile and watch ‘Sesame Street’ so I can learn French as well as the English people don’t think I already know” (37). Her unwillingness to use English is much the same as Keiko’s refusal to use Japanese, but it is *her* prerogative: Naoe has forgotten nothing. But just because her voice isn’t being heard doesn’t mean she thinks Keiko’s OK. Naoe leads a double life, one in which she is the harmless but bothersome elderly immigrant woman who feigns ignorance, and another in which she keenly notes and remembers everything that she observes: she has a secret mailbox (15); she gives contraband Japanese snacks to Murasaki (16); she wants sex (40, 174). With all these things up her sleeve, and despite appearing immobile in her chair, she is actually the character in this novel who travels the farthest and mutates the most.

In spite of superficially being the most Japanese person in the Tonkatsu family, Naoe’s attitudes reflect the ways in which living in Canada has changed her. Reminiscing about her childhood in Japan, she ultimately refers to *Nanton*, not Japan, as her home. Having come all this way, she decides that she wants to stay in the same farmhouse she has lived in during her time in Alberta: “No time now to learn new dust in a new home” (4). Her memories of Japan are peppered with critiques of her former homeland and culture, especially of the rigid expectations that are placed on women. Naoe was promised a hard life, and her life as an outsider in Canada allowed her to see what her life as a child was really like: “I could not know that we were privileged. That people hated us for our wealth and power” (9). She comes to realize that living as a member of the majority weakens her perceptions of it. How could she know not to act like she ruled the village when her family actually did? How could she learn to question

when nothing personal was at stake? “Japan. Island to itself and don’t leave your home. Easy to be convinced of your strength if there is nothing to compare it to: (45). Out of the consciousness of the exclusivity of dominant narratives, Naoe and Muriel/Murasaki turn the focus of their revisions on Canada.

*

Chorus of Mushrooms writes Japanese Canadians into the national script by putting into question the concept of cultural fixity and purity, rather than by simply inserting oneself into the official discourse of citizenship and nation. “By explicitly adopting and adapting ‘impure’ myths and legends, Goto refuses to accept the ‘fixed tablet of tradition’ offered to her by hegemonic groups; she refuses their imperative to reproduce ‘Japanese culture’” (Beauregard 48). In Naoe’s story about the sisters, the elderly are exiled from the village, but “‘It’ a place where people are abandoned. It’s a place of abandonment!” (68). This story harks back to Nakayama sensei’s prayer in *Obasan*: “We are abandoned yet we are not abandoned. You are present in every hell. Teach us to see Love’s presence in our abandonment. Teach us to forgive” (243). But while the Nakanes are praying for deliverance from abandonment, Naoe and Murasaki are contemplating turning this misfortune to their advantage: “They...shift the focus of the narrative from a passive negative event (‘being abandoned’) to a conscious act of cutting loose and having fun (‘abandonment!’)” (Beauregard 51). Muriel’s/Murasaki’s development has given her abandon to be who she is, not rooted down in self-conscious conformity, nor in a rigid preservation of the culture of her ancestors” “‘invented’ tradition can also be ‘genuine’” (Iwama 15). This contrast is seen in Aunt Emily’s insistence in “knowing all” (*Obasan* 194), exposing the truth (“it matters to get the facts straight” [*Obasan* 183]), and the literalness of government documents. Being abandoned or unwanted is also a state of *carte blanche*. If nobody cares about what you do, you can do whatever the hell you want. Yahoo!

Finding new niches is about writing a new scripts. Goto’s characters rescript the folktales they learned as children and make them emancipatory. They critique the power of the story to freeze things until it seems normal. “*Yuki Onna*. Woman of snow. Locked in your story of beauty and death” (82). A folktale is always supposed to end the same way, no matter how many times it’s repeated. Muriel/Murasaki and Naoe are attempting, in their retelling of folktales, as well as in the living of their lives, to unlock themselves from the expected unhappy endings. The creation of new spaces for growth out of the old stories, the unhappy immigrant stories---this is the “repetition that will not return the same” of Bhabha’s performative intervention (“DissemiNation” 312). We must depart from the script---after all we are not narratives---we have to get on with the business of living, even if it’s unheard-of. Instead of being fed the same old stories, Murasaki says she is “not erasing. [She’s] re-telling and re-creating” (185). Naoe rewrites the Issun-Boshi story to give the girl a name as well as desires and the power to enact them (71).

