

A Brief History of the Critical Reception of Japanese-American Literature in the U.S.

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Japanese American literature was first disseminated primarily by a collectivity of Asian Americans through their own newspapers and anthologies, with the exception of those few early writers who were picked up by the mainstream press for their colorful, exotic "Orientalisms." Writers of Japanese descent, such as Sadakichi Hartmann, born in Japan to a Japanese mother and a German father, who emigrated to the U.S. when he was young, and Etsuko Sugimoto, who came to the U.S. to marry her fiancé, a Japanese merchant, and went back and forth between her native land and her adopted country, can be considered harbingers of what the literary establishment – which I define for the purposes of this paper as the dominant white culture brokers – preferred to read, publish and shower with awards and fellowships. On the one hand, if a writer exhibited too much "in-your-face" writing, by which I mean an attack on the American national values, laws, and practices of the times, that writer generally did not get floated into the mainstream, for example, John Okada. On the other hand, if a writer "accommodated" the nationalistic and / or patriotic needs of white America, that writer was projected right down the middle of the river, for example, Monica Sone or Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston. A third category of Japanese writers associated with Asian American literature would be those born in Japan, who publish works in English in the U.S., and then return to Japan, such as Yone Noguchi (1875-1904), who do not *significantly* contribute to or resist dominant American culture. The receptivity of the Japanese American writer by the dominant culture, then, may have less to do with "literary merit" (admittedly a loaded phrase in the age of poststructuralism) and more to do with

the espousal of certain "American" national values accompanying a resistance to traditional Japanese culture, that is, *essentializing practices* rather than *existential* realities. It goes without saying, when literary merit meets American cultural desires, the writer should be at the peak of receptivity, but is this necessarily the case?

My interest in this paper is to follow the history of the receptivity of Japanese American literature (excluding drama) in *the mainstream press*, rather than the usual path of looking at the collective opinions of Asian American critics published by Asian American-dominated anthologies, journals, periodicals, or edited collections, such as *Aiiieeee!*, *Amerasia Journal*, *Ayumi*, *Breaking Silence*, *Counterpoint*, *Frontiers of Asian American Studies*, the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *Making Waves*, *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (often referred to as the first anthology in the field of Asian American Studies), and so on. I want to consider the currents of receptivity of Japanese American literature by the U.S. literary establishment, by tracing them through history to the present, in order to determine, if possible, if there has been any significant change in the rational of the establishment for choosing the works of Japanese American writers in this age of "multiculturalism." Has American culture on the whole finally made an important break away from previous orientalist and racist depictions of those of Japanese descent, or do anti-Japanese sentiments still lurk in the cultural interstices, given the recent release of the film *Pearl Harbor*, with its overt and latent forms of racism? Though within the confines of this paper I cannot analyze all of the relevant published materials, I hope to highlight the major writings and bring forward key contemporary debates in this particular field of literature. Such investigation may reveal the readiness (or not) of the mainstream to be de-streamed of its great white way. I will begin with a brief glance at texts by Anglo-American writers who promulgated racist stereotypes to contextualize my project, continue with a longer historical look at significant Japanese American writers, and then conclude with a lingering gaze at an illuminating contemporary debate in the field of Japanese American poetry.

I.

Early in the 20th century Wallace Irwin's Hashimura Togo stories began to appear in *Good Housekeeping*, a magazine primarily read by women. The popular-press magazine featured the adventures of a Japanese house servant who is both unintelligible to and indispensable for an American family, as in the story, "Togo Assists in a Great Diamond Robbery" (GH March 1917). Hashimura Togo is little more than a caricature of a good, obedient "Oriental" servant upon whom Caucasians depend even as they think of him as inferior to themselves. According to Elaine H. Kim, one of the early and prominent literary critics in the field of Asian American literature: "Caricatures of Asians have been part of American popular culture for generations" (*Asian American Literature* 3). She locates two basic stereotypes in Anglo-American literature: the "bad" Asian and the "good" Asian, the former being sinister villains, criminals, or people with animalistic appetites whereas the latter tend to be loyal and lovable allies, playing the role of willing servants. Both types through rhetorical contrast elevate the Caucasian as superior in every aspect (Kim 4). Besides the "good" Hashimura Togo, Wallace Irwin also created "bad" Asian characters in his anti-Japanese novel, *Seed of the Sun*, since Japanese farmers, who are said to be carrying out the wishes of the Japanese emperor, are shown working their wives and children mercilessly in order to shut out white farmers from the economic marketplace, as well as to want to take over U.S. land for Japan. Surely this novel heated up anti-Japanese sentiment on the West Coast. Though Kim omits the fact that Irwin includes a very positive image of a Japanese American Christian couple, she probably does so with good reason. Without too much difficulty, we can see through Irwin's strategy of pitting Christianity against Buddhism through this characterization, thus serving American national / religious interests. I concur with Kim's opinion that the characterization of the Japanese and Japanese American agricultural workers in California is demeaning and overtly racist. Other Caucasian American writers were also guilty of producing racist Asian stereotypes, such as Jack London,

Bret Harte, Frank Norris, and Maude Madden, among others. Their novels and short works of fiction appearing in the first half of the 20th century certainly contributed to increasing the flames of racism in those times, in the way that films then, such as the notorious *Shadows of the West* and *The Cheat* (See Ogawa 1971; Wong 1978; Oehling 1980) and films in the second half of the 20th century continue to do, such as *Year of the Dragon* and *Rising Sun*, and in this century, *Pearl Harbor*.

