

Passing Time, Moving Memories: Interpreting Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadian Women

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The story of internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II has become part of the collective memory of most Canadians of Japanese descent. Promoted as part of the community's efforts to seek redress for wartime losses, the collective narrative has centred around loss of property, the indignities of detainment in Vancouver, expulsion to ghost towns, and violation of human rights and principles of democracy. The Redress Settlement with the Canadian government in 1988 has prompted a further unearthing of personal memoirs, in a conscious effort of Japanese Canadians to recover their history. The individual experiences examined here, through the author's personal memories, from private letters written during the war by Japanese Canadian women and intercepted by the Canadian government, and from recent interviews with second-generation Japanese Canadian women, reveal diverse experiences within the collective story. In particular, these accounts challenge the image of the silent, unresisting, and uncritical Japanese Canadian woman.

L'histoire de l'internement des Canadiens japonais durant la Deuxième Grande guerre fait maintenant partie de la mémoire collective de la plupart des Canadiens d'ascendance japonaise. Le récit collectif, promu dans le cadre des efforts déployés par la communauté afin d'obtenir réparation pour les pertes subies en temps de guerre, gravite autour de la perte de biens, des indignités de la détention à Vancouver, de l'expulsion vers des villes fantômes et de la violation des droits de la personne et des principes de la démocratie. La conclusion en 1988 de l'Entente de

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redressement à l'égard des Canadiens japonais avec le gouvernement canadien a encouragé les Canadiens japonais à déterrer d'autres souvenirs personnels dans un effort conscient pour recouvrer leur histoire. Les expériences personnelles que relate ici l'auteure en puisant à ses propres souvenirs, à des lettres écrites durant la guerre, et alors interceptées par le gouvernement canadien, par des Canadiennes japonaises de même qu'à des interviews menées récemment avec des Canadiennes japonaises de deuxième génération témoignent d'une grande diversité au sein de l'histoire collective. Ces récits vont à l'encontre de l'image de femme silencieuse, subordonnée et sans esprit critique de la Canadienne japonaise.

THE WIND is so sickly warm. Perhaps the same wind has blown over the bloody battle fields of the Pacific. I have so much to write to you about tonight, I mustn't waste my time by letting my imagination get the better of me — my mind wanders so easily these days — could it be what they call the "ghost town rot"? Even with the certain amount of freedom that's allowed us in the ghost towns, we're getting so sick of the place. We're getting so dull and dry, and uninteresting. I can't help but wonder what boredom and monotony you must have to endure behind those nasty barbed wires! It's more than three years now, *Niesan*, three long years.... [from sister in Bay Farm to her brother in Angler, Ontario, June 1945, written in English]¹

Acts of Political Violence²

The pain caused to all persons of Japanese descent by the Canadian government's actions during the years of the Second World War is etched in my memory. It has become an integral part of my existence, as well as the defining moment in my own family's history. Throughout the better part of my adult life, I have reflected on the wartime internment of my mother, father, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. As a sociologist, I have been researching these injustices for years. I do not know how familiar most Canadians are with these events in history. By now, many must know the rough contours of the story, at least the one that has entered the public discourse and been legitimated by the written word and the published record.³

In the years prior to the Second World War, over 95 per cent of Japanese Canadians lived in British Columbia, the first immigrant from Japan settling

1 This and all subsequent censored letters are located in the National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC], Record Group [hereafter RG] 27, Department of Labour, Japanese Division, "Intercepted Letters", vols. 655, 661, 662, 1527, 1528. To respect the privacy of the individuals named in these letters, I specify relationships only and do not disclose names.

2 I employ the term political violence to describe the uprooting, dispossession, and incarceration of various groups of Japanese Canadians by the federal government, in an effort to convey the devastating and long-term impact of these acts on individuals and the community as a whole. I do not "compare" this form of violence to historical acts of genocide, massacre, lynching, bodily rape. I see the need to consider, however, the government's treatment of Japanese Canadians as part of a continuum of political violence that takes into account emotional and physical pain and suffering, as well as material losses.

3 See Kirsten Emiko McAllister, "Captivating Debris: Unearthing a World War Two Internment Camp",

in this western province in 1877. Discriminatory legislation, in addition to ostracism from the Anglo-Celtic population, forced a concentration of Japanese settlements in the southwest corner of B.C. People of Japanese origin owned fishing boats along the coast, as well as berry farms and gardens throughout the Fraser Valley, and in Vancouver a Japanese business and residential community (known as Japan Town) flourished on and around Powell Street. Yet, in spite of their economic and cultural presence, Japanese Canadians had extremely circumscribed rights. By law, they were prohibited from holding public office, from voting in an election, and from entering most institutions of higher learning and hence the professions.

Anti-Asian sentiment was strong and unabashed in B.C. in the decades leading up to the war.⁴ However, racism took on new dimensions and its impact on the community intensified dramatically when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Days after the bombing, with claims that “all people of Japanese racial origin” posed a threat to national security, the Canadian government closed down Japanese-language newspapers, impounded fishing boats, and began plans to remove forcibly 21,000 persons of Japanese ancestry from their homes (75 per cent of this group were naturalized or Canadian-born citizens).⁵

4 In a thoughtful analysis, Mona Oikawa argues that the violations committed against Japanese Canadians should be more generally viewed as “reflective of the war for white bourgeois supremacy being waged against people of Japanese origin (and against Aboriginal people and other marginalized communities) living in Canada”. Pointing to exclusionary laws against Asians in British Columbia from the time of their immigration to Canada, Oikawa is critical of the representation of the internment as a “wartime event”. See Mona Oikawa, “Cartographies of Violence: Women, Memory, and the Subject(s) of the ‘Internment’” (PhD dissertation, OISE/University of Toronto, 1999, p. 13). For a discussion of anti-Asian sentiment, see, for example, Gillian Creese, “Class, Ethnicity and Conflict: The Case of the Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1880–1923”, in Rennie Warburton and David Coburn, eds., *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988); Patricia E. Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man’s Province, 1914–41* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), “Visible Minorities and Political Participation”, in Jorgen Dahlie and Tissa Fernando, eds., *Ethnicity, Power, and Politics in Canada* (Toronto: Methuen Publishing, 1981), pp. 151–171, and “British Columbia’s Fear of Asians, 1900–1950”, *Histoire sociale/Social History*, vol. 13, no. 25 (May 1980), pp. 161–172; Timothy J. Stanley, “White Supremacy, Chinese Schooling and School Segregation in Victoria: The Case of the 1922–1923 Chinese Students’ Strike”, *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d’histoire de l’éducation*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Fall 1990), pp. 287–305; W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978).

5 On January 16, 1942, the federal government passed Order-in-Council PC 365, calling for the removal of male Japanese nationals, 18 to 45 years of age, from a designated “Protected Area” 100 miles from the B.C. coast. Three weeks later, the government passed Order-in-Council PC 1486, expanding the power of the Minister of Justice to remove all persons of Japanese origin from the “protected zone”. As military officers responsible for defence of the Pacific coast did not regard the Japanese in Canada as a security threat, the government established the B.C. Security Commission. This civilian body carried out the expulsion of Japanese from the area. For a comprehensive discussion of these events, see Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was: A History of the Japanese Canadians* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991); Ann Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1980).

Along with the uprooting, Japanese Canadians were subject to a dusk-to-dawn curfew and had their homes searched by officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Over time, thousands were herded into the stench-filled livestock buildings of Hastings Park in Vancouver, a “clearing site” for those who would later be dispersed to isolated parts of the province. The majority of Japanese Canadians (approximately 12,000) were eventually sent to “internment camps”, where they were forced to live in hastily prepared shacks or run-down hotels.⁶ These “settlements” were situated in various parts of the B.C. interior: Greenwood, Sandon, Kaslo, New Denver, Rosebery, Slocan City, Bay Farm, Popoff, and Lemon Creek. Tashme, another site, was set up on vacant land just outside the 100-mile “protected area” close to Hope. A smaller number of families (approximately 1,150) were relocated to so-called “self-supporting” camps in Lillooet, Bridge River, Minto City, McGillivray Falls, and Christina Lake. These families supposedly possessed the financial resources necessary to assume full responsibility for their own relocation and maintenance. Another small group (about 4,000) were sent to perform grueling labour in family units on the beet farms of Alberta and Manitoba.

