

Eglė Kačkutė (2016) “Mother Tongue as the Language of Mothering and Homing Practice in Betty Quan’s *Mother Tongue* and Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*”. In Vallianatos, H. and Kuroczycka Schultes, A., eds., *The Migrant Maternal: ‘Birthing’ New Lives Abroad*, Toronto: Demeter Press, pp. 56-74.

Mother Tongue as the Language of Mothering and Homing Practice in Betty Quan’s *Mother Tongue* and Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Survival Strategies and Identity Construction of Migrant and Refugee Mothers

“I am my language. I speak Chinese. Your voices. Your words. You drown me out” (Quan 14) – says the Mother to her children in Betty Quan’s play *Mother Tongue* underlining the crucial aspect of mothering in exile, the language of mothering, as a site in which the cultural/ethnic identity, the sense of self and maternal subjectivity intersect and are negotiated. This chapter explores the language of mothering through two fictional accounts of immigrant mothering both of which underscore the tension between mothering practices and linguistic difference. It aims to address this tension by suggesting that in the context of migration, the language of mothering can be conceptualised as a mothering and homing practice, which functions as a structuring, creative force that produces and shapes both migrant mothers’ and their children’s subjectivities. The chapter will consider two fictional texts: the play *Mother Tongue* (1996) by Chinese-Canadian playwright Betty Quan and the novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) by Japanese-Canadian author Hiromi Goto, both featuring immigrant and refugee mothers who mother primarily in their own mother tongue rather than English, the language of the host country, Canada.

Both Quan and Goto are award winning authors. Quan is a playwright writing for stage, radio and television as well as a children’s author, whereas Goto is primarily a novelist who also writes for young adults. They both make extensive use of Chinese and Japanese folklore respectively in their work and explore issues of identity, racism, belonging, cultural difference and the generation gap. Goto was born

in Japan and immigrated to Canada with her family as a young child. She is fully bilingual and uses Japanese to speak to her sisters and bilingual friends (Grant). Quan is a first generation Chinese Canadian who spoke Cantonese at home as a child, but with assimilation lost much of the vocabulary and uses “Chinglish”¹ to communicate with her mother. The play was inspired by Quan’s school friend, whose Chinese mother was a widow with no other immediate family members in Vancouver and is therefore partly based on first hand observations of the difficult experience of immigrant mothering.² Goto’s novel draws on her experience of growing up on a mushroom farm with her immigrant parents and the character of the grandmother, *Obāchan*, is loosely based on her own monolingual Japanese grandmother.

In recent decades, mothering in Asian Canadian and American women’s writing has often been read through the paradigm of speech, the “woman speech” (Collins 69), which has been interpreted as a source of power and maternal agency in the face of North American “discourses and practices of domination” (Lee-Loy 318). For example, Ho conceptualises the “talk story”³ as a means through which racialised mothers equip their daughters with survival strategies, thus, constructing and establishing a specific ethnic identity for both mothers and daughters (Ho), whereas the lack of it, that is “silence as the act of mothering” (Lee-Loy 320), is associated with the inability to do so. I argue that the actual language of mothering, in this case, the mother tongue of the immigrant mother can also be read as a mothering practice and a productive, positive force as well as a source of maternal, not only cultural agency.

Both literary texts chosen for the analysis are arguably multilingual. Written in English for the most part, they use other languages; Cantonese and American Sign Language (ASL) in *Mother Tongue* and Japanese in *Chorus of Mushrooms* as

