

Lost in Translation: Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*

"There's always room for beginnings."
—*Chorus of Mushrooms*

Teaching Without Knowing

How do we learn if we don't understand? This question loomed especially large for me recently, as I endeavoured to teach Hiromi Goto's novel, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, to an undergraduate class in Winnipeg. Goto's novel, a Japanese Canadian coming-of-age narrative set in Alberta, includes extended passages of Japanese transcription, but does not offer any translation of these sentences. As is often the case with undergraduates, my students—none of whom had any knowledge of the Japanese language—looked to me, their instructor, for a running translation.

I, however, am unschooled in Japanese, and therefore was as lost as my students were when reading these passages. I anticipated this pedagogical challenge when adding *Chorus of Mushrooms* to my reading list, and had decided that rather than employing various resources in an attempt to compile translations of Goto's Japanese passages, I would use this impending crisis of knowledge as a means of deferring my own authority as an instructor. Having always bristled at the perception of the professor as the ultimate authority on questions of textual meaning, I felt that Goto's 'bilingual' novel might provide an opportunity to challenge the notion of the instructor as the repository of knowledge. Together, my students and I dealt with a series of common gaps in our ability to read Goto's text: we discussed what meanings might be elided, we argued about how to "read around" what we could not decipher, and together we moved, tentatively, conditionally, towards a series of contingent readings of *Chorus of Mushrooms*.

I still question this choice not to seek translations for myself and for my class. Was this decision an unintentional act of colonialism, an erasure of the text's language of difference and a refusal to accept its otherness? Although I attempted to subvert the New Critical position of the scholar as one who *knows*, perhaps I had merely re-established this framework by creating a cultural vacuum in my classroom that refused resources "outside" the text as a means of explication. Arun Mukherjee, in her essay on teaching ethnic minority literature, describes how a rewarding learning experience may be derived from soliciting translations of unfamiliar terms and exploring their connotations. In one anecdote, Mukherjee relates the example of a student who developed a glossary as a companion to Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*. In such cases, Mukherjee suggests, "the text leaves the printed page to join our day-to-day oral culture and to become embellished with further narrations" (43). However, considering that Mistry chose not to include a glossary of Parsi words or phrases as an appendix to his novel, could this student's act of codifying Mistry's discourse be interpreted as an undesirable intervention, a violation of the novel's own statement of difference?

Who is meant to *understand* the text, and how that understanding might be encoded, is a question the writer of colour must continually examine. Roy Miki articulates the issue in his essay "Asiancy" as an adjunct of the writer's intention: "for whom do you write? for the majority? or for the more limited perspective of a community?" (146). The issue of intention, however, implicates the reader's strategy for engaging with the text. *Chorus of Mushrooms*, like Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, challenges the reading habits of what Miki terms "the majority" by refusing to translate Japanese passages, and in such a way either directing a certain portion of its narrative to the "more limited perspective of the community" or to the self-motivated reader as active translator. In view of Goto's writing style, my failure to translate the Japanese passages for myself and for my class can be perceived as an active choice as well as an option already encoded in the novel's discursive strategy.

The Failure to Translate

The negotiation between culturally specific terminology and popular comprehension is, as Miki suggests, a matter of authorial intention, and reading through a selection of Japanese Canadian texts demonstrates the options available to writer and reader. Miki's own collection of poetry, *Saving Face*, provides a glossary at the back of the edition, while both Joy Kogawa's

Obasan and Kerri Sakamoto's recent novel, *The Electrical Field*, employ a mimetic writing strategy in which Japanese transcriptions are followed by English translations, as in the following examples:

"Mukashi Mukashi O-o mukashi . . .," *Obasan* says holding the photograph. "In ancient times, in ancient times, in very very ancient times . . ." (*Obasan* 54)

How people could have it in their heads to build such hideous things was beyond me; on that afternoon they reminded me of giant ika, standing in the field on their long squid legs. (*The Electrical Field* 28)

In the above passage from Sakamoto's novel, the Japanese word "ika" is translated within the space of the same sentence through the use of "squid" as an adjective. In the passage from *Obasan*, the translation of the phrase "Mukashi Mukashi O-o mukashi" is a textual echo that permits Kogawa to incorporate culturally specific discourse into her novel while allowing the reader unfamiliar with Japanese to comprehend the phrase. Both Kogawa and Sakamoto repeatedly encode this "echo" effect in their prose, and one might argue both for the desire to educate the mainstream reader in Japanese culture and language and against a conciliatory mode of writing that sacrifices the mimetic frame of the narrative and often the graceful style of the prose in order to convey denotative meaning.

Chorus of Mushrooms, however, stands as a text unwilling to adopt the conventions of encoded translation. Indeed, in Goto's novel, the passages of Japanese text are substantial and frequent, and the narrative rarely offers its own translation. Thus, my decision not to seek out translations of these passages is acknowledged by the text, and in choosing not to translate I am deferring a desire I believe to be encoded in the structure of Goto's novel: the desire to know a text, a story, a culture, completely—the desire to subsume narrative into knowledge, story into truth. I am both acknowledging and refusing the desire to translate literally in the belief that this deferred and dual desire is encoded in the act of reading *Chorus of Mushrooms*.

