

# Screening Motherhood in Contemporary World Cinema

edited by  
Asma Sayed



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# 1. *Obāchan's Garden*

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## Maternal Genealogies as Resistance in Canadian Experimental Documentary

SHEENA WILSON

*It is also necessary, if we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, for us to assert that there is a genealogy of women ... mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, and daughters.... Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity.*

—Luce Irigaray, “The Bodily Encounters  
with the Mother” (539)

MOTHERS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERHOOD have been historically overwritten by patriarchal practices that accord some lives and certain life stories greater value. Fiction and non-fiction stories by and about mothers—particularly the stories of poor women, working women, and women of colour—have gone largely unrecorded. What remains are patriarchal daughter-centred stories of young women who move from one male protector to another: father to husband to son. As a response to this history of literary and cultural production, the telling of mother-stories can be reclaimed as an act of resistance, whether mothers are telling their own stories, or daughters and granddaughters are retracing their matrilineal genealogies. This is the project of Linda Ohama’s 2001 intercultural, experimental documentary film *Obāchan’s Garden*<sup>1</sup>—to reclaim, resist, and retrace. Like other literary and cinematic productions by Japanese Canadians produced after 1980—such as Joy Kogawa’s novels *Obasan* (1981) and *Itsuka*<sup>2</sup> (1992), Kerri Sakamoto’s *Electrical Fields* (1998),<sup>3</sup> and, perhaps most comparably,

Midi Onodera's film *The Displaced View* (1988)—Ohama's 2001 film functions as a community autobiography.<sup>4</sup> It reorients the main subject, Asayo Murakami—who is referred to throughout the film as Obāchan [grandmother]—in relation to the Canadian national myth. Her story offers an alternative literary and cinematic version of Canadian history that reconfigures her—and, by proxy, other women and mothers, immigrant women of colour, and Japanese Canadians more generally—as political agents who have shaped the present. While acknowledging the role that women have played and continue to play in the colonial project of Canada might more comfortably be left unarticulated, the film also recuperates the stories of founding mothers, particularly working women and immigrant women of colour. It thus revises the traditionally masculine story of colonialism in ways that politicize women's lives. This rewriting of history breaks open possibilities for women to be more fully acknowledged in the present, not only as victims of colonial patriarchy and its oppressions, but also for their past, present, and future power to shape social, cultural, and political life.

As an intercultural film, *Obāchan's Garden* employs experimental techniques “to attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge, or living as a minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West” (Marks 1). Films of this genre disrupt any notion that “cinema *can* represent reality,” drawing instead on a plethora of cultural traditions to represent memory, its fallibility, and the “violent disjunctions in space and time that characterize diaspora experience—the physical effects of exile, immigration, and displacement” that destabilize notions of truth (*italics in original*, Marks 1). As such, *Obāchan's Garden* experiments with techniques of memoir, biography, and autobiography. The grandmother starts out as the subject and central figure in this filmic biography; however, at a specific turning point in the film's production she becomes a co-auteur, producing a partial memoir-auto/biography. Furthermore, the boundaries between her story and the stories of her descendants are blurred and overlapping. Thus, the film documents not only Obāchan's story but also the stories of other family members. Her story blends with their stories, weaving a personal, familial, and community narrative across truth-telling genres that record, reveal, and invent

her life through personal interviews, archival footage, investigative reporting, and docudrama re-enactments—for Obāchan's sake and for that of the family and extended community.

By definition of its genre and subject matter, this National Film Board of Canada (NFB) documentary is a narrative of resistance born of the multiple, shifting social and political issues of the historical moment of the film's production: 1) the NFB's social justice and multicultural mandate; 2) the post-Japanese Canadian redress period; 3) and shifting ideas about motherhood and maternal agency coming out of feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. But this documentary is more than a moving-image memoir or autobiography of a mother-grandmother and her family; it re-visiones the national myth that writes the mother-grandmother into the centre of the family, community, and national story, at the intersections of race, class, and gender.<sup>5</sup>

OBĀCHAN'S GARDEN AND THE  
NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA (NFB)

*Mythologies or national stories are about a nation's origins and history. They enable citizens to think of themselves as part of a community, defining who belongs and who does not belong to the nation. The story of the land as shared and as developed by enterprising settlers is manifestly a racial story. If Aboriginal peoples are consigned forever to an earlier space and time, people of colour are scripted as late arrivals, coming to the shores of North America long after much of the development has occurred.*

—Sherene H. Razack, “When Place Becomes Race” (74)

In the context of this collection on mothers in various national cinemas, it is apropos for the chapter on Canadian film to focus on representations of motherhood in a documentary film. Canadian film and television have historically been produced in the shadow of American cultural representations, particularly Hollywood feature films and American television. However, film has historically been dominated by the genre of documentary film, a medium that not only reflects but also produces and reproduces a national narrative

and identity. Documentary has been both an official vehicle of national propaganda and a state-sponsored space for social critique. True to the history of the documentary form in Canada, *Obāchan's Garden* both represents the tension between using film to sustain national multicultural agendas and creates cracks in the veneer of assumptions that gloss over established national identity tropes of Canada as a French-English country—the Great “White” North.

