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“Bury Your Head Between My Knees and Seek Pardon”:
Gender, Sexuality, and National Conflict
in John Okada’s *No-No Boy*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English
American Literature

By

Patricia Ann Thomas

August 2012

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Abstract

In “‘Bury Your Head Between My Knees and Seek Pardon’: Gender, Sexuality, and National Conflict in John Okada’s 1957 novel, *No-No Boy*,” I analyze the ways in which the complexities of gendered sexuality expressed by protagonist Ichiro Yamada intersect with post-World War II and Internment-era national identifications for American nisei. I demonstrate that this apparent story of one man’s pursuit to resolve his conflict over national identity is, in reality, a tour de force of literary subversion that not only destabilizes the subterfuge that surrounded internment but also—in its deliberate failure to resolve questions of national conflict on the basis of masculine and heterosexual norms—encourages skepticism about the larger structures of order that allowed internment to happen.

Gender; sexuality; masculinity; nisei; internment; resistance

Introduction

I am for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior. I don't mean a nice part of the interior either. Herd 'em up, pack 'em off and give 'em the inside room in the badlands. Let 'em be pinched, hurt, hungry and dead up against it.

— Henry McLemore, syndicated columnist, Los Angeles, January 29, 1942¹

Here in the land of Buffalo Bill, the government is erecting model camp towns in which they'll live unmolested, not as prisoners but free to work and paid to work by the United States government. . . . All the comforts of home. The Japanese in America are finding Uncle Sam a loyal master, despite the war.

— World War II newsreel²

Only in fiction can the hopes and fears and joys and sorrows of people be adequately recorded.

— John Okada, letter to his publisher

In the opening passage to John Okada's 1957 novel, *No-No Boy*, we are alerted that the alienation of Ichiro Yamada, the nisei person at the margins, is going to be re-centered and reflected in sexualized terms: "Ichiro got off a bus at Second and Main in Seattle. He had been gone four years, two in camp and two in prison. . . . Waiting for the light to change to green, he looked around at the people standing at the bus stop. . . . half a dozen women. . . failed to arouse him even after prolonged good behavior." As this passage signifies, Ichiro is a no-no boy, so called because he answered "no" to two pivotal questions on the loyalty questionnaire distributed among some 120,000³ West Coast Nikkei—over two-thirds of whom were American citizens by birth—who were confined to concentration camps during World War II. The two critical questions that became known as the "loyalty questions" were: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?" (question 27), and "Will

¹ As quoted in *Prejudice, War and the Constitution: Causes and Consequences of the Evacuation of the Japanese Americans in World War II*. tenBroek, Barnhart, and Matson. Berkeley: U of California P, 1954 p.75

² Wartime newsreel excerpted in *Rabbit in the Moon*. The pay referred to in the newsreel ranged from \$16 to \$19 per month.

³ This number reflects the 110,000 Nikkei who were removed and the 10,000 who were born in camp. (William Hohri, Introduction to *The Lim Report*). An additional 5,000 Nikkei were similarly forced off the West Coast, but had the means to relocate to inland and east coast states in advance of removal.

you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese Emperor or any other foreign government, power, or organization?” (question 28).

By answering “no” to both questions Ichiro, like his historical counterparts, refused to swear allegiance to a country that had reclassified him from citizen to “enemy alien,” and he refused to serve in a military that had, less than a year earlier, declared him unfit.⁴ But by the time of his return to Seattle, Ichiro has internalized his “enemy alien” status and feels “like an intruder in a world to which he has no claim” as a result of actions undertaken by his “own free will” (1). As he tries to reconcile this dilemma of alienation, aspects of gender and sexuality become signposts of social membership that intersect with his questions surrounding national identity.

Four years before the novel begins, Ichiro was a promising university student of engineering and a favored son of a thriving Seattle Nikkei community. He returns to a fractured community in the full throes of collective social amnesia as a living symbol of the treasonous behavior of which they were all suspected. According to historians, “[p]owerlessness, [a sense of] inferiority, and self-hatred became common responses [to internment], along with an imposed silence caused by a fear that it could happen again” (Gordon & Okihiro 78). Amnesia was also a conciliatory gesture, the seeds of which had been planted during internment. As one camp inmate wrote: “We have had time to rationalize our own predicament. The tragic experiences of evacuation, the untold volume of business losses of the evacuees, the unwarranted hatreds engendered toward us by some people because of our hereditary kinship with the Asiatic foe –

⁴Reclassified as alien enemies, nisei men were also automatically reclassified from 1A to 4C, ineligible for military service according to the US Code of Federal Regulations Title 32, Chapter XVI, Sec. 1630.2

these we write off our ledger” (Benti 65, emphasis added). In keeping with this implied pact to forget, little is said in the novel about the camps. We see the negative impact of the experience in its effects: the anger, despair, confusion, dysfunction, and disorientation of Okada’s characters. He leaves it to the reader to make the connections. It is not until midway through the story that Ichiro makes the statement, “I’ve ruined my life and I want to know what it is that made me do it” (91); but his pursuit to resolve his conflict over national identity forms the backbone of the narrative.

The earliest criticism on *No-No Boy* focuses on its importance to the Asian-American canon. As Lawson Fusao Inada commented in his 1976 Introduction, *No-No Boy* was written “back in the days of ‘humble beginnings,’ before ‘ethnic’ literature, before ‘ethnic’ programs on campuses, before ‘Asian-America’ even...back in the days when a Jap was just a Jap” (v). In his Afterword, Frank Chin describes a more personal reaction: “For me the discovery of John’s 1957 novel was like a white writer feeling gloomy and alone in a literary history, discovering Mark Twain. *No-No Boy* proved I wasn’t the only yellow writer in yellow history” (254).

Early criticism of *No-No Boy* also reflects the era’s racially charged argument over literary legitimacy. In response to Chin’s chastisement of Modern Language Association (MLA) members for their reluctance to read Asian-American literature, Myron Simon argued that writers like Okada “have thus far made virtually no impression on the larger reading public in America” because Okada wrote for readers like Inada and Chin, whose “whole lives had prepared them to read *No-No Boy*” (22). Gordon Hirabayashi took another view: “Western reviewers in 1957 ignored *No-No Boy* or refused to accept it as a legitimate piece of literature, complaining about its ‘bad English,’” while “Japanese Americans...seemed to be embarrassed by its appearance and tended vigorously to reject it” (176). Hirabayashi further suggested that

responses to *No-No Boy* continued to be mixed because “Okada succumbs neither to the stereotyped, polite, self-effacing Oriental speaking pigeon-English, nor to the cleaned-up ‘model minority’ preferred by some Japanese Americans” (175-6). Today, however, *No-No Boy* is a regular feature of college curriculums and is widely studied as a premier text of the master narrative of internment.

Until recently, Okada’s treatment of gender and sexuality has been de-emphasized in relation to his themes of redemption;⁵ assimilation, national identification, and dissent;⁶ momism and psychological torment;⁷ and Cold War containment.⁸ While scholars of gender and sexuality studies have shown an interest in *No-No Boy*, more attention must be paid to the specific ways in which gender and sexuality intersect with Ichiro’s dilemma over national enfranchisement. After all, from the start of the novel Ichiro’s return home is characterized by him feeling alienated and un-“aroused.” My study builds on recent criticism by emphasizing Okada’s persistent interweaving of gender/sexuality conflicts in Ichiro’s relationships with three other characters: his issei mother who encouraged his negative responses to questions 27 and 28; Kenji Kanno, a dying nisei war hero and amputee who befriends Ichiro despite his no-no status; and Emi, a female nisei who seeks to mediate his reconciliation with America. My analysis of these relationships and Ichiro’s overall social position leads me to propose that the novel represents a more complex view of gender and sexuality than is typically attributed to Okada’s treatment of this historical moment. By putting his text in conversation with journalism, incarcerated testimonies, memoirs, letters, camp newspapers, and government documents, I will demonstrate that this apparent story of one man’s quest to understand what it was that made him ruin his life

⁵ See Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald and Jeanne Sokolowski.

⁶ See Suzanne Arakawa, Patricia Chu, Elaine Kim, Jinqi Ling, Gail Sato, and Stan Yogi.

⁷ See Joseph Entin and Bryn Gribben.

⁸ See Daniel Kim, Viet Nguyen, and Elizabeth Wheeler.

is, in reality, a tour de force of literary subversion that not only destabilizes the subterfuge that surrounded internment but also, in its deliberate failure to resolve questions of national conflict on the basis of masculine and heterosexual norms, encourages skepticism about the larger structures of order that allowed internment to happen.