Even before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Anglo-American sentiment against those of Japanese descent in the US, was fuelled not only by racial stereotypes but also by political acts, for example, V. S McClatchy, a member of the Japanese Exclusion League, lobbied for an immigration law to exclude "Orientals" by using the rhetoric of non-assimilability:

The Japanese are less assimilable and more dangerous as residents in this country than any other of the peoples ineligible under our laws. . . with great pride of race, they have no idea of assimilating in the sense of amalgamation. They do not come here with any desire or any intent to lose their racial or national identity. They come here specifically and professedly for the purpose of colonizing and establishing here permanently the proud Yamato race. They never cease being Japanese. (Daniels 99)

One might have liked to ask McClatchy if he had any desire or intent to lose his racial or national identity, to show how illogical his argument was. Nevertheless, because of white people of his ilk the Immigration Law of 1924 was passed and it effectively barred most Japanese from entering the U.S., thus also marking the undesirability of Japanese already in residence as potential American citizens.

The attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent evacuation of the West Coast Japanese to the relocation sites, and then to the internment camps, only reinforced the racism and discriminatory practices already in place. General DeWitt testified before the House Naval Affairs Subcom-

mittee in 1943 in this manner: "The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on U.S. soil, possessed of U.S. citizenship have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted" (Ogawa 11). Racist practices against the Japanese living in the US were continued by bigoted people, in overt or latent forms, until the construction of the Japanese as a "model minority" in the 1970s-80s gave a new twist to the reception of Japanese Americans and their writings. I mean to suggest that racism for this ethnic group went underground, so to speak, manifesting itself in more complex and hidden ways, which can be shown by a deep investigation of the receptivity patterns of Japanese American literature by the dominant culture brokers.

II.

Issei writers, in general, did not combat the egregious stereotypes of those of Japanese descent. The few issei who were able to write in English for the most part were educated, bilingual, and of a higher socioeconomic class than the majority of Japanese immigrants to the US, who tended to be agricultural laborers, farmers, small-business owners, or domestics on the West Coast, as Ronald Takaki and Stan Yogi have noted (*An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* 127). Thus, Carl Sadkichi Hartmann, a poet, and Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto, autobiographer (*A Daughter of the Samurai* [1925]), novelist and journalist, are not considered as typical or foundational writers of Japanese American literature not only because they were not American-born, but also, more importantly, because they do not reflect the prejudicial and discriminatory context of Japanese American life. One issei poet, Bunichi Kagawa, who lived in northern California in the 1920s and was befriended by the famous white poet and Stanford University professor Yvor Winters, comes closer to the concerns of the majority of immigrants, and those of the nisei as well, with his 1930 volume of poetry *Hidden Flame* (Yogi, *Interethnic Companion* 127).

In reaction to the stereotypical images in literature written by whites

about Asians, nisei writers such as Toshio Mori, Toyo Suyemoto, John Okada, Wakako Yamauchi, Hisaye Yamamoto, Monica Sone, and Mine Okubo (all considered “founders” of Japanese American literature), attempted to create authentic, real-life portraits of Japanese Americans, in their novels, autobiographies, memoirs, poems and plays. Early critical reception of these works in the mainstream press varied from high praise to indifference. For example, Toshio Mori’s *Yokohama, California*, a work of short stories (The Caxton Printers, 1949) and one of the incipient works of Japanese-American literature, was both vilified (though Saroyan may not have thought so) and lauded by the more famous American writer and critic, William Saroyan. In his introduction to Mori’s work, he wrote:

Of the thousands of unpublished writers in America there are probably no more than three who cannot write better English than Toshio Mori. His stories are full of grammatical errors. His use of English, especially when he is most eager to say something very good, is very bad. Any high school teacher of English would flunk him in grammar and punctuation. (Quoted in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers xxxvii*)

But Saroyan in the same introduction also praised Toshio Mori (a fact which the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* fail to point out), saying he was “probably the most important new writer in the country at the moment,” “a natural-born writer” who saw “through a human being to the strange, comical, melancholy truth that changes a fool to a great solemn hero” (Yamamoto, Intro. *The Chauvinist and Other Stories*, 1979, 1). Lewis Gannett, book critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1949, when *Yokohama, California* was brought out, called the work “stories of sunlit loneliness” (Yamamoto, Intro. 1). The worse attack on *Yokohama, California*, came from Albert Saijo, who wrote for the Japanese American weekly, *Crossroads* (March 29, 1949). Saijo condemned all nisei writing for its “muddled intelligence. . .sentimentality. . .and poor craftsmanship” though he admitted that Mori “does manage to convey the Issei character with some

truth" (Yamamoto, Intro. 2-3). More about Saijo later in this paper.

