

“Onto the hard path toward freedom”: Urban Environments and Asian American Agency

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Like many other American ethnic minority literatures, Asian American fiction has traditionally been tied up with urban landscapes. In this paper, I explore the relationship between three fictional Asian American protagonists and their urban experience in three novels from the postwar period: John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), Hua Chuang's *Crossings* (1968), and Nami Mun's *Miles from Nowhere* (2009). Okada's novel remained out of print until 1976, and it took even longer before its literary merit began to be appreciated. Chuang's modernist novel was likewise ignored when it first appeared in 1968. However, since the novel began to win recognition, it has been praised as "a work of remarkable aesthetic and stylistic innovation" (Pehkoranta 81) and is currently regarded as a forerunner to Maxine Hong Kingston's landmark work *The Woman Warrior*. Fiction in English by Korean American writers was mostly published after 1980, and women writers in particular proliferated in the nineties (Kim 156, 173). Although Mun's 2009 novel received favorable reviews, it has, so far, not attracted scholarly attention.

The settings of the three novels are very dissimilar. Okada's novel is set in Seattle's bleak Japantown in the wake of the United States World War II policy of interning Japanese Americans. By contrast, Chuang portrays an upper-class Chinese family who moved from China to England and then to the United States where they are depicted as living in comfort in New York. Whereas Chuang's novel was written in the socially conscious and experimental sixties, *Miles from*

Nowhere represents the flipside of neoliberal politics and post-ethnic thinking which, by failing to recognize the mechanisms of racial oppression, suggests that people are free to choose their ethnicity. Nevertheless, the three novels are closely linked in thematic terms by the protagonists' sense of displacement in the various urban locations in which they find themselves. Like other second-generation Japanese Americans, the marginalized Nisei protagonist of Okada's novel grapples with his desire to belong to America, whilst the upper-class female protagonist of Chuang's novel searches for her identity and agency between the three countries during her self-imposed exile in Paris. The reality of the inequalities in contemporary urban American society is palpable in Mun's 2009 novel about a runaway Korean-born teenager.

These three relatively neglected Asian American texts represent fiction created by authors from three different Asian American groups in three different periods in Asian American literary history. In his book entitled *Literary Chinatowns*, Jeffrey F. L. Partridge regards the textual worlds under study as potent mediums of cultural transformation, but claims that at their best they begin to push us "onto the hard path toward freedom" (25, 203). Taking my cue from this notion, my aim is to examine to what extent the three protagonists' construction of transformative agency is related to their experience of their urban environment. When analyzing the novels and their changing responses to the city, I will draw upon studies of spatial relations between people and urban environments.

As the geographer Doreen Massey points out, scholars have detected a close connection between place and personal or cultural identity, but she criticizes their research for its tendency not only to see identities, but also places as pre-given and static (137). Conceptualizing places as localities characterized as intersections of social relations, Massey stresses that—in addition to geographical places—people's identities are constructed out of a whole complex of other relations, such as "race" and gender. When discussing the three novels, I will place an emphasis on their responses to the city. Furthermore, I will pay particular attention to their complicity with and challenges to not only hierarchies of race and gender, but also of class. If both place and identity are understood to be processes rather than products, human agency as self-direction or resistance is also subject to the effects of social situatedness and inequalities of power.

At the beginning of Okada's novel, the twenty-five-year old protagonist, Ichiro Yamada, returns home from a period of internment and, subsequently, of imprisonment. The internment experienced by Japanese Americans during the war has always been viewed as a traumatic watershed in their lives. In 1943, the United States Army began a recruitment drive to provide a quota of volunteers for an all-Japanese combat regiment in the internment camps by asking each Nisei internee to answer two crucial loyalty questions. The double negative in the title of Okada's novel refers to the fact that the questions asked could only be answered by "Yes" or "No." The fictional Ichiro is a so-called "No-No Boy," one of the young men who answered "no" to both questions and hence was condemned to serv-

ing a prison term. When approaching his former neighborhood, the protagonist is depicted as feeling “like an intruder in a world to which he has no claim” (1). Although American by birth, Ichiro feels by now that “American” relates to white America and hence he intuits that the Japanese community will be split on the basis of the loyalty oath.

