

**“No Place in Particular”:  
Inhabiting Postinternment America,  
Articulating Postinternment Anxieties  
in John Okada’s *No-No Boy***

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**I. Leading Questions**

While the telos of immigration, settlement, assimilation, and citizenship has been an enduring narrative of American history, it has not always been aligned with the reality of immigrants’ experiences and interactions with American society. Such is the case with Asian American immigration given its history of exclusion. A logic of exclusion has existed in Asian American history even after the national origins quota system was abolished in 1965, not to mention the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ legal edifices of restriction such as the Chinese exclusion law of 1882, the Immigration Act of 1917, and the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. The difficulty with which the two signifiers “Asian” and “American” coexist in the formation of Asian American identity has engendered an in/out position among Asian Americans in the United States who live as both “official nationals” and “foreigners-within.” Particularly, the opposing demands of capital and the US nation-state have been resolved through the racialization of Asian immigrants. As Lisa Lowe suggests, the racialization of Asian immigrant labour has served to cover the contradiction between the demands of capital that requires an influx of cheap labour and those of the US nation-state that must unify its members to constitute itself as a homogeneous citizenry (5).

Accordingly, the liminal position of Asian Americans has not fit neatly into US nation-building prerogatives and attests to the state’s power to presuppose an outside within its domestic space while illustrating the contingent consolidation of the nation against itself—a kind of “[e]xceptionalism that defines and affirms a people by negating others,

who form their opposition” (Okiihiro 148).<sup>1</sup> In other words, the United States presents itself as an inclusive entity supposedly comprised of *all* American citizens with the rhetoric of *e pluribus unum*, yet its universality is contradicted by the very presence of its constitutive outside that is placed in opposition to the particular articulation of the nation. An irony here is that the excluded, who are presumed to be outside of the nation’s universal norms and its coherence, become an *anomaly* that is “internal to the state yet external to the national narrative” (Pease 549). It is precisely in this context that Lowe argues Asian American culture is pitted against the US national culture as “an alternative formation” while it is haunted by the memories of a US nation-state based on Asian immigrant racialization and imperialist projects in Asia: “This distance from the national culture constitutes Asian American culture as an alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen in the nation” (6). The imperative of the nation has thus defined and delimited the psychic identifications that make up Asian American identities, most visibly in the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, which, as Mae Ngai writes, still “stands as the most extreme case of the construction and consequences of alien citizenship in American history” (175).

Given such historical specificities of Asian American experience and the racialization of Asian Americans, I seek to reconsider John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) in this article with an eye toward the protagonist Ichiro Yamada’s plight of inhabiting postinternment America as a space of contradiction and Okada’s strategy to articulate postinternment anxieties. The title of Okada’s novel derives from the history of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. On February 19, 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued “Executive Order 9066” under which approximately 12,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were “relocated” throughout the Pacific coast region to desolate internment camps.<sup>2</sup> In 1943, the War Department planned to recruit young Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) internees and they were administered a Selective Service questionnaire. As a security-clearance measure, internees were asked about their willingness to serve in the American forces and were compelled to forswear allegiance to Japan.

In the novel, Ichiro Yamada is among those who answered “no” to both questions and, like other “no-no boys,” was jailed for disloyalty.<sup>3</sup> Such a governmental narrative of internment exemplified the US’s various articulations of nationhood against the backdrop of Asian America, thereby bringing into sharp relief how “Asian” could be separated from “American” in the formation of Asian American identity. “Asian American” as a sign of redefining the nation and “a constantly shifting designation” (Palumbo-Liu 13) becomes a compelling reminder that the very idea of national identity is contingent upon what it is *not* as much as what it includes.

Having experienced displacement and disruption, and having been “denied a *place* as citizens” (Okada 52; emphasis added) due to their Japanese origins and ties, returned internees were in urgent need of an act of *re*-remembering against *dis*-membering by reconfiguring their lives in old places, and they were faced also with the growing pressure to blend into a postwar-America steeped in consensus politics and conformist sentiment. Returned internees’ desire to reclaim a place of their own is thus at the heart of *No-No Boy*, which I suggest deals with the aftermath of the internment no less than the internment *per se*.<sup>4</sup> Confronted with such urgency to propose an alternative reconstruction by inhabiting the nation as a space of contradiction, *No-No Boy* becomes a story of competing spatial logics and desires. My argument here is that contending spatial visions become apparent most dramatically in the suburban fantasies harboured by Ichiro.

