

## LOOKING AT HIROSHI KASHIWAGI'S STARTING FROM LOOMIS AND OTHER STORIES THROUGH NEW HISTORICIST LENSES

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*Abstract: As the title suggests, the present research paper is intended to identify and comment on the different representations of history and power encountered in Hiroshi Kashiwagi's memoir in this way revealing numerous instances in which representatives of a superior society exercise power and thus gain control over weak individuals. On the one hand, the present analysis is meant to work with key terms specific for the new historicist sphere and apply them when analyzing Hiroshi Kashiwagi's storytelling, while on the other it will seek to interpret the importance of past events in the spectrum of contemporaneity. Hence, another concern of the research will be to see how the audience received the memoir in a post-ethnic context, in this way questioning the historical events encountered in the stories and the political context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, because new historicism focuses on the individual as being part of a major system that functions on power centers, the paper will resort to analyzing how Japanese Americans dealt with the concept of power in the American society.*

*Keywords: discourse, ethnic identity, ideology, power, new historicism*

Hiroshi Kashiwagi's *Starting from Loomis and Other Stories* is a collection of the writer's own memories and interpretations from his early life as a Nisei i.e. second generation immigrant. The book brings to light boyhood experiences as well as internment camp episodes and, last but not least, recollections from the years after World War II. Because Kashiwagi writes about many of his distant recollections with the experience of a poet, writer and playwright, his stories are told in thematic and also in chronological order, in this way making the reader aware of aspects connected to his own family, the places he had lived in, and the emotions he felt during his life. The most powerful experiences the writer recollects are the ones connected to the Tule Lake concentration camp because there is where he began his acting and poetry career, his memories connected to the gaining of the 'No-No boy' name and the loss of his American citizenship.

When thinking about the factors which contributed to the decisions made by Kashiwagi, one should mention Edward Yoshida. In his article, "Author Hiroshi Kashiwagi: From Togan Soup to Plums Can Wait and beyond, the life of an American", Yoshida explains that Kashiwagi: "takes readers through this traumatic period in his life. Reading a firsthand Japanese American account of renunciation during WWII is rare, and is no doubt best

experienced through the author's own words"<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, Karen Tei Yamashita rightfully considers that Kashiwagi's stories "recuperate from erasure the history of Japanese American immigration and wartime detention, especially that of the Tule Lake incarceration, and the sensibilities and trauma of a Nisei whose long life, creative talents, and desire to write have allowed him to reflect on this past"<sup>2</sup>. This is a clear example that the memoir is in itself a collection of unique life stories which make themselves visible through simple yet powerful experiences connected to the World War II years. Apart from that, the book is also about his father who suffered from tuberculosis and died after being admitted to the Weimar sanatorium, his mother's cooking skills and the years after World War II when he earned a master's degree in library science, wrote pioneering plays and acted both on stage and in movies.

This paper questions how both history and power define the Japanese American experience reflected in Hiroshi Kashiwagi's *Starting from Loomis and Other Stories* as well as how the audience received the memoir in a post-ethnic context, by reflecting on the historical events encountered in the stories and the political context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Accordingly, the following pages will focus on Kashiwagi's view of Loomis and the Arboga Assembly Center as well as on Tule Lake and the aftermath of responding to questions 27 and 28 with 'No' and 'No' respectively. Nevertheless, because the title of this paper aims towards a new historicist interpretation, one finds it important to first tackle some aspects related to history and historical interpretation of literary texts.

When reading Paul Hamilton's *Historicism*, one notices that the book brings to the fore a rather intricate theory related to the movement which bears the same name as the book because "historicism is suspicious of the stories the past tells about itself; on the other hand, it is equally suspicious of its own partisanship. It offers up both its past and its present for ideological scrutiny"<sup>3</sup>. It is obvious that history cannot be viewed as having only one interpretation, so who can tell whether a story is true or false? Who can actually say if the events encountered in books were described exactly in accordance with reality? One answer is sure: there is no plausible explanation as history, just like literature, develops in time. Hamilton rightfully considers that "both past and present have to remain separate so that one can question the other, and so that a 'fusion of horizons', making possible agreement and disagreement, can take place"<sup>4</sup>. Hence, one needs to detach himself/herself from past events in order to understand former actions with present results. Additionally, one finds it crucial to make a clear distinction between past and present, because one cannot speak about what it is without understanding the happenings that took place. It is also important to mention that "current new historicism distinguishes itself by its heightened consciousness of criticism's institutional past, and of how its methodological changes might have served particular cultural interests"<sup>5</sup>. What new historicism tries to blend in is the unchangeable past the changes that might have taken place according to requirements imposed by a certain cultural background. Another way of interpreting new historicism in contemporary literature would have to do with the following quote: "new historicism recasts history as a battle over fictions, a battle of

<sup>1</sup> Yoshida, Edward. "Author Hiroshi Kashiwagi: From Togan Soup to Plums Can Wait and Beyond, the Life of an American" Discover Nikkei. N.p., 13 Jan. 2014. Web 07 Nov. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Starting from Loomis and Other Stories*. Ed. Tim Yamamura. Colorado: University of Colorado, 2013. back cover.

