Transformation of the Desert Representation: from the Internment to a Symbol of Multicultural Society in Japanese-American Literature

Division of Human and Socio-Environmental Studies,
Graduate School of Human and Socio-Environmental Studies
Yasuyo Komatsu

Abstract

As the internment of Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor and numerous incidents of harassment and hate crimes against Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans after 9/11 show, hyphenated Americans tend to be identified with enemies outside the country because of their ethnicities, and excluded from society, when a critical and nationalistic situation such as war and terrorist attack happens. Hyphenated minorities are thus positioned as “the internal Other” in American society. After 9/11, the Japanese-American community has strengthened solidarity with the Arab-American and Muslim-American communities in order to fight against America’s racism and construct a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society.

Reflecting this social/political situation, in Japanese-American literary works published after 9/11, the internment memories have been reconstructed as a symbol of discrimination and injustice against all ethnic minorities. Also, the desert, which was the place of the internment camp, has been recreated as an alternative site to modern progressive standards of values, from which racism or colonialism was formed. By relating Japanese-Americans to Native-Americans in the desert, and repositioning it as a place symbolizing solidarity among people for realization of multi-cultural society, Japanese-American writers transform their Japanese ethnicity from the label “enemy” to an essential element to change America into society accepting diversity.

Keywords
the Japanese-American internment, 9/11, multicultural society, the desert

日系アメリカ文学における砂漠表象の変容
－強制収容の地から多文化共生社会のシンボルへ－

小松 恭代

要旨
パールハーバー攻撃後の日系人の強制収容や、9/11の後のアラブ系やイスラム系アメリカ人へ
の暴力行為の多発が示すように、ハイフン付きのアメリカ人は、国家に戦争のような危機的状況が起こると外国の敵と彼らのエスニシティが同一視され、社会から排除される傾向にある。ハイフン付きのマイノリティは「他者」としてアメリカ社会の周縁に位置づけられているからである。9/11以後、日系コミュニティはアメリカ社会の人種差別に抗するために、アラブ系やイスラム系コミュニティとの連帯を強めている。

多文化共生社会の実現に向けて日系アメリカ人が他のマイノリティ・グループと団結していく中で、日系アメリカ文学においても強制収容の記憶がエスニック・マイノリティ全体の人種差別の象徴として再構築されている。また、強制収容の場であった「砂漠」が、近代価値の対抗的場所として再意味化されている。「砂漠」を通じてネイティブ・アメリカ人と日系アメリカ人を関連づけ、西欧的な価値基準とは異なるオーガニティヴの場＝「砂漠」をエスニック・マイノリティ同士の共生の場として描き、そこに白人中心の社会を多文化共生の社会へと変容させる可能性を示している。「敵」のしるしであったJapanese-AmericanのJapaneseが、アメリカを真に多様性を認める社会にする上で必要な要素へと変容していることを、日系三世の文学作品を中心に検証する。

キーワード
日系アメリカ人の強制収容、9/11、多文化共生社会、砂漠

On September 11, 2001, the American TV networks referred to the terrorist attacks as a "second Pearl Harbor," by airing the images of hijacked airplanes slamming into the World Trade Center in parallel with those of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. In the following days, numerous incidents of harassment and hate crimes against Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans occurred, including attacks on mosques and other religious buildings. In response to these developments, one of the representative groups of the Japanese-American community immediately issued a statement supporting Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans. In San Francisco, Japanese Americans folded two thousand paper cranes to symbolize solidarity with Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans. In Washington D.C., JACL, Japanese American Citizens League, and other organizations rallied to call for unity and tolerance of differences. In Los Angeles, responding to Cathy Masaoka, a high school teacher, about 250 Japanese-Americans, ranging from former camp internees to young people, gathered and rallied for protection of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans from hate crimes. As the anti-terrorism movement and patriotic feelings were growing, the Japanese-American community thus worked with Arab-Americans, Muslim-Americans, and other ethnic minorities for protection of their birth rights as American citizens.

After 9/11, President Bush started the “war on terror” and enacted the Patriot Act in order to protect America from “the enemy of freedom,” that is, terrorism, but he struck fear into the hearts of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans, and they have been frightened by racial profiling. The Japanese-American community, which has a collective memory of being treated as enemy during WWII, based on an idea that “A Jap’s a Jap. . . . whether the Jap is a citizen or not,” has tried to build solidarity with other ethnic minorities to fight
against the attempt inside America to separate and exclude specific minorities. For example, many Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans have participated in the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage, which started in 1969, to learn about what happened in the Manzanar camp during WWII and share the internment experience with Japanese-Americans. One Muslim student said that he came to Manzanar "because it embodied [his] fear . . . as a Muslim living in a post-9/11 world, [he] has too often heard Muslim Americans whispering their worries that we too would be numbered and carted off into a wholesale prison." The Japanese-American community shares the fear Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans are feeling, and tries to build up understanding of these communities and support them. Through these attempts they have participated in the "war on terror."

The internment is one of the most important themes in Japanese-American literature. Nisei who had experienced the internment published works in relation to it after they left the camp. Even though they felt resistance against it, they had to remain silent about it and assimilated into the American mainstream for survival in the 50s and the 60s, the Cold War era, in which America strengthened "Anglo-conformity," that is, assimilation into the values of the white middle class, in order to win the ideological conflict with the Soviet Union. Under control of American society and the Japanese-American community, the Nisei writers had to use rhetoric and covertly criticize American society, while trying to be accepted by it. In the early 70s, stimulated by the Civil Rights Movement and the Asian American Movement, Sansei started what is known as the Redress Movement, an effort to obtain an official apology and reparations from the federal government. Through and after the Movement they recovered pride in their Japanese ethnicity. Putting the historical background in their works in the 80s and the 90s, we could understand the Sansei writers, who have no internment experiences, resist their parents' inclination for assimilation and feel proud of their Japanese-American ethnicity. Then, how do the Japanese-American writers represent the internment memories in the post 9/11 world? In this paper, I'd like to examine how the writers have attempted to criticize white-middle class values and reconstruct the internment memories in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic framework, reflecting the construction of close relationship between the Japanese-American community and the Muslim community after 9/11.

