

“I wish you a land”: Hawai’i Short Story Cycles and *aloha* *’aina*

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The artistic appropriation of place ranks among the central concerns of Asian American writing. Place in literature, a simultaneous geography of space and imagination, has the potential to represent communal formation and preservation as it highlights the identity that binds its members in a shared sense of purpose and a common sense of belonging. For first-generation writers, the portrayal of the land of the past often blends with that of the present, offering a vivid depiction of how immigrants perceive the physical and emotional journey from the geographic and temporal past to the present, as they struggle to establish themselves in the new surroundings. For second-generation Asian Americans, place often acquires another meaning, that of a definition of self in the place of birth, as they shift between visions of their parents’ past location and their own cultural differences. Third-generation writers engage a wide spectrum of negotiations with the land that was a protagonist of their growing up, and that of their increasingly complex personal and community history. Consequently, a sense of place becomes one of the most significant elements the Asian American writer can manipulate to condition self-representation and the portrayal of community.

In the short story cycles by third-generation writers from Hawai’i I will discuss – Garrett Hongo’s *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai’i*, Sylvia Watanabe’s *Talking to the Dead*, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* – place is at the very center of identity politics.¹ These

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¹ Stephen Sumida has analyzed the controversy attached to the expression “Hawaiian writer” when used to refer to immigrants rather than native people. In his study on the literary traditions of Hawai’i, he reserves “the word ‘Hawaiian’ to identify native

writers appropriate the short story cycle to inscribe cartographies of personal and cultural belonging, as their highly individual representations of Hawai'i have as a major feature the concern with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place and its separateness that the process of subjectivity can be conducted. In this regard, Stephen Sumida defines "a fundamental Hawaiian value much touted today, *aloha 'aina* (love of the land)," linking it to "another parent of Hawaiian values – *'obana* (family) [The] symbols and metaphors [that arise from these terms], integral to the Hawaiian language, bind love of the land, family, sustenance, and culture itself into a rich complex of values – values involving reciprocity among people and between people and nature."² Each of the cycles, in distinctive and highly creative ways, foreground the protagonists' engagement with the land, highlighting a reciprocity in this relationship. At their center lies an evolving relationship with Hawai'i, as a site characterized by diversity and in a continual process of change. Love of the land implies a growing knowledge and interiorization of the specific characteristics of the place, and a complementary appreciation of family and community becomes essential the process of selfhood.

Engaging the short story cycle in the representation of place and community extends layers of meaning and ways of signifying. The advantages stem from the structure of the cycle itself – its openness to multiple voice and vision, its tendency toward inclusiveness and simultaneous respect for difference, its emphasis on place, character, and situation acting on each other. Places – towns, villages, islands – tend to be created through aggregation or accumulation, not just in geographic, economic, or planning terms, but also in terms of feeling and emotion. As such, they become "more than their built environment, more than a set of class and economic relationships, they are also an experience to be lived, suffered, undergone,"³ Hawai'i is represented in these cycles as a distinctly plural phenomenon constructed out of the interpenetration of past and present, of colonizations and immigration, of the cohabitation of different

Hawaiian (i.e. Polynesian) people and culture. For a non-Polynesian, I refer to a 'Hawai'i' person." Stephen H. Sumida, *And the View from the Shore: Literary Traditions of Hawai'i* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), xxiii, I will abide by the criteria he sets and use "Hawai'i writer" in the discussion of Hongo, Watanabe, and Yamanaka.

² Sumida, 108–09.

³ Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley, eds., *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon and the New Jerusalem* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–2.

racess and cultures. Each version of this place offers individual histories, embodied in the characters that live there or that visit, while descriptions of the landscape encode stories about origins, inhabitants, and the broader society in which it is set. Hawai'i writers Garrett Hongo, Sylvia Watanabe, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka clearly see their place as text, waiting to be written or rewritten in literary terms, read or reread as both personal and communal chronicles. These writers, I believe, function according to Anita Desai's description of "writers who *create* place. It does not exist on any map – or else, it exists on all maps and in all countries and the writer who recognises it as his spiritual home goes straight to it out of an instinct as true as the homing pigeon's."⁴