A former inhabitant of Seattle’s once vibrant prewar Japantown describes it as a place where “everyone was intertwined economically, which reinforced social ties” (George). This description echoes an older sense of a “place-called-home” characterized by its social support networks, which “may provide stability, oneness and security” (Massey 167). However, Massey is critical of scholars who associate home as a geographical place “with stasis and nostalgia, and with an enclosed security” (167), and claims that “the social relations out of which the identities of places are produced are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing” (169). Seattle’s Japantown emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Seeking economic opportunity in the United States, immigrant families from Japan settled and opened small businesses in the racially segregated south end of the city’s downtown area. Generational conflicts characterize American immigrant literatures in general, and they also plagued the first Japanese American families. As Jinqi Ling argues, one of the internal conflicts in the community derived from the fact that the Issei parents regarded themselves as sojourners in the United States, but saw their own children, who had dual citizenship, as Americans (144). Suffering from a psychic split, Ichiro perceives the city to be even dirtier than when he left, which matches his negative feelings of isolation, self-hatred and passivity. Surmising that his decision to say “no” was made when he was not man enough and in control of his life, he initially wonders whether committing a crime and returning to prison would not be preferable to returning to his parents’ house.

The opening scene of Chuang’s novel underscores the female protagonist’s physical and mental displacement in Paris when she has to ask for directions. Just like Ichiro, the protagonist, called Fourth Jane, no longer finds her previous identity formation viable. This former self was constructed in terms of Chinese ethnicity, gender and class in her adopted homeland, in the context of New York. In Paris she suffers from a loss of agency induced by her temporary psychic passivity. Unlike Ichiro, who has a masculine need to exclude painful memories of the places where he was incarcerated, Chuang’s protagonist dwells on her memories, which unexpectedly and in no chronological order, punctuate the narrative about her love affair with a married, white, French journalist. While she revisits in her mind meaningful episodes that occurred in all the places where she has lived in the past, her actual world consists of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces and temporalities.

Elizabeth Wilson argues that, at the “commonsense” level, the whole notion of city culture has been developed as one pertaining to men (9). However, using modernist literary figures as her examples, Wilson points out that many male

modernists “drew a threatening picture of the modern metropolis,” whereas “modernist women writers such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson responded with joy and affirmation” (157). Presumably, the reason for this was that it was easier for women to escape the rigidity of patriarchal social controls in the metropolis (Massey 258). It is true that when Fourth Jane worked as a stockbroker in her father’s firm in New York and lived in her own apartment, she enjoyed a certain amount of personal freedom from patriarchal control. Moving to Paris against her father’s will, she hopes to find her way out of a complicated family situation, which has everything to do with her understanding of her female Chinese ethnicity. Paris, as the setting of *Crossings*, offers little of the glamour and charm of its traditional literary and artistic representations. The basic function of the city in the novel seems to be that it provides enough distance from the United States to enable the protagonist to come to terms with the complex Chinese and American components of her ethnic identity. China and America are instrumental to the new identity she seeks, but as she remarks: “[E]ach part equally strong canceled out choice” (121-22). As her ethnic, gender and class identities inevitably intersect, gender has a crucial role in blocking Fourth Jane’s agency in the two major metropolitan cities between which she shuttles.

In contrast to *Crossings*, the aptly titled *Miles from Nowhere* concentrates on the American underworld. Mun’s feisty protagonist, Joon, the daughter of recent Korean immigrants, leaves the one-family house she had shared with her parents up to the age of thirteen, after her adulterous father walked out on his wife and mother and daughter and her mother finally succumbed to her mental instability. Set in the Bronx in the eighties, the novel’s social context is the urban crisis of New York City. While the Bronx was known as a lively, ethnically diverse neighborhood in the fifties, it underwent a rapid decline from the sixties onwards. Marshall Berman succinctly describes the degradation of the Bronx by the early eighties into “an international code word for the epoch’s accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into a garbage- and brick-strewn wilderness” (290). Mun’s protagonist and first-person narrator spends five years of her adolescence in the fictional version of this multicultural wasteland. What Joon calls “homes” are squats in abandoned buildings that she shares with any one of her undependable boyfriends or even “with roughly twenty people” (111). The novel’s central plotline follows her attempts to survive her years on the streets. Given the fact that her identity is rooted geographically in rundown urban areas in the midst of derelicts, she gradually becomes a drug addict who sells her body in order to survive.