In chapter one, I focus on Ichiro's relationship with Ma. Once collaborators in protest, they become alienated enemies in Ichiro's eyes. I explore the remarkable sexual imagery used to describe Ichiro's inner turmoil as he re-engages their relationship. Initially, Ichiro blames Ma's inverted gendering for pressuring him to say "no-no," thereby denying him manhood. But his growing awareness of her disenfranchised national status clarifies his own marginalized position, and eventually he seems to recuperate his "no-no" position on the questionnaire. Measuring himself against Kenji, Ichiro longs to similarly embody masculine patriotism, but finds that, despite their opposing responses to questions 27 and 28, their fates both revolve around a nation that demands sacrifice. Continuing my exploration of sexual imagery in chapter two, I examine how the homoerotic bond between Ichiro and Kenji amplifies the fluidity of sexuality and the fragility of heteronormative masculinity. My discussion interrogates the unequal distribution of reward for military sacrifice and the ways the body becomes the site for resolving sexualized national conflict. My third chapter opposes criticism that sees Emi existing "only to support and discuss the choices and careers of male nisei" (Chu 60). Instead, I see Emi as an autonomous agent who uses her sexuality to lure Ichiro into a reinvention project that would entail him taking on a normative role. Faced with Emi's demand for assimilation, Ichiro discovers he is unwilling to submerge and abandon his no-no status. Although Ichiro approaches each of these relationships in pursuit of an understanding of his own perceived failings, what he finds has the effect of strengthening his position of resistance. He rejects the terms of his alienation and

parlays his position at the margins into a new understanding of the effects of social hierarchies. By rejecting heteropatriarchal norms, he gains the ability to empathize with others who are all marginalized in some way. In the end, Ichiro has a rather queer response to the nation's request for atonement. By (re)embracing the "nos" of his response to the loyalty questionnaire and applying the "no" to the terms of heteronormativity, he espouses an alternative vision of the future.

Chapter 1: “Bigger Than Her”

In our block, people who chose to stay in America were called dogs, so we also became dogs.... We were not served hot rice. ‘For dogs, cold rice is good enough,’ they said.

— Ai Mitysaki, issei woman, interned at Tule Lake

In the camps many felt that the *inu*—the dogs—were the informers, the ones who worked with the camp authorities, the JACL. After the war the *inu* were the resisters. Those who had answered No-No. Pariahs. Black sheep.

— David Mura, *Famous Suicides of the Japanese Empire*

haha ga ima yu-koto
wono uchi ni
wakatte kuru

What your mother tells you now
in time
you will come to know.

— Mitsuye Yamada, “What Your Mother Tells You”

On his way home from the bus station, a newly released Ichiro is greeted by nisei veteran Eto Minato, who spits on him after he admits that he did not serve in the military. Bending down to pick up his suitcase, Ichiro transforms Eto, the pimply-faced kid of his past, into a sexualized representative of omnipotence: “The legs of his accuser were in front of him. God in a pair of green fatigues, U.S. Army style. They were the legs of the jury that had passed sentence upon him. Beseech me, they seemed to say, throw your arms about me and bury your head between my knees and seek pardon for your great sin” (4). In this passage, a “yes-yes” boy represents an American-ness that is both God and jury, and the judgment Ichiro imagines is the penance/sentence of symbolic sexual submission.

Ichiro’s acute sense of alienation upon his return to Seattle prevents him from re-examining the faulty loyalty questionnaire and the flaws of the larger binary argument—either you’re loyal or you’re not—that forced the nisei to choose between parents and country. Instead of blaming the American government for setting up an impossible binary, Ichiro seeks other

causes for the “weakness” (3) that resulted in his negative response. One explanation he finds upon his return home is his parents’ failure to conform to normative gender roles: “He should have been Ma and Ma should have been Pa. Things would have worked out differently then. How, I don’t know. I just know they would have” (112). Pa’s non-heteronormative gender is emphasized throughout the scene of reunion between father and son. Upon hearing the bell of the entrance to the Yamada’s grocery store that signals his son’s homecoming, Pa comes through the curtains that separate the store from their apartment by calling out his son’s name “preciously as might an old woman” and “bounces silently over the wood flooring in slippered feet.” He “delicately” places a “pudgy hand on Ichiro’s elbow.” He serves Ichiro tea and busies himself with repeated rinsing and washing of the tea cups. When a second “tinkling” of the bell signals the arrival of his wife, Pa “leap[s] out of the chair and [flees] out of the kitchen” to avoid her reprimand, confiding to Ichiro: “Doesn’t like my not being in the store when she is out” (6-11).

Ichiro views Pa’s submissive maternalism as a symbolic castration—“Pa’s okay, *what there is of him*” (112, emphasis added)—and attributes his severed masculinity to Ma. When Ma welcomes Ichiro with the words, “I am proud that you are back. . . . I am proud that you are my son,” he sees it as “her way of saying that she had made him what he was and that the thing in him which made him say no to the judge and go to prison for two years was the growth of a seed planted by the mother tree...she was the mother who had put this thing in her son” (11). With this interpretation of his mother’s greeting, Ichiro ascribes a “virile, fertilizing agency that is traditionally the prerogative of fathers” (Kim 2005, 69). As Ichiro’s reverie continues, he transfers his symbolic sexual submission from Eto to Ma: “It was she who opened my mouth and made my lips move to sound the words which got me two years in prison and an emptiness that is more empty and frightening than the caverns of hell” (12). With this statement, Ichiro transfers

a state of omnipotence from the symbol of the U.S. military to his mother, a disenfranchised immigrant whose native country is under Allied occupation and who, herself, has for nearly four years been subjected to similar occupation in the form of internment in American concentration camps. With this remarkable projection of power, Ichiro's point of view is signaled as potentially unreliable, a possibility that is immediately reinforced by another shift in his consciousness. No sooner has Ichiro endowed his mother with a sexualized and procreative dominance—indeed, so sexualized is their relationship in his mind that seeing the tiny family apartment with only “one bedroom” makes him feel “like puking” (7)—he back-pedals, transforming her into a friendlier Ma, who “smile[d] a mother's smile” and whose heart was filled with “boundless joy” over his (immaculate) arrival: “I was that boy in the peach and you were the old woman” (15).⁹ By suggesting that Ma's and Pa's inverted gender roles may have spiraled into a sexualized maternal dominance that led Ichiro to make the decision that “ruined his life,” the novel might be seen as encouraging the enforcement of rigid gender roles. But by juxtaposing these contrasting, equally fantastic images—Ma as sexual predator and Ma as kindly barren mother—Ichiro undermines the stability of his own narrative perspective and casts doubt on his gendered suppositions in the process.

Ichiro concludes this particular bout of anxiety by circling back to the original dominator—the nation-state—whose power he attempted to transfer to Ma, and ends up with a three-way tie: “I blame you and I blame myself and I blame the world which is made up of many countries which fight with each and kill and hate and destroy...again and again and again” (16). As the story continues, Ichiro will rehearse this formula over and over in his head, repeatedly coming up with the same sum. Even as he pulls his mother's lifeless body out of the bathtub following her suicide, he continues to cipher her failings: “It was a mistake to have ever left

⁹ This passage is structured around the Japanese folktale, *Momotaro*.

Japan. It was a mistake to...come to America...to have two sons...to think that you could keep us completely Japanese in a country such as America...Had you lived another ten years or even twenty, it would still have been too late. If anything, my hatred for you would have grown” (186-7). At some point, we just have to ask: Who is this woman who lives in the back of a grocery store, whose apartment is so small that she and her husband must share a bedroom with their grown sons, who walks uphill to the bakery each day to save “twelve and one-half cents” (8), but yet somehow has enough power to be endowed with a level of accountability that is on a par with “many countries”?

Here are some things we know for sure. Ma was born to a peasant family in Japan in 1899, the “the thirty-first year of the Meiji era” (194). She was once “a pretty young thing,” who received “honors for scholastic excellence” (194). When she was nineteen years old, she “forsook a teaching career to marry a bright, ambitious young man of the same village.” She was “small and proud and firm and maybe a little bit huffy” (177) when Pa, who had been working on the railroad under the “scorching sun” and “choking dust” of Montana (106), returned to Japan to find a bride. Their “match,” made by the “village mayor’s brother,” made her smile (177-8). By the time we are introduced to her, Ma has somehow become “flat-chested” and “shapeless,” “dried and toughened” (10), and Ichiro’s “primary antagonist” (Sato 245).

Once collaborators in protest, Ma and Ichiro are now among the *inu*, or “dogs” (as identified in David Mura’s epigraph to this chapter), ostracized by a community in the “crisis of readjustment” (Kashima).¹⁰ Ma’s defense takes the form of cruelty directed toward Pa as well as toward the nisei veterans and their issei parents who shun her. Pa turns inward, submitting to

¹⁰ Tetsuden Kashima writes: “As a collective entity, Japanese immigrants initially experienced the crisis of immigration and adjustment (roughly from 1869 to 1906); then a crisis of exclusion (from 1906 to 1924); and a period of accommodation (from 1924 to 1941). Then came the catastrophe of evacuation (1941 to 1945) and the crisis of readjustment (1945 to 1955)” (109).

Ma's malice, and Ichiro vacillates between self-loathing and vituperative hatred of his mother. Ultimately, however, it is Ichiro's growing discomfort with his own demonization of Ma that supports a critical intervention that, to my knowledge, has not yet occurred. Critics have generally been content to accept Ichiro's demonization without questioning his ambivalence. Elaine Kim writes, for example, "We are not privy to why Ichiro's mother has allowed herself to become demented by her illusions" (1982, 197). Gayle Sato agrees, arguing that "nowhere [is Ma] significantly fleshed out." Because Ma "never speaks in her own voice," Sato writes, "there is no basis for analyzing Ichiro's hostility" (250-1). But as the novel progresses, Ichiro begins to understand Ma's position. He acknowledges that "[r]ight or wrong, she, in her way, had tried harder than most mothers to be a good mother to him. Did it matter so much that events had ruined the plans which she cherished and turned the once very possible dreams into a madness which was madness only in view of the changed status of the Japanese in America?" (104). He speculates about causal relationships: "Sometimes I think my mother is to blame. Sometimes I think it's bigger than her" (152). He recognizes that "[i]t wasn't she who wished the war on all of us and got the Japs thrown off the Coast and stirred up such a mixed-up kind of hatred that no one could think or feel straight" (195). I agree that Ma's voice is limited, but I see complexities in Ma's often silent, often outrageous, actions that appear to me as continued acts of protest.