Kogawa’s novel also attempts to reshape given ‘truths’ by the retelling of stories. In *Obasan*, Naomi tries to imagine her mother’s return (67), rescripting a happy ending to her story. That never happens, and the rest of her life is spent trying to forget, a desire that paradoxically underlines the necessity of remembering since she is not set free by the forgetting. The story needs to be retold and re-exposed as an alternative to the ‘official’

telling. For example, Aunt Emily's clipping of a picture of relocated beet farmers as "grinning and happy" is only "one telling. It's not the way it was" (197). Her files and activism in the redress movement are attempts to retell the story as she saw it. Her rallying cry is "remember!" While the Tonkatsus' attempts to erase their history cause an amnesia in which they even forget their family name, Emily and Naoe and Murasaki are trying to excavate the past and expose it, even if it hurts to challenge the dominant Canadian narrative. Naoe and Obasan are both silent, but Naoe's memory and her stories are repeated in Murasaki's own narrative to her lover. In Kogawa's novel, Naomi's internment experience is reasserted in the clippings, documents, and journal of Aunt Emily, who refuses to forget: "You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene" (49-50).

Chorus of Mushrooms is about finding the other options, unoccupied spaces, and being in a different category. Divorce is a way out for Naoe---an option or an alternative plot to a story that allows a woman to be only a wife or daughter, and Muriel's/Murasaki's refusal to marry is a way for her to exit the prescribed destiny of women. Part Three of *Chorus of Mushrooms* illustrates the possibilities of creating new myths to satisfy new needs: an "Immigrant Story With a Happy Ending" is a page-long non-story waiting to be written into existence:

Part three. Everything that is missing or lost or caught between memory and make believe or forgotten or hidden or sliced from the body like an unwanted tumour.

Or

A longing, a desire for. (159_

It is "the missing part" (159), which is to say that no such stories exist---yet. Though unwritten, the old immigrant stories are constantly being recreated in the act of living them. Murasaki and Naoe retell the old immigrant story with such liberty that they destroy the old plot.

Naoe's, and eventually Murasaki's, departure from Nanton signals a refusal to remain fixed in the single location that immobilizes the Nakanes. "You can't move until you have arrived" (198), Murasaki says to Keiko. By contrast, Kogawa's Naomi has remained in southern Alberta since the Nakane's relocation, and the physically mobile Stephen is described as "half in and half out of his shell, is Humpty Dumpty---cracked and surly and unable to move" (115), so firmly is he self-isolated from his past. The internment experiences in *Obasan*, however, forcibly exclude Japanese Canadians from their "homeland," and cannot be interchanged with the chosen migration in *Chorus of Mushrooms* (109). An attempt to immobilize or contain a national identity is countered by the reality of a flexible, mutable, evolving performance of that identity, or as Homi Bhabha says (paraphrasing Frantz Fanon), "The present of the people's history, then, is a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture that attempts to hark back to a 'true' national past, which is often represented in the reified forms of realism and stereotype" ("DissemiNation" 303). Mobility challenges fixity. Goto's characters are fluid in their identities and are fully aware of the stereotypes that they are resisting; they are equally aware of the reactionary impulse to reject them totally. They are not outside of Canadian culture and play freely with the inside/outside status.

