

THE MURAKAMI WOMEN OF SALTSRING ISLAND

BRIAN SMALLSHAW

“It matters to get the facts straight,” Aunt Emily said last May. It was late, but she was still so full of the California conference that she was unable to sleep. The tone of her voice had softened since earlier in the evening and she sounded neither bitter nor angry. “Reconciliation can’t begin without mutual recognition of facts,” she said.

— Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*

IN MARCH 2016, members of the Coast Salish communities of the area, Japanese Canadians, community members, researchers, and activists gathered for a workshop on Saltspring Island.¹ Entitled, “Asian Canadians and First Nations on the Islands: New Conversations about Land, Redress and Reconciliation,” this workshop brought together people who rarely have the opportunity to meet face to face.²

It was a transformational event. Chris Arnett, a UBC anthropologist who has done a lot of work on the Indigenous history of the island, sat on a panel together with Rose Murakami, who, together with her family, was forcibly removed from the island in 1942 and sent to the BC interior. Murakami gave a moving account of being forcibly taken from the prosperous farm that her parents had built and having it sold without their consent. Arnett explained how early settlers intermarried with Indigenous women to gain access to lands on Saltspring.

Elder Larry Grant of the Musqueam Nation; Tl’ul’thut Robert Morales, chief negotiator of the Hul’qumi’num Treaty Group; Earl Claxton Jr., W̱SÁNEĆ knowledge keeper; and SELILIYE (Belinda Claxton) brought forward powerful personal stories and posed

¹ There is no consensus on which is the correct spelling of the island, “Saltspring” or “Salt Spring.” I prefer the former and will use it throughout this paper.

² Held on 19 March 2016 at ArtSpring, I was involved in organizing the event, part of the Asian Canadians on Vancouver Island project. See <http://vi-asiancanadians.ca/>.

challenging questions about Saltspring. As a person of mixed Chinese and Musqueam heritage, Elder Grant told a moving story of the Canadian government's actions that stripped him of his status in the Musqueam Nation, while Morales and Claxton spoke of the dispossession of lands never ceded under treaty to the colonial government.

Joe Akerman of the British Columbia Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres, whose family roots on the island go back many generations, sat on a panel with Mary Kitagawa (née Murakami), sister of Rose Murakami. Akerman led the fight to protect the Grace Islet burial site in Ganges Harbour, and Kitagawa shared stories of her work to pressure the University of British Columbia to offer honorary degrees to the Japanese Canadians who were expelled from the university in 1942, at the time of their incarceration,³ and were not able to complete their studies.

Many had come with some idea of the struggles other groups had encountered: for example, the Canadian government's harsh treatment of Indigenous peoples and the incarceration and dispossession of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. But throughout this day the air reverberated with heart-rending first-person stories told by people who still lived with the effects of discrimination and dispossession. Our discussions that day followed Indigenous protocols for the sharing of information, which involves acknowledging the limits of Western ideas of objectivity – “abandoning the illusion that it is possible to stand above the field,”⁴ as Asch, Borrows, and Tully write in their introduction to a study of Indigenous-settler relations and earth teachings. This way of learning involves listening to the stories of others and evaluating them not only within the context of the speaker but also within the context of how others are receiving what is being said:

By listening carefully and asking and answering questions truthfully in turn, participants learn or are reminded that it is illusory to presume that their views are the comprehensive view of the field. They are moved around to the complex field they inhabit from the diverse perspectives of fellow inhabitants. Then, by means of exchanges of comparisons and contrast, they begin to see the strengths and limits of the different meanings, as well as the extent to which various meanings share features. Engagement in these exchanges also exposes

³ Mary Kitagawa has said in a personal communication dated 18 February 2019 that, while “no single term describes the multiple measures taken against Japanese Canadians,” she prefers the terms “uprooting” and “incarceration.” In this article I privilege the latter.

⁴ Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully, eds., *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 10.

the limits of one's own view and makes possible the self-critical task of accepting the epistemically humbling insight that we need each other's perspectives in order to understand the complex world we co-inhabit.⁵

In discounting subjectivity, scientific thinking seeks to minimize emotion in the recounting of facts. Yet even among cultures that privilege objectivity, we know that people are moved more by emotions than by facts. In his studies of political behaviour, linguist George Lakoff has shown that, when it comes to taking a political position, people are more likely to be swayed by emotions than by the recounting of facts.⁶ Common threads ran through all of the workshop presentations: the dispossession of property, culture, and community, and the damaging legacy of colonialism. Although Asian and Indigenous workshop participants were well aware of their personal and community struggles, hearing first-hand accounts of the experiences of others helped them to situate their own histories within the larger pattern of dispossession suffered by members of all those groups not deemed to be first-class citizens in the white settler society of British Columbia.

For myself, a grandson of white settlers on the Canadian Prairies, married to a Japanese woman and living on Saltspring for the past twenty-five years, the workshop contextualized graduate research I had conducted on the dispossession of Japanese Canadians on this island.⁷ Before moving to Saltspring from Japan in 1994, I had a general understanding of the injustice perpetrated against Japanese Canadians after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The stories of the Murakami family first led me to seriously research the Japanese Canadian incarceration as it occurred on Saltspring, one of the Gulf Islands of British Columbia that, prior to the Second World War, had a significant population of Japanese Canadians. Unlike many Japanese Canadians who were forcibly removed from the coast, the Murakami family chose to return to the place from which they had been taken. Hearing their stories in conversation with Indigenous stories revealed the full human dimension of the suffering that the Canadian government's racist policies had caused prior to, during, and after the Second World War. Rose Murakami's and Mary Kitagawa's testimonials at the Saltspring workshop reminded me of the power of personal story and reinforced my belief in the need to dig

⁵ Ibid., II.

