

“The Slender Bond”: Death, Language, and Intergenerational Identity in John Okada’s *No-No*

*Boy*

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By

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27. *Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?*

28. *Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese emperor or any other foreign government, power, or organization?<sup>1</sup>*

After being incarcerated by the United States for nearly a year during World War II, Ichiro Yamada, a young Nisei<sup>2</sup> Japanese American man, responded “no” to two questions on a distributed form asking if he would both serve and swear allegiance to the country that imprisoned him.<sup>3</sup> This simple act led to his self-explanatory classification as a “no-no boy” and subsequent imprisonment as a draft resister for two years after his initial incarceration. While Ichiro—the main character of John Okada’s *No-No Boy*—is entirely fictional, his situation is anything but: well over 78,000 Japanese American citizens and first-generation immigrants incarcerated in WWII camps for years answered the same questions, and real-life “no-no boys” were labelled as “agitators” and summarily separated from their families<sup>4</sup> (Murray 78-80).

Known as one of the earliest works in the Asian American literary canon due to its 1957

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<sup>1</sup> See “The So-called ‘Loyalty Questionnaire.’”

<sup>2</sup> Second generation Japanese American, born to Issei (first generation Japanese immigrant) parents and possessing U.S. citizenship.

<sup>3</sup> This form, though later called colloquially a “loyalty questionnaire,” was distributed as the War Relocation Authority application for leave clearance, saliently as an initial step to draft “loyal” Japanese American men from the camps. The ambiguous language of the questions and the double-barreled question 28 caused confusion. Some Issei, as non-citizens, feared that “if they renounced their allegiance to the emperor they would be without a country” (Wax 15). Other American-born Nisei worried that answering in the affirmative would be admitting a former allegiance to Japan that they had never held.

<sup>4</sup> No-no boys were sent to the Tule Lake camp, a “segregation center” meant for “troublemakers” (Murray 91). Notably, historical no-no boys were not imprisoned as draft resisters, as answering “no” on the questionnaire meant that they were never drafted. Ichiro’s positionality as both no-no boy and draft resister makes him an amalgamation of Japanese American resistance during the war, if not a fully historically accurate one.

publication date,<sup>5</sup> *No-No Boy* is set in 1946, when Ichiro returns to Seattle after his release. Ichiro steps into a Japanese American community split generationally by culture and loyalty to Japan or the United States; he is ostracized by many of his peers for refusing to fight and lauded by his mother for not “betraying” Japan. The backbone of the novel is formed by his reckoning with the social and emotional consequences of his draft resistance and incarceration on his relationships, job prospects, and, more insidiously, the precarious construction of his own identity. This depiction of the destructive nature of the state when it comes to individuals and identity is excogitated through the framework of death. However, the end of *No-No Boy* hints at the potential breaking of the cycle of trauma through restorative community relationships.

*No-No Boy* forces us to question the repercussions of an unjust system that threads invisible fingers of lasting harm through a community; the text foregrounds identity as an emblematic lifeblood built of and from culture that is exceedingly vulnerable to this structural harm. In this essay, I will first examine the initial construction of Ichiro’s subjectivity and intergenerational relationships through the subtly distinct motifs of death and killing. The ties between death/killing and identity are established early on; subsequently, this framework weaves through the novel to reveal deeper implications about individual identity in a postcolonial manner. As I discuss these ties and their further development through language and cross-generational relationships, I will apply the concept of the postcolonial zombie to examine the responsibility of the state for the creation of the static, binary oppositions constraining Japanese American characters’ identities—and the ways these binaries are eventually challenged. The framework of death throughout the novel—from how it is originally presented as a metaphor for identity to its enactment for other characters and consequences for Ichiro—foregrounds the nuances of hybridity, intergenerationality, and the tumultuous nature of Japanese American

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<sup>5</sup> *No-No Boy* was Okada’s first and only published novel.

identity within a hegemonic system. To understand the importance of the true cause of epistemological destruction in the Japanese American community—not just through material goods but through emotional, community, and identity-based damage—we must read and understand the deep-rooted harm perpetuated therein. Through *No-No Boy*'s intertwining of death/killing, language, and intergenerational relationships, the text demands the recognition of the true cause of these issues as the racist policies of the state, and *not* the individual. Ultimately, the text proposes this recognition as a critical step of accessing the restorative potential in a wronged community.

### **The Construction of Binaries**

Ichiro's first major reflection upon his nationality frames the ensuing text as an exploration of a series of binary relationships within his identity. His lingering sense of displacement—both figuratively and literally—after his incarceration and imprisonment is sparked by external factors that coalesce into a thorny relationship with his Japanese American heritage. The literary techniques revealed by a close reading of the text are at the core of Ichiro's initial considerations on identity, especially in his first interaction with Kenji Kanno, a veteran and peer. In conjunction with an earlier passage regarding the split Ichiro experiences in his sense of self, this section informs the bifurcation and subsequent destruction of his sense of identity by tying it intrinsically to conceptions of death. In doing so, this passage also plays into the novel's exploration of liminality, establishing Ichiro's existence in a liminal space between Japanese and American, alive and dead. This space is framed in the negative, creating for Ichiro a hollow sense of self built on negation rather than assertion of identity—and reinterpreting

liminality through a post-incarceration perspective that is fundamentally structured around emptiness.

Setting the context for his discussions with Kenji is a crucial internal monologue Ichiro delivers after he first returns home to his Issei<sup>6</sup> parents and finds that his mother, Mrs. Yamada, is still fiercely loyal to Japan and is convinced that the United States has lost the war. Her staunch belief in Japan and pride in Ichiro for refusing the draft culminates in a passage throughout which Ichiro's train of thought spirals as he considers how his identity has been wrenched apart over the past few years. Early in his internal dialogue, Ichiro reflects on his youth, in which "we were Japanese with Japanese feelings and Japanese pride and Japanese thoughts because it was all right then... even if we lived in America" (Okada 16). The polysyndeton contributes to the flow of Ichiro's thoughts, emphasizing that his Japanese heritage used to be at peace with his American upbringing. After all, just a few lines later, Ichiro points out that "one is not born in America and raised in America and taught in America... without becoming American and loving it" (16). The epistrophe in this line marries with the anaphora in the first, the lines mirroring each other to show implicitly that Japanese and American connections can coexist—and did, before the incarceration of Ichiro and his family. In presenting Ichiro's initial identity as cohesively Japanese American, this section sets the stage for the rupture of the coexistence of his identity through the catalytic experience of incarceration.

Indeed, in the same passage, Ichiro laments the result of his incarceration and choice to refuse the draft, expanding upon what happens when the binary is forcibly split. Defining himself by what he is not, Ichiro lays claim to neither his Japanese ancestry nor his American nationality, instead lamenting, "I am neither and I blame [my mother] and I blame myself and I blame the world" (17). The importance of this quotation within the context of Ichiro's perception of his

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<sup>6</sup> Issei refers to first-generation Japanese immigrants without American citizenship.

identity lies in the pivotal word “neither.” In using this word to define the intersection of his Japanese and American “halves,” Ichiro prevents their coexistence. Instead of defining himself as a combination of both or within a liminal space between the two, he frames his place in the negative, creating a vacuum or an emptiness where his sense of Japanese/Americanness should be. Indeed, Ichiro splits himself down the middle as he speaks of his “halves” (American/Japanese). “[T]he half of me which was you [my mother, Japanese] is no longer there,” he explains, and all that is left is “the empty half” (16).

Emptiness—through lack of identity and belonging—remains a recurring theme for Ichiro through this passage and the novel; he returns to it time and again as what is left behind after the bifurcation of his previously unified Japanese and American identities. Directly before Ichiro meets Kenji, he has a brief and superficial conversation with a former professor as he considers returning to his prewar studies. The lack of depth to the discussion, which Ichiro blames on himself, leads him to feel “empty and quietly sad and hungry” (53). This short phrase introduces Ichiro’s emptiness as physical manifestation, particularly when placed alongside his hunger. The physical connotation of the word “empty” juxtaposed with “hunger” implies a space for consumption, encompassing Ichiro’s embodied desire to fill his emptiness just as he fills his stomach. This is nowhere more clear than in the rest of this passage, during Ichiro’s first meeting with Kenji.