**Eurocentric binary opposition "We" and "the Other"**

Before discussing the Japanese-American stories published in the 21st century, I'd like to talk about Eurocentric binary opposition. Following the declaration of war on Japan, President Franklin D. Roosevelt designated not only Japanese, but also American citizens of Japanese ancestry as enemy aliens and segregated them as such. After 9/11, President George W. Bush called for international support in the fight against terrorism, saying that "[e]very nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." Put in other words, he tried to divide the international world between friend and enemy. This worked well at home too, as clearly demonstrated in the incidents of harassment and hate crimes against Arab-
Americans and Muslim-Americans. American people, equating them with the members of Al Qaeda, showed anger against them and excluded them from society as scapegoats. It should be noted that in both Pearl Harbor and 9/11 terrorist attacks a binary opposition between "we" and "the Other" was repeatedly created.

The Japanese-American internment and the treatment of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans as potential terrorists reveal the issue of "the internal Other" in America. In a critical and nationalistic situation such as war and terrorist attack, the whole nation is expected to unite against the enemy, and the question of who is assumed to constitute "the nation" and "enemy" is raised, resulting in the persecution and exclusion of ethnic minorities who are situated as "the internal Other" in America. Their status as legitimate American citizens is threatened, when nationalism, which is essentially exclusive and discriminatory, is enhanced. President Bush referred to 9/11 as attacks on American freedoms and democracy, but the tendency to separate and exclude specific minorities for the reason of difference in ethnicity or religion reveals that in America itself lies a contradiction between its founding principles of liberty, equality, and democracy and the way its people actually behave.

When any incident that worsens relations between America and another country, especially the country of ancestry of an ethnic minority, American society tends to establish the ethnic minority group as the Other, that is, the enemy. Anxiety and fear caused by being positioned as "the internal Other" in America are demonstrated in the following statement by Yuji Ichioka, a Japanese-American historian:

To Japanese-Americans, the deterioration of Japan-U.S. relations, whatever it is, is a cause of fear. Our nightmare once came true when Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor happened. Needless to say, we feel scared just thinking a nightmare like this might happen again, whatever it will be, but it is a possibility that any Japanese-Americans have to face. (Translation is mine)\(^8\)

It would be worth noting that he says that there is a possibility that such a nightmare will happen again. His fear tells us about Japanese-Americans' unstable position in American society. Actually, in the 1980s when economic friction between Japan and America grew, the anti-Japanese sentiment, which materialized in public destruction of Japanese cars and a boycott of "made-in-Japan" goods, got Japanese-Americans scared. In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was killed when he was mistaken to be Japanese. Considering the frequent occurrences of hate crimes against Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans after 9/11, it can be said that a fear of rejection and exclusion by American society would be shared by all ethnic minority groups, that is, hyphenated Americans. Therefore, they have to unite and insist on their rights so that none of them will be persecuted as aliens by American society.

In their literary works, Japanese-American writers have criticized the Eurocentric binary opposition. Sansei, for example, seem to say that pride in ethnic identity is necessary to resist the white domination in American society and build a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society. While David Mura stayed in Japan for about a year in the mid-80s, he (re)defined himself as Japanese-American, not as American, the identity which he had wanted before going there: "now I'm so much more conscious of
myself as a colored person. It's as if I've discovered not only Japan, or even Asia this year, but a whole new way of looking at the world" (1991, 332). His remarks indicate that he has found a culture and value system in which he can feel comfortable and fit in, different from the monolithic white middle-class culture and standard of values, which left him with feelings of self-hate and anger inherited from his Nisei father. By demonstrating his affinity with Japanese culture and different view of the world, he thus challenges the Eurocentric value system, which tends to establish a xenophobic binary opposition between "we" and "the Other."

Mitsuye Yamada, a Nisei writer, tries to (re)define herself as Japanese-American, saying that "I am, by most standards, a thoroughly assimilated Japanese-American" (200), in her autobiographical essay, "Unbecoming American" (2000). It seems that she rejected assimilation as the title of the essay indicates (though admitting herself as "thoroughly assimilated"), and has (re)established herself as Japanese-American. Her redefinition of herself as Japanese-American, not as American, after the success of the Redress Movement, seems interesting, because it was a campaign calling not only for an official apology and monetary reparation from the government, but also for American citizenship. When she left the camp, as one of her poems, "Cincinnati," shows, she wanted to eliminate her label as a person of Japanese ancestry, and become American. In addition, in her essay "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster" (1979), she attempted to disown her Japanese cultural heritage, as it prevented Japanese-Americans from protesting the internment. Therefore, it is obvious that the (re)definition of her racial identity as Japanese-American in hyphenated and binary terms is made by her own standards, not by standards of the mainstream. The "Japanese" in "Japanese-American" no longer has the connotations of shame, stigma, abjection, and "the Other" that American society brought to them. It should have a positive meaning, as we can see from her words: "We Asian-Americans have, by gradually contributing our own unique culture, changed the cultural landscape of this land forever" (2000, 209). She doesn't take the term of "Asian-Americans" (Japanese-Americans) negatively, unlike when she came out of the camp. Her change in attitude about her Japanese ethnicity shows that she has recognized the importance of her Japanese identity to realize a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society as an alternative to the white-dominated country.

In The Floating World (1989), in which a Sansei narrator-protagonist, Olivia, talks about events she observed and experiences she had from the age of 12 through 21 in the 1950s and 1960s. Cynthia Kadohata, a Sansei writer, criticizes white middle-class values, by Olivia's dislike of the home her stepfather has built, imitating the white ideal of the American Dream in the Cold War era. Also, Kadohata describes the father's fatigue and frustration caused by the assimilation pressure he undergoes from the mainstream. In order to win the ideological war with the Soviet Union, the government offered white veterans the privileges of low-interest loans to buy houses in the suburbs, which reveals a national strategy of spreading the image of white American families living in the suburb as the symbol of affluent and free American society to the world. Japanese-American men were forced to conform to white middle-class values by the mainstream, without the privileges
given to white men or equal treatment.