⁶ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

⁷ Brian Smallshaw, "The Dispossession of Japanese Canadians on Saltspring Island" (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 2017).

deeper into what happened to Japanese Canadians in my community during and after the Second World War.

First, the workshop revealed the Japanese Canadian experience as part of a larger pattern of colonialism that began when European settlers first started to arrive on this part of the North American coast. Second, it increased my already great respect for the Murakami family, especially for the women, all of whom have shown remarkable perseverance and tenacity in their ongoing determination to shed light on the continuing consequences of the incarceration of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. Finally, by educating me about their family's history on Saltspring, they enabled me to understand how the stories of individuals in a community can illuminate the truths lost in big picture overviews of national events. They taught me the truth of Faulkner's words: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."⁸ The stories of the workshop participants weren't about the past; they were about how we got to be in the present.

In this article I focus on the Murakami women – the sisters Rose, Mary, and Alice, and their mother Kimiko – who have been a driving force on a number of levels: the operation of the family farms, surviving and surmounting incarceration during and after the war, struggling to re-establish the family on Saltspring, and continuing to raise awareness of the history of Japanese Canadians. Although numerous popular accounts of the Murakamis exist (indeed, at one time Kimiko Murakami's portrait hung in the Portrait Portal of Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa), to date there has been little if any scholarly treatment of the family story or of that of the Japanese Canadian community on Saltspring. In undertaking this study, I hope to add to the small but significant literature on Japanese Canadian women and, without portraying them as the exception that proves the rule, to better understand how these four people defied the caricature of what Mono Oikawa describes as the "silent" Japanese Canadian woman.⁹

⁸ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 2011), 73.

⁹ See Mona Oikawa, *Cartographies of Violence: Japanese Canadian Women, Memory and the Subjects of the Internment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 58, 67. Other works on Japanese Canadian women include Pamela Sugiman, "Memories of Internment: Narrating Japanese Canadian Women's Life Stories," *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 29, no. 3 (2004): 359–88; Michiko Ayukawa, *Hiroshima Immigrants in Canada, 1891–1941* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

OVER A CENTURY ON SALTSRING

That the Murakami family made the decision to return to Saltspring is a little less surprising if you consider the family's migration story and the depth of their roots on the island. The current generation's maternal grandfather, Kumanosuke Okano, emigrated from Hiroshima and was joined by his wife, Riyo Kimura, in 1902. Their daughter Kimiko was born in 1904 in Steveston, on the mouth of the Fraser River near Vancouver. In their early years, the Okanos made their living by fishing, and in 1909 the young Okano family bought a house on Duck Bay near Vesuvius on Saltspring. It is said that Kimiko developed her strong, independent streak at an early age, helping to pilot the family's fishing boat between Saltspring and the mainland, where they sold fish from the time she was just five years old.¹⁰

In 1911, following the death of the Okanos's third child Kazue, and a fire that destroyed their houseboat at a herring camp they were operating, Kumanosuke, Riyo, Kimiko, and her younger sister Sayoko went to Japan aboard the *Mexico Maru*.¹¹ While there, they lived on the island of Innoshima in the home of Kimiko's grandmother Karu, who at the time was seventy-eight years old and a widow. Innoshima is a small island in Japan's Inland Sea and it has some striking similarities to Saltspring: it is situated in a protected inland sea surrounded by other islands and is close to a much larger island (Honshu) and the nearby city of Hiroshima. It has many sheltered bays for mooring boats, and the island is dotted with many small farms and mandarin orange orchards. Historically, it is home to the famous Murakami *Suigun* (*suigun* meaning "navy" or "privateer"), a clan that made its living collecting fees from ships passing nearby.

On Innoshima, Kimiko and Sayoko were enrolled in school, Kumanosuke returned to British Columbia to work, and being pregnant, Riyo stayed behind with the children. After the baby Miyoko was born, Riyo returned to Canada, leaving the two girls behind in Japan in the care of their grandmother, whom neither of them particularly liked. Kimiko became her younger sister's caregiver and apparently did well in school and was popular with her classmates.¹² She never really forgave her parents for leaving her behind in Japan, and she had abandonment issues for the rest of her life. While being left behind may have taken a

¹⁰ John Endo Greenaway, "Kimiko Okano Murakami: A Picture of Strength," *The Bulletin*, December 2005, 3, at https://saltspringarchives.com/japanese/Kimiko_Murakami_Story.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

psychological toll, Kimiko rose to the challenges of living in a different culture and taking on adult responsibilities while still very young. She developed a toughness and adaptability that she drew upon for the rest of her life and that she passed on to her children.

Seven years after she had left Canada, Kimiko returned with her younger sister at the formative age of fifteen. During her stay in Japan, she had become immersed in Japanese language and culture and thus, upon her return to Canada, the land of her birth, she suffered culture shock and even had to relearn English. Back in Canada, she and Sayoko looked after Miyoko and brother Victor Masatoshi (born 1916) while their parents were out fishing. The family was prospering, owning five fishing boats, but there was growing resentment among white fishers at the success of the Japanese Canadian fishers and this led to the imposition of a discriminatory licensing system that limited the number of licenses available to the latter.¹³

In December 1919, the family sold three of its five boats and turned to farming. Using the money from the sale of their boats, they purchased fifty acres on Sharp Road near the end of Booth Inlet, the area on Saltspring where Japanese Canadian farms came to be concentrated. The creek that flows into the end of the inlet is known as Okano Creek, and recent research by Chris Arnett has revealed that it was the site of an ancient canoe portage linking Booth Inlet with the bay where there was a sizable Coast Salish village named Shiya'hwt,¹⁴ location of the present-day town of Ganges.¹⁵ The Murakami family cleared the property and sold the logs that they cut, and Kimiko and her younger sister Sayoko raised chickens and grew produce for sale while their parents continued fishing. In three years the new farm was thriving, and so the family sold its last two fishing boats and took up farming full time.¹⁶ In 1923, Kimiko became the first woman driver on the island, using her parents's Model T truck to deliver eggs to the Mouats' store.¹⁷

The family travelled to Japan in 1925, and during their stay, young Kimiko was introduced to Katsuyori Murakami, whom she married in January 1926. At the time, under the "Gentleman's Agreement" of 1908,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Chris Arnett, "First Nations History of Shiya'hwt (Ganges Village)," Salt Spring Island Historical Society lecture, 8 October 2014.

