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Asian American Literature

Friday, 5 October, 2018

The Boys Are Not Back In Town:

Demasculinization as Death in John Okada's *No-No Boy*

John Okada explores the cultural dissonance experienced by Japanese-Americans in the stateside fallout of World War II. Japanese Internment Camps forced people of Japanese heritage living in the Western United States to relocate to spaces bordered by barbed wire. Men were given the opportunity to prove their dedication to the United States by indicating they would respond if conscripted to fight in the war. Those who refused were labelled as No-No Boys and, in the case of the novel, imprisoned. Okada centers the internal monologue and external experiences of Ichiro Yamada, one of the titular No-No Boys, and explores his relationship with Kenji, an injured Japanese-American veteran, to criticize the nature of cultural essentialism and (ethnic) pride, both of which are elements of a toxic and racialized masculinity. This criticism proves timeless given the nature of masculine violence in the United States today, whether racialized or not.

Any internal conflict Ichiro might have been experiencing regarding his bicultural identity was forced to a head when he identified as a No-No Boy. His rationale for it is irrelevant, as Ichiro's identity is shaped by his sense of belonging, whether to his Japanese culture or his American culture. This conflict plays out in Ichiro's interactions

with Kenji, a Japanese-American who lost his leg while fighting for the United States. Kenji's injured leg is shortened semi-regularly due to some "rottenness" (Okada 57-58). Kenji's leg, in a Freudian sense, serves as his phallic extension. Once his phallus, the heteronormative signifier of manhood, is gone, Kenji's death as a man will manifest. In the discourse of heteronormativity, demasculinization, whether consensual or not, is tantamount to a death sentence.

Kenji therefore tries to lend Ichiro his masculine guidance. He introduces Ichiro to Emi, whose husband has not returned to her despite the war being over. Kenji's revealed intentions are for Ichiro and Emi to be together, sexually or romantically because Kenji can't. "I'm only half a man," Kenji asks Ichiro to perform in his stead (Okada 82). Kenji recognizes that his injury cost him more than his leg, it cost him his masculine ability to perform sexually. Kenji gave his leg for *his* country. Kenji, a Japanese-American man, was forced to exchange his masculinity for the recognition of his Americanness.

The conflicting binary of being either a/n _____-American or a man existed before Okada and continues to exist today. For Asian/American men there is a long history of the "West" producing and reproducing the stereotype of Asian men being submissive to white people while also existing violently towards Asian women. When confronted with international conflicts, white Americans confront Americans of whatever demographic they associate with the blame. An example of this is the continued demonization of Muslim-Americans in the United States in the fallout of 9/11.

Due to narratives of US Exceptionalism and the ideological vestiges of colonialism or imperialism, white Americans understand their country as being masculine because heteronormativity dictates that masculine is dominant. In a binary, this leaves the rest of the (non-white) world to be feminine and therefore subordinate. Being Asian-American in the United States comes with a certain cultural conflict between embracing one's Asianness and the implied femininity that comes with that or one's Americanness and the implied masculinity that comes with that. What goes unrecognized/untold, and the crux of Ichiro's conflict, is that even if one decides to be American (and therefore masculine), an Asian-American is still Asian and will never be American enough.

It is exactly this lack of enoughness that consumes Ichiro and comes to a head between him and his brother turned *comprador*, Taro. Ichiro had failed to prove the Yamada's Americanness, so Taro took it into his own still masculine hands to break ties with his Japaneseness. Kenji capitalizes on helping his friend as a means to challenge the other men on a classically masculine front. He uses his disability to his advantage. Kenji's cane is, to again draw from Freud, an additional phallic extension. He spends the remainder of the sequence beating the men who threaten to hurt or even kill Ichiro. Kenji's phallic extension is rather large compared to that of the "youth" kneeling over Ichiro's semi-conscious body. Kenji swings his phallus around, hurting some of these American men, thereby regaining the vague shadow of his masculinity, despite having to align himself politically with an anti-American body.

On his deathbed, Kenji explains to Ichiro that he wants to go to a place with “only people” and no racial or national differences because if “I’m still a Jap there and this guy’s still a German, I’ll have to shoot him again and I don’t want to have to do that” (Okada 148). Kenji finally acknowledges that his actions in the conflict of biculturalism was toxic and futile. He embraced narratives of US Exceptionalism and acculturation through service, and it ultimately cost him his life. Kenji enlisted to fight before Japanese-Americans were even conscripted to the army. Him and Taro both acted as they did to prove their Americanness as cultural ambassadors for their respective families and, more broadly, the larger Japanese-American community. Many _____-Americans today feel the need to prove their Americanness by succumbing to narratives of what it means to be an American and what it means to be a man, usually one and the same. This subscription leads to either their death or injury, which would allow them to claim Americanness, or the tragedy of surviving without bodily consequence and being trapped in their perceived ethnic identity instead of their national one.