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*The Ambivalent American:  
Asian American Literature  
on the Cusp*



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**W**HEN A colleague at the institution in which I was teaching heard I would be speaking at Brown University, he asked, "So what group do you represent?" His question struck at the heart of the occasion: for me, for I was conscious that the invitation to **speak** was addressed not just to me as **an** individual but also to the group I represent. I am a representative, I suppose, by virtue of my origin and appearance, my yellow-brown skin and black hair, my birth in **an Asian** country, and my coming of age in the United States of America.

It is difficult to **be** a representative. One must always be more **than** one is, and in **like** manner one is always less than one is. No wonder my unsubtle colleague caught the taint of tokenism on me and snagged the conclusion that I had been invited because of my minority status. **The** lingering, unspoken question he posed is, Would I have been invited if I were not **Asian** American and a woman—in short, if I did not represent a group whom a white mainstream America must make a conscious effort to include? The answer to this question is, to my mind, irrelevant, for I believe there is a more proper question to be asked: Should I have been invited? The taint of tokenism is actually the transmuted stain of racism so long embedded that **we** no longer *see* it. No one asks if a William Buckley would be invited to speak at such an institution if he did not represent a white male elitist conservative group each time he opens

his mouth. The question of tokenism is actually a question of power. Who has the indubitable power to speak, to insist on being heard, the power to join in the debate? Those on the margins or outside the circles of power will always be questioned on their credentials to participate in inner-circle conversations and will be made to wear identification tags to authenticate their authority to be present.

As a scholar and writer, I have been fortunate to find myself a naturalized citizen of the United States and an equal inhabitant in the domain of the English language. Through my equal access to the English language, I have access to sociocultural, intellectual resources which resist being legislated, commodified, or phantomized into specious consumer items with limited shelf lives. Language gives indiscriminately to every human inherent abilities to shape, manipulate, express, inform; to protest, to empower one's self in the world. So my response to the oppressiveness I felt in my colleague's intimated accusation of tokenism is to hold fast to the First Amendment of the Constitution; I represent that freedom of speech guaranteed to every United States citizen, where freedom of speech is defined not solely as a political right but as a metaphysical condition: the inalienable human condition of access to language.

But the condition of freedom constituted by our human access to language has another dimension; the freedom inherent in speech, even when accompanied by political freedom of speech, which is always and everywhere constrained, means nothing if access to an audience is absent. Thus the human birthright of speech can be made mute, silenced by sociopolitical structures. Language achieves little if it is denied listeners. One may express, create, discover, but how does one move, inform, persuade, protest without an audience? How can speech give the speakers access to social power without social permission?

So I write with an ambivalent mind resisting the aura of tokenism and the unspoken assumption that I should write for a minority group, yet acknowledging the implication that I will claim access on behalf of a muted social group to a public conversation.

Let me give two illustrations of what I mean by access to the power to be heard, a process which is subtly corrupted and always weighted against a minority voice. I was at the East-West Center in Hawaii in 1988 as a writer-in-residence. When I returned home, two incidents occurred which struck me forcefully. I received in the mail offset copies of an article I had written on Asian American novels that had just appeared in an issue of a journal that had been sched-

uled for publication some years before. I should have been pleased to receive these copies; after **all**, I am not such a widely published scholar that my publications have ceased to provide me with a glow of achievement. But what I felt was an actual repulsion, a shudder of disgust and fear; for between the writing of the article and its publication, seven years had elapsed. I had begun the year-long research on twelve Asian American fictionists in 1981 for a graduate colloquium on ethnic American literature at Rutgers University. I presented a paper on the research at the **1982** Modern Language Association Convention and submitted the expanded paper to a journal in early **1983** when it was immediately accepted. In the years it had taken the essay to appear in print, I have read Asian American, ethnic American, and feminist writing much more widely; I am no longer the same person or the same reader I was when I wrote that essay. A critic who reads continuously is continuously revising; Stanley Fish begins with that unapologetic statement in his book *Is There a Text in This Class?* Any critic who is not dead from the neck up will have **left** some of her ideas behind in a decade or so. But to have an essay one has already outgrown appear as if a fresh statement just made is damaging to both the critic **and** the discourse to which the essay is supposed to contribute. It is damaging to the critic in that she is publicly presented in a false light, as a newcomer in a field in which she has already revised many early concerns. Many minority scholars, because of such lack of access and opportunity to publish, find that their work is even further marginalized. This publication marginalization is especially damaging for the discourse of minority literary criticism because the delayed appearance of such ethnic-related criticism creates the false appearance of belatedness, a crucial disadvantage in a profession where originality in the sense of newness or novelty is a primary asset. Moreover, such delayed publication of ideas allows the minority discourse to be appropriated by mainstream critics who, because they have access to more immediate publication resources, succeed with such appropriation in reaffirming their positions of power and gaining increased access to even more publication resources. In criticism, as in capitalism, those who have more publication resources publish more—that is, make more intellectual property—while those who have less continue to be impoverished.

