

大庭みな子の『浦島草』における ディスプレイメント —〈第三の場〉を求めて—

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大庭みな子（1930年～）は、「三匹の蟹」（1968年）や『浦島草』（1977年）などの作品の中で、現状に満足できず、さらに、自分の存在そのものへの違和感を抱える者たちを主人公に据えている。その主人公たちは、しばしば外国で生活を営む者であり、その姿は漂流する旅人にも重なる。本稿では、『浦島草』における地理的、文化的、時間的、言語的、ナラティブ的なディスプレイメントに注目し、アイデンティティを疑問視する大庭の姿を明らかにしていきたい。

大庭の年譜を辿ってみると、まさに彼女自身が歩んできた人生がディスプレイメントというメタファーで表現できることがわかる。まず、広島への原子爆弾投下直後、被爆者救済活動に動員されたことは、彼女のその後の人生に強い影響を与えた。大庭はそのトラウマとなる絶望的な原爆の経験を『浦島草』で描いた。そして、1959年にアラスカ州に渡り、その後、約11年間をアメリカ大陸で過ごした。混交的な文化を特徴とするアラスカでの生活は、大庭にとって「国家」と「アイデンティティ」の関係を問いかけるきっかけとなった。このように、放浪や移動という言葉なしには語るできない大庭の人生は、作品のテーマと深く関わっている。

『浦島草』で、男性と女性の欲望と狂気が、戦争をめぐる歴史的時間と、アメリカ・広島・東京・新潟というそれぞれの空間に複雑に絡み合ってい

る。主人公の雪枝は12歳の時に留学生としてアメリカに渡り、23歳になって日本に帰国し、異父兄の森人とその家族が暮す東京の家に身を寄せる。日本で出会う血縁者たちの記憶の世界に入り込んだ雪枝は、その家族一人ひとりの物語を受け継ぐ。そして、小説の最後には、雪枝の兄とその家がたった一晩で煙のように消えてしまうという魔術的リアリズムを思わせる手法も取り入れられている。現実と幻想の境界が混濁する場所でこそ大庭は歴史を語り直すことができる。その語り直された時空間は、国家やアイデンティティといった既成の枠組みが無効化されている〈第三の場〉ともいべき新しい空間となっているのである。

Displacements in Oba Minako's *Urashimaso*

—The Magic of the Third Space—

Raquel Hill

Introduction

Displacement has always been a feature of postcolonial societies; this is no doubt because much postcolonial literature is concerned with constructions of selfhood and dismantling the myths of national identity.⁽¹⁾ However, displacement as a crisis of identity is not only a symptom of colonization, nor is it unique to settler societies. Furthermore, it could be argued that writing by female authors as diverse as Katherine Mansfield, Jean Rhys, Margaret Atwood, and Maxine Hong Kingston, employs a rich rhetoric of displacement which both inscribes the sense of alienation that arises from being a woman in a patriarchal society, as well as questions (and often deconstructs) existing power structures. This paper is an exploration of cultural, spatial, temporal, linguistic and narrative displacements in the novel *Urashimaso* (1977) by Oba Minako (1930~). Although not the product of a postcolonial society in the conventional sense, Japanese-born Oba spent a decade in North America, an experience that shaped the themes in a number of her stories, many of which demonstrate a self-consciousness about nationality that emerges as a resistance to the idea of a fixed unified identity in favor of occupying a space “in-between.”

In the course of my research on New Zealand-born author Janet Frame (1924 ~ 2004), I became aware of how displacement can be read in Frame's writings as both a theme and a narrative strategy which questions binary oppositions such as centre/margin and ultimately deconstructs the myth of an unequivocal national identity. In particular, while analysing Frame's Commonwealth Prize-winning *The Carpathians* (1988), I was struck by the similarities to Oba's *Urashimaso*. Briefly, both novels feature female protagonists, New Yorker Mattina Brecon and Japanese-born but American-bred Yukie Hishida, who travel to the other side of the world (New Zealand and Japan respectively) in search of an "authentic" identity, only to be caught up in a space where time and place are turned upside-down and characters literally vanish into thin air. In this respect, both novels share characteristics of the magical realist genre, where "time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality" (Flores 115).

Furthermore, both novels are mythopoeic in that they have at their "centre" a flower which is connected to a myth. In *The Carpathians*, it is the "Memory Flower" – the tale of a young Maori girl chosen by the gods to be the memory-collector and story-teller of her land. After many years of successfully fulfilling her role, one day she mysteriously disappears and in her place grows a tree with one blossom named the Memory Flower (the discovery of which is ostensibly the purpose of Mattina's journey). In *Urashimaso*, the flower is of course "urashimaso" [浦島草], a deep purple plant belonging to the arum family that blooms in early May. This plant is connected to legend because its tendril is said to resemble Urashima Taro's fishing line, with Urashima Taro being a kind of Japanese Rip van Winkle. Another similarity is that both novels feature mute characters, Decima James and Rei Azabu, who are pivotal to

our understanding the important role of those seen as outcasts by society.

