

Critical Essay on Cultural Identity: Conceptions of Asian American in Three Pre-Civil Rights Era Novels

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When exploring conceptions of Asian American identity, it is beneficial to draw on three pre-civil rights era novels written before the stylization of the term “Asian American”. The terminology of Asian American was coined by political activists and historians Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka in 1968 amidst uprising and political activism during what is often referred to as the civil rights era in the United States (U.S.) (Kambhampaty). Younghill Kang’s *East Goes West* (1937), Carlos Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart* (1943) and John Okada’s *No No Boy* (1957) are considered classics of Asian American literature; however, these texts were written before the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, as well as Gee and Ichioka’s 1968 coinage (Kambhampaty). Therefore, this article addresses the research question, how do these novels—without the availability of such a term—define what many universities and cultural studies programs regard as Asian American and Asian American literature? This article explores representations and characterizations of Asian American identity through the framework of the three novels previously stated. Drawing on representations of identity from these texts, this article argues that *cultural* identity rather than *racial* or *ethnic* identity best defines Asian American literature as well as other intercultural/cross-cultural (hereinafter intercultural) literature. It is outside the scope of this article to address the complexities that exist between the definitions of the terms *race* and *ethnicity*. However, as topics related to these definitions are raised, this article understands *race* to include phenotypic features such as hair and skin color while *ethnicity* encompasses broader cultural factors such as language, nationality, religion, and traditions of a particular group of people. The reader will also notice that the term Asian American, as well as other ethnicity plus American compound nouns, are non-hyphenated—this is done purposefully to dispel any negative connotations associated with

hyphenated epithets. Turning now towards the focus and larger conception of intercultural literature in the Western literary canon, this article will put forth an argument for further critical cultural identity perspectives on intercultural literature as opposed to racial (or ethnic) representations of identity. Equally so, there is a need for placing conceptions of identity on a fluid progression that does not seek dichotomous binary relationships, but rather envisages an intercultural identity that exists on a transformative continuum that can accept new cultural dimensions at any given moment and is unrelated to notions of race or racial makeup.

1. Early Cultural Identity (Mis)Representations in Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*

In Younghill Kang's 1937 fictionalized memoir *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee*, immediately in the subtitle, Kang begins his intercultural (mis)representation of Asian Americans with a protodefinition of cultural identity: "oriental yankee." Most modern critics may cringe upon first exposure to the subtitle as the appellations "oriental" and "yankee" could both contain culturally insensitive overtones. However, this was 1937 and *East Goes West* is considered an early and influential text in the growing body of Asian American literature. Kang begins the complex process of defining intercultural representations of Asian Americans in his work that mimics his own experience of immigration to the U.S. *East Goes West* examines the experiences of a young Korean man, Chungpa Han, settling in New York city before the start of the second world war. Chungpa, who fled a Japanese-occupied united (North and South) Korea, witnesses his fellow Asian Americans, becoming involved in Korean independence whilst living in the U.S. He observes how most Asian first-generation immigrants are in the U.S. with the sole intention to save enough money to return to their place of origin. However, Han and fellow Korean American George Jum, are interested in integrating into U.S. culture. As George, who has lived in New York for a short time already, begins Han's informal education in American cultural norms, Kang writes: "The next period of my life must properly be dedicated to George Jum. He attempted to be my teacher in everything American, and certainly he had left all Asian culture as a thing of nought [sic], If I am not a very shining example of his precepts, the faults must be laid to me and not to him" (Kang 31). George has attempted to leave all "Asian culture as a thing of nought [sic]", however, he inevitably fails to integrate into U.S. society, which further isolates both George and Chungpa from

fellow Asian Americans, who are interested in repatriation rather than integration, as well as from the U.S. society that they wished to integrate into. In a more fortunate conception, Chungpa and George could have exhibited an intercultural perspective to retain their Korean heritage whilst simultaneously adopting U.S. cultural norms of the era. Although the terminology Asian American did not exist at that time, this intercultural perspective would have been valuable to the characters in Kang's *East Goes West* as it would have afforded an identity on an ever-evolving continuum. In other words, cultural identities are best viewed as transformative and fluid. Rather than viewing Asian identity and U.S. identity as dichotomous binaries—as in the case of Kang's characters—a cultural identity could coalesce on a continuum that converges multiple identity markers into one individual. Although Kang's poignant critiques of American industrialization, greed, alienation, hypocrisy and racism remain relevant, his representations of an intercultural identity as viewed through the lens of an "oriental yankee" do not age quite as well.