¹⁵ Chris Arnett, "Hwtse'lumun 'Place of the Fir Poles': Overland Indigenous Canoe Travel on Salt Spring Island," Salt Spring Island Historical Society lecture, 12 September 2018.

¹⁶ Greenaway, "Kimiko Okano Murakami," 4.

¹⁷ Charles Kahn, "Salt Spring's Japanese Canadian Community," in *Salt Spring: The Story of an Island* (Pender Harbour, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1998), published online at <http://saltspringarchives.com/japanese/index.html>.

immigration to Canada from Japan was limited to four hundred males, but there were some exemptions, including agricultural labourers working under contracts with Japanese landowners in Canada.¹⁸ Katsuyori came into the country under that exemption and after arriving on 13 April 1927, he was required to work on his wife's family farm for three years. This stretched into five years, and by 1932 the young couple had saved enough money to purchase seventeen acres nearby on Sharp Road.¹⁹ Kimiko gave birth to their first child Alice (Atsuko) in 1928, followed by Violet (Taeko) in 1930, Mary (Keiko) in 1934, Rose (Takako) in 1937, and Richard (Katsuhide) in 1941.

The couple's farm was adjacent to Kimiko's parents' place and part of a tight cluster of Japanese Canadian farms around the end of Booth Inlet on the west side of Saltspring. With the notable exception of the extensive Iwasaki property at the north end of the island, all of the Japanese Canadian properties were situated on the rich farmland of the Booth Inlet area, just to the north of Ganges.

Like their parents, Katsuyori and Kimiko built their property into a prosperous market gardening farm over the next decade. They supplied berries, asparagus, and other vegetables to the Victoria market.²⁰ Katsuyori built a house, a separate bathhouse, and a bunkhouse for workers. The young couple also constructed a large chicken and egg operation that came to have upwards of five thousand birds at a time, with six chicken houses as well as brooder and incubator houses. This operation was far larger than any chicken and egg farm currently in operation on Saltspring, and in the years prior to the Second World War, the island produced and exported far more food than it does today, in no small part because of the Japanese Canadian farmers. The Murakamis are justifiably proud of what their family was able to accomplish before the war, and when people see the photos of their enormous greenhouses, the full impact of what was taken from them hits home.

The Murakami children did well in school and were well liked by their peers. When an initiative to build what would come to be called the Consolidated School was launched, the Murakamis – together with all of the other Japanese Canadian families on the island – contributed

¹⁸ *Gentlemen's Agreement, 1908 (Hayashi-Lemieux Agreement)*, Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, at <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/gentlemens-agreement-1908>.

¹⁹ Rose Murakami, *Ganbaru: The Murakami Family of Salt Spring Island* (Ganges, BC: Japanese Garden Society of Salt Spring Island, 2005), 9..

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

generously.²¹ The family attended St. Mark's Anglican Church, at "Central," just north of Ganges, every Sunday.

The Japanese Canadians of Saltspring were settlers like their white, black, and Hawaiian counterparts on the island, but their incarceration in 1942 starkly highlights their marginalization in the colonial project. At that time, neither naturalized nor Canadian-born Japanese Canadians had the right to vote, and they were barred from civil service jobs and teaching. And, less than a year after they had been forced from their homes on the coast into camps in the interior, their property was sold off without their consent under a wartime order-in-council that stipulated that it would be sold "as if the property belonged to an enemy within the meaning of the said Consolidated Regulations."²² Despite being born in Canada and being loyal, law-abiding British subjects, they were treated as enemies. Farms that they had carved out of the forest and built into productive, family-sustaining enterprises were given to returning veterans of an army from which Japanese Canadians had been barred. That a regulation pertaining to enemies was used to dispossess them of their property intensified the injustice they suffered, making it profoundly more hurtful – and impossible to forget.

AN ISLAND COMMUNITY

It is difficult to overestimate the degree of trauma inflicted on the Murakamis at the time of their forced exile from the island – a scarring that they shared with all Japanese Canadians forced from their homes but perhaps more acutely felt in a small island community where "everybody knew everybody."

Prior to the Second World War, Saltspring was neither an egalitarian paradise nor a society of racially segregated enclaves; or, rather, it was some of both. Many of the earliest settlers who began arriving in 1859 married into Indigenous families, and some of the oldest settler families whose descendants still live on the island, such as the Akermans and the Irwins, acknowledge their ties to Indigenous families. Among Kānaka Maoli (Hawaiian) settlers, whose descendants are also still present on Saltspring, there was extensive intermarriage with the WSÁNEĆ people of Saanich, Saltspring, and Cowichan. Some of the first settlers were blacks from the United States.

²¹ *Saanich Peninsula and Gulf Islands Review*, 28 June 1939; and *Saanich Peninsula and Gulf Islands Review*, 19 July 1939.

²² Order-in-Council 469, 19 January 1943.

