

## ON ESSENTIALISM



*Garrett Hongo*

### 1 *Gardens We Have Left: Against Nationalisms in Literature*

When I was six, my family was living in Kahuku, Hawai'i, on the windward North Shore of the island of Oa'h'u, a place since 1888 that was dedicated, up until twenty years ago, to the cultivation of sugar cane. The abandoned canefields still dominate the strip of flat land between the ocean and the green cliffs of the Ko'olau mountains, remnants of one of the volcanoes that built the island. Going east, as you drive the highway there, a blue sea will be to your left while the green sea of pitching cane will be to your right. As a child, I saw workers flailing machetes in the fields across the highway, smelled the cane fires when they set them before harvesting. Kahuku was a plantation town, rows of shacks and bungalows dominated on the one hand by the blackened exhaust spire of the Castle and Cook sugar mill, but also, on the other, by the wing-like roofline of the Nishi Hongwanji—the Buddhist Church. It was a two-story building of bare, greying wood and grotesque carvings along its eaves and guarding the rails to the stairs. I didn't then know much about Buddhism, but its gargoyles impressed me with far.

This was where I grew up, a place where my family, immigrants from Southern Japan, had lived for three and a half generations. My ancestors came at the end of the nineteenth century, peasants displaced from their lands and exported as a diaspora of labor to help capitalize the industrialization of modern Japan. And, in a short few weeks, we were to become immigrants again. Our future was to be on “the Mainland”.

I'd heard the phrase many times, “the Mainland” invoked like it was another paradise. Spoken at dinnertime, said out on the schoolyard, tossed in as a rhyme-word in hopscotch and jump-rope games, it was nearly a religious mantra, something soteriological that signified potential and hope, saying that things would be better elsewhere—and soon. My playmates, cousins growing tired of hearing it from me so frequently, began to taunt, then spit it back as a curse. “You go Mainlan”, they'd say in the pidgin English that was our creole. As if it were a soul's-leap into Hell. But I was a believer, and I clung to its promise—a step across a transformation-

al brink to redemption in some sociological afterlife. This was my future, a myth of deliverance.

That summer before we left, like every summer, there was a festival—the Bon-Odori—a ritual that took place on the sandy parade ground, a kind of village square adjacent to the Hongwanji. There was also a mess hall for the plantation workers, a union hall, a Filipino barber shop, a Japanese barber shop, the tofu maker's shed, and the movie theater built for G.I.s during the war. A bit further away, like petals off a sunflower, were the rows of worker houses.

A dance festival for the dead, the Bon-Odori takes place in midsummer, near the time of the solstice, near the time, in rice-growing countries, of the harvest. The dances are based on motions derived from work—rice-planting, coal-mining, hoeing... And the songs that accompany them are also often about work. Bon-Odori is celebrated in Southern China, Japan, Hawai'i, and, now, along the West Coast where Japanese immigrants have brought it to America. The idea is that the community dances all night long in order to earn good karma for the souls of the dead locked in a spiritual limbo that is a transitional paradise—it was Buddhism that invented the original twelve-step so that those souls will be freed and thus enabled to reach complete extinction, an escape from the cycle of birth and death, an escape from the carnal world altogether—nirvana. Symmetrically metaphysical in its logic, it is the most ingenious excuse for a block party I've ever heard of.

What I remember from that time is a set of images—people who were grimed, khaki-clad workers by day transformed by the festival into celebrants wearing white gowns and crisp, dark cotton jackets, everyone waving fans decorated with white cranes and the indecipherable emblems of calligraphy. There was a makeshift tower at the center of the square's sandy ground, and, in the middle of it, on a linen-covered platform, gymnastic men took turns trouncing huge, barrel-like drums, while someone played a flute and someone else sang a rhythmic song about shoveling coal. All was lamp-lit. From time to time, the spinning dancers would shout refrains back to the singer. Women danced in concentric circles around the tower, slowly waving flagged sleeves as if they were huge fans attached to their arms. Within a circle of their own, the men bobbed and jerked like fish schooling in a contrapuntal dance. Pennants flapped and paper lanterns swung from wires strung overhead around the square. On a low platform near the temple, people brought their tributes—heaps of sacked rice, green and black pyramids of bottled liquor and soy sauce, and paper chains of individual and group pledges. I was given a papier maché bird that dangled from a stick and string. It twittered when you swung it. I was given a pink

and yellow fan. It was the end of my childhood and a peculiar joy filled the air like a wet wind bathing all of us in its erotic, tropical kiss.

That was my past—a memory of ecstatic commonality. An Edenic garden of cultural coherence.