The postwar suburban sprawl was not only a significant demographic shift in postwar US history but also an historical instance within which the logic of national consensus was acted out by marketing the suburbs as a cultural outpost of belonging, complacency, and conformity.<sup>5</sup> However, the no-no boy’s surreptitious desire for belonging led by his suburban fantasies entails a set of questions. What happens when the idea of the postwar suburb meets up with returned internees’ and no-no boys’ compulsory struggle for national belonging? What is gained and lost if they shift their allegiances from the old ethnic ties to the new suburban ideal of postwar-America? Is the move to postwar suburbia likely to lead to a pluralistic integration in tune with the postwar pressures

to conform across racial boundaries, or is it likely to reinforce racial identities by resorting to a defensive ethnic mobilization to preserve a sense of cultural distinctiveness? All these questions are inseparable from the postwar suburban culture deeply embedded in the values of homeownership, marriage, childbearing, conformity, and the middle-class, consumer-oriented way of life.<sup>6</sup>

That said, as I will demonstrate, some notable tensions arise when the specificities of Asian American experiences of exclusion are pitted against the ideal of American citizenship and the new sense of suburban belonging. Such tensions serve to dismiss facile narratives of the assimilation and integration of Asian Americans. As a site of belonging forged out of various longings and affective investments, the postwar US suburb signaled to returned internees and no-no boys an ambiguous narrative of historical amnesia and forgiveness while they reside within the US cultural and psychic borders deployed to define what constitutes “postinternment America.” This article thus argues for an appropriate approach to the tricky nature of Ichiro’s unresolved dilemma in *No-No Boy* by teasing out the US postwar suburb as a tableau bearing the imprint of the postinternment milieu of the 1950s and by interrogating how suburban fantasies reveal both promises and limitations of Japanese Americans’ surreptitious desires for belonging.

In addition, the postwar suburb and the postwar consensus politics embedded in the text are inextricably linked to Okada’s textual negotiations with the postwar readership to articulate a historical trauma in a “limited cultural space” (Ling, *Narrating* 37) allowed for the author. Put otherwise, if suburban fantasies are closely associated with the resolution of Ichiro’s plight as a no-no boy, it is of paramount importance to ask if Okada ultimately embraces the rhetoric of national self-legitimation by envisioning the suburb as a place in which a historical rupture is believed to be sutured. That question provides an entrée into a discussion of Okada’s textual intervention in the cultural climate of the late 1950s, thereby allowing us to examine how the no-no boy’s suburban fantasies are constructed or contested and how postwar suburban culture is affirmed or questioned vis-à-vis the no-no boy’s and the author’s predicaments.

## II. "No Place in Particular"

*No-No Boy* opens with Ichiro returning home after a four year absence, "two in camp and two in prison" (1). As soon as he steps off the bus, Ichiro runs into an old Japanese American friend named Eto. Eto, however, turns hostile and spits in Ichiro's face as soon as he learns that his friend is a no-no boy who did not serve in the US army but instead chose to go to prison. The "despising hatred" (3), repeatedly surfacing in Ichiro's encounters with other returned Nisei soldiers, has a deep resonance throughout the text. Still preoccupied with polarized definitions of "American" and "Japanese," postwar Nisei nationalism regards no-no boys who wear a "scarlet letter" of disloyalty as a stain on their community. What actually makes Nisei youths hostile toward no-no boys, however, is that no-no boys stir up what they truly wish to forget: they are also "Japs" despite their "badges of courage." The insulting epithet "Japs" that Japanese American veterans use to despise no-no boys returns to them the very moment they seek to separate themselves from "disloyal" no-no boys as sharply as possible. With the crushing weight of assimilation and conformity on their shoulders, Nisei veterans turn their faces away from the root causes of their alienation from the mainstream society. As a result, they can never fully understand that no-no boys have attempted to live out the "American promise" on their own terms by squarely confronting the contradiction of American citizenship.

The festering opposition between "Japanese" and "American" awaits Ichiro at home as well. Mrs. Yamada, Ichiro's mother, takes pride in her son's "choice," which she sees as his complete identification with her Japanese nationalism, and the "Japanese" mother welcomes the nation's "prodigal son" warm-heartedly: "I am proud to call you my son" (11). As a fanatic nationalist, she never accepts the Japanese defeat and waits for the ships that she hopes will be sent by the Japanese government to take home the "loyal" Japanese, including her family. In contrast, Ichiro's younger brother, Taro, feels so compelled to prove his Americanness and atone for his brother's "sin" that he cannot wait for the day he turns eighteen to enlist in the army. Caught in the American/Japanese split, Taro even lures Ichiro out of the Club Oriental so that his Nisei friends can assault his brother.

