

CES / ENGL 314
Topics in Asian American Literature:
War and Rebellion in Asian Pacific American Literature
Fall 2008
M/W 12:00 – 1:15
6 Wilson-Short Hall

John Streamas

Office hours: Monday 11 - 12
Tuesday 1 – 3 and by appointment

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Required texts (in the order in which we will read them)

Okada, John. *No-No Boy*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Uchida, Yoshiko. *Journey to Topaz*. San Francisco: Heyday.

Okubo, Miné. *Citizen 13660*. Seattle: University of Washington Press

Murray, Sabina. *The Caprices*. New York: Grove. *Note: Your edition may be the original Mariner Books edition or the new Grove edition. Page numbers are the same, however, and the different edition should be no problem.*

Keller, Nora Okja. *Fox Girl*. New York: Penguin.

Phan, Aimee. *We Should Never Meet*. New York: Picador.

Trask, Haunani-Kay. *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*. Corvallis, OR: Calyx. *Note: Be sure you have the expanded, revised edition from 1999, not the 1994 original.*

Miyake, Perry. *21st Century Manzanar*. Los Angeles: Really Great Books.

Yamashita, Karen Tei. *Tropic of Orange*. Minneapolis: Coffee House.

Please note that, as this is a literature course, you will need your own copies of these books. The library system has only a few copies of some of them. If getting the books will impose a severe financial burden on you, you must let me know by the end of the first week. You will be expected to read and know the assigned readings.

Course description

The course catalogue says only that CES / Engl 314 covers “[t]rends, themes, major writers.” We will cover the theme of war and rebellion, beginning with four books on World War II, then move on to Nora Okja Keller’s novel of the Korean War and Aimee Phan’s stories of the Vietnam War. We will deviate from chronology to read Haunani-Kay Trask’s poems of Hawaiian indigeneity, and end by looking into the future in novels by Perry Miyake and Karen Tei Yamashita.

Course rationale

In Summer 1998 I enrolled in my last class as a doctoral student, an 800-level English course called Postcolonial Literature. The professor was a diasporic South Asian woman, and she assigned mostly books by Anglophone colonial novelists, such as D. H. Lawrence's *Quetzalcoatl*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but also Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. Given such texts, a course description that stressed the theme of postcolonial culture and politics, and the very course title, I expected that the course would insist on politicized readings, but most of its students were enrolled in the MFA program in creative writing, and many of them wanted to read the novels "for pleasure and for aesthetic enjoyment." Obviously they would not argue for reading *only* for pleasure, or else they would drop out of school and read Danielle Steel. But they wanted to read *mostly* for pleasure, and to reserve a right to reject politicized readings. But, arguing for this, they had to ignore their teacher's racial and immigration history, and they had to ignore the very reason she had chosen these texts. Why read Lawrence's sensualized engagement with indigenous American history at all rather than, say, an Agatha Christie murder mystery? As students of writing and as aspiring novelists, they might have wanted to read these books as models to follow or reject—but even this motive would have to engage the authors' subject matter. Why, for example, must Ishiguro mix a subplot about upper-class British fascism into his story of repressed working-class romance? Furthermore, if, as hopeful writers, they followed the dictum "write what you know," what would they themselves ever write about except their own middle-class Midwestern lives? In a recent essay in the literary quarterly *The Gettysburg Review*, Michael Busk complains about postwar writing in the United States:

Characters don't have to worry about being burned at the stake or freezing to death, so they worry about unrequited love and psychic desolation. . . . [Writers] wrote what they knew: social striving, sexual awakening, urbanization, family strife, philandering. But it is hard not to see this as a lowering of the stakes. . . . The writers of postwar Pax Americana weren't taking readers farther than their own backyards. . . . This is not to say that human interiority is dull or unworthy of portrayal, but in a post-theistic era, when the psyche is considered little more than a nexus of Freudian fears and desires, characters built to these specifications cannot but be dull. More accurately, they won't even be characters as much as human-shaped molds filled with gaseous doses of eros and thanatos.

("Allah Akhbar," vol. 21, no. 3 (Autumn 2008), 477-78.)

In other words, if realistic representation is dull, is it any wonder that so many writers work in fantasy and science fiction? But, even in these fields, politics emerges. A reader of literature who rejects politics must be ignoring, or trying to ignore, the dullness of her or his own privilege.