Since then, it is important to say that I think my unconscious has worked to slowly merge what was the future and what had been the past in a way that says something about the tendency of subalterns to re-imagine both along lines that glorify and essentialize. This is the forgetting and revolutionary millenarianism, a kind of reification, that reproduces what has been made marginal, through complex interaction with cultures of dominance, as an archaic and mythic archive and, potentially, also as a totalizing system that, when engaged, particularly as lyric *telo* in narrative schemes of transcendence, creates that illusory horizon of a future wherein ruptured colonial and regional identities are repaired and re-vitalized. For descendants of immigrant peoples, which most of us here are, if the future has been some fulfillment of potential, some graspable thing had after effort and in the condition of diaspora; if the future was “the Mainland” or “the West”, then the past can have become some orgiastic cultural root in a pre-fragmentary, unisonant society, particularly in the cases where race, region, and ethnicity create elements of history and identity that resist assimilation or are excluded and silenced in the dominant culture. The past and the imagined future, then, can coalesce into writerly beliefs and narrative tendencies that function in the way similar to characteristics of a pre-critical, uninvestigated ethnic nationalism—a *mythos* for the saved and the excluded “Other.”

This is troubling, yet, for those steeped in post-colonial studies, something quite recognizable. Homi Bhabha has described it as a practice which “inverts the axis of political discrimination by installing the excluded term at the center.” In ethnic literature, this is the claim of continuity and derivation from a pre-critical, mythic root—a metaphysical “home” which is the end-point for any lyric of nostalgic, cultural praise. In writerly practices, it comes down to the fallacy of authenticity. It is possession of this essence which authenticates and makes recognizable a given work’s tie to “a people.”

Post-colonial critics have identified this approach, this culturally *nationalistic* approach, as an aftereffect of the colonial process in which the new political/cultural regime, after overturn of the colonial power, reproduces the structure of colonial institutions and practices within colonized societies attempting de-colonization under the sign of the revolutionary, the organic, and the *authentic*. What is deemed authentic in these configurations, therefore, are provisional political constructions of a society

attempting to redefine itself with cultural referents recognizably antagonistic to the former colonial powers or ruling set of values. This society creates a centrism, an essentialism along different alignments, reproducing its own version of the marginal and Other in a process that, though revolutionary, is nevertheless hegemonic.

To cite from recent history, the Black Arts movement of the Sixties once elevated firebrand Amiri Baraka and denounced the professorial Robert Hayden on these terms. The movement inspired Gwendolyn Brooks to abandon formal approaches that smacked of canonicity and adopt a more colloquial diction and recognizably folkloristic practices. Critically, it elevated Richard Wright while de-valuing Ralph Ellison, and cautioned James Baldwin to de-emphasize distance, in his public statements, the Jamesian influence on his own fiction.

Since then, this kind of cultural nationalism has been effectively critiqued by a powerful cadre of black intellectuals who are well known. In African American intellectual circles, it is no longer easy to make claims about “black authenticity” regarding a literary work without appearing illiberal and underinformed.

Lamentably “Asian American authenticity” has survived as a legitimate phrase and principle of investigation. It is frequently the very tool of the categorization, fostering a kind of historical vision that fills the past with stories of its victims, what Derek Walcott has called “a literature of recrimination and despair... [that] yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos.” Used as a principle of canonical formation under the category of Asian American literature, it reproduces those centrist, essentializing tendencies of a cultural process that is one stage along a potential continuum of de-colonization. Though useful for a brief cultural moment, it locks our literature into a reified past that stifles both learning and imagination. It is time to go further.

I have been back to Kahuku several times now. When I was ten, in order to firm up physically and maintain more island ways, I was sent from Los Angeles where we’d moved to live with an aunt in Honolulu. On weekend a trip to Kahuku, I visited the old village square where the Bon Festival had regularly taken place. It had long since ceased being held. When I went to the temple to inquire, I was told by a caretaker that the priest had retired and moved back to Japan, that the *sangha*, the parishioners, had all scattered and moved “to town” in Honolulu or else gone to the Mainland. My great-grandmother still lived nearby, but no one of the younger generations was left. The square and its surrounding buildings seemed a dry husk then, emptied of its grain.

And each time I’ve gone back, there was less to see. Ten years ago, the

last time I was there, the temple had been boarded up, along with many of the shacks and bungalows. Some few of these had been occupied by newcomers and even fewer by descendants of the original workers. I talked with a couple of them. They looked at my strange clothes and regarded my strange accent with suspicion. The strongest sense left of the old village and its people was in the yellowing temple moss over the sandy mounds of the graveyard on the promontory by the sea. And wind was scrubbing its wooden markers clean.

I think that the future, this soul's leap into a troubled metropolitanism, having arrived now, has shattered any misconceived harmonious totality that might have been the past. And the past will be fragments again, broken rice bowls left out on the saline ground of the cemetery-by-the-sea. With Homi Bhabha, I see this new future splitting the patriotic voice of unisonance, exiling the atavistic, ethnic past and its language of anterior belonging. I see it opening to other histories and narrative subjects, becoming itself as American or European as it is regional and Asian, like the Argentinian literature Jorge Luis Borges saw as, not only local, but descended from "all of Western culture." What remains to be accomplished, perhaps collectively, is a hybrid and transnational literature that will turn the past into questions for interrogating the future rather than maintain it as an Edenic garden of cultural coherence. We might then celebrate the bits and pieces of it left to us not as fragments which we can piece together and reform into an archaic shape, Apollo or Ashikaga, but elements for a new cultural mosaic, diaspora frescoes under a variegated spire somewhat freer from exploitative commerce and subaltern religious certainties, encrusted with porcelain shards polished by the sea.

