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An Analysis of Racial Solidarity in Lawson Inada’s Jazz Poetry
Yuka Yoshioka

Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss Asian American poetry reading with music. My goal in this paper is to solve a question: how did Asian American poets articulate their ethnicity through their poetry reading? Japanese American poets Lawson Fusao Inada (1938-) creates jazz poetry, which are devoted to the theme of his experience of Japanese American internment. Therefore, I will describe the historical racial issue in America through an examination of Lawson Fusao Inada’s poetry reading about a concentration camp, with an emphasis on the racial solidarity evoked by jazz music. Investigating jazz, which is created by non-African minorities, may lead to solving the complexity of multiculturalism in America.

I. Lawson Fusao Inada and his Works

Lawson Fusao Inada, a third-generation (sansei) Japanese American, was born on May 26, 1938 in Fresno, California. Inada’s family was living in the west side of Fresno which had a “racedly mixed working-class community.”(Huang, 145) The place Inada and his family lived is divided by a railway from the white in the east and the minorities in the west. Inada lived in the minorities’ area. Therefore he had a close relationship with non-Japanese minority groups. He also had many minority friends: Asian, Black, and Chicano, which he called “ABCs.” From this circumstance, his poetry has established a multicultural phase. Additionally, Inada’s family did not need to belong to the Japanese community in Fresno, which has a Buddhist temple because his parents were Christian. Because of these reasons, Inada socialized naturally with the multicultural society in Fresno. In those days, he was influenced by jazz and his father often gave him jazz CDs, so it is supposed that his multicultural poetics took root in jazz.

On the other hand, during World War II, Japanese Americans had the experience of concentration camps. Inada and his family were also interned when he was four—in the Fresno Assembly Center, a temporary holding station, in Jerome, Arkansas, Amache, Colorado. These experiences have laid the foundation for Inada’s versification.
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For his education, he graduated from California State University in Fresno in 1959. After that he spent two years as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, and started teaching in the English Department at Southern Oregon University from 1966. He organized some poetry reading in cultural festivals, and lectured in the United States and abroad. His first poetry book, Before the War: Poems as They Happened (1971) is the first poetry collection by an Asian American published by a major press. His second poetry book Legends from Camp (1992) was awarded the American Book Award and Oregon Book Award. Legends from Camp and Drawing the Line (1997) are based on his experience of the internment camp.

Now, in the following sections, I would like to analyze the Inada’s poetry reading “Something Grand.”

II. Inada’s Jazz Poetry

In America, a racial dichotomy usually means a matter between the white and the black. By contrast, Japanese Americans who want to assimilate into a major culture have been regarded as an unwatched minority, in spite of representing approximately 5% of the population in America. One reason for not being mentioned by the majority is their “model minority” label. The other reason is their inclusive complexity. That is to say so many minority groups are in the category of “Asian” American, but they have various differences on the culture and the language. It caused a strong prejudice toward them since before the world war. These historical backgrounds led to the inhibition of inter solidarity. To overcome this issue, the influence from the African American movement and their culture has exerted a powerful function to the Asian American movement. Jazz is the one of the strongest influences on Asian Americans in order to promote their movement. Beyond the historical, cultural and social background, a lot of people from Asia have banded together via jazz, and the designation “Asian American” has been established through the movement in the 1970s. Therefore, the African American movement in the 1960s led to the Asian American movement.

Interestingly, “Asian American” is influenced by the African American ethnic movement, not only through political activism, but also on the cultural phase. In Asian
American literature, there is a lot of mimic and fusion with African American culture. In fact, many Asian poets and novelists who have been influenced by African culture use the music in their works, for example there is literal solidarity between Frank Chin, a Chinese novelist, and Ishmel Reed, an African novelist. The solidarity among ethnic groups also provides a diversity of culture. It is thought that a reexamination of the Asian American fusion works will provide a clue to investigating the function of minority culture. Against these backgrounds, Asian American jazz began in the twentieth century. In the 1970s and 1980s, West Coast musicians began to create hybrid music by using their homeland culture and experiences as Asian Americans. Mainly, Japanese and Chinese Americans led this movement, for instance: Anthony Brown, Glenn Horiuchi, Jon Jang and Mark Izu.

