DOI: https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2024.e97651

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND TRANSLATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH JAPANESE AMERICAN WRITER JULIE OTSUKA

Aline Yuri Kiminami[1*]
[1]Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Maringá, PR, Brasil

Julie Otsuka

Julie Otsuka is a Japanese American writer from California, USA. She is the author of *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002), her first novel, *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011), winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award, and *The Swimmers* (2022), her newest book. More recently, *The Swimmers* was awarded the 2023 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. All of her novels revolve in some way around the experiences of the Japanese immigrants in the US, which reflect the lives of her parents and grandparents. After studying art as an undergraduate at Yale University, she pursued a career as a painter for several years before turning to fiction writing at age 30. She received her MFA from Columbia. Perhaps because of her acquaintance with art, her writing is described by *The New York Times* as being close to the Japanese art of *sumi-e*, which encourages simplicity of lines and captures sensations of what lies within.

Otsuka is a recipient of the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Asian American Literary Award, the American Library Association Alex Award, France's *Prix Femina Étranger*, an Arts and Letters Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and was a finalist for the National Book Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and The International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

About the interviewer: Dr. Aline Kiminami is currently a lecturer at State University of Paraná at Apucarana. Her doctoral dissertation discussed the translation of Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* and this interview, originally intended for the dissertation's annexes, is now presented as a standalone piece to offer readers a deeper understanding of the issues discussed. Dr. Kiminami was a recipient of the PDSE-CAPES scholarship, at the University of California –

[*] A graduate in Language Arts with a focus on Portuguese and English from the State University of Maringá (UEM-PR), Aline Yuri Kiminami is a specialist in Foreign Language Teaching from the State University of Londrina and holds a master's degree in Linguistic Studies with a focus on Discourse Analysis from UEM. She earned her doctorate in Literary Studies with a focus on Translation from UEM, including a period as visiting researcher at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC-CA), funded by the PDSE/Capes Program. She has been teaching in public higher education since 2016 and is currently an assistant professor at the State University of Paraná, at Apucarana. E-mail: alinekiminami@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0685-179X.

Santa Cruz, and that paved the way for the invaluable support of her advisor, the renowned author Karen Tei Yamashita.

The following interview was carried out via Zoom on January 3, 2022, transcribed and edited in order to assist the reader's comprehension. Based in New York City, Julie Otsuka graciously agreed to discuss topics related to her personal life, her writing, matters of translation and adaptation, as well as cultural and historical aspects of her life and work. While the interview was conducted a while back, due to the complexities of editorial workflow, the topics discussed remain relevant today.

Aline Kiminami (AK): Julie, my first question for you is: Do you know how many languages your books have been translated into?

Julie Otsuka (JO): Yes, my first novel *When the Emperor was Divine* has been translated into 11 and then *The Buddha in the Attic* into 22.

AK: Wow, that's a lot. And how do you feel knowing that your work is being read all over the world?

JO: Hmm, it's kind of amazing, I have to say. When I first began writing, especially my first novel, I didn't think that I would have that many readers at all. I didn't even know if it would get published. Just because, it came out in 2002, my first novel, it was a little different than what people were writing at the time so it's kind of wild to me that I now have a worldwide audience. It's kind of beyond what I ever dreamed would happen, I began writing really for myself and just telling the story that I wanted to tell. And I don't really worry about the market appeal or anything like that. So I guess you just have to have faith that if one has a good story to tell then people will want to read it.

AK: It's true and, well, I work with translation and one of the authors that I work with is Susan Bassnett and she has a quote that goes: "whatever a writer writes is to some extent a kind of translation, because that work will be the product that has emerged out of readings of other people's writings." I would like to know if you agree with that statement.

JO: Yes, I do actually; I think no writer works in a vacuum and a void. And then whatever I'm writing at the moment is really influenced by all the writers that I've read until this particular moment. And I'm probably influenced especially by the readers that I'm reading at the moment that I'm writing the novel. So yeah, I think influence is very important, I think that's how a writer learns how to write, first of all. It is by imitating other writers and then, at some point, you begin to have an idea of what your own voice might be or could be.