The longing to translate is articulated from the beginning by Goto's narrator, Muriel. Born and raised on a mushroom farm in the rural Alberta town of Nanton, Muriel is unable to understand her Obāchan's ongoing Japanese monologue, and instead makes up her own translations based on intuition and empathy. Muriel's inability to understand Japanese is a consequence of her parents' conscious efforts to assimilate into Canadian culture. Although Muriel's Obāchan talks a steady stream of Japanese words and

feasts on surreptitious Japanese delicacies, Muriel's mother, Keiko, never speaks a word of her mother tongue, and feeds her family a "Canadian" diet of baked ham and macaroni.¹ Her parents' attempt to assimilate for Muriel's sake, however, produces a sudden and irrevocable loss of their former language, as her father, Sam, describes:

We decided, your Mom and I, that we would put Japan behind us and fit more smoothly with the crowd. And from that day, when we decided, neither of us could speak a word of Japanese. Not a word would pass our lips. . . . So I stopped talking. I used to talk a lot in my youth, that's what won your Mom to me. She was taken with my chatter and my jokes. But after the day I lost my words, my home words, I didn't have the heart to talk so much. I just put my energies into the farm, grew mushrooms in the quiet of the dark. (207)

Translating themselves into Canadian mushroom farmers, Sam and Keiko not only find their personalities transformed, but are unable to speak Japanese anymore. Sam's description of his relationship to Japanese suggests that the language itself has forcefully censored him from its structure. Indeed, the dynamic nature of this linguistic expulsion is evidenced in Sam's explanation of how the family came by their surname *Tonkatsu*, which, as Muriel eventually discovers, signifies an entrée of deep-fried pork chop:

It's funny, really. That word. It was the only word I could utter when the change took place. Your Mom suggested we take a Canadian name, if we couldn't remember our real one. But I was firm about that. I said if we couldn't remember our own name, the least we could do was keep the one word I could remember. *Tonkatsu!* (208)

As the remaining fragment of an abandoned language, the word *tonkatsu* becomes a compulsively repeated token of loss and the lever with which Muriel is able to recover her forgotten language and the abandoned route to a Japanese community.

The position of Sam and Keiko as characters who are denied access to the Japanese language, as well as the position of Muriel, who approaches Obāchan's language through empathy rather than interpretive knowledge, locates my problematic relationship to the untranslated Japanese dialogue in Goto's novel. In its construction of the *Tonkatsu* family, *Chorus of Mushrooms* allows space for the inability to translate, allows a site where language is purposefully inaccessible.² There is, therefore, place for me—a reader who knows no Japanese—to begin to read the text, despite the elisions I am compelled to make.

On the Threshold of Translation

In its frequent use of the Japanese language, *Chorus of Mushrooms* makes conspicuous the gap between the non-Japanese reader and the text: I am challenged to seek meaning to passages I cannot interpret on my own. Yet, as an “outsider” to this text’s discursive structure, my desire to *know* may be construed as the presumptuous invasion of another culture. Trinh T. Minh-ha, writing on “The Language of Nativism,” suggests the destructive potential inherent in the act of translation in her examination of the imperialism of anthropology. In Trinh’s analysis, the anthropologist asserts his authority over his objectified subjects by gaining mastery of their language:

Language as a “system of social ideas” allows he who knows how it is used and uses it himself as “an instrument of inquiry” to render “the verbal contour of native thought as precisely as possible.” The anthropologist’s expertise in interpretation gains in scientific recognition as it now swells with the ambition of being also a loyal recording and translation of native mentality. In other words, language is a means through which an interpreter arrives at the rank of scientist. (73-74)

By conceiving of the other’s language as an “instrument of inquiry,” the anthropologist solidifies the language—and by extension the other—into a fixed object that can, by virtue of its static state, be codified, quantified, and definitively known.

The desire for truth that drives the enterprise of translation has been addressed by postcolonialists and poststructuralists alike. Jacques Derrida, discussing the matter in an interview in *Positions*, suggests that the translator must presuppose “meaning” as a discrete object:

In the limits to which it is possible, or at least *appears* possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. (20)

Since the signified is, as Derrida would have it, inseparable from the signifier, an authoritative translation is an impossible dream, and only by acknowledging the illusory nature of the enterprise can we, as readers, begin to excuse ourselves from the destructive potential of that dream.³

But is it possible to translate another language—specifically a language that represents a marginalized group within Canadian society—without replicating the presumptuous empiricism of Trinh’s anthropologist, without attempting to orchestrate the “‘transport’ of pure signifieds from one language

to another,” that Derrida describes as a seductive fantasy (20)? Trinh suggests one possible answer lies in a “*suspension* of language, where the reign of codes yields to a state of constant non-knowledge” (76). Rather than trying to define the other through observations, laws, and generalities, the reader must understand that there is no means of completely comprehending the other through language:

In writing close to the other of the other, I can only choose to maintain a self-reflexively critical relationship toward the material, a relationship that defines both the subject written and the writing subject, undoing the I while asking “what do I want wanting to *know* you or me?” (76)

As Trinh suggests, when reading a text that is aware of its difference from the culture of the majority, the reader must examine his/her own motivations as much as s/he analyzes the text as object. The reader who is sensitive to difference, as Trinh contends, must be ready to question identity and willing to let that identity shift in order to accommodate difference. This “suspension of language” situates the reader at the threshold of translation: at the point where s/he is beginning to extract meaning from the text, with the tentativeness and openness that accompanies this position. Signification is perceived, at this threshold, as a boundless possibility on the verge of being glimpsed. Meaning is neither comprehended nor rejected, but rather recognized as something both possible and alien.