In the first phase of the internment, many sons, brothers, and husbands were separated from their families and sent to labour in work camps in B.C. and Ontario. Approximately 1,000 men were sent to road camps. Japanese nationals were placed in camps around the B.C./Alberta border, while the Canadian-born *Nisei* were sent to the Hope/Princeton highway or to Schreiber, Ontario. Men who showed even the most mild form of resistance were interned as prisoners of war in Petawawa and Angler, Ontario. About 700 men were incarcerated in these sites, many of whom remained there for the duration of the war.⁷

With the defeat of Japan in 1945, all cleared Japanese Americans were permitted to return to the coast.⁸ However, Japanese Canadians, by then interned for three years, faced a “second uprooting”. At this time, the Department of

6 Here I use the term internment to describe a wide range of experiences, including forced relocation to ghost towns, “self-supporting camps”, and sugar-beet farms; incarceration in prisoner of war camps; movement to labour camps; compulsory resettlement from B.C. to Ontario or Quebec; and deportation to Japan. In some government documents, in comparison, the term refers only and specifically to the incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Canadian men in prisoner of war camps. Ann Sunahara notes that, legally, the *Nisei* could not be interned, as they were Canadian citizens. Under the Geneva Convention, internment is a legal act that applies only to “aliens”. As a result, the federal government referred to the “detainment” of Japanese Canadians. Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism*, p. 66.

7 Roy Miki and Cassandra Kobayashi, *Justice in Our Time: The Canadian Redress Settlement* (Vancouver and Winnipeg: Talonbooks and National Association of Japanese Canadians, 1991), p. 4. For more information about the conditions in these internment sites, see Robert K. Okazaki, *The Nisei Mass Evacuation Group and P.O.W. Camp “101” Angler, Ontario* (Scarborough, Ont.: n.p., 1996); Yon Shimizu, *The Exiles: An Archival History of the World War II Japanese Road Camps in British Columbia and Ontario* (Wallaceburg, Ont.: Shimizu Consulting and Publishing, 1993).

8 For a comparison of American and Canadian wartime policies toward persons of Japanese origin, see Daniel J. O’Neil, “American vs. Canadian Policies Toward their Japanese Minorities During the Second World War”, *Comparative Social Research*, vol. 4 (1981), pp. 111–134. For a more comprehensive discussion of the wartime internment of Japanese Americans, see Lawson Fusao Inada, ed., *Only What*

Labour announced two policies: dispersal and “repatriation”. People of Japanese ancestry were forced to leave B.C. by either dispersing east of the Rockies (Ontario or Quebec) or “repatriating” to Japan. As noted by Roy Miki and Cassandra Kobayashi, the term “repatriation” was a euphemism for what was in fact “a forced exile”. After all, “[T]he ‘patria’ or country of birth for the majority of these citizens was Canada, so they could not in this sense, be ‘repatriated’ to Japan.”⁹ Fearful, angry, and confused, approximately 10,000 Japanese Canadians signed up for expulsion. Many signed simply because they were reluctant to face the unfamiliar and racially hostile terrain of Eastern Canada, and thus a large number later changed their minds. Yet in 1946 roughly 4,000 individuals had already been deported (2,000 of these were Canadian born; one-third of the 2,000 were dependent children under the age of 16).¹⁰ The government did not allow Japanese Canadians to return to the “protected zone” until 1949, roughly four years after the war’s end. They were not granted the right to the federal vote until June 1948 (effective April 1949), and could not vote in the province of British Columbia until March 1949.¹¹

These were acts of political violence. The government’s actions resulted in dispossession, property loss (farms, fishing boats, vehicles, homes, and personal belongings of less monetary worth but great personal value), a violation of human rights, disruption of education, diminished aspirations, coerced employment (often highly exploitative in nature and typically for low pay and little recognition), the break-up of families, loss of culture (language, customs, art forms), and continued exposure to racism in its many guises. The more hidden and unquantifiable costs of these wartime injustices enter the realm of emotion and subjectivity, the most dramatic and tragic of these being suicide.¹² In short, the Second World War internment resulted in the destruction of a community and trauma to the individuals within it.

We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience (Berkeley and San Francisco: Heyday Books and California Historical Society, 2000); Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied* (Seattle and London: The Civil Liberties Public Education Fund and University of Washington Press, 1997).

9 Miki and Kobayashi, *Justice in Our Time*, p. 49. Writing about the Japanese American experience, Raymond Okamura presents an important critique of the language used by the United States government during the years of internment. Okamura demonstrates how the U.S. government relied on euphemisms such “evacuation” and “relocation”, which concealed the harsh impact of its treatment of persons of Japanese origin during the war. See Raymond Y. Okamura, “The American Concentration Camps: A Cover-up Through Euphemistic Terminology”, *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Fall 1982), pp. 95–109.

10 Deportation took place between May and December 1946.

11 Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was*; Miki and Kobayashi, *Justice in Our Time*; Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism*.

12 Mentions of cases of suicide within the Japanese Canadian community were found in NAC, RG 27, “Intercepted Letters”. In at least one of these cases, the suicide was directly linked to the experience of extreme racism in Canada. Out of respect for surviving family members, I do not discuss these

Situating the Narratives

If this story is not known to a general audience of *Hakujin* Canadians, it has no doubt been heard many times by most Canadians of Japanese descent.¹³ Indeed, promoted over the last few decades as part of the community's efforts to seek redress for wartime losses, it has become part of our collective memory. The collective narrative has centred around loss of property, the indignities of Hastings Park, expulsion to ghost towns, and violation of human rights and principles of democracy. Since the Redress Settlement with the Canadian government in 1988, we have witnessed a further unearthing of personal memoirs, in a concerted effort on the part of Japanese Canadians to recover their history, consciously to remember, and to preserve memory through the literacization of experience.¹⁴ This expanding cultural reservoir is of enormous value in enriching and extending our sense of ourselves.

Notwithstanding the political utility and empirical value of the official public history, I would caution, however, against the colonization of our thinking about Japanese Canadians and their communities by one (perhaps dominant) story. It is important to search for and listen to many different narratives, drawn from a wide array of sources. As Kirsten McAllister writes, we are somehow compelled by *the* story and therefore must ensure that *all* stories are not reduced to the same one.¹⁵ One narrative alone may conceal the diverse experiences of people — experiences shaped by age, generation, and one's location within hierarchies based on gender and social class. A uniform story, moreover, obscures the ways in which complex systems of domination come together in shaping people's lives. The dominant narrative, though always changing, remains one in which the theme of resistance (in its varied forms) is not always strongly conveyed. Indeed, one might even suggest that much of the publicized literature on the internment has promoted the idea that Japanese Canadians generally, and Japanese Canadian women especially, have been a passive and acquiescent lot.¹⁶ These traits, assumed

13 *Hakujin* is a Japanese term translated as "white person" or Caucasian.

14 The Redress Agreement was signed by the National Association of Japanese Canadians and the Canadian government on September 22, 1988. For a discussion of the Redress Movement and Agreement, see Audrey Kobayashi, "The Japanese Canadian Redress Settlement and its Implications for Race Relations", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 24 (1992), pp. 1–19; George Kurian, "Bittersweet Passage: Redress and the Japanese Canadian Experience", *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, vol. 26 (1995), pp. 286–287; National Association of Japanese Canadians, *Democracy Betrayed: The Case for Redress* (National Association of Japanese Canadians, 1985, 2nd printing); Maryka Omatsu, *Bittersweet Passage* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993).

15 As Kirsten McAllister (citing Lifton, 1979) states, there is often a "compulsion to repeat *the* history of Japanese Canadians". This compulsion "has the power to impose stasis, halting the impulse to extend outwards towards the fleeing, tumbling motion of the ongoing world and thus to incorporate new experiences. Within its grasp, all stories are reduced to the same story." See McAllister, "Captivating Debris", p. 98.

16 It is interesting that some of the earlier wartime literature on Japanese Canadians highlights the protests of Japanese Canadians against the Canadian government. For example, after interviewing Japa-

to be cultural, are embraced by the popular phrase *shikata ga nai* — “what can be done” or an expression of resignation to the situation.¹⁷ The concept of *shikata ga nai* and the silent, passive Japanese woman is part of a race and gender essentialism that must be challenged. While the Redress Movement has clearly disrupted the cultural amnesia that has for so long marked Canadian history, I am not convinced that the imagery of the silent and uncritical Japanese Canadian woman has been fully contested.

Multiple stories of internment from *Nisei* (second-generation) women and, to a lesser extent, their *Issei* (first-generation) mothers indeed challenge this image. I explore the ways in which these women asserted themselves in the face of the nightmares they endured during the war. I take up this theme by describing a range of narratives of Japanese-Canadian experience, each derived from a different source. The first is highly personal, embedded in my own memories. The second set of stories emerges from a selection of private letters written by and to *Nisei* and *Issei* women in the mid-1940s. Finally, some images are drawn from the oral testimonies of 35 *Nisei* women currently living in Ontario and B.C.

