

An Untenable Dichotomy: The Idea of Home in John Okada's *No-No Boy*

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Abstract

Given the particular history of Asian immigration in the U.S., the idea of a stable and safe home has been regularly sought after in Asian American literature. Whether these Asian immigrants abandoned their homeland due to war, famine, or other disasters, the urgency to find safety and protection in a new home in America remains one of most enduring themes. In *No-No Boy*, a 1957 novel by John Okada that explores the traumatic aftermath of the internment of Japanese Americans during and after World War II, the idea of home is presented in an unstable dichotomy between affirming Americanness and perpetual foreignness. The novel's protagonist Ichiro Yamada regains his freedom after serving a prison term for refusing to join the American military in the war against Japan, only to find a dysfunctional home in the back of the family grocery store. Everything here is Japanese: the food, language and allegiance. Ichiro's home is contrasted with Kenji's home, which showcases its Americanisation in every aspect. By setting up this dichotomy, Okada exposes the tension within the Japanese American community in the difficult process of assimilation into American society. The ultimate hope for Ichiro seems to lie in a home that is yet to be built, a life with Emi in an America that simply accepts him for who he is without racialisation.

Keywords

John Okada, Americanisation, assimilation, home, identity, Japanese American internment

While the importance of home as a sanctuary, safe haven and site of belonging is usually self-evident in American literature, in Asian American literature, the idea of a stable and welcoming home or the lack of one often takes on additional significance. Typically, in an Asian American home there are complex racial, cultural and political forces at work, in addition to the generational and socio-economic factors common in all households. However, given the long history of Asian American exclusion in America and the unrelenting perception

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of Asian Americans as “unassimilable aliens” (Kim 9), it is only logical that in Asian American literature, the theme of establishing a home base in America has been more amplified and persistent. For a race that had once been barred from owning land and real estate in a country presumably welcoming to all,² the appeal of procuring a home has been understandably intense and far-reaching. From Sui Sin Far’s pioneering stories in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* around the turn of the 20th century to Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), from Shawn Wong’s *Homebase* (1979) to Chang-rae Lee’s *The Native Speaker* (1995) and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), home features prominently throughout Asian American texts, serving as a crucial part of the setting that informs significantly the assimilation processes of Asian Americans.³

Speaking in 1980 about *China Men*, a mixed-genre series of short stories about the lives of several generations of Chinese immigrants to America dating back to the 19th century, Maxine Hong Kingston highlights the importance of the homestead by proclaiming, “What I am doing in this new book is claiming America. In story after story Chinese American people are claiming America.... Buying a house is a way of saying that America – and not China – is his country” (Pfaff 14, qtd. in Skenazy and Martin). Kingston’s insight here proves valuable not only in understanding her own work, but also in analysing a great many Asian American texts, especially those with the thematic focus on “claiming America.” John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957), the first full-length fictional work on the Japanese American internment, is a unique case in this category. While previous studies on the novel have largely focused on the protagonist Ichiro Yamada’s quest for a new identity in the post-internment years through a series of painful struggles,⁴ my essay argues that the primary conflict of the novel may be read as Ichiro’s attempt to reclaim a stable home that is lost during the devastating internment years, in order to form a new Asian American identity. Given the powerful influence that home commands in

² Although there were numerous alien land laws in the 19th century and early 20th century all over the country, The California Alien Land Law of 1913 specifically targeted Asians without naming any racial group. Because at the time most of the Asian groups were not eligible for citizenship, which was necessary for land ownership, the law effectively disqualified Asians from owning land or leasing land for longer than three years (Takaki 203).

³ Regardless of the historical period, social class, or national origin, the procurement of a stable home plays an important part in the lives of Asian Americans. The theme remains prevalent throughout the 20th century and continues to the present, cutting across all socioeconomic levels as well. The titles listed represent only a few well known works.

⁴ According to Jinqi Ling, scholarly work on *No-No Boy* from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s focused primarily on the quest theme, with particular attention to the use of the Japanese folk tale Momotaro (Peach Boy) (362-3). Criticism since has largely shifted to more specific issues of gender, cultural production, and race. For further examples, see Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 56-62 and Xu, “Sticky Rice Balls or Lemon Pie” 51-68. Yoon’s recent essay entitled “‘No Place in Particular’” follows the early quest theme that analyses Ichiro’s movement from urban to suburban space.

