

Back from the Dead:

Rediscovering Value in John Okada's *No-No Boy* and John Williams's *Stoner*

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John Williams begins his 1965 novel, *Stoner*, with a description of the bathetic destiny of his protagonist: "Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers" (3-4). William Stoner's epitaph could just as easily been applied to the novel itself. Considered a failure upon its release, *Stoner* went out of print twice before being republished more than forty years later on the strength of an author's recommendation to his publisher. According to Julian Barnes, it went on to reach the best-sellers list "almost entirely by word-of-mouth among its readers." *Stoner's* unique publication history, as well as the narrative its champions tell about its reception, offers a unique opportunity to examine the values that determine those texts that are ascribed cultural relevancy, whether that be through repeated inclusion on college syllabi or extensive critical attention. The reevaluation of a text for inclusion in this kind of literary canon is often explained in relation to a sea-change in public thinking around a particular discourse or discourses that illuminates the forgotten text to be ahead of its time. But this explanation, while partly true, is an inadequate explanation in *Stoner's* case because so much of the novel takes place within the walls of the university, sheltering William Stoner from the outside world, and also because *Stoner's* value is said to be located in its masterful prose.

*Stoner*'s history in some ways mirrors the trajectory of John Okada's 1956 debut novel *No-No Boy*, another text that went out of print after being generally overlooked. Okada's novel was also rediscovered and republished, but this time by a collective of Asian-American writers hoping to resurrect a forgotten text which they believed both spoke to their lives as Asian-Americans and held an innate brilliance. While *No-No Boy* is consistently associated with this group of Asian-American men, *Stoner* is routinely said to have been rediscovered by passionate readers who are not determined within a particular racial group or associated with academic institutions or publishing houses. While their journeys show many similarities, the reasons critics argue for the value of these texts is starkly different. These differences are even more interesting considering that both novels depict a male protagonist who refused to serve in the military and remains largely exiled from society, and his family, until the novels end. The novels also share similar prosodic techniques, namely, an inclination to *tell* the reader rich emotional detail rather than *show* this information through images and actions. This style is most strongly felt, in both novels, in scenes where the protagonists grapple with their inability to understand and explicate the complicated nature of their existence. A closer examination of the arguments for canonization in these cases reveals a concentration on the "purely literary" in *Stoner*, which associates the novel with an ability to speak to a universal human condition, and a focus on the slow change of racial history that allowed *No-No Boy* to speak to a new set of politico-racial circumstances (Wang). Reading the journeys of *Stoner* and *No-No Boy* into the modern-day canon, exposes a cultural pressure that makes ethnic texts hyper-local examples of racial expression, a marking that's never divorced from its formal qualities. In the opposite way, non-ethnic, or white texts,<sup>1</sup> are praised for their prosodic achievement which is separated from its

historical context and thereby underwrites the presumption that great literature speaks to a universal human experience.

This kind of comparison supports Dorothy Wang's critique, set out in her book *Thinking Its Presence*, that modern critics of avant-garde poetry have "set[] up an opposition...between the literary and the writings of [] racialized and postcolonial subjects who are members of 'subcultures.'" The way this binary positions makes writing by ethnic authors indicative of a subculture in the United States implies that a normative, white culture can be accessed in the texts deemed literary. However, this does not mean ethnic texts, like *No-No Boy*, should be read as simply expressions of a universal experience, a term that is purposefully vague so as to act as a "placeholder" for larger cultural assumptions, because universalizing its experience denies it the ability to speak to power. Formal achievement in *No-No Boy*, while not separate from its content, deserves closer scrutiny<sup>ii</sup> because form is one of the ways Okada creates an oppositional text that challenges the cultural hegemony of post-war America. Considering the importance of technique is important in ethnic texts because, as Anthony Reed writes in his study of experimental black writing, *Freedom Time*, "Attention to the surface itself—the techniques through which [the text] "says the impossible" and brings into existence thinking obscured by dominant ideologies and ideologies of race—stresses complexity, the ways this writing does not make itself available to epigrammatic resistance or expression" (22). If the formal achievement of *No-No Boy* cannot be divorced from its content, neither can the oppositional message that its content presents be divorced from its form. Therefore, by ignoring form, readers limit what the text can say.

