Recovered Legacies

Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preface</th>
<th>vii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chronology of Works Discussed</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floyd Cheung</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Self and Generic Convention: Winnifred Eaton’s Me, A Book of Remembrance</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Shih</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgina Dodge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Capitalist and Imperialist Critique in H. T. Tsiang’s And China Has Hands</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia H. Lee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Knadler</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Asian American (Im)mobility: Perspectives on the College Plays 1937–1955</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josephine Lee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asian Americans, we should be suspicious of any "kinship" that we assume. The lived experience and felt identities of Asian Americans must be distinguished from the political agendas and cultural imperatives set by the more recent Asian American movement; these plays exhibit little of the pan-ethnic solidarity, racial self-consciousness, or radical aspirations that many might see as defining more contemporary instances of Asian American theater. Rather than attempting to read these plays as reflections of a nascent Asian American consciousness, in other words, one should see them as depictions of and contradictions to the social relationships and issues of ethnic identity that were being redefined both in Hawai‘i and on the mainland during the crucial period before, during and following World War II.

The plays in Volume I from Wilson’s class were written during the fall semester of 1936; Volume II begins with the postwar year of 1946–47; subsequent volumes pick up with subsequent years of the postwar era. Taken together, the ten volumes delineate a time when the social status of Asian Americans in Hawai‘i was clearly in flux. In Hawai‘i as on the mainland, Asian immigration in large part was spurred by economic hardships in Asia and the demand for cheap labor in the United States; immigrants and their descendants were systematically exploited and victimized by institutional discrimination, oppression, and prejudice. The years between 1937 and 1955 might be remembered in terms of the anti-Japanese paranoia inspired by the attack on Pearl Harbor, wartime martial law, and the internment of Japanese Americans—and in terms of the grim racism inspired by postwar anti-Communist fervor. At the same time, this period also saw significant gains by Asian Americans in Hawai‘i, marked especially by the end of plantation feudalism and the political dominance of the largely haole Republican party. In the years following World War II, the status of certain Asian American groups in Hawai‘i has changed to the extent that “in the minds of many in the local community, Asians are more central than marginal” (Morales 1998, 116).

The social status of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans in Hawai‘i, as measured in terms such as income, home ownership, education, and political visibility, has clearly risen since the 1950s. However, at the present moment, social stratification in Hawai‘i in terms of income level, land ownership, access to education, and political representation continue to belie the island’s reputation as a multicultural paradise; Noel Kent argues that “the transformation of the old kamaaina [in this case, the traditional white elite] corporate complex in Hawai‘i from local sugar agencies to medium-sized transnational corporations with far-reaching interests has not—contrary to prevailing wisdom—acted
as a force for genuine economic development and political liberation in Hawai‘i” (1983, 121). This social inequality is still very much defined along ethnic and racial lines; such divisions, as Jonathan Okamura suggests, present an ethnic hierarchy: “An overall ranking of groups in the ethnic/racial stratification order would have Caucasians, Chinese, and Japanese holding dominant positions. The midrange of the ethnic/racial stratification order is occupied by Koreans and, to some extent, by African Americans. The lower levels of the ethnic/racial stratification order continue to be occupied by Filipinos, Native Hawaiians, and Samoans, a situation that appears unlikely to change in the next generation” (Okamura 1998, 200–201). Current concerns about native Hawaiian autonomy also complicate the perception of Asian American success and “progress.”

In this light, postwar changes in social status for Asian Americans might be interpreted as a perpetuation of economic inequality and social hierarchy—only this time with particular Asian ethnic groups, such as the Japanese, “on top.” Rodney Morales describes the 1950s as “a time of sweeping change,” which he describes in ways that suggest that “privileged” Asian American groups—especially Japanese and Chinese—perpetuate exploitative power structures at the expense of not only native Hawaiians but also other less economically successful Asian ethnic groups, such as Filipinos:

In 1954, a group of Democrats, mostly of Asian ancestry, many of them Japanese who had fought for America in World War II, came to power. As a result, the haole-dominated, mostly Republican Big Five lost the total dominance that they had held over Hawai‘i’s economy and people for more than half a century. The Japanese and Chinese citizens who came to political power, however, sought economic wealth. By the 1980s, Japanese and Chinese, along with descendants of earlier boatloads of Koreans, were among the wealthiest groups in the Islands. (Morales 1998, 124)

As former Lieutenant Governor Thomas Gill reflected, “Making the old order over became less important than simply making it” (Wright 1972, 239).

Such charges allow us to turn to the College Plays with an even greater curiosity about what they reveal. If it is true that artists of Asian descent in Hawai‘i do not articulate a unitary “minority voice” in a white-dominated state, and if constructing theater history as “Asian American” cannot, as Stephen Sumida argues, simply celebrate “the process of forging a new national identity through politics, economic strides, and the raising of our own voices” (1997, 278), then how might we interpret the dramatic texts of College Plays? One way might be to concentrate on how Asian American social mobility (or the lack thereof) is depicted. In these plays, we can see not only the immediate economic and political effects of this transformative period—particularly how Hawaiian economic and military development opened up business, farming, and educational opportunities to Asian Americans—but also the ideological constructions that helped pressure such changes into being. The College Plays depict not only the evidence of Asian American social mobility, but also the fantasies that construct racial and ethnic identities in relation to economic success and technological progress.

