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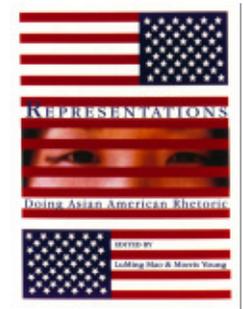
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RHETORIC OF THE ASIAN AMERICAN SELF

Influences of Region and Social Class on Autobiographical Writing

Robyn Tasaka

As someone who has recently moved to the Midwest after living almost my entire life in Hawai'i, I have become acutely aware of how different it is to be Asian American in the two places. In some ways, this was not a surprise. I knew Hawai'i was unique and that being Asian American in the Midwest would be different, but recently I have been able to see more clearly how living in the two areas affects me. When I am in Michigan, I am often aware of how many other Asian Americans are in the room—whether it's just me, or there are one or two others a few tables away. I notice if the others are speaking English, or Korean, or Mandarin. I notice if they are with other Asians, Caucasians, or members of another racial group. After several months, there are times when I forget to notice, but still, when I am back in Hawai'i, I feel a bit more relaxed.

I guess if, in Michigan, I notice other Asians, I know that they—and others—notice me as well. In Hawai'i, I am no longer on display. Or at least not as a representative of my race. In Michigan I am more aware of myself as Asian American. If I play hip-hop or rock or show tunes in my car, I feel others reading it in connection with my Asian appearance. This experience has increased my awareness of how location affects Asian American identity.

In this chapter, I focus on how region as well as social class affect students' conceptions of themselves as Asian American and thus the ways in which they inscribe their racial and/or ethnic backgrounds in autobiographical writing assignments. I begin by describing Hawai'i's current and historical racial environment and the ways social class can influence Asian American student writing and then turn to examples of personal writing by Asian American students at the University of Hawai'i

at Manoa (UH) to show how these factors may have affected the ways they communicate significant events in their lives.

HAWAII'S ETHNIC AND RACIAL ENVIRONMENT AND HISTORY

In Hawai'i, Asian Americans are not a minority. According to the 2004 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, the population of Hawai'i is 27 percent white, 42 percent Asian (including 17 percent Japanese, 15 percent Filipino, 4 percent Chinese, and 2 percent Korean), and 9 percent Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.¹ The UH population, though slightly different, reflects this racial mix. In addition, some Asian American groups have been able to gain positions of political and economic power in Hawai'i. In this section I describe two significant elements of Hawai'i's racial history—the plantation and the English Standard education system. I then discuss the current racial hierarchy and views of race in Hawai'i in order to help illuminate the context within which Asian American students in Hawai'i write themselves.

Hawai'i's ethnic diversity is largely a result of the plantation system. Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos first came to Hawai'i in the mid-nineteenth century as “cheap labor” for the sugar plantations (Takaki 1989, 132). They performed backbreaking work, sometimes spending four hours bent over in order to cut rows of sugarcane, overseen by whip-bearing foremen on horseback (135–136). Plantation laborers were subject to “numerous restrictions [that] governed work, housing, and social life and were enforced through fines, docking of time and wages, imprisonment, and corporal punishment” (Okimoto 1991, 34). The Caucasian planters viewed the plantation as a “beacon in the wilderness, [which] upheld Christianity and civilization; [and] the plantation master, through discipline and paternal affection, cultivated cane and morality among his impressionable charges” (39–40). The planters' view of Asian workers as childlike led to the implementation of racist restrictions that kept Asian workers from rising to skilled positions (Takaki 1989, 138–141). Planters also encouraged workers' national pride so that when the Japanese union, for instance, went on strike, Korean workers could be counted on to work as scabs (150–151).

In 1920, however, when the workforce was ethnically diversified to the point that workers realized they needed each other in order to

1. The statistics for the remainder of the population are as follows: 2 percent African American, less than 1 percent American Indian and Alaska Native, and 20 percent mixed race (Hawaii 2004).

effectively strike, the Hawai'i Laborers' Association, the first interracial workers' union, was formed (Takaki 1989, 155). At around the same time, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) aimed to register plantation workers to vote so that the unions and workers could gain control of the legislature (407). In this way, local Asian groups began to gain political power in Hawai'i. After World War II, the ILWU helped end the plantation system, and "the Democratic party in Hawai'i became the bastion of reform-minded Asian-Americans, primarily second-generation Japanese" (Hughes 1993, 84–86).

