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ENGL 4411

April 23, 2015

“For the sake of one Japanese Canadian family”:

*Mothertalk* as Family Auto/biography

### **Introduction**

*Mothertalk: Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka* began as a project by Roy Kiyooka to record the life stories of his mother, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka (*Mothertalk* 3)<sup>1</sup>. Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka was a first generation Japanese-Canadian immigrant, who raised her family in Canada during the period of Japanese internment. In a funding application letter to the Japanese Canadian Redress Foundation, Roy Kiyooka wrote, “I must [do this work] for the sake of one Japanese Canadian family and their aged mother who will be ninety-five this year” (qtd. in Egan and Helms 70). Roy Kiyooka solicited his friend, Matsuki Masutani, to interview his mother in Japanese and translate the transcripts into English, which Kiyooka then proceeded to rework and revise in a series of *Mothertalk* manuscripts (*Mothertalk* 3). When Roy Kiyooka died in 1994 during the production of *Mothertalk*, his daughters, Mariko, Fumiko, and Kiyoko, asked his former partner and family friend, Daphne Marlatt, to edit his manuscript and prepare the text for publication. Marlatt proceeded to do so in consultation with Roy Kiyooka’s children and siblings. Their feedback was eventually incorporated into the final text, along with a selection of Roy Kiyooka’s previously published writing and the transcript of an interview with Harry Shigeokiyo, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s husband and Roy Kiyooka’s Papa.

As family and friends, all contributors to *Mothertalk* had a personal investment in the content of the narrative. Of herself, Marlatt admits “I am not a disinterested editor” (*Mothertalk* 6). Neither, it seems, was Masutani a disinterested interviewer, as he “suggests that he unconsciously positioned himself as a grandson might, listening to a grandmother with great respect” (Egan and Helms 53). For Roy Kiyooka, the project was deeply personal, as he says of his mother: “She and she alone reminds me of my Japanese self” (*Mothertalk* 182). In “Mothers, Displacement, and Language,” Bell Brodzki states that “the autobiographical project symbolizes the search for origins, [...] a search for maternal origins and that elusive part of the self that is coextensive with the birth of language” (157). In *Mirrortalk*, Susanna Egan expands that parents are especially significant in diasporic auto/biography<sup>2</sup>, “in terms of their ability to define the other or originary half of diaspora” (157). She posits that for the diasporic auto/biographer, family is often emblematic of cultural displacement; however, it can also serve to place the auto/biographer within “a continuous web of identification” (126). This paper proposes to read *Mothertalk* as diasporic family auto/biography: a co-constructed intergenerational narrative that (dis)places subjective selves within collaborative interpretations of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s life stories. Family and family friends collaborate to construct a story that tells the lives of multiple generations of the Kiyooka family in context of a community of Japanese Canadian immigrant families.

### **Critical Context**

Previous criticism has not proposed to read *Mothertalk* as family auto/biography; however, it has examined widely the collaborative nature of *Mothertalk*’s creation. In an interview with Marlatt, Samantha Hodder defines *Mothertalk* as “a dual autobiography of mother and son” (2). Marlatt

agrees: “It’s both Roy’s and Mary’s. Two voices that are so incredibly twinned that it’s really difficult to pull them apart” (3). In “The Many Tongues of *Mothertalk*,” Susanna Egan and Gabriele Helms problematize Hodder’s romantic reading of the collaboration, stating: “what seems to be a collaborative venture poses problems from the start, with the risk that “Mary” is subsumed by multiple layers of reading” (47). They find that within the layering of Matsuki Masutani’s, Roy Kiyooka’s and Daphne Marlatt’s interventions, “every change marks accretions of meaning and purpose for this text as new readers become involved,” and “each listener becomes the speaker of another story shaped by yet another listener” in a process they dub “serial collaboration” (47-50).