Ma's is an imperfect resistance, complicated by her professed alliance with a nation that applies the same imperialistic aggression as the U.S. (a fact that, to some, might undercut easy assignment of heroism to her acts of opposition). But Ma is afforded privilege by neither nation. Rather, she is an example of the human fall-out of a particular global conflict. Ma's antagonism revolves around the betrayal of America, her adopted country, which has failed to include her in

its “world-wide welcome,”¹¹ and the inadvertent failure of citizenship she experiences from Japan, her country of origin, which, in its current state of decimation and occupation, is unable to provide her safe harbor. What if Ma’s “hammering, pounding. . . . hatred” (12) is borne less out of “pro-Japan fanaticism” (Kim 1990, 72) than out of twenty-five years of disenfranchisement climaxing in the blitzkrieg of internment?

For all incarcerated Nikkei, internment was a violent leveler. Men and women, adults, teenagers, and children alike were equally rendered dependent on the government’s newly established War Relocation Authority (WRA). While for the nisei removal sent a shocking signal of their tenuous hold on national enfranchisement, for the issei, the same events extended a progressive and systematic legal and social disenfranchisement dating back to the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants during the late 1860s. As sociologist S. Frank Miyamoto writes: “[i]n the mid-1930s, the nisei spent a good deal of time in self-examination and in discussions of their assimilation problems. In ten years, they would have seen much more clearly that the problems were not within themselves but in the castelike social structure that excluded them.” Meanwhile, during this pre-war period, the issei were interpreting anti-Japanese “antagonism as reason to question the nisei’s trust of the American [sic] people” (Miyamoto xi-xiii).

Under the Geneva Convention, internment of the issei was technically lawful based on their enemy alien status when the U.S. entered World War II following Japan’s bombing of the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. However, the issei were disproportionately incarcerated in comparison to immigrants from other axis countries, namely, Germans and Italians. Also, of the three groups, only the issei had been subjected to wholesale denial of naturalized citizenship in the first place. Removal and incarceration of their nisei

¹¹ This phrase references Emma Lazarus’s sonnet, “The New Colossus,” which is engraved on a bronze plaque inside the Statue of Liberty (Baym 1602).

children demonstrated to the issei that even American citizenship did not guarantee Constitutional protection. If the legally prescribed disenfranchisement they experienced could also be unlawfully extended to their American-born offspring based solely on ethnicity, the issei position was that much more precarious.

Criminalized “by virtue of their eradicable brownness” and dehumanized as “animals of a different breed” (Okada vii), West Coast Nikkei were ordered to line up on street corners wearing shipping tags printed with government-issue identification numbers. Packed onto buses and removed to makeshift “temporary relocation centers” at racetracks and fairgrounds with “only what they could carry in their own two hands” (Sarasohn 167), incarcerated encountered holding cells unfit for human habitation. As Miné Okubo illustrate in her memoir, *Citizen 13660*, scant effort was made to disguise the fact that these quarters were intended to house livestock: “A swinging half-door divided the 20 by 9 ft. stall into two rooms....below the rafters an open space extended the full length of the stable.... Spider webs, horse hair, and hay had been whitewashed with the walls....A two-inch layer of dust covered the floor, but on removing it we discovered that linoleum the color of redwood had been placed over the rough manure-covered boards” (35).¹² At the more permanent WRA camps, hastily built in remote desert areas of inland states, conditions were not much better. Surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers armed by American soldiers, living quarters consisted of blocks of tar-paper covered barracks, typically 16 x 20 feet in size, to which assignments were made based on head counts rather than family affiliation. Incarcerated were summoned by bells for morning and evening roll calls, to wash clothes, and to receive mail, checks, meals, and medical care (Okubo 86). Slipshod construction

¹² Historian Roger Daniels has noted that because college dormitories would soon have been available, it “was probably more than the housing shortage that inspired the Wartime Civilian Control Agency (WCCA) to select sites that had been intended to house livestock” (88). Alison Dundes Renteln concurs: “[t]he fact that the Japanese Americans were portrayed as animals in much of the World War II propaganda may have helped convince the American public that inhumane treatment was acceptable” (620).

and lack of running water in the barracks combined with insufficient and ill-placed communal latrines and showers tied intimate functions to the suspension of citizenship and civil rights. The impact of systemic publicization of private acts (to which Okada later alludes in the novel with a reference to Freddie's overhearing "Tommy thanking God for the Sears-Roebuck catalogue one day while squatting over the hole in the outhouse" [229]) reverberates across incarcerated testimonies. Yoshiko Uchida recalled latrines at the Tanforan Racetrack, composed of "crude wooden structures containing eight toilets, separated by partitions but having no doors," and writes: "many would take newspapers to hold over their faces" (74). George Takai remembered that at the Tule Lake camp it was sometimes "sheer torture dashing through the wind, muscles tightly held, to the latrine. There were occasions when I didn't think I could make it in time" (121). Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston described similar conditions at the Manzanar camp, where "[t]welve toilet bowls were arranged in six pairs, back to back, with no partitions" (28). "My mother," Houston writes, "was a very modest person, and this was...agony for her, sitting down in public, among strangers. . . . the entire situation . . . the packed sleeping quarters, the communal mess halls, the open toilets—all this was an open insult . . . a slap in the face you were powerless to challenge" (28-9). These humiliating physical circumstances were exacerbated by continual monitoring of private acts, as illustrated by the oral testimony of Sue Kunitomi Embrey: "I remember going out . . . one night, and the searchlights followed me all the way to the latrine. When I came out from the latrine it followed me all the way back to my room" (n. pag.).

Communal conditions similarly turned sexuality into a voyeuristic/exhibitionist affair. *Citizen 13660* features a drawing of Okubo herself observing a camp worker peeking through a hole in the weatherboard of a horse-stall "apartment" over the caption: "Day and night Caucasian

camp police walked their beats within the center” (60). Houston describes the “blanket partitions” and “open ceilings overhead” which allowed “mischievous boys like Ray and Kiyo” to “climb up into the rafters and peek into anyone’s life” (28). And Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga remembers the effect of WRA-issue bedding: “Making love on a straw mattress was noisy. Any time you moved at all—crackle, crackle, crackle” (n. pag).

To some extent, the suffocating conditions of the Yamada’s cramped apartment duplicate the camp experience, to which Ichiro alludes when he wonders “if his folks still pounded flesh” (7). In this way, the stage is set for perpetual re-enactment of the joint “no-no” decision, to which Ma clings but which Ichiro, after two years in prison, wishes to put behind him. While Ichiro now wonders how the “flat-chested, shapeless woman” with the “awkward skinny body of a thirteen-year-old” could have “gotten together [with Pa] long enough to have two sons” (10-11), the post-camp Ma that he encounters values sex and mothering only to the degree that they produce a (Japanese) patriot. As she pronounces at the Kumsaka’s home in Ichiro’s presence, “To sleep with a man and bear a son is nothing. To raise the child into a man one can be proud of is not play. Some of us succeed. Some, of course, must fail” (27). Presumably because the camp regime disintegrated familial sexual boundaries, Ichiro has difficulty distinguishing between his mother’s sexuality and his own. Ma sees sexual activity as inextricably tied to nationalism, a view that Ichiro will wrestle with in his relationships with Kenji and Emi, as I will discuss below.

Continual surveillance by on-site military and camp administrators was not the only scrutiny to which incarcerated were subjected. Multiple observation projects of questionable legitimacy were undertaken within the camps as well. The WRA’s Community Analysis Section (CAS), for example, placed representatives in each of the ten internment camps. CAS reports

“were written up and sent to Washington, D.C., where they were classified in a collective portrait of ‘the Japanese enemy’” (Feeley 59). The largest project, the Japanese-American Evacuation and Relocation Study (JERS), led by Dorothy Swaine Thomas, was endorsed by the WRA, sponsored by the University of California, and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Columbia Foundation, and the Giannini Foundation. Suggesting the sadistic and experimental nature of the JERS project, Thomas sent a memo to her team of sociologists in which she stated the “primary purpose” was to collect data on “the nature of the restrictions that were imposed . . . and how incarcerated “behaved under these restrictions and *after the restrictions were removed*” (Feeley 62, emphasis added). One field worker on Thomas’s team would later write: “I did not realize that it was stupid and callous to ask these harassed folk to express their views about the U.S. to a stranger who might well be a spy for the administration. . . . But if I acted like a decent human being and left them alone, how was I to earn my salary as a researcher?” (Wax 71). Some of the most damaging psychological violence perpetrated on isseis like Ma came from the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), which by definition excluded all issei from membership. The complexities of the JACL’s role during World War II have been well documented.¹³ A few salient points, however, add to an understanding of Ma’s position. According to JACL historian Togo Tanaka, for example, the organization adopted a wartime position as “constructive cooperators for national defense” (Lim n. pag.). Although JACL leaders considered themselves to be performing a “brave service to report to federal agents what they judged to be subversive and disloyal acts and utterances,” writes Tanaka, “[t]o the majority of fear-ridden issei and resentful nisei, the activity assumed the aspects of a hateful witchhunt” (qtd

¹³ See, for example, Frank Abe, *Conscience and the Constitution* and Deborah Lim, *The Lim Report*.

in Lim).¹⁴ During a meeting with the governors of the inland states chosen to host the camps, JACL leadership recommended that West Coast Nikkei “be branded” and “farmed out to large sugar beet combines as cheap laborers” (Lim n. pg.). And, the midst of removal, in April of 1942, in an 18-page letter to WRA Director Milton S. Eisenhower¹⁵ in support of internment, the JACL’s designated national secretary and designated spokesperson, Mike Masaoka, asserted that most issei were “at the end of the trail” and predicted that “fifty percent of the issei [would] die off within their first year at camp” (Masaoka 2). Coinciding with this ominous prediction is the fact that some JACL members chose to exploit the crisis of removal to accelerate nisei ascension into community power-broker positions, which until that time were held almost exclusively by the issei. As Tanaka reported, “there is a considerable body of evidence . . . to indicate that it was not rare for nisei individuals to take advantage of the issei businessman[’s] or farmer’s weakened position and attempt literally to expropriate the latter’s holdings” (Tanaka 40, qtd. in Lim).