In the earliest days of settlement on Saltspring, there was a kind of “frontier egalitarianism.” Because of the mild climate, the Gulf Islands are today viewed by many people as island paradises, but for newcomers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Saltspring was not an easy place to live. There was little good farmland and most of it had to be carved out of the primeval coastal rainforest, which involved felling giant trees and burning or blasting enormous stumps to create fields to grow crops or graze animals.

Japanese and Chinese labourers were employed to help with land clearing, and employing skills brought from Japan, some of the Japanese workers turned to making charcoal using some of the wood from the cleared fields. Charcoal was in demand at the salmon canneries that sprang up along the Fraser River in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and by the turn of the century, it was one of the island’s top four exports.²³ Saltspring enjoyed water access for the transport of agricultural and other products to markets in southern Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland, but it was also isolated from those places. The tiny population living on a small island had to be more self-sufficient than settlers elsewhere, and this made them more dependent on their neighbours, wherever they had come from, whatever they looked like, and whatever language they spoke.

In her recollections of life on Saltspring before the Second World War, Kimiko recalled good relations with many of the family’s white neighbours, such as prominent community member Harry Bullock.²⁴ Manson Toynbee, another notable figure in the community, remembered the Japanese Canadians as being strongly community-minded.²⁵ Gavin Mouat, scion of the large Mouat clan and principal of Salt Spring Lands, the island’s largest real estate company, was on good terms with many members of the Japanese Canadian community. When he organized to raise money for the construction of a new school in the years just prior to the war, he canvassed for donations, and during one of his fundraising drives Japanese Canadian families accounted for more than half of the families who donated.²⁶

²³ Rumiko Kanesaka and Brian Smallshaw, eds., *Island Forest Embers: The Japanese Canadian Charcoal Kilns of the Southern Gulf Islands* (Ganges, BC: Japanese Garden Society of Salt Spring Island, 2018).

²⁴ Kahn, “Salt Spring’s Japanese Canadian Community.”

²⁵ “Manson Toynbee,” audio recording of an interview with Manson Toynbee, n.d., from the Salt Spring Archives, <http://saltspringarchives.com/audio/114MansonToynbee.html>.

²⁶ *Saanich Peninsula and Gulf Islands Review*, 19 July 1939.



Figure 1. The Murakami Family in 1938: Katsuyori and Alice (rear), Violet and Mary (standing), Rose on Kimiko's knee. Source: Salt Spring Island Archives

RACISM

At the same time, in the two decades prior to the Second World War, Saltspring was home to some of the most strident racists in the province. MacGregor Macintosh, Saltspring resident and MLA for “the Islands,” travelled the province in the late 1930s giving speeches in which he advocated for the expulsion of all Japanese Canadians, saying they would never become “white Britishers, white Canadians.”²⁷ On the evening of

²⁷ Patricia Roy, “Educating the ‘East’: British Columbia and the Oriental Question in the Interwar Years,” *BC Studies* 18 (Summer 1973): 50.

27 January 1938, Macintosh addressed a public meeting in Mahon Hall in Ganges (the largest town on Saltspring) with 150 citizens present. After discussing a number of political issues, he turned his attention to “the Japanese question” and asked if “this province is to be for the white man or the Oriental?”²⁸ It is important to note that these fiery speeches did not go unchallenged. Kimiko’s daughter Rose cites her father’s recollection that Raymond Rush, the island’s doctor, stood up and asked Macintosh to come to the Okano farm (Kimiko’s parents’ place) to see how they lived.

These different attitudes among some white residents of the island towards their Japanese Canadian counterparts illustrate the complex and shifting nature of racism as it existed on the island. The situation changed over time: Gavin Mouat, a respected friend of the Japanese Canadian community, later became an agent of the Custodian of Enemy Property,²⁹ and he used his position to acquire the most valuable of the Japanese properties at an extraordinarily low price. This betrayal by a person who had been a trusted friend left a wound far larger than those inflicted by blatantly racist politicians who sowed hatred for political gain. More than seventy-five years later, the mention of his name is enough to reignite feelings of rage among members of the Murakami family.

The news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor sent a shock wave through the Japanese Canadian community on Saltspring. Overnight they began to experience overt anti-Japanese sentiment. Alice, the oldest of the Murakami children, born in 1928 in Ganges, was abused by her teachers in front of the class. The assaults were not just verbal: on her way to and from school some of her fellow classmates threw stones at her. Further, while Kimiko was out shopping, members of her church congregation, people she had considered to be friends, would loudly whisper about “those Japs.”³⁰

About two and a half months later, on 24 February 1942, the government enacted Order-in-Council PC 1486, ordering all persons of Japanese descent removed from the “protected area” along the coast and one hundred miles inland. Previously, on 14 January, it was announced that all male Japanese nationals between the ages of eighteen and forty-five would be removed from the coast and sent to work camps in

²⁸ *Saanich Peninsula and Gulf Islands Review*, 2 February 1938.

²⁹ Originally created during the First World War to manage the property belonging to enemies in Canada, after the Pearl Harbor attack the Custodian of Enemy Property’s role was expanded to include the administration of property taken from Japanese Canadians who were forcibly removed from the coast, in spite of the fact that the majority of them had either been born in Canada or were naturalized Canadian citizens.

³⁰ Murakami, *Ganbaru*, 16.

the province's interior. On 17 March, five men were taken from Saltspring by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and sent to the Yellowhead Prison Camp.³¹

Katsuyori, who was forty-three at the time and recovering from an appendectomy, was one of those men. Rose recalls an RCMP officer coming around to their house in a truck to take Katsuyori away. After he had said goodbye to his wife and children, he moved towards the truck, but apparently not fast enough for the RCMP officer, who shoved him towards it. Katsuyori stumbled, and with difficulty because of the pain of his recent operation, climbed onto the truck before it lurched away.³² The anger and the humiliation of seeing their husband and father treated this way was seared so deeply into the family's memory that more than seventy-five years later it has scarcely diminished.