I would like to imagine myself as a reader *suspended* at the threshold of Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*. By refusing to forget the gaps in my translation of the text, I construct myself as a reader always beginning to read a novel that is obsessed with the multiplicity of narrative and with the perpetual process of beginning.⁴ I linger at the brink of the reading act, and in doing so I recognize that the novel itself never moves far from the inaugural moment of its composition.

Mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukashi . . .

Chorus of Mushrooms is a novel that is clearly concerned with beginnings, a novel consistently aware of the surfeit of beginnings in a story, the many ways of beginning to tell a story. This notion of ongoing commencement is evidenced in the prolific repetition of the phrase, “*mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukashi,*” which, as I have earlier cited in my example of Kogawa’s use of translation as echo in *Obasan*, means “In ancient times, in ancient times, in very very ancient times.”⁵

The phrase provides a conventional and structured beginning to the tale that follows. Like the traditional beginning of fairy tales, “Once upon a time,” the opening phrase provides an instantly understandable coding for the ensuing story. The inaugural phrase, “once upon a time,” offers a context for the story, a set of narrative criteria the reader can expect—whether these are talking frogs or child-eating witches. As a reader who is not literate in Japanese narrative conventions, I do not know if the phrase has the same clichéd resonances as “once upon a time.” However, like its English equivalent, it locates narrative in terms of chronology. This “ancient” past, in the case of the fairy tale, is only accessible through the reception of the story itself: time is not measurable by historical or geographical periodicity but can only be accessed by the fairy tale, just as the story is identified through its invocation of “once upon a time.”

Although “*mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukashi*” situates narrative and fixes the structure of the tale, in *Chorus of Mushrooms* the repeated invocation of this formalized opening phrase demonstrates the impossibility of a singular beginning.⁶ This is the knowledge of fluid discourse passed from Obāchan Naoe to Muriel/Murasaki, the novel’s narrator, who offers her own appraisal of the process of story-telling:

There isn't a time line. It's not a linear equation. You start in the middle and unfold outward from there. It's not a flat surface that you can walk back and forth on. It's like being inside a ball that isn't exactly a ball, but is really made up of thousands and thousands of small panels. And on each panel, there is a mirror, but each mirror reflects something different. And from where you crouch, if you turn your head up or around or down or sideways, you can see something new, something old, or something you've forgotten. (132)

Insofar as Murasaki describes the acts of reading and writing as multiple, partial, continuous, the repetition of “*mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukashi*” acknowledges traditional modes of narration while subverting their limitations.

Yet, *Chorus of Mushrooms* does not “begin”—if we are to read the novel linearly (and there is no reason to do so, according to Murasaki’s reflexive description of the text)—with the Japanese words “*mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukashi*,” but rather with the following sentences:

We lie in bed, listen to the click of the blinds, watch a thin thread of dusty cobweb weave back and forth, back and forth, in the waves of air we cannot see. The blankets and sheets are a heap at the foot of the bed, and we are warm only where skin is touching skin. (1)

This opening, from its first word, constructs a linguistic scene that positions text, reader, and writer. The plural pronoun “we” creates a textual space quite different to the standard use of first- and third-person pronouns. The “we” with which Goto commences her narration troubles the distinction between “I” and “you,” between sender and receiver. The plural pronoun, “we,” if only for an instant, constructs the reader as a figure complicit in the production of the text s/he reads by drawing him/her into the textual frame as an extension of the narrator. The text initiates itself with a pronominal gesture of inclusiveness.

The textual community invoked by the pronoun “we,” however, is reconfigured by the verb phrase that follows—“lie in bed”—which constructs a situational specificity that suddenly distances the reader from the pronoun. In other words, textual inclusiveness is disrupted by the beginning of story. The communal “we,” it seems, can only exist unproblematically in the absence of the very details the narrative demands.

And yet connotations of symbiosis invoked by the “we” before it is contextualized by the narrative can be found in a notion that persists throughout the novel: the idea that identity, like story, is multiple and fluid. The structure of Goto’s novel is deliberate in demonstrating effortless shifts in voice, between Obāchan Naoe, Keiko, and Murasaki, and Naoe and Murasaki both articulate the position that identity is as easily translatable as languages. Naoe, especially, muses on the folly of believing in a singular, static identity:

Who was that silly Chinese philosopher? The one who fell asleep gazing at a butterfly and dreamt that he was a butterfly dreaming that he was a philosopher. And when he woke up, he didn’t know if he was a philosopher or a butterfly. What nonsense. This need to differentiate. Why, he was both, of course. (44)

The novel’s ongoing translation of subjectivity reaches its apotheosis when Naoe re-names herself “Purple,” thus reconstructing herself as a translation of Murasaki, a name that is itself her translation of the English name, Muriel, into Japanese.⁷ Grandmother and granddaughter, while remaining separate, also move through the narrative in unison:

Two women take two different roads, two different journeys at different times. They are not travelling with a specific destination in mind but the women are walking toward the same place. Whether they meet or not is not relevant. This is not a mathematical equation. (200)

Although Naoe and Muriel perform a fusion of identities that can be seen as potential for limitless possibilities of liberation and regeneration, *Chorus*

of *Mushrooms* is also concerned with the problem of confused or misrecognized identities as they apply to Asian Canadians. Goto's narrator tells several stories of instances when her physical appearance provokes stereotyped assumptions and responses from white Canadians. In one instance, Muriel recalls the racism of her classmates, who cannot, and do not care to, distinguish between Japanese and Chinese cultures:

"Me Chinese, me play joke, me go pee pee in your Coke! Hahahaha!"

