

Performing Genres Peggy Abkhazi's *A Curious Cage* and Diaries of War

“If you ever do read these letters,” Peggy Abkhazi notes in her published diary, “long before you get this far, you will realize that monotony is the keynote of our existence here. No direct brutality, so far no bayoneting and torture and raping and such accompaniments one had imagined as part and parcel of internment by an oriental nation, but just monotony, discomfort, dirt and overcrowding” (105-6). Held in a civilian internment camp in Shanghai by the Japanese, Peggy Pemberton-Carter, later better known as Princess Peggy Abkhazi of Victoria, British Columbia, kept a regular record for over two years chronicling her extraordinary experiences. But as her comment above demonstrates, Abkhazi was aware when she readied her diary for publication how her narrative must disappoint, describing a time marked above all by boredom instead of heroics, “discomfort” instead of real pain. Both she and her text are notable for the ability to overcome tedium with a good story and to summon an audience to listen to it. But as a record of life in war, Abkhazi’s diary, published in 1981 as *A Curious Cage*, offers little to readers looking for drama or suspense, or for an eyewitness account of military action. Her narrative reflects not only her own experience as a civilian internee but also the genre in which she recorded that experience. Writing originally in the diary form, Abkhazi could only narrate what she was experiencing in the moment. She therefore could not shape her story to include pattern or purpose; writing without the benefit of hindsight, she could not know what kinds of events would matter for a narrative of “history,” both public and personal. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, *A Curious Cage*, like the events it narrates, has received

little academic or popular attention. Like many other South Pacific internment accounts, it was out of print for several years, and few North Americans seem aware that thousands of Allied civilians in China and the South Pacific spent years behind barbed wire (Cogan 1-2). The reissuing of *A Curious Cage* in 2002 invites reconsideration of this text and the kind of narrative of war that it creates. Abkhazi's diary highlights the problematic role of personal narratives in public history, and the differing values accorded to particular kinds of writers, genres, and experiences as versions of history. I will examine some of the reasons why a text such as Abkhazi's and the history it narrates have been overlooked for so long.

Additionally, *A Curious Cage* merits attention because of its complex textual history, which indicates that Abkhazi used the diary for different purposes and to address different audiences when she first wrote it than when she published it almost four decades later. The extant manuscript diary from February 1943 to December 1943, held in the University of Victoria archives, demonstrates the scope and nature of her own editing and revisions.¹ In preparing the manuscript diaries for publication, Abkhazi made substantial changes, rearranging and combining material, and inserting new passages. She also worked with historian S.W. Jackman, who helped "edit the journal into a workable draft and add[ed] an introduction" (Gordon 209). Most significantly, Abkhazi invented an epistolary framework for the diary, writing an introductory passage for the published diary in which she describes her journal as a letter to her friends Roderick and Muriel McKenzie, and inserting references to "these letters" (105) and "this wandering letter" (58) throughout the diary. She also added introductory phrases to suggest that she always wrote for a specific audience: for instance, a collection of character sketches in the original diary becomes, in the published edition, "a series of lightening portraits—to make you laugh" (63). Another entry now begins, "I am writing to you quite far into the night" (82). Instead of the potentially multiple addressees of the original diary, the "you" of the published edition becomes the McKenzies and, by extension, the British, upper-class, colonial community. Such changes signal Abkhazi's negotiation of genres, audiences, and textual identities, and demonstrate her remarkable knack for public self-performance.

"Pauper-Prisoner-Princess": Peggy Abkhazi

A British citizen born in China, Peggy Pemberton-Carter came to Victoria in 1945, joining the McKenzies, whom she had known in Shanghai before

the war. She bought property and made plans to build a home, and soon after she reunited with and married an old friend and correspondent, Nicholas Abkhazi, a Georgian prince. She thus became Princess Abkhazi and quickly established herself among the upper classes in this most British of colonial cities. Abkhazi fully embraced her new royal identity, insisting that strangers and acquaintances use her official title when addressing her, and making her new home and garden into the self-proclaimed "Principality of Abkhazia" (Gordon 12). Her outstanding garden has become her claim to local and international fame, her "beautiful if somewhat unintended legacy" (Gordon 14); after her death in 1994, this garden became the centre of a battle between developers and conservationists. In February 2000, the garden was purchased by The Land Conservancy of British Columbia and is open today as the Abkhazi Garden, which is sentimentally marketed as "The Garden That Love Built" ("Abkhazi Garden"). Abkhazi's self-construction as both local princess and outstanding gardener was wholly accepted by Victoria's citizens, who literally bought into Abkhazi's mythology, the fairy tale that her publishers describe as that of the "pauper to prisoner to princess."