Asian American life, this angle of analysis will serve to inform significantly Ichiro's process of re-assimilation into American society.

It is easy and tempting to read *No-No Boy* as a quasi-picaresque novel because Ichiro's quest for his identity is indeed a soul-searching journey, a series of encounters he has with various characters throughout the novel, such as fellow no-no boy Fred Akimoto, his former instructor Professor Brown, sympathetic friends Kenji and Emi, and potential employers Mr. Carrick and Mr. Morrison. However, it is important to recognise that there exists a loaded superstructure to the linear progression of the plot that Okada uses to facilitate its thematic development, namely Ichiro's and Kenji's parallel households, which serve as two competing impulses concerning identity formation among the Japanese American community in the immediate years after World War II. Ichiro's admiration for Kenji's war heroics as well as his cohesive home seems to suggest the embracement of American values as a necessary condition for assimilation. However, the incompleteness of Kenji's family – the lack of a unifying mother figure, the amputation of his leg and eventually his death – complicates Ichiro's process of Americanisation. The ultimate hope for Ichiro seems to lie in a home that's yet to be built, a life with Emi in an America that simply accepts him for who he is without racialisation.

Unlike in other works of literature in which home serves as simple background of a welcoming refuge or a source of rejuvenation, in *No-No Boy* home becomes an integral part of the action, a central site where Ichiro Yamada struggles to sort out his confused sense of belonging. In a typical picaresque novel, major scenes occur on an external landscape where characters carry out their adventurous explorations, but in *No-No Boy* most of the key scenes occur within a domestic space. Of the novel's total of eleven chapters, six (chapters one, two, five, seven, eight and nine) are largely set in Ichiro's home, whereas chapter four is divided between the Club Oriental (Kenji's home away from home) and Emi's home, chapter six unfolds mostly in Kenji's home (chapter eight is also partially set there), and chapter seven partially occurs in Emi's home. With such a predominant focus on the idea of home, *No-No Boy* clearly invites a close examination of the domestic interior as a mirror of Ichiro's internal struggle for acceptance into American society. To be sure, home is presented in an unstable dichotomy between affirming Americanness and perpetual foreignness. When the novel opens, Ichiro regains his freedom after serving a two-year prison sentence for refusing to join the American military in the war against Japan, only to find a dysfunctional home in the back of the family grocery store. Everything here is Japanese: the food, language and allegiance. Ichiro's home is contrasted sharply with Kenji's home, which showcases its Americanisation in every aspect.

To clarify the distinction I am making here between a literary work that uses the home simply as setting and a work like *No-No Boy* that makes the home

a central facilitator, I evoke a well known short story by Ernest Hemingway. In "Soldier's Home," the home that the protagonist Harold Krebs returns to in Oklahoma after his tour of duty in World War I serves poignantly as the setting of alienation and rejection, thus making his difficulty in adjusting to the peaceful environment at home all the more transparent and convincing. In *No-No Boy*, however, even though Ichiro returns to a similar home environment of disengagement and isolation, Okada complicates the idea of home as mere setting by transforming home as domestic space into a defining force that helps shape Ichiro's emerging consciousness as an Asian American. Specifically, Okada achieves his purpose through the use of parallel homes in the novel, including a contrast between Ichiro's Japanese home and Kenji Kanno's Americanised home, to balance out the negative impact of Ichiro's surroundings and to suggest a possible way for him to re-assimilate into American society. Thus configured, the notion of home in *No-No Boy* has risen above the flat canvas of setting and become a necessary thematic catalyst in facilitating Ichiro's transformation of self-identification.

