
MADSEN, Deborah Lea


Available at: http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:93091

Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.


Gary Okihiro begins his revisionist narrative of American history with an autobiographical sketch. He recalls how, as a young boy growing up on a sugar plantation on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, he would play cowboys and Indians with his young friends. This experience, he goes on to explain, was one aspect of his Americanisation. By emulating the Lone Ranger, by projecting himself imaginatively into the heroic role of the cowboy, the young Okihiro was led to reject the Indian, the "bad guy," in both the game and himself. This is a fitting introduction to a book that is engaging, highly readable and passionately motivated by Okihiro's personal commitment to his subject. In this study Okihiro sets out to challenge, from an Asian American perspective, the singular narratives of American national identity and national culture that have so often relied upon the construction of ethnic minorities as Other. It is not his intention to do as others like Toni Morrison and Eric Sundquist have done, and reinscribe the invisible yet defining racial Others into the texture of American historical narratives. Rather, he sets out to challenge the binary categories that structure and sustain those powerful historical explanations of America and Americans.

The book consists of five chapters, the first four of which each address a crucial logical binary: West versus East, white versus black, man versus woman, and heterosexuality versus homosexuality. Okihiro begins his first chapter, logically addressed to the cultural construction of West and East, with an account of L. Frank Baum's children's story *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* published in 1900. Baum's fictional Kansas, the Middle America of national mythology, provides Okihiro with a paradigm of American pastoral idealism that incorporates the pioneer ideals of Jeffersonian democracy, and a rejection of Old World values in favour of self-recreation amid the challenges and opportunities of America's virgin frontier. The agrarian tradition that generated the symbolic significance of the West as the cultural space where a true American character would be nurtured complements the maritime narrative of American cultural formation – the idea that, as Okihiro explains, "America is the western terminus of an Atlantic civilization comprised of European 'cultural hearths' and their trans-Atlantic diasporas and transplantations." This narrative of national origin of course omits the geographical incursions into continental North America that came from the Pacific – from the East. The identification of this omission allows Okihiro a point from which he can begin to deconstruct the unity and coherence of the maritime-agrarian narrative of American cultural identity. He observes that trade routes linking Europe, the Philippines, and America had existed since the early 1500s; in the 1760s Filipino and Chinese sailors established the oldest Asian communities in North America in the swamps near New Orleans; and by the early nineteenth century America had developed a highly lucrative trade with China which also brought with it Asian immigration. American imperialistic ambitions in the Pacific – directed largely at the Philippines and Hawaii – in the latter nineteenth century, which were aimed at the expansion of Anglo-Saxon civilisation ever westward beyond the continental limits of the United States, in fact further undermined the coherence of agrarian myths of origin that themselves originated in Europe.

As he exposes the cultural construction of geographical space as national imaginary, so Okihiro deconstructs the binary polarities of race, gender and sexuality in subsequent chapters. Here, he leaves Baum's representation of an idealised Midwest, and turns instead to what Okihiro sees as the historical counterpart to Baum's Emerald city of Oz – the White City constructed in Chicago for the 1893 Columbian Exposition. The semiotics of the Exposition furnishes Okihiro's
primary text in the three chapters that deconstruct the dominant American constructions of racialised, gendered and sexed cultural meanings. In Okihiro's terms, the representation of American progress and its global contextualisation that was the Columbian Exposition reveals the logical oppositions between white and black, men and women, homosexual and heterosexual that controlled American cultural meanings then and now. So the grandeur of White City celebrated the value of whiteness and masculinity; the marginal locations of the Woman's Building and of the Midway Plaisance which housed exhibits from Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin and Native America and the Pacific Islands, revealed the devaluation of these civilisations on the ladder of progress, dramatised in miniature by the spatial priorities accorded different cultural artefacts by the organisers of the Exposition. However, these binary categories and the racial and sexual stereotypes they generate are not stable, they are contingent upon historical circumstance. The changing construction of Asian American identity lends Okihiro examples of this semiotic instability. At one point, he observes, "Asian men and women's sexualities, however, were never static and took different turns within the white imagination, depending upon the social needs of the time. Chinese men might be seen as passionless during the late nineteenth century, but they, like Japanese men, were reborn as predators of white women during the early twentieth century."

