

Shattering the Binary: Teaching Critical Thinking Through John Okada's *No-No Boy*

By Sarita Nyasha Cannon

INTRODUCTION:

The saga of the so-called culture wars of the 1990s has been written about widely. Those who affirmed the importance of opening up the literary canon by including on course syllabi and in literature anthologies texts written by and about historically marginalized groups (including women and people of color) faced vehement opposition from those who believed that the decentering of works by those in the dominant group represented an attack on aesthetic integrity and an unsavory conflation of “politics” and “literature.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s 1993 *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* and Allan Bloom’s 1987 *The Closing of the American Mind* represent these two factions respectively. These wars may have receded from the center of academic discourse, but the conflicts and tensions they embody simmer beneath the surface of liberal pluralism that defines the Obama Age. It is tempting yet dangerous to believe that American racism is dead because a black biracial man was elected President of the United States. Instead, the election of Barack Obama should be a catalyst for critical thinking and personal reflection about issues of race, difference, and identity. As a teacher of Ethnic American Literatures at a large state university, I am in a unique position to facilitate these kinds of discussions in the English classroom. While this kind of pedagogy has its risks, it is one to which I am deeply committed. In this article, I share the philosophical stance that I have developed in relationship to my teaching of U.S. Ethnic Literature and examine the rewards and pitfalls of this path by reflecting on my own experiences teaching John Okada’s *No-No Boy* in undergraduate American literature courses. By illuminating why texts (especially texts by Ethnic American authors) matter intellectually, emotionally, and politically, this discussion will provide a model for critical and self-reflexive pedagogy at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY:

After over a decade of teaching a range of students in a variety of contexts, I have developed a pedagogy founded upon four tenets:

1. Learning is uncomfortable but should occur in a comfortable space.
2. Subject positions matter.

Sarita Nyasha Cannon is Associate Professor of English at San Francisco State University where she teaches 20th-century American Literatures. She has presented at conferences around the world and recently traveled to Cape Coast, Ghana to share her scholarship on Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Her work has appeared in *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, *Pembroke Journal*, *The Black Scholar*, and *Callaloo*. She is President of the Humanities Education and Research Association.

3. Visceral reactions to texts are intimately linked to intellectual analysis.
4. The classroom is a community that values all of its members.

My first principle is that the best kind of learning involves a healthy balance of comfort and discomfort. That is, ideally the classroom should be a safe and comfortable space where dialogue, risk-taking, and the discomfort of learning can occur. How do I nurture that in the classroom? On the first day of class, I acknowledge that the people in the room reflect a wide range of backgrounds, belief systems, levels of education, and abilities. In order to create a comfortable space in the classroom, it is important to interact with each other in a respectful, civil, and generous fashion.

I also believe that positionality matters. Rather than trying to separate our personal identities from our role as literary scholars, we need to embrace both. Nancy Miller writes about this in her appropriately titled book *Getting Personal*, and Michael Awkward also emphasizes the importance of nurturing this new form of scholarship: “Indeed, we might say that sincere responses to the injunction, ‘Critic, position thyself,’ are seen by many as among the most effectively moral and significant gestures of our current age, protecting us from, among other sins, fictions of critical objectivity that marred previous interpretive regimes” (Awkward 4). Viewed through a pedagogical lens, this focus on positionality reminds us that students and teachers do not leave their selves behind when they enter the classroom. Of course, the potential danger is that the classroom becomes a confessional space and the focus moves from the texts to the readers. While subject position influences our reading of a text, we also need to be able to look at a text critically, which leads to my third foundational belief: head and heart can work together in tandem.

Indeed, visceral reactions can be mobilized to spark intellectual analysis of texts. To that end, I often assign short response papers in which students articulate gut reactions to the text and analyze a passage of their choice. Here is the assignment:

- (a) Discuss your gut reaction to the text (Did you like it? Did you hate it? Why? Did your feelings about it change? Would you recommend the text to a friend? Why or why not?)

AND

- (b) Analyze a short passage from the text by considering WHAT the author is saying and HOW he/she is saying it. (See “Tips for Close Reading” below).¹ You should choose a passage that is thematically and linguistically rich and that we have **not** discussed in class. Please type out the entire passage in your response paper and cite page number.