The way *No-No Boy*'s later champions describe its initial failure, in the sense of market success and critical acclaim, illuminates how this novel has been received as a hyper-local text

and thereby denied literary value. In the preface to *No-No Boy*, Ruth Ozeki, writing to the deceased John Okada, describes how this process functions, even at the level of prose, writing, “The few critics [in the United States] who bothered to review [the novel] pretty much panned it. They bitched about your ‘bad English’ and said it wasn’t literature” (VII). Ozeki points to the way *No-No Boy*’s reception was racially marked through its narrative voice in such a way that its inability to conform to a perceived standard of grammar denied it a good review. Ozeki offers Okada’s Tokyo-based publisher, Charles E. Tuttle, as further evidence that *No-No Boy* was not given an impartial hearing upon its first publication. The editors of *AIIEEEEE!* similarly note that *No-No Boy* was not recognized on college campuses in 1971 because it “lacked literary value. It was not American enough” (Chin et al. 128). If *No-No Boy* possessed “bad English,” or was somehow not “American,” it also possessed the wrong kind of “bad English” for the time of its publication. Apollo Amoko, referencing Jinqi Ling’s work on the novel, locates the book at a time when “the superficial interest in Asian American culture was intended to deflect the civil rights campaign by producing the image of Asian Americans, in contrast to disenfranchised African Americans, as a model assimilated minority” (42). It is therefore the “general invisibility of Asian-Americans as self-representing subjects,” at this time that made Okada’s portrayal of a fraught Japanese-American identity unpalatable, both for a popular readership and critical consensus (42). His depiction of the specific trauma that made their experience so fraught did not appeal to normative understandings of being “American” or great “literature.”

But if these reviews represent the attitude of an establishment committed to politically conscious understandings of “proper English,” *No-No Boy* did not fare much better outside of this collective of readers. The Japanese-Americans who read the book “shunned it” because, Ozeki believes, Okada “wrote unflinchingly about the scarring experience of being a Japanese-

American on the West Coast during World War II” and, unfortunately for Okada’s reputation, “that war had only ended twelve years earlier, and twelve years is no time at all” (VII). It is important to note that Ozeki appreciates the novel’s “unflinching[]” portrayal in terms of the historical-racial moment that contributed to the silence that Japanese-Americans greeted the novel upon publication. As Thomas Girst points out, critics have also argued that the dialogue should be presented as translated Japanese in order to more authentically represent Japanese-American experience, thereby inscribing Ichiro<sup>iii</sup> more trenchantly within his ethnic community (143). In this way, the text’s value is hyper-local, speaking to the specific experience of this group, and became one of the ways that the institutions argued *No-No Boy* was not literature. What appears to be a sign of its genius to Ozeki and many modern readers, was oppressive, and understandably so, to people who “were busy keeping their heads down, assimilating and working on becoming the model minority of 1950s America” (VIII). In other words, Ozeki concludes, *No-No Boy* was “ahead of its time.”

Naming a novel “ahead of its time,” in retrospect, implies the logical supposition that society must change in order for the novel to become effective and possess value. “By 1976,” Ozeki writes, “people were ready for your book, and they read it and loved it and were inspired by it” (VIII). The newly discovered value was made possible because “two decades had passed, and the world had changed. The civil rights movement had made huge gains. Americans were talking about racism and discrimination. Japanese Americans were starting to speak out against the internment and criticize the United States government for its unconstitutional policies” (VIII). If *No-No Boy*’s earlier failure was read as the unharmonious relationship between text and the cultural moment, value was later conferred along those same lines. Ozeki herself describes a similar relationship to the text, writing that as a young person she was not interested in the

“Japanese-American cultural movement,” but once she had grown up the novel “stunned” her for its depiction of these events. My intention is not to criticize Ozeki, but rather to point to the way that the story that is told about this novel’s value consists of a beginning in which it is out of sync with cultural ideologies, a middle period when it lies dormant during a time of cultural change and then an ending when the text reemerges as a piece of art with worth because it matches the newly defined values. The problem with this kind of narrative is not that it is untrue but rather the way it holds the ethnic text to a standard of relatability. The ethnic text is denied the chance, which the white text is given, to speak to something both putatively timeless and universal about human experience.