The work of Egan and Helms is crucial in establishing the degree of influence each collaborator has on the text. Masutani’s interview style, they find, was not neutral. As an immigrant himself, he admits his questions may have directed Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka towards conversations on her own experience as a Canadian immigrant (62). Throughout his multiple manuscripts, Roy Kiyooka made liberal edits to adjust grammar, elaborate on descriptions, and add poetic stylistics to better prepare the text “for more public delivery than her [Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s] intimate conversations with Masutani had invited” (55). Marlatt claims she “unwove the stories he [Roy Kiyooka] had woven” and relied upon the original transcripts to clarify chronology and accuracy (6). However, Egan and Helms demonstrate that there are several stories that have been revised beyond recognition of the original transcripts, even after Marlatt’s proclaimed excavation (59). Egan and Helms conclude that the process of serial collaboration obscures and distorts the original meanings of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s stories, as “Each participant in this collaboration has recognized and valued something different in Mary’s storytelling” (65).

Like Egan and Helms, Sally Chivers explores the polyphony of *Mothertalk*; however, she proposes to re-interpret the “the many tongues” as “The Many Mediations of *Mothertalk*,” to place focus on acts of mediation and “the place of Mary Kiyooka’s voice within them” (70). Chivers outlines the amendments made to Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s story in footnotes, appendices, and Marlatt’s introduction. She argues that this “amplified mediation” questions Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s memory (70). Chivers notes the contradiction that “Mary’s advanced age makes her an authority through personal experience about the historical events that the editors want to frame,” but allows editors to assert “that her stories are unreliable because of her age and presumed loss of memory” (72). Given Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s marginalized position as a Japanese-Canadian immigrant woman of low socioeconomic status, Chivers argues that the collaborative construction of *Mothertalk* editors to undermine and destabilize “an already under-authorized voice” (75). Therefore, Chivers finds that “*Mothertalk* depends on the speaker’s lack of social agency so that others – her editors, her translator, and the transcription itself – speak for her and through her” (75).

In “Routes and Roots: The Auto/Biographical Voices of *Mothertalk*,” Joanne Saul acknowledges the mediation of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s authorial voice – as established by Egan, Helms and Chivers – and the resulting compromised representation of her life. In “Displacement and Self-representation,” she proposes to read *Mothertalk* as Roy Kiyooka’s “biotext.” The concept of biotext theorizes the text as an extension of the author’s self and the writing as process of self-discovery (“Displacement” 260). Saul observes: “throughout the manuscript, the process of working on, working through, translating, and transmuting his mother’s stories becomes a vector of Kiyooka’s own process of self-discovery and self naming” (“Displacement” 266).

All the above critics chart the many tongues, texts and mediations of *Mothertalk* to clarify the author and the subject of the auto/biography. Egan and Helms question: “Are we reading *Mothertalk* to learn more about Mary Kiyooka, Matsuki Masutani, Roy Kiyooka, or Daphne Marlatt?” (67). Similarly, Saul wonders, “who speaks for whom in a multiply authored text like *Mothertalk* and what are the various authors attempting to communicate?” (*Routes* 82). Ultimately, Egan and Helms conclude, “No single author can account for the many versions we have found exposed or subsumed in *Mothertalk*, the published text” (71). In part, the difficulty in determining a primary author of *Mothertalk* stems from a process in which each contributor simultaneously receives, responds to, re-interprets, and thereby appropriates the words of the others. Each revision interprets the work of previous collaborators in a way that inserts the self into the final product: what collaborators choose to emphasize, revise, and reconstruct, and their motivations for the project, are all a reflection of their own positions and priorities. Therefore, it is productive – and perhaps necessary – to examine *Mothertalk* as a co-constructed text that tells the life stories of all friends and family involved in its production: a family auto/biography.

