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Street Lit: John Okada Ventures into the Proletarian

Within the confines of cultural-historical scholarship of the United States, terms such as "proletarian literature" and "the cultural front" have been assigned mostly to the 1930s. Most of the familiar examples of murals, novels, music, even films advancing the causes of labor and economic justice come from that decade. This is not to say that scholars have ignored other times of surges in class politics. The turn of the twentieth century, the 1960s, even the current decade have witnessed spikes in concern for economic injustice and the plight of workers. But most critical attention has been paid to the 1930s. And despite calls among critics of race and gender for intersectional analysis, too little of that attention has focused on activists of color. Many studies of black artists such as Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and Billie Holiday exceptionalize their interest in proletarian politics, as though it is somehow separate from their more "regular" poetry, theater, and music.

With few exceptions—E. San Juan Jr's works on Carlos Bulosan, Floyd Cheung's revival of the fictions of H.T. Tsiang, critics' brief discussions of Ayako Ishigaki and Karl Yoneda, and Josephine Fowler's research into immigrant activism—studies of Asian Americans devote almost no attention to their role in class politics of the 1930s. The most rigorous study is Fowler's valuable *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919-1933,* but many of its laboring subjects communicated in their Asian home languages, and few engaged in literary or other arts. The "model minority" stereotype seems to wash retroactively over Asian American artists, rendering

them too comfortable to agitate for class consciousness. As with black artists such as Hughes, the 1930s work of people such as Miné Okubo seems to have been exceptionalized into a mere "phase" for youthful dabbling. Thus if Asian Americanists largely ignore the activism, can we be surprised that a scholar of the movement such as Alan M. Wald, in his study of the American "literary left," ignores Asian Americans? Perhaps the fullest survey of "popular front" Asian American activism is provided by Michael Denning, in *The Cultural Front*, for he does identify and discuss most of the participants, albeit in an atomistic, individualized way—for, except perhaps among immigrant Asian longshoremen engaged by Karl Yoneda and farmworkers engaged by Carlos Bulosan, there was little sense of an organized "Asian American front."

But of course activism stretched beyond the 1930s, into the McCarthy era, justifying purges and blacklists, and even as Asian Americans settled into midcentury "model minority" comforts Bulosan, Yoneda, Yuri Kochiyama, and others continued to agitate. We can even argue that their midcentury activism eased the way for the later Yellow Power movement. Yet I would urge a still larger claim: that the continuing literary activities of Asian Americans in the quarter-century between the Bomb and Yellow Power expressed a politics of resistance. These fictions and poems might not have been loud and confrontational, but even in the quiet lyrics of Toyo Suyemoto and the deferential memoir of Monica Sone injustices are recognized and, implicitly, defied.

And then there is John Okada's 1957 novel *No-No Boy*, which is agitated and urgent. The conflicts circumscribed within its plot rage inside the Seattle Japanese American community, even within the protagonist's family, but they were created elsewhere, by powerful people with racist motivations. In reconstructing Okada's life, Frank Abe says that the author "was a quiet man who did not talk much, and like other Nisei fathers he did not burden his children with his

camp stories" (103). Furthermore, "the word *resistance* never appears in his text, and there's no evidence he consciously saw his work as an act of rebellion" (Abe 5). Ruth Ozeki even claims that Okada seems "to have been a model member of the model minority" (xiii). But she also says that *No-No Boy* courageously subverts stereotypes and dares to challenge American mythmaking (Ozeki xiii). Abe's biography depicts Okada as a man who understood his world, who empathized with victims of injustice and transformed that empathy into art. This volatile blend of empathy and rage drive *No-No Boy*.

