

Representations of Home in Obasan and Nihonjin: The Issei, Nisei, Sansei of Canada and Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and Oscar Nakasato's *Nihonjin* (2011) are two novels that narrate the lives of Japanese diaspora in Canada and Brazil respectively. Both countries share a rich tradition of Japanese migration during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which, while distinct in important ways, has resulted in a significant body of cultural production. In this article, I examine spatiotemporal treatments of the home space in *Obasan* and *Nihonjin*, arguing that this realm serves two primary functions: 1) as a site for the expression and construction of identity 2) as a point of disruption and resistance in the face of cultural, linguistic and national alienation. Examining Japanese migration literature from a comparative lens sheds light on the past as a gateway to the present, while nuancing national discourses around race and ethnicity. Although these two narratives are separated by thousands of miles and thirty years in their publication dates, Japanese migrant tales from Brazil and Canada teach us diverse and intersecting lessons about ethnic heritage and cultural plurality. The domestic space is particularly critical for observing these crossings as its attention to language, food culture and other artifacts reveals a multi-layered experience.



In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau asserts that every tale can be read as a spatial practice advancing along a narrative trajectory (115). Indeed, narration as a mode of movement can be understood broadly, with the most unassuming of events propelling a story forward. Unsurprisingly, narratives on migration and migrants are frequently less focused on the literal migratory voyage than they are on the journey of the psyche. 'There' is expressed both spatially through the act of creating and performing place, as well as temporally, through the keeping of multilayered time, often conveyed as frozen or slow-moving.¹ Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and Oscar Nakasato's *Nihonjin* (2011) exemplify these trends, relaying two tales of Japanese migrant families in Canada and Brazil respectively.² Both countries share a rich tradition of Japanese migration during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, resulting in important literary production.³ While Brazil houses the largest Japanese population in the world outside of Japan, forecasted to top over 1.5 million citizens as of 2010 (IBGE), the case of Canada has been one of restriction.⁴

1 This is observable in other contemporary migration narratives from Brazil, including Tatiana Levy's *A chave da casa* (2007), an introspective look at a Turkish-Brazilian's retracing of her family heritage back to Turkey and Portugal. Despite the spatial trajectory covered in the novel, it is ultimately grounded in the protagonist's memories, which are interspersed with her travel.

2 Both novels' titles are left in the Japanese, an important marker of language. *Obasan* means Aunt, and draws attention to the close relationship between the protagonist, Naomi and her elderly Aunt, referred to only as Obasan, who loses her husband. Naomi's Aunt Emily, always referred to in English as Aunt Emily, also becomes an important influence as Naomi matures. *Nihonjin* means Japanese people in Japanese. These titles stress the importance of language in the process of migration, placing it at the forefront.

3 Fictionists including Hiromi Goto, Kim Moritsugu, Ruth Ozeki and Kerri Sakamoto form part of a rich tradition of Japanese-Canadian authors who explore themes of identity, multiculturalism, cultural alienation and preservation.

4 In his article on immigration and literature in contemporary Brazil, Luiz Ruffato notes the Japanese-Brazilian resistance in entering the Brazilian literary scene due to often self-imposed cultural and linguistic segregation, "Although it encompasses about 1.5 million nisseis, the largest population of Japanese outside of Japan, who entered into the country between 1908 and 1915, for a long period of time the population resisted integration. The poets and writers of prose continued to be inserted in an Oriental tradition, in the themes, in the writing, in the language. Until very recently, the name of Eico Suzuki, which appeared during the 1970s, was the lone name in the history of Brazilian literature, but now he has gained the company of Marília Kubota and Oscar Nakasato" (my translation). In Portuguese: "Embora abrigue cerca de 1,5 milhão de nisseis, a maior população de japoneses e descendentes fora do Japão, entrados no país entre 1908 e 1915, durante muito tempo a colônia resistiu a se integrar - os poetas e prosadores continuavam inseridos dentro da tradição oriental, nos temas, na escrita, no idioma. Até muito recentemente, o nome de Eico Suzuki, aparecido na década de 1970, mantinha-se solitário na história da literatura brasileira, mas agora ganhou a companhia de Marília Kubota e Oscar Nakasato" (Ruffato, 2013).

In 2011, the country reported just over 100,000 citizens of Japanese origin, one tenth that of Brazil, explained in part by its ceasing to allow Japanese into the country in 1940 due to Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany (*Statistics Canada* 2011). Nevertheless, Japanese cultural heritage has left its mark on both nations, an important consideration as we move beyond some of the theoretical limitations of multiculturalism. Literature brings these histories to life in critical ways, illuminating intersections and divergences as well as cultural practices and encounters. In this article, I examine spatiotemporal treatments of the home space in *Obasan* and *Nihonjin*, arguing that this realm serves two primary functions: 1) as a site for the expression and construction of identity, and 2) as a point of disruption and resistance in the face of cultural, linguistic and national alienation. Examining Japanese migration literature from a comparative lens sheds light on the past as a gateway to the present, while nuancing national discourses around race and ethnicity.