The second anecdote concerns a letter and response in the *New York Review (Books)*, which may be viewed as among the pinnacles of language power access in the United States. As an observer of the

spectacle of publication power in the ration, I spent the first few days after my return from Hawaii reading the back issues of the *New York Review of Books*, to which I have been subscribing uneasily but steadily for the past decade and more. And as any sane reader who reads the funny pages would do, I turned to the personals first, before reading the **letters** to the editors **and** finally the articles themselves. I was intrigued to find a letter from Czeslaw Milosz protesting a poor review of his *Collected Poems*. Milosz had always struck me as a modest, nonperforming writer, someone I could read without asking how much of his writing has been tuned on stage and amplified to reach the maximum audience. In his letter he bitterly expressed his "dissatisfaction" with the review, a public denunciation which I felt must have been torn out of him by a very unfavorable reception (Alvarez, "Replies," 42). **What** struck me even more was the casual and amused response of Alvarez, the reviewer, a critic and scholar whom I had long admired for his acuity of insights into the workings of poetry as deeply personal utterance. His unfazed reply was even slightly reproving, **like** that of a Victorian patriarch morally smug at the sight not of Oliver Twist asking for more but of a much-loved spoiled child throwing a greedy tantrum: "Dear, dear," writes Alvarez, "I thought I had written an enthusiastic and sympathetic review of a poet whose work I greatly admire. I **am** sorry that Professor Milosz has felt impelled to provide proof, if proof were needed, that in the world of letters there is no pleasing anybody" (Alvarez, "Replies," 42). Alvarez expressed regret, not at his deficient review, which he viewed as amply enthusiastic and sympathetic, but at the sorry sight of an eminent man making a pig of himself.

Yet a close reading of his review and of Milosz's letter reveals that he had misunderstood the **poet's** grievance. Milosz takes exception not to the tone but to the substance of the review. Alvarez's review approached Milosz's *Collected Poems*, the product of a lifetime of writing, from the fixed view of an insider who **is** speaking for an outsider (Alvarez, "Witness," 21–22). Sympathetic to the poet's political and historical position in the 1930s and 1940s, he grants the poet the special status of witness to the horrors resulting from Nazi and Soviet war policies. To Alvarez, Milosz is the quintessential "Central European man" who is also the ultimate poet-in-exile: "This need for the beauty and order of poetry **as** an alternative to the disorder of homelessness **has** been Milosz's constant theme," he declares (Alvarez, "Witness" 22). But Milosz rejects that description; he reads

in Alvarez's *idée fixe* of his origin an appalling kind of ethnocentrism (although he does not use that word himself). 'With our planet shrinking and distances becoming smaller every year, how does it happen that people continue to be provincial, or, worse, to grow more and more provincial?' he asks in his letter (Alvarez, "Replies," 42). And again, "Am I really so exotic **an animal** that I deserve to be exposed in a separate cage bearing the label: 'Far away?'" (42). Can it be possible that we hear in Milosz's complaint the same protest against the stereotyping of exoticism, the same anger against a deeply engrained Anglocentrism as has been expressed by black Americans, Chicanos, Asian Americans, Latinos, and other ethnic minorities in the last three decades?

But what could a successful poet, a Nobel prize winner, find so threatening in Anglocentric praise of his work? Let us listen to Milosz explain himself: "My struggle as a writer-in-exile has consisted in liberating my neck from those dead albatrosses; in fact for a long time my name was connected with my books in prose available in translation, while the poetry that I have been publishing since 1931 only slowly made its way to the reading public abroad thanks to its English versions. I am grateful to America and proud of being now one of its poets, reaching young audiences who treat me primarily as a poet" (42).

Now, an astonishing thing has happened in the gap between two sentences. From the first sentence, where Milosz presents himself as a "writer-in-exile" still caught in the struggle to liberate himself from dead albatrosses, cursed like the Ancient Mariner to repeat the same old story to the reluctant listener, to the second sentence, he has become simultaneously an American poet, "reaching young audiences who treat me primarily as a poet." Is Milosz making **an** ingenious or disingenuous distinction between the writer and the poet? Is he in exile as a writer, that is, as an essayist and prose writer, but naturalized as an American poet, "proud" even of "being now one of its poets"? How is "being" to be construed here? **As** a shallow idea resulting from legal documents? Or as a more complicated process of coming into being, through poetry which is above all the language of existentialist phenomenology? Is Milosz claiming that he is now (as opposed to an original period) an American poet, **and** on what does he base this claim? If not a status based on citizenship papers, could he be claiming one conferred by *that* other power of language and confirmed by the audience—in this case "young audiences"

whose very existence assures him of a future in this other place, a future as an American poet, in the American canon?