Asians in Hawai'i also faced a racist school system. From 1924 until 1948, Hawai'i's public school system was divided into English Standard and non-English Standard schools, with students ostensibly divided by English ability, but in reality segregated by race. The system was designed to allay the concerns of "Americans [who] know that their impressionable children, literally surrounded throughout the school-day and at playtime by these swarms of Orientals, will unconsciously pick up and adopt Oriental manners and mannerisms" (quoted in Young 2004, 116). Furthermore, in the non-Standard schools, "Hawai'i's nonwhite students . . . were often seen as nothing more than future plantation laborers"; educating these children past a certain level was considered a waste of taxpayers' money (115).

Today, however, some Asian ethnic groups² such as the Chinese and Japanese have managed to gain a certain degree of power. Based on 1990 census data, ethnic studies scholar Jonathan Okamura found these groups, along with Caucasians, "holding dominant positions" while "lower levels of the ethnic/racial stratification order continue to be occupied by Filipinos, Hawaiians, and Samoans" (1998, 200–201). Okamura says, "Koreans and, to some extent, . . . African Americans" fall somewhere in the middle (201). Japanese and Chinese began to gain power after World War II, when many moved into the middle class and obtained more influential careers. Local Japanese also gained power through involvement in politics and law, some relying on the GI Bill to earn their degrees (Cooper and Daws 1985, 42).

The roster of the Hawai'i State Legislature reflects the political

2. It is important to note that in Hawai'i, different Asian ethnic groups are viewed quite distinctly. The term *Asian American* is rarely used, and individuals are more likely to identify as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Taiwanese, Laotian, Vietnamese, or some mix. Each ethnicity is even stereotyped differently. Chinese, for example, are said to be tight with money, while Koreans are said to have short tempers.

power of different ethnicities. Between 1960 and 1980, local Japanese “averaged 50% of the total membership of both houses” (Cooper and Daws 1985, 42). Based on self-reported responses from members of the state House of Representatives in 2005, 58 percent of the representatives were Japanese, 17 percent Caucasian, 17 percent mixed (including Chinese/Caucasian and Filipino/Chinese/Spanish/Caucasian), and 8 percent Filipino. Because representatives’ racial and ethnic backgrounds are not officially recorded, this data is only partial, based on voluntary responses to an e-mail I sent to the fifty members of the Hawai‘i State House of Representatives, briefly informing them about my project and asking their ethnicity. Twenty-four percent of the representatives responded. Despite the relatively small response, however, alongside George Cooper and Gavan Daws’s reports in *Land and Power in Hawaii*, this data provides an idea of the relative representation of different ethnic groups in the legislature.

Race is also discussed quite differently in Hawai‘i than it is in other parts of the country. There seems to be a belief that being “local” is more important than one’s race or ethnicity (Young 2004, 71). This belief is expressed, in part, through a sense of pride in the local ability to laugh at ethnic differences. In one of Hawai‘i’s daily newspapers, for example, an article on “the king of ethnic humor in Hawaii [sic]” says that the comedian’s “takes on racial stereotypes can pretty much be a gauge of residency: Laugh, and it shows you’ve been in Hawaii [sic] for a while. Laugh at a joke about your own race, and you’ve been here longer” (Kreifels 1999). Making jokes about race is seen as characteristic of local identity, while non-locals, especially those from the U.S. mainland, are viewed as being too uptight when it comes to ethnic humor.

Charles Memminger, a columnist in the same daily paper, expresses another popular Local idea about race, saying, “Hawaii’s come a lot further than the rest of the country on racial relations. We take it for granted that people of different races marry, socialize, work and live together in relative harmony” (2001). While this statement is not entirely without basis, it reflects an overly self-congratulatory view of race in Hawai‘i. Several scholars have pointed out the dangers of this blind faith in the local, which can make it more difficult to bring up the racial injustices one does experience (Rodrigues 2000, 202). Local unity is also used to attack the Hawaiian sovereignty movement, which is portrayed in a local daily newspaper as “a dangerous threat to ethnic harmony” (Okamura, 1994, 283). The difficulty of discussing racial problems in Hawai‘i is

also reflected in the caution exercised by Hawai'i journalists who do criticize race relations. One editorial, for example, which goes on to suggest ways to increase racial harmony in Hawai'i, begins with "Make no mistake. Hawaii's overall atmosphere of racial and cultural tolerance is still the envy of the rest of the world" ("How Can Schools Teach" 1999). Both these current and historical racial issues likely influence the ways in which race and ethnicity show up in the autobiographical writing of Asian Americans in Hawai'i.

SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATIONAL VALUES

In concert with race and region, social class may also influence the ways in which Asian American students write. According to Mike Rose, middle-class students are less likely to write about issues of race than students from less privileged backgrounds (1989, 177). Victor Villanueva (1993) also finds that social class, more than racial background, predicts the extent to which students attend to difference.

