

## Fractures of Constructed Asian American Identity in *No-No Boy* and *Insurrecto*

*No-No Boy*, by John Okada, and *Insurrecto*, by Gina Apostol, utilize historical materials in their incomplete portrayals and constructions of Asian/American identity. Through the use of equivalence, Okada reflects the frustration of post-WWII Japanese-Americans at having to choose between two identities in the historic Loyalty Questionnaire. Apostol's *Insurrecto* also speaks on a sense of duality; Virginie's doubled vision and Elvis's fragmentations reflect the relationship between stereoscope and stereograph, America and the Philippines, and history and fiction. Ultimately, the frustrating nature of Okada's equivalences creates a hopeful space for further enumeration on identity, while Apostol argues that a legible Filipino/American identity can only be created through a reconstruction of fragmented visual perspectives.

Reminiscent of Okada's numerological approach to time and identity, an implicit equal sign is present throughout the novel *No-No Boy*. As seen in pages 38 to 39, this equivalence reflects the frustration of Japanese-Americans at having to choose between their doubled identities.

“He did not have to ask himself where he was or why because it did not matter. He was Ichiro who had said no to the judge and had thereby turned his back on the army and the country and the world and his own self... Out of the filth of his anguished soul, the madness welled forth in a sick and crazy scream...” (38)

“‘It was not the boy but the mother who is also the son and it is she who is to blame and it is she who is dead because the son did not know.’

‘I just know that Bob is dead.’

‘No, the mother. It is she who is dead because she did not conduct herself as a Japanese and, no longer being Japanese, she is dead.’

‘And the father? What about Mr. Kumasaka?’

‘Yes, dead also.’

‘And you Ma? What about you and Pa?’

‘We are Japanese as always.’

‘And me?’

‘You are my son who is also Japanese.’” (39)

The passages above create short and infuriating equivalences, which are hurriedly expanded upon with run-on sentences that carry the frustration of a lack of space. This sense of frustration at the insufficient capacity needed for the complexity of the human condition can be felt almost viscerally in the rushed explanations that come immediately after these implied equal signs. Despite the presence of these run-ons, however, they do little to temper the stark nature of equivalence. He = Ichiro. Mother = Son. He is (=) Ichiro, “who had said no to the judge and had thereby turned his back on the army and the country and the world and his own self.” Mother, “who is to blame and it is she who is dead,” is (=) son, who “did not know.” The stifling nature of equal likeness can also be felt in Ichiro’s follow-up questions to his mother’s succinct answers. Ichiro’s mother, who believes in equivalences, deludes herself that Japan won the war and retains her Japanese identity through the refusal of all things American; Mrs. Yamada, therefore, reflects the sick madness of the equal symbol, while Ichiro attempts to find a way to break free of the perpetual sign (=). In his continued qualifications, “And you?,” “What about,” “And me?,” Ichiro attempts to create the space for a Japanese / American identity in a world where Japanese can not equal (=) American.

Frustrating equivalences also appear in questions 27 and 28 of the historic Loyalty Questionnaire given to Japanese-Americans held in internment camps during World War II. In an effort to gauge their loyalty to the U.S. government, these questions demanded an unqualified “yes” to swearing allegiance to the U.S., agreeing to serve in the armed forces, and forswearing any ties to Japan, utilizing the equal sign to divide Japanese and American as irreconcilable identities. In an equivalence, the novel defines Ichiro as someone “who had said no to the judge,” categorizing him by his responses to these questions. Question 27 = No. Question 28 = No. Thus, Ichiro is forcefully branded as a “No-No Boy” for the rest of his life. There is no space for further explanation or clarification, creating “madness” in Ichiro’s forever “anguished soul,” and the impulse to clarify “well[s] forth in a sick and crazy scream.”

Within the narrative of *No No Boy*, the historical detail of the Loyalty Questionnaire, specifically questions 27 and 28, function as a false equivalence of identity. Just as Japanese American boys have to falsely pick between Japan and America, they had to pick between Yes and No. In the questionnaire, identity is choice, an equivalence, but for Ichiro, this lack of nuance is a sickness, sparking alienation from family, society, happiness, and the world. “Being American is a terribly incomplete thing,” not something that can be easily defined through an equal sign. Therefore, through the anger, frustration, and impulse to expand, Okada creates a space for a Japanese/American identity in a world of equal signs.

The incompleteness of Asian-American identity also imbues Apostol’s attempt to reassemble a Filipino/American identity. *Insurrecto*, using Elvis as a constructed figure of pop culture iconography and Virginie’s double-sight, speaks to the fragmentation of identity held within the historical materials of stereographs, documented evidence of the Philippine-American War.

“The spotlight turns back on. Virginie realizes it is a visual effect, not a snap in her brain, and she sees the man being rearranged, put back together by the strobe lights. A constructed and reconstructed figure, produced by his audience’s screams. And he becomes who he is— a fused, patched, and growling man breathing into a microphone—... Is her mind failing her, or is it her bad eyes? At the sight of a figure straining to become whole before the crowd that fragments him, she feels something crawling under her bones, the pain of a rip in her own shell: a snail-house disassembling, coming unglued from her skin... She does not quite know how to put it, this fragmenting sense of herself, except that it is the only way she can get at who she is.” (32-33)

Virginie, through her “bad eyes,” becomes a literal manifestation of the inherent doubled split in stereoscopes, the photographic equipment used to capture stereographs, often from the privileged view of Americans. In her doubled vision, Virginie “sees the man being rearranged, put back together;” she witnesses Elvis’s “becom[ing],” his creation as a “constructed and reconstructed figure.” Just as the American history and perspective held in the stereographs replaces Filipino history, Elvis and American pop culture replace Philippine culture; in other words, the idea of Elvis, as symbolic of American pop culture as Muhammad Ali, becomes Philippine-American history through Virginie’s lens.

The stereoscope, Virginie, also becomes subject while watching Elvis. A stand-in for Filipino/American identity, Virginie “feels something crawling under her bones... coming unglued from her skin.” This “fragmenting sense of herself... is the only way she can get at who she is.” The “only way” to understand a sense of Filipino/American identity, Apostol argues, is through the sense of fragmentation inherent in the historical stereographs that documented the Philippine-American War. When viewer and subject, American and Filipino, and stereoscope and

stereograph fracture, replace, and become one another, only then does a Filipino/American identity become legible.

The narrative strategy of *Insurrecto* can be found within this fragmentation, doubling, and splitting, inspired by the doubled pictures, placed side by side with only the difference of time, of stereographs. In her examination of history through a fictionalized, splintered narrative, Apostol gives meaning to the different perspectives that make up Philippine-America.

Both Apostol and Okada wrestle with dualities; Apostol with the doubled stereograph and Okada with the equivalences of Japanese-American identity as presented in the Loyalty Questionnaire. While Okada leaves us with a hopeful space for the nuances of Asian-American identity, Apostol provides a possible method of encapsulating such nuance in the doublings and fragmentations of historical and present perspectives.