Milosz takes exception to Alvarez's placement of him in a long ago and far away: "He was born," Alvarez writes, "in Lithuania, a country that has vanished utterly into the Soviet maw" (Alvarez, "Witness," 22). Milosz protests against this false mythologizing of himself as a historical witness, a frozen poet, because he wants to validate his American present to ensure his future in the American canon: "After all," he argues, "a poet repeatedly says farewell to his old selves and makes himself ready for renewals" (Alvarez, "Replies," 42). We can read in Milosz's discontentment **an** echo of the struggle between descent and consent that Werner Sollors outlines in his book, *Beyond Ethnicity*. Milosz, a first-generation American immigrant, will not permit Alvarez to constrain his writerly identity in simple terms of descent; he will not consent to being only a "Central European man," even one **as** heroic and fabulous as Alvarez had mythologized in his review; for, in his American present, he has made a new, **and** to him more powerful, myth, the myth of Milosz the American poet.<sup>2</sup>

This brief account of a minor tussle over books is to provide an example of the paradoxical, difficult, contradictory, anxious, suspicious, struggling creative position of the first-generation minority writer in Anglo-American society. The immigrant and minority writer who is identified as such is immediately suspicious as to the intentions of that identification. The historical fact of foreign birth, once it is in your hands, can be used for all kinds of purposes, many of them perhaps pernicious. This knowledge of my other-origin allows you to deny me entry into your society except on your terms, brands **me as an** exotic, freezes me in a geographical mythology.

Yet I **am** proud of my origin. Should you proceed to treat me as if I were not different, as if my historical origin has not given to me a unique destiny and character, I would **also** accuse you of provincialism, of inability to distinguish between cultures.

In a nation of immigrants, however, origin is only half or less-than-half of destiny. **An** immigrant, no matter how reluctant an exile, usually undergoes a process of naturalization. The naturalized American—and what **an** ironically inept term that is, for there is nothing natural about the process of Americanization—is proud to be an American now, just as simultaneously there is in him those other selves that will always escape being only **an** American. In a nation of immigrants, there must therefore always be already that straining

against the grain, the self that is assimilated and the self that remains unassimilatable. This self that escapes assimilation, I believe, renews American culture, making it ready for the future. Even as each new generation of immigrants casts away its old selves in the fresh American present, so American culture casts away its old self in the presence of new Americans. This political and cultural dialectic has presented to the modern world many of its models of dynamism and continues to invigorate despite its many sorruptions and oppressions every other nation and culture in the world.

The process of renewal, of the remaking of American civilization, is not easy and not without conflict, and the conflicts have changed in nature from generation to generation. In an earlier generation of immigrants than Milosz's, the paradigm for the American, as numerous cultural historians have reminded us, was that of the melting pot, that tremendous stewing machine into which all the ingredients are combined and fused into a futuristic alloy.<sup>3</sup> The trope of melting differences into a homogeneous whole is still one of enormous persuasive power to the majority of Americans today and was perhaps first used by Crèvecoeur: "Here individuals of **all** nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world" (55). But when Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* first appeared in 1782, the notion of **all** nations was limited to Europe; Africa was not even a dark continent in his consciousness, and Asia was beyond his imagination. To Crèvecoeur the pot contained only the culinary from Europe. "What then is the American, this new man?" he asked, struck by the audacious commingling of origins. "He is either an European, or the descendent of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country" (54). Of course, what to Crèvecoeur was "that strange mixture of blood" is now in twentieth-century America the mainstream, the heartbeat of its presidents and those a heartbeat away from the presidency; it is *the* norm—what conservatives would preserve from the decadent revisionism of "politically correct" faculty—now enshrined as Western Civilization or the Great **Books**. The new man has become the grand old **man**.