Both *Obasan*, written in English, and *Nihonjin*, written in Portuguese, fall within the genre of historical fiction and narrate the lives of two Japanese families across several decades. *Obasan*'s point of departure is 1972, and the novel commences from the perspective of a Japanese-Canadian schoolteacher in her mid-thirties, Naomi, who has lived since the outbreak of war with her aunt, Obasan, and her uncle, her mother having been trapped by the war while on a visit to Japan, and her father interned separately. The loss of her Uncle prompts a digression into the past, from Pearl Harbor to the bombing of Nagasaki, where, she discovers much later, she has lost her mother. *Obasan*'s language is lyrical, often juxtaposing difficult childhood memories with present-day ruminations. As many critics have noted, including Donna Bennett and Erika Gottlieb, the novel illustrates the systematic othering of Japanese-Canadians embedded in a broader geopolitical conflict that extended beyond individuals. As Gottlieb explains in her analysis of the novel's historical backdrop, "Canada fell victim to the hysteria -- fear, greed, the need for a scapegoat -- it was fighting against" (43). *Obasan* humanizes Japanese-Canadian wartime victims through a deeply personal narrative. Indeed, Naomi narrates the past in the present tense and through the eyes of a child, connecting it to the present and bringing memory to life. Past tense verbs are used to denote historical events, rather than interrupting digressions into memory. The novel describes the horrors of forced internment and exile from Vancouver to the prairies from differing perspectives of children and adults, skillfully interweaving moments of solidarity or refuge amongst its protagonists. The novel includes excerpts from a wartime journal by Naomi's activist Aunt, Emily, providing an adult perspective as well as a fictional eyewitness account of events.

Nihonjin explores Japanese-Brazilian life through a similar emphasis on a multiplicity of narrative voices.⁵ Its seven chapters can be read as freestanding stories or together via the intersection of three generations along a shared plotline. Beginning the story is Hideo Inabata, a proud first-generation Japanese economic migrant to Brazil during the second decade of the twentieth century. The loss of his first wife and difficulties with his children test his rigid Japanese will and just before the end of the novel, the narrator, Hideo's grandson, embarks on a return journey to a Japan he had only previously imagined.⁶ Though *Nihonjin* commences with a brief description of the voyage to Brazil, it focuses on the destination of migration, like *Obasan*'s focus on Canada, and in particular on quotidian and domestic places. In both *Obasan* and *Nihonjin*, home is a concept not defined by physical space, but is rather made and unmade, performed and abandoned. This complex portrayal calls into question the ability to maintain rigid binaries in light of fluctuating migrant identities and ever-changing national contexts. At the same time, the home serves a number of critical roles, acting not only as a family gathering point but also as a site for the preservation and testing of language, cultural traditions, and even racial purity, deemed essential for future generations.

Before turning to depictions of the home, it is important to comment upon some of the historical and cultural distinctions between Brazil and Canada regarding their immigrant populations. Given the temporal and geographical differences between these two novels, their treatment of Japanese migration is influenced by a complex set of variables accompanying distinct national traditions. This is complicated by the fact that immigrants to both countries often initially occupy social classes far from the privileged elite, an important consideration when examining the quotidian spaces of these novels. In the case of Brazil, long-term immigration beginning in the colonial period and culminating in government-sanctioned immigration programs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has changed the ways in which everyday Brazilians perceive national belonging. As Brazilian migration historian Jeffrey Lesser notes, "Most Brazilians understand immigrants and immigration in an [...] elastic way, challenging those who suggest that the exclusive definition of an immigrant is an "individual who moves by choice from one nation to another"" (2). Lesser goes on to observe that rather than utilizing hyphenated denominations that would stress

⁵ *Nihonjin* won the Jabuti Award as best novel in 2012, one of the most important literary awards in Brazil.

⁶ This provides a comment on the ability of narratives to create national spaces, conceptual (narrated) rather than lived, and how these spatial abstractions are transformed and preserved across generations.

hybrid identities such as Japanese-Brazilian, immigrants of all backgrounds tend to stress their country of origin, in this case calling themselves Japanese (Lesser 2). Yet although ethnic origin may not work in opposition to Brazilian identity, this fluid understanding does not eliminate discriminatory practices, as *Nihonjin* reveals. Of equal significance is the historical emphasis placed on miscegenation, evidenced in concepts including racial democracy, coined by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. Racial democracy relies on the notion of racial dominance in the blending of Brazil's three major racial groups: the Amerindians, descendants of African slaves, and whites. Not only does racial democracy falsely simplify race relations in a country with a long-standing legacy of slavery and other unjust racial power hierarchies, its privileging of racial mixtures fails to include Japanese or the many other ethnicities that fall outside of the colonial model. Thus, despite an expansive notion of Brazilian-ness, it is clear that Japanese-Brazilians do not always fit within conceptual and historical frameworks. At the same time, the novel's depiction of the home-space speaks to preferentiality for racial isolationism amongst first-generation Japanese-Brazilians.