Ichiro is partway through a hamburger, satiating his stomach’s literal emptiness, when a character that will drastically affect his figurative emptiness steps into the novel. Kenji at first simply appears to be Ichiro’s antithesis: he fought in the war and, due to his service, appears to maintain a relatively stable Japanese American identity. Yet this relationship is complicated by

Kenji's missing leg, the result of a battle injury and a source of tension between the two men.<sup>7</sup> Ichiro notes as he and Kenji walk together that Kenji's prosthetic leg "was stiff and awkward and not like his own at all" (54). Okada's polysyndeton builds tension in the sentence, drawing attention to its conclusion: Kenji's lack of control—and, specifically, ownership—over his leg. Ichiro is not the only one to have lost a part of himself to the American government; in fighting to "prove" his loyalty—and his Americanness—to the United States, Kenji loses a physical segment of himself as well. Paradoxically, Kenji notes that "not having" his leg doesn't hurt, but that "it hurts where it ought to be" (56). His experience of physical absence mirrors Ichiro's experience of internal loss; Ichiro, in comparison to Kenji, "was strong and perfect but only an empty shell" (55).

As both Ichiro and Kenji experience emptiness in disparate ways, the idea of what is (ful)filling—what it means *not* to be empty—brings the (apparent) binary of life and death alongside that of the American/Japanese dichotomy. Kenji reveals to Ichiro that his injured leg is unstable in more ways than one; a rot has set into the flesh, incrementally eating away at it from the inside. Kenji is, in his own way, being consumed by the repercussions of his service. Notable is the fact that Kenji's recurring (and deadly) illness is, like Ichiro's "emptiness," an invisible phenomenon. Ichiro bears no marks from his incarceration, refusal of the draft, and imprisonment; Kenji shows no signs of the creeping rot, a direct result of his service to the same country that incarcerated him. Yet both men experience the intimacy of destruction from within, Kenji unable to excise his sickness and Ichiro to fill his damning emptiness. Once again, the juxtaposition of Kenji and Ichiro's characters complicates the binaries of Japanese/American, tangible/intangible. Furthermore, the physical elements of Kenji's illness irrefutably connect the

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<sup>7</sup> Both Kenji and Ichiro show a "mutual investment in the idea that happiness is rooted in being intact and whole" (Chen 38). For a more extensive disability reading of Kenji's injury, see Chen.

life/death binary to identity, though the exact alignment of life/death to American/Japanese “sides” of identity remains ambiguous at this point. The additional facet of life/death tied to identity raises the stakes of an unstable identity—and indirectly condemns the circumstances (or greater power) that bears responsibility for that instability.

### **The Generational Logic of Death and Killing**

While *No-No Boy* consistently returns to life and death as motifs through which its characters conceptualize identity—and its destruction—the metaphorical discussions of death are confined primarily to Ichiro’s conversations with two characters: Kenji and Mrs. Yamada. The ways in which Ichiro converses about death with both characters differ subtly, reflecting a generational difference in conceptualization of identity through the intricacies of the diction. Ichiro’s conversations with Kenji intertwine death and identity as a way of visualizing Ichiro’s internal torment regarding his liminal identity; Ichiro’s considerations on his identity reflect little on Kenji, as the subjectivities of the two are clearly separated and neither man’s “death,” figurative or literal, is posited as directly impacting the other. However, Ichiro’s earlier discussion with Mrs. Yamada presents an alternate viewpoint dependent upon the parent/child generational relationship of an Issei mother and a Nisei son, intertwining the child’s identity—or lack thereof—with the parent’s.

Death becomes a metaphor for identity most explicitly in Ichiro’s interactions with Kenji. Ichiro envies the way that Kenji’s veteran status allows him to be accepted cleanly back into Seattle society. However, this certainty that Kenji’s lot is better wavers when Ichiro learns that his friend will not live longer than two years. Ichiro notes that as a veteran, Kenji has earned the “right to laugh and love and hope... [but] hobbling toward death on a cane... seemed far more



disastrous than having both legs and an emptiness that might conceivably still be filled” (58). The striking image of Kenji “hobbling toward death” gives Ichiro pause as he considers whose situation is preferable. Yet he almost immediately conflates a literal and figurative death as he realizes that “he, Ichiro, had stopped living two years ago” (58). The boundaries of death—a death of the soul, a death of the body, a death of belonging through identity—blur as Ichiro begins to construct himself as a man no longer living. His ostracism from society due to his status as a no-no boy—and his own internal conflicts over his loyalties and place within the world—leave him no room to thrive. Before Ichiro and Kenji leave each other, Ichiro thinks, “give me the stump which gives you the right to hold your head high. Give me the eleven inches [of leg] ... and give me with it the fullness of yourself” (58-59). The anaphora of the words “give me” in Ichiro’s thoughts, almost as a plea, emphasize the desperation he feels to have the claim to identity (and Americanness) that he believes Kenji does. He creates a contrast between himself and Kenji as he wishes for Kenji’s “fullness”; Kenji may be dying, unlike Ichiro, but also unlike Ichiro, his positionality and claim to identity allow him to achieve some form of social acceptance. Identity in this moment becomes equal to—or perhaps even supersedes—life itself. After all, Ichiro seems to conclude, does life without belonging qualify as living?

This connection between life/death and Japanese/American identity culminates later that day, when Ichiro and Kenji are drinking together in the Club Oriental. “[T]hey sat silently through the next drink,” Okada writes, “one already dead but still alive and contemplating fifty or sixty years more of dead aliveness, and the other, living and dying slowly... two extremes, the Japanese who was more American than most Americans... and the other who was neither Japanese nor American” (68). Okada explicitly intertwines concepts of life and identity, placing Kenji and Ichiro at a liminal space between the two. Ichiro’s oxymoronic “dead aliveness”

coincides with his empty identity and informs the previous passage, further explaining his claim that he has stopped living; Kenji once again is both Japanese and American and living and dying, his positionality allowing him to cleanly occupy the space in between and claim both sides of the binaries. Still, it seems that Kenji had to sacrifice his life in order to live. In allowing the self to be harmed along lines of nationality and race, Ichiro and Kenji experience both figurative and literal deaths, the interplay of which illuminates the repercussions they each feel from the impossible choices they made during their incarceration. The questions of loyalty and nationality forced upon the two by the government were not only needless, but caused active harm, driving Ichiro out of the space he had carved for himself as a Japanese American, yanking him away from his pre-war ambitions,<sup>8</sup> and rendering him adrift in uncertainty about his multifaceted identity and his place in America.

Death and identity are intertwined through Ichiro and Kenji's conversations. Yet even as the two young men discuss death as a way of conceptualizing identity, the text does not equate one man's identity with the other. Indeed, the consistent juxtaposition of emptiness/fullness, death/life, and American/Japanese presented for both young men implicitly highlights their differences rather than their similarities, with Kenji acting as a narrative foil to Ichiro. The difference in approach when intergenerational relationships surrounding death and identity arise is most clear in the immediate shift in terminology used for Ichiro's conversations with and thoughts about his mother. Rather than his relatively passive conceptualizations of "death" as he speaks with Kenji, his thoughts about death and identity as they relate to his mother revolve around a far more active word: "killing."

The very first words Ichiro's mother speaks after his two-year absence are themselves devoid of life, described as spoken in a "sharp, lifeless tone" as she tells him "the bread must be

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<sup>8</sup> Before the war, Ichiro was pursuing an engineering degree.

put out” (11). The continued association of Ichiro’s mother with death arises only a few moments later, when Ichiro lies in bed and reflects upon the anguish he feels about his choice to resist the draft. It is in this passage that two ideas are first introduced: the text’s alignment of Ichiro and Mrs. Yamada as reflections of each other, tying them together through their habits, thoughts, and speech patterns—despite Ichiro’s claims to be unlike his mother; and the idea of a (Japanese) child’s capacity to “kill” their parent and vice versa. The latter is most important to the immediate comparison of the connection of death and identity between Ichiro and Kenji versus Ichiro and his mother, though I will return to the former in subsequent analysis.

As Ichiro considers his draft resistance, he specifically blames his mother for his choice to say no. Ichiro most explicitly and negatively verbalizes the fault he attributes to his mother when he thinks, desperately, “she’s killed me with her meanness and hatred, and I hope she’s happy” (13). The choice of the word “kill” takes her impact on Ichiro to the extreme, drawing together multiple subtextual implications at once. First, the tense establishes that Ichiro has *already been* killed; this is reiterated by a comment in his later conversation with Kenji, when he remarks to himself that he “had stopped living two years ago” (58). In both scenes, Ichiro’s thoughts refer to the same instance, marking his proverbial “time of death” as the moment he resisted the draft. However, when Ichiro is considering his mother, he places the responsibility for his living death and inability to claim a purely Japanese or American identity on her shoulders, giving her both blame and power through the loaded word, “kill.”