The Canadian film industry privileges the documentary genre.<sup>6</sup> The groundwork for this institutional focus was established in the 1930s when the Canadian government commissioned John Grierson, a Scottish filmmaker now credited as the father of documentary film, to visit Canada and study Canadian film and the associated communication industry. In 1939, based on the recommendation and leadership of Grierson, the Canadian government formally created the NFB through an act of parliament. As Gary Evans explains in Grierson's biography, “He, who had invented the word ‘documentary,’ was called upon by Prime Minister Mackenzie King in 1939 to head Canada's National Film Board and to supervise the distribution of wartime information to the free press and radio. The newspapers called him Canada's Propaganda Maestro” (5). In the interim, three quarters of a century since the establishment of the NFB, this national institution has continued to produce documentary films of varying lengths in both English and French, along with a range of educational materials. The initial propagandistic vision to create a national identity lasted well beyond Grierson's tenure at the NFB, which officially came to an end in 1945. The subsequent *National Film Act* of 1950 formally mandated the NFB “to produce and distribute and to promote the production and distribution of films designed to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations” (NFB). This mandate gestured both to Grierson's initial vision for the social role of film and to the critical future role of the NFB in drawing viewers' attention to Canadian and global social issues. Grierson believed that “the social use of film will do for people what my [Grierson's] family's lighthouse tradition did for ships” (Evans 31), guiding Canadians away from peril and toward safety. Significantly, the National Film Act also officially separated the NFB from the state while maintaining its financial

support—albeit at arm's length with fewer government officials involved in its operations.

The pre-eminence of documentary film—a truth-telling genre often associated with activism and discourses of resistance—has created an interesting tension in the body of national cinema in Canada. By the 1970s, for instance, the NFB was producing the Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle program (1967-1980), which focused on both exposing social problems and using media to create change.<sup>7</sup> During that same period, the NFB also produced the well-recognized Canada Vignettes series of animated short films designed to promote national unity.<sup>8</sup> Yet even with the Vignettes, the NFB resisted producing works that might be conceived of as explicitly propagandistic<sup>9</sup> and preferred to create films that would be received as celebratory of the nation and that could inspire national unity. Paradoxically, government funding stemming from the multicultural agenda provided the NFB with the resources to produce numerous films on a range of ethnocultural issues that critiqued the government's vision and explicitly highlighted the tensions between the theoretical principles of the official policy and the lived reality of Canadian citizens.

By the time Linda Ohama began collaborating with the NFB in the late 1990s, the NFB was recognized for consistently supporting female filmmakers and artists from across the country who focused on regional issues and a range of ethnocultural and national identity issues around race, class, and gender. In short, the NFB was publicly known for producing films on social justice issues from a diversity of perspectives. The corpus of NFB films to the late 1990s represented the politics of the institution: to point a critical lens at society and to reflect, for better or worse, a multicultural politic, which has been critiqued for its contradictory practice of celebrating multiple cultures while only supporting two official languages: English and French.

In 1995, the federal government ordered a review of the NFB, Telefilm Canada, and the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) that by 1996—around the time of Ohama's affiliation with the NFB—resulted in a new operational model<sup>10</sup> with fewer in-house filmmakers. This reconfiguration created the need to contract more independent directors. Ohama was already a known documentary

filmmaker, and the timing of the NFB's fiscal restructure coincided with the need for increased funding for *Obāchan's Garden*. Moreover, the film's subject—the life and biography of a Japanese Canadian pre-Second World War immigrant who survived the hardships of racism and the Second World War evacuation from the West Coast to become a contributing member of the Rainier farm community in Alberta—comfortably aligned with the NFB's ongoing mandate to promote ethnocultural and regional stories.

Affiliation with the NFB afforded Ohama the ability to create this film, and it also provided distribution; this is a key factor for sustained influence on Japanese Canadian identity formations as understood in relation to official national discourse(s). Long-term distribution and impact were further assured by the accolades that the film garnered at the time of its release; these included a nomination for a Canadian Genie award in the category of Best Feature Length Documentary and five Leo awards.<sup>11</sup> As Sherene Razack points out in the epigraph to this section, the settler-colonial story is a racial one that relegates Indigenous people to a pre-development era and people of colour as “late arrivals, coming to the shores of North America long after much of the development has occurred” (74). *Obāchan's Garden* temporally and geographically remaps the settler narrative by inscribing a racialized woman as the axial figure of early twentieth-century pioneer life in Western Canada, despite the fact that the film does little to disrupt the centrality of the settler-colonial narrative overall.

#### OBĀCHAN'S GARDEN AND JAPANESE CANADIAN HISTORY IN CONTEXT

*During the course of Western history representations of persecution from the persecutor's perspective gradually weaken and disappear.*

—René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (201)

Ohama's *Obāchan's Garden* is a response to one of the most significant issues embedded in the Japanese Canadian literary and cinematic corpus: the fear of invisibility and co-optation via dominant cultural narrative. Within the inherent hierarchies of

Canadian multiculturalism, the dominant discourse defines itself through difference, what it *is not*. As such, Japanese Canadians and Japanese-Canadian identities have been exploited at various historical moments, on a scale ranging from clearly pejorative and harmful classifications such as “Enemy Alien”<sup>12</sup> to conceptions of Japanese Canadians as model minority citizens. While some labels are seemingly more negative or positive, they are, ultimately, all peripheral to what it means to be a Canadian with no adjectival descriptor or hyphenated construct: that is, the difference between *Japanese Canadian* and *Canadian*.

Over the last 140 years since Japanese-Canadian immigration began, Japanese-Canadian identities have oscillated between variations on Enemy Alien or ethnic outsider and model minority citizen. These shifts have resulted from changing national and international politics; in both cases, these identity discourses were homogenizing and served larger national political and economic projects that were not concerned specifically with Japanese-Canadian identity. Ultimately, these various narratives of model minority or ethnocultural “Other” are easily absorbed and neutralized, erasing dynamic and nuanced subjectivities.

Between 1877 and the early 1940s, Japanese Canadians were legally and socially excluded through racist labour practices and legislations, culminating in Second World War policies of dispossession, relocation, and internment that continued in various forms until 1949. Racist practices in this period served economic interests. Japanese Canadians (referred to simply as Japanese at that time) provided a cheap labour force that could be mobilized for nation-building purposes. They were considered transient or temporary within a permanently white Canadian landscape. The politics of wartime dispossession and relocation were a response to racist attitudes, but they also had direct economic benefits for white businessmen; the relocation of the entire Japanese-Canadian community eliminated a competitive labour force, and their dispossession made property available to competing businesses at a fraction of the market value. In the post-War era, there was still much publicly expressed prejudice against Japanese Canadians. Despite high rates of intermarriage with predominantly white English-speaking Canadians, Japanese

Canadians were still characterized at this time as being incapable of assimilation.