Considering these backgrounds, Inada’s poetry reading “Something Grand” is also influenced by jazz, therefore the literal style should be made clear through the analysis of the relationship between the music and the poem. [See Appendix] Inada’s reading CD, Legends & Legacies, which contains four numbers published in 2004. All three poetry readings were recited by Inada himself and an Asian American band was in charge of the music. Glenn Horiuchi was in charge of the shamisen, Mark Izu played bass, and Francis Wong played saxophone.

The second number “Something Grand” will be analyzed in this section. This poetry reading takes So-ran Bushi as its basic rhythm of music performance. Here, it is important to make sure why So-ran Bushi is taken into jazz poetry so often. In the reading of “Something Grand,” So-ran Bushi took an important role. An explanation about the accompanied music with the recitation CD is cited as follows;

Lawson’s Whitmanesque poem Something Grand and Francis’ rendition of the traditional Japanese fisherman’s song, Soran Bushi are magically woven together into a triumphant ballad proclaiming a community renewed, a celebration of a people and their special, intrinsic value in this universe. Soran Bushi follows in the tradition of Tanko Bushi (Coalminers Song) revived and popularized in America as a contemporary expression of a continually evolving Asian American sensibility. (Wong, Legends & Legacies)
It is noted that Inada’s poem and the folk song make a superb combination, and the So-ran Bushi “revives” a sense of Asian Americans. However, in the actual performance, Inada called “so-ran, so-ran” at the very transition moment from the prelude to the poetry reading, and the music performance is different from a Japanese traditional one because of the metallic sound and the rhythm. Inada and his band transform the Japanese folk music into jazz in order to emphasize their Asian American identity.

II-1. Structure of “Something Grand”

In this poem, the key phrase “Something Grand” is repeated twenty–five times with each several lines, and other lines also just use short words and phrases throughout the poem. The italic type creates a variety on the lines visually. After the prelude, from 3’51,” Inada begins reading. The first lines, “Something grand / Rain. / Sacred.” (ll. 9-11), accompany with the low pitch of the shamisen. In the following opening lines, the same form is used repeatedly: “Something grand. / Sand. / Sacred. / Something grand. / Hands. / Sacred. / Something grand. / Stand. / Sacred.” (ll. 12-20) On the accompanied music, the drum beats with each of the stressed vowels in the lines of Inada’s reading. An alliteration of [s] sounds occurs, in addition to the beat of the drum, in order to provide a shrill sound, and the emphasized repetition forms a rhythmical riff.

Although, “something grand” is kept as an unexplained thing until the second half of the reading, the speaker finally confesses the true identity of “something grand” from line thirty-one: “We say / we are / that people.” (ll. 31-33) Judging from the theme of this book, this “we” might be referred to as the Asian internees in the camp. In the next few lines, the speaker calls for the people— “Come down / Through time / Among peripheries” (ll. 35-37), “Amazing / ourselves / with / song.” (ll. 39-41) The word “peripheries” also implies Asian’s marginalized circumstances: for example, the camp, social and cultural position and the homeland in Asia. The speaker urges the people to stand in open rebellion against the invisible force, and overcome the antagonism among Asians.

Moreover, from line thirty-five “Come down,” the sound of So-ran Bushi starts to play again. The following lines “Strong things / Spring / From our feet” (ll. 43-45) are stressed on a consonance of [ng] sounds and the alliteration of [s] sounds to emphasize the strong rhythm of
So-ran Bushi. Inada and the band often use Japanese folk songs in their sessions. However, it is supposed that the drums make a jazz conscious rhythm because they do not beat the first time of the melody like Japanese folk songs. This So-ran Bushi is turned up gradually, and reaches a peak at line forty-five. At the next line, Inada’s reading increases the volume of voice. In contrast, the sound of So-ran Bushi disappears immediately.

As is emphasized in his reading, the internees are now unchained. They also have wings, which are a symbol of freedom: “Strong things / Spring / From our feet [. . .] With wings. / With messages.” (ll. 43-48) From these lines, it could be read that Inada suggests a mental liberation of internees and their strong will. Inada’s powerful voice also emphasizes a pleasant round of events about liberation. Additionally, the latter half of the reading, especially from line sixty-one, expresses the zest for life at the place to where they have immigrated. At the ending of the poem, the key words are repeated five times, and the fonts are changed line by line as if describing a conversation between Inada and the audience: “Something grand. / Something. / Something grand. / Something.” This description associates with a number of voices, and it also reminds us of the style of “call and response” in jazz. For these characteristic forms of poem, Inada’s voice stirs up a sense of unity and solidarity as a call for Japanese internees through the repetition of “Something grand.”