This serves as an initial introduction to the idea of a “killing” of identity. Even if Ichiro misattributes the destruction of his identity, and therefore his “killing” and internal torment, to his mother, rather than the state that complicated the choice to be drafted on all sides and then forced him to make it, the idea that his mother has “killed” him through a ruination of identity

still stands. Soon, however, it becomes clear that the logic of killing does not just apply to the Yamadas. Ichiro's return to Seattle prompts a round of visits to friends of the family, including the Ashidas, who are just as fanatical as Mrs. Yamada about Japan's hidden "victory" in the war, and the Kumasakas, whose son Bob chose to fight and was killed. In a subtle connection between Ichiro's conceptualization of killing as it is tied to identity and his mother's, the text's description of Mrs. Yamada's thoughts when Mrs. Kumasaka breaks down sobbing over her son allows "[Mrs. Yamada] with a living son... [to] say to her you are with shame and grief because you were not Japanese and thereby killed your son but mine is big and strong and full of life because I did not weaken" (29). The very incident through which Ichiro feels that his mother has "killed" him through her influence on his assertion of a "Japanese" identity (his "no") is reflected by her belief that Mrs. Kumasaka's allowance of an "American" identity for her son (his "yes") caused *Mrs. Kumasaka* to be his killer. Paradoxically, Mrs. Yamada, who sees not Ichiro's internal turmoil but only his decision, claims that he is "full of life"—an assertion which Ichiro challenges repeatedly. Still, the similarities between mother and son are notable. The way they conceptualize a mother's power over her son to "kill" him through assertion/negation of a Japanese/American identity is similar, even if what they consider to be the identity aligned with death differs.

The logic of killing between Issei/Nisei generations is later complicated in a brief anecdote that reveals the bidirectional nature of intergenerational power over identity and, therefore, life. Ichiro recalls an acquaintance, Kenzo, "whose mother was in the hospital and did not want him to go [into the army]" (32). (While not stated explicitly, the implication within the context of the mothers presented by the novel thus far is that Kenzo's mother believes similarly to Mrs. Ashida and Mrs. Yamada regarding her son's Japanese identity.) "The doctor told him

that the shock [of his enlistment] might kill her,” Ichiro continues, but “he went anyway... and she did die” (32). In this instance, the text not only establishes the logic of killing as bidirectional, with the child having the ability to “kill” the parent through assertion of identity just as previous instances gave the mother a killing power over the son, but it further ties together death and identity beyond a figurative bond. Kenzo’s mother actually dies because of the action he takes towards what he considers the “right” identity—right because “he knew that [his mother] was wrong” (32). In this instance, the text blurs the lines between figurative and literal, questioning whether death and identity can be tied together not just conceptually, but as an actuality. Furthermore, the text blurs the boundaries of responsibility, fitting neatly into the false equivalence assumed in the framework of what Joseph Entin calls Ichiro’s “logic of mistakes,” which places the “mistakes” of an individual and of the state on the same scale (95). If the mother did indeed die because of her son’s apparent betrayal of his Japanese heritage and identity, as the text implies, then the responsibility does not lie solely upon Kenzo’s shoulders. The American government, in enacting incarceration and forcing the question of the draft in the first place, shares responsibility for the nameless mother’s death. Yet, as through much of the beginning of the novel, the power of the government in the situation is left unacknowledged, unspoken, unsaid.

### **Responsibility for Identity Destruction and the “Logic of Mistakes”**

As in this case, many scholars have noted that the negative consequences of the actions of the state are often placed on the shoulders of its victims in *No-No Boy*. Returning to Ichiro’s initial thoughts about his mother reveals the way in which he imputes the blame for his draft resistance to her, though whether he faults her nature, parenting, or other actions for his “killing”

remains ambiguous. As Apollo Amoko explains in his article “Resilient ImagiNations: ‘No-No Boy, Obasan’ and the Limits of Minority Discourse,” Ichiro assigns responsibility for his situation squarely on the shoulders of his mother, eschewing the potential of blaming the racist policies of the state for forcing his choice in the first place. Indeed, Ichiro’s “self-flagellating logic... [not only] efface[s] the racist injustice of internment and the enduring reality of racial discrimination” but allows for “the projection and domestication of the racist excesses of the nation-state onto the mother’s gendered body” (Amoko 43). This early in the novel, Ichiro seems relatively unable to recognize the role the government plays in his torment. His blaming of his mother reflects his intense focus and inability to see the greater picture; he sees the actors performing towards tragedy, but not the systemic, racist forces that built their stage.

Ichiro is not the only character to fall victim to this thought pattern; as Joseph Entin explores *No-No Boy*’s “logic of mistakes,” he points out that Carrick and Emi, two characters that Ichiro meets later in the novel—the former his potential employer and the other Ichiro’s primary romantic interest—both frame the state’s actions as mistakes on par with Ichiro’s (95). This false equivalence inflates Ichiro’s individual responsibility and efficacy and minimizes the government’s, forgetting the “radical power differentials between the government and the no-no boys” (96). As Entin puts it most succinctly, “[t]o restate this matter of racist federal policy as an issue of interpersonal forgiveness is a conservative gesture that reduces large-scale social, political power plays to discrete, personal errors” (96). There remains a textual dissonance between many of the characters’ perceptions of draft resisters and the complicated reality of incarcerated young men choosing not to enlist. Yet the harm caused by the policies of the state is unmistakable, both in Ichiro’s deeply conflicted mental state and in the inability of the victims of incarceration policy to recognize the magnitude of America’s “mistake.” Even the use of the

word “mistake” implies a lack of deep-seated malicious or racist intent on the part of the United States—a lack which is historically and demonstrably untrue, with the incarceration of Japanese Americans rather than German Americans or Italian Americans remaining the only large-scale “relocation” effort during the war.

Circling back to Ichiro’s role as the first in the novel to unduly place blame on the individual over the system reveals another nuance of his claims: his language when doing so unintentionally draws himself and his mother together. Just as Kenji and Ichiro’s interactions only solidify their identities as discrete young men, different in fundamental ways, Ichiro consistently ties himself and his mother together through words and actions, intertwining their identities through what he describes as a “slender bond” even as he disavows her beliefs and tries to wrench himself away from her (Okada 40). Ichiro viscerally binds himself to his mother as he describes his draft resistance, lamenting that “[i]t was she who opened my mouth and made my lips move to sound the words which got me two years in prison” (13). This section once more reflects the blame Ichiro attributes to Mrs. Yamada, but no less does it place her almost literally into his body and his identity. *She* had the power to open Ichiro’s mouth and move his lips as no one but he should be able to do. The powerful language in this passage ties mother and son together in Ichiro’s thoughts and gives her an explicit, embodied connection to him, albeit a fragile one—a slender bond. In a later conversation with his mother as he tries to convince her that Japan truly has lost the war, Ichiro defaults to first person plural as he speaks to her. “You’re crazy. I’m crazy. All right, so *we* made a mistake. Let’s admit it” (15, emphasis added). His shift to the first-person plural groups him with his mother even as he fights against her fanatical beliefs. Furthermore, the “mistake” to which Ichiro refers remains ambiguous—it could be his choice to say “no,” again distributing responsibility for his draft resistance between him and his

mother, or, alternately, it could refer more generally to the “mistake” of having attempted to maintain a Japanese American identity. Either way, Ichiro subtly shifts the blame to himself and his mother for failing to give up a part of themselves rather than condemning the state that asked that they do so.

The connection between Ichiro and his mother creates a structure that persists throughout the novel: reckonings with identity that span the generations of Nisei/Issei. As Ichiro seeks to deal with a burgeoning crisis of identity, his mother attempts, fruitlessly, to prevent the onset of her own identity crisis; so long as she can create excuses for the evidence presented to her that Japan has lost the war, Mrs. Yamada can maintain an identity tied intrinsically to her belief in and loyalty to Japan—and exemplified by her trust in her version of Japan’s victory. The stakes of the identity crisis Mrs. Yamada staunchly fends off are established by the associations of an unstable identity with death; Ichiro may assign responsibility to his mother for aspects of his own crisis, but she herself struggles with similar challenges that cross the generation between her and her son.