Manuela Constantino’s framework of the family memoir is useful here. She states that family memoirs “replace the notion of a single writer” with “the ‘speaker’ who tells the story and the ‘listener’ who compiles and writes the narrative that is published” (138). She expands: “Family memoir writers are indeed positioned as the ‘listeners,’ but they are also the ‘speakers,’ as the stories that they are listening to are partly theirs and they are the ones writing (telling) the stories” (138). Reading *Mothertalk* as a family auto/biography allows for in-depth examination of the ways in which the creators of *Mothertalk* interact as simultaneous speakers and listeners. This examination will illuminate the family dynamic at play in the construction of their family auto/biography.

## Family Narratives

The process of constructing family narratives is clarified by Robyn Fivush's work on family life stories. All autobiographical memories, Fivush argues, are formed through a collaborative process of shared reminiscence and co-construction of meaning. Individuals evaluate their subjective understanding of memories in response to how they are received and contextualized by others: "In a very real sense, it is only when we share experiences with others that they become our own" (*Voice* 85). Fivush suggests that the process of external validation of memories becomes a question of authority: "Listeners can accept or dismiss, negotiate, cajole, or coerce particular evaluations over others" (*Voice* 86). Appropriately, Fivush asks: "Who has the authority to author the autobiography?" (*Voice* 83). In her autobiographical interviews, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka seeks such validation to authorize her personal experience in her interviews with Masutani. Examining the original transcripts, Egan and Helms note that she repeatedly turns to Masutani for confirmation of her stories; she demands validation with prompts like "Remember!" and "You know home, don't you?" (54). Roy Kiyooka seeks this same external validation of his autobiographical memories from his mother, noting that he sought "extended conversations" with his mother to determine a cohesive narrative of his childhood (*Mothertalk* 187). Marlatt recognizes that even Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka's memories were recorded, they were already altered by family interpretations. What Marlatt calls "the original material" of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka's memories "had already undergone subtle transformations of memory over time, altering from lived experience into a form of family legend" (*Mothertalk* 7).

Marlatt concurs with Fivush's theory of autobiographical memory as co-constructed: "we constantly retell, to ourselves and others close to us, the story of our lives, and such retelling

tends to simplify the inarticulate complexity of original experience into something more clearly formulated as story and remembered as such” (*Mothertalk* 7). Marlatt offers this as the reason different family members may have divergent understandings of the same experience. She tries to utilize co-construction in the final compilation of *Mothertalk* by inserting footnotes that offer elaborative or alternate perspectives on Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s stories. However, rather than highlight power dynamics of acceptance, negation, and coercion at play in the mediation of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s life stories, Marlatt further destabilizes the authority and accuracy of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s voice (Chivers 77). The note from Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s son, Frank, that “the story Mother tells [of Papa’s death] is just not true” (*Mothertalk* 155, n4) actively denies the validity of his mothers voice. Marlatt explicitly challenges the accuracy Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s memory, stating that in remembrance “the so-called ‘facts’ can shift” (*Mothertalk* 7). Marlatt’s inclusion of alternate perspectives actively shifts the facts of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s memory. The footnotes Marlatt inserts reinstate the original power dynamic by which the mediation of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s memories is originally produced.

In “The Intergenerational Self,” Fivush proposes to expand the study of autobiographical memory to include “Family stories, stories about shared family experiences, about the parents’ lives before the children were born, what parents’ childhoods were like, and stories of previous generations” (*Intergenerational* 134). In the case of family stories, there is increased likelihood that parents will “impose a particular shared perspectives on narratives” and, therefore, “impose particular versions of reality on their children” (*Voice* 94). Likewise, Constantino proposes that “The ways in which [families] negotiate this aspect of collaborative storytelling constitute an important feature of family memoirs because they illustrate the power dynamics at work in the familial structure and the influence of these dynamics on the interpretation process” (139). In the

case of *Mothertalk*, the traditional parent-child dynamic of autobiographical authorization is reversed by undermining Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka's authority due to her advanced age. It is further complicated by the fact that the final compilation of the text occurred after Roy Kiyooka's and Mary Kiyooka Kiyoshi's deaths. Therefore, "Marlatt could not seek final approval or authorization" from the two initial authors, and "therefore sought feedback from all of [Roy] Kiyooka's daughters and siblings" (Egan and Helms 67). This was a poor strategy for ensuring representativeness of the original stories; children of autobiographical subjects often "have a vested interest in certain kinds of truths" that reaffirm their childhood perception of their family (Constantino 144).