I am concerned here with a short story, discovered and newly brought back into print by Abe, Cheung, and Greg Robinson, in their volume of works by and about Okada. "What Can I Do?" was, according to Cheung's note, probably written for a creative writing class at the University of Washington. It was first published in the community newspaper the *Northwest Times* in March 1947. It is also, Cheung says, "the only published short story by Okada to include a Japanese American character," a man named Jiro who prefigures two main characters in *No-No Boy*: Ichiro, for his "emotional desperation," and Kenji, for his "physical disability" (142). The first sentence recalls stories by or about Carlos Bulosan and John Steinbeck and Woody Guthrie: "The clicking of the heavy wheels resounded through the freight car and mingled monotonously with the stench of straw and manure" (143). Jiro appears in the next few sentences, favoring his sore bones and carefully making his way out of the railcar: "Suitcase in one hand, he leaped clear of the train to the ground, landing on his good right leg, then falling back on the bad one" (143). The late-day railyard, the empty dirt street, the train-hopper: These are figures from Depression-era narratives in which exhausted, well-meaning men become hoboes looking for work. Preston Sturges made movies about such men; Dorothea Lange and Carl Mydans photographed them. I mention these connections only because they originate in the

1930s, the decade before Okada wrote and published the story. There is no real clue in the text into the story's temporal setting. It may be the 1930s, though if the town is in the US West, it is much likelier to be the 1940s. Cheung describes Okada's "psychologically realistic style" and "noir voice," and these are more characteristic of books and films of the 1940s.

But of course the proletarian literature of the 1930s often becomes the noir fiction and film noir of the following decade. Train-hopping hoboes traveling cross-country morph into low-budget detectives or desperate young men trying to survive on grimy urban streets or small-town dirt roads. The railyard is only a starting- and stopping-point for Jiro. Most of the story takes place in a noir-era small-town diner. Jiro is a Japanese American version of James Cagney or John Garfield. In *The Cultural Front* Michael Denning defines Garfield as a midcentury extension of the Depression-era proletarian protagonist, someone whose movie-star roles mirrored his politics but whose real-life fate is as tragic as the fates of some of his characters. In the 1930s he worked in the radical Group Theatre, then in the 1940s he moved on to Hollywood "thrillers and war films, playing tough, working-class outsiders," and in 1952, harassed by industry red-baiters, he was dead (155). None of this is to suggest that Okada's character is a Communist, an organizer, or even political at all. But the ambient gloom of film noir that subverted postwar triumphalism and mythmaking pervade "What Can I Do?" The very title is the sort of question that John Garfield might ask, in a movie scene in which he is trapped by fear and despair and poverty. That Jiro himself does not ask it, that throughout the story he is too defiant and defensive to ask it, suggests that Okada holds it over his characters, not only Jiro but also the marbles-playing kids and Jim the café owner, for all of them are caught in a world not of their making or choosing. The only emotion they all express is anger, and this anger is borne of frustration. Jiro rages at the kids, "I ought to kill every damn one of you," but then the

omniscient narrator says, "Jiro stumbled along awkwardly, as if in a fog, knowing that the anger would pass" (144).

The indeterminacy of the story's setting—or, rather, Okada's refusal of context—may owe partly to the strategic decontextualizations of proletarian and noir narrative. All we learn of Jiro's past are that he has suffered penury for three years, that his disability has kept him from getting a job, and that he can work in a restaurant because his father managed one. All we learn of Jim's past is that his experiences have made him suspicious of men he calls "bums": "You were going to steal my money," he says to Jiro. "I knew you were all the time. . . . You bums are all alike" (148). Yet what we learn of these characters' pasts is communicated in their dialogue, and their anger and distrust may produce lies as easily as truths. The narrator may be omniscient, but the narration provides none of this context. Even as apparently simple a matter as the identity of the man behind the café counter is unknowable, as Jiro concludes only by the place's name, Jim's Café, that the man is Jim; but the narrator refers to him as "the man." Such withholding of context seems to result from a strategy of proletarian and noir narratives that might seem counterintuitive, given the Marxist insistence on historical awareness. Yet the particular histories of these individuals is insignificant compared to the larger historical forces that bring these men to their present condition. The risk of such narratives is that they reduce characters to types, suggesting that their motives derive only from sweeping cultural and economic currents. A solution, then, is to particularize the present state of characters' suffering and despair. John Garfield's skill in showing the rage and frustrations of his characters may prompt an audience's empathy not only with those characters but also with their types. When Carlos Bulosan suffers beatings and betrayals, readers empathize with him and other immigrant Filipino farmworkers. In the six pages of "What Can I Do?" Okada provides just enough of a sense of Jiro's physical and