Into this Orwellian atmosphere the loyalty questionnaire was introduced in the camps in February of 1943. Literary critics have provided ample discussion on the responses to questions 27 and 28 by draftable nisei, but one sub-textual element of *No-No Boy* that critical studies seem to have overlooked is Ma’s personal relationship with the document. For one thing, Okada’s title, *No-No Boy*, is somewhat misleading. As William Hohri has noted, the term *no-no boy* is “incorrectly gender exclusive” (Hohri). Approximately 15 percent of those required to complete the questionnaire, male and female alike, did not respond positively to question 28.¹⁶

¹⁴ It is worth noting that despite enthusiastic cooperation on the part of the JACL no acts of sabotage on the part of either generation, issei or nisei, were ever uncovered.

¹⁵ Milton S. Eisenhower, brother to Dwight D. Eisenhower, held the position of WRA director for one year before resigning, at which time Dillon S. Meyer assumed the directorship for the duration.

¹⁶ Also worth noting is the fact that, while Ichiro is a no-no boy by virtue of answering “no” to questions 27 and 28, this action would have not have resulted in imprisonment. Ichiro’s two-year sentence resulted from his refusal to comply with the Army’s induction process following the re-instatement of the draft for the nisei, which occurred one year after the loyalty questionnaire was distributed. Of the hundreds of draftable nisei men who responded negatively to questions 27 and 28, a total of 315 ultimately resisted induction.

Approximately 6,700 answered “no,” approximately 2,000 qualified their answers and thus were counted as “nos,” a few hundred left the question blank, and approximately 3,000 avoided the questionnaire altogether (Daniels 114). In addition, the questionnaire was cobbled together with the intention of meeting multiple objectives.¹⁷ As the camps became progressively less manageable from a cost and administrative standpoint,¹⁸ and increasingly less defensible on the international front, the WRA needed a way to reverse the project of internment while still saving face. Dismantling the camps and “resettling” incarceratedes required salvaging the public image of the Nikkei, the negative construction of which had been capitalized on and intensified during the year prior in order to justify internment. This image now needed to be rehabilitated to facilitate their return to the general population, which was now more hostile than ever to ethnic Japanese, and to restore the 1A classification of nisei men, who had been declassified to 4C, non-draftable enemy aliens, but were now being encouraged to enlist in the Army. Thus, the questionnaire was intended to function largely as a public relations tool. By requiring all incarceratedes seventeen years of age or older, issei and nisei alike, to concretize their national positions, the questionnaire would create distinct categories of “loyals” and “disloyals.” Only loyals, then, would be allowed to enlist in the military or to “resettle” in inland states. Disloyals would be removed to a single segregation camp with reinforced security.

Finally, although Ichiro accuses his mother of putting words into his mouth, it was not, in fact, uncommon for a family to make a joint decision about how to respond, due to the questionnaire’s confusing language and the potentially broad consequences for both negative and

¹⁷ As such, it was titled “Application for Leave Clearance” while also bearing the logo of the Selective Service System.

¹⁸ As WRA director Dillon Myer wrote, the WRA also “did not want to be responsible for fostering a new set of reservations in the United States akin to Indian reservations” (qtd in Nakano, 160). Interestingly, as Mei T. Nakano has noted, a few years later Myer would become the commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

positive answers.¹⁹ While nisei men and a handful of nisei women could utilize the military question to protest the national request for “proof” of loyalty, this avenue was not available to the issei.²⁰ Instead, issei like Ma had two avenues for protest. They could refuse to renounce allegiance to Japan via question 28 and request repatriation or they could encourage their sons to answer “no” to question 27 and resist induction. As Okada’s text implies, Ma chose both routes. But while the text devotes several pages to Mr. Kanno’s reservations about Kenji’s military service, less attention is paid to similar concerns Ma might have had. Testimonies from incarcerated issei provide some insight into Ma’s position of resistance. The views of one mother, who actually encouraged her sons to enlist, probably reflect one aspect of Ma’s position: “The issei’s turn to sacrifice is over,” she said. “Thirty or forty years of toil have evaporated into thin air” (qtd. in Muller 133). The views of a dissenting issei father articulate Ma’s position more directly: “After being evacuated to this relocation center from the outside I have lost everything in worldly goods. All I have left is my family. I’d rather have them go to prison, and know that they will come back alive someday” (qtd. in Muller 124). Like these parents, Ma refuses the role of America’s scapegoat and encourages Ichiro to do the same.

Ultimately, Ma’s vehemence combined with her silence seems to force Ichiro’s introspection. Rather than reducing Ma to “just the sort of nationalist, Anti-American Japanese nut who was conjured up by the American press and military to justify placing Japanese

¹⁹ It was unclear, for instance, how nisei women were to be impacted by a positive response to question 27, which specified combat duty. Also, a positive answer to question 28 would have rendered stateless the issei who were barred from U.S. naturalization. And issei and nisei alike worried that “no-no” and yes-yes” respondents would be sent to separate camps, thus potentially splitting family units, or that “no-no” respondents might automatically be deported to Japan. Although question 28 became known as the “loyalty question,” other questions were equally problematic in terms of the anxiety they would have produced. All aspects of life were probed, with special emphasis on associations with Japanese culture, including religious affiliations and fluency in the Japanese language. These inquiries were further complicated by a plus/minus grading system. For example, “If subject is Christian, 2 plus; if Shinto, reject. If subject reads, writes, and speaks Japanese well, 2 minus” (Omori). Paradoxically, nisei respondents who indicated fluency in Japanese were being recruited by the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) to be used as interpreters and translators.

²⁰ The re-institution of the draft for nisei men in 1944 also provided nisei women with the opportunity to join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), but the quota of 500 was never reached (Moore 29).

Americans into camps” (Chu 59), Ichiro’s dawning realization acknowledges Ma’s resistance to sacrificing her sons to military service, as well as her desire to return to Japan with her family, as legitimate acts of protest against her social position in America. As he ruminates on the “events” that had “turned...her dreams into madness” (104), Ichiro silently poses the question: “Was it she who was wrong and crazy not to have found in herself the capacity to accept a country which repeatedly refused to accept her or her sons . . . or was it the others who were being deluded, the ones, like Kenji, who believed and fought and even gave their lives to protect this country where they could still not rate as first-class citizens because of unseen walls?” (104). This query, which occurs midway into the novel, signals that Ichiro is beginning to understand his mother’s position and even to appropriately transfer culpability for his alienated status away from her and onto the nation. But by conflating his mother’s position with Kenji’s, Ichiro reveals an important gap in his understanding of the issei’s national dilemma. Ma has not been denied *first-class* citizenship; rather, she has been denied citizenship of any kind.

The novel follows Ichiro through a series of repetitive and contradictory advances and retreats in his quest to resolve his “self-lacerating sense of guilt over his refusal to serve” (Kim 2005, 67). He seeks advice and camaraderie outside the family, with varying degrees of success. Ma, on the other hand, shunned by the issei community and hampered by a language barrier, is stuck in an endless cycle. Every day, in her trips to purchase bread, she makes a metaphoric pilgrimage out of camp, and every day she comes back in. It is fitting that she goes to the Wonder Bread bakery because Ma needs a miracle—she needs Japan to be a viable option. The turning point for Ma is the letter from her sister, the authenticity of which is verified by her sister’s use of Ma’s “own diminutive,” Kin-chan (108), and a reference to a childhood incident only the two of them know about. Whether because the letter confirms for Ma Japan’s current

state of decimation, or because Ma realizes life in Japan would be encumbered by her native family's poverty, or because she now knows her husband and sons will not help her go back, Ma realizes repatriation is not possible.

The next time we see Ma she is taking out her frustration in the family's grocery store, "methodically empty[ing] a case of evaporated milk and lin[ing] the cans with painful precision on the shelf" (136), then "reach[ing] out suddenly with her arms and [sweeping] the cans to the floor" (137). Ichiro views this scene as evidence of Ma's insanity, but Ma's obsessive performance, combined with her refusal to send food to her starving family in Japan, is a symbolic refusal to shoulder the burden of two empires. After being forced to accept the punishing paternalism (and ongoing disfranchisement) of one nation-state during internment, she was now expected to contribute to the resuscitation of the other nation-state as Japan rebuilds under Allied occupation in the wake of catastrophic nuclear attacks.

