

Recuperating Oblivion in The Displaced View **(1988)**

*Midi Onodera's Intercultural Feminist Experimental
Cinematic Polyphony*

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Midi Onodera is a well-recognized award-winning Toronto-based Canadian filmmaker.¹ The numerous films that she has written and directed in her more than thirty-year career have been screened at venues such as the Andy Warhol Museum, the International Festival of Documentary and Short Films, the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the Berlin International Film Festival, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Toronto International Film Festival.²

When Onodera wrote and directed the intercultural feminist experimental film *The Displaced View* (1988), it marked a shift away from the subject matter of her earlier work, which was largely focused on sexual identity. Her experimental documentary style in this film explores auto/biographical subjects and filmmaking practices as a means to disrupt dominant narratives of Japanese-Canadian histories and identities. The subject of the film is the intergenerational story of three Japanese-Canadian women represented visually by Onodera, her mother, and her grandmother. Their stories revolve around various moments of displacement resulting from immigration, wartime relocation (commonly referred to as “internment”³ or “evacuation”⁴), or from being visibly “other,” woman, or queer. While a self-referential relationship between sexuality and ethnic identity remains, *The Displaced View* focuses on identity issues that constitute 1980s experimental and intercultural video-film making as a means to complicate, in productive ways, the representation of Japanese-Canadian history and women’s relationships to politics and community. Onodera’s use of experimental feminist intercultural film techniques creates not only intergenerational

and intracommunity transformations, it also challenges white dominant viewers to question their own relationships with and responsibilities toward historical accounts and to non-white Canadians represented in the film. Furthermore, as an intercultural film, *The Displaced View* exposes what is knowable in addition to revealing what can never be recovered. That which was silenced was also, in some cases, forgotten—lost to the archive. Using the dynamics of the image and narrative fantasy, Onodera re-represents spaces of oblivion: those elements of a fragmentary history that have been permanently erased from the cultural community memory. Thus, Onodera's narrative proposes that the missing her-stories must be imagined into a new vision (revision) of identity: personal, familial, and communal.

Intercultural Mediations

“Interculturalism” provides a useful and productive means of engaging with Onodera's film, since *The Displaced View* creatively addresses the complexities of living in and interacting with a diverse society. Why “inter” as opposed to “multi,” given multiculturalism's privileged status in Canada? Multiculturalism is useful to the degree that it recognizes the plurality constitutive of Canadian society, but to term Onodera's work as multicultural implies a certain agenda linked to the Official Languages Act (1969), the Multicultural Policy (1971), and the Multiculturalism Act (1988), which her film exceeds and even defies in certain respects. As Phil Ryan details in *Multicultiphobia* (2010), multiculturalism in the Canadian context is interpreted in a number of different and sometimes conflicting ways: as an ideology, an empirical social condition, a government policy, a social practice, and a character attribute (7). Interculturalism, by contrast, is a theoretical paradigm that foregrounds the potential for positive transformation and reinvention through the interaction of two or more cultures. The interpretation of multicultural policy by some analysts aligns it with an intercultural mandate. Ryan, for example, writes that “full participation in Canadian society”; ‘creative encounters and interchange among all Canadian cultural groups’; language acquisition: all these expose the individual to new ideas and new people. Clearly, the integration envisioned

by multicultural policy *must* affect people's way of life" (46, emphasis in original). However, as I and others have argued elsewhere, the lived reality of a multicultural Canadian nation predates any state policy or act, and state multiculturalism as it has been written into the nation has been critiqued for being limited to spectacular performances of ethnocultural heritage that fetishize and essentialize specific cultural practices—song, dance, and culinary multiculturalism.⁵ These scripted manifestations of ethnicity function to homogenize each ethnocultural group that is identified as “minor” and to undermine a more engaged understanding of diverse cultural identities and languages as part of, and not marginal to, “Canadian” English–French national identity. Multiculturalism—as it is culturally expressed—has been critiqued by scholars such as Daniel Coleman, Janine Marchessault, Laura U. Marks, and W. Peter Ward for establishing white nativist Anglo-dominant identity constructions as the norm against which more recent ethnocultural identity tropes have been juxtaposed. As Ward argues in his book *White Canada Forever* (1990), Canadians “have clung tenaciously to the myth of the ethnic mosaic: the belief that the nation evolved more or less harmoniously as a multicultural society, and the related assumption that this was and is a desirable condition” (x). He maintains that despite a tenuous commitment to multiculturalism in Canada, there has been a historical focus on building an Anglo-Canadian nation (particularly in British Columbia in the first half of the twentieth century). “It would seem that the limits of tolerable diversity have been much more narrow than today we commonly believe” (x). In Canada, the “hot rhetoric of racism” has changed, but the message “is clear to most observers. Racism still pervades” (xix).

Interculturalism—historically linked to theories of multiculturalism but distinct from Canadian state multiculturalism—provides one avenue to attempt to address state multiculturalism, which has been critiqued for its foundation in a white-centrist racist politic that (despite producing some limited positive outcomes) has institutionalized and normalized discrimination by confirming the centre via an identification of which members of the citizenry define the margins.

Intercultural film, based on intercultural theories, is characterized, according to film scholar Laura U. Marks, “by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experiences of living between two or more