Middle-class students of color may avoid discussing race because they do not see themselves as disadvantaged or Other. According to Rose, middle-class students of color grow up seeing "people of their race exercise power. They felt at the center of things themselves . . . they felt strange about being marked as different." While they may be aware of hardships their families have faced, they perceive these events as being part of history rather than an immediate concern (1989, 178). Middle-class experience also leads some to feel that, rather than dwelling on past suffering, one should focus on the future and making a good life for oneself (179). Whether based on the lack of blatant racism in their own lives or the way they have been taught—by immediate family, the mainstream media, or both—middle-class students of color may not see themselves as underprivileged.

These students may also recognize the class-based privileges they have had and feel it would be unfair to claim hardships based on race. Villanueva, for example, describes a Japanese American student from Hawai'i he works with. He notes that she makes some errors in writing that she corrects in speech and suggests that the errors seem similar to those of English-language learners from Asia. The student denies the connection Villanueva draws between her writing and racial background, instead attributing her errors to a less race-specific cause: "I just don't worry" about it, she says (1993, 104). When reading this account, I felt that the student chose to attribute her errors to carelessness because

she was embarrassed to be compared with Asian immigrants. I imagine her being embarrassed for a variety of reasons—perhaps she does not want to be associated with recent immigrants, but more than that, as a fourth-generation Japanese American with an “exclusive private school” education (102–103), I imagine she feels she has little in common with recent immigrants, and is perhaps embarrassed for Villanueva, thinking that he does not understand the difference between Asians and Asian Americans. She may also be embarrassed that she made these errors, given her expensive education and fourth-generation status. In a way, it may be a form of humility³—this student realizes the privileges she has had and does not feel entitled to claim hardships based on race.

Similarly, middle-class Asian American students may avoid social issues because they believe that they have a better chance of succeeding by “playing the game” than by calling attention to racial inequities. This is how Villanueva describes a group of working-class African American students’ resistance to a teacher, Floyd, who uses a “Freire-like pedagogy” (1993, 53). The students resist in part, Villanueva says, because they “could reason that no matter how slight their chances of getting into college or the middle class, they did have chances, maybe better than most.” Revolution is for “when there is nothing left to lose,” and Floyd’s students feel they have the chance to succeed (61). Like Floyd’s students—perhaps even more so since their families have already achieved middle-class status—some students of color feel they can be successful; there is thus no reason to bring up the difficulties that individuals might face because of their racial background.

In addition, middle-class students may be able to avoid discussing race because of their familiarity and similarity with others in the academic community. According to Villanueva, students in a basic writing class he studies that, like many basic writing courses, enrolls a large number of working-class students, had to pay attention to difference and how it might affect the way their writing is understood. During a peer workshop, for example, one student tells her group, “[M]y experience . . . *you* guys . . . can understand. . . . Cause maybe in some way *we’re* alike, but I’m not talking to *you*. I’m talking to people like *John* [the teacher] who don’t move up from where we do” (emphasis in the original). On the other

3. In discussing one student’s supposed humility, I do not intend to further the stereotype of the humble Asian. Nevertheless, I do believe it is a form of humility that can lead middle-class individuals who are not perceived as coming from such privilege to avoid discussing the source of their supposed setbacks.

hand, regardless of color, students in the traditional writing class feel they do not need to explain their perspectives because they all “share in the speech code of the majority” and have the same context “born of a common literate background” (Villanueva 1993, 109). The primarily middle-class students in the traditional writing course, even when faced with a text about racial difference, limit their discussion to things like word choice and mechanics rather than discuss the issues raised in the paper (114). Villanueva seems to say that issues of race and other forms of difference arise more readily among working-class students because they must think about and discuss these factors in considering how their writing will be read by others in the academic community, who they assume, often accurately, have backgrounds different than theirs. In addition, middle-class students can avoid confronting difference because, based on their greater facility with the language and values of the academic community, they can explain their perspectives without discussing factors like race.⁴

IMPLICATIONS

In the existing literature, the characteristics of the autobiographical writing of Asian Americans and other people of color are attributed not to some inherent, for example, Chinese American or African American trait, but to the role of the individual—as a person of color—in American culture. Thus, in order to more fully understand the autobiographical writing of Asian Americans, it seems crucial to pay attention to such things as region and social class and how these factors interact with race to influence individuals’ roles in society and their perceptions of those roles. While Asian Americans in Hawai‘i are, to some extent, aware of where we stand in mainstream American culture, Hawai‘i’s environment also influences our self-perceptions. An Asian American with Caucasian schoolteachers, community leaders, classmates, and neighbors is certainly going to have a different perception of herself and her race than someone who is surrounded with people who share her racial and/or ethnic background.