Stan Yogi's chapter on "Japanese American Literature," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, relates that Mori modelled his short story collection on James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesberg, Ohio*, works that focus on a community of characters and show how the incidental and mundane can carry significance. In portraying daily lives of Japanese Americans, Mori breaks up the old exotic stereotypes. Yogi identifies Mori as a nisei who has an "optimistic" perspective concerning American life, even when he was interned during World War II, thus allying him with the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) whose motto was "Better Americans in a Greater America." Considered loyal to America but disloyal to the civil rights of Japanese Americans, the JACL's reputation in Japanese American letters and documentary films is often trashed, as in the film *Rabbit in the Moon*. Today, though, Toshio Mori is often referred to as the "founding father" of Japanese American literature published in the US mainland and it is important to remember that his very first acceptance was by *Coast* magazine, founded by wealthy white Californians who wanted a magazine similar to the *New Yorker* (Yamamoto, Intro. 8).

Another writer, and painter, who was accepted by the dominant press was Mine Okubo. Her collection, *Citizen 13660* (1946; reprint, 1983) is a diary of her real life experiences behind barbed wire, and she describes both the relocation and concentration camp situations through a combination of writings and drawings. Her work was so well-received by mainstream America that she was able to find employment as an artist in New York City, even during the internment period.

Another mainstreamed book was Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953). It shows the difficulty a young female Japanese American had in breaking through her culturally-trained silence to speak authentically about her own experiences. Kazuko Itoi, the protagonist in the book and a surrogate of Sone herself, is anxious about the question of identity. Is she Japanese or American? To succeed in a racist society, she practices self-negation and tries to minimize her ethnic difference, but in the end she

realizes that to be an authentic person, she must be *both* Japanese and American. Her book was also a popular choice of Caucasian readers for its "accommodationist" tone. With the advent of Asian American studies in the 1970s, however, Sone's reputation was marginalized by many Asian-American critics because of her so-called assimilationist stance toward white culture. It should be noted and remembered, however, that her work appeared *before* "Asian American" became a politicized, affirmative action term in the 1970s, set in motion by the Asian-American student activism at San Francisco State College and Berkeley University, and *before* the subsequent publication of anthologies of Asian American works, such as *Roots: An Asian American Reader* and *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, collections that were not of the mainstream but brought the attention of Japanese American writers to the dominant cultural brokers.

Not to be forgotten are the pair of writerly friends, Wakako [Nakamura] Yamauchi and Hisaye Yamamoto [DeSoto]. The very versatile writer, Wakako Yamauchi, who wrote short stories, memoirs, and a play titled, *And the Soul Shall Dance*, gained recognition slowly, at first in the Japanese American press, primarily in *Rafu Shimpo*, then she was anthologized in *Aiiieeeee!* and published by *Amerasia Journal*. Yamauchi met Yamamoto while working on the camp newspaper, the *Poston Chronicle*, when they were both interned at the Poston Relocation Center in Arizona. After World War II, they lived together in a boarding house in Los Angeles, where Yamamoto was employed by the *Los Angeles Tribune*, a weekly newspaper for African Americans, as a columnist and copy editor. She also wrote short stories that were published in the Japanese American press. Her 1950 short story, "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara," is one of the first published prose accounts of the internment experience by an internee. Wakako married Chester Yamauchi in 1948, essentially becoming a housewife who wrote "quietly and on her own, laboring in obscurity even within the Japanese American community" (Intro. Hongo, *Songs My Mother Taught Me* 4), whereas Yamamoto continued her professional life. The year 1974 found both writers sharing print space in *Aiiieeeee!*

Yamamoto gained national acclaim when two of her short stories were combined in the film *Hot Summer Winds*, directed by cinematographer Emiko Omori for US TV's prestigious *American Playhouse* in 1991. The first mainstream break for Yamauchi was the gaining of a Rockefeller playwright-in-residence grant to expand her short story, "And the Soul Shall Dance," into a drama for production by East-West Players of Los Angeles. Her play "was enthusiastically reviewed by the drama critic of the *Los Angeles Times*. The house was packed for a run of two months, then for an extension, and then a revival. . . . [it was] re-produced by KCET in Los Angeles for PBS and aired nationally in 1977-78" (Intro. Hongo, *Songs My Mother Taught Me* 5). Yamauchi entered the *feminist* mainstream, when her work was collected and edited by Garrett Hongo, contemporary Japanese American poet / writer, for The Feminist Press, in 1994.

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973 published twenty years after Monica Sone's autobiography came out) was collaboratively-written with her husband James D. Houston. It is an autobiographical narrative addressed primarily to a non-Japanese audience, intending to educate that audience about the concentration camps. According to Elaine Kim, in her critical text, *Asian American Literature*, this work almost completely elides the "self" in order to be read as an American "success story." Her theory is that "the distinction between 'success' and 'disappearance' or 'assimilation' has not been made any clearer than the distinction between cultural pluralism and 'melting pot' notions." (81). Kim, however, fails to take into account the psychological-social needs of a Japanese woman writer in the context of her interracial marital situation. Houston's *Manzanar* piece is often anthologized today in texts of ethnicity for high school or undergraduate students. The film adapted from the book *Farewell to Manzanar* and shown on national U.S. television was negatively critiqued by Asian American critics for being "assimilationist."