In the case of Canada, critics have highlighted the ways in which *Obasan* brings to light a racist past observed from the vantage point of contemporary "multiculturalism." Indeed, in juxtaposition with Brazil's focus on miscegenation and racial democracy, Canada was the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy in 1971. However, since the 1970s, scholars have largely dismantled the idealism surrounding this framework and its goals of holding individual cultures intact, exposing instead its limitations and fallacies. In his important study of the more recent criticism on *Obasan*, Guy Beauregard addresses the need to go further in readers' encounter with the text, highlighting the long tradition of anti-Japanese racism in Canada, one that extends far beyond the window of 1942-1949. Long-term restrictions on immigration, voting, and other state-sanctioned anti-Japanese policies are critical components to its interpretation. Both *Nihonjin* and *Obasan* bring to light some of the limitations of national discourses around race, ethnicity and multiculturalism, bringing nuance to our historical understanding of Japanese migration and its social facets in these two immigrant-rich countries.

I. Home as a site of memory and identity

Turning to the text, both novels ruminate on the dynamic ways in which the home space acts as a site of memory for its Japanese protagonists. In both works, migration into new homes does not quell memories of former ones, or those of Japan, but provides a platform for their recollection. Here the past and present coalesce through dreams, writing,

and storytelling. Gaston Bachelard's classic text, *The Poetics of Space*, speaks to the deep bond between protected spaces and the imagination: "The imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thoughts and dreams. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we lived in come back to us, we travel back" (5). In *Nihonjin's* initial descriptions the boundaries of "home" are connected to remembering Japan, conserved spatially via artifacts, cultural practices and rituals. At the same time, the home-space also highlights the challenging socio-economic situation of newly arrived Japanese to Brazil. When Hideo and his Japanese wife enter the immigrant housing project in Brazil to which they are assigned, Kimie literally marks the newly trodden Brazilian ground of their makeshift hut, "The foreman opened the windows. Then I saw Kimie looking down at the dirt floor: on the grooves she was drawing maps on the ground, the outline of her country in the center of the room" (Nakasato 20; my translation).⁷ This simple act stresses an attention to Japan as memoir, the first of many instances frequently juxtaposed with the culturally challenging spaces external to the home. The courting of memories from Japan is elaborated in the novel's representation of the poet Jintaro, a fellow first-generation immigrant who comes to live with Kimie and Hideo. For Jintaro, the space of the kitchen is a sanctuary for writing and recollecting, a melancholic process of looking back:

At night, at dawn, it was his own private temple, burn away his uncertainties, contemplate his anguish, and register his memories into the absence of the past. He lit the lamp, let the flame remain high in order to see better, to not see ghosts, and he wrote about the four seasons: the sad redness of the sky that the leaves of momiji⁸ copied in autumn, the white coating on the cherry trees during the winter, the song of the nightingale in the spring, the symphony of cicadas on summer nights. It was a way of feeling as though he were in Japan. (Nakasato 35; my translation)⁹

⁷ In Portuguese: "O capataz abriu as janelas. Depois vi Kimie observando o piso de terra batida: os sulcos desenhando mapas no chão, o esboço de seu país no centro da sala."

⁸ In Japanese this means autumn leaves, however, it is left in the original in the novel.

⁹ In Portuguese: "À noite, de madrugada, ero o seu templo privado, lugar de frigir as incertezas debruçar-se sobre as angústias, inscrever na ausência do passado as suas lembranças. Acendia a lamparina, deixava a chama alta para ver melhor, para não ver fantasmas, e escrevia sobre as quatro estações do ano: a triste vermelhidão do céu que as folhas de momiji copiavam no outono, o manto branco sobre as cerejeiras durante o inverno, o canto do rouxinol saudando a primavera, a sinfonia das cigarras nas noites de verão. Era um modo de se sentir no Japão" (35).

In the candlelit room Jintaro is transposed spatially to the skies, leaves and cherry trees of his native land and also to the lasting seasons of a nation remembered. In this passage, the act of writing is synonymous with the recuperation and preservation of space, coupled with the complex feelings of loss. Not only does this add a layer of depth of experience, the scene displaces the narrative away from the Brazilian settlement (Nakasato 29-32) in which the migrants are otherwise centered. These digressions thicken narrative time, altering the rhythm of events.¹⁰