Although it is not surprising that a book which does not coincide with cultural values would not be popular, and maybe even understandable that it would not be critically attractive, the necessity to read the book’s reappearance to this standard points to a tendency where “in historical and theoretical terms, experimentation and race seem opposed” (Reed 3). In other words, reading *No-No Boy*’s reception as entirely cultural, denies an appreciation of the ways the text might have been formally challenging. The cost of this kind of practice is that it denies an ethnic text admittance to “genealogies of presumptively white avant-garde writing, on the grounds that its concerns seem insufficiently ‘universal’” (7). Although it is also true that appeals to a text’s timelessness and universal capabilities should be strenuously questioned and doubted, due to their ambiguous meaning and hegemony’s ability to use these terms to inscribe difference, if these appeals are to continue, critics and readers must be attentive to the way that white writing is considered universal much more routinely than ethnic writing. In *Stoner*’s similar story of struggle out of obscurity, there appears a surprising lack of attention to the cultural and historical

forces at work at the time of the novel's writing and publication which contributes to the prevailing belief that it expresses something essential about human experience.

In praise of *Stoner*, and as an impassioned plea to readers to open its cover themselves, Julian Barnes, writing in *The Guardian*, described *Stoner*'s publication history in the following manner: "It was respectably reviewed; it had a reasonable sale; it did not become a bestseller; it went out of print." Barnes does not equivocate often in his praise of the novel, and therefore his indifferent disposition towards its publication history is all the more striking. Not only does he seem uninterested in speculating as to why the novel was not an instant success, his string of ironic independent clauses leaves the impression that this subject is not only uninteresting, but also something that can never be known. It was a cruel roll of the dice and the critic's time would be unproductively spent trying to explicate its meaning. Writing in a similar vein, Morris Dickstein describes how *Stoner* was "Ignored on publication in 1965, a clamorous year,"<sup>iv</sup> but has been "kept alive by enthusiasts...[who] invariably wonder why no one has heard of the book. [and ask] 'Why isn't this book famous?'" Dickstein's casual reference to the historical circumstances of publication is both precise and ambiguous. It creates the illusion of a historical context, while remaining uncommitted to whether or not this context played any demonstrable role in *Stoner*'s reception, and then gently tosses it aside to suggest that context no longer plays a determining role in the novel's value. The "invariable wonder" becomes a matter of pure speculation, similar to the way Barnes considers *Stoner*'s success story to be an unfathomable process. Steve Almond comes the closest to nailing down a concrete reason for the text's history of obscurity, writing, "Since its publication in 1965, *Stoner* has gone out of print twice, doomed by its mundane plot and restrained style." Interestingly "1965" is no longer categorized as an influence, making the "mundane plot and restrained style" stylistic choices devoid of context.

Almond situates it alongside other classics like *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby* which did not enjoy canonical status upon release, but simply required the unfolding of time before they could be appreciated. Although it is not Almond's duty to elucidate the set of historical circumstances whose transformations turned *Gatsby* into a major work in a newspaper article about another novel, it is interesting the way the simple passage of time is described as the necessary ingredient for the success of all three white texts without any reference to the historical conditions that surrounded their publications or their eventual reevaluation.<sup>v</sup> Considered alongside Ozeki's attention to the ways "the world had changed," the white text's popularity is not affected by the context of history and becomes associated with a universal experience which, as was demonstrated in *No-No Boy*'s initial reception and is continued in *Stoner*'s recent reception, becomes associated with literary value (VIII).

If contemporary critics are somewhat ambivalent about why *Stoner* was not widely read or enthusiastically embraced in its time, they are more interested, if not more scrupulous, about its reception today. John McGahern, whose recommendation brought *Stoner* its most recent, and most successful reissue, references the novel's prosody as an estimation of its value nine times in his seven-page introduction. McGahern praises the "plain prose which seems able to reflect effortlessly every shade of thought and feeling" without reference to the characters or the moment of these particular passages that might make these thoughts and feelings local to a particular race, class or gender (vii). In this way McGahern can compare Williams's masterful prose to the "almost impossible material," later he calls it "unpromising material," suggesting the prose can overcome the limitations of its content (xii-xiii). This attitude creates a separation of form and content where, because the prose doesn't represent anyone specifically, it seems to speak to everyone universally. Whereas Ozeki located Okada's ability in "the gritty postwar



world of rifts and schisms that [he] paints so brilliantly,” McGahern defines Williams’s skill as simply “the clarity of the prose,”<sup>vi</sup> which he writes, “is in itself an unadulterated joy” (XI, xiii). By eliding the hyper-local markings that do exist<sup>vii</sup> in *Stoner*, McGahern creates the implication that literary value is not associated with context.