John Okada, in contrast to Sone and Houston, tries to imagine Japanese-American identity as a fluid body of interrelationships, while simultaneously saying "No" to any form of domination, or fixed cultural

identity. Even though Frank Chin, Jeffery Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong, in their "An Introduction to Chinese- and Japanese-American Literature" in *Aiiieeeee!* claim that Okada's "style itself is an expression of the multi-voiced schizophrenia of the Japanese-American compressed into an organic whole" (xxxix), my own view of the novel's protagonist Ichiro Yamada's "voice" is that it is "multi-voiced" (as American voices generally are, after the first generation of immigration) but not "schizophrenic," rather his is the sanest voice in the novel. Taking a different perspective on voice in Okada, Benzi Zhang's chapter on "Japanese-American Literature" in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States* (1996), describes the work as dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense:

To express his original perception of Japanese-American experience, Okada develops a unique, carnivalized style. This style suggests some basic features of the discourse by which Okada translates experience into words. The "ungrammatical" or "unconventional" style Okada employs is not merely an incidental trick or technique of writing but is, rather a literary configuration that reacts to the larger issues challenging Japanese American writers. *No-No Boy* is in a form of textual democratisation or absence of hierarchy, which encompasses multiple focuses and voices in a carnivalistic, simultaneous achievement. . . . Okada's *No-No Boy* manifests a rebellion against a "tyranny of language" that marginalizes and ostracizes ethnic discourse from entering the mainstream. . . . His consciousness of the linguistic problem operates at a point where a language carnivalization borders on social critique, as the question of "language domination" is always related to racial discrimination. (132)

But it is probably Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald, one of the earliest critics of Japanese American literature, herself Japanese American, who has the most acute perspective on John Okada's novel. She claims the preface to *No-No Boy* "sets a tone of sympathy of white and Japanese-Americans alike for those who had said "No-No," though she goes on to say that

Okada's view "is tinged with the ironic conviction that racism is here to stay" (20), and insists he is a non-assimilationist, a point I agree with because of his resistance to the nationalistic and racist trends of the times. The fact that Mori, Sone, Okubo, and Houston were accepted by the American public-at-large, while Okada was not, indicates that writers who did not directly confront and criticize racism in the US, even though they depicted it, were more readily adopted by mainstream readers.

The nisei poet Toyo Suyemoto had her work published in the Japanese American "small" press and collegiate magazines before her poems about her internment experience were picked up by the *Yale Review* (1946) and *Common Ground* (1948), two prestigious magazines of the dominant literary press. Though she continued to write poetry, mostly haiku in a lyric mode about personal relationships, she rather disappeared from the literary scene, until her brief resurrection by *Amerasia Journal* in 1983. David Daiches, a famous British literary critic, wrote to her the following about her verse: "I have read your poems carefully, and find them accomplished and sometimes most moving. I am sure you are right to employ a certain regularity of stanza: it clearly suits your talent, with its quiet precision and obvious gift for verbal and rhythmic discipline. . ." (Suyemoto 75). Suyemoto may have attracted the notice of the literary establishment in the 1940s because she was among the earliest of the poets to write about the internment, but she may not have remained in the eye of the mainstream as time passed because the form she wrote in was not fashionable.

A prolific nisei writer, who is usually placed more in the category of "popular" rather than "literary" by the critics is Yoshiko Uchida. Her best-known novel is *Picture Bride* (1987), not to be confused with Kayo Hata's film, *Picture Bride*, set in Hawaii. The novel is dedicated to "those brave women from Japan who travelled far, who endured, and who prevailed," and it is unsparing in its depiction of racism. Some of her other novels are *Journey to Topaz* (1971) and *Journey Home* (1978), and her works generally were well-received by Americans of Japanese descent, Japanese in Japan (her book was translated by Japanese journalist and professor,

Kanji Shibata) and sometimes, non-Japanese because of her gift for poetic imagery. The contemporary writer Kyoko Mori, who mainly writes popular works for young adults, was mainstreamed by the literary magazine *Kenyon Review*, and reviewed by the *New York Times*, among other non-Asian American periodicals. I would submit Mori follows the trajectory of Uchida, though it is Japanese misogyny and racism in *Japan* that she attacks, hence, diverting our attention from American varieties of the same, thus in a certain way meshing with the more conservative American interests that play a role in "Japan bashing."

After World War II, Japanese Americans were released from the internment camps and their community became dispersed across America much more than it had been before the war. In the postwar period, the writers not only challenged the old myths and stereotypes about Japanese immigrants, but also took a stance on the side of assimilation to or separation from the dominant white culture. The first book of poetry published by a US mainland-born Japanese American writer, Lawson Fusao Inada, was titled *Before the War: Poems as They Happened* (1971), though the majority of the contents do not literally fit the title, as Gayle K. Sato has remarked:

Quantitatively speaking, poems about internment form just a fraction of the contents in *Before the War*; only one part of one poem actually qualifies in terms of literal subject matter to be called a poem about the pre-war period. It thus becomes obvious that "before the war" signifies something more than just a time and place. (7)