Just as each of these narratives emerges from a distinct source, each is also communicated in a different way. My personal memories were indirectly experienced, born in childhood, travelled across generations, and strongly informed by a present-day collective remembrance. The private correspondence was crafted in the context of war, intercepted and edited by government officials, and most likely not intended for a public audience. In comparison, the oral testimonies were spoken to a researcher, rooted in personal memory, directly experienced. Rather than offer a direct point-by-point comparison of the narratives, I am interested in the ways in which they inform one another, bringing out the many and complex dimensions or layers of a story. At a general level, the narratives tell us something about the importance of interpretation for the construction of history and about the imposition of time and memory in the process of research and story-telling.

nese Canadians interned in B.C. during the war, sociologist Forrest E. La Violette wrote at length about their complaints and demands to the B.C. Security Commission, federal government representatives, and the Spanish Consulate. Forrest E. La Violette, *The Canadian Japanese and World War II* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948). Mona Oikawa notes that La Violette’s analysis stands in contrast to that presented by Ken Adachi. Adachi’s post-war account presents an image of Japanese Canadians as “relatively docile” and “co-operative”. Writes Oikawa, “What is stunning to me in the literature is the shift from the depiction of protesting Japanese Canadians to a prevailing image of docile people co-operating with the government.” See Oikawa, “Cartographies of Violence”, p. 32; Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was*.

17 In conducting interviews with aging *Issei* in Canada in the contemporary period, sociologist Atsuko Matsuoka has observed that the Western interpretation of *shikata ga nai* may differ from the meaning given by the *Issei*. In the context of her interviews, Matsuoka discerned *shikata ga nai* to mean “we do/did the best we can/could” rather than resignation or “giving up”. She further found that the *Issei* revealed a remarkable resiliency. Atsuko Matsuoka, personal correspondence, November 2003.

Personal Memory

Let me begin with a few words about my own memories of the internment.¹⁸ For many decades, feminist academics have argued against the idea of scientific objectivity and academic distance.¹⁹ In this project especially, I must immediately dispel any pretense of academic distance — and I make no claims of detachment. As Annette Kuhn writes about the process of exploring memory in her book *Family Secrets*, it has been a “story so far of a voyage that turned into an odyssey of the heart as much as of the intellect”.²⁰ Like Kuhn, while working with the materials of my research, I found that “the distanced standpoint of the critic began to feel less and less adequate to my material, incapable of addressing such powerful responses to my critical objects”. I too am “captivated” and “intrigued” by the stories that I have read and heard. Writes Kuhn, “Getting to grips with this response demanded that I should not stifle it by insisting upon a critical distance, but rather acknowledge it and bring it into play by embracing my own past and its representation through memory.”²¹

My personal memories and the emotional essence of these memories have undeniably shaped my interpretation and construction of the two other narratives.²² The letters and testimonies upon which I draw were never simply

18 Though a more detailed story of my own family’s experience of internment would add richness to this discussion, I provide here only a cursory account. I believe that to convey the wider, sociological meaning of a personal story, one must present it in the context of a comprehensive analysis that links biography to a broader theoretical and empirical literature. Such a project is beyond the scope of this article. I consider more fully the relationship among biography, personal memory, and history in Pamela Sugiman, “These Feelings that Fill My Heart: Exploring Japanese Canadian Women’s Lives Through Oral Testimony” (paper presented to the “Feminism and the Making of Canada” Conference, McGill University, May 7–9, 2004). For an interesting and thoughtful discussion of research and self-reflexivity, see Franca Iacovetta, “Post-Modern Ethnography, Historical Materialism, and Decentering the (Male) Authorial Voice: A Feminist Conversation”, *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 32, no. 64 (November 1999), pp. 275–293.

19 Many of the issues that inform this discussion have been taken up by feminist historians in a critique of positivism and the assumption of objective historical research. See, for example, Susan Geiger, “What’s so Feminist About Women’s Oral History?”, *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 169–182; Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History”, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 87–100.

20 I refer here to an article in which Kuhn reflects on her experiences in writing *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 2002). These ideas are expressed in Annette Kuhn, “A Journey Through Memory”, in Susannah Radstone, ed., *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 179.

21 Kuhn, “A Journey Through Memory”, p. 185.

22 For a discussion of the researcher’s emotional engagement with the research, see Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1996); Antoinette Errante, “But Sometimes You’re Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Telling”, in Sharlene Nagy Hese-Biber and Michelle L. Yaiser, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 411–434; Suzanne Fleish-

“sources of data”, pieces in a project of historical reconstruction. Clearly, they informed my understanding of Japanese Canadian lives, but they have also been personally experienced and are very much a part of my own “journey through remembrance”.

My early memories of the internment were gathered largely from my parents, my aunt, and, to a lesser degree, my grandparents. Given that I could not speak Japanese and they said that they could not speak English, communication with my grandparents was largely by way of an implicit understanding based on eye and body contact, as well as their tales as told by their *Nisei* children. The grandparents whom I knew seemed stoic, displaced, and highly dependent on one another. They seemed to be passing time in Ontario, very much rooted both emotionally and materially in their past lives. My mother taught me about the internment through her caution, in addition to her fragmented stories about life in Haney, then Hastings Park, Rosebery, and ultimately the long, lonely train trip to work as a domestic for a wealthy family in Toronto. My father conveyed anger and ambivalence, and offered snapshots of a carefree pre-war existence in Vancouver, followed by incarceration in a prisoner of war camp. The most vivid of these snapshots is the white shirt with red circle that he was forced to wear in Petawawa.

My knowledge of the internment was drawn from an extremely small and homogeneous group. Sheltered in my Anglo-Saxon/Eastern European neighbourhood of Toronto, my only contact with other Japanese Canadians was with people in my own family. Once in a while, I visited distant relatives, and on Sundays I saw familiar strangers at the Toronto Buddhist Church. During these years, I had curiously embraced the idea that we should not talk about the internment, that to ask too many questions would hurt my parents. This is odd because, in retrospect, my parents gave no obvious indication that they did not want to share their memories with me. I furthermore believed, albeit with an increasingly critical eye, that Japanese Canadians may be best described by the phrase *shikata ga nai*. I asked my parents if they had not felt anger. I assumed that they had no critical feelings toward the Canadian government. I believed that Japanese Canadians then did not protest, and later just wanted to forget.

Memory, of course, is fluid. As I undertook this project, my memories have changed. In encountering new information, new sources of data, voiced by people beyond my own family, I have begun to remember in different ways. My memory has been transformed. I now turn to some of the sources of its transformation.

man, “Gender, the Personal, and the Voice of Scholarship: A Viewpoint”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Summer 1998); Iacovetta, “Post-Modern Ethnography”; Personal Narratives Group, eds., *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989); Valerie Yow, “‘Do I Like Them Too Much?’ Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa”, *Oral History Review*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 55–79.

Private Letters

In the initial stages of my research, I came across a number of letters, written by and to Japanese Canadians, that had been intercepted and censored by government officials during the war. The extracted contents are now housed in the National Archives.²³ Among the first to catch my eye was a letter that had been written to my aunt by her brother. I later found correspondence by other members of my extended family. Many months passed before I gathered and read all of the 900 letters that I had collected, but, as I did so, another narrative began to unfold, one that contested my simple childhood memories.

The narrative that emerges from the private correspondence was produced in the context of war. Little time elapsed between the thought and the writing of that thought, the documenting and preservation of sentiments. In this sense, the letters have an immediacy and rawness. For Japanese Canadians, the time of writing was one of separation, uncertainty, and disruption. During these years, many women were living lives away from their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and boyfriends. Many *Issei* women were advancing to middle age, while the majority of *Nisei* were teens or relatively young. Some were children. The experiences about which they wrote were not mediated by decades of living. The letters and their authors are, in a sense, “fixed in time”.²⁴

This private correspondence seems to have served two main purposes. People used the letters to communicate information to one another about living and working conditions, finances, government policy, family decision-making. The letters also served as a vehicle of self-expression, a means by which to convey feeling and articulate personal opinion. One theme that is clear, perhaps more directly and consistently communicated than in the oral

23 In correspondence with the office of Arthur MacNamara, Deputy Minister, Department of Labour, T. B. Pickersgill, Commission of Japanese Placement for the Department of Labour, stated that most of the private letters intercepted by the federal government were written by individuals who had family members either interned in prisoner of war camps or relocated outside British Columbia (NAC, RG 27, Department of Labour, vol. 1528, Japanese Division, Intercepted Letters, Pickersgill to MacNamara, March 2, 1946). Most of the letters cited here were originally written in English. Those letters that had been composed in Japanese had been translated during the war by employees of the federal government. I have read only the translated versions of these letters, retyped by the Directorate of Censorship, Department of National War Services. The majority of the intercepted letters that can be found in the collections at the National Archives appear in translated form only. As a result, some of the nuance and meaning in the original letters may be lost. Most likely to facilitate censorship and review by politicians and bureaucrats who were not fluent in Japanese, the Canadian Postal Censor in Vancouver instructed that all letters be written in English. Correspondence in Japanese was to be restricted to “essential news and information” and free of “inconsequential gossip”. The Censor furthermore warned that use of unusual Japanese symbols would delay their reading (Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was*, p. 267). The Censor also indicated whether or not correspondence was to be “held”, “released”, or “condemned”. Most of the letters cited here were released, some with passages deleted.

