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ABSTRACT

NEW HISTORICISM AND CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Keywords: history, culture, power, biopower, biopolitics, ideology, discourse, new historicism, ethnicity, gender identity, Japanese Americans, assimilation, World War II, Japan's fifth column, the Yellow Peril, internment camps, Asian American Movement.

This thesis analyzes contemporary Japanese American literature and mainly works with the concepts of power, ideology, discourse and history. The selected memoirs, poems, novels and plays include the writers' perception of the first part of the 1940s. Because the texts focus on World War II and on how Japanese Americans were treated in that period, the research also includes details related to the 1960s and the 1970s, when participants to the Asian American Movement fought along other groups of color in the hope of abolishing discrimination based on race. The focus on the above mentioned concepts, which point to new historicism, is an important aspect of the research because we concentrate on how the audiences received the selected texts in the late 20th century and the early 21st century. This dissertation investigates the Japanese American community from the 1940s, finding and working with secondary sources from newspapers, academic journals and historical records concerning the same period.

The theoretical chapter, "The Conceptual Frame: New Historicism and Beyond", comprises three parts and has as main purpose bringing to the fore key concepts and definitions connected to new historicism, the World War II period and the Japanese American experience. The first subchapter comments on a selection of books and articles which helped in the weaving of the theoretical framework. Paul Hamilton's *Historicism* and John Brannigan's *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* as well as articles belonging to William Dean, Dwight Hoover and Winfried Fluck are of great use for the present analysis, as they helped in the understanding of this literary theory. The analysis also focuses on Stephen Greenblatt's interpretation of new historicism and on Michel Foucault's concepts of power and discourse.

Other terms discussed by Hayden White are history, poetics of history and emplotment. This section proves that new historicism is a more complex concept of culture, which focuses on interdisciplinarity, power and ideology, while emphasizing numerous little stories instead of focusing only on one history.

The second theoretical subchapter is concerned with Americans of Japanese descent during World War II. Akira Iriye's book, *Power and Culture: The Japanese American War 1941-1945*, brings to the fore the concept of power, which is interpreted according to the military strength of both Japan and America. In his book, *American Power, the New World Order and the Japanese Challenge*, William Nester views the power of a state as being ubiquitous. This section also discusses the signing of Executive Order 9066 as well as the consequences of questions no. 27 and 28 from the 1943 loyalty questionnaire. In her book, *Legacy of Injustice: Exploring the Cross-Generational Impact of the Japanese American Internment*, Donna Nagata explores this issue of signing the loyalty questions as it raised conflicts for both Issei[1] and Nisei[2]. Greg Robinson's *By Order of the President* is a valuable asset for this section because it discusses the Japanese Americans' life in camps while distinguishing between relocation camps in America and the Nazi death camps.

The third section of the chapter discusses the concept of culture, as it was defined by Foucault in his *Hermeneutics of the Subject*. According to the author, culture includes not only traditional beliefs and values, but also mechanisms of both selection and exclusion. Here culture can be associated with power which implies historicizing texts. At the same time, it focuses on issues of gender, ethnic identity and individuality in a society by putting emphasis on Asian American assimilation. Other relevant terms are Foucault's biopower and biopolitics. These are very useful for the understanding of new historicism because they refer to the ability to control people and, implicitly, populations. Other important concepts are cultural capital and empire. If cultural capital refers to cultural knowledge, politics, ideology and identity during the 1960s, empire refers to the United States as a country built on ideology by emphasizing culture and politics.

The second chapter, titled "Reading Japanese American Memoirs from a New Historicist Perspective", has three parts: the first one deals with Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (1946) and

[1] First generation Japanese immigrants.
[2] Second generation Japanese immigrants, born in the United States and, implicitly, American citizens.

Jack Matsoka's *Poston: Camp II, Block 211* (1974). The subchapter is concerned with different ways of revealing how the concepts of biopolitics and biopower are recounted by the two writers in their memoirs. They are revealing how human bodies were controlled in assembly centers and relocation camps. Secondary materials proved to be of great use for the present analysis and here we could mention newspapers from relocation camps, such as *Tanforan Totalizer* and *The Poston Chronicle*, newspaper articles from *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*. The reading of such articles strengthened the idea that Japanese Americans were indeed controlled during World War II.