The 1970s, however, saw a shift in these attitudes. Multicultural narratives tended to re-inscribe Japanese Canadians as model minority citizens who had survived the adversity of racist history in Canada. Seemingly positive, these narratives focused predominantly on Second World War internment, which allowed for a contrast to be drawn between historical abuses of power and the post-1970s tolerance for diversity. Racism was presented in the public discourse as a historical problem resolved by multiculturalism. Yet despite official, rhetorical claims to the contrary and even after the Multiculturalism Policy of 1971 and the *Multiculturalism Act* of 1988, ethnocultural communities continue to occupy the margins against which White Canada is defined.

By the 1980s, the Japanese-Canadian redress campaign was gaining momentum; leaders were demanding acknowledgement in the form of an apology and compensation. This move again positioned Japanese Canadians in an adversarial relationship with the state. At this time, Japanese-Canadian political leaders, writers, filmmakers, and artists began producing narratives that articulated individual and communal suffering as a result of racist government policy. These cultural productions refute multiculturalism as the solution to ethnocultural polemics in Canada.

When the government agreed to the redress settlement in 1988, Japanese Canadians again found themselves being recuperated by cultural and political discourses that reintegrate them into the socio-scape as model minority citizens and exemplary survivors of historical racism—sustaining the perpetual struggle against being defined either through *exclusion* as enemy/Other/outsider/ethnic or through *inclusion* as model minority citizen.

The aforementioned fear of recuperation and invisibility was not only discursive but also a potential outcome of statistically high rates of inter-ethnic marriage and an increasingly aged *is-sei* population.<sup>13</sup> After the war, many Japanese Canadians were anxious to prove their loyalty to Canada by working hard and assimilating. In the process, many families lost their direct connection to Japanese language and culture. Furthermore, Japanese social decorum typically places a value on silence and reticence,

which is one reason that in the Canadian post-Second World War context many people responded to the tragedy and loss of the wartime internment with the attitude of *shikata ga nai* or “it couldn’t be helped.” Many *issei*, in particular, resigned themselves to the facts of the past and stopped speaking about it in order to move on. The shame associated with the internment ensured that it was rarely referenced; memories slowly disappeared from family histories buried by years of silence. However, as visible minorities, Japanese Canadians cannot vanish into the Canadian social landscape. Eventually, a younger generation of Japanese Canadians, largely *sansei* motivated by the civil rights movements of the 1960s, began a process of political and cultural reclamation: politically as a redress movement and culturally by reclaiming authority over Japanese-Canadian identities by countering the official version of Canadian history. The *sansei*, many born during or after the War, were educated in the Canadian public school system and understand the vocal mandate of North America (Cheung 8). Stan Yogi explains that many *sansei* “write with a sense of urgency, to capture Japanese American communities that are either disappearing or changing in dramatic ways” (142). It was in this social context, the post-redress era after the government’s official apology in 1988, that *sansei* Linda Ohama endeavoured to capture and invent, when necessary, more nuanced, complex, and diverse conceptions of Japanese-Canadian history and identity. The acknowledgment of official government redress created the possibility for younger Japanese Canadians to address the community silences that had partially severed intergenerational communication.

#### RESISTANCE AS FEMINIST INTERCULTURAL DOCUMENTARY

*What each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren’t in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement (énoncé). But above all else, because collective or national consciousness is “often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down,” literature finds itself positively charged*

*with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation.*

—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,  
*Toward a Minor Literature* (17)

Documenting the life story of Asayo Murakami, or Obāchan as she is called in the film, is a politically subversive act. This cinematic narrative encompasses Obāchan's life from her childhood in Japan, to coming to Canada as a picture bride,<sup>14</sup> only to be evacuated from the West Coast and forced to relocate to a sugar beet farm in Manitoba. After the War, she and her husband chose to resettle on a potato farm in Rainier, Alberta. This narrative is politically disruptive in a context of literary and cinematic narratives that repeatedly position Japanese Canadians as either victims or survivors of a racist history. This matrilineal genealogical story exceeds the political moments of the internment and redress, which were so commonly the fulcrum points around which Japanese-Canadian history had been (and sometimes still is) narrated in official discourses. It is also a resistance story because in publicly reclaiming Obāchan's full mothering story—to include both her sorrow and longing for her lost children in Japan and her sometimes distant relationship to the ones she raised in Canada—Ohama and her co-auteur Obāchan simultaneously subvert social norms around the good mother in both countries, while the story also re-situates Obāchan as a strong, resilient Japanese-Canadian woman within the early twentieth-century feminist *herstory* of Canada.

The desire to capture the story of the grandmother is a desire to exhume a buried family history as well as to capture the vanishing “Japaneseness” that Obāchan represents. As Ohama explains in the film, “For us [the family], Obāchan has been our Japaneseness, but we have never really understood very much about her or the culture. We know the taste of her sugar cookies and the sound of her voice singing but more of what we know is from what is not said than what is said, which leaves a lot of things buried in that silence.” By acknowledging what is unsaid, Ohama resists the invisibility resulting from the appropriation of Japanese-Canadian identity by the dominant discourse. Canadian multicultural policy, despite its professed aspirations to encom-

pass a multitude of diverse cultural communities, produces new forms of assimilation by transforming ethnicity into an ancestral attribute—a residue of the past, one's heritage. Multiculturalism incorporates or recuperates reductive minority identities into its grand narrative and, consequently, denies the existence of dynamic ethnocultural identities. In this paradigm, ethnicity becomes historical—something of the past and of previous generations, and not of the present or future.