important structural and artistic devices. *Mother Tongue* features three main characters with different linguistic identities. The mother mainly uses Cantonese and some broken English, her son Steve speaks ASL and her daughter Mimi is fluent in all three languages, thus, playing the role of a communication facilitator between her mother and her younger brother. The relatively equal weight in languages used in the play is a metaphor for an immigrant family in which all three members enjoy different linguistic and cultural identities and reflects the equally shared perspective amongst the three characters. The printed text of the play is written entirely in English with linguistic difference marked in parenthesis before each phrase as (C) for Cantonese, (E) for English, when the monologue is carried out in Cantonese, and (ASL) for American Sign Language, thus, indicating that it too is granted the status of a language in the play (Samuels).⁴ Contrariwise, *Chorus of Mushrooms* features phrases in Japanese without the English translation and sometimes even Japanese characters without Romanisation. Like the stage productions of *Mother Tongue*, such an artistic device puts readers in the situation of minority language people who experience varying degrees of confusion in their every day lives and makes the reader identify with the immigrant mothers portrayed in the play and the novel in question.⁵

Both immigrant mother characters that constitute the focus of this discussion left their homelands out of necessity and struggle to feel at home in Canada, but cannot be said to be melancholically drawn towards what they had left behind either. The Mother in *Mother Tongue* left China for political reasons at the age of 18 and is disenchanted with her new life in Canada: “I left China for Canada. Alone. We were rich. Capitalists. (E) But the war had brought the Japanese, followed by Mao’s government. [...] Over twenty years gone and I sometimes wonder why I ever came at all” (Quan, 25). She is a widow of a Chinese man with whom she had two children;

an elder daughter Mimi, an aspiring architect, and a teenage son Steve who lost his hearing due to an ear infection at the age of eleven. She speaks Chinese to her children and feels unable to learn either of their languages.

The *Chorus of Mushrooms* features two mother figures: the grandmother or *Obāchan* called Naoe and her own daughter Keiko/Kay, the mother of Naoe's granddaughter Murasaki/Muriel, who is the main character and narrator in the novel. Interestingly, Naoe, who is also one of the narrators, is a second time immigrant. She had followed her husband to China as a young woman and a new mother and joined her daughter Keiko's family in Nanton, a small town in Alberta, as a divorced woman and a mother dependant on an adult daughter. In China, she was an oblivious, powerless and voiceless wife of a man who would build bridges used to occupy the country. She "never learnt to speak Mandarin or Cantonese or any other dialect" (Goto 53) and confided her young daughter Keiko to a Chinese servant boy. At the time when the novel is set, she is an independently-minded and self-conscious woman who enjoys a strong sense of identity in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationality, age and motherhood. Nevertheless, she remains strangely isolated by the "noisy silence" of her native Japanese that nobody from her immediate environment seems to understand.

The novel opens with the image of Naoe sitting on an uncomfortable wooden chair in the hallway, obstructing the entrance to the house and speaking Japanese so loudly that she silences all other conversation in the house: "Obāchan, please! I wish you would stop that. Is it too much to ask for some peace and quiet?" (Goto 16) – implores her daughter Keiko. Keiko, who insists on being called Kay, came to Canada deliberately and set up a mushroom farm with her Japanese born husband Shinji. She would tenaciously not speak a word of Japanese and it is unclear whether it is her

conscious and wilful choice or a sort of aphasia that her husband, who, following their joint decision to “put Japan behind us and fit more smoothly with the crowd” (Goto, 211), suffers from. Eloquently, Keyko is not granted a narrative voice in the book and is only heard through direct speech in dialogue with either her mother Naoe or her daughter Muriel, which gives her an authentic and autonomous voice and perspective that the reader is discouraged to identify with and suggests a degree of lack of autonomy in relation to her mother and daughter. Indeed, when Naoe runs away without an explanation and disappears, Keyko falls into a debilitating depression, takes to her bed and becomes literally dependent on her daughter who nurses her back to physical and emotional health. Lee-Loy reads Keyko’s silence vis-à-vis her daughter as an act of mothering that ensures the daughter’s survival by preventing her from standing out in the culture she lives in, but concludes that this mothering strategy fails to provide the daughter with an authentic sense of ethnic identity (Lee-Loy). Consequently, Keyko’s identity comes across as complex and multiple. Her silence in her native Japanese seems to be both an expression of a lack of identity and a source of agency at the same time. In a newspaper feature, “The Multicultural Voices of Alberta,” she highlights her deliberate decision to move to Canada and to adopt the host culture as her own. Keyko runs a successful business, creates jobs and ends up supporting her mother Naoe on the road trip she embarks on after leaving her daughter’s house. Naoe uses Keyko’s credit card, which she steals on her departure to pay for her meals in Asian restaurants and hotel bills. The credit card receipts that Keiko regularly receives and pays let her know that her mother is alive and, as she remarks to Muriel, eats well. Such an impersonal, estranged and silent form of daughterly care is an interesting metaphor for mother-daughter relationships in migration, across an insurmountable cultural distance. As conventional expressions of