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But what about those *new* new Americans who, despite restrictive immigration policies, continue to flock to the United States? The national ambivalence toward admitting immigrants, especially those who do not conform to the original European type, can be read in

the literature produced by these other Americans—peoples Crève-cosur did not identify as Americans because they were not yet here, or were here as livestock were here, as slaves, without human and national identity.’ “[The new Americans] are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, German, and Swedes” (51), Crève-cosur tells his French audience, omitting the Spanish who had their own colonies on the continent, African Americans, and the native Americans who were not, after **all**, new on the continent. But the list has greatly expanded since then to include not only Greeks, Italians, Jews—people who by their color blend into a cream stock—but **also** African Americans, West Indians, Colombians, Nigerians, Ethiopians, Arabs, Samoans, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipinos, Indians, Turks, and others. The racial mixture is probably **as** broad as the global community’s, a kind of species gene **pool**.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the original model of the melted nationality, a European or the descendent of one, is still held in place, not **only** by governmental and institutional bodies whose function, after all, is to rigidify and encode living processes but also by some who count themselves among the nation’s intellectual **elite**.<sup>6</sup> The early definition of American civilization as Western civilization appears as comfortable and comforting as the pair of old boots that the cowboy is supposed to die in; never mind that the definition erases an even earlier origin for American civilization, among the numerous tribal nations of the Navajo, Apaches, Shoshonees, Cherokees, and so on.

Lynne Cheney’s **1988 Humanities in America**, a report of the National Endowment for the Humanities, equates the humanities in American culture with the great books of European and Euro-American culture. “Vast majorities” **of** the nation’s seventeen-year-olds, it complains, “demonstrated unfamiliarity with writers such as Dante, Chaucer, Dostoevsky, Austen, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville” (4). Humanity, in Cheney’s version, despite what global **and** national demographics indicate, does not wear a black, brown, or yellow face. Cheney elides the humanities with Western tradition, and Western tradition or European civilization with American civilization. More dangerously, she equates **all these** with absolute value: ‘What gives them their abiding worth are truths that pass beyond time **and** circumstance; truths that, transcending accidents of class, race, and gender, **speak** to us all” (14).

If we accept Cheney’s vision of the European in the humanities, and of American civilization as a more highly evolved European civi-

lization, it follows then that there is no reason to revise the canon. Why admit books from Asia, Africa, or South America, or books written by Americans of non-European descent—except when **they** specifically claim kinship to Eurocentric culture, as in the passage she quotes from Maya Angelou's autobiography (14–15)—when American civilization is built on ideals arrived at from European civilization? Her argument has a dangerous simplicity, for it asserts partisan national values as undebatable truths and denigrates humanists who do not uncritically accept these valuations.

To sum up Cheney's position, since Western tradition contains both truth **and** beauty, it follows that "the study of Western Culture should be central to a college education" (13). But culture is a **human** product; humankind has wandered all over the earth and left its compounded imprint in the most unlikely places. In the United States, humankind insists on wandering still, despite immigration officials and border guards. Imprints of the non-European, non-Western American are found **everywhere** in American civilization, including American literature. Asian Americans, for example, form **less than 3 percent of the population**, yet they are producing literature and criticism at a tremendous rate, as evidenced in the recent bibliography of Asian American literature published by the Modern Language Press. A similar situation exists for African American, Hispanic American, and Native American literatures. Every time we come across a minority American writer, we expect an American who is outside that Crèvecoeuran, Cheneyan model of a "European descendent." Should not the cultures of these non-European minorities also be studied in the high schools and universities?

The debate has been more acutely felt recently, for these non-European Americans may be a minority only for the present. The Census Bureau has predicted that by the year 2100, the United States will be a minority-majority nation, with 10 percent Asian Americans, 17 percent black Americans, 27 percent Hispanic Americans, and 46 percent white Americans. New York City, we know, is no longer a majority white city: by the year 2030, only 15 percent of the city's population will be white; Asian Americans will form **14 percent** of the population, black Americans **29 percent**, and Hispanic Americans **41 percent**.<sup>7</sup> What the census projections tell us is that a new American civilization is already here, one of greater ethnic variety, of global representation rather than of European descent. The projections indicate an intraethnic, interethnic new world of inter-

layered cultures, a product not of a melting pot but of interracial, interethnic marriages whose progeny will claim "America" as their own, in their own rainbow images, with European as only one beautiful hue among the dazzling array (that is, if this new world is not riven by racial and ethnic wars and ruled by a fascist state).

As usual, American business is one of the first on the scene. Even as conservatives are fighting a rearguard action to preserve the monocultural face of Western tradition in American civilization, American corporations are acknowledging that the United States will very soon be a different ethnographic mix. According to "Workforce 2000," a study by the Hudson Institute for the United States Labor Department, of the 25 million people expected to join the labor force in the next dozen years, 85 percent will be women, minorities, and immigrants (Schmidt, 25, 27). The director of Work-force Diversity for Honeywell, Barbara Jerich, has said that her program "emphasizes the importance of understanding and valuing differences" (Schmidt, 25). "The changing labor force," according to Roosevelt Thomas, director of the American Institute for Managing Diversity, "is forcing employers to realize that diversity is a fundamental management issue" (Schmidt, 27). This "fundamental management issue," the management of difference, is perhaps what will manage the transition in the changing face (and traditions) of American, civilization.

