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## NOT WAVING BUT DROWNING: CREATIVITY AND IDENTITY IN DIASPORA WRITING

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The essay argues against triumphal readings of 'diaspora' creative writing established upon theories that understand diasporic identities as dispersed cultural unitariness. Instead, through a reading of John Okada's novel *No-No Boy*, the essay examines a different, more troubled representation of the relationship between an 'original' or diasporic Japanese identity and a present national 'American' identity. Ideals of essentialized cultural beings connected to territorial place come to crisis when time and space shifts dislocate subjects. Asian American literary works offer opportunities for studying such subjects in crisis.

Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning:  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he's dead.  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said.

Oh, no no no it was too cold always  
(Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning (Smith 1988:67).

### Introduction

Casting about for a title for a paper on diaspora and creative writing, I could think only of Stevie Smith's famous poem, *Not waving but drowning*. 'Oh no', my husband groaned when I admitted this to him, 'there are dozens of papers already out with this title'. In short, I was forewarned, I had stumbled upon a critical cli-

ché. Perhaps that is the lesson to be drawn from my insistence on the title as the unavoidable trope for a mediation on diasporic creative writing: What can be said about such creative writing that is not already a cliché?

In the last fifteen years or so, a number of theoretical and critical works have appeared on what is becoming generally categorized as 'diaspora' writing. While it is well-known that the term 'diaspora' was first used for the dispersion of the Jews from Israel, and has primary reference to the maintenance of Jewish religious and cultural identity across temporal and territorial distances (see Chapter 2), the term has taken on a larger generic function, to signify any community of people coming originally from one political territory and settling down in another. Diasporic literature, or writing produced by Iranians living in London, Palestinians resident in Chicago, or Chinese exiled in New York, for example, has significant varying meanings from related terms such as immigrant, émigré, refugee, settler, or expatriate writing, although these terms are often used interchangeably, and may also be confused or fused with the senses of transnational, cross-cultural, postnational, cosmopolitan, metropolitan, and travel, encounter, or contact literature. James Clifford offers an exhaustive discussion of these various meanings:

An unruly crowd of descriptive/interpretive terms now jostle and converse in an effort to characterize the contact zones of nations, cultures, and regions: terms such as *border*, *travel*, *creolization*, *transculturation*, *hybridity*, and *diaspora* (as well as the looser *diasporic*) (Clifford 1994:303).

For Clifford, citing Khachig Tololian:

the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain ... [which] is the domain of shared and discrepant meanings, adjacent maps and histories, that we need to sort out and specify as we work our way into a comparative, intercultural studies (Clifford 1994:303).

According to Clifford, diaspora is distinguished from, if not in opposition to, 'the old localizing strategies — by bounded *community*, by organic *culture*, by *region*, by *center* and *periphery*' (Clifford 1994:303). Like Roger Rouse 1995, he sees 'transnational migrant circuits' as exemplifying 'the kinds of complex cultural formations that current anthropology and intercultural studies describe and theorize' (Clifford 1994:303); and diasporic literature as constituting and evidentiary of 'diaspora discourses' that 'represent experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from homes' (Clifford 1994:302).

For this topic, I could engage, cultural studies-wise, with issues of a Malaysian-Singapore diaspora as constituted through creative work, seen in Chinese Malaysian writers who left for Australia in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, such as the playwright Lee Joo For, the poet Ee Tiang Hong, and the novelist Beth Yap.

Or I could consider the Chinese Malaysian/Singapore women poets, Wong May, Hillary Tham, and me, who came to the United States in the 1960s and

1970s. Examining the work of Malaysian-Singapore-born creative writers who left for two different versions of the West, Australia, and the United States, I could arrive at a number of interpretations concerning the experience of nativization or deracination, of departure, relocation, or removal, and of arrival, contact, memory, nostalgia, identity devolution or involution, of identificatory or alienating formations, dis-identification or dis-alienating disavowals, and so forth.