love between a mother and adult daughter such as shared conversations, meals, common interests or hobbies are inaccessible to Naoe and Keiko due to their enormous cultural and linguistic differences, Keiko resorts to keeping up with her mother's news through reading the credit card receipts as silent communications containing information on her mother's whereabouts and diet. It is also Keiko's only possibility of looking after her old mother: providing her with comfortable accommodation, a clean bed and regular meals.

Lee-Loy interprets Naoe's refusal to speak anything but Japanese as her bid "to protect and fortify Muriel's ethnic identity, and in doing so, to provide Muriel with the confidence needed to define and claim space for herself as a Japanese Canadian" (Lee-Loy 321). I take this idea further and demonstrate that the mother tongue as the language of mothering in diaspora can function as a productive mothering and homing practice that helps immigrant mothers create a lasting bond with their children, establish both their and their children's identities as positively different and provide both immigrant mothers and their children with a sense of ethnic, cultural, maternal, and self identity.

The theoretical framework of this inquiry combines feminist migration theory and the theory of maternal subjectivity. Migration theorist Irene Gedalof claims that migrant mothers often negotiate and create a sense of belonging in their host country through their subject position as mothers, especially their ability to adapt familiar mothering practices to new cultural and physical contexts. Therefore, Gedalof conceptualises migrant mothers' homing practices that she describes as "the embodied work of mothering, such as childbirth and childcare, and the work of reproducing cultures and structures of belonging, such as the passing on of culturally specific histories and traditions regarding food, dress, family and other inter-personal

relationships” (Gedalof 82) as dynamic, transformative, and productive, that is to say constructive of identity. Her point of contention is that the reproductive sphere in the context of migration is far from being repetitive and reproductive of the identity that immigrant mothers left behind. On the contrary, she believes that mothering in migration is a site of intense negotiations of difference and change that consist of constant reformulations of identity. Therefore, Gedalof sees such embodied mothering practices as dressing, styling one’s and one’s children’s hair, furnishing and adorning one’s house or cooking as performative manifestations of cultural identity that are gradually reshaped and given a new meaning by repetitively adapting those practices to a foreign environment, each time modifying them further. Drawing on feminist interpretations of the domestic sphere, Gedalof advances the notion of “repetition that undoes, or that recollects forwards” (Gedalof 96). Repetition that undoes suggests performing habitual daily acts in a new non-habitual environment, with different tools and modified devices, whereas remembering forwards entails training children to perform certain elements of immigrant mothers’ birth culture so that they can be competently, meaningfully and creatively practiced as their own. As Gedalof remarks: “It is marking time through the ‘same’ family and cultural rituals taking place in a different context that requires endless subtle re-inventions and adaptations to a different range of possible private and public spaces, appropriate dress and adornment, food and drink, etc.” (*Ibid.*). Such mothering practices create identities that are familiar, recognizable, but new and original. They are transformative and innovative because they take place in an unnatural environment. I suggest that the idea of a repetitive mothering practice that undoes and recollects forward can be extended to thinking of the language of mothering and, more specifically, the native languages of the immigrant mothers featured in chosen texts. Like other culturally

specific mothering practices such as cooking or dressing, language also requires “endless subtle re-inventions and adaptations” and as such can be considered to be an embodied mothering practice that produces and shapes identity.