The ambivalence I alluded to earlier is, I repeat, a dialectic; minority writers, especially first-generation immigrant writers, the ones straight off the boat or the Boeing 747, contain within themselves this double perspective; as in an optical illusion, their identities encompass more than one figure simultaneously, like the figure that is both the image of a delectable young female and the horrid witchy profile of an old woman. This double, even triple or multiple perspective exists simultaneously for the same figure, but we cannot see both simultaneously; only through a switch in focus can one envision one or the other figure. Though we know both figures exist in this optical illusion, we can only see one at a time. Human sight cannot hold both contradictory visions in one glance. So too with the identity of alien and American. For while immigrants are both simultaneously alien and American, they are conscious of only one or the other at any one time.

We can read much of early Asian American writing from this double perspective. Take, for example, Jon Shirota's *Lucky Come Hawaii*, published in 1965 but never seriously taken up either by main-

stream or Asian American critics. The novel begins with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. This event, signaling Japanese military superiority over the United States, is also the decisive point where vision is focused or refocused on the Asian American figure. For Kama, who has lived in the Hawaiian islands for thirty-five years, the event marks the refiguring of his Japanese identity: "He was as much a part of the valley, he felt, as the Kanakas that had lived there for generations. . . . He knew that in his own way he had been playing an important role in the valley" (15). Kama appears at first sight to be the very model of an assimilated Issei. But on second glance, Kama represents the unreconstructed Japanese national; Pearl Harbor signifies for him the salvation of the Niseis, the second-generation Japanese Americans. "They would learn the true ways of Japan and would be educated under a better system," he fantasizes wildly. "Eventually, everyone in Hawaii would be speaking Japanese" (16).

The second chapter moves to Niro, Kama's second son, a student at the University of Hawaii. Niro is ('part-time servant-chauffeur-houseboy" for the rich Mr. and Mrs. Wittingham. He is watching the aerial bombardment with the elderly gardener Kato-san and Mr. Wittingham, when Kato-san recognizes that the airplanes are Japanese and begins "waving a mucous-stained handkerchief at the plane miles away. 'Did you see that!' he screamed into Niro's face. 'Japanese airplanes bombing all the ships in Pearl Harbor. Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!'" (21). Unsurprisingly, Mr. Wittingham responds with patriotic spleen, "Why you goddamn little Jap. . . . You son-ofabitch! I'm going to kill you!"

The discovery of this national/racial "ambivalence" in a supposedly loyal servant can be unsettling. But what is more unsettling to my mind is how this sudden change in focus, like a powerfully distorting lens, once used to discover this second perspective, begins to take on a social life of its own. Thus, Niro, who attempts to stop Mr. Wittingham from killing Kato-san, is also suddenly perceived by Mr. Wittingham in this second glance. As Kato has proven himself a disloyal American, having cheered the murderous Japanese planes, so too Niro, because he shares Kato's ethnicity, must be in reality a Japanese. "I'm gonna get my shotgun and blast you *two* Jap bastards," Mr. Wittingham screams (22).

For Japanese Americans, Pearl Harbor marked that point in their history when ambivalence, the ambivalence in their own community toward Americanization and the ambivalence in the larger American

society toward assimilating these Asian immigrants, became visible. Not that both ambivalences were not already there, as they have been there for all immigrant, especially non-European, groups. For Asians, the history of legislated injustices has been clearly documented; the riots, expulsions, and other forms of violent discriminations are a matter of public record. (The psycho-political effects of these events on the Asian minority groups, however, **have** not been as clearly or fully recorded, or even where recorded fully apprehended.)<sup>8</sup> What **makes** the treatment of Japanese Americans during the early **1940s** different from other forms of racism in the nation, as slavery was and is a different form of racism in American history, is **that** for the first time the powers of the federal government were deliberately and explicitly used to pervert the Constitution of that government itself. Significantly, **also**, this historical overruling of the Constitution can be traced back to that single event. It is no wonder, therefore, that Pearl Harbor, for Japanese American writers, has the anarchic resonances of a demonic creation story. “**As** of that moment,” John Okada tells us in the preface to **his** novel *No-No Boy*, “the Japanese in the United States became, by virtue of their ineradicable brownness and the slant eyes which, upon closer inspection, will seldom appear slanty, animals of a different breed. [At that] moment . . . everything Japanese and everyone Japanese became despicable” (vii). Okada describes the shift in perspective for Japanese Americans thus: “The Japanese who were born Americans and remained Japanese because biology does not know the meaning of patriotism no longer worried about whether they were Japanese-Americans or American-Japanese. They were Japanese, just as were their Japanese mothers and Japanese fathers **and** Japanese brothers and sisters. The radio had said so” (ix).<sup>9</sup>

