

Japanese American Representation

Yuki ENDO

Philip Kan Gotanda is a third-generation (sansei) Japanese American. He was born in Stockton, California, in 1949. He is the youngest of three children of second-generation (nisei) parents--his father from the Isle of Kauai of Hawaii and mother from Stockton. One of his early plays written in the late 70s, entitled *A Song For A Nisei Fisherman*, portrays his parents factually to a certain extent. Its protagonist Itsuta Matsumoto--his first name from Gotanda's father and his last name from his mother's maiden name Matsumoto; moreover, a story of a second generation fisherman of the play and his wife Michiko is based on their real lives--Itsuta Matsumoto studied medicine at the University of Arkansas and met his future wife in Stockton. For the playwright, his lineage, the family history is one of the most important elements. It seems to be a crucial part of what he is.

Gotanda grew up in a typical Californian city with an East-meets-West environment. The local cultural atmosphere of his upbringing was not as multicultural as American society today, but he enjoyed nonetheless the commingling of different cultures. He enjoyed good old TV series such as "The Twilight Zone" and "Star Trek," the music of Bob Dylan and Miles Davis. I would say he belonged one way or another to the late 60s "Flower Children." Since his high school days, his greatest enthusiasm was music. He played the guitar and composed songs of Japanese American experiences for a band. While dedicating himself to music he became a psychiatry major at UC, Santa Cruz.

Just having started his college life he left for Japan to study ceramics in 1970. Ceramics was not necessarily what he wanted to pursue; he had to find what interested him the most. (His apparently chance interest in ceramics then might have something to do with his latest play, *Ballad of Yachiyo*, first produced last December in which a young girl who embodies his Aunt Yachiyo loves a married pottery craftsman, gets pregnant and kills herself.) His visit to the ancestral homeland ended up fruitless, or I should say it paid off in that he finally realized that it was not Japan but America in which he belonged.

In a year or so he returned to the United States to perform music again. But another turning point came. He went to law school. What happened was: His band played music in a night club, although drunken customers never paid attention to their music, when a strip-teaser from next door appeared in costume, that is with a chain mail dress on and nothing underneath. The incident disgusted him. He thought, "God, my friends are all becoming doctors and lawyers and here I am doing this and everyone's hooting. This is fucked. Forget it!" While studying law, he committed himself to writing musicals. He graduated in the late 70s and it was around that time that East West Players in LA asked him to stage a musical, *The Avocado Kid*, which he accepted. He was,

however, losing interest in music and musicals so he began to engage himself in writing straight drama mostly with East West Players.

Gotanda's *The Wash* has a scene in which Masi is disgusted by Nobu's obsession with the days of internment camps, incensed enough to say, "That's over forty years ago. How can I remember something like that." Although these two people are married, it seems as if they lived separate lives; ironically Masi has left Nobu for his reluctance to prove his love for her after their forty years of married life. The wife has had to overcome the hideous traumatic memories of her camp life to take care of her family and had no time to look back. The husband, on the contrary, tends to be somewhat retrospective in order to escape from the harsh real world. His repeated use of the word 'remember' in the same scene testifies to his lack of determination to face reality. Nobu pressures Masi to look back: "Remember those dances they used to have in the camps?" He seems to believe that if things were different he would be successful in his life. He just keeps dreaming when making kites which he never flies, possibly because he fears that they won't go up in the air.

It is not in an unfavorably critical manner that Gotanda portrays Nobu preoccupied with the past. Needless to say, "the past" here refers to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Their experience of internment camps is one of Gotanda's central themes. Some of the principals he has created in his plays other than *The Wash*, such as *Fish Head Soup*, and *A Song For A Nisei Fisherman*, live under the shadow of the camps. Gotanda, however, is elaborate enough not to consider this ethnic devastation a mere political error on the part of American society. The virtual imprisonment of one specific minority group indicates that much more of American culture is essentially concerned. In *Fish Head Soup* the playwright, it seems, makes Papa mean the diseased culture when he talks about a deep-seated resentment of the way Japanese Americans on the West Coast were treated in wartime.

