

Transgressive Sexualities in the Reconstruction of Japanese Canadian Communities

In what literary critics have come to call the field of Asian American writing,¹ Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* has earned a place as a "major Canadian novel" (Harris 1996 155). Academics have interpreted *Obasan* as evidence of high Romance (Goody 1988), elegy (Merivale 1988), historiographic metafiction (Goellnicht 1988-89), Lacanian psycholinguistics (Magnusson 1988), women's fiction (Howells 1987), the Kristevan abject (Jones 1990); and, according to Mason Harris (1996), documentary novel, immigrant literature, and "the great Nisei² novel," to name only a few readings. These interpretations agree that the desire in *Obasan*—more specifically, the frustrated sexual longing of Naomi, the novel's unmarried, celibate, and childless middle-aged narrator—represents either Naomi's separation from her mother, or from her own fully actualized self, or both. These critics also agree that healing comes to Naomi with the knowledge of her mother's injuries and ultimate death from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. That is, this *dénouement* settles the matter of Naomi's frustrated and wounded desire.

This popular analysis of *Obasan* has led critics to view Kogawa's subsequent novel, *Itsuka*, as overtly political and, *therefore*, lacking any sustained exploration of desire (Harris 1996; Persky 1992; Shahani and Shahani 1997). Harris, for example, makes Naomi's desire an impossible topic for *Itsuka* by reading the novel as a "public affirmation" of the "psychological resolution" he observes in *Obasan* (194). Understanding that the implied ascetic public and political spheres are paramount in *Itsuka* leaves readers facing a prickly choice: either over-interpret or overlook the desire on the page.

This tradition of reading sociological significance into texts by “minority” writers has made it quite easy for readers to imagine overt connections between desire and political context where none exists. Such imagining may be happening with *Itsuka*. For instance, the relationship between Naomi and the multi-ethnic Father Cedric may well be a metaphor for “the multicultural ideal” (Shahani and Shahani 1997 88). However, individuals might misread this relationship because they find the representation of desire in the midst of a political context to be “self-indulgent” (Lim 1990). It is also possible that some readers do not recognize Nikkei³ women writers’ representations of desire.

Historical accounts and sociological analyses of Nikkei social realities have generally constructed “the Japanese Canadian woman” in terms of this imaginary individual’s performance in the roles of wife and mother (Ito 1994; Takata 1983; Adachi 1976; Young and Reid 1939). Sexuality defines the terms of this “heteronormative” representation (Ting 1998). Yet sexuality, the corollary of desire, has always been an unspoken component of the image. Moreover, the insistence on the maternal Japanese woman disallows any desire that is inconsistent with the heteronormative framework. In spite of their real and common existence in Nikkei social life, Nikkei women whose desire transgresses the boundaries of faithful, monogamous heterosexuality have thus been un(der)represented in Nikkei discourse, appearing mainly in textual shadows. A recent challenge in the critical approach to texts by Canadian Nikkei is that Nikkei women have begun writing frankly about transgressive desire in the constructions of lesbian sexualities. My essay takes up this challenge as an invitation to begin destabilizing the discourse of Nikkei (hetero)sexuality.

I approach the topic of transgressive desire from a feminist standpoint that considers the categories of sexuality, gender, and desire to be the discursive effects of institutional practices (Butler 1987 & 1990; Scott 1988). A thoroughgoing approach to transgressive desire requires a substantial examination of the exclusionary processes of heteronormativity. What concrete cultural practices reflect and produce disciplinary heterosexual processes? How have these processes constructed the gendered bodies of Nikkei women as natural and inevitable carriers of heterosexual desire? With Butler, I am concerned to explore the political possibilities raised by the critique of foundational categories. I turn, then, to Nikkei women’s critique of “female” desire as a way of introducing the accumulation of performative

acts (Butler 1990) that have, over time constituted the bodies of “Japanese Canadian women.”

Nikkei women have been writing in private all along.⁴ However, the published textual self only began circulating in earnest in 1981, the year Joy Kogawa published her novel, *Obasan*. Thus, when writers from the dominant Canadian culture were already questioning the autonomous self, marginalized writers were just constructing her. For Kogawa (and her contemporaries who began publishing in the 1990s), entrenched stereotypes of the silent, submissive, “Asian” woman meant that writing for a public was immediately a counter-discursive act. Less than a decade ago, Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1990) observed, “Why they [Asian women] write is a mystery because their readers are still marvelling at the fact that they write at all . . .” (153).