Asian American representations of place most often reflect the struggle for continuity and association within the group. The narratives here discussed epitomize the cultural mosaics that form contemporary towns, villages, and cities in Hawai'i, stressing the multiplicity of divergent cultural perspectives as well as modes of living that coexist but do not always interpenetrate. Such narratives of place therefore tend to be "both diachronic, in that [they] recount[t] a story of change through time, and synchronic in that [they] see those stories of change as existing and constantly surfacing."⁵ Descriptions of places become histories of their creation and sustenance. In the case of Asian American writing, the continuance arises from successive immigration or the growth of a younger generation that takes upon itself the task of preserving communal identity within the specific location. Furthermore, the characters in these narratives often feel the particular features of particular places bearing down on them, producing responses that would not have occurred elsewhere. The pivotal role of place in the formation of the ethnic subject is therefore a primary concern of these writers, who also delve into an identification and analysis of the concept of "home." Spatial orientation has always been an imperative, and for the immigrant, as for the second generation who must redefine the relationship with place, cultural identity is intricately woven with the idea of location. The manner in which Hongo, Watanabe, and Yamanaka describe Hawai'i thus becomes a loaded statement on the intersection between mapping place and inscribing the processes of self-formation and community history.

The physical idea of home, and the community that sustains it, is well delineated in the narratives analyzed in this article, all of which center on

⁴ Anita Desai, "'Feng Sui' or Spirit of Place," *A Sense of Place: Essays in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. Britta Olinder (Göteborg: Göteborg University Press, 1984), 101–09.

⁵ Preston and Simpson-Housley, 7.

need for a sense of location, of home, as a source of identity. “A home has no identity except through self-knowledge,” Andrew Gurr argues, supporting the claim that the literary engagement with place engenders both identity and community.⁶ Alienation from a cultural or physical home has radical effects on both the writer’s mind and choice of theme, this critic explains, and the economic or political freedom of exile “works paradoxically as a constraint, a commitment to create a fresh sense of identity through the record of home.”⁷ Setting becomes the governing symbol in all three narratives. Garrett Hongo’s highly poetic exercise in life writing, *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai’i*, narrates his rediscovery and growing involvement with the physicality of the land of his birth as the springboard for the story of his life. *Volcano* becomes the record, not only of Hongo’s experiences growing up Japanese American in Hawai’i and Los Angeles, but of his necessary recovery of the Hawaiian village of his birth and his ethnic history. The unique achievement of this autobiographical exercise lies in the manner in which the writer blends the external and the internal, through the imaginative recuperation of the place of beginning and in the reconstruction of the dispersed community through the building of the text. The story cycle form allows him to formulate the discrete realities that worked to make him as he learns them, or as he recollects them in memory. Hongo moved away from Volcano, the village of his birth, as a child, and lost contact with the paternal side of the family. Now he tells the stories as he hears them, the accounts filling in the gaps, opening up new versions of previously unquestioned facts or events.

The chronicle of Hongo’s recovery of his land begins with a prologue that recounts an early memory of the process of loss. Through the metaphor of language, Hongo explains how his moving to Los Angeles with his family at the age of six initiated a journey of separation. His mother sits at the kitchen table with the boy, helping him to adjust to mainland life by instructing him on “Mainland English.”⁸ His struggle to swim in these new “lagoons of syntax” (x) effectively erases the pidgin from his speech. For the poet Hongo, this loss of the language of his Hawai’i childhood becomes a loaded symbol of a doubled loss: of a land and a history. In this context, his return to Volcano in the later stories will necessitate his recovery of that culture-specific form of speech, repre-

⁶ Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981), 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ Garrett Hongo, *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai’i* (New York: Vintage, 1995), x. All subsequent references to this edition will be cited in parenthesis within the text.

senting a personal and cultural reclamation of land and family history. This prologue sets the tone for the rest of the stories which are, in diverse ways, attempts to retrieve the lost past: the move to Los Angeles led to separation from a homeland, from grandparents and family, and ignorance of family history.