The College Plays as Responses to Modernization

During and after the Second World War both the rhetoric and the technological apparatus of “progress” in Hawai‘i took on a particular urgency. Hawai‘i’s strategic location gave it military importance for the United States; it also made it a prime target for material redevelopment as part of a U.S. “Pacific Rim” strategy. In the American postwar project of global transformation, the development of a Pacific Rim economic strategy was key; the United States targeted Japan and Southeast Asia as markets for American goods and as regions for the export of capital. This economic strategy had a large impact on how Hawai‘i would be imagined in public discourse: as being on the “fast track” of economic change and development that made its modernization (like its earlier annexation) an aspect of inevitable “progress” and manifest destiny.

Willard Wilson’s introductions to the College Plays underscore such changes. In his introduction to the Volume I (1937–38), Wilson mentions events of local interest, including labor strikes by shipping, laundry, cane, and railroad workers. However, his focus quickly moves to “our comparative isolation in Hawaii” in contrast to “momentous changes going on in the outside world: a world trembling with power like a racing motor with a jammed accelerator.” In Volume II, Wilson suggests that this isolation has been broken; he describes a celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the university, in which there was generated “considerable interest in the developing role of Hawaii and the University in the so-called Pacific Era.” In later volumes, Wilson returns repeatedly to his observations of material changes in the daily lives of his students that affect the subject and nature of their playwriting:

All the islands now have daily plane service. The ratio of car owners to [the general] population is supposed to be about 1:4; every third person has a radio; most remote rural communities are served by electric power and telephone companies; one can get fresh-frozen Alaska salmon or Oregon
peas at almost any little country store; the “movies” and “comics” provide the matrix of thought for 90% of Hawaiian youngsters, just as they do for their enlightened siblings in Los Angeles or New York. (Volume III)

In Volume V, he notes the conspicuous absence of “Hawaiian regional flavor” and concludes that “this inability to seize local material and turn it into grist for the dramatic mill may be unfortunate from a historical point of view, but it seems to me a somewhat inevitable result of the cosmopolitan and almost international way in which the society of Hawaii has been going for many years.”

Many of the student plays also openly register this climate of change and make it fundamental to their characterizations and dramatic purposes. Two such examples—Kathryn L. Bond’s We’ll Go See the World (Volume I) and Clara Kubojsiraj’s Country Pie (Volume VII)—exemplify two different modes of figuring Asian and Asian American characters with respect to Hawai'i’s modernization. As we shall see, these two plays present a paradigmatic opposition between “old” and “new” forms of Asianness, as marked by obsolescence or incorporation into modernization and Americanization.

Bond’s We’ll Go See the World focuses on the antics of two old “China-men,” Lim Sui and Wing Bo, who saw logs, smoke their pipes, joke about a friend (“John Pake”) and his new “Pololican” (Portuguese) wife, and banter with Mrs. Wall, their welfare case worker, who has come to get them to apply for the Old Chinese Home in Honolulu. In her choice to depict these former plantation workers, Bond hints at a more elaborate history of the Chinese in Hawai‘i: as Mrs. Wall fills out her forms, she asks them for details of their lives. The two men tell of coming to the island in order to work at Kohala Plantation during the time before automobiles and tractors: “Cow pull cane car.” Wing Bo recalls how their friend “John Pake” got his generic appeal: “Haole mans no can talk ‘Wing Tduck Tzeh’ Allee mens speak John Pake. Wing Tzeh no speak. Allee time speak John Pake.” However, a more rounded characterization is ultimately sacrificed in favor of making Lim Sui and Wing Bo into comic types, to the end that Lim is described as a “short, shrivelled old Chinese with only two or three teeth left. High shrill cackling laugh. Comparatively lively” and Wing as a “fat, bloated old man. Low sepulchral grunt, which takes place of laughter. Phlegmatic old man.” The play constructs its caricatures not only through emphasizing comic mannerisms, but also by limiting its use of oral history. Even when asked, Lim Sui cannot remember how old he is or when he came to the island. Wing Bo is equally short on exact answers: “Some time tallo patch hanna hanna, some time banana hanna hanna, sometime plantation.”

Instead of constructing a realistic past for her characters, Bond uses her one-act to set up a different sense of “living in the past.” The two men are depicted as lazy, isolated, and backward. Their ways of living (sawing logs, digging holes, cooking, and eating with chopsticks) are portrayed as obsolete and inefficient. The social worker, Mrs. Wall, chides them for eating rotten fish out of rusted tin cans and relying on Chinese medicine to treat Wing Bo’s injured leg. Their ignorance of modern conveniences is both comic (asked why he did not call Mrs. Wall to report the death of their friend Yap Ng, Lim Sui replies, “No goo’ telephone. Why for telephone? Misses no can make Yap Ng pau muckee”) and life-threatening: Wing Bo’s leg proves to be badly infected and ultimately must be treated by the government doctor.