Written in the immediate years after the war and published in 1957, *No-No Boy* is a record of Okada's daring yet cautious attempt to explore the devastating impact of the Japanese American internment. However, his choice of the title for the novel, with the sardonic moniker "no-no" referring to the double negative answers given by those interned Japanese American young men who refused the draft, seems to imply an authorial solidarity with the resistance against the draft as protest against the US government's illegal act of interning indiscriminately a segment of its constituency purely based on the reason of racial difference. In the 1950s, American society was far from ready to take up the vexing issue of Japanese American internment for critical examination; even the Japanese American community itself much preferred silence on the topic because the majority of them were deeply ashamed of the action of the select few who stood up courageously for their constitutional rights of equality and justice. It is no surprise then that *No-No Boy* was never even close to achieving its goal of initiating a dialogue on the issue of Japanese American internment as it quickly went out of print and out of sight of the American public soon after publication. Since *No-No Boy* is as much a novel about the no-no boys as it is about the yes-yes boys, perhaps Okada should have chosen a more neutral, thus less sensitive, title for his book, although I doubt that it would have made any substantive difference in its reception. However, given the fact that Okada himself was a yes-yes boy who had actually served in a US Air Force reconnaissance regiment with operations close to Japan during the war, it is not hard to understand the novel as his expressed determination to voice the other and equally important side of the story, no matter how untimely and undesirable it may be. If Kenji Kanno represents an articulation of Okada's own (and of the vast majority of the Japanese American community's) calculated capitulation to

the overwhelming authority of the US government, then Ichiro must be regarded as a crystallisation of atonement for Okada's sense of guilt and regret in not standing up to Uncle Sam's bullying. In other words, Okada infuses *No-No Boy* with two simultaneous and contradictory impulses, one culminating in Kenji's embracement of America and the other in Ichiro's defiance of America. Even though Ichiro's side wins the battle by claiming the title of the novel, Okada nonetheless compensates Kenji's side by framing the novel's narrative in the preface with a Japanese American soldier's poignant affirmation of his loyalty to his country, "I got reasons" (xi).

Without a doubt, these "reasons" constitute the foundation of Okada's double consciousness as an Asian American⁵: one, being the dutiful citizen, answers the call of his country in a time of war even though his basic rights have been disregarded and violated by his government; the other, being his moral compass, rejects the call of his country to register his protest against such institutional disregard and violation. It must be pointed out that it is easy to misidentify these opposing impulses simply as American and Japanese respectively, but the fact of the matter is that both impulses are equally American. On the one hand, a white American like Okada's fellow soldier, the "blond giant from Nebraska" from the book's preface (x), may take it for granted that should his own family be likewise interned, there is no way in the whole wide world that he would be fighting for America. On the other, a Japanese American soldier like Okada must justify his enlistment with "I got reasons" (xi). It is logical to assume that the divergent, race-specific reactions to the Japanese American internment gave rise to Okada's two-pronged approach to his fictional narrative, culminating in the novel's binary opposition as represented by Ichiro's "Japanese" household and Kenji's "American" household. Although this dichotomic structure proves convenient and useful for Okada to explore and clarify Ichiro's conflicting sense of Asian American identity, the inherent limit on such structural arrangement eventually leads to the latter's collapse toward the end of the novel, paving the way for a more balanced concept of home to emerge in Ichiro's girlfriend Emi's country house.

Given the central role home plays in the novel, it is no surprise that *No-No Boy* opens with Ichiro's return to his home city of Seattle, where his family now resides in a newly acquired grocery store: it is a one-bedroom apartment in the back, "a hole in the wall with groceries crammed in orderly confusion on not enough shelving, into not enough space" (6). His father has painstakingly

⁵ In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois develops his famous notion of double consciousness for African Americans: "One ever feels his two-ness, – 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" (11). The term aptly describes how Japanese Americans felt during the years of the internment and its aftermath as they were torn between Japanese and American identifications.

described it to him in Japanese, the only language Mr. Yamada is proficient in. Japanese is the language spoken at home, and the food, consisting of fried eggs “in soy sauce, sliced cold meat, boiled cabbage, and tea and rice” (12), is also typically Japanese. The family wardrobe is made of cardboard (11) and “a nail on the wall” serves as a clothes rack (18). Although the Yamadas are not wealthy, they are not poor either, having lived in America for 35 years and practiced with great discipline their cherished tradition of frugality (19). However, the Yamadas’ austere lifestyle has more to do with their state of mind as sojourners, with an expressed desire to return to Japan some day. The irony is that the perpetual deferral of the date of return has taken on some unexpected urgency as a result of the Japanese American internment, which has inflicted tremendous damage on Mrs. Yamada’s ethnic pride. Suffering from a pathological delusion that Japan has won the war, she has been waiting for the non-existent government ships from Japan to repatriate her family. Now with Ichiro’s return, Mrs. Yamada sets out eagerly to prepare for the day by proudly showcasing her draft-resisting son to her equally-delusional expatriates, such as Mrs. Ashida. The evidence is overwhelming at the opening of the novel that Okada is setting up Ichiro’s household as an embodiment of Japaneseness within the Japanese American community.