For Canadian Nikkei women, marginalized in the dominant society by ideas of race and gender, the textual construction of transgressive sexuality carries particular risks:

Within the JC [Japanese Canadian] community, pressures are present which deny my existence. They are subtle but destructive all the same. ‘Japanese and gay? Not possible. Who ever heard of that?’ Under such constraints it becomes almost impossible for a Japanese person to explore sexuality issues. (Mochizuki 13)

The invisibility engendered by this denial may lead to a critical practice that classifies this emergent writing as idiosyncratic, an alternative view too easily marginalized again.

One way of refusing to repeat this marginalization in criticism is to make multiple sexualities relevant to the whole of Nikkei experience. In “Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in Asian America,” Dana Takagi counsels scholars not to consider that the theoretical job has been done once the voices of lesbian writers have been added to the body of Asian American literature: “. . . the topic of sexualities ought to be envisioned as a means, not an end to theorizing about the Asian American experience” (10). Here Takagi is emphasizing the importance of process. However, her advice also parallels the concern that women’s experiences be added to history as a compensatory act, and as part of the process of changing the way in which history is regarded, recorded, and interpreted. Women must not only write, says Cixous, but “write through” their bodies (256).

For Cixous, writing through the body is a celebratory and liberating act that releases “luminous torrents” and beautiful forms (246). For Nikkei

women, too familiar with a history of sexual stereotyping and racialization, recognizing the body is as pressing a task as writing it.

I mean if I found my body, if I were back in it, I might not write. I might not have to, I might actually be happy (laughter) and I'm not. (Kogawa and Koh 1995 29).

Here Kogawa is responding to Karlyn Koh's query about whether or not Kogawa sees writing as a way of "reclaiming the body" (29). Kogawa's position acknowledges the way the material (that is, aching, aging, pregnant, hungry, fit, tired) body insinuates itself in writing, regardless of intention. The body is, in a sense, pre-eminent; "present" or "absent," the body is always being written. What can be reclaimed in a transformative piece of writing—where stereotypical images do not compel representations of identity—is the writer's lost union with a body.

This is not to say that the union of the material body and the intangible self is a condition of transformative writing. The writer's separation from the materiality of her body and its representations is, in itself, textually productive. *Obasan*, for instance, may be read as a textual exploration of the mother's absent body. However, by testifying to a personal and/or communal history of division between the experienced self/body and the represented self, the complex self/body emerges. In fact, the body of Nikkei women's writing would be slight without textual investigations into the denial of the body. A common theme in fiction and poetry by Nikkei writers such as Joy Kogawa, Noriko Oka, Mona Oikawa, and Tamai Kobayashi is the experience of inhabiting and inscribing bodies that do not find their counterparts in the images that society privileges. From this historical place of denial, Nikkei women have constructed selves that depend on the body as a means of knowing and communicating. While Kogawa's constructions of desire and the body are, perhaps, more subtly transgressive than the other writers mentioned, she has begun a tradition of articulating desire that several younger writers claim as formative in their own creative practice.⁵

Kogawa's poetics engage the body as a metaphor of community. In *Obasan*, Naomi describes a happy evening in the bathhouse at Slocan, the internment camp where Naomi's family spent the Second World War:

The bath is a place of deep bone warmth and rest. It is always filled with a slow steamy chatter from women and girls and babies. It smells of wet cloth and wet wood and wet skin. We are one flesh, one family, washing each other or submerged in the hot water, half awake, half asleep. (160-61)

Through this multi-layered metaphor, divisions between individuals become indistinct. The water of the ofuro [bath], this most “Japanese” symbol of cleansing and purity, joins the bathers’ flesh together as one.⁶ For Naomi’s Christian family, the ofuro also evokes the purifying waters of baptism that render the individual one with Christ and the body of Christians. Furthermore, the designation of this place as the “women’s side” of the bathhouse recalls the ultimate union of the amniotic bath. The shared bath removes even the distinction between the inanimate and the living—wet wood, wet cloth, and skin. Yet even as the thing which obscures individuality is at once water and steam, the women retain their individual selves, washing each other, chatting.