Aside from these similarities in plot, theme, and character, I discern a rhetoric of displacement which destabilizes fixed boundaries in both *The Carpathians* and *Urashimaso* and I find it fascinating that the alternatives posed by both authors are an emphasis on the role of memory and the redemptive power of story-telling, factors which are of wider relevance to the works of women writers in general. This paper will examine in detail the pattern of displacements in *Urashimaso* and is part of a larger project, namely my doctoral thesis, which analyses and compares displacements in the works of Frame and Oba as a whole.⁽²⁾

Critical Reception

Oba came to fame in 1968 when her first published short story "Sanbiki no kani" ("The Three Crabs") garnered her a share of the prestigious Akutagawa Prize. This tale of Yuri, a Japanese housewife living in a foreign country who spends the night with a one quarter Eskimo, one quarter Tlingit (native Alaskan), one quarter Swedish, and one quarter Polish man known only as "Pink Shirt," sent ripples through the prize judging committee and attracted some negative criticism for its portrayal of a woman who abandons her husband's bridge party and her daughter in order to pursue sexual satisfaction outside of the home. Oba's position as a woman overseas, where she was in large part separated from the Japanese literary scene and moral climate of the time, may have allowed her to write with a freedom or unselfconsciousness that she might have otherwise found difficult to achieve if she had been living in Japan.⁽³⁾ In this respect, cultural and spatial displacement worked in her favour. However, as Sharalyn Orbaugh (2001a) has pointed out, opinion

amongst the judges on the Akutagawa committee was divided, with a point of contention being the “morals” of the characters in “Sanbiki no kani” and “Niji to ukihashi” (“Rainbows and Floating Bridges”); one of the judges commented that “The Americans and other nationalities depicted in these stories are like rootless grasses [nenashigusa], and are horrible. Probably not all the people are like this, but these stories are written focusing on a society where there are many such rootless people” (273). As Orbaugh rightly surmises, it would seem that one reason for the judges’ general uneasiness was that “Sanbiki no kani” dealt with a Japanese woman experiencing freedom in a “rootless” liberal society (273). Either way, the message was clear: in a man’s world, when a woman steps out of place, it is men who have the most to lose.

Since then, Oba’s work has often been analysed from the viewpoint of feminist poetics, with Noriko Mizuta being a pioneer in the 1980s.⁽⁴⁾ Although Oba has not been completely ignored by Japanese scholars (her complete works were published in ten volumes by Kodansha between 1990 and 1991 as *Oba Minako Zenshu*), the first book-length study devoted exclusively to analysing her oeuvre was not published until 2001, over three decades after her debut (see Mitsuko Egusa, *Oba Minako no sekai: Arasuka, Hiroshima, Niigata*). In fact, the first book to deal solely with Oba’s works was published, perhaps surprisingly, in English, in 1999 (see Michiko Wilson, *Gender is Fair Game: (Re)Thinking the (Fe)Male in the Works of Oba Minako*). Interest in Oba has always been strong among foreign scholars – aside from translations in a variety of European languages, at last count nine of her short stories, a collection of her poetry, and one of her novels had been translated into English, as well as various excerpts from her essays.⁽⁵⁾ To give a brief overview of the main trends in English-language criticism, Marian Chambers

(1991) examines the influence of native Alaskan culture on Oba's works, especially "Higusa" ("Fireweed"); Meera Viswanathan (1995) argues that Oba's frequent use of the *yamamba* (mountain witch) motif functions as a site of female resistance; Reiko Nemoto (1996) positions *Urashimaso* as a new kind of *genbaku bungaku* (atomic bomb literature) in which Oba is able to transcend the limitations of Hiroshima's time and space to produce a narrative that ultimately focuses on humans' dark desires; Janice Brown (1998) connects the personal trauma Oba experienced during the war to her poetry collection *Sabita Kotoba (Tarnished Words)*; Adrienne Hurley (1999) focuses on the multi-national characters in *Garakuta Hakubutsukan (The Junk Museum)*, a tale set in Alaska, to conclude that Oba steps outside the model of normative power relations to describe what can be read as "feminist possibilities for a counterculture" (90); and Sharalyn Orbaugh (2001a) investigates the paternity of Oba's maternalist discourse.

This paper does not engage in an overtly feminist analysis of Oba's work; rather, it attempts to reread *Urashimaso* from the perspective of various displacements. This focus on place in Oba's literature is a relatively new trend — Egusa's study uses Alaska, Hiroshima, and Niigata as thematic focal points but fails to explore the repercussions of this in post-colonial terms. Sharalyn Orbaugh (2001b) comes closest to what I am attempting here, by reading *Urashimaso* as a "return to a fantasized Japan of nostalgia" for Oba, albeit a view of Japan which has been complicated, or "doubled" to paraphrase Orbaugh (315). In this paper, I want to underline that the concept of displacement, which is mostly discussed in postcolonial literatures, can also be applied to Japanese writing from a space between two countries, and in *Urashimaso* this "third space" becomes one from which a new version of cul-

tural history is reinscribed. In the latter part of this paper, I show how this interpretation is strengthened by reading the novel as magical realism (a term coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925) which, as Zamora points out, with its in-betweenness “(...) encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures” (6).

Displacement in Oba’s Life

A richer reading of *Urashimaso* can be gained when understood in the context of two major displacements which have defined the life of Tokyo-born Oba. The first was her witnessing of the devastating effects of the Atom Bomb directly after it was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. She was still a teenager when she spent two weeks attending to the victims, and she describes those painful memories in a chapter evocatively entitled “Ujimushi to kani” (“Maggots and Crabs”) from her autobiography *Mai e mai e katatsumuri* (*Dance Snail Dance*, 1984): “I have spoken and written of those events since then more times than I can remember but I know I will never be able to say all that needs to be said or write all that needs to be written.”⁽⁶⁾ This comment points to the traumatic nature of memory that survivors must try to come to terms with: in the words of Dori Laub, “Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect” (69). The recurrence of the word “memory” and emphasis on story-telling in Oba’s works is undoubtedly linked to the trauma she experienced during the war years, when she was displaced by being part of an historical event that no one could have imagined.