24 See Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History”, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 12 (1981), pp. 96–107.

testimonies, is that of the violence imposed upon the community and the harsh impact of this violence on individuals. Most of the letters are highly personal, thus allowing for a sense of the intimate experience of the government's wartime actions. The outright disclosure of injustice, the open airing of misery and grief, is enlightening and profound.

The Emotional Experience of Political Violence

While both *Issei* and *Nisei* women conveyed anger in their correspondence, the *Issei* were more likely at the same time to declare their outright loyalty to Japan, and their criticism of the Canadian government specifically, and white people generally, was unqualified. While equally critical of government and politicians, letters written by *Nisei* women reveal more contradictory emotions. Their anger toward the government was tempered with disappointment and despair. Born and raised in Canada, good citizens, they were in disbelief about their treatment in this country. Because their unfair treatment was based on phenotypical racial qualities, they felt that much was beyond their control. Despite this, there are repeated assertions of national loyalty and national identity. In May 1945, for example, a *Nisei* woman wrote to her brother in Ontario:

Through no fault of our own we happened to be born of Japanese parents, however, as you know, all were educated in Canadian system of governing Democracy. Right of free speech, etc. etc., no matter what race colour, or creed. Well, these ignorant "so-and'so's" think they're the only ones in this country thats entitled to live.... With all the raw deals and racial hatred towards us I'm still proud to say that I'm a Canadian of Japanese ancestry. I was created to be one and will live up to one. [From sister to brother?, May 1945, written in English]

A *Nisei* woman in Lemon Creek expressed similar feelings to a male friend in Angler, Ontario:

No use going out East, when, wherever you go, the narrow minded whites call you "JAPS". Might as well stay here where there are practically no white people. The nisei are sure in a tight spot. We don't know whether we're a CANADIAN or a JAPANESE. Because we were JAPANESE they forced us from the coast and now as CANADIAN they want us to evacuate EAST. Phooey and double phooey to the damn selective service guys. [From woman in Lemon Creek to male friend in Angler, Ontario, March 1944, written in English]

And in a letter to a male friend in Brantford, Ontario, a *Nisei* woman from Slocan wrote:

It surely makes me sick — and angry ... they may take us for enemies just cuz our parents were born in Japan but they certainly don't give us much chance to

let us prove ourselves worthy of this country.... Oh, it made my blood boil — “once a Jap, always a Jap”.... The more I think of our standing the worse it is for my poor heart so I’ll stop. [From woman in Slocan to male friend in Ontario, March 1944, written in English]

My present-day political outlook and sensibilities made it difficult for me to read, over and over again in these letters, the word “Jap”. It was one thing to see this word used in official government documents or in *The Vancouver Province* newspaper, but quite another to read it in private correspondence written by and to Japanese Canadians themselves. Given its author, the language took on an even more violent and obscene quality. A *Nisei* woman in Bay Farm wrote to a female friend in Alberta:

[I]f we are loyal we have to go east, or on the other hand back to Japan. There’s work outside of this place I guess but what is the difference, wherever you go a Jap is a Jap. [Between woman friends, Bay Farm to Alberta, April 1945, written in English]

Many *Nisei* repeatedly expressed feelings of entrapment. They were marked by their own faces — trapped by physical features that identified them as Japanese. Writing about Japanese American women, Jeanne Houston notes that slanted eyes and high cheekbones became not simply Japanese physical traits, but “floating signifiers of difference” linked to “negative behavioral characteristics”. The inner self may have been Canadian, but the outer self was Japanese. This separation of self is part of the violence done to Japanese Canadians.²⁵

Dichotomization of the inner and outer self is evident in the following letter written by a *Nisei* woman in Toronto to her girlfriend in Alberta:

They call us “Japs” and think of us in the same light that they think of the native Japanese. I think there are very few people that really consider us as “fellow Canadians” ... even among our occidental friends. I suppose it all boils down to the fact that we have black hair and oriental features and we look so different from the other races that we can never become quite as Canadianized as the rest.... [Between woman friends, Toronto to Alberta, August 1944, written in English]

Imparting similar views, a *Nisei* woman in Tashme wrote her brother in British Columbia:

25 Jeanne Houston (1973) cited in Traise Yamamoto, “‘The Other, Private Self’: Masking in *Nisei* Women’s Autobiography”, in Traise Yamamoto, ed., *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 116.

I think a *Nisei* has a better chance as we know English and customs, but pretty hard for *Isseis*. Bad enough that we have black hair and slant eyes. [From sister in Tashme to brother in Sicamous, B.C., May 1945, written in English]

Interned in Tashme, a woman wrote to a girlfriend in Rosebery:

Imagine we the *Niseis* have to do, what the Selective Service tells us to do, when we don't even get the rights of *Canadian citizen*. Really we are treated like skunks anywhere we go — we are not wanted because of black hair and brown eyes.... [Between woman friends, Tashme to Rosebery, October 1943, written in English]

Reference to what had become conspicuous aspects of the physical self is made repeatedly in many of the letters. The *Nisei* were painfully aware of the ways in which hair colour and the shape of one's eyes were used to homogenize a group and to deny the social factors of citizenship and cultural identity.

Daily Survival and Hardship

Much of the correspondence furthermore concerns the women's feelings about day-to-day survival, getting by. In their letters, gendered divisions and experiences are prominent. They braved the internment as women whose oppression had been strongly shaped by both sexual and racial subordination. Some revealed a strong consciousness of this. While husbands, sons, and boyfriends wrote about exploitative working conditions in the road camps, in lumber mills, and in factories and about the inhuman treatment they endured as POWs, women wrote of their own gendered hardships: the burden of supporting a family in the absence of a male provider. This was particularly true of *Issei* women who were mothers and therefore shouldered heavy financial and familial responsibilities. To her husband in Angler, an *Issei* woman in Lemon Creek wrote:

My worries are greater than yours. Every day with the temperature at hundred and twenty degrees I have to go to negotiate and every time I go to the Welfare I have to fight. Not receiving sufficient for our daily necessities I have had to use what I had but had saved.... And who has made us suffer in this way taking away my husband who is guiltless and interning him. And is it not a wilful thing to do by taking away the subsistence and then telling me to go out to work. [From wife in Lemon Creek to her husband in Angler, July 1944, written in Japanese]

Similarly, a woman in Greenwood explained to her husband in Angler:

I took all the notes of what I had earned by working in the fields, of what I spent and bills of things I had bought ... I had twenty-seven dollars and eighty-

one cents left.... With that [money received from the B.C. Security Commission] and the twenty-seven dollars and eighty-one cents I was told to maintain myself for three months. This was really too exasperating. I think one cannot be blamed for grumbling after being told a ridiculous thing like that and also after working so hard in the fields. They seem to think we can produce work for ourselves.... It really makes me miserable to think that we are getting no where except in years. [From wife in Greenwood to her husband in Angler, July 11, 1944, original language not specified]

Also telling are the letters that some *Nisei* women wrote about their treatment as domestic workers in private households. Many *Nisei* had been sent to work for *Hakujin* families in Ontario and Quebec, as well as in B.C. itself. In fact, some even cared for the children of their RCMP guards. Within these homes, they sometimes faced severe racist and sexist treatment. Though women (who continued to perform paid domestic work long after the war's end) today speak warmly, uncritically, of their *Hakujin* bosses and are particularly reluctant to broach an issue such as harassment, the latter problem is raised in some of the written letters. One young woman, for example, wrote her fiancé in Ontario about her experiences in Nakusp. Apparently, her male boss had sexually harassed her when the woman of the house was away. Not only does the tone of her correspondence convey disgust, but she openly declares her intention to fight against such treatment. She wrote:

[T]he old lady went for her holidays so I was alone with this fat old [—] ... he just walked right toward me and grab hold of me and he didn't let me go so I just hit me and scream and everything I could but he's a fat old pig so I was squashed I just told me I'll tell everything to your wife well I think that hurt him he sure was mad but its his fault eh.... I knew this will happen someday I didn't like her to go for holiday leaving 3 kids. [From woman in Nakusp to her fiancé in Ontario, January 1945, written in English]

The writer planned to leave the position immediately. However, because their employment had been arranged by the B.C. Security Commission, many did not have the option of leaving such situations.