In 2002, no doubt in response to the publicity the conservation campaign had raised, Sono Nis Press re-issued *A Curious Cage*, adding an eight-page biographical sketch by Katherine Gordon as an afterword; the press published Gordon's full-length biography, *A Curious Life*, the same year. With the opening of the garden and the publication of these two texts, Abkhazi's place in the history of Victoria was firmly established. Though the jacket of her biography highlights Abkhazi's time as a civilian internee, the book allots only one of twenty chapters to this period; it is but one element in the story of a woman known and valued far more for her title and her garden than for her time as a prisoner of the Japanese. Unlike other civilian internee diarists and memoirists such as Desmond Power, Natalie Crouter, or Fern Miles, Abkhazi went on to enjoy "fame" for reasons other than her internee past and reinvented herself for a new public. Thus, when Abkhazi decided to publish the diary in 1981,² she had an existing public identity, and interest in her "private" writings was piqued by her stature as a local celebrity. Her refashioning of her original working diary for a reading public acknowledges this local as well as historical interest and represents one of a series of self-performances Abkhazi put on. As a friend told her biographer, Peggy Abkhazi was "her own best invention" (Gordon 15), a uniquely Canadian version of local royalty. Abkhazi's public identity extended the self-construction that she undertook in her diary during

internment, when her prewar existence—community, wealth, and sense of who she was—had been stripped away. The diary, in both its original and revised forms, demonstrates this writer's agility with fashioning narratives and performing selves.

Despite Abkhazi's local fame, *A Curious Cage* found a limited audience in 1981 and was criticized for its "privileged," "sheltered," and "naïve" perspective (Gordon 209). Partly this limited perspective results from the circumstances of the text's original production behind enemy lines, a situation that necessarily restricted what the diarist could know and, more importantly, what she was able to narrate. Though rumours persisted in many internment camps that personal writings of any kind were forbidden, with penalties ranging from torture to execution, Abkhazi felt that "once she was interned any purely private diary that she kept would not be regarded as dangerous" (Jackman, "Introduction" 17). She notes, however, that when a group of internees were repatriated in September 1943, their luggage was subject to "not less than three fine toothcomb examinations" and "[n]othing written or printed was allowed to be taken" (102). Since Abkhazi did run the risk of her notebook being read by her captors should they confiscate it, she remains quite circumspect in her comments about the Japanese, who stay for the most part offstage, the disembodied agents of "slaps and hits galore" (128). She refrains from all but the most muted criticisms of her captors and fellow prisoners; consequently she crafts a rather Pollyannaish narrative of internment. In fact, the original diary includes passages that are sympathetic and even admiring of the camp commandant Hiyashi, passages that have been left out of the published edition. Free of rage against the Japanese, though not of racial stereotypes about the "oriental nation" (105), Abkhazi's diary upsets expectations of prisoners as actively resistant and of the Japanese as brutal captors.

Abkhazi is similarly silent about her outside helpers, T.S. (Ye Duan-Sheng), and servants Li and Ah Ching, hiding their identities behind the passive voice until the final entries when the war is over. In addition to protecting these people should the Japanese, or worse yet, the *kempeitai* (their brutal military police) read her diary, her silence about these individuals and the life-saving roles they played for her may reflect the privileged colonial perspective that critics of her diary have denounced. Despite her own transformation during internment into "coolie"—yet another performance—she maintains silence about her Chinese compatriots, or she represents them only as "untiring" (147) and "faithful" (152) servants and inferiors. This

colonial blindness may explain her total failure to record in her 1941-42 journal any instances of the brutality of the Japanese to Chinese citizens that took place daily in the streets of Shanghai, or, after she is interned, to acknowledge except by passing reference the suffering of the Chinese outside the gates of the camp, to which the internees were witnesses. Though she remarks on a rare occasion that the camp could hear “the yells and screams of the Chinese in the neighbouring village, no doubt being given the works” (127) following the escape of three internees, she mentions this suffering only in relation to the internees’ own series of punishments, none of which included “the works.” She makes no comment here, either, on the fact that the internees’ actions have resulted in torture for the villagers. In neither the original nor the published version does she demonstrate any shame or discomfort about the position enjoyed by colonial whites in China, even during internment, indicating that she imagines a very particular audience for her diary who also hold this world view.