Charlie-O, Olivia's stepfather, wants not only himself but also his family to become more Americanized. He is "proud to be a business owner" though he is virtually just a garage mechanic, and so he subscribes to a business newsletter (70). He expects his daughter to call her grandmother, "Grandma" (8), not "Obāsan" or "Obachan" (7), because it sounds "more American" (8). He feels delighted at the way Olivia speaks English: "If you couldn't see her, you wouldn't even know she was Japanese" (11). Furthermore, following the gender ideology that was re-strengthened in the Cold War era, he requires his wife to have respectability that a middle-class wife was supposed to have. She wants to get a job, but he doesn't approve of it. She gives up working outside and becomes a housewife, and goes to church and the library. When Olivia finds her father's deck of cards with naked ladies, he gets embarrassed but says, "... a man got to be a man" (94). He thus has a desire to acquire white middle-class manhood, but the establishment of a middle-class patriarchal family requires the father to have a stable job and earn enough to support his family. Charlie-O tells his daughter how he feels at work:

I try to get through every day without making any mistakes... I try to be exact. I don't want to use any more movement than I have to when I'm fixing a car. I look at it and make my decisions as quickly as possible, then do everything I have to do... with the least possible movement. I want to be perfect. (143–144)

His failure on the job means not only a financial loss, but also a loss of the manhood necessary to maintain a middle-class family. In Gibson where a small number of Japanese-Americans live, the people for whom he feels he has to "be perfect," with no mistakes on the job, are white, that is, the mainstream Americans. He thinks he has to "be perfect" in the mainstream society, which indicates that he feels severe pressure from it to be a perfect model minority, willingly conforming to it.

Collie Asano, a Japanese-American veteran, lost his family, house, and job because of his indulgence in gambling, through which Kadohata shows the contradiction contained in the white ideal of the American Dream. He works at the hatchery in Gibson after he "learned chicken sexing at a school, paid for by the G. I. Bill" (95). Even though he is a veteran, he is not completely free of discrimination. "Nisei men in uniform, even after their heroic service ... found that they were not yet accepted in American society" (Takezawa 115). Olivia observes that he is not cheerful and has "an air of being always fed up" (95). Sheila Sarkar states that Olivia's description of him indicates "the emotional impact of the war" on him (84). His indulgence in gambling can also be interpreted to show deep scars in his mind. Though he gave his loyalty to America and fought in the war at the risk of his life in the same way as white soldiers, he has not been treated equally. Different from the white veterans who have realized the American dream and lived in the suburbs because of their privileges as white, he is driven into the hopeless, desolate situation due to racism.

Kadohata seems to try to (re)construct an alternative space to the "home" built based on white standard of values outside American society. Olivia's resistance against assimilation is revealed in her rejection of the home her
father has built. Wanting to “feel separate from [her] normal life” (86), she sleeps “on the couch in the living room rather than in [her] bedroom” (86–87). She says that “[fires] and birds and trees [are] what saturate[s] [her] life and [makes] it real,” and sleeping on the couch makes her feel “wild and displaced” (86). She prefers the outdoors to staying in the home that her father has constructed by imitating an idealized nuclear family model of the white middle class, and wants to get out of it because she felt “wild and displaced” outside (86). In Eurocentric discourse, “wild” and “displaced” are used as negative elements in a binary logic, but she doesn’t want to stay in the father’s “home” symbolizing “ideal,” “standard,” “happiness” according to white-middle class values.

Also, she went to Los Angeles for college after her graduation from high school, but she decided not to enter college, which can be interpreted as her rejection of the American mainstream values, because the institutions of higher education had been supposed to teach Eurocentric knowledge and values before ethnic studies started in the 1980s, influenced by the Civil Rights Movements and the Asian American Movement in the 1960s and the 1970s. Instead, she serviced a vending machine route on the highway that she had inherited from her deceased real father. The highway running from the outskirts of Los Angeles to Arizona would figuratively signify the margins of American society, a place which can be interpreted as being designated by the mainstream for ethnic minorities, “the internal Other,” to stay. It can be said that the margins of American society indicate the “wild and displaced” place she preferred, just the opposite of his father’s “home” embodying the American Dream. This is a place where she can feel happiness by her own standards, different from the “happiness” which the American mainstream presented as something that everyone should seek. She says: “I wanted badly to leave, and I knew that . . . someday I would have that freedom” (133). She can feel a freedom and happiness on the road, at the margins of American society, which can be considered an alternative space to what white-middle class values, or modern progressive values, have constructed.

The “wild and displaced” place Olivia preferred is represented as the desert:

Many of the machines we filled were in small towns, clusters of one-story buildings surrounded by yellowed weeds. . . . In the background there were water towers . . . protecting the towns from the surrounding desert. At night the scenery was bare but not barren. (185)

The description shows the desolate and dilapidated environment, which is the opposite image of an ideal nuclear family smiling in front of a house in a suburb used as propaganda to the world. Yet, she feels that “the scenery was bare but not barren,” seeing the desert in a non-stereotypical way. Also, it can be said that the desert is presented as a site signifying different values from those of white-middle class.

In the marginalized space of the desert, Kadohata seems to make a small attempt to destroy binary opposition; the binary between life and death, or the past and the present, is disrupted. Her dead father in his youth appears as a ghost and she talks to him, working and taking a rest together: “I talked
to a ghost . . . The ghost was my real father, who'd died a month earlier. We sat on a curb and ate candy bars together" (180). By resisting a binary concept, she tries to create a new site in which anyone can stay and communicate beyond time and space. Also, the past and the present are not separated because of her father's death. Olivia meets the people who know her dead father on the road: "A couple of the most out-of-the-way places were tiny offices for which Jack (her father) had simply laid out candy on shelves, with no machines . . . 'Jack's girl' is what a couple of them called me" (189). It is suggested here that she inherits a friendship, or a community, which her father had built with people, while living on the margins of American society and taking care of vending machines, and that she maintains and develops this community, which includes her ghost father. Kadohata, I think, tries to represent the desert, the margins of American society, as a place where a different value system exists and works, and by so doing she shows her resistance against Eurocentric modern values.

