

Varia

“The country I had thought was my home”
David Mura’s *Turning Japanese:*
Memoirs of a Sansei

Alina ANTON

ABSTRACT: “Home” functions ideally as an anchor, our most familiar and predictable place. What happens, however, when one discovers at the heart of this safe haven (indeed, at the heart of one’s identity) a feeling of “not being at home”? Or when the home (and homeland) one lays claim to requires constant proof of the right to belong? With these questions in mind, the article examines the problematic notions of “home” and (ancestral) “homeland,” and their implications for the ethnic individual as articulated in the partly fictional autobiography *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991) by Japanese American author David Mura.

KEYWORDS: identity, Japanese American, home, fiction, ancestral homeland

Alina ANTON is Project-Specific Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Humanities, Faculty of Letters, Kobe University. Previously she worked as a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University. E-mail: anton@lit.kobe-u.ac.jp

ALINA ANTON

“All fiction is homesickness.”

(Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home*)

As a way of mentally organizing space, the notion of “home” is deeply embedded in human consciousness and designates, first and foremost, a place where one feels a special familiarity and security, a sense of reassurance and confidence in one’s identity, and even some measure of control over the environment or, at least, “some degree of manageable predictability” (Young 134; Tuan 99–100). Home is thus articulated as one’s most intimate and legible place, a safe haven and a point of relative stability (Cavannò 177). Any disruption or dislocation inevitably affects our sense of self and can have destabilizing effects on our identity, imagined as fixed and stable. Should the disruption be accompanied by geographic displacement (whether voluntary or forced) and/or a loss of family and community, the result is not only a painful emotional journey from the space identified as “home,” but also identity fragmentation and interrogation. The outcome can be a new awareness of the self as flexible and unstable, an imagined construction produced through the interaction of cultural milieus and landscapes; however, this construction possesses itself the power to deform and destabilize the very surroundings from which it emanates. With the understanding that landscapes are a creation of the subject, who projects onto them his or her desires, hopes, and dreams of home (Dascălu 18–19), comes the recognition that culture, nation and the homeland are as unstable as the subject itself.

Starting from this realization—of the fictionality of home and the resulting need for a flexible, adaptive subjective identity—the current paper looks at David Mura’s book *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei*¹ (1991) through the lens of the problematic relationship that the Japanese American ethnic consciousness entertains with its claimed home (the United States as the country of birth), as well as with the ancestral homeland of Japan (inherited, if not always claimed, through membership in the Japanese American community)². With North-American authors of Japanese descent, the attitude toward the ancestral (home)land of Japan seems to vary with the generation to which the writer belongs (*Nisei*, *Sansei* or

¹ “Third generation” (三世): a Japanese and American English term used in South and North America to refer to the descendants (grandchildren) of Japanese immigrants to the United States. The majority of American *Sansei* were born during the Baby Boom after the end of World War II; but older *Sansei* who were living in western United States during WWII were forcibly interned with their parents (*Nisei*) and grandparents (*Issei*) after Executive Order 9066 was promulgated to exclude everyone of Japanese descent from large parts of the Western states. After the war, the *Sansei* were strong activists in the redress movement, which resulted in an official apology from the American government and monetary compensation to the internees.

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

Yonsei). Nevertheless, consciousness of the ancestral land and its distinctive cultural elements and norms is almost invariably present in the literary imagination of such writers. As Cuder-Domínguez notes, interest in Japan and things Japanese is often prompted by an attempt to ground and fix racial identity, or else by first-hand experiences of the country (Cuder-Domínguez 91).

A *Sansei* (third generation) poet, nonfiction writer, essayist and critic, David Mura has actively contributed to the literary representation of issues concerning identity, ethnicity and cultural relations in multi-ethnic America. Dealing with a first-hand experience of the ancestors' home country and culture, his partly fictional memoir *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* is one work that fits the above-mentioned framework of return to cultural roots in an attempt to gain an identity foothold. Arriving in Japan as a self-identified American, Mura is compelled to recover his connection with his family's homeland, which has been missing during his Midwestern childhood and to reconsider his identity. To a certain extent, thus, the text conveys the trials and tribulations of identity formation as a *Sansei* (third generation) navigating between the birth home of the United States and the land of the ancestors, Japan. Yet, what makes Mura's book worthy of critical attention, we believe, is that it is more than a mere “document” of the quest for identity, as the subtitle (*Memoirs of a Sansei*) would have the reader believe. Both displaced and self-displaced, the author seems more at home on the page and in the text than in the actuality of the world. The autobiographical account his narrative alter-ego constructs does not follow the rules of simultaneous and chronological recounting, as the one-year experience in Japan is narrated through the retrospective lens of time elapsed since Mura's return to Minnesota. What is more, the narrative is interspersed with childhood and young adulthood episodes and reminiscences, restless emotional questioning, as well as fictionally-constructed experiences and romanticized characters (inspired by real persons in Mura's life). Through its use of fiction in an apparently autobiographical account, then, Mura's text destabilizes, on the one hand, the genre of the memoir (which conventionally should tell *a story from the author's life*); on the other hand, it defamiliarizes

² Japanese American communities have themselves distinguished their members with terms like *Issei* (一世), *Nisei* (二世), and *Sansei* (三世) which describe the first, second and third generation of immigrants. The fourth generation is called *Yonsei* (四世) and the fifth is called *Gosei* (五世). The Issei, Nisei and Sansei generations reflect distinctly different attitudes to authority, gender, non-Japanese involvement, and religious belief and practice, and other behavior patterns. The age when individuals faced the WWII evacuation and internment is the single, most significant factor which explains these variations. The collective memory of the Issei and older Nisei was an image of Meiji Japan from 1870 through 1911, which contrasted sharply with the Japan that newer immigrants had more recently left. These differing attitudes, social values and associations with Japan were often incompatible with each other. In this context, the significant differences in post-war experiences and opportunities did nothing to mitigate the gaps which separated generational perspectives.

the process of linearly articulating an identity as a descendant of Asian immigrants to the United States.

In order to construct an organizing thread for the analysis, the first two sections will survey conceptualizations about “nation,” “home” and “homeland,” and illustrate their applicability to the immigrants and exiles in general and the particular case of the *Sansei*. Sections three, four and five will focus on the struggle of the ethnic consciousness to belong, to break free from the confinements of the stereotype and to find its own voice in a literary space where recognition seems to be permanently denied or displaced. The following three sections look at the way fiction is employed in the text not only to construct home through the act of writing about it, but also to imagine the self from “this split I have felt between America and Japan” (Mura 372). The conclusion drawn is that the search for a “lost center” and the attempt to recuperate an “old home... lost in unreality” ultimately prompt the use of fiction as a means of outplaying, of “leap[ing] beyond the bounds” (Mura 33) of (pre-)conceptions and of creating an “own myth of history” (Mura 358). Mura’s act of destabilizing the conventional limits of the *memoir* as a “document” of *Sansei* experience is, in essence, the result of the constant need to defy limits and “keep [one’s] options open” (Mura 33).