Houses and homes are usually regarded as private areas in spite of the inextricable connection between public and private spaces. This connection is certainly true for the Yamada household in *No-No Boy*, since the family lives in the back of their grocery store. Ichiro’s deranged mother is associated with Japan as a place and as a nation, because she had sided with her native country during the

war. Moreover, she clings to the belief that Japan has won the war. On the night of his homecoming Ichiro and his mother pay ritualistic visits to the homes of their remaining family friends in Japantown. Massey has stressed that places are full of internal conflicts (155) and, indeed, these visits underscore the split that emerged over draft resistance and participation in the war as being at the heart of the divided Japantown. The dimly-lit bars such as the Club Oriental, which Ichiro frequents together with hostile Nisei veterans, is permeated by the same Japanese/American loyalty split. Ichiro's younger brother, a school-boy called Taro, embodies the American side of the ethnic duality. Indeed, it is Taro's eagerness to join the American army that drives a wedge between him and Ichiro.

The masculine outer spaces of Japantown are dominated by unthinking masculinist Nisei veterans. However, Ichiro's identity and burgeoning agency are positively influenced by his friendships with a fellow no-no boy and with a sensitive invalid who has returned from combat in the war. One of the important places outside Japantown, which is considered white and which Ichiro remembers with pleasure, is the university where he used to study. It is significant for his new identity formation that he is met with sympathy there. Mr. Carrick's engineering office in Portland is another white space where Ichiro is treated with respect. In stark contrast to the city, the countryside is marked as feminine, and it also contributes to Ichiro's construction of Asian American identity and agency. A young Nisei woman called Emi, who lives in the country, is the diametrical opposite in the novel to the fanatical figure of Ichiro's mother. Emi is also associated with land, but as a nurturing figure. Drawing upon the Edenic tradition in American literature, Okada's narrator associates her with light, neat lawns and flower beds. Emi tries to help Ichiro to heal his internal schism by bringing his American side to the fore.

The domestic space of the family in *Crossings* consists of a large apartment in the city and a country house with a large walled-in garden. Having left China because of the political turmoil that raged during the civil war, the close-knit family lives under the firm patriarchal control of Dyadya. As Monica Chiu points out, the spatial arrangement of his armchair in the living room is a trope for family control (71). In the novel, the view from this armchair begins from one end of the entrance hall and not only includes "the long corridor giving on to all the bedrooms," but also "a part of the dining room in view and the door to the pantry" (71). Echoing Michel Foucault's adoption of Bentham's idea of a 'panopticon' Chiu calls the father's position "panoptic" (124). However, a conflict arises when the first son, Fifth James, escapes his father's surveillance by going to Europe. He marries a white woman whom the family regards as a "barbarian" on the basis of her racial identity. This is intimately linked to Fourth Jane's voluntary exile. The rift in the family deepens when the father suddenly decides to accept his pregnant Caucasian daughter-in-law. While the protagonist continues to side with her mother, she is depressed after her recent abortion and decides to leave for France.

Nevertheless, the positive representations of the garden and Dyadya's love of gardening give expression to the soft and caring side of his construction of Chinese masculinity. Like the strategic placing of the father's armchair, the garden is also reminiscent of Foucault's ideas about space. Referring to the profound significance of the garden in the Orient since time immemorial, Foucault sees it as a "microcosm," because it can contain elements that represent the rest of the world (6). The connotation of the garden as a liminal space is highlighted in a moving episode in which the mother goes to the countryside by herself. On her return she presents Dyadya with flowers they have planted together as a token of reconciliation. As the spatial and temporal categories enmesh in the protagonist's memories during her dislocated existence in Paris, her positive memories of life at home with her father are also suffused with reconciliatory garden imagery.