Her sense of social and perhaps racial superiority certainly accounts for her ongoing self-reflexive commentary on how internment has changed her own and her fellow internees’ behaviour. She records watching a new family move into the camp; seeing herself and the other internees through their eyes, she remarks, less than three weeks into her internment, “how far we have fallen” (66). In this same vein, she notes her new-found skill at camp-induced “Low Cunning,” confessing, “I am horrified at my proficiency in the art” (73). Expanding her observations to the camp in general, she describes a conversation amongst internees: “We were talking about the decadence of our table manners and general deportment, and in how short a time the veneer of a lifetime peels off. So for fun I examined my own behaviour objectively” (76). Among the “horrorifying” behaviours she lists are “an extraordinarily efficient ‘boarding house reach’” and her use of her “bare knees” in place of a napkin (76-77). She concludes her self-examination by wondering “whether these ghastly habits will trip one up, during a fit of absentmindedness, after one returns to civilization” (77). Imagining an audience of readers who are, like her, British, white, and wealthy, Abkhazi measures her internment activity against their standards, which are, or used to be, her own. Recording these improprieties in her journal, she can confess and reshape them, making them funny and therefore inconsequential, not serious breaches in her identity. Aware later that the published diary represents herself and the largely British camp to an audience made up in large part of readers from “the colonies” (as represented by the McKenzies),

Abkhazi works to show how she upholds these community values even when, given her unusual circumstances, she cannot live up to them. In demonstrating how far she has fallen from her old life and standards, Abkhazi reinscribes the class and racial prejudice on which her values are founded. Such entries illustrate that Abkhazi's diary, both in its original and refashioned forms, captures personal and public history in process, narrating both a changing society and an individual whose sense of self (and/in place) is in flux between prewar and postwar identities.

The Internee Experience

Abkhazi was one of over 185,000 civilian Allied nationals interned by the Japanese in the Pacific during World War II (See *ABCIFER*). Civilian internment camps in China and other parts of the Pacific theatre were not extermination camps.³ These sites acted as "holding pens" intended to keep colonial whites away from the native populations the Japanese wanted to enlist as full-fledged members of the "Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" (Bloom, "Escaping" 104). Because the internees were civilian and not military prisoners, they were not subject to *bushidō*, the Japanese "military code of honour," and "their imprisonment was not considered a disgrace" (Van Velden 248). Consequently, internees in China were rarely subject to torture or abuse, though they did suffer from malnourishment, illness, exposure, and loss of livelihood. "The commandants of the civilian internment camps," Frances Cogan argues, "as far as anyone can tell, apparently intended for the internees to live—though not well, of course, and primarily by their own means, with minimal help from the Japanese" (111).

For several months after the occupation of Shanghai, the Japanese upheld Extra-territorial rights, but by 1942 they had begun to intern Allied civilians; eventually, 9,350 men, women, and children were imprisoned across China (Waterford 145). In February 1943 Abkhazi was ordered to report to the "Civilian Assembly Centre" at Lunghua Middle School, where she remained with approximately 1,800 other "Enemy Subjects" for the next "two years, five months, and five days" (Abkhazi 152) until the camp was liberated in August 1945. Lunghua was one of four internment camps in the Shanghai area, and was considered to be one of the better sites in the "Co-Prosperity Sphere" (Power 183-86). (This camp acquired some level of renown in J.G. Ballard's novel *Empire of the Sun*, later made into a film by Steven Spielberg; Canadian Desmond Power has also written of his time in the camp in his memoir *Little Foreign Devil*.) Prisoners were allowed parcels

from outside once a month containing vital food and other necessities, though they were able to send and receive local mail only sporadically. They had a relatively generous allotment for personal space (Abkhazi's "bunk" measured 3 m by 1.2 m, compared to the minuscule 50 cm by 1.8 m allotted to women in the "First Barracks Camp" in Sumatra [Colijn 118]). They could receive newspapers, set up schools, and put on musical revues and other forms of entertainment, though all of these privileges could be, and often were, revoked as a form of punishment. Hiyashi, the camp commandant for most of the war, was generally considered moderate (Jackman 20). Food and water supplies, however, were barely adequate, and on several occasions the camp approached "starvation diet" (Abkhazi 129). The internees' ramshackle housing offered little protection from the environment, particularly during the harsh winters of 1943 and 1944, two of the coldest on record. Although Abkhazi declared in her first month of incarceration that internment would be a "liberal education in the humanities" (65), and at the end of the war she still felt it had been a "unique experience in a lifetime— . . . something I am not sorry to have lived through" (153), the camp was still an extraordinary ordeal.