"But I'm not Chinese," I protested.

"Yes you are! You are! You're a slanty-eye Chinaman. Hweee chong chop chop ching ching Ahhh so! There, what did I just say now. Tell me what I said in Chinaman." (52-3)

The racism of the schoolboy, who sees all those with "slanty eyes" as "Chinamen" develops, according to Goto's narrator, into an indifference that masquerades as a benevolent interest in the exotic other. In a parallel anecdote, Muriel describes an encounter with an inquisitive shopper who assumes she is an expert on Bok Choy, Suey Choy, and other Asian vegetables (90). Although ostensibly more benevolent than the schoolboy's taunts, the shopper's curiosity effaces Muriel's cultural identity by reducing it to the generalized image of the "oriental."

The violent effacement of cultural difference is not the exclusive property of the white Canadian in Goto's novel. Naoe, in her recollections, describes life with her husband in China during World War II, after Japan has invaded that country:

I stayed behind the walls they built around the cities, the towns, to protect people who lived there from the people who lived without. [My husband] Makoto building bridges across rivers and chasms. He even convinced himself that he was working for the betterment of the Chinese people. To aid in their development. Stupid fool. The bridges were for Japanese soldiers to march across to kill their inland cousins. And I was the stupidest fool of all. I never questioned why the schools were made separate, why Chinese and Japanese were never taught together. Why Chinese children had to learn Japanese, but Japanese children were never taught the words of the land they lived in. (46-7)

In an ominous parallel to the vegetable incident Muriel recounts, Naoe's perspective on World War II describes how imperialism and racism are justified through the rhetoric of kinship. In the propaganda of the state, the oppressed Chinese become "inland cousins" who require improvement by their superior Japanese relatives. The manner in which identity is effaced as a result of persecution is manifest in a refusal of mutual translation:

although the Chinese must learn the language of their colonists, the Japanese are never “taught the words of the land.”

The shifting boundaries of subjectivity come to stand, in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, both for the possibility of community and the violent refusal to understand cultural difference. Just as the “we” that opens this text describes limitless possibilities for communal narrative while deflating that ideal by delimiting the “we” in the first sentence, so too does the (in)ability to translate offer equally liberation and oppression, recognition and effacement.

The Scent of Meaning / The Meaning of Scent

If Naoe’s wartime experience as a colonial presence in China disturbs her, she finds solace in a trip to Calgary’s Chinatown, where she is attracted by the scent of late-night food:

Of course I know the food is not the same, but there is a compatibility of flavour, a simple nose tongue connection. Now if I can only make my way there. Well I don’t need a map. I’ll just roll down my window and let the flavours of Chinatown beckon me. (142)

The “compatibility” of flavour is especially welcome, considering Naoe’s outspoken dislike for her daughter’s dinners of baked ham and macaroni. The “nose tongue connection” offered by Chinatown’s restaurants allows Naoe to reunite with the pleasures she rarely experienced in Nanton.

The desire for sensory gratification appears to be the very reason that Naoe runs away from the family mushroom farm. Her meal in Calgary heals the perceived lack in Naoe’s Japanese Canadian identity through a rediscovery of the taste of familiar food:

I eat, I drink. What more could a body ask for when there is shrimp, squid, scallops, and lobster heaped on plates before you? If I measured my happiness at this moment, no one could be richer than me. Simple pleasure of crack crack lobster shell between my molars, pry sweet meat with my *hashi* and suck out the juice still inside, licking the garlic ginger cream sauce, pungent with green onions, and chew chew of lobster flesh, fresh and sweet as sea. Sip, slurp from my cup of tea and choose a shrimp, a scallop. (148)

It is her reconnection with the abundant tastes she remembers as typically “Japanese” that revives Naoe, and her assertion that, “I eat for Murasaki. I eat for Keiko” (148), confirms the belief that food mends divisions in the family, that the taste of food ameliorates a fragmented sense of community.

Sensual descriptions of food through taste and aroma permeate *Chorus of*

Mushrooms, and the example quoted above is representative of the language and diction characteristically deployed. The determination to represent food as a sensual experience is evident in Goto's replacement of verbs with adjectives—"Simple pleasure of crack crack of lobster shell"—and of adjectives with verbs—"chew chew of lobster flesh." This syntax, along with the repetition of onomatopoeic words, represents the adoption of Japanese conventions of grammar in order to translate the pleasures of taste and aroma into the textual discourse of the novel.⁸

Goto's newly adapted syntax of smell and taste is evident in Naoe's description of the family's mushroom farm. Although she has never visited the farming buildings, Naoe comes to know the routine of a day through her olfactory sense:

Keiko used to come back from the barns smelling like soil and moist. Like birth. I used to press her clothes to my face and breathe deeply, smell-taste her day. Warm semen smell of the first crop of mushrooms. Wet, wet peat moss, the tepid coffee she drank at 10:00, the stink of formaldehyde she used to sterilize her buckets. I can see these things with a scent on my nostrils, a passing taste on my tongue. (37)

The generative potential of this grammar of "smell-taste" is apparent in the comparison of the aroma of the farm to "birth" and "semen." The syntax itself is born out of translation, and reflects an encoded desire to represent sensory perceptions in an immediate and unmediated writing style.