For all his complaining about contemporary American writing, Busk does concede that war literature engages history and politics. He mentions the greatness of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, but he dismisses it as a historical novel, and "if literature is downgraded to a subset of history, imagination will become a catamite to fact" (478). And yet an entire field of literary criticism, narrative theory, engages the coalescence of history and fiction. Busk is as blind to the inevitability of history as the MFA students were blind to the inevitability of politics. Obviously all war novels are, to a very great extent, engagements with history. But so too are novels written by writers of color in the U.S. James Baldwin argued that it is the moral and social obligation of every person of color here to feel a deep rage over the history of racism. He did not argue that this rage must be expressed in violence or even in angry language. Rage may seethe

below the surface of his great stories, novels, and essays, but on the surface is often an expression of generosity and love. Busk argues that U.S. writers such as Ken Kesey write with humor and compassion, but they are still writing only about themselves, while writers such as John Updike write a soulless nihilism as they write only about themselves; but he fails to note that these are white male middle-class writers who work from a built-in advantage of white male privilege. Lacking such privilege, writers such as Baldwin and Morrison—and the writers whose work we will read this semester—cannot help but work outside themselves. We will read works by Asian Pacific American writers, and we will read about war and conflict.

In the contemporary U.S., is it even possible for serious writers of color to write mostly about themselves, or mostly for pleasure? How can they possibly avoid history?

Finally, a point must be made about the age-old debate between “form” and “content.” Formal decisions—how you say what you say—are unavoidably political. Notice, for example, the language of politicians and bureaucrats: it is full of passive verbs that allow them to try to dodge responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

Course requirements

Attendance and participation: Attendance is mandatory. An attendance sheet will be distributed in each class meeting after the first week. After a second unexcused absence, each new unexcused absence will result in an automatic reduction of your course grade by one-third of a letter. In other words, if you miss five classes, you will lose a full letter grade; if you miss eight, you will lose two letters; and, if you miss ten or more, you should drop the course.

Your participation is also required. If you read the assignments, you will be able to discuss them in class. But this also requires more than simply reading. Think about what you read: Question and challenge it. As this is not a graduate course, you are not expected to talk profoundly about literary theory. Tell us what you glean from the text, explain why you like or dislike it, and challenge it. Also be prepared to ask others why they like or dislike it. Ideally this will be a discussion among all of us, not just between Student and Teacher. You can participate in different ways. But you need to make your participation evident to me, so that you may receive credit for it. Participation options include e-mailing me comments or questions prior to class. Your attendance and participation will count as 20 percent of your course grade.

Text Presentation: Twice during the semester you will lead the class in discussion of a text. This will involve your reading the assigned text, discussing an aspect of the text that you find significant (a theme, an issue, a characterization, an author’s use of setting or language, etc), and raising at least two questions suggested by the text. Each presentation will count as 5 percent of your course grade.

Reading Journal: When we have completed each text—see the schedule below—you will turn in a Reading Journal of one page or more (at least 275-300 words). Indicate whether you liked or disliked the text and explain why. Your explanation should be more detailed than just “I liked this chapter because it flowed well.” In a page, you can provide enough detail to explain yourself. These Reading Journals will receive no individual grades, but take care to write them in your best prose. I will read them as you turn them in, and I will keep them to review at the end of the term. If you turn them in regularly, you will receive credit for 20 percent of your course grade. You will lose this 20 percent only if you fail to turn them in regularly.

Paper: You will write one paper. Due at the end of the twelfth week, it should fill six to eight pages and analyze an aspect of two assigned texts. The paper should be typed in a standard font, with standard margins and a title. It should have a Works Cited page, and cite sources in the MLA reference style. You will not be required to do any outside reading or research, though,

obviously, you may find helpful, for example, a published interview with Karen Tei Yamashita or conservatives' very strong disputes with Haunani-Kay Trask. Your paper will count 40 percent of your course grade, and the grade will include the mechanics of your writing and your adherence to rules of citation.

Final Exam: The final examination will be a take-home test, to be assigned during the fourteenth week and turned in during the week of finals. It will count toward 10 percent of your course grade.