1. Theoretical guidelines

Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities has become an academically ubiquitous notion since its first introduction in the 1983 eponymous book *Imagined Communities*. As Radhika Desai notes, “indeed, no single phrase occurs as widely and frequently in the literature on nationalism as ‘imagined communities’” (Desai 1). Although the term was coined for the specific purpose of explaining nationalism (and has not been without criticism)³, the concept of imagined communities continues to be relevant in the contemporary context of how nation-states articulate and revise their identities in a globalizing world, especially in relation to domestic and foreign policy (such as policies towards immigrants and migration). We will make use of the concept to the extent that we believe it suited to illuminate the fictionality of home and homeland as social constructs.

In the case of the nation, argues Anderson, the acts of imagining and projecting are essential for distinct individualities to come together in a community, however unequal the relationship between the parts of the newly-formed communal body may be: “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, *the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship*” (Anderson 7, emphasis added). And because true and complete knowledge among members of a nation is impossible, members must hold in their

³ See Özkırımlı, *Theories of Nationalism* (2000), for a summary of the principal criticisms of *Imagined Communities*.

"THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME"

minds a mental image of their affinity if they are to partake of the "imagined community" that is the nation: "individuals will never come to know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them" (Anderson 6), so that the only available bond is the image of the communion that lives in the mind of each and every member. Awareness of this need to imagine and project brings to the foreground the fundamentally fictional nature of the national body, which comes to be recognized as the creation of "an imagined political community" that is at once "inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6). Its inherent limitation is a geographical and political one, because each nation has "finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (Anderson 7); its sovereignty, on the other hand, stems from the refusal to willingly recognize and submit to the authority of another nation—the modern nation almost always "dream[s] of being free" (Anderson 7).

In imagining itself as unified and sovereign, the nation necessarily comes to exclude and/or obliterate the presence of difference as an inconvenience, a disruption of its projected unity and stability. Difference is consequently constructed as "Other" and envisaged as a threat to the nation. If eradication of this menacing otherness is not entirely possible, the attempt is made to contain and manage it through the rigid medium of the stereotype. As "a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 23), the stereotype becomes a means to control and naturalize difference, to lessen the danger alterity is perceived to represent, given its ascribed position as antagonistic to the self. The employment of stereotype presupposes not only oppression (be it explicit and accompanied by violence as in the case of colonialism, or more veiled as in the case of power relations between the different groups of a pluralistic society), but also a silencing of resisting voices and a leveling of diversity.

The idea of "home" is similarly constructed on an opposition, on the tension between the conceptualization of home as "the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries," and an awareness that home is but "an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of difference even within oneself" (Martin & Mohanty 190). While the first understanding is predicated upon what Mohanty defines as the modality of "being at home," the latter arises the moment one is physically or symbolically removed from the safe haven of the home (in both the literal and metaphorical sense of the word) and experiences this removal as "not being at home." Through the lens of this second modality, the assumed comfort, familiarity and stability of "home" is undermined and deconstructed. Like the nation, "home" is revealed to be "an imaginative, politically charged space" (Martin & Mohanty 208). And, just like the self, "home" is disclosed to be shifting, unstable, fictional and plural. There is not only one sense of home, but several, and even this feeling can be an illusion. Thus, the associated notion of "homeland" is itself exposed as "imaginary," a fictionally-constructed landscape that the self imagines in the attempt to ground its shifting identity.

2. Two halves of home

That “home” is not only inherently “imaginary,” but also a multidimensional and contradictory concept is confirmed by the preoccupation of Asian American ethnic authors (writing in English) with the difficult issues of “home” and “homeland.” For instance, to a Japanese American *Issei* author like Kyoko Mori (*The Dream of Water: A Memoir*, 1995; *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures*, 1998; *Yarn: Remembering the Way Home*, 2009), who was born in Japan and spent nearly equal halves of her life in the land of her birth and the United States, “home” is a label that can be applied to both countries, albeit with very different meanings. She positions herself in the interstices between the two cultures, while at the same time acknowledging a certain anxiety and insecurity, a rift that is both troublesome and painful:

“I don’t regret leaving, but as a result, *I have two halves of the whole when it comes to home*—home as a special place of childhood, home as a place where I can live, work, be part of the community, and feel happy. The two halves don’t make a smooth whole [...] *I am always lonely for a home where I can have everything: the past, the present, the future.*” (apud. Cuder-Domínguez 91, emphasis added)

This rift in the whole that should be “home” inevitably leads to a fragmentation of identity, an uneasy balance between the self of childhood, the self of the present and the self of the future, which is still open to definition. One could surmise that it is precisely this perpetual longing for (a lost) unity, for imagined identity wholeness that serves as a source of creative powers. Such a proposition would not be completely unfounded, if we consider that Mori’s writing explores, among other themes, a sense of home “when you don’t live in the place of your childhood anymore.” While the beloved “place of childhood” may function as a primary signifier for the landscape of Japan, the prefecture of Kobe and the house of Mori’s early years, to which the author’s consciousness has undoubtedly attached fond memories of youth, it also goes beyond the meaning of “place” (and “home”) as a physical locale to connote a time spent in unity and innocent happiness, before the intervention of pain, and the destabilization of the subject through a self-imposed exile. Of her own admission, Kyoko Mori began to write in both Japanese and English at an early age, under the influence of her mother and maternal grandfather, two people who instilled in her “the idea that writing was something we did every day or even every week with enjoyment.” Thus, in the consciousness of the young girl, imaginative writing came to be associated with something enchanted and deeply powerful; to write fiction was to exercise “the magic of transformation—a limitless possibility of turning nothing into something.” This transformative “alchemy/magic” must have provided some kind of refuge, or at least some anchoring during the emotional disrup-

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

tion caused by the mother’s suicide when the author was only 12 years old. Her father’s later remarriage failed to return happiness to the household and eventually drove the adolescent Kyoko to move to the United States to attend college, and later graduate school. And like other expatriates before her, she took up permanent residence on American land and her old “home” was relinquished to the realm of memory.

Given that Mori is a first-generation immigrant, the role of “home” and “homeland” in the articulation of subjectivity in her case seems closer to the meaning of “homeland” for the exiled writer, who, out of necessity or choice, forsakes the original geographic and linguistic “home” and comes to dwell in a new “foreign” land and a new “foreign” culture that is at once experienced as alien and familiar. Having lost a stable notion of “home,” the exile becomes a “subject between landscapes,” whose existence is constantly underpinned by a sense of geographic and personal displacement. As such, the exile not only assumes a position of radical difference within the system of identity and nationality, but also comes to invalidate the idea of the subject as stable and static (Dascălu 11–19). And he or she does this through their very presence, which suggests difference, but also through the agency of their narrative imagination. In the words of Seidel, the exile is someone “who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another” (Seidel 10). And we contend that the immigrant shares a similar predicament.