However much a comic sketch, We’ll Go See the World nonetheless highlights in some detail the modern technologies of travel and medicine as a means of emphasizing the backwardness of the older Chinese characters. Their isolation is depicted as both rural and cultural. While they are aware of the technologies of travel (Wing Bo comments on the daily evidence of airplanes: “Everyday look see bird go nisee place”), they cannot themselves use any of them until they are literally spirited away by Mrs. Wall, the haole social worker, in her automobile. It is this “goo’ laily,” as the two men call her, who allows them into the contemporary world; she in turn is the agent of government programs and doctors, by whose benevolence and science they will be protected and provided for while they are alive and after they are dead:

**LIM SUI.** They give box, that place?
**MRS. W.** Box? What kind of box?
**LIM SUI.** Muckee time box.
**MRS. W.** Yes, they will give you a nice coffin.
**LIM SUI.** You no lie? No box, no likee go.
**WING BO.** Too long time me give Tong Boxx nicee place tenteem’ een’ one month for buy muckee time box.
**MRS. W.** Yes boys, I promise, you will have a good box when you die. But you have long time yet before you will need it. (*Old men greet this with cackles.*)
**WING BO.** No too long time. Goo’ box got, no trouble. Today muckee, tomorrow, muckee, any time muckee, no trouble—sappose nice box got.

As Mrs. Wall emphasizes, placing the two men in the Old Chinese Home is for their own protection. The play ends with Wing and Lim
in awestruck anticipation of Mrs. Wall’s promises—not only of a future airplane ride to Honolulu but also of an immediate trip in her automobile to Mahukona, ten miles away, to “see the boat”; in their excitement, they “chatter in Chinese.” Mrs. Wall marvels, “Here fifty years and they’ve never been ten miles to Mahukona”; she offers them what will be their first ride in what they refer to as the “ollomobile,” declaring, “Come along boys, we’ll go see the world!”

We'll Go See the World is not alone among the College Plays in its preoccupation with defining Asian and Asian American characters through their response to modernization. Clara Kubojiri’s domestic drama Country Pie (Volume VII) also relies on a background of a changing rural Hawai‘i. Set in “an isolated farming district,” the play considers the troubled marriage of the Japanese American couple George and Martha. Martha’s mother and siblings, who arrive after George runs off to the movies, criticize him for ignoring Martha and their daughter Emi; Martha’s mother (Okasan12) reminds Martha that she should have married “that Kuroda boy” instead of George. When George returns, Okasan confronts him angrily. George explodes in rage, tells his in-laws to leave, and yells at Martha to leave with them. Martha refuses, and her loyalty prompts an emotional reconciliation in which George realizes how much she loves him.

At first, it seems as though the play’s plot centered on what might be seen as more “universal” character traits, such as George’s self-centered, jealous, and impatient personality, and Martha’s nagging and exhaustion. Later on, though, their mutual misunderstanding is resolved by assertions of love and loyalty. And the play’s reminders of ethnic difference—for instance, through Okasan’s use of Japanese phrases—are kept to a minimum. What eventually infiltrates the texture of the play much more emphatically is an emphasis on changing technologies. Martha’s problems are located not just in her unappreciative husband, but also in a life of inefficient and obsolete labor, unrewarded by the pleasures of new housewares and the convenience of modern appliances. Working alongside George all day on the farm, she must save her household tasks for evening where she does them by the inadequate light of her kerosene lamp. Throughout the play, we see Martha employed in menial domestic tasks: sorting laundry, darning socks, ironing shirts, baking pies, and cleaning her home; she is forced to live with old curtains, a gas iron, a manual sewing machine. For Okasan, George’s lack of concern for his wife is exemplified by his reluctance to buy her a washing machine.

The happy ending is bolstered by the promise of new devices that will materially change the nature of Martha and George’s work. Without these new appliances, the play suggests, no domestic peace is possible; in the absence of household technologies such as refrigeration, even the ice cream that George buys for his daughter (as penance for refusing to take her to the movies) melts away. Martha’s lot in life will improve not only because George realizes how much she loves him, but also because he finally recognizes the obsolescence of their own household objects (as they reconcile, he suddenly notices that one of the coffee cups is chipped) and the endless nature of Martha’s housework. When Martha makes the happy announcement that she is expecting another child, he makes jubilant plans: “Now we gotta get that washing machine quick there. All that diapers and stuff. We gotta get the washing machine first when the electricity runs up this way.” By inference, electricity and new technology may eventually help with George’s farming troubles—crop failure, flooding, worms, disease—as well. The play does not suggest an actual solution to dire money problems that face this young couple, nor does it explain how they will finance their planned purchases. But it nonetheless suggests a happy ending where their lives are transformed by the magic of new technology.

Unlike Bond’s We’ll Go See the World, Kubojiri’s Country Pie does not necessarily see first-generation Japanese as backward or ignorant of progress. Young and old alike embrace change; indeed, it is Okasan who tells her daughter: “You get washing machine first. Number one good. No need break back washing clothes. Save plenty time.” But this young Japanese American couple and their growing family must redefine themselves as active participants in an unfolding era of progress. They do so by first breaking with extended Japanese family structures and loyalties, and then by constituting themselves as an independent nuclear unit possessing those things that ensure their “completeness.” Through their transformation into happy consumers of labor-saving devices and new domestic goods, George and Martha not only save their marriage, but also live up to their quintessentially American names.