In one stroke Kimiko became a single parent to five children, aged one to thirteen. She also became the sole adult working a substantial farming operation. But not for long, for, as it turned out, on 22 April 1942 the rest of the Japanese Canadians on Saltspring were forcibly removed from the island and taken to the Hastings Park Detention Centre. They were kept in repurposed livestock barns, still stinking from the animals that were kept there, and forced to sleep on straw mattresses with minimal toilet and shower facilities and no privacy. It was degrading treatment for anybody, and for a family that had until then lived in the gentle natural beauty of the Gulf Islands, it was especially shocking. At this point, like all of the families who had lost their men and were unsure where they had been taken, they were filled with anxiety that they might be permanently separated from Katsuyori.

TWELVE YEARS IN EXILE

For the next twelve years, the Murakamis would endure severe hardship. From the animal barns of Hastings Park, on 1 May 1942 the family was moved to Greenwood in the BC interior. On 21 July of that year, after the married men were released from the work camps, Katsuyori made his way to Magrath, Alberta, where his mother-in-law, father-in-law, and brother-in-law (Okano) were staying. Kimiko left Greenwood with the children and arrived in Magrath on 15 August 1942, and the family was

³¹ Recollection of Mary Kitagawa as documented in notes in the Salt Spring Japanese Garden Society Archives.

³² Story told by Rose Murakami in a discussion following a talk given by Brian Smallshaw to the Salt Spring Japanese Garden Society, 18 February 2016.



Figure 2. Kimiko Murakami with children Richard, Mary, Rose, Violet, and Alice in Greenwood, British Columbia. *Source:* Salt Spring Island Archives.

reunited after having been separated for five months.³³ Their happiness quickly turned to despair after they were sent to work at the Lalovee Jensen sugar beet farm. The owner thought they should “treat the Japs like criminals,”³⁴ and he gave them an empty ten-by-fifteen-foot building in which to reside. There were no cooking facilities, and Katsuyori found some lumber to use to construct bunk beds. Alice, who was fourteen at the time, was required to work for the farmer’s wife and was paid with milk and butter, which were useless without some means of storing them so that they wouldn’t quickly spoil.

The living and working conditions were so brutal that Katsuyori’s health began to deteriorate and the couple became seriously concerned about their survival on the Jensen farm. In desperation, Alice penned a letter to the British Columbia Securities Commission explaining the family’s plight and asking to be moved to a different location. They may have had no other option, yet the letter is an example of the grit and determination shown by members of the Murakami family during and

³³ Murakami, *Ganbaru*, 23–24.

³⁴ Mary Kitagawa interview, 18 February 2019, Tsawwassen.

after their incarceration. Mary recalled talking to Alice about the episode and how it was fully in character for her older sister, a reflection of the way they were raised: if you see injustice, you speak up and respond to it. She noted how this was counter to the narrative of the Japanese Canadian as a “silent survivor,” stoically enduring hardship and adversity.³⁵

The letter prompted a visit from a commission official who agreed that the conditions were intolerable and made arrangements for the family to move to a camp in Slocan, British Columbia. Travelling by bus and escorted by an RCMP officer, they arrived at a camp on Slocan Lake in November and were forced to live in an unheated tent with three other families until January, when they were shifted to a camp in Rosebery, about four miles away.

The conditions in Rosebery were scarcely better. They were housed in an uninsulated fourteen-by-twenty-eight-foot shack with no electricity or running water. It had been built with green wood and covered in tarpaper, and when the lumber dried and shrank, the wind whistled through the walls and floor, and what little heat they were able to coax from the unseasoned firewood went straight through the ceiling. It was a harsh contrast to the cozy home they had built on temperate Saltspring, and decades later it was a bitter memory as they contemplated how the Canadian government could inflict such punishment on its citizens – people who had never shown anything but loyalty.

The family remained in the Rosebery camp until the end of the war, when the government presented Japanese Canadians with an ultimatum: accept “repatriation” (deportation) to war-ravaged Japan or move east of the Rockies. Throughout their incarceration, Katsuyori never gave up his dream of returning to Saltspring. Many Japanese Canadians opted to move further east (Toronto was a common destination); the Murakami’s decided to move back to Magrath, despite bad memories of the place, because it was close to British Columbia.

Once again in the sugar beet fields of Alberta, the family faced living conditions that were as awful as before. They were forced to live in a shack built for migratory workers who had only used them during the beet-growing season. After the birth of the family’s youngest member Bruce in New Denver, they numbered eight and had moved into a fourteen-by-twenty-five-foot bunkhouse without electricity. Drinking water came from a neighbour’s well, and wash water had to be fetched from an irrigation ditch; in winter they melted snow over a coal-burning

³⁵ Oikawa, *Cartographies of Violence*, 8.

kitchen stove. In their first season, they contracted to cultivate thirty-five acres of sugar beets for twenty-seven dollars an acre.³⁶

After the end of the season, the Murakami family realized that they were unable to survive on what they were earning, so they moved to another house that was worse than the last but slightly larger. In the 1947 season, they worked thirty acres of sugar beets and Alice worked in the town's grocery store, the extra money being vital for their livelihood. In Rose Murakami's recollection, Mr. Ririe, the owner of the store, was very kind, providing the family with the opportunity to earn extra money picking beans and cultivating extra acres of sugar beets.³⁷

Rose's recollection highlights the important role played by allies. The incarceration of Japanese Canadians was a result of racist government policy, a shocking occurrence for people who were proud, loyal Canadian citizens, but the racist treatment received from individuals caused as much injury. For the targets of this injustice, it was important to know that racism was not universal and that there were also people who were fair and kind. These small acts of kindness are clearly remembered many decades later.