This written exercise demonstrates that “emotional” reactions to texts need not be separated from “intellectual” analyses of texts. In addition to assigning guided response papers, I often solicit reactions to the text at the beginning of a unit through an activity that democratizes the classroom community. In this

exercise, borrowed from a former colleague at a small high school I taught at many years ago who called it a “whip,” everyone in the classroom shares his or her response to the text. I emphasize that these contributions need not be brilliant or earth-shattering; I simply want to know how each student felt about the text. This allows everyone to be engaged in a low-stakes and non-threatening way. I use these reactions to structure my discussion of the text and emphasize how these initial reactions can lead to thesis statements for papers.

Finally, the context for these approaches to learning is the creation of a community in the classroom. The idea of a safe learning community may seem abstract, especially when I discuss it with students on the first day of class. But I underscore that the classroom is a community that is in flux and that depends upon the participation and investment of all of its members. This is why presence matters and why participation, both through speaking and active listening, is central to a successful classroom. I share bell hooks’ belief that “one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice” (hooks 40).

THEORETICAL STANCE:

In addition to the teaching philosophy that informs all of the courses I teach, I have developed a theoretical stance on teaching US Ethnic Literatures that I make explicit on the first day of class. In particular, I am committed to grounding the course in a meta-conversation around issues of canonicity and inclusion as well as encouraging students to unpack the term “American.” The course that I have taught most frequently since beginning my career as an English professor is entitled *Modern American Literature: 1914-1960*. Like any instructor of a survey course, I have had to answer some critical questions while creating my upper-division syllabus: Do I teach primarily “canonical” authors like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Eliot? Do I focus on the literary contributions of authors from historically marginalized groups? Do I combine the two canons? Do I reject the notion of canonicity altogether? These are by no means straightforward answers to tackle, as the debates around multiculturalism in the 1990s demonstrate. But I find Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s approach in his 1993 collection of essays entitled *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* to be quite useful. He articulates a third space between the stance of people like William Bennett and Allan Bloom who insist on being “guardians at the last frontier outpost of white male Western Culture” (Gates 42) and thus sanctify not only the notion of the canon but also a particular list of books in the canon, and those on “the cultural left” who reject the “hierarchical, patriarchal, and otherwise politically suspect” nature of any canon and seek to dismantle it entirely (Gates 34). The syllabus shifts a bit each semester, but I have largely stayed true to the initial approach I took when I first taught the course in Fall 2006. From an intellectual and political point of view, I believe that notions of American-ness need to be constructed, questioned, and engaged in critical ways not only by scholars but also by undergraduate students. To that end, I teach some familiar favorites of Modern American Literature, such as *The Waste Land*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *The Great Gatsby*, but I also assign texts of literary value written by American voices that have been silenced or oppressed, such as Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, José Antonio Villareal’s *Pocho*, and John Okada’s *No-No Boy*.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. eloquently articulates the belief system inherent in this pedagogical choice:

Indeed, this is one case where we've got to borrow a leaf from the right, which is extraordinarily aware of the role of education in the reproduction of values. We must engage in this sort of canon deformation precisely because Mr. Bennett is correct: the teaching of literature *is* the teaching of values; not inherently, no, but contingently, yes; it is – it has become – the teaching of an aesthetic and political order, in which no women or people of color were ever able to discover the reflection or representation of their images, or hear the resonance of their cultural voices. (35)

Despite the impulse by some to segregate literature from values, art and politics are deeply intertwined in ways that become clear in the classroom.

Indeed, teaching literature from this perspective has its own set of challenges, and some of the student responses to this inclusive approach to teaching American Literature reflect the reactions of many thinkers who opposed the opening of the canon in the 1990s. As Lillian Robinson recalls in an essay from *In the Canon's Mouth*, many people opposed the so-called “politicization of the curriculum” (105). Robinson notes that many progressive teachers have been accused of practicing a form of “literary affirmative action” (106). She asserts:

We are said to be proposing the addition of new voices ‘simply because’ of their gender, race or nationality, with no regard for the aesthetic values that had hitherto defined and (as it happens) closed the curriculum. A different aesthetic is presumed to be no aesthetic. And the female, black, working-class, or homosexual experience is critically assumed to be, at best, an unlikely candidate for canonization, precisely because it is the marked variant, whereas the experience of straight white men has a unique claim to universality. (107)

This refusal to acknowledge that a text like *The Great Gatsby*, written by a white male, is just as “political” as a text like *A Raisin in the Sun*, written by a black lesbian woman, is a perfect example of the pernicious phenomenon known as white privilege. Coined by Peggy McIntosh in 1988, white privilege refers to the invisible power that is conferred on light-skinned people. She writes: “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (McIntosh). One of the side effects of white privilege is the inability to recognize that whites (not just people of color) are “raced.” Undoing this white privilege is part of my work in the classroom, and it is often a struggle to confront.