In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Sollors argues that in contemporary America, ethnicity takes the form of “voluntary or multiple-choice ethnicity”; he is sympathetic to the position that there are few cultural differences among ethnic groups, quoting with approval Parsons’s revised position that “however strongly affirmative these ethnic affiliations are, the ethnic status **is** conspicuously devoid of ‘social content’” (Sollors, 35). Sollors bases much of his thinking on ethnicity in the United States on Gans’s work on symbolic ethnicity; according to Sollors, Gans posits that “modern ethnic identification works by **external** symbols rather **than** by continual activities that make demands upon people who define themselves as ‘ethnic’” (35). “American eth-

nicity” therefore, “is a matter not of content but of the importance that individuals ascribe to it” (35). But Executive Order 9066 and the experience of 120,000 Japanese Americans in the internment camps in Manzanar, Lake Tule, Poston, Gila River, Lordsburg, Fort Sill, and so on would provide the exception to this theory. In this instance, ethnicity had sociopolitical content. Stripped of their homes, possessions, livelihoods, and dignity, herded into substandard housing, for these Americans their Japanese identity was a problematic that made demands upon their daily activities. (I would argue that the same kind of negative sociopolitical content applies today in the lives of many Americans of color. What lies *beyond* Solors’ definition of ethnicity, in fact, is more ethnicity, and an increasing political strain in “ethnicities,” at that, in twenty-first-century American culture.)

In *No-No Boy*, the character of Kenji represents one means of incorporating his ethnicity into his American identity. Kenji was

the one who had come to [his father] to say calmly that he was going into the army. It could not be said then that it mattered not that he was a Japanese son of Japanese parents. It had mattered. It was because he was Japanese that the son had to come to his Japanese father and simply state that he had decided to volunteer for the army instead of being able to wait until such time as the army called him. It was because he was Japanese and, at the same time, had to prove to the world that he was not Japanese that the turmoil was in his soul and urged him to enlist. (121)

Kenji’s actions say “both . . . and”—yes-yes.

In contrast, Ichiro’s refusal to serve in the army and to take the pledge of loyalty brands him a “no-no boy,” someone as deeply despised by his Japanese American community as by white Americans, perhaps more deeply despised, because by refusing to submit himself to white American hegemony, Ichiro threatens those very Japanese Americans who desperately wish to assimilate into American society. Here is how Okada’s satirizes these doubly loyal assimilationists:

Please, judge, said the next one. I want to go in your army because this is my country and I’ve always lived here and I was all-city guard and one time I wrote an essay for composition about what it means to me to be an American and the teacher sent it into a contest and they gave me twenty-five dollars, which proves that I’m a good American. Maybe I look Japanese and my father and mother and brothers and sisters look Japanese, but we’re

better Americans than the regular ones because that's the way it has to be when one looks Japanese but is really a good American. We're not like the other Japanese who aren't good Americans like us. . . . We can be Chinese. We'll call ourselves Chin or Yang or something like that. (33)

The passage offers a fictionalized instance of what Sollors terms “voluntary or multiple ethnicity”; in the 1940s, many Japanese Americans would rather have been any other race than Japanese!

The major thrust of Okada's novel, however, is exactly how involuntary, unerasable, full of burden—that is, of content—Japanese ethnicity was at that moment in American history; and the novel's power lies in its reminder to us that for people of color—whose external (biological) features are not simple external symbols that we can shuffle around in a free play of interpretation but are perceived, or are capable of being perceived, by others as irreducible content of our selves—this occasion of sociopolitical ambivalence is always possible. (Testifying before a congressional subcommittee, General DeWitt, prime mover of the Japanese Americans' internment, **said** in support of his position, “A Jap is a Jap” [Hershey, 5]. Despite what Sollors and Gans would indicate, ethnicity as a marker of difference—containing already and always **the** possibility of sociopolitical content (as in discriminatory acts, violence, prejudices, unequal treatment, whether positive or negative, enacted legislation, and so on)<sup>10</sup>—was and remains an active cultural yeast, virus if you will, in American civilization, producing these split images, this ambivalence toward and within certain American ethnic groups.