Philosopher Alison Stone proposes a psychoanalytical theory of maternal subjectivity. She develops a useful concept of maternal space as relational and characterised by a dynamic connectedness as well as distinctiveness of the mother and child. Stone describes it as follows: “A mobile, temporal space, it takes concrete embodied shape over time as the mother and child’s patterns of coming and going, thus, intrinsically embodying the significance of their particular modes of being-together” (Stone 76). The maternal space is largely based on Julia Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic *chora* and as such is a womb-like mother-child corporeal space, defined by pre-linguistic production of meaning and socialisation initiating the child into the world of codes and denotations (Kristeva). Despite it being relational, it is called maternal as it is dominated and regulated by the mother. Stone observes: “the mother figures twice over within the *chora*: once as the emerging other with whom the child is entwined, second as the overall corporeal context of their entwinement” (Stone 65). Being herself a subject in the process of becoming and the background of her own and her child’s becoming, she provides the stability necessary for the child’s development symbolised by her nurturing body and creates conditions for change necessary for her own and her child’s identity formation. Significantly, Stone situates the nurturing and structuring *chora* outside of the mother’s body, between the mother and child thus making it not the mother’s only, but a shared zone.⁶ This way, the maternal space that is dominated and regulated by the mother is no longer suffocated by maternal authority and, as a result, does not necessitate the child’s breaking away from it completely. Due to its social function and spatial as opposed to entirely corporeal

character, maternal space displays nurturing and fostering qualities without the mother's uninterrupted presence in it and can serve as a mother's substitute or extension of sorts. Stone writes: "The child comes to accept the mother's difference insofar as potential space establishes a field of secure and *ongoing* connection with the mother" (*Ibid.* 71). Thus, the maternal space, the uninterrupted connectedness to the mother, continues to provide security, nurturing and structuring even if the actual mother temporarily extracts herself from the physical proximity to the baby. This also suggests that it is not only the child that receives the nurturing necessary for growth and development, but the mother, too as "containing, supporting, nurturing is then received by the mother as much as given by her" (*Ibid.* 76). The theory can be productively applied to immigrant mothering as an immigrant mother brings up her children in a cultural and linguistic context she herself does not easily navigate and therefore needs to be "mothered" or supported in some way by her own children who develop a higher degree of belonging in the host culture and do so faster due to schooling and socialisation. Furthermore, the mother tongue of the immigrant mother and her language of mothering can be conceived as the maternal space that is both the overall context of the mother-child connectedness, but also provides some room for the mother's alterity and the child's cultural difference vis-à-vis their mother. Stone suggests that the principal aspect of the maternal that accompanies the human being throughout their life is the language. "Our speaking lives", Stone claims, "are organised by fantasy patterns and relational structures first laid down in childhood" (*Ibid.* 79). If linguistic maternal presence has such a lasting impact on an individual life, the language of mothering also shapes that individual in many important ways and crucially provides the mother with the possibility of an enduring and meaningful relationship with their offspring, even if they develop a linguistically and culturally

different identity over the years.

The Mother in *Mother Tongue* and the grandmother in *The Chorus of Mushrooms* insist on speaking only their own mother tongue to their children and, in the case of *Obāchan*, to the granddaughter, as well. For *Obāchan*, who understands and can but will not speak English, it is firstly an act of defiance vis-à-vis her daughter Keiko and secondly, as Lee-Loy suggests, an act of mothering in relation to her granddaughter Murasaki. Naoe believes that Keiko “has forsaken identity. Forsaken!” (Goto 24) and thus failed to teach her daughter Murasaki/Muriel Japanese, although “she calls me *Obāchan* and smiles. ... she can read the lines on my brow, the creases beside my mouth” (Goto 26), which suggest a deep connection between the grandmother and granddaughter. The Mother’s initial attachment to her native Cantonese in *Mother Tongue* comes across as a reaction to the threat of losing her identity in the process of migration, as a mechanism of self-preservation. She says: “I am my language. I speak Chinese. Your voices. Your words. You drown me out” (Quan 14). As if the foreign languages her children speak to her have the power to obliterate her own existence.