INTRODUCING *NO-NO BOY*:

As a junior in high school, I won an essay contest sponsored by a Japanese American organization in San Francisco on the internment of people of Japanese descent during World War II. I wrote an essay linking the oppression of people of Japanese descent in the 1940s to the racial tensions of the 1990s, most

powerfully encapsulated in the “riots” in Los Angeles in 1992 that followed the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers who had beaten Rodney King after pulling him over for speeding in April of that year.ⁱⁱ As the first-prize winner, I was invited to participate in a ceremony of remembrance in San Francisco’s Japantown for those who were interned, and a piece of history that I learned about in the classroom came alive for me. However, it was not until I was studying for my oral exams in graduate school that I learned what a “no-no boy” was. My advisor recommended that I read John Okada’s 1957 novel *No-No Boy* as part of my preparation for the twentieth-century American Literature portion of my doctoral qualifying exam. The book provided a new lens through which to view this chilling moment in American history, and I recall being greatly moved by Okada’s prose and his ability to capture the pain that his protagonist feels after being interned for two years and then imprisoned for two years for refusing to sign a loyalty oath given by the United States Government. So when I had the opportunity to share the novel with students, I jumped at the chance. I have taught the novel several times in undergraduate classes, and the lessons I have learned from teaching this text to a diverse student population in the San Francisco Bay Area have reaffirmed my teaching and life philosophies.

I always ask my students how many have read *No-No Boy* before, and often the text is new to all of them. Occasionally a couple of students out of a class of forty or fifty have read it, but rarely in the context of an English class; more likely they have read the novel in a History class or an Ethnic Studies course. Because of the lack of familiarity with the text, I often spend more time than usual providing students with a biography of the author, background on the publication, recovery, and reception of the text, and the social and historical contexts that inform the novel. Born in 1923 in Seattle, John Okada was a Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) who was “not a No-No boy” (Chin 256). In fact, he served in the Army during World War II, “hanging out of an airplane over Japanese-held islands asking their occupants in their own language to give up” (Chin 256). Educated at University of Washington and Columbia University, Okada worked primarily as a librarian. He was also a technical writer for Chrysler Missile Operations in Michigan (Chin 259). Okada died of a heart attack in 1971, while in the process of writing a second book. Scholars have been curious about the content of this second novel, but the manuscript was destroyed by Okada’s wife, Dorothy Mitchell, after her husband’s death (Chin 256-77).

In his introduction to the 1976 edition of the novel, Lawson Inada recalls the “discovery” of *No-No Boy* in a Japantown bookstore in San Francisco by fellow author Jeff Chan (Inada iii). Reissued in paperback by the Combined Asian American Resources Project, Inc. in 1976, the text is now widely recognized as a seminal text in Asian American Literature. As Inada concludes: “For as with Carlos Bulosan’s *American Is In the Heart*, as with Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, and as with Toshio Mori’s *Yokohama, California*, John Okada’s *No-No Boy* is much more than a great and lasting work of art. It is a *living* force among us. And it is just one of the many beautiful and courageous stories of the continuing story of what we know as Asian America” (Inada vi). I also tell my students that *No-No Boy* belongs to a group of other texts by members of historically marginalized groups that were recovered in the 1970s and 1980s, one

AALDP | Cannon

of the most famous of which is Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In addition to providing the biographical background textual history of the novel, I distribute and discuss a handout that provides a glimpse of life in the 1940s for students living in the early twenty-first century. The handout consists of the following items:

1. An excerpt from an article in *Time Magazine*, published two weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor entitled "How To Tell your Friend from Japs"
2. A brief definition of Executive Order 9066 which removed approximately 120,000 Japanese people from their homes
2. A map of the United States with the ten relocation "camps"
4. Excerpts of the instructions for evacuation that were posted in San Francisco in April 1942
5. The two questions posed by internment camp officials on a Leave Clearance application, questions to which "no-no boys" like Okada's protagonist Ichiro answered "no"ⁱⁱⁱ