Perry Miyake's 21st Century Manzanar (2002), which was published after 9/11, squarely criticizes white racist thinking and presents a different value system. In this novel, the Third World War brings evacuation to Japanese-Americans again. David, the protagonist, states that "Re-Evacuation" of Japanese-Americans is conducted because they have threatened to destroy white dominance in America. The war broke out due to economic disputes between Japan and America: "If World War II was the battle to save Western Civilization from . . . the Japanese race, World War III became the ultimate battle to save the very soul of American: its pocketbook" (13). The problems behind Re-

Evacuation are the economic dominance of Japan over America in the international world and a strong, threatening workforce of Japanese-Americans within America. In order to maintain white domination both inside and outside the country, the U.S. government deprived Japanese-Americans of everything and sent them to Manzanar again, which was one of the ten camps during WWII, so that job creation for "real Americans" and reduction of the unemployment rate can be implemented (176).

Moreover, the government attempts to eliminate their Japanese element from Japanese-Americans through some medical procedures. Lillian, the director of the camp who represents an embodiment of American mainstream values, mentions that her mission is to "restore the Japanese people to their rightful, traditional place in American society as a model minority [which] is a symbol of how all our minorities ought to behave" (278). Her final mission, which is called "the Plan" by Congress, is "ethnic cleansing" of Japanese-Americans:

Unlike the slaughter in Bosnia-Herzegovina, there would be a medically approved and executed plan to produce a generation of clean, healthy Japanese boys and girls who wouldn't breed like rats and produce future Japanese who would compete and . . . take college admissions and good jobs away from deserving, potentially hard-working, real Americans. Not to mention screwing up the curve in the math and science classes. (176)

The American mainstream can feel safe as long as Japanese-Americans stay in a lower, second-class, servile position in society and play the role of "model minority." In order to make them the model minority forever, the
government attempts to eliminate the Japanese elements that are threatening to white supremacy. Miyake describes the Japanese element as a threat to white dominance in American society, which means that he sees Japanese culture and the Japanese way of thinking as a potential alternative to Eurocentric monolithic values. So, he gives an important meaning to the Japanese element in "Japanese-American," which was the label "enemy" during WWII, and which assimilation-seeking Nisei tried hard to eliminate out of their racial identity after the war. Isabella Furth points out, "whereas for most European immigrants the hyphen drops out after a generation, it remains with citizens of Asian extraction" (304), but he stresses the value of the hyphen in Japanese-American identity, because the sign of their ancestry has the potential to destroy the white hegemony in American society, and make America the country accepting diversity in a real sense.

Miyake describes whites and Japanese-Americans in the camp, as oppressors and the oppressed in a vertical way, while treating the relationship between Native-Americans and Japanese-Americans as sort of "comradeship" in a horizontal way. Some Native Americans living on the reservation near the camp brought the internees their tribal food. Japanese-Americans waited for them to come with a sense of closeness, and they felt Native-Americans resembled their family members, including the deceased ones. One Navajo woman, whose grandfather was a Nisei, changed her name back to "Kuroyama" as a protest for the Re-Evacuation, when she was in college (339). Japanese-Americans started a riot against Lillian, the camp director, and escaped from it in collaboration with Native-American characters. It can be interpreted that Japanese-Americans broke away from the American mainstream, quitting their attempts to be assimilated, and united with Native-Americans. During and after WWII, Japanese-Americans, especially Nisei, tried to stick closely to the mainstream, but as Kadohata points out in her novel, assimilation didn’t bring them an equal footing with whites. Miyake, in his novel, describes their transformation from assimilation into the mainstream to unity and solidarity with Native-Americans.

Japanese-Americans, through and after the Redress Movement, came to have pride in their ethnicity, and Miyake, a Sansei writer, after 9/11, reconstructs the Japanese ethnicity as the potential to challenge white supremacy. Mura’s discovery of his affinity with Japanese culture and Yamada’s redefinition of her racial identity as Japanese-American, I think, indicate they’ve found in their Japanese cultural heritage a possibility of transforming white-dominated America into a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society, in which people’s fundamental rights and their cultural heritages, including those of whites, are respected equally. Of course, Japanese-Americans’ Japanese ethnicity should be an important element in building close and equal relationships with other ethnic minorities and white people in such a society, connecting people beyond race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

The internment memories in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic framework

As I mentioned, not only Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans, but also other ethnic minorities have participated in the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage, and in the events held
on the Day of Remembrance commemorating Executive Order 9066, and tried to learn and share the Japanese-Americans’ internment experiences. So, it can be said that the internment memories of Japanese-Americans have been transformed into the symbolic memories of discrimination and injustice shared by all ethnic minorities after 9/11. Reflecting this trend, some Sansei writers have attempted to reconstruct the Japanese-American internment experiences in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic framework. For example, Miyake, in 21st Century Manzanar, portrays Native-Americans as having sympathy with Japanese-Americans and demonstrating resistance against the mainstream in their place. As for the government’s unfair and abusive treatment of Native-Americans, he alludes to the unknown disease and following death en mass that could be caused by “all the nuclear testing, toxic-waste dumping, [and] polluted water” (338), for which the government denied any responsibility.  

It can be said that he re-creates a Japanese-American internment story multi-culturally, by drawing a parallel between two groups that have been subject to America’s racism.