AK: Can you mention a few of these influences that you feel like really impacted your writing?

JO: Yes. Ernest Hemingway, especially when I was writing my first novel, was a huge influence. I'd never really read him before until I got to graduate school and then I was assigned a book of his, *A Moveable Feast*, his essays, do you know these essays? They're wonderful. I mean they're about his time in Paris and I always thought Hemingway was a man's man and wrote about fishing and hunting, things that I couldn't relate to. But I read these essays and they were utterly fresh and felt like they could have been written yesterday and so very immediate. You really get the mood of the time and what it must have been like to be in Paris after the war as a young person. And the cadence of the sentences was just lovely and so, after that, I just read all of his short stories and most of his novels, and I'm just very taken by his use of language, especially how much he leaves out and doesn't say. But just the rhythm of his sentences is, you know, magical, like music.

AK: Interesting, because you said that the sonority is important to you in the *Buddha in the Attic*, mainly, but I guess in your other works as well. But what I'm wondering is: would you say that the sonority factor is essential to the experience of the reader?

JO: Oh, for sure, I feel like especially in the *Buddha in the Attic* it's all about [that]. My background is in painting and sculpture, so when I was writing *When the Emperor was Divine* that came more to me in pictures, in visual images so I would see a scene in my head, and then I would just kind of transcribe what I was seeing in my head onto the page. But the Buddha in the Attic was more influenced by the rhythm of the language; I just became obsessed with sound and where the accents fell in certain words. I feel like in that novel there's something like this secret underground hidden grid of sound that holds everything together, one you know that the reader might not be aware of, but I as a writer was very… I'd read each paragraph aloud many, many, times over until it sounded right. So that book in particular is driven by rhythm, or sonority as you say, more so than the first book.

AK: And do you believe that it could pose a challenge for a translator, the fact that you put all that thought into rhythm and cadence, and then translating into another language you're going to have changes and transformations, right?

JO: Yes, I guess it's an act of faith when you put your work in the hands of a translator and I just have to believe that, you know, that the good translators will somehow come up with their own version of what the novel is. I've been told the French translation of *Buddha* somehow recaptures the same rhythms as the original, but I don't speak French so I wouldn't know. I guess to me, though, it could be a phone book in French and it would sound like music to my ears 'cause it's such a beautiful language but, yes, I have no idea how most

of those translations turned out at all. I mean, it really does depend on the translator and their ear.

AK: And talking about *Certaines n'avaient jamais vu la mer*, the French version I discovered that it was adapted into a theater play in France. I don't know if you have watched it or if you have had the opportunity…
JO: I was there actually for the opening in Paris, I mean, first it premiered in southern France at a Festival in the summer, which I didn't go to but I went to that opening in Paris and it was just… I don't speak French, but it was amazing to see, you know, somebody's visual version of my novel. It was just wild, I loved it, it was not something that I could have done, obviously, 'cause, you know, theater works with a whole different set of… a different vocabulary, it's very visual, but I found it stunning actually.

AK: And what are your thoughts on the adaptation of your novels to other formats like that one?

JO: Oh, I'm open to it all. I didn't want to have a lot of input into the theatrical production. I wanted to just hand it off and let the director do whatever he wanted with it. I'm happy to have it out there in different forms; to me, it's just fascinating and makes the work live on in a different way that I could not have imagined, which is wild, it's just kind of amazing.

AK: Interesting! And going back to *The Buddha in the Attic* and its language, you've probably been asked a lot about this, but what I was wondering is what kind of difficulties, linguistic or otherwise, did you face by choosing to use the "we" narrator?

JO: There were times when there were real logic problems, it's very tricky, but it was the perfect voice for the material, I tried writing it from the point of view of just one picture bride initially and it just, for a few months, and it was just not working and then I really kind of stumbled upon this first person plural narrator… What were the difficulties, is that what you asked?