By emphasizing “the clarity of the prose” in this way, McGahern argues for seeing the novel, using Williams’s own words, as “an escape into reality” (xiii). Judging Williams would require more context from the original interview, but the way that McGahern equates the prose with an escape into an unspecified human reality illuminates the tendency to view white texts as capable of representing the essence of experience. Equating a focus on pure aesthetic value with a universal white experience is made possible by “how much readers,” of *Stoner*’s Introduction for example, “both intuit and are expected to intuit” because terms like “clarity” or “reality,” “act as placeholders for larger assumptions and beliefs, many of which have largely become normative in shoring up the supposed opposition between the cultural against the literary” (Wang). Whereas in *No-No Boy* reality is not a placeholder, but rather explicitly marked as the experience of post-war Japanese-American life, *Stoner*’s reception represents an undefined “reality” even though its context is white, and mostly male. Because this move is achieved through attention to pure aesthetics, noting the formal accomplishment of an ethnic text like *No-No Boy* becomes a political calculation that can disrupt a hegemonic belief that whiteness is indicative of “reality.”

Appropriating the aesthetic privilege of white texts for ethnic texts should not be used to erase the hyper-specific textual signifiers that make the text ethnic. To read *No-No Boy* as emblematic of a broadly defined human experience would strip the text of its power to speak against hegemony. As Amoko points out, “[*No-No Boy*] is a novel set squarely in the charged

racial margins of the American nation-space: it develops almost exclusively within the confines of Japanese American culture” (42). Taking the novel out of these “charged racial margins” would attempt to make internment a universal experience which would negate its very reality. However, as Reed makes clear, ethnic writing must resist definition as examples of exclusively racial expression because “for minoritized writers, race exists as part of a larger articulation of social contradictions at work simultaneously inside and outside the text.” In order to successfully understand these “social contradictions” readers must acknowledge that “literature’s function in politics requires a look at poetics” (9). Readers that study ethnic texts in terms of language and form, for example, contemplating the way signing John Okada’s name to the preface<sup>viii</sup> of the 2014 edition changes *No-No Boy*’s message concerning assimilation, have a better understanding of the way “language [is] central to articulations of national belongings” (Reed 13).

One limitation of a comparison of the revaluations these two novels’ have received is the lack of contemporary newspaper and magazine articles regarding *No-No Boy*’s resurgence. Most of the discussion surrounding Okada’s novel has appeared in literary journals, where writers are more inclined to map the novel’s development using theory, than what might appear in *The New York Times Magazine*, which is more sympathetic to publishing the kind of impassioned pleas that Almond and Dickstein have written. Writing of this kind on *No-No Boy* has been contained within reissues of the novel, Asian-American literary anthologies and small Pacific-themed<sup>ix</sup> newspapers. That essays on *Stoner* appear in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, publications which purport to represent their respective countries and populations, and which appear more easily in a routine Google search, where a wider swath of readers can access their content, contributes to the assumption that *Stoner* has a universal applicability. *No-No Boy*, on the other hand, must be published in hyper-local publications that explicitly mark it as a specific

kind of experience and deny it the chance to be an example of simply good writing or offer an addendum to the general understanding of human experience. It also speaks to the way, in ethnic texts, “value is ascribed before the text” (Reed 12). This limitation also contributes to the sense that *No-No Boy*, because it is specific, is a cultural or political text that needs to be explicated rather than be enjoyed in the way Almond, and Williams himself,<sup>x</sup> advocate for texts to be read. Again, it would be dangerous to advocate for white readers to pick up *No-No Boy* and simply enjoy themselves because that would smooth out all of the ways the novel is radical and challenges power. Canonizing ethnic texts by advocating for aesthetic enjoyment uncomplicated by race, can also place them “under certain jurisdictions not only consigning them to prescribed areas but also gathering them under certain sets of meanings” (Ferguson 19).