The other major displacement in Oba's life was when she accompanied her husband on his posting to a Japanese pulp company in Alaska in 1959. In the small coastal town of Sitka, with its mix of ethnicities including Russian settlers and the native Tlingit, Oba made friends with people who "as if it were prearranged, had experienced abandoning the old places in which they were born,"⁽⁷⁾ an aspect which is reflected in the melting-pot of characters that appear in stories such as *Garakuta hakubutsukan*. Rather than feel out of place in Alaska, it seems that Oba found somewhere close to the "home" she felt she lacked. In her autobiography she writes that, like her ancestors, "wherever I go, I have always felt that I have no place to go, and so I easily feel sympathy for people and I long for some impossible home" (22). However, in Alaska she found her "home in a foreign land" ["ikoku no kokyō" 異国の故郷] because it was there that she spent a significant period of time in the same place for the first time in her life. Oba lived in Tokyo for the first five years of her life but after that her father, a doctor, moved the family all around Japan so Oba never really felt she belonged anywhere, until she had lived in Sitka.⁽⁸⁾ Oba was further displaced when she left Alaska and had to readjust to life in Japan; this experience is clearly one of the driving thematic factors in *Urashimaso*, in which both Yukie and the author have spent exactly the same amount of time away from Japan (eleven years).

Oba's life shows that displacements can be historical – the horrifying trauma of Hiroshima – as well as spatial, as in her move to Alaska, and can encompass both positive and negative aspects. As she wrote in "Ikoku no yūjin" ("Friends from Foreign Shores") from her collection of essays *Omou koto* (*Reflections*), "when we come into contact with something foreign, it is then that we at last start to see ourselves clearly. Then we are touched because

another person accepts us as we are in our entirety” (84). Oba’s essays reveal her constant questioning of the meaning of “home” and a fascination with the ideas of exile, belonging and identity. In another essay entitled “Furōnin no tamashii” (“The Vagabond Spirit”) from her collection *Sametemiru yume* (*Waking Dreams*), she writes of how the Second World War created both an era and a literature of exile, a legacy which is still felt today in the numerous “spiritual exiles” [“seishinteki bōmeisha” 精神的亡命者] that wander the world (27). However, she does not view this as negative; rather, by being such a vagabond [“furōnin” 浮浪人] or wanderer, one can look objectively at their country from both inside and out. Oba’s ideal “furōnin” figure occupies a liminal space which transcends both nation and nationalism.

Towards an Understanding of Displacement

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “displace” means to “shift something from its proper or usual position,” “to take the place, position or role of,” or “to force someone to leave their home.” Separating the word into two components, “dis-”: 1) expresses negation; 2) denotes reversal or absence of an action or state; and 3) denotes removal, separation, or expulsion. We may gather from this a general negative impression that something is “lacking.” Modern usage gives “place” numerous meanings: as a noun, it denotes location, home or position. As a verb, it can mean “to put in a particular position” or “find an appropriate place or role for.” Often it is used to indicate where one feels a sense of belonging, for example, to “find one’s place in the world”; alternatively it can imply discomfort, as in to feel “out of place.” The phrase “a place called home” illustrates how place is often associated with the idea of belonging. Thus “displace” and “displacement” inherently allude to

a kind of loss of identity.

Postcolonial and feminist critics have expressed the idea of displacement in terms such as exile/diaspora (Edward Said), the borderlands/*la frontera* (Gloria Anzaldúa), and hybridity/the interstices/the third space (Homi K. Bhabha), concepts which all essentially point towards the impossibility of a fixed identity. Nico Israel in *Outlandish: Writing between Exile and Diaspora* (2000) combines these terms in his exploration of the "interstitial area between exile and diaspora," the latter of which he asserts are fundamentally "different descriptions of displacement" (3). Israel focuses on the works of Joseph Conrad, Theodor Adorno and Salman Rushdie, all exiles at one time or another, and shows how they confront and expose geographical, psychological and institutional boundaries as well as use "metaphors of displacement that function to shape textual representations" (4), all frames of analysis which are applicable to both Oba's *Urashimaso* and Frame's *The Carpathians*. Israel calls this space where boundaries such as inside/outside, national/extrnational, centre/periphery, and West/East are pushed and definitions are questioned "outlandish."

The terminology of postcolonial discourse is relevant to *Urashimaso* for a number of reasons. Most obviously, Oba published the novel after she had returned to Japan from living overseas for over a decade, a period that gave her the chance to consider national identity from a unique perspective. Furthermore, *Urashimaso* has at its "centre," in many ways, the spectre of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. This represents, when looked at from a simplistic perspective, the classic theme of East versus West in its most extreme form. The West, traditionally masculinized and privileged as the "centre," tirelessly exoticized the East as a feminine and weak other, relegat-

ing it to the periphery. However, this dichotomy was upset when Japan stopped playing Butterfly to the West's Pinkerton, which resulted in the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima as the ultimate assertion of the power of the West. However, the bomb at the centre of *Urashimaso* is an event of such magnitude that not just the centre but all boundaries are upset, causing spatial and temporal displacements that reverberate for generations after, as emphasized by the twisted web of relations in the Azabu household.

Thick Tangled Roots

Critics agree that *Urashimaso* marked a turning point in Oba's career; Oba herself has said that when she finished writing the novel, she felt as if "a revolution had taken place in her internal world," after which she "entrusted herself to a world of flowing time and consciousness, as if freed from some constriction."⁽⁹⁾ The plot is complicated as not only does it feature a large cast of characters who form a mass of relationships as tangled as the roots of the urashimaso plant itself, but also because the narrative moves back and forth between time and place (from modern-day Tokyo and Hiroshima to war-time Hiroshima and pre-war provincial Niigata). Added to the mix is the element of narrative displacement, which the author creates by omitting direct quotation marks to distinguish between the omnipresent narrator, the characters' actual speech, and their interior monologues; this kind of narrative strategy is a feature of magical realist fiction, the implications of which I will explore later.