My paper picks up, instead, one thread in the many braided conceptualizations of the term; that is, the theoretical identification of individuals and groups with fixed, totalizing, original identities. As Clifford notes in an ironically oxymoronic subtitle, *Diaspora's Borders*, 'Diasporas are caught up with and defined against 1) the norms of nation-states and 2) indigenous, and especially autochthonous claims by "tribal" peoples' (Clifford 1994:303). These diasporic identities have also taken on quite dizzying collective shadings. Hence, not simply a Nigerian diaspora but an African diaspora; not an Irish diaspora, but a European diaspora; not a Chinese-Malaysian, but an Asian diaspora. The many and profound differences and complexities among individuals or micro-groups traversing political boundaries in response to very different causes — calamities, social-economic forces, plain idiosyncratic dissatisfactions in some particular location, and desires for change — are elided in the category of diaspora; a categorization whose reference to single collective identities may in fact have been the totality refused by the diasporic individual in the first place. I argue that while clear, fixed, bounded identities may help in the mapping of large social movements, poets and fictionists contend against these abstract social theories in the very particularity, concretion, and specificity of their themes, styles, and addresses. Creativity and diasporic identity, as twentieth-century Western concepts, are in epistemological tension with each other, the first viewed as fundamentally related to a subject's agency, activated against restrictive and prescriptive forces of totalitarianism that assume fixity, essence, primacy, original order, and purity; and the other, a collective social construction received and augmented by critics and readers, shaping through the force of reception, and itself shaped by individual authors.

### Constructing identities

These antinomies, whose identities I am constructing in antipathetic relation to each other, shape a disabling theoretical model. In my recent readings across the United States, I have been approached by first-generation immigrants from Asian nations who have read my memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (Lim 1996), as a model of a shared narrative of creative writing imperiled in a diasporic space. Some pressed on me their self-published chapbooks or their poems. The few who have had poems published in U.S. magazines tell me of the gap between their identities and that of mainstream America; rather, the gap within their identities produced by the absence of an audience for their work in mainstream America.

These writers have not yet gained an audience in the U.S., and even those who do publish, caught in the split between Asia and America, leave hardly a

trace on the critical horizon. In the late twentieth century, such diasporic writers appear to exemplify the burden of double-consciousness, which W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* had theorized as the condition of the American Negro:

born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world. — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only let him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . . . One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1957:45).

In contrast to Du Bois's argument on the disabling nature of such double-consciousness, some critics of Asian-American writing call attention to the increasing double notice received by Asian-American writers. Read as both ethnic American and diasporic Asian writers, such double-conscious reception arguably operates less to disadvantage their reception than to ensure a double, if not a multiple reception. A major part of this literature is being written by green-card holders (permanent residents), new immigrants, or children of first-generation Americans; and increasingly, studies of their works focus on the manifold relations of the identities of the authors to the texts' variously different audiences. The Philippines-born novelists Bienvenido Santos, N. V. M. Gonzalez, and Jessica Hagedorn, the Burmese-born novelist Wendy Law-Yone, the Indonesian-born poet Li-Young Lee, Malaysian-born authors like me, the Korean-born poets such as Theresa Cha and Myung Mi Kim, the South Asian-born writers Bharati Mukherjee, Bapsi Sidwa, Vikram Seth, and so forth, are received as Asian-American and also as diasporic writers who must be read in a non-US-nation-bound context.

Reviewers and critics are increasingly announcing the emergent presence of Asian-American literature in the U.S. Harold Bloom sees the turn in U.S. culture toward an Asian-American literary ascendancy:

the life of the mind and spirit in the United States will be dominated by Asian-Americans in the opening decades of the twenty first century. The intellectuals — the women and men of literature and the other arts, of science and scholarship, and of the learned professions — are emerging from the various Asian-American peoples (Bloom 1997:xv).

*Time* and *Newsweek*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* have proclaimed the success of Asian-American literature in mainstream American publishing. Janice C. Simpson, writing in *Time*, attributed the 'enthusiasm among publishers for Asian-American writing ... to the growth of the country's Asian population, which nearly doubled, from 3.5 million to 6.9 million, over the past decade' (Simpson 1991:66). Like the observer in Smith's poem, Harold Bloom, on the American shore, views the diasporic Asian-American writer in the act of writ-

ing as waving; a gesture interpreted not simply as one of survival but of triumphant individual mastery of the oceanic space of the American literary nation.