Nevertheless many Japanese Canadian women did express a defiant spirit, in spite of forced inaction. The discourse on which they drew promoted cultural constructs of womanhood, sometimes embracing a distinct racial component. A number of *Issei* women, for example, asserted their resilience, their strength to persevere, as would be expected of a true Japanese woman. A wife in Lemon Creek wrote to her husband in Angler:

Please do not worry about me ... I'll like to do my best for the two children. I have the same intention as I had at first and even if my hair turns grey in years of waiting I will be a true Japanese woman. [From wife in Lemon Creek to her

husband in Angler, November 1944, original language not specified]

Another *Issei* woman writing from New Denver expressed these sentiments to her male friend in Angler:

It is difficult for woman alone to move but ... I fought and fought for it and won. I worried over it so much and what with the heat I was sick in bed for 7 days.... If they treat me like that just because I am a woman I won't give in even one step. [From woman in New Denver to male friend in Angler, July 1944, written in Japanese]

Some women additionally drew on maternal imagery in resisting racial oppression. An *Issei* mother in Manitoba wrote to friends in B.C.:

We will keep our health until the day when we again tread the earth of our motherland. As a woman I may be looked upon as of the weaker sex, but as a mother I am strong. I have been able to work through the severe cold without one day of illness. I overcome all hardships as for my country and my children. [From woman in Manitoba to friends in B.C., March 1945, written in Japanese]

The Forced "Repatriation" Decision

As indicated by some of the letters that I have thus far cited, a prominent subject in the private correspondence was the issue of "repatriation" or dispersion.²⁶ Eager to eliminate the "Japanese race" from the province of B.C., and more generally to ensure that a concentration of such people not resurface elsewhere in Canada, in 1945 the federal government forced Japanese Canadians to "choose" either to "repatriate" to Japan or to move east of the Rockies. The pros and cons of moving to Ontario or Quebec or relocating to Japan began to saturate Japanese Canadian communities.²⁷ As noted, the government presented its policy as one of "choice". However, the *Issei* and

26 The "repatriation survey" as well as the general dispersal of Japanese Canadians were administered by T. B. Pickersgill, Commissioner of Japanese Placement. Beginning on April 13, 1945, in Tashme, an RCMP detachment under Pickersgill's authority canvassed all Japanese and Japanese Canadians over the age of 16. Before asking people to sign the repatriation forms, RCMP officers posted two notices in each internment site. The first notice stated that anyone who sought repatriation would receive free passage to Japan. In addition, the notice explained that, upon signing, Canadian citizens were expected to declare a desire to relinquish their "British nationality and to assume the status of a national of Japan". The second notice offered (limited) financial support to people who agreed to move east of the Rockies. This support, however, was contingent on one's willingness to accept whatever employment the government deemed appropriate. Failure to do so would be regarded as evidence of disloyalty to the nation. Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was*, p. 298. For a full discussion of family, gender relations, and repatriation policy, see Pamela Sugiman, "Home and Family: Acts of Intimacy in the Transnational Politics of Wartime Canada", in Lloyd Wong and Victor Satzewich, eds., *Transnational Communities in Canada: Emergent Identities, Practices, and Issues* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming).

27 Miki and Kobayashi, *Justice in Our Time*, pp. 46–55.

Nisei alike knew that this “choice” was illusory. Indeed, it was coercive. Repatriation decisions tore apart many families, both physically and emotionally. Faced with this so-called choice, wives, mothers, and daughters not only asserted their will against government authorities; they also had to negotiate relations of power within their own families. Contrary to the popular image of the obedient *Issei* woman, many first-generation wives firmly opposed their husbands in decisions about repatriation. An *Issei* man incarcerated in Angler warned his wife about the consequences of her resolution to remain in Canada:

If you carry out your desire to go East you will not be able to return to (our) country [Japan]. After the war there will be great hardship and, as at present, hell on earth.... There is no object to be attained by going East on your own accord.... It is the Government's aim to separate and scatter. It is frightening.... Canada is a large country. Its ostracism is terrifying. [From husband in Angler to his wife in Lemon Creek, May 1944, written in Japanese]

In many cases, a wife's opposition to her husband's repatriation decision was met with the threat of desertion. For instance, an *Issei* man declared to his wife in Rosebery:

If you disagree to go back to JAPAN with me I am afraid that I will have no more to do with you because I cannot see any other way. What is more, I will leave you behind and go back myself. [From husband in Angler to his wife in Rosebery, April 12, 1944, original language not specified]

A woman in Popoff wrote to her husband in Angler:

No Sir, I won't go out of here even if you divorced me or they kill me.... No one in the families will move out of here so don't forget that. You think I am selfish and man but what can I do.... All this time I thought my husband was a man but not anymore. If you don't do or listen what I say well then, do anything you like but don't forget I'll never forgive you, never. [From wife in Popoff to her husband in Angler, May 1945, written in English]

The repatriation question resulted in even more frequent conflicts between *Nisei* children and their *Issei* parents. On the whole, the Canadian-born *Nisei* had serious reservations about moving to Japan, a country that was foreign to them. One may surmise that the majority of young *Nisei* girls and women ultimately respected their parents' decisions, contrary to their own desires. Some of these women later returned to Canada on their own. Yet a number of *Nisei* daughters did resist their parents' will. A woman in Vernon disclosed her intentions to her girlfriend in Popoff:

[M]y parents are keen on returning to Japan after the war ... I guess they think me unpatriotic but I do not see things their way and I firmly believe my future

is in this country. I know there are families in ghost towns and elsewhere where the children and parents take the different viewpoint on this survey. The parents think they control our body, mind and soul and believe they could make us do anything they want us to. They utterly believe we would never disobey them in any way, but I think they're mistaken there. Surely our life is not theirs, surely we aren't going to suffer because we had followed them to their homeland and can't adopt ourselves to their customs.... I haven't as yet said anything about my decision to my parents but when they start to survey here in Vernon they'll sure be surprised when they hear what I have to say about the whole darn nasty affair. If after all my objections I do go to Japan you'll know very well I never went because I desired to do so ... I'll fight to my last energy to remain in Canada. [Between woman friends, Vernon, B.C., to Popoff, April 1945, written in English]

These letters dispel notions of a silent and accepting Japanese Canadian woman. Crafted in the immediacy of war, they impart strong emotion, notably anger, at times outrage. While historians have documented the resistance efforts of organizations such as the Nisei Mass Evacuation Group and the Japanese Canadian Committee for Democracy, we have few narratives of informal, individual protest against racial and gender oppression, often articulated by women who possessed limited structural resources.²⁸ These letters are especially remarkable given that the women I interviewed claimed to have then known that their correspondence might be read by government authorities. In this light, their letter writing may be viewed as a symbolic gesture of defiance.²⁹

Oral Testimony

My intent in bringing these letters together with narratives generated through oral testimony does not rest on the belief that the more data sources we consult, the more valid our history. Furthermore, I do not suggest that written documents (housed in archives) may serve as a measure of the accuracy or veracity of spoken reminiscences. In particular, there is no place in this anal-

28 The Japanese Canadian Committee for Democracy was established by a small group of *Nisei* in 1943. Its initial goal was to achieve full citizenship rights and to assess the financial losses incurred during the war. The Nisei Mass Evacuation Group was formed in protest of the government's decision to split apart Japanese Canadian families. Initially, the group requested that people be relocated as family units. Later, the Mass Evacuation Group advocated resisting the government's orders until families could stay together. Miki and Kobayashi, *Justice in Our Time*, pp. 36, 56.

29 After reading the letters in the archives, I began to ask the women narrators in this study whether or not they had known that their personal correspondence was being censored during the war years. Thinking back, all of them said assuredly that everyone in the ghost towns knew that letters were being read by government authorities. Whether or not they believed that their own correspondence had been intercepted, however, is not clear. It is significant, though, that the authors of a small number of the letters in the Department of Labour collection did make direct reference to the Censors, claiming that they did not care what the Censor thought of their feelings of anger and violation.

30 See Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994); Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History".

ysis for accusations of faulty or distorted memory.³⁰ Rather, I wish to explore the process of remembering and the ways in which the derivation of our knowledge of history (sources of data and methods of gathering) may generate very different types of narratives that may be used to build upon one another and to disclose the role of subjectivity, of interpretation, and of the researcher herself in constructing the past.

Researcher and Narrator

My engagement with the oral testimonies forced me to confront a distinct set of concerns. Admittedly, in interpreting the written letters, I intervened, carefully selecting passages upon which to draw and comment in a formal analysis.³¹ Indeed, when relying on written documents, it has been especially tempting to separate analysis on one hand from data on the other.³² This is problematic, for, in dichotomizing data and analysis, in neatly separating the collection of data from their interpretation, we run the risk of overlooking the ways in which the data themselves are already the products of editing, reflection, and decision and are therefore not simply concrete indicators of historical objectivity. Yet, in gathering oral testimony, my role as researcher seemed even more intrusive. I was responsible for the generation of the testimony itself. Without my intervention, the testimonies would simply not exist.³³ I entered the women's lives, asked them my questions, tape-recorded and transcribed their words. In comparison, the letters rest in the archives, whether or not I examine them. Moreover, without my shaping, the spoken narratives would assume a different form. As I have noted in other writings, in gathering *Nisei* women's stories, I imposed my own agenda and sensibilities. Initially at least, I enforced a reliance on a linear historical chronology and yet, at the same time, imposed a feminist logic, highlighting the significance of the personal and its links to a wider political existence. Furthermore, my questions

31 In part, these letters have also been authored by government censors. Surely, there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other letters that moved directly from sender to receiver, read in full by friends and family. Just as the women's testimonies are products of our culture, the letters too have been constructed in time.