Course policies

Ideally, each class meeting will be a lively, student-directed discussion of our course material. Short of that ideal, I will try to lecture as little as possible, not because lectures are boring or inefficient. In fact, good lectures often provide excellent ways of learning. Rather, I hope we will model a "good" community, driven by shared concerns and goals even when we disagree. To do well in this class, please note the following guidelines:

Read the assigned material when it is due. *Bring the assigned reading to class.*

Come to class on time.

Do not read newspapers, magazines, e-mail, or Web sites in class.

Turn off cell phones and put them away. If you use your cell phone in any way during class time, you will count as absent for the day.

Do not use class time for sleeping or otherwise disengaging, or you will count as absent.

Name-calling and other signs of disrespect will result in your removal from the class.

Feel free to disagree, respectfully.

Consider others' views. Reflect on your own social location, your privileges and power.

Learn a historically informed definition of racism, and challenge all racist discourse.

Reflect your grasp of history by deferring to the experiences of people of color in class.

Reflect your grasp of social relations by respecting shy and quiet classmates.

Finally, understand and consider the rage of people who are victims of systematic injustice. If injustice does not fill you with rage, then perhaps you should ask yourself why.

Academic integrity

See the WSU Student Handbook on Academic Dishonesty. Academic honesty is much easier to achieve than academic dishonesty, if only, whenever you use someone else's information or ideas, you cite that source. This is a legal issue, and is not negotiable. Plagiarism involves misuse of others' published or unpublished work by presenting that work, their intellectual property, as your own. Penalties range from an F on an assignment to an F for the course, even to expulsion from the university.

Students with Disabilities

Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, please visit the Disability Resource Center (DRC). All accommodations MUST be approved through the DRC (Admin Annex Bldg, Room 205). Please stop by or call 509-335-3417 to make an appointment with a disability specialist.

Schedule

Texts are identified by authors' last names. Please note that the reading schedule is subject to change, and you will be responsible for knowing and keeping up with changes. Some of our readings will be supplemented by films and possibly a few handouts and Web sites, and you will be expected to keep up with these.

8/25: Introduction, syllabus.

8/27: Okada chapter 1. Discuss cultural politics, World War II, and Japanese Americans.

9/3: Okada chapters 2-7. Begin text presentations.

9/8: Okada chapters 8-11.

9/10: Uchida chapters 1-3. FIRST JOURNAL DUE.

9/15: Uchida chapters 4-17.

9/17: Streamas, "Narrative Politics in Historical Fictions for Children," from *Comparative Literature and Culture* Web site:

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1348&context=clweb>

SECOND JOURNAL DUE.

9/22: Okubo: read all.

9/24: Murray, "The Caprices." THIRD JOURNAL DUE.

9/29: Murray, "Order of Precedence," "Walkabout," and "Folly."

10/1: Murray, "Colossus" and "Position."

10/6: Keller through chapter 8. FOURTH JOURNAL DUE.

10/8: Keller chapters 9-11.

10/13: Keller chapters 12-20.

10/15: Phan, "Miss Lien." FIFTH JOURNAL DUE.

10/20: Phan, "We Should Never Meet," "The Delta," "Visitors," and "Gates of Saigon."

10/22: Phan, "Emancipation."

10/27: Phan, "Bound" and "Motherland."

10/29: Trask, the two Prefaces, the Introduction by Eleanor Wilner, and the section "Chant of Lamentation." *Note: Trask follows several poems with explanations. Read these. Also consult her Pronunciation Key (100) and Glossary (101-06).* SIXTH JOURNAL DUE.

11/3: Trask, the sections "Raw, Swift, and Deadly" and "Light in the Crevice Never Seen."

11/5: Miyake through chapter 7. *Note: Miyake provides a Glossary (384-89).* SEVENTH JOURNAL DUE.

11/10: Miyake chapters 8-33.

11/12: Miyake chapters 34-41. FINAL PAPER DUE.

11/17: Miyake chapters 42-59.

11/19: Yamashita, read Hypercontexts, epigraphs, “Gentle reader” note, and Monday section (first seven chapters). EIGHTH JOURNAL DUE.

12/1: Yamashita, Tuesday and Wednesday sections. FINAL EXAM ASSIGNED.

12/3: Yamashita, Thursday section.

12/8: Yamashita, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday sections.

12/10: Discussion of Asian Pacific American literature and war. Closing remarks and questions.

