

“A Larger Capacity for Normalcy”: Apparitions of the Non-Alien in Midcentury Empire

[First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to Floyd Cheung for agreeing to read this paper in my absence, not to mention organizing this panel and coediting the volume that inspired it. I apologize for my absence, a regrettable consequence of contingent faculty life, but I’d be happy to respond to questions via email at vjs@uw.edu. The title of my paper is “‘A Larger Capacity for Normalcy’: Apparitions of the Non-Alien in Midcentury Empire.” In it, I attempt to sketch how the revelations of Frank Abe, Greg Robinson, and Floyd Cheung’s new book on John Okada allow readers to remove Okada’s life and work from an origin story of Asian American literary history that itself is overdue for historical revision, and resituate it within the crucial and understudied period of Japanese American rehabilitation as a problem of midcentury empire.]

In his book *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, the poet, critic, and archivist Kevin Young writes eloquently about the idea of a *shadow book*—a book that you know of but that doesn’t actually exist, whether because it’s no longer extant, or because it never came to fruition, or because it’s merely a figment of the imagination of another text. Young is concerned specifically with black aesthetic traditions, but the idea of a shadow book resonates particularly with Asian American literature, and indeed with any literature produced under conditions of social subordination. Lacking access to publishers and critics, salons and syllabi, prestige and remuneration, Asian American writers struggled to find audiences that could learn how to read them, and so the history of Asian American literature is inexorably or inexorably haunted by what could have been—a library of shadow books.

Asian American literature was not founded, not even as a concept, in the 1970s, but the most influential origin story for Asian American literature as a loosely coherent body of works begins there, with the story of Frank Chin and his co-conspirators in the Combined Asian American Resources Project, or CARP. A group of aspiring and early-career writers, their

commitment to literature as a profession distinguished them from other cohorts, who were arguably more central to Asian American cultural production at the time. On one hand, there were poet-activists, like Janice Mirikitani and Al Robles, whose ambitions were tied to a “serve the people” model of community work. On the other, intellectuals and artists primarily concerned with ethnic studies faced a mid-1970s backlash, forcing them either to submit to traditional protocols of academic professionalization, or to abandon the field, typically for radical left organizing or for an activist trajectory through law school.

Thus, despite Chin’s well-known—and heartily reciprocated—antipathy for Asian American studies, the field was effectively cleared for CARP’s 1974 anthology, *Aiiieeee!*, to provide a concept of Asian American literature suitable for academic study. The core of CARP’s contribution was not the cobbled-together, explicitly provisional set of theoretical provocations that were retrospectively, and misleadingly, termed “cultural nationalism.” Rather, it was their commitment to historical recovery work—finding, critiquing, and republishing forgotten texts, interviewing Asian American authors or their survivors, and introducing them to new audiences.

For all the necessary critiques of CARP and Chin, this commitment has rarely been equaled in Asian American studies before or since. This new volume by Abe, Robinson, and Cheung can be seen both as the culmination of CARP’s recovery project and as an occasion for Asian American studies scholars and readers of John Okada to finally step beyond the terms of their project. This would entail historicizing both its ascendancy, in the mid-70s backlash to revolutionary social movements, and the critiques of it that nonetheless reinscribed its origin stories, during the late-80s transition from Third Worldism to multiculturalism.

A revisionist history of 1960s and 1970s Asian American cultural production is overdue, in other words, though this paper can only gesture towards it. Meanwhile, this new volume on

Okada might also suggest new lines of inquiry into the history of Japanese American racialization, in the pivotal, understudied period between incarceration and the Asian American movement—a period in which the rehabilitation of Japanese American citizenship helped consolidate the terms of US geopolitical power. In what follows, I borrow Young’s idea to identify, not one, but three shadow books that can organize responses to Okada’s life and legacy.

Famously, John Okada’s 1957 novel, *No-No Boy*, was simply “the book” for Chin, Jeffery Chan, Shawn Wong, and Lawson Inada—the one text, above all others, that provided objective evidence of a literary tradition capable of explaining their sensibilities. Indeed, after CARP reprinted *No-No Boy*, the book vindicated their faith, with sales that established proof of concept for the republication of neglected texts by the University of Washington Press. But the book that exists, the one they saved, was haunted by a shadow book. Just as Jean-Michel Basquiat crossed out certain words in his paintings to make viewers “see them more,” as Young puts it, the legend of Okada’s lost second novel lent force to the critical mythologies CARP spun to develop an audience for *No-No Boy*. Okada’s projected follow-up, a book on the Issei, was never completed, and the CARP writers, who made contact with Okada’s widow Dorothy shortly after his death, were too late to rescue any drafts and research materials he’d generated. When Dorothy moved, unable to find a taker for John’s papers, she got rid of them, along with his childhood photos and other effects. As she explained to Chin and Wong, “I thought, well, I have him in my heart and I have him in my head, what more evidence do I need?”