From its opening entries, Abkhazi's war diary restricts its narration to the personal world of the diarist, inscribing her own direct experiences of war and its consequences for civilians. It is strictly her version of life in internment camp, limited to what she herself undergoes.⁴ She articulates this focus from her first "war" entry on December 8, 1941, when she records that "The war started for *me* when I heard the furious sound of planes rushing over the house at 6:50 a.m." (23, emphasis added). Until the war affects her personally, until the public intrudes on the private, for her the war has not yet begun. Even in the face of the cataclysmic events unfolding around her, Abkhazi concentrates only on her own first-hand encounters with the conflict. This focus on the diarist and the fact that the "action" of the war happens largely off-stage or in the margins of this text complicate a reading of *A Curious Cage* as a "war diary." Though caught in the middle of the conflict, in a camp behind enemy lines, Abkhazi and her fellow prisoners have little real idea what is taking place outside the barbed wire. They have a clandestine wireless—miraculously a staple in almost every civilian camp—but for most of the war, the internees cannot verify the accounts they receive. Until the Allies begin aerial attacks in their region in 1945, the prisoners are not eyewitnesses to the military battles and instead anxiously exchange and record the latest rumours. The internee diary narrative of war,

then, offers quite a different perspective from that contained in a combatant's record. Limited not only to the kinds of knowledge of war that a civilian internee could obtain but also to what he or she chooses to record at the time, the internment diary creates a very particular record of military conflict. The diaries of the civilian internees, personal records of a historic time, create what Esther Captain argues is a "new type of war-literature" (2), testimonies of an experience of war that is untraditional, but that the writers see as intrinsically valuable and in need of recording.

Incarcerated in an internment camp behind enemy lines, Abkhazi does of course experience elements of the war first-hand, but when things are really bad in the camp (or really boring), she simply does not write. By September 1943, her sixth month as an internee, Abkhazi skips a month between entries, then does not record again until late November. She comments on this gap, noting, "It is hard to explain the long gap . . . Part of the reason is just plain idleness (mental only) . . . There is also a feeling of futility" (105). More daunting reasons cause further silences. In April, 1944, she begins, "I haven't written . . . for over two months. The bitter coldness, making it difficult to hold a pencil even in mittened hands, has been largely responsible, and the endless monotony holds one in its grip for weeks on end" (115). The winter of 1944 similarly defies description, causing a four-month hiatus. Picking up again on March 21, 1945, Abkhazi writes, "The grim and so much dreaded prospect of our second winter here more than fulfilled itself. My mind is just a blur as to what really happened from the end of November until now; a frozen, stupefying blanket numbed all my faculties" (134). Her apologetic explanations, a self-reflexive commentary on her narrative that many diarists produce, indicate her sense of responsibility and obligation to her reader(s) and to her text.

Abkhazi's periodic silences, which increase in frequency and length over her tenure in the camp, indicate the physical and mental difficulties of keeping a diary under such circumstances. Elizabeth Hampsten reminds readers of diaries that silences are possibly more significant than what the diarist chooses to record. She suggests that to read diaries "knowingly" requires "a special inventive patience. We must interpret what is not written as well as what is" (4). Just as Abkhazi chooses not to write, for reasons of personal safety or cultural prejudice, about the Asians around her, she also chooses not to include the most painful periods of internment. Not writing them down could allow Abkhazi to imagine that they had never happened; without written record, these incidents fade into the "blur" of her numbed

memory, a key survival tactic for a prisoner who has no idea when her incarceration may end. Such events also do not fit in with the generally positive tone of Abkhazi's record, in which she strives to maintain her dignity and optimism. Significantly, although Abkhazi adds material to flesh out other entries in the published edition, she does not fill in these particular blanks. Having chosen not to depict her captors and their behaviour or to narrate the periods of the most suffering, she can make camp life into a series of humorous sketches in which she stars as the plucky if unwilling heroine, a practice of selective self-construction so evident in her later public performance as princess.⁵

For a diarist keeping a clandestine diary in an enemy prison camp, what is said and not said produces a particular kind of war narrative. The daily struggle to survive on rapidly decreasing and inferior food with fewer mental, physical, and material resources constitutes a different kind of fight on a different sort of battlefield, one that internment diaries can portray in vivid, daily detail. The record of conflict they create is specifically a woman's, and a civilian's, record of war; they are "war diaries" that take into account the fact that participants in the war are not always combatants. The value of a text like *A Curious Cage* lies not only in its portrait of an individual under duress but also in its interpretation of "the human significance of war rather than its military meaning" (Bloom "Women's War Stories" 67-68). Read in this capacity, Abkhazi's text is a legitimate war diary, even though it may not be recognized as such, given this text's inherently different (non-military, non-combatant, woman) narrator. With the catapulting of the private citizen onto the larger stage of public history—both through the actions of the war and through the decision to publish a "private" journal—the diary expands its functions beyond recording the personal life story to serving as a personal narrative of historical events.