Sato and Benzi Zhang concur, that for Japanese Americans the most critical period of their history is identified with the internment experience during World War II (138). Inada's work is a prime example of poetry that was first published in Asia American sources, then slowly picked up by mainstream anthologies celebrating multiculturalism, such as *Down at the Santa Fe Depot*. I should mention here that not all Japanese Americans embraced Inada's poetry. The Japanese American Citizens League's

organ *Pacific Citizen* used a “white racist reviewer, Allen Beekman” who called Inada’s work “outhouse poetry” (Gee 4) Could it be that his abrasive poetic voice and jarring poetic lines that criticize America’s racism, which he had experienced first-hand growing up in Fresno, California, was cause for the vituperative response. If we compare his slower receptivity pattern to that of Toshio Mori’s faster trajectory, we find that even the sponsorship of his famous award-winning teacher, poet Philip Levine, could not catapult Inada into the literary establishment for some time. It seems that the U.S. white reading public tolerated critiques of racism against Jews and African Americans but was far less open to receive information about the Japanese internment experiences or acts of discrimination against Japanese Americans in the postwar period, until the 1970s Asian American activist movements set the stage for ethnic coalitions of empowerment.

The first positive postwar images of Japanese Americans appeared in the mainstream popular press for the purpose of stressing “the higher educational, employment, and income levels that is, compared to other nonwhite groups in the United States,” of Chinese and Japanese, according to Amy Tachiki (*Roots* 1). Tachiki cites the following articles: “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1966); “Success Story: Japanese American Style” (*New York Times*, 1966), Joseph Alsop’s “New American Success Story;” (on Chinese and Japanese, 1971); and “Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites” (on Japanese Americans, *Newsweek* 1971). So it wasn’t only the force of Asian American activism (also called the “yellow power” movement) that gained inroads to the dominant culture for the Japanese Americans, but also the construction of the stereotype of the most “successful” minority, over against the threat of increasing numbers of blacks moving to the West Coast during and after World War II, that smoothed the way, to some extent (Uyematsu 11). In 1969 Asian American Studies first became established as an academic program at San Francisco State College (later, University), and at U.C. Berkeley, in the early 1970s. During the 1970s, when Asian American writers’ conferences were being held both in Hawai’i and in the U.S.

mainland and Asian American Studies curricula were instituted in a number of American colleges and universities, editors of literary journals began to actively seek out the writings of Asian Americans. The immense critical and commercial success of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) brought a windfall of opportunity to Japanese American writers as well, both nisei and sansei, as they moved from publication in the Asian American journals into the dominant press. Cynthia Kadohata, a sansei, provides a good example of this phenomena.

In the 1980s, Kadohata's short stories "Charlie-O," "Jack's Girl," and "Marigolds" appeared in *The New Yorker*, a magazine that bridges the gap between the popular and the literary in the U.S. She also published "Seven Moons" in *Grand Street* and "Singing Apples" in *The Pennsylvania Review*, giving her additional mainstream attention. These short stories and others make up her first novel, *The Floating World* (1989), published by Viking Penguin. This novel is a *Bildungsroman* about a Japanese-American girl's relationship to her grandmother who was cruel to her but also taught her about *ukiyo*, the floating world. In America, for this protagonist that world consisted of gas stations, motels, blackjack and poker games and the unstable life of those who are forever on the move to find jobs in a broken-down economy. As the narrative takes place mainly in Arkansas, Oregon, and California, it seems to echo with Steinbeckian concerns about working-class subjugation to the white hegemony, and thus fits the paradigm of the liberal humanists' battles against corporate America, a theme continuing after Steinbeck in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, and others. Kadohata's second novel, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992), a work set in the year 2052 in a Los Angeles that has succumbed to environmental disaster, was reviewed less kindly than her first, although Susan Heeger writing for the *Los Angeles Times* gives the novel a "thumbs up." ("What kind of L.A. in mid-21st century?" Rpt *The Japan Times* (Sunday, January 17, 1993): 12.) It should have been seen, in my opinion, as a work that transcended ethnic and working-class literature, an experimental *tour de force*, and a powerful work of ecofeminism. One reviewer, Michiko Kakutani, writing for *The New York Times*, did in fact

come close to my view, calling the novel “[A]n apocalyptic picture of America on the brink of civil disorder and social collapse. . . The writing is lucid and finely honed, often lyrical and occasionally magical.” Moreover, there is a strange absence of the presence of Kadohata in two major collections of ecofeminism: Ariel Salleh’s *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (1997) and Greta Gaard’s and Patrick D. Murphy’s *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (1998). The ubiquitous Maxine Hong Kingston is mentioned by Salleh in a not-very-relevant way, as though Salleh is trading on Kingston’s greater fame. Gaard and Murphy include only one Japanese American writer in their text, briefly mentioning the poet Janice Mirikitani, in regard to the definition of “ecofeminist”:

Was only a poem like Janice Mirikitani’s “Love Canal” about the dying of the land in upstate New York and the simultaneous dying of a woman poisoned by her proximity to Love Canal to be considered ecofeminist? Or could an older piece, like Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron,” be ecofeminist too? (21)

Along the same lines, no Japanese American women writers are included in *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990), edited by Linda J. Nicholson, and only one Asian woman, Aihwa Ong, is remarked upon, very briefly, though two essays by poet-feminist Mitsuye Yamada (“Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman” and “Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism”) appeared in the previously-published anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), thus establishing Yamada as both a feminist and a postmodernist.