cultural regimes of knowledge, or living as a minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West” (3). In Onodera’s case, more specifically, this regime is white Euro-Canada. Onodera was researching and creating her film *The Displaced View* within the 1980s sociopolitical context, wherein Japanese-Canadian community leaders were working to negotiate a redress settlement and apology. Also during this time, the federal government was discussing the Multiculturalism Act, which was passed in 1988—the year of the film’s release. Marks identifies intercultural film’s usefulness in creating exchange and transformation between various minor discourses (and not only as a hierarchical engagement between dominant and minority discourses). In the case of *The Displaced View*, Onodera uses intercultural film techniques to explore non-hierarchical but strained inter- and intra-community relations. Of course, one strategy determined by leaders of the redress movement was to create a cohesive community narrative to resist long-standing representations of Japanese Canadians as either enemy aliens (pre-war and during the Second World War) and/or as model citizens (postwar). However, these master narratives failed to fully acknowledge the diversity within Japanese-Canadian communities that was based on differences in class, politics, religion (Buddhist, Shinto, Christian), *ken*-ties (regional cultural and linguistic affiliations to community members who immigrated from the same *ken*, prefectural *heimat* in Japan), as well as regional affiliations that developed in Canada, and generational differences that develop over time between the *issei*, *nisei*, and *sansei*. In their most simplistic renditions, the terms “*issei*,” “*nisei*,” and “*sansei*,” refer respectively to the first generation (those who immigrated to Canada), the second generation (born in Canada), and the third generation. However, this generational division (first, second, third) becomes more convoluted when one considers that depending on the period of immigration, a *nisei* and a *sansei* might be of different immigrant-generations, yet be of the same age. Therefore, a *nisei* and *sansei* might share certain commonalities based on their age and their experiences as Canadians, while their viewpoints might differ because of their family histories and their own relationship to Japan, Japanese language, and Japanese culture.⁶ The instigation of a redress movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s had heightened awareness of this intracommunity diversity. Contrary to the homogenizing effect of existing narratives,

Onodera uses 1980s intercultural feminist video and film techniques in *The Displaced View* to expose, at least in part, intracommunity and intercommunity diversity and to then move to construct intracultural and intercultural understanding—first, between generations of Japanese Canadians, and also with a non-Japanese-Canadian audience.

Experimental Techniques

To expose the multiplicity of intracommunity Japanese-Canadian perspectives, Onodera uses numerous intercultural experimental cinematic techniques. Strikingly, she employs a female polyphonic voice-over narrative, as opposed to the traditional male voice of documentary film. In addition, she uses English and Japanese language both orally and as a visual semiotic layered onto the film itself. She also creates scripted composite characters played by real women, not actors. And these characters are based on archival research and interviews with Japanese-Canadian women across the country. Furthermore, her invention of fantastic narratives becomes a means to reconcile the erasure of history necessary to manifest a story—a film—about three generations of Japanese-Canadian women. Onodera explores multiple interstices where cultural perspectives—namely, generational, gendered, and racialized—collide. Onodera represents how generational viewpoints are informed by both temporal-specific issues as well as the varying relationships each of them has to Japanese language and culture. She also exposes the contrast between Japanese women’s histories versus dominant white Canadian discourses that had already been circulating for several decades about the events and policies of the Second World War—and depicts the long-term ramifications of these histories. The onscreen character of Onodera reflects transformations that result from the memory work Onodera, as director, undertook to create the film, which illustrates the potential for film to create new intercultural dynamics.

Onodera’s avant-garde filmmaking practices use the viewfinder to present various perspectives, displaced from one another, but collectively part of a complex community narrative. In her representation of issues specific to Japanese-Canadian women and to the experiences of being

an ethnic minority displaced either by immigration, forced relocation, or the experience of being “other” in white Canada, Onodera makes a “new” set of identities, à la Bhabha,⁷ that result from the telling of what it means to be a visible body born into displacement simply by existing in a white Canadian context, regardless of whether whiteness is mythic or manifest. Furthermore, she plays with the medium of film in ways that are consistent with documentary forms of autobiographical portraiture and second-wave feminist filmmaking techniques that simultaneously represent female realities new to the screen and disrupt the illusions of truth that documentary, non-fiction, truth-telling film genres still carry—and carried, particularly at the film’s historical moment.

Which View is Displaced?

The English title of the film is *The Displaced View* but the accompanying Japanese title reads “Issei, Nisei, Sansei.” For bilingual (English- and Japanese-speaking) viewers, the title immediately places narrative emphasis on the complex generational perspectives and the dislocation of the generations from one another, all within the context of multiple other displacements. This reimagining is a complicated process that Onodera illustrates by emphasizing the complexities of both the forced relocation(s) as well as the resulting generational disjunctures.⁸ The specific reference to the generations gives added nuance to the English title, which is read as one displaced view—the displaced view—shared by the three generations, in relationship to the mainstream. However, *The Displaced View*, within the framework of both the Japanese and English titles, reflects the different loci of the three narrators as embodiments of different generational perspectives, each of whom is displaced from the other. *The Displaced View* explores two kinds of generational divides that lead to a lack of communication: the more straightforward linguistic divide of the issei (first generation) grandmother and the sansei (third generation) granddaughter, and the complex lack of understanding between the nisei (second generation) mother and her sansei (third generation) daughter. And, all of this must be considered within the context of multiple temporal and spatial displacements.

Historically, immigration represents an initial displacement. Then there are the social dislocations that have resulted from government policies: during the Second World War, this included the forced removal of approximately twenty-three thousand Japanese Canadians from the West Coast to detention centres, road camps, tuberculosis sanatoriums, farms in the Interior, and “internment” camps. For the issei, the end of the war signaled a third major displacement because they were, in many cases, then forced to relocate from these original sites of confinement to elsewhere—usually, settlement east of the Rockies or deportation to Japan (euphemistically referred to as “repatriation”). No Japanese Canadian was legally allowed to return to the West Coast until April 1, 1949, and for those that opted to go back home, this was yet another displacement. And a return home to the West Coast implied starting again, given the liquidation of property that had been orchestrated by the government. These dislocations are largely part of the lived experience of the issei and nisei. However, all three generations share the displacement of the visible body from white Canada. In the film, Onodera parallels her own experience of this alienation by the hegemonic culture with the othering that she simultaneously experiences in relationship to her ancestral language, culture, and history, and the othering that she experiences as a lesbian in a straight-dominant world.

Historical Context of the Film’s Release

The Displaced View was screened in Toronto on July 22, 1988 as part of a two-day festival entitled *Hot Night in July: Video & Film by & about Lesbians of Colour* (Bociurkiw). The previous day, July 21, 1988, Canada had passed the Multiculturalism Act, whose aim was to make amendments to strengthen the position of non-English, non-French, and non-Aboriginal citizens. Two months later, on September 22, 1988, Japanese Canadians received formal recognition for the injustices enacted against them as a result of Second World War government policies.