Further complicating this struggle between form and content, *Stoner* also receives glowing praise of its subject matter, but praise which does not consider its racial or historical markings. Dickstein, in language so effusive (“a perfect novel”) it weakens his overall conclusion, writes that the novel is “the story of an ordinary man, seemingly thwarted at every turn, but also of the knotty integrity he preserves, the deep inner life behind the impassive facade.” Compared to the popular reading of *No-No Boy* as an exploration into “the (im)possibility of American nationhood for racially marked Japanese Americans in the immediate wake of the Second World War,” *Stoner* is represented as an exploration of Life rather than any particular experience of life (Amoko 41).<sup>xi</sup> Barnes also makes this kind of claim arguing that the sadness that spreads across *Stoner*’s narrative “feels [like] a purer, less literary kind, closer to life’s true sadness. As a reader, you can see it coming in the way you can often see life’s sadness coming, knowing there is little you can do about it.” There is a privileging inherent in the attempt to claim that *Stoner*’s particular kind of experience is closer to Life, rather than

emblematic of the specific historical, racial, material and gender signifiers that contribute to its professed literary value. Interestingly, *No-No Boy* engages with this very topic challenging the claims Stoner's advocates would make for it.

In one of the novel's most famous scenes, Ichiro, the protagonist, has just left a jobsite where his ethnic identity played a particularly important role and contemplates "the apostrophe, the topside comma, the period with a tall on it" (Okada 202) The comma represents what separates Ohara from O'Hara, or in other words, the Irish from the Japanese. Okada's metaphor is powerful, almost overwrought in its symbolism, but the way he initially slips it into his text through Gary's story about the proud Japanese-American veterans who will "take a trip to some resort, thinking this is God's green land of democracy [only to] get kicked in the face with the unfortunate mistake about the reservation story" saves it from embracing a clichéd, all-encompassing humanism (201). Okada's use of metaphor in this example makes the scene not only about the Japanese and the Irish, but points to the seemingly arbitrary lines that underpin the post-WWII racial state. In this way, which will be discussed more in the next paragraph, *No-No Boy* speaks both to its time and also to a future readership. Later, Ichiro imagines his own version of this story in which the apostrophe is "the bald headed pivot on which man hung, unborn and unnamed until suddenly he found himself squirming on one side or another. It made a difference, of course, which side he chose to fall on" (202). Ichiro imagines the kind of universal human experience that Barnes describes, but also links it to the very moment of racial signification. He also makes it clear that to assume such an experience, and to assume one exists in our everyday interactions, leads to overlooking the importance of the specific determinations of race. Okada's choice to tell the reader the specific content of his metaphor, rather than only showing them the image of the two names and asking the reader to infer their own meaning,

contributes to the sense that he “wrote unflinchingly” about his themes. Ichiro’s conclusion, “Lock up the apostrophes for a while. We’ve got too many Irishmen” points explicitly to the materialization of white hegemony, which does make a difference.

Even though it matters which side of the racial pivot a text comes down upon, to consider only the side that the book has fallen on, marking it as cultural or sociological, reveals an ineffectual critical practice because “Race is one means through which a textual surface seems to make legible some more fundamental meaning or claim, even as it has no meaning apart from the claims one makes for it” (Reed 21). Just as Ichiro’s experience is Japanese-American, and *No-No Boy* is an ethnic text, there are more fundamental meanings and claims that it can represent because “every text addresses both its own moment and an unknown future readership” (21). In McGahern’s introduction, as well as the newspaper and magazine articles referenced above, *Stoner* is assured its future readership, and admittance into the canon, because of the unspecified way its prose speaks to a universal notion of lived experience. Of course, *No-No Boy* also found a future readership, but only in so far as it had finally found a present moment that was in sync with its message. In other words, *No-No Boy* spoke to the specific cultural realities that were relevant in 1971 and 1972, but there was not an acknowledgment that it spoke to something essential about human experience that implies meaning for a future readership. This approach becomes a way to exclude *No-No Boy* from the canon by judging it “exclusively through thematics of race or the social [that are] narrowly conceived.” To read a novel exclusively as a racial text is always to conceive of the thematic of race as “narrowly conceived” because “racialized reading” reduces ethnic culture “to a set of properties” (Reed 6-7). Noticing Okada’s “fondness for detail, the nuances of his metaphors and the sophisticated use of the emblematic” opens up the apostrophe scene, and others like it, to a future readership interested in