Significantly, this strategy of *partial* acceptance of the Japanese American writer by the dominant press also coincided with the newly-created stereotype of Japanese-Americans as a successful “model minority,” in contrast to the African American who was imaged as alcoholic, drug-addicted, criminalized, and rather worthless as far as contributing to

the "national" interests of America. The political strategy of designating the Japanese Americans as a model minority is really a policy of containment and should be resisted on the basis of a false essentialism. As Bruce Iwasaki has indicated ". . . the means of breaking the closed circle that structures much of the literary imagination are the same means necessary for removing the bonds of political oppression" ("Response and Change. . ." 98). For white America to play one race against another is a particularly insidious form of discrimination, exposing latent prejudices against both groups. Institutionalized and racialized discourses have become much more complicated since the days of the overt racist texts mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and it takes a sharper eye to uncover them, which is part of my purpose in writing this essay.

By the 1980s, Japanese American writers had clearly entered mainstream culture through the dominant presses, though none of them achieved the success and acclaim of a Maxine Hong Kingston, or became an "overnight sensation" (Hong 414) in the manner of an Amy Tan with the publication of her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989. It has often been remarked by male scholars and writers that Kingston and Tan had the advantage of a "feminist" moment, that it was primarily a female audience (which likes to read matrilineal works) that provided their immense receptivity. But such opinion discounts the male audience for Kingston's *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey*, as well as her favorable reviews by male critics, such as William McPherson, Paul Gray, and John Leonard, among others, writing for major U. S. newspapers. Further, the popularity of at least the film version of *The Joy Luck Club* among many men may require an alternative receptivity theory, such as the one proposed by Patricia Chu. Chu claims Tan's use of the generic immigrant myth shares "certain values central to American thinking: the belief in America as a land of opportunity, the bonds between parents and children, and the power of the individual to control his or her own future through acts of will (agency)" (143). May I remind the reader that these are precisely the values *not* found in Okada's *No-No Boy*, many of Lawson Inada's poems, nor in Kadohata's *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*. De-

spite the growing recognition of Asian American writers, they were not included in mainstream anthologies published in the 1980s. In 1986, the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (Shorter Second Edition) included fourteen African American writers but no Asian American ones. Not until the 1990s did Norton come out with an anthology dedicated to Asian American writers. As late as 1989, Macmillan's *Anthology of American Literature* (Fourth Edition) included thirteen African American writers and no Asian American ones. Published in the same year Stuart Friebert's and David Young's *The Longman Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (Second Edition) listed no Asian Americans but featured four African Americans. Famous American academic critics of poetry, such as Jonathan Holden, Alan Williamson, Cary Nelson, Charles Altieri and Harold Bloom did not include Asian American poets in their critiques, though in the late 1990s, Altieri and Bloom began to consider them (see References at the end of this paper). The prestigious poetry journal *Parnassus*, known for its sophisticated essays on poets, included no writings on Asian American poets in its first 16 Volumes (32 issues). Why did they neglect prizewinning poets such as Mitsui Yamada, Kimiko Hahn, Patricia Ikeda, Janice Mirikitani, Garrett Hongo, and David Mura? Finally, Volume 17. No.1 of *Parnassus*, entitled "Multicultural Issue," did lead off with "Garrett Hongo." More about Hongo later, in conjunction with David Mura. Both of these Japanese American male writers have been favored by the dominant culture brokers, not only in terms of winning prestigious prizes and rave reviews but also the broad dissemination of their works across the American literary terrain. Yet both poets have evoked significant negative critiques by those critics who are, in general, not part of the "high" literary establishment. The last section of my paper is a foray into the whys and wherefores of this split decision.

III.

Postmodernism, poststructuralism and multiculturalism working through the rivers of American culture helped to break up the WASP male

hegemony in the field of American poetry throughout the 1980s and 1990s, opening a narrow current in the mainstream for the works of Asian American poets. The mainstreaming of ethnic poetics was not without its bed of thorns, however. "The term 'Asian American' itself came in the 1980s to be perceived by artists and scholars moving and growing into the field as totalizing and thus extremely problematic" (Sumida 806). The effect of this "deconstructive" movement was not only to question the authenticity of the stable subject / voice but also to implode several divisive debates, two of which I will focus on now: the notion of "selling-out" and the ideology of "authenticity." To some extent, the debates overlap and merge since selling-out, in terms of this paper, indicates an "authentic" Japanese American writer who has been accepted by the dominant culture as an ethnic / racial *representative* in the sense of Emerson's Representative Man worthy of promulgating "American" cultural values held by the majority, such as individualism, agency, democratic rights, and liberty for all. Whether this is actually true or not is beside the point. Particular Japanese American representative writers will be chosen by the cultural hegemony to perform that function. One of the first of these representatives to be singled out for this performative role was Garrett Hongo, especially after he was awarded the Lamont Prize (one of the most distinguished awards given to U.S. poets) in 1987 for his second book of poetry, *The River of Heaven*. His first book *Yellow Light* (1982) was well received by the mainstream makers, given great blurbs by David St. John in *The Antioch Review*, as well as by Maxine Hong Kingston, who wrote these words: "To read his poems is to know one's own ordinary secret world worthy of song. Songs of grief and songs of praise. He constantly grows, and is now at least one of the best" (back cover of *Yellow Light*). In 1993, Hongo brought out his edited anthology *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*, which led to a flurry of critical responses, some good and some downright viperous, replete with contentious culturalism, in my opinion. First, an example of a favorable review can be found in the *Academy of American Poets Newsletter* (1993): Dave Smith, a white poet regarding *The Open Boat* says "this chorus of poets celebrates all the char-