The Murakamis spent three seasons in Magrath, and in January 1949 they moved to Cardston, Alberta. Kimiko's father Kumanosuke, brother Jim, and a partner were operating a restaurant in Cardston called the Du-Et Cafe, but they were heavily in debt and near bankruptcy. The Murakamis decided to take over the business: Kimiko cooked for two shifts every day, while Katsuyori baked bread, buns, and pies. The older children washed dishes and waited on tables. Sadly, Kumanosuke died in November 1949 and did not live to return to Saltspring.³⁸

DETERMINATION TO RETURN

In 1949, four years after the end of the war, the ban on Japanese Canadians returning to the coast was lifted. They had never been a security threat, but after the war ended even that pretense disappeared. Though legally permitted to return, it would not be until September 1954 that the Murakamis were able to pay off the family debt and earn enough to go back to Saltspring.

In deciding to go back to the place from which they had been forcibly removed, the uniqueness of the Murakamis stands out: bitter memories of racism in British Columbia prompted most Japanese Canadians

³⁶ Murakami, *Ganbaru*, 31, and interview with Mary Kitagawa, 18 February 2019, Tsawwassen.

³⁷ Murakami, *Ganbaru*, 29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

to take their chances in other parts of Canada. Of the approximately three thousand residents of Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, they were among only about 150 who came back, a return rate of less than 5 percent, compared to 60 percent or more in the United States. Their fierce determination to return is highlighted by the fact that, while the fishers who came back had the support of fishing companies who helped them with funds to buy or build boats, and the families who returned to Paldi on Vancouver Island received support from Mayo Singh in the form of jobs, the Murakamis received nothing but a little help from old friends.

They returned to almost nothing. In contrast to the United States, where Japanese Americans had much of their property returned to them, in Canada the property of Japanese Canadians had been sold off under War Measures Act regulations regarding enemy property, even though uprooted Japanese Canadians were not enemies and had never been legally defined as such.³⁹ Their property was sold at depressed prices in 1943 and 1944, and they received the proceeds from the sales; however, having had to pay for their own upkeep while in camps in the interior, most had little or nothing left by the time they were free to return to the coast.

When the Murakamis returned to Saltspring in September 1954 Katsuyori was fifty-five and Kimiko was fifty, well into middle age. They first tried to buy their old property back, but it had been sold by the Custodian of Enemy Property and was owned at the time by Cliff Wakelin and Frank Downey, who refused to sell. The Murakamis then looked for a new property, settling on an unimproved parcel on Rainbow Road near Ganges that they purchased from Frank Speed.⁴⁰

The realtor managing the sale was Gavin Mouat of Salt Spring Lands. At the time they were forcibly removed from Saltspring, Mouat had personally assured Kimiko that their property would not be touched in their absence. During the war, Mouat, despite working as an agent for the Custodian of Enemy Property for Saltspring and the other southern Gulf Islands, had managed to acquire the large Iwasaki property on the north end of the island for a fraction of its true value.⁴¹ For the Murakami family, fully aware of Mouat's betrayal of their trust, having to deal with him for the purchase of their new property was a bitter experience. For

³⁹ See Smallshaw, "Dispossession of Japanese Canadians," 130

⁴⁰ In the memory of Don Cunningham, who has lived his whole life on Saltspring and was a young boy at the time of the incarceration, three Japanese Canadian families returned to the island, but only the Murakamis chose to stay. See "Don Cunningham Talks about the Old Days of Salt Spring Island, Part 3," <https://vimeo.com/202494241>.

⁴¹ See Smallshaw, "Dispossession of Japanese Canadians," 81.

Saltspringers, hearing this account of an injustice perpetrated against a family they know evokes more anger than does the larger story of the dispossession of tens of thousands of Canadians of Japanese descent.

It might be imagined that, by 1954, when the Murakamis returned to Saltspring, the racist attitudes of the prewar and wartime years had disappeared, or at least softened. For some people, the Murakamis were just another island family. Garry Kaye remembered playing with Richard Murakami as a kid, at the time not considering him any different than the rest of his playmates.⁴² Others, however, remained suspicious. Shortly after purchasing their Rainbow Road property, a local government official visited, prompted by some islanders to inquire how they had obtained the money to buy their land.⁴³ Before the war, the family regularly attended services at St. Paul's Anglican Church in Ganges and all of the children had been baptized there. After their return, a senior person from the parish came by to inform them that they were not welcome to rejoin the congregation.⁴⁴

Upon returning, the Murakami family was distressed to find that the Japanese Canadian graves in the cemetery at Central had been vandalized and the area used as a dump. Japanese settlement on the island dates from around 1880: the first recorded birth of a Japanese Canadian was Frank Uehara, born 11 March 1893,⁴⁵ and there are unconfirmed records of Japanese workers hired to help with land clearing in the south end of the island from as early as the mid-1870s.⁴⁶ Many of the island's earliest settlers are buried in the cemetery and the Murakamis were shocked at the disrespect that the graves had been shown. Since returning to the island, they have spent many hours and a considerable amount of money repairing and installing grave markers, and cleaning up and maintaining the cemetery.

The Murakami daughters all did well in school, and Mary and Rose both pursued higher education. After receiving a bachelor of arts from the University of Toronto, Mary obtained a teaching certificate from the University of British Columbia and began teaching in Kitsilano in 1960. Rose graduated from the Vancouver General Hospital's School

⁴² Interview with Garry Kaye, 8 December 2015.

⁴³ Murakami, *Ganbaru*, 32.