Both plays, however, are preoccupied with how acceptance of “progress” or modernization defines the “character” of Asians and Asian Americans. Both plays affirm that the inevitable process of modernization produces a corresponding need for new “ethnic” identities that can keep up with the changing times. We’ll Go See the World shows a generation of older “Asian” characters who will ultimately be left behind by the inventions exemplifying the new world; the other presents
a family of "Asian American" consumers whose future will rely on the promise of electricity, new products, and new lives. Unlike We'll Go See the World, Country Ple reads "Asian" as not necessarily incompatible with "progress"; and in so doing, it sets the stage for picturing new "Asian American" identities on the move.

COMEDIES AND TRAGEDIES OF (IM)MOBILITY

The juxtaposing of "old" Asian and "new" Asian American characterizations must be seen in the context of the more general reconfiguration of Hawaiian "multiculturalism" in postwar and Cold War America. In the first half of the twentieth century, the rise of a more progressive and liberal view of race relations, championed by the Chicago school of sociology, took hold of the popular imagination. Within this framework, a more "cultural" and "ethnic" view of difference emerged, one that stressed a process of immigration and inevitable assimilation, and characterized a set of generational differences that would pass away with succeeding generations.13 It is this shift in attitudes toward race that in fact enables the imagination of the multiracial population of Hawai‘i to be considered "American" (or at least "Australians-in-progress").

Significantly, as Henry Yu has pointed out, in the 1920s Hawaii became one of the prime sites of study for the Chicago sociologists, "the ultimate racial laboratory, a place where the formation of the cultural melting pot they had predicted for the West Coast was already taking place" (2001, 167). This interest in Hawai‘i as the "racial frontier" renewed the "island fantasy" already put in place by the white planter class of "a Hawaii supposedly dominated by the old native Hawaiian aloha mentality of hospitality and tolerance" (2001, 168-69). In the vision of the "new" Hawai‘i, racial tensions here are downplayed through contrast with racial tensions elsewhere. Commissioned in response to the racially polarizing and highly publicized 1931 Massie case,14 the U.S. Department of the Interior's tract Hawaii and Its Race Problem (1932) relies on narratives of racial harmony and "progress." In his 1932 report, William Atherton Du Puy is concerned that "there is much talk in the continental press of race antagonisms in Hawai‘i." He continues:

This talk is based on a lack of understanding of the relations between the races over there. In the States race conflicts and race prejudices are often intense. In the islands they are practically nonexistent. The masses are of a common, lowly, and unpretentious origin. The whites through a century have felt sympathetic toward them. The social question of race has never been raised. It does not exist. It is never raised except by some outsider who brings his prejudices with him or some continental newspaper which bases its interpretation of events in Hawai‘i on race prejudices that exist where it is published.

If this outsider had an appreciation of the beauty of the interracial relations of these islands he would hesitate long before taking any step that would interfere with them. Race prejudice is a mad, intense, unreasoning thing, and arousing it where it does not exist is an act as malicious as the introduction of the plague. (129-31)

Of course, the ultimate goal is racial assimilation, which would provide a testimony to the success of "American" ways of life: "It is a part of the beautiful experiment, here in the mid-Pacific, that self-government is to be tried out under conditions and with human material that is new" (130). In his assessment of Hawaii's racial groups, Du Puy describes at some length "a group of some 23,000 "haole," "white men, mostly from continental United States, but with a sprinkling of Scotch and English":

It is this group that guides all the rest toward adjusting itself into the American mold of citizenship and government. When it is noted that language, manner of dress, manner of life generally, homes, schools, industries, business establishments, transportation, all of which are admittedly progressive and up to date, are all on the American plan, it must be admitted that this handful of "haole" gives evidence of having considerable enterprise and ability. (27-28)15

Du Puy imagines Hawaii as led by the haole minority out of what is thought to be a state of isolation and backwardness and into the modern world. The multiracialism of Hawai‘i is led by haoles of "enterprise and ability"; members of all other ethnic groups will become successful as Americans by emulating haole leaders.

Du Puy's rhetoric quite clearly designates a new role for Hawai‘i in the postwar United States, whose victory over enemies clearly marked by openly racist and imperialist policies could be seen as signifying the moral as well as the military superiority of America. As the designated bastion of racial tolerance, in other words, Hawai‘i becomes Du Puy's emblem of America's new prominence as guardian of fairness, liberality, and democracy—in contrast to the cruel racism and tyranny of America's wartime enemies, Nazi Germany and Japan. During World War II itself, as well as throughout the "Pacific Rim" era and the drive toward statehood that followed the war, Asian American identity in Hawai‘i was necessarily determined by the everyday interactions of Hawai‘i's multiracial population as well as by a set of
elaborate discursive imagined fantasies that responded to Hawai‘i’s perceived importance as racial “showcase” (Kent 1983, 122). Hawai‘i epitomized the future of “American” racial relations in an idealized, almost mythical way—a way that was untouched by the history of mainland slavery, segregation, and violence. Of course, sustaining this vision of Hawai‘i’s happy multiculturalism required the suppression of the United States’ active participation in colonialism and forced annexation, together with accompanying anti-immigration laws and restrictions, segregation, slavery, and cultural genocide. Postwar policy makers may have recognized that such suppression could be effected, at least in part, through a new kind of attention paid to Asian Americans.