And, as Rose and Villanueva argue, racial differences are sometimes tempered by similarities in social class. In Hawai‘i, as stated previously,

4. This claim may seem questionable, as Villanueva does not discuss other possible explanations for the difference between the two student discussions. The difference between the two groups, for example, may instead be a result of the different ways the students were taught to use peer revision groups. Villanueva’s larger argument, however, that we need to pay attention to class, and not just race, is surely valuable (114).

those of Japanese, Chinese, and Caucasian ancestry occupy relatively high socioeconomic status, giving these students the privileges of social class that Rose and Villanueva describe.

Autobiographical writing, with its complex ethical issues, provides a valuable space in which to study the influences of race and ethnicity. As scholars like Ellen Cushman (Brandt et al. 2001, 57) and bell hooks (1990, 152) have argued, assigning autobiographical writing can be problematic. Asking students to earn their grade by communicating their personal lives to strangers is fraught with ethical issues—and ones closely tied to racial and ethnic difference. Are individuals from some backgrounds, for example, less comfortable sharing their private lives? How do different perceptions of the self influence how students perform on personal writing assignments? How might racial difference between the student and teacher, or the student and her peers, influence the way she writes her life? Autobiographical writing is an arena in which racial and ethnic difference can have critical consequences, and the study of these issues has been limited, particularly for Asian Americans. In conducting the research for this chapter, for example, I began by searching for literature on Asian American autobiographical writing but, when that turned up few resources, had to expand my search to include literature on other people of color as well.

In the existing literature, race is represented as, in many ways, determining what individuals write. Scholars describe the way the “ethnic” autobiographer writes and seem to assume that people of color experience “limiting social conditions” and perceive themselves differently than others do (Wong 1992, 262; Ray 2000, 94; Friedman 1998, 76). I find these descriptions to be too narrow. As Rose (1989) and Villanueva (1993) demonstrate, the experiences of students of color may not be limited in the ways we expect if they come from middle-class backgrounds. This is not meant to deny that many people of color do face “limiting social conditions,” even in a place as diverse as Hawai‘i, but if they do not perceive themselves as facing hardships, if they do not see race as heavily influential in their life—as the students in my research claim—they will not write in the ways that, based on the published literature, Asian Americans and other people of color are expected to write.

In the following section, I summarize the existing literature on the autobiographical writing of Asian Americans and other people of color and use samples of autobiographical writing from Asian American

students at the University of Hawai'i in order to show the gaps in the published literature. The student writing shows none of the characteristics described by scholars of autobiographical writing and, in fact, includes few references to race at all. I believe this discrepancy is in part due to the effects of region and social class.

DISCUSSION OF STUDENT ESSAYS

In my analysis of the student writing, I rely on the scholarship of W.E.B. DuBois (2004), Susan Stanford Friedman (1998), Ruth Ray (2000), and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1992). Of these scholars, only Wong focuses specifically on Asian Americans; DuBois focuses on African Americans, Friedman studies women's autobiography, and Ray writes about Armenian and African American students. The qualities these scholars find, however, are depicted not as inherently female, Armenian, or African American, but as resulting from the writer's role outside the mainstream. Thus it seems this scholarship would apply to the autobiographical writing of other minorities as well. I also rely on these scholars because they provide descriptions of the autobiographical writing and characteristics of the writers they discuss. Based on the work of these scholars, I expected to find in the students' autobiographical writing evidence of double consciousness, social statement, and guided tours of the writers' cultures.

According to DuBois and Friedman, double consciousness results when an individual faces contradictory views of herself—"the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription" (Friedman 1998, 76). DuBois and Friedman discuss the existence of double consciousness for African Americans and women respectively, leading me to expect that any minority or relatively powerless group in the United States—including all people of color—would also experience the phenomenon. Double consciousness is expected to appear in autobiography because the genre provides an opportunity to reconcile the writer's multiple identities.

Wong says that "ethnic" autobiographers may "capitalize on white curiosity by conducting the literary equivalent of a guided Chinatown tour: by providing explanations on the manners and mores of the Chinese-American community from the vantage point of a 'native.'" Chinese American autobiography has this inclination because Chinese culture is seen as exotic (and readers tend not to distinguish between Chinese and Chinese Americans) (1992, 262). As the guided tour is a result of western perceptions rather than an inherent Chinese

American quality, it seems the guided tour might also appear in the autobiographies of other Asian American writers, since their cultures are also often exoticized.