In Weedflower (2006), Cynthia Kadohata explores friendship between a Japanese-American girl and a Mohave boy at Poston, which was one of the camps during WWII. This is a camp built on the Colorado River Indian Reservation under the plan to make Japanese-Americans with farming skills develop the desert into agricultural farmlands. It is Kadohata’s first novel dealing with the internment directly,14 and her “Acknowledgments” section in this novel states that she was greatly influenced by Sharing a Desert Home: Life on the Colorado River Indian Reservation by Ruth Okimoto, a former Poston internee, the book which “explores the relationship between the Japanese Americans incarcerated at Poston and the Native Americans living on the reservation.” 15 Native-Americans and Japanese-Americans have in common as ethnic minorities of American society: treated as “uncivilized” by the Eurocentric binary logic, uprooted from their homes and relocated to places designated by the government, controlled and exploited by the American mainstream. Kadohata describes how a Japanese-American girl and a Native-American boy build a good friendship in the camp/on the reservation, overcoming difficulties, but in reality, during the war, both ethnic groups rarely encountered and “the Indians were told not to mingle with [the internees].” 16 So, I would assume that in this story Kadohata attempts to transform the desert, which symbolizes injustice and violence of the government, that is, white dominance, into a site of cooperation and solidarity among ethnic minorities against racism.

This novel, which belongs to the genre of young adults, starts with Sumiko’s first experience of being discriminated against by whites. She and her brother lived with their grandfather and their uncle’s family who owned a flower farm, because their parents had been killed in a car accident. She was invited to a white girl’s birthday party, which excited her a lot, and she went to the party, carrying a bunch of stock flowers and an expensive scarf her grandfather bought her for a present, but she was not welcomed, and ejected by the white mother for being Japanese: “It’s not me, dear, but my husband has a few friends in back, some of the other parents who helped him raise some money for a charity we work with” (36). Kadohata’s way of description that only a twelve-year-old girl is not
welcomed at a white girl’s birthday party to which the entire class has been invited tells us about the severity and rigidity of racial divide before the war. Sumiko, feeling humiliated badly, thinks that she would become a different person from now on: “She wouldn’t be Sumiko heating water and cooking rice, she would be Humiliated Sumiko heating water and cooking rice” (38). This experience is represented as a Japanese-American girl’s initiation to America’s racism. She was forced to leave the house with several children watching her from a window, which demonstrates her position as “the Other” in American society, and also foregrounds the internment after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor.

After Sumiko was put in the camp, she felt about racial problems as follows:

[H]akujin thought they were better than the Japanese and the Indians; the Indians didn’t seem to particularly like whites or Japanese, and Japanese didn’t want to socialize with the Indians and resented the whites. So nobody liked anybody much. (178)

This is a young girl’s observation and perspective of race issues. She seems to understand both the Japanese and the Indians are positioned in the same lowered, degraded place in American society, in relation to Hakujin, and to wonder why both of them don’t try to get along with each other.

Kadohata, I think, attempts to show what had prevented Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans from building a friendship; it is prejudice against each other constructed by the mainstream. When Sumiko and her friend first saw Frank, a Native-American boy, and his friend, her friend said that if they were caught by Indians, the Indians would “scalp [them], cut off [their] fingers and boil them” (121). On the other hand, Frank’s friend said to him, “If [the Japanese] think you’re going to kill them, they stick a sword in their stomach before you can do it. I read that” (123). Moreover, Frank links Sumiko with Pearl Harbor and says to her: “I’m not the one who bombed Pearl Harbor,” and in turn she associates him with Custer: “You killed Custer” . . . She’d learned that in school” (140). As the Native-American boy’s words that “I read that” and the phrase that Sumiko had “learned [Custer] in school” indicate, they learnt another minority’s stereotypes constructed by the mainstream at school and from the media. Kadohata illustrates, through young people’s attitudes toward the other ethnic group, that internalization of the stereotypes in the dominant discourse not only keeps Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans from getting to know each other, but also gets them implicated in the white dominance and racism. Kadohata doesn’t mention in this novel, but another reason for the two minority group having no close relationship is that the government had taken measures for minority groups not to get together and make up a threatening power to the white dominance. It had adopted policies to separate minority groups from each other and keep them in hostile relationships.

At first, Sumiko and Frank were afraid of each other, and he felt angry with Japanese-Americans living on his people’s land. Yet, their fears gradually disappeared as they exchanged words, interested in each other’s life. Unlike the door of the white girl’s house which symbolizes racial divide between Japanese-Americans and whites, through the fence
surrounding the camp, he comes inside and goes outside with ease. There seem to be no racial divide between the two minority groups. Frank and Sumiko came to find common grounds in their circumstances; both of them "thought of whites as people you had to be quiet around" (159), and they lost everything before they were brought to the camp/the reservation. Their friendship across ethnic divide extends to the people around them, and Frank’s older brother asked Sumiko’s uncle to tell Native-Americans about irrigation system and farming, because he wanted to get the whole reservation irrigated. What influenced her uncle’s decision to help them seems to be the remarks that Frank and his brother made: the government built the internment on their land though "the tribal council voted against having the camp" there (213), and "Indians were declared citizens by the U.S. government in 1924" (214), but Arizona doesn’t allow them to vote.¹⁸ Her uncle, a Nisei, was denied his birthright and sent to the camp as an enemy alien, and so, he realized both Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans were victims of injustice and violence committed by the government. His decision to provide Japanese-Americans’ knowledge and skills of irrigation and farming for Native-Americans so as to better their lives on the reservation is based on his awareness of the shared experience of uprooting, denial of rights, and trauma between the two ethnic groups. It can be said that Weedflower is a story not only about the Japanese-American internment, but also about Native-American’s traumatic memories and sacrifices. In the End Note, by writing about the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and Native-Americans’ contribution to service in the armed forces and war-related jobs,¹⁹ Kadohata demonstrates both minority groups tried to prove themselves American at the cost of their lives during the war. Yet, it should be noted that the government took advantage of their desire to be included in American society for the war. When they returned home from the battle field, they found they were still discriminated against.