I offer a different interpretation of that act of writing/waving, in reading that act as a typology of aesthetics. If aesthetics is defined as what moves us, the reader/viewer, then we might be able to imagine a viewer like Bloom, whose gaze on the diasporic writer is a form of objectification; the waving is enjoyed or consumed through the 'scopic' desire of the casual passer-by who wishes to have his notion of happy security confirmed. The ignorant watcher from the safety of the shore speculates on, or interprets, the swimmer's gesture as that of waving, sharing a moment of enjoyment of communication, from the ocean to the shore, from the swimmer out at sea to the shore-grounded viewer, reading the swimmer/writer as agent, and his act of swimming/writing as a sign of active progressiveness; a communication of his playful mastery of the ocean. But this is the view from the outside. Stevie Smith's poem (Smith 1988:57) reinstates the knowing ironic point of view of the swimmer. The pathos of the reversal — not swimming but drowning — is framed by the temporal and spatial distance between viewer and swimmer; reader and writer. The swimmer speaks now from a different present — the present of his death. The communication was not one of existence but of dying. The swimmer is viewing the shore-grounded spectator as much as he is being viewed. From his perilous position of drowning he interjects his denial of the reader's misreading. The passer-by and the swimmer view each other across the distance between safety and danger, stable ground and unstable water. The poem offers no holistic vision; both views are partial and fragmented; the communication and the interpretation do not cohere or signify. The final condition is that of the necropolis, the condition of death, and the poet/speaker/swimmer speaks as a dead man, from the domain of what is already dead.

### Diasporic creativity

My meditations on diasporic creativity take up this challenge of speaking from the necropolis of diasporic identity, in the place of a speaker from the dead whose creativity expresses the conditions of danger, detachment from a secure shore, fear of loss, and dying, which I argue are the major subjects of the diasporic imagination, in contrast to the subjects of the immigrant imagination that encompass new life, settlement, strenuous adaptation, and attachment to a new land. I wish to defamiliarize the idealized condition of separation from an original natal *familias, communitas*, and territory, to examine the constructions of nostalgia skeptically; to force, as it were, a literal accounting of the relation between creativity and diaspora. For Michel Foucault, history is meaningless 'if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present' (Foucault 1979:31). I assume that Foucault is critiquing a presentist approach to history; urging that history is to be abrogated when the past is to be understood only in present terms. Instead, Foucault argues for an interest in history 'if one means writing the history of the present' (Foucault 1979:31); that is, history is significant when it leads to an understanding of why, how, and where we are in the present; what it signi-

fies to be caught in present institutions, present ideas, and present conundrums. Taking Foucault's distinction of two types of history, one to be explained by present ideology and the other to explain present ideology, I argue that the creative writer who persists in writing, for example, from within an Asian diaspora lacks the tools and resources that are available only from a history of the present, that is, a history of America. Writing with another identity, from another past than the American past in which she is contingently juxtaposed, she cannot appeal to the history of that contingent American present, unless she gives up her diasporic history. The two histories — Asian history and present American history — are radically and politically differentiated, if not epistemologically incommensurable.

Further, I argue, the flexible and comprehensive categories popularized today, categories such as transnational, multicultural, and binational, undermine the fixity of diasporic identity, for they instate notions of dynamic process, change, movement, multiplicity, and so forth that are missing in the freezing of identity as dispersed unitariness. I may go so far as to interrogate the very definition of 'diaspora', if within this category we are going to include immigrants, nationals, and citizens whose very political subjectivities have been formed within a non-diasporic territory, and I wish to trouble the apparent ease with which the modifier 'diasporic' is now attached to broad swathes of creative writing by turning first to Japanese-American literature and thence, very briefly, to my own work.

In John Okada's 1957 novel *No-No Boy*, the author-narrator opens the work with a preface that marks the troubled sign of the diasporic. The dropping of 'Japanese bombs' (Okada 1957:vii) on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, what President Franklin Delano Roosevelt called 'a day of infamy', also ruptured the uninterrogated boundary between diasporic Japanese and non-diasporic Japanese-American. As the preface describes it:

The indignation, the hatred, the patriotism of the American people shifted into full-throated condemnation of the Japanese who blotted their land. 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 as much (Okada 1957:x-xi).

In the space of a few paragraphs, Okada maps out the trajectory of a diasporic Japanese community in the United States in 1941, a trajectory made tragic by the increasing obliteration of emergent identities that fall outside the polarities of American and Japanese nations. The first subset of the Japanese-American community to be removed is composed of 'real Japanese-Japanese', that is, Japanese nationals temporarily abroad on errands of diplomacy, business, and academia:

First, the real Japanese-Japanese were rounded up. These real Japanese-Japanese were Japanese nationals who had the misfortune to be

diplomats and business-men and visiting professors. They were put on a boat and sent back to Japan.

The second, less clearly marked, are 'the alien Japanese', the non-citizens who, despite decades in the U.S., are 'found to be too actively Japanese':

Then the alien Japanese, the ones who had been in America for two, three, or even four decades, were screened, and those found to be too actively Japanese were transported to the hinterlands and put in a camp (Okada 1957:xi).