Conflicts of "History": Public Records of Personal Experiences

While diaries have served the purposes of "history" long before they were accepted as "literature," their capacity to do so has been limited because of their "subjective" nature. The diaries of ordinary women in particular have long been overlooked by academics, dismissed as artless, domestic, and quotidian. But diaries, and especially women's diaries, are some of the only records, official or personal, that exist about civilian (or military, for that matter) internment under the Japanese. Waterford remarks that "notes and diaries written during incarceration" are among the principal sources of

information on the POW and civilian internee experience in the Pacific (ix), particularly since the Japanese often destroyed official documents about the camps (1). Personal narratives, then, have an essential role to play in calling attention to a war experience that has been undervalued and underrepresented. Diaries like *A Curious Cage* written by female civilians (figures not commonly included in military or official histories) have a particular contribution to make to the recovery of this aspect of the Pacific War.

But why have these stories been so long forgotten? One reason is that the events Abkhazi's diary and others like it chronicle took place on the Pacific front, which was and has continued to be secondary to the European theatre of war, in part due to the Churchill-Roosevelt "Germany first" agreement (Keegan 297-313, Morton 11-41). In addition, war historians have given relatively little attention even to military prisoners of the Japanese, relegating their stories to "peripheral mentions," or including them only as a "kind of appendix" (Daws 25). This absence of official record suggests some guilt about internment: civilians, largely women, children, and the elderly, should have been protected from such an ordeal. Indeed, the total failure to anticipate the Japanese campaigns and consequently to protect Allied civilians in the Far East has been the subject of much controversy since the first days of the invasions (Cogan 25-32; Warner 16-47). Another complicating factor is the postcolonial perspective that European and American civilians should not have been in these countries in the first place. As Frances Cogan notes, "It would be easy to see what happened to these 'comfortable' [colonials] as a kind of morality play judgment on those with too many of life's resources suddenly forced to cope with life the way the 'other half' lived—especially their servants" (17). For military POWs, who suffered in the extreme and died by the thousands, surrender and captivity signalled defeat by the enemy; their experience lacked the grandeur and heroics of military action and sacrifice. Perhaps *bushidō*, the Japanese belief that to surrender to one's enemy is dishonorable (Waterford 38), runs underneath Western military thinking as well, making narratives of enemy imprisonment somehow shameful. Whatever the reasons, official chronicles of World War II have marginalized the history both of POWs and of civilian internees.

Without public awareness of or official attention to these stories, the experiences they attempt to represent are vanishing. No monuments mark the camps of either civilian internees or POWs, and many of these sites have been reclaimed by the jungle or built over. The Changi Camp in Singapore, for example, where civilians and, subsequently, POWs were housed, is now

an international airport (Daws 391). Photographs do not exist of most civilian camps, leaving sketches done by internees as some of the only visual records. Personal narratives therefore serve an essential purpose, providing intimate, first-hand accounts of life under the enemy. However, while personal experience is foundational for autobiographical authority, it has not traditionally been so for history texts or military chronicles. Historian Frances Cogan, for example, writing in 2000, still feels it necessary to qualify her use of first-person narratives in a work of history. Including first-person accounts in a discussion of “problematic” sources (321), Cogan remarks: “Such narratives are literary booby-traps unless the historian using them remains constantly aware that the author very well may have an agenda and that even ‘facts’ can be skewed or contradicted” (325). Diaries, perhaps the most personal of first-person narratives, though “vibrantly alive, immediate and detailed,” still “intrinsically have other limitations,” in part because they “lack perspective” (325). Affirming history as “objective,” and “truth” as non-ideological, Cogan contributes to the culture of suspicion that surrounds autobiographies and diaries as records of both personal experience and public history.

Because internment diaries narrate a civilian rather than military experience of war, with an attendant focus on women and children, they challenge attempts to classify (and market) these stories. Internment narratives illustrate the problem of categorization that civilian internees posed to governments and militaries during the war, and to historians, archivists, and publishers ever since. Civilian internees were not combatants, although they were very much involved in the war; they were not prisoners, despite being locked up. Their status as enemy nationals was not a category that even international agreements had anticipated. The Geneva Convention of 1929 (which Japan had signed but not ratified before the outbreak of the war) makes only one recommendation about civilian internees, noting that “they shall be treated as military POWs” (Waterford 48, n.6). After the war, US government records sometimes classified civilian internees as “honorary P.O.W.s” (Cogan 108-9), but the experiences of internees in most Japanese camps cannot be compared with the horrors of imprisonment for the military.

As records of internment camp, a space and time that is itself difficult to define using traditional concepts of military conflict, first-hand accounts like Abkhazi’s therefore occupy a not entirely legitimate space in the narratives of war. For one, can they really be called “war diaries,” since typically their subjects were physically removed from the sphere of action? At issue I suppose

is who can speak authoritatively: as a woman civilian, Abkhazi has no authority on war or the military other than her personal experiences, and because of her internee and non-combatant status, readers may dismiss even these personal observations. Since internment diaries do not fit neatly into received categories—private journal, chronicle of war, prison narratives—scholars and popular readers tend to overlook them. With little knowledge of the events these texts describe, and few other texts to compare them with, critics and readers consequently import expectations from other genres and accounts, not always felicitously. As historical narrative, then, civilian internment diaries, like the civilian internees themselves, have fallen between the cracks.