At the same time, the voice shows the significance of solidarity not only for Japanese Americans, but also Africans and other minorities through the interaction of voice. The transition of the vigorous reading and So-ran Bushi also symbolically imply the process that the Asian Americans explored their movement through escaping from the label as a “model minority.” On the other hand, the repetition of “Something grand” and “Something” seem to throw an endless question, “how should we live together harmoniously,” for the unsolved racial matters in America.

III. “We” Blur the Racial Boundaries

Now, I would like to examine another poem “Instructions to All Persons” in Legends from Camp to focus on the use of “we.” It is also recorded in the first number of the CD Legends & Legacies. In this poem, we can find the characteristic style, i.e. the poem takes words from a poster that shows a call for Asian American’s deportation in 1942, and each
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word is technically re-structured and repeated. The poetry lines remind us of a dialogue between the speaker of the poem and the audience. From the first line to the sixteenth in the poem are quoted as follows;

Let us take
What we can
for the occasion:

Ancestry. (*Ancestry*)
All of that portion. (*Portion*)
With the boundary. (*Boundary*)
Beginning. (*Beginning*)
At the point. (*Point*)
Meets a line. (*Line*)
Following the middlw. (*Middle*)
Thence southerly. (*Southerly*)
Following the said line. (*Following*)(*Said*)
Thence westerly. (*Westerly*)
Thence northerly. (*Northerly*)
To the point. (*Point*)
Of beginning. (*Beginning*)(*Ancestry*)

(*Legends from Camp, 5, ll. 1-16*)

As the description style of “Something Grand” shows, “Instruction to All Persons” uses italics in the parenthetical repetition parts at the end of each line. This style is associated with not only “call and response” in jazz, but also a sermon and the following repetition in a black church.

As I mentioned above, “Instruction to All Persons” took words from the poster, which shows an order of displacement for Japanese Americans by the American military. In contrast to the original poster, which uses words meaning “restraining,” “expulsion” and
“deportation,” Inada’s poem reproduced a positive image by modifying the order of the words. These styles of this poem aim at drawing forth the solidarity between minorities through the rhythmical dialogues. On the other hand, the personal pronoun “we” is not identified throughout the poem. The same thing happens in the poem “Something Grand,” which also uses unidentified “we” frequently, for instance in the lines 31 to 33, “We say / we are / that people.” Needless to say, it could be assumed that the personal pronoun “we” indicates Japanese internees as I mentioned above. Robert Grotjohn gave a suggestive indication about Inada’s use of “we.”

Inada writes that “we’re”—and he uses “we” ambiguously, giving it the possibility of including Japanese and/or other Americans and people of other nationalities altogether [. . .] He further refuses to isolate “Japanese” from “American.” (Grotjohn, 261)

The repetition of “we” means the profession of “we as an American.” Concerned about Grotjohn’s indication, Inada’s voice resonates with all the various Americans through his experience of internment: Asian, African, Hispanic, and Anglo-Saxon. In addition, it suggested that Inada tried to capture the Japanese internment as one of the significant events in American history. Namely, Inada insists that the relocation gave a historical significance to all Americans.

In a chapter “Camp” in the poetry book, Legends from Camp, Inada said that “History offers clues: The American camps are part of the American experience.” (l. 3) Therefore we could notice that Inada’s use of “we” originates from his consciousness as an American. This consciousness also shows the influence of jazz, which gathers original sounds from all over the world, especially Africa, and refines it as one music genre. Besides, as the prelude of Legends from Camp, “camp” indicates not only the number of Japanese American relocation camps, but also a ritual (it is called “camp”) of the Navajo—the largest nation living in North America, and the Jewish camp “Dachau” in Germany. In Inada’s poetry, the “camp” is used as a key concept in order to link some minorities beyond the time and the space. From this point of view, most importantly, it could be suggested that Inada intentionally used “we” to blur boundaries between racial frames. Inada’s growing multicultural environment might be
one reason to blur the racial boundaries on his versification.