I find myself returning to the word "desire" in terms of Goto's novel; once again reiterating my position that the desire to translate is inscribed within, and refused by, the text. This desire is reflected in the Japanese transcriptions that remain untranslated, as well as in the language of "smell-taste" that allows us to examine the poetics of translation operative in the narrative. Goto's syntax seems designed specifically to acknowledge and honour the untranslatable loss while still allowing itself to be seduced by a desire to translate this loss. The language of "smell-taste" is a monument to these encoded desires.

For certainly food—at least the Japanese and Chinese food described in the novel—signifies desire in *Chorus of Mushrooms*. In the passage earlier quoted, in which Naoe escapes to Calgary's Chinatown, desire is expressed and ultimately sated by the food she enthusiastically describes. The narrative, with its inflected syntax and onomatopoeic resonances, constructs a language of "smell-taste" as an articulation of the desire for individual fulfillment and communal unity. The language of food becomes, as Marilyn

Iwama suggests in her dissertation on Nikkei women writers, “a vocabulary of excess, giving voice to ways of being that lie outside the predictable and ordinary . . . shaping a system of communicating and being whereby the literal and the symbolic merge” (267-8). Goto’s narrators strive to describe the smells and tastes of food while demonstrating how these olfactory, gustatory experiences exceed the grammar and vocabulary of the English language.

Because of the constraints of language, the discourse of “smell-taste” becomes a partial translation of the vocabulary of alternative experience. The description of Naoe sharing her daughter’s day on the farm by the smells she breathes demonstrates the way in which this sensory language is more evocative than the discourse of visual classification (37). In the context of this novel, the synesthesia of olfactory language overthrows a Cartesian discourse that privileges the scopic and the logocentric. We can return, with this in mind, to the thematics of naming in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, where *tonkatsu*, the Japanese entrée of deep-fried porkchop, becomes the residue of an all but forgotten language and culture. It is the language of food that remains insistently in place when the rest of culture is displaced, revealing the power of signification Goto’s text invests in food. This theme eventually resolves itself when Muriel cooks a celebratory dinner of *tonkatsu* as a remedy to cure her languishing mother and silent father (151).

Muriel’s cooking of the *tonkatsu* serves, then, as a gathering together of the family, a re-connection of community through the well-prepared, well-eaten meal.⁹ Muriel re-assembles the family by calling her parents to a traditional table, where the scent of *tonkatsu* returns them to a language they have forgotten. Just as Naoe eats food not just for herself but for Keiko and Murasaki; Muriel, Sam, and Keiko eat together in order to reconnect themselves to a cultural centre from which they have been displaced.

And of course, Naoe, Murasaki, Sam, and Keiko eat not just for themselves and for other family members but also for me, the reader. The language of “smell-taste” is directed outwards—designed to “call” the reader to a table s/he can only access textually. It attempts to provide—as in the passage in which Naoe visits the Chinese restaurant—the articulation of scent, of taste, of texture, by reshaping, through synesthesia, a system of language that is predicated upon what can be seen and heard rather than on scents and tastes. The diction of “smell-taste” announces the beginning—for Goto’s characters as well as for the reader—of “knowing” a community in an essential (but not essentializing) way. As Muriel explains:

There are people who say that eating is only a superficial means of understanding a different culture. That eating at exotic restaurants and oohing and aahing over the food is not even worth the bill paid. You haven't learned anything at all. I say that's a lie. What can be more basic than food itself? Food to begin to grow. (201)

For Muriel, the line between appropriation and recognition, between desire and consumption, becomes entangled in the act of eating the food of another culture. The dialect of “smell-taste” provides an alternative way of knowing, but it might also be merely another means of assimilating the other. Muriel's previous encounter with essentialism in the produce section of Safeway demonstrates that food is not the perfect signifier of culture.¹⁰ At the same time, Muriel describes eating as the site where the desiring subject begins to grow. Food, as I have suggested, becomes the site where community gathers, and where other “readers” might also participate in this textual congregation. Indeed, Goto's narrator continues to think about food in terms of shared story:

A place where growth begins. You eat, you drink and you laugh out loud. You wipe the sweat off your forehead and take a sip of water. You tell a story, maybe two, with words of pain and desire. Your companion listens and listens, then offers a different telling. . . . You get dizzy and the ceiling tips, the chair melts beneath your body. You lie back on the ground and the world tilts, the words heaving in the air above you. You are drunk and it is oh so pleasurable. (201)

Food becomes narrative, narrative becomes ingestion, in Muriel's non-linear equation. In this formula, the reader is invited into the possibility of the “we,” the possibility of entering a community through food and story, the possibility of a “different telling.”