Ichiro's postwar Japanese American community has thus become an arena of competing strategies of assimilation/resistance, conformity/dissent, and accommodation/confrontation. Ichiro is seeking to get away from his community's restrictive definitions of who he is, but it is hard for him to completely dissociate himself from his past:

A man does not start anew totally because he is already old by virtue of having lived and laughed and cried for twenty or thirty or fifty years and there is no way to destroy them without destroying life itself. That he [Ichiro] understood. He also understood that the past had been shared with a mother and father and, whatever they were, he too was a part of them and they a part of him and one did not say this is as far as we go together, I am stepping out of your lives, without rendering himself only part of a man. If he was to find his way back to that point of wholeness and belonging, he must do so in the place where he had begun to lose it. (154–55)

What is more painful to Ichiro than the matter of whether or not to leave his hometown is his realization that there are very few geographical alternatives for him both physically and psychologically. His dilemma is not so much whether he should stay or go but that he has nowhere to go. He feels mounting pressure to reconfigure the world which he must share with the returned veterans and internees. The fear of finding himself always “out of place” trails Ichiro no matter where he goes. As the two questions of who he is and where he belongs are imbued with each other's resonance, Ichiro's surreptitious desire to carve out a niche for himself is merged with his fear of never being able to find it. The preface of *No-No Boy* addresses this issue with an account of a Japanese American soldier, presumably Okada's persona, who is on a reconnaissance mission to Japan.<sup>7</sup> When asked by his lieutenant, a “blond giant from Nebraska,” where he is from, all the Nisei soldier comes up with is equivocation: “No place in particular” (x). Aligned with Ichiro's plight of having no clear destination, the Nisei soldier's evasive answer implies that neither returning to old places nor leaving them will ever be a redemptive experience for Ichiro.

From the beginning of the novel one is struck by both Ichiro's craving for belongingness as well as the social realities that undermine his desire. When he returns to the once familiar places inscribed in his memory, Ichiro, to his dismay, finds himself adrift and astray since the war has wreaked "violent changes upon the people" and the people, in turn, have "distorted the profile of Jackson Street" (5), a section of Japanese Town in Seattle. The city and Ichiro's remembered community is respatialized and he accordingly feels "like an intruder in a world to which he had no claim" (1). It should come as no surprise that Ichiro's father has sent Ichiro a letter that was "purposely repetitive and painstakingly detailed so that Ichiro should not have any difficulty finding the place" (6). As his sense of place is defamiliarized, Ichiro feels "as if he were a foreigner coming to the city for the first time" (6). The anxiety Ichiro feels upon his return home, both hailed as a Japanese mother's prideful son and condemned as a nation's "prodigal son," penetrates the whole text and paves the way for all his anticipations of reception and rejection. His problematic relationship to Jackson Street thus combines Ichiro's compelling story of "who I am" with his desperate question of "where am I?" (39). Caught in the contesting spaces for overarching US nationalism, Issei pro-Japanese patriotism, and Nisei nationalism is Ichiro's narrow sphere of belonging. What Ichiro must come to terms with are those competing demands and an urgent need to move away from them to find a niche for himself.

### III. "An Unquestionable Place"

Since "being American is a terribly incomplete thing" (54), Ichiro cannot shrug off the fear that he will never be able to belong to either of the two worlds that interpellate him respectively as a nation's prodigal son and a mother's Japanese son. Meandering through "the ugly street with ugly buildings among the ugly people which was a part of America and, at the same time, would never be wholly America" (71), Ichiro comes to fantasize about a geographical and social anonymity from the two worlds as "his heart mercifully stacked the blocks of hope into the pattern of an America which would someday hold an unquestionable place for him" (52). He continues:

Was there no hope of redemption? Surely there must be. He was still a citizen. He could still vote. He was free to travel and work and study and marry and drink and gamble. People forgot and, in forgetting, forgave. Time would erase the rupture which now separated him from the young Japanese who were Americans because they had fought for America and believed in it. And time would destroy the old Japanese who, living in America and being denied a place as citizens, nevertheless had become inextricably a part of the country which by its vastness and goodness and fairness and plenitude drew them into its fold, or else they would not have understood why it was that their sons, who looked as Japanese as they themselves, were not Japanese at all but Americans of the country America. In time, he thought, in time there will be again a place for me. I will buy a home and love my family and I will walk down the street holding my son's hand and people will stop and talk with us about the weather and the ball games and the elections. (51–52)