The redress campaign leading up to this moment was part of a historical period focused on identity-politics (gender and ethnicity, as well as “race” as a social construct) that had become increasingly part of social and

political discourse starting in the 1960s in Canada and around the world. This identity discourse was an outgrowth of ideas proposed by major intellectual thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Audre Lorde, and Michel Foucault, followed in later years by the work of Judith Butler, Sherry Turkle, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Gayatri Spivak, Constance Backhouse, Charles Taylor, and Will Kimlycka, to name a few. In Canada, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was established in 1963, and, in 1969, it would result in the establishment of an Official Languages Act. In 1971, the Multiculturalism Policy was passed. This legislation confirmed the unique status of Aboriginal peoples and the status of English and French languages in Canada. The Canadian Broadcasting Company promoted this policy as a “bold step [that] charted the path to a vibrant and evolving cultural mosaic premised on mutual respect for Canadians of all backgrounds and ancestry.” Some Canadians, however, critiqued the contradictory nature of a policy that declared Canada to be both bilingual and also multicultural, given the central role of language to culture. In addition to ongoing discourses around language and cultural rights in Canada, Japanese Americans had begun to organize a redress campaign, and, throughout the 1970s, the idea of a Japanese-Canadian movement gained momentum. By 1976, the National Redress Committee in Toronto had begun to officially discuss redress. By 1977, the Reparations Committee was formed and political positions on redress were being co-constructed and negotiated within Japanese-Canadian communities and in the Japanese-Canadian press—the *New Canadian* and the *Canada Times*.

The project of mediating a Japanese-Canadian history was taken up anew, against a backdrop of historically biased and problematic representations from mainstream radio, television, and print sources that were largely favourable to government rhetoric and void of Japanese-Canadian perspectives. In *Of Japanese Descent: An Interim Report* (1945), an earlier propaganda film by the National Film Board, the relocation centres are redefined by the narrator as “towns”; likewise, he reinscribes into the national historical account the multiple racist wartime policies as part of more general liberal democratic practices of policing. In this film, funded by the British Columbia Security Commission, Japanese-Canadian identity undergoes

reinvention as part of a government plan for postwar integration. The film visualizes the inceptions of a future multicultural discourse that privileges white Canadian normativity (Pendakis and Wilson). Even in Pierre Berton's more sympathetic 1970s television production, *Exodus of the Japanese*, the comments and perspectives of the two Japanese Canadians who appear in the film, Mrs. Tanaka and Harry Nobuoka, are framed by a 1970s Trudeau-era multicultural narrative that acknowledges the racially motivated injustices of past governments, while claiming that the Trudeau-era government has resolved racism. Racism is narrated as historical; meanwhile, the episode simultaneously racializes Canadian residents and citizens of Japanese heritage as "the Japanese" (as per the title) and reinforces an ethnic binary whereby visible minorities are positioned in relationship to an imagined white Canadian society, which is blind to its own hegemonic privilege. In the 1975 NFB documentary, *Enemy Alien*, Mrs. Horiouchi, an elderly Japanese-Canadian woman who appears in the film, never speaks for herself but is used, instead, as visual evidence to add credibility to the perspective presented by the male voice-over narrator.

By the late 1970s, there were also an increasing number of non-fiction print publications from a variety of perspectives: Ken Adachi's *The Enemy That Never Was: A History of the Japanese Canadians* (1976), Barry Broadfoot's history entitled *Years of Sorrow, Years of Shame: The Story of Japanese Canadians in World War II 1877-1977* (1978), and the Japanese Canadian Centennial Project's *A Dream of Riches*. Ann Gomer Sunahara's book *The Politics of Racism* (1981), released the same year as *Obasan* (1981), provided a historically researched account of the racist motivations behind wartime and postwar policies aimed at forever resolving the "Japanese problem" in Canada (Sunahara 13). In 1982, CBC television produced the documentary "A Call for Justice" as part of the national news and information program *The Journal* and in response to the call of the redress movement. According to Miki, one of the former leaders in the movement and a historian of Japanese-Canadian redress, what stands out about this documentary is that it includes the perspective of Japanese Canadians in ways that allow for the CBC's "tacit endorsement of some form of redress for what are acknowledged as injustices" (*Redress* 142). By the mid-1980s, the Japanese-Canadian redress movement had gained momentum in the

media and had become part of the popular consciousness of Canadians. Maryka Omatsu, former redress activist and lawyer, writes that by “1984 editorials across the country had begun to take up the issue and to advise the Trudeau government that ‘Japanese Canadians have waited long enough for compensation; they should have to wait no longer’” (97). The continuous media attention given to the matter of the campaign and ensuing settlement throughout the 1980s—as several multiculturalism ministers, some of whom included Jim Fleming, David Collenette, Jack Murta, Otto Jelinek, and David Crombie, tried to negotiate a settlement with Japanese Canadians—had created an awareness of Japanese-Canadian history. This cultural and political climate established the need and, in some cases, inspired a desire for Japanese Canadians, Onodera included, to discover and voice their individual, familial, and communal histories.

The Displaced View, as one of the early texts in the tradition of narrating Japanese-Canadian women’s histories that include stories of immigration and internment, has become part of a larger contribution to community auto/biography, both literary and cinematic. Other influential texts in this category include its literary predecessor and the aforementioned *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa, which I have argued elsewhere is “the palimpsest over which all Japanese-Canadian texts—literary, cinematic, and otherwise—are articulated (*Joy Kogawa*, 21). Another writer who has made significant contributions, although from another perspective almost two decades after Kogawa, is Kerri Sakamoto, with her two novels *The Electrical Field* (1998) and *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003), and her film *Obāchan’s Garden* (2001). Onodera’s *The Displaced View* was chronologically the next creative text of significance after Kogawa’s *Obasan* to provide such significant insight into Japanese-Canadian perspectives and women’s views in particular. All these creative texts by Kogawa, Onodera, and Sakamoto share the common narrative practice of uncovering and discovering family histories, for which the events of the Second World War are part of larger more complex stories. This is in contrast to many accounts from the dominant discourse that focus almost exclusively on the historical narration of wartime events—namely, the internment (as this term has been popularly applied to camp life)—thereby containing Japanese-Canadian history in ways that do not allow for continually developing Japanese-Canadian histories and identities.