In *Obasan*, the first encounter with the home centers on the kitchen, as Naomi visits Obasan following the death of her Uncle. She finds her "sitting at the kitchen table when I come in. She is so deaf that my calling doesn't rouse her and when she sees me she is startled" (16). Here, the kitchen is likewise central to first and second generation Japanese; in *Obasan* it is a place to mourn the loss of Uncle/Husband, as well as a mnemonic site. Importantly the first action Obasan takes is to remain in the kitchen and put on a kettle for tea. Naomi takes a moment to observe the house, which is layered with memory-laden things: "The house is in its usual clutter. Nothing at all has changed. The applewood table is covered with a piece of discoloured plastic over the blue and white tablecloth. Along one edge are Uncle's African violets, profusely purple, glass salt and pepper shakers, a soya sauce bottle, a cracked radio, an old-fashioned toaster, a small bottle full of toothpicks" (17). Though the home may not evoke memories of Japan as in *Nihonjin*, its artifacts are connected to Japanese cultural heritage via the soya sauce bottle and the remnants of Uncle. These items are interspersed with generic things, including a toaster, a radio and toothpicks, a mixed landscape speaking to the plurality of the migrant experience.¹¹ Within this mélange the African violets stand out, described as "profusely purple," highlighting anew the recent passing of her Uncle. Later on Naomi sees another sign of him, "a black loaf of Uncle's stone bread, hefty as a rock. It's too big to be a bun but much smaller than regular 'story-boughten bread.' The fact that it's uncovered means that it was made either yesterday or today. Was making this bread Uncle's last act?" (18). The violets and the bread mark a presence and also an absence, traces of a man no longer there. At the

¹⁰ Curiously, it is Japan in general which occupies these migrants' imagination, rather than a specific village or region.

¹¹ In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence related to the post-colonial condition, as well as the creation of in-between spaces by former colonial subjects. The term hybridity was first used to indicate ways in which cultural production and resistance are sought through alternative means in the hybrid spaces of the in-between. The term has come to be used in broad ways in cultural studies, to describe the intermingling, mixing and fusion of two cultural system.

same time, both artifacts highlight how personal items linger on in the home, unhindered by death. Though stone-bread is not typical of Japan, theorist Wenying Xu has associated this bread with the poverty and dislocation of Japanese people in Canada in his work on eating identities.¹²

Moving from the kitchen to specific domestic zones, *Nihonjin's* representation of windows further blurs the lines between memory and reality, inside and outside, while advancing readers' understanding of the realities of the farming class to which many Japanese-Brazilians initially belonged. In his critical analysis of windows in architectural theory, Bechir Kenzari writes, "The traditional window opens the interior to the exterior, but at the same time it defines a place and a threshold, establishing a relationship of spatial and emotional exclusion" (39). If windows draw the boundary between in and out, how might the home serve as a catalyst for the transformation of outward spaces? In a particularly poignant passage exploring the power of the psyche to alter reality, Kimie sits by the window looking out on the coffee plantation in Brazil. To the chagrin of her worried husband, she remains transfixed, contemplating the landscape outside, which she mentally converts into a hybrid realm. She sees the coffee-field, but also her brother and a dusting of imagined snow:

She went to the window, turned the knob and opened it, in spite of her husband's protests. Kimie looked upon the snow-covered coffee plantation. She saw Kimiko running between the coffee plants, and Kimiko was a child running after Tikao, her brother, and they were two children playing... Kimie preferred to stay at the window, observing... This was her way of being happy. (Nakasato 40; my translation)¹³

From the window, Kimie succeeds not only in spatially altering outdoor landscapes through snowfall, but also moves into the temporality of her childhood. Readers understand the impossibility of the snow given the tropical climate, and identify it as a fantasy from her earlier life, poignantly juxtaposed with the classic Brazilian landscape of the coffee plantation. Gaston Bachelard echoes the affective character of one's private dwelling stating, "The house, even more than the landscape, is a 'psychic state'" (72). In this passage, home becomes a stimulus for the wandering of the mind, aiding Kimie in coping

¹² Xu writes, "Both rock and stone bread are products of persecution, poverty and powerlessness, as Uncle makes stone bread out of leftovers, such as oatmeal and barley, carrots and potatoes, after the family is relocated/displaced to Alberta, a dust-story beet country" (28).

¹³ In Portuguese: "Ela foi à janela, girou a taramela e a abriu, mesmo sob os protestos do marido. Kimie olhava o cafezal coberto pela neve. Ela viu Kimiko correndo entre os pés de café, e Kimiko era uma criança que corria atrás de Tikao, seu irmão, e eram duas crianças que brincavam...Kimie preferia ficar na janela, observando... Era o seu jeito de ser feliz."

with the loss and isolation characteristic of migration. In the chapter's closing scene, her skeptical and worried husband Hideo eventually 'acknowledges' the existence of the snow, allowing her to exit and immerse herself in it, "She left the house, went to the coffee plantation, ran among the coffee plants, feeling the snow falling on her head, and on her shoulders" (Nakasato 43; my translation).¹⁴ In the scene's climax, Kimie is no longer the dreamer of an imagined realm, but rather a participant. This alteration is not only physical but also sensorial—indeed, she *feels* the snow—interrupting the lines between memory and present, fantasy and reality.¹⁵ Similar to Jintaro's kitchen writing sessions, her escape into fiction reveals a profound angst, one that ultimately culminates in her death as the scene closes.