And the long train ride to the camp, the camp, the barbed wire, twisting, crawling with it. And Mama looking at Papa, "The camp did that, the camp did it," and me thinking it's not true, it's not true, because I could always see it. It was always there, the sickness. A part of the land. The land itself. And the moment you leave your mama's stomach it begins to feed on you. Entering your body, your blood, your mind--so that your thoughts, your thinking, it's all filled with the sickness.(64)

The thing is that everything is not necessarily resolved by denouncing the then President Franklin Roosevelt, who issued Executive Order 9066 to incarcerate more than 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry. As Papa notices, the problem is closely connected with the core of American culture and society.

Unfortunately, there have so far been few publications or representations of the atrocity in so influential a manner as to appeal to the general public. Unlike other TV and film productions the incarceration of Japanese Americans Alan Parker's *Come See the Paradise* has the advantage of being more of Hollywood in terms of its production team, which somehow helped the wider distribution of the film. The director himself has been internationally acclaimed, though some of

his films aroused racism-related controversy, and is advantageously Caucasian. Also, its leading characters were played by popular white actor Dennis Quaid and well-received Japanese American actress Tamlyn Tomita. Obviously all these factors were contributory. The film, nevertheless, was not box-office in the US; Japanese movie houses gave up a showing of the film after a first week. (Generally Japanese are more indifferent to Japanese Americans than Americans are.) Even so, it is certain that it appealed to a wider public than any other creation dealing with the relocation camps. It must have moved an audience and slightly increased awareness of the history of Japanese Americans.

It should be noted that Alan Parker is sincere enough to portray how Japanese Americans on the West Coast were treated by Anglo-America in the early forties after the so-called surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. He successfully represents the Japanese community in those days with the details of their daily life vivified on the screen. The careful rendering of each sequence artfully animates long forgotten feelings that remain deeply embedded in the first-and second-generation Japanese Americans. Such a manner of film direction enables the piece to be effective visually and acoustically. It is greatly to Parker's and the LA-based theatre company's credit that the East West Players offered some of their best actors. It might seem as if the audience can even touch and smell the world created by Parker, which only good-natured people of Japanese ancestry inhabit. The director's wholehearted goodwill to and friendship for the minority group in America contributed to the production without doubt. In this connection I have an interesting anecdote told to me by a friend of mine. She once used a video of *Come See the Paradise* in her literature class dealing with cinematic representations of Asians. When they finished viewing it her students breathed a sigh of relief and said that unless it had a happy ending they would certainly end up heartbroken. They truly like the film as is. That seems to prove that the film is good entertainment for the general public towards whom motion pictures are orientated.

I wonder, however, if Parker's representation of Japanese Americans is successful. I don't think that it is beyond criticism. No one would fail to notice that the Japanese American community in *Come See the Paradise* is peopled by stereotyped characters: A father with old-fashioned ideas who wants to marry his daughter off to a rich middle-aged man, whereas the daughter falls in love with another man. While incarcerated the father feels betrayed by his family and America and virtually commits suicide. The father, Papa Kawamura, at first looks as nasty as any prewar Japanese tyrant patriarch but later proves to be very naive, sensitive, and humane. Just remember the scene where he sings a lullaby to his granddaughter Minie (Minae). Everybody is basically not mean or ruthless but gentle and kindhearted; each is a likable personality. A loving, caring mother, Mama Kawamura, typifies such ideal humanity.

Although there live wicked people outside the community, one could hope for the savior from outside in time of need. To meet the imaginary expectations, the film readily offers a good old story: a prince on a white horse rescues a pretty girl in danger. Even though the savior belongs in an ideologically minority groups--a leftist activist and an Irish American, Jack, he definitely stands for a Caucasian gentleman-caller for the young Japanese American woman, Lily. Her marrying out to a non-Japanese American disagrees with her father's belief, yet Lily wins love

and peace in the end. The savior heals all sorrows and so does time. In this regard the framework of the film is so telling as to invite clarification. The story begins and ends in the early postwar days, a few years following the first half of the 1940s, a period of Japanese American's appalling suffering. In the first scene Lily and her daughter, Minie are on their way to the station to welcome Jack her savior and returnee husband. The great disaster that overtook Japanese Americans is told in retrospect in compiled sequences. The last scene shows that they have a happy reunion. The whole story is built on the healing power of the savior and time. It seems too artificially constructed for us to be convinced of it. It is doubtful whether this predestined storyline is effective or not.