### **John Okada, Paratext, and the Language Gap**

In tandem with the way the language of death and killing in the novel complicates intergenerational relationships and identity comes literal language: the Japanese/English split in the languages the characters speak. A paratextual analysis of John Okada’s epistolary writings during the original publication of the novel invites a lens through which to approach death and identity through the context of language as informed by Okada’s own racial and cultural hybridity—and, specifically, along generational lines. Okada’s musings while writing and publishing the novel center it from the outset in a deeply intergenerational framework. When he



received his initial contract to publish *No-No Boy* with the Charles E. Tuttle Company, based out of Japan but run by an American, Okada wrote to the publisher that he was agreeable to the contract and that “the only question in my mind is whether or not you plan to publish the book in both Japanese and English. It doesn’t really matter except that my father could not appreciate it in English and it won’t mean a great deal to me in Japanese” (qtd. in Abe 86). This indication of separation between his generation, the Nisei, and his father’s, the Issei, reflects Okada’s prevailing awareness of a generational split between Japanese American parents and children along lines of language. Furthermore, it showcases the tension of Okada’s own positionality. Okada experienced significant hybridity within his identity; he negotiated the space of Japanese American identity as a World War II Japanese interpreter, a position for which he had to learn a functional level of the language in a United States training camp (Abe 44). When he wrote, “[the novel] won’t mean a great deal to me in Japanese,” it is unclear if he meant that he had once again lapsed in his understanding of the language, or if the novel had to be in English for it to carry “meaning” for him in a different sense (qtd. in Abe 86). Okada questions Japanese American identity and hybridity within his book, as discussed previously, with Ichiro’s recognition of his potential ability to build an identity from both Japan/America or from neither; Okada’s letter reflects the tensions at the forefront of his mind when writing, and, furthermore, promotes a reading of the novel within the context of his personal considerations.

Okada’s thoughts about these issues before the novel even emerged give new meaning to intergenerational relationships in the novel like those between Ichiro and his parents. In fact, it allows the binaries and hybridity presented in the novel along the lines of Japanese/American to also fall along the lines of Issei/Nisei. For example, a close reading of a brief passage early in the novel, as Ichiro arrives home, exemplifies the ways in which generational and linguistic splits

fall along the lines of hybridity. Ichiro's "father had described the [home] to him in a letter, composed in simple Japanese characters because otherwise Ichiro could not have read it" (Okada 7). This letter, "purposefully repetitive and painstakingly detailed," creates a fictional version of the same ideas of hybridity that Okada's letter to Tuttle addresses (7). Ichiro can read Japanese characters, true—but only simple ones. This very distinction places him squarely in a space of racial and cultural hybridity, neither entirely fluent in the language and culture of his Japanese parents nor as ignorant to them as a solely English-speaking American citizen. Ichiro conceptualizes the language of the letter as if it treats him like a "foreigner"; just thinking about the letter's simplistic characters and detailed directions, "made him... mad" (8). Even so early in the novel, the liminal, hybrid space Ichiro inhabits, as not quite Japanese and not quite American and potentially part of both, is underlined by generational interactions mirroring those experienced by Okada.

The idea introduced by his hybridity that so incenses Ichiro—the idea that he is being treated as a "foreigner" (which in this case, is a positionality actually held by his non-citizen, Issei parents)—angers him in part because he has practically been labeled as such by the United States government. It was precisely the questioning of his belonging because of his racial hybridity that led to Ichiro's incarceration and subsequent decision to respond "no-no," creating the conditions for a tempestuous relationship with his identity when he returns to Seattle. Okada's positionality and the casual epistolary comment to his publisher that separates his father and himself provides a background for Ichiro's anger, placing his frustration about his hybridity within the context of a language—and, indeed, communication—gap between the Issei and Nisei generations that always leaves one half feeling like a "foreigner" (8).

The language split between Issei/Nisei, with most Issei speaking primarily Japanese and most Nisei primarily English, reflects a deeper tension at play within the novel. The breakdown in communication between generations—illustrated by the way Ichiro describes said communication—foregrounds each’s inability to understand or comprehend the identity and desires of the other through the motif of language. When he arrives home, Ichiro notes:

The gently spoken Japanese which he had not heard for so long sounded strange. He would hear a great deal of it now that he was home, for his parents, like most of the old Japanese, spoke virtually no English. On the other hand, the children, like Ichiro, spoke almost no Japanese. Thus they communicated, the old speaking Japanese with an occasional badly mispronounced word or two of English, and the young, with the exception of a simple word or phrase of Japanese which came fairly effortlessly to the lips, resorting almost constantly to the tongue the parents avoided. (8)

The foregrounding of the language barrier between parent and child in this passage reflects the barriers that arise between Ichiro and his mother on the basis of identity. It is worth noting that when Ichiro says his mother has killed him, it is because of her (ostensible) central role in his saying “no”; when his mother says that Bob killed Mrs. Kumasaka, in her mind it is because Bob said “yes.” In both cases, it was a word—an actualization of language itself—that killed.

Language is thus not only framed as a distancing factor and literalization of the split between the Issei and Nisei generations, but is also given the potential to be complicit in the killing of an identity and subsequent epistemological and postcolonial killing of a self.

Naoki Sakai makes a salient point about language in *No-No Boy* in her article “Two Negations: Fear of Being Excluded and the Logic of Self-Esteem,” which introduces an idea that creates even more of an ambiguity about the language split between Issei/Nisei. Only twice in

the novel are words in Japanese actually written as such, and in both cases an older, white man asks Ichiro if he speaks Japanese. (“*Nihongo ga wakarimasu ka?*”) The rest of the novel is entirely in English—though the above quoted passage, in which Ichiro reflects on his parents’ English fluency, makes clear that Ichiro’s parents certainly do not generally *speak* in English. The paradoxical nature of the English words representing to the reader potentially non-English language, but *without specification as to when* the “original” words are English or Japanese, leads to what Sakai calls “the ambivalent and unstable relationship between the narrator and his language of writing” (243). Sakai extends the line of reasoning mentioned above, arguing that it is near-impossible to determine in most of the novel when the language used by any given character is Japanese and when it is English, since they are both written in English even when Japanese must be the language at hand. As she discusses a passage in which Ichiro argues with his mother, Sakai notes the ambiguity of Mrs. Yamada’s seemingly awkward sentences, such as “it was not the boy but the mother who is also the son and it is she who is to blame and she who is dead because the son did not know” (Okada 29). While Sakai recognizes that these sentences could be Mrs. Yamada’s strained attempts to express herself in English, she draws attention to the ambiguity of the scene, offering the alternate interpretation that “[t]he grammatical irregularity of Ichiro’s mother’s utterances could indicate his uneasy relationship to his mother’s language rather than her stilted rapport with English” (249). Sakai’s idea complicates the novel’s language gap; as with so much of the novel, whether it is Ichiro or his mother who is “at fault” for failures in communication, either in expression or comprehension, is ambiguous. Perhaps Ichiro and his mother are not so different after all; perhaps it is primarily in the lack of a common language with which to express their emotions that they are “killing” the other.

And, indeed, the preoccupation with language reflected by Okada's paratext, Ichiro's textual musings, and Sakai's analysis once again draws Ichiro's experience into the greater context of wartime America and the racist policies of the state. The Japanese language, which should be an epistemological haven for Ichiro, both as a cultural touchstone and a foundation for intergenerational understanding, instead is forced by the history of incarceration and systemic suppression into becoming a confusing, exclusive concept. Japanese becomes both "strange" to Ichiro's ears and anathema to Japanese Americans who wish to prove their "Americanness," like Taro (Ichiro's younger brother) and his friends. When these young men confront Ichiro outside of a bar, they even draw the Japanese language into their taunts at him for being a no-no boy. "Talks Jap, I bet," one of them says, while another adds, "Say no-no in Jap. You oughta be good at that" (Okada 73). Language is wielded multidirectionally against Ichiro, once more reflecting the abiding damage done by the wedges the state has driven deep between parent and child, brother and brother.

### **The Nuclear Family and Solidarity**

The separation created between the Issei and Nisei generations along the lines of language and identity and complicated by the motif of death reflects the larger historical context of the novel. Firstly, the discrete generations of Issei and Nisei in the novel reflect a real-life phenomenon stemming from the United States' Immigration Act of 1924, a moratorium on Japanese immigration after the first wave, of which Ichiro's parents would have been a part.<sup>9</sup> The Issei were the last immigrants to arrive before the act snapped into place, leaving no allowance

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<sup>9</sup> The act reflected racist mentalities about Japanese immigrants, evident in the editorials of many major news outlets of the era. A historical analysis of these editorials concluded that "[t]he newspapers could have projected an equal place... a "proper" place... or no place... for Japanese immigrants in the future United States society. They chose no place" (Hamm 66).

for further immigration until decades later. The consistent absence of the Nisei generation's grandparents throughout Okada's novel and explicit separation of characters into two generational groups (parents/children) reflects this historical split.