3. “*Looking for America*”– the struggle to belong

“[T]he past is a country, from which we have all emigrated”
(Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*)

But what about the descendants of the immigrant? What relationship do they entertain with the problematic notions of “home” and “homeland”? Early in *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991), Mura ponders the idea of “home” and the restrictions that such a concept imposes primarily on the ethnic individual: “Home, in one sense is a limit. It restricts by categorizing” (Mura 32) declares the writer at the same time that he acknowledges his own “sense of homelessness” and his “defiance of limits.” His (partly fictional) memoir, which is based on a year-long visit to Japan in the mid-1980s on a U.S./Japan Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship, thus articulates itself as a quest for what Mura calls a “lost center” of personal history (and personal myth, we would say, borrowing from the words of Japanese Canadian author Hiromi Goto). Through the retrospective lens of time passed since the author’s return to his “landlocked” home in Minnesota, the memoir recollects not only the experiences of the year in Japan, but also Mura’s childhood removed from Japanese culture, his avoidance of any association with Japan, and his uneasiness about being an American of color, moving toward an open ending in which Mura feels himself neither “Japanese” nor “American,”

nor even necessarily a “Japanese American” in any simple understanding of the term. The biculturalism in question is further complicated as Mura and his wife Susan, of English and Hungarian-Jewish descent, expect at the end of *Turning Japanese* the birth of a daughter, on whose behalf Mura muses as to the questions of identity she will eventually face:

“...she kicks with a sound that has come from nothing, from everything in our past, from my Japanese genes to the genes of my wife, English and Hungarian Jew... Our daughter has made me feel much older than I was in Japan, much more tied to my grandparents, my parents, and to the future. *This split I have felt between America and Japan, this fusion of two histories, will reside in her, in a different, more visible way.* I would like to think she is a part of a movement taking place everywhere throughout the globe, our small planet spinning along in blue-black space. *I would like to think that the questions of identity she faces will be easier than mine, less fierce, less filled with self-neglect and rage. That she will love herself more and be more eager for the world, for moving beyond herself.*” (Mura 372, emphasis added)

Inasmuch as it presupposes the need to form and hold a mental image of communion and shared affiliation, “home” (whether one’s family home or one’s neighborhood, community, and country) indeed restricts by requiring the subject to attach itself to the fictionally constructed landscape as if to a fixed base. However, Mura’s conceptualization of “home” as a limit is, we believe, directly related to the issue of the stereotype and the attempt to contain and control projected alterity through fixed representation. As a Japanese American *Sansei* growing up in the Midwest, he inevitably comes to regard the country of his birth as “home” and strives to absorb and conform to the officially sanctioned cultural norms, at the same time that he refuses to acknowledge his membership in the culture of his Japanese ancestors: “*Japan? That was where my grandparents came from, it didn’t have much to do with my present life... **We were American***” (Mura 3, emphasis added).

Mura’s narrative alter-ego has absorbed the ideological myth of the model minority promoted by mainstream America to such a degree that at the start of the book he identifies himself not as Japanese American, but as “a true landlocked Midwesterner,” and has come to be himself the reproducer of racial myths about the Japanese:

“For me *Japan was cheap baseball, Godzilla, weird sci-fi movies...* Sometimes the Japanese hordes got mixed up in my mind with the Koreans, *tiny Asians with squinty eyes mowed down in row after row* by the steady shots of John Wayne or Richard Widmark... Before the television set, wearing my ever-present Cubs cap, I crouched near the sofa... I fired my gun. And the Japanese soldiers fell before me, one by one... By the eighties... [r]ather than savage barbarism the Japanese were now characterized by *a frightening efficiency and a tireless energy. Japan was a monster of industrialization... Robot people.*” (Mura 3–4, emphasis added)

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

So absorbed is he in his identification as American, that he fails to acknowledge, during holidays, the fact that “the faces around [him] looked different from most of the faces at school” (Mura 3), or that his grandparents were absent—grandfathers had returned to Japan and grandmothers were dead. Even as a poet and artist he would much rather visit Paris than Tokyo, and he turns to European authors such as Baudelaire and Proust, structuralism and Barthes for inspiration, rather than to Japanese creators such as Bashō, Kawabata, and D. T. Suzuki, or philosophies such as Zen (Mura 4). In his aspiration to become “a poet of the English language” (Mura 77), he feels compelled to shun his Japanese American identity, for it seems to relegate him to secondary status.

This repudiation of a hyphenated identity in favor of the less equivocal identification as “grassroots” American appears to be common in Mura’s family. Both the author’s parents and his aunt and uncle seem imbued with the Nisei’s genuine and hopeful belief that “their quiet obedience,” “their hard work” and “their efforts to educate themselves,” as well as “their decision not to protest” and “their willingness to fight in the service” can help them “become part of America” (Mura 218). Mura’s aunt, for instance, wants “to believe she [can] be part of the country” and repeatedly professes the conviction that “the Nisei [need] to prove they [are] good Americans” (Mura 195). Yet, her lifestyle is impregnated more with elements of Japanese culture than with tokens of American middle-class existence. Mura’s parents, on the other hand, offer an even more powerful embodiment of the “model minority” fiction and the stereotyped roles it prescribes. Socially and economically, “[t]heirs was an American storybook rise” (Mura 311), the perfect illustration of the rags-to-riches narrative so deeply ingrained in the American national consciousness: through hard work and frugality they manage to move from a lower-class neighborhood in Chicago to a working-class area, then to middle-class, and ultimately upper-middle-class suburbs. Such socioeconomic advancement indeed seems to endorse the claim that success is a matter of personal enterprise and discrimination cannot be held responsible for an ethnic individual’s failure. Determined not to stand out, Mura’s mother refuses to recall the trauma of the past (the forceful wartime uprooting and camp incarceration of Japanese Americans by the U.S. government), motivating that “she was too young” and “it wasn’t all that important” (Mura 195). She declines any involvement in Japanese American-related activities or associations, and instead throws herself into her housework. A model housewife, she rejects the “standard Nisei middle-class tastes” and embraces the ideals of upper class white America:

“My mother is the quiet one, for whom the past means nothing... her house is always immaculate and white: white walls, white carpets, white furniture... Her life is the air-conditioned mall and tennis courts, the golf course just out back of the family-room picture window.” (Mura 311, emphasis added)

The whiteness with which the mother surrounds herself and the family can be read as a symbolic manifestation of the desire to overcome her ascribed status as a “person of color.” What she cannot achieve physically—she cannot renounce or scrub clean her racially marked body—she compensates by imbuing the intimate universe of the family house with material whiteness and frequenting open and/or well-aired spaces. Unlike the aunt, she refuses to speak the language of her parents and seeks to eliminate from the family home all evidence of their membership in the Japanese American ethnic group.

The same predilection for efficiency and discipline is manifested by the author’s nonsense father, who “possesses the practical energies of a self-made man” and is driven “by the desire to succeed” (Mura 310). A 60-year old “successful executive” with a body that “looks ten years younger, hardened by weights, by Nautilus, though it has begun to stoop just a touch,” he has followed his camp teacher’s exhortation “to be not one, but two hundred percent American” (Mura 124) and now appears to be content with the routine of his business and his upper-middle-class existence. He has, in Mura’s estimation, “no problems with identity, with the past or race. He has been freed from history” (Mura 143). Like his wife, he would sooner forget the past than recall the tribulations of his boyhood mowing lawns in L.A. (“his father was a gardener there”), the shame of “his teen years behind a fence near the swamps of Arkansas” (Mura 323), or the sense of alienation and estrangement he experienced after his release from camp. Consequently, he dismisses his son’s attempts at delving for memories with a simple “I had fun in the camps” and endeavors to instill in young David the same “desire to succeed,” at times resorting to physical discipline to drive his point across.