Although the Yamada household presents the Japanese side in the novel’s structural dichotomy, its power structure is unexpectedly non-patriarchal in that Mr. Yamada has already been displaced at the centre of decision making by Mrs. Yamada. One of the consequences of the internment is that the father’s absolute power and authority in the traditional Japanese household was greatly eroded, and in Ichiro’s home, this loss of patriarchal dominance has taken the unusual form of complete gender role reversal.⁶ When Ichiro first arrives home, he immediately senses the change in the relationship of his parents: “[Pa]’s a goddamned, fat, grinning, spineless nobody. Ma is the rock that’s always hammering, pounding, pounding, pounding in her unobtrusive, determined, fanatical way until there’s nothing left to call one’s self” (12). Later on in the novel, Ichiro sums up this relationship even more explicitly: “He should have been a woman. He should have been Ma and Ma should have been Pa” (112). The radicalisation of Mrs. Yamada is a huge stumbling block for Ichiro’s rehabilitation toward becoming a full-fledged Asian American because with a mixture of pity, frustration, and fear, he is unable or unwilling to challenge his mother to face the reality of Japanese defeat and atone for his own failure to live up to his American obligation.

⁶ For a more detailed treatment of the phenomenon of gender reversal in *No-No Boy*, see the section titled “Gender Reversal in John Okada’s *No-No Boy*” in my essay under the title “Gender Negotiations and the Asian American Literary Imagination” in Guiyou Huang 109-131.

As a contrast, Kenji's home, a two-story frame house sitting on top of a hill, exudes every aspect of quintessential American life one can possibly expect. Unlike Ichiro's short, fat, emasculated, Japanese-speaking father, Kenji's English-speaking father is "a big man, almost six feet tall and strong" (117). Unlike Ichiro's sparsely furnished home, Kenji's home is equipped with proper furniture and modern appliances: a polished mahogany table, a china cabinet, new rugs, and a "big television set with the radio and phonograph all built into one impressive, blond console" (118). To welcome Kenji, his father buys a large roasting chicken, his sister Hanako makes a salad and his brother Tom brings home a lemon meringue pie.⁷ To make this gathering of an American household complete, everybody sits down after dinner to watch a game of baseball on television, with Kenji's father contently bouncing "a year-old granddaughter on his knee while two young grandsons fought to conquer the other knee" (129). This perfect picture of harmonious American family life stands in sharp contrast to Ichiro's drab, tension-filled Japanese home life, endorsing the warm and attractive Asian American household that Ichiro yearns to belong to. Even the absence of Kenji's mother, who died early, is somewhat made up for by the presence of his three sisters, who, along with their families, help make the evening a deeply satisfying affair.

However, this seemingly perfect Americanised household is marred by Kenji's deteriorating remnant of his amputated right leg, an eleven inch stump that serves as a painful reminder of the high price of his patriotic dignity and sacrifice. Kenji's wound, looking ever more fatal by the day, pains his father in particular because he feels responsible for Kenji's decision to say "yes" to the government's military draft, a decision that will cost Kenji's young life. Despite its welcoming and warm feel, Kenji is uncomfortable in his Americanised home, whose respectability and acceptance in American society were surely his motivations to enlist but are now a constant reminder of his ill-fated, under appreciated service to his country.⁸ He knows full well that this final night at home before reporting to the VA hospital in Portland, Oregon is likely to be his last ever with his family, yet he is determined not to spend it there. Instead, he stops by the Club Oriental, a bar in Seattle's Chinatown frequented by Asians, where he enjoys drinking whisky to dull the pain in his leg and feels completely

⁷ In her article entitled "Sticky Rice Balls or Lemon Pie," Wenying Xu first draws attention to the divergent food choices in Ichiro's and Kenji's households as an indication of the respective families' alienation from and assimilation into America culture (58-59). While Ichiro's household prefers Japanese food, which indicates their identification with the Japan, Kenji's household enjoys American food, which underscores their identification with America.