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton, Paul. *Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1996. p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton. *Ibidem*. p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton. *Ibidem*. p. 153.

communication”<sup>6</sup>. In other words, new historicism is not necessarily concerned with the accuracy of events, but with the act of writing, and more importantly with the acknowledgement of power relations which influenced the sphere of literature.

Accordingly, Kashiwagi’s memoir is a historical representation of power relations exercised upon Japanese Americans because aspects related to both history and power can be encountered even from the first pages of the memoir. When talking about Loomis, the narrator claims that: “most of the Japanese who lived in Loomis were farmers. A few owned their farms; they had bought them before the 1913 Alien Land Law was enacted, which forbade the ownership of land by Issei (first generation Japanese). After 1913, some bought land in the name of their citizen children to get around this law. But most Japanese leased the farms or sharecropped”<sup>7</sup>. This is a clear example of exercised power over individuals who were considered aliens in the American society. If we were to analyze how the Alien Land Law affected the lives of Japanese Americans, than one should keep in mind that Japanese immigrants were seen as settlers as opposed to other Asian immigrants<sup>8</sup>. Another factor which contributed to the enactment of the previously mentioned law was the fact that Japanese pursued American lands in order to settle and work while their children were able to attend school<sup>9</sup>. In other words, the narrator from *Starting from Loomis and Other Stories* explains that because of the Alien Land Law, first generation immigrants could not own American land anymore. Instead they could only lease their lands and sell their crops, in this way coping with the power imposed by the law.

Even if the Alien Land Law seemed to do injustice to Americans of Japanese descent, the narrator remembers that at the beginning of World War II he and his family members were forced to leave their home and prepare for a new life in camps. As a starting point, they had to go to Arboga Assembly Center, a temporary detention camp. The narrator’s experiences from Arboga are obviously connected to the political situation of the time and, of course, the power centers which concentrated their attention on gathering Japanese American families in places where they could constantly be supervised. The narrator painfully recollects that Japanese Americans were forced to live in single room barracks, that for meals they had to line up with tin plates in hand and that no background or previous position in society mattered anymore as everyone was reduced to a number. When talking about the use of the latrine, the narrator claims: “what was most outrageous was going to the latrine, a public outhouse with accommodations for eight or so without partitions. We sat there cheek-to-cheek, so to speak”<sup>10</sup>. To put it differently, Japanese Americans became nameless and, at the same time, powerless, being forced to live in such conditions, being forced to comply with the rules imposed by the society in which they lived. The above mentioned ‘latrine’ episode is a clear example of white supremacy as it brings to light the idea that other races are inferior and, thus, are not allowed to benefit from decent 19<sup>th</sup> century facilities.

However, after arriving at Tule Lake the narrator draws parallels between his previous experience from Arboga Assembly Center and his current location. He clearly states that: “after the miserable experience in Arboga, we were excited about the flush toilets in the

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<sup>6</sup> Hamilton. *Ibidem*. p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Takaki, Roland. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York, NY, USA: Penguin: 1990. p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Neiwert, David. *Strawberry Days, How Internment Destroyed a Japanese American Community*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 15.

latrines; in fact, we made a special trip to the latrine to check them out – two rows of porcelain toilets that actually flushed. We tried them several times to see if they really worked; they did”<sup>11</sup>. Being overwhelmed by the changes between these two camps, the narrator, in fact, points towards a sense of embracing the situation in which he found himself. So, we could claim that he found a way to cope with the power imposed by the system, in this way resisting it by simply not resisting.

Kashiwagi’s stay at Tule Lake did not have negative repercussions on all levels because apart from being surrounded by fences, here he was able to begin his career as a poet and actor. He even reckons that: “I belonged to the Tule Lake Writers Club and the Tule Lake Little Theater, administered by the camp recreation department. Both were great creative outlets for me, and they gave me a chance to pursue my interest in the arts. Strangely, going to camp was an exciting time for me; I was able to do what I absolutely loved to do...at least at first”<sup>12</sup>. Being able to interact with people who had the same interests, the narrator sees Tule Lake as a fruitful experience. However, one finds himself/herself in the situation of questioning his remark ‘at least at first’. Does that mean that he was initially allowed to perform and after some time he was not? Or was this just another short-term career prospect?

Interestingly enough, the following pages from the memoir reveal aspects related to Little Theatre in camp and the feelings rooted deep inside him. He states: “Strangely, camp gave me a chance to pursue what interested me the most: writing and acting, performing in front of people. I had taken a drama course at Dorsey High School during my year in Los Angeles and had acted in plays at the Japanese-language school. But nothing like the Little Theater Camp”<sup>13</sup>. We could only assume that even if Kashiwagi had to spend his teenage years in an internment camp, he took advantage of the situation and focused on his aims. More importantly, the fact that he still remembers Little Theater and compares it to other drama courses proves that the Tule Lake experience was indeed a fruitful one.