According to Okubo's and Matsuoka's memoirs, Americans of Japanese descent were sent to live in assembly centers and relocation camps under permanent supervision. Their names were reduced to a number, in this way being similar to prisoners. A drawing titled "Coming Soon! Poston Water Festival" from the 1942 *Official Daily: Press Bulletin* proves that the Poston internees took part in different activities and associated themselves with other ethnic groups. The drawing shows two harmless Japanese American children, a girl disguised as a Native American and a boy dressed as a Japanese. The drawing shows that the Native American reservations and the Japanese American internment camps are, in fact, sites of relaxation, not prisons. An official reading of the drawing would be that containment is for the Japanese Americans' own good and that the two children had nothing to do with the subversive actions against the United States. Instead, they represent the future of assimilated Japanese Americans.

More importantly, biopolitics and biopower were both used when the narrators reminisced about answering the loyalty questionnaire from 1943. These questions were problematic because they asked for U.S. allegiance while rejecting the Japanese Emperor. The authorities knew that in the Japanese Americans' honor code the worship of their Mikado[3] was central. The matter of rejection had to do with the Issei recognizing their acceptance of the Emperor. Most of the young Nisei were less bound to that code. Some of them volunteered in the Japanese American combat team. Matsuoka ironically refers to these questions by using the phrase "to be or not to be loyal" in order to make a discreet, but clear allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (130).

The second part of the chapter deals with Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973) and reveals how ideology functioned in the American

[3] Mikado was the Japanese Emperor.

space during the World War II period. Secondary materials helped in the analysis of the memoir. Some of them are Robert Wilson's or Forrest LaViollete's reviews on the book, Anthony Friedson's interview with Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, references to the relocation camp newspaper *Manzanar Free Press* and articles from the American newspapers *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*.

The memoir explores ideas which were debated in the 1940s and 1950s and here we could mention the anti-Japanese ideology which was visible through shameful remarks such as "*Japs go back where you came from*" (Wakatsuki Houston, Houston 136)[4] or "Why don't you all dirty Japs go back to Japan!" (Wakatsuki Houston, Houston 168). Similar situations were encountered in Patrick Okura's article from *The Washington Post* or in Sonni Efron's article from *Los Angeles Times*. They strengthened the fact that the American public was hostile and unfriendly toward Japanese Americans. Additionally, the narrator from *Farewell to Manzanar* reminisces about the first time her teacher asked her to read out loud during class and one of her classmates says: "Gee, I didn't know you could speak English" (Wakatsuki Houston, Houston 141).

The third part of the chapter focuses on Hiroshi Kashiwagi's *Starting from Loomis and Other Stories* (2013) and on Yoshiko Uchida's *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family* (1982) while putting emphasis on history and ideological thinking. In analyzing how dominance works with the help of ideology and cultural means, the subchapter reflects the historical and political context of World War II and the formation of the narrators' identity in relocation camps. Online articles belonging to Edward Yoshida and Gus Thompson, journal articles by Rocío Davis, Roger Daniels and John Culley and newspaper articles from *Los Angeles Time*, *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* helped in a better understanding of the selected memoirs.

Both memoirs tackle the sensitive aspect of answering the loyalty questionnaire. While Kashiwagi mentions the decision of renouncing his American citizenship, thus becoming a No-No boy, Uchida adds that Japanese Americans should not have been singled out when volunteering because Italian or German Americans had the chance to fight along Americans. Articles from *New York Times* or *Los Angeles Times* strengthen Uchida's idea, in this way proving that Japanese Americans were primarily discriminated based on appearance and skin

[4] The abbreviation "Jap" was an insult for the Japanese.

color. In the 1944 article "America At War: Danger of Racism" from *The Washington Post* the author says that: "The real danger, however, is in our attitude toward the Japanese, not toward the Germans. Here the racial hatred is already in full bloom and is even taken out on loyal Americans who happen to have Japanese ancestry" (Menefee 8). Another article from 1972 published in *Los Angeles Times* and titled "Nisei Wartime Camps: A Negative Portrait" says that during World War II the Japanese American constitutional rights were put on hold immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Indeed, Japanese Americans had a lot to suffer during the war because of the terrible consequences of Pearl Harbor and its attending circumstances.