According to Robert Lee, Asian Americans were stereotypically reconfigured during the postwar period as the “model minority”: that is, as “a racial minority whose apparently successful ethnic assimilation was result of stoic patience, political obedience, and self-improvement” (1999, 145). Put another way, this reconfiguration distinguished Asian Americans from other, less “obliging” or “cooperative” minority group—such as African Americans: “The representation of Asian-American communities as self-contained, safe, and politically acquiescent became a powerful example of the success of the American creed in resolving the problems of race” (Lee 1999, 160). Of course, the “model minority” myth necessarily ignored the history of exclusion laws, unfair and oppressive labor conditions, and violent prejudice that affected the lives of Asian Americans; furthermore, the duly sanitized myth constituted a white American appropriation of Asian American history as part of its own “success story.” This change in how Asian Americans figured in the public imagination was consistent with U.S. economic interests in the Pacific Rim; the emphasis on an Asian-friendly climate was crucial to attracting (for example) Japanese tourism, investments, and participation in multinational corporate ventures. Most importantly, such a view of Asian Americans fits within the model of assimilation established by white European immigrant groups, thus affirming the ability of the “melting pot” to absorb even the most “alien” in its all-encompassing democratic values.

That Asian American success figures heavily as testimony to this vision of Hawai‘i as progressive “melting pot” can be easily traced through particular works from the College Plays. Significantly, the “comic” actions of both We’ll Go See the World and Country Pie rely heavily not only on dismissals of antiquated “Asianness,” but also on the refiguring of a new kind of Asian American, one that can be demonstrably incorporated into the American body politic, one that helps substantiate the image of a more liberal postwar United States.

This vision is consistent with a significant number of other characterizations in the College Plays. As I have indicated elsewhere, “Asian American success” is a driving theme of such plays as Bessie Toishigawa Inouye’s Reunion and Nisei (Volume II) and Robert Suyezoka’s The Last Reprain (Volume IV), which portray the Nisei World War II veteran as winning a legitimate “American” identity through his military service and sacrifice. Further, we see preoccupations with “success” pushing student playwrights toward a particular genre: the interracial romance. Indeed, the interracial romance offers clear-cut and predictable responses to “progress” and ethnic identity. Not only do Japanese and Chinese parents oppose their children’s interracial unions, the unhappy children rebel in ways that characterize parental resistance to interracial romance as old-fashioned and “backward,” effectually enabling a younger generation of Asian Americans whose insistence on interracial dating and marriage marks their more “modern” attitudes. Moments of Henry Chun’s The Man They Left Behind (Volume VII), for instance, seem to echo the comic—and “comic”—depictions of We’ll Go See the World, as its “Old World” Chinese and Japanese fathers, Mr. Young and Mr. Tanaka, bemoan their sons’ marriages with “fast” haole women:

YOUNG. A-ah, haole no good. No-o-o good.
YOUNG. A-a-ah, waste tam, dees kahn. Dees kahn airplane no good. Haole ony like go mo’ fass, mo’ fass! Bime by airplane fo’ down, ellybody malko. Wen my boy go mainlan’, I no lettum go fly airplane. I tellum go on boat, mo safe. An’ dees kahn car no good, too. Look how many pippo get kew elly year by automobrew. Dees kahn haole like too much hully, hully!
TANAKA. Yah, ol’ time mo’ betta. In ol’ time, young falla lissen to papa, mama san.

At the end of Chun’s play, progress (in the guise of new furniture) is literally thrust upon Mr. Young, who is opposed to change of any kind; the moving man intrusively replaces Young’s old Chinese furniture with the new “haole” furniture ordered by his wife (“He lifts him up slightly by the back of the collar, takes away his jade-inlaid black stool, and shoves a shiny, chromium-plated one under him”). This comic moment employs, as do similar moments in many of the plays, a familiar tension
between parent and child, "Asian" and "American," "East" and "West," and "traditional" and "modern." Asian American assimilation through inter racial union serves as testimony to the liberal racial mixing that is a sign of the future.

**FOR YOU A LEI AND THE "HAWAIIAN WAY"**

A significant number of the College Plays are preoccupied with the reimagining of "Asian Americans" as successful exemplars of the possibility of cultural hybridity and social mobility. In these plays, these new identities are often defined in relation to both "obsolete" or "traditional" Asians who cling to cultural difference, or to benevolent haole who represent the intervention of enlightened and progressive attitudes and who most often appear as teachers, social workers (such as Mrs. Wall in *We'll Go See the World*), and counselors. Upwardly mobile Asians move toward "whiteness" and away from the "backward" status of the racialized "other," a space that is significantly occupied not only by those Asians who are resistant to change, but also by native Hawaiians and members of other, less assimilable Asian ethnic groups.

Yet this is by no means the characteristic mode of representation in the College Plays. Importantly, implicit tensions within even the most "comedic" of the plays—act as important counternarratives to the racialized discourse of "progress." One such example is Wai Chee Chun Yee's *For You a Lei* (Volume I). Set in a tenement in the slums of Honolulu, this play not only offers a grimly realistic portrayal of Asian American poverty (including what some scholars note as the earliest example of Hawaiian Creole English ["pidgin"] writing), but also inspires an interesting set of questions concerning the social immobility of its characters.