acter and strength and dooms and glories it takes for a people to survive in adversity. It assembles the pieces of a story untold, unsung until now, and its voice is compelling and chastening. These are poems demanding, asserting, and cherishing freedom" (21). *Publisher's Weekly* and *School Library Journal*, important trade publications, also gave Hongo accolades. Next, a pox on him from Juliana Chang for his "appropriation of Asian American poetry into hegemonic narratives of immigration and assimilation," Catalina Cariaga for his use of the "immigrant trope," and Victor Bascara, teamed with Cariaga, for a "lack of the social" (See References). By and large, white reviewers favor Hongo's work, while some Asian Americans (usually non-Japanese) are irritated by, perhaps, his fame and subsequent canonization, taking linguistic potshots at him that do not always make a lot of sense. When the attack is more rationally-thought through, we find comments such as Timothy Yu's, in his Review of *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*. Yu claims, and I partly agree with him, that when the ethnic voice moves

into the market place of the wider culture, it finds itself in a sphere in which individual speech has been so heavily commodified that it has lost its potential for social critique, in which the ethnic differences displayed by minority writers become marketable commodities, name-brand variations on a uniform product. (436)

Yet Yu's real gripe is that *The Open Boat* garnered so many outstanding reviews, while Walter K. Lews' *Premonitions* did not and deserved to. This is indeed another kind of "othering" alluded to earlier, the internecine war between various Asian American writers and critics. Yu also takes on David Mura, award-winning sansei poet, memoirist, and performance artist, fencing with Mura's language. Yu's *une pointe de raillerie* is that Mura's autobiographical poem "Gardens We Have Left" (from *The Open Boat*): "follows the conventions of ethnic writing of the 1970s in its focus on subjectivity, that he "exoticizes and reifies the food" in his poem, "presenting cultural identity as a consumable commodity" (437-8) (God forbid,

that I myself should ever write on poem on pasta!). Worse yet, Yu's final *coup de bec* is that Mura shows "allegiance to the homogenizing conventions of the MFA mainstream" (439). Any thoroughly analytical reading of the whole body of Mura's work would prove Yu's off-hand comment to be a false assertion. David Mura won the National Poetry Series Award, in addition to many other prestigious fellowships and grants, and while I am not tabling the issues of "selling-out" and the "authenticity" of the mainstreamed Asian American writer, neither am I saying that because a writer is taken up by the dominant culture brokers, his or her work should automatically be discredited, as so many academic critics want to almost insist on today. The debates on the acceptance or refusal of the Asian American writers are threaded through with issues circulating around gender, race, class, and ethnicity. They are particularly heated and complicated, transparent and obtuse, and I cannot do more in this essay than to present them to readers with a cautionary note of suggesting that they read widely in the field and make up their own minds. But to perhaps make my own position a little clearer, I'd like to focus now on two new American anthologies that embrace the formerly excluded ethnic/racial/woman/gay/lesbian writers, in tandem with the new politics of multiculturalism.

Paul Lauter's *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Volume 2 (second edition), and Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990*, were published in 1994. As General Editor, Lauter for the most part selected works that exhibit the "increasingly multicultural framework of American literature" without deviating "from accepted patterns of literary representation," according to white reviewer Hank Lazer (363-64). Lazer further critiques *The Heath Anthology* by asserting it "smacks of an imitateness of dominant white modes of representation" since "the poems themselves are remarkably the same as their white counterparts in form, in voice, in diction, and in the manner of narrating experiences with the dominant mode of the personal narrative as crafted and developed over the past thirty-five years," and he singles out Garrett Hongo's poem "Something Whispered in the *Shaku-*

hachi" (originally published in *Harvard Magazine*) as an example of his point (366-67). Clearly, to write with the expertise of the canonized poets of the "past thirty-five years" is not a good practice for this reviewer. Lazer's bias is on the side of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, a mode of writing employed by Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman, Susan Howe, Wanda Coleman, Kathleen Fraser, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, and Ron Silliman, among other primarily *white* poets. This style of poetry is lauded by white poet and critic Rob Wilson, who also co-opts "marginal" poetries to find fault with *The Heath Anthology* and Garrett Hongo, putting down "its packaged tours of the local, marginal, and ethnic as *representative* voices such as Garrett Hongo or Gary Soto" (125; emphasis mine). Messerli offers his poetry anthology "as a travel guide" (*From the Other Side* 34), but Lazer finds it is just not so because it "offers little articulated context and almost no map or guide" (373). The "personal lyric" (one form that both Hongo and Mura use, though not exclusively) "is virtually missing from Messerli's book," Lazer tells us with a nostalgic tint to his voice, and he confesses he would like to see "a *range* of aesthetic choices" (382) represented in an anthology, though, problematically, that range for him has already been limited by his own definitive critique.