The third chapter from the present thesis, titled "Analyzing Japanese American Poetry from a New Historicist Point of View", questions how historical events are depicted in Mitsuye Yamada's *Camp Notes and other Writings* (1976) and Lawson Fusao Inada's *Legends from Camp* (1993). While the first subchapter identifies various ways of exercising power and resisting it when reading Yamada's poems, the second one deals with different cultural representations of power in Inada's poems. The chapter proves that Japanese Americans did not resist the power imposed by the American government as reflected in Yamada's poems. Inada, on the other hand, brings together American and Japanese characters present in popular culture and folklore in this way creating a bridge between the two cultures embedded in his own identity. Important secondary materials which helped in the weaving of the chapter are: "Remapping Internment: A Postcolonial Reading Of Mitsuye Yamada, Lawson Fusao Inada and Janice Mirikitani" by Robert Gritjohn, "Resistance to Images of the Internment: Mitsuye Yamada's *Camp Notes*" by Anita Haya Patterson, Jodi Varon's review on Inada's work and the MELUS interview of Mitsuye Yamada by Helen Jakoski.

In the poem "Evacuation" Yamada proves that the photos American journalists usually took during the Japanese Americans' relocation were a means of propaganda, an assurance that relocation was not a mistake of democracy, but something necessary. Yamada's "Inside News" comments on the treacherous side of Japanese Americans. Phrases such as "we are the enemy", "the enemy is confused" and "the enemy is determined and winning" reveal the speaker's double identity and her inability to choose sides in times of war (Yamada 21). If she first identifies with the enemy because of her internment, then the last reference to the determination and capacity to win is directed to the United States.

Inada's poem "Instructions to All Persons" can be read together with the poster "Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry" from the previous page of the volume. The poem evokes the basic human qualities of responsibility and respect while the echo points to frustration and astonishment. Just as Grotjohn noticed, the italicized words from the poem can be found in the poster. Moreover, while the poster gives specific instructions and excludes Japanese Americans, the poem functions as an invitation to relocate and a desire to include everyone. In his other poems Inada resorts to a number of cultural icons. For example, "The Legend of Coyote" makes reference to Native American mythology. The cultural icon of the Trickster is represented through Buddy's ability to talk with spirits and read stars as well as the speaker's constant use of the verb "claim" which denotes a liar, a deceiver. "The Legend of Amaterasu" links to Japanese folklore, as in Japanese mythology Amaterasu is the Sun Goddess. The speaker compares the unendurable heat of the desert sun in Colorado with Amaterasu, in this way revealing that Japanese Americans had to endure high temperatures during their internment. In "The Legend of Superman" Inada resorted to American popular culture. The speaker identifies with an ally of the American icon as well as an alien. He is an ally because Superman has asked him to keep his "secret code" safe and an alien because, just like the hero who came from another planet, the speaker came from another continent. The constant reference to Superman links to the 1913 Alien Land Law which forbade first generation immigrants from owning American lands. Just like the superhero, who was accepted by the American society, Japanese Americans regained their status as citizens of the U.S. after World War II and after the Asian American movement.

The forth chapter titled "A New Historicist Interpretation of Japanese American Fiction" analyzes works belonging to Julie Otsuka, John Okada and Karen Tei Yamashita. While the first section of the chapter compares Otsuka's historical fictions *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) and *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) and seeks to identify representations of power, the second subchapter is concerned with various ways of resisting power and post-war ideology when reading Okada's *No-no Boy* (1957). The third section analyzes *I Hotel* (2010) by Karen Tei Yamashita and works with the concepts of culture, power and society. If Otsuka's novels deal with World War II and life in concentration camps, Okada's novel reveals the Japanese American life after 1945 as seen through the eyes of a traitor and Yamashita's focuses on the

1960s and 1970s, when Asian Americans defended the International Hotel from Chinatown, San Francisco.

The subchapter dedicated to Julie Otsuka reveals various ways in which American institutions exercised power over Japanese Americans. While in *The Buddha in the Attic* Japanese Americans received the worst seats in a theatre, or were refused to enter a barber shop or a restaurant, in *When the Emperor Was Divine* the father is taken away from his family and questioned because he is suspected of treason. The most significant part of the analysis circles around the chapter "Confession" from *When the Emperor Was Divine* as it reveals the impact of power relations to the Japanese American community. The father eventually recognizes that he indeed planned to destroy America and that he is responsible not only for the bombing of Pearl Harbor, but also for poisoning the crops and waters, for spying on his neighbors and setting oil wells on fire. These accusations point to him being an active member of the fifth column. Otsuka's chapter is interpreted together with Theodore Seuss Geisel's political cartoon published on February 13, 1941. The cartoon presents Japanese Americans who appear to "migrate" from Washington, Oregon and California. While being given boxes of TNT by other members of the "Honorable 5th Column", the man who uses the spyglass is faced toward West Coast, he is "waiting for the signal from home" (Miner).