Finally, 112,000 Japanese-Americans, about two-thirds of whom are American citizens by right of their birth in the country, are sent to remote internment camps in the West and Mid-West:

By now, the snowball was big enough to wipe out the rising sun. The big rising sun would take a little more time, but the little rising sun which was the Japanese in countless Japanese communities in the coastal states of Washington, Oregon, and California presented no problem (Okada 1957:xi).

The snowball serves as an effective metaphor for American war hysteria and hostility; white, cold, and 'big enough' to destroy the diasporic Japanese community, 'the little rising sun', on the West Coast.

Okada does not tell the reader — although, publishing the novel in 1957, he must have assumed that at least his Japanese-American readers knew — that the right of naturalization and a small immigration quota were granted to Japanese immigrants only in 1952 (under one clause of the McCarran-Walter Act); and that California's alien land laws were repealed only in 1956. The identity of 'the alien Japanese', the preface suggests, is open to subjective interpretation. Who screens this identity; and who has the power to decide if a subject is 'too actively Japanese'? What surveillance and policing mechanisms operate to arrive at such crucial distinctions and discriminations?

The passage explicates the relentless course of such mechanisms:

The security screen was sifted once more and, this time, the lesser lights were similarly plucked and deposited. ... The whisking and transporting of Japanese and the construction of camps with barbed wire and ominous towers supporting fully armed soldiers in places like Idaho and Wyoming and Arizona, places which even Hollywood scorned for background, had become skills which demanded the utmost of America's great organizing ability (Okada 1957:x).

The Japanese-American subject enters this discourse unambiguously only in his capacity as 'an American soldier' (Okada 1957:x), but it is an identity that is integrally confused with a different natal identity: 'the Japanese-American' has 'folks [who] were still Japanese-Japanese, or else they would not be in a camp with barbed wire and watchtowers with soldiers holding rifles' (Okada 1957:x).

Okada's preface is historically ironic, for the Japanese-Japanese identity of Issei parents of Nisei or American-born Japanese-Americans was constructed through the white-only naturalization laws of the U.S. That is, their alienness was a construction of a racist state-apparatus whose maintenance of identity boundaries served the political and economic purposes of a ruling group. Moreover, the passage is heavily sarcastic, for the phrase 'or else they would not be in a camp' repeats the canard of alien identity for the more than 112,000 who were interned in the camps. The internment of U.S. citizens, although sparked by war and race hysteria, could only have been carried out through exploiting the conceptual confusion inherent in the construction of a diasporic identity.

*No-No Boy* focuses on American injustice in its incarceration of Japanese-Americans from 1942 to 1945; but more, it focuses on the internal struggles within this community between a diasporic Japanese and a Japanese-American identity. True, the struggles arose out of, and were exacerbated by, white American racism and by the racist pressures for Americans of Japanese descent to demonstrate their assimilation into U.S. citizenship; but the novel constructs the conflict, the bitterness, violence, and divisiveness brought about in the community by the struggle between the two different identities as partly self-generated and self-dividing.

Arriving home to his Japanese-American community in Seattle after serving a prison sentence for refusing the draft during the war, Ichiro Yamada is traumatized by feelings of guilt and unworthiness. He has accepted the verdict that his refusal to be drafted is a sign of his lack of patriotism — that is, lack of love for America, and hence of 'Americanness'. He worries obsessively over his failure to prove himself an American:

Why is it that I am unable to convince myself that I am no different from any other American? Why is it that, in my freedom, I feel more imprisoned in the wrongness of myself and the thing I did than when I was in prison? Am I really never to know again what it is to be American? ... There is no retribution for one who is guilty of treason, and that is what I am guilty of (Okada 1957:82).

The post-internment Japanese-American enclave is imagined solely through this conflictual paradigm; characters are screened as either 'too actively Japanese' or coming to another identity in which 'Japanese-ness' is assimilated or lost to an American identity-formation.

The novel defamiliarizes the diasporic Japanese figure through the eyes of a viewer who is both an insider and outsider in this community. Moreover, it sites the crisis in Japanese-American identity-formation on a gendered masculine subjectivity. To become American is also successfully to achieve manhood through coeval bonds with other men. Ichiro, as protagonist, third-person point-of-view, and narrator, is the consciousness through which the reader screens the other characters for signs of identity as American or Japanese. Himself divided between American and Japanese, Ichiro constructs himself and is constructed by others as



a traitorous, un-American coward. He despises his initial act of refusal of American-identity-formation, the draft into the U.S. military, and he sets up Kenji, the Japanese-American veteran, wounded in the war, whose gangrenous leg condemns him to a lingering death in peacetime, as the counter-hero to his own narrative of failure to qualify as an American. Kenji's voluntary act of military service confirms and categorizes his otherwise unstable confused identity as American and as male:

It was because he was Japanese that the son had 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. There was confusion, but underneath it, a conviction that he loved America and would fight and die for it because he did not wish to live anyplace else (Okada 1957:121).