Because of the importance of the semiotic interaction of self and environment, the inscription of place becomes a central part of Hongo's autobiography. Paul John Eakin argues that the autobiographical act recapitulates the fundamental rhythms of identity formation, emerging as "a second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self-consciousness."⁹ Hongo's memoir illustrates this point on two levels: firstly, through the physical repossession of the land and, secondly, by the unearthing of a lost family and history, a new path into oneself. The writer tacitly acknowledges the transient nature of the places he depicts – even as he describes in painstaking detail the flora and physical characteristics of the newly found home – delineating a symbolic cartography rich in allegorical and referential meanings. Branching out from the recollection and reclaiming of a land, he constructs subjectivity through a complicated mesh of dispositions, associations, and perceptions which he represents through a singular ordering of the accounts of events and persons who have played important roles in his process of selfhood. The constructedness of the text highlights the writer's consciousness of the processes of meaning and memory, subjectivity and representation.

The first story, "Ugetsu," begins the writer's trajectory back. His introductory description of his place of beginning already centers the journey he will undertake – "a pilgrimage, an exploration, and a reunion" (4) – to a physical and spiritual home, whose homecoming involves an immersion in location and history:

Volcano is a big chunk of the sublime I'd been born to – the craters and ancient firepit and huge black seas of hardened lava, the rain forest lush with all varieties of ferns, orchids, exotic gingers, and wild lilies, the constant rain and sun-showers all dazzled me, exalted me ... There was something magical about it – a purgatorial mount in the middle of the southern ocean – and there was something of it native to me, as insinuation of secret and violent origins and an aboriginal past. (4)

Entering Volcano becomes Hongo's foray into "a book about my own life" (6), where "all I needed was to look around, and the past – historical or familial – and my own childhood were tangible as the mirror-beads of

⁹ Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 18.

rain streaking against the car window” (6). *Volcano* can thus be read as Hongo’s story of connection, of a growing sense of self within place. In contrast to his father, who was “desperate to make art out of his alienation” (241), Hongo composes poetry in his process of reconnection, his appropriation of place and history.

To counter the loss described in the prologue, the writer begins a revisitation of places and memory, his own and those of others, to reconstruct the narrative of his own life. The cycle form therefore signifies as it describes, reflecting the writer’s own process of story collection. Writer and reader struggle to fill in the gaps between the stories, allowing the discrete tales to build coherent impressions in the mind. The events recounted in this first story – his meeting his father’s sisters for the first time, his trip to the Hongo Store where he was born – make a more permanent return to the land imperative for the writer. The decision to bring his own family to Volcano leads to the succeeding stories of their discovery and bonding with the land. His narrative intention and his creative strategy spring from an almost supernatural impulse that arises from his first contact with Volcano:

I suddenly wanted to be *better* than I had been, more a part of the earth I was born to, its rock and garland of ferns, more a part of the history that had been kept from me out of some mysterious shame, and more a part of my own poetic mind, an elusive and beleaguered thing, almost out of keeping with our own time I wanted to know the place and I wanted to tie my name to it, to deliver out of the contact a sacred book – a book of origins. (26–27)

The construction of the text becomes an emblematic part of Hongo’s journey back to Volcano, a representation of his experience that textually recaptures both the experience and the manner of living it. Hongo envisions his text as a way of healing the lost past, the faithlessness and betrayals that had split the family. As such, discontinuity and fragmentation in the text may be read as signs of epistemological exploration, as the poet privileges the process of knowing in the immigrant situation. *Volcano* becomes, therefore, the answer to fundamental questions of self-knowledge, as entry into Volcano spurs the questions and allows the writer to begin to discover answers.

Diverse narrative forms and techniques blend to recreate the cycle of Hongo’s life and search for personal and communal history. The writer merges memory with botanical and geological discoveries and investigation, family lore with descriptions of lava flows, poetry and the narrative essay. He self-consciously seeks metaphors that describe his growing awareness and attachment to the land, combining childhood

recollections with the richness of feeling, image, and information that his journey provided him, stressing the relationship between inner and outer landscapes. Titles like “House of Ferns/House of Fire,” “Volcanology: Trails, Ponds, and Trees,” and “Volcanology: Lava-Walking” illustrate how Hongo gains insights about himself and his family through incursions into the dramatic properties of the land. “Self-Portrait” is perhaps the most traditionally autobiographical story, as it recounts his process of becoming a writer. Hongo also writes biography in “The Hongo Store” where he recounts his aunt’s version of her family’s life, and in “Kubota,” the story of his maternal grandfather. In the poem, “The Unreal Dwelling,” he appropriates a voice he had never heard, his paternal grandfather’s, centering on the old man’s need to reclaim his past, and his son. Linking the diverse accounts and styles is Hongo’s metafictional act, his presence as watcher, listener, and thinker, a historian of his own life. He takes notes compulsively, even as he watches the movements of a lava lake (283), and consistently discerns parallels between his observations and his own poetic process. “I stood on the shore of pure creation ... The deep mystery was making more and more without my calling for it. I wanted its intimacy, a kind of fathering to come” (285–86).