4. Scraping away the skin of stereotype

With hindsight and the illuminating experience in the ancestral homeland of Japan, the adult Mura will come to recognize that there were greater forces motivating the father’s and grandfather’s behavior, that both were inevitably conditioned by history and ethnicity, by their ascribed alterity and their inferior status in the dominant white society: “*somehow, behind these acts of fathers and sons lies the backdrop of race and relocation*” (Mura 139–140, emphasis added). As a young adult, however, David blames the father’s strict discipline for instilling in him “the fear of failure” and making him more conscious of his “proximity to loss rather than gain” (Mura 310). Before he discovers “the liberating power of anger” (Mura 292), the adolescent Mura is himself captive in the stereotype of the Asian overachiever. “Awkward, socially backward, [and] more adept in the classroom or on the basketball court than at a dance” (Mura 126), he obeys his father’s “ban on dates” and focuses excessively on studying. Yet, behind all this fear-driven performance lurks a powerful and barely acknowledged need to rebel against the pressures and limitations of the racial stereotype. So deeply ingrained is this desire in the psyche that it even seems to manifest itself on the physical

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

level of the body. Read symbolically, the eczema that afflicts Mura (“a condition that is both hereditary... and psychological”) bespeaks “a seeming desire to scrape away [the] skin” (Mura 122).

The need to belong and the lack of validation from the dominant white order has caused the racialized consciousness to deem its own body a cage, at the same time that the desire to extricate oneself from this bodily prison is acknowledged as shameful and kept under the heavy lock of silence. Conscious of this burdening secret desire (which is at once uncanny and unsettling to the consciousness), Mura asks: “*Was my condition a way of speaking about what no one in my family ever talked about—the desire to shed the color of our skin?*” (Mura 122, emphasis added). No explicit answer is provided in Mura’s memoir, yet our thoughts are immediately carried to the advice in Janice Mirikitani’s poem *Recipe (for Round Eyes)*. To remove the evidence of one’s ethnic identity, betrayed by the shape of one’s eyes, one must simply use a few basic ingredients (“scissors, Scotch magic transparent tape, eyeliner—water based, black” and “optional: false eyelashes”) and follow some simple steps:

“Cleanse face thoroughly.

For best results, powder entire face, including eyelids
(light shades suited to total effect desired).

With scissors, cut magic tape 1/16” wide, 3/4”–1/2” long,
depending on length of eyelid.

Stick firmly onto mid-upper eyelid area
(looking down into hand mirror facilitates finding adequate surface).

If using false eyelashes, affix first on lid, folding any
excess lid over the base of eyelash with glue.

Paint black eyeliner on tape and entire lid.

Do not cry.” (Mirikitani 71–72)

The solution is not quite so drastic in Mura’s memoir, but it does entail a similar amount of mental pain and self-destruction. For instance, once the author reaches the age of sexuality, he becomes engulfed by a limitless desire and starts “com[ing] to woman after woman” until he almost burns himself out (Mura 125). More problematic than the promiscuity are the racial connotations contained in these sexual encounters. At first unaware of racial issues (“like many other American boys, I do not think of the color of the woman’s skin... the

forbidden quality of sex overpowers any thought of race”), he nevertheless shuns Asian American women and women “of color” in general. Their sexuality is too tainted with issues of power, systematic devaluation and prolonged exclusion, too charged with “the baggage of history” for comfort. And their stereotypical image (“of a doll-like submissiveness and a mysterious exotic sensuality”) is too emasculating to the Asian male, who is already “placed in a category of neutered sexuality, where beauty, power, and admiration [are] out of the question, where normalcy and acceptance [are] forbidden” (Mura 148–149). Thus, from the picture he first discovers in one of his father’s magazines (the woman there “is white, her beauty seemingly self-evident,” somehow “more beautiful than Asian women, more prestigious”) to his Anglo-Saxon wife Susie, the author will only take white partners, as if seeking to possess their whiteness, to absorb it into his own body. Just like his skin condition, Mura’s sexual dissipation communicates with a vengeance the unexpressed longing to rebel against his subordinate position and burst free from the constraints of the racial stereotype.

5. “Where do you [really] come from?”

However much young David seeks to vindicate his disempowerment by acting as the creator of desire in his sexual encounters (once he discovers that he has the power to make women “reveal themselves, [and] let down the guard” (Mura 150)), the country he recognizes as “home” continues to deny him equal membership in its “imagined community,” focusing, instead, on the biologically conditioned difference of his body as an indelible mark of otherness. As a young man living and studying in a white, predominantly Jewish neighborhood, Mura’s attempts at dating Jewish girls meet with the strong disapproval of the fathers, apparently on account of his not being Jewish. Although no explicit comment is made with respect to his Asianness, the implication is that the real problem lies with his ethnicity, perceived as more relevant than his religious affiliation (would the opposition have been so strong if he had been a non-Jewish white American?). Later, as the Asian husband of a white woman, he often finds himself the recipient of questioning glances and looks of disapproval when the couple goes out together. People would much rather pair him with his Asian-looking sister than with his actual wife—who is “beautiful, with long brown hair, [and] a pale Wasp face” (Mura 149). Even the fourth-grade children attending a presentation Mura makes as part of the Writers-in-the-Schools program insist on finding out his “real” birthplace and the degree to which he fits the stereotyped image of the Asian American. They press him with questions such as “Where do you come from?” “No, where were you born?” “But where did you learn English?” and “Do you know karate or judo?” (Mura 76). His answers, that he plays jazz piano and used to play football and basketball, or that he comes from Minneapolis, was born at Great Lakes Naval Trading Center and learnt English “the same way they had, at home, in school, on the streets of [his] hometown, Chicago” (Mura 76), fall short of the

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

students’ stereotype-induced expectations. He seems to appeal to the imagination of the fourth-graders primarily as the embodiment of something exotic, foreign, an otherness that fascinates through the very fact that it is not recognized as part of the self, of the familiar boundaries of “home.”