Because the same boundary distinguishes inclusion *and* exclusion, Kogawa’s metaphor of the body as community is always ambivalent. In her poem, “Glances,” the body bears the documentary traces of (not) belonging. The Nikkei narrator arrives in Japan to find that eyes are “fierce” and “fearful” spotlights trained on the cultural *faux pas* that she, as a Canadian visitor, commits. She interprets as “Japanese” those cultural symbols that do not mark her foreign body: the scars from moxibustion,⁷ “stomach ulcers and suicide.”⁸ Similarly, in “Dwarf Trees,” both male and female Japanese bodies are “stunted,” “twisted,” and “pruned” by what the narrator interprets as cultural constrictions on their behaviours. Yet a sense of the metaphor’s relativity emerges in *Itsuka* when we read that it is in contrast with Canadian Nikkei, not Japanese, that Hawaiian Nikkei seem “as unbent as free-standing trees” (92). This time, it is the loss of culture, rather than its imposition, that diminishes Nikkei: “unlike us crippled bonsai in Canada, they’ve retained community here” (92).

The destruction of community is also implicit in the amniotic bliss of the bathhouse in Slovan. The scene in Slovan evokes the intimacy of bath times that Naomi shared with her Obāchan [grandmother] in Vancouver. Yet “Slovan” Nikkei only built the bathhouse because they were forced to leave Vancouver, the place that Naomi remembers as the site of paradisiacal belonging (*Obasan* 48-49). Bodily traces of the disappearing community appear again in Naomi’s description of her role at the death of another family member:

I’m an undertaker disembowelling and embalming a still-breathing body, removing heart, limbs, life-blood, all the arteries, memories that keep me connected to the world, transforming this comatose little family into a corpse. (*Itsuka* 75)

This account of the disintegrating cultural body resembles, but should not be confused with, the disappearance of the physical body in death.

Shortly after Aunt Emily's description of Hawaiian Nikkei, Naomi recounts a dream in which she disappears from the realm of the physical:

The instant I look down, I know it's happening. I've passed the boundary. My limbs—legs—arms—are gone. There's nothing left to see or touch, yet I find myself plummeting, further, into the infinitesimal. (*Itsuka* 93)

Here Kogawa uses the metaphor of the (disappearing) body as a passageway into the presymbolic: "I, the thought and the person, am one, indivisibly, consciously and utterly myself" (93). This is also the unthinkable place of utter communion where, because there is no separation, "[t]here is no death. There is no disappearance, no finality in the drift downstream. Annihilation is not possible. Individual consciousness cannot be extinguished. So that's what death is" (94). Thus the death of the body is qualitatively different from the body of death. The destruction that accompanies the death of the body signals the end of physical existence, and is a fruitful metaphor for the disintegration of community. Conversely, the body of death is an imaginative sphere in which one overcomes the separation of tangible and intangible in exchange for a third realm of the utterly unified.

This unity is realizable in a durable body of death that resembles Lacan's "indestructibility of unconscious desire" (*Écrits* 167). Lynne Magnusson (1988) has already identified Lacanian strains in the images of Naomi's separation from her mother in *Obasan*. In *Itsuka*, Kogawa turns to the recovery of that first plenitude, before the signifying phallus distinguishes child from mother: "I am without a body, but I am not, I am not without consciousness. . . . I become, and I am, the song" (94). This is that impossible site where satisfaction of individual need "means the destruction of the organism itself" (*Écrits* 167).

In its obvious alliances with Lacan, Kogawa's model of desire is determinedly gendered. In Lacanian terms, the child begins life in seamless dependence on its mother, unable to distinguish her existence as separate from its own. This union is interrupted in early childhood by the paternal phallus, the ultimate signifier. In what Lacan calls the drama of the mirror stage (*Écrits* 4), the infant travels through a time of insufficiency and anticipation towards this moment or plane of separation, after which the symbolic order reigns and the child is armed with a rigid subjectivity. This individual is one who has learned that separation from others, especially

the mother, makes entry into the realm of the symbolic possible. The subject *must* separate from the mother, whose absence of a phallus makes her the emblem of male desire *and* a sign of lack. Female desire operates by being doubly displaced: first by separation from the mother, but also, according to the incest prohibition, from the father:⁹

The 'double-alienation' of the woman is thus a double-alienation from desire itself; the woman learns to embody the promise of a return to a preoedipal pleasure, and to limit her own desire to those gestures that effectively mirror his desire as absolute. (Butler 1987 203).

In this doubly-alienated state, Naomi "fear[s] touch as much as the inability to touch" (*Itsuka* 2). She runs from personal intimacy and from identification with the Nikkei community, describing her emotionally arid state as a coma from which she must be revived (*Itsuka* 3).

