

**“I Must Be Strong”:
Awareness and Resistance in John Okada’s December 7th Poem**
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John Okada authored the poem “I Must Be Strong” as an eighteen-year-old student at the University of Washington right after learning of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. This is the earliest recovered piece--published anonymously in the *University of Washington Daily* on December 11, 1941, and reprinted in the *Seattle Star*—that appears in *John Okada: The Life and Rediscovered Writing of the Author of No-No Boy*, edited by Frank Abe, Greg Robinson, and myself.

The preface to his poem read:

I am a Japanese-American descendant from Japanese parents and sworn to the allegiance of the United States. In thought, background, history, culture, language and religion I am fully American and proud to be so. I owe my all to this land of my birth, and I will gladly uphold the laws, traditions, and policies of this nation.

On the evening of December 7, 1941, after there was no doubt as to the significance of the dastardly move taken by the Japanese nation, I sat in my room and thought of the situation in which I, as well as others like me, had been placed by this unforeseen attack on the United States.

I attempted to put down my thoughts on paper for a home theme, but my mind was in such a state of confusion and entanglement that I was unable to produce an organized and well-unified paper. As a consequence I tried the same thing with poetry. The improvement was slight, but in poetry the reader can read a great deal between the lines. The result was the following poem, still unorganized and disunified, but most of my thoughts have been captured as they were that evening before I had little chance to discuss the matter with anyone.

I Must Be Strong

by John Okada

I know now for what war I was born.
Every child is born to see some struggle,
But this conflict is yet the worst.
For my dark features are those of the enemy,
And my heart is buried deep in occidental soil.
People will say things, and people will do things,
I know they will, and I must be strong.

I dread the thought of having to leave home each day,
The thought that I must continue as naught has happened,
For clouds will hang where the sun was bright.
Everyone will smile, but what of their thoughts
As they gaze on one whose eyes are so black?

People will say things, and people will do things,
I know they will, and I must be strong.

Why did he publish it anonymously? Frank Abe theorizes that he did it for personal safety. Simply put, Okada may have feared being the victim of a hate crime, as was Choy Get Ming. A tutor at the Chong Wa Benevolent Association, the Chinese American Choy was perceived as a Japanese threat by a gang during the evening of December 11. On the corner of Fifth and Main, they confronted him, forced him to kneel, tied his hands behind his back, and killed him with an ax.¹

So how did Frank figure out that this anonymous poem was written by Okada? He learned that when Okada applied for a student transfer from Camp Harmony to a junior college outside of the exclusion area, namely, Scottsbluff Junior College in Nebraska, Okada had to pass a background check. Okada's father was already in FBI custody, so the relocation council was on guard. One witness approved of his "mental ability" but cautioned to the council to "watch his loyalty as he is young and the parental influence is strong." The poem and its preface, however, convinced the reviewer to approve of his loyalty. The report reads, "Soon after Pearl Harbor he wrote a poem indicative of his loyalty entitled, 'I Must Be Strong' which was published anonymously in the *Seattle Star*."

I can still remember the day that I opened my email to learn that Frank had discovered this poem. It was February 6, 2016, a cold Saturday morning in New England. Frank exclaimed in his email: "One key piece for my biography is that now we know exactly what was his reaction to Pearl Harbor... he was sitting at home at the Merchants Hotel writing about it!" A few hours later I responded, "Another wonderful and important discovery! Thanks for involving me. I was so moved by what I read that I had to write up the attached draft. I don't know whether it can be of any use besides as a record of my own response, but I share it with you, my collaborators, nevertheless." Because it happened to be a Saturday, I had time to read and write. I now share with you a revised and expanded version of what I drafted.

When Okada wrote this poem at the University of Washington during his freshman year, the eviction had not been announced yet. Instead in this poem Okada earnestly considers the societal tension that he believed would arise from the fact that he is both "fully American" and a "descendant from Japanese parents."² In "I Must Be Strong," Okada participates in a tradition of writers shaken by war who turn to poetry. For instance, upon the outbreak of World War II, W. H. Auden wrote: "I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-second Street / Uncertain and afraid." And after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, many Americans wrote poems now collected in volumes like *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11*. In the preface to his poem, Okada explains his reasons for responding to the attack on Pearl Harbor in verse: "my mind was in such a state of confusion and entanglement that I was unable to produce an organized and well-unified paper. As a consequence I tried the same thing with poetry." With modesty he admits that the

poem is “still unorganized and disunified,” but he trusts that “in poetry the reader can read a great deal between the lines.”