Roy Kiyooka considers his mother's stories a "last link" to his origins across the specific. (*Mothertalk* 11). He has vested interest in his mother's stories as connection to his Japanese roots. Masutani confirms that Roy Kiyooka's undertaking of the *Mothertalk* project was indeed an active attempt to mediate his mother's words, to "render his lost mother-tongue into English" (*Mothertalk* 4). Roy Kiyooka claims: "my mother gave me my first language" (*Mothertalk* 183). Brodski states that in auto/biography, the mother is often emblematic of cultural orientation through language: "As the child's first significant Other, the mother *engenders* subjectivity through language; she is the primary source of speech and love" (157). This experience may be amplified in the relationship between Roy Kiyooka and his mother. Marilyn Iwama states that in Nikkei communities, women – and in particular, mothers – are "represented as the primary source of cultural transmission in the home" (135). Roy Kiyooka's desire to access his mother's life stories was not just a desire for maternal attachment, but for attachment through the mother to an ordinary home.



### **“Suspended or permanent transition”: Diasporic Subjectivity**

For the diasporic writer, cultural orientation is particularly important, as the diasporic experience “holds discourses of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension, so that the diasporic subject exists in suspended or permanent transition” (Egan 125). When one leaves their country of origin, one’s sense of home is compromised, as one’s home is no longer where one is “from.” At the same time, one becomes increasingly distanced from one’s country of origin due to temporal change and assimilation with the country in which one now resides. Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka experiences this ambivalent transition from Japan to Canada. She laments: “After a long lifetime in Canada I still miss Tosa” (*Mothertalk* 142). She claims, “I’ve never gotten to know a neighbourhood as well as my childhood one” (*Mothertalk* 24). However, she is displaced from her childhood home by her outdated language and misidentified as a “rich aunt”; therefore, she is differentiated by class and nationality when she returns to visit (*Mothertalk* 166).

For Roy Kiyooka, a second-generation immigrant, this experience is further amplified. The Nisei subject is not truly from the originary country they may associate with home, therefore their only access to this country is through their parents (Wong 301). However, as a racialized subject the Nisei subject is still marked as someone who does not belong. As Lily Cho writes in her work on Asian-Canadian identity, discrimination against visibly racialized bodies means “a fourth- or fifth-generation [Asian] Canadian might still be asked to ‘go home’ in a way that a fourth- or fifth-generation white Canadian will never be” (3). Therefore, as Japanese-Canadian immigrants, the Kiyookas were denied belonging to either Japanese or Canadian identity. Roy Kiyooka summarizes: “You are of it, and you are not, and you know that very clearly” (qtd. in Miki, *Broken* 71).

### **“Enemy alien”: Japanese-Canadian Internment and Identity**

In mid twentieth-century Canada, during World War II, Japanese immigrants inhabiting Western Canada were condemned as enemy aliens, and many families were forced to enter internment camps. For the Kiyooka children, liminal diasporic identity is further complicated by active cultural condemnation of Japanese identity. The Kiyookas were forced to register as enemy alien after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour (*Mothertalk* 137). Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka states that this was not only a denunciation of their Japanese identity, but a denial of their Canadian identity. It disrupted any feeling of belonging to their new home that may have been possible. She states: “it was dismaying to be called a JAP just when we were beginning to feel Canadian” (*Mothertalk* 136).