If Obāchan's silent story had never been given a voice, the Japanese family history of her great-grandchildren would have been lost and with it the position from which to establish complex contemporary and dynamic ethnocultural Japanese-Canadian identity formations. However, the cinematic recovery of a long-silent family history is a tenuous project founded in memories and distorted by fantasies dreamed to contend with the harshness of Obāchan's reality. Suspended between two cultures, one more verbal and the other less so, Ohama collages together and creates, where necessary, a version of her grandmother and a visual imagining of Japanese-Canadian identity. *Obāchan's Garden* intervenes in a predominantly patriarchal national discourse by tracing Obāchan's matrilineal line through her mother to her grandmother, interviewing female relatives on the way, and discovering new relations through a process of filmmaking that uncovers, invents, and records history.

Starting in 1991, with interviews between Ohama and her grandmother, *Obāchan's Garden* was produced over a ten year period. By 1996, Ohama began to focus more intensely on the project and hoped to have it ready to be screened at Obāchan's one hundredth birthday in 1998. However, the film reveals that Asayo Murakami refused to attend her centennial birthday celebration. It is at this "juncture that the subject became the auteur;" when she revealed the shocking truth that she had been previously married and had other children in Japan before immigrating to Canada as a picture bride (Amsden 30). Ohama explains in an interview that her intention was to tell a story true to her grandmother's worldview and interpretation of events while also maintaining her own authorial voice: "I tried to be true to my grandmother's feelings and the way she saw her world through all those years.

I can't pick out a moment when I had to watch out for my own agenda because this film is an expression of me, too" (Amsden 30). As such, this documentary is a co-constructed text that allows for multiple perspectives: not only those of Ohama and her grandmother but also for the voices and perspectives of Obāchan's children and grandchildren as they make meaning of both her life and, by proxy, their own.

This presentation of her maternal family is a bold divergence from established documentary narratives of the wartime Japanese-Canadian experience—such as the NFB short documentary, *of Japanese Descent* (1945); Pierre Berton's CTV program "The History We Lived Through: Exodus of the Japanese" (1970); the NFB documentary, *Enemy Alien* (1975); the Access Network production of *Mrs. Murakami: Family Album* (1991); and the CBC telefilm, *The War Between Us* (1995).<sup>15</sup>

### *Fantasy, Memory, and Female Genealogical Histories*

The introductory voiceover that opens *Obāchan's Garden* speaks to both its form and content. The young narrator<sup>16</sup> asks, "How do we learn about things that have happened before us? And what about memories, what people remember? Are these memories always real? And what about what we dream or wish for, can these become real one day?" In contrast to the aforementioned documentaries and television programs with more linear narratives, in which Japanese Canadians often do not speak but act merely as visual evidence for explanations of white male narrators, *Obāchan's Garden* is a self-reflexive presentation of a silenced history, focused on uncovering those aspects of the archive that have been intentionally or unintentionally withheld, forgotten, or lost.

Ohama, as director and narrator, subverts her own version of history, thus calling into question the authority of any one version of the past. Throughout the documentary the director patches together her grandmother's memories, indistinguishably entwined with her dreams, in an effort to record her story and secrets before she dies—a tenuous foundation for a family history. Ohama researches, rediscovers, and, where necessary, reinvents her grandmother's story in a way that allows her to provide her daughters with a family history to pass on to their children.

Ohama remains self-reflexive about the creative act of rendering a potential version of Obāchan's life that can add to both familial and communal history. Like her literary foremother Joy Kogawa, who "implicitly or explicitly questions the possibility of restoring an authoritative minority history and shies away from a complacent return to the past" (Cheung 13),<sup>17</sup> Ohama dares to undermine her own version of history by questioning the accuracy of Obāchan's ephemeral and dream-like memories. The film demonstrates the incongruity between Obāchan's version of the past and that of her various family members in Japan, all of whom have diverse recollections that, again, are not always supported by historical records. Ohama is cognizant that this history, presented via a truth-telling genre, the documentary, fills in the silences that her grandmother is incapable of clarifying. Ohama's narrative often relies on personal memory, because of gaps in documentation. When the archive fails her, Ohama incorporates docudrama representations that creatively "dream" or imagine the details erased by seventy-five years of silence. The narrative makes clear that Ohama not only offers an addition to the Japanese-Canadian identity but also calls into question any official narratives of history, which are always at the mercy of human bias and the fallibility of memory.

Obāchan's recounting is filled with gaps, both in memory and in knowledge. Ohama discovers that Obāchan had three children with a first husband—a secret withheld from her family in Canada. Beyond that, the details of her previous life remain unclear even at the end of the film. Obāchan is never able to explain her husband's motivations for leaving her and taking her two daughters with him, other than saying he was going to work at the Imperial Palace—to serve the Emperor, who at that time was considered a god. Ohama, the director, hires an investigator to attempt to unriddle the past. Using the investigator's findings as well as information from Obāchan herself, Ohama, along with her mother and daughter, surmises that the separation was initiated by Obāchan's in-laws, who were angry about her failure to produce a healthy son; he died in infancy. Obāchan, instead of being able to provide clarification, speaks instead of how she dreamed and imagined the lives of Fumiko and Chieko, her two missing girls:

I always had these dreams. They were always in my heart. Fumiko. Chieko. So many dreams of their cute faces. I knew they were close to the emperor so it was fine. I've always talked to the pictures ... that's all I will say. [Emotional, she waves the camera away with her hand.] That's enough. That's enough.

Based on information provided to her by her husband before his departure, Obāchan dreamt for the interim seventy years that her daughters were living within the walls of the Imperial Palace, under the protection of the emperor. However, there is little evidence to support Obāchan's memories. The two girls were adopted by other families; the vision that had consoled Obāchan all these years was unfounded in reality. The narrator makes it clear that Obāchan's revelations are confusing to the family both in Canada and in Japan. Ohama's mother, one of Obāchan's Canadian-born daughters, voices her concerns that this is all the product of an old woman's imagination; however, there are photos of Obāchan's Japanese-born daughters as young children. The value of photos as proof is questioned in the film. Are the children in the pictures Obāchan's own children? In Japan, Obāchan has several younger siblings, and each have a different version of what happened to Obāchan's first marriage. The film remains self-reflexive about the value of either memory or documentation as proof, and renders explicit how neither of these means of acquiring knowledge is any more or less credible than simply inventing a past based on what can be supposed or surmised. Even after the making of the film, some elements of Obāchan's past still remain shrouded in mystery, silenced forever by her death in 2002 at the age of 104.