The second subchapter analyzes different ways of resisting power and ideology during the post-war years in Okada's *No-no Boy*. Although it first received negative feedback from the American audience, it was rediscovered in the 1970s and gained popularity among people belonging to Asian American communities. The main character from the book, Ichiro, renounced his American citizenship for two reasons: first, he respected his family and felt that they were subjects to injustice and second, he rebelled against the system which imprisoned him for having Japanese blood. Even if his father recognizes that he is sorry for Ichiro because he chose to spend time in prison just to prove his loyalty to his parents, his mother is deluded and thinks that her son had done the right thing. Ichiro is haunted by his mistake because many representatives of the Japanese American community, including his brother Taro, blame him for his decision of becoming a No-No boy. However, at one point in the novel, Ichiro calls his father a *Jap*. By doing this, Ichiro unknowingly stigmatizes his father based on his looks. More than that, he associates the word Jap with the inability to understand things. This time, Ichiro finds himself in

the position of the white people, who judged Japanese Americans based on race issues and stereotypes.

The third section of the chapter investigates the 1960s and 1970s and the fight for the International Hotel in San Francisco, in this way questioning the historical and the political background with the help of posters, brochures, newspaper articles and academic journals. The reading of the novel proves to comprise references to American history as well as to the development of Asian American literary and historical culture. For instance, the section "War and Peace" confronts two Asian American writers with different political views. These are Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston. Even if Chin believes that Kingston's writings encourage racist stereotypes and lack of truth, as he stated in the introduction of the anthology *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, Yamashita proves that both writers belong to the Chinese American community and neither one should be neglected based on his/her different ways of promoting Chinese culture in the American space. Another section which discusses historical and political contexts tells the story of an Asian Mexican mother, Chiquita Banana, Don Juan (a personification of Uncle Sam) and Mulan Rouge, the Chinese sister who avenges her family after the unfortunate event of Chiquita Banana being killed by Don Juan. This section proves that the American nation was formed with the contribution of numerous races, thus emphasizing interracial life. It also pokes fun at the American government and Frank Chin's interpretation of Kingston's work. She is not a fake writer, as Chin claimed in his introductory part from *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, simply because her Fa Mu Lan inspired others. If the mythical warrior was introduced in the American culture due to the 1998 Disney movie, she can also be reintroduced in the Asian one through Yamashita's 2010 Manga. This return to history and mythology only proves that the issue is still debatable among Asian American critics.

The fifth and last chapter from the present thesis, titled "A New Historicist Reading of Japanese American Theatre", analyzes two plays belonging to Philip Kan Gotanda and one belonging to Karen Tei Yamashita. If Gotanda's *Sisters Matsumoto* (1998) is set in 1945, right after the ending of World War II, his *Fish Head Soup* (1991) is set in 1989, almost 12 years after the ending of The Vietnam War. These two plays explore questions of Japanese American identity in the American space by making reference to historical facts which contributed to the formation of each character. The plays comment on the choices and challenges of Japanese Americans, in this way revealing human struggles connected to internment camps and World

War II, ethnic identity, public humiliation and discrimination. Yamashita's *GiLArex* mocks the idea that, if not preserved, ethnic identity may be washed out. At the same time, the play (or the musical as it was initially published) questions gender identity and politics. Apart from revealing important historical events, the play also introduces Japanese popular culture as it was perceived by the American society.

The first section of the chapter analyzes different representations of history, power and culture while focusing on three sisters who return home in Stockton, California, after being incarcerated in the Rohwer War Relocation Center during World War II. The play reveals how a broken family succeeds in adapting to a new way of life even if the sisters are or feel oppressed by representatives of the American society. *Sisters Matsumoto* focuses on three main events, the first two taking place before the beginning of the play. These are: the father's decision to sell the house without telling his daughters, the father's death and the sisters' return to the vandalized home. A first example that the sisters faced oppression could be seen in the "Japs go back home" sign painted on the walls of their house (Gotanda 6). The message from the Matsumotos' house points to other anti-Japanese messages. Roy L. Brooks's section on Japanese American internment and relocation from the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism* includes a photograph The photograph shows a Caucasian barber pointing "proudly to his bigoted sign" which reads: "We don't want any Japs here – Ever" (6). Alan Taylor's online article "World War II: Internment of Japanese Americans" includes a photograph showing a family of four returning to their vandalized home, only to find the message "No Japs Wanted" on the walls of their house (Taylor). Both photographs point to anti-Japanese American sentiment, thus encouraging post-war racism, but also a certain amount of fear for the Yellow Peril. The photos show that Caucasians were concerned about their businesses and neighborhoods. The fear was closely connected to the great amount of Japanese immigrants who created their own power centers along with the fast development of their family business. The anti-Japanese sentiment developed as a consequence of refusing to assimilate Western elements into the Japanese American cultural identity. This linked toward a certain historical and cultural background which separated Japanese Americans from other members of the American society.