Of the internment and criminalization of Japanese-Canadians, Sugiman states, These events in Canadian history represent the deliberate destruction of a community, a form of ‘cultural genocide,’ an erosion of human dignity, and a dramatic disruption of personal lives and family relationships. The last category is especially significant because the family had been the primary vehicle for the acquisition of an ethnic identity and for the transmission of Japanese cultural symbols in Canada. (49)

The destruction of familial and cultural transmission makes the family auto/biographical project all the more necessary. In “Mother Tongues and Other Strangers,” Angelika Bammer states of the relationship between family and national community, “When one or the other declines in importance, it seems the other(s) rise(s) commensurately” (94). For those upon whom a crisis of identity is imposed via “cultural genocide,” definition of oneself and one’s origin through familial belonging becomes all the more necessary.

### **“Dislocated Motherhood”: Immigrant Family Experience**

Chivers states that the structure of *Mothertalk* highlights the ways in which Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s mothering was adversely affected by her cultural context. (79). She argues that Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka struggles with a sense of “dislocated motherhood” (80). Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka laments, “Motherhood and grief have gone together from the beginning of my life in Canada” (*Mothertalk* 96). Her entrance into motherhood is marked by cultural displacement, as she tells of her immigration to Canada, “Papa said I cried a lot at first. He said he couldn’t do much to console me so he gave me a child” (60). In this passage, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka makes her own equation of filial attachment and cultural belonging, as one becomes a substitute for the other. However, both connections are repeatedly denied to her throughout her motherhood.

Following a trip to Tosa, financial constraints force Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka to leave her first-borns, George and Mariko, with extended family in Japan (*Mothertalk* 67). This separation is intended to last for three years, but due to economic hardship and the birth of more children, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka couldn’t keep her promise of return (*Mothertalk* 68). The ramifications of the separation last even longer. Of George, she laments: “those ten years spent in Umagi have turned out to be the very heart of our estrangement” (*Mothertalk* 115). She admits that Mariko perceives that “Papa and I abandoned her when she was a child,” and that though they live together in their elderly years, they “seldom talk [...] and she looks at me as if I were a stranger” (*Mothertalk* 116). The depth of their division is the topic of many of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s stories. Even in family photos their absence is evident. Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka remarks: “Looking through this album I’m reminded of Mariko’s absence and all the pain her prolonged absence caused” (94). For Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka and her family, geographic distance becomes the source of emotional distance between her family.

Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka repeatedly relates diasporic or cultural trauma to familial disconnection or vice versa. She blames her separation from Japan on a parental error in judgement: “It was my father’s mistake to send me to Canada” (*Mothertalk* 42). She explains that her father mistakenly identified Harry Shigekiyo Kiyooka as part of a wealthier “Kiyooka clan” (*Mothertalk* 28). Papa’s emigration is rooted in familial trouble as well: “Papa was in Canada because he had a big quarrel with his feckless father” (*Mothertalk* 45). Papa’s emigration may also be the root of their marital estrangement, as by the time Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka and Harry Shigekiyo Kiyooka met, “he was no longer quite Japanese,” and was thus already culturally estranged from his fiancée (*Mothertalk* 150). Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka relates her family’s poverty to Papa’s poor relationship with his family, observing that “Only the guys who had learned a family trade and knew how to use their skills over here succeeded” (*Mothertalk* 70). In her narration of events, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s displacement from Japan, estrangement from her husband, and economic struggle are all attributed to familial disconnection.

Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka recognizes the shared experience of familial disconnect amongst a community of Japanese-Canadian families. She compares her separation from George and Mariko, finding “Lots of Issei families went through the same kind of separations” (*Mothertalk* 67). Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka attributes traumatic experience to the cultural displacement of many Japanese-Canadian families in addition to her own. She attributes the widespread alcoholism amongst Japanese-Canadian men to diasporic lack of belonging, stating that most lack “a woman to comfort them here let alone a family. I guess they drank to assuage their loneliness” (*Mothertalk* 48). Iwama directly attributes the dysfunctional patterns of young Japanese-Canadian immigrant families to their displacement; she explains that had they remained in Japan,

young families could have sought guidance from their elders (131). The simultaneous cultural and familial estrangement experienced by first-generation Japanese-Canadian immigrants is the direct cause of traumatic relations amongst migrated family members.