For Hongo, Hawai'i, “my storehouse of natal memories” (44), an “archive” (45) and “storage” (45), demanded an incursion. His raid on land and memory produce three types of stories that blend to create the memoir: recollections of a personal past, stories that recreate the lives of his forebears, and considerations of the physical construction of Hawai'i. The stories, though ostensibly independent, are highly complementary. The biological accounts are, ultimately, subliminal explanations of what he seeks: connection, roots, attachment. If we believe, as Sumida argues, that “history and place are not simply two separate elements of a world view or of a sensibility in Hawai'i, but in Hawaii's island culture *place* is conceived *as history* – that is, as the story enacted on any given site,”¹⁰ Hongo's unearthing of buried family history and stories must be understood as a natural result of his communing with the land. He describes himself as he describes the *hapu'u* which “has no ‘roots.’ Its stump is its root, a thick bundle of matlike fibers that take on sustenance from the rains ... The *hapu'u* grows, then, like a gigantic mushroom in the rainforest, its attachment to the earth a fine and fragile thing, the step

¹⁰ Stephen H. Sumida, “Sense of Place, History, and the Concept of the ‘Local’ in Hawaii's Asian/Pacific Literatures,” in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, eds. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 215–37.

of an angel” (72–73). He forges a connection to the human culture that, though he was pulled out of it at an early age, helped to shape him, and to the living earth that helped to shape the culture. His true epiphany comes as he hears the family story in the context of the land, the “knowing” he acquires when he returns to Volcano becomes the remedy to his sense of profound estrangement from his past.

Hongo, deprived of family history and connection with the land, seems to want to assure that his own family will not suffer that loss. The lullaby he sings to his son, a ballad his father and grandfather liked, is a poet’s injunction to remember one’s origins and the community of people and place – a reminder to return to the place of beginning (173–74). His obsession with discovery and chronicle leads him to write to preserve; his second son, Hudson, is born in Volcano, as though to complete the cycle of detachment and reattachment, “What I need from stories and my own returning to Volcano is this same kind of thing,” he writes, “a way to belong and a place to belong to. A place to belong that, at once, ties me to human culture and to a living earth that is itself without culture or care for human life” (258). Through the writing of his memoir, he binds himself to the land and the past – “like raw earth to itself, wound around my own origin in a bath of first things” (261) – his son signalling the continuation of the family connection to the land. In this manner, he metaphorically reclaims the land and his family, and presents it to the next generation. For the man who learns that his family name is written in Japanese with the ideograms of “home” and “place,” combining to mean “homeland,” Hongo’s valedictory for his village and his past becomes a ritual of affiliation and attachment: “I wish you knowing. I wish you a land” (339).

The foregrounding of place as the setting for the stories that arise from the Hawai’i experience makes Sylvia Watanabe’s *Talking to the Dead* illustrate Sumida’s definition of a complex Hawaiian pastoral as a form that tacitly recognizes and parodies images of the island as paradise populated by noble savages, often giving “a major role to intercultural encounters and interactions in the Hawai’i setting, where differences between cultures, perspectives, and values are considered important.”¹¹ The diverse stories in her cycle analyze the complex interaction between place, culture, language, and history that govern living in the islands, through the presentation of a Japanese-American community in the fictional coastal village of Luhi, on the island of Maui. Once again, the

¹¹ Sumida, *And the View from the Shore*, 5–6.

Hawaiian values of love of the land and family are privileged in the stories, Watanabe admitting that “the concern with these values very much informed my writing of those stories.”¹² Her position as a Hawai'i writer living on the mainland gives her access to a variety of traditions to draw from, yet consciousness of place clearly occupies a central place in her creative process: “I feel obliged to draw on all the traditions that have shaped my cultural identity And to be able to work at this place of intersection, where so many formerly disparate traditions come together, is what I believe to be the truly exciting possibility of the current multicultural ‘range.’”¹³ She therefore takes advantage of her awareness of the multifariousness of Hawai'i, as location and cultural specificity, to construct a narrative that celebrates the place and its people.