In Toronto at Aunt Emily's behest, Naomi finds herself at the end of a chain of exile from her past selves and communities. As the adolescent Naomi awoke to sexual longing, Pastor Jim was there to translate that desire as "the sins of the flesh." Now middle-aged, Naomi has succeeded in repressing her desire (for both belonging and the release of passion) to the point that she suffers the somatization of the exiled (Kristeva 1991 310).

In this state, her shattered body, so foreign to herself, bears the marks of repression:

My abominable abdomen. Something vast as childhood lies hidden in the belly's wars. There's a rage whose name has been forgotten. . . . Pastor Jim's message of hell probably spread within me a fear of life. (*Itsuka* 119).

This "something" as vast as childhood recalls the physical abuse and untruths that placed a chasm of separation between the child Naomi and her mother (*Obasan* 65). Significantly, it is not only Naomi's rage at those who manipulated her desire, but the repression of that desire that continues to afflict Naomi. Not surprisingly, then, even Father Cedric's gently ministerial and paternal courting sends Naomi fleeing to her bed in pain.

Eventually Naomi allows the androgynous Father to guide the process of her re-socialization, and she is led by this "fairy godmother priest, though the forest of [her] adolescence" (*Itsuka* 145). This re-socialization is a journey "back" to the unity of the earliest infancy and amniotic bliss where Naomi becomes "whole" and "complete as when [she] was a very young child" (285). The narrative ends only as Naomi re-enters the symbolic order where the law of the father is the invisible given. Now the priest is simply

Tamai Kobayashi speaks of the need to articulate transgressive desire in her poem “for renee.” Here memories of childhood plenitude and safety—“echoes of the first songs / and stories in this exile’s heart”—form the background to sexual intimacy. Plenitude is also a talisman against the utter exclusion created by attacks based on perceptions of race and sexuality. In the safe embrace of the mother/lover, words are unnecessary, silence is “deep with dreams,” and speaking is an act of looking, touching, and remembering:

remembering the sound of her voice
as she whispers your name
the shape of her hand
remembering her touch
against the streets of fear
and mornings
gazing at her
in sleep with the simple joy
of watching her breathe

The poem vaults from this time and place where communication does not depend on utterance to “the streets of fear,” where the need for language attacks comfortable, sufficient silence:

remembering the skinheads down on yonge
with their white skin sneers and swastikas
and nights when you think you’re dying
it’s the end of the world and you’re going insane

and there are words for this
Jap, bitch, chink, dyke

Kobayashi acknowledges that the story of exile in this place can only be told with a language of desire:

you see we must have words for this
slipping by
as a dream, desire

to awaken in her eyes (15)

The shape of this language is not simply counter-discursive. These words defend against material and discursive violence by (re)collecting that first plenitude—“echoes of the first songs / and stories . . . slipping by / as distant as a dream”—with the second—the memory of it. Merging the concrete past with its present traces gives form to desire in the present.

Yet to travel back to the site of the first plenitude, where the articulation of

desire does not demand separation, is to imagine away the need for representation. Moreover, as Naomi is convinced in her journey back to that first wholeness, plenitude is a necessary stage on the way to full identity as an individual, not a state of permanence. Such plenitude is the mark of infantile sexuality (Freud 1938), that short time when the very young child cannot distinguish between external reality and the interiority of its “experienced world” (Piaget and Inhelder 1973). Not only is representation unnecessary in this literal state of complete identification; representation does not exist (Piaget 52). Lacan’s democratic emphasis on the causal relationship between the advent of representation and subjectivity (*all* individuals become subjects through language) may seem to qualify the maleness of the symbolic order that the child later enters. However, each of these models remains incompatible with a positive valuation of the literal and with the idea that “infantile” plenitude might have any healthy place in adult subjectivity.

Some feminist theorists recognize a fertile compatibility between Lacanian psycholinguistics and women’s sexualities (Kristeva 1986; Irigaray 1985), while others (Homans 1986; Chodorow 1978) have suggested that feminism recast the (female) presymbolic in a more positive light. Homans, for example, sees the phallic fracturing of the mother/daughter dyad as less traumatic, even less necessary for the daughter than it is for the son. The father does not compete with the daughter for the mother’s attention as he does with the son. Moreover, adult women may continue in close relation with their mothers without sacrificing maturity.