Such a politically incorrect hardship on the part of Japanese Americans somehow inflicts sorrow even on innocent younger generations who muster courage to represent themselves whether their ethnic traits are visible or not. From December 1994 through January 1995, the New York audience saw a production of Chiyori Miyagawa's *America Dreaming*, jointly produced by the Vineyard Theatre and the Music-Theatre Group. The play is more like a musical than a straight drama. The story unfolds with an undercurrent of Japanese Americans' traumas of wartime evacuation and internment. Not merely did they lose their houses and businesses, they were also incarcerated in officially called "relocation centers." The authorities argued that Japan that was non-Caucasian enemy was so vicious as to make a sneaky attack on Pearl Harbor. They forcibly justified diabolically persecuting this minority group. The "camp" experience casts a shadow, though vaguely, on the playwright's imagination.

The program from its production company did not tell me how much the dramatist has been acknowledged. On the night I visited the theater, the audience comprised somewhat multiracial theater-goers, though Asian Americans, more precisely those of the Far Eastern ancestry, were the minority. This might suggest that the play was open to the general audience. What was the audience's reaction? A play review from a newspaper would be a help. A *Village Voice* critic, Michael Feingold remarks in a soft-toned but at the same time skeptical way:

The politics of *America Dreaming* . . . have been blended perfectly into its musicality. The trouble here is that no one involved seems to have asked, while achieving the perfect blend, what they were doing it for. Smooth, beautiful, and sensuous as a dream [....] (83)

He securely stays on his guard:

A Japanese American dreams herself suspended between the two cultures, and so? But there is no "and so"; what Miyagawa dreams is what we get. If it weren't so lusciously carried out in every department, there'd be nothing to discuss [....] But the overall effect's like an elegant sushi lunch box, so beautifully laid out you don't notice at first how little nourishment it contains. (84)

It is suggested here that Feingold points out that Miyagawa's play has failed to convey Japanese Americans' painful experiences during World War II and that its decorative appearance has just reminded him of a trendy ethnic diet. Nobody can blame him for the failure to sense the devastating predicament of this group. He is not necessarily required to consult literature on American history (of Japanese Americans) before he writes a critical essay. It is a playwright's and production staff's task to creatively arouse an audience's imagination to appreciate their play.

We should ask ourselves if it is possible for us to appreciate others' suffering. We might say the playwright herself is not certain how Japanese Americans were afflicted with ethnic atrocity about fifty years ago. She just makes use of part of history to blend it with other historical and cultural elements to form a piece of well-made bricolage. However, her portrayal of Asian Americans does not make sense when presenting on the stage. She might take it for granted that she has already identified herself with an ethnic group of Japanese ancestry. Since I have never seen her other plays ever produced, it would be irresponsible to deny all her work. Even so, her *America Dreaming*, as Feingold senses, fails to appeal to the general audience, not even to Japanese Americans.

Compared with Miyagawa, Gotanda has found something tangible to excite his dramatic imagination. I feel dissatisfied with *The Wash* but at the same time I am still interested in the subtlety of his theatrical imagination as demonstrated in his whole work. For the sake of argument, let me digress from theatrical and cinematic representations of conflicting elements of ethnic identity. In the genre of Japanese American fiction, John Okada, as Frank Chin puts it, is the greatest writer. Okada's only published work, *No-No Boy*, has Ichiro as the protagonist. Ichiro has served a couple of years in prison for refusing conscription. Unlike other no-no boys, it is because of pure hatred of killing that he has not gone to war. Nobody understands him, not even his family. His mother mistakes him for a hero; on the other hand, his brother despises him as a coward. His father is no more than sympathetic with him. It is only Kenji who knows what Ichiro feels but he is a seriously wounded veteran, so he can't support him. Ichiro wanders being devoured by great loneliness, deprived of his identity. Having been dragged out of their homes, many Japanese Americans are interned in camps. Likewise he is kept confined in ontological devastation after judicial imprisonment. All of them undergo one and the same atrocity.