In *Urashimaso* Yukie Hishida returns to visit her remaining family in Japan in the late 1970s. Yukie left Japan for America eleven years earlier, shortly after the death of her father and with the blessing of her mother, who "had

wanted to put distance between herself and the cool appraising eyes of her daughter" (19).⁽¹⁰⁾ After a decade in the States during which she has maintained only cursory contact with her next-of-kin, Yukie decides to visit her half brother Morito (literally "man of the forest") and his family in Tokyo. She is picked up at the airport by Morito and is shocked by the changes that have occurred during her absence and by how the landscape of her childhood has disappeared: "I suppose the Japan I've been thinking of just doesn't exist anymore" (15).

To the Japanese reader, the similarities with the legend of Urashima Taro will be immediately obvious, and as the novel progresses, characters often mention the tale. The English translation of the novel by Oba's daughter Oba Yu includes a detailed account in the appendix to ensure that the nuances of the metaphor are not lost in translation. The summary tells the tale of Urashima Taro, a poor fisherman invited to the magical underwater realm of Ryūgū (the Palace of the Dragon King or the Sea God's Palace) where for many years he enjoys a luxurious life. However, he begins to feel nostalgic for the small village and the elderly mother he left behind so he returns home from his underworld adventure, only to find that some 300 years have passed on earth and the world he once knew no longer exists. In despair, he opens the "tamatebako" (a Pandora's Box) given to him by the Princess of Ryūgū, despite instructions against doing just that. Of course, he must pay the price for his folly and the smoke that emerges and envelops him turns him instantly into an old white-haired man. Yukie is aware that she too is "[...] just like Urashima Taro. Everything's so changed. Things I'm sure once existed – things I remember have disappeared like smoke" (82).

The mythical tone of this legend, with its boundary crossing (land/sea) and

time-travelling (300 years in the blink of an eye), adds rich cultural complexity and irony to the tale Oba weaves of unexpected encounters, traumatic displacements, and mysterious disappearances. It is also directly related to Oba's own return from Alaska. In her essay "Arasuka no omoide" ("Memories of Alaska") from the collection *Yasō no yume* (*Dreams of Wild Grass*), Oba writes: "After living in Alaska for ten years, when I left there I felt like Urashima Taro who had returned to his seaside hometown and recalled his life in the sea paradise. Since the ascending white smoke is frightening, I've buried the Pandora's box in a hole I dug deep in the sand" (186).

Oba's female Urashima, Yukie, must contend not only with the cultural displacement of readjusting to Japanese life but also with the temporal displacement of the poor post-War Japan she left behind (the past) and the prosperous 1970s Japan she returns to (the present). The tale would not be complete without a "tamatebako": the Pandora's box is opened when Morito's mistress Ryoko relates to Yukie the horrific sights she saw in Hiroshima. Ryoko, married to Ryū Azabu who was at the time serving in the Japanese army in China, escaped the blast through a twist of fate but journeyed back to Hiroshima to look for her mother-in-law, whom she secretly hoped had perished in the disaster. Ryoko does not escape the fall-out of the bomb however, as she conceives her son Rei with Morito in the ashes of Hiroshima and he is born autistic. Not long after Ryoko has finished her tale, she and Morito along with their house literally disappear into thin air, like a puff of smoke, to be replaced by a parking lot.

Yukie is only one of a host of characters caught between two worlds: she is joined in Tokyo by her "thoroughly and one-hundred-percent American" (5)

boyfriend Marek, who grew up in the USA with a Polish father and French mother. At the Azabu house, Yukie must contend with Natsuo, Morito's adopted daughter, and the biracial product ("a bastard of the Occupation" 38) of Yukii (a young maid employed to take care of Rei as a baby) and an American soldier who died in the Korean War. Yukie spends close to a month in Japan and moves between Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Niigata, with the stories in each location entangling her like the vines of the urashimaso plant.

Spatial, Cultural and Temporal Displacements

Given that Yukie could have probably foreseen her reverse culture shock upon returning to Japan, the reader is left to wonder why she embarked upon the trip in the first place. It seems that she was at a loss as to what kind of career path to follow, but more than that, she was driven by a desire to "take another look at the country she knew so little about" (197). Part of the reason for her pilgrimage is no doubt related to a sense of "fantasized nostalgia" (Orbaugh 2001b) but I argue it is also possible to read Yukie's pilgrimage, like that of Mattina in *The Carpathians*, as a quest for an "authentic" identity. In many ways, Yukie looks at Japan through the eyes of the archetypical foreigner in search of the "real Japan," apparently unaware that it may no longer exist.

As Yukie and Morito travel from the airport through the changed Tokyo landscape, the half brother and sister (they share the same mother) search for a common thread of understanding by reminiscing about their upbringing in Kambara in rural northern Japan. However, verbs such as "disappear," "gone," and "change" crop up time and time again: when Yukie asks Morito about the sand dunes at Kambara, he replies: "They're gone now. [...] They disappeared into the sea. [...] They disappeared. I don't know if the sand sank

or the sea rose. Anyway, they say the landscape has changed” (10), while the “gentle slopes of goumi [...] don’t exist any more” (11). Time has transformed not only the landscape but people too: Morito has aged so dramatically that he looks to Yukie like “an ugly swollen loaf of mouldy bread” (1). In contrast, Yukie, like Urashima Taro upon his return to his home village, has retained her youth; Morito tells her this is because “you’ve been living in your imagination in an imagined country that doesn’t exist anywhere on earth. This Japan or whatever that you’ve been dreaming up in your mind is all gone, it’s disappeared” (15), reminding us that Yukie may be trying to grasp a mirage.