Interestingly, Ichiro's longing to "start anew" is fleshed out in the form of "an unquestionable place," where forgetting and forgiveness are recalled as an adequate, if not outright permanent, solution to Ichiro's plight. While this new sense of place sometimes borders on despair, it is not a fleeting vision for Ichiro. It rather recurs like a leitmotif throughout the novel, demonstrating how Ichiro seeks to displace his trauma onto space to gain a safe, reassuring distance from the past and to map out a future. Furthermore, such a new sense of place keyed to the country's "vastness," "goodness," "fairness," and "plenitude" is predicated upon the clichés of suburban domesticity of the 1950s and the middle-class lifestyle in mass-produced, single-family dwellings in the suburbs—the period's reigning ideals that came to dominate America's cultural landscape after World War II. As the novel unfolds, Ichiro's desire for a new, fresh start in the US postwar suburb takes on a more distinctive form with the visible indices of middle-class suburban family life accreted.

While Ichiro's ties to Jackson Street and the Japanese American community are never moored to a specific site such as a house, a bar, an



apartment, or a farm, an ardent desire for taking root in “an unquestionable place” begins to nourish Ichiro’s aspirations for a suburban life. For instance, Ichiro is envious of the Kumasaka family’s decision for settlement. When his mother pays a visit with him to the Kumasakas who lost their son in the war, she flaunts her “Japanese” son to them who she believes have sacrificed their son on the altar of loyalty. The Kumasakas, who ran a dry-cleaning shop before the war, have arrived at a decision of “finally sinking roots into the land” (26) and bought “a freshly painted frame house” with “a neatly kept lawn” (25). Sitting down on the sofa in a room furnished with “rugs and soft furniture and lamps and end tables and pictures on recently papered walls” (26), Ichiro cannot but covet the house that is “like the millions of other homes in America and could never be his own” (26).

Kenji’s father is another character who has opted for rooting. He has been “fixed for a long time,” which he takes positively as “a good feeling” (118). His house is laden with “the new rugs and furniture and lamps and the big television set with the radio and phonograph all built into one impressive blond console” (118). In a family gathering at the house with Kenji’s siblings, in-laws, and their children the night before Kenji heads for a hospital in Portland for his second operation, it is revealed that “the family has thoroughly adopted the behavior and values of the American middle class of that era” (Yogi 70). They are talking about “baseball on television” (128), how “to keep two cars in the double garage behind a large brick house in a pretty good neighborhood” (129–30), and so on, most of which epitomizes the expansive, consumer-oriented, and conformist suburban lifestyle in postwar US society.<sup>8</sup> Although the festive atmosphere of the occasion is clouded by an undercurrent of fear of Kenji’s impending fate, the gathering bears an imprint of the suburban culture deeply imbedded in the cultural milieu of the 1950s.

It is Emi who significantly affects Ichiro by planting herself firmly in his quest for a spatial alternative inextricably tied to the postwar American suburb. Separated from (or abandoned by) her husband who refuses to return home after the war, Emi serves as both a lover and mother to Ichiro, providing for him the maternal nurturing that he

no longer receives from his own mother. Emi exhorts Ichiro to “start anew” by telling him to “[a]dmit your mistake and do something about it” (95). Her rhetoric echoes the familiar American sense of place that enables Ichiro to “start clean” while admitting that “[t]o forget completely would be impossible” (112): “This is a big country with a big heart. There’s room here for all kinds of people. Maybe what you’ve done doesn’t make you one of the better ones but you’re not among the worst either” (95). Emi’s rhetoric of the bigness of the country is conditioned here by her belief in its capability to forgive. While it is questionable whether Emi’s narrative of forgetting and forgiveness is soothing to Ichiro’s wounded self, she, at least, seems to pave the way for Ichiro’s relentless quest for a place of belonging.