Again, let us think about the meaning of the book version of “Something Grand.” It has a subtitle “Chant for many voices” and eight lines at the beginning of this poem. However, Inada did not read aloud these lines in the reading version. The eight lines at the beginning are cited as follows;

From everywhere,
We gather on this ground.
From everywhere,
We gather on this ground.

From everywhere
Let our spirits sound.
From everywhere,
Let our spirits sound.

(Legends from Camp, 170, ll. 1-8)

The eight lines say that the immigrants came from various places to America, and then they tried to send their messages from various places in America. Through this powerful profession of the immigrant, this poem tried to depict their address to confront racial issues and search for their identity in America. America is, of course, a country of immigrants except for the Native American. For this reason, some cultures meet with acceptance, and “we” in the poetry lines is depicted as an inheritor of that multi-cultural spirit in America. As the subtitle “Chant for many voices” shows, this poem is obviously illustrating the voices of many people, but it is not confined to the minorities. For Inada, the solidarity also means a musical linkage between Asian and other minorities and the majority via jazz as a “lingua franca” (Legends from Camp, 57) to avoid the same historical mistake.

Juliana Chang argues that Inada’s Legends from Camp shows the speaker of “the trauma of wartime internment.” (134) In addition, she refers to Inada’s artistic fusion with poetry and jazz music.
Trauma is that which one experiences both prematurely and belatedly: it occurs before we are prepared, and because shock prevents us from experiencing it at the moment of its occurrence, we can only experience it later through its recurrence. Inada’s use of a jazz poetics—and of its relation to trauma, racial subject formation, and time—raises the question of what it means for an Asian American poetics to be mediated through an African American musical form. (Juliana Chang, 135)

As Inada calls himself “campsman,” it can be suggested that his poetical source originates from Japanese American internment. On the other hand, jazz itself is rooted in racial trauma, so the rhythm, improvisation and syncopation of jazz will reproduce the trauma of displacement for the Japanese American. Nevertheless Inada searches the performance by taking jazz rhythm and improvisational reading sessions in order to review issues of Japanese American internment from the perspective of a problem for all Americans.

Conclusion

A rhythm brought from Africa to America provides a number of various playing styles over a few decade of jazz history. In addition, Inada and his band add Asian music to jazz in order to express their ethnic identity and memory. Jazz has been established by blending some music from all over the world into America, so it might be said that the jazz sound is one of the most American of all cultures. Some poets wanting to try and express their American identity or culture are influenced by the background of jazz, and the orality of rhythm is useful for poetry reading.

Inada focuses on the experience of Japanese American internment, and then he explores the issues as a historical thing for all Americans in order to emphasize the importance of solidarity of various races. From this point of view, jazz is appropriate for the promotion of racial solidarity because of its form and rhythm, especially “call and response” and the colloquial expression. In addition, jazz can be “lingua franca” to share and hark back to a racial trauma beyond the difference of race, place and time. Jazz conveys a lot of American voices at all times, and Inada will no doubt continue to create a new sound and style on
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American modernist poetry by using jazz.

Appendix

“Something Grand”
CHANT FOR MANY VOICES

From everywhere,
We gather on this ground.
From everywhere,
We gather on this ground.

From everywhere 5
Let our spirits sound.
From everywhere,
Let our spirits sound.

Something grand.

Rain. 10
Sacred.

Something grand.

Sand.
Sacred.

Something grand. 15

Hands.
Sacred.

Something grand.

Stand.
Sacred. 20

Something grand.

Radiating.

Something grand.

Shaping.
Gracing. 25

Something grand.

Listen.

Something grand.

Listen.

Something grand. 30

We say we are that people.
Something grand.

*Come down*

*Through time*

*Among peripheries.*

Something grand.

*Amazing*

*our selves*

*with song.*

Something grand.

*Strong things*

*Spring*

*From our feet.*

Something grand.

*With wings.*

*With messages.*

Something grand.

*Listen. Listening.*

Something grand.
Everything we have.
is this

Something grand. 55

Is this.

Something grand.

Radiant.
Radiating.

Something grand. 60

Standing.
Dancing in a field after rain.

Something grand. 65

Standing.
Dancing in the sunlight after rain.

Something grand. 70

Something.
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Something grand.

Something.

Something grand.

Something. 75

Something grand.

Something.

Something grand.

Something.

Something grand. 80

[line numbers are added] (Legends from Camp, 30)

Bibliography


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