In similar manner, America refuses to validate his right to the English language as his native tongue, continually expecting him to betray his foreignness and speak with an accent, thereby confirming the stereotype of the Asian as visually, culturally and linguistically unas-similable. Graduate school in English, notes Mura, has the effect of undermining his sense of self, while his experience teaching a special seminar of Freshman English to undergraduate refugee students from Southeast Asia is marred by self-consciousness and a frustrating sensation that he needs to “prove that I had the same rights to the language” (Mura 75) as his white teaching assistant. Ironically enough, his command of English proves to be superior to hers, providing Mura with a small measure of satisfaction. As a writer, he experiences the same sense of insufficiency, of being somewhat of an impostor and an intruder in the edifice of English literature. In spite of his open admiration for Yeats, T. S. Eliot and John Donne, as well as for “Lowell, Berryman, and the boys” (Mura 75), he suspects that they would never have recognized him as one of their own. As voices of power, members of the elite and defenders of the poetic tradition, such names would most likely regard an ethnic writer as “either a curiosity or a savage; in any case, an unlikely candidate for a poet of the English language” (Mura 77). Unimagined in the world of English literary tradition (as he deems himself to be), he is apprehensive at the possibility of finding himself, like the black West Indian poet Derek Walcott, an impossibility, “a black man from the islands” wondering “amid the graves and gravestones of the great English poets” (Mura 76). This sense of contradiction stems, on the one hand, from his position as an ethnic writer trying to claim his own place in a cannon dominated and shaped by white voices, and, on the other, from the reluctance of the dominant cannon to acknowledge ethnic productions as valuable and necessary creations. At the same time, however, this self-conscious positioning as an apparent incongruity in the institution of English literature functions positively as the source of an original narrative, “a much different, more wayward and contradictory, story” (Mura 76) that bids telling—just like in Kyoko Mori’s case the interstitial position between two cultures and two halves of “home” provide the author with a wider, albeit fractured lens through which she can read and narrate identity.

Nevertheless, this interstitial position brings with it a sense of displacement and homelessness, and Mura cannot help wondering: “*Would my displacement continue even into my readership?*” (Mura 302). The rhetorical question expresses Mura’s bittersweet reaction at finding himself among the Asian American poets that capture the interest of a small, mainly academic readership in Japan. The satisfaction of being validated as a writer of interest is, however, eclipsed by the knowledge that the recognition is received outside the boundaries

of the country and culture he claims as home (or had been claiming as home before his trip to Japan): “They were my best audience,” writes Mura, “but they lived halfway around the world, were not my compatriots” (Mura 302). Geographic and cultural remoteness inevitably imposes on the Japanese readership an outsider’s perspective and robs them of the power to influence either the reception of Japanese American literature in North America, or the position of this ethnic literature in the American literary canon. Awareness of these limitations triggers in the author a sense of being displaced not only as an American of Japanese descent, but also as a writer aspiring to find his own voice amid the giants of the English tradition.

Such restrictions, on the other hand, can be understood as precisely the factors that motivate lectors in Japan to show appreciation for Japanese American productions. Their distance from the difficult history of Japanese immigrants in North America and their non-involvement with the state of arts and literature in the United States allows them to look beyond the racial issues that preoccupy the Japanese American authors and appreciate the literary dimension of the works these writers produce. At the same time, these productions attract because they vicariously express feelings and opinions that the Japanese lectors themselves cannot or will not voice in the atmosphere of Japanese culture: “You show us something of ourselves we can’t express,” confesses Nakayama Yo, a college professor of English. It is also Nakayama who praises Mura’s poem about the *hibakusha*, the victims of the nuclear bombing, for articulating what “no Japanese would have written” (Mura 303). The impetus in Japan (at the time) is to relegate into oblivion the traumatic history of World War II: “It’s best you forget about such things. We have gone on from there. This is the new Japan. We have forgotten such things” (Mura 19), advises an official of the Japanese government at the beginning of Mura’s stay in Japan, when the author discloses his intention to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the perhaps naïve expectation that he “might somehow capture the Japanese perception of the event, but with an American eye” (Mura 19).

6. “Writing home” is constructing “home”

Altogether, Mura comes to the conclusion that most of his poems are “too racially charged and political... too filled with an anger the Japanese did not feel” (Mura 293). He will thus never be able to impart to the Japanese readers “how left out of American culture” he feels, how exasperated he feels living on the margins, caught between identities. What the interest manifested by the Japanese audience nevertheless does, is make Mura aware that his involvement with the literature of his ethnic group is much too limited and that his literary themes are more American than he imagined. In this sense, then, the Japanese readership (as well as the Japanese college students he gives a poetry seminar to) functions as a benchmark and an agent that gives an impulse to the articulation of Mura’s voice as a writer. Despite

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

finding in Japan “a certain comfort . . . that [he] had not experienced in the States” (Mura 293), the reactions he receives from the Japanese lecturers communicate to him the surprising message that “the ways in which [he] think[s] about the world are so un-Japanese” (253). This realization, nevertheless, motivates him “to delve even deeper into the problems of crossing cultures, and to find more and more inspiration from Japanese sources” (Mura 292), for he feels that “the traces of the culture that were handed down to [him] from [his] parents” entitle him to claim “a body of material” with which other white writers can never experience an equally powerful and intimate connection.

In writing and publishing his fictionalized memoirs to critical success (and even some controversy), we argue that Mura does find his own voice as a writer in English. At once displaced and self-displaced throughout the text of *Turning Japanese*, Mura seems at times more at home on the page, in a “world elsewhere” generated through the act of writing, than in either the adoptive land of the United States or the ancestral homeland of his grandparents. America appears, thus, more like a holographic projection of the artist’s preoccupations than an actual physical place. Trying to keep at bay the sensation of dizziness and imbalance that lasts for weeks after his return to the States and writing as he is “from Chicago, that inland city beside that inland sea” (that in a game of mirrors seems to evoke the island nation of Japan), Mura comes to the startling realization of “how much I am not reflected in American culture, how much it is not my culture” (Mura 369). Mura’s developing sense of Japanese American heritage is rooted in solidarity and fragmentation, in an experience of alienation within the very culture to which he belongs inevitably, yet from which he comes to feel apart. Before leaving for Japan, for instance, he suddenly senses himself already immersed in the imagery of a defining Japanese American experience that was ostensibly “over with” before he was born, yet which is insistently welling up from within. Like the proverbial “skeleton in the closet,” the (silenced) past had been calling all along, yet the anxious and restless consciousness had refused to acknowledge and act upon it. The one-year stay in Japan will somewhat assuage Mura’s feelings of uprootedness, yet the proposed task of recuperating the lost connection with the “old home” will ultimately prove as impossible as the Nisei father’s attempt to “make the new place [America] his home”:

*The man who emigrated—my grandfather—carried with him the memory of home, the former world, the place where he was once “real.” It tore at him, that memory, and yet it kept him anchored: he knew where his home was, knew that he had lost it. The son of that man—my father—believed he could make the new place his home. The task was probably impossible, but it kept him occupied. The son of that man—myself—realizes what? That the new home—in my case, a Jewish suburb—is no home; is, in fact, for me, an absurdity, a sham, and that **the old home is lost in unreality.*** (Mura 32, emphasis added)