Homan’s argument does not necessarily depend on normative heterosexuality. Kobayashi’s poem, “As yet untitled,” suggests that the continuity of the mother-child dyad also complements adult lesbian sexuality:

I see your hand
 curled
 as an autumn leaf
 life lines
 carved out of years
 memories of summers green
 and you, young
 heart racing across a field of light
 a shy nod
 and gentle smile
 and how you have grown in years
 in silences
 winters of childhood

...

softly tell me your name
whisper in your mothertongue
grow
run wild
and come back to me (29-30)

Within the poem, the metaphor of representation is possible, even desirable: the hand “curled / as an autumn leaf,” “the heart racing.” But the speaker also acknowledges communication that precedes the symbol. These presymbolic gestures of speechless infancy co-exist with the words of old age in “winters of childhood,” and can be recalled and repeated in the uncivilized “mothertongue.”

This “mothertongue” resonates in writing by Nikkei women as a name for the often lost native language of their forebears, and as an attempt to reclaim or (re)construct a way of speaking that exceeds or precedes dominant “patriarchal” language (Ueda 1994; Kobayashi & Oikawa 1992). In these respects, what might be called “Nikkei” mothertongue evokes Daphne Marlatt’s (1987) “Musing with Mothertongue.” At least, the ideas that the “name” may be held in a hand, or in a touch (Kobayashi 16 & 30), that ecstasy, the yearning for “woman,” is a woman wrapped in words (Oikawa 73) *sound like* Marlatt’s idea of language as body and place:

inhabitant of language, not master, not even mistress, this new woman writer
(alma, say) in having is had, is held by it, what she is given to say. (225)

Yet, it is at this place where the writer is given what she—particularly—has to say, that these mothertongues meet, and depart from, each other. That is, the bodily traces of Nikkei women’s particular histories, especially as the targets of exclusionary practices based on ideas of gender and race, make Marlatt’s celebration of essential womanhood seem a costly indulgence.

However, the two mothertongues do agree on the irrelevance of substitution to language. The notion of substitution as a prerequisite for meaning is a necessary component in so-called patriarchal theories (such as those of Freud, Piaget, and Lacan) for two reasons. First, these theories insist that the acquisition of speech depends on the sacrifice of the oral pleasures of eating. Second, the same theories diminish the significance of the mother’s pleasure by emphasizing that of the infant. Because it sustains the complete union of that first plenitude, mothertongue manages instead to articulate an infancy in which the enjoyment of feeding exists as part of a whole pleasurable experience in which mother and child participate together. The mother’s

sexual excitement and other pleasures of breast-feeding co-exist, as does the infant's enjoyment of sucking and babbling. The pleasure of one need not supplant the other, for either the mother or the child. Where the nature of pleasure and the one who enjoys it are already part of another, neither substitution nor metaphoricity is required, or even imaginable.

Mona Oikawa extends this challenge to representation by playing with the literalness of adult lesbian sexuality and mothertongue in her short story "Stork Cools Wings." Lisa, a Chinese Canadian, and the anonymous Nikkei narrator meet at a tai chi class: "two Asian women in a room full of tall white men" (93). Driven to sleepless nights full of yearning at the sight of Lisa executing the tai chi movement "stork cools wings," the narrator suppresses her desire, convinced that Lisa is heterosexual. As her luck has it, the narrator is proven wrong and, after six months of restless, desiring nights, finds herself in bed with Lisa. At the brink of realizing her fantasies, the narrator is interrupted by Lisa's dislike of the bubble gum taste of the dental dam covering the vulva of her lover.¹⁰ The narrator urges Lisa to look in the refrigerator for a bottle "with a drawing of a Japanese woman on it" (98). In the bottle is umeboshi paste, the pungent, salty sweet puree of pickled ume, or plums. Lisa smears it on the dam:

"It looks like dried blood," she says.

"That's why I like it," I answer, adding, "It's actually dried plums, very macrobiotic." She laughs and I feel a cold sensation as she spoons out the thick red paste while the dam is still on me. (98)

Here sex is food, and neither is a substitute for the other. The woman Lisa eats from the body of a "Japanese" woman food that is identified by the image of a Japanese woman. The umeboshi paste that she eats resembles menstrual blood, the material sign of mature womanhood that would have become food had fertilization occurred.¹¹ Yet Lisa cannot eat her way through the multiple representations to the "real" Japanese woman under the sign. The dental dam does not hide some phallic thing beneath layers of signification, a referent for which another meaning can be substituted. Rather, this covering at the vaginal entrance simply veils another passage-way, a literally empty signifier.