Beyond the simple presence or lack thereof of extended family structures, *No-No Boy* also presents a depressing view of the nuclear "American" family in the Japanese American community. In anecdotes from incarceration camp survivors as described in *We Hereby Refuse*, in more than one Japanese family a father, brother, or other relative was separated from their family members and placed in a different camp (Abe & Minura 25, 66). The separation of Hajime "Jim" Akutsu from his father is included among these stories. *No-No Boy* references a similar situation, perhaps even derived from Akutsu's experience—Akutsu, a resister himself, was recognized by Okada's acquaintances as "a model for the character of Ichiro" (Abe 93). In Okada's preface, an unnamed "Japanese-American soldier" completing missions similar to those Okada flew during the war reflects on "his friend who didn't volunteer for the army because his father... was in a different camp from the one he and his mother and two sisters were in" (Okada xxvii). These examples both contextualizing and contained within *No-No Boy* speak to the efforts of incarceration camps to both confine and assimilate Japanese Americans, in part through the purposeful destruction of family structures—and, as indicated by the dynamic nature of language in the novel, through suppression of language as well.

*No-No Boy* reckons with the aftermath of the state's focus on intentionally driving Japanese American families apart. A sobering detail of the novel arises as a trend in the families presented throughout the tale, from the prime example of the Yamadas to the Kannos, Kumasakas, and even the unnamed families mentioned only briefly, like Kenzo's. Harkening back to Ichiro's discussion of "emptiness" with Kenji, almost no Japanese American family in

Okada's novel is explicitly "whole." Apart from the way that figurative death of self and identity colors Ichiro's relationships with Kenji and Mrs. Yamada, death's physical manifestation permeates the Japanese American community, seeping into its very bones—and, it is implied, welcomed in by the American government because of its actions driving families apart during and after the war. Derek Paul Lee mentions the idea that "in Ichiro's postwar America, all Japanese-Americans are already dead to one another" (170). While Lee refers to a figurative death of the like imposed between Taro and Ichiro, with schisms internal to the community forcing solidarity out, literal death and "sickness" is just as omnipresent. Ichiro's family splits apart first when Taro leaves for the army and is functionally disowned by Mrs. Yamada and, later, when she commits suicide. Bob Kumasaka is dead, as is Kenzo's mother. Even Kenji's otherwise thriving family is absent a mother figure. The impossibility of the nuclear "American" family for Japanese Americans is realized through the novel in the subtle reveal that no families have achieved such a standard; death, and usually a death caused by or related to wartime incarceration or suffering, permeates all.

### **Death, Actualized**

Death and identity are intertwined in Ichiro's early interactions with both Mrs. Yamada and Kenji, both from the perspective of death as a metaphor for identity and in the idea of identity as an avenue for intergenerational killing. Later in the novel, we see death actualized as both Ichiro's friend and his mother die—Kenji from the infection in his leg and Mrs. Yamada in an act of suicide. The conjunction of the two characters' deaths in time—with both dying only a few hours apart, Kenji in Portland in the afternoon and Mrs. Yamada that evening in Seattle—separates them from no-no boy Freddie, the novel's third and final death, and aligns them with

each other for a salient comparison. Both Mrs. Yamada's and Kenji's deaths are predicted or foreshadowed—and, more importantly, both stem from the ultimate space of the character in question needing to “prove” a discrete identity (Japanese and American, respectively).

In Kenji's case, the wound that will ultimately engender his demise is caused in battle during the war. The origin of his injury traces back to what so many other interned Japanese American men chose as a way to “prove” an American identity: service to their country of birth. While Kenji's motivations for entering into the army instead of resisting the draft like Ichiro remain unclear, his actions are situated in the context of consistent attempts of Nisei men to appear, be recognized as, or become “more American” through military service (such as Taro, Bull, and Eto). Kenji's choice becomes representative of that of those Nisei men who feel they must stake a claim to America, in many cases disavowing or eschewing their Japanese culture and heritage to do so. Kenji's injury leads to a situation over the subsequent years reminiscent of a death by a thousand cuts; he successively loses more and more of his limb to the “rot” that will eventually take his life. Mrs. Yamada, conversely, attempts throughout the novel to “prove” her loyalty to her Japanese identity in her staunch belief that Japan has won the war. When Mr. Yamada presents her with a letter from her sister, who still lives in Japan and is requesting Mrs. Yamada's aid after the devastation left by the war, the cognitive dissonance proves too much for Mrs. Yamada to bear. What she constantly refers to as her “strength” – her strength of identity and belief intertwined—is thrown into jeopardy by a few all-too-convincing sentences, and she suffers a mental breakdown that culminates in her suicide. Notably, both Kenji and Mrs. Yamada attempt to prove a singular identity—American for the former, Japanese for the latter—and are met with a death sentence. (In Mrs. Yamada's case, this “sentence,” carried on her sister's letter, is literal as well as figurative.)



The two characters' deaths may be attributed to solely their own choices. However, a framing of the cause and effect of their mortality in this way forgets what initially incited the reckoning of each with their own identity. World War II and the incarceration camps that came alongside it acted as a catalytic moment for both Kenji and Mrs. Yamada; incarceration *gave* Nisei citizens like Kenji and Issei Japanese like Mrs. Yamada "something to prove" in the first place. Regardless of how Kenji and Mrs. Yamada conceptualized their identities before the war, the policies of the state forcibly simplified and decontextualized their subjectivity, catalyzing the reaction that would lead to their eventual deaths. The inevitability of a destruction of hybridity and multifaceted identity closely followed by a destruction of actual, physical self is a combination of the epistemological loss described by Lee and the focus on the physical bodies of minoritized individuals he references.<sup>10</sup>

The inevitability of the courses set before Kenji and Mrs. Yamada once they have had their liminal subjectivity ripped away from them is reflected in the foreshadowing of their respective deaths. Kenji's death is predicted by himself. He consistently refers to his own demise; while he often appears outwardly relaxed, he mentions thinking about killing himself once and notes that he believes he is going to die "this time" of the rot in his leg at several points (Okada 56, 118, 128). Mrs. Yamada's death is foreshadowed more subtly; in the letter written to her by her sister, the sister writes in a desperate plea for her words to be recognized as genuine that Mrs. Yamada must "remember the river and the secret it holds... you almost drowned that day for the water was deeper and swifter than it looked... and, children that we were, we vowed never to tell anyone how close to dying you came" (99). This moment in the letter is a catalyst for Mrs. Yamada's final questioning of her Japanese identity as it relates to her nationalism,

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<sup>10</sup> More specifically, he references "scholarly conversation... [that has emphasized] only material politics in its most violent and blatant forms... [with] a heavy emphasis on bodies and political standing" in order to contextualize his own focus on epistemological violence (Lee 156).

sending her spiraling towards the moment when she commits suicide by drowning herself in the family's bathtub. Both Kenji's and Mrs. Yamada's deaths are predicted, deepening the text's sense of an inevitability to their passing—an inevitability that would never exist were it not for the state's policies.

Gayle Sato argues that “[n]egative liquid imagery [is] associated with Mrs. Yamada—a near drowning, laundry hung out in the rain, evaporated milk, excess alcohol, suicide by drowning” (251). Mrs. Yamada's association with liquidity offers an additional insight into her death. Each example Sato references occurs in the context of Mrs. Yamada's final “spiral” into a reactive depression she shares with her son; before the letter is read and its anecdotal drowning revealed, Mrs. Yamada is described, rather than as fluid, as primarily *solid*: she is a “stiff, angular figure” in Ichiro's eyes, her body “dried and toughened,” the “rock that's always hammering, pounding, pounding, pounding” (Okada 11,13). Ichiro's fascination with the strong, substantive, and admittedly rough aspects of his mother's body, as well as the repetition of forceful verbs like “pounding,” present her as a formidable, immovable figure, at odds with her later association with frailty and liquidity. Indeed, when Ichiro pulls her out of the bathtub after her death, she is primarily depicted through her hair, which has become a “tangled mess”; her stature and demeanor are left undescribed (165). In the case of both Mrs. Yamada and Kenji, death serves to represent the dissolution of an unsustainable identity. Mrs. Yamada loses her stubborn conviction, falling into fluidity, and Kenji experiences a prolonged process of death that is literally chopped into repetitive sections of hope and despair. Just like their discrete identities, the processes by which they die differ, paired only by the causes of their identity “crises” and the temporal similarity of their final moments. Both characters' deaths serve to concretize the chronic negative impacts of incarceration and its effect on identity; even two years after the war,

repercussions are still reverberating throughout the Japanese American community, a shockwave whose ripples cannot be contained simply through intentional selection of one side of the binary opposition of Japanese/American. Those characters who lose sight of their ability to negotiate a hybrid or multifaceted identity—including those blinded by the actions of the state—are those most at risk for figurative and/or literal death.