## 2 *Homage to lost Worlds: Where I Write, Why I Write There*

I constantly find myself having to *counteract* what pop and postmodern culture provides me as scenic and narrative identities, backdrops for the play of consciousness, yet they have the appeal of mass (mis)recognition, visual referents others can attach to a story I'm telling, in prose or poetry, about Hawai'i, my childhood place. And I am likewise constantly inspired by the great works of literature not to give in, to find inspiration in the humble regions of my own memory, in a homebound ethicality, in the sere commonplaces of mild existence. I have found *Walden* as our American version of the great Japanese eremitic *zuihitsu* (poetic essay) tradition practiced by Kamo-no-Chomei, Yoshida Kenko, and Matsuo Basho. And I know that I write from lost places, neighborhoods I have been taken away from I feel a need to return to.

I want to look at geo-cultural locations and dislocations, collisions of, not geologic plates or continents, but of circumstances wherein consciousness shifts when it travels and meets and feels affection for or even rejects different landscapes, cityscapes, and cultural matrixes associated with radical origin or, alternatively, radical change. If there is a “geography of the self”, that theory from Romanticism that says that the forms of one’s own gravitate to items of the natural world, humanizing the landscape as a personal history as Wordsworth did the Wye Valley as a child, as Thoreau did with Walden Pond, then what happens when the landscape changes or is degraded or when a person migrates or a people are removed from homelands? What happens when there is trouble? What happens when the exile returns home? What happens when the foreigner becomes American? When there is diaspora? What do we do when the self is estranged from lands?

I write from Kahuku, the plantation village on O’ahu in Hawai’i where I grew up as a child, remembering its Buddhist temple, tofu makers, rows of shotguns, and sandy village square, remembering the fields of sugar cane, the tractors and trailers hauling burned and cut cane down the Kamehameha Highway to the smoking mill at the center of everything. I write from the rocky beaches and sandy promontories where the separate graveyards were for Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese workers. I write from the blossoming plumeria trees, from the ironwoods by the beaches, and my memory of streetvendors calls and my grandfather singing in Hawaiian and Japanese as he washed dishes for his roadside café. I write from this world I left at the age of six, returned to when I was ten, that was lost to everyone as the capitalized world of Hawai’i itself turned from sugar to tourism.

I write from the small tract home my parents bought for us in Gardena, near Los Angeles, its symmetrical grid of suburban streets, its corner gas stations and liquor stores, the barbed wire around my high school, the razor wire around wrecking yards and auto shops, the tiny Japanese *okazuyas* and gaudy poker parlors, the rat-nests of palm trees, and the long, cooling, fog-banked and wind-tunneled seaward-bound road at the center of town. I write from my memories of all of us in high school—black kids bused in from Compton, Chicanos from “The Tracks” near Gardena Boulevard, and us *Buddhaheads* from all over town, worried about dress and the latest dances, worried about cool and avoiding addiction to glue and Robitussin even as we hoped we were college-bound. I write about the summer evening Festival for the Dead at Gardena Hongwanji and the intimate spaces of dinnertime cooking my mother and grandmother made, my father watching football and boxing on the

TV, exhausted after work and stymied by his social isolation. I write from people who work and want better for themselves and their children.

And I write from what was an intellectual native ground—my years away at Pomona College, where I studied literature, languages, and philosophy and was allowed to develop my deep love for learning and reflection. I found “the better nature” of literary practices there, sponsored in my soul a feel for the finish of language, the finer tone of contemplative emotions. What was better than reading Chaucer in the mornings, hearing a lecture on jazz operas and *Moby Dick* by the fiery and entertaining Stanley Crouch, browsing through the home library of the poet Bert Meyers and hearing him hold forth on the Spanish civil war and the poetry of Miguel Hernandez? What was better than reading Chinese poetry late at night, having a cup of burgundy, and practicing ideograms until I fell asleep over the smearing ink on the soft, absorbent pages of my copybook? A rhyme from Yeats runs through my head as I walk across the yellowing grass of a soccer field. It’s a late spring twilight, the moon ascends over a snow-streaked Mt. Baldy in the distance, and I feel a studious complacency aroused into passion.

Volcano, the little village where I was born on the island of Hawai’i, is, finally, the first lost neighborhood of my soul. I did not grow up there in that preternatural rainforest and sublime volcanic landscape, but I moved back many times these last few years, writing from the ache of my love for that place. It exceeds all the praise and lyric description I can muster. Poet, take nothing from this world but awe and a longing to return to the magnificent beginnings of first things.

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