The characters that populate the stories of *Talking to the Dead* are obsessed with landscape and the personal and communal histories hidden behind the lush plant life and the shining sea. The question of the limits of attachment to the land becomes an obsession for many of the characters, who cannot seem to leave it, or find they must. Watanabe acknowledges the pervasiveness of such a land on the lives and imagination of those born there, or the many who come. As she explains:

Without sentimentalizing too much, there is something very embracing and easy about a place that's always so warm and green. And so perhaps it is easier to feel as if you belong to a landscape like that. I think a lot of the feeling I have about the Hawaiian landscape has to do with Polynesian values about the land. There's a Hawaiian term for it, *aloha'aina*, ‘the love of the land,’ which refers to one's rootedness to a place ... a sense of belonging that is almost a feeling in your blood.¹⁴

The opening story introduces the question of this attachment through a protagonist/narrator who is about to leave the islands for her first job as an art teacher in Anchorage: “I had never been away from the islands before, and was caught between the anticipation of a new, independent life and the sensation of being cast adrift, with everything familiar slipping further and further away.”¹⁵ Hana hovers between commitment to the land, her grandmother and ailing father, and her future away from her home. The images of home and family life are filled with vibrancy and

¹² Letter to Rocío G. Davis, 26 Nov. 1998.

¹³ Patricia Clark, “Living Among Strangers: An Interview with Sylvia Watanabe,” in *Worlds in Our Words: Contemporary American Women Writers*, eds. Marilyn Kallet and Patricia Clark (New Jersey: Blair Press, 1997), 403–14.

¹⁴ Quoted in Clark, 406.

¹⁵ Sylvia Watanabe, *Talking to the Dead* (London: The Women's Press, 1994), 2. All subsequent references to this edition will be cited in parenthesis within the text.

color: “Down the hill, the cloud shadows drifted over the sugar fields. The shifting green and yellow of the cane, the red furrows of the earth, and the blue curve of the water joined into a patchwork of shapes and colors” (3). Her happiest memories of her father, who loved to paint, include his giving her first “seeing lessons”: “Look, Hana Everything is made of light” (5). She understands that she must leave, though her dreams of Alaska are of a cold whiteness: “I was crossing a vast, wintry field with no trees, or landmarks, or colors for as far as I could see in any direction. With each step, I sank further into the deep, white drifts As I struggled to get free, it quietly began to snow” (7). The final words of the story are a valedictory to both the land and the family being wrenched from both her and her father: from her by her eminent departure, from him by his unforgiving “forgetting sickness.” “To not forget,” her father whispers, as he looks out at the harbor beyond which stretched the open sea (16).

In this story, Watanabe also presents a metaphor for the communal portrait being created in the stories through the quilt the narrator sees in her grandmother’s attic:

There hung an immense quilt, bordered by squares of bright-colored Bird Tracks. Though unfinished, the quilt covered nearly the entire wall. From where I stood, perhaps fifteen feet away, it seemed to contain every color in the entire world. I moved closer, and the colors began to cohere into squares, the squares into scenes – each scene depicting places and people in the life of the village. There were the sugar fields sloping down to the water. The green and white company houses with a different-colored dog in every yard. The singing tree. The old head priest leading the procession of lights toward the sea. There was Henry Hanabusa performing his nightly calisthenics, and Emi McAllister in her garden. Every detail had been carefully chosen – down to the green and pink scarf on her tiny sun hat. (15)

Watanabe appropriates the image of the quilt as a metaphor of both theme and structure. The patches combined in a design constitute an analogy of the history of the place and the pluralistic culture and blend of human relationships that characterize the village, an analogue for the cycle itself. The sewing of the quilt contextually enacts the author’s textual process of constructing the short story cycle out of details of character’s lives, each detail imbued with history and significance, privileging place, family, and community. The details in the quilt will be thematically considered in succeeding stories; the reader will understand the different references in the quilt, and even feel regret for those elements that were not included, such as “Minerva Sato’s tap-dancing comeback” (15) which was hindered by Aunt Pearl’s finding the nightcap grandma planned to use. Watanabe

adds the comically ironic detail of making Hana's grandma and father the "Laundry Burglar" who steals from neighbor's washlines the pieces of fabric that will go into the making of the quilt, causing consternation within the community. The pieces that make up the quilt come from the people they represent, yet their illegitimate appropriation adds subtle humor to the story, as it hints at the intricate relations that bind the group.