However, this experience soon ended together with a questionnaire which intended to measure the loyalty of Japanese Americans. The narrator explains that: “the Little Theater came to an abrupt end with the institution of the loyalty registration order in early February 1943, when politics displaced art, when division, distrust, even enmity among the members – all caused by infamous order – effectively killed off any creative energy within the group. The last performances were in January and by mid-February the Little Theater at Tule Lake was history”<sup>14</sup>. Because of this questionnaire Japanese Americans began to lose trust in their peers and there is no wonder why Little Theater lost its members.

In fact, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) tried to identify Japanese Americans who could be released from camp and the two questions from the loyalty registration order, namely no. 27 and no. 28<sup>15</sup>, intended to prove the internees’ allegiance to the American people. However, there were serious consequences after answering these questions with a firm “No”. The narrator explains that: “Tule Lake became a segregation center, a maximum

<sup>11</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> The two questions intended to separate those who were loyal to the United States of America and those who were not. Question no. 27. Asked: “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty whatever ordered?”, while question no. 28 asked: “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 or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?” (<https://caamedia.org/jainternment/camps/questions.html>).

security prison for ‘disloyal’ Americans. And we became known as the infamous ‘No-No Boys’, a stigma that would mark us whenever the subject of camps came up, which was often”<sup>16</sup>. In other words, Tule Lake became a place where unfaithful Japanese Americans resided and soon some of them renounced their American citizenship, thus becoming Native American Aliens.

When thinking about his decision, the narrator claims that: “I renounced my American citizenship at Tule Lake, and I felt that was the dumbest thing I ever did in my life [...] I had opposed the registration in protest against the many injustices I had suffered – not just the incarceration but all the racist abuses I had taken as a child and as a young man, all the times I had been called a ‘Jap’”<sup>17</sup>. Clearly, the narrator felt that by renouncing his citizenship he would choose to fight the system and resist its power. However, as stated above, the only way to resist power was by not resisting. Hence, he soon realized that this rebellion was in vain because: “renunciation was totally unnecessary [...] We had already made our protest known by not registering. Giving up our citizenship was stupid and redundant. Since I did not possess Japanese or any other citizenship, I essentially became a person without a country. My official status, in fact, became ‘Native American Alien’”<sup>18</sup>.

After years of being a Native American Alien the narrator finds out that he had recovered his American citizen status on March 21, 1956. To put it differently, his American citizenship renunciation was cancelled and his birth certificate returned together with a letter from Assistant Attorney General George Cochran Doub. Part of the letter said: “In view of the determination that your renunciation was null, void and without legal effect, you are entitled to the return of your birth certificate. It is returned herewith”<sup>19</sup>. Unfortunately, the documents were sent to Weimar Sanatorium in 1956 and because Kashiwagi’s father died in 1951, they were unclaimed and returned to Washington. But this episode bears much more meaning than a mere cancellation of citizenship renunciation; rather it points towards a poor apology from the American system for all the injustices that were exercised upon Americans of Japanese descent.

This paper has proved that while some of Kashiwagi’s stories reveal dreadful experiences of Japanese Americans i.e. Arboga Assembly Center, the end of Little Theater, the loyalty questionnaire and its aftermath, others have more positive messages such as the Little Theater experience and the cancellation of American citizenship renunciation. For these reasons, in his article Gus Thompson recognizes that: “while some of Kashiwagi’s ‘Starting from Loomis’ stories cut like a sharp knife deep into old wounds, he feels that the message that emerges is a guardedly positive one”<sup>20</sup>. Because the narrator from *Starting from Loomis* exposed not only negative but also positive aspects related to internment camps, the reader realizes that there were instances in which weak individuals such as Japanese Americans learned how to cope with representations of power in a critical period from the American history. Moreover, Yoshida rightfully considers that Kashiwagi’s memoir: “stands as a testament that Hiroshi led and continues to live a spirited life. He did not live in the shadows. Quite literally, he did the opposite...he lived his life out in front of audiences, on stage”<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Kashiwagi, Hiroshi. *Ibidem*. p. 156.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, Gus. “The Bittersweet Americanization of Hiroshi Kashiwagi | Auburn Journal” *The Bittersweet Americanization of Hiroshi Kashiwagi | Auburn Journal*. N.p. 18 Feb. 2014. Web. 06 Nov. 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Yoshida, Edward. *Ibidem*.

Clearly Hiroshi Kashiwagi's *Starting from Loomis* is a symbol for every Japanese American who identifies with the war trauma and the triumph defined by a multitude of experiences. Last but not least, one could add that through his stories, the narrator exposed the American ideology of the time, thus proving that history in itself is a collection of interpretations that need to be known.

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