Peggy Abkhazi's diary in particular has this ambiguous status, since it complicates categories not only of experience (civilian/military, public/personal) but also of genre, both in its original and published forms. Given the atypical setting of the internment camp, the diary needed to perform a variety of social actions for internee diarists, some of which exceeded the normal boundaries of the genre. Such "genre-bending" gives insight into the unusual circumstances of these texts' creation and the cultural and historical moment of their production. In its narration of events and a cultural space that are foreign, unsettling, and "potentially embarrassing" to the narrator (Hassam 37), the internment diary overlaps with the travel diary, a mode that allows diarists to transform experience through the act of writing, making the strange familiar. Abkhazi's original diary draws on this tradition in its detailed descriptions of camp life, and in Abkhazi's self-positioning as detached observer of her fellow campers, a narrative stance that allows her to shed, briefly, the subject position of "internee," and to imagine herself as an outsider. By adopting the letter-diary format, the published diary further aligns itself with the travel diary tradition. As both Helen Buss and Andrew Hassam describe, many diaries of travel or immigration combine the letter and the diary out of necessity; without regular or reliable mail service, writers began letters that became diaries, which may or may not have been subsequently sent to the original addressee. Since internees could not send mail and rarely if ever received it, the practice of turning letters that could not be posted into daily records was common (for example, Natalie Crouter and Elizabeth Vaughan, both civilian internees in the Philippines, also begin their diaries this way). Letter-diaries allowed internees, who often had carried on lengthy overseas correspondence with friends and family back "home," to continue this practice for themselves,

providing an imagined audience for their unsettled identity and a much-needed element of continuity with their prewar lives.

Unlike a travel diarist, however, the internee does not know when—or if—her “trip” will end. Consequently, the “teleological narrative structure” that a journey typically provides (Hassam 42) falls apart once the novelty of internment gives way to the realization that internment is not a journey but a seemingly endless stopover between the past and the future. This period of stasis, rich though it is in potential for personal growth (cf. Abkhazi’s sense of internment as “education in the humanities”), makes for narratives that quite literally do not go anywhere. These texts can be monotonous for both writer and reader, particularly if the audience comes to the text with narrative expectations derived from other texts such as war diaries that border on the same terrain but in fact inscribe a different experience.

Internment diaries represent internees’ desires to record what they are experiencing for an outsider, whether it is the intended recipient of a letter that could not be sent, or other, less specific imagined addressees projected by the diarists, who need to believe someone outside the camp will hear their story. Unable to alert the outside world to their plight, prisoners feared—justifiably, it has turned out—that their experiences would be forgotten or disregarded. In Waterford’s survey of Western internee literature, he finds that the fear of not being believed is recurrent. “Many of the books, diaries, and accounts,” he writes, “carry some kind of statement such as, ‘Please, believe me, this is all true!’” (3). Daily or regular accounts of life in internment camp can provide the level of detail to substantiate the internee’s claims, but, as Abkhazi’s own words illustrate, the kind of experience they construct has often been deemed insufficiently awful to “count.” Since diaries cannot interpret events through hindsight or evaluate their import in retrospect, they create historical narratives that do not necessarily meet expectations. Instead of following typical narrative trajectories, with a clear climax and resolution introduced by suspense and foreshadowing, internment diaries are often interrupted, meandering, and unexpectedly boring. Even announcements of the end of the war, though celebratory, come across as strangely flat, partly because they are totally unexpected (internees such as Abkhazi had little idea that the Allied victory was so near), and partly because the diarists were too hungry and exhausted to put their feelings into words. Internment diaries reflect the reality of internment: they are repetitive, shapeless, and unpredictable.

Not only narrative but also generic expectations—what people expect from the diary genre and from women’s diaries in particular—have troubled the