The diasporic Japanese identity has to be disavowed in order for the avowal of an American soldier-citizen to emerge. That moment of crisis in U.S. history engages the issue of national subject-formation in a crass dualism that today — in a moment of peacetime between Japan and the U.S. — would be viewed as theoretically inadequate.

Okada, through the hyper-sensitized consciousness of a subject who plays and replays the dilemma of diasporic Japanese versus U.S. national identity formation, displays little sympathy for the diasporic imagination. Ichiro instead searches for his place in America in the everyday practices of American life:

In time, he thought, in time there will again be a place for me. I will buy a home and love my family and I will walk down the street holding my son's hand and people will stop and talk with us about the weather and the ball games and the elections (Okada 1957:52).

Home, family, son, weather, ball games, elections. These are the icons of American space — beginning with family but culminating in communal, social and institutional practices, with the right to vote in elections as the chief identity marker of the American national.

This novel has usually been read as an indictment of American racism toward those of non-European origins, and some passages strongly suggest that it is the context of white racism that sets the frame for Ichiro's agonistic return to his community. In pondering the symbol of the slide rule, a signifier for the leveling power of technological learning in the U.S., Ichiro recalls his younger days as an engineering student. But he also recognizes that the power symbolized by 'the slide rule ... which hung from his belt like the sword of learning' (Okada 1957:53) was inadequate in the face of American anti-Japanese war hysteria, for 'being American is a terribly incomplete thing if one's face is not white and one's parents are Japanese of the country Japan which attacked America. It is like be-

ing pulled asunder by a whirling tornado and one does not think of a slide rule although that may be the thing which will save one' (Okada 1957:54).

The slide rule, imaged as the phallic 'white sword', is later re-figured as the emblematic white father in the character of Mr. Carrick, who offers Ichiro a position in his company despite Ichiro's status as an ex-prisoner jailed for refusing the draft. In contrast to this promise of redemption through the forgiving white American father, Ichiro's mother is associated with the destructive energy of the tornado and viewed as the maternal force that pulls his fragile American identity asunder. Okada imagines Ma as a conventional type of diasporic character: 'a Japanese who breathed the air of America and yet had never lifted a foot from the land that was Japan' (Okada 1957:11). From the moment of Ichiro's reunion with Ma, the fiction makes it clear that Ma is what Ichiro's trouble is: 'the way he felt, stripped of dignity, respect, purpose, honor, all the things which added up to schooling and marriage and family and work and happiness. [His fate] was to please her' (Okada 1957:12). Ichiro views his mother as 'the rock ... determined, fanatical ... until there is nothing left to call one's self', and he lays the responsibility for his refusal to serve on her: 'It was she who opened my mouth and made my lips move to sound the words which got me two years in prison' (Okada 1957:12).

According to the anthropologist Sylvia Yanagisako, traditional Issei society attempted to replicate the separate spheres of gender roles that had been held up as the model for social organization in Meiji Japan (Yanagisako 1985:29). In the division of the domestic from the public or political life, the name for the wife is *uchi no koto*, that is, 'inside of things'. Ichiro, as the first son, is also the *chonon*, the one who bears the responsibility for filial duty to his parents. The novel, however, consistently represents the mother as transgressing all the social roles of the patriarchal-ruled woman. An angular and breastless female (see Okada 1957:10, 20), she works in the store, walks for miles to shop for cheaper bread, and dominates her husband and sons. In contrast, Pa is round, soft, giggly, and passive; he stays indoors and cooks for Ichiro (Okada 1957:6-7, 115-6).

More significant than this gender role reversal, in Ma's diasporic vision, the place of origin, Japan, is the central teleological referent. Although the U.S. has won the Pacific War, she continues to believe that Ichiro's future lies in a victorious Japan, and urges him to go back to school because then 'your opportunities in Japan will be unlimited' (Okada 1957:13). Ma's conviction that '[t]he boat is coming and we must be ready' (Okada 1957:13) is the faith of the diasporic subject whose gaze toward the return is forward backward. In Ma's case, this diasporic gaze is phantasmagoric, delusional, psychogenic, and characteristic of the imagination associated with the diasporic subject: 'The day of glory is at hand ... What we have done, we have done only as Japanese ... Hold your heads high and make ready for the journey, for the ships are coming' (Okada 1957:14).