Intercultural Film: Re-Constituting Community and Memory

As an intercultural project, the film negotiates itself between several layers of meaning: that which is known, that which has been imagined, and that which cannot be added to the re-membering of Japanese-Canadian communities or collective memory either because it has been permanently forgotten or because it was never understood or known. Experimental filmmaking techniques, such as the construction of a narrative using family photographs, home video footage, and formal interviews (in this case as the foundation to the script), all work to create a “less plot driven and more synchronically organized presentation” common to what Jim Lane describes as autobiographical portraiture (94). These techniques, in particular the female voice-over narrative, are also consistent with Onodera’s second-wave feminist filmmaking practices that aim to create a space to represent Japanese-Canadian women. As an archival recovery project, the film is intended to preserve knowledge and her-story/ies. The three female characters in *The Displaced View* each have an autonomous voice: they are not, as has been the case in early representations of Japanese-Canadian history by the dominant discourse (CBC, NFB, government rhetoric), merely the objects of anthropological investigations by white Canadian men/filmmakers. Each female character recounts a story unique to her generation and is, therefore, partially representative of a more collective female Japanese-Canadian experience; together these characters reconstitute one possible past onto which other women can graft potential futures.

The experimental technique of constructing a polyphonic voice-over allows for a cohesive narrative while still providing the cinematic flexibility to represent a wide range of female Japanese-Canadian perspectives. The onscreen characters played by Onodera, her mother, and her grandmother, visually represent composite persona that Onodera, as screenwriter and filmmaker, created based on extensive research trips and personal experience. As part of the background work of writing this screenplay, Onodera travelled across Canada to conduct interviews with first generation (issei), second generation (nisei), and third generation (sansei) Japanese Canadians. While Onodera’s own mother visually represents the sansei mother, another nisei woman reads the voice-over. Onodera’s grandmother

reads and acts her role, but is still following a script. Onodera's screen character is perhaps the most auto/biographical in that it represents her personal story of defending her sexuality, in addition to issues that she shares with other women of her generation. None of these characters can be accepted as fully auto/biographical in their own right, but each should instead be considered as more generally representative of her generation and of the ways that personal experiences shared by many Japanese-Canadian women have intersected with social and political events.

Functioning as a polyphonic community auto/biography, *The Displaced View* records the unveiling of wartime events to a younger generation through a dialogue with history and with older community and family members. This cross-temporal and cross-generational communication takes place during multiple intervals: initially, it occurs during the research and interview stage, and it subsequently transpires via the medium of cinema itself, and then as part of the film's reception. As the film's director, Onodera creates a venue to explore the motivations and actions of the older generations, which she concedes are explicable, given the historical context, though not always forgivable from her generational perspective. Namely, Onodera struggles to understand the lack of issei and nisei resistance against systemic oppression: the pervasive attitudes of resignation and acceptance that sustained individual and community silence after the war.⁹ Ultimately, however, Onodera's narrative voice-over expresses her growing understanding, as a sansei, of the issei and nisei. This growing comprehension is represented through Onodera's onscreen matrilineal relationships with her mother and grandmother.

Issei-Sansei: Grandmother-Granddaughter Relationships

The Displaced View traces the intercultural video project of using film itself as a medium to communicate between generations and beyond language barriers. At the time of this film's production in the mid-1980s, the redress movement was exacerbating existing generational tensions, further complicating the need for Japanese Canadians to find a common voice to represent their collective wishes; generational divides, among other

differences, made the unification of a community voice seem nearly impossible at certain moments during the redress era. Japanese Canadians often held drastically different opinions about what redress should aim to accomplish and how those goals should be achieved (Miki *Redress*; Omatsu). One hurdle to be overcome was that, as previously mentioned, the generations had radically variant perspectives, and, in some cases, the difficulty of communicating these views was exacerbated by the linguistic caesura that had taken place in Japanese-Canadian families and communities after the war. Many Japanese Canadians stopped speaking Japanese in the postwar era. This was in part the result of assimilationist government policies that dispersed Japanese Canadians across the country in an attempt to resolve the “Japanese problem,” as it had been labeled during the war. This linguistic discontinuity simultaneously disrupted the transmission of heritage culture and largely silenced the issei. The silencing of individual, family, and communal histories allowed for official interpretations of history to dominate, unchecked, during the postwar period and into the 1970s. Then, with the redress movement, personal, familial, and community stories began to emerge.

It was within this sociocultural and political climate that Onodera created *The Displaced View*. One of the avant-garde innovations of this film, given its historical moment of production, is the director’s decision to have the issei grandmother speak in Japanese. The sansei narrator’s inability to understand and communicate with her grandmother is not narrated but rather experienced by the viewer: the English speech is subtitled in Japanese. However, the reverse is not true: Japanese speech is not subtitled in English, which identifies the Japanese-speaking issei grandmother as the target audience. At the outset of Onodera’s film, there exists a chasm between the grandmother and the granddaughter because they do not share a genealogical continuity: a mother tongue. In this sense, the passage of genealogy was lost with the historical denial of the immigrant grandmother’s minority language and female voice. Onodera’s filmmaking techniques attempt to undo the grandmother’s multilayered othering—as elderly-ethnic-female—by the hegemonic white-Anglo culture that alienates her.

Marks argues that experimentation with techniques is integral to intercultural films given that intercultural work offers other, different, and

new ways of knowing and representing the silences of the archive, the traumas of the past, and the dislocations from culture and language, and that from the efforts of this memory work, experimental techniques are developed—*newness* à la Bhabha—comes into being on screen (5). Many experimental film artists in the mid-1980s were making “explorations of language and representation at a time when academia was seized by semiotic theory: ...many began making primarily queer work.... When broader cultural interests (or, narrower academic interest) turned to questions of racial and ethnic identity, many artists shifted their work to address these concerns” (4). While Onodera’s use of Japanese subtitling in *The Displaced View* distances non-Japanese-speaking viewers, it also situates the non-Japanese speaker in the position of the sansei, who struggle to understand the older generations, especially the issei. In so doing, Onodera aims to encourage cross-cultural listening. She explains, “That’s what I do a lot of the time with my grandmother: sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t” (qtd. in Waring 18). Onodera wants and expects audiences to feel both frustrated, as she often has, but also to listen for an intercultural communication beyond language—what she refers to as “a sort of basic or pure communication” (qtd. in Duran 8). This technique of subtitling the English and not the Japanese audio is an intercultural experiment to test the potential for film to act as a conduit of communication across previously irreconcilable breeches between individuals and communities, represented onscreen by the three female characters, each of whom have specific generational, cultural, and linguistic perspectives.