Another characteristic attributed to the autobiographies of nonwhite writers is the inclusion of social statement. Ray says that the elderly Armenian and African American women she works with tend toward “social documentation [through] either tacit or explicit critique of limiting social conditions” (2000, 94). I imagine that these social statements are intended to help readers understand how ethnicity informs the writer’s experiences; social conditions are noteworthy elements of the writer’s life, and she wants to show how they have influenced her story.

None of these characteristics, however, appears in the autobiographical writing of the three University of Hawai‘i students involved in this study.

Double Consciousness

The double consciousness DuBois and Friedman describe is supposed to arise for those outside the mainstream, which may be why the student writing shows no evidence of it. In Hawai‘i, Asian American and mixed race students like Brian, Christine, and John Williams⁵ are the mainstream.⁶ Brian identifies his ethnicity as Chinese. Christine says her mother is Chinese, Filipino, and Spanish, and her father is English, Irish, Welsh, Swedish, Scottish, and French. John describes himself as Korean and Caucasian. The students confirm, in interviews, that they do not feel like minorities in Hawai‘i, where Brian and Christine have lived their entire lives, and John has lived since he was a teenager (personal communication, May 2004). These students also do not feel Other in the 300-level autobiographical writing class for which they composed the pieces they shared with me; Christine and John describe their classmates as “diverse—different ages, different races” (Williams 20004b). Christine adds, “I don’t feel like I stick out any.” Brian may feel like a minority in the classroom—he identifies the majority of his classmates as “probably Caucasian,” but he does not feel like an outsider in the greater environment—his hometown or state.⁷

5. Participants indicated whether they wanted a pseudonym used. “Christine” and “Brian” are pseudonyms.

6. Twenty percent of Hawai‘i residents count two or more races in their ancestry (“Hawaii” 2004).

7. Brian’s view of his classmates’ ethnicities may be a bit skewed as the instructor, like Christine and John, describes the class as “diverse” (Curry 2004).

Guided Tour of Culture

Composing guided tours as Wong says “ethnic autobiographers” do may be unnecessary for Brian, Christine, and John because they feel their audience will understand their cultures without explanation. Brian says his primary audience is the instructor. He and Christine also consider the classmates in their autobiographical writing course to be their audience. Based on the broader racial makeup of Hawai‘i and the university, students can generally assume that their classmates and instructor have had many experiences with people of Chinese or Filipino ancestry; describing foods or practices is unnecessary.

Christine also says, however, that she “kind of went out of the way to mention my cultural background in there, like with the story about my grandmother and just little tidbits so that people would know a little bit more about me.” In this statement, Christine seems to acknowledge that it is important for readers to know her racial background, that this can help them understand her. What Christine feels is going “out of the way” to mention race, however, is quite minimal compared to what Wong describes. She includes, for example, only two direct references to race, one to “an old Japanese man” and another to her grandmother “swearing in every dialect of Filipino she knew.” While there are a few other slight references, for example, to Hawai‘i place-names, overall Christine’s inclusion of race is quite subtle.

John, in contrast to Brian and Christine, describes his audience more broadly, as “Everybody” (Williams 2004b). Coupled with the lack of explanation in his writing of how race plays into his experience, it seems John assumes that race does not affect his story. Perhaps this, too, stems from living in Hawai‘i. While he does not specify if “Everybody” means everybody in the world or just in Hawai‘i, as with Brian and Christine, John’s experiences in Hawai‘i, where he may not often be required to explain his race, might influence the extent to which he feels his racial background has affected his life’s stories.

Social Statement

The social statements Ray describes do not show up in Brian’s, Christine’s, or John’s writing, although all three write about situations in which it seems race may have been significant. John, in his interview, describes feeling like an outsider when he lived in the continental United States. Since moving to Hawai‘i as a teenager, he says, he feels

“more the majority” (Williams 2004b). The racial consciousness indicated in the interview, however, does not appear in his writing. In a piece about his adolescent friends, John focuses on one young man in particular. Near the beginning of the piece, he writes, “You meet a lot of interesting people when you move around a lot. I have had all types of different friends, and shared all types of different experiences with them.” He goes on to describe a friendship in which “[t]here were a few moments . . . where we had some ‘respect’ issues, but all friends do” (Williams 2004a, 1). Based on the statements John made in his interview, it seems strange that this piece, which refers to both diversity and conflict—two issues that, to differing extents, are often raised when discussing racial difference—does not include any mention of the friend’s race or how he reacted to John’s race.