In this story Oikawa incorporates material food with sexual expression as a metaphor for transgressive, transformative sexuality. Honouring the familiar association of sex and food, Oikawa has the two characters come to know each other over tea and dinners together, but complicates the

metaphor of sex as eating by introducing the tangible umeboshi paste. Replacing the modern, stereotypically western, bubble gum taste of the dam with the “Japanese” flavour of the literal umeboshi is an exchange of metaphors: the substance still camouflages the barrier that obstructs the “real” woman behind it. But by parodying the identification of women with food, and the domestic—specifically Nikkei women—with the diminutive, exotic, Japanese lover, as well as women’s role as consumable commodities intended for men’s use, Oikawa releases the narrator from the cold storage of Nikkei women’s stereotypes. Elsewhere, Yau Ching (1997) has pointed out how stereotypes may be reproduced in the process of parodying “a world in which we Asians become the food we (are expected to) eat” (33). Oikawa avoids the stereotypical by changing the traditionally accepted gender of the diner/lover, and by emphasizing the nature of the woman eaten as a representation. Lisa must be satisfied with eating food that resembles the menstrual blood, in itself also only a sign of the womanhood behind the barrier; her tongue never finds a core of that being.

This story so celebrates the bond created by the lovers’ identities as Asian women that it would seem Oikawa is following the tradition of early Asian cultural nationalism that exchanged the image of the assimilated Asian with polarized images of “yellow power” (Chin et al., preface). The characters’ “bond of sisterhood” forms the instant they recognize they are the only Asian women in their class. Their ethnicities merge as the women do: “incense wisps of jasmine and cherry blossom rise in clouds above our bed. ‘Til the light of dawn we carry each other to the peaks of Tian Shan and Fuji-san. . .” (99). This is just one story, and elsewhere in *All Names Spoken* Oikawa resists simplistic exchanges of unified identities. In the essay, “Some Thoughts on Being a Sansei Lesbian Feminist,” she interrogates her own actions in “[c]hoosing a lover who is white,” examining the implications that action might have on the extent of her belonging—or not—within feminist, lesbian/gay, Nikkei, and white communities (Kobayashi and Oikawa 100-03).

Oikawa’s story does follow a critical tradition that views the discourse of lesbian sexuality as a way of subverting or rejecting patriarchal components in heterosexual models of subjectivity, such as the Lacanian insistence on the phallus (Homans 1986; Wittig 1973). Remarkable in “Stork Cools Wings,” though, is the manner in which the story’s literal rendering of eating returns to the mother the oral pleasures of “infantile” sexuality, without threatening the identifying boundaries of the self. In fact, as the lovers’ oral

explorations test temporal boundaries, the mother emerges as one who finds that she is, already, part of a host of others: "I move her beneath me and begin to travel the paths of our foremothers, through crevice and moss, uncovering treasures with mouth and hand" (98-99).

This is probably not what Mrs. Makino has in mind when she urges the young women around her to identify their bodies as Japanese (*Itsuka* 247). Nonetheless, by reaching "back" in time and place through the processes of eating and being eaten, the anonymous Nikkei woman in "Stork Cools Wings" makes an identity for herself. The woman on the bottle of ume-boshi paste is no more or less "Japanese" than the fictional Nikkei woman on the bed, but the images commingle and are eaten into being, as they are both licked into the mouth by the mothertongue.

At another meal, Oikawa treats the tangible qualities of food, in this case steam rising from a bowl of udon (thick wheat noodles), as a metaphor for the way in which decorum obscures reality:

The steam from the udon
fogs my glasses as I tell you
I feel closest to you
and need someone to know who I really am
in case. . . .

This stanza is from "Coming out at the Sushi Bar," a poem which incorporates food as a marker of community identity. Within the poem food establishes the intimacy of two sisters in relation to "the men at the bar," while simultaneously suggesting the ideological and experiential chasm that separates the women:

"The wasabi is hotter today," you say,
And feeling the pressure
to analyze and rationalize
(as so many straight people do)
you add,

"I knew it after you had been away—
Was it in 1977—
that you came back different.
I figured something horrible
had happened to you.
You had changed so much."