32 See Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

33 Among many others, this issue has been discussed by Michael Frisch and Dorothy L. Watts, "Oral History and the Presentation of Class Consciousness: The *New York Times* versus the Buffalo Unemployed", *International Journal of Oral History*, vol. 1, no. 2 (June 1980), pp. 88–110; Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1985); Judith Modell, "Stories and Strategies: The Use of Personal Statements", *International Journal of Oral History*, vol. 4, no. 1 (February 1983), pp. 4–11; Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History", p. 103.

34 In the words of Alessandro Portelli, "Let our history be as chronological, factual, logical, reliable, and documented as a history book is supposed to be. But let it also be, like a literary text, a book about itself. Let it contain the history of its making, the history of its maker. Let it show how he grows, changes, and stumbles through the research and the meeting with other subjects. Speaking about the Other as a subject is far from enough, until we see ourselves as subjects among others, until we place time in ourselves, and ourselves in time" ("The Peculiarities of Oral History", p. 179).

were guided by the collective internment narrative with which I was most familiar.³⁴

As well, over the course of the interviews, my relationship with the women evolved and itself informed the research inquiry.³⁵ Just as the women's narratives are the product of this unfolding relationship, so too was my own understanding of them and their stories. At the outset, I believed that the differences between myself and the narrators might pose a barrier, in spite of our apparent bonds. But, with each interview, I discovered that the differences between us in age and generation were important in helping the women to establish a sense of their value as "informants". My (comparatively young) age and different status (*Sansei* or third-generation) rendered me ignorant in some ways and marginal to "their" history. Furthermore, inequalities based on class and education proved to be far less important than I had anticipated. Though most of the women themselves lived working-class lives, their *Sansei* children have achieved remarkably high levels of education. Research projects, book manuscripts, and doctoral degrees were therefore not foreign to many of the women. More meaningful than my educational credentials was my family background. The most significant bond between us proved to be one based on "racial" identity and family relations and thereby an implicit understanding of the impact of internment by virtue of my place in a cross-generational "community of memory".³⁶ Before we started to talk about her life, Sue (whom I had never met before) told me that we were distant relatives.³⁷ She conveyed

35 The oral testimonies on which this discussion draws were gathered by myself, in addition to two research assistants, both young women. One research assistant was a *Yonsei* (fourth-generation) Japanese Canadian. Some of the early interviews were conducted by a *Hakujin* graduate student. I decided to employ this student because of her strong interview skills, maturity, and intelligence. As well, she was given the task of interviewing only those women (a minority) who have been active (leaders) in the Japanese Canadian community. I recently communicated with some of these women about the interview experience. They said that they felt more obliged to provide details about the internment because the researcher was a *Hakujin*. Recognizing the importance of race and subjectivity in shaping the researcher/narrator relationship, I have arranged to conduct a second and, in cases, a third interview myself with some of these women. In doing so, I hope to understand more fully the interaction between researcher and narrator, as well as the role of time in shaping narratives.

36 The concept of "community of memory" is introduced by Iwona Irwin-Zarecka. A community of memory, she writes, in its most direct meaning, "is one created by that very memory". Irwin-Zarecka notes that, as increasing numbers of second-generation writers and artists "work through the meanings of living with the memory of the Holocaust, the community bonded by that memory grows to include all the empathetic witnesses as well". Rather than severing the direct link between experience and remembrance, the connection "is redrawn to capture the complexity of effects of that experience beyond individual memories". A shifting of the boundaries of the community is ongoing. It extends as, over time, the trauma functions as a "key orienting force" in the lives and public actions of others who did not themselves live through that trauma. Irwin-Zarecka further writes, "what underlies that bonding ... or what defines the community through its many transitions, is a shared, if not always explicated, meaning given to the experience itself.... Personal relevance of the traumatic memory, and not personal witness to the trauma, here defines the community" (*Frames of Remembrance*, pp. 47–49).

37 Sumi (Sue) Kai, Toronto, Ontario, February 7, 2003.

stories about my grandmother: her penchant for sweets, her sense of humour, her characteristic toothy smile. At the beginning of another interview, I discovered that Yoshiye had grown up in the same small community as my mother.³⁸ (I never before knew that my mother had played baseball, not to mention that she was good at it.) And no one had ever told me that Yoshiye, who became a nurse after the war, was working in a Toronto hospital and happened to be on duty at my father's side when he died over 30 years after the war's end.

In the evolving relationship between researcher and narrator, secrets were exchanged. Few of the women hesitated to ask me about my own family, about my current situation and emotional sentiments. In turn, some of them shared their secrets with me. It is paradoxical that some of these shared stories, which now dot my own narrative, are ones I cannot tell. The women's secrets, "small and fragile", are now most vivid in my own memory of the internment.³⁹ Of course, some memories will never be shared with anyone. These are purely autobiographical. Others will be kept within a particular community, shared with some but not others.⁴⁰ In a hushed voice, Rose, for instance, asked me to promise never to disclose some of her sentiments to a *Hakujin* audience.⁴¹

Time and Memory: In Retrospect

Compared with written documents, the women's testimonies have a different relationship to time. The time at which the interview takes place, the time that passes over the course of an interview, the passage of time from the events discussed to memories conveyed are all significant in shaping the narrative. In the words of Alessandro Portelli, "Tales go with time, grow with time, decay with time.... Life histories, personal tales, depend upon time, if for nothing else, than because there are additions and subtractions made to them with each day of the narrator's life." As Portelli states, there is only so much material that can be preserved in individual and collective memory.⁴² In interpreting the spoken narratives, it is important to keep in mind that, in a way not possible with the letters, the women's thoughts have been filtered through the passage of roughly 60 years — and all that has unfolded during these years. What we are hearing, then, are the women's memories of internment.

Many of the women who participated in this project had trouble remember-

38 Yoshiye Kosaka, Toronto, Ontario, July 10, 2001.

39 Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, p. 55.

40 Eviator Zerubavel, "Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past", *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1996), p. 284.

41 Rose Kutsukake, Toronto, Ontario, April 7, 2003.

42 Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History", p. 163. For a more complete reading of Portelli's thinking about oral history, time, and memory, see the collection of essays in Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

ing events that are now prominent in the public narrative. There are silences in their narratives. Some women do not remember dates that have taken on an official importance. “What year did the war end? When did we have to head East?” Some do not remember the sequencing of events in their lives and in the larger history. “How could I have come to Toronto in 1947, if the war ended in 1945? That must be a mistake. Well, let’s see, I got married in ’45. I must have left B.C. before then.”

Some women comment on these omissions as deliberate and wilful.⁴³ As noted by Eviatar Zerubavel, people make choices about what to “put behind them”.⁴⁴ As she showed me her collection of photos from the war years, Amy talked about having to leave business school because of the internment. I inquired about this.

Pam: How long were you in business school?

Amy: Well, from September until oh, March, I think. I don’t remember. That part I can’t remember. And I don’t remember — if it’s because I don’t like to think of unpleasant things. I don’t remember that.

Further in her testimony, she noted another gap in her memory.

Pam: Did you have any communication with your father who was in the road camp?

Amy: Well, I guess my mother did. But I don’t remember that. It’s very shattering not to remember.

Pam: I think it’s because of age, probably....

Amy: But I know that when he was moving to New Denver ... when we arrived in New Denver, we were all sick.... We all vomited.⁴⁵

Similarly, Rose stated,

It’s funny. I was twenty-two, twenty-three. Isn’t it funny that I don’t have too ... maybe it’s ... like you try to block what you know. But I remember that we didn’t get out ’til October of that year.... We moved from our home ... on Powell Street ... across the street there was a Japanese department store.

43 In addition, though we have witnessed a recent proliferation of writing on the internment, the women in this study were still reticent about some topics and spoke with greater ease and energy about others. It was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to broach with most women issues pertaining to sexuality. This matter seemed to be off-limits. To put it on the agenda would be to risk violating the shared understanding that existed between researcher and participant. In the rare case that a woman did raise the issue on her own initiative, it seemed to generate such discomfort, embarrassment, and unease that I decided not to communicate this part of her testimony to other listeners, perhaps less known and trusted. In making this decision, I myself have participated in a selective remembrance.