AK: Yes, for example, when you're writing as a collective, linguistically, there are some challenges and I was wondering if, at some points, it was difficult for you to say what was one person or what was everyone or if it wasn't a problem.

JO: Hm… probably more so in the beginning, when I was first using the voice, it was a little trickier; and then I think I got used to it, though, fairly quickly and it wasn't that hard to just switch, you know. All you have to do is kind of drop in a line of dialogue "One of us said," so it feels like I dip in and out of the collective, and then I just kind of pinpoint one character. But it didn't seem that hard, I know there were grammatical, and logical problems, 'cause sometimes

things don't work… that I hadn't run across before because I'd never used the first person plural, but I actually can't remember what those instances were…

AK: Not a problem, but for example in Portuguese or even other Latin languages or Romance languages, we have the question of gender; so when we say "we", it could be referring to male or female, so that is a challenge for translators and this is just something that was on my mind because of the challenges created by the "we" narrator, and I was wondering if in English it would be the same.

JO: So, in Portuguese, is the "we" gendered or non-gendered?

AK: In Portuguese, it's "*nós*". It doesn't have a gender by itself but we do have the conjugation or agreement of gender, so we would say for example "we were ready" and then, in Portuguese, it's going to be gendered, it would be "*nós estávamos prontas*" - it'd have the gender marked. So I was just wondering if, throughout your novel, you were always thinking about the "we" as collective female voices or if, at times, it comprised the whole Japanese Community, including men, children, and so forth.

JO: I think I tried to stay really close to the women because a lot of what they're talking about is them: the men, the Japanese men. But there might be times when I slip into "we the Japanese", you know, the Japanese Americans. But most of the time I tried to stay with the women because they're in such opposition at times to their husbands and the men. In opposition both to the Japanese immigrant men that they're marrying, as well as the larger white American society, you know, there are a lot of things that they're up against both within their own community and then outside of the community.

AK: Your book deals with the experiences of these Japanese people, Japanese women mainly, but also with the North Americans, because you are from the United States, so do you see your writing as this cultural in-between place?

JO: I feel very American for one thing I mean I don't feel Japanese, do you feel Japanese or do you feel Brazilian or both?

AK: Especially because I'm mixed, it's confusing to me [laughter]. My mother's side is more European and my father's side is Japanese so I feel like I'm pretty much in a very "in-between" locale: I have the Japanese culture in me, you know, I go to *kaikans*[1] and I sing karaoke, Japanese songs, *enka*[2]. And then, on my mother's side, it's the Brazilian culture, affection, hugging, and food, so I feel like I'm very in between. How is it for you?

JO: I don't feel like I'm in between because I think people of my generation, who are the children of people who were incarcerated during WWII, were raised to be

very All-American; so our parents deliberately did not speak Japanese at home because it was… they didn't want what happened to them to happen to their children, so they wanted their kids to be as American as possible. I think one summer when I was eight or nine, my parents made me go to Japanese school on Saturdays but I wouldn't, I refused to go unless my neighbor Tommy Yoder, who was my best friend, and we were raised together, our two families (they were *hakujin,* they were a white family, Tommy had curly blonde hair) and I said I wouldn't go unless Tommy could come with me, and so his mother allowed him to come with me, and so he was the one white child in the Japanese school! But we just played, I didn't like it at all [laughter] so I didn't last very long but that was my one exposure to Japanese when I was younger.

Then when I went to college, I studied Japanese intensively because I wanted to learn. So we were raised eating American food. We had Japanese food maybe once a year on New Year's Day, my grandmother would come over, she immigrated to this country maybe in the late 1920s and was very, very, Japanese, and I would hear my mother speaking to her mother in Japanese, so I grew up with the sound of the language, but I really couldn't understand anything, hardly, a few words, but I couldn't understand much of what they were saying. So, to write *The Buddha in the Attic* I had to do a lot of research about everything, but also about the old Japan from which these young women were coming, and I don't know anything about that world at all. I mean, I did go to Japan when I was 19, the year after my freshman year in college and I'd just taken a year of intensive Japanese and so that was my first… Actually, I went when I was 18 months old too but that doesn't really count… I don't remember [laughter]. My parents told me that when I was 18 months old they left me for, like, 10 days with… my father is an immigrant he came over in 1952, so he grew up in Japan, so they left me with his mother. My parents traveled for 10 days and when they came back they said I didn't recognize them at all [laughter], so it was probably the first time I had been around so many Japanese people!