I spend a bit of time discussing the *Time Magazine* article, unpacking it both as a disturbing statement of racial and ethnic ignorance and as a literary text. When I ask students if there are any modern-day parallels to the ideas expressed in this article, many students point to the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hysteria in the United States following the September 11th, 2001 attacks as current manifestations of racial profiling. Showing students the evacuation orders that were posted in our very own city, San Francisco, also brings home this piece of history in immediate, tangible ways. Students are often surprised when I tell them that the site of a newly refurbished shopping mall just a few miles south of San Francisco, Tanforan, was used as a holding center for people of Japanese ancestry who were en route to relocation camps. This bit of local history reminds students that these events happened in our very own proverbial backyard. While making this history relevant might be more challenging in a community without a strong Japanese American presence, it is still possible. For instance, a classroom of mostly European American students in, say, rural Wisconsin, might be interested to learn that people of Italian and German ancestry were also targeted as "enemy aliens" during World War II. Although the number of Italian and German Americans interned was far fewer than the number of Japanese Americans interned, they were nonetheless arrested and detained under President Roosevelt's 1941 Enemy Alien Internment Program (Christgau vii, 33). Knowing that this wartime persecution was not limited to people of Japanese descent might give students who have little connection to Japanese American cultures and communities an entry into the discussion of Japanese American history that is central to understanding *No-No Boy*. Contextualizing Okada's novel establishes a common knowledge base as we read and discuss the text, but

it also jumpstarts critical thinking skills by encouraging students to question the apparent neutrality of journalism and history.

FORM & CONTENT:

There is often a tendency (even among progressive instructors) to emphasize the ethnicity of a text by a person from a minoritized group over its textuality. While much of the importance of Okada's text lies in its discussion of Japanese and American identity, it also exemplifies modernist sensibilities. As Shirley Geok-Lin Lim writes: "Divisions between races and cultures give rise to divisions within the individual. Authorial consciousness of the divided self leads to an increasing interiority of narrative style and to irony, the literary mode by which split or opposed points-of-view are yoked violently together" (Lim 64). I emphasize Okada's use of free indirect discourse and the stream of consciousness technique that allows the reader to enter Ichiro's mind. Indeed, these modernist techniques reinforce and inform the thematic thrust of *No-No Boy*, and I ask students to interrogate the link between what is often understood as the binary of form and content.

Notions of healing and forgiveness, not only of the individuals but also of communities, are central to *No-No Boy*. How does a group recover from large-scale traumas like the internment during World War II? I often ask students to trace images of illness, weakness, and emptiness throughout the text, taking a cue from Daniel Y. Kim's analysis: "Throughout the novel. . . [Ichiro's] self tortured psyche is described through figures of division, hollowness, and amputation – figures that all suggest castration. This metaphor of castration is rendered most explicitly in the contrast that *No-No Boy* draws between Ichiro's plight and that of Kenji, returning veteran who has lost a leg" (Kim 3). We discuss how these symbolic absences represent the aftermath of World War II for people in Japanese American communities. This exercise also gives me an opportunity to link form and content by calling attention to the third-person omniscient narration of the novel. The use of free indirect discourse refracts the various approaches that different characters in the Japanese-American community have towards healing. I ask students to isolate how various characters deal with this illness, and we talk about the slippery word "hope." While some characters are naively hopeful, others are cynical and self-destructive. Emi, a friend of Kenji who sleeps with Ichiro, says to Ichiro:

Make believe you're singing the "The Star Spangled Banner" and see the color guard march out on the stage and say the pledge of allegiance with all of the other boys and girls. You'll get that feeling flooding into your chest and making you want to shout with glory. It might even make you feel like crying. That's how you've got to feel, so big that the bigness seems to want to bust out, and then you'll understand why it is that your mistake was no bigger than the mistake your country made. (Okada 96)

Emi's almost obscene patriotism renders her a one-dimensional caricature in some ways, an observation that many students make about Emi in particular and Okada's female characters in general. Yet she is trying to move beyond the past in a non-confrontational way, which is quite different from the attitude of other Japanese American characters, such as Freddie, a fellow no-no boy with whom