44 Zerubavel, “Social Memories”, p. 286.

45 Amy Miyamoto, Montreal, Quebec, March 1, 2003.

The most distinct and graphic memories of some women seem unrelated to official facts of the internment. Yet they are very much a part of the women's personal memory of the wartime suffering. In her testimony, Ruby explained that, when she was growing up in British Columbia, there was one boy who was "really nasty" [racist].⁴⁶ To this she quickly added that there had been "an English couple who were always being nice to us". She maintained that, once the war was over, racial discrimination was not a problem. In her words, "I'm sure there's always a few even up to now, you know.... Certain people don't like certain nationality or whatever. But on the whole, I would say it's not too bad." However, later in her testimony, Ruby reintroduced the racist boy. She remarked, "I don't know what he's like now. I think he still lives in Winfield.... 'Cause I mean, he was a real jerk." She continued, "But I often think, I wonder what that guy is doing. I wonder what kind of life he has or whether he's still that way. I don't know." She remembered him again at the end of her testimony: "Oh, he was a real mean kid ... I don't think he was much older than we were but he's just a mean bully. Yes, real bully. Oh, he used to be a real nasty kid. I don't think there's anybody as nasty as him."

Since the war's end, *Nisei* women have lived in neighbourhoods and entered workplaces in which there have been few Japanese. Importantly, as their sons and daughters have married, most have acquired *Hakujin* daughters- and sons-in-law and grandchildren that are part *Hakujin*, part *Nihonjin*, and thoroughly integrated into the dominant (*Hakujin*) society.⁴⁷ Betty explained,

I don't talk about it much to my children. We remember a few things but try not to dwell on it. We're hoping our children won't have to go through the same things we did. In those days it was all Japanese or all *Hakujin*. There was no intermarriage. Now it's different.⁴⁸

Some no longer speak openly about "race" and racism. Ruby concluded her commentary on the racist bully by asserting, "But I don't think there's that mean of a kid around any more." Neatly demarcating the war years from all those that followed, some women maintained that the experience of racism was specific to the pre-war period and the duration of the Second World War. While some women did offer powerful and damning stories of racist assault

46 Ruby Hanako Ohashi, Vernon, B.C., July 29, 2002.

47 As noted by Audrey Kobayashi, marriages between Japanese Canadians and individuals of other ethnic backgrounds currently make up over 90 per cent of all marriages. Audrey Kobayashi, *A Demographic Profile of Japanese Canadians and Social Implications for the Future* (Ottawa: Department of the Secretary of State, 1989), p. 40. For a discussion of inter-marriage among Asian Americans, see Harry Kitano, Wai-Tsang Yeung, Lynn Chai, and Herbert Hatanaka, "Asian-American Interracial Marriage", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 46, no.1 (February 1984), pp. 179-190.

48 Betty (a pseudonym), Steveston, B.C., August 24, 2002.

in post-war B.C., Ontario, and Quebec, others claimed that they seldom, if ever, heard racist remarks or encountered discrimination within employment, education, or housing. When these women spoke of racism in particular, it was almost as though the decades immediately following their internment had disappeared from memory, or at least faded in significance. Indeed, some women promoted the liberal equation of cultural/ethnic assimilation and the denial of difference with equality and the eradication of racial intolerance. Long regarded as the “orientalist” other, they are relieved to have become culturally and economically integrated into the nation. While most no longer speak with passion about their inhuman treatment as the racialized “other”, the women did offer clear descriptions of the long, horrible train trip from one internment site to the next and from B.C. to Ontario, the nothingness, the loss of opportunity, the ways things could have been.

Nostalgia and Critical Memory

Testimony reveals many layers of feeling. In hearing the women’s memories, I was also struck by the positive sentiments, indeed the happiness, in the recollections of some. Happy moments existed alongside thoughts about forced exile, the violation of rights, and losses incurred. Some women described their years in the sites of internment as “fun” and “the best times” of their lives. Hideko, for instance, explained,

Those were very interesting years for me. That’s where I met all my friends.... Nobody’s rich or poor or educated. We were all the same. And we all helped each other.... In fact, the whole Tashme was ... we were happy. Nobody sad. We all encouraged each other, you know. And helped each other so.⁴⁹

Similarly, Sugar remarked, “We had a lot of fun as kids, you know.”⁵⁰

On the surface, these remarks stand in stark contrast to the narratives drawn from the letters. Yet it is not surprising that these women uphold a time in their lives, experienced in youth, free of heavy domestic burdens, in a situation of shared oppression. Though families were often separated, groups of *Nisei* women lived together in forced communities that were characterized by age, sex, and racial and ethnic homogeneity. Isolated in desolate parts of the B.C. interior, communities of internees established close bonds. Over time, these bonds have no doubt taken on heightened meaning. By the war’s end, the government shattered these communities, severing the ties.

Moreover, thinking about years past, the women remembered not only what they themselves had directly experienced. They also placed their memories in the context of families, friendships, and other social relationships. Hideko commented, “What we had to do to keep the family together ... it

49 Hideko (a pseudonym), Kamloops, B.C., July 20, 2002.

50 Sugar Sato, Toronto, Ontario, March 26, 2003.

must have been horrible for my mother.” Similarly, Masako remarked, “I myself, I guess, I’ve been fortunate to be born right in the middle. I didn’t suffer. But it’s my oldest brother and my mom and dad. They really suffered. And it’s the person who really suffered, they didn’t even get their Redress.”⁵¹

The same woman who recalled good times, in which she learned to sew, danced to Benny Goodman, and went ice skating with the girls, has also embraced in memory the whippings that her husband endured as a prisoner of war and the hours spent by her mother scavenging for discarded pieces of coal to heat the family’s leaky shack in the cold of winter. As noted by Zerubavel, notwithstanding diverse experience and particular memories, we may speak of a common, shared memory. The common nature of memories suggests that they are not purely personal and individual.⁵² Memory reveals a strong social dimension. Like the researcher herself, *Nisei* women delve into “communities of memory.”⁵³

In reading the women’s stories, furthermore, it is important to consider the broader process of transmission, the ways in which people convey meaning beyond words, and the disjuncture at times between the written (transcribed) word and vocalized utterances. Much is lost or concealed in the transcribing of voices and words and in the writing of oral testimony. We do not see the tears, the visible inability to talk, the emotion welling up in a woman’s eyes as her words continue to flow with calm. The women’s narratives are punctuated with emotion, with throw-away phrases such as “I don’t know” and “That’s what I think, anyway.” Their recollections of both “good” and “bad” times were interspersed with defensive laughter that attempted to mask hurt and consequence.

Also telling is that the very women who spoke of the internment as the “good old days” voiced strong objections to the actions taken against them, their words more subdued but nevertheless echoing sentiments articulated in the old letters. Yoshiye commented, “It was a foolish, expensive adventure that the federal government took.... At least [with the Redress Settlement] it came out in public that it was a horrible thing.” Similarly, after providing decades of faithful domestic service to the same *Hakujin* woman, Ritsuko recollected with exasperation her former employer’s remarks about the internment.

Like [Mrs. Whitton] said, “Well, that was a great mistake.” She used to say that Mackenzie King, he made a big mistake. Well, I don’t think that was a mistake! ... How can she ever say that was a mistake! ... To evacuate is different. But the thing what the Japanese went through, leaving their things behind,

51 Masako Yakura, Vernon, B.C., July 17, 2002.

52 Zerubavel, “Social Memories”, p. 284.

53 Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, pp. 47–65.

leaving their business ... behind. Just like that in twenty-four hours? You lose everything? And [Mrs. Whitton] calls that a mistake of Prime Minister? It was so crazy for her to tell me that! I think there was a better way ... I know. I guess they were so afraid of Japanese after the war.... That's why it happened you know. I guess they weren't afraid of the Germans.⁵⁴

In many women, nostalgia co-exists with a critical eye toward the injustices that they and their families endured. Leo Spitzer's concept of "critical nostalgia" is useful in understanding this juxtaposition of happiness and suffering.⁵⁵ While critics of nostalgia have regarded it as "inauthentic, reactionary, and offering a falsification of the past", Spitzer argues that, although nostalgic memory may be viewed as "the selective emphasis on what was positive in the past", it is not by any means antithetical to a critical awareness of the negative aspects of one's past.⁵⁶

Roughly six decades after the war's end, the women also offered explanations as to why, back then, they did not and could not collectively (effectively) resist the government's actions. Having witnessed the emergence of a human rights framework, a discourse of liberalism, and most immediately the successful campaign of the Redress activists, they were prompted to explain. Indeed, an explanation of their apparent lack of resistance has become part of the narrative. However, these explanations do not rest on ideas about essential cultural traits. Rather, the women highlighted their past position of structural powerlessness. During the war, they were young, propertyless, uneducated — and female. Pauli remarked,

There was some young men that resisted, naturally, back at the Coast. But then men at the RCMP got word of it. They were pilfered out and taken right away. They were the ones that were sent to the internment camps [POW camps]. And of course, all the younger men, able men, were all sent out to the road camp. So only the older, and the women and children. So there couldn't have been much resistance. There just was no way.⁵⁷

She continued, "[M]any people just sort of gave up, you know, if we were here so what else can we do.... There's no way you could write a letter or

54 Mrs. Whitton is a pseudonym. Ritsuko Sugiman, Toronto, Ontario, July 16, 2003.

55 Leo Spitzer, " 'Back Through the Future': Nostalgic Memory and Critical Memory in a Refuge from Nazism", in Meike Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 87–104.