For some, Ma's suicide functions to purge the novel of a "disturbing, unassimilable element" (Chu 59). For others, Ma's suicide "[rids] the narrative of a perverse and disruptive masculinized female influence" (Arakawa 189). But Ma's suicide can also be seen as the culminating act of a protest she began with her no-no collaboration with Ichiro during internment, a partnership that Ichiro recognizes but misinterprets. The "half" of him that he thinks is Ma (16) is their shared resistance to the blind nationalism required by the loyalty questionnaire. In his confusion, Ichiro recognizes rebellion in Ma while initially failing to recognize it in himself. In himself he recognizes only submission, which leads him to conflate Ma's resolve with the power of the U.S. government. But when he sees the pile of suitcases "stacked neatly on his parents' bed" (185), he correctly identifies Ma's symbolic separation from an American society that never accepted her as a member; she is leaving the camps for the last

time. “Go back quickly,” he thinks, “Go to the Japan that you so long remembered and loved and be happy. It is only right” (186).

With the character of Ma, Okada disrupts the typical representation of the duality of racialized gender in which “Asian men have been cast as both hypersexual and asexual, and Asian women have been rendered as both superfeminine and masculine” (Espiritu 106). The novel burdens Ma with all four qualities. While Ichiro casts her as both a masculine hypersexual predator planting seeds of resistance and a kindly asexual old woman embracing the miracle of found motherhood, Pa remembers when she was “soft and good inside” (177), demurely accepting their match with a smile.

Okada apparently recognized that *No-No Boy* does not adequately express the complexities of the issei trajectory in America. For this reason, as Okada wrote in 1956, his second novel had “for its protagonist an immigrant issei rather than a nisei. When completed, I hope that it will to some degree faithfully describe the experiences of the immigrant Japanese in the United States. . . . I feel an urgency to write of the Japanese in the United States for the issei are rapidly vanishing and I should regret if their chapter in American history should die with them” (qtd. in Chin 256-7). Unfortunately, Okada’s second novel died with him.²¹ Its spirit, however, supports a sympathetic reading of Ma.

Until the time of her death, Ichiro scrutinizes Ma on the basis of heteropatriachal/nationalist norms, but listening to her eulogy, he is forced to recognize elements of Ma that he had not previously factored into his reductive analysis. He is faced with a three-dimensional Ma, whose cumulative experiences shaped the woman he encountered upon his return from prison. He cannot “believe that she had ever been any of the things the man was

²¹ As Chin reports in his Afterword, the manuscript was burned by Okada’s wife, Dorothy, after being rejected, along with Okada’s other papers, by the Japanese American Research Project at UCLA (Chin 257).

saying about her” (194). This epiphanic moment is unforeseen and not immediately comprehended by Ichiro. Instead, it produces a visceral reaction. He “feel[s] sick,” is overcome with “the urge to laugh,” and “want[s] to get out of there” (194). Ironically, he runs straight to Freddie Akimoto, a fellow no-no boy whose reckless avoidance repels him. He sees Freddie as “a man possessed with a desperate urgency to move fast, covering ground in a frantic pursuit . . . conducted for the sole purpose of running from reality,” and is “glad for himself that he [is] bearing the problem inside of him and making an effort to seek even a partial release” (202). What Freddie calls “living,” Ichiro sees as “like being on a pair of water skis, skimming over the top as long as one traveled at a reasonable speed, but, the moment he slowed down or stopped, it was to sink into nothingness that offered no real support” (201). Later, during the triangulated fist-fight between Ichiro, Freddie, and Bull, Ichiro finds he has no trouble accessing the martial manhood he thought he had lost to Ma’s dominance. But once he gains advantage over Bull, he becomes “sick with what he [is] having to do” (247), and does not want to fight anymore. Although Ichiro endeavors to understand himself in opposition to Ma, he ultimately finds affinity in resistance. Just as Ma refuses the overdetermined identity of the immigrant, Ichiro rejects the overdetermined identity of the no-no boy. Together, they protest a paternalistic social order that has as its foundation rigid heteropatriarchal norms—the violence and invasiveness of which were made palpable in the very conditions and circumstances of internment.

Chapter 2: “Obtrusive Displays”

Son joined the army
walked great distance
alone in the sagebrush²²

— Sho Nakashima, issei father

What hurt me the most, I guess, is the resisters said I didn’t know what I was fighting for. . . . it kind of reminded me of a little saying that we had: On the way to the bombing target, we were fighting for Uncle Sam. The minute we dropped the bombs and turned around, we were flying for ourselves. All we wanted to do was get back to base and live another day.²³

— Ben Kuroki, nisei soldier, World War II

. . . until we are restored all our rights, all discriminatory features of the Selective Service abolished, and measures [are] taken to remedy the past injustices thru Judicial pronouncement or Congressional act, we feel that the present program of drafting us from this concentration camp is unjust, unconstitutional, and against all principles of civilized usage. . . . we hereby refuse to go to the physical examination or to the induction if or when we are called. . .

We are not being disloyal. We are not evading the draft. We are all loyal Americans fighting for justice and democracy right here at home.

— Fair Play Committee bulletin, Heart Mountain camp

If gender is inverted and sexuality perverted in Ichiro’s relationships with his parents, in his relationship with Kenji gender and sexuality explode, calling into question constructs of desire, masculinity, and nationalism. Despite the fact that the gangrene in what remains of Kenji’s leg has rendered him impotent, Ichiro describes his homoeroticized envy of Kenji’s status as a “real” American in terms of the national purchase such status affords him. Observing Kenji’s “stiff and awkward” (59) gait as he walks to his modified Oldsmobile, “fixed to be driven with a right leg that wasn’t there anymore” (63), Ichiro seizes on Kenji’s stump as an enviable marker of patriotism. When Kenji asks Ichiro which he would rather have, the stump of eleven inches or “fifty years, maybe sixty” (59) of life, Ichiro chooses the stump because a “leg

²² As published in *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience*, 178.

²³ As quoted in *Conscience and the Constitution*.

more or less [isn't] important when compared with himself, Ichiro, who was strong and perfect but only an empty shell" (60). With this choice, he extends the dominance of "yes-yes" boys (previously applied to Eto) to include the privilege of penetrating a feminized American landscape. He thinks, but does not say, "[g]ive me the stump which gives you the right to hold your head high . . . because you were man enough . . . you can put your one good foot in the dirt of America and know that the wet coolness of it is yours beyond a single doubt" (64). As Ichiro ruminates, Kenji's stump also becomes a masculinized point of arousal. "Give me the eleven inches," he thinks, "and give me with it the fullness of yourself." As if eavesdropping on Ichiro's erotically charged interiority, Kenji breaks the silence to say, "I like you, Ichiro." Ichiro smiles, "a little embarrassed," and answers, "I could say the same about you" (64).

Almost immediately after Kenji and Ichiro establish this homosocial/homoerotic bond, a rabid nisei veteran, Bull, attempts to undermine and usurp it. While Kenji sits with Ichiro at the bar at the Club Oriental, Bull comes over and wedges himself into the small space between them. Bull ignores Ichiro and invites Kenji to join him at his table with "the good looking white girl" (74) he has come in with. "C'mon," he says. "I'll fix you up." When Kenji refuses, saying, "I'm with a friend," Bull looks at Ichiro and "with exaggerated motions" begins to "brush himself furiously" as if to remove the taint of the no-no boy. "Goddammit," Bull says, "brand-new suit. Damn near got it all cruddy," generating laughter among the crowd around them. Someone in the crowd comments, "No-no boys don't look so good without the striped uniform" (74), which makes Ichiro feel like "nobody, nothing. Just plain nothing" (76), and prompts him to say to Kenji, "you go, with blondie. That's for you" (77). But Kenji persists in his loyalty to Ichiro, and soon has the opportunity to prove it by rescuing him from a pack of nationalists, as I will discuss below.

The “fix-up” is a hallmark of the homosocial contract, but *No-No Boy* complicates the paradigm by connecting issues of inclusion/exclusion to sexual expression. In contrast to the entitlement that Kenji’s war-damaged body represents, for example, the only apparent advantage of the sexually able body of no-no boy Freddie is its ability to perform therapeutic sexual acts that numb the pain of alienation. The first time Freddie sees Ichiro upon his release from prison, he offers to share the woman in 2A. The woman is a “fat pig” who wouldn’t have merited Freddie’s attention before the war, when he could afford to be “particular about dames” (47). But in Freddie’s post-prison position at the margins, this woman has value, as Freddie explains: “She don’t care who I am or what I done or where I been. All she wants is me, the way I am, with no questions.” Here, as throughout the novel, Ichiro is unconvinced about sex as a solution, “Sure, I see your point,” Ichiro says. To which Freddie responds, “No you don’t. Me, I been out and around.” When Freddie indicates he has accepted nonjudgmental female comfort in lieu of nisei male camaraderie—“Either they’re in a big fat rush,” Freddie says of the Seattle veterans, “or they don’t know you no more” (48)—Ichiro is unable to “hide his disappointment” (49). Although he defines citizenship as being, among other things, “free to . . . marry” (51), he fantasizes about peaceful co-existence between resisters, veterans, and their children. “I will buy a home and love my family and I will walk down the street holding my son’s hand. . . . I will take my family to visit the family of Freddie . . . and our families together will visit still another family whose father was two years in the army of America instead of two years in prison and it will not matter about the past” (52). In Ichiro’s future vision of community, homosocial relations are privileged over heteronormativity—women are notably absent.