### **The Slender Bond and Postcolonial Zombie in the Aftermath of Death**

By the very logic of the aforementioned paragraph, Ichiro is in jeopardy as a character whose subjectivity has been thrown into turmoil after his catalytic experience with the American government. And, indeed, he faces a figurative death, as he described to both Kenji and his mother, if not a literal one. At this point in the novel, Ichiro's primary antagonist (Mrs. Yamada) and closest friend (Kenji) have both passed. Yet Ichiro finds that his mother's death, particularly, is almost freeing. Sato notes that "[b]ecause [Mrs. Yamada's death] releases Ichiro from a vacuum, he can now search for the real thing" (250). To understand what these deaths and this search mean for Ichiro, I will return to two concepts, one mentioned previously and one which other critics have proposed: 1) Ichiro's persistent "slender bond" with his mother, especially as reflected in their similar experience with reactive depression after the incarceration camps/prison, and 2) Derek Paul Lee's conception of the postcolonial zombie and its role in the text.

Gary Storhoff examines Ichiro's perspective, mindset, and behavior through the lens of modern-day psychology in his paper "'Prisoner of Forever': Cognitive Distortions and Depression in John Okada's 'No-No Boy.'" In particular, Storhoff analyzes instances in which Ichiro displays traits consistent with a modern diagnosis of depression. Along with Ichiro's

incarceration and imprisonment, which themselves are traumatic experiences from which he still bears scars, Ichiro's "living death" serves as a form of reactive depression, stemming directly from the trauma he experiences. Storhoff examines the ways in which Ichiro and his mother are tied together through similarities in their experience of this "reactive depression"—which is reactive in that it is a direct response to the United States' actions during the war (9). Apart from the similarities of the causes of their depression, Storhoff also explains some of their shared depressive tendencies using the foundations by which the two characters conceptualize the world, noting that "[d]uring her life [Ichiro] shares with his mother her tendency to envisage the world in a strictly dichotomous fashion" (10). This analysis suggests that the idea of binary opposition critics often return to in the novel<sup>11</sup> is shaped explicitly by Ichiro's positionality as a main character who consistently shares the novel's point of view. Perhaps, Storhoff seems to say, the binary oppositions become so prevalent *because* of Ichiro's uniquely dichotomous worldview, not because they are the only inherent way that Japanese American identity can exist in a postwar America. Furthermore, Storhoff gestures towards the "slender bond" shared by Ichiro and his mother—a slender bond that might either rend or strengthen after her death. The slender bond intertwines Ichiro's experience with his mother's across generations; it persists in the conception of the postcolonial zombie, a role which Derek Paul Lee argues both Ichiro and Mrs. Yamada fulfill at different points.

Lee's conception of the postcolonial zombie—or, as he phrases it in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer, homo amens* ("the man without a mind")—takes current work in the postcolonial field and questions the primacy of the physical body within it. While Lee acknowledges the importance of placing a "heavy emphasis on bodies and political standing,"

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., "You had to be one or the other": Oppositions and Reconciliation in John Okada's *No-No Boy*" by Stan Yogi.

such as foregrounding dehumanization in literary analysis, he also notes that this focus in recent postcolonial criticism “overwhelms a far less visible... aspect of the postcolonial and neocolonial experience: epistemological loss” (156). Specifically, Lee formulates his *homo amens* as “the postcolonial representative of socio-historical and cultural annihilation”—a description that aptly matches Ichiro and his experience with incarceration both in camp and in prison (157). As Lee expands upon the idea of *homo amens*, he builds an argument that marginalized people in a postcolonial world are often “zombified” through a loss of culture and epistemological knowledge—and that this knowledge is both a target and a victim of colonial action.

Lee’s implicit connection of death and identity, as he argues that it is *homo amens*’ epistemological damage that zombifies them, dovetails with my exploration of the same connection in *No-No Boy*. Lee’s most clear description of *homo amens* is as a character for whom “epistemic decline manifests as physical and mental impairments that render the subject zombic in some fundamental way... neither fully alive nor fully dead in terms of functioning knowledge” (157). This phrasing is attuned to Ichiro’s own introspection, as Ichiro describes his current state of being as one of “dead aliveness,” not fully alive nor fully dead but somewhere in between (Okada 68). And, indeed, Lee examines Ichiro as *homo amens* elsewhere in *No-No Boy*, claiming that his repetitive job-searching behavior and walking habits support the idea that “Ichiro illustrates the telos of biopolitical abjection in terms of epistemology... in whom knowledge loss symbolically evokes a static, zombic self” (171). While Lee’s argument surrounding Ichiro’s potential zombification is intriguing, his application of the *homo amens* postcolonial figure remains limited. There is one other character whom Lee neglects, but whose actions fit nearly to the letter Lee’s description of *homo amens*: Mrs. Yamada.

Lee's construction of the postcolonial zombie allows for a cohesion of a variety of points made thus far in this essay. Just as Ichiro and Mrs. Yamada share Storhoff's reactive depression, so too are Mrs. Yamada's actions textually similar to Ichiro's through the lens of the *homo amens*. If Ichiro is a textbook example of the postcolonial zombie because of what Lee sees as his reduction to "repetitive motions," his mother is even more explicitly so (157). When Mrs. Yamada suffers what appears to be a mental break after reading her sister's letter, Kenji sees her through the window of the Yamada's preternaturally neat shop, "methodically empty[ing] a case of evaporated milk and lin[ing] the cans with painful precision on the shelf" (Okada 123). A few moments later, he watches in shock as she sweeps the cans onto the ground. As he and Ichiro leave the shop together, Kenji notices that "having gathered all the cans," Mrs. Yamada is "once more lining them on the same shelf" (124). If Ichiro is zombified through "automatic repetition" in his postwar behavior, so too is Mrs. Yamada as she robotically repeats the exact same physical task (Lee 171). The shared identity of *homo amens* between Ichiro and Mrs. Yamada suggests in Lee's framework that both mother and son are currently experiencing a death of identity and destruction of epistemological history shared across intergenerational borders. Furthermore, their existence as postcolonial zombies suggests that they *both* experience a form of (un)death before actual death. Yet while Mrs. Yamada's story ends as she falls from the tightrope between dead and alive into a state of true death, Ichiro has a chance to step off the path of the postcolonial zombie in the other direction.

Where Lee's argument falters is near the end of his discussion of Ichiro—exactly where Ichiro's chance to leave the realm of the postcolonial zombie lies. Lee argues that even by the end of the novel, "Ichiro is zombic... a figure without the social networks or communal wisdom to guide him through his existential woes" (172). However, this construction ignores figures of

support Ichiro has identified and benefited from in the forms of benevolent strangers like Mr. Carrick, in close friends like Kenji, or through burgeoning relationships like the one with Emi. These figures serve as the sparks of the flame of community support for Ichiro, presenting a potential way to pull him out of the sort of living death Lee describes. Lee and Sato alike suggest that Ichiro's experience through the novel results in a net zero effect. Lee writes that he is a listless figure "whose thoughts run in self-flagellating circles" (172); Sato more strongly argues that "[d]espite the appearance of perpetual motion, the novel's essential drama is static rather than dynamic—reifying rather than deconstructing the terms of ethnic self-destruction" (241). While both critics argue that Ichiro's physical motion results in no actual movement, neither acknowledges his growth throughout the novel in the form of solidarity, knowledge, and guidance plucked from conversations and experiences with members of his community. In fact, in Storhoff's view, it is exactly these interactions that match the novel's positing of "the psyche as a dynamic patterning of interactions, connections, and interrelationships—where change is possible through the individual's recognition of interrelatedness" (14). Ichiro's interactions with others, be they antagonistic or benevolent, build towards a watershed moment for him in which those relationships can culminate in an understanding of a restorative connection to his community he may be able to access.