emotional pain that readers empathize with him, and understand even if they cannot excuse all his anger. This is so even when Jiro stands before Jim's cash register, tempted to steal from it: "I wonder how it feels to be rich, so rich that, when people saw you, they only saw how rich you were" (147). The narrator says that Jiro's expression is "almost reverently thoughtful" as he stands before the register (147). In other words, he fantasizes about wealth not because he is a thief but because he has for years suffered poverty.

If the story succeeds, it is because Okada seduces readers into accepting minimal scraps of context only in the dialogue of unreliable and mutually distrustful characters. This would have been more easily achieved if the narration had been written in first person, and might have been quite easy if the narrator had been Jim or one of the marbles-playing boys. Context provided by a narrator hostile to Jiro would have been dependable in a backhanded way. In fact, Jim or one of the boys would surely have confided to readers perspectives on Jiro's Asianness. As the story exists, Jim resents Jiro as a bum, not as an Asian, even after Jiro provides his full name. If one of the boys had narrated, then readers would know what was being whispered about Jiro at the end of the story. Instead Okada leaves readers guessing: "A busy hum of unmuffled whispers pierced the silence. They were watching him again. They were talking about him" (148). This is different from Jiro's first encounter with the boys, before entering the café. Okada precedes and follows that encounter by citing Jiro's sensitivity to his disability, so that the boys' "inquisitive stares" and Jiro's challenge—"What the hell are you looking at?"—seem unlikely to be related to racial differences. Race seems to be so insignificant to this story that Okada would probably have had to change nothing if his protagonist had been named Billy Johnson.

This matters as more than a curiosity in the context of Okada's scant body of work. For if this is his only short story with a Japanese American protagonist, then why does race matter so

little here, given that in *No-No Boy* racism is the catalyst for tensions within family and community, and given too that his unfinished second novel meant to focus on immigrant Japanese? For that matter, even Jiro's penury seems to result only from his disability, as he tells Jim, "Nobody wants [to hire] a guy with a bad leg" (145). Yet neither Jim nor the kids seem to be luxuriating in material comforts, so that capitalism enables them only to be occupied or preoccupied but not thriving.

When would Jiro's Japaneseness have mattered more, in the 1930s or the 1940s? That depends partly on the story's regional setting. In the postwar West Coast, Jim might have asked whether Jiro's disability originated during the war years, either in camp or in combat. But before the war, his hostility would probably have included racial resentment. But in the Midwest or East, Jiro's Japaneseness might have mattered as a curiosity no less than his disability. It is the absence of geographical setting, more than an absence of temporal setting, that weakens the story. In both the 1930s and 1940s, small-town railyards were common. Much proletarian literature is concerned with a hard life on the road. "What Can I Do?" is a story of a moment in life *off* the road. In the next town where Jiro hops off the train, he may still find no meal and no job, no friendly greeting, but he will be somewhere different, and difference holds at least a possibility of something better. Bleakness pervades proletarian and noir literature, but so, at the end of every narrative, does a hope for something better. Now deprived of even his suitcase and his hat, Jiro leaves the kids and the street "as fast as he could, felt his way unsteadily down the embankment and limped heavily across the yard towards the trains" (148). Whether or not this story was, for Okada, a venture into proletarian literature, it does demonstrate a keen understanding of relationships at the heart of the movement, relationships linking rage, frustration, despair, poverty, and migrancy.