Ma is crazy precisely because her imagination is diasporic, despite the material history in which she is embedded. The history of her present is the history of

U.S. resettlement, of American victoriousness, and Japanese marginality, but the diasporic imagination lives in the history of another past, of Japanese settlement, ascendancy, and centrality. For Ichiro, his childhood lay in diaspora formation: 'it was all right then to be Japanese ... even if we lived in America' (Okada 1957:15). His legal status as an American-born citizen, however, does not confer on him the metaphysical condition of American-ness: 'it is not enough to be only half an American and know that it is an empty half' (Okada 1957:16). In his divided struggle between a Japanese identity, which his mother has shaped for him from birth, and a social identity as American, which is achieved through living and acculturation in America, Ichiro's dilemma illustrates the impossibility of second-generation diasporic imagination. In the novel's narrative of American identity formation, American-ness is a sacred quality to be achieved teleologically, through a sacrifice of America as the idealized subject. In Kenji's father, Mr. Kanno, the novel imagines the successful transformation of the diasporic subject into the American national:

He had long forgotten when it was that he had discarded the notion of a return to Japan but remembered only that it is was [sic] the time when this country which he had no intention of loving had suddenly begun to become a part of him because it was a part of his children and he saw and felt in their speech and joys and sorrows and hopes that he was a part of them. And in the dying of the foolish dreams which he had brought to America, the richness of the life that was possible in this foreign country destroyed the longing for a past that really must not have been as precious as he imagined or else he would surely not have left it (Okada 1957:123).

The error in the inclusion of both present and past tense in the passage ('it is was the time') underlines the tentative and contingent nature of this project of subject-transformation. Unlike Ma's intransigent and essentialist-nationalist subjectivity, Kenji's father displays the flexible and de-essentialized structure of American citizenship in a more pluralistic ideology of the nation. Kenji's heroic military service is endowed by the sacrifice of an original Japanese identity, while Ichiro's refusal of the draft has branded him as 'no-no boy', a failed male and citizen, released from prison and shunned both by white America and by other Japanese-American men who had claimed their American identity through military service.

### **Approach to diasporic identities**

Floya Anthias 1998 argues that the approach to diasporic identity overlaps with that of ethnic identity in that both depend on a notion of deterritorialized ethnicity with the primordial bonds of homeland as a central referent. As an emergent 'American' subject, Ichiro finds Ma's insistence on his diasporic Japanese identity a hateful obscenity and lunacy. But Ma sees Ichiro's rejection as endangering the authenticity of the diasporic Japanese self which she is struggling to preserve. Their two struggles are not along the same plane. One can see in Ma a nar-

cissistic quest to affirm the superiority of an original national self. Ma exhibits the narcissism of a 'homelander' nationalist. Her reified Japanese nationalism engulfs her husband and sons, who are viewed as extensions of her national self. Their refusal in this construction finally brings her to the inevitable acknowledgment of the delusionary in her diasporic identity, and hence to her psychological breakdown resulting in her suicide when she drowns herself in the bathroom.

Ichiro's struggle is two-fold. Asian-American critics usually construe the narrative as voicing an oppositional struggle against racism in America, whether enacted by whites, blacks, Chinese or Japanese-Americans. But on the narrative level it foregrounds chiefly a narcissistic struggle for the survival of an American self against the claims of a diasporic superior Japanese identity and culture, figured in Ma's character. If we read the position of a diasporic Japanese subject in the U.S. in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s as doubly problematic, as in-between Japanese and U.S. imperialisms, both Ma's and Ichiro's psychological dilemmas can be said 'to articulate the problems of narcissistic value-production within — rather than in negligence of — the larger context of cultural imperialism', as Rey Chow 1993 notes of diasporic Chinese intellectuals in the West. To Ma, Ichiro's status as her son confers on him a central Japaneseness. When she brings him to visit the Kumasaka family, it is in order to contrast the Kumasaka's loss of their son Bobbie, an American soldier killed by German fire, with Ichiro, the Japanese son, released from an American prison. Ma says to Mrs. Kumasaka, 'If he [Ichiro] had given his life for Japan, I could not be prouder' (Okada 1957:27), setting into contrast her diasporic Japanese nationalism against the Kumasakas' acculturated immigrant Americanness. As if bonded by Bobbie's sacrifice to America, Mr. Kumasaka tells Ichiro that he and his wife, 'finally decided that America is not so bad. We like it here' (Okada 1957:27).