Obasan pushes this idea a step further, the home is more than a psychic state, it is a broad metaphor for the body. Not only does Obasan spend a great deal of time in the home, she becomes inseparable from it, as evidenced by her vast collection of things. These are belongings that are acquired over many years, the result of many migrations and constructing homes. In the face of this movement, Obasan becomes an accumulator. Naomi reflects:

The house is indeed old, as she is also old. Every home-made piece of furniture, each pot holder and paper doily is a link in her lifeline. She has preserved in shelves, in cupboards, under beds- a box of marbles, half-filled colouring books, a red, white and blue rubber ball. The items are endless. Each short stub pencil, every corn-flakes box stuffed with her paper bags and old letters is of her ordering. They rest in the corners like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory. This house is now her blood and bones. (Kogawa 22)

The reader is taken aback by the abundance of these artifacts and also their variety. In fact, this imagery is evocative of the act of hoarding as many of the items are not in use. No longer are there children in the family to play with the balls or color in the other half of the books. Both Naomi and her Aunt Emily are childless. At the same time, this comparison unites the materiality of the home with the corporality of the body; they are fused. The

¹⁴ In Portuguese: "Saiu, correu até o cafezal, correu entre os pés de café, sentindo a neve cair sobre a sua cabeça, sobre os seus ombros" (43).

¹⁵ The act of observing fictional snow also reinforces a latent and suggestively promiscuous bond between Kimie and the secondary figure Jintaro, who acknowledges Kimie's vision, in an act of sympathy. The pair's capacity to retreat into the world of memory and fantasy, taking refuge in poetry (through Jintaro's haikus on the Japanese seasons, constructed in the aforementioned kitchen space) and other homages to nation, serves to bond them in a silent transnational solidarity, contrasted notably with the down-to-earth nature of Kimie's hardworking husband Hideo.

focus on the age of these items creates a material landscape compared with the body, the stuffing of letters and the preservation of shelves, an archive of her elderly self. The inorganic intermingles with the organic –in bones, blood, tissue and cells– equated as “tiny specks of memory,” displaying anew how memory and domestic items unite. At the same time, there is an ephemerality expressed here that is linked with the breakdown of Obasan’s body, the home mirroring her decline. Unlike the organic bread or the African violets, these inorganic things will remain long after Obasan’s death, a ruin of self like or an ancient library of fragments, with her papers and objects occupying every space.

II. Cultural plurality and resistance in the home space

The home gains further complexity in its two-fold function: in both novels, it is an area of cultural preservation and resistance against the estrangement experienced in the outside world. These two functions are progressive in both novels, as boundaries are tested and second-generation protagonists become further removed from their first-generation parents. In *Nihonjin*, access to the home is initially denied to non-Japanese visitors and family members who overstep cultural boundaries.¹⁶ In *Obasan*, the home space is also a site of cultural preservation and an increasing focus on cultural plurality in second-generation protagonists, a symbol of defiance during the Second World War. The questions of access to the home mirror family tensions in both novels and also an evolving multiplicity of cultural norms. In *Nihonjin*, when young Kimie becomes violently ill during the first section of the novel, her desire to allow Maria, an Afro-Brazilian acquaintance, into the family space to cure her with local remedies is heavily resisted due to the xenophobia of her husband. In its handling of the home, *Nihonjin* forms part of a dialogue on cultural preservation and resistance to assimilation by the Japanese communities in Brazil. In the visual arts, Japanese-Brazilian director Tizuka Yamasaki’s film *Gaijin – The Roads to Freedom (Caminhos Da Liberdade)* (1980) portrays a Japanese immigrant community in the beginning of the 20th century, one of whose central spaces is their dilapidated house. Not only does the film depict the home as a site of culture and language, it is also an arena for the expression of discontent, as immigrants toil in the coffee fields. In line with the protection of the home space, contemporary scholars on the Japanese presence in Brazil including Naomi Moniz contrast two images: 1) the plurality and miscegenation inherent to the envisioning of the Brazilian identity, discussed earlier; and 2) the focus on purity and homogeneity upheld in the Japanese immigrant community. In this way, Japanese

¹⁶ The strict protection of the home reveals a cultural isolationism, also reflected in the near invisibility of Japanese-Brazilian writers in the country’s literary canon.

communities have differentiated themselves from other migrant communities in their adherence to cultural values and opposition to assimilation, a direct affront to Brazilian nation building (Moniz 223).