Roger Bell notes the postwar financial success of a number of Chinese Americans in Hawaii: "As measured in per capita terms, the Chinese had by 1959 replaced haole as the wealthiest ethnic group." This change "was influenced by two important factors: the immense wealth of a small number of new Chinese millionaire businessmen like Chinn Ho and Hiram Fong, and the influx of large numbers of mainland white wage and salary earners in defense and service industries, especially tourism, which substantially reduced the average per capita income of whites" (Bell 1984, 112). However intriguing these statistics may be, however revealing they are of the immense changes taking place in the situations of Asian Americans after World War II, they cannot be interpreted as indicative of a uniformity of ethnicity or class. As Bell cautions, although the figures suggest "a general correlation between class and ethnicity," they fail to represent "the substantial inequalities which existed within each group" (113). *For You a Lei* not only suggests that all Chinese are not destined to move up the social scale; even more importantly, it draws our attention to the values underscoring the relative nature of both "mobility" and "success."

Mrs. Lee, "a middle-aged woman of slight build," spends days and nights in domestic labor in order to support her five children. Her difficult life is complicated further by the constant rebellion of her eldest daughter, Ah Lan, who plays hooky from school. Confronted by Ah Lan's haole teacher, Miss Carter, Mrs. Lee expresses her wish that her daughter be sent to reform school, only to be told by her son Ah Quon that reform school would seal Ah Lan's fate. Ah Quon decides to buy his sister "one peen karnation lei" so that she will return to school the next day to participate in the lei program. The end of the play is uncertain—it is not known whether Ah Lan will return to school, whether she will be sent to reform school instead, or whether, in picking flowers for her lei, she has fallen into the river and drowned.

This uncertainty fuels a variety of interpretations. *For You a Lei* suggests the now-familiar opposition between "Asian" backwardness and haole-led progress. Mrs. Lee's rough manner, her inability to deal with her daughter, and her unkempt appearance (she has disheveled hair and is "dressed in a two-piece Chinese costume of plain material"; "as she walks, she drags her ragged slippers along with her") mark her as une ducated, recalcitrant, and unenlightened. Her old-fashioned emphasis on duty, hard work, and family loyalty is juxtaposed with Ah Lan's desires to be with her boyfriend, to spend her money at the movies, to pick flowers in the park, and, at all costs, to escape her mother's stingy and joyless expectations. Married at fifteen and inured to a life of hard work, Mrs. Lee cannot understand her daughter's desire for pleasure: "Me, I wan come Hawaii from China wan only one teen yeer old. Me, I marri ole man, get keed, go hana-hana. Why Ah Lan no can?" Mrs. Lee's situation might well exemplify a version of the "old Hawaii" as "a mid-Pacific backwater," to use Noel Kent's phrase (3). The play accentuates Mrs. Lee's exhausting and endless manual labor—she is constantly hanging out clothes, ironing, carrying her baby on her back; there is no promise of labor-saving devices (as there was in *Country Pie*) that would make Mrs. Lee's life easier. She cannot take a part-time job that allows her more time with her family because none pays enough. If she did not
spend her nights caring for “boss baby,” she would be spending them working in the cannery. Forced to work day and night outside her own home, she in turn imposes her household duties onto her own children, trying to maintain parental control by beating and scolding them.

If Mrs. Lee is associated with the problems created by urban poverty within the older, feudalistic Hawaiian economy (where Chinese were “imported” to become part of white plantation labor forces), then education presents the possibility of individual redemption from the brutalizing effects of the postfeudal environment. Put another way, education is the vehicle of modernization that entails “the introduction of a modernized and ‘enlightened’ capitalist order.” In contrast to Mrs. Lee, the haole teacher Miss Carter is the voice of compassion and reason, telling Mrs. Lee that her daughter is a “good girl” and trying to lift Ah Lan out of the impoverishment of body and spirit that is her mother’s life. But Mrs. Lee, who cannot appreciate the value of education, comments that school is “only good for learn how tal lie.”

And yet the play does not unequivocally present the “new” order—education, progress, and “haolification”—as a clear, inevitable solution to problems of the “old” life: familial and ethnic isolation, drudgery, and poverty. Instead, the play takes a skeptical view of all possibilities—all conditions that might allow the play’s characters to break out of abject poverty. Miss Carter, though well intentioned, is incapable of solving Mrs. Lee’s real problems of depression, exhaustion, and severe financial need; moreover, the threat of the reform school acts as a reminder that schools are punitive as well as uplifting. Nor does For You a Lei suggest that the problems of the Lee family are transitory or even escapable. Seen clearly, Mrs. Lee’s problems have nothing to do with racial backwardness or a refusal to “go with the times”; they have everything to do with social stagnation and with the lack of true social reform.

In short, Yee’s play does not promise that modernization will eradicate urban poverty; Yee asserts that the illusion of “progress” only masks deeply entrenched class divisions. If there is any optimism in the play, it is offered through another avenue. The opening dialogue between the ten-year-old Ah Mui and her neighbor friend Leilani hints at another dimension of the play, one that counters an exclusive emphasis on the binary opposition between “haole” progress and “Asian” immobility. Within this Honolulu slum, the colonial oppression of Native Hawaiians is virtually indistinguishable from white subjugation of immigrant workers. Yet, although both these Chinese and Hawaiian families labor for haole profit and live side by side, they do not share the same attitudes toward work and money. Leilani taunts Ah Mui with the fact that her mother has a better job than Mrs. Lee; Leilani’s mother “only gotta work day time, and every night she bring poi home.” Leilani also indicates that her mother is critical of Mrs. Lee’s attitudes toward work and money: “My ole lady say da pake wahine next door lolo for make money, boy. Da kind job she got, she mo’ batter no work.” She is likewise disapproving of Mrs. Lee’s beating of Ah Lan: “She say, waste time wan your ole lady come home. She only good for hit your seester, Ah Lan. Everytime we hear Ah Lan yell, boy. We no stink ear, you know.”