Both Naoe and the Mother feel physically close to their children, but are unable to connect on a symbolic, deeper level and it is their linguistic difference that seems to be the main culprit in their alienation. Naoe says about her daughter Keiko that she is:

A child from my heart, a child from my body, but not from my mouth. The language she forms on her tongue is there for the wrong reasons. You cannot move to a foreign land and call that place home because you parrot the words around you. Find home inside yourself first, I say. Let your home words grow out from the inside, not the outside in. *Che!*” (Goto 56).

Home here is an essentialist concept as it is contained inside of one's body. Home is also indissociable from the native language, which too belongs in the realm of the body. Home can and should be found or identified inside the psycho-physical space in order to be further developed by letting the words, that is to say, language, identity grow out of that mental state. Home has to be grown, created through daily, embodied practices as the "inside" here refers to the maternal body, which has the capacity to grow, nurture and birth an autonomous being out of the familiar inside. For Naoe home is not a ready-made edifice one can move into and mechanically appropriate by mimicking the identity markers of the local population. It is rather a new identity that can and should be gradually and patiently constructed through familiar practices, such as performing native cultural rituals, food and language progressively integrating aspects of the adopted culture and thus familiarising them. For example, Naoe picks up English, the language of the host country, just by listening to it for twenty years. Creating this sort of home is a productive mothering practice that has the power to offer both mother/grandmother and daughter/granddaughter a sense of identity that would be anchored in her embodied relationship with the maternal culture, in this case Japanese, and the culture they both live in, the one that grows on them imperceptibly from the outside.

Similarly, the Mother in *Mother Tongue* deplores her loneliness in Canada despite having mothered two children there and the disconnection from them she suffers:

My husband dead and me alone. None of my own family to comfort me. No. There are my children. But I often feel as if I bore strangers whose souls have been stolen by invisible spirits. I wonder, when I am dead, if my children will

remember to honour me on *Chingming*. Will they follow tradition?" (Quan 25).

Despite their physical similarity to the Mother, the children lack something essential (she calls it soul) that would make them recognizable to her. The missing quality of her children seems to be related to their ability to reproduce the cultural rituals familiar to the Mother, the Chinese rituals the practice of which makes her who she is in the same way as speaking Chinese constitutes the core of her sense of self.

Both Naoe's and Mother's fidelity to their respective native languages is reminiscent of Gedalof's theory of homing practices in migration as it is tightly knit with the repetitive work of reproducing cultures and relational structures by passing on the culturally specific stories, cooking traditions and dressing habits as well as behavioural and relational conventions. The Mother in *Mother Tongue* is concerned with teaching her daughter to perform the ritual of burning spirit money and making offerings of oranges to the spirits on the occasion of the traditional Chinese festival of *Chingming*, the tomb-sweeping day associated with Chinese ancestral veneration. She also tells her children the popular Chinese mythical tale of *jingwei*, a metaphorical story of migration and identity transformation. Furthermore, the family are portrayed in the play as having traditional Chinese food for dinner. The *Chorus of Mushrooms* is also full of traditional tales that Murasaki inherits from *Obāchan* and readjusts them to suit her own purposes of identity construction. Naoe, Keiko and Murasaki all engage in the traditionally Japanese cultural practice of ear cleaning, which is the ultimate expression of intimacy in Japanese culture and becomes a metaphor for otherwise incommunicable mother-daughter affection and love in migration. Japanese food plays a particularly significant role in the *Chorus of Mushrooms* as Keiko, who,

according to Naoe, “has forsaken identity,” “converted from rice and *daikon* to wieners and beans” (Goto 24), in other words, adopted Canadian culinary culture, whereas Naoe, who would not eat at the family dinner table, sticks to dried salted squid and rice crisps. Most significantly, food in the novel is semantically linked with language, the native language of origin, which is imagined as a nourishing source of sustenance ensuring the survival of identity in the process of migration. As Naoe’s granddaughter Murasaki explains:

I was always hungry for words, even when I was very little. Dad, the man without opinion, and Mom hiding behind an adopted language. ... *Obāchan* took another route, something more harmonious. Showed me that words take form and live and breathe among us. Language is a living beast (Goto 104).

Keiko’s daughter Murasaki is shown here unable to develop as a person, to grow and become independent brought up solely with her mother’s adopted cuisine and language. She needs her grandmother’s constant and unintelligible, but vitally charged flow of Japanese coming straight from the “inside”, from the productive maternal body and thus itself alive and nourishing as well as nurturing. *Obāchan*’s native language in this passage and, indeed in the entire novel, comes across as an important source of life and agency. After Naoe’s departure, Murasaki nurses her mother back to health by feeding her Japanese food of the same name as their family name, *Tonkatsu*. Towards the end of the novel, Keiko, who refuses to understand or speak Japanese, says: “At least she’s eating well, *Mattaku!* But I still hope you can do better than one postcard!” (Goto 204).⁷ All of this goes to show that the mother’s native language, along with other modes of “reproducing cultures and structures of belonging” (Gedalof 82) is an important parameter that helps sustain the mother’s

identity and structure the identity of the children at least to a degree.

According to Gedalof's theory, repetitive mothering practices set around food, cultural rituals and, I argue, language is a dynamic process "that requires endless subtle re-inventions and adaptations" (Gedalof 96). To Gedalof, this is the repetition that recollects forward and births something that is both new and familiar. Thus, the embodied and repetitive homing practices the mother engages with in the *Mother Tongue*, including the repetitive use of Cantonese, can be seen as producing identities – her own and her children's – that are familiarly Chinese, but Canadian enough to be new and autonomous. In one of the episodes the mother consciously attracts the daughter's attention to her ritualistic activity to remind her of its significance and symbolism:

MOTHER: (C) The incense is very fragrant, isn't it?

MIMI: Moon festival?

MOTHER: *Chingming*. (C) Have you forgotten already?

MIMI: No, I remember. I just get all of them confused, that's all (Quan 30).

The short exchange and the two different languages used in the dialogue – Cantonese by the mother and English by the daughter – demonstrate that Mimi is already initiated into Chinese culture enough to recognise what the mother is doing and clearly fluent enough in Chinese to understand what is being said.⁸ In another scene featuring a trilingual conversation between three family members, language is also represented as a dynamic element that is transformed and adjusted according to the speakers' needs thus participating in the creation of a new, but familiar identity that remembers forwards.

MIMI: Mother, remember when you would tell us stories?

MOTHER: (C) I remember.

MIMI: We were young.

MOTHER: (*E then repeat in C.*) Before all the trouble.

(*STEVE's inner voice is not heard by the others.*)

STEVE: I remember your voice, Mother. This is the sign for Mother.

(*MIMI looks at STEVE and sees the meaning of his signing.*)

(*He signs as he speaks it.*) ...

MOTHER: (C) What? What? I don't understand. Mimi? ...

MIMI: Steve says the same thing: tell us a story. Like you used to.

MOTHER: (C) I know a good one. A favourite. (E) My father used to tell it to me when I was a little girl. You'll remember this one, Mimi. ... (C) a long time ago—

MIMI: (ASL) Long-time-ago.

MOTHER: (C) What does that mean?

MIMI: A log time ago.

STEVE: (ASL) Long-time-ago. Story. Yes. Understand.

(*MOTHER begins the motion of the hand sign, but stops and stares ahead.*) (Quan 19-20).