12/15: FINAL EXAM DUE in my office (118 Wilson) or my mailbox (111 Wilson) by 4:00 PM. *Do not slip your paper under my door.* Keep a copy for your own records.

Some foundational formulations

Let me propose ten schemes through which we might read expressions of culture and power in literature:

- 1) Natural/eternal/unchangeable \Leftrightarrow social/historical/changeable
- 2) Social/communal \Leftrightarrow personal/individual
- 3) Cultural and (vs?) institutional \Leftrightarrow individual and (vs?) cultural
- 4) Binary (simple: right/wrong) \Leftrightarrow multiple (complex: undifferentiated difference) \Leftrightarrow contextual (historical)
- 5) Public \Leftrightarrow private
- 6) Parallel and coterminous development \Leftrightarrow fluid and uneven development
- 7) Cultural nationalism \Leftrightarrow strategic essentialism \Leftrightarrow social/historical nationalism
- 8) Technological \Leftrightarrow Aesthetic \Leftrightarrow Social
- 9) Freedom \Leftrightarrow Justice
- 10) Private Time and Space \Leftrightarrow Public Time and Space

Other schemes are possible, perhaps even more useful, and we may discover more as the semester develops. But even the schematic structure above is problematic, as is suggested by my orthography (troubled arrows, virgules, and question marks) and conjunctions (“and” or “vs?”). And so we must use these only as suggestive and provocative, not as definitive binary or tripartite structures governing anything. With this in mind, a summary of issues raised by some of the schemes may be useful.

As for (1) above, there is a tendency in some people to assume that what is “natural” is also unchangeable. If they define “human nature” as governed by certain primal fears and instincts, then they may also believe that a “fear of the unknown” translates into racism. According to these people, racism has always existed and will always exist. In this scheme, “nature” substitutes for history. We do not need to learn history if we only understand “human nature.” This scheme is flawed for many reasons, of which I will cite one. Not only does it repudiate history, it also repudiates most religion, science, philosophy, politics, all of education—all of which teach history as a function of various processes of change. This formulation, however, believes nature is static, unchanging and unchangeable. Why should we even bother to confront racism if we are doomed forever to have it? But why would people

whose natures are doomed to commit racism try to find cures for diseases and illnesses that afflict everyone or even anyone? It is not enough for us, however, merely to show the evolutionary changes that construct and transform racism. We must also demonstrate that racism *can* end, thereby denying any claims to its immutability.

As for (5), “the American way” is defined by devotion to freedom. Not even the “founding fathers” denied, however, that individual freedoms and social justice often clash. And yet their Declaration of Independence and Constitution are filled with a language of freedom. Rather than defining the limits of free speech in terms of the public good, however, we are expected to celebrate Supreme Court justices who merely talk about shouting “Fire!” in a crowded theater (an unlikely event that could be prosecuted on grounds altogether separate from free-speech issues) and about knowing pornography when they see it (a cowardly diversion to personal whim). Rather than settling Second Amendment disputes in terms of the public good, we are expected to resolve the issue in terms of either individual owners’ rights or statistics on gun-related deaths—both sides resorting to the language of the private sphere. Abortion, cloning, welfare, health care, immigration—we usually hear these issues debated in terms of private, personal rights rather than public, social justice. The attacks against “political correctness” and Affirmative Action derive from this preference for the private over the public. Unfortunately, however, many advocates for victims of domestic violence and workplace hazards also frame their advocacy in terms of the private rather than the public good.

As for (6), those who believe in parallel and coterminous development suffer the opposite logic of those who believe in an unchangeable and unchanging nature (1). They subscribe to such notions as the “domino effect” and “trickle-down” theory—for example, a policy that benefits immigrants from Argentina must also necessarily benefit immigrants from Sri Lanka, in the same way and to the same extent. Similarly, they believe that racism affects all groups in the same way. They reason that, if one subjugated racial group prospers relative to another’s languishing in poverty, then the fault is not systemic racism but rather the personal and cultural deviance of the second group—which means that “society doesn’t owe them anything” and that they must overcome their poverty by working harder and assimilating. Meanwhile, however, advocates for social justice must realize that not all progressive changes will benefit all victim groups equally. Cross-racial solidarities among communities of color promise to minimize uneven progress.