In feeling himself merge, in the crowded streets of Tokyo, into a sea of faces that look just like his own—unlike his wife Susie, who is instantly apparent as a *hakujin*, a white foreign person, albeit more open to the actualities of the Japan than the author himself—Mura experiences an immersion into a ghostly flow of Asian faces from the American past. With greater clarity than he had found possible in the U.S., he sees in generational array both his own family history and that of the Japanese in “the country I had thought was my home” (Mura 6), an America which now both is and is not. Feeling himself the inheritor of a legacy of victimization, Mura adopts a collective *Sansei* voice when he identifies more with the fate of his grandparents, than with what his *Nisei* parents endured. The *Nisei*’s quiet compliance with Executive Order 9066 is more angrily condemned by the *Sansei*, to whom their parents’ success appears to have softened their view of their own violation, making it easier for the *Nisei* to forgive and forget. Paradoxically, however, the *Sansei* came to be the beneficiaries of the *Nisei*’s ascent to the middle-class, a fact that further complicates the process of articulating an identity, while at the same time engendering a certain sympathy for the parents’ position, for “how far they had to travel in their childhood, from the Japanese world of their Issei parents to the America of their schools, the streets of L.A. and Seattle” (Mura 370). Negotiating an identity thus involves less an indictment of the father or forgiveness of the crime, than finding an individual “space” on the continuum between generations:

“One day K. steps out of his door to find a notice: he must report to the authorities. Who are the authorities? He does not know, only that he must report to them. When he reports to them, they give him a number, tell him to come back tomorrow. When he comes back the next day, he is taken by bus to a train and then by train to a place with others who have been given numbers and notices. He realizes he has been imprisoned. He is no longer singular, no longer private.... What is his crime? He is K. That is his crime.

My father’s name was originally Katsuji Uyemura. Then Thomas Katsuji Uyemura. Then Tom Katsuji Mura. Then Tom K. Mura.

What is the job of the son of K.? To forgive his crime? To try him again?” (Mura 227, emphasis added)

7. “Will you tell me a story... a true story?”

“Sure, but bear with my language, won’t you?

...you might not get everything I say.

But that doesn’t mean the story’s not there to understand.

Wakatte kureru kashira? Can you listen before you hear?

...Here’s a true story.”

(Hiromi Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms*)

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

“Sangre llama a sangre” (“blood calls out to blood”) remarks Jeannette Rodriguez in the preface to *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* (2007), commenting on the profound nature of cultural memory and its otherness to the individual consciousness. This otherness becomes even more poignant if one is deprived of the possibility to form a nurturing connection to the cultural memory of one’s cultural group and the past generations. The deeper the abyss of the crisis (the lack of shared memories) is, the greater the need for such a connection. And in the absence of narratives to foster the connection, imagination and myth supplant the “often-aching sense of absences”.

In the case of the Japanese Americans, the *Nisei* (second generation) parents’ refusal to transmit to their descendants (the *Sansei* and *Yonsei*) a lore of memories laden with trauma and othering often prompted in the younger generation a compelling need to resort to imagination in order to fill a gap in their personal and cultural identity that would normally be prevented by the passing down of traditions and stories. David O’Brien and Stephen Fugita’s sociological study *Japanese American Ethnicity: the Persistence of Community* showed, for instance, that the majority of the *Sansei* interviewed “had to piece together bits of stories and fragmented behaviors to get a picture of their parents’ experience” (O’Brien & Fugita 77). Thus, in their quest to understand who they are and who they can become, most *Nisei* and *Sansei* writers were drawn toward their ancestors’ “*kuni*” (country) as a haunting presence, an “old home” that has become “lost in unreality”. And in so doing they not only piece together personal history, but also create and end up “retelling personal myth” (Goto, back cover)—although not all will acknowledge (to themselves and/or their readers) the fictionality of this (in many ways necessary) personal myth.

The appeal to imagination to recover some bits of cultural memory is not restricted to the Japanese Americans—although in their case it seems more frequent and necessary because of the traumatic uprooting from the geography and community of the pre-war period. Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston remarks in one of her memoirs: “Father, you won’t tell me the stories, so I have to make them up” (apud. Smith 35). Of course, Kingston’s declaration comes as a complaint in the context of a comparison between the silence of the father and the wealth of stories that flow from the mother, but it contains an overarching truth. Silences and gaps in cultural memory demand filling and telling. And in answering this call, the younger generation inescapably mythologizes the experiences and the homeland of their ancestors, for myth and imagination are intrinsically connected.

In the case of David Mura, the parents’ refusal to openly share the details and upheavals of internment life will prompt Mura to supplant the gap in cultural memory by imagining snippets from his father’s camp experience, most likely modeling these fragments on the stories he avidly absorbs from his aunt as a young boy. And while such fictions humanize the father, who is otherwise depicted as rather distant in the relationship with his son, they also romanticize him to a great extent, just like they idealize the grandfather and transform

ALINA ANTON

him into a larger-than-life character. The father is thus invested with attributes believed to characterize his whole generation:

“It is summer 1943. On a dust-dry country road, my father waits for the bus with other young Nisei. Behind them, like a bad dream, the fences of barbed wire, the rifle towers, the gates, the barracks filled with mothers, fathers, and bawling babies, with aging bachelors, with newlyweds... These boys frighten some of the Issei in camp. They play cards behind the barracks, smoke cigarettes, curse in English.” (Mura 140)

Caught as he is, in the dilemma of being American but marked as less by the color of his skin, Mura is afflicted with anxiety all throughout adolescence and young adulthood, and the restlessness eventually develops into an obsession with the obscure past of his Japanese grandparents, a past in which they migrated and about which his second-generation Japanese American parents refuse to talk:

“I am asking my aunt about her childhood, about my grandparents. I ask because *my father never talks of the past, nor does my mother...* my father has simply said, “I had fun in the camps.”... My mother replies that she does not remember, she was too young, it wasn’t all that important. *Only my aunt will talk about the camps, about the past, about her parents... I listen to story after story.*” (Mura 195, emphasis added)

The aunt is, in fact, the only relative through whom young David can gain access to the culture and language of his ancestors:

“From classical records to Japanese pottery and prints, from children’s books to various Japanese foods, my aunt’s house was filled with objects exotic to me, that embodied some alternative to my parents’ all-American suburbia of bridge, golf and television... Her roommate, Baye, was Japanese, and their house was the one place where I heard Japanese spoken with any frequency.” (Mura 195)

It is the aunt’s stories that foster in the young boy the sense of belonging he hungers for, providing him with glimpses into the silenced history of his family and ethnic group. What the parents obstinately refuse to share “about the camps, about the past, about [their] parents”, the aunt recounts with a vengeance. And, just like in Kiyoko Mori’s case, it is the aunt’s “story after story” that sows in young David’s highly imaginative mind the first seeds of the “limitless possibility of turning nothing into something” by harnessing the powerful “magic of transformation” contained in words:

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

“In my mind, these stories took on a legendary quality... I loved them because they were a clear link to the past that my parents had not provided. Just as importantly, the stories had a certain romantic cast. They pictured my grandfather as a certified character, a somewhat lazy and fun-loving man, who liked to gamble, smoke cigars, and play the Japanese biwa, who wrote haiku until a stroke kept him from holding a brush ever again... my grandmother was pictured as a seer, a ghostlike creature with an eye for the future and the other world.” (Mura 195–96)

The older David (the real-life author, as well as his narrative alter-ego in the memoirs) will retain the same fascination with his grandparents, especially the much romanticized grandfather who will feature in several poems (see, for instance, “Relocations”) and will even become the subject of a novel (*Famous Suicides of the Japanese Empire*, 2008). Before his trip to Japan, the obscure past and the migratory experience of his grandparents, as well as the internment of his parents, can be explored and reconstructed only through poetry. No doubt influenced by the European and French writers for whom he professes an open preference, Mura’s poetry pieces together a landscape for his ancestors from bits and pieces of information and other stories passed down by his relatives (his aunt, especially, and the war-time accounts of one of the uncles). Once in Japan, it is the appeal of these glamorized figures that will prompt the author’s almost obsessive determination to return to the village of his grandparents—because “all my aunt’s stories somehow meant more in Japan” (Mura 199).