But when I was 19, I took a 6-week language class at *Kokusai Kirisutokyō Daigaku,* the Christian University in Tokyo, and then I visited my father's hometown in the mountains. It was about 60 miles outside of Tokyo, and it was just a tiny country town and it was just… it was the most foreign place I'd ever… it was just so unlike any place I'd ever been, you know, it was not very Western-oriented and I realized just how far from home I was and what a big trip it was for my father, and my grandmother too, to come over from Japan to America. And I remember my father telling me that America is the opposite of Japan. So, I am very rooted in America and, especially, I'd say, West Coast American California.

AK: Yeah, I can imagine… I feel like not only for the Japanese Community but for the Mexican Community too, or other immigrant communities, it was very common for parents to raise their children as All-Americans, very rooted in Western culture. And talking about the research you made, I was reading *The Buddha in the Attic* and I came across some expressions used in the book, and I

found them very interesting and I wanted to run them by you, okay? So I'm going to read them for you first and then I'll ask my question: "You are worth less than the little finger of your mother"; the other one is "one day 5 years later we gave birth to Toichi whose name is 11 he's a caboose" and then we have: "divorced the neighbors would whisper and I hear she's dry as a gourd" and "fortune begins with a penny, it's better to suffer ill than to do ill, you must give back whatever you receive". I was wondering if you would consider these as translations to English of the Japanese ways of expressing themselves, or if they are expressions they would use.

JO: Yes, they are all expressions that I ran across in my research, except for the caboose [laughter], I heard that phrase myself in English. But the other expressions were all… she's dry as a gourd, I love that one [laughter] it was so great to stumble across! But they were all expressions translated into English that I ran across in my research.

AK: Interesting, because, understanding translation as more than just a process of carrying meaning from one language to another, but more of a process of transforming concepts or adapting ideas from one culture like the Japanese culture to American culture, to what extent do you think you would say that your writing of Japanese-American experiences in the *Buddha in the Attic* could be considered a translation of the Japanese culture—or way of thinking—into the English language?

JO: Huh, it's a big question. I don't know if there's a difference between translation and interpretation, you know. What I'm writing, it's my understanding of what I've learned in my research about Japan and Japanese culture. So it's all filtered through my brain, so it's really an act of learning but then it all comes out in my language but… the translation of culture, is that what you asked? I guess it is… because the only filter I have is a Western one, it's all filtered through that lens. I don't know if that answers your question or not…

AK: Yes, because it's a very common thing for people to think of translation as just a process of getting a book to be read in another language, for a person who doesn't know the language, [for example] Brazilian people who don't know English, so they have to have the translation so they can understand what they're reading. But translation can be seen as much more than that, so for example, when you say it's your understanding or your lens that is filtering what you're writing, it also is a means of translation, a form of translation in a more postmodern approach to translation. So, in that sense, I was wondering if you would think of yourself, maybe, as a translator of transcultural experiences, because you're in this in-between of trying to write about these experiences that are Japanese American, and typical of these people that you studied, that you researched, and also who are part of your family and your ancestors, and if you feel like you would be, in that sense, a translator of these experiences.