the ways the U.S. hegemony subjugates certain classifications of citizens. But since these nuances are “all deeply rooted in the particular Japanese American post-WWII experience” an appreciation of them never flattens Okada’s ability to speak to this particular instance (Girst 139). A fitting example of this kind of reading practice can be found in perhaps the most canonical of Western writers, Shakespeare. His play *The Merchant of Venice*, of which more will be said later, is appreciated today both because it was able to engage with the hyper-local problem of anti-Semitism, but also because it is said to speak to the problems between parents and children more broadly and also specifically to those relationships within diasporic communities. That *The Merchant of Venice*, and Shakespeare in general, is considered to have an aesthetic brilliance, or what Wang calls a “pure literariness,” and also, what many critics perceive to be a universal applicability, speaks to the association of these two concepts and foresees the way that texts that are not considered universal can be excluded from the canon.

The importance of form and an attention to literature as an unspecified field that represents human experience is one of *Stoner*’s largest concerns. William Stoner’s “required survey of English literature [which] troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before,” serves as a crucial turning point in the novel (Williams 10). In this class, Stoner’s teacher, Archer Sloane, asks his students what one of Shakespeare’s sonnets “mean.” Sloane is clearly not looking for summary of its content, but asking for something more transcendental. Confronted with the silence of the class, Mr. Sloane recites<sup>xii</sup> “Sonnet 73” and adds “dryly, ‘Mr. Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr. Stoner; do you hear him?’” Stoner struggles to speak, but cannot explain what the sonnet means. The sonnet becomes a source of profound and deep meaning that transcends the context of the poem and eludes explication. This trend continues once he has become a teacher and, preparing for class, “felt the logic of

grammar, and he thought he perceived how it spread out from itself, permeating the language and supporting human thought [and]...his mind...grappled with the power of the literature he studied and tried to understand its nature...he moved outward from himself into the world which contained him, so that he knew that the poem of Milton's...changed the world which was its subject, and changed it because of its dependence upon it" (26). Here "power," which could also serve as one of Wang's placeholders, becomes synonymous with an anonymous world that is shared by human beings in common and is not a product of Shakespeare's or Milton's cultural or political position. For Wang this kind of practice is not only problematic because it frames a binary between white (literary or universal) writing and ethnic (political) writing, but because poets as canonical in the Western tradition as Blake and Shelley, saw their political activism as "neither marginal nor incidental, but [] essentially related to a large part of the experience from which the poetry itself was made" (Wang). Although *No-No Boy* does not contain meta-literary commentary, its attention to thinking and trying to understand the world is "essentially related" to the political.

The scenes of literary work in *Stoner* are mirrored by a similar attention to the struggle for meaning, the battle to grasp the seemingly ineffable essence of experience, which consumes Ichiro. In the novel's final pages, Ichiro walks away from the dark alley that has just been the scene of a bloody fight after "sharing the empty sorrow in the hulking body, feeling the terrible loneliness of the distressed walls, and saying nothing" (Okada 221). The blunt explication of loneliness and inner turmoil is a routine fixture in *Stoner*'s narrative and the way Ichiro "wanted to think about" these events, and the ones that have surrounded him since his release from prison, emphasize the deep inner-life of the character. Because Ichiro's thinking attaches itself to Ichiro's cultural-political world, his repeated quest for "understanding," a major theme of the

novel, is coded along the “social and political lines” that Wang argues distances minority text from literature. Okada ends his novel describing Ichiro “walking along, thinking, searching, thinking and probing, and, in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America, he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart” (221). The similarities between Ichiro and Stoner, who sat in Sloane’s classroom struggling to elucidate the meaning of Shakespeare’s sonnet, but failed to achieve a comprehensive understanding, is striking. In this passage, Okada, as Garret Hongo points out, is able “to encourage diversity, intellectual passion and an appreciation of verbal beauty,” but because *No-No Boy* is marked through “racialized reading,” its ending is not said to speak to what in *Stoner* is considered the universal quest to elucidate profound truths. It becomes only, but not simply or merely, the struggle for Japanese-American assimilation.