It is important to note that Goto does not privilege Japanese food or Asian cuisine as the site for community, narrative, and meaning. Though the “Canadian” food that Keiko serves her family is never described sensually, this does not so much signify a disrespect for the diet of white Canada as it makes a point about inauthentic cuisine—food that fails to invoke memory, story, community—for the Tonkatsu family. Towards the end of the novel, we are offered a positive reading of white Canadian comestibles in the memories Tengu—the Albertan truck driver who picks up Naoe on the highway—relates of breakfast on his father's farm:¹¹

And I went to wash up and I could smell coffee perking on the gas stove all hot and brown-smelling and the blue eggs cracked and the yolks so yellow all stirred up and scrambled and the floor of the bathroom icy beneath my bare feet, the smell of Janet burning toast, Dad stirring the eggs. (193-94)

The sensual grammar of “smell-taste” permeates Tengu’s language of recollection. The scents and tastes of “authentic” food signify the site of the family, a space where one might “begin to grow.” This is contrasted, in Tengu’s tale, with the memory of his first day of school. When the boy is asked his name, he replies that his name is Son, and his father’s name is Dad:

Even the teacher was laughing. Finally, he said, Son is not your name. It means a boy child. Your dad calls you son because he is your father. Dad means the same thing as father. Do you understand? And everything swung around and words and names all swirling and bang, they smacked into place so that something I had known and trusted was really a solid wall that I could run into and I puked my two cups of coffee and breakfast all over the teacher’s shoes.... (195-96)

Tengu’s story concludes with the moment of rupture between the “smell-taste” world of food and family, and the considerably less sensual world of institutionalized education. The exchange between the boy and his teacher demonstrates the moment when secure meaning based on family relationships and familial love is troubled by the institution of the State, which declares the need for a proper name, an active forgetting of the family space within the new social sphere. The residue of this forgetting is the remains of breakfast that reappears insistently and on cue.

Goto performs a translation poetics of food into language, speech into sustenance. The discourse of “smell-taste” becomes, for the Tonkatsu family as for Tengu, a signifying system in excess of the structures of the English language, in excess of the conventions of grammar and naming. As Iwama suggests, by emphasizing the act of eating throughout her novel, Goto is “challenging the referentiality of metonymy” even as she relies on this device: “Words are lost to the untrustworthy materiality of food; identities are created by and through the food people eat” (196). In other words, the language of food, the full range of sensual and experiential possibilities, is in excess of any single language or discursive register. Inevitably, the grammar of “smell-taste” begins and ends by falling victim to the limits of the English language and its failure to translate the full range of meanings.¹²

The Banana of Metaphor

Chorus of Mushrooms is a text that implicitly explores the metaphor of “hyphenated” identity. The hyphen in such terms as “Japanese Canadian” or “Asian American”—whether or not it is typographically represented—functions to signify both a plurality of identities and a singular subjectivity.

The individual terms—"Japanese" and "Canadian"—are maintained as separate entities, but since an individual can be both "Japanese" and "Canadian," the hyphen may be seen as a unifying force as well as a mark of division, an indicator of assimilation as well as segregation.

Even as *Chorus of Mushrooms* articulates the implied hyphenation of Japanese Canadian identity, it reveals how all identities are hyphenated in multiple ways. Tengu's memory of his first day of school reveals yet another variegated identity: the identity of a Canadian son-student. The failure to contain these terms as they are determined in prescribed contexts provokes Tengu's narrative as well as the reappearance of his breakfast. Tengu's identity, in this anecdote, is constructed as determinedly *excessive*, with the final act of regurgitation as the most cogent metaphor for his extremity. Bill Ashcroft suggests that in marginalized discourse, "excess can become the place in which the post-colonial is located" (34). Insofar as postcolonial discourse functions to absorb and appropriate the "cultural surplus" produced by the colonial centre as language, genre, or theory, "the post-colonial place is itself 'excess' an excess which changes the nature of discourse" (42).

In this sense, the hyphen under investigation in Goto's novel is a metaphor for excess, just as Ashcroft's reading of excess is a metaphor for the hyphenated "place" of the postcolonial. Goto's novel is propelled by an extravagant display of largesse: language, narrative, food, aromas, sexuality, all serve as evocative metaphors in *Chorus of Mushrooms*. The possibility of the "we," as a process of constructing community, delineates an excessive space, a "place to begin to grow." The figure of Tengu—as a white rural Albertan translated into a figure from Japanese folklore—represents just such a surfeit of meaning and identity. Tengu's character creates an ambiguous space for himself in a text that presents itself as a struggle to define Japanese Canadian identity *against* the white mainstream. The very definition of the Japanese Canadian subject is extended in the figure of Tengu, who becomes a part of that community by joining the "we" of eating, of story-telling, and—as his relationship with Naoe culminates in a motel room—of sexuality.

The hyphen, as a metaphor of excess, however, must fail to encompass its full range of possible meaning, since metaphor, by its function, admits that what it attempts to represent cannot be rendered literally. Metaphor is a device reliant upon comparison, and as such the significance of what the metaphor describes can only be approached by way of an analogical structure. As the etymology of "metaphor" suggests, the signifying power of this

device is dependent on the notion of transport or transfer. Metaphor transports language into the *meta*, into the “beyond,” but metaphor, as its etymology attests to, is always in motion.¹³ Constantly moving towards the “beyond” of meaning, metaphor strives to cross the borders of literal language.

At the same time as metaphor tries to enhance language, it is constrained by the linguistic structures it attempts to surpass. The excessive discourse of Goto’s text fails to express itself as the means of escaping conventional language and representation. Excessive discourse, in Goto’s novel and elsewhere, can only gesture towards the possibility of a “beyond” to language. The metaphor of excess, the metaphor of metaphor, moves towards its own impossible meaning.