⁴⁴ Interview with Mary Kitagawa, 18 February 2019.

⁴⁵ Birth records in the Salt Spring Island Archives, <http://saltspringarchives.com/stats/births.html>. There is sketch of Frank's colourful life in the 1 March 1939 issue of the *New Canadian*, <http://newspapers.lib.sfu.ca/tnc-34745/page-3>.

⁴⁶ Charles Kahn, *Salt Spring: The Story of an Island* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1998), 91. No reference is provided for this, but Kahn tells me that it comes from an oral history, and therefore the date may not be reliable.

of Nursing, which she followed with a bachelor of science degree from the University of British Columbia. Later, she received two master's degrees: a master of science (applied) from McGill University and a master of science from Boston University. She went on to teach nursing as an associate professor in the University of British Columbia School of Nursing and served as vice-president of nursing at the University of British Columbia's Health Sciences Centre Hospital in Vancouver. Prior to the war, Violet was a happy girl who was good in sports and doing well in school, but during the incarceration she suffered some kind of illness that left her mildly challenged. Afterwards she remained an active participant in family life, was opinionated like her siblings, and was much loved by her nephew Landon and niece Karen for her unique expressions, which they referred to as 'Vi-isms'. She passed away in March 2019.

The racism the Murakami's experienced continued up to the recent past. In 1967, more than a decade after their return to Saltspring, the island embarked on a project to create a park in the middle of Ganges to honour the island's pioneers. The Murakamis donated money to pay for a cherry tree to be planted to commemorate the early Japanese Canadian settlers. Later in the year, returning from the only trip to Japan they ever took, they were disappointed to learn that the tree had not been planted. Rose Murakami recalled:

That tree was never planted. A prominent citizen, one of the original directors of the Centennial Park Committee, told mother to get her money back. The Park Committee did not want people of our race to contribute to the park.⁴⁷

CHALLENGE INJUSTICE

The Murakamis did not stay silent in the face of injustice. After their gardens were vandalized in 1971, Alice wrote a long, eloquent letter to the editor of the *Gulf Islands Driftwood* from her home in Gardena, California, not just about the vandals who had trampled their crops but about the racism to which her family had been subjected for years. It was published in the 7 October 1971 issue of the paper under the heading "Racism?" We have no way of knowing who wrote the heading, but it was likely one of the newspaper's editors because if it had been written by Alice she certainly would not have put a question mark after it. After an overview of the Murakami's history on the island and their forced removal in 1942, she states her intention to fight back:

⁴⁷ Murakami, *Ganbaru*, 38.

I would like to address this to the people who with great malice in their hearts vandalized and destroyed the best harvest of their crops.

It is most ironical to me that in the blackness of the night, that you people could crawl like worms out of the gloom and bowels of “That Park” to do such a dastardly act. I know that to perform such a cowardly act there was much premeditation. So I have come to the conclusion, that there still infests in the minds of some people on that island, the great delight of systematically discriminating against people of Japanese descent ...

Once before on this beautiful island, I experienced along with my parents, the harshness of being on the receiving end. I did not fight back because I had not walked the rugged road of life and was so believing in the goodness of my fellow men. But I would like to inform you, that I will do my utmost, with all legal means available to me and other influential acquaintances to avail me of their services, to pursue and to conclude any further harassment of my parents.⁴⁸

Mary Kitagawa believes that the desire to speak up and challenge injustice, a character trait of all the Murakami siblings, is a result of the way they were raised. She credits her parents with teaching their children that they should always stand up for what is right, no matter who is being unjustly persecuted.⁴⁹ Their characters were undoubtedly moulded by their parents, but they were also shaped by their experiences growing up on the island, being forcibly removed from it, and then returning to a community that was far from welcoming.

The island community was more intimate and close-knit than those in other places from where Japanese Canadians were uprooted. In addition, the entity responsible for taking their land was not an anonymous government bureaucracy located far away: it had a face in the local agent of the Custodian of Enemy Property, Gavin Mouat. Prior to the war, he was a trusted figure and a pillar of the local community who enjoyed good relations with the Japanese Canadian families. When the Murakamis returned and found not only that Mouat had failed to protect their property in their absence as he had promised to do but also that he owned the most valuable of the properties and was already profiting handsomely, their feeling of betrayal was naturally intensified. This was compounded by their being ostracized by other community members whom they used to count as friends.

⁴⁸ *Gulf Islands Driftwood*, 7 October 1971, 4.

⁴⁹ Interview with Mary Kitagawa, 18 February 2019.

In speaking with Mary about the family's experiences during their incarceration and after their return to the island, she stressed that they did not perceive themselves as victims, nor were they were looking for pity.⁵⁰ Despite the hardships they endured, they have had successful careers, have achieved noteworthy accomplishments, and have contributed substantially to their communities. What matters to them most is that this history be remembered, and Mary and Rose have been very active in this regard.

REMEMBER THE PAST

On Saltspring, Rose was instrumental in the creation of the Heiwa Garden within the Peace Park in Ganges. With its goal being a place of unity and reconciliation, the Japanese garden has become a focal point for the community of new Japanese immigrants who have settled on the island over the last two decades. Every spring for the past ten years, with the participation of Japanese Canadians and many other members of the community, the Salt Spring Japanese Garden Society has hosted the Blossom Festival, which offers food, music, traditional dance and calligraphy, plays, and martial arts demonstrations. Through the Japanese Garden Society of Salt Spring Island, Rose published a booklet entitled *Ganbaru: The Murakami Family of Salt Spring Island*,⁵¹ in which she tells the history of her family in Canada and speaks out against the racism that has been directed towards them. *Ganbaru* has been very influential in educating Saltspringers about the Japanese Canadian history of their island.