Chin’s account of this revelation, in a 1976 *Seattle Weekly* article included in reprints of *No-No Boy*, secured the place of Okada’s shadow book in the Asian American canon. Vintage Chin, it features a gratuitous fantasy of gendered violence (“I wanted to kick her ass around the block”) that could hardly be better calculated to set off his critics, even though his actual

exchange with Dorothy was respectful. It also allows him to grind an ax against UCLA’s Japanese American Research Project, which he claims told Dorothy to destroy John’s papers—advice he’d later attribute to “the JACL’s Joe Grant Masaoka.” Frank Abe respectfully corrects Chin in the new book, pointing out that Masaoka predeceased Okada, and that, in the transcripts of Chin’s interview, Dorothy appears to say she wrote to UCLA’s department of Asian languages, not to Asian American studies.

Chin’s version clearly says more about his own obsessions with Asian American studies and the JACL than about Okada. (This is a cautionary tale, for Asian Americanists’ own critiques of Chin since the 1980s often say more about the obsessions of the multiculturalist era than about Chin’s place within 60s and 70s Asian American cultural production.) At the end of his essay, Chin reproduces a short personal statement Okada wrote as *No-No Boy* was about to be published, in which Okada presents himself as a breadwinning family man, mentioning his accomplishment but reassuring prospective employers that writing wouldn’t interfere with his job. Chin’s anxiety over Okada’s priorities suggests an underlying fear haunting his account, and his recovery project in general—if even Okada succumbed to the emasculating demands of patriarchal responsibility, perhaps the father-writer-hero Chin seeks can never be found. Like much of Chin’s work, this is ultimately a parable about how Asian America neglects its writers.

The new volume by Abe, Robinson, and Cheung provides a much richer account of Okada’s life and work, suggesting alternative approaches to the story of his lost second novel. Like Chin’s account, they are less about recovering the facts as they happened and more a way of drawing out the narrative investments that this shadow book helps bring to light.

In an episode that evokes contemporary “family separation” policies targeting immigrants and asylum seekers, Abe carefully reconstructs a link between Okada and Hajime “Jim” Akutsu,

the draft resister who was the model for *No-No Boy*'s Ichiro. On Feb. 21, 1942, two days after Executive Order 9066, the FBI arrested both Okada's and Akutsu's fathers in Seattle, later shipping them to the Department of Justice camp at Ft. Missoula, Montana, in advance of the incarceration of the rest of their families at Minidoka. These arrests bring into focus the period of terror after Pearl Harbor, when the FBI first began roundups of Issei community leaders.

Dorothy Okada's decision to dispose of John's effects resonates with a recurring scene in literary and historical narratives of the period between Pearl Harbor and camp. In this scene, generally told from the perspective of Nisei children, Issei parents burn or bury family heirlooms, papers and printed material in Japanese, records, toys, and any objects that government agents might deem suspiciously foreign. The destruction of what is most precious can be understood as an act of commemoration against all hope, consecrating to memory what is placed beyond the reach of the living. Dorothy Okada, a Kibei from Hawai'i, presumably would not have experienced such a scene directly, but her words offer a gloss on it—*I have him in my heart and I have him in my head, what more evidence do I need?* At the same time, her act, read within a collective history, may appear either as a traumatic repetition of the scene, decades later, or as what the writer Tamiko Nimura calls “a form of release” from Japanese American hoarding practices understood as evidence of “intergenerational trauma.”

In the end, barring the irreducible prospect of its reappearance from some forgotten archive, Okada's second novel, along with his other photographs and papers, remains sealed in a space between Dorothy and John. This shadow book is not merely a story of immigrant striving, or an effort to bridge the gap between a generation defined as aliens ineligible to citizenship and the US-born children upon whose tenuous claims to citizenship rights their fate depended. It also bears the tale of a marriage, of gendered ambitions and disappointments that could or couldn't be

contained within that economic and legal and social form, and of whatever possibilities of love or friendship that might rationalize or escape it. However you might read this shadow book, it asks you to take Dorothy, not as a villain or victim or fool, but as a protagonist in her own right.