Ichiro socializes on occasion. Freddie seems just as lost as Ichiro, but he expresses his anger by having sex, shooting pool, and drinking to excess. Freddie's self-destructive impulse comes to a head near the end of the novel when he insists on going to the ironically named Club Oriental and gets into a fight with Bull, a hulking white man who provokes him with racial epithets and physical intimidation (Okada 247). In order to escape the *melée*, Freddie jumps into a car but smashes it, killing himself instantly. One of the bystanders comments on the gruesome scene: "Didja see it? Poor guy musta been halfway out when the car smacked the building. Just about cut him in two" (Okada 249). Indeed, the literal splitting of Freddie symbolizes the spiritual cleavage that has haunted him, and there seems to be no possibility of redemption. But Ichiro's perspective lies somewhere in between, as the ending of the novel is ambiguous and refuses closure. Ichiro's thoughts are refracted through the third-person narrator: "A glimmer of hope – was that it? It was there, someplace. He couldn't see it to put it into words, but the feeling was pretty strong. He walked along, thinking, searching, thinking and probing, and, in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America, he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart" (Okada 250-1). As Ichiro walks away from the carnage of Freddie's death and the pathos of Bull crying like a baby in front of the bar, he seems to recognize the obstacles to hope, as indicated by the use of contingent words like "glimmer," "someplace," "faint," "elusive" and "insinuation," but he also seems to believe in the possibility of a different world where he can be forgiven, and, perhaps more importantly, forgive himself.

Two of the most powerful and deeply intertwined lessons of this text are that oppression is arbitrary and that the divide between oppressed and oppressor is blurry. Towards the end of the novel, Ichiro meets another no-no boy who finds solace in his work at the Christian Rehabilitation Center. He acknowledges the challenges faced by all people of Japanese descent in the U.S. after the War, including veterans, through the story of a Japanese man named Ohara who made a reservation at a resort but was expelled when he arrived because the "guy at the resort thought it was good old Irish O'hara" (227). A few pages later, Okada's narrator describes Ichiro's feelings about this story:

He was thinking about the apostrophe, the topside comma, the period with a tail on it. It was the little scale on which hinged the fortunes of the universe. It was the slippery, bald-headed pivot on which man hung, unborn and unnamed until suddenly he found himself squirming on one side or the other. It made a difference, of course, which side he chose to fall off on but, when a fellow can't see for the heavy cloud down below, he simply has to make up his mind in a hurry and hope for the best. Was that the erratic way of the Almighty? Ohara, O'Hara. Lock up the apostrophes for a while. We've got too many Irishmen. (Okada 228-9)

A class discussion of the history of the Irish in the United States, and how they suffered discrimination in the early twentieth century but eventually "became white" (to quote the title of Noel Ignatiev's 1995 text), reinforces students' understanding of how this novel suggests that oppression shifts depending on time and place.

The issue of identity in Okada's text is certainly an important and relevant one for the diverse student body I teach. Identity raises questions not only of personal heritage but also of literary history. Okada wrote this novel before there was such a thing as Japanese American people or Asian American literature, categories that we take as givens in 2013. Gordon Hirabayashi argues that "[Okada] heralded the beginning of an authentic *Japanese American literature*" (Hirabayashi 177), and Stan Yogi unpacks the political ramifications of such a beginning:

Through Ichiro's journey to re-establish himself as an American, Okada explores the gray area between the oppositions that develop around polarized definitions of "Japanese and "American," individuality and community, assimilation and cultural maintenance. In the course of the novel, Okada reveals how many of these oppositions are false and how polarized notions that divide the community tend to collapse in upon themselves. (Yogi 64)

I also call attention to the ways in which language and identity inform each other by discussing the idea of the hyphen. Even though Okada does not explicitly thematize the hyphen, his text invites reflection on this small but mighty piece of punctuation. One of my favorite activities when teaching *No-No Boy* is writing on the board JAPANESE AMERICAN and JAPANESE-AMERICAN and then asking students to consider the difference between the two. This often sparks a lively discussion on the meaning of the hyphen. Is it a bridge? Is it a minus sign? Both? Neither? Once again, the distinctions between form and content collapse as we see how language and subjectivity construct each other.

STUDENT RESPONSES:

These approaches to Okada's text result in a variety of student responses that indicate both strides in learning as well as resistance to learning. Their reactions range from resentment to empathy, which is why it serves as a good case study for looking at the challenges and rewards of teaching American Ethnic Literatures. Below are three responses to the text in three different semesters:

- (1) *I was chatting with my roommate about No-No Boy and we got to talking about the lack of education about Japanese internment in our country's public schools. She told me she mentioned it in her high school history class (in Wisconsin) and her teacher flat-out denied there was ever such a thing. This was sickening to me. It was through my AP English class in 11th grade that I was first exposed to the internment, through the novel Farewell to Manzanar. I don't recall any other mention of it until this class. Basically, thank you for teaching No-No Boy and allowing this ignored and repressed voice to be heard.*
- (2) *I was thinking about our class discussion today while on my one hour commute home to San Jose. I had a few thoughts about the comments that were made. One of the students said that she doesn't see hyphenated identities anymore. I think that's true when examining our print culture, but*

I think that it's a personal choice and personally, I still identify myself as Vietnamese-American. For me, it's a happy hyphen that marries the two cultures. Of course, that's when I'm envisioning my utopia, but most days I am very conscious of my multi-consciousness (female, Vietnamese, American, immigrant, Other, etc.). Rarely is the hyphen happy, but it's my conscious choice.