Just as he did with his sexualized expressions of Ma’s dominance, Ichiro continues to blur the lines between nation, body, and sexuality with extraordinary symbolism. After rejecting

Freddie's offer, he stops by the university he attended prior to internment. The discouraging visit with a former professor prompts a reverie in which Ichiro fetishizes the tool of his trade as both a sexual and militaristic object—"the slide rule with the leather case which hung from his belt like the sword of learning." "Where was the slide rule," he asks himself "where was the shaft of exacting and thrilling discovery when I needed it most? If only I had pictured it and felt it in my hands, I might well have made the right decision (53). Okada's pun on masturbation—the "thrilling" shaft in Ichiro's hands—contrasts the self-sufficiency of autoeroticism with the lack of autonomy experienced by nisei men during World War II.

Later, in Portland, Ichiro is buoyed by Mr. Carrick's vindication—"It wasn't your fault. . . You know that, don't you?" (152). Motivated "to find his way back to . . . belonging" (154), Ichiro continues to use sexuality as a gauge for measuring his position at the margins against the entitlement he seeks. He goes to the Burnside Café specifically to find the "sweet babes" who waitress there (155), but instead picks a fight with the veteran behind the counter who "obtrusively display[s]" a "bronze discharge pin" (156). The "comforting thought" that Ichiro might be "offered a way back into the great compassionate stream of life that is America" (153) is further quashed by an exchange with a hotel elevator operator who offers services of sexual procurement. Ichiro views the "filthy" offer of pathologized sexuality as a reminder of his position at the margins, and rejects the "rotten . . . cheap and smelly" world it represents. He wishes to access the domesticity touted "in all the homey magazines," but at the same time rejects its heterosexual constraints. In Ichiro's "land of the happily-ever-after"—which includes detailed markers of normativity: "clean, white cottages," a "red-brick church with the clean, white steeple," two children, one boy and one girl," "a shiny new car in the garage," "a dog and a cat" (159)—there is no mention of women or wives. Rather, Ichiro's imagined utopia implicitly

dismisses the essentialist constraints of the homo/hetero binary in a way that presages contemporary opposition to the nuclear family.

The novel is ambiguous about Ichiro's sexuality, and Ichiro himself is evasive. Even with Kenji, Ichiro vacillates between disinterest and arousal. When Kenji tells him, "I'm thinking about you all the time," Ichiro answers, "Sure" (165). After Ichiro rejects Freddie's offer to share his lover, the married woman in 2A, Freddie sends him to the Christian Rehabilitation Center, a "big junkyard . . . fulla drunks and deadbeats and homos" (203). Gary, a resister who works at the center, has the "same problem" as Ichiro (219). The Center's intake officer, Mr. Morrison, is perplexed by Ichiro's and Gary's "kind of illness" (220) and doubts his ability to find "a solution to your peculiar situation" (221). Meanwhile Freddie continues to attempt to commodify women in order to establish homosociality with Ichiro. But the black pimp, Rabbit, is unwilling to hire out his "gals" to this pair of resisters. Despite Rabbit's evident approval—"If they had come for me, I would of told them where to shove their stinking uniform too"—he tells them, "Sorry . . . I want to help, but that's how it is" (238). While he sympathizes with their resistance, he is not willing to risk exacerbating his already tenuous position as a black man in the post-war racial hierarchy.

Freddie lives fast and dies hard in a fatal car accident while being chased—not by his lover's nisei husband, but by Bull, who bullies Freddie and Ichiro in lieu of the unrequited promise of social acceptance in a racist society. As Ichiro recognizes, Bull similarly lacks entitlement. "The blond" that Bull brings to the Club Oriental is a "compensation for his lack of acceptance. Somehow, he has managed to date her, but before the night was done, Bull would be looking stubbornly for her while someone else took her to bed." Bull's patriotic version of masculinity does not earn him national enfranchisement, here symbolized by the body of the

white woman. He is allowed to escort but not to penetrate the “blond” (81). Instead, after the war has ended, he is caught in a loyalty loop that involves continuously fighting the “goddamn Japs” (246), now in the form of no-no boys.

In his death, Freddie’s body reflects the bifurcated national status of the no-no boy: “Poor guy musta been halfway out when the car smacked the building. Just about cut him in two” (249). When Bull learns that Freddie has died as a result of his nationalistic persecution, he breaks down, “[m]outh agape, lips trembling. . . . not like a man in grief or a soldier in pain, but like a baby in loud, gasping, beseeching howls” (250). With this passage, Okada blends a graphic illustration of Freddie’s internal national conflict with a symbolic reminder of the fragility of the hyper-masculine façade. Though they are positioned differently, both men are denied full inclusion into U.S. society, and sexual domination over women does not offer a justifiable path to power.

In contrast to the combative relations of Bull and Freddie, the truce Kenji offers Ichiro from their first encounter in the coffee shop extends to physical protection. The scene at the bar during which Bull humiliates Ichiro has been witnessed by Ichiro’s younger brother, Taro, who compensates for his family’s resistance by joining the Army. Thinking Taro wants a “family powwow,” Ichiro follows him outside to a vacant lot where he unwittingly walks into a bum rush. “That’s a Jap” sneers one attacking “youth.” Another chides, “Say no-no in Jap. You oughta be good at that” (78). The assault escalates into a gang-rape style retribution when one attacker “threw himself athwart his legs and Ichiro sprawled heavily to the ground.” “Dogs don’t wear pants,” an attacker says, referring to the post-war term for resisters, a comment that is rejoined with “We can’t let it run around with pants on” and “No. People will think it’s human.” While Ichiro’s arms are “pulled painfully behind him,” his attackers begin “clawing at his trouser

legs and it [is] only a matter of moments before he [is] stretched out helplessly” (79). Just as one attacker opens his knife with a “sharp snap” and bends over Ichiro with a “wide grin” to “slip the knife blade under [Ichiro’s] leather belt,” Kenji, “whose manhood . . . is never questioned” (Arakawa 192), “limp[s] across the lot” (79) and saves Ichiro with his phallic cane: “The cane swished and smacked loudly against the wrist of the knife wielder” (80). Ichiro’s attackers make an “urgent” retreat, with one saying: “I heard about this guy. Kill-crazy, that’s what. Even his buddies were afraid of him;” and another saying: “Just like a madman. Couldn’t kill enough krauts” (80). With this scene, the homosocial contract between Kenji and Ichiro expands to include Kenji’s masculine protection of a feminized Ichiro, echoing the novel’s opening scene in which Ichiro symbolically assumes the position of sexual submission to Eto’s show of nationalized dominance.

At the same time, the war wound that Ichiro covets buys Kenji upward social mobility, but only at the expense of self-sufficiency. While Kenji has agency among nisei veterans and gung-ho young men anxious to distinguish themselves from the *inu*, he relies on the government for medical care and for his cane, his prosthetic leg, and his tricked-out Oldsmobile. He receives a monthly stipend in lieu of the paycheck he might have received if his mobility had not been impaired. Kenji knows that his currency is chump change compared to his loss, and the novel illustrates this fact during the trip to the Portland VA hospital where Kenji will have one final amputation and then die. When they are stopped for speeding, Kenji protects Ichiro by symbolically making the body switch that Ichiro had earlier requested. As the police officer pulls up behind them, Kenji trades places with Ichiro, who, as a convicted felon, has been driving without a license. But Kenji’s ability to protect Ichiro is purchased with the currency of his own

impending death. He can only “stand up” to the police officer and refuse to pay the requested bribe because he knows that he will not be alive to face a traffic court judge.

From his deathbed, Kenji tells Ichiro that he looks forward to dying, because “wherever it is I’m headed” there won’t be “Japs or Chinks or Jews or Poles or Niggers or Frenchies, but only people.” In contrast to the reputation he has among the young nisei men in the vacant lot, Kenji is haunted by the specter of one of his victims. “He wasn’t the only German I killed,” he tells Ichiro, “but I remember him. I see him rolling down the roof.” As a result, Kenji opposes Ichiro’s romanticized view of the body as a resource for military sacrifice. He proposes, instead, that the body be used to eliminate racism by eliminating race and national identification, “because if I’m still a Jap...and this guy’s still a German, I’ll have to shoot him again and I don’t want to do that” (165). He advises Ichiro to “[g]o someplace where there isn’t another Jap within a thousand miles. Marry a white girl or a Negro or an Italian or even a Chinese. Anything but a Japanese. After a few generations of that, you’ve got the thing beat” (164). Significantly, Kenji’s plan is not a project of assimilation, nor does it have whiteness as its ideal. Rather, Kenji is advocating for a future that flattens race and ethnicity, thereby eliminating such factors from questions of loyalty and patriotism, a radical proposition in light of anti-miscegenation laws still on the books during the period in which the novel is set as well as the time during which Okada wrote it in 1955.