⁸ For example, despite his heroic service to his country, Kenji still gets no respect from the white police officer who pulls him over on his way to Portland, Oregon. Although the officer may not have been able to identify Kenji as a veteran, he is quick to call him a "Jap" and then solicits a bribe, which betrays the officer's deep-rooted racial bias and condescension toward Asian Americans (140-41).

at home. There, he does not stand out, is no different from the person sitting next to him, and there is no need to justify his presence because he simply belongs. On the previous night when he visited the club with Ichiro, he confided in his friend, "I like it here.... If I didn't have to sleep or eat, I'd stay right here" (71-72). On this night, while he is alone drinking his usual bourbon and water, relishing his final moments of peace and quiet in his "Waldorf" (132), his "home away from home" (133), Kenji launches into a contented reverie, "Not many places a Jap can go to and feel so completely at ease. It must be nice to be white and American and to be able to feel like this no matter where one goes to, but I won't cry about that" (133). Kenji's rejection of his Americanised home in favour of the Club Oriental underscores his disillusionment with identifying with America when the country fails to deliver on its fundamental promises to Asian Americans.

It is highly ironic that a decorated war hero like Kenji should only feel at home in a small corner of America's ethnic ghetto and not in his Americanised home, which was his *raison d'être* for risking his life on the battlefield. Confined to his hospital bed, Kenji is able to move beyond the issue of Asian American discrimination to contemplate racial injustice in general. He realises that racial strife and discrimination exist not only between whites and Asians, but also among other ethnic groups, and the key to full membership in the American society is through total acceptance and respect for every race and a complete renunciation of discrimination against one another. "Was there no answer to the bigotry and meanness and smallness and ugliness of people?" he asks. "One hears the voice of the Negro or Japanese or Chinese or Jew, a clear and bell-like intonation of the common struggle for recognition as a complete human being" (134).

It is this vision for a "complete human being" that gives rise to Kenji's solution to racial bigotry, the fundamental cause of the Japanese American internment and the subsequent anguish and suffering of his no-no boy friends, the yes-yes comrades and the Japanese American community at large. In his last conversation with Ichiro, Kenji describes his vision for a racially homogenised society where it would be impossible to discriminate against one another because everybody would be the same: "Go 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). Kenji's observation demonstrates his realisation that despite the wartime exploits of the heroic deeds by Japanese American soldiers, home for Japanese Americans is still not the ideal place of comfort and belonging because racism persists and the self-isolation of the Japanese American community does not help their cause of assimilation either. Of course, this is Okada saying to his readers that to really resolve the problem

of discrimination against Asian Americans, one must break out from the domestic ghetto and go far and wide to assimilate into America.

Such an idealistic view – apparently still far from being the reality more than half a century later – is exceedingly optimistic to say the least, but coming from Kenji, a character who presumably resonates on many levels with the author as a yes-yes boy, this vision might represent a serious attempt on the part of Okada to resolve the tenacious resistance that racial minorities encounter in their assimilation effort. However, as attractive as this notion may sound, its efficacy relies on the American myth of the melting pot: ethnic differences and cultural values are homogenised due to political expediencies that not only downplay the inherent difficulties of such a process but also ignore the needs to preserve ethnic and cultural diversity. Besides, racial homogenisation alone would not solve the fundamental problems of ethnic tension and social inequality because gender and class are equally important factors to be considered in the social equation of justice and fairness. Still, Okada's vision is a product of the immediate postwar era when Japanese American community's desire for acceptance and recognition far outweighed concerns for ethnic and cultural preservation. From our current perspective, a proper appreciation for one's own ethnicity and culture is no doubt a prerequisite for meaningful assimilation.