*Filming Mother: Lived Realities and Intergenerational Forgiveness*

*We think back through our mothers if we are women.*  
—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (76)

Mothers reproduce dominant ideology (quite literally) yet also become ready targets if they fail to uphold prevailing notions of

“good” motherhood (Addison 4). Obāchan, as a first generation immigrant to Canada, lived with the expectations of two different places and time periods: early twentieth-century Canada and Meiji Japan. The Meiji era was over by the time Obāchan was raising her children, but she had been raised according to Meiji tradition cultural values of the good wife and wise mother—termed *ryosai kenbo*, which demanded filial piety and duty to one’s children (Ayukawa 109).

Obāchan came to Canada as a picture bride, marrying a Japanese emigrant to Canada, sight unseen. Travelling by boat for several months to begin a new life in Canada, she knew little about who awaited her and what kind of life to expect. Of course, Obāchan’s story differs somewhat from that of other women in her same position because upon arrival, she immediately rejected her husband. She did not feel she could live with him or grow to love him. She spent years enduring back-breaking labour to repay him for the cost of the boat trip. Eventually, she married again; her third husband was a widow with children. She raised his children, and together they had eight more. Her mothering was influenced both by the cultural values of good wife and wise mother as well as by newly encountered Canadian expectations and understandings of motherhood. Certainly, immigrating to Canada allowed Japanese women certain liberties. As Ohama explains in the film, “women like Obāchan felt more free to be themselves and enjoyed a new sense of openness with other women—something they couldn’t experience in Japan.” However, despite new-found liberties, Western expectations around motherhood came with their own restrictions. The 1930s saw an increased professionalization of mothering: mothers were increasingly responsible for all aspects of their child’s well-being, development, and education, under the supervision of male doctors and professional experts. This system created a culture of mother blame, wherein women were under constant scrutiny (Ehrenreich and English). Obāchan raised her Canadian-born children in the 1930s and 1940s during a period of progressively heightened expectations for mothers in North America, which long predated any feminist theorizing of the disjuncture between lived realities and expectations in what Adrienne Rich later terms the “institution of motherhood” in

her 1976 book *Of Woman Born; Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Feminist theory began exploring motherhood starting in the 1970s when Obāchan would have already been over seventy-two years old.

Whatever the standard of motherhood that Obāchan's children had for her—Japanese, Canadian, or some blend of the two—she seems not to have lived up to their expectations. Obāchan's children speak openly about their parents' demeanour and child-rearing methods; they are seemingly more accepting of their gruff father, seeing him as similar to all fathers in that era, while they question their mother. The director's mother expresses grief and frustration about the fact that Obāchan was, and continues to be, both emotionally distant and physically absent. In addition, one of Obāchan's long-lost Japanese-born daughters, Fumiko, was apparently also inaccessible and insufficiently nurturing to her own daughter. Although Fumiko is already deceased, her daughter explains her mother's inability to show love and expresses how that made her feel: "As a child, I always felt I had no mother ... that she was too afraid to be one." The film postulates that the traumatic separation of mother and daughter, make each of them respectively unable to connect emotionally to their children: Obāchan remains emotionally distant and aloof with her children in Canada, born after she is forced to abandon her first two daughters in Japan; Obāchan's eldest daughter Fumiko, as an adult, is apparently equally aloof with her own daughter. Implicitly, the film draws a link between the trauma of separation and the fact that they are both "bad mothers." The process of filmmaking also becomes part of a transformation that allows family members the opportunity to explore the way that they see their mothers and their relationships with them. Ohama's own mother (Obāchan's daughter) and Fumiko's daughter (Obāchan's granddaughter) are able to reconcile their sorrow for their respective mothers and the loss they each feel at never having had a strong mother-daughter bond. "Now then, you come from Canada and change this. Finally, I understand her [my mother's] sorrow and love for me," explains Fumiko's daughter as a follow up to what she had explained to Ohama in regards to her earlier beliefs about her mother.

Ultimately, what the film reveals is a matrilineal genealogy of women at the crossroads of multiple social, political, and even environmental crises: the great Kantō earthquake of 1923, the cruelties of patriarchal society that blame women for not producing male heirs and for the death of their children, as well as the cruelties of war and racism. These events, all beyond the control of these women, leave a legacy of emotional trauma inherited by the next generation. Nevertheless, through the creative act of revisiting and reconnecting to their matrilineal history, these grown daughters—both Linda Ohama's own mother and Fumiko's daughter—can come to terms with their mothers. Through the creative act of reclaiming personal and communal history, healing begins to take place even within the frames of the film itself.

In this film, appreciation for the mother's whole identity—even that which is secret or taboo—is an act of resistance against conceptions of the “good mother” that restrict women's individual desires and aspirations. While Obāchan was, by social standards, a failed mother in Japan and a bad mother in Canada, she was also a rebel mother in ways that she had not fully claimed and that her children did not comprehend. At over one hundred years of age, however, she goes back to reclaim these silenced and denied aspects of her personal history. As a younger mother, Obāchan resisted the dutiful mother role. Indeed, her personal rebellions also become the markers of her strength and a point of familial and personal pride. Ohama fled a patriarchal world that blamed her for matters beyond her control: the gender of her children and infant mortality. She dared to come to Canada to build a new life. Meiji standards rendered her a bad mother and a failure as a woman for bearing a son who had failed to thrive. Despite these painful experiences, Obāchan still had the gumption to reject the husband that awaited her on the docks when she arrived to Canada as a young woman in her twenties. Throughout her life, she consistently refused to forsake love and beauty for duty and practicality. She grew flowers instead of vegetables. She danced and played music. She socialized outside the home as an escape from domestic drudgery—absences that pained her children but were part of her own survival strategies. These expressions of her individual desire and will made her a renegade mother who refused

to abandon her sense of self for her role as mother. Giving voice to the silence of Obāchan's story, Ohama exposes the taboo aspects of Obāchan's biography and the family history, and in so doing, transforms hurt and shame into intergenerational understanding.