Rose also instigated the partial restoration of one of the charcoal kilns built by Isaburo Tasaka, one of Saltspring's Japanese Canadian pioneers. Located in what is now called Mouat Park, this project attracted the participation of many members of the community and helped to highlight an important industry on the island in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This, in turn, led to a project by the Salt Spring Japanese Garden Society to research the history of the kilns throughout the Southern Gulf Islands. Charcoal making in the islands was a Japanese Canadian industry devoted to supplying the salmon canneries on the Fraser River as well as explosive factories, and it was also important for domestic use. The results of the project were published in a booklet entitled *Island Forest Embers: The Japanese Canadian Charcoal Kilns of the Southern Gulf Islands*.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Murakami, *Ganbaru*.

⁵² Kanesaka and Smallshaw, *Island Forest Embers*.

Like her sister, Mary has also made sustained efforts to bring attention to the injustices of the past. When it was proposed that a new government building in Vancouver would be named after Howard Green, a notoriously racist Conservative MP who played a key role in the incarceration of Japanese Canadians, she and her husband Tosh led the opposition to the move.⁵³ It took a year of work, but ultimately the building was named after Douglas Jung, the first member of a visible minority elected to the Parliament of Canada. Mary's efforts to get UBC to grant honorary degrees to the Japanese Canadian students who were forced out of the university in 1942 was an even more notable achievement, and an example of her family's determination not to stay silent in the face of injustice.⁵⁴

In May 2008, she stumbled upon the news that all of the universities on the west coast of the United States had granted degrees to students who were forced out of school in 1942. Dismayed to find that the University of British Columbia had not followed suit, she wrote a letter, which eventually found its way to the university's Senate Tributes Committee. The first response was not encouraging as the committee believed that no Japanese Canadian had been expelled. With no university records of students having been expelled, Mary began making a list, publishing pieces in the *Nikkei Voice* and *The Bulletin* asking the community if they knew of people who had been at UBC in 1942. She started getting responses and eventually compiled a list of seventy-six students, sixty-one of whom were expelled and fifteen of whom had their degrees re-conferred because they had been taken to camps before they could graduate.⁵⁵

Things progressed slowly, but Mary talked to whomever she could to move the process along. Finally, in November 2011, UBC agreed not only to grant the degrees but also to collect and archive the stories of individual students as well as to digitize the *Tairiku Nippo*, a Japanese-language newspaper that was shut down in 1941. Most important, it decided to launch a new Asian Canadian studies program, which now offers a minor in Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies (ACAM). The convocation was scheduled for 30 May 2012 and invitations were sent out to the twenty-three individuals who were still living and the families of those who were no longer alive. Ten students were able to come to the

⁵³ Norm Masaji Ibuki, "The Indomitable Spirit of Keiko Mary Kitagawa," *Discover Nikkei: Japanese Migrants and Their Descendants*, at <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2014/7/24/indomitable-spirit-mary-kitagawa-1/>.

⁵⁴ Elaine Bernard, "A University at War: Japanese Canadians at UBC during World War II," *BC Studies* 36 (Autumn 1977): 36–55.

⁵⁵ Interview with Mary Kitagawa, 18 February 2019, at <https://japanese-canadian-student-tribute.ubc.ca/the-story/>.

convocation, a deeply emotional event for everyone present. Beginning in January 2018, together with Dr. John Price, Mary taught a class in the new ACAM program at UBC entitled “Histories and Legacies of Japanese Canadian Internment.”⁵⁶

More people have probably learned about the forced removal of Japanese Canadians from the coast and their incarceration by reading Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* than by reading all of the excellent histories that have been written on the subject. The story of Naomi Nakane and her elderly aunt, the *obasan* of the title, has a powerful effect on readers. As we learned during our workshop on Saltspring, First Nations and Asian Canadian stories emanating directly from the teller – individual experiences subjectively told – convey truth and meaning in a way that we historians, who privilege text and objectivity, cannot. Instead of trying to remove ourselves from the story, we should acknowledge the value of being in it: to acknowledge our subjective view is to concede that there are multiple truths and that the perspectives and experiences of others must be considered. Reconciliation cannot happen without this kind of humility.

The *obasan* in Kogawa’s poignant novel is stoic and resilient in the face of adversity and injustice. Her characterization of the “silent survivor” tends to dominate the narrative of incarceration, but we should remember that there are two *obasans* in the story. There is gentle Aya Obasan who calmly and quietly cleans Naomi’s brother Stephen’s face after he has been beaten up for being a “Jap,” and there is fierce Aunt Emily who is determined to ensure that the injustice of the internment is not forgotten.⁵⁷ The silent survivor narrative denies agency, promotes a view of Japanese Canadians as nothing but helpless victims when they were anything but – the silent survivor narrative silences survivors. Kogawa deftly personified two currents in Japanese Canadian thinking, and in the character of Naomi she shows that these two ways of coping with racism and hardship are not mutually exclusive, that they coexist within individuals in a variety of complicated ways.

By hearing their powerful stories and in learning about the ways they have lived their lives, the Murakamis have taught me about the long-term damage caused by systemic and personal racism. Three-quarters of a century and two generations later, the scars are still visible. But they are scars and not wounds, there to remind us how people struggled to cope with a government that treated its citizens as enemies. The family has spoken out about what they endured, not in bitter recrimination but consistently, forcefully, and with facts and first-hand experiences.

⁵⁶ Mary Kitagawa, “Histories and Legacies of Japanese Canadian Internment,” at <https://acam.arts.ubc.ca/new-course-acam-320a-history-and-legacies-of-japanese-canadian-internment/>.

⁵⁷ Oikawa, *Cartographies of Violence*, 58–66.