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong explains the conflict between American-born children and their Japanese-born parents as a cultural clash between “New World” and “Old World.” She characterizes the realization of “how American [the children] have become” in contrast with their parents as “representatives of the culture of origin” as “psychologically threatening” and therefore concludes: “immigrants and their children frequently do experience their family conflicts *in the form of* cultural confrontation” (301). Wong’s analysis applies equally to the conflict between first-generation Japanese-Canadians and their children. As evidenced by Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s experience of cultural confrontation with her husband, father and children, the cultural displacement of immigration and internment is a direct cause of familial conflict and estrangement.

### **“I wonder how we translate ‘family’”: Diasporic Relations**

Bammer explores the tension of communicating “family (hi)story” (96) across the generational and geographic divides. She questions, “I wonder how we translate “family” through the experience of cultural displacement? [...] And what gets ‘lost in translation’?” (91). Language and cultural misunderstanding is a major barrier to the Kiyooka family’s intergenerational connection. Roy Kiyooka laughs at his situation: “I need a translator to listen to my own mother’s story” (*Mothertalk* 3). However, his humour also conceals acute pain at the reality: “every time a word forms on the tip of my tongue, it bears the pulse of an English which is not my mother tongue” (*Mothertalk* 181). Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka finds the situation painful as well:

“My kids will never know what befell their Mom because she never learned to speak English well and they didn’t learn enough Nihongo” (*Mothertalk* 15). Language becomes an additional barrier to familial and cultural transmission.

Banner she argues that the language in which a family communicates indicates how the family defines their national identity (96). That the Kiyooka children do not learn Japanese indicates that their parents have prioritized integration into Canadian culture at the expense of segregation from their Japanese heritage. Papa makes this distinction clear: when Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka expresses regret that they did not teach their children Japanese, he replies: “It’s okay, they’re Canadians so English is more important” (*Mothertalk* 152). However, this same judgment is not made for Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s language acquisition. Upon arriving to Canada, she learns to “speak and tell simple things” in English, but is not taught to read or write (*Mothertalk* 148). This is caused by a failure of familial connection: Papa was unwilling to take time to teach her (*Mothertalk* 59). Instead, the circumstances in which Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka learns to speak English are also emblematic of her disconnection with her children. She acquires the English language not through interaction with her own children, but with the child of another while she works as a nanny. This child receives the cultural and linguistic transmission denied to her own children: “I taught it all the Japanese lullabies of my childhood and together we learned to speak English” (*Mothertalk* 61).

The linguistic division also makes a clear distinction between Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka as Japanese and her children as Canadian. In part, the Kiyooka parents do not teach their children Japanese because “the desire to rid ourselves of our immigrant status was very strong” due to the national discrimination against Japanese-Canadians (*Mothertalk* 151). Therefore, the Kiyookas’ linguistic divide is another instance of family divided by cultural trauma.

Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka is also denied access to her mother tongue. Her Japanese dialect was “arrested in time at the point of her emigration,” and therefore outdated in contemporary Japan (*Mothertalk* 4). After some time in Canada, she is not considered fluent in Japanese or English. Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s linguistic limbo is indicative of her liminal diasporic status: after emigrating from Japan, she belongs wholly to neither country. Her new intermediary identity is indicated by new linguistic practice. She notes that she now often combines the two languages: “I get all mixed-up and break into English and say ‘fish’ instead of ‘sakana’” (30).

Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s hybrid speech is reminiscent of Roy Kiyooka’s invented “inglish”: “his own transformation of anglocentric ‘English’ into a language that could articulate the networks of a subjectivity nurtured in another mother tongue, in his case the vernacular, childhood ‘Japanese’ which he absorbed through his mother” (Miki, *Broken* 76, n2). Both mother and son are striving towards a language in which they can both communicate. Karla Schultz notes that for immigrant families, the “mother tongue” could refer either to the parents’ native language or the new language an immigrant mother learns from her children (qtd. in Bammer 96). Bammer expands: “The question, then, becomes: Which is the mother tongue in this case: that of the parent(s) or that of the child(ren)? A solution by which to avoid such an either/or choice is to construct the family language multilingually” (96-97). Roy Kiyooka’s “inglish” is exactly such a language. So too may be Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s accidental hybrid of English and Japanese. In contrast to his mother, Roy Kiyooka characterizes the strained communication between parents and children as an increased effort to communicate despite linguistic barriers, motivated by “an unspoken sense of the familial that tied us together” (*Mothertalk* 184).