The generation lag causes a fair amount of miscommunication between the siblings, who are separated in age by 30 years. For example, when Yukie is talking about how immigrants in America have preserved much of their original cultures by using old forms of language and following traditional customs, Morito merely “murmured vaguely, then stared vacantly into space as if thinking of something else” (14). And when he makes a comment about the nature of words, it is Yukie’s turn to answer “vaguely, not quite sure what he was trying to say” (15). Yukie thinks that “[P]art of [Morito] was vague and distracted, and not listening at all to what she said” (10), a comment that could go for many of the characters in *Urashimaso* who struggle to make themselves and their message understood.

Feeling thoroughly disjointed, Yukie is somewhat relieved when she arrives at Morito’s traditional-style Japanese house tucked away in a corner of Tokyo where time seems to have stood still. On the ride in, “instead of feeling like a native come home, she had felt like a visitor to a foreign country. Here, at last, she found a fragment of her remembered homeland. But at the same

time, it seemed to her that her memory book of Japan with its fresh ink portraits had suddenly turned into an ancient volume with yellowed and sticking pages. The printing was old and like the writing on tombstones" (25), a metaphor which shows the disintegration of Yukie's preserved memories. The Azabu house is symbolic of the themes of the novel, as it seems to exist in a time zone all of its own, one which causes temporal displacement for Yukie: "[...] here was a strange fragment of space where the threshold of time was blurred. Some force had created a ripple in time that surfaced at this very spot. It was as if something that had been there all along but was invisible had suddenly loomed into her presence" (26).

Furthermore, it is in the garden of this strange house that Yukie first comes across the *urashimaso* plant: "The space between the gravestones and the earthen storehouse was overgrown with grass, and some strange, dark-purplish flowers bloomed in the overgrowth. The flowers wore a hood, and were like black flames that flickered on and off as they swayed in the breeze" (26). Significantly, the plant has taken root between gravestones, reminding the reader that the past, as represented by ancestors, is still very much a part of the present. A longer description of the plant appears in the chapter which bears its name and it is worth quoting at length because it foreshadows many of the novel's themes:

Some purple black flowers grew in the overgrowth, striking in their grotesqueness, and they bloomed like flickering flames hovering above the dense grass. The stems grew straight to a height of some forty centimeters, then branched off into leaves that spread out like webbed hands. A slender shaft grew out of the main stem slightly under the green canopies, and a dark purple tubular spathe about ten

centimeters long extended horizontally from its end. A long tendril emerged from the spathe and curved upward before trailing down to the ground. [...] The purple-black flower-like spathe was similar in form to a calla lily and emitted an air of gloom (53-4).

The purple grotesqueness and flickering flames of these flowers evokes Hiroshima, and the metaphor is extended when the reader learns that “strangely, the dark flowering spathes had swayed in the breeze until the very hour of Rei’s birth, then suddenly withered into ugly old Urashima Taros all bent and crooked with age” (58).

One week into Yukie’s stay, her live-in partner Marek lands in Japan, an arrival which further forces Yukie to confront the issue of her identity. Marek makes her feel more Japanese because they argue over the differences in Japanese and American culture, as in the following exchange:

“Now that you Americans have lost your frontier, you’ve finally come to see the need to imitate the Japanese way. I mean, the way we provide for circulation in a closed world,” said Yukie.

“So you’re Japanese and I’m American – is that it?”

“I’m the offspring of a people that cut itself off from the rest of the world for three hundred years,” she retorted with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Well, the amoeba also happens to be our ancestor. Maybe you respect the ancestors who cut off your country, but I respect the amoeba, our most ancient ancestor. Besides, you happen to be just like an amoeba. You have faithfully inherited every one of its characteristics!” (118-19)

Although Yukie may feel Japanese, Marek sees her as an outsider in Japan,

commenting that she understands the Japanese “in a vague way with a touch of nostalgia. But nostalgia is only nostalgia and I don't feel any attachment, was her attitude” (123). Marek, who is himself the product of exile, brings Yukie's own displacement into relief by causing her to reflect with ironic insight on Japanese society (in the chapter aptly titled “Mirage”). By the end of her stay, she feels “lost in this alien land” (195): “Here, she found a tightly knit society that repulsed any outsider, where simply being with Marek was enough to shut her out completely. [...] Something told Yukie that she would never be accepted here as long as Marek was with her. She would have to resign herself to living among foreigners, or to being a rootless outsider” (199). Yukie is left in an “outlandish” space, one where she is no longer at home in any land: “Eleven of the 23 years of her life were full of America. Maybe America was her homeland now. She stood with one foot each on two continents, and it seemed to her that she would be torn apart if the water flowing between them rose any higher” (200).

***Urashimaso* as Magical Realist Fiction**

In his comparative study of Maori New Zealander Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* (1986) and Oe Kenzaburo's *Dojidai Gēmu* (*The Game of Contemporaneity*, 1979), Christopher Isherwood has argued that both novels are examples of mythopoeic or myth-making literature. In other words, they question the interpretation of myth as purely fictitious by upsetting the apparently unambiguous line between fact and fiction. Isherwood asserts that in this respect their work strongly resembles magical realist writing “which rejects monolithic representations of national history and culture in fiction” (121). If, as Zamora claims, “magical realism is a mode suited to exploring

– and transgressing – boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic” (5), then this framework of analysis has fascinating implications for *Urashimaso*.