Within the context of ongoing debates associated with the contradictory natures of bilingualism and multiculturalism, Onodera’s focus on language can be read as both a semiotic system and a form of political resistance. These subtitles in *The Displaced View* allow not only for communication between the filmmaker and the first generation, represented by her grandmother, but they also layer the celluloid with a visible Japanese aesthetic that brings into relief exactly what Onodera has lost. Marks maintains that in intercultural film a process of mourning is part of the work of interrogating the traumas of the past. The resulting “grief may be individual or widely shared, but in these films and tapes it becomes a collective experience” (5). In the Japanese-Canadian historical context,

the causes for grief are multiple. However, Onodera, as sansei, represents a grief that results from her break with Japanese language—the ancestral mother tongue—and therefore culture. The film exposes the pain that this linguistic alienation causes her, both in terms of the impact on the relationship with her grandmother, the first generation (issei) more generally, and in terms of Onodera’s own sense of identity as a Japanese-Canadian woman. Despite being a third generation Canadian, Onodera is largely received by white Canadians as “Japanese.” She expresses her frustrations with the discrepancy between perception and reality, as well as her shame at being misidentified. She feels both the upset at being considered “other” in her native nation-state, Canada, and the poignant loss of the linguistic knowledge that is, in part, the result of her family’s and the larger Japanese-Canadian communities’ postwar desire to be identified as loyal Canadians and model citizens—an ambition to belong that seemed the promise of suppressing one’s Japaneseness. However, the film reveals that it was a false promise. Onodera’s character explains, “I met an old man who said ‘too much Japanese stuff. That’s over.’ I remember my mom saying just because you’re Japanese that doesn’t mean you are different from anyone else. She said that for quite some time. If that were true, why did she have to keep reminding me?” The film narrative exposes all that has been lost and forsaken in an effort to belong, only to document how prejudiced assumptions are sustained into the present. Onodera’s character describes her struggles as someone who does not conform to rigid identity paradigms of either Japanese or Canadian:

A few years ago I decided to learn Japanese. I wanted to talk to you [her grandmother] properly. I quit after two classes. Just because I look Japanese everyone expects you to know the language.

“How long have you been here? You have such good English.”

“I can only speak English.”

Furthermore, the use of Japanese subtitles becomes part of the film’s resistance against the fact that Onodera’s mother—as the synecdoche of the nisei generation—has forever acted as the family translator. In this role, her

mother has been the mediator and the barrier, allowing for communication but impeding direct contact with the grandmother's generation and by proxy the family culture and history.

Onodera's directorial choice not to translate the Japanese of the grandmother into English forces the non-Japanese-speaking viewer to reflect on Onodera's displacement from her grandmother, as well as her ancestral language, history, and culture. An outsider within her own family dynamic, Onodera is shut out from any nuanced understanding of the older generations and therefore has the perspective of a perpetual child. This technique foregrounds for viewers how the filmmaker's relationship with her grandmother has been mediated—both literally, through translation, as well as metaphorically—by her nisei mother, in much the same way that many Japanese-Canadian family and community interactions (including the complicated community debates that went on in the 1980s regarding redress) have relied on nisei intervention to smooth intergenerational understanding, linguistic as well as world views, political perspectives, and cultural attitudes.

Onodera reclaims the power of direct communication through video and film. Via her control of the medium, she can bypass her mother's interventions to speak directly with her grandmother. As such, this experimental film is a tool for cross-cultural and even cross-temporal exchange. Onodera's directorial choices—to speak to the grandmother directly through subtitles and to have the grandmother speak in unmediated and untranslated Japanese—place this representation in stark contrast to the appropriation of Japanese-Canadian voices and stories in other earlier television and film productions. In this sense, the film is an attempt to reestablish lost voices, lost genealogies, and the fissure between grandmother and granddaughter.

Nisei-Sansei: Mother-Daughter Relationships

The Displaced View also records the transformation in Onodera's understanding of her nisei mother that is a direct outcome of the intercultural video techniques employed in the filmmaking process. Onodera opens

The Displaced View by making the following claims: “My love and respect for my grandmother lead me to ask the questions. I have begun to understand my mother better through the answers.” While the mother character in the film speaks English, like many nisei, she has never used that language to defend herself publicly or to resist oppression. Onodera’s character struggles to reconcile herself to a mother who has been unwilling to fight for her rights: “I don’t understand why she didn’t fight back, stand up for her rights. I realize the time and the struggle are different, but that doesn’t allow me to forgive her.” Unable to relate to the non-politically engaged mother character, Onodera’s character imagines that she has gained her strength from her grandmother.

Initially, Onodera is highly critical of her mother’s generation: “I’ve heard you [mother] say that the evacuation was a good thing. *It made the Japanese assimilate more. It took them out of the ghetto.* Do you really believe that, or are you still trying to justify the pain?” At the outset, Onodera’s character, equating her resistance against heteronormative standards and racist injustices, cannot fathom the issei and nisei acceptance of the past and of government policies that assured assimilation. Fearful of reawakening the past, many issei and some nisei, depending on their age and attitude, advocated the mantras of *shikata ga nai*, indicating resignation (“it couldn’t be helped”) and *enryo*, restraint. However, by the end of the film, the narrative has traced Onodera’s path to understanding that it has been unfair on her part to compare her own struggle to assert her sexuality with her mother’s lack of defence of her ethnicity, when, in fact, Onodera herself has failed to assert herself as Japanese Canadian: “Like my mother I’ve denied my history for so long, pretending to be white.” By 1988, Onodera had already directed several films focused on her lesbian identity. This intercultural film, however, becomes her ethnic “coming out” film in two senses: in it, she comes out as a lesbian to her own ethnic community, and the film itself also allows her to explore and assert herself as Japanese Canadian. “Because I had to fight for my sexuality, I ended up protecting my culture.” Onodera articulates that the process of filmmaking has made her increasingly aware of her differences within difference—of the role of her ethnicity in relationship to her sexuality. By the end of the film, one identity is no longer subsumed by the other.