In addition, it is noteworthy that Emi is described as a Caucasian-like woman rather than a typical Asian woman: “Emi was several inches taller than Kenji. She was slender, with heavy breasts . . . and her long legs were strong and shapely like a white woman’s” (83). This description of Emi’s features stands in stark contrast to that of Ichiro’s “Japanese” mother who is portrayed as “a small, flat-chested shapeless woman” who has a “skinny body of a thirteen-year-old” (10). It is in this context that Kenji’s advice to Ichiro echoes: “Go someplace where there isn’t another Jap within a thousand miles. Marry a white girl or a Negro or an Italian or even a Chinese” (164). Attuned to Kenji’s desire for a new life in a color-blind society, Emi’s racial identity is ingeniously equivocated. As Ichiro becomes more and more involved in his love affair with Emi, she figures as an eligible woman with whom he wishes to have a family in a suburban neighborhood. He imagines “holding his son’s hand” and talking about “the weather and the ball games and the elections” with his neighbours on the street:

Where is that place they talk of and paint nice pictures of and describe in all the homey magazines? Where is that place with the clean, white cottages surrounding the new, red-brick church with the clean, white steeple, where the families all have two children, one boy and one girl, and a shiny new car in the garage and a dog and a cat and life is like living in the land of

the happily ever-after? Sure it must be around here someplace,  
some place in America. (159)

Keyed to Emi's preaching of forgetting and forgiveness, Ichiro fantasizes about a suburban life that he hopes will allow his trauma to be healed. Not incidentally, Ichiro suddenly realizes that he is twenty-five years old—probably a scintillating recognition that he is old enough to have his own family.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. No-No Boy Goes to the Suburb?

Ichiro's fantasy about a suburban life is deeply wedged into the dramatic transition the United States had gone through in the twentieth century from Depression to war and to the exodus from cities to suburban areas after World War II. The ideal of the freestanding single-family dwelling with lawn, carport, and a bedroom for everyone in the postwar US society became possible for a larger range of families than ever before by the policies of mass-produced suburbs, facilitated by the GI Bill, ingenious planning, energetic marketing, interstate highways, and new freeways.<sup>10</sup> Homes were affordable and available, and labour-saving devices and new appliances to fill those homes were multiplying at a staggering rate. It was not only a significant demographic shift in American history but also a reaffirmation of the American Dream, a reassuring vision of the good life that was supposed to be available to everyone. The suburban tableau thus reflects profound, shared national experiences of space in the American psyche from the westward movement, to the closing of the frontier in the late nineteenth century, and then to the suburbanization and housing crises in the mid-twentieth century. The suburb was a new type of terrain, a variation of Henry Nash Smith's conception of the West as "the garden of the world" and Leo Marx's "middle landscape" as "a new, distinctively American, post-romantic, industrial version of the pastoral design" (Marx 32). It dissolved the urban and rural distinction by linking urban socio-political dynamism to the countryside where the pastoral ideal was supposed to survive.<sup>11</sup> The latest compromise has been made particularly since the end of World War II when many Americans had the old feeling of making a new start in suburban

regions where mass-produced single-family houses were marketed as a piece of the American dream for a modicum of comfort, intimacy, and convenience.<sup>12</sup>

Traditional scholarship on the American suburb describes it as homogeneous, conformist, and bourgeois. The urban historian Lewis Mumford suggests in his seminal *The City in History* (1961) that the American suburb was fast becoming a “low-grade uniform environment from which escape was impossible” (486). In contrast, to Mumford the city represented a rich opportunity to nurture social diversity and served as a mainstay of democratic pluralism. Concurring with Mumford, Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) celebrates the pluralistic view of urban life. Seeing postwar suburbia through the lens of postwar critics like Mumford, many observers have continued to paint a monochromatic picture of the suburban world as white, affluent, and conformist. For instance, Kenneth Jackson argues that there are “essential similarities in American suburbanization” (6). In a similar vein, Robert Fishman contends that the American suburb “expresses values so deeply embedded in bourgeois culture, that it might be called a bourgeois utopia” (4). From this perspective, Catherine Jurca in her comprehensive study of US suburban literature and culture pathologizes suburbia with deepening irony by posing an intriguing question of why suburbanites feel a sense of entrapment at home as if they are “spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity” (7). She argues that “the suburb is the exemplary location, not only of middle-class advantages, but of middle-class abasement; moreover, its abasement is a function of its advantages” since “material benefits” may serve for the suburbanites as “cultural and spiritual handicaps” (4).

In addition to the comprehensive study of suburban middle-class homogeneity and uniformity, what is particularly interesting to me is how the idea of a suburban utopia as a bulwark against the crowding, poverty, and industrialized aesthetic of urban life was also predicated upon its ability to segregate and defend the white homestead with explicit racial overtones. In actuality, the Federal Housing Administration’s “redlining” policies gave rise to the creation of white suburban communities that systematically excluded people of colour, and gave an official

stamp of approval to the exclusionary practices. Developers even used race-specific deed restrictions in order to market exclusion and actively promote suburbanization through segregation by insuring home loans for new single-family houses in homogeneous neighbourhoods while multiracial, older, and urban communities were neglected. For instance, William J. Levitt, developer of Levittown, specified in contracts “the residents must be of the Caucasian race” (Jackson 241; Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 135). Despite the 1968 Fair Housing Act to prohibit housing discrimination and residential segregation, the redlining practices resulted in a long-term social injustice, coupled with the devastating effects of urban renewal.