JO: What I had to do is really try to see things as these young women did, which kind of has to do with what my father said about America being the opposite of Japan, and it was like coming to an upside-down world for them, everything was just reversed, you know? Even the way you turn a key in the lock, it's a different direction, it's like going from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere, and the water circles down the drain in the opposite direction. Everything was so different for these women so I would have to understand where they're coming from and then be able to somehow flip that… not flip, but somehow convey that "reverse in the mirror world" to a Western audience so, in that sense, I do feel like I'm translating a different culture but I hope I was able to convey just how foreign and bizarre America and American ways [were], and the way American people smelled and… I remember my father telling me when he first came to America on a ship (actually he came to the East Coast first, but then he took a train across the country and went to the West Coast) just how surprised he was that American houses were covered with paint, 'cause I guess in Japan you don't paint your house, if it's a wooden house, it's a wooden house, it's not covered with color. But just things that we here, in America, take for granted. There are just so many things, or even like the colors, black and white, for a funeral. White is the color of death in Japan so I was just trying to convey what a reverse mirror image of the world Japan and America seem to be if that makes sense.

AK: Yes, of course, and I think you have to experience being in a foreign country so you can understand what it was like for these women to be here. I guess your experience being in Japan contributed a lot for you to try to have this mirror idea of the things that they would find strange here, right?

JO: I was only there for six weeks and I know it wasn't long enough to… I think most of what I know comes from my research. Japan back then was very different but nothing like the Japan of now sure, but I think most of what I learned did not come from that trip; it probably came from my research, but also growing up with my grandmother, and also with my father, even though he would never, ever, speak Japanese, even if he met another Japanese person. He was very adamant and, yet, he had a strong Japanese accent, which I wasn't even aware of until I was maybe like 10 or 11. That's when I think probably some friend commented on my father's accent and I said oh, you know, he just sounded like "dad" to me, I wasn't aware he had an accent! But he is in some ways very, very, deeply foreign to me just because you know he's a Japanese man of this certain generation and just very, very, un-American, you know, very reticent, very thoughtful, but he just passed away in January [2021] and, you know…

AK: Ah… I'm so sorry to hear it…

JO: Yeah, no thank you, he was almost 95, so he had a good long run but, you know, in his later years… he had dementia at the very end and every day he would

talk about going home to Japan and he'd never spoken about that before. But he just wanted to go back to Japan, after all these years, it was kind of amazing. But having an immigrant father also gave me some sort of window that I might not have been consciously aware of into Japan and Japanese culture.

AK: Yeah, it makes sense, and your father was interned during the Second World War?

JO: No, he came over in 1951, so his experience of the war was very different. He just missed being drafted by a couple of weeks when the war ended in Japan, but he would go every day to the munitions factory. Instead of going to high school they would go to the factories and work during the war, so, no, he was not put in the camps at all, he had a very different experience than my mother did.

AK: And your mother… she's a child of internees?

JO: No, she herself was interned, so she was…

AK: But she was [interned] along with her family, right?

JO: Correct, her father was arrested on December 8th, after Pearl Harbor was bombed, and there was a whole set of separate camps that were run by the Department of Justice for Dangerous Enemy Aliens. He was a community leader and businessman, he was a prominent man, so he was taken away in the first FBI raids. A few months later, my grandmother and her two children, my mother and my uncle were taken away in Berkeley.

AK: So you're a *nisei*[3] from your mother's side and your father's side as well?

JO: I am probably considered a *sansei* from my mother's side because she was *nisei*, and then my father was[4] *issei* but I think I'm still considered *sansei*[5].

AK: In another interview, you mentioned that now, as third-generation, we start to see more people talking about the horrors of that time and the sadness of internment camps. Do you feel like when you were a child you got into contact with that history a lot at school?

JO: No! Not at all, absolutely not… No, that's why when I began to write the book I had to do a lot of research, and even when I got to college it took… I went to Yale and so it was on the East Coast and I took my first class. It was probably the only class offered at the time in Asian American history and it was just eye-opening; I never had studied internment in any sort of depth, so it wasn't taught in my high school, junior high school. I've traveled all across the country speaking about my books and, even now, it is not taught in so many parts of the country. I guess it

comes down to having a particular teacher who's interested in that era of history and wants to bring it to the fore, but I do think that the 4th and 5th generations generation Japanese Americans are hungry to know about that time and, also, so many of the people who lived through the camps are dead or else they're very, very, old so it's kind of our last chance to get to talk to actual survivors.