56 See, for example, Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity", in Herbert Gans *et al.*, eds., *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1979), pp. 193–220; Christopher Lasch, "The Politics of Nostalgia", *Harper's*, November 1984, pp. 65–70; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Suzanne Vromen, "The Ambiguity of Nostalgia", *YIVO Annual*, vol. 21 (1994), p. 71.

57 Pauline (Pauli) Inose, New Denver, B.C., July 28, 2002.

anything and have somebody come out and help you and say, well, we'll send you here or there, you know. There was nothing like that." Sachi likewise commented,

But there was nothing we could do. We're too young to fight.... "Why didn't you fight? Why didn't you stand up against the Government? They were taking your legal rights." Well, heck, we're only teenagers. We weren't old enough to think. Well, some did but the fighting only meant they were incarcerated and sent to a prison camp. So, there was no way we could stop that racial prejudice that was so great in Vancouver days. And I know, you might think we were dumb not to fight but we couldn't. We could do anything.⁵⁸

The passing of time is important in shaping these responses. Though we can never accurately predict the pieces that will appear in unfolding narratives, one wonders whether, 20 years earlier, these women would have freely volunteered an analysis of their powerlessness.

Just as the women told a story of the past, they also presented an image of themselves in the present.⁵⁹ In doing so, they remained keenly aware of the audience to whom they were speaking. The women in this study presented their past suffering partially, selectively. While they wanted their pain to be acknowledged, they also did not wish to reduce themselves to the status of victims.⁶⁰ They told their stories in such a way that highlighted their endurance, as well as their agency. Judy Giles's concept of "composing subjectivities of dignity and self-respect" aptly describes this manner of presentation. Giles notes that women sometimes create stories as expressions of their attempts to compose subjectivities that offer dignity and self-respect in a world characterized by their own powerlessness.⁶¹

In asserting dignity, the women gave me many happy endings. The conviction of a happy ending indeed was resonant at the conclusion of most of the testimonies. In their narratives, one could detect an ideology of positive thinking and the theme of "triumphant social mobility".⁶² Echoing the words of many others, Hannah said,

58 Sachi Oue, Toronto, Ontario, May 24, 2001.

59 This point is elaborated upon by Portelli. He notes that, while "[t]he historian is mainly interested in reconstructing the past; the speaker seeks to project an image..." ("The Peculiarities of Oral History", p. 166).

60 See Mary M. Childers, "The Parrot or the Pit Bull": Trying to Explain Working Class Life", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 1 (special issue on "Gender and Cultural Memory", Autumn 2002), p. 214.

61 Judy Giles, "Narratives of Gender, Class and Modernity in Women's Memories of Mid Twentieth Century Britain", *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2002), p. 36. I present a more comprehensive discussion of these points in Sugiman, "Memories of Internment: Narrating Japanese Canadian Women's Life Stories", *Canadian Journal of Sociology* (forthcoming).

62 Childers, "The Parrot or the Pit Bull", p. 204.

Well, if this hadn't happened and we were still living at the coast, we'd probably be discriminated. And people have been able to further their education and they wouldn't be what they are today, a lot of people. So in a way, maybe it was, it was terrible to go through that, but I guess in the end, you look at it now. People are scattered all over.... And maybe it was a good thing [*softly spoken*].⁶³

According to Michiko, "Everybody has done well because of the suffering. They achieved."⁶⁴

There is a corrective sense to these reminiscences. *Nisei* women frequently voiced the view that the suffering of the past has been "a blessing in disguise", but this statement contains many layers of meaning and therefore should not necessarily be taken at face value. It is not a statement of forgiveness. It is not redemptive. Nor is it spoken by women who have neatly put the past behind them. Rather, it is part of an attempt at healing, though, in hearing their memories, we see that this process of healing will never be complete. Nonetheless, the women attest: we have not only survived; we have succeeded. The past is remembered but will not be relived. Though they experienced violation at the hands of the state, their children did not endure such suffering, and they are resolved in the belief that their grandchildren never will. They have not been defeated.

Conclusion: A Multiplicity of Stories

Writing about her edited collection on memory and working-class consciousness, Janet Zandy notes that the essays "do not dissolve into one blended working-class essence".⁶⁵ Like the collection that Zandy describes, the narratives that I present here do not simply merge into one single story. Rather, they suggest a multiplicity of stories. When we consider them together, when we think about the ways in which the different narratives weave in and out of one another, we begin to see the complexity of the internment experience. The conditions of their creation — the different sources from which they stem and the social process of their communication — lead us to reflect on the significance of time and memory in the construction of these narratives.

If we turn to documents written in the midst of war, we read one set of stories. When we ask women to remember the past in the present time, we hear different tales. To all of this, the researcher brings her own past as well as her current concerns, sensibilities, and political agenda. These narratives inform one another. They present history itself as a social and political construct, and the process of historical/sociological research as one that must be self-con-

63 Hannah Tabata, Kamloops, B.C., July 21, 2002.

64 Michiko [a pseudonym], Vernon, B.C., August 14, 2002.

65 Janet Zandy, *Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. xi.

scious and multi-layered. According to Walter Benjamin, “it is the task of those who deal not only with chronicles, but with history, to study not just the mechanics of the material event, but the events of the remembering and of the telling — the patterns of the remembering, the forms of the telling” — the conditions under which our “historical materials” have been created. In this sense, though the event may be over, the telling of that event is “boundless”.⁶⁶

In what ways has this study contributed to a reconfiguring of the historical narrative and the telling of history? Much of the early literature points to a silent and uncritical Japanese Canadian woman. This portrayal, one so familiar as to be at times compelling, is much too narrow. Growing up with fragments of memory, imparted by the close members of my small family, I long viewed the internment of Japanese Canadians as a shameful episode in our nation’s past, a blatant act of injustice but one far removed from our present existence. My own exposure to racism as a child growing up in an Anglo/European neighbourhood of Toronto, along with my parents’ unspoken warnings about the safety of staying at the social margins of my world, suggested however that the wartime violations still touched our lives. As a teenager, I was burdened with many questions about my family’s history in this country: Why didn’t my parents and their generation fight back? Why hadn’t they stood up for their rights and resisted? Over the years, why had they chosen to remain silent about such an blatantly unfair and tragic experience?

Prompted by the Redress campaign in the 1980s, I took these questions beyond my family and began to read the early published accounts of the internment.⁶⁷ I participated in a growing “community of memory”. As this community broadened, encompassing both those who had lived through the war and those born afterward, it seemed to offer new space and thereby legitimated my presence. My active intervention as a researcher revealed many dimensions to the story that I had heard years ago. The multiple stories, voiced and written, uncovered detail where before there seemed only to be silence. The contents of old letters housed in archives revealed intense emotion, notably anger and despair. Upon reading them, I learned that many *Nisei* women had indeed displayed a strong spirit of resistance, contained by a structural powerlessness. In the narratives, I detected a range of emotions and forms of defiance — inside the individual, if not presented to an external, public audience. These feelings may or may not have been seen or noticed.

Alongside the emotion, the different narrative sources unfolded layers of injustice. Beyond property loss and the stench of Hastings Park, I heard and read about diminished aspirations, lost opportunities, troubled relationships, generational conflict, a yearning for privacy, boredom to tears, deportation, work-related injuries, attempted rape, suicide, and death due to inadequate medical care. All of this produced in me a heightened sense of loss. In their

66 Walter Benjamin cited in Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History”, p. 175.

67 Most importantly, Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was*; Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism*.

oral accounts, women carefully selected memories for sharing with an unfamiliar audience. They conveyed some thoughts as secrets, experiences that had no clear fit with the collective history. These secrets told of episodes that had caused their holders memorable grief. When I asked them to sum up their stories as a way of concluding their narratives, most women tempered personal pain and critical thought with the passage of time. They minimized the suffering of the past with the successes, comforts, and contentment of the present. The voices of the present offered forgiveness, perhaps for the preservation of dignity.

In *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, Alessandro Portelli writes about presenting a paper to an academic audience and afterward receiving comments such as “Yes, nice, very interesting — but what difference does it make?” Portelli writes in reply, “[F]ieldwork is always a form of political intervention because it encourages an effort at self-awareness, growth, and change in all those involved.”⁶⁸ Hearing the women’s testimonies, reading their letters, has inspired me to nuance my own narrative and to reconsider the ways in which I study women’s lives. More importantly, I regard the women themselves as active participants in the creation or production of the narratives, and thereby of images of themselves. In short, I see both the act of putting pen to paper and articulating thought, as well as sharing memories in the oral tradition, telling personal stories and disclosing thoughts to a researcher and her community of listeners, to be a deliberate and interpretive act — an act of agency. The women’s narratives are “a mixture of the telling of their lives” and a statement of their minds.⁶⁹

68 Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, pp. 51–52.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 80.