So in addition to the culture, the gender – Frank Chin vs. Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Diana Chang – and the ethnic wars, we have the poetry wars, from the right and from the left to confuse issues: New Formalists vs. free verse, and accessibility and authenticity vs. indecipherability and undecidability. Though Hongo and Mura are neither New Formalists, nor Language poets as defined by *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984), they are not easily accessed and they sometimes parody authenticity or its markers. We no longer accept Cleaneth Brooks' definition of the poet's role, that is, his / her "task is finally to unify experience. He [she] must return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience" (194). Yet most of us want some retention of the experiential in our poetry. So when does experience become valid for art, and when does it become a "sell-out"? I cannot end this paper without a closer look at Rob Wilson's critique of Garrett Hongo, and the accusation

of “selling-out.”

In a recent *boundary 2* essay, “From the Sublime to the Devious: Writing the Experimental / Local Pacific,” Rob Wilson puts down the lyrical greatness of American poets W.S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, and Robert Pinsky to raise up (“sell”?) certain Hawaiian writers, such as Barry Masuda, Justin Chin, Wendy Miyake, Lee Tonouchi, and Albert Saijo, whose literary practices, Wilson says, combine “various forms of Pidgin and mongrel cultural mixture” (133). He particularly uses Albert Saijo’s “singular memoir of experimental language, *OUTSPEAKS: A RHAPSODY*” with its “very globalized view of the local Pacific” (134; his emphasis and mine) to trash Garrett Hongo’s memoir *Volcano*. (Saijo, as I mentioned earlier in this essay, puts down Lawson Inada’s work with a trashy comment.) I quote Wilson’s footnote on Hongo extensively here to make my point:

30. A very different and much more conventional view of the writing life at Volcano is offered by Garrett Hongo in *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai’i* (New York: Knopf, 1995). Bowing to Yeats and Marquez and Basho, even as he puts local ethnic and Hawaiian indigenous signifiers italics and wills the ghosts of his immigrant Japanese ancestors to talk story (“*kahiko* out of my voice” [xi]) with this prodigal son becoming native insider, Hongo recounts a “magical-realism” drenched narrative that aims to be a “sacred book a book of origins” (20-27). Rich in borrowed metaphor and myth and posited as poetic quest, it is surprising to realize that Hongo actually spent only his first three months at Volcano village and grew up in the less charmed urban locales of Honolulu, Los Angeles, and Irvine. . .”

Without any more space in this essay to parse this note critically, I leave it to the reader to see how this kind of rhetorical attack is used to attempt to build an alternative canon, at the expense of a highly- imaginative artist who has been mainstreamed, and, I would submit, to the detriment of Japanese American literature in general.

I am aware of the issue, so clearly stated by David Palumbo-Liu, about what happens when a minority discourse gains currency with the dominant hegemony. As he says, "it loses its latitude as a counterdiscourse and its ability to designate a shifting open space outside the hegemonic" (17). However, the answer cannot be for all minority discourse to remain excluded, but rather by *inclusion* the discourse may attempt to change the codes of the hegemony. Historically, the boundary between "Japaneseness" and "Whiteness" has been more or less permeable according to politico-economic global realities, and the Japanese-American writer who can further permeate that boundary at any given moment through his or her art is deserving of being more than a tool for the language game players.

A final thought. Rey Chow identifies "selling-out" as "being worked over by the language of the first world"(210) and she implies that the ethnic writer who is accepted by the American mainstream has sold out to bourgeois individualism and has achieved fame by way of the commodification and dissemination of third world exoticism. This first world-third world binary is not a productive way to speak about the American-born ethnic poet since the racialization/ethnocentricism processes that, in part, identify that poet are not consistent, nor does Chow factor in the *resistance of the artist* to such identifications, as well as the ever-changing nature of an artist's work. An artist's work cannot be essentialized in this manner, nor can it be forced into the theoretical binary that she constructs, when she says: "the West is the place for language games, aesthetic fantasies, and fragmented subjectivities; the West's others, instead offer us 'lessons' about history, reality, and wholesome collective consciousness" (100). The interpellation and interrogation of East/West writer/artists has to some significant extent collapsed this binary. I might accept the idea of "selling-up" when a Japanese American writer, such as Hongo or Mura enter the mainstream, but even this spatial metaphor disturbs me, since I know how quickly they can be displaced and erased from the contemporary scene. "In this instance, we are temporary visitors to the publishing world. It is not a far reach then to see that the favorable 'cli-

mate' for Asian American writers is not as hospitable as it at first appears to be". . . . "Every publisher wants their Amy Tan in hopes of cashing in on her popularity. It is a cynical approach, but so are the publishers," David Wong Louie reminds us (Intro. *Dissident Song* 1-2). Agreeing with Rika Nakamura that ethnic literature *in its resistance to domination* can participate in, reproduce, and exploit the discourses of the dominant culture. . . ." (1), I believe the literature I have discussed in this essay has indeed done that. Following Lisa Lowe's emphasis on understanding "the dynamic fluctuation and heterogeneity of Asian American culture" in order to "release our understandings of either the 'dominant' or the emergent 'minority cultures' as discrete, fixed, or homogeneous" (69), I would suggest that we make fluid, "democratic" space for all American artists of integrity, and leave the ideology of authenticity to gather dust on the library shelves that are dismantling before our very eyes.

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