“I Must Be Strong” lacks meter and traditional rhyme but gathers force from its use of repetition and internal near rhyme. Of course the repetition of the final two lines of each stanza gives the poem unity. The repetition of “I know” in lines 1, 7, and 14 links Okada’s two main realizations: he knows that most Euro-Americans will judge him with suspicion, and he knows that he must find a way to respond with strength. With prescience, Okada’s very first line meditates on the many wars to be fought both on battlefields and in society. “I know now for what war I was born,” he begins. In December of 1941, we leap immediately to the US entry in World War II, but Okada surprises us by turning to the mental and social wars that Japanese Americans will have to fight in order to maintain their dignity in the face of racism. This pivot towards the self from the social is not that strange when we consider that Auden, too, wrote of “Obsessing our private lives.” Okada starts with the general but then moves to the personal: “Every child is born to see some struggle, / But this conflict is yet the worst, / For my dark features are those of the enemy.” The word *conflict* stands in here for the interpersonal strife that all Japanese Americans will have to endure in a post-Pearl Harbor world.

The internal near rhyme in lines 4 and 5 anchors the main theme of the poem. The word *dark* nearly rhymes with the word *heart*, linking the images of “my dark features” and “my heart . . . buried deep in occidental soil.” The tension here between surface and depth, facial features and essential identity, governs the entire poem. Okada knows his own identity deep down but knows also that others will judge him based on his appearance. He continues to meditate on this theme of surface and depth in the second stanza as he considers these others’ outward appearances and possible internal prejudices: “Everyone will smile, but what of their thoughts.” Okada, like Auden, stewes in his personal feelings of unease, but whereas Auden can afford to take comfort in others knowing his allegiance, Okada cannot. In “September 1, 1939,” Auden famously intoned, “We must love one another or die.” Okada knew that to do so would require strength on his own part as well as that of his fellow Americans: I must be strong *and* all of us must love one another.

Okada’s poem is a remarkably perceptive meditation on race and American society of the time. He was right: “People will say things, and people will do things, / I know they will.” President Franklin D. Roosevelt did something in February of 1942 when he signed Executive Order 9066, which enabled the mass incarceration of all Japanese “alien and non-alien”—i.e., both noncitizens and citizens—living on the west coast of the United States. While spending five months behind barbed wire, receiving leave clearance for Nebraska, and then joining the army, Okada discovered ways to “be strong” in the face of incarceration and war. The poem serves as evidence, moreover, of Okada’s awareness that “conflict” would persist beyond the closing of the camps and the official end of World War II. After being discharged, Okada would return not only to college but also to writing as a way to meditate on

varieties of strength (think of Kenji and Mrs. Yamada in *No-No Boy*) and the costs of internalizing conflict (think of Ichiro and his father). . . .

So how can this poem help us reassess the (un)governability of Japanese Americans in Mid-century America? I posit that Okada practiced self-governance via sublimation. Sworn to secrecy about his work as a radio interceptor for the Military Intelligence Service, he could not write or talk about his wartime experiences directly. In his college creative writing classes, he sublimated by writing about the difficult situations of other kinds of characters, ranging from a wounded Japanese American vagrant looking for food and work to a man debating with a disembodied voice over the death of his young daughter. Of course, Okada's ultimate sublimation took the form of his novel, *No-No Boy*. As Frank Abe argues, Okada fictionalizes his friend's experience as a draft resister instead of his own experience as a veteran. While Kenji fought in the war, we all know that the perspective and emotional core of the book resides in Ichiro. Kenji uses his government benefits to buy an Oldsmobile—a symbol of respectability and mobility—but he cannot outrun death, the ultimate governor. Ichiro, on the other hand, lives, but he spends the entire novel trying to figure out how he fits in the post-war government. At the end of the novel, he chooses to continue doing so alone.

The poem reads, “my heart is buried deep in occidental soil.” This recalls Ichiro's interior monologue in chapter one, which reads in part: “one is not born in America and raised in America and taught in America and one does not speak and swear and drink and smoke and play and fight and see and hear in America among Americans and American streets and houses without becoming American and loving it.” At the same time, however, the poem communicates a strong streak of well-founded paranoia: “Everyone will smile, but what of their thoughts /As they gaze on one whose eyes are so black?” In *No-No Boy* one need to think only of Eto Minato's greeting or Professor Brown's half-hearted welcome. How is one to react? The poem acknowledges, “I dread the thought of having to leave home each day, / The thought that I must continue as naught has happened.”

Okada, like many other Japanese Americans at mid-century, had to repress quite a bit to carry on with their lives. (Bull's tears at the end of the novel are a rare instance of emotional release.) We know that stress led to long-term health consequences for many. The incidence of heart disease among Nisei was higher than the national average, and Okada himself died of a heart attack at the age of 47.³

The army required him to govern himself. The US required the formerly incarcerated to govern themselves. We know that it took the Redress Movement to compel the US finally to pay a token reparation to survivors in 1988—eleven years after Okada's death. **What do we now call what Okada and others had to endure between the war and reparations?** Neoliberal individualism. How did Okada put it in his poem? “I must be strong” (emphasis added).

What did we learn from the Redress Movement? What did we learn from the Third World Strikes? What do we still believe in AAAS after all these years? Together, we are stronger.

¹ Abe, p. 30.

² Introduction to "I Must Be Strong," 11 Dec. 1941, *University of Washington Daily*.

³ Jensen, G. M. (1998). The experience of injustice: Health consequences of the Japanese American internment. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 58(7-A), 2718.