Another student mentioned feeling anger and wanting us all to identify as American. I understand his stance, but I see it as being problematic, also. On one hand, we're still identifying ourselves to something and that in itself is problematic because identity creates divisions amongst homo-sapiens, and hence, conflict, warfare, ignorance, [and] hatred, but also. . . not only are double identities necessary to ship out resources to appropriate groups, but America has a history of harming and colonizing others. For example, the Native Americans need to identify themselves so that Americans can continue to rectify their wrongs towards that specific group.

For me, when the student said that we should all identify as Americans, I wish that I could, but unlike him, if I did that, I would be erasing half of my history. My family is exiled from Vietnam because of communism. We didn't want to leave our country, but we didn't have a choice because communism was unbearable. Furthermore, if I said that I am American, I leave out my family's identity as The Boat People, and I leave out my ancestors' history of being colonized for thousands of years by the Chinese and the several decades by the French, not to mention the Vietnam War, and so on and so forth.

*Lastly, as I've been trying to learn about spirituality these last couple of years, I came across Eckhart Tolle, who is a spiritual teacher that wrote *The Power of Now*, and *A New Earth*. He talks about the ego and he says that people who identify themselves with a collective pain, for instance, women's oppression, civil rights, or homosexuality, although they are right for feeling the way they do, they are also wrong because their identity with this collective pain body is what's causing them internal conflict (similar to Ichiro identifying with all the other no-no boys). Do I honestly want to identify myself with all these oppressed intersections? I try and I wish I could eradicate my identities, but then, who would I be and do I really want to be invisible?*

- (3) *I feel cheated. This is the worst piece of literature that has been assigned to me to read in quite a long time. No-No Boy is easily the worst reading material to be assigned in this class. . . . Upon having made it to the midway point of this book, I thought to myself, "Why this novel? Why, in all the constellation of brightly burning stars that constitutes the American literary canon, why this?" It's not as though the book is a difficult read – I could have burned through the prose in a single sitting given enough time without interruption, but why? Why invest myself in this flimsy narrative about wretched characters at all? Perhaps the point Okada is trying to communicate is that World War II was such a tragic event in the history of Japanese American culture that the literature of the culture was horrifically stunted as a result? Perhaps the book itself is a symbol of profoundly scarred cultural psyche? Probably not. I feel cheated. Of all the things you could have told me to read*

and write about, you told me to read and write about this. And I resent that fact.

The first two responses were unsolicited reactions from students who sent me emails during the unit on *No-No Boy*. The third excerpt was from a response paper on the novel. These responses provide evidence of the kind of skills that I try to instill in my students, notably thinking critically and making links between the self and the text. But they also demonstrate the difficulties that arise when teaching multiethnic American Literature from my own pedagogical and philosophical stance.

The first response represents the fulfillment of one of my primary goals as a teacher: the realization that learning can (and should) happen beyond the walls of the classroom. The fact that this student was talking about something she learned in class with one of her peers is a small miracle, particularly at my university, which is largely a commuter campus. Because students are commuting to school from all over the San Francisco Bay Area and juggling school with employment, family obligations, and extracurricular commitments, there is often little opportunity for engagement beyond the classroom. I was heartened to know that she was discussing *No-No Boy* with her roommate, and I imagine that hearing her roommate's story about her high school teacher's denial of the internment of people of Japanese descent during World War II reinforced the idea that history is far from objective. Her anecdote was eye-opening for me as well, for it reminded me how systematic oppression as well as individual prejudice are reinforced and reinscribed when educational institutions perpetuate ignorance and misinformation.