One of Christine’s pieces is about a friend, also from Hawai‘i, who committed suicide. Christine mentions that the young woman “had been attending Harvard University, and she had trouble making friends.” While the friend’s race is never identified, Harvard’s racial and cultural environment is surely much different from Hawai‘i’s. A 2005 Associated Press article, for example, describes the difficulties that students from Hawai‘i often have adjusting to life on the continent, to the “more fast-paced lifestyle and sometimes unfriendly encounters, especially in large East Coast cities.” One student, for example, says, “For a Hawaii [sic] person on the mainland, the culture here is different” (Lee 2005). It seems that this kind of change, in part related to racial difference, may have affected Christine’s friend, yet she does not comment on this in the piece.

Brian writes a piece on his father being shot. He expresses a sense of shock in the text; he cannot believe this is happening to him. He mentions the “faint sound of sirens” and writes, “It was the same sound I’d hear behind me in rush hour traffic, but it meant something else to me this time.” These quotes and others like it indicate Brian’s disbelief, his sense that “[t]his isn’t supposed to happen to people like us.” It seems this would lead into thoughts about who typically is involved with violent crime, which might reveal racial stereotypes that he could then examine, but Brian’s story does not move in that direction. Instead, he returns to recounting the events—his conversation with the police officer, a phone call to his mother.

Issues related to race and ethnicity might also have appeared in descriptions of his characters, particularly his parents, whom Brian describes, in conversation, as first-generation immigrants. Brian says he

is surprised by the shooting, but how do his parents react to this violent event in their adopted country? Does it make them question their migration? Or are the effects of immigration something they no longer think about? There are also a lot of missing details about Brian's parents—details that might have revealed their ethnicities in the service of providing a fuller picture of their characters. Brian's father, for example, is reacting to the gunshot throughout the piece, so his dialogue is limited to telling his son what has happened and directing him to call 911. Brian could have, however, included other scenes to provide background information about his father or show how the shooting affected his life. All he says about his mother is that she is not home at the time of the shooting, but where is she? At work? At a friend's or relative's house?

Omitting these details may have been a conscious decision, as Brian did indicate in the interview a concern with revealing too much about his parents. He says he would be hesitant to share his writing with his mother and father because they "might not be that comfortable knowing that this has been read by other people." On one hand, it seems this would not have affected Brian's writing, as he seems worried not about sharing his parents' stories but about having them find out he has shared them. Nevertheless, perhaps this concern did limit Brian's portrayal of his parents.

The topics John, Christine, and Brian choose to write on seem conducive to the inclusion of social statements. The absence of these statements is even more conspicuous when coupled with the students' minimal references to race overall.

Lack of References to Race

Though Brian, Christine, and John write detailed descriptions of such things as friends' bedrooms or paramedics' gear, descriptions of characters' physical appearances are lacking. In her "Fallen Friend," Christine describes her friend's room as "sparsely decorated with only a chest of drawers, a wooden desk with matching chair, and a twin bed neatly made." She says her friend was "a sweet, quiet thinker," but gives no physical description of the young woman. Brian describes the paramedics "in their white uniforms and latex gloves, shouldering duffel bags bulging with medical supplies." John does give a physical description of one of his friends, but references to race or ethnicity are still absent. John writes: "James was your average sized guy. The funny thing about him was that he was eighteen and looked like he was thirty. Seriously,

when we went to parties everyone who didn't know him thought he was an undercover cop. James had a five o'clock shadow that grew back at two-thirty, with thinning hair, and a small beer belly slowly developing a large one [*sic*]" (Williams 2004a, 1).

This is a quite thorough sketch. John's description includes details about James's build, hair, and facial hair, as well as how others reacted to his appearance. What is missing is any description of James's race or ethnic background; there are not even clues like hair or eye color. Perhaps James is white, the invisible norm—but coming from a writer who is part Korean, why does John not describe how James is similar to or different from him? Or how people reacted to him at parties compared to James? Physical traits, of course, are not the only possible markers of race—things like behavior, food or eating habits, and language can also be markers. Physical traits are one racial marker, however, that these students neglect.