It is this relationship between historical conditions and the binary cultural reflex that is the most engaging aspect of this study. Okihiro spends a great deal of effort mapping the operations of binary thinking in nineteenth-century American culture but, to my mind, not enough effort exploring how this relates to a wider historical context both within America and the world. It is because I found this slim volume so interesting that I was left disappointed by it. I wanted more consideration of other binaries – such as rich versus poor and young versus old – which Okihiro mentions only in passing because they are peripheral to the racial issues that are his true subject. Similarly, I wanted to know how these binaries survived into the twentieth century: the dizzying historical leap made in the final chapter from the late nineteenth century to David Henry Hwang's 1986 play *M Butterfly*, I found very unsatisfactory. The close focus upon the 1893 Exposition that characterises the middle chapters just cannot support such a massive historical shift without substantial consideration of the intervening years.

There is a larger issue raised by Okihiro's book, an issue that concerns the current direction taken by Asian American Studies. At the very end of the book, Okihiro reminds the reader again of his opening autobiographical reflections. He reminds us of his ethnicity and of the common ground he shares, as an Asian American, with his historical subjects. And, as I close the book, I am confronted with a glossy image of a Hawaiian landscape, "Manoa valley from Waikiki," that is the cover illustration. I am bothered by the relevance of this image, together with the way in which Okihiro chooses to begin and end his book. It suggests to me that he is reinscribing precisely the kind of ethnic essentialism that the argument of his book contests so effectively. Okihiro establishes his authority to speak by invoking his own ethnicity. This is troublesome both on its own terms and because it is characteristic of many recent Asian American works, not least of which is the collection of essays edited by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Stephen H. Sumida, published by the influential Modern Language Association of America. Few of the contributors are not Asian American: the collection consists of contributions by Shilpa Dave on Meena Alexander, Tim Libretti on Carlos Bulosan, Laura Hyun Yi Kang on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, David Shih on Louis Chu, Nerissa S. Bake on Jessica Hagedorn, Viet Thanh Nguyen on Le Ly Hayslip, Chung-Hei Yun on Ronyoung Kim, Patricia P. Chu on Maxine Hong Kingston, Marie Lo on Joy Kagawa, Tamara C. Ho on Wendy Law-Yone, Susan Koshy on Bharati Mukherjee, Stephen H. Sumida on Milton Murayama, Jinqui Ling on John Okada, Taisue Yamamoto on Monica Sone, Leslie Bow on Amy Tan, Cheng Lok Chua on Frank Chin, Nancy Cho on Philip Kan Gotanda, Roberta Uno on Velina Hasu Houston, Angela Pao on David Henry Hwang, Stephen H. Sumida on both Momoko Iko and Wakako Yamauchi. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Rachel Lee, Sunn Shelley Wong and George Uba contribute overviews of Asian American anthologies, short fiction, and poetry. The impression that
arises from this list of contributors is that Asian Americans uniquely understand Asian America – a
dangerous, if unexamined, assumption which relies upon an essentialist conception of ethnicity that
is challenged by contemporary Asian American writers and scholars alike. Each of the essays
focuses upon a single book-length work by an influential Asian American writer; the essays follow
a common structure consisting of publication information, a descriptive overview of the text, a
discussion of the reception of the text, the biographical background of the author and relevant
historical contexts. The collection covers the broad field by including the range of Asian ethnicities
and by representing the now-canonical writers. The collection delivers precisely what the title
promises: a guide which will be of use in teaching Asian American literature and also to introduce
the field of Asian American literature to those who come to it from other perspectives.

DEBORAH L. MADSEN
South Bank University, London