This story introduces characters who will later be protagonists of their own narratives that, in turn, lead to other interlinked stories. Emi McAllister also appears in "Emiko's Garden," the account of her husband's affair with Lulu, protagonist of "Certainty." The ostensibly passive acceptance of this affair by the submissive Japanese wife works to her advantage: we find out in the latter story that her husband will not leave Emi for the younger woman. Moreover, Lulu and Doctor McAllister meet when she is recovering from a self-inflicted accident after she learns that her lover, Jimmy Hanabusa, Henry's son, has died in Vietnam. "The Caves of Okinawa" narrates Jimmy's parents' divided efforts to save him from the horrors of war, and failing. Aunt Pearl and Emi are old classmates of Yuri, narrator of "Talking to the Dead" and the Prayer Lady is turned to for help and solace in both the opening and concluding stories. In spite of her use of multiple narrators, Watanabe's constant weaving of connective strands in the cycle constructs a tightly knit community, where the dynamic relation between unity and plurality reinforces the themes presented. As such, this cycle tightly links the inhabitants of the village: all the characters in the stories know each other well, their lives and stories are inextricably connected, their personal conflicts and relationship with the land a central part of their communal living.

The title story, "Talking to the Dead," presents the central motif of the cycle. Watanabe considers her narrative as a kind of "temporal dialogue ... a conversation with the past,"¹⁶ Privileging the land offers the possibility of presenting timelessness, a merging of the past in the present. The author recognizes this symbolic potential in her setting: "I think that the physical landscape has greatly influenced the temporality of that book. When I was growing up, it seemed as if time didn't pass because the landscape is so green, always."¹⁷ Multiple focalizers – alternating among villagers of different ages, sex, and race – make for a variety of perspectives on the theme of the influence of the past on the present. In "The Bishop's Wife," Aki, looking into the mirror, "could

¹⁶ Letter to Rocío G. Davis, 26 Nov. 1998.

¹⁷ Quoted in Clark, 406.

see the repeating shapes of time frozen in the reflection there. Her wide brow and stubborn mouth in Missy's dreaming face; her own face so much like her mother's photograph" (97). Her daughter's refusal to leave the island to go to college blends with memories of her first love, Kitaro, who "did not care about the other worlds promised in books and prayers. The world he wanted was everywhere around him – in the village, the hills, the sea" (100). A half-forgotten dialogue returns to haunt her: "Do you want to spend your whole life buried in this place?" her mother had demanded as the tiny world of the village, with its network of obligations and personal histories gathered Aki in with the boy's embrace" (100), only to be answered by her own daughter, Missy: "You can want a place with your whole skin, the way you can want a person. It can fill your thoughts, without your even knowing; you only know that, of it wasn't there anymore, maybe you wouldn't have any thoughts at all" (103). The daughter chooses to stay on the island, heightening the mother's sense of loss for her old lover.

The intergenerational and intercultural conflicts between those who struggle to maintain old traditions and those who prefer newer ideas also recur in the cycle. In an essay entitled "Knowing Your Place," Watanabe discusses the contrasting forces of leaving the island and staying, as well as the battle between the preservation of the old ways and the intrusion of the new. In Hawaii, she says, "there was no such thing as a perfect stranger It would have been impossible not to form those kinds of ties in a landscape where everything – the weather, the fact that you were surrounded by water, the distance to anywhere – conspired to make you stay put."¹⁸ Zhou Xiaojing argues that personal relationships in the stories are all intertwined with the changing environment of Hawai'i "as technology in the guise of process undermines native Hawaiian folk knowledge and spirituality, and as popular culture competes with religion for influence."¹⁹ Each of the stories contains elements of this conflict – pastoral descriptions of nature are tempered by the intrusion of high-technology. Hana, recently arrived from Honolulu, can contemplate the changes: "On the opposite shore of the bay, the skyline bristled with the metal and glass towers of the fast-spreading resort town, where there had been miles of empty beach and some of the best net fishing on the island just ten years before" (3–4). An entire way of life appears to be in

¹⁸ Sylvia Watanabe, "Knowing Your Place," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 35: 2 (Spring 1996), 316–28.