Mimi addresses her Chinese-speaking mother in her own native language, English. The mother replies in Cantonese, which suggests a degree of the Mother's linguistic hybridity. She understands what the daughter said, but chooses to answer in her own language, thus emphasising her respect to the daughter's linguistic identity, but highlighting her own difference. Mimi continues to speak English, which signals her linguistic competence in Cantonese as well as English. The mother replies in both English and Cantonese, repeating the same phrase twice, which suggests that both mother and daughter share some degree of communicational linguistic competence,

whilst both enjoy different linguistic and cultural identities. In other words, both mother and daughter experience some cultural, linguistic as well as emotional connectedness, but recognise each other's otherness and alterity at the same time.

The Chinese story that the mother was brought up with and is now telling her own children in a mix of Chinese and English is a form of remembering forward. It is a story of a little girl who turns into a bird as a result of drowning in the sea – a metaphor for identity transformation through migration – and forever tries to fill the sea with stones and sticks – a metaphor for trying to bridge the cultural gap between pre- and post- migration identity. As such, the story provides the children with the knowledge of their own cultural provenance, but through the pertinence of its message to their own and their mother's lives, it also affords them with the sustenance and cultural capital needed to construct a familiarly new identity of a second generation Chinese. When the third character, Steve, joins the conversation, he immediately evokes the corporeal experience of his mother's voice. The mother's language is imprinted in his body as a memory trace, which he can now use to reconnect with her through American Sign Language, a language foreign to her that can be made familiar through their embodied linguistic bond. Interestingly, in this scene, the mother makes a feeble and almost automatic attempt at repeating the hand sign made by her son, but stops as if short of physical or mental strength. However, at the end of the play, the Mother clearly makes up her mind to attempt to enter into a corporeal linguistic relationship with Steve: "Her hand holds out the orange. ... MOTHER reaches out again, this time using her other hand to force STEVE to face her" (Quan 46). To quote Samuels, she engages "in a process of seeing-listening," which defines communication with a deaf mute (Samuels 20).

Such a mother-child relationship based on an embodied linguistic association

between the mother and child brings us back to Stone's theory of maternal subjectivity and the nurturing relational maternal space which "suggests a mother who is not the mere background to her child's speech and imaginings but who actively co-speaks and co-imagines with her child and does so from their bodily relatedness" (Stone 68). Seen through this lens, the trilingual conversation and the Mothers' repetition of the same phrases in two languages seems to be an expression of such a space in which both mother and her children participate in mutual negotiations of their linguistic and cultural identities. They engage in endless repetitions and innovations as Gedalof would have it, in order to develop their respective identities that would be familiarly common and respectful of each other's linguistic and cultural difference.

Embodied linguistic mother-child relations and the maternal space as theorised by Stone are also explored in *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Naoe's granddaughter Murasaki grows up speaking English as such was her parents' design. However, thanks to Naoe's bid to speak exclusively Japanese, she learns to speak it as a young adult: "Obāchan away when my words are born so I'm responsible for the things I utter" (Goto 104). When *Obāchan* disappears and Keiko falls into emotional and physical disarray, Murasaki is the only one responsible for sustaining her own and her mother's lives and effectively mothers her own mother with the telepathic help from *Obāchan*, with whom she has mental conversations in Japanese and gets useful advice as to how to go about looking after her ill mother. The advice includes feeding her Japanese food and talking to her in English and, when she is well enough, asking her to clean Murasaki's ears, a symbolic act of giving Keiko a possibility to mother her own daughter with a meaningful embodied cultural practice, which ends up bringing out the long forgotten mother tongue in her. Murasaki's learning to speak Japanese

coincides with *Obāchan's* departure. Thus, Naoe's connectedness with her own daughter and granddaughter as well as the nurturing and structuring quality of the Japanese that continues to provide sustenance even in her absence can be read as maternal space, the space in which the mother receives the nurturing as much as provides it (Stone 76).