However, even in Japan, direct apprehension of the ancestors’ experiences and feelings proves impossible, so that all the insights are imaginatively obtained through vicarious probing into other people’s experiences. Of the Japanese readers (and expatriates in front of whom Mura gives a reading in Kyoto), most passionate seems the college professor Nakayama Yo, and it is his experiences as a young scholar in America that allow Mura a glimpse in the experiences of his own immigrant grandparents half a century before. “The things he [the professor] found strange they [the grandparents] would have found strange too: the size of the people, the buildings, the food, the space. The fields of white faces in the stores, on the streets, ghost-like in the clear California sun. The impatience of shop clerks, the alternating sense of being invisible, of standing out” (Mura 303). The seeds of “limitless possibility” planted by the aunt’s tales have sprouted as Mura matured, providing him with his ability to visualize and narrativize not only his own experiences, but also the trials and tribulations of other family members and new people he encounters in the land of his ancestors.

In her willingness to remember the past and transmit it as narrative inheritance to the next generation, Mura’s aunt resembles Aunt Emily, the “word warrior” in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), with her deep-felt conviction that that “the past is the future” (Kogawa 51). Like Aunt Emily, Mura’s aunt seems convinced that remembering is imperative, because “you are your history” and “[i]f you cut any of it off you’re an amputee” (Kogawa 60), yet she lacks Emily’s vehemence and militant determination. She surrounds herself with Japanese objects

and retains the language of her parents (she converses with her roommate in Japanese), yet she aspires to become part of “the fabric of America,” to prove herself a “true blue American” and consequently acts in accordance with some of the tenets of the “model minority” narrative (a forgiving attitude towards past discrimination and oppression, hard work and political noninvolvement). At the same time, however, if we paraphrase Aunt Emily’s pronouncement that “everything a Canadian does is Canadian” (Kogawa 68), we can also read Mura’s aunt as breaking the confines of the ideological myth because, if everything an American does is American, her current way of life and her willingness to remember the past prove that she is a justified member of the United States, as American as any other non-ethnic member.

While Mura “grew up very much as a child of America” (his own wording in an interview), he had no personal encounter with the internment camps, so that his endeavor to make sense (through poetry and writing) of the myriad of “doubts and feelings of loss,” of the “questions which pull [him] on, step after step,” also leads him to create his “own myth of history” (Mura 358).

8. Imagining the self from “*this split... between America and Japan*”

*“Back and forth, the river of Japan eddied
through our lives, creating, disturbing our dreams.”
(David Mura, *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei*)*

The grandson’s proposed task of recuperating the “old home... lost in unreality” will ultimately prove just as impossible as the father’s attempt to “make the new place his home.” Mura’s one-year stay in Japan will indeed somewhat assuage his sensation of being disconnected from history, yet it will also confront him with conflicting feelings of intimacy and alienation.

So unsettling is the effect of this re-established connection that, upon returning to America, he experiences a disabling sensation of dizziness and imbalance that lasts for weeks. And he is ultimately unable to return to the same view of America as home. The breaking away from the former home signals a re-evaluation of his identity as simply American and rising awareness of his identity as Japanese American. Thus, his “turning Japanese” is very much a process of turning Japanese American, for what his year in Tokyo reveals is that he can never become a true *nihonjin* (Japanese). As Mura himself admits, “Japan had forced me to confront certain questions of identity I’d long avoided” (Mura 7). The return to the United States is therefore made with the newly-found awareness that Japan allowed him to see himself, America, and the world “from a perspective that was not white American” (Mura 368).

Turning Japanese is thus marked by an ironic sense of disjunction from both the

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

“Japanese” and the “American” in the “Japanese American” designation. At the end of his memoir, Mura even speaks of how “turning Japanese,” as he understands it, has led him to see that he is “not Japanese,” but rather either “American or... one of the homeless, one of the searchers for... a world culture” (Mura 370). In truth he is both, now more comfortably inhabiting the space between the two dimensions. Like Henry James observing America from Europe, Mura looks at America from Asia and reflects on his return to his life in the United States. Such meditation enables him to come closer to cutting loose from the need to balance sides in “a conversation which had been taking place before I was born, a conversation in my grandparents’ heads, in my parents’ heads” (Mura 370) about how and whether to be Japanese in America, a conversation including, albeit not limited to the internment. For his generation, Mura maintains, this conversation has become more of an argument, “very one-sided, so that the Japanese side was virtually silenced” (Mura 370).

What his time in Japan ultimately brings is the realization that “a balance, which probably never existed in the first place [between cultures so fundamentally different, as he discovers], could no longer be maintained” (Mura 370). He thus becomes interested in confronting the specter of an alternative self that has started to entertain a different relation to the country of his birth (Taylor 302). The problem of “home” is posed in terms of achieving a trans-generational consciousness of the ancestors’ historical experiences, including their internment and relocation; and the author’s sense of homelessness before traveling to Japan comes to be recognized as a reaction to stereotypes, an inherent need to keep one’s options open, “to outplay, to leap beyond the bounds of, other people’s conceptions” (Mura 33)—all of which amount to an illusion of possibilities for becoming, rather than fixed identification in terms of prescribed national or racial identity.

A student of Japanese language during his stay, an ardent amateur of modern Japanese painting, dance and performance art (he takes lessons in Butoh and Noh with a passion), a conversant with contemporary Japanese writers, an adopter of current Japanese fashion in clothes, an endless walker of the cities, rider of subways and patron of Japanese restaurants and bars, Mura acknowledges towards the end of his stay that he has a greater affinity for the surfaces of Japanese life than for the depths concealed under those exteriors. Tokyo, for instance, appears to him as a “wacky, Japanese *Doppelgänger* to New York” (Mura 294), a similarity that is at once disappointing and reassuring. The sense of racial invisibility in Japan sharpens his sense of racial difference upon return to the United States. Thus, finding his individual voice and re-claiming an identity as a Japanese American presupposes “coming to terms with how the dominant culture had formed me; it meant realizing my identity would always be partially occluded. Finally, it meant that issues of race were central to me, that I would see myself as a person of color” (Mura 19).