As early as the 1890s, the perceived threat of Japanese immigration was voiced in sexualized terms. A 1892 edition of the *Sacramento Daily Record Union* portrayed Japanese “as men who know no morals but vice, who sit beside white daughters and debauch and demoralize them” (qtd. in Ogawa 15). In 1913, a California farmer raised a similar alarm:

Near my home is an eighty-acre tract of as fine land as there is in California. On that tract lives a Japanese. With that Japanese lives a white woman. In that woman's arms is a baby. What is that baby? It isn't Japanese. It isn't white. I'll tell you what that baby is. It is a germ of the mightiest problem that ever faced this state; a problem that will make the black problem of the south look white. (qtd. in Lake and Reynolds 267)

And the *San Francisco Chronicle* editorialized in 1920: "The Japanese boys are taught by their elders to look upon...American girls with a view to future sex relationships. . . . The proposed assimilation of the two races is unthinkable. . . . American womanhood is by far too sacred to be subjected to such degeneracy." With Kenji's future vision, the novel denounces both militarism and the policing of interracial desire. The *Chronicle* went on to suggest that ethnic Japanese and "Americans" are not the same species by suggesting the perceived "degeneracy" of racial mixing is not only "morally indefensible," but "biologically impossible" (qtd. in Ogawa 15). With Kenji's future vision, Okada not only thumbs his nose at anti-miscegenation laws, but also subverts the popular dehumanization project on its own terms by offering a reproductive "solution" to anti-Japanese bigotry. The poignant irony is that Kenji's proposal of racial erasure through procreation comes from the one character in the story whose war wound has made him incapable of reproducing.

Kenji cannot give Ichiro the "inches" that he desires through transference of his "yes-yes" identity. Nor can he offer him the "punishment" he seems to seek through sexual domination because the patriotic wound that Ichiro covets has rendered Kenji impotent. "I'm only half a man," he tells Ichiro, "and when my leg starts aching, even that half is no good" (89). Over the course of their relationship, however, Kenji is able to penetrate Ichiro's self-hatred by

demonstrating the consequences of constructing masculinity through patriotism. With his future vision of racial erasure, he encourages Ichiro to consider an alternative solution to ethnic alienation. And by exposing him to the assimilationist scenario Emi has to offer, Kenji facilitates Ichiro's understanding of the limitations of nationalism.

Chapter 3: “Because We’re American”

The Japanese are . . . more dangerous as residents in this country than any other peoples ineligible under our laws....they never cease being Japanese.”

— Japanese Exclusion League, lobbying the U.S. Senate, 1924²⁴

A Jap’s a Jap....It makes no difference whether he is an American....You can’t change him by giving him a piece of paper.

— Lieut. General J. L. DeWitt, 1943²⁵

As we boarded the bus
bags on both sides
(I had never packed
two bags before
on a vacation
lasting forever)
the Seattle Times
photographer said
Smile!
So obediently I smiled
and the caption the next day
read:

Note smiling faces
a lesson to Tokyo.

— Mitsuye Yamada, “Evacuation”

In 1945, Les Brown’s “Sentimental Journey,” played by his Band of Renown and sung by America’s sweetheart, Doris Day, became the unofficial homecoming theme for World War II veterans. In *No-No Boy*, set in 1946, the song is played on Emi’s piano by post-war America’s public enemy number one, the nisei draft-resister. Emi mistakes Ichiro for her husband, Ralph, who effectively abandons her by signing up for another hitch in the Army despite the war’s end. After realizing that Ichiro is not her “AWOL” husband, Emi sits down at the piano and together they play “Chopsticks.” In addition to giving Emi a chance to get closer to Ichiro, the duet is a

²⁴ As quoted in Ogawa 10-11.

²⁵ This statement was part of DeWitt’s testimony to the House Naval Affairs Subcommittee. DeWitt was the military commander in charge of removal. He interpreted FDR’s Executive Order 9066 as sanctioning removal of all Nikkei from the West Coast based on ethnicity rather than loyalty or citizenship status.

nod to both Kenji's prosthetic leg and to his homosocial contract with Ichiro. Okada would have likely been aware of the 1946 film, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, in which a WWII veteran who lost both hands during the war successfully plays "Chopsticks" with his mechanical hook prostheses. In Okada's version, the veteran (Kenji) has lost not his hands but his sexual potency. As a result, he is incapable of "playing" with Emi. The novel's piano scene foreshadows the polyamory that is about to unfold, when Kenji offers Ichiro to Emi as his sexual proxy. Or is it Ichiro having Kenji through Emi? Or Emi reuniting with Ralph through Ichiro? It hardly matters, because despite all of the dimensions of queered sexuality between the three of them (four if you count the ghost of Ralph), Emi subverts any agenda the men may have in favor of her own project of Americanized performance.

Patricia Chu writes that while white women in texts authored by Asian-American men symbolize the American landscape, potential trophies of successful assimilation, and cultural mediators and gatekeepers" (20), and "Asian . . . mother[s] personif[y] the ancestral homeland (43), Emi "exists only to support and discuss the choices and careers of male niseis" (20). I propose, however, that, with Emi, Okada carries forward the literary tradition by offering a transnational hybrid who advocates for a new homeland: America. My view of Emi, Ichiro's only actualized sexual partner, is in opposition to criticism that reduces her to a "passive and maternal" "tool for personal growth" (Sokolowski 70) or a "unidimensional . . . appendage of the male characters around whom the book revolves" (Kim 1982, 197). Neither do I see her as a "benevolent woman of profound moral compassion" (Ling 372) who offers "love and forgiveness" (Wong and Santa Ana 183) and "complete acceptance" (McDonald 24) to "heal the broken man with her love (Entin 95). Rather, I see Emi as a sexually liberated nisei woman who,

on a mission of wholesale assimilation during the post-war crisis of readjustment, is motivated to exploit Ichiro's conflicted and vulnerable state on a level that rivals Ma.

Already discouraged by Freddie's sexual solution, Ichiro has also been degraded by Bull and debased by Taro's gang of tormentors. Now instead of spending the night on the sofa with his mentor/protector as he expected, he's thrust into heterosexual activity with a stranger. While Kenji settles in, "feeling good and satisfied, leaning back and lifting [his] stiff limb with both hands onto the coffee table, and pointing with his cane to Emi's bedroom (88-90), Ichiro is "[a]ppalled by the realization of the fantastic situation" (89). In Emi's bedroom, he's uncertain about undressing, but "like a swimmer" he "plung[es] . . . into the bed" (90). Moments later, he cries out: "I've ruined my life and I want to know what it is that made me do it" (91). Emi recognizes the contradictions of racialized exclusion, and at first she responds supportively: "It's because we're American and because we're Japanese and sometimes the two don't mix," she tells Ichiro. "It's all right to be German and American or Italian and American or Russian and American but, as things turned out, it wasn't all right to be Japanese and American. You had to be one or the other" (91). But Ichiro is inconsolable, so she reach[es] out her free hand and [draws] his face against her naked breast. Lost and, bewildered like a child frightened, he sob[s] quietly" (92). In the morning, however, she attempts to transform Ichiro into a U.S. nationalist. While Ichiro sleeps, she takes away his clothes and replaces them with clothes left behind by her "yes-yes" husband. Ichiro wakes up to find neatly laid out on a chair near the bed "a fresh shirt, a clean pair of slacks, even underwear and socks. His own clothes were not in sight" (92). Emi's re-invention of the no-no boy has begun.

Throughout the novel, clothing is prominent among the signposts that intersect gender and sexuality with Ichiro's national conflict. Eto continues to wear "green, army fatigue trousers

and an Eisenhower jacket” (2) to preserve the dubious social purchase of military service, while Gary characterizes resisters like himself as “big black marks” on the “new laundry” of nisei veterans (228). It is “urgent” for Taro to “get into a uniform to prove he is not part of [Ichiro]” (81). Ichiro’s “tormentors” attempt to debase him by removing his pants (79). Bull wears a “pale blue suit” that fails “to conceal his short legs and awkward body,” which do not warrant the “good-looking white girl” (74). By forcing Ichiro to dress up in Ralph’s clothes, Emi lets Ichiro know who he needs to be in order to be with her. Resisters get women like Freddie’s neighbor in 2A, whose “housecoat was baggy and dirty and unzipped down to her waist” (45); war heroes like Kenji and Ralph get women like Emi. But like the pants of the patriot that are “a little snug” (93), Ichiro will find the relationship Emi offers to be a bad fit.

Emi’s own costume changes, and the reactions they produce, are equally informative. While Ichiro sleeps outside in Kenji’s Oldsmobile, Emi “kick[s] off her shoes and rest[s] her chin on her knees, not bothering to pull the skirt down over her legs,” but Kenji is “unresponsive” (84). The next day, when Kenji and Ichiro are sitting together in the kitchen, Emi will make an entrance “shed of the baggy work clothes and wearing a trim, blue-Shantung dress and high heels.” The fact that Kenji “seem[s] to take no notice” while Ichiro “eye[s] her approvingly” (100) will signal the fulfillment of their homosocial contract. Meanwhile, however, she waits outside for Ichiro, dressed in men’s clothing that signal both a lack of sexual access and a gendered assumption of authority.