2. Sacrifice for Cultural Identity in Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*

In Carlos Bulosan's collective autobiography *America is in the Heart* the question in which Bulosan seeks to answer at the "heart" of the novel is essentially, what is America? Further to that, what is the U.S. to a Filipino immigrant in the 1930s and 40s? Therefore, to further outline conceptions of cultural identity and implications of the term Asian American, it is first necessary to understand how Bulosan defines "America". In an impassioned speech, Macario, older brother of the protagonist Carlos, defines "America" to his fellow writers at a meeting of one of the first Asian American literary magazines:

America is also the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee, the hungry boy begging for a job and the black body dangling on a tree...We are all that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy...that lynched black body. All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate—*We are America!* (Bulosan 189).

It is crucial to remember that the term Asian American did not exist for Bulosan—an individual was either one or the other, Asian *or* American, even Kang's "oriental yankee" was innovative at the time. The terminology Asian American was simply not available. Hence, to Bulosan, an "American" is anyone who has sacrificed for the U.S.—anyone who has suffered for the U.S. The U.S. is the "hungry," "the poor," "the nameless," the dead and the "dangling" (Bulosan 189). Bulosan takes a non-idealized view of U.S. identity that incorporates both the "educated" and the "illiterate" (Bulosan 189). The U.S. is not one race

or one class, but rather is defined by its troubles and its triumphs. Further to that, the U.S. adheres to its *cultural* suffering and not its *racial* suffering. Equally, Bulosan's quota of suffering spans history "from the first Adams to the last Filipino" (Bulosan 189). These principles are a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps outlook from a pre-civil rights movement immigrant. From these values that Bulosan provides for his characters, an intercultural definition of Asian American begins cultivation and reaches fruition later in this article.

3. Cultural Non-Identity in John Okada's *No No Boy*

Turning to John Okada's 1957 *No No Boy* and its conception of Asian American, it is necessary to remember that like both Kang and Bulosan, the terminology Asian American still does not yet exist. Therefore, to understand Okada's idea of "America" (and Asian America), it is imperative to understand Okada's character Kenji, a Japanese American World War II veteran who fought for the U.S. and the allied forces in Europe. Suffering from injuries from the war, on his death bed, Kenji relates a speech to protagonist Ichiro concerning his ideal view of the future: "Drink to wherever it is I'm headed, and don't let there be any Japs or Chinks or Jews or Poles or Niggers or Frenchies, but only people. I think about that too. I think about that most of all" (Okada 165). Here Kenji is Okada's pure forum, his ethical muse—a war hero who eventually dies a casualty of the hypocrisy of that time. Kenji is a victim of the violation of rights and prejudices of that era; however, he has fought for these very rights and has suffered for them. Moreover, Kenji is killed by the failure of ideals and believes in a world of "only people" where ethnicity does not signify identity. In this sense, Okada fights for a similar ideal of "only people", where color and ethnicity are rendered meaningless. Here is irony at its best. Most scholars will associate Okada as a seminal Asian American writer, yet his character is both hyper-aware of his Asian American identity, yet wishes to essentially erase ethnicity and cultural markers. Of course, this is simply not possible, nor should it be. As an alternative, Kenji could consider an intercultural perspective that highlights cultural heritage and allows for multicultural identities to co-exist on a continuum of self. This article is aware that Kenji is Okada's mouthpiece against racism; however, simply erasing ethnic markers could be equally as harmful as it seeks to nullify the differences between people.