response to *A Curious Cage*, (and to other internee diaries such as Sheila Allan's *Diary of a Girl in Changi*, Crouter's *Forbidden Diary*, and Vaughan's *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Vaughan*). *A Curious Cage* is the diary of a private citizen placed in circumstances that she perceived worthy of record and of interest to readers beyond herself; the extraordinary events of her internment suggested to her a public value for her private text. This diary is in some aspects private, in the sense of a personal, as well as intimate, recording of thoughts she would not want to share with fellow internees, let alone a worldwide audience. But it is also public in its inclusion of "general interest" news and observations and in Abkhazi's adoption of a "public persona" (Hassam 39) in her refashioned text. By drawing even in the original manuscript such a detailed picture of individual life in civilian internment camp, Abkhazi, like Anne Frank with her map of the Secret Annex, actively engages a non-internee reader, giving information she imagines will be most interesting and illustrative for "history." While her text includes personal and private material, it also addresses a public readership, presenting itself as a chronicle of war. Her decision to publish her diary and the lukewarm reception it received indicate the conflicted and conflicting nature of a wartime diary. Significantly, many of the civilian internees who kept diaries and later published records of their experiences elected to use their diaries as the basis for retrospective accounts rather than publish them in their original form (e.g. Keith, Miles, Sams). Given this tradition of generic prejudice, the lack of popular and critical attention accorded *A Curious Cage* and other civilian internee diaries is less than surprising.

Diarists themselves, along with their editors and commentators, acknowledge the perplexing nature of their texts. Frequently apologizing for what their diaries do not do, they seek to define the value of their personal narratives in the broader context of public history, yet seem able only to offer negative definitions. Sheila Allan, who spent three years interned in Changi internment camp in Singapore, begins the introduction to her diary by explaining, "It is not a war story—it isn't meant to be—only a record of the experiences and reactions of one who went through those hazardous days of 1941-5" (7). In the afterword to *A Curious Cage*, Abkhazi's biographer Katherine Gordon similarly anticipates and deflects criticism, pointing out that the diary "is not an academic treatise, examining political and social issues of the Second World War, nor, as 'A Shanghai Journal' (part of the original title) might suggest, does it reveal a great deal about Shanghai during that period." Instead, she continues, Abkhazi's record "tells a purely per-

sonal story” (159). Instead of celebrating these “record[s] of the experiences and reactions” of individuals who survived these ordeals, both writers feel the need to apologize for presenting personal narratives that may not measure up to reader expectations.

In that vein, Abkhazi’s editor S.W. Jackman makes a point of stating upfront—“It must be emphasized from the beginning”—that the diarist was not subject to any physical brutality (18). Abkhazi herself addresses the gap between fact and fiction by adding the lines about monotony with which I began this paper. With public knowledge about Japanese camps generally limited to the ordeals of military POWs, as characterized by movies like *Bridge on the River Kwai*, or based on the versions of civilian experiences Hollywood offers in typically sensationalized fashion in *Empire of the Sun* and *Paradise Road*, diaries like *A Curious Cage* cannot help but disappoint. Former internee Margaret Sams, who turned her diary into the retrospective account *Forbidden Family*, recalls how after she returned to the US she learned to keep quiet about her internee past, not because it was shameful but because it wasn’t. Her editor notes that “all the civilians wanted to know was whether or not Margaret had been raped. When she said she hadn’t they didn’t want to hear anymore” (312). Perhaps this curiosity on the part of Sams’s interlocutors had something to do with expectations of brutality on the part of the Japanese, based again on soldiers’ ordeals in the POW camps. Perhaps it also has something to do with what women’s roles are supposed to be behind enemy lines: though asking Sams about rape seems an appalling invasion of her privacy, it is not a surprising question, given public awareness of the so-called “Comfort Women.” But the fact that Sams’s negative answer stopped all interest in her experience is troubling and significant for women’s narratives of war.

Abkhazi’s diary stands, then, at the intersection of the civilian and the military, the literary and the historical, the public and the private. As the diary of an unmarried white woman who had lived a life of luxury while enjoying “Extra-territorial Rights,” it is inscribed by colonial, class, and gender discourses. A diary transformed in publication into a letter-journal, this text highlights as well generic functions and the social actions that the diary genre serves in both personal and public forms. Abkhazi’s journal and those of her peers consciously make history, recording an experience with both personal—to their future selves and to their families—and public import. In the process, they raise some particular questions about the role and value of personal experience in public history. *A Curious Cage* negotiates the

boundaries of the individual story and the historical record. That this negotiation has in some sense failed—since such texts have largely been ignored—brings us once more to the question of whose stories, and what kinds of stories, count in particular contexts.

NOTES

I would like to thank a number of individuals who commented on earlier versions of this paper, in particular the anonymous readers for Canadian Literature who made valuable suggestions.