Wearing the farmer’s overalls, she is dressed for the sentimental journey upon which she hopes Ichiro will embark. With her farm serving as a metaphoric throwback to the period during which the issei dominated a flourishing Pacific Coast agribusiness, Emi asks Ichiro to forgive the homeland that turned against them so that social relations can return to an ostensibly more

palatable pre-war state. Ichiro is suspicious of the pastoral promise that Emi represents, and history supports his suspicion. The pre-war prosperity of issei farmers was cut off at the knees by land laws enabled by equally proscriptive immigration laws. The issei were denied naturalized American citizenship, then denied land ownership on the basis of their non-citizen status. Many issei circumvented the laws by purchasing land in the names of their American-born offspring, which probably explains Emi's current land ownership. Other issei were reduced to leasing land for prescribed, limited periods of time, as illustrated by Mr. Maeno, the issei who leases land from Emi. Thus, to some extent, Emi has benefited from the racialized exclusion that derailed the issei and has now been extended to nonconforming nisei. As a result of alien land laws, Emi is a financially self-sustaining landowner, a position she seeks to stabilize. She has the agency to offer Ichiro a place in the very business of agriculture whose competitive hostility drove Nikkei removal from the West Coast in the first place, but her offer is contingent on his transformation.

First, Emi (re)criminalizes Ichiro's protest: "In any other country they would have shot you for you did," and asks him to atone for his past. Then, to facilitate his rehabilitation, she encourages him to engage in the sentimentalism that she has adopted to reconcile her own conflicted position: "I can remember how full I used to get with pride and patriotism when we sang 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and pledged allegiance to the flag at school assemblies, and that's the feeling you've got to have." When Ichiro counters her, "It was different then," she resorts to gaslighting, "Only because you think so," and, echoing governmental paternalism, encourages him to "pretend" he is back in school. "Make believe you're singing 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and see the color guard march out on the stage and say the pledge of allegiance with all the other boys and girls. You'll get that feeling flooding into your chest and making you want to shout with glory." In this passage, Emi reduces the unconstitutional actions

of the American government and elevates Ichiro's response, collapsing both positions as equal "mistakes." Just as Ichiro attempted to transfer the nation's power to his disenfranchised mother, Emi attempts to project onto Ichiro the power of reconciliation: "They made a mistake when they doubted you. . . . Try, if you can, to be equally big and forgive them" (96). Implicit in this false allocation of power is the notion that the nisei might transform their marginalized position by adopting a revisionist history and shaping themselves into patriots. Ichiro's response is physical. He "pushe[s] himself off the step and walk[s] slowly to the end of the yard" (96-97); then, rejecting Emi's authority, he makes "his way back until he [is] looking down on her." "It's nice out here," he says, gesturing to the "quite and peaceful and clean and fresh and nice" rural area that encompasses Emi's farm. "But I don't live here" (97). In reality, neither does Emi live in the revisionist world she attempts to sell to Ichiro.

Emi's performance might be seen as a brand of social amnesia as delusional as Ma's desperate belief in Japan's viability, but, like Ma, Emi is not naïve. When Ichiro "dwell[s] at great length on his admiration for Mr. Carrick," she responds by saying that Carrick "sounds like the kind of American that Americans always profess themselves to be." When Ichiro calls Carrick, "[o]ne in a million," Emi counters, "[l]ess than that. . . . If a lot more people were like him, there wouldn't have been an evacuation" (169). And from a sexual standpoint, despite the sentimentalist discourse she imposes on Ichiro, Emi is a pragmatist. For her, men are interchangeable. While she "waits" for Ralph, she takes on Kenji as a surrogate. As Kenji explains to Ichiro, Emi "needs someone. Just like you need someone. Just like I need someone, sometimes. I won't apologize for her because then I'd have to apologize for myself" (89). When Kenji indicates his intended hand-off—"Kenji kept grinning, apparently with meaning to Emi, for she began to fidget nervously" (88)—she accepts Ichiro as Kenji's "substitute" (89). When

she sees the Oldsmobile return, she is disappointed to find Ichiro instead of Kenji at her door. But when Ralph sends her divorce papers, she tells Ichiro she might grow to love him. Recognizing a moment of opportunity in Ma's death, Emi shows up at Ichiro's house to offer her condolences. When Ichiro takes her dancing at the roadhouse, she usurps the outing. She resumes her project of transformation by coaching his reaction to the customer who buys them drinks. Here, as an advocate for Americanism, Emi, not Ma, best personifies Ichiro's anxiety over being victim to a female dominate who "opened my mouth and made my lips move to sound the words" (12). The exchange is worth quoting in full:

"What do you think?" asked Emi. . . .

"I think the man had a lot of Japanese friends once. Maybe he was a produce buyer or something and he misses the ones who didn't come back."

"That's no good," she said.

"I think," he started again, "he had a son in that outfit that got surrounded up in the mountains by the Germans and was finally liberated by the Japanese boys."

Emi smiled. "No good."

"I think he's a Japanese who's lucky enough not to look Japanese and feels sorry every time he sees a Jap that looks like one."

"That's even worse". . . .

"I want to think," he said soberly, "that he saw a young couple and liked their looks and felt he wanted to buy them a drink and did."

"You keep on thinking that. That's how it was." (210-11)

If the novel ended here, with Ichiro accepting the lines Emi feeds him as they sit on the edge of the dance floor (which critics often view as a metaphor for America's melting pot²⁶) and with Ichiro feeling "immensely full and wanting that moment to last a lifetime" (211), it would be reasonable to argue that Okada advocates for assimilation at the expense of a more complex reality. But Okada jolts our memory by taking us back to the Yamada grocery store, where Pa is wrapping packages of food to send to his desperate relatives in occupied Japan. Okada then takes us to the Christian Rehabilitation Center, where Morrison is angered by Ichiro's confusion over resisting the draft and demands remorse, and where Gary tells Ichiro the story about the abuse he is subjected to at the foundry, where Birdie defends him against veteran co-workers who then "loosened the lugs" on Birdie's car, causing him to lose "a wheel going fifty miles an hour and [roll] over three times" (227). Okada also takes us back to the Club Oriental, where Freddie is killed in a car crash after being chased by Bull. While Ichiro's guesses at the roadhouse customer's motivation reflect the war-torn and racially charged reality in post-internment America, Emi's dismissals reflect the national demand for revisionism not reparation. With his final passages, Okada reminds his readers where Ichiro lives.

²⁶ See, for example, Stan Yogi, "'You Had to Be One or the Other': Oppositions and Reconciliation in John Okada's *No-No Boy*," and Joseph Entin, "A Terribly Incomplete Thing": *No-No Boy* and the Ugly Feelings of Noir."

Conclusion

John Okada opened his second novel with the line, “A ship docks in the harbor. A man jumps overboard, then searches for soy sauce casks on display, a sign for finding fellow immigrants to take him in” (*In Search of No-No Boy*, n. pg.). *No-No Boy* closes with a similar sentiment. Although for much of the novel Ichiro searches for reasons that led him to “ruin” his life, in the end what he seeks is fellowship. He approaches every interaction with a desire to be accepted in spite of his no-no status, but he ultimately rejects heteropatriarchal norms as a path toward belonging.

As the novel closes, neither Emi nor her heteronormative scenario is on his mind. Instead, he wants to “think about Ken and Freddie and Mr. Carrick and the man who had bought the drinks . . . about the Negro who stood up for Gary, and about Bull” (250). The homosocial resolution that Ichiro envisions suggests solidarity along a spectrum of masculinity that includes veterans and resisters as well as their multi-racial male sympathizers. After giving Bull’s shoulder a “tender squeeze” and patting his head “once tenderly,” Ichiro walks slowly away from “the morbidity of the crowd,” “probing” the possibility of an imagined community that has a “faint and elusive insinuation of promise” (250-1). He no longer wants “in” from the margins. In fact, he concludes, as he suspected earlier, that “the answer is that there is no in” (160). Instead he wants to carve out a “tiny piece of America” where he can form a homosocial fellowship.

The “fellows” in Ichiro’s imagined community have each in their own way demonstrated a capacity to resist heteropatriarchal norms. By becoming a pacifist, Kenji not only usurps the terms of military privilege but derides the dubious opportunity of being “allowed” to prove national loyalty through military service. He also subverts his own position of ethnic marginalization by conceiving a destabilizing formula that would eliminate the markers required

to keep racial/ethnic hierarchies intact. Carrick subverts the (white) heteropatriarchal archetype by being ashamed of his former “big-mouthed, loud-talking, back-slapping” American-ness rather than demanding Ichiro’s shame over resistance to national compliance. Birdie troubles the imposed racial triangle by befriending Gary and protecting him from the veterans at the foundry rather than competing with him for a slightly higher place at the lowest end of the national strata. Gary queers his position of criminalization by detaching altogether in favor of a life of solitude and artistic expression. And Freddie’s grisly death has proven that running from the past is not a viable response. Even the anonymous customer at the roadhouse—who might alternately be a white man who misses his Japanese friends who died in the war, or a white man who had a son who was liberated by a nisei soldier, or a Nikkei man who passes as white—troubles the racial/ethnic boundaries of post-war America by offering a gesture of camaraderie.

Ichiro’s imagined community queers the terms of assimilation—internal repression and external suppression—by demonstrating an alternative solution that involves instead continual resistance and critique. While the “whole damn country is pushing and shoving and screaming to get into someplace that doesn’t exist,” the members of his future community will be those who “know that the outside [can] be inside” (160).

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