It is with this trope of excess as a gesture to an ever-receding destination that I turn to the childhood memory Naoe describes of turning her eyes upwards towards a blimp hovering above the schoolyard. Naoe and her classmates are encouraged by the teacher to sing a song of praise (transcribed in untranslated Japanese) to the zeppelin floating above them:

Gawa gawa gawa gawa
Oto tatete
Are are mori no mukō kara,
Soro soro detekuru hikōsen
Marukute annani hosonagaku
Banana no yō ukuranda
Fukuro no naka ni wa nani ga aru. (21-2)

While they sing, Naoe questions her teacher about the lyrics: why they sing that the balloon “is filled up like a banana,” since the blimp is “brown and isn’t even shaped like a banana” (22). What the teacher tells her—“It’s only a song, Naoe-chan, and the words aren’t that important. We are happy to see the blimp and we sing a merry song”—emphasizes the difference between story and “truth,” between language and signification. The undeniable fact that the blimp is not a banana demonstrates the surplus and ambiguity of meaning in language and in narrative.

At the same time, the song to the blimp represents the narrative dictates of the State, as represented by the school and by Naoe’s teacher. Far from being a subversive exercise, the school’s song to the blimp praises a technological innovation that embodies the glory of the State, and therefore of national and cultural identity. By praising the blimp, the schoolchildren are praising Japan, and in so doing praising themselves. The failure of the metaphor of the banana to represent the blimp might be read as the failure

of the subject to translate herself into a singular and coherent narrative.¹⁴ The banana represents the moment of unintentional subversion, a mis-translation of the singular icon of authority, identity, and narrative.

The banana, then, stands as a metaphor for metaphor, a metaphor for excess, for incomplete translation. I choose this as a final symbol in this examination of my continued decision not to translate Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and also as an image for the beginning of a hyphenated Canadian text. I offer the banana of metaphor as an understanding of translation and its failure, the compulsion to articulate and the corresponding inability to do so. The banana of metaphor is offered as "a place to begin to grow," to "fill up like a banana" though the site does not resemble a banana, and in the knowledge that bananas do not "fill up." The banana of metaphor is communicated as the beginning of the possibility of "we," a possibility always already forgotten but that is commemorated in the subversive potential of the figurative, which reveals much less and much more than what it purports to signify.

I return, finally, to the question that initiated this inquiry: How do we learn if we don't understand? The answer I find encoded in Goto's text is that we learn by exploring our inability, by suspending our limitations and by *beginning* to understand the Other. The banana of metaphor is proffered as a gesture towards this inauguration, in the welcome knowledge that, "there's always room for beginnings" (63): the beginning of translation, of fertile and provocative misreadings. The beginning of desire as a happy ending, a happy beginning:

Mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukashi . . .

NOTES

- 1 In Obāchan Naoe, Goto constructs a figure who re-addresses Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*. For just as *Obasan* begins and ends with a call for *redress*, for a healing of the community, *Chorus of Mushrooms* attempts to provide an "immigrant story with a happy ending" (211), a text that—while addressing the issues of racism and assimilation that concern Kogawa—tries to approach these issues in a playfully subversive way. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Obāchan is a whirlwind of words, as opposed to the hauntingly silent *Obasan* of Kogawa's novel. Goto's narrative demonstrates the absent mother to be recoverable, and re-figures dispersal as liberating rather than as a metaphor for absence, loss, death.

Similarly, *Chorus of Mushrooms* might also be read as a re-telling of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. Laurence's Hagar is an elderly woman whose words and

actions constantly slip outside her conscious control, who dreads being sent from her house by her concerned children, and who, distraught, runs away from home in an attempt to liberate herself. In contrast, Goto's Obāchan Naoe is always in control, a woman who unleashes her perpetual flow of Japanese words as a reminder to her family of their heritage. When Naoe runs away from home, it is with self-assurance and determination rather than panic. Throughout the text, Naoe remains a self-defined, self-assured, and sensual woman who disappears into narrative rather than into death.

2 In my reference to the Japanese passages as "inaccessible," I am of course speaking entirely subjectively, for these passages would be easily comprehensible to anyone schooled in the Japanese language. I include such subjective statements not in order to convince the reader of the inaccessibility of Japanese, but rather to remind myself that my position as a reader of *Chorus of Mushrooms* is both specific and problematic. As a white male Canadian, it is all too easy for me to forget that what I fail to understand may be easily understood by others, and that the questions of translation that have launched this reading of Goto's novel are not necessarily problematic to other readers.

3 Of course, not every literary critic has such a negative view of translation as an enterprise. Indeed George Steiner, in *After Babel*, advocates the act of scholarly reading as the translation of a literary text out of time in order to restore "all that one can of the immediacies of value and intent in which speech actually occurs" (24). The reader, by engaging with a text composed in another historical period, performs an act of "original repetition," wherein s/he re-enacts, "in the bounds of our momentarily heightened, educated consciousness, the creation of the artist" (26). This view of reading as a learned and timeless translation, a translation that restores the text to a privileged state of orality, is precisely the position that Derrida critiques in his own writings.