- 1 The University of Victoria archives also contain the typescripts for the 1941-42 and 1944-45 diaries, but not the originals. My efforts to track down these manuscripts have to date been unsuccessful.
- 2 Gordon suggests that Abkhazi's decision to publish the diary, a project she had considered since 1973, was motivated in part by the princess's increasingly dire financial situation (209). Abkhazi was delighted to receive royalties, which represented the first money she had ever earned through her own efforts (Gordon 211).
- 3 Frances Cogan notes that conditions such as those described by Abkhazi in China were not, unfortunately, the norm for the entire Pacific theatre. In the civilian internment camps in Sumatra, Malaya, and Java, where the prisoners were largely Australian, British, and Dutch, "treatment and conditions were brutal enough to resemble those of the POWs. . . . The further South the camp was, the worse the conditions" (Cogan 110). See, for example, Colijn's *Song of Survival*, Jeffries's *White Coolies*, and Warner's *Women Beyond the Wire* for personal narratives from some of these camps.
- 4 Of course, in choosing later to publish the diary, Abkhazi gives her text public purposes as well. But at the time of writing she does not indicate that she has any thought of publication, unlike other internee diarists including Natalie Crouter and Elizabeth Vaughan, who both comment on their diaries' potential value as published books.
- 5 Silences in such a text—and such a situation—could also indicate trauma, experiences that literally cannot be narrated because they exceed the limits of language to describe them. However, based on Abkhazi's own representation of internment, as well as on historical records and other personal narratives from Lunghua, such a reason seems unlikely for this diarist.

WORKS CITED

- ABCIFER. The Association of British Civilian Internees Far East Region. 22 Jan. 2003 <<http://www.abcifer.com/uk-japanesepow/statistics.htm>>.
- "Abkhazi Garden." *The Land Conservancy*. 28 Jan. 2003 <<http://www.conservancy.bc.ca/Projects/CRD/Abkhazi/Abkhazi%20Main.htm>>.
- Abkhazi, Peggy. *A Curious Cage*. 1981. Ed. S.W. Jackman. Afterword Katherine Gordon. Victoria, BC: Sono Nis, 2002.
- Allan, Sheila. *Diary of a Girl in Changi 1941-45*. 1994. 2nd ed. Sydney: Kangaroo, 1999.
- Ballard, J.G. *Empire of the Sun*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1984.
- Bloom, Lynn Z. "Escaping Voices: Women's South Pacific Internment Diaries and Memoirs." *Mosaic* 23:3 (1990): 101-12.
- . "Women's War Stories: The Legacy of the South Pacific Internment." *Visions of War*.

- Ed. M. Paul Holsinger and Mary Anne Schofield. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1992. 67-77.
- Buss, Helen. *Mapping Our Selves*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1993.
- Captain, Esther. "Written with an Eye on History": Wartime Diaries of Internees as Testimonies of Captivity Literature." *Tydskrif vir Nederlands en Afrikaans* 5 (1999): 1-20.
- Colijn, Helen. *Song of Survival*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud, 1995.
- Cogan, Frances B. *Captured: The Japanese Internment of American Civilians*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2000.
- Crouter, Natalie. *Forbidden Diary*. Ed. Lynn Z. Bloom. New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1980.
- Culley, Margo, ed. *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*. New York: Feminist P, 1985.
- Daws, Gavin. *Prisoners of the Rising Sun: POWs of World War II in the Pacific*. New York: Morrow, 1994.
- Gordon, Katherine. *A Curious Life*. Victoria, BC: Sono Nis, 2002.
- Hampsten, Elizabeth. *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982.
- Hassam, Andrew. "As I Write": Narrative Occasions and the Quest for Self-Presence in the Travel Diary." *Ariel* 21.4 (1990): 33-47.
- Jeffrey, Betty. *White Coolies: A Graphic Record of Survival in World War Two*. 1954. North Ryde, NSW and London: Angus and Robertson, 1985.
- Keegan, John. *The Second World War*. New York: Viking-Penguin, 1989.
- Keith, Agnes Newton. *Three Came Home*. Boston: Little Brown, 1947.
- Miles, Fern. *Captive Community: Life in a Japanese Internment Camp*. Jefferson City, TN: Mossy Creek, 1987.
- Morton, Louis. "Germany First: The Basic Concept of Allied Strategy in World War II." *Command Decisions*. Ed. Kent Robert Greenfield. New York: Harcourt, 1959. 11-41.
- Power, Desmond. *Little Foreign Devil*. Vancouver, BC: Pangli, 1996.
- Sams, Margaret. *Forbidden Family: A Wartime Memoir of the Philippines, 1941-1945*. Ed. Lynn Z. Bloom. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1989.
- Vaughan, Elizabeth. *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Vaughan*. Ed. Carol M. Petillo. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1985.
- Waterford, Van. *Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II: Statistical History, Personal Narratives and Memorials Concerning POWs in Camps and on Hellships, Civilian Internees, Asian Slave Laborers and Others Captured in the Pacific Theater*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994.
- Warner, Lavinia, and John Sandilands. *Women Beyond the Wire: A Story of the Prisoners of the Japanese 1942-1945*. London: Michael Joseph, 1984.