“Without moving there is no eating,” Uncle Isamu says in *Obasan* (207). Movement is one way to combat the attempts to freeze up. Even Naomi is surprised at the typically Japanese way that she reacts in the public bath in Slokan, despite her attempts to assimilate: “‘Atsui,’ I scream. The comic books are right. We yell words like that” (48). The influence of her grandparents’ culture creeps up on her (through comic books—hardly a Miss Manners guide to being Japanese) without her noticing, although later she has no Japanese friends, nor can she read (45). Naomi’s need for ‘Japanese’ education contrasts with Murasaki’s tacit understanding of her Obachan and her eventual desire to relearn how to cook and speak.

The tack that *Obasan* takes, though similar to that of *Chorus of Mushrooms*, is in the end less complex and effective in its criticism of the mainstream Canadian narrative. Aunt Emily is constantly repeating to herself and Naomi that Japanese Canadians are *Canadian*, no questions, no qualifications. “We are the country,” she says (*Obasan* 42). Her performance of Canadianness embraces the ‘official’ representation of the democratic, vocal, and just nation: “I almost worshipped the Mounties” (100). Here, Aunt Emily asserts that, as a citizen, she is entitled to justice because she believes fundamentally in Canada, regardless of her racialized position: “Canada is supposed to be a democracy” (86). There were “130 Nisei interned for rioting and crying ‘Banzai,’ shaving their heads and carrying ‘hino maru’ flags” (109), but Aunt Emily condemns them as “Damn fools” (109). Bhabha explains that such a move is typical: “The minority does not simply confront the pedagogical or powerful master-discourse with a contradictory or negating referent...Insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse, the supplementary antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidity” (“DissemiNation” 306). There is no contradiction in Aunt Emily’s mind between having a Japanese heritage and being *fully* Canadian, because being Canadian is a citizenship. Every act performed by someone designated as such is Canadian: “milk and Momotaro:’ I asked. ‘Culture clash?’ ‘Momotaro is a Canadian story. We’re Canadian, aren’t we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian”” (*Obasan* 54). However, this simple categorization does not call into question the perilous position of being a citizen of a country that has historically acted and continues to act in a racist manner, against its own citizens. In a racist economy, one cannot erase one’s differences just by relabelling them “Canadian.”

In Naoe’s case, as a ‘new’ Issei, she is able to participate in acts and performances that are stereotypically Albertan, especially of the rural, white, and redneck kind, and enact what Bhabha calls “the principle of avenging repetition” (“DissemiNation” 319). She re-enacts a performance—that of bull riding—that is understood to be 100% pure beef-loving Alberta, but in doing so, she reveals that it is also reproducible by someone like her who is considered 0% Albertan. By taking bull riding over from cowboys, she puts into question the idea that cultural differences separate immigrants from ‘real’ Canadians. Because she participates in an approved Canadian tradition, she cannot be disapproved of, but the fact that she is not the typically imagined bull rider pushes the boundaries of what a rodeo star is. Naoe has beaten the Albertan redneck at his own game. By becoming the Purple Mask, she is not only a rodeo star, but also a successful inhabitant of her environment, no problem. She has infiltrated the ranks. While furiously not white Canadian, she fully embraces and occupies aspects of that culture that please her.

This entry into the dominant culture may seem like a sell-out: however, Sneja Gunew points out: “To be heard and seen, even if that facilitates recuperation [of “exhausted monolingualism and monoculturalism”], is nonetheless preferable to being completely invisible. Even better, if it is possible to subvert expectations and to set up alternate reading formations which in turn appropriate existing discursive formations concerning migrants” (151). As Kiyokawa Naoe would say, listen and speak: “this is not the story I learned, but it’s the story I tell. It is the nature of words to change with the telling. They are changing in your mind even as I speak” (32). Entering in means that the centre is neither sealed nor exclusive. Membership changes, and as it does, the norm is altered. By challenging expectations and by living outside of the fear of being detected as abnormal, it is possible to carve out a new space of belonging while remaining truthful about the differences that do exist. Goto “re-writes” the immigrant story by “[f]orgetting or remembering something that never happened” (159). Near the end of the novel, she asks, “When does it end?” and challenges the reader, “You tell me” (212). The very last page contains two more questions, “When does one thing end and another begin?” and “Can you separate the two?” As readers, we return to the inseparable man-butterfly, or the inseparable Japanese Canadian.