This ambivalence is rooted in the immigrant experience; when the internal subjectivized ambivalence is confronted by the sociopolitical, seemingly “objectivized” ambivalence, **the** yeast of ethnicity or the virulence of racism takes place. Asian American writers, recording their experiences of America, reinscribe this ethnic energy and lunatic racism. Hisaye Yamamoto, who was incarcerated in Lake Tule, says of her ethnic identity:

I'm sure the Japanese tradition has had a great influence on my writing since my parents brought it with them from Japan and how could they not help but transmit it to **us**? I even wonder if I would have been a writer at all without this tradition to go by, since most of the stories seem to deal with this interaction of the Japanese tradition with the American experience. And even while I have come to **look** upon the American experience with a jaun-

diced (yellow) eye, I appreciate being able to communicate in the English language. (Quoted in McDonald, 23).

For many immigrant minority writers such as Yamamoto, Richard Rodriguez, and Carlos Bulosan, the English language gives them the means by which they can begin to affirm an American identity. Bulosan's autobiography, *America Is in the Heart*, begins with a Filipino childhood (the first twelve chapters of part one), traces a difficult immigrant experience of poverty, rootlessness, and illness along the West Coast (part two), and culminates in Bulosan's remaking of self through the act of writing in English (part three).<sup>4</sup> The second part of the autobiography draws to an affirmative conclusion with the narration of the emergence of the English language writer:

I bought a bottle of wine when I arrived in San Luis Obispo. I rented a room in a Japanese hotel and started a letter to my brother Marcario, whose address had been given to me by a friend. Then it came to me, like a revelation, that I could actually write understandable English. I was seized with happiness. I wrote slowly and boldly, drinking the wine when I stopped, laughing silently and crying. When *the* long letter was finished, a letter which *was* actually a story of my life, I jumped to my feet and shouted through my tears: "They can't silence me any more! I'll tell the world what they have done to me!" (180)

For many ethnic writers, writing is frequently a writing of "the story of my life" (or "of my people's lives"), whether it takes the form of poetry, fiction, or autobiography. This writing of and from life can be read for those slippages of selves—national, racial, existential—which, I would argue, form a pattern in what we call the American experience. In Bulosan's autobiography, these slippages recur frequently. For example, Bulosan provides us with his reading list, his own great books library, as he was lying sick with tuberculosis in the hospital for **two** years. Among the American proletarian and socialist writers he reads, Whitman figures prominently: "And from him, from his passionate dream of an America of equality for all races, a tremendous idea burned my consciousness. Would it be possible for an immigrant like me to become part of the American dream?" (251). A little while later, however, Bulosan discovers "with amazement that Philippine folklore was 'uncollected, that native writers had not assimilated it into their writings. This discovery gave

me the impetus to study the common roots of our folklore. . . . Now I must live and integrate Philippine folklore in our struggle for liberty!" (260). This ambivalence of cultures, biculturalism if you will, the simultaneous existence within the same mind of the Utopian American future and the Golden Past of Filipino nativistic folk, it can be argued, is what creates the dialogics of identity for the immigrant American writer.

In Bulosan's case, this ambivalence, while further negotiated, is never completely resolved. By the end of the autobiography, Bulosan is working for legislation that would give citizenship to Filipinos in the United States. Bulosan speaks here as an American to other Americans:

We who came to the United States as immigrants are Americans too. *All* of us were immigrants—all the way down the **line**. We are Americans **all** who have toiled for this land, who have made it rich and free. But we must *not* demand from America, because she is still our unfinished dream. Instead we must sacrifice for her. (312)

Speaking thus to Filipino workers, he discovers community and a new faith. The common cause for citizenship fuses his life and writings into a meaningful purpose: "This was what I had been looking for in America! To make my own kind understand this vast land from our own experiences" (312). In this cause the American ideals of individual worth and liberty and his own yearnings to serve his Filipino community can cohere to infuse the brutality and meanness of his immigrant experiences with purpose. But Bulosan himself never became a United States citizen. Just as his writing demonstrates the difficult, paradoxical, contradictory negotiations of ambivalent American identity in an American civilization ambivalent toward the Asian immigrant, so too his life and his legal papers show identity on the cusp.

I would like to believe that with the inexorable shift of **the** United States from a white majority nation to a multiethnic nation of minorities, the paradigm of conflict and ambivalence reflected in these early Asian American texts, which finds expression in internalized alienations and in external racial discrimination and violence, will be transformed into a productive multivalence. "Valences" speak for the abilities to integrate, combine, fuse, and synthesize different elements. Conflict is almost always a product of dualities; perhaps

synergistic commonalities will be the product of pluralities of ethnic figures, a pluralism which we know is already on its way.