True enough, Ichiro's search for acceptance in and identification with America prompts him to leave Seattle as Kenji has suggested, but contrary to Kenji's expectation, Ichiro is not running away from all Japanese. Although Ichiro would look at his esteemed friend Kenji with great admiration and even envy, Kenji's experiences convince him that genuine assimilation would entail far more than an Americanised household or even heroic service in the American armed forces. For Ichiro, this next phase of healing and rejuvenation lies in Emi's home, a farm house south of Seattle, which he has visited earlier with Kenji, but the significance of which is not immediately apparent until after Mrs. Yamada's death when Emi comes to his home to convey her condolences. Outwardly, Ichiro is unmoved by Emi's repeated appeal for his love, but it appears that he has embraced the vision of spending his life together with Emi. In a dance hall south of the city, in dance after dance with Emi, Ichiro feels a joy that he has not experienced in a long, long time. With Emi in his arms, far away from the confusion and depression he feels in his home environment, Ichiro feels "immensely full and want[s] that moment to last a lifetime" (211). Encouraging as it is for Ichiro, the dance is the last scene in which Emi appears in the novel, and the new life that they appear to be headed to is only implied and not actually shown. The novel ends two chapters later, with Ichiro searching unsuccessfully for a job with Mr. Morris at the Christian Rehabilitation Center, and witnessing at the Club Oriental a chaotic confrontation between the yes-yes boys and the no-no boys that leads to

Freddie's death. Ichiro emerges from deep thought, sensing a "glimmer of hope" that is somewhere and "someplace" (250) and a "faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart" (251).

Although Ichiro does not know it yet, this "someplace" that holds out the faint promise for his future is likely to be Emi's home, which may be a more concrete entity than he first imagined when he wanted to "buy a home and love my family" (52). This is a small farmhouse with 40 acres of "partly wooded but mostly cleared" land, far away from all the confusion and despair of the city (83). At the time of Ichiro's first visit, Emi is still attached to Kenji emotionally although there had never been any possibility of consummation of their relationship due to Kenji's wound in the war.⁹ Besides, Emi had not made up her mind to divorce her husband Ralph, who had in effect abandoned her. Ichiro was immediately attracted to Emi, who is tall and slender, with "heavy breasts" and long legs that are "strong and shapely like a white woman's" (83). Like Ralph, Ichiro is tall and muscular, and in spite of herself, Emi easily fell for Ichiro and at Kenji's urging, they spent the night together. Feminist scholars have objected to Okada's portrayal of Emi's physical attributes, pointing out that her description betrays Okada's implicit racist bias in marking Emi's attractiveness with white features.¹⁰ Indeed, when compared with Okada's description of Mrs. Yamada, who is an apparent embodiment of Japaneseness, as "a small, flat-chested, shapeless woman" resembling a 13-year-old girl whose "awkward, skinny body" has ceased to develop any further (10-11), Emi's over sexualised portrayal with explicit reference to white features is particularly striking. Clearly, Okada is susceptible to the prevalent racist stereotypes of his day even when he is profoundly on target against white racism. However, despite this flaw or perhaps because of them, Okada's effort in underscoring Emi's femininity supports my reading that Emi's home serves as the last crucial influence in Ichiro's recovery from his personal agony and trauma as a no-no boy.

As I have argued, while the dichotomy of Ichiro's Japanese home versus Kenji's Americanised home works well in embodying Ichiro's conflicted psyche as he searches for a way to re-assimilate into American society, the ultimate

⁹ While Kenji's amputated right leg is described in much detail, including the eleven inches that are left, another wound he suffers is mentioned only once and very ambiguously. From Kenji's vague remark, "I'm only half a man, Ichiro, and when my leg starts aching, even that half is no good" (89), the reader has to assume that he has suffered severe damage to his genitals as well in the war.