4. A Comparative Cultural Identity Inquiry: Bulosan and Okada

Okada's view of Asian American is, akin to yet, slightly different than that of Bulosan. In terms of an identity, rather than a geographic origin, to Bulosan, "American" is a non-idealized sacrifice, "one who suffers for America is America"; whereas to Okada "American" is an ideal of "just people." To Okada, suffering is not a pre-requisite for citizenship nor identity; nor is becoming a part of America's troubles and triumphs. To Okada, being an "American" is simply (and arguably) turning our skin inside out or wiping our faces of ethnicities. However, Bulosan understands this is not possible and sees that "the black body dangling in the tree" is just as American as "the first Adams", which positions sacrifice at the heart of "American" identity. In Bulosan's world, color and ethnicity are *not* rendered meaningless, yet they are less meaningful than the sacrifice an individual makes for their country. Although his novel was published seven years previous, in a sense, Bulosan has a more progressive view of cultural identity than Okada. All this despite that Bulosan's first language was not English nor was he born in the U.S. (unlike Okada). In *East Goes West*, Kang's characters also exhibit behaviors similar to Bulosan's in that Han recognizes suffering people; however, his cultural identity is not fully formed, which ironically is closer to the fluid and ever-evolving continuum this article is recommending.

For Bulosan, there is a simple answer to his question, what is "America"? The answer is: *sacrifice*. Sacrifice as forfeiture, accordance and anointment to becoming "American". It appears that Bulosan wholeheartedly believes in these sentiments and yet his characters hold slight variances in belief concerning the amount of sacrifice in comparison to what is considered "American". Apparently, these variations of sacrifice can make a difference, especially for whom a character is sacrificing for. In Bulosan's world, Okada's Kenji is *absolutely* "American", because of his almighty sacrifice and eventual death for the U.S. However, Ichiro, would not be "American" in Bulosan's view since he is a draft-resister. Ichiro made the decision *not* to fight for the U.S. and instead chose prison over war. In this sense, if Bulosan had written *No No Boy* Ichiro would *not* be an "American"—though he suffered and rotted two years in a prison cell—he did not sacrifice for the U.S., but rather for Japan. In some sense Ichiro's character himself believes the same thing. When in Portland, Ichiro responds to Mr. Carrick's offer for a drafting job: "You've no apology to make, sir. You've been very good. I want the job. The pay is tops. I might say I need the

job, but it's not for me. You see, I'm not a veteran" (Okada 152). Rather than take the job from a "real American", someone who Ichiro believes has sacrificed for their country by going to war—he turns it down. Ichiro believes he did not suffer for the U.S., but rather for his mother and for Japan. He embodies the conflict between filial duty and loyalty to his nation. This is his guilt and his cross to bear. Ichiro believes that many jobs would be better suited for a true "American" and not himself.

Although, Ichiro's nationalist mother views him as a "No-No," technically Ichiro's position is a No-Yes. This pertains to the final two questions (number twenty-seven and twenty-eight) on the 1943 "loyalty questionnaire" issued by the U.S. War Relocation Authority (WRA) to interned citizens of Japanese ancestry during WWII. In the WRA's questionnaire, in response to question twenty-seven, "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?" (Lyon). Ichiro answers *no*—he will not "serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty" because, he believes that, essentially, his constitutional rights as an American are being violated. This classified him as a draft-resister and coupled with his "yes" answer to question twenty-eight—he found himself in a prison cell. Question twenty-eight was initially three questions with only one possible yes-no response: "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Emperor of Japan, to any other foreign government, power or organization?" (Lyon). However, question twenty-eight was later revised to: "Will you swear to abide by the laws of the United States and take no action which would in any way interfere with the war effort of the United States?" (Lyon). Historically, many of the respondents rejected the premise of this question as it was perceived to be a trap. The question implies that the respondent had already sworn allegiance to the Emperor of Japan, even though many of the respondents were U.S. citizens having been born in the U.S. (Lyon). Either way, by answering "no" to either question, young Japanese often found themselves in prison at Tule Lake Segregation Center, or similar venues. It is possible these "No-No" boys were left questioning their country, their identity and what it means to straddle the lines between nations and cultures. Only after the significance of Kenji's death does Ichiro begin to understand the multicultural idea of Asian American identity.