### “Another time and place”: Writing Across Familial Divides

Bammer claims the structure of a family narrative can serve to “[bridge], even though it cannot fill in, the spaces of silence created by the people whose stories had remained untold” (94).

Azade Seyhan states that narratives of immigration “The labors of memory transcribed in language reclaim the lost experience of another time and place” (175). *Mothertalk* is a labour to reclaim the lost experience of family connection across time and place. Marlatt attempts to forge connections between families as her edits emphasize the Kiyookas’ placement within a community of Issei families (*Mothertalk* 8). She also attempts to place Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka within the narrative arc of Canadian history by selectively including stories that are primarily set in Canada, and by including Roy Kiyooka’s letter to the Japanese-Canadian Redress Secretariat at the end of the book (Chivers 74). Roy Kiyooka attempts to define and place his subjectivity in relation to his family and community through the act of writing. Roy Miki argues: “In the pragmatics of survival as one of a beleaguered minority, though, writing also became the most effect mode of articulating the personal, familial, and communal conditions of being Japanese-Canadian” (*Broken* 57-8). Roy Kiyooka confirms, “Oh yeah, to me [writing] had to do with surviving – survival. At some level I needed to be able to come to an articulateness by which I could stand in this world of literate people, and hold my own” (qtd. in Miki, *Broken* 55). As previously established, for the diasporic subject, origin (and thereby identity) is permanently under question from oneself and others. Constantino states that the immigrant auto/biographer is enabled to reclaim identity by appropriating their families stories: “i.e. they *inherit* the migration experience and the history attached to it” (139).

However, Chivers finds that, in *Mothertalk*, appropriation is “simultaneously productive and out of place” (72). The co-construction of a family auto/biography in *Mothertalk* is not a



process of equals. Fivush outlines the possible consequences for the parent-child co-construction of autobiographical memory:

to the extent that parents share power with their children, children are given voice; they are empowered and have authority over their life experiences. [...] To the extent that they exert power over their children by imposing certain stories, children may come to tell these stories but not necessarily from their own subjective perspective. They will not have a sense of ownership of these memories; they are not the authors of their own autobiography. (*Voice* 93)

In *Mothertalk*, power is not always shared. Editors impose the inclusion and structuring of stories upon the auto/biographical project. Many of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka's stories have been re-told by Marlatt and Roy Kiyooka; not from her own subjective perspective. Nor are they necessarily from the subjective perspective of her children, as evidenced by the protestation in footnotes. Stories that are excluded are effectively silenced, and therefore selections of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka's perspectives on the past are invalidated. In comparison to Fivush's model of parents (in)validating their children's stories, the placement of authority within the Kiyooka family appears to be reversed.

Bammer states that such reversal is common in immigrant families, in which cultural and linguistic authority is more readily claimed by the children. Bammer observes that the parents' fluency in the language of the new country "is often, as it is tellingly put, broken," while their "children come to master the very cultural codes (language, modes of dress, forms of social interaction), ignorance of which functionally reduces the parents to children" (100-1). Chivers notes a disruption in the parent-child dynamic of the Kiyooka family as well: "That Mary Kiyooka outlived her son indicates that the process of "passing down" stories is not necessarily

linear – perhaps Mary should have sought to record Roy’s experiences instead of the other way around” (76). Therefore, the traditional power dynamics of autobiographical construction are reversed and the various participants in the compilation of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s life stories have the power to grant or deny authorization to her voice; she is not the author of her own autobiography.