Theorist Kazys Varnelis discuss these unwritten guidelines in his work *Networked Publics*, stating that, “places are filled with individual identities, language, references, unformulated rules” (18). This is particularly true of the Japanese community, and is seen clearly in *Nihonjin* when Haruo (son of Hideo and his second wife, Shizue) integrates into the local Brazilian school. Haruo is caught between the rigidity of tradition and integration into mainstream Brazil, leading to a series of transgressions including peering out the window (again a framing and boundary) in his Japanese school.¹⁷ Eventually, Hideo and Shizue ban Haruo from home for one week, a tradition meant to instill appreciation and remorse in unruly family members. Haruo ultimately turns to an Italian migrant family nearby for shelter, but is denied:

After Hanadasan’s refusal, Haruo concluded that he could not seek help in the home of a *nihonjin*. None of them would challenge the authority of his father. So he remembered Pietro, and that he was his friend. Both were children though one might eat polenta and the other *shirogohan*. They both would eat Dona Ludovica’s manioc cake, the tastiest cake in the world. (Nakasato 78; my translation)¹⁸

Relevant here are not only the ways in which Haruo connects with his classmate, but also the markers of difference seen in food lexicon, polenta and manioc cake, made from the cassava root. Polenta is a word used in Portuguese gastronomy that derives from the Italian. However, its use contrasts with the abundant references to Japanese culinary arts, while also embedding it in an ‘othered’ domestic space (the kitchen), likewise linked with cultural identity.¹⁹ Beyond the Italian polenta and the Japanese shirogohan, a cake made

¹⁷ Contrasts between spaces reinforcing national identity, language, and culture, and the liberating character of transnational spaces are apparent in a variety of spatial contrasts outside of the home, include the Japanese language school and the Buddhist temple.

¹⁸ In Portuguese: “Após a negativa de Hanadasan, Haruo concluiu que não poderia buscar ajuda em casa de *nihonjin*. Nenhum deles desafiaria a autoridade de seu pai. Então lembrou-se de Pietro, lembrou-se de que era seu amigo. Pois ambos eram crianças, embora um comesse polenta e outro shirogohan. Comeriam o bolo de mandioca de dona Ludovica, o bolo mais gostoso do mundo” (Nakasato 78).

¹⁹ In the case of *Nihonjin*, this can be seen in the multiple references to the keeping of gastronomic traditions, “Once a week they ate okra with soy sauce” (Nakasato 31; my translation). (In Portuguese: “Uma vez por semana, comiam quaibo com shoyu” (Nakasato 31). As with a number of references to the Japanese, these words are not translated but rather left in the Japanese, without footnotes or gloss.

of manioc flour is mentioned, “the most delicious cake in the world.” Manioc or cassava is a root vegetable indigenous to South America that is eaten in Brazil in a variety of forms, and is also used to make tapioca flour. The foodstuff, originating in indigenous culinary practices, was widely adapted during Portuguese colonization and quickly became a staple of the national diet of Brazil (Katz 232). This blending of culinary origins reminds readers of the heterogeneity of the Brazilian cultural landscape, a space globalized and trans-cultured long before the arrival of immigrant communities. As in *Obasan*, culinary traditions further expose the fabrication of culture along with its fusions. The use of Japanese without a translation is important in *Nihonjin*, with the entirety of its extensive Japanese lexical elements left un-translated with no glossary. In *Obasan* there is typically a direct explanation or translation for what is stated in Japanese.²⁰ In *Nihonjin*, both languages are placed on an equal plane, rather than stressing their difference through translation. This necessitates both an active reading and a tolerance for ambiguity. Nowhere is the Japanese lexicon more prevalent than in the home, where food, family names and cultural artifacts reside.

In this sequence of events the rigid barriers of Japanese culture slowly start to disintegrate and a narrative moment that reflects historical progressions in Brazil, as the masses of first-generation Japanese-Brazilians gain a greater foothold in society. The seemingly inflexible Hideo eventually hands Pietro’s father a care package for his son, along with his backpack for school after turning a blind eye to his stay with the Italians, a family that accepted him. This interaction highlights not only the ways in which the household establishes the limits of permissible behavior, but also expresses an increased fluidity of movement between the home and its exterior. While an initial reading may center on an insular characterization of the home, a subtler interpretation speaks to the contrary. Indeed, the novel’s representations are ultimately characterized not by their immobility or rigidity, but rather evolve and shift with the lives of their protagonists. The work moves geographically and temporally from the immigrant settlement (*colônia*) to the countryside, both located in the rural regions of Paraná, then to the cities of São Paulo and finally Rio. Naturally, as family members become embedded in transnational social networks, via Brazilians, Italians, and the like, their aspiration to preserve a strict notion of Japan vis-à-vis the home space diminishes.

Like *Nihonjin*, *Obasan* characterizes the home as a site which is multiple and fluid, exposing boundaries and points of resistance. In order to understand these transformations, it is important to note that the novel begins with a reflection on Canada. In the first chapter,

²⁰ For example, “Sonuva bitch’ becomes ‘Sakana fish,’ ‘sakana’ meaning ‘fish’ in Japanese” (312). Many other instances abound.

Naomi makes one of her yearly journeys to Granton, Alberta, with her later deceased Uncle. She notes, “Everything in front of us is virgin land. From the beginning of time, the grass along this stretch of prairie has not been cut” (4), reflecting also that “some of the native children I’ve had in my classes over the years could almost pass for Japanese” (5). This introduction is significant in its sense of possibility, shifting away from ethnicity and towards collective experience. It also premises a series of reflections in which protagonists assert themselves as Canadians, a proclamation of belonging necessitated by severe discrimination. For example, in one of her diary entries, Aunt Emily discusses some of the politics of relocation, stating, “Who among us wants to be a burden on anyone? It’d be better if, instead of writing letters to help one or two of us, they’d try to persuade their City Councils to let us in. After all we’re Canadians” (148). The emphasis on the Canadian wilderness and its indigenous inhabitants upsets the link between place and culture of origin. This is important as the novel progresses, as the home disrupts an otherwise hostile environment during the war, its preservation an act of resistance.