¹⁹ Xiaojing Zhou, "Sylvia Watanabe," *The Companion to the 20th Century American Short Story*, ed. Blanche Gelfant (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

danger of disappearing, as Aunt Pearlie urges Grandma to sell her place to the Canadian investment company that built the new hotels across the bay. Watanabe also explores the complex implications that such a change implies – the ambiguous conclusion of some of the stories suggest both revision and acceptance. The cultural and generational collision in “Anchorage” is resolved, or reaches a respite, through the prevailing of the Grandmother’s point of view as she “insists on the clear-sighted but loving acceptance of things as they are.”²⁰ The author thus articulates in her cycle the inexorable movement of time, in a specific place, with the inevitable consequences it brings.

Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s three prose works – *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, *Blu’s Hanging*, and *Heads by Harry* – foreground Hawai’i as a place of belonging as she cleverly engages with the Hawaiian pastoral on different levels, offering palimpsestic views of the land. Her short story cycle most dramatically articulates the child protagonist’s complex relationship with her land. The thirty-one stories or vignettes in *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* are narrated by Lovey Nariyoshi, a precocious and engaging child who lives between an imaginative world peopled by Donny Osmond, Barbies, and Charlie’s Angels, and the real world of the Japanese American community in Hawai’i, with its complex socio-economic circumstances. Through her eyes we see the family and the community, and experience the pain and insecurities of growing up in Hawai’i. More importantly, her voice communicates the nuances of the Hawai’i experience through the use of pidgin and the importance given to the act and art of storytelling. Pidgin, a language of self-determination, a child of many parents, identifies the speaker’s class and, more importantly, “opposes and transcends colonial standards” which include gendered constructs of who may speak pidgin and who should not.²¹ The use of pidgin is, as Sumida explains, “Local identity in one of its many forms, whether in daily life or in the poem, and therefore in its treatments of otherwise widespread themes,”²² and Yamanaka’s literary appropriation of this form of discourse becomes the most vivid manner of characterizing the child who uses it.

The narrative is a *Bildungsroman*: Lovey’s process of cultural apprenticeship links in the stories in *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*. The

²⁰ Quoted in Clark, 407.

²¹ Stephen H. Sumida, “Postcolonialism, Nationalism, and the Emergence of Asian/Pacific Literatures,” *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 274–88.

²² Sumida, “Postcolonialism,” 280.

values of *aloha 'aina* and *'abana* are formulated as essential aspects of her understanding her place in her complex world. Lovey's voice immerses the reader in the colors, flowers and fragrances of her paradisiacal home: "I felt the color blue," she rhapsodizes, "*the sky through the band-room window, Punalu'u near the reef where the water turned aqua,*"²³ "From Hilo town as we leave in the morning," she says, "I see the *purple-mountainmajesty* – Mauna Kea. I know exactly what the song means every time I see the mountain in the middle of my island" (198). But the land simultaneously symbolizes both grandeur and destruction, and in the "biggest eruption of Mauna Ulu I [her father] ever seen" (261), Lovey's father loses his sight trying to put the goats who were "burning and melting away" (263) out of their misery. But she will learn most movingly about the true meaning of love for the land and the significance of home from her father's stories. When he tells her about his father's death, he privileges the role of the land in its physical constituent for a definition of home:

When my madda open the package, [that the grandfather had brought with him from Japan] was soil – from Japan. My old man, he wanna be buried in Japanese soil. He carry that package in his one bag in 1907 all the way from Japan and keep um under his bed all those years. That was his way of going home. (174)

He then charges his daughter with the task of bringing him home in the same way after his death: "Maybe I grab me some soil off Haupu Mountain and put um in one package under my bed And maybe you rememba, when I die, you know what for do with that package. Just pour um on me and I be home" (180).