In this sense, the repressed histories of racial anxieties belie the traditional logic of suburban regions marketed as privileged sites of social homogeneity and places of safety free from urban ills and an urban sense of alienation. Moreover, the suburban as a cultural enfranchisement for *all* Americans has ironic meanings when juxtaposed with Asian American history, which vividly demonstrates the conflicting logic of US citizenship deployed at once to preserve national boundaries and to accommodate an absolute racial separateness. What does Ichiro’s surreptitious desire for the suburb entail if social homogeneity and exclusion coexist in the postwar US suburb? Do Ichiro’s suburban fantasies mean a retreat into a nostalgic longing for an abstract, generalized sense of place rooted in community and racial homogeneity? Can the no-no boy’s move to the suburb really serve as a conduit for a clean, fresh start? In the next section I will seek to answer these questions by linking them to Okada’s textual intervention in the cultural and ideological milieu of the 1950s.

### V. No-No Boy(s): Ichiro/Okada in Postinternment America

As *No-No Boy* comes close to its ending, the reader may feel an increasing sense of redemption as Ichiro’s experiences take a favourable turn. While he accompanies Kenji to the hospital in Portland, Ichiro has a job interview with a man called Mr. Carrick who regards the internment as a “black mark in the annals of American history” (150) and sympathizes with Ichiro’s no-no boy position. Ichiro decides not to accept his

job offer after due consideration, but Mr. Carrick's apologist gesture allows Ichiro to see himself without relying on the split of "Japanese" and "American." Ichiro's internal reconciliation seems to be achieved when he goes dancing with Emi after the funeral of his mother. He is seen eventually unleashing himself from the fetters of his mother's obstinate pro-Japanese standpoint: "I feel a little bit freer, a bit more hopeful" (196). Apparently, the dance floor on which Ichiro and Emi dance together in each other's arms harks back to Emi's rhetoric of forgetting and forgiveness:

This is the way it ought to be, he thought to himself, to be able to dance with a girl you like and really get a kick out of it because everything is on an even keel and one's worries are only the usual ones of unpaid bills and sickness in the family and being late to work too often. Why can't it be that way for me? Nobody's looking twice at us. Nobody's asking me where I was during the war or what the hell I am doing back on the Coast. . . . I've got to love the world the way I used to. I've got to love it and the people so I'll feel good, and feeling good will make life worth while. There's no point in crying about what's done. There's a place for me and Emi and Freddie here on the dance floor and out there in the hustle of things if we'll let it be that way. I've been fighting it and hating it and letting my bitterness against myself and Ma and Pa and even Taro throw the whole universe out of perspective. I want only to go on living and be happy. I've only to let myself do so. (209)

When a slightly drunken white man buys Ichiro and Emi a drink, Ichiro prefers to think that the man "saw a young couple and liked their looks and felt he wanted to buy them a drink and did" regardless of what they are and what they were (211). Well beyond the constraints and confines of his burdening dilemma, Ichiro is "feeling immensely full" (211) having embraced the country's "bigness," "vastness," and "forgiveness" once lauded by Emi. With Ichiro's suburban fantasies and Emi's preaching of forgiveness symbolically projected onto the dance floor, an image of a suburbanite couple begins to take shape.

Apparently, Ichiro's groping for a sense of wholeness never loses its momentum as it accretes with phrases fraught with Ichiro's growing confidence, such as "He was young still, but a little wiser" (232), "After the rain, the sunshine" (232), "A glimmer of hope" (250), and an "insinuation of promise" (251). However, it still remains to be seen if Ichiro's suburban American dream will fully live up to its promise and if the postwar suburb will be presented as a means of solution to Ichiro's plight. As noted earlier, Ichiro's implied assimilation into the postwar suburb, attuned to Emi's advice of amnesia and forgiveness, is problematic because it is not so much a cultural counter-practice as a compliance with an amnesic reaction to the "evacuated" history of the internment of Japanese Americans and racial overtones implicit in the postwar suburb. The following quote deserves a closer look in this regard:

They're on the outside looking in, just like that kind and just like me and just like everybody else I've ever seen or known. Even Mr. Carrick. Why isn't he in? Why is he on the outside squandering his goodness on outcasts like me? Maybe the answer is that there is no in. Maybe the whole damned country is pushing and shoving and screaming to get into some place that doesn't exist, because they don't know that the outside could be the inside if only they could stop all this pushing and shoving and screaming, and they haven't got enough sense to realize that. That makes sense. I've got the answer all figured out, simple and neat and sensible. (159–60)

Ichiro, struggling with his no-no boy plight alongside a dream of a suburban family life, asks himself what it means to be "on the outside looking in." Apposite here would be a critique of the internment enacted by a remapping of the nation's interior and defining its identity against others who are excluded from this particular vision. What should be revealed is how such an expression of national interior space ironically contains within itself a constitutive outside—the presence of "an American in an American concentration camp," which is "enclosed by wire fencing" and sentined by "guards who were American soldiers like himself" (121). Thus, Ichiro's suburban vision could disclose the fact

that the nation's interiority is actually established by its interaction with the outside that is therefore itself a part of what constitutes national interior, and that the interior is apt to be turned *out* insofar as it depends on an outside that provides its conditions of possibility. While Ichiro's sudden doubt as to the certainty of inside and the distinctness of outside evokes the nation's remapping of its space by holding internees behind barbed wire that corresponds to a revisionist act of making an outside within the nation's interior, it never lasts long enough for Ichiro to work it tenaciously through to the point where it threatens to dismantle what lies under the veneer of a suburban way of life for Japanese Americans.

That problem is not without its implication for the ambiguous ending of the novel. Okada does not end the novel with Ichiro's assimilation into his suburban dream, and the very place Ichiro craves throughout the novel is not conclusively presented as reducible to an actual geographical location. Accordingly, one may quibble with the future Ichiro maps out for himself at the end of the novel as he is still "thinking, searching, thinking and probing . . . in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America" and chasing "that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continues to take shape in mind and in heart" (251). Will Ichiro and Emi enter marriage in a model suburban home adorned with labour-saving appliances and furnishings and play their roles respectively as a successful breadwinner and a supporting, attractive homemaker? Will Ichiro ever recognize that his suburban fantasy is likely to be caught up in the suburban conformity rather than envision an alternative interpretation of place? What is at issue here is to assess whether the author resolves those questions or merely glosses over them as articulated by the traditional scholarship on *No-No Boy*, which has read the novel as a postinternment Asian American text that, resignedly, if not outright eagerly, embraces postwar US ideologies gravitating toward a unified American culture.<sup>13</sup>

It is at this juncture that Emi's rhetoric of forgetting and forgiveness, aligned with the powerful political consensus of the era, strikes quite a different note. Issuing from a character whose rhetoric of forgetting and forgiveness is as straightforwardly molded throughout the text as the obstinate Japanese nationalist attitudes of Ichiro's mother, Emi's naïve



belief in the country's capability to forgive readily calls itself into question and thus, as Ling suggests, should be read as a parody of "the mainstream culture's portrayals of the United States as a happy melting pot" (*Narrating* 48). As a parallel, one should take with a grain of salt Kenji's exhortation to Ichiro to live a life in a place where he is no longer afflicted by his split identity. That place evokes the dance floor represented earlier as a compelling metaphor for a utopian society where the no-no boy's anxieties become a matter of attitudes—dancing with a girl you love and buying a drink at your pleasure for whomever you run into and instantly like. Kenji sounds quite ironic here, particularly given his sardonic manner, corroded bit by bit by the premonition of death and renunciation of all the hopes for life.

Ling's exploration of Ichiro's plight by locating *No-No Boy* in a larger context of cultural production in the late 1950s serves here as a case in point. Given the Japanese American community's reluctance to revisit the years just past and given the postwar consensus, the most tricky question Okada was confronting, according to Ling, is "how to convey the severity of the World War II rupture in Japanese American life within the limited cultural space allowed for Asian American literary expression" ("Race" 362). Ling continues to argue that Okada was well aware of "the era's conditional receptivity to Asian American literary writings" and that "an autobiographical—hence documentary—account of Japanese Americans' wartime sufferings would be either too shocking for postwar readers or too vulnerable to ideological censorship" ("Race" 362).