Notes

1. Nellie McKay, president of the Vancouver Folk Festival, 1940: “We are indebted to our Japanese friends. Personally, I am very proud of our new Japanese Canadians. They bring grace and poise to this Canada of ours” (qtd. In Iwama 17).
2. These are the idealized ‘founding nations’ often used as an originary myth of Canada’s peoples.
3. Loosely, this means “Whatever you’re saying, I don’t understand it. Speak Japanese please.”
4. Nanton is also a real town—Goto grew up there.
5. Shikibu Murasaki, author of *The Tale of Genji*.
6. I’m not certain about the statistics, but it seems to me that it’s fairly common for Japanese Canadians to be given or to adopt an English name as well as a Japanese name. For example, my sisters have Japanese names on their birth certificates but are known as “June” and “Pauline,” while my brother is “Roy Makoto”---his Japanese name is his middle name, which is a western naming tradition. I was for many years (of all things!) “Mary” before I changed it back to the original spelling. Also, many Japanese Canadian men at work adopt English names for the sake of their clients or co-workers.
7. David Suzuki, on his way through Edmonton promoting his book on Japan, also talked about his grandparents’ home as smelling different, like pickles.
8. Impairment or loss of memory of language.
9. Myself, I believed for a long time that spaghetti was Japanese too. My Chinese Malaysian Canadian friend’s mom cooks it in a wok.
10. A very popular brand of Japanese cigarettes. Young people prefer Marlboros.

11. Extraordinarily sentimental Japanese pop songs. I have seen grown men cry
Singing them.
12. This is when two species, despite their completely different evolutionary
origins, develop traits that are alike. For example, raccoons and ring-tailed
lemurs have very similar patterns on their coats, but one's a prosimian (a kind of
primate), and one's a procyonid.

Works Cited

- Beaugregard, Guy. "Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* and the Politics of
Writing Diaspora." *West Coast Line* 29.3 (1995-96): 47-62.
- Bhabha, Homi K. « DissemiNation : Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the
Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. New York :
Routledge, 1990. 291-322.
- _____. "The Other Question." *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary
Culture*. Ed. Russell Ferguson et al. Cambridge : MIT P, 1990. 871-88.
- Goto, Hiromi. "The Body Politic." *West Coast Line* 28, 1-2 (1994): 218-21.
- _____. *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1994.
- _____. "Translating the Self: Moving between Cultures." *West Coast Line* 30.2
(1996): 111-13.
- Gunew, Sneja. "Framing Marginality." *Southern Review* 18.7 (1985): 142-56.
- Hage, Ghassan. "Locating Multiculturalism's Other: A Critique of Practical
Tolerance." *New Formations* 24 (1994): 19-34.
- Iwama, Marilyn. "If you say So: Articulating Cultural Symbols of Tradition in
The Japanese Canadian Community." *Canadian Literature* 140 (1994): 13-29.
- Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. Markham: Penguin, 1983.
- Kogawa, Joy, and Karlyn Koh. "Heart-of-the-Matter Questions." *Other
Solitudes*. Ed. Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond. Toronto: Oxford UP,
1990. 19-41.
- Mathur, Saloni. "bell hooks Called Me a Woman of Colour." *The Other Woman*.
Ed. Makeda Silvera. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1995. 271-29.
- Miki, Roy. "Asiancy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing." *Privileging
Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies*. Ed. Gary Y. Okihiro et al.
Pullman, WA : Washington State UP, 1995. 135-51.
- Stratton, Jon, and Ien Ang. "Multicultural Imagined Communities: Cultural
Difference and National Identity in Australia and the USA." *Continuum* 8.2
(1994): 124-58.
- Wong, Rita. "Jumping on Hyphens." *The Other Woman*. Ed. Makeda Silvera.
Toronto: Sister Vision, 1995. 117-51.