By telling her own story, Obāchan articulates herself as a multifaceted woman. In an interview, Ohama explains that when her grandmother finally told her the secret that she had been keeping for seven decades, Ohama suddenly saw her as a woman:

“I remember seeing the two little girls and seeing my grandmother as a young mother, a woman, more like me. I could really relate to that. I never thought of her so much as a mother, even as being my mother's mother. But when I saw the two little children, she stopped being just my grandmother. She was, in my mind, a woman who had this deep, deep love and deep, deep loss that she was sharing with another woman.” (Amsden)

Through the film, Ohama conveys her grandmother's complexity so that a broader audience can see Obāchan as a woman beyond her roles as mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Throughout the film and the filmmaking process, the family discovers much about this matriarch's life, allowing descendants to reconsider her as an individual woman and, likewise, to reconsider their relationships to her as their mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

Another subtle but significant point is also brought to the fore by the revelation of this silenced past: Obāchan has complex relationships to both Canada and Japan. Obāchan's home was Hiroshima, Japan, and, like many issei, she had an entire family in Japan—mother, father, siblings, children, and so on. As a Japanese subject, Obāchan revered the emperor of Japan as a living god. For her entire life, she took great comfort in the belief that her two daughters were with the Emperor. The documentary reveals, of course, that they were not. However, her belief makes clear why the surrender of Japan at the end of the war had a heightened significance for Obāchan. The surrender of Japan signified that Emperor Showa had been defeated, creating anxieties for Obāchan

about the well-being of her daughters. Suddenly Obāchan's fascination with everything to do with the emperor—she collected clippings and information—went from a quirky personality trait to a consequence of Obāchan's life as a transnational woman.

Likewise, the poignancy of Obāchan's deep emotional reaction upon learning of the bombing of her native city Hiroshima takes on new meaning. The film conveys the greatest horror of the war for Obāchan was not the relocation, as in so many of the other documentaries by and about Japanese Canadians, but rather as the annihilation of her hometown and the death of so many friends and her family—potentially even her own daughters. *Obāchan's Garden* reframes Canada's betrayals not only as the evacuation and other domestic politics but also as an Allied power that collaborated on many fronts against Japan, including nuclear attacks on civilian areas.

Ohama emphasizes the personal significance of the bombing of Hiroshima through a docudrama re-enactment, wherein the younger Obāchan, played by an actress,<sup>18</sup> hears the devastating news of the atomic bomb on the radio. She grabs her violin, rushes from the house, and runs over the prairie fields, screaming "Onomichi, Okaaaasan, Otoosan, Sueko, Fumiko, Chieko." The first is the name of her city, followed by the Japanese words for mother and father, and the names of her two lost daughters. At the end of the scene, she collapses in the field crying, curls into the fetal position, and is covered by falling cherry blossoms. Obāchan is not only a mother but a daughter and part of a genealogy of woman. Her body is covered by blossoms, visually representing her return to the womb of mother earth.

As Linda Ohama follows the matrilineal history back to Obāchan's childhood, she discovers that Obāchan was prepared and educated to be quite a different woman with a very different life than she had lived in Japan. The great-granddaughter in the film speaks about the pleasure of imagining herself as someone related to the royal family—a princess of sorts—and being quite disappointed to discover the truth. This illustrates how Obāchan's identity has immediate consequences for the self-perceptions of her family members. However, the reality of Obāchan's class status falls somewhere between the poverty of her mid-century Canadian

reality and her granddaughter's fantasy of being a princess living in the Imperial Palace. While Obāchan spent most of her life in Canada either in actual poverty or at least struggling financially—first as a young immigrant woman working in the cannery, then displaced to a farm during the War, and then living as a farm woman for many years in Rainier, Alberta—she had been raised in fairly affluent circumstances in Japan. Like many picture brides of the early twentieth century, she had a good education and had been brought up to expect a much more gentle life than what she faced in Canada. As Midge Ayukawa explains, “Many of the picture brides were better educated than the average Japanese girl and than their future spouses, having graduated from girls’ high school, normal school, or midwifery school” (109). However, those who became picture brides and married below their class—for a number of complicated reasons, including the fear of remaining single in Japan—arrived in Canada only to face unexpected levels of poverty and isolation. Like Obāchan, many of these women “were expected to take on back-breaking labour” (111). In the film, Ohama explains, “I’ve watched my grandma work hard with her hands all her life doing farm work so I always assumed she came from a peasant background. Only recently I learned that she had a privileged childhood.”

As a film that enacts resistance, it is significant that Obāchan's story was funded as an NFB production, because the stories of poor women are often erased from history and despite her affluent childhood, her life in Canada was very modest, which hardly qualified her for any significant mention in the history books. Indeed, as Ayukawa points out, poor women are often absent from the historical record: it is women with wealthier and more socially influential husbands who tend to have their stories recorded. The biographies are not fully representative of these social communities and so it was with Japanese-Canadian women, as well. *Kanada Doho Hatten Taikan* [*Encyclopaedia of the Japanese in Canada*] focuses on the lives of “fifty-four women, the majority of whom were married to ministers and successful businessmen” (117). In addition to filling in the gaps left by this type of selective publication, *Obāchan's Garden* speaks back to more contemporary stories, such as Anne Wheeler's 1995 CBC telefilm *The War Be-*

*tween Us*, which features the fictional Kawashima family, whose sophistication and affluence resonate differently with middle-class Canadian viewers than Obāchan's more humble history. Ohama's film is more representative of the realities of the majority of issei women and picture brides who had laboured in lumber camps, sawmill towns, fishing villages, farms, boarding houses, kitchens, and laundries. Few of these working-class women's stories have ever been recorded and celebrated.