This kind of conclusion is complicated because, as the editors of *AIIEEEEE!* point out, “Obviously, sincerity and the real language that Okada heard in the streets of Seattle, where he grew up, was not literature” for universities in the 1970s (128-29). The editors of *AIIEEEEE!* clearly find something real and sincere in Okada’s writing, but they also point out the way that the institutions, who here possess the power to confer the mark of the literary, did not recognize this capability. Lisa Lowe points out how universities conceived of “Western culture as a separate sphere and the materially, racially and sexually differentiated society against which that notion of autonomous culture is constructed and whose contradictions it works to conceal” is accomplished at the level of narrative (38). The editors of *AIIEEEEE!* quote a letter from Mills College that refused credit for a class in Asian-American literature, which included *No-No Boy*, to count towards an English major because “many of the books are not of high literary quality, however interesting and valuable they are as records of the experience of an ethnic minority in



America” (128). Here “literary value” is used as the specific bulwark by which universities protect Western culture from ethnic texts. Although it is unclear how Mills College evaluated *No-No Boy* specifically, the way they refuse to equate literature with “records of experience of an ethnic minority” is further proof that the “literary” is considered to in some way speak to a white subjectivity that is coded as the universal. When a text is marked as hyper-local through race it loses claims to the universal and therefore its literary value. The assumption of the universal is the same feeling that Stoner has while studying Milton. Ichiro, on the other hand, is able to contemplate a moment before racial definition, perhaps a universal moment, but imagines it alongside the movement that racializes each subject.

In an ironic turn that perhaps the faculty at Mills College did not foresee, when a text is marked as universally literary it can lose its political relevancy. In the case of *Stoner*, that loss has not hindered its ability to become popular,<sup>xiii</sup> but, as the writing of Dickstein and Barnes makes clear it has lost an ability to speak to the political moment of its publication or current reader, even if that secures it an emotional brilliance. As teachers, parents and critics try to make older texts, or perhaps, those putatively universal texts, speak in new and interesting ways to a new generation of readers, texts that have been seen as hyper-local because of their racial content are providing new ways to think about these old texts. Dorothy Kehler argues that reading Shakespeare alongside “[Okada and Kingston] confirms that human responses are not exclusively cultural bound” and makes Shakespeare relevant for a classroom of students who might believe this play cannot speak to their experience (110). Kehler’s argument has the danger of promoting belief in the kind of universal humanist values that elides difference and strips an ethnic text of its ability to challenge the perceived normativity of the present and the implied future. When she writes that teaching “these texts [*The Merchant of Venice* and *No-No Boy*]

together can validate Shakespeare for students, especially in ethnically diverse high school and college classes,” her argument points to the way Ferguson, in his book *The Reorder of Things*, envisions minority writers who challenge hegemony can be co-opted by the institution. But acknowledging the way these two texts may be similar would also remind readers that “every writer comes out of a particular time and place and that the timeless and universal in literature are suspect” (110). In this way *Stoner*’s champions would be forced to acknowledge its context, which would problematize the estimations of its literary value as its ability to speak of an “ordinary man” or “reality” and force the canon to consider the literary value of distinct experiences (Dickstein, xiii).

Theorizing the problems inherent in labeling texts as depictions of a universal reality that expresses lived experience is a problematic, and complicated, proposition because by denying the universality of certain experiences hegemony can more easily separate writing on the grounds of difference. But, an attention to the ways that ethnic writers are treated as representative of a specific experience, while white authors, through an attention to the formal quality of their work, are able to depict a sense of general lived experience, exposes the grounds upon which the canon can be reorganized. As Ichiro exemplifies in his famous apostrophe scene, an attention to the determinative realities of minority experience need not occlude finding other truths that extend beyond the particular experience of the Irish or Japanese. In the same way, critical attention to *Stoner*’s depiction of both the poor farmers and middle to upper class university professionals that populate this predominately white novel would not diminish its narrative power for the legions of readers across the globe who have enjoyed it. Lawson Fusao Inada echoes this sentiment in his Introduction to *No-No Boy*, writing: “*Whoever* reads [*No-No Boy*] will be a bigger person for it” (my emphasis, XXII). Different readers will find themselves

affected in different ways, just as they come down on different sides of Ichiro's "bald headed pivot." But both of these novels affirm, together, the shared reliance on fiction as, what John Okada's calls, the only place where "the hopes and fears and joys and sorrows of people [can] be recorded" (Chin et al. 127).

### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> My use of the term "white text" is intended to highlight the ways that novelists and novels marked by a racial experience that is not included in whiteness are not afforded the position of a universal subject hood that is granted to a novel written by a white novelist about white characters. Although there is not space in this essay to examine the ways that female, queer and other marginalized individuals, who may also identify as white, but are excluded from this kind of universal subject hood, change this term and our understanding of the appeal to the sense of universal experience, it is directly relevant to this kind of inquiry.

<sup>ii</sup> Reed foresees the pitfalls of overlooking form in ethnic writing by asking "How does one change the valences of the burdens of black writing in a society where people presume to know in advance what one will say?" (21). Without an attention to Okada's formal value, critics run the risk of containing its message to the already dominant ideology concerning Japanese-American experience.

<sup>iii</sup> Girst convincingly argues that the only two examples of spoken Japanese in the novel, both of which ask Ichiro if he speaks Japanese well, are spoken by white employers and Ichiro answers them in English to defy the very encoding they are attempting.

<sup>iv</sup> Although Dickstein is referring, at least indirectly, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 it would be interesting to consider *Stoner's* reception in relationship to the passing of this landmark bill explicitly. Ling argues that part of the reason *No-No Boy* was unpalatable was a "superficial interest" in Asian-Americans deployed to "deflect the civil rights campaign" with the image of a "model assimilated minority" (Amoko 42). *Stoner's* depiction of a white culture almost entirely isolated from both Black America and Asian America would seem to speak to a nostalgia that was being very publicly rewritten 1965. Perhaps its reception speaks to the way readers thought it was out of touch with the current climate, but the novel's resurgence at a time that was incorrectly labeled "raceless" or "post-race" might speak to a cultural ambivalence towards minority representation in 2013.

<sup>v</sup> The objection that great novels should be considered on the strength of the text and on the text alone is not necessarily being refuted here. That kind of objection would not address the reason these two novels were unpopular when they were published and became popular, or at least critically acclaimed, years later which is the issue at stake here.

<sup>vi</sup> He uses this phrase twice on the same page and uses the word clarity four times in reference to Williams's writing.

<sup>vii</sup> In addition to race and gender, class would a particularly interesting way to look at *Stoner's* experience. He is "born at the end of the nineteenth century into a dirt-poor Missouri farming family," but marries the daughter of a rich St. Louis banking executive. Although his position at the university comfortably establishes *Stoner* within the middle-class, he exhibits the influences of his childhood, spent working in the fields, throughout the novel (excerpt on book cover).

<sup>viii</sup> It did not appear there in previous editions.

<sup>ix</sup> *Pacific Affairs* and the *Pacific Citizen*, for example.

<sup>x</sup> McGahern provides excerpts from an interview with Williams in which he laments the "changes in the teaching of literature." Upset that literature is now taught "as if it were a kind of puzzle," his interviewer asks him, "And

literature is written to be entertaining?” and Williams answers “Absolutely. My God, to read without joy is stupid” (xiii). Although this exchange seems to place Williams on the side of the Great Western Books debate of the 1980s, the joy which the editors of AIIIEEEEE! read *No-No Boy* with complicates what exactly it means to read with joy.

<sup>xi</sup> Whether this tendency represents a conscious anxiety toward praising the ordinary story of a white male’s life because he is the representation of power and hegemony, or an assumption that white experience is primary, the erasing of racial signifiers and the historical moment of *Stoner*’s specific experience remains integral to their argument for canonization.

<sup>xii</sup> Williams reproduces all fourteen lines of the sonnet in the text.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Stoner*’s popularity offers a potentially fruitful examination of this issue because its success in Europe, particularly France, has actually out-paced its success in the United States. As Julian Barnes notes, “It was the novel’s sudden success in France in 2011 that alerted other publishers to its possibilities; since then it has sold 200,000 copies in Holland and 80,000 in Italy. It has been a bestseller in Israel, and is just beginning to take off in Germany.” Although there are many articles, like Barnes’, that point out this curious fact, none seem to posit why the story of a college professor in America is so intriguing overseas and in countries as different as Germany and Italy. While many of these countries represent Western culture, “rights have been sold in 21 countries, and *Stoner* is soon to be launched on China” (Barnes).

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