Home takes on many geographical locations, from Cecil, Alberta, where Naomi goes on to be a schoolteacher, to her childhood home in Vancouver, to the abandoned mining town of Slocan in British Columbia, to New Denver after leaving an internment camp, to Toronto, where her brother Stephen attends the Royal Conservatory of Music, and even back to Japan, where her Mother and Grandmother Kato die in the bombing of Nagasaki. Rather than a singular migration, the novel is a spider web of relocations, evocative of *Nihonjin*. As Naomi leaves British Columbia behind her in a forced migration, she reflects on her identity, “We are leaving the B.C. coast- rain, cloud, mist- an air overladen with weeping. Behind us lies a salty sea within which swim our drowning specks of memory—our small waterlogged eulogies... We are Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei— the Japanese Canadians. We disappear into the future undemanding as dew” (158-159).²¹

A method of dealing with this sense of loss and reacting against involuntary moves is the construction of homes. Beyond *Obasan*’s home, many homes emerge in the form of tents, bunks and skating rinks, as well as abandoned hotels and log huts during the relocation period (168). Even in the internment camps, Japanese women attempt to create makeshift homes, a tribute to their preservation of self and culture. In one of Aunt Emily’s diary entries, she remarks on this as an act of resistance,

Steel and wooden frames at three-foot intervals with thin lumpy straw ticks, bolsters, and three army blankets of army quality- no sheets unless you brought your own. These

²¹ Issei, Nisei and Sansei translate to first, second and third generation Japanese migrants respectively.

are the 'homes' of the women I saw [...] The bunks were hung with sheets and blankets and clothes of every color –a regular gypsy caravan– all in a pathetic attempt at privacy– here and there I saw a child's doll or teddy bear. (140)

In the face of austerity, the women use colored materials to create an enclosure from the outside world. Their choice of colors over black or white, an expression of personal identity. The multitude of colors disrupts the otherwise desolate portrait –Emily goes on to discuss the weariness of its inhabitants– in a way that marks this space as one of opposition and defiance. Children's artifacts adorn the bunkers, a reminder of how mass relocation affected every strata of Japanese-Canadian society. The use of the word home, set in her diary entry in quotation marks, is a significant marker of place. While these are clearly internment barracks, Aunt Emily narrates them as domestic, places that are constructed and preserved. As in *Nihonjin*, home is fluid in *Obasan*, a reminder of how it does not belong to one singular geographic location. As bell hooks notes, "At times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation. The home is no longer just one place. It is locations" (148). Rather than a definitive home or not-home, inside-outside, spatial practices in these novels unravel these certainties, exposing the challenge of life in the third space, that of the neither here nor there, hovering somewhere in-between.

III. Treatments of time in the home

Lastly, I would like to reflect on how time plays out with respect to domestic realms. This is an important consideration as we attempt to understand the preservation of culture and identity in Japanese migration literature. Given the limited social mobility of the protagonists, the plasticity of time provides a tool for gaining representational space. Regardless of the distances traversed, it is memory that shapes their stories. Indeed, in *Time in Literature*, Hans Meyerhof contrasts the accessibility of time with that of space, "[Time] is more general than space, because it applies to the inner world of impressions, emotions, and ideas for which no spatial order can be given. It is also more directly and immediately given than space" (1). This consideration is significant when we consider the focus on memory in both novels. It would seem that storytelling acts as a direct affront to spatial restriction and relocation. *Nihonjin* frequently contrasts the "time of the home" with sequences exterior to it, as seen in the portrayal of Sumie, Hideo and Shizue's daughter and the narrator's mother. As a young woman, Sumie plans to flee the home to be with

her gaijin²² love. However, a late-night, chance encounter with her mother in the kitchen weakens her will. Leaving the home would signify a complete departure from the family and a breaking with the Japanese community:

In the hallway, Sumie saw the clock hanging on the wall: 1:45. The conversation with her mother weakened her determination... From the window, she saw Fernando in front of the gate. Then suddenly, the gate seemed a distant place to her, shrouded in mist, and she thought that it was not just a few steps that separated the two of them... (Nakasato 111-112; my translation)²³