¹⁰ For example, Paul Spickard is critical of Okada for endowing Emi with white features at the expense of other Japanese American females in order for Ichiro to achieve his Americanisation (45). Gayle Fujita Sato also objects to the drastically different descriptions of Mrs. Yamada and Emi, but she does not explicitly equate Okada's portrayal of Emi's sexualised body to racism (252). On the other hand, Sheng-mei Ma regards Ichiro's disgust with his mother as internalised self-hatred and his attraction to Emi as a desire to embrace Americanness (73-74).

solution lies in a more balanced home in Emi's rural country house. It appears that there are crucial differences between Emi's home and both Ichiro's and Kenji's homes. While Ichiro's home is dominated by its association with Japan and Kenji's home, despite its ostentatious Americanisation, is only a rental, Emi's home sits on 40 acres of solid land that she owns, symbolising its irrefutable claim to America. Additionally, since Emi's father has been repatriated back to Japan, her mother has died, and her husband Ralph has refused to return, Emi as the only child has assumed the sole control of the household, combining her role as the girlfriend (the feminine) and the maternal (head of the household) into one.¹¹ In Ichiro's home, the only female character is his mother, but Mrs. Yamada has lost all the characteristics of femininity. In Kenji's Americanised home, all seems to be well except for the conspicuous absence of his mother who has died early. Although his sisters have made up temporarily for their mother's absence during the family dinner, Kenji finds no genuine solace at home and makes a point about not spending his last night with his family there. In Emi's home, however, Ichiro finds a woman who emanates not only feminine charm but also profound wisdom. Emi feels a natural empathy for Ichiro because her mother, like Ichiro's, also believed that Japan won the war. Like Ichiro who is despised by his brother Taro, Emi is also a victim of internal Japanese American strife on the issue of draft resistance because her husband Ralph, ashamed of his own brother Mike's criticism of the internment of World War I veterans, refuses to return to her and their home from his military service.

Perhaps the most significant point is that in Emi's home, Ichiro finds not only acceptance and understanding but also love, that dynamic agent for transformation that has been long missing from his life. While Ichiro has rejected his own home for its tenacious identification with Japan, he finds a measure of longing and admiration for Kenji's Americanised home, which ultimately proves inadequate and out of his reach. Situated in America's countryside and away from Japanese American community and amply equipped with typical American furnishings,¹² Emi's home fulfils Kenji's prescription for the "promised land" with one exception: Ichiro will have at least one Japanese close to him. Despite Okada's unconscious subscription to white racial stereotype in Emi's portrayal, her ethnicity is an important affirmation of Japanese American values, which are crucial for the awakening of Ichiro's Asian American consciousness. With her shoulder-length "rich, black hair" (83) and a readiness to lay out fresh new clothes for him in the morning (92), Emi looks

¹¹ Christopher Douglas makes the provocative suggestion that Emi in fact plays the role of Ichiro's surrogate mother whose nominal whiteness would legitimise him as an American (151).

¹² When compared with Kenji's, Emi's home is even more Americanised in its furnishings, which include such typical items as pictures, books, lamps, curtains, and a piano (85-6), making it highly appropriate for Ichiro's Americanisation.

like the ideal Japanese wife for Ichiro, and yet she is far more than just a woman to him: she can be an inspiring soul mate who can touch him at unusually profound levels of his being. When Ichiro claims that nobody can understand his depression and misery, Emi offers him a hefty dose of practical advice of rather surprising insight that makes her appear more mature and eloquent than her years. "Admit your mistake and do something about it," she says. "This is a big country with a big heart" (95). Sensing that Ichiro is not altogether convinced, Emi goes on to elaborate her point:

In any other country they would have shot you for what you did. But this country is different. They made a mistake when they doubted you. They made a mistake when they made you do what you did and they admit it by letting your run around loose. Try, if you can, to be equally big and forgive them and be grateful to them and prove to them that you can be an American worthy of the frailties of the country as well as its strengths. (96)

Judging from our current perspective, there is no question that Emi's advice to Ichiro smacks of oversimplified political expediency that fails to delve deeper into the racial, cultural, and historical specificities of the times that led to the Japanese American internment in the first place. But as a character in the novel, Emi is more than adequate and convincing in her argument to pull Ichiro out of the hole of self-loathing and put him on the road to rejuvenation. If one feels occasionally that Emi sounds just a little too much like Okada's mouthpiece, we can be sure that that is indeed the author trying hard to reach out to readers of varying political sympathies and persuasions. I wish his messages had resonated with a few more kindred souls. In retrospect, we can certainly appreciate Okada's pioneering effort at negotiating a meaningful understanding of a very difficult chapter in US history even though his work was not without faults and limitations.

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