Postcolonial writers such as Trinh would find Steiner's assessment of the reading act objectionable. Steiner's emphasis on the "educated" reader who is subsumed by the artist's imagination seems strikingly similar to Shirley Geok-lin Lim's early encounters with "colonial university teachers" in her youth. Lim describes her literary schooling as a time when she was instructed in the British canon while being reminded by her teachers that "English literature was really only for the English people" (5). Thus, for the postcolonial reader, the act of reading as translation, involves subjugation to a higher, British, intelligence; a literary mind that must be admired without full comprehension.

4 I want to return to Mukherjee's essay on cultural translation as a pedagogical tool, for the anecdotes she selects leave room for the inability to translate certain discursive codings. Although Mukherjee describes the benefits of cultural interpretation in teaching the works of Claire Harris, Cyril Dabydeen, Sky Lee, and as I have earlier discussed, Rohinton Mistry, the final anecdote describes her inability to translate passages of Ojibway in Basil Johnston's *Indian School Days*. Mukherjee describes how this incomprehension on her part enriches the text, since the gaps in her knowledge remind her of the "colonial nature of the Canadian state, in that no Native language . . . enjoys the status of 'official' language in Canada" (44).

My reading of *Chorus of Mushrooms* does not necessarily contradict Mukherjee's advocacy of greater multicultural literacy in the Canadian university. Indeed, Mukherjee refuses to offer a single, coherent approach to texts which foreground their cultural difference, and so finally presents a variety of pedagogical options that can be seen as either wide-ranging or self-contradictory.

5 Since I repeatedly refer to Kogawa's novel as a key to some of the phrases in *Chorus of*

- Mushrooms*, I am indebted to *Obasan*, as perhaps Goto's novel is indebted to *Obasan*. The two texts offer a fluid, and necessarily partial, translation of each other. This example forces me to acknowledge that the representation of myself as having no access to a translation of Goto's Japanese passages is not entirely accurate. Just as the attempt to translate is always partial, the refusal to translate is similarly incomplete and doomed to failure.
- 6 Within the text, the phrase "*mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukashi*" is always printed in italics and in bold print, and situated in a paragraph of its own as though it floated free of the novel's narrative while at the same time remaining an integral part of its structure. A great deal could be said about how typography is employed by Goto to situate or disturb narrative expectations and to alternately frame or unsettle the use of voice in the novel. As in many texts of hyphenated identity, terms foreign to most English-Canadian readers are italicized. Thus, although they are not translated for the reader who cannot speak Japanese, these words are marked as a specialized discourse. Unless otherwise noted, the italics used in citations are Goto's own.
 - 7 In the assimilated world of her parents, the narrator is legally named Muriel. However, Obāchan subversively translates this name into a Japanese equivalent, Murasaki, which means "purple," but which also alludes to the Japanese writer Murasaki Shikibu, who wrote the first extended piece of fiction in the Japanese language, and introduced the concept of the antihero (165).
 - 8 I owe acknowledgement and thanks to the anonymous reader who, while refereeing this paper for *Canadian Literature*, provided me with some insight into certain Japanese linguistic conventions, namely the reliance on context and shared meaning that results in sentence "fragments" and "inverted" syntax, and the repetition of onomatopoeic words in order to portray sensory perception.
 - 9 Iwama provides a close reading of the Freudian imagery that is presented and subverted in this scene, suggesting that the eating of the family name calls to mind Freud's writing on totemism only to reject it:

The evening's entrée for the Tonkatsu family is, of course, a multiple substitution. Because tonkatsu is neither the "real" name of the father, nor treated with veneration by the Tonkatsu clan, neither the primal father nor his literal substitution is being eaten. (251-52)
 - 10 bell hooks' essay, "Eating the Other," examines how, under the guise of good intentions, curiosity, or fascination, a majority culture commodifies the Otherness of a minority culture, and effectively devours the difference of the Other. hooks' analysis of this colonial consumption, especially in the form of interracial sexual desire, is relevant to Goto's text, specifically the episode where a Nanton boy tries to seduce Muriel in order to experience the exotic pleasures of "Oriental sex" as he sees it portrayed in the miniseries *Shogun* (122).
 - 11 "Tengu" tells Naoe that this nickname derives from a trip he made to Japan, where the heat of the summer caused him to stand out because of his red face (110-11). Once again, Goto's novel presents us with an act of translation, as the white Albertan is transcribed by laughing schoolchildren into a figure from Japanese story.
 - 12 It is important at this juncture to remind myself that the limits and range of my understanding do not coincide with the limits of others. Other readers of *Chorus of Mushrooms* can and will remember the taste of the Japanese and Chinese foods described in the text, just as other readers can and will translate the Japanese passages in the novel. This is not to say that these readers can provide a comprehensive translation of the text, but that the boundaries of their reading are located differently from mine.

- 13 Metaphor: [Gk, f. *metapherein* transfer, f. as META- + *pherein* to bear.] 1. A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable; an instance of this, a metaphorical expression. 2. A thing considered as representative of some other (usu. abstract) thing; a symbol. (OED)
- 14 This reading is strengthened by Glenn Deer's reminder to me that banana is a term applied, most often in a derogatory sense, to an assimilated Asian American (yellow on the outside, white on the inside). In this sense, Naoe's reaction to the incongruity of the banana metaphor highlights the text's continual negotiation of the Tonkatsu family's hyphenated status in Canada, and the issue of identity as a matter of place and cultural identity.

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