Okada's *No-No Boy* illustrates in a subtle and refined but at the same time decisive manner what Sakai Naoki tries to demonstrate by defining such universalism as America has most forcibly claimed. American society deprives its central character, Ichiro, of every possible form of his identity, leaving him in sheer otherness. Sakai observes:

[...] particularism and universalism do not form an antimony but mutually reinforce each other. As a matter of fact, particularism has never been a truly disturbing enemy of universalism or vice versa. Precisely because both are closed off to the individual who can never be transformed into the subject or what infinitely transcends the universal, neither universalism nor particularism is able to come

across the Other; otherness is always reduced to the Other, and thus repressed, excluded, and eliminated in them both. And after all, what we normally call universalism is a particularism, and it is worthwhile doubting whether universalism could ever exist otherwise. (98)

What the passage here suggests has something to do with “the sickness” that Papa in *Fish Head Soup* acutely senses. The implications of *No-No Boy*, however, are much more complicated than that. Ichiro has seen more of American society in a negative sense and a positive one alike, and his insight is deeper than that of Gotanda’s Papa is. In the first half of the novel, Ichiro talks to Emi. She is critical about his bitter, hopeless feeling and says, “Do you really think it’s so hopeless? What do you propose to do during the rest of your life? Drown yourself in your selfish bitterness?” (95) She can’t but still encourage him:

This is a big country with a big heart. There’s room here for all kinds of people. Maybe what you’ve done doesn’t make you one of the better ones but you’re not among the worst either. (95)

Later on Emi’s words lingers. When Ichiro seeks a job, Mr. Carrick offers him one. Though he declines, Ichiro says to himself:

What words would transmit the bigness of his feelings to match the bigness of the heart of this American who, in the manner of his living, was continually nursing and worrying the infant America into the greatness of its inheritance? (155)

Despite his ghastly predicament, Ichiro seems to be determined to stay in America. After bloody confrontation with a rough called Bull at the end of the story, Ichiro has learned a little more of life.

He wanted to think about Ken and Freddie and Mr. Carrick and the man who had bought the drinks for him and Emi, about the Negro who stood up for Gary, and about Bull, who was an infant crying in the darkness. A glimmer of hope--was that it? It was there, someplace. He couldn’t see it to put it into words, but the feeling was pretty strong. (250-51)

This comprehensiveness of insight is peculiar to Okada, who was neither a dramatist nor a filmmaker. It was a novel that he wrote. Frank Chin was enraged when Okada’s widow told him that, as suggested by the Japanese American Research Project at UCLA, she concluded that none of other pieces of Okada’s writing deserved preservation and simply burnt them. His only novel does not seem to be fit for cinematic reproduction. The story has many a scene that could be visualized but could not be actable. One can read it (aloud), but otherwise his imaginings will

collapse.

In view of the distinction between the two art forms, it is not useful to compare Okada's achievements to Gotanda's. Gotanda has yet to explore the possibility of theatrical representations of Japaneseness and further Asianness. Considering plays he has written so far, it seems, Gotanda has not yet succeeded in depicting comprehensive Asianness. He sometimes confines himself to marginality when he tries to portray the marginalized status of Asian Americans in Anglo-America. Asian identity thus might split into pieces and shatter its own unity. When he grapples with ambitious attempts he tends to introduce ethnically specific props into a play, such as a 'shoji' screen, 'bunraku' puppetry, 'shakuhachi' flute music. *The Song for a Nisei Fisherman, The Dream of Kitamura, Yankee Dawg, You Die, and Ballad of Yachiyo* exemplify the theatrical characteristics. Although they help enhance lyricism, those devices seem fragmentary. Whether they are integrated with the theme and central images of each play remain open.

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