In addition, the students' stories can barely be placed in Hawai'i except for the faintest hint of Hawai'i Creole English (HCE) in the dialogue and a reference here and there to a character with a Hawaiian name, local food like plate lunches and *kaki mochi*, and a few place-names. In one of Christine's pieces, for example, a character slips the HCE phrase "Shame you know," indicating that she is embarrassed, into a conversation in which all other dialogue seems to be in, if not Standard English, then relatively mainstream teenage slang. In Brian's piece, his sister's boyfriend's name is Kimo, a Hawaiian name, but as far as the reader can tell, this has absolutely no effect on his experience. All Kimo does in this story is say that the robbers "asked where the girl was." One of Christine's pieces includes references to the Ala Moana Shopping Center, her hometown of Waiialua, and "the island," which provide some clues about the story's setting. Christine's reference to her hometown might also lead readers familiar with Hawai'i to speculate about the writer's ethnicity.⁸ These hints of the Hawai'i setting are there, but often need to be searched for carefully and are still quite minor. It is also unclear exactly what the authors' thinking processes were as they worked on these stories. Was Kimo, for example, really the young man's name? If not, how did Brian choose the name?

8. In the interview, Christine says that most people in her neighborhood are of Filipino ancestry. This is due to the town's plantation history; while workers of other ethnicities had lived and worked on the plantations in Waiialua in the past, "Filipinos . . . have been the majority of the plantation workforce since 1920" (Alcantara 1972, 2). While the plantation is no longer in operation today, the town's population still reflects the makeup of its most recent plantation workers.

In John's piece about his eccentric friend, there is one clue that might point toward Asian influences. John describes a language his friend invents as part of his imaginary spy persona. His friend calls the language "Campodonese," and displays his skill, saying, "Sudi wado Nuagaki Takmako si si Do namo'" (Williams 2004a, 3). This fictional language looks a bit like Japanese or Indonesian, and its name sounds like it might be some kind of cross between Cambodian, Indonesian, and Japanese, perhaps influenced by John's or his friend's familiarity with Asian languages. This might be seen as evidence of ethnicity and/or ethnic influences on John's writing, but again it takes quite a stretch to identify.

I recognize that the identification of "race" in writing is an extremely subjective task. I have tried to be as comprehensive as possible, hunting down the tiniest signs of race and taking the views of other readers into consideration. I am aware, however, that my analyses of these texts change from reading to reading. My understanding of this is influenced by Stanley Fish, who describes each person's reading as "a moving field of concerns, at once wholly present (not waiting for meaning but constituting meaning) and continually in the act of reconstituting itself" (2001, 2079). According to Fish, even in one reading of one piece, my understanding of the text changes multiple times.

In addition, the views of other readers, as I did not always agree with them, drew my attention to the fact that others might read race in these students' writings differently than I do. Fish also sheds light on this, discussing how readings differ from person to person, depending on the associations each reader makes (2001, 2080). Another reader who looked at the students' stories, for example, drew my attention to the invented language in John's piece as influenced by familiarity with Asian languages. We also discussed whether the characters' dialogue in that piece reflects the influences of HCE or the dialogue between young males as seen in movies like *Swingers* (1996) and *Clerks* (1994). John's characters say things like, "Man, where the hell is James at?" "[W]here you been?" and "Man, that's some bullshit, that wasn't no language" (Williams 2004a, 2-3). We were unable to come to a conclusion; in the end I do not include a discussion of John's characters' dialogue mainly because I do not feel equipped to argue its reflection of either influence. My knowledge of language patterns is based primarily on hearing—I can say what the dialogue sounds like to me, but beyond that I have no evidence.

While I did incorporate some references to race that other readers pointed out, others I omitted—either because I disagreed with them or because I do not have the disciplinary training to argue for them. Hearing other readers' views about race in these readings, however, draws my attention to the possible ways that I might be misreading race. I have tried to be as comprehensive as possible, and to take the students' views and the views of other readers into account, but ultimately, the interpretation of race in these students' writings is my own.

In interviews, however, Brian, Christine, and John also seem to believe that race is not a factor in their writing or classroom performance. When asked whether he feels his cultural background affects his experience in the class, John immediately answers negatively. Brian and Christine, while more ambivalent, ultimately seem to feel that their ethnic backgrounds have little effect on their writing and experiences. Brian, for example, when considering the way some of his classmates write about serious issues like rape while others stick to lighter topics like dirt biking, says, "I don't think that [difference in how much writers reveal] really has to do with culture. . . . Maybe it did. I think it's just the person." While some students seem more confident of their answers than others, all seem to, at the very least, downplay the effect their ethnic and racial backgrounds have on their writing and experiences.