### **Funerary Rites, Wrongs, and Hints at Community**

Mrs. Yamada's death arises as a catalytic and formative moment for Ichiro, allowing him to break out of the cycle of the postcolonial zombie. It is only once his mother is dead that Ichiro can begin to accept his "interrelatedness" with her; furthermore, her death allows Ichiro to begin to both reconfigure his identity without her and stop blaming her for the systemic mistakes that

placed the two in similar positions, laying the groundwork for his potential reconnection with his community. The clearest example of this is immediately after her suicide, when Ichiro returns mentally to the intricate network of death in his intergenerational relationships, noting “[f]or me, you have been dead a long time, as long as I can remember. You, who gave life to me... were never alive to [your sons]” (Okada 165). Rather than resorting to a separation of himself from his mother as he does when he claims that she “killed” him earlier in the novel, Ichiro reverts to the language of death rather than killing—and places himself, in contrast to his earlier construction, on the living side of the equation. This moment depicts a subtle shift in Ichiro’s conception of his recursive subjectivity. As he continues in the passage to note his mother’s “mistakes,” the rhythm of his words spills into the anaphora that so often characterizes Ichiro’s thoughts: “It was a mistake to have ever left Japan. It was a mistake to leave Japan and to come to America and to have two sons and it was a mistake to think that you could keep us completely Japanese in a country such as America” (165). What “frees” Ichiro towards a reconfiguration of his own identity and a shift of blame away from his mother is not a revelation of the causes of her suicide—systemic destruction on a grand scale. He is still mired in the logic of mistakes in that regard, as his winding thoughts reflect. It is, more simply, his rapid shift to a hint of understanding for his mother after her passing.

Starkly opposed to his scathing comment after he remarks that she has “killed” him earlier in the novel, when Ichiro bitterly notes, “I hope she’s happy because I’ll never know the meaning of it again,” here he realizes that “too late I see your unhappiness, which enables me to understand a little and, perhaps, even to love you a little... I want very much for you to know the happiness that you tried so hard to give me” (Okada 13, 166). Ichiro’s sarcastic “I hope she’s happy” carries with it a venom characteristic of their relationship when Mrs. Yamada lived,



when he would have gladly seen their “slender bond” severed. Yet his recognition of her unhappiness after her death seems a moment in which he clings to that same slender bond, reinforcing and validating it through his recognition of her humanity instead of allowing it to snap with her death. Even the shift in Ichiro’s mind from third-person pronouns to the second person subtly develops the intimacy he shares in this moment between himself and his mother. Ironically, he understands her best and communicates with her most sympathetically (if only in his mind) when she can no longer speak to him. The split along the lines of Issei/Nisei (generational) and Japanese/English (linguistic/communicative) deepens with the actualization of Mrs. Yamada’s suicide, which adds an element of physical death to the rift between mother and son. Yet her death also elucidates for Ichiro her deep “unhappiness,” which so closely resembles his own, allowing him to reconcile himself with his Japanese mother and, therefore, with his potential for a truly harmonious identity as a Japanese American.<sup>12</sup>

Mrs. Yamada’s funeral stands as a textual symbol of Ichiro’s release from his mother and from various expectations and assumptions he has placed upon her shoulders. Beyond that, the juxtaposition of her funeral with the prewar funeral of Emi’s mother serves to underscore the deep-seated community damage perpetrated through incarceration and to simultaneously present a collective ideal that the Japanese American community might yet return to. The physical space of the funeral is depicted as separate from Ichiro’s internal mourning process, which is in turn characterized by his lack of grief. (This “lack” is ambiguous; Ichiro’s numbness might simply be grief he does not recognize as such.) His emotional state during the service reflects the precarious nature of his reaction to Mrs. Yamada’s death; he vacillates between feeling “sick and

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<sup>12</sup> In large part because she serves throughout the novel as a figure emblematic of his Japanese heritage, aligning his rejections of her with a rejection of the Japanese aspects of his identity. Ichiro’s “doubt about the role his own ethnicity plays in his post-war identity results in a fear of his mother. By believing his own Japanese identity to be dead, Ichiro casts his mother into the role of ‘ghost’” (Gribben 41-2). See Gribben for additional discussion of Ichiro and his mother from a psychoanalytic perspective.

want[ing] to get out of there” to having “an urge to laugh” and back again (172). The instability of Ichiro’s emotions in the wake of his mother’s demise is indicative of the interpersonal loss caused, ultimately, by wedges driven into intergenerational Issei/Nisei relationships by the state. Ichiro cannot “properly” grieve; incarceration and imprisonment have removed from him the comfort of his community in this moment, as he darts away from the procession before the attendees share a meal at a Japanese restaurant.

Hanging over the ceremonies is the implication that Mrs. Yamada’s funeral would be far different if she had died before the war and the cataclysmic damage it caused to the Japanese American community at both an individual and a broader level. Specifically, her funeral is framed unfavorably by Emi’s mother’s funeral, discussed by Ichiro and Emi earlier in the novel. Emi describes her mother’s funeral as “wonderful,” noting that “the war would have made her suffer”; furthermore, Emi places emphasis on the community coming together after the death, noting that the friends of the family pitched in and fully “paid for the funeral” (83-4). Conversely, while some members of the community seen previously on Ichiro’s rounds with his mother, like the Ashidas and Kumasakas, make a reappearance at his mother’s funeral, Taro ignores Ichiro’s telegram about her death, and an attendee’s suggestion that they do a reading of the condolence telegrams is awkwardly cut short by the revelation that “there are no telegrams” (169). The juxtaposition between the prewar and postwar funerals of two women sharing their positionality—they are both Issei mothers—serves to highlight the differences in community involvement in the two events, implying that Mrs. Yamada’s death would have been better for everyone involved if it had occurred before the war—even, perhaps, for Mrs. Yamada herself. This twisted logic only makes sense within the idea that incarceration and the fallout of the war

caused such lasting community damage that it really might have been better, as Ichiro considers, “if [Mrs. Yamada] had died mercifully before Pearl Harbor also” (84).

The systemic community damage revealed by a close reading of Mrs. Yamada’s funeral brings a greater weight to Ichiro’s subjectivity as a postcolonial zombie—and his transition away from the *homo amens* role. How can Ichiro break out of the repetitive behavior that marks him as a postcolonial zombie? In identifying the root of that behavior—his conviction in the structure of binary oppositions and, therefore, a logic of mistakes that places him as an undeserving citizen because of his draft resistance—Ichiro has an opportunity to reframe his identity and, therefore, his interactions with the world. Jinqi Ling introduces the idea of an additional binary opposition into the novel—that of Japanese nationalism and American assimilationism. Ling argues that Ichiro’s search for identity is “characterized by a wavering between Japanese nationalist and American assimilationist attitudes from which he at once distances himself and with which he becomes inextricably entangled” (366). Like so many other binaries in the novel, this one can be read through the “text” of Ichiro’s family, with an emphasis on his mother and brother. Mrs. Yamada, of the Issei generation, is aligned with Japanese nationalism through her fanaticism; Taro, the wayward Nisei son, chooses assimilation instead as he and his friends turn their backs on their Japanese ancestry, “parroting... the language of the dominant culture” as they taunt Ichiro about being a “Jap” (Ling 364). Mrs. Yamada, as opposed to Taro, may experience a physical death; yet Taro, too, experiences a death of self and identity as he is cut off from his family, “dead” to his mother and turning his back on his father and brother. As so many characters do in the novel, Taro serves as a brief reflection of an alternate future for Ichiro—and one Ichiro did not take.

Indeed, Ichiro and his father—the only members of the Yamada family left by the end of the novel—both have a tempestuous relationship with binaries. Mr. Yamada is described (though unfavorably) by Ichiro as “neither husband nor father nor Japanese nor American but a diluted mixture of all” (Okada 105); Ichiro in turn claims “I am neither [Japanese nor American]” (17). Yet despite the complexity in identity of the two men described initially through negation—“neither,” rather than “both”—Ichiro’s refusal to be defined as solely one of the many binaries he confronts during his journey unintentionally prepares him to conceive of a positionality in the liminal space between them. Binary oppositions are an uncomfortable skin for Ichiro no matter where they come from; in his mother’s death, he (and perhaps even his father) may break free of both his tendency towards a postcolonial zombie role and his compulsive need to think in binaries at all.

The progression of Ichiro’s conceptions of his identity as they gain complexity and nuance throughout the novel is evident in the aftermath of the funeral. He initially frames his identity in fractions that literally split himself along the binary, dividing his identity piecemeal into halves: “I was only half Japanese,” he notes, then continues to partition his identity as he thinks, “you were still half my mother and I was thereby still half Japanese... the half of me which was you [was] bigger than the half of me which was America” (16). His mother’s passing is a sign of Ichiro’s shift into a less binary pattern of thinking, leading to an additional possibility: that Ichiro, by stepping away from thinking in the binary, may potentially begin moving towards reparative and restorative community relationships without consistently and self-destructively decimating his own subjectivity.