Intercultural Narrative Fantasy: Reclaiming a Genealogy

The Displaced View records Onodera's sometimes unsuccessful struggle to reassemble her maternal history, an elusive goal that she identifies as an ongoing task. The gaps and silences Onodera encounters and then represents in the film itself are consistent with the process of memory work that Marks identifies as integral to intercultural film, given that the filmmakers are typically addressing difficult histories. Like other intercultural video and filmmakers who undertake "traumatic investigations," Onodera's narrative discovers "personal and family memories, only to create an empty space where no history is certain...The story suspends in order to contemplate this emptiness, which is narratively thin but emotionally full" (Marks 5). Through a better understanding of her mother and grandmother, the narrator of the film seeks to know herself, her matrilineal parentage, and her Japanese-Canadian identity more thoroughly. To achieve this, Onodera resists easy conclusions. She asks the following questions: "Am I a Japanese Canadian, or a person 'of Japanese descent'? Passing as. In the closet when. I am guilty of playing it safe." Admitting that it has been easier to deny her heritage than to confront it, she has existed in a liminal space, floating between signifiers.

Where there has been no story, Onodera has fantasized a matriarchal figure, creating for herself a genealogical history. Framed by tangible wishes and transformed fairy tales, the absence of a spoken history creates the space for an imagined family story. Onodera's film is one of the first Japanese-Canadian films to use this technique, which is later applied by other filmmakers.¹⁰ In the absence of any knowledge of her grandparents' past, the narrator as a young child fantasized that her grandmother and grandfather were the old man and his wife in *The Crane Wife* fairy tale. Onodera uses this story as a framing device and imagines her grandmother to be the wife of the benevolent woodcutter:

There is still so much I don't know about you, my grandmother:
Bāchan. Information guarded from me, simply because I never asked. I didn't need to. A Japanese fairy tale. You became the old woman living in a small village with *Jiichan*: the childless couple. *Jiichan* was the one

who freed the snow crane from the trap. For his act of kindness, you were rewarded with a visit from a young girl. You gave her food and shelter, and in return she wove beautiful fabric of exquisite design. Then one day, her secret was discovered. But, I made up that past for you.

In an attempt to recapture yet another history and a more complex understanding of her grandmother's early life, Onodera embarks on a train voyage into the BC Interior to identify former sites of confinement (internment camps). This exploration becomes more specifically a metaphysical journey of reflection—the deconstruction and reinvention of history and identity. When Onodera goes in search of the internment camps scattered across BC, they are not situated on the maps—spatial oblivion—and she does not know what she will find: “Everyone told me not to be disappointed, but I didn't need the physical evidence to validate history. I wanted to find the part of you [my grandmother] that I imagined in myself, the part of you that my mother had denied me, but I was almost afraid of what I might discover.” On her trip, Onodera is struck by the realization that there is little physical evidence remaining of the injustices done to her family and the Japanese-Canadian community in general throughout the 1940s. In many cases, nothing identifiable denotes the locations of the unmapped sites that nature has since reclaimed; the mainstream nation bears no scars.

Nature's reclamation of these physical spaces parallels the “naturalization” of the de facto oblivation of Japanese-Canadian communities caused by government policies during and after the war. In this sense, Canada, with its mythopoeisis of the natural landscape, is able to re-absorb any societal glitches that have occurred and absolve the nation of responsibility for historical injustice. Japanese Canadians, however, need no physical marker of wartime discrimination for it to continue to exist as a wound in their psyche and lived reality. Onodera's voyage to Sandon, Slocan City, and New Denver unfurls the concept of the internment camp as a mythical place/space, erased from the landscape, just as family histories had been erased for several decades between the war's end and the redress period. This sequence resonates with the tropes of silence and the discovery of family history that permeate Kogawa's *Obasan*.

The Displaced View, like that novel, acknowledges its status as a text, a narrative construct, a fallible medium through which one potential (never absolute) version of history and one interpretation of truth can be reconstructed. This experimental film follows Onodera's journey back to an identity that requires partial reinvention. Through this process, the sansei narrator is replacing her childhood fantasies about her grandmother's biography with another potential story, invented for viewers, by the character of the grandmother. Still, the new version does not represent a concrete account, verifiable by places and facts. It too relies on the grandmother character's failing memories and interpretations of her personal history.

The grandmother's story, founded in lived experiences, is potentially less impressive than the fairy tale Onodera has told herself for her entire life, but by replacing the fairy tale with the bits of information that she gleans about her grandmother's past through the filmmaking process, the narrator is able to create a *new*, more nuanced her-story. In its avant-garde use of historical invention, the film creates a dynamic mythopoeia, subject to change and metamorphosis that encompasses not only the wartime situation but also the narration of the issei's arrival to Canada, as it links to the identities of the issei's daughter and granddaughter. In this context, the grandmother's identity is not frozen in time, limited only to affirming the family's link to Japan; nor are community identities fixed as a result of traumatic experiences resulting from unjust and racist policies and legislations.

Between the various generational views of the grandmother, mother, and daughter, supplemented by family pictures and historical documents, exists a story—suspended between the images that remain, the places that remain, and the people who testify to their varying points of view on what happened during and after the war. Onodera also exposes the difficult reality that some facts are too difficult to recall: in some cases what was silenced was also forgotten. Using the dynamics of the image, Onodera re-represents the space of oblivion—those elements of the fragmentary history that have been permanently erased from the cultural community memory. In so doing, the film's narrative makes explicit that facts do not equate to "truth." A meta-narrative is not possible for reasons linked not only to the fallibility of memory but to generational politics and perspectives. In some cases, and to varying degree, silence was the status quo after the Second World

War. Ultimately, however, through the process of intercultural filmmaking, Onodera comes to a better understanding of her mother and grandmother's politics of silence. Functioning as a polyphonic community autobiography, the film's narrative proposes that silenced and missing history/stories must be imagined into a new vision (revision) of identity—personal, familial, and communal.