## NOTES

1. The occasion for this essay was a public lecture funded by the Mellon Foundation for the Department of American Civilization at Brown University in the fall of 1988. In preparing the paper for publication, I refer to the occasion as it provides the context for the paper.

2. Milosz's position in American literature is perhaps being shaped in the direction that literature teachers such as Leonard Deutsch are indicating. In an interview for the *local* paper when Milosz spoke to students of Marshall University, Deutsch expressed the view that "the position of Milosz in American literature exemplifies the thesis of the Society of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States that American literature is the literary expression of all Americans, regardless of language or content." Noted in *MELUS News Notes*, November 1984, 5.

3. Milton M. Gordon offers three "philosophies" of assimilation at work in American history: that of "Anglo-conformity," of the "melting pot," and of "cultural pluralism" (85). The work of later immigrant scholars such as Robert Blauner, Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich suggests these paradigms are inadequate.

4. According to Gordon, at the time of the American Revolution, African Americans made up nearly one-fifth of the total U.S. population (86).

5. This argument is not new. The case for cultural democracy or diversity was made by Horace M. Kallen in 1924 (Gordon 142).

6. See, for example, the books that defend Western civilization humanities in the early eighties and that have their antecedents in the recent university-bashing polemics of "political correctness"; e.g., Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*; Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*; Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*; and Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity and Alienation*.

7. The figures were culled from Roger Sanjeck's presentation, "Race and Ethnicity in 21st Century U.S. of A.: Historical Possibilities," delivered at the American Studies Association Conference, Miami, 1988. The 1990 census figures indicate that "as the proportion of white Americans dwindles, the percentage of minorities, led primarily by growth among Asians and Pacific Islanders, is increasing" (Fulwood A3). The national percentage of Asians increased in 1990 to 2.9 percent from 1.5 percent in 1980, and the number of Latinos rose from 6.4 percent in 1980 to 9 percent in 1990.

Blacks continue to be the largest minority group, increasing to 12.1 percent. American Indians rose to 0.8 percent (Fulwood A30).

8. See, for example, the case of Joe Kurihara, a Nisei born in Hawaii, which demonstrates how this ambivalence functions upon the subject. Kurihara was a veteran of the United States Army and had been wounded in World War I. "He swore, after he was put behind barbed wire, 'to become a "Jap" a hundred percent.' . . . [Kurihara] greatly influenced many other Nisei to oppose the government in its recruitment efforts to enlist Nisei volunteers" (Chuman 249).

9. In 1924 a federal law had forbidden all Japanese immigration and naturalization; thus, many of the parents of the nisei were never able to take citizenship in the United States. This law was not rescinded until 1952 (Hershey 59, 73-76, 120). These issei were treated as enemy aliens during the Pacific war, and many were pressured into repatriation to Japan. There are many untold stories of such "ambivalent Americans" and their fate after they returned to their countries of origin (including Chinese and Filipinos who decided to return to Asia).

10. There have been numerous sociological, historical, and testimonial volumes on the Japanese American internment. See, for example, Weglyn, *Years of Infamy*; the Japanese American Citizens League, *The Japanese American Incarceration*; and Chuman, *The Bamboo People*. It might surprise the average American reader to learn that "at first 15 temporary detention camps were constructed scattered throughout Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington. They were mostly county fairgrounds, race tracks, and livestock exhibition halls hastily converted into detention camps with barbed wire fences, search lights and guard towers. . . . The vast majority of Japanese Americans were moved from the temporary detention camps near their hometowns to the permanent camps several hundred miles away after the threat of invasion had vanished. Each of the permanent camps held some 12,000 Japanese Americans, and a total of about 120,000 Japanese Americans were ultimately detained" (*The Japanese American Incarceration* 14-15).

11. Marilyn Alquizola argues against a reading of *America Is in the Heart* as straight autobiography, citing approvingly Morante's formulaic breakdown of the text as "thirty percent Bulosan's autobiography, forty percent histories of the first-generation Filipino workers in America and thirty percent fiction" (211). The text is clearly composed of constructions that resist a simple reading as factual experience. In its blurring of genre boundaries, it is another instance of the collapse of distinct generic boundaries that James Olney discusses in his study of the autobiography and that is generally accepted in postmodern interpretations of literary works (Olney 4). Even so, I use the term "autobiography" here as the least contestable generic signifier; whatever the text has been called, it has not been classified as a novel.

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