The novel displays its magical realist strands in a number of areas, not least in the frequent shape-shifting that characters undergo: for example, when Yukie is trying to converse with Morito in the taxi on their way to his house, we are told that “Every three minutes [or] so, he would turn into a bird or some other creature incapable of understanding the human language. A gray bird that fluffed out its feathers and buried itself in the sand on the crown of a dusty dune” (10). The shape-shifting continues in the next chapter entitled “The White Otter” (Oba does not number her ten chapters, instead giving them the names of flora, fauna, and symbolic words) when Yukie arrives at the Azabu house and meets Ryoko and Natsuo. Natsuo is described as a “magnolia spirit” who “unexpectedly shed her petals and became a butterfly taking wing” (23-24): “the spirit had metamorphosed suddenly from flora to fauna, and now the butterfly flitted down the hallway and turned into the sensual backside of a white otter” (24). The house itself becomes a forest in which “trees extended their branches in invitation, shrouded in voluptuously gay blossoms of fungi and hanging moss, and from somewhere in the depths came the faint tinkling of water” (24). This is when Yukie first meets Ryoko, who is described as a beautiful middle-aged woman with pure white hair (another oblique reference to Urashima Taro) and “the delicate beauty of an Awa doll” (24). Of course, we already know that Morito is the “man of the forest” so the leafy imagery used to describe the Azabu house further emphasizes this metaphor. Oba’s technique of having characters morph into flora and fauna leads the reader to question the line between reality and fantasy, a

border which is collapsed when Yukie and Marek return to Tokyo after a two week sojourn in Hiroshima to find that the Azabu house “had disappeared like a puff of smoke” (279) and has been made into a parking lot.

A trademark of magical realist fiction is the omission of the demarcation between narrative and quoted speech, with one of the most famous proponents being Latin American writer Gabriel Garcíá Márquez. Interestingly, Wilson points out that the deliberate omission of direct quotation marks is a practice common in classical Japanese literature, particularly in the “dreamy, fluid style” of *The Tale of Genji*, which Oba has said is the most influential work of literature in her life (123-126). Wilson notes that the characters in *Urashimaso* “resemble the ghost figures in magic realism” (127) but she does not take her argument any further to explore how magical realism can be used to comment on the discourse of national identity, instead positioning *Urashimaso* as a “revisionist story of female desire and creativity” (127).

Orbaugh (2001b) has argued that the displacements of Hiroshima and Alaska caused in Oba a “double vision” which led her to construct narratives of nostalgic fantasy. Orbaugh notes how Yukie tries to deal with the spatial and cultural displacement between America and Japan, and the temporal and cultural displacement between prewar and post-Hiroshima Japan, claiming that *Urashimaso* clearly represents a “return to a fantasized Japan of nostalgia” for Oba, although that nostalgia is complicated (315). This is a valid reading but I propose that by using the framework of magical realism, we can read *Urashimaso* as more than a novel which merely articulates one author’s concerns about her own subjectivity. Isherwood argues that Ihimaera and Oe try to reconstruct an alternate cultural paradigm in the act of remembering

and recreating their narratives of history. They do this by incorporating elements of magical realism, especially in respect to their strange distortions of time (which interestingly in Oe's *Dojidai Gēmu* occur in the forest, "the periphery of the village and a liminal space that has no structure and no sense of 'fixed' time" 123). Napier has noted that *Dojidai Gēmu* tells Japanese history from a mythicized version of a marginalized location much like Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and that other Japanese writers such as Natsume Soseki, Izumi Kyoka, Abe Kobo, Murakami Haruki and Oba use magical realism (451-475). In *Urashimaso*, multitude displacements destabilize fixed boundaries so that the stage is set for Oba to reject monolithic representations of national history and culture by making liminal characters such as Ryoko and Natsuo story-tellers and positioning Yukie (who is coincidentally a history major) as listener.

Natsuo, who candidly confesses to Yukie that "I'm mixed-blooded. I guess you could say that I'm a bastard of the postwar occupation" (33), serves to emphasise the meaninglessness of national borders and histories. She is a liminal figure who claims "I don't belong to any country. [...] I could live anywhere. Right now, I'm living in Japan because I happen to like it. Not because I don't have any place else to go, but because it suits me. If I wanted to, I could get along in any country of the world" (74). Yet despite this cavalier attitude, Natsuo needs someone to listen to her story, and Yukie fits the bill: "You think you've washed your hands of this country, don't you? Well, you're exactly the kind of person I've been looking for. Someone disinterested, but still an insider. I wanted someone like that to hear my story" (32). Natsuo's story is that of her mother Yukii who died giving birth to her, her stormy relationship with her step-mother Ryoko, and her incestuous relation-

ship with 30 year old Rei, whom she takes care of. She has grown up in a space where time has been rearranged: "I get so bored talking to people my age. It's because I grew up surrounded by people who've left time behind them. I guess I stole it from them – all that time they left behind" (50), testament to the strange temporal displacement of the Azabu household. Time is a preoccupation of magical realism, a hybrid space which, in the words of Sangari, "gives a third space and a different time the chance to emerge" (Cooper 33).