Potential Futures

As the film comes to an end, Onodera closes the frame stories but identifies the search for the family history and ethnic identity, linked the recovery of oblivion, as a work in progress. As director, she wisely avoids providing simplistic answers that recuperate diverse Japanese-Canadian experiences into mainstream narratives of economic success and/or assimilation, as earlier white filmmakers had typically done. Instead, she interrogates the historical outcomes that speak to the larger sociopolitical ethos of the period, and the contradictions and complexities inherent in determining a multicultural future for the country. Despite the fact that Onodera was creating a film focused on ethnocultural identity during a moment of heightened awareness of multicultural issues, she ironically found it even more difficult, in some cases, to find funding for the film. Onodera was confronted with the negative implications of multicultural funding in ways that made it clear that multiculturalism gives attention to Canadian diversity within a paradigm that still privileges the view of the dominant culture(s) and homogenizes ethnocultural interests in order to disenfranchise the minority groups it claims to empower (Marchessault 20). In *The Displaced View*, Onodera was working to represent a complexity of Japanese-Canadian perspectives that ran contrary to tidy homogeneous ethnocultural identity paradigms. Furthermore, despite the fact that asserting ethnocultural identity is cohesive at many levels with multicultural politics, the redress movement positioned Japanese Canadians (and therefore Onodera's project) in opposition to the state.¹¹

In *The Displaced View*, Onodera avoids succumbing to the funding imperatives that have resulted from the institutionalization of cultural

difference and has instead written new identities that resist stagnant Japanese-Canadian identity representations that exist only in relationship to internment—an overly simplified term that does not encompass all the various policies and civil/human rights abuses enacted against the Japanese-Canadian wartime community. This film was a response to previous cinematic texts that had represented a history of racist government policies as aberrations, rather than fully acknowledging the degree to which these events are part of what has constituted the formation of the Canadian nation. Stagnation of identity at the moment of historical trauma, whether it be the initial immigration, or the events of the Second World War, or coming out as a lesbian, does not allow for a fluid and dynamic identity. Whether personal or communal, identities that are constructed solely around a particular event become fossilized. To historicize ethnicity at the moment of victimization is to recuperate it into status quo narratives of “enemy alien” and “other.” Furthermore, the mainstream narratives that evaluate Japanese Canadians according to a Protestant work ethic that values economic productivity, in general, claim that Japanese Canadians have recovered from the wartime injustices and the ramifications of those events, based on their economic successes after the war and their continued economic productivity. These narratives of the model minority fail to capture the complex consequences of a century of racist policies and social attitudes enacted on Japanese Canadians, starting soon after the first Japanese immigrant arrived to Canada in 1877.

Onodera reminds viewers of potentially negative cultural outcomes resulting from these practices—about how a lack of intergenerational communication can reduce the issei to mere representatives of family ethnicity, instead of incorporating ethnic identity as a comprehensive part of a lived reality, enriched by cultural diversity. *The Displaced View*, by contrast, resists this impulse. The film articulates Onodera’s fears about losing her grandmother and her history/stories either to a failing memory or to the inevitability of death. It records her grandmother for posterity, but it also communicates with her and allows her to represent a complex new story and identity for the next generation that will not be possible from a nostalgic posthumous perspective—once Obāchan and all the issei women are gone. Onodera’s desire for her grandmother’s immortality articulates one

of the predominant concerns of later Japanese-Canadian documentaries released in the 1990s: the fear of invisibility through a complex process of assimilation that begins with a loss of language and a lack of communication between generations, creating cultural gaps and an erasure of history. As the issei age and die, families begin to recognize that the issei are bearers of culture, language, and history, and when they die, so do the links to the family's sense of ethnic identity. Grandmothers, and the symbolic role of the matriarch as a link to cultural heritage, become a trope in Japanese-Canadian family documentaries (community auto/biographies).

Conclusion

The directorial focus of *The Displaced View* is a cinematic narrative of resistance against the imposition of historical oblivion. By archiving fragments of the past and weaving them with a degree of fictionalized content necessary to establish a cohesive narrative, Onodera realizes her dream to communicate with her grandmother. Initially, this connection with the grandmother assumes an exclusion of the mother, which is eventually transformed into a stronger mother-daughter relationship. Onodera's initial desire to speak to her grandmother without the intervention of her mother is reflected from the outset, with the dedication "For My Grandmother, Suno Yamasaki," to the concluding scene. Onodera's quest to communicate with her grandmother is creatively imagined by the fairy tale frame-story and visually represented by a Daruma doll.

A Japanese Daruma doll initially has blank eyes. When a wish is made, the first eye is painted. The second eye is filled in when the wish comes true. Onodera paints the doll's first eye at the beginning of the film. In the film's final moments, Onodera fills in the second eye and we hear her recounting to her grandmother what she has learned from her:

Through you I've gained the strength to be who I am, and somewhere along the line I've discovered my own, as well. In order for a person to grow, they say that you must confront your worst fear. In some ways mine hasn't changed since childhood. I'm still afraid of losing you and

I will always regret not being able to tell you what you mean to me....
That wish I have, of you living forever. I know it'll come true. If your
memory fails and you don't remember who I am, I'll remember, for the
both of us, and when you die, we'll remember.

However, the closure symbolized by the Daruma doll is the only narrative resolution the film claims to achieve.

Onodera's community auto/biography does not propose an official history. She explains both the impossibility of one cohesive history and the possibilities born of an engagement with multiple and dynamic narratives: "It's difficult to get your facts straight. Even in one family, everyone has a different story. *Shikata ga nai. Shikata ga nai.* There are questions that remain unasked." Via an open-ended story, Onodera destabilizes the facts, transforms the failings of memory into a positive space for reinvention, resists the resignation of *shikata ga nai*, and alludes to all that must still be discovered and the memory work still to be done.

The narrative does not seek to record a family history for posterity but rather to create one in absentia. By extension it also offers one potential visual iteration of Japanese-Canadian history, while simultaneously using the medium of experimental film to represent the impossibility of achieving a cohesive community narrative given the numerous displaced views, the heterogeneity common to every (ethnocultural) community. To finally understand her grandmother and then her mother, Onodera, the filmmaker, navigates back from the vocalicity of the redress campaign to the silence that had marked Japanese-Canadian postwar history. She places in evidence the individual and community struggles that were involved in the move from secrecy and silence to personal action, political action, and public acknowledgement. Onodera's film, as an answer to this dynamic, emphasizes the necessity for intracommunity, intergenerational communication that starts with the sansei narrator's deepened understanding (if not forgiveness) for her mother's choices and world views. One proposed path toward understanding is a shared family story, co-constructed by whatever means available.