Leilani’s comments make it clear that Mrs. Lee’s problems are rooted less in her “backward” condition than in the fact that she is “lolo” for money. In a money-driven society, Mrs. Lee has sacrificed her will and body as well as family harmony in attempting to meet the “haole” terms of survival, if not success. She no longer sees any possibilities beyond the value system of Western capitalism; she even embraces reform school as a state-sponsored solution to her daughter’s problems, seeing it as a means to shift a personal responsibility that is crushing her (“No need lick’em, no need kaukau money”). Mrs. Lee’s philosophy of behavior is based purely on monetary relationships. “Ah Mui, you go tal da teacher only reech-kin peepul wear long lei all right ... long kind, short kind, any-kind all right. Poor peepul go hana-hana, O.K. If no get flowers, no wear, see?” For her, “hana-hana” is the only means of existence.

Thus, what is coded as “Hawaiian” through the play promises some respite from the overwhelming social emphasis on money and work. In particular, the lei becomes the symbol of hope, of escape through a different notion of valuation—where the life or light of indigenous Hawaiian cultural values replaces, however tentatively, the terms of self-improvement through hard work, modernization, and education. The isolated and pleasureless domestic toil of Mrs. Lee is contrasted with the labors of Ah Mui and Leilani, who intersperse their making of leis with playful banter, hulas and rubmas, and dreams of new dresses. Leilani tells Mrs. Lee that Ah Lan is good for picking flowers, if not for doing housework; she reminds Mrs. Lee that should Ah Lan fall into the river, she “no can make lei for you, too.” Significantly, when Mrs. Lee receives a day off her job in order to get ready for lei day, she spends her “vacation” working at home. The allusions to leis, to the natural beauty of the islands, suggest an idyllic life that is almost fully eclipsed in the rest of the play by the scramble to get ahead. Even the play’s setting—the bleak tenements with their laundry lines and garbage cans—is a far cry from the romanticized portraits of Hawai‘i suggested by the leis.
In a spirit of hope, of determined extravagance, Ah Quon decides to buy his sister a "peek" carnation lei, believing it will save her from delinquency. The final dialogue of the play—where Ah Quon initially asks his mother for money as a reward for telling his sister to go back to school, and then decides to buy his sister a lei for the school program—presents a figurative transition away from the "old" terms of both "Chinese" familial duty and the "new" economy of "hana-hana" to a third possibility, albeit a highly tentative one. That is, what might redeem Ah Lian (if she is not, as suggested by the ominous siren that sounds later in the play, already lost to the river) is the lei that her brother buys for her as an opulent gesture of brotherly affection.

What might be called the "Hawaiian way" is presented in Yee's For You a Lei as an alternative to capitalistic interethnic competition, to "white" or even "Asian" ways of living and knowing. When the play draws attention to the problems of urban poverty, it does not suggest that the resolution to such problems is only in the ethic of hard work, education, assimilation, and competition that distinguishes what will later be labeled the "model minority" variety of Asian American success. In this way, Yee's play questions the values by which communities and individuals are supposed to climb the socioeconomic ladder—industry, discipline, personal and familial sacrifice. The play also questions the ends of the Asian American rise to "whiteness" through competition with the "other." Thus, For You a Lei joins other works in Willard Wilson's collection to provide a means of reenvisioning ideal relationships among those of different ethnic identities while reevaluating how the concepts of work and upward mobility reconfigured the real and imagined lives of Asian Americans in prewar and postwar Hawai'i. Together with the other works comprising College Plays, Yee's For You a Lei helps reveal and explain the tensions, uncertainties, and contradictions within the variety of Asian American identities on the move during the mid-twentieth century.

Notes


3. This by no means constitutes the majority of the plays. Of the 127 plays included in these volumes, only 22 were written by students with obviously Asian surnames.

4. It is not clear who, aside from Wilson and perhaps other students in the class, would have played audience to these works; the majority of them were clearly written as assignments by first-time playwrights, rather than as scripts for professional production. The few that saw any kind of production were only performed in student workshops or one-time amateur productions at the University of Hawai'i. Indexed in "Theatre Group Plays 1946–1969" are those plays that the University of Hawai'i Theatre Group awarded or produced locally. Among those that the University of Hawai'i Theatre Group produced were Bessie Toishigawa's Reunion (May 7–10, 1947), Robert Suyecho's The Return (May 13–14, 18–21, 1949), and Clara Kubojiri's Country Pie (Jan. 9–10, 15–17, 1953).

5. Although Misha Berson's Between Worlds (1990) is often hailed as the first collection of contemporary Asian American plays, it was in fact Dennis Carroll's Kumu Kahua Plays (1983) that was the first widely distributed published collection to include works by Asian American writers from Hawai'i such as Edward Sakamoto and Bessie Toishigawa Inouye.