Thus, Obāchan's story makes an important contribution to the archive. The film not only details her life as an immigrant, working-class, working mother at a time when women's history of labour has been imagined as limited to domestic work and childrearing, but also illustrates the complex lived realities of Obāchan's dual loyalties to Japan and Canada, two warring countries. That she names her eldest son George after the royal family of one country and collects news clippings about the royal family of the other country becomes illustrative of the intersection of multiple networks of local and global politics. Women's actions are often politically neutralized or erased, but Obāchan's life story places the politics of motherhood into geographical and historical contexts.

#### CONCLUSION

*Nor let us forget that we already have a history, that certain women have, even if it was culturally difficult, left their mark on history and that all too often we do not know them.*

—Luce Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother" (539)

Writing the mother into the centre of the story is, as evidenced, a political act that contributes to the rupture of white-patriarchal and settler-colonial nationalism. At the turn of the millennium, this film visually re-inscribes this elderly Japanese-Canadian woman into the pioneer narrative of Canada and, thereby, rewrites the myth of the white-settler nation. While its limited circulation does little to destabilize the settler-colonial worldview on a large scale, the film successfully places the immigrant mother-grandmother into the centre of both the familial and national story. Furthermore, this

mother-grandmother is a rebel, a mother-outlaw, a mother who not only disrupts the Canadian nation's founding story of itself as white, but also refuses at the age of one hundred to be defined by the shame of her in-laws' rejection of her for failing to live up to Meiji-era notions of the good wife and wise mother. Expelled but also freed from strict upper-middle class Japanese patriarchal standards of wife and mother, Obāchan came to Canada only to encounter another set of cultural expectations around motherhood that transformed quite radically from her arrival in 1924 to her death in 2002.

Via the process of co-creating the film with her granddaughter, Obāchan publicly claims the entirety of her biography; her life story produces an identity and sense of self beyond being the mother of eight Canadian children. Her story now admits past marriages and previous children. She was forced to remarry as a result of being cast out from her first husband's family, causing deep intergeneration sorrow for many people in two countries. Adventuring away from Japan to Canada as a picture bride, Obāchan decided to divorce her second husband at first site; this allowed her to finally claim her life as an independent working woman in a new country. She would later marry a third time. After finally settling down, she was forced to relocate and start again during and again after the Second World War. Her story also includes dual loyalties to the British and Japanese royal families, to Canada and Japan—an affinity still taboo in the late 1990s within many Japanese-Canadian communities. Each of these issues is, in its own right, a resistance strategy aimed at claiming her full personhood and, by proxy, narrating a new story of being and belonging for herself and her family. As a Japanese-Canadian woman in both Canada and Japan at critical historical moments, Obāchan's story resists simplification, and she managed to tell it in all its complexity just before this type of nuanced discourse was silenced at the turn of the twenty-first century—brought to an end by post-9/11 politics in the West.<sup>19</sup>

Japanese-Canadian internment is one of the most well-documented human rights abuses in Canada, with a significant legacy of cultural production over a number of decades. This history has been narrated from a multiplicity of perspectives. These texts from the

1970s onward, when taken collectively, illustrate what multiculturalism can achieve and what injustices it continues to accommodate. Although part of the redress agenda included funding to support the prevention of similar injustices being enacted in future, the disjuncture between tidy historical accounts and the complexity of present-day politics does not make clear the relationship between historically racist legislation and contemporary laws. We do not intern Muslim Canadians, but certainly the detainments of Omar Khadr and Maher Arar and the plethora of anti-Muslim discourses circulating in mainstream media and public discussion are evidence that racism is not merely historical. As Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Christine Gabriel argue, “Liberals have increasingly emphasized multiculturalism as a way to deal with global markets and global competitiveness” (116). What polyphonic experimental narratives such as *Obāchan's Garden* contribute to the national conversation is a more complicated, and sometimes uneasy, *herstory* that more accurately reflects the discontinuity of lived reality. These types of narratives resist interpellation into either model minority or Other, and negotiate instead a third subjectivity that has the potential to expose multiculturalism as a modern tribalism that fractures Canadian society in order to control it.

Ohama's *Obāchan's Garden* is a creative act that challenges the reductive narrative of internment that cannot contain the diversity of the Japanese-Canadian wartime community or the complexity of Japanese-Canadian experiences. The film also challenges contemporary post-911 audiences to recognize the parallels between the Second-World-War experience of Japanese Canadians and the present condition of Muslims who have lived through the war on terrorism and who face continued pressures in light of ISIS and its many attacks—Paris and Beirut, for example. Heterogeneous communities defy the simplicity of categorical stereotypes and racial profiling. It is daring of Ohama to point out the dual loyalty of her issei grandmother; yet by doing so through a narrative that undermines the authority of any one voice over the entire community, she emphasizes the importance of individual experience and a community narrative that can encompass heterogeneity. Moreover, within that heterogeneity women and mothers feature as full political citizens.

Obāchan's story is a critical and self-reflexive interrogation of women's lives as they occur at the intersection of national and international politics; all mothers are political beings. To tell our stories is a transgressive act sufficient to disrupt patriarchal histories—resituating women at the centre of *herstory* and the future.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The orthography of the title is in Japanese rather than English or French. I write about this creative strategy elsewhere in relationship to Midi Onodea's film *The Displaced View* (1988).

<sup>2</sup>This novel was revised and rewritten as Emily Kato in 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, the idea of dual and divided loyalties in *Obāchan's Garden* resonates with Sakamoto's second novel *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003), not yet published at the time of this film's release in 2001.