The film itself initiates an exchange with various demographics of viewers, both Japanese-Canadian and non-Japanese-Canadian. It catalogues Onodera's personal transformations, the shifts that take place in her

relationships with her mother and her grandmother (her genealogy), and the metamorphoses that she undergoes in relationship to her various communities: queer, Japanese Canadian, Canadian, and beyond. By the end of the film, Onodera's own identity is newly transformed as plural and fluid, in a dynamic relationship to others, to time and across space—proposing similar possibilities for viewers, who dare to ask the “questions that remain unasked.” By addressing her own personal, familial, and community relationships and their correlation to larger Canadian political events during the Second World War and the redress campaign, Onodera effectively challenges the multicultural construction of her identity, as well as the hierarchical construction of ethnicity in Canada; she appeals to all viewers to question their relationship to others, to “other” histories and, in so doing, to render visible and fluid the whiteness of the Canadian nation.

Notes

- 1 This article is loosely based on an earlier version that appeared in my doctoral dissertation, “Paradigms Lost and Re-membered: The Case of Japanese Canadian Experience in Canadian Media, Cinema, and Literature.”
- 2 The start date of Onodera's career is ambiguous. However, she produced her first film in high school, in 1979.
- 3 “Internment” is a term that is culturally understood and often used to refer to the relocation camps. It was actually not the term used during the Second World War, because it is against the Geneva Convention to detain citizen without a trial and Japanese Canadians were not accorded due process of law. As Roy Miki points out, “Even if the government were to ignore that rule—under the War Measures Act it could perhaps justify such action—it would have paid the costs of building what would then be ‘internment camps,’ and would also have provided food and clothing to the internees, as the United States did for Japanese Americans” (*Redress* 141). In contravention to international law, Japanese Canadians paid for the cost of their confinement. In this chapter, “internment camps” is sometimes used to indicate the “relocation sites.”
- 4 Roy Miki explains that the term “evacuation” was originally a euphemism coined by the Canadian government that “helped to translate the inherent racism of its policies for Japanese Canadians into the language of bureaucratic efficiency” (*Redress* 51). The term is used by many Japanese Canadians (and by Onodera in the film) to indicate the wartime and postwar injustices enacted by the government. These include, but are not limited to, mass uprooting and forced relocation, dispossession, dispersal

and deportation. However, the term “evacuation” is problematic on many levels, including the fact that it suggests an eventual return, which, as Miki has pointed out, was not part of the government plan.

- 5 For more details, see W. Anselmi and Sheena Wilson, 2009.
- 6 To further complicate these community nuances and generational differences, families who immigrated to Canada at different periods of Japanese history—namely, the Meiji period (1868–1912) when there was greater focus on collectivity and building the modern nation, as opposed to during the Taishō period (1912–1926) when Western concepts such as individual rights and democracy were influencing the shape of Japanese political and cultural life (Hane 220)—would, in many cases, maintain different Japanese-Canadian values and identities. Furthermore, some second-generation Japanese-Canadian children were sent back to Japan for their education, while others were educated in Canada, which also had an influence on their various world views. Then there were those Japanese Canadians who married newly immigrated issei, which impacted family dynamics. The variations in experience transform exponentially based on individual experiences and the ways that different communities developed in relationship to other Canadians.
- 7 Bhabha proposes that the “newness” of migrant or minority discourse has to be discovered *in medias res*: a newness that is not part of the ‘progressivist’ division between past and present” (325, emphasis in original). He suggests that “the ‘foreign’ element that reveals the interstitial; insists in the textile superfluity of folds and wrinkles; and becomes the ‘unstable element of linkage,’ the indeterminate temporality of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which ‘newness comes into the world’” (326).
- 8 The s in “relocation(s)” is to acknowledge the complexity of multiple displacements both during the war and as a result of the policies to mandate dispersal and deportation after the war.
- 9 Given the historical tendency to homogenize “the” Japanese-Canadian community/perspective/attitude/politics of redress, it is important to acknowledge, of course, that, as with any community, there was a heterogeneity of reactions during and after the war, and some people did speak out. Muriel Kitagawa is one such example. Her writings, both personal and public, have been collected and published by Roy Miki in the book *This is My Own: Letters to Wes & Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941-1948* (1985).
- 10 For example, in Kerri Sakamoto and Rea Tajiri’s film *The Strawberry Fields* (1997), Luke rejects the option of searching for his birth parents and prefers, instead, the fantasy that he has created by relying on images and ethnic stereotypes constructed by the mass media. His girlfriend, Irene, criticizes him for his inability to face his own past: “You can’t face the truth. You cut out pictures from the magazines and pretend they are real” (*The Strawberry Fields*). In the docu-drama *Obāchan’s Garden* (2001) by Linda Ohama, the messages of the great-granddaughter resonate with those of Midi Onodera. The *yonsei* (fourth generation) great-grandchild imagines that the family has descended from the imperial palace, and that she might find out that she is a princess, once her obāchan’s (grandmother’s) secrets are revealed.

- 11 For this, Onodera was, on one occasion, denied access to a cultural event put on by Caravan and sponsored by government money budgeted to support multicultural initiatives because the subject of Japanese-Canadian women was perceived of as overtly political (Waring 26). Onodera also believes she was denied government funding (naming the Ontario Film Development Corporation, as one example) because of a lack of desire to fund experimental films (25) and because of concerns that her film would not conform to “a middle class, heterosexual, apolitical format” demanded of artists using multicultural funding dollars (“Reconsidering”). In 1991, in the *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, curated by Paul Wong at Vancouver’s Or Gallery (May 10–June 8, 1991), Onodera observes that, in some cases, filmmakers of colour “have become so preoccupied with racial and cultural differences that artistic concerns come second to our visible presence” (“Reconsidering”).

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