Ichiro initially sees his mother's resistance to American acculturation as a stubborn strength, but his father understands it as a 'sickness' (Okada 1957:37). Diasporic identity, essentialized and paralyzed in an Imaginary located in a past that forms an absent present, is an abstraction that is removed further and further from the material world of the real. The focus on an authentic origin threatens the subject at the place of arrival; and the mystique of pure origin evacuates the mysterious destined present, robbing the subject of agency and self. It is Ichiro the son who passes this judgment on Ma:

Dead ... all dead. For me, you have been dead a long time, as long as I can remember. You ... tried to make us conform to a mold which never existed for us, because we never knew of it, were never alive for us in the way that other sons and daughters know and feel and see their parents. But you have made so many mistakes. It was a mistake to have ever left Japan. It was a mistake to leave Japan and to come to America and to have two sons and it was a mistake to think that you could keep us completely Japanese in a country such as America (Okada 1957: 186).

The repeated words and syntax, 'mistake ... it was a mistake', hammers the lesson home. Ichiro instructs the mother's spirit, 'Go back quickly. Go to the Japan that you so long remembered and loved' (Okada 1957:186). But for the American-born son, reconciliation between a diasporic origin and an American place is impossible: 'Had you lived another ten years or even twenty ... my hatred for you would have grown' (Okada 1957:187). For the Yamada father and son, the diasporic maternal figure, whose message is not of waving but drowning, is a hateful spirit, to be exorcised.

Released from the marriage, the father is able to emerge into a communal space: 'drunk with the renewal of countless friendships ... Women were constantly hovering over the stove, cooking meals for the bereaved' (Okada 1957:192). For Pa, the fantasy of Japan as homeland dissipates, and he can begin to 'live in the real world ... live naturally' (Okada 1957:212). But the death of the diasporic mother does not result in any satisfactory narrative resolution for the son. When he goes with Emi to dance at a roadhouse the night after the funeral, and when he looks for work at the 'Christian Rehabilitation Center' the next day, Ichiro is attempting to recover a normative notion of a real and natural world. Freddie, however, serves here as Ichiro's double, as a figure of male trouble. The Nisei males' history of internment and military service, the concluding chapter suggests, makes Americans out of diasporic Japanese, but it makes these identities through hatred, self-hatred, pain, and violence. Like Ichiro at the beginning of the novel before Kenji has helped him come to terms with his confused American identity, Freddie is viewed as hating 'the complex jungle of unreasoning that had twisted a life-giving yes into an empty no, blindly [seeking] relief in total, hateful rejection of self and family and society' (Okada 1957:241-2). The 'yes' to the draft is the affirmative to a virile masculinity; the 'no' places both masculinity and American identity in crisis. The fight between Bull and Freddie and Freddie's violent death are the cathartic agents to Ichiro's development. His tenderness is reserved not for Ma or Emi but for Bull, the Nisei veteran; the male diasporic subject resolves his crisis of American manhood through homosocial bonding rather than through maternal birthing:

Ichiro put a hand on Bull's shoulder, sharing the empty sorrow in the hulking body, feeling the terrible loneliness ... He gave the shoulder a tender squeeze, patted the head once tenderly (Okada 1957:250).

Four decades later, Rey Chow 1993, in *Writing Diaspora*, offers a different interpretation of the diasporic Chinese intellectual. Loosening the reified space of diasporic origin and teasing apart the elements that had structured diasporic identity in a polarized duality of origin/destination, Chow argues

'being Chinese' as a cultural identity ... can no longer be confined to national boundaries alone ... the Chinese population in Diaspora whose claims to cultural identity are rooted in 'being Chinese' are the ones who must consolidate the groundwork for future change. Future change as such is, of course, imaginary. Its possibility is that of provid-

ing an alternative to what is currently being severely dismantled and demolished (Chow 1993:92).