Indeed, the statement John Okada wrote for his job search, which Chin feared betrayed a writer's loyalties, works to seal the figure of the novelist, whose writing is "[r]educ[ed] to an avocation, though a disciplined one," within an impenetrable archetype of the 1950s family man—devoted husband, proud father, workaholic breadwinner. In a curious, widely cited phrase, it describes the author as "endowed with a larger capacity for normalcy than most people." Quiet as it's kept, that's a paradox, logically impossible, until you realize it posits "normalcy" as a performance, anxious disavowal of the drama and strangeness that defines a life or a marriage. Indeed, Okada's unnecessarily elegant phrasing at once invokes a shared presumption of "normalcy" as disingenuous, and diverts the reader's attention from their tacit acceptance of it. It does not require too much imagination to recognize this self-portrait as haunted.

Haunted by whom or what? Because any story about a shadow book is necessarily the story of a haunting, of an unknowable and unrepresentable agency, you might seek an answer by identifying a second shadow book, distinct from the Issei novel. This shadow book, fictional and fictionalized, shares a title with the volume whose insights make it possible to imagine—Abe, Robinson, and Cheung's *John Okada*. It turns out that Okada's own biography, the story of a representative Nisei turned midcentury Everyman, suggests the makings of a Great (Japanese) American Novel whose scope that exceeds his extant works. He studied creative writing and English at the University of Washington and Teachers College; plugged away as a librarian and aspiring novelist before becoming a technical writer for Chrysler Missile and Hughes Aircraft

and a chain-smoking ad-agency copywriter; and jumped from sleepy Seattle to booming Detroit, finally dying at 47, with a wife and two kids in the Southern California suburbs.

He went in the house to do his taxes and he died.

All the clocks in the house stopped, Dorothy said, even his wristwatch.

Okada's rambling postwar itinerary animates the great themes of midcentury American life, recast with a Nisei hero adrift in the military-industrial complex and *Mad Men*-era advertising. What makes this casting possible is Okada's previously established status as a model subject of Japanese American rehabilitation. After only three weeks at Minidoka, Okada was among the first Nisei to participate in student relocation programs, attending Nebraska's Scottsbluff Junior College, and volunteered for the Military Intelligence Service, and, later, for service in Occupied Japan. As a student and soldier, Okada performed the two key roles of what became the War Relocation Authority's resettlement policies, which pursued the rehabilitation of loyal Japanese American citizenship as a way of preparing for a postwar global racial order.

In other words, the shadow book of Okada's life suggests the possibility of narrating Japanese American rehabilitation as the story of midcentury empire. If the first phase of wartime incarceration continued the logic of Asiatic exclusion, from the FBI roundups of Issei leaders to the forced removal of "all citizens of Japanese ancestry, alien and non-alien" to temporary camps, the second phase corresponded to the logic of postwar racial liberalism. This phase, which begins with the establishment of permanent WRA camps and programs for student resettlement, is arguably the more consequential and more traumatic part of the incarceration experience. Its endpoint is forever in question—is it the *Endo* case and the closing of camps, Truman's celebration of the 442<sup>nd</sup>, the 1966 proclamation of Japanese American model-minority

success in the *New York Times*, the passage of redress? There is no conclusion, because Japanese American rehabilitation itself continues the process it purports to end.

Recall that the name by which the US government summoned Japanese American citizens—the non-alien—is a euphemism, a fudge, and a paradox, a variety of the category it negates. The non-alien is, to the extent it exists, a type of alien. Like the construction “no-no boy,” it is a double negative—not-not a citizen: properly speaking, the non-alien is a citizen whose rights are cancellable on racial grounds. The instability of this figure was more than the law or the nation could bear to perceive, and so a substitute was needed, the Japanese American (no and no, again). The rehabilitation of the Japanese American, which is ongoing, establishes loyalty and innocence, beyond the shadow of a doubt, as the conditions of citizenship, which is the basis of the vindication of rights. In so doing, it disavows the non-alien, denies the existence of the non-alien, whose punishment was never predicated on guilt or proof, but on doubt. Banished from perception and representation, the non-alien persists as the intimation of vulnerability that both motivates and unravels the performance of normative citizenship, and whose liberation would require the abolition of citizenship as such.

The non-alien is the figure that haunts all the shadow books of Japanese American life and letters, including the book on the Issei Dorothy Okada disposed of and the unwritten novel of John Okada’s own life. But there is one more shadow book to consider, which appears in the oscillation between the other two, never quite resolving itself, like a cartoon depiction of vision disoriented by a blow to the head. This shadow book is narrated and authored by the non-alien, a position that is not properly capable of speech, and it is unrepresentable.

Its title is *No-No Boy*, and the task you are given now is to learn how to read it.