### **The Potential Energy of Restorative Community**

At the point of Kenji's and Mrs. Yamada's death, Ichiro is "freed" to step towards an attitude of healing. While he is not immediately "fixed"—far from it—his immediate encounter with Freddie, another no-no boy introduced earlier in the novel, after Mrs. Yamada's funeral presents a foil for Ichiro that illustrates what happens when a liminal identity is perpetually denied. For all Freddie's focus on "livin,'" his death, set apart from Kenji's and Mrs. Yamada's, completes the novel and frames Ichiro's final reckoning with the binary oppositions that Freddie cannot ultimately escape. Ichiro describes the attitude of his fellow no-no boy as "like being on a pair of water skis, skimming over the top as long as one traveled at a reasonable speed, but, the moment he slowed down or stopped, it was to sink into the nothingness that offered no real support" (179). Freddie's idea of "livin,'" which he returns to time and time again, requires that he never stop moving—this attitude stands in contrast to Ichiro's constant pauses to consider his positionality. But in Freddie's refusal to pause—his constant "water skiing"—he "blindly [seeks] relief in total, hateful rejection of self and family and society," a rejection that includes deeply offending Bull, a Nisei veteran who leaves Freddie in constant terror of a fight (213). As opposed to Ichiro's self-reflection, which initially seems to only compound his problems as he falls into the same "complex jungle of unreasoning" that Freddie does surrounding his draft resistance, Freddie's approach ultimately excises him nearly completely from Japanese American society. Freddie is left with "no real support," while Ichiro's passivity allows for tenuous (re)connections with community members. It is Freddie's form of "livin'," casting aside community relationships and taking out the damage done by the state on fellow victims, that leads to his untimely death in a car accident as he tries to flee from an angry Bull. An excitable bystander relays the details of Freddie's demise to Ichiro; fittingly, the accident "[j]ust about cut [Freddie] in two," aligning Freddie's fractured identity to his physical death.

Unlike many other binaries in the story, such as Issei/Nisei (generation), Japan/America (country), Japanese/English (language), and nationalist/assimilationist (mentality), the binary of death does not allow for an easy placement of death/life on the scale of Japanese/American. Life is not Japanese and death is not American, or vice versa; rather, life is the complexity of a whole identity and death is the forced choice of one aspect or the other. Both Nisei and Issei characters die in Kenji and Mrs. Yamada, respectively; both have discussions with Ichiro that highlight the connection between death and identity, with neither one aligned more or less with death. It is precisely because of this inconsistency in death/life as a binary opposition in the novel that it is so elucidating as a framework for *No-No Boy*. Rather than death being associated with Japanese or American identity, death is simply associated—both figuratively and literally—with a *destruction* of identity due to systemic injustice. Life, then, comes to represent a harmony that acknowledges the multifaceted and complex nature of a mixed identity, neither denying the Japanese nor American influences on a life—and, therefore, encouraging empathy for others in the Japanese American community. After all, the community's members are still negotiating the process of recovery from the ultimatums and framework imposed by the state and reified in the novel's title: the forcing of a binary through the structure of the *yes/no* question that the entire novel, and Ichiro's journey, is predicated upon. Movement away from this forced binary, the primacy of which flavors the entirety of the text, is the only way to effectively resist the systemic and intentional destruction of nuance in identity and, therefore, in life for Japanese Americans after the war. Ichiro's initial draft resistance is a precursor to and predictor of a potential future in which the forced *yes/no* construction is interrogated and even removed entirely, allowing for a rejuvenating liminality in identity and existence and a refusal of binary, racist classifications.

## The Ending as Beginning

Ultimately, death's prominence as a literary motif in *No-No Boy* allows for a more nuanced view of identity across linguistic, generational, and idealistic chasms, offering insight through Ichiro's character and relationships into the deep-seated harm done to the Japanese American community by the racist policies of a hegemonic state—not just in the loss of material goods during Japanese American incarceration, but also through emotional, community, and identity-based damage. The construction of the death/life binary in direct contrast to the binary oppositions otherwise present throughout the novel offers a subversive alternative framework for identity reconstruction and rejuvenation as something outside of the binary, in a liminal, revitalizing space. Furthermore, *No-No Boy* suggests that recognizing the true cause of these issues as the state and not the individual, therefore denying the logic of mistakes that places both on equal footing, grants restorative power to those experiencing the most lasting harm.

In an increasingly globalized world—especially one in which systemic racism and the power of the state are still intertwined and omnipresent—Okada's work is particularly important as a way to understand and reckon with the pull and shift of diverse, hybrid identities. Incarceration was a very real historical event, as were the crises of identity and community catalyzed by the camps. Reading *No-No Boy* today both recalls the irreparable harm done in the past and sustains the memory of the real-life Issei and Nisei<sup>13</sup> whose direct experience with incarceration serves as the historical underpinning of the novel. In exploring the novel's intricate conceptualizations of identity and responsibility, we can place a rightful claim on complexities of identity, even—and especially—under a system that prefers binaries and simplifications.

Moreover, *No-No Boy*'s ending gestures towards a way not just to understand the violence oft perpetrated (and perpetuated) by systemic injustice, but to identify a potential

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<sup>13</sup> Many of the Nisei generation are reaching the natural end of their lifespans.

protective and restorative factor in the face of it. The ending is remarkably ambiguous, though perhaps this is to be expected given the ambiguity inherent to the rest of the novel. Some critics have argued that Ichiro's fate is primarily hopeful (Storhoff); others have maintained that he ultimately rejects his "Japanese" identity in order to regain his "American" one, a distinctly less positive reading (Sato). More ambiguously, Ling argues that Ichiro consistently searches for a way to resist, and that although "[he] has not found an adequate alternative discourse by the novel's end, his voice does not totally dissolve into the dominant one" (374). Despite Ichiro's own relatively positive perspective in his final words, "chas[ing] that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart," the question stands whether the ending is actually the "final" conclusion at which Ichiro has arrived, or if it is simply a reiteration of the cycles of positive and negative thinking Ichiro reverts to throughout the novel, with a retreat into despair waiting just a few pages after Okada stopped writing (221). However, there *is* an indication that Ichiro may break out of this cycle in two specific, heretofore-uncharacteristic choices he makes.

First, he chooses to stick by Freddie and fight Bull in the ultimate moments of the book, a decision standing in sharp contrast to his consistent impulses elsewhere in the novel to escape from his problems. Ichiro's constant claustrophobic thoughts, amplified by his depressive thought patterns, shine in his avoidance of confrontation as he tries to "escape" from Eto, the Ashidas, Taro's gang of bullies, and even his own mother's funeral. Ichiro's response to discomfort is exemplified by his thought at the Ashida's house: "he wanted to get up and dash out into the night" (23). Yet Ichiro breaks his own pattern in the final pages, "urged by a need to



fight this *thing* which no amount of fighting would ever destroy,” and punches Bull to let Freddie escape<sup>14</sup> (218, emphasis added).

It is exactly this nebulous “thing” that indicates the glimmer of an oasis for Ichiro near the end of *No-No Boy*, though it remains subtle. What is the “thing” which no amount of fighting would destroy, if not mutual destruction within the Japanese American community? To fight with each other is only to substantiate the work of oppression. Following this logic, Ichiro, in the aftermath of Freddie’s death—that is, almost immediately after punching Bull—does something unexpected. Bull sobs and wails after Freddie’s death... and Ichiro extends a hand to comfort him. Storhoff puts it best when he writes that this “is the first time that Ichiro has reached out beyond his own psychological suffering to sympathize with other human beings in distress (13). Perhaps Bull is the best example of the long-term, negative impact of the state’s destruction of individual identity: even though he is the “perfect” Japanese American in the eyes of the government, having fought for his country during the war, he still experiences overwhelming distress. Ironically—perhaps intentionally so—Ichiro’s strongest form of resistance to the government comes through affirmation of a community member. In figuratively saying “yes” to Bull, Ichiro validates the identity crisis of another victim of systemic oppression, recognizing the harm done to individuals and eschewing a rivalry with Bull fomented by tension propagated by the state. He tentatively reaches outside himself, towards a renegotiation of his multifaceted identity that includes himself not as apart from, but as a vital part *of* the Japanese American community. And he recognizes, if only for an instance, the potential for restorative solidarity in the slender bond tied between them all.

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, it was also a refusal to fight—his initial draft resistance—that catalyzed Ichiro’s issues with identity throughout the novel.

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this paper.

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