Chow cautions that 'the clinging to an unquestioned ideal of being "Chinese", together with its hierarchized ways of thinking about the rest of the world, ought to be the first to be removed' (Chow 1993:93). That is, there is no place for a formation like Ma's national-Japanese-in-diaspora in postmodern diaspora identity. Rather, Chow places her hope precisely in the recognition that:

The imposed exile from China, to which many now cannot return, effects a discontinuity, a rupture, which may in due course give rise to the emergence of a critical mass. This critical mass will address 'China' without the privilege of the land. The denial of the illusion of one's existence on 'Chinese soil' may in due course force Chinese intellectuals to use the rhetoric of patriotism and nationalism differently ... For Chinese intellectuals to deal with contemporary Chinese history as the specific constitution of a people's democratic struggle, it will become increasingly necessary to move outside 'Chinese' territory, geographical and cultural ... It is at the same time a self-conscious moving into the global space in which discursive plurality inevitably modifies and defines cultural identity rather than the other way around (Chow 1993:95).

In place of Ma, crazed by the disconnection in her illusion of Japanese identity on American territory, Chow constructs an identity of self-reflexive unsentimental post-Tiananmen-Square Chinese diaspora intellectuals whose occupation of 'global space' turns them into 'a privileged class vis-à-vis the women in China' (Chow 1993:109).

The postmodern intellectual class of late twentieth-century Asian diaspora is, of course, radically different from the early twentieth-century Asian diaspora working class, and the creative imaginations expressed in their figures are inevitably set apart. However, if we agree with Chow that the 'diasporic postcolonial space' that we academics speak from today is 'neither the space of the native intellectual protesting against the intrusive presence of foreign imperialists in the indigenous territory nor the space of the postcolonial critic working against the lasting effects of cultural domination in the home country' (Chow 1993:171), then what would we foreground as the theoretical unity for such a diasporic identity? I contend that the diasporic identity that we postcolonial critics and writers play with resembles more and more the dead space of illusionary identity that Okada had imagined in the denatured, degendered figure of the mad mother whose diasporic vision finally drowns her.

## Conclusion

Yes, there are practices for the creative writer in diaspora. My presentation so far has sought to suggest that some kinds of creativity in diaspora share the desperate or isolated or already historically irrelevant qualities of subjects entering their

deaths. What may emerge from the death of the diasporic subject is the question that now seizes my imagination. Two poems, both grounded in forms of dying, in my recently published collection of poems, *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say*, (Lim 1998) gesture toward the shapes of backward/diaspora-generation/Asian and forward/second-generation/American identity-formations that I have been mapping in this essay. The first, which opens the collection, looks back toward the mother as the sign of Asian origin; the second, in the last section of the collection, looks to the son as the sign of American destination.

1. *What the fortune teller didn't say* (Lim 1998:3-4)

When the old man and his crow  
 picked the long folded parchment  
 to tell my fortune at five,  
 they never told about leaving,  
 the burning tarmac and giant wheels.  
 Or arriving — why immigrants  
 fear the malice of citizens  
 and dull shutterings of those  
 who hate you whatever you do.

My mother did not grip my hand  
 more possessively.

Did I cry and was it corn  
 ice-cream she fed me because  
 the bird foretold a husband?  
 Wedded to unhappiness,  
 she knew I would make it,  
 meaning money, a Mercedes,  
 and men. She saw them shining  
 in the tropical mildew  
 that greened the corner alley  
 where the blind man and his  
 molting crow squatted  
 promising my five-year-old hand  
 this future. Of large faith  
 she thrust a practical note  
 into the bamboo container,  
 a shiny brown cylinder  
 I wanted for myself, for  
 a cage for field crickets.

With this fortune my mother bought,  
 only the husband is present,  
 white as a peeled root, furry  
 with good intentions, his big nose  
 smelling a scam. Sometimes,  
 living with him, like that  
 black silent crow I shake  
 the cylinder of memory

and tell my fortune all over again.  
 My mother returns, bearing  
 the bamboo that we will fill  
 with green singing crickets.

2. *Learning to love America* (Lim 1998:74)

because it has no pure products  
 because the Pacific Ocean sweeps along the coastline  
 because the water of the ocean is cold  
 and because land is better than ocean.  
 because I say we rather than they  
 because I live in California  
 I have eaten fresh artichokes  
 and jacarandas bloom in April and May  
 because my senses have caught up with my body  
 my breath with the air it swallows  
 my hunger with my mouth  
 because I walk barefoot in my house  
 because I have nursed my son at my breast  
 because he is a strong American boy  
 because I have seen his eyes redden when he is asked who he is  
 because he answers I don't know  
 because to have a son is to have a country  
 because my son will bury me here  
 because countries are in our blood and we bleed them  
 because it is late and too late to change my mind  
 because it is time.

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