Sumie's observance of real time (1:45) in this sequence is juxtaposed with the 'interior time' passing at home, characterized by fragmented memory. From the perspective of the clock, a period of two hours²⁴ is lengthened across eight pages. The event commences with the protagonist's internal anxieties, a conversation with her mother, interspersed with memories and anecdotes about her past in Japan along with commentary on the dangers for the Japanese community. The scene culminates in an encounter with her Brazilian love, Fernando, whom she ultimately abandons. Curiously Sumie's attempted departure sheds light upon how spatial and ideological distances are frequently melded in the novel, binding her to the home space. Similarly, all of *Nihonjin*'s chapters involve detailed family memoir interwoven into the time of a Japan remembered while always returning readers to Brazil. In this way, the novel is in fact comprised of seven time arrangements, frequently drawn out by national memories, while moving towards a shared trajectory. In contrast, the periods of time that pass between chapters are frequently ambiguous and lengthy, spanning years rather than days or weeks. Unlike the spaces of the novel, which are limited to a few locations beyond the home, time is played out in multiple ways, across long historical trajectories, and then stretched within a singular narrative moment.

In *Obasan*, time is also drawn out in the domestic arena via dreams, reading and recollecting, with some dream sequences encompassing entire chapters. Much like

²² Literally, 'non-Japanese,' but also 'alien.' The usage of gaijin is contrasted with the use of nihonjin, or 'Japanese people or person,' also the novel's title.

²³ In Portuguese: "No corredor, Sumie viu o relógio pendurado na parede: 1:45min. A conversa com a mãe enfraquecera a sua determinação... Da janela viu Fernando em frente ao portão. Então, de repente, o portão lhe pareceu um lugar distante, envolto em brumas, e ela pensou que não eram somente alguns passos que a separavam dele..." (112)

²⁴ On page 106, the two lovers set the departure time for "two a-clock in the morning" ("duas horas da madrugada"), and the narrative sequence begins on the following page with, "A little after midnight, Sumi oriented herself with the light illumination that came from the window..." (Nakasato 107-07; my translation). In Portuguese: "Pouco depois da meia-noite, Sumie se orientou com a leve iluminação que vinha da janela..."

Nihonjin, the time of the home is contrasted with briefer narrative events that take place in its exterior. After Naomi visits Obasan, she dreams heavily and wakes up to find a series of documents from her Aunt Emily, a stack of papers including letters and journals. As Naomi files through these, she is transported to her own childhood recollections, Aunt Emily's collection of artifacts filling in the absences of her memory. Naomi enters the past from the vantage point of Obasan's home, while remembering past homes, "I am supremely safe in my nemaki, under the heavy bright-colored futon in my house."²⁵ The house in which we live is in Marpole; a comfortable residential district of Vancouver. It is more splendid than any house I have lived in since. It does not bear remembering. None of this bears remembering" (70-71). Logically, it is difficult to engage this moment in her childhood, her Vancouver home providing a rare serenity. Her Aunt Emily urges her not to suppress these recollections and to allow them to form part of her, "You have to remember... you are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee" (71). Once again memory and identity are joined in the body; in the end Naomi heeds her Aunt Emily's words and pushes forward into a lengthy memoir filling much of the novel. Here, time and place operate in symbiosis, the home providing a unique realm for the preservation of the past.

IV. Conclusion

Although these two narratives are separated by thousands of miles and thirty years in their publication dates, Japanese migrant tales from Brazil and Canada teach us diverse and intersecting lessons about ethnic heritage, cultural plurality, as well as race, class and gender. The domestic space is particularly critical for observing these crossings as its attention to language, food culture and other artifacts reveals a multi-layered experience. What is clear in this comparative analysis is that class or social position affects the modes through which spaces are made and unmade. In both *Nihonjin* and *Obasan*, the occupation of space is synonymous with the attainment or challenging of dominant power structures, be they national, domestic or cultural. The ability to construct a home is significant in both works; it means not only a place to be and preserve identity, but also one of refuge, resistance and personal growth. The homes of these two works are often transitory and are not a given. To complicate matters, the spatial transformation of the home is affected by a distancing in time from the 'homeland' across its second and third generations, revealing the ways in which spatio-cultural parameters change alongside shifts in national posture towards immigration. From kitchen tables to windows looking out to the exterior,

²⁵ A nemaki is a Japanese pajama or a bathrobe used after bathing.

from marking one's identity on the soil of a home to be occupied, to stuffing papers in a house's nooks and crannies, these novels challenge and complement each other in their examination of space. At times home is a psychic state, on other occasions it encompasses an entire body, but what is clear is that self and dwelling, temporary or permanent, are linked in unique ways.

In her influential work, *Space, Place and Gender*, Doreen Massey speaks to the intimate connection between space and identity stating that like space, "identities are inevitably unfixed. They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing" (13). In *Obasan*, when Obasan archives herself through her collection of things or when Japanese women craft makeshift houses out of barracks during the war using multi-colored fabrics, we witness how identity and home operate in dynamic ways. In the case of *Nihonjin*, we see a set of protagonists whose sense of home alters over time, from the inflexibility of the first generation to the openness of the second and third. The novels gain perspective and depth in their historical trajectory of Canada and Brazil, permitting readers to see the home as a dynamic site that mirrors ever-changing national and personal realities, taking on many forms.

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