### **Conclusion**

No contributor to *Mothertalk* is equal author of this family auto/biography. Despite the cooperative intention of the project, voices compete and displace one another in their attempts to be heard. W. J. T. Mitchell states: “Every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy” (qtd. in Seyhan 176). As the stories in *Mothertalk* have undergone several acts of representation (the first of which being in Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka’s own memory), there are gaps left throughout the text where contributors’ incongruent intentions have interfered with the realization of each other’s vision for the text.

The fragmentary process of *Mothertalk*’s creation represents the fragmentary nature of the identity of a Japanese-Canadian family marked by diasporic trauma. The Kiyooka family is haunted by a diasporic experience that severs intercultural transmission, impedes intergenerational communication, and condemns their Japanese heritage, while simultaneously denying their newfound Canadian identities. Their familial legacy of disrupted identification and communication motivates the search for connection through the process of family auto/biography. However, denied the opportunity to develop productive strategies for

interpersonal communication, each family member's voice is partially modified, negotiated, misconstrued, contested, or invalidated.

In some ways the fragmented production of *Mothertalk* is an apt representation of the Kiyooka family's experience. Lai argues that linear narratives "inadvertently denies the discontinuities, reversals, and aporias in experience, self-understanding, self-sameness, and writing, as well as the ongoing racisms and injustices that can so easily be erased then repeated" (7). Conversely, the fragmented layers of *Mothertalk* communicate the fragmented lives and identities of its authors. However, Larissa Lai argues that when "something of experience is articulated [...] the articulation of partial experience drives deeper into repression that which is not, or perhaps cannot be, articulated" (41). While *Mothertalk* attempts to address to effects of diasporic trauma upon the Kiyooka family, the denial of authority to voice(s) in already marginalized position(s) provides a model for readers that allows this trauma to be reinstated.

Roy Kiyooka states: "I long ago recognized that I was given a job to do and that job had to do with being, for my own immediate family in the first instance, a kind of voice, and a cultural voice in a collective sense" (qtd. in Egan and Helms 70). *Mothertalk* is an effort by the Kiyooka family to express their distinct "cultural voice" in a collective sense. Roy Kiyooka, Daphne Marlatt, Matsuki Masutani, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, and other members of the Kiyooka clan collaborate to create an auto/biographical representation of the Kiyooka family through the life stories of their grandmother, wife, family friend, and mother. The auto/biographical project is productive in many ways. It forges connections within the Kiyooka family. It also connects the Kiyookas family with other families of Japanese-Canadians who shared experience of migratory displacement, racialized segregation and discrimination, linguistic differences, and diasporic trauma. However, in their engagement with these phenomena, the collaborators

recreate some of the disruptions they wish to rectify. Subjective perspectives are denied, content is excluded, language is modified, subjects are textually displaced, and voices are silenced. The dysfunctional collaboration of voices within *Mothertalk* reflects the dynamic of a family surviving intergenerational trauma. Language and identity are disrupted by diasporic displacement, and this interferes with the Kiyooka family's ability to co-construct a representative family narrative. Still their voices struggle to collaborate in the construction of a text that will reconcile generational displacements, offer familial and cultural belonging, and strive towards intergenerational healing.

## Notes

1. Though it is not conventional citation practice, I have chosen to follow Susanna Egan's and Gabriele Helms' precedent of citing *Mothertalk: Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka* by title, rather than by primary author. This decision is intended to address the ambiguity of the primary authorship of *Mothertalk* and the ways in which the text is authored by all who contribute (as argued in this paper and by previous critics).
2. I use the term "auto/biography" to indicate the ways in which *Mothertalk* is simultaneously biographical and autobiographical. In my interpretation of *Mothertalk* as family auto/biography, collaborators participate in the writing of their own lives while writing the lives of others simultaneously. This relates to a theoretical argument that all auto/biography is relational, as discussed in Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices," *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (37-8).

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