Ryoko is another story-teller, with her role being to recount her experience of Hiroshima and reveal the dropping of the bomb as a supreme act of human greed which has distorted and twisted the relations of all those around her ever since. She is a mouthpiece for conveying the message of the futility of war. For example, as she is walking amongst the ruins of Hiroshima, a small boy who is dying asks her if Japan is winning the war: "In Ryoko's mind, the War had been reduced to nothing. [...] What if the War was won or lost? How could it change anything here? [...] America, the so-called enemy, never came to her mind. It seemed to her that this hell was the miserable result of the actions of all mankind – mankind including herself. Who knew but Japan was doing the same kind of thing in another part of the world?" (92). When Morito and Ryoko make their first visit to Hiroshima in twenty-seven years, they are shocked not only by how the city has been rebuilt so that the scars of history are invisible but also by how people seem to have forgotten what happened. They are traumatized again by how life has gone on as normal for everyone else but them; this realization is conveyed vividly in a piece of imagery that is a good example of magical realism: "Morito's head spun in a strange reel and he felt a dull pain deep inside his skull. He took his skull in

his two hands and shook it out; lumps of earth with tangled white grass roots fell out in clumps” (182). Ryoko realizes that “We left something behind, didn’t we? Here, in Hiroshima. I – we – left something behind. [...] Something very important. And we’ve been living without it for thirty years” (182).

Another way in which Oba alerts the reader to the lessons of history is through conversations between Marek and Morito. On the eve of their trip to Hiroshima, Marek and Yukie have dinner with Morito and Ryoko. Marek, speaking only English, and Morito, speaking only Japanese, communicate with Yukie acting as interpreter. At first they seem to be talking at cross-purposes and Yukie is exhausted from interpreting for them. However, in spite of some awkward pauses, Morito, at least, comes away with a feeling of accomplishment: “It was remarkable that this foreign man could be a mouthpiece for some of his own thoughts. Morito could supplement the connections between some of Marek’s sentences, sometimes anticipate his thoughts for him, sometimes add a different twist to his words. Thirty years ago, it would not have occurred to him to talk to an American about these things, and he did not think it would have been possible. [...]” (192).

However, as their argument over the necessity of dropping the Atom bomb heats up, they cease to wait for Yukie’s help: “Yukie began to translate, but Morito was busy with his own thoughts and ignored her” (193). As Nemoto observes, “inserting American characters [...] along with occasional English-language words, provokes the (Japanese) audience of the novel to problematize their perspective on history” (11). Furthermore, the Japanese audience is forced to reflect on Japanese deeds during the Second World War through the figure of Ryū Azabu, who as a soldier raped a young Chinese

girl.

The possibility of reading *Urashimaso* as a narrative which counters a nationalistic view of history is strengthened by looking at some of Oba's own comments. In essays that reflect on issues of identity and exile Oba has often written of her strong distaste for the word "nationalism" ["kokkashugi" 国家主義] which resulted from her coming of age during World War Two (or the Pacific War as it is commonly known in Japan). For example, in "Kojin to kuni" ("Individual and Country") from *Sametemiru Yume*, she writes: "I was brought up during war-time, and since I was so terribly betrayed by 'the state' ["kokka" 国家], somewhere along the way I decided to live a life that had as little to do with 'the state' as possible. I want to be a citizen of the world, and I want to be a human being but I don't want to be driven into the kind of predicament whereby, by belonging to some particular country and vowing allegiance to that country, I am killed or I witness my compatriots being killed" (163). Oba in her autobiography recalls how Western music, literature and art disappeared and how *katakana* (borrowed words) were replaced with Japanese words. In order to escape from this turning upside down of the world she knew, Oba writes that she chose to live in a world of myth and legend including stories by the Brothers' Grimm, Greek mythology and *The Arabian Nights* (194). The extraordinary circumstances in which Oba came of age combined to infuse in her a sense of unreality which is reflected as displacement in her writing. In one essay entitled "Kokyō sōshitsu to hōrō" ("The loss of home and wandering") from *Yasō no yume*, she highlights people who are not content with living in the place where they were born: she describes these people who have lost their homeland ["kokokusōshitsu" 故国喪失] as strangers ["ihōjin" 異邦人] or rootless grasses ["nenashigusa" 根

無し草] (162), words which reappear in *Urashimaso*.

The theme of trauma which underlies *Urashimaso* further supports the case for reading the novel as a counter narrative. Trauma is caused by characters' displacements and, according to Laub, in order "to undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process – a process of constructing a narrative, or reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalization of the event – has to be set in motion" (69). *Urashimaso* deconstructs the myth of national identity and the alternative offered is to construct one's own narrative through the painful yet redemptive power of story-telling. Natsuo urges Yukie to "ask Mother [Ryoko] to tell you about the Bomb. You should hear it from her while you can, and learn it by heart in your own way. After all, it was the deed of human beings of the generation that gave birth to you and me" (40). In the original Japanese text, one word is repeated over and over: "memory" ["kioku" 記憶]. As the narrative begins, the emphasis is on the lack of memories – for example, Yukie's memories are often "vague" or "fragmentary," while her memory itself is described as an amoeba, a word which in its original Greek form means to change or transform: "Countless memories came alive in Yukie's mind only to fade away again. Nothing had any definite shape – nothing came into focus. Instead, everything was amorphous and constantly changing form. Blurred like a color photograph with all the colors running together" (9). Memories are part of Yukie's trauma, and in fact of all the characters in *Urashimaso*, which is why it is so important that they tell their stories.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that *Urashimaso* is a significant work of Japanese post-colonial literature because liminal characters such as Natsuo, Marek and Yukie through their temporal (historical) and spatial (geographic) displacements dismantle the myth of nation as a homeland. Furthermore, Oba's incorporation of elements of magical realism upsets "normative" narrative patterns (such as linear time, a feature of realist fiction), and opens up a third space where a new narrative can be inscribed. This novel is both a personal tale of one woman's attempts to connect with who she is, and the reinscribing of a national narrative, one that highlights the pointlessness of war and nationalism. Yukie's hopes of finding and reliving the Japan of her fantasized nostalgia are thwarted and her visit turns into something nobody counted on: "Since her return to Japan, Yukie had felt herself coming down from the floating cloud she had been living on. Her body was solidifying and she was standing on firm ground, on a piece of land, instead of a fluffy cloud in the sky. But instead of feeling secure, she wanted to kick that land with her toes and float up into the sky again and disappear" (262). In this quote towards the end of *Urashimaso*, we see Yukie coming to terms with reality and, although she knows it will bring more pain, she decides to stay in Japan for longer than the one month she originally planned, in order to "force herself to look at her own tangled roots" (270).