The sensuous intensity of the wasabi (a type of horseradish), in excess of the fundamental tastes of bitter, sweet, sour, or salty, introduces the uncontainable

nature of lesbian desire within a heteronormative reality. In effect, the futility of the attempt by the (presumably) heterosexual speaker to categorize the wasabi mirrors her equally futile efforts to make sense of her lesbian sister's "horrible" difference.

Throughout the poem, food, as an emblematic symbol of commensality, highlights the disparity of inter-group ideologies. The sisters are members of several of the same groups (ethnicity, family, gender, and generation), a criterion that, in the tradition of Nikkei written history, has usually been invoked as the basis for analysis. Theoretical analyses of race and ethnicity, especially, have so depended on a causal connection between shared group membership and shared ideologies that disparity within the group has been interpreted as a partitive sign, evidence that the group is disintegrating (Park 1930; Creese 1988). Elsewhere, Nikkei discourse invokes similar criteria in the shaping of generalizations about identity.¹²

However, "Coming out at the Sushi Bar" invites the reader to consider that sharing group membership is no more a guarantee of shared ideology than is shared wasabi, or udon, or the fact that the sisters "each take a pastel-coloured mint / for the road" (62). Neither is the world of the poem a lesbian utopia, in which the straight sister is converted, nor a gustatory hiatus in which the two shelve their sexual differences so that food may be purely enjoyed. However, the poem does intimate that food may accommodate and signify difference without threatening community. The sisters retreat to their separate worlds, never having seen through the foggy steam, but with promise: "Maybe next time / I will tell you / how loving women / did change my life" (62).

In a lighter vein, Oikawa offers a cheekily disruptive telling of the dailiness of lesbian sexuality in her poem, "Eating Ramen" (Oikawa et al. 53-55). Situated in a North American "Japantown," in a café selling ramen (a noodle soup already "impure" with Chinese elements), on Oshōgatsu (a celebration that centres on home and the heterosexual family), Oikawa's North American narrator and her partner strain against multiple physical and symbolic borders; even the ramen that starts out so properly stiff and straight is softened with cooking and then slurped round¹³ as the two women "sit close, / hand in hand, / talking about Malcolm X, / the film we just saw." The lovers' passionate public embrace suggests an identity that is only elliptically signifiable, confounding the other customers who are "trying to figure out / whether we're two men or two women or. . ." Yet Oikawa

blesses this unruliness with an almost nostalgic infusion of two significant “Japanese” cultural symbols: “I smell the warmth of miso, / feel o-shogatsu breathing / kindness upon me.”¹⁴

Much of Oikawa’s writing participates in what Ching identifies as “the desire of young Asians to queer up the hetero-patriarchal ideologies embedded in their food culture” (33). As with the sisterly disclosure in “Coming out at the Sushi Bar,” by situating an open display of lesbian sexuality in a Japanese North American restaurant, traditionally a meeting place for friends, families, and “obviously” heterosexual lovers, this poem reconfigures both food and sexuality to accommodate the textually novel. However, as in “Stork Cools Wings,” Oikawa is not concerned to substitute one representation for another: in fact the narrator of this unruly sexuality suspects her own stereotypical assumptions:

. . . I still notice their eyes,
people slurping ramen—
straight people—
men with women.
(Of course I’m sure of this.) (54; emphasis hers)

The indeterminacy of the narrator’s position is characteristic of this most recent stage of Asian North American literature in which writers explore the multiplicity of identity, and of the contradictory tensions inherent in multiplicity.

In her poem “Origins,” Oikawa’s narrator examines the multiple selves she discovers within as she relates to the woman who is her lover:

When I think of you
I become a geisha
Waiting to serve you
o-cha [green tea] and nori [paper-thin sheets of sea-weed]—
wrapped morsels on a cold winter day. (76)

Her lover’s beauty prompts “ancient memory” to rise. The women’s shared histories as “the colonized daughters / of daughters of / Japanese mothers” excite the samurai within. With the lovers’ admission that they are also “Japanese women,” the speaker loosens the obi, or belt, of her lover’s kimono, a familiar symbol in love scenes depicted in Japanese art and literature. These several identities co-exist, not quite randomly (the invocation of each imagined identity depends on separate and different material contexts), but without the imposition of hierarchical ordering that privileges samurai over

geisha or mother over daughter. Moreover, by “queering up” the clichéd image of the subservient geisha feeding male guests on demand, the poem also re-animates the metaphor by linking forbidden desire with food.