The second subchapter analyzes how the four family members from *Fish Head Soup* interact by focusing on (in)efficient ways of communicating. Even if the characters seem to interact with each other, the only interaction is represented within their inner selves.

Miscommunication primarily happens because of the characters' traumatic past. While the parents are still haunted by the relocation years and Mat's "drowning" in the river, Victor is still trapped in the Vietnam War and Mat is still ashamed of his father's silence when confronted by an American. The subchapter demonstrates that being Japanese is seen as having a disease, in this way tackling aspects connected to racism in the American space. While at first sight, Mat is the only one who does not seem to be infected, he becomes aware of his condition as he realizes that having Japanese blood implies carrying the disease. While Papa recognizes that racism is a kind of disease and associates it with cancer, Mat later realizes that he is also infected. Mat's awakening and his decision of waging a war against the people who had harmed him and his family, by making them run instead of listen, are full with hatred. He is not attempting a democratic approach to the problem of racism, but distances himself from the American society in favor of closer familial ties. Ironically, this gap is what separated Japanese Americans from other members of the American society. Immediately after their arrival in the USA, Japanese Americans succeeded in building their own businesses on American ground without involving other active members of the society. This led to an anti-Japanese sentiment which hardly vanished throughout the post-World War II years.

The third subchapter provides a reinterpretation of history in connection with World War II and the construction of the Los Angeles aqueduct. The unconventional character Manzanar "Ringo" Murakami proves to be valuable not only because of his connection to Manzanar relocation camp, but also because he is able to control GiLArex, the Asian American monster which rises from underneath the relocation camp. The fact that Manzanar mentions how the city of Los Angeles gained its metropolitan shape together with the monster's ability to destroy the city, reveals aspects connected to the consequences of ruining the agricultural area from the Owens Valley. The play also pokes fun at ethnic erosion as Emi, one of the main characters, is not familiar with her Japanese heritage and, more importantly, she rejects it when she claims that she is not Japanese American, but American. The return to history takes place when the creature awakens and the other characters are thinking of evacuating and saving themselves from the monster. Here, Manzanar makes reference to Executive Order 9066. He says: "Years ago, my folks evacuated. I'm staying here. Let the others evacuate…" (Yamashita 115). Another return to history happens when we compare Yamashita's musical with the original Godzilla (Gojira) movie from 1954. In his online article commemorating Godzilla's 60th anniversary, Daniel

Alvarez says that: “Godzilla himself was a metaphor for the atomic bomb, and the film itself […] used the terrors of a post World War 2 Japan to create an intense atmosphere” (Alvarez).

As mentioned before, the selected books are analyzed together with articles and newspapers which reflect the ideological directions adopted by various *actors* involved in a specific World War II situation: the fate of ethnic Japanese in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack. These little stories narrated by people who experienced World War II internment showed, in a more serious or ironic manner, how Americans of Japanese descent were affected prior, during and after the above-mentioned Pearl Harbor episode, while also placing this within a larger power context, displaying a complex situation. Because a very important part of new historicism is covered by the awareness and the acknowledgement of history, this thesis has started from the assumption that any literary text is a historical document in itself and it needs to be taken into consideration, but the ideological networks weaving these historical documents are essential in their interpretation.

This dissertation is meant to be a contribution to a better understanding of the ways in which power configurations are instrumental in determining and shaping people’s perception of the world in which they live, or the world in which their predecessors lived. It has examined the extent to which a number of cultural texts, featuring literary texts, participate in this permanent process of reassessment of how ideological factors intervene in people’s engagement with the past in order to better negotiate aspects of the present and of the future, a critical and active attitude that new historicism, within the larger context of contemporary critical cultural discourses, has promoted.

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