The second response I have excerpted here was particularly powerful because it came from a student who excelled in her written assignments, but rarely spoke in class. Her poignant and candid reflection reminded me that there are so many personal struggles occurring within our students that we as teachers cannot access but that nevertheless have a profound impact on how they learn and what they learn. I could relate to this student's learning mode, for even throughout graduate school, I was a reticent speaker in classroom discussions. I find that I learn best when I listen to others, reflect on the information, and then articulate my own response, a process that often takes time. I feel fortunate that she chose to share this reflection with me, and it reminded me that one of the reasons teaching is such a privilege is that I have the opportunity to witness the transformation of other human beings. This student's reflection on her own experience as an Asian American woman in response to class discussions about *No-No Boy* also affirmed my belief in teaching this and other non-canonical texts in an American literature course. While I do not subscribe to the "affirmative action" approach to incorporating literatures by minoritized groups into American literature syllabi, I do believe that seeing one's experience represented in literature is vitally important. Though this student is not Japanese American, she could still relate to the immigrant experience and the experience of a divided cultural psyche that Okada's text thematizes. Being visible and being understood for who we are is an essential part of living with dignity and agency, and seeing this student work through those issues was quite gratifying. I also realize that the process of growth is ongoing and decidedly non-linear, and that I see students at various stages of their own personal development. As a result,

not all of their responses to the text make me feel warm inside. Yet if I apply to myself the maxim that discomfort leads to learning, then I can learn something from the student responses that brim with anger and resentment, as the third response does.

In the final response, I realized that instead of provoking a thoughtful analysis of the text, visceral reactions can sometimes prevent one. The language and tone of this student's response indicated to me that assigning this book had raised a multitude of thorny issues for him. I was tempted to take his words personally; I have never had a student tell me that he or she "resented" my book choice. Clearly more was at stake here for this student than simply not enjoying Okada's novel. Although this is an example of the reader's subject position short-circuiting his analysis of the text, he clearly has ideas about what makes a good piece of literature, and it would be great to see him reflect on those beliefs a bit more. Though I usually wrote one or two short sentences in response to these short papers, for this student, I typed out a longer reply, which I include here:

It seems that your reaction to the novel prevented you from doing a thorough analysis of the given passage. You need to discuss speaker, imagery, and word choice more in-depth. Also note that you need to type out the passage in its entirety as well. I respect your opinion of the text, and you are certainly not alone in feeling that this was your least-favorite text this semester. But I don't quite understand the vehemence of your reaction to the text and the ways in which you question and almost attack Okada and Japanese-American literature and culture. At the very least, I hope that the experience of reading this text allowed you to reflect on yourself as a person and as a scholar. The notion of feeling "cheated" because you had to read a book you didn't like demands further consideration in my mind. Are students entitled to "get paid" every time they go to class? What does it mean to "get" an education, as opposed to creating an education? I'm happy to talk with you about these ideas in office hours.

I never heard from this student regarding my comments, and I have no idea whether his ideas about the experience in my class have changed in the several years since he enrolled in the course. But I do know that it was an important learning exercise for me that encouraged me to find ways of responding to my students as human beings while also encouraging their development as critical thinkers and readers of literature.

CONCLUSION:

Teaching texts like *No-No Boy* in undergraduate American Literature courses allows me to impart critical thinking skills that students might apply to literature, to the world, and to themselves. Okada's novel is an ideal vehicle for shattering the binary thinking that threatens to produce a generation of citizens who simply consume without questioning or reflecting. Just as *No-No Boy* thematizes the attempt to find a third solution to racial hatred, a strategy that resists what Jinqi Ling calls "wholesale assimilation and fanatic Japanese nationalism" (Ling 365-6), teaching this text in a U.S. Literature class enables me to deconstruct binaries such as visceral/intellectual, form/content,

AALDP | Cannon

ethnic/American, and, perhaps most importantly, oppressor/oppressed. Being able to question and deconstruct binary oppositions is the crux of critical thinking, and it is the key to social change. My job is to challenge people to examine their own beliefs, and to reflect thoughtfully on the choices, ideas, and assumptions that inform who we are and who we are always in the process of becoming.

WORKS CONSULTED

"An 'Aberration' or Police Business as Usual?" *Los Angeles Times* 10 March 1991: E7. ProQuest. Web. 13 August 2009.

Awkward, Michael. *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. Print.

Aycock, Wendell. "Hyphen-nation." *MELUS* 7:1 (Spring 1980): 2. Print.

Chin, Frank. Afterword. *No-No Boy*. By John Okada. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1979. 253-260. Print.

Christgau, John. "*Enemies*": *World War II Internment*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1985. Print.

Daniels, Roger. *Prisoners without Trial: Japanese American World War II*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993. Print.

Edelstein, Marilyn. "Multiculturalisms Past, Present, Future." *College English* 68:1 (September 2005): 14-41. Print.

Freire, Paulo. *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach*. Boulder, CO: Westview P, 2005. Print.