This proclivity for enduring, perhaps even welcoming, the contingencies of being is a common thread in writing by Nikkei women. Writing outside the strictures of both Nikkei and white convention, these writers are forging new images of Nikkei women from submerged and transgressive desires. Perhaps their intimacy with exclusion and denial motivates these Nikkei writers to risk exposing the contingent nature of community memory in the construction of community truths. Writing from groups that have doggedly constructed themselves as communities of heterosexual families, Nikkei women writers are (re)constructing communities of multiple sexualities.

NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, Lim and Ling; Chin et al.; and Cheung. Each of these texts subsumes Joy Kogawa within the category of “Asian American.” Within Canada, academics are beginning to reconsider the wisdom of maintaining sub-classifications based on race, ethnicity, or nationality for Kogawa and other “visible minority” writers. For instance, in her introduction to the democratically entitled *Canadian Writers and their Works* (Lecker, David, and Quigley 1996), Margery Fee identifies an abundance of differences and similarities among the book’s five “Canadian” writers (Josef Škvorecký, Austin C. Clarke, Joy Kogawa, Rohinton Mistry, and Neil Bissoondath) that render such classifications useless. Scott McFarlane’s emphasis on the complexities of *Pacific Windows: The Collected Poems of Roy K. Kiyooka* (Miki 1997) makes a similar comment, describing the classification of “Asian Canadian writing” as “masterly watchwords” (154).
- 2 “Nisei” refers to the second generation, or children, of immigrants from Japan. Because I do not wish to set Nikkei discourse apart as “foreign,” or in some way outside of conventional Canadian, that is “English,” discourse, I leave all Japanese words in plain text, unless a writer I am citing uses italics.
- 3 Nikkei are individuals of Japanese descent living outside of Japan.
- 4 For translations of these early “private” accounts, see Midge Ayukawa (1990 & 1988) and Keibo Oiwa (1991).
- 5 See, for example, Hiromi Goto’s evocations of *Obasan* throughout her novel, *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Also, see Oikawa (1992) regarding Kogawa’s influence on her writing.
- 6 For discussion of the bath as a symbol of moral and physical purity, see Clark (1994) and Ohnuki-Tierney (1984).
- 7 Moxibustion is a treatment common in Japanese kanpo or “traditional” (that is non-bio-medical) Japanese medicine. The practitioner burns small cones of dried mugwort leaves on the body, generally to treat pain and paralysis (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984 98-99).
- 8 Each of Kogawa’s poems discussed herein is from *A Choice of Dreams*. Unless otherwise noted, writing by Tamai Kobayashi and Mona Oikawa is from *All Names Spoken*.

- 9 For discussion of Lacan and gendered desire see "The Signification of the Phallus" (*Écrits* 281-91); Butler 1987 186-217; and Mitchell and Rose 1985.
- 10 A dental dam is a piece of latex that some dentists use to isolate the affected area of the mouth during treatment. The rate of transmission of HIV/AIDS during oral sex between women is uncertain; nonetheless, some women cover the vulva with a dental dam to decrease the likelihood of transmission.
- 11 My thanks to Millie Creighton for suggesting the characterization of menstrual blood as "food that might have been."
- 12 See, for example, Adachi 1976; Omatsu 1992; Kogawa 1981.
- 13 This phrase refers to the technique of noisily slurping one's noodles; if the diner is unskilled or in a particular hurry, the noodles may not be sucked up straight but whipped around to slap against the cheek, hence "slurped round." As with any cultural practice that is acceptable in one society and taboo in another, slurping has become evidence of ethnicity. An amusing scene in the film *Tanpopo* involves a group of young Japanese women being taught (in Japan) how not to slurp when they eat noodles prepared in a western fashion. The humour in this scene is augmented by the Caucasian man seated at the next table who is noisily slurping up his spaghetti.
- Slurping is one of those cultural practices that become a site of ambivalence in "impure" social groups. For instance, "mixed" or intercultural families may debate whether to slurp only when eating "Japanese" noodles, or as long as the family is eating at home, regardless of the ethnicity of the meal. These families may also debate whether or not the ethnicity of guests and visiting family members ought to determine eating techniques. Ethnicity in "Eating Ramen" is already so ambiguous that the lovers' clumsy slurping cannot be read authoritatively as a sign of not belonging.
- 14 Miso is fermented soy bean paste, the base ingredient in miso shiru (soup), a staple of the "Japanese" diet.

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