Reconstruction of the desert

I mentioned that in *The Floating World*, Kadohata attempts to represent the desert, the margins of American society, as a place where a different value system exists and works, criticizing white-middle class standards of values. In *Weedflower*, she stresses Japanese-Americans’ connection to the desert, which signifies their internment and assimilation into the mainstream, and then describes the desert as a symbolic place of solidarity between Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans, leading to multicultural society.

The change in a view of the desert from a place of the internment and assimilation to that of solidarity among ethnic minorities leading to multi-cultural society can be seen in Mitsuye Yamada too. In “Unbecoming American,” she writes that she re-conceived the desert and came to identify with it: "I have come to identify with the desert, as a woman, an Asian American, the “other” in white America most of my life" (209). Even though the desert is a place associated with the traumatic memories of the internment, when she revisited it many years later after the camp, she found in it a strong power to "resist development and stubbornly insists on retaining its integrity" (208). Therefore, it can be interpreted that she identifies with the desert because she discovers
the commonalities between her and the desert; the history of being ruled, excluded, and exploited as a minority woman, under patriarchy of both American society and Japanese-American community, the strength of resistance against it and insistence on its integrity. So, she re-conceived the desert as a site having a different value system from the mainstream, that is, an alternative place to the white dominance in American society. Moreover, she states that "the desert is necessary for our survival, that the animals and plants that live on very limited resources share what little there is in a most amazing kind of symbiosis" (208). It should be noted that she saw the desert not as "a barren place" or "nothingness," but as a site of symbiosis among animals and plants. So, it can be interpreted that she represents it as a space in which living creatures including human beings can survive on the basis of sharing and cooperation among them. Changing her view of the desert from "a barren place" to a site of cooperation and sharing, indicates that she dropped white-middle class ways of thinking based on Eurocentric modern values which see the desert as "a barren place" that should be cultivated by civilization, trying to give a new meaning to the desert.

Like Yamada, in Weedflower published in 2007, Kadohata resituates Japanese-Americans in the desert. In the story Japanese-Americans are described as farmers: "the great majority of Nikkei were farmers" (231). Sumiko's family grew kusabana, or "weedflowers," for a living in the prewar era, and even in the camp she made a garden and grew flowers, saying that she "still loved dirt [because] it smelled really good" (149). Kadohata seems to put stress on their affinity with Native-Americans in terms of nature; their lives depending on and benefitting from nature, and their love and respect for it. Rika Nakamura states, "in the dominant [US... discourse, [the desert] has been equated to absence, nothingness, or non-existence, as [Native-Americans and Japanese-Americans] have been perceived in similar terms of "lack" and "deficiency" (68). In the story, Sumiko expresses how her family is confined in the camp on the reservation in the desert, cut off the world, by using a binary phrase "in here"/"out there"; we are "in here" and they "out there" (88–89). In this binary logic, the desert, Native-Americans, and Japanese-Americans are all positioned "in here." So, it can be said that this is a story about the three Others, which are constructed by the Eurocentric binary opposition. The Poston camp, at which this novel is set, is a place signifying "colonialism and racism" (Ishiyama 150), because the two minority groups of Native-American and Japanese-American were forced to relocate and labor there by the country. Kadohata, I think, by changing the representation of the desert from a place of "colonialism and racism" to a site of ethnic minorities' friendship and cooperation, attempts to de-centralize modern progressive values which have made the desert as a symbolic space of "colonialism and racism," and present non-white-standards of values which have the potential to construct American society beyond a binary logic.

In 21st Century Manzanar, Perry Miyake also reconstructs the desert as a symbol of a multi-cultural society, as an alternative to white-dominated society. As I mentioned before, in the story, Japanese-Americans escaped from the Manzanar camp in collaboration with Native-Americans. The relationship between the two ethnic minorities is intensified through
the Indian tribe’s traditional ceremony held on the night when Japanese-Americans reached their reservation. They stand with Native-Americans in a circle with the fire burning in the center. While the drum is being beaten, the pipe is being passed around with the prayer that Mitakuye oyasin, which means “to all our relations,” and that “there [are] four nations on earth, red, yellow, black and white, and everyone [was] related” (355). It is a ceremony connecting people, regardless of their differences in race, ethnicity, gender, class, and age. Also, it is described as a site beyond time and space. The dead family members who went through the internment during WWII, or who were victims of America’s racism appear before the living. For example, David, the protagonist, talks with his brother who was killed by white youth, like Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American man who was mistaken for Japanese-American and beaten to death by unemployed auto-workers in Detroit.

It is worth noting that some Japanese-American characters feel as if they became part of the landscape around them, or part of nature, during the ceremony: “She felt like she was becoming part of the rock, like her toes became roots that sank quick and deep down into the earth, sinking deeper and deeper” (359). This description would indicate Japanese-Americans’ strong connection with the earth/the desert, because it can be said that their life in America originated from the earth/the desert as a farmer. In addition, Miyake represents it as a site where David can be reborn: “This was land where his body and mind could regain strength, where his faith could be restored, where his battered dream that it would someday be safe to be Japanese in America could be revived” (381). This passage indicates the desert (this land) is a place representing a different value system from white standards of values, because in the desert “his battered dream that it would someday be safe to be Japanese in America could be revived.” In white-dominated society, Japanese-American, a hyphenated American, has a possibility of being treated as the Other, but in the desert, as the passage implies, there is no worry about that, and they can be reborn to feel their pride in their Japanese ethnicity, which can be rejected and debased by the mainstream. Miyake thus describes the desert as a counterpart of the American Dream that is represented by an image of a smiling nuclear family in front of their house in a suburb, constructed by white-middle class values. Of course, the desert is where Native-Americans live, so it can be said that the desert is a place where Japanese-American and Native-American can share and respect their standards of values and ways of living. He thus re-means the desert as a potential center for the construction of multicultural society.