His experiences in Japan enable him to loosen the rigid bonds of his national identity, shed the marks of the role prescribed for him by the model minority narrative, and awaken

as a Japanese American. Aware that he will never become a true Japanese, despite having access to the Japanese society through his body, just like he will never become a white American, despite his attempts to identify as such, he finally manages to find his unique artistic voice—a voice that comes from his “sense of duality, or rather plurality” (77). Like the Black English poet Derek Walcott, he becomes aware that “identity is a political and economic matter, not just a personal matter” (Mura 370)—a condition that is especially true for those with a dual cultural heritage. Only after this recognition does he admit to himself (and the readers) that his admiration for the works of white writers like T.S. Eliot, Faulkner or John Donne “would always be tinged with detachment, even anger, and a political awareness of my place in the world” (ibid). His newfound sense of self as a poet and as a Japanese American is thus predicated on plurality and a reconnection with the past:

“In order to understand who I was and who I would become, I would have to listen to voices that my father, or T.S. Eliot or Robert Lowell did not dream of. Voices of my family, of Japan, of my own wayward and unassimilated past. *In the world of the tradition, I was unimagined. I would have to imagine myself.*” (Mura 77, emphasis added)

And imagine he does, for *Turning Japanese* can very well be read as the outcome of this effort to imagine himself, to create personal myth. The title declares it to be a *memoir*, and thus non-fiction, yet there is something rather ironic in Mura’s choice of words, we believe, because he more than once declares his need to resort to fiction as a means of reconnecting to the “lost center,” and in so doing he necessarily includes in the text fictionally constructed episodes and experiences. For instance, the aunt’s stories and the “story of an uncle and World War II” both serve as “personal talismans from the past” (Mura 239). They stick more than “dates and documents and textbook accounts” (Mura 239), yet at the same time they have “no continuity. That has been lost” (Mura 240). And they are hard to reconcile with the reality of what their protagonists have become years later (the survivor uncle of World War II, for instance, has turned into a pharmacist, “jocular, beefy like a sumo wrestler”), or with the embarrassing feeling that “the Nisei seemed to beg to be let into America” (Mura 244). Similarly, in Japan, Mura seems to have entirely constructed experiences and interactions that never took place, such as the exchange with Itako, whom he never met, as well as fictionalized some of professor Nakayama’s comments and reactions—the real professor Nakayama is reported to have been displeased with his portrayal in the book. Such examples make it impossible not to question the level of verisimilitude of some of the episodes. Mura may not use fiction in the same way that writers like John Okada, Joy Kogawa, Julie Otsuka or Hiromi Goto do, to create fictional narratives interspersed with autobiographical bits and historical facts, or to weave fragments of passed-down stories with the declared aim of constructing and “re-telling personal myth.” But by interspersing what is proclaimed

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

an autobiographical account with fictionally constructed details, episodes, and people, he nevertheless subverts the *memoir* genre and in so doing contributes to the body of Japanese North American literature a book entirely worthy of critical attention.

9. Conclusions

In David Mura's case then, “home” is revealed to contain at its heart the condition of “not being at home” in one's own country and language. The result is not only a further destabilization of the precariously articulated self, but also a sense of homelessness, frustration and anger at the world in general. This deep-seated anger prompts the author's constant “defiance of limits” and insistence to “keep [his] options open,” to counter “with the illusion that I could be anything” (Mura 3). Nevertheless, despite the refusal to choose, to settle for an identity defined from the outside and imposed by forces external to the consciousness, there is still a deep-felt need for the stability and sense of belonging provided by the idea of “home,” fictional as it may be, so that the subconscious (free from the constraints of physical space) is drawn to and travels by means of the imagination to the “*kuni*” (country) of the ancestors as if to a “lost center,” even before the consciousness is willing to acknowledge the irresistible pull towards this imagined anchor, and long before the Pacific is actually crossed by the author in a journey of symbolic return. Our contention is that in Mura's case, as much as in the case of other Japanese North American writers, the ancestral homeland (in both its fictionalized form and its presence as a geographical actuality) plays an essential part in the construction and representation of (racial and ethnic) identity. There is a tendency to look back towards the original home abandoned by the ancestors, a longing for the sense of stability and anchoring generated through the knowledge that one belongs to a community and a place, from which one can draw substance and present oneself as “real.” With the passing of generations, however, the “memory of home” loses its reference point in the reality of the individual and its ability to ground identity, so that to the descendants of the immigrant or the exile, “the old home is lost in unreality” (Mura 32) and the certainty of belonging or having belonged is sometimes supplanted by a haunting sense of homelessness. And with the intervention of historical trauma (that affects the individual as much as the community to which he or she belongs), the preservation and passing down of the “memory of home” is irreversibly disrupted, so that fiction becomes one of the best instruments by means of which the lost connection can be recovered, at least on an imaginative level. Thus, “writing home” becomes very much a process of constructing “home” through a similar process of imagination and projection that Anderson talks about in the case of the nation. This reclamation of “home” through fiction is particularly important for the young generations, who might find themselves deprived of the anchoring power of shared (cultural) memory in their struggle to define their identity. This use of fiction to gain access to an imagined “lost center”

echoes Rosemary Marangoly George's affirmation that "all fiction is homesickness," just as "all homesickness is fiction" (Marangoly George 11).

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. "The Other Question... Homi K Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen*, Volume 24 (6), 1983: 18–36. Print.
- Cavannò, Peter F. "In the Wake of Katrina: Climate Change and the Coming Crisis of Displacement." *Political Theory and Global Climate Change*. Ed. Steve Vanderheiden. Cambridge: MIT P, 2008: 177–200. Print.
- Cuder-Domínguez, Pilar. "Facing Japan: Homelands, Affiliations and Gendered Identities in North American Nikkei Authors." *The Dialectics of Diaspora: Memory, Location and Gender*. Ed. Mar Gallego and Isabel Soto. València: PUV, 2009: 89–104. Print.
- Dascălu, Cristina Emanuela. *Imaginary Homelands of Writers in Exile: Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, and V.S. Naipaul*. New York: Cambria P, 2007. Print.
- Desai, Radhika. "The Inadvertence of Benedict Anderson." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, March 16, 2009: 1–12. Web.
- Goto, Hiromi. *Chorus of Mushrooms*. London: The Women's P, 1997. Print.
- Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994. Print.
- Marangoly George, Rosemary. *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-century Fiction*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.
- Martin, Biddy, and Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*. Ed. Teresa de Lauretis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. 191–212. Print.
- Mirikitani, Janice. *Out of the Dust: New and Selected Poems*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i P, 2015. Print.
- Mura, David. *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei*. New York: Doubleday, 2005. Print.
- O'Brien, David, Fugita, Stephen. *The Japanese American Experience*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. Print.
- Özkırımlı, Umut. *Theories of Nationalism*. London: Palgrave, 2000. Print.
- Rodriguez, Jeannette, and Fortier, Ted. *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity*. Austin: University of Texas P, 2007. Print.
- Seidel, Michael. *Exile and the Narrative Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1994. Print.
- Smith, Jeanne Rosier. *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California P, 1997. Web.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. New

“THE COUNTRY I HAD THOUGHT WAS MY HOME”

York: Columbia UP, 1990. Print.

Young, Iris Marion. *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*.
Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997. Print.