Building upon and extending Ling's insightful investigation of such a discursive terrain within which *No-No Boy* was produced, I would like to put forth an argument that Ichiro's suburban fantasies are effectively utilized as an "elusive insinuation of promise" (251) as Okada insinuates himself into the text by projecting his authorial concerns onto his protagonist's suburban fantasies. Okada represents a suburb fantasized by his character not as a "lived" place but as an "imagined" place that can never be reached. Such elusiveness is both symptomatic and determining of the extent to which Okada's textual intervention works through postinternment anxieties. In other words, if an urgent task confront-

ing Okada is not merely a matter of resisting the dominant culture or advocating postwar American ideologies, the “limited cultural space” allowed for him becomes rather a space wherein a contingent formation of Japanese American identity appears in relation to multiple contingencies—caring for postinternment Japanese American community, a sense of control over one’s recent historical trauma, a renewed sense of self-respect, public recognition, and reclaiming American identity.

Okada’s textual intervention here meets up with Ichiro’s plight and Okada stands in for Ichiro as another kind of “no-no boy” in the postwar US society by opting for neither conformity nor dissent. Okada transforms his protagonist into a would-be postwar suburbanite who links concerns about Japanese American authorship and Americanness with concerns about survival on both the material and cultural levels. It is precisely in this context that one is able to understand why Okada has presented what Ichiro is eager to belong to as a “place that doesn’t exist” (160). That place thus becomes a vexed but counter-hegemonic space where readers are enabled to recognize what cultural consent or confrontation entails for both the author and the no-no boy. As such, Okada insinuates himself into Ichiro’s plight, postinternment anxieties, and cultural contingencies of the 1950s in America rather than merely bypasses them through the lens of a suburban way of life with which one is supposed to start anew. Okada may not have pointed to a moment beyond a specific point as the prefix “post” in “postinternment” may signal. He resists an ending rooted in a utopian moment by neither privileging the “post” nor accepting that a status for Japanese Americans of social exclusion internal to the nation is over. Such an elusive nature of Okada’s rendition of Ichiro’s suburban fantasies—both desirous of a specific moment “beyond” and skeptical of it—is at the heart of *No-No Boy*.

## Notes

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1 For instance, see Kaplan for the examination of the US national narrative straddling bipolar spaces, “the domestic” and “the foreign,” in the particular context of nineteenth-century US history.

2 See Takaki, 379–405.

- 3 The two questions to which no-no boys answered “no” are as follows: “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States in combat duty wherever ordered?”; “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attacks of foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese Emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization?” (Takaki 397).
- 4 Concurring with Jingqui Ling and Viet Nguyen, Kim positions *No-No Boy* as a text of the 1950s (65–66).
- 5 A majority of the nation’s middle-class families lived in homes they owned for the first time in 1946. See Jackson, especially Chapters 11 and 12.
- 6 A showcase of the abundant family life in suburban homes in the 1950s is the televised 1959 Nixon-Khrushchev “kitchen debate” at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. At this exhibition, Vice-President Nixon landed a blow by displaying the suburban homes as the visible manifestation of the American way of life and a proof of the superiority of American free enterprise over communism, well epitomized in a model house nicknamed “Splitnik.” See Marling for the debate, especially chapter 7.
- 7 Unlike his fictional protagonist, Okada served as an officer in the US Air Force in World War II, “hanging out of an airplane over Japanese-held islands asking their occupants in their own language to give up” (Chin 256).
- 8 See Spigel for a discussion of how the postwar period is associated with mass-produced suburban homes and the consumer-oriented culture.
- 9 The median marriage age ranged between twenty and twenty one in the early 1950s, and most families had three to four children. See May for birth rate, marriage age, and American families in the Cold War era in general.
- 10 The housing shortage of the 1940s, the postwar baby boom, the GI Bill Rights (the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944) demanded increasing roles of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in earmarking guarantee money for new suburban housing projects, while affording federal insurance for loans to veterans in addition to the text benefits for home owners. As a result, it became cheaper to buy than rent houses. For expansive accounts of the suburban landscape in the United States, see Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, especially 3–16.
- 11 Smith demonstrates that “Americans were unsentimental about unmodified nature” (141–42) and were eager to transform the wilderness into a garden. While Smith laments at the conclusion of *Virgin Land* that the exclusively agricultural garden he describes “was powerless to confront issues arising from the advance of technology” (259), Marx in *Machine in the Garden* takes a step further by pointing out that the kind of garden Americans sought not only varied over time but gradually made room for “the machine.”
- 12 See Hayden’s *Redesigning* for the inextricable linkage of the postwar suburbanization and the process of rebuilding the American dream.
- 13 See Kim, McDonald, and Yogi.

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