Then, at the feast, under the leadership of a woman whose grandfather was a Nisei, both Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans dance ondo, while in the camp Lillian, the camp director, announces that she has been promoted because of her successful accomplishment of the mission. Here is a contrast between the two ethnic minorities and the American mainstream, regarding standards of values. Ondo is a dance associated with obon, when the dead people return to the present time and see their families. Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans are dancing together in circles, including their dead family members, which would indicate that there is no difference, no boundary between death and life. Also, as I
mentioned above, while dancing, Japanese-Americans noticed that they became part of the landscape around them, or part of nature. So, through the dancing scene, Miyake symbolically illustrates equality and unity not only among human beings, but among all beings, including dead ones, in the universe. The desert is represented as a non-hegemonic, non-hierarchical site which signifies equality, unity, and harmony, symbolized in Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans dancing in circles.

On the other hands, Lillian is excited about her promotion brought by the sacrifices of Japanese-Americans. In this respect, Miyake criticizes that white dominance and prosperity in American society have been brought and maintained at the cost of ethnic minorities’ great sacrifices. Moreover, she says, “[t]his Temporary Relocation Center was a well-oiled machine that could easily be converted from Japanese to Afghani or Arabic or whatever Homeland Security dictated” (368), and her words reveal that any ethnic minority can be treated as enemy aliens at any time, if they become a threat to the white dominance. White people should be in the ruling position, and ethnic minorities be marginalized. In this way, the binary opposition between white and ethnic minorities has been (re)constructed and maintained. Lillian’s excitement of promotion and success at the cost of Japanese-Americans and strong desire to sustain white supremacy contrast sharply with the dancing scene of Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans. Miyake shows a big difference in a world-view between the mainstream and the ethnic minorities, and indicates there is a possibility of changing American society by ethnic minorities’ cultures and ways of thinking.

Here, I’d like to consider why in the dancing scene the dead family members appear before the living. For example, David’s brother, a victim of a hate crime, returns to tell David about the circumstances in which he was killed by white youth and how he was feeling about the killers. The appearance of the dead, or ghosts, in this novel makes me think of Beloved (1987), by Toni Morrison, an African-American writer. As is obvious from this novel’s epigraph, “Sixty Million and more,” it is dedicated to the black people who died in the “Middle Passage,” that is, slavery. This past haunts the story, in which there are many ghosts, including “Beloved,” probably the ghost of the daughter whom the protagonist, Sethe, killed, because she didn’t let the slave-catchers take her children back to bondage. The ghost, Beloved, represents the inescapable, horrible historical fact of slavery, the past that people should not forget even though they want to. About the past and memory of slavery, Morrison says as follows:

We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is bsent or it’s romanticized. This culture doesn’t encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past. That memory is much more in danger now than it was thirty years ago. (Gilroy 179)

She states that America tends to become historical amnesia, and in order not to make the history of slavery “absent or romanticized,” she wrote Beloved, which Paul Gilroy says deals with “the power of history, the necessity of historical memory, the desire to forget the terrors of slavery and the impossibility of
forgetting (179)."

The media coverage of 9/11 as a "second Pearl Harbor" shows that America has amnesia about the internment. In 1988, President Reagan signed the legislation that apologized for the internment, and in 1993, President Clinton sent every internment survivor an apology letter saying that "we acknowledged the wrongs of the past," and "[w]e must learn from the past." But in fact, racial violence against Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans in the post-9/11 indicates that American society did not correct "the wrongs of the past" or "learn from the past." Miyake, I think, by having the ghosts of the internment victims appear in the novel and showing their "unspeakable thought, unspoken" (Morrison, 1987, 199), attempts to resist against national amnesia about the internment and engrave the historical event in American people's minds.

Moreover, it should be noted that the ghosts appear in the desert, which signifies a site of oppression and suffering not only for Japanese-Americans, but also for Native-Americans. Ostensibly, Miyake doesn't write anything about Native-American ghosts, but we can easily imagine that in the dancing circles there are many ghosts of mass-killing victims by Europeans, who can tell about their oppressive past. The history of America's nation-building is equivalent to that of death and displacement of Native-Americans, but the past of Native-Americans—millions of them had to lose their lives for the making of America as a nation—tends to be erased from the history of America and forgotten.

In The Location of Culture, Homi K. Bhabha contends that he has "attempted to constitute a postcolonial, critical discourse that contests modernity through the establishment of other historical sites, other forms of enunciation" (254). It can be said that Morrison, Miyake, and other minority writers, through putting the past of her/his ethnic group, in Bhabha's words, "other historical sites, other forms of enunciation," in her/his works, have attempted to criticize and challenge national discourse of historical events and modernity. America has been trying to develop it as a nation and establish the hegemonic position in the world, under the name of progress and success, but in that course of history, how many minority people were victimized and erased from America's national history! Modern society has been constructed by making differentiations among people in terms of gender, race, and class. The attempts of minority writers to recreate and re-memory their pasts mean to "speak of humanity through [the] differentiations ... that mark an excessive marginality of modernity" (Bhabha 238). I have discussed Japanese-American writers attempt to reconstruct the desert as a site of solidarity among ethnic minorities for racism, from their descriptions of close relationships between Japanese-Americans and Native-Americans. The desert, which has been perceived as "wild," "displaced," and "uncivilized" by the mainstream in the same way as ethnic minorities, can be interpreted as a space symbolizing the oppressive, horrible past of the whole ethnic minority. Japanese-American writers also re-situate the desert as a site of counter-memory and counter-history of all ethnic groups, and by so doing they try to contest modernity.