<sup>4</sup>Community autobiography is a concise term used to capture the theoretical framework that E.D. Blodgett outlines in "Ethnic Writing in Canada: Borders and Kogawa's Obasan," in which he writes the following:

Cultural space, then, is plural, just as is the question of origin, implying that the composition of the subject is also plural. In other words, one should ask with reference to the subject, what, rather than who, speaks. For the narrated is not simply a character, but a plurality of registers constructing an ethnic voice. This holds especially for those narratives, whether in prose or poetry, that adopt an autobiographical form, in which the speaker's position is immediately doubled in its focalization. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, for example, presents in its opening pages various speakers, each of whom speaks from different registers or possibly from different ontological positions. (62-63)

<sup>5</sup>The idea of writing the mother into the centre of the story comes from Elizabeth Podniek's and Andrea O'Reilly's analysis of the daughter-centric focus in texts from a range of literary genres: auto/biographical, fiction, and poetry. They identify the need to "exca-

vate the matrifocal perspective that is denied and distorted” (12).<sup>6</sup>While the NFB is most recognized for its documentary films, the corpus also extends to include experimental films, interactive documentaries and productions, animation, and some dramas (often made for TV).

<sup>7</sup>The Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle program produced close to 250 films—approximately 145 English language films and about 60 French language films—focused on inspiring social transformation through media: “Nowhere else did such a relatively well-financed program test in such a consistent and focused way the tenets of the international New Left and its cinematic cohort” (Baker, Waugh, and Winton 6). Many of the Challenge films focused on issues of poverty, regional issues, and ethnicity.

<sup>8</sup>As explained by Albert Ohayon on the NFB blog, these animated short films are so recognizable to Canadians because they have aired on Canadian television since the late 1970s. In the 1980s, a number of them were also screened in Cineplex Odeon theatres before feature films, and they continue to circulate on various media, including online (Ohayon).

<sup>9</sup>Oyahan explains that the motivation behind the Vignettes series was the desire to move away from producing films that could be interpreted as propaganda: “Secretary of State announced in the fall of that year [1977] that \$13 million would be given to Federal Cultural agencies to help promote national unity. The NFB was allocated \$2 million of this money...; after some discussions, it was decided to make films on Canadian history and famous Canadians that would be a celebration of Canada, and not anything that could be perceived as propaganda” (Ohayon).

<sup>10</sup>Ohama began working with the NFB at some point after 1996. In a *Take One* article, Ohama explains that she had begun doing video interviews with her grandmother around 1991 while working on other documentary projects in the area and visiting intermittently: “‘Around 1996, I [Ohama] actively started to focus on her as a subject of a film.’ It was then, after Ohama had invested her own resources on the project, that the NFB came on line and ramped up the project budget” (Amsden 30).

<sup>11</sup>The full list of awards and honours is as follows: 2001 Audience Choice Award, Vancouver Intl F.F.; 2002 Audience Choice Award,

Newport Beach I.F.F.; 2002 Audience Choice Award, Turin I.F.F., Italy; 2002 Genie nomination for Best Feature-Length Documentary; 2002 Five Leo Awards for: Best Director of Documentary, Best Scriptwriter, Best Sound, Best Cinematography, and Best Sound Edit; 2003 Richmond City Heritage Award (Ohama).

<sup>12</sup>“Enemy Alien” was the term used in Canada during the Second World War to designate residents and citizens originating from Axis countries (Germany, Italy, and Japan).

<sup>13</sup>*Issei* refers to the first generation of immigrants, *nisei* the second, *sansei* the third, and *yonsei* the fourth.

<sup>14</sup>Pictures brides were early twentieth century women who married men living abroad, sight unseen (except the picture provided by the matchmaker), and then travelled as legal wives to meet their husbands for the first time.

<sup>15</sup>Narrations of the *evacuation* coming from the dominant discourse have largely focused on the injustices of the Second World War. Many of these films focus on internment, despite the more complex history of events leading up to and following the forced displacement of 22,000 people of what was then considered the “Japanese Race” from the West Coast. Without due process of law, some of the men were sent to work on road camps, some people and families were relocated to farms in the southern Canadian Prairie provinces, and a large majority were forced to endure hard conditions in poorly constructed internment camps for the duration of the war. Their property was confiscated and auctioned off for a fraction of its value. After the war, they were given the option of “repatriation” to Japan or settlement east of the Rockies. “Repatriation” was in many cases a misnomer, since many of deportees were born in Canada and had never set foot in Japan. In total, approximately 10,500 Japanese Canadians were repatriated; this represented approximately 43 percent of the post-war Japanese Canadian population (Kelly 304). The policy of repatriation was eventually reversed; those who had the financial means and desire could return to Canada. Approximately 25 percent would eventually come back home.

<sup>16</sup>Obāchan’s great-granddaughter narrates this opening section. In other parts, it is the director, Ohama, who narrates.

<sup>17</sup>Note that the original quote from Cheung refers to Yamamoto

and Kingston in addition to Kogawa as nisei Asian North American writers.

<sup>18</sup>The actress is also another of Obāchan's granddaughters, highlighting intergenerational connections.

<sup>19</sup>While discourses of "with us or against us" touted by George Bush filtered into cultural and political discourses in the U.S., Canada, and the global West in too many ways to enumerate here, a culmination of the naturalized state of this type of discussion is evidenced by Bill C-24 passed in Canada in June of 2015, which renders dual citizens more precarious members of the Canadian citizenry. A *Globe and Mail* editorial critiques the policy for providing the Canadian "government the discretion to strip the citizenship of any dual citizen convicted of terrorism, treason or spying abroad. The consequences are disturbing and unfair for Canada's 863,000 dual nationals. They run the risk of being treated as somehow less Canadian. There is an ugly, xenophobic side to this law, which may play well with some voters, but has no place in a modern, multicultural Canada" ("Bill C-24 Is Wrong: There Is Only One Kind of Canadian Citizen").

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