5. New(ish) Definitions of Asian American and Asian American Literature

What exactly constitutes Asian American and Asian American literature? The Oxford online English Dictionary's denotative definition places an Asian American as simply "A U.S. citizen or resident of Asian descent" (Definition of Asian American). However, as with many things, a denotative definition only goes so far. Therefore, a more connotative understanding is necessary: in one respect, Asian American is a cultural phenomenon—defined by the history and struggles of a people with Asian heritage living in the U.S. Essentially a person who fits into this category and writes a significant text could call that work "Asian American" literature even if it never once mentions Asian American identity or culture. However, this definition adheres to exclusion, rather than inclusion, as there is no implication that Asian people living in the U.S. are separate entities than non-Asian Americans. Here, the argument is for a cultural identity comprised—not by socio-economic class or abstractions such as race—on an intercultural continuum enveloping both Asian *and* "American" cultures. In 1976, when Frank Chin writes of the "yellow soul" in the afterword to *No No Boy*. Although in Chin's definition, there exists the idea of a cultural identity—distinct from an ethnic identity—"yellow soul" remains outdated because of its reference to race and the racialized usage of "yellow". In a sense, Ichiro's *ethnic* identity is Japanese and his culture is from the U.S., or is it the other way around? These are complex issues. Consider though the idea of a multicultural identity. Multicultural identity (related to cultural diversity) could be understood as a fluid personal intercultural identity that does not seek dichotomous binary relationships, but rather exists on a transformative continuum that continuously accepts new cultural dimensions at any given moment and is unrelated to notions of race or racial makeup. The argument is that Asian American literature is a work of literary merit that addresses the complexities of Asian culture and identity in relation to the culture and identity of the U.S.

All things considered then, currently, what does it mean to be Asian American, or any *hyphenated* ethnicity for that matter? In some respects, to simply be a person is to belong to a culture and a literature that goes along with that culture. In an earlier section of Macario's speech in Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* there is a clear representation of this: "We are approaching what will be the greatest achievement of our generation: the discovery of a new vista of literature, that is, to speak to the people and to be understood by them" (Bulosan 188). This portion of Macario's call to arms for literature and literacy of

Filipino immigrants could stand-in as a mantra for Asian American literature. “A new vista of literature” is literature speaking “to the people” (immigrants in this case), and more importantly “is understood by them.” When Macario refers to being “understood by them,” the phrase linguistically pulls double duty. He is not only speaking of educating illiterate immigrants to the English language, but he also comments on a common sacrifice by a group of people with Asian heritage living in the U.S.—an Asian American intercultural identity. This is a literature that belongs to a specific group of people, “Americans” of Asian descent living in the U.S. and speaking English, written for and by this group of people. However, on a fluid continuum, this could also signify any individual or group concerned with Asian culture and identity as it relates to U.S. culture and identity. The ethnicity or heritage of the writer is not of consequence—only the topic of the literature itself.

6. Intercultural Identity and Multicultural Literature: A Way Forward

This adaptable view of cultural identity put forth could be (if it is not already) what academic Asian American studies programs adhere to when defining Asian American literature as well as intercultural literature in the Western canon, e.g., African American, Native American, Latin American. In the works of Kang, Bulosan and Okada, their definitions of Asian American as an “oriental yankee”, “one who suffers for America” and “just people,” respectively, act as protodefinitions emanating from pre-civil rights era fiction and are useful for beginning to understand the complexities of immigration and identity. However, these definitions do not address the cultural aspects necessary for understanding the fluidity of identity that was coined in the term Asian American. An intercultural perspective is inherent in these hyphenated ethnicity phrases and this suggests an intercultural framework through which to critically view Asian American and other forms of intercultural literature. In a few years’ time, even definitions in this article could seem outdated, and probably already are to some; however, awareness takes time to reach critical mass. In one sense, the undefinable nature of culture and identity is a reason why intercultural literature is exciting and worthy of inquiry. Multicultural literature is a malleable and dynamic body of work, open to new ideas and definitions that define its literary undertakings.

Further comparative intercultural inquiry and critique of the very strands and

definitions of intercultural literature is needed in terms of genres in literature. However, this article has sought the beginnings of an intercultural understanding of Asian American cultural identity as viewed through the lens of three pre-civil rights era literary texts: Kang's *East Goes West*, Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* and Okada's *No No Boy*. Jumping off from the framework of these three novels, this article has argued for critical cultural identity perspectives on intercultural literature that exists on a fluid and evolving continuum as opposed to a racial binary representation of cultural identity. This understanding could be utilized when modern literary critics perform cultural inquiry and identity work on intercultural literature.

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