AK: I can imagine. And I guess your book is a great means of visibility for the Japanese-American experience here in the US and how it feels for you to have this responsibility in a sense but also this privilege of being the speaker - writer actually – who has the means to talk about their experiences?

JO: You know, when I wrote my first book as I said, I didn't really know if it would get published or have an audience at all, so I think that was actually good. I think that if I had sat down with the idea of writing a book about "the camps" it would have been super intimidating just to take on something—a subject matter that fraught, just that loaded and that weighed down. Actually, before I wrote the first chapter of that novel, which I wrote as this stand-alone short story, not knowing it would end up as the first chapter of a novel, I was writing only comedy, just humorous stories, so I didn't think of myself as being a serious writer at all, which is probably a good thing. I feel like I kind of accidentally stumbled into writing this novel without knowing it. The second chapter I also wrote as a standalone short story; I think after I finished the second chapter I realized that those two stories put together might add up to the beginnings of a novel, so I was writing it as a way of trying to understand my mother and what she had gone through during the war so it was a very personal story and I wasn't thinking: "This has to be the one representative story that's going to tell what happened to the Japanese Americans during the war." It might have just paralyzed me to think that.
I also thought while I was writing the book that there must be at least a dozen other Japanese-Americans like myself, sons and daughters of internees here, writing their versions of that same story, but it took a while before other versions of that story did come out. You know, there's a talk, I think it's a TED Talk by Chimamanda Adichie, it's called *The Danger of the Single Story…* So, I do feel like there is the danger of—if you're one of the first to tell a story—of this being taken to be *the* story, which I would never want it to be seen as, it's just one of many, many, stories. This is just my own particular take on what happened to my family during World War II, but it's by no means representative and I would not want it to be thought of as representative at all.

AK: Alright, thank you, Julie, for your time and I'd like to know if there's anything else you would like to say or add…

JO: Well, I'm working on this new novel. It's coming out… it's very, very, different [laughter].

AK: *The Swimmers*, right?

JO: Yeah, it's very different so I'm interested to see how it's received. Initially it doesn't seem to be about Japanese Americans, it's just the first half of the book is set in this public swimming pool and I don't refer to race at all! Which is what I like about a pool. It's, in some ways, a very democratic place, you know, all that matters is: "Are you a fast, medium, or slow swimmer"? That's all that really matters!

AK: And you're a swimmer?

JO: Not now, but I grew up in California so I went to the beach every day in the summer when I was a kid, growing up, but I did swim recreationally, you know, for years at the Columbia University pool but I haven't swum for years. I guess my point is that it [the new novel] is very different from my first two books and yet the second half of the book does end up focusing on a character who was interned during World War II. She's now very, very, old so it's set more in present-day times. I guess it could be seen as a trilogy, starting chronologically with *The Buddha in the Attic* and then *When the Emperor* kind of begins where *Buddha* leaves off and, then, in this last novel, the character who is now very old could be seen as the girl in the first novel who was sent away to the camp when she was young, so thematically they would align.

AK: Thank you, Julie, for all you've shared, it was wonderful talking to you.

Notes

1. Japanese cultural and sportive centers
2. Japanese music genre
3. Nisei means second-generation Japanese immigrants.
4. Issei means first-generation Japanese immigrants.
5. Sansei means third-generation Japanese immigrants.

References

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The danger of a single story*. Video, TEDGlobal, 2009. www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Bassnett, Susan. *Reflections on translation*. Multilingual Matters, 2011.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Moveable Feast. The Restored Edition.* Scribner, 2009.

Otsuka, Julie. *The Buddha in the Attic*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor was Divine*. Anchor Books, 2011.

Otsuka, Julie. *The Swimmers*. Knopf Publishing Group, 2022.

Submission date: 06/12/2023
Acceptance date: 19/08/2024