In closing this paper, I'd like to talk about David Mura's Famous Suicide of the Japanese Empire (2008), which is a novel that could be read as a serial of John Okada's No-No Boy
(1957), because the protagonist’s father is a no-no boy, who is still hurt too deeply to adapt socially, has no jobs, and ends up with suicide. I think Mura, in this novel, attempts to reconstruct a site of Japanese-American identity, different from the racial identity given by the mainstream that tends to separate and exclude ethnic minorities by the binary opposition between “we” and “the Other.” The younger brother of Ben, the protagonist, vanished in the desert, and he is considered to have committed suicide there, but Ben received a postcard that his brother, an astrophysicist, had sent ten years ago from Japan when he stayed there, which gave Ben the feeling that he was still in Japan. The desert is a place of the internment that symbolizes death for the brothers, because the internment is related to their father’s suicide. Yet, it also can be a site of rebirth as David in 21st Century Manzanar states that the desert is “land where his body and mind [can] regain strength” (381). So, it could be said Ben’s brother died in the desert, he was reborn there, and then, he stays somewhere between America and Japan in the sky, which his interest is placed in, and has no boundaries. I think Mura’s way of description surrounding the death of Ben’s brother indicates his recreation of multiple and inclusive Japanese-American identity, which can never be separated into “Japanese” and “American” in the post 9/11 world. In other words, Mura says that we should identity ourselves with the sky, which has no national borders, and so no conflicts or wars between nations. Why were Japanese-Americans put into the concentration camps, forced to decide to which country they were loyal, and still hurt and suffering after the camp?—because a war took place between Japan and America.

The “Japanese” in Japanese-American identity is an important element to construct a multicultural, multi-ethnic society, and it also represents a site of a different value system which has the potential to rebuild American society beyond the white dominance. In Japanese-American literary works, Japanese-Americans, changing their attitudes about the internment/Pearl Harbor memories from assimilation into the mainstream to solidarity among ethnic minorities against racism, or modernity, reconstruct the desert embodying the internment, as a symbol of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society, a new vision of alternative beyond white-dominated society. Taking this vision in a global framework, it can be said that they resituate the desert as a place of resistance against modernity and human rights violations that still take place worldwide. Japanese-Americans transform their view of Japanese ethnicity from the label “enemy” to a symbol of resistance against abuse of human rights, and by so doing they fight against “terrorism” inside and outside American society.

Notes
1. For Japanese-Americans’ protests against the violence towards Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans after 9/11, see Rosenberg. 256.
4. About the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage, see <http://www.manzanarcommittee.org/The_Manzanar_Committee/Home.html>.
5. Emily Leach, “The Ties That Bind: Muslim

6. Milton M. Gordon defines "Anglo-conformity" as the theory demanding "the complete renunciation of the immigrant's ancestral culture in favor of the behavior and values of the Anglo-Saxon core group" (85).


9. As for the argument about the Redress Movement and the claims of citizenship, refer to Nakamura, "Introduction" of Attending the Language of the Other: Recuperating Asia, Abject Other in North American Literature.

10. "Cincinnati" in Camp Notes and Other Writing. After Yamada left the camp, she went to Cincinnati, expecting that she could be invisible in such a big city. But she was noticed and spitted on: "No one except one / hissing voice that said / dirty jap / warm spittle on my right cheek" (32). She was a "Jap" no matter where she went and didn't escape her racial identity because of her Japanese face. The last line reads: "Everyone knew me" (33).

11. In her essay "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman" (1981), Yamada attempts to disown her Japanese cultural heritage. She regards the inherited Japanese cultural values such as "attitudes of resigned acceptance" represented by the word "Shikataganai" as factors that have prevented Japanese-Americans from protesting the internment. So, "Unbecoming American," an essay written after the Redress Movement, indicates her shifting of attitudes about her Japanese cultural heritage.

12. Stan Yogi explains that "[t]he "model minority" image first appeared in William Peterson's New York Times Magazine article "Success Story: Japanese American Style" (74). Elaine H. Kim remarks that '[a]s a 'model minority,' Asians are supposed to be restrained, humble, and well-mannered, a people who respect law, love education, work hard, and have close-knit, well-disciplined families" (177). She also mentions that "they are praised for not complaining about or protesting against difficulties: ... they 'take care of their own' instead of burdening 'Americans' with their needs by seeking government aid and welfare assistance" (177). For more information about "model minority," see Kim, 177–180.

13. It is well known that nuclear testing has been done and nuclear waste has been dumped near/on the Indian reservations.

14. Kadohata was criticized for being not talk[ing] enough about the camps" (Pearlman 117), being not reflect[ing] the reality of Japanese Americans" (Lee 180), when her first novel, The Floating World, was published.

15. Okimoto's book is now out of print, but in her documentary movie, Passing Poston, four former detainees talks about their experiences at Poston and she shows the government documents telling that Japanese-Americans were used as laborers for the settlements of Native-Americans. Kadohata says that she was also inspired and moved by "Hot Enough to Melt Iron: The San Diego Nikkei Experience 1942–46" co-written by Professor Donald H. Estes who worked hard to establish Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego, and his son, Matthew T. Estes. I understand that JAHSSD's activities to record and preserve Japanese-American history in San Diego made a contribution to this book.

16. "Celebrating a shared history" by Teresa Watanabe.

17. Custer, a U.S. army officer, is well-known in American history as "Custer's Last Stand."
He was engaged in Indian wars and killed in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

18. In End Note Kadohata writes that "Arizona granted Native Americans the right to vote in 1948" (260).

19. According to Ronald Takaki, 45,000 Indians served in the U.S. armed forces, which accounted for more than 10% of the Indian population. In one unit, for example, the casualties were 3,747 dead, 4,403 missing, and 19,403 wounded. For more information, see Takaki, Double Victory, 58–81.

20. Yamada writes, in "Unbecoming American," that she had seen it as "a barren place useful only for dumping toxic waste, for testing nuclear weapons, and for exiling ‘undesirable’ human beings" (208).

21. Ondo is referred to Japanese traditional dance. It is danced at Obon festival held during summer by the Japanese-American communities across America. In the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage, the participants dance Ondo together in a circle. I had an opportunity to participate in Obon festival held in Buddhist Temple of San Diego cosponsored by the Japanese-American community, and found Ondo as a symbol of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society because people with different racial, ethnic background were dancing together in a circle.


Works Cited


Yamada, Mitsuye, Camp Note and Other Writings. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1998


______. "Unbecoming American." In Becoming

Yogi, Stan. "‘You had to be one or the other’: Oppositions and Reconciliation in John Okada’s No-No Boy." MELUS, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer 1996): 63–77.