In conclusion, mothering with and through linguistic difference is an enormous challenge for all immigrant and refugee mothers who left their homelands and cultures out of necessity and often ended up in culturally and linguistically unrecognisable environments. Exercising their native languages with their children as well as engaging with culturally familiar practices in their mothering seems not only a survival strategy safeguarding their sense of identity, but also a necessary structuring and nurturing force producing their new migrant identities that they develop together with their children. Therefore, mothering in the mother's native tongue as opposed to the language of the host country should be read not as maternal silence and disengagement, but rather as the source of maternal agency and power. By building a lasting embodied linguistic relationship with her children, the mother opens up to the possibility of being "mothered" into the host language and culture by her children without suffering a devastating sense loss of self.

References:

- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Shifting the Centre: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood." *Representations of Motherhood*. Ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, 56-74. Print.
- Gedalof, Irene. "Birth, Belonging and Migrant Mothers: Narratives of Reproduction in Feminist Migration Studies." *Feminist Review*, 93 (2009): 81-100. Print.
- Goto, Hiromi. *Chorus of Mushrooms*. (1994) Edmonton: NeWest Press. 2014. Print.

Grant, Gavin J. "Interview with Hiromi Goto. Indie Bound. Web. 1/09/2015.

Ho, Wendy. *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing*. Oxford: AltaMira Press, 1999. Print.

Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Print.

Lee-Loy, Anne-Marie. "Asian American Mothering in the absence of Talk Story: *Obasan* and *Chorus of Mushrooms*." *Textual Mothers. Maternal Texts*. Ed. Elizabeth Podnieks, Andrea O'Reilly. Toronto: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010. 317-331. Print.

Quan, Betty. *Mother Tongue*. Winnipeg, Scirocco Drama, 1996. Print.

Samuels, Ellen. "Speaking as a Deaf Person Would": Translating Unperformability in Betty Quan's *Mother Tongue*." *Amerasia Journal* 39.1 (2013): 19-32. Print.

Stone, Alison. *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity*. London, New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.

¹ The nickname for the fusion of English and Chinese.

² Personal e-mail communication with Betty Quan, May-June, 2015.

³ "Talk story is a Hawaiian expression describing casual everyday storytelling particularly concerned with the sharing of life stories. Subsequent to Maxine Hong Kingston's use of the term in *The Woman Warrior* talk story has become a popular means of describing mother/daughter storytelling in Asian American literature" (Lee-Loy 330).

⁴ Stage productions of the play have been made problematic by its multilingual character and the play has even been judged "unperformable except to a uniquely trilingual audience" (Samuels 19). Conversely, Samuels argues that the play opens up "new hybrid realms of performance and communication" (*Ibid.* 30).

⁵ Goto writes: "I also integrate Japanese words for my Japanese Canadian characters who are bilingual. ... Much of it remains untranslated in my texts because, although books often make transparent the translation for narrative purposes, language in everyday life doesn't work that way. We don't live with universal translators. If you don't know the word, meaning is not always accessible. What then? You ask someone or you look it up. Or you don't bother and you never know. I'm not interested in writing novels that ultimately narrow down into a "We're actually all alike" kind of mentality. Very real differences exist across all spectrums of human interaction. I'm interested in making language "real," not smoothing over the difficult terrain" (Grant).

⁶ Stone uses Donald W. Winnicott's concept of potential space that "mediates between a mother and child who are becoming differentiated" (Stone 69) to introduce that move.

⁷ The Japanese word *mattaku* means *honestly*.

⁸ The fact that the elder daughter Mimi speaks Chinese and Steve does not as well as the fact that only Mimi is invited to partake in the Chinese traditions signals an interruption in the process of the dynamic and embodied transmission of the mother's native language and culture to the children. There is evidence in the text to suggest that both pre- and post- migration trauma ensuing from the circumstances of the Mother's departure from China and the early loss of her husband is directly responsible for this interruption.