7. The 1989 median incomes of ethnic groups in Hawai'i (from 1993 U.S. Census figures) are as follows: Black $27,338; Caucasian $41,878; Chinese $48,518; Filipino $41,955; Hawaiian $37,960; Japanese $52,982; Korean $37,420; Samoan $23,914; Total $43,176 (Okamura 1998, 196).


9. One example were the tensions following the landslide win of Democrats in territorial elections in 1954 and subsequent political victories for Democrats later. Although Filipinos as well as Japanese Americans supported the Democratic party, the former did not enjoy the rise in economic status of the latter, but were "regarded as mere junior partners" (Haas 1992, 21).

10. The 1993 U.S. Census figures for the ethnic composition of Hawai'i report the following percentages: African American 2.4%; Caucasian 31.4%; Chinese 6.2%; Filipino 15.2%; Hawaiian 12.2%; Japanese 22.8%; Korean 2.2%; Puerto Rican 2.3%; Samoan 1.4%. The 1994 Hawai'i Health Survey gives a somewhat
different picture: African American 1.5%; Caucasian 24.1%; Chinese 4.7%; Filipino 11.4%; Hawaiian .8%; Japanese 20.4%; Korean 1.1%; Puerto Rican 0.3%; Samoan 0.3%; Mixed part Hawaiian 35.5; “other mixed” 17.5%. Both are cited in the editor’s introduction to Multicultural Hawai‘i: The Fabric of a Multicultural Society (Haas 1998, 19).

11. Mary L. Dudziak and Robert G. Lee have provided us with some figures: “While overseas investments grew at about 10 percent per annum—twice the growth rate of domestic investment—American investment in the Pacific Rim outside Japan brought a 25.5 percent return on investment, and investment in the Japanese economy brought in 11.3 percent. Between 1951 and 1976, the book value of American investments in the Pacific Rim grew from $16 billion to $80.3 billion” (Dudziak 1998; qtd. in Lee 1999, 156).

12. I have chosen to retain the playwright’s spelling, “Okasan,” even though the Japanese title for “Mother” is generally rendered as “Okaasan” in current American orthography.

13. For a summary and critique of this model, see Omi and Winant (1994).

14. An upper-class white woman, Thalia Forese Massie accused five local men, Benny Ahakuelu, Henry Chang, Horace Ida, Joseph Kahahawai, and David Takai of rape and assault. After a deadlocked jury found insufficient evidence to convict these men, Ida was seized on the street and severely beaten, and Kahahawai was killed by Massie’s husband, mother, and friend. The subsequent trial of the three murderers resulted in conviction, but they were released after serving just one hour of their sentences in the judge’s chambers.

15. Du Puy concludes with the satisfactory progress of “Americanization” of the “oriental races” (1932, 127–28) and argues for the potential self-government of this “new…human material” (131).


17. I have found only one significant example involving a Korean family, in Mama’s Boy by Margaret C. Kwon (Volume I). Interestingly enough, here the mother opposes her daughter’s marriage to a Chinese man, whom the mother describes as a “foreigner”; the daughter’s wish to marry seems directly tied to her desire to leave her alcoholic, abusive mother and their impoverished household: “He’s nice, so nice. He dresses swell, he’s polite, he has a good job, and—and he likes me. And I want to marry him—even if he’s Chinese.”

18. For You a Lei received its first reading by the Rainbow Interpretation Organization (ARIO) at a workshop of “Literary Pioneers” at the Lucky Come Hawaii: The Chinese in Hawaii conference held at the East West Center on July 20, 1988 (Chock 1989, 235). Also see Sumida (1986, 312).

WORKS CITED


Toyo Suyemoto, Ansel Adams, and the Landscape of Justice

JOHN STREAMAS

Toyo Suyemoto\(^1\) was born in Oroville, California, in 1916, a time when laws were being passed in West Coast state legislatures forbidding immigrant Japanese, or Issei, from owning land. A second-generation Japanese American, or Nisei, Suyemoto grew up in Sacramento, in what she calls "a multicultural community, surrounded by numerous nationalities" (Moran 1995, 37). Encouraged by her mother to write poems, she published even as a teenager and became "one of the most prolific and talented of the prewar Nisei poets" (Yogi 1996, 68). She was a young mother in her mid-twenties when the war began; she and her family were among the 120,000 persons of Japanese descent, or nisei, imprisoned in the remote concentration camps that the government called "relocation centers." She continued to write, and her work turned not more private, as one might expect of a writer imprisoned in a remote place, but more public.\(^2\) Susan Schweik calls her "the Japanese American woman poet who gained the broadest possible reading public—though that breadth was extremely limited—outside Nikkei circles in the war years" (1991, 186).

Schweik argues that Suyemoto’s work is "so relatively presentable" that, even as "resistance and critique" are "embedded within the forms and diction of poems," the poems themselves "appear apolitical" (186). Here I will examine six poems, five of them written during the war years in the Topaz camp in Utah, to argue that, while they remain "presentable" today, their "resistance and critique" were particularly relevant to the imprisoned nisei community, and that the language of both their presentability and their critique is a simple language of landscape.\(^3\) In these poems landscape is oppression, as in the racial geographies of plantations, reservations, and concentration camps. To stress this point, I will compare the senses of landscape in Suyemoto’s poems and in