CONCLUSION

Through the minimal references to race in their writing, these students rhetorically construct themselves as only marginally influenced by race and ethnicity. They make clear that their Asian American and mixed-race backgrounds are tangential to who they are. They construct themselves as unique, as "just" Brian, Christine, and John. In many ways, this can be seen as playing into the ideals of neoliberalism and multiculturalism. The ways that race might be said to appear in their writing, through Hawaiian place-names and diverse neighbors and languages, point to the brand of diversity celebrated by multiculturalism—in which difference is visible, but has no effect. Participants' denial in interviews of the influence of race may also reflect Local and neoliberal views that privilege "color blindness." It also reflects, however, participants' realities—they do not perceive race as influencing their or their peers' writing. Thus, Brian, Christine, and John seem to construct themselves as untouched by race. Brian specifically, in attributing differences

between student writers to “just the person,” emphasizes the influence of individual identity over membership in a racial group.

We might say that these students’ experiences are simply different from those reflected in the published literature, that Brian, Christine, and John are lucky to have grown up or experienced living in a place where they did not feel their Asian ancestry was a liability. This is true, but I think we must also recognize that the limited references to race in these students’ writing in many ways reflect their position of privilege.

Just as Caucasian is the invisible norm in many parts of North America, Asian, as described earlier, is in many ways the invisible norm in many parts of Hawai‘i. In demonstrating the invisibility of whiteness, Barbara Applebaum describes a study where “both African Americans and white Americans were asked to describe them-selves [*sic*].” The study found that, “[w]hile the African-Americans used racial identity markers in their self-descriptions, most of the white Americans did not [because w]hiteness, for many white people, is not considered to be a colour, it is not even considered to be a perspective, a position” (2001, 63). I believe that as Asian and mixed-race students in Hawai‘i, Brian, Christine, and John do not mention their races because, like white students in North America, they think of themselves as the norm.

Students’ insistence that race does not matter also points toward their dominant position. Their statements that cultural background has little effect on their writing and experiences are quite similar to those of a white student teacher who says, “What’s the hangup, I really don’t see this color until we start talking about it, you know. I see children as having differences, maybe they can’t write their numbers or they can’t do this or they can’t do that, I don’t see color until we start talking multicultural. Then oh yes, that’s right, he’s this and she’s that” (Applebaum 2001, 56). As Applebaum says, these comments, “based as they may be on lofty intentions, indicate a lack of awareness on the part of these teachers of their own dominant positions” (57). I believe that Brian, Christine, and John, in their similar responses to talk about race, may also be reflecting their own dominant positions.

These students have the privilege to avoid talking about race. On one hand, perhaps they are wise to take advantage of this privilege. When you talk about race, you are often pigeonholed, consequently seen only as “the Chinese kid.” Like an academic who does not want to be known only as a Native American scholar, Brian, Christine, and

John are careful about the ways they reveal hints of their cultural backgrounds. They have this privilege because they are perceived as “typical” students. Conversely, someone who is immediately perceived as different will be pigeonholed no matter what she writes about; she, in response, might thus be more inclined to use her writing expressly to defy the stereotypes that she expects color her classmates’ perceptions, perhaps invoking the characteristics mentioned in the published literature: double consciousness, social statement, and the guided tour. In a sense, Brian, Christine, and John may be attempting to defy stereotypes in their own way: by telling their stories as ones that simply happen to be part of one person’s Chinese American or mixed-race experience. Brian, Christine, and John, however, have the privilege of avoiding race in their writing—in a way that students who are immediately perceived as different do not.

In addition, while ignoring race in their writing may be an attempt to defy racial stereotypes, it also reinforces the idea that race does not matter. If Brian, Christine, or John had mentioned race in their writing, they might, in class, have been called on it, and asked, “Why do you think race is important to mention?” They would be forced to defend themselves on a topic that is uncomfortable for most—to interrogate the links between race and experience. While uncomfortable, however, this would have created an opportunity in which to discuss the extent to which their racial and/or ethnic background influences their (or their peers’) lives, stories, and ways of telling those stories. By avoiding discussions of race completely, the connections between race and privilege and other experiences are invisible, kept under the surface, and we have the privilege of continuing to believe that race does not matter.

The differences between the students’ writing and the published descriptions point toward the underexamined complexities in the writing of Asian Americans. Perhaps, Brian, Christine, and John are constructing the influences of race in their lives in ways we are unable to see and measure given current literature on Asian American autobiographical writing. This seems a possibility particularly in Christine’s case, since she claims she did try to make race evident. Despite arguments in the existing literature, however, double consciousness, foreign practices, and immediate hardship are not always significant aspects of our life stories. Depending on such factors as region and social class, “Asian American” can mean quite differently, even marking relative privilege.

An understanding of the intersection of factors like region and social class with race will help build a more comprehensive awareness of the experiences and writing of Asian American students.

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