The possibility of a third space is also hinted at:

Here, in this country, she might find a third world for herself in addition to the two she already had. She was no longer thinking of Japan as a homeland that would welcome her with open arms, but as a place where the frail old roots inside her might grow new shoots, and then

the funny stem that had grown out in the foreign land of America might suddenly bring forth an entirely new type of blossom (298).

This idea of a third space is important, as it validates neither centre nor margin (or “this world” and “that world” in the words of Janet Frame), but instead advocates the possibilities of letting oneself explore a new space, one where identities are not fixed. The third space is reached through various displacements; in this respect, *Urashimaso* shares the propensity of magical realist texts which “admit a plurality of worlds...[and]...situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds” (Zamora 6).

The end of *Urashimaso* makes it clear that Yukie has to find a way to live in this interstitial space – after all, the house and her brother whom she was closest to have disappeared and she decides to leave Marek because “she was hampered by the fact that Marek stood somewhere between the two countries. Being hampered meant being unfree [...] Until very recently, life with a foreign man had been an adventure for her. But all that had changed, because Japan was so much more uncertain and unknown” (271). The Japan Yukie has come to know has no official history because she has listened to the versions given by liminal characters.

In this paper, I have argued *Urashimaso* can be read from the discourse of displacement and magical realism which questions nationalistic definitions of identity. These factors, by overturning our notions of place and time, create a textual third space where Oba clears the slate, so to speak, to reinscribe a new version of human existence.

Notes

- (1) See Ashcroft et al for a succinct summary of the major themes of postcolonial literature.
- (2) For a detailed analysis of displacements in Janet Frame's *The Carpathians*, see: ラクエル・ヒル「ジャネット・フレイムの『カルパチア山脈』におけるディスプレイメント—揺れるニュージーランドのアイデンティティ」瀧田佳子編『太平洋世界の文化とアメリカ』彩流社、2004年。
- (3) Oba writes in her autobiography that it was only thanks to her mother, who used copies of esteemed literary magazines such as "Gunzo" and "Shincho" as padding when sending her daughter packages, that she was able to keep up with happenings on the Japanese literary scene. It was in one of these packages that she came across an advertisement for the "Gunzo New Writer's Prize" ("Gunzo shinjinshō"); Oba entered and won and this led to her being recommended for the Akutagawa Prize. See *Mai e mai e katatsumuri*, 33-34.
- (4) Mizuta was one of the first Japanese critics to focus on Oba's works; unfortunately most of her criticism remains untranslated into English, with the exception of Chapter 5 from her book *Monogatari to hanmonogatari no fūkei – bungaku to josei no sōzōryoku* (1993). See "Symbiosis and Renewal: Transformation of the Forest World of Oba Minako." Trans. Julianne Komori-Dvorak. *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 12:5 (December 1993): 59-66.
- (5) At the time of writing, the following translations English translations of Oba's works were in print (listed in alphabetical order according to title): "Birdsong." Trans. Seiji M. Lippit. *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 12:4 (December 1991): 84-93; "Candle Fish." Trans. Yukiko Tanaka. *Unmapped Territories: New Women's Fiction from Japan*. Ed. Yukiko Tanaka. Seattle: Women in Translation, 1991. 18-38; "Double Suicide: A Japanese Phenomenon." Trans. Manabu Takeuchi and Wayne Root. *The Japan Interpreter: A Journal of Social and Political Ideas* 3:9 (Winter 1975): 344-350; "Fireweed." Trans. Marian Chambers. *Japan Quarterly* 28:3 (1981): 403-427; "Sea-Change." Trans. John Bester. *Japanese Literature Today* 5 (1980):12-19; "The Pale Fox." Trans. Stephen W. Kohl. *The Showa Anthology: Modern Japanese Short Stories 1924-1984*. Eds. Van C. Gessel and Tomone Matsumoto. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1989. 351-361; "The Repairman's Wife." Trans. Tomoyoshi Genkawa and Bernard Susser. *The Kyoto Collection: Stories from the Japanese*. Tokyo: Niheisha, 1989. 87-132; "The Smile of a Mountain Witch." Trans. Noriko Mizuta Lippit, assisted by Mariko Ochi.

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- (6) *Mai e mai e katatsumuri*, 214. All translations from Oba's stories and essays are my own, unless otherwise stated. Page numbers are shown in brackets in the text.
- (7) This quote comes from the essay "H.Y.G ni sasagu" ("To H.Y.G") quoted in Egusa (81) and is not included in Oba's collected works.
- (8) See "Ikoku no kokyo" in Oba's collection of essays *Sametemiru yume (Waking Dreams)*, 314.
- (9) Noriko Mizuta, "Introduction," *Urashimaso*. Trans. Yu Oba. Saitama: Center for Inter-Cultural Studies and Education, Josai University, 1995. xii.
- (10) Although all quotes from *Urashimaso* come from the above translation, I have slightly altered some words to make the translations read more smoothly. Page numbers are shown in brackets in the text.

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