Miles from Nowhere is devoid of representations of nature as a form of redemption despite the fact that the club, where the underage Joon has her first devastating sexual experience as a so-called "dance hostess" is ironically named Club Orchid. Joon's series of odd jobs typically include work as an assistant in a small nursing home and as a door-to-door salesgirl, when she wants "to get straight" (104). Mun's representation of the contemporary Bronx brings to mind Don DeLillo's mammoth novel *Underworld* (1997) where the postmodern city is characterized by the polarities of the crumbling urban wasteland and the "topside world" defined by "new fortified, gleaming corporate architectures" and the insular "affluent kingdoms of suburban wealth" (Heise 221, 248). Each is fueled by global capital. In *Miles from Nowhere* the figure of Frank, a former stockbroker, in the underworld proves that the two worlds are not entirely separate. The rise of the negligent father figure from a hopeless drunk to a wealthy real estate agent is another indication of the gendered nature of the neoliberal topside world.

DeLillo's story of the underworld not only highlights the dignity of modern day marginalized communities, but also pinpoints their solidarity in the face of extreme poverty. Joon's most enduring bond is with an African American runaway called Knowledge. As a geographical place Union Square in Manhattan has an accumulated historical significance of its own, but in Mun's literary world it acquires an interethnic, symbolic meaning, when the two young runaway girls discuss freedom on a bench right on that spot. When Joon says that she would like to visit the Statue of Liberty, Knowledge answers that she does not need to see it to know that she is free: "'You are free right now,' Knowledge continues, 'You can do whatever you want with your life'" (66). In spite of their lives of deprivation and racial discrimination in the United States they express their faith in utopian optimism that indisputably smacks of post-ethnic thinking.

Unlike the protagonists of the other two novels, who are conscious of their ethnic roots, the Korean-born Joon has neither ties to a Korean ethnic community nor an awareness of the historical past of her original home country. Despite her post-ethnic imaginary assimilation into mainstream America, she spies on her parents and sporadically meets them in the course of the novel. It is the con-

ventional conflation of mother and the mother country as the place of origin of an immigrant group that links Okada's *No-No Boy* to Mun's novel. Before leaving home Joon observes how her mother works at night in the yard on a hole in the ground, "as if trying to tunnel her way back to Korea" (3). After her mother's death Joon returns to her abandoned home and finally understands that the severing of ethnic ties constitutes a great loss. Realizing that she is guilty of having left her mother "when she needed me most" (234), Joon metaphorically conceives her as "a place to begin" (235). This place is a shared space that is important in Joon's search for a new diasporic identity and agency in the global world.

It is time to return to Partridge's phrase about the "hard path toward freedom" and to the question of agency in each of the three novels. In *No-No Boy*, Ichiro has dream visions about his readjustment to his home country, and on the last page of the novel he feels reassured that Japantown is just "a tiny bit of America" (251). The glimmer of hope he has gained through his positive encounters with certain Japanese Americans and white Americans have strengthened his masculine Japanese American identity and given him a burgeoning sense of agency. The dislocated protagonist of *Crossings* suffers from her inability to imaginatively fuse her sometimes frightening childhood memories of China and her family's construction of Chinese ethnicity in the United States. Positive memories of her strong-willed father ultimately help her to achieve agency after his death and to free herself from the paternal-type control of her unreliable French lover. Like Okada's Ichiro, she takes responsibility for her actions, assumes a female Chinese American identity and, upon returning to the United States, she—to quote Amy Ling—"reaches toward a personal coherence" (36). Although the female protagonists' class and geographical positions are poles apart in Chuang's and Mun's books, Joon's individual agency also emerges in the context of group-based oppressions when she finally achieves a new awareness of her deceased mother's fate. There is no doubt that in looking at these three intriguing texts the identities of personal places are constructed in interaction with other places under the influence of ever-shifting power relations. At the same time, places, as well as a whole complex of other intersecting axes, participate in the construction of personal identities and agency. Like identity, agency is a socially fluid process that is potentially of great value to people belonging to ethnic minorities including Asian Americans.

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