Fuss, Diana. "Essentialism in the Classroom." *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference*. New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, Inc., 1989. Print.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. Print.

Gelfant, Blanche H. "Mingling and Sharing in American Literature: Teaching Ethnic Fiction." *College English* 43:8 (December 1981): 763-772. Print.

Hirabayashi Gordon. Review of *No-No Boy*. *Pacific Affairs* 53:1 (Spring 1980): 176-177. Print.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995. Print.

AALDP | Cannon

- Inada, Lawson Fusao. Introduction. *No-No Boy*. By John Okada. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1979. iii-vi. Print.
- Kim, Daniel Y. "Once More, with Feeling: Cold War Masculinity and the Sentiment of Patriotism in John Okada's *No-No Boy*." *Criticism* 47:1 (Winter 2005): 65-83. Print.
- LeDuff, Charlie. (2004, September 19). "12 Years After the Riots, Rodney King Gets Along: Out of the Public Eye, Pondering His Legacy." *New York Times*: N22. ProQuest. Web. 13 August 2009.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-Lin. "Twelve Asian American Writers: In Search of Self-Definition." *MELUS* 13:1/2 (Spring/Summer 1986): 57-77. Print.
- Ling, Jinqi. "Race, Power, and Cultural Politics in John Okada's *No-No Boy*." *American Literature* 67:2 (June 1995): 359-381. Print.
- McIntosh, Peggy. *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. Web. 4 December 2012.
<<http://www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html>>.
- Miller, Nancy K. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Mydans, Seth. "Verdicts Set Off a Wave of Shock and Anger." *New York Times* 30 April 1992: D22. ProQuest. Web. 13 August 2009.
- Nomura, Gail, Russell Endo, Russell Leong, & Stephen H. Sumida, eds. *Frontiers of Asian American Studies: Writing, Research, and Commentary*. Pullman: Washington UP, 1989. Print.
- Okada, John. *No-No Boy*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1979. Print.
- Robinson, Lillian. *In the Canon's Mouth: Dispatches From the Culture Wars*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997. Print.
- Sumida, Stephen H. "Asian/Pacific American Literatures in the Classroom." *American Literature* 65:2 (June 1993): 348-353. Print.
- Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989. Print.
- Wood, Daniel B. "L.A.'s darkest days." *The Christian Science Monitor* 29 April 2002, ALL ed.: 1. ProQuest. Web. 13 August 2009.
- Yogi, Stan. "'You Had to Be One or the Other': Oppositions and Reconciliation in John Okada's *No-No Boy*." *MELUS* 21:2 (Summer 1996): 63-77. Print.

ⁱ The six criteria for close reading come from *A Guide to Teaching in the English Department for GSIs* UC Berkeley, Fall 2002, page 181:

A close reading aims to wrestle with the words, images, and organization of a literary passage. A nuanced and thorough close reading is the foundation of any strong essay. This exercise clarifies the relationship between the content (WHAT is the author saying?) and the form (HOW is the author saying it?) of a passage. Here are some questions to consider when doing a close reading:

1. CONTEXT: How is the passage situated in the novel/poem/short story/drama? What happens immediately before and after the passage?
2. SPEAKER(S): Who is talking and why? Is the speaker objective or biased?
3. CHRONOLOGY: What is said first, second, third, etc.? Is the order of presentation important?
4. CONCEPTS: What main ideas is the passage or speaker trying to communicate?
5. IMAGERY: What sorts of images, similes or metaphors are used? What is their effect?
6. LANGUAGE: Is repetition, formal or informal language, and/or conventional or unconventional sentences important to the way meaning is produced in the passage?

ⁱⁱ On the evening of March 3, 1991, Rodney Glen King was pulled over for speeding in Fountain Valley, California. He was “struck as many as 56 times and kicked seven times by the three officers while a dozen more, including a supervising sergeant, watched” (“An ‘Aberration’”). The beating was captured on video by a bystander, and the video soon circulated nationwide. On April 29, 1992, four LAPD officers were acquitted of the beating by a jury trial, and the response to the verdict sparked violence in Los Angeles as people “rampaged through the streets of the city, smashing and looting stores, beating passing motorists and setting scores of fires” (Mydans D22). Rodney King pled for calm with the question: “Can we all get along?” (LeDuff N22). The conflagration lasted until May 3 (Wood, 1) and left “55 dead and \$1 billion in property damage” (LeDuff N22).

ⁱⁱⁱ The two questions were: (1) “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?” & (2) “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?” (Ling 360).