Though pastoral elements abound in Lovey's descriptions of her land, these acquire both metaphoric and symbolic meaning through her pragmatic vision of the less beautiful aspects of the same realities. Lovey never allows us to immerse ourselves completely in the idyll at any level. Potentially exoticizing accounts of animals, for instance, are undercut by comments such as "sheep stew stinks" (78); that "field poison the sugar company uses to kill cane rats makes the owls brain dead, dizzy, and dazed by the time they die" (172); or the description of plucking a peacock with emerald-green feathers, "the body cold but defrosting, smelling a little bad already" (165). Tales of pet animals end in tragic awareness: she witnesses a pet rabbit's tenderness with her young, and another devouring her offspring; Lovey and her sister Calhoon take their pet goat to the zoo

²³ Lois-Ann Yamanaka, *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1996), 59. All subsequent references to this edition will be cited in parenthesis within the text.

where Nanny is immediately assaulted by the billies in the cage, and they eat wild meat and hamburgers made out of their pet calf Bully. In the story entitled "Dead Animals Spoil the Scenery," she describes, among other things, a "mouse smashed in the cabinet right under the counter of the Lei stand, X's for eyes and bleeding from its mouth and ears" (151). The world of ghosts, which Calhoon sees, also lurks in the forest and in darkened bedrooms. Birds that have been killed take the form of ladies that come in the night, and "Calhoon Never Lies" relates the haunting that arises from Lovey's reckless killing of the Japanese blue pheasant Cal promised to show her.

Yamanaka's sense of language is critical to the portrayal of the child in her place. For Lovey, who describes herself as "kind of short and fat" (89) and is fascinated by the appealing white culture that excludes her, pidgin represents all she does not want to be: "I don't tell anyone, not even Jerry, how ashamed I am of pidgin English. Ashamed of my mother and father, the food we eat, chicken luau with can spinach and tripe stew" (9). She dreams of being a *haole*, a white American like those she sees on TV, even as she despairs of the way she talks. When her teacher tries to teach the class proper English, she laments: "I can't talk the way he wants me to ... the sound from my mouth, if I let it rip right out of the lips, my words will always come out like home" (13). Home is a reality Lovey alternately embraces and rejects, a Japanese American world where Lovey wants desperately to become white and speak like white people:

Just better to be haole. Live in Riverdale. Be Vicky or Jenny. Talk straight to the mainland Japaneese cousin who say things like "Gee, you talk *funny*. Do they talk like that at your school? How come you pronounce words so *inarticulately*? My mother says that the relatives who grew up in Hawaii have *difficulty expressing themselves verbally*. Gee, Lovey, does *everybody here* speak so *strangely*." (29)

She perceives the system of social classification in her world, how ethnicities are ranked on the scale of popularity and admiration. "In our school," she explains, "if part Hawaiian goes with pure Jap, that's the ultimate. Everybody wants a hapa girlfriend or boyfriend. Everybody wants a part Hawaiian person" (217). Understanding the system means struggling vainly to enter it. "I wanna be Lovey Beth Cole," she cries out. "Mrs. Michael Cole. Wanna marry you, Dennis. Be a Cole. Be a haole. A Japaneese with a haole last name" (29). Her revelry in her imaginative world and the chaffing under the strictures of the real one engages the narrative in different emphasis of optimism and despair. But the marginal position she places herself in is balanced by her resilience, her ability to derive pleasure from the things of ordinary life.

Engaged in a process of physical and psychological development, Lovey finds herself constantly in transition. The stories stress the experience of change, the awareness of her otherness and the establishment of relationships, the definition of the dynamically shifting margins of her identity. Lovey cannot find external acceptance because she cannot accept herself. The self-assurance of the girls at school, and even of her own sister, contrast sharply with her constant efforts to be someone else. She unconsciously seeks obliteration, preferring to be transformed into someone beautiful and popular. Calhoon defies her at one point: “First you like be like Daddy. And then you like be haole. And then you like be like Jerry. And Katy. And now you like be one rough and tough hunter like Daddy. Why you no can just be you, hah? Why you like be something you ain’t?” (72). Even her father is aware of her desperation: “You always make like we something we not, I tell you. When you going open your eyes and learn, hah? You ain’t rich, you ain’t haole, and you ain’t strong inside. You just one little girl” (260). Lovey must learn to seek and accept the peculiar parameters that define her and her world in order to find her place within it.

The different stories enact episodes of Lovey’s process of spiritual maturity, permitting entry into her private world of imagination and longings. In this manner, Yamanaka presents a composite portrait of her child narrator, her relationship with her family and her world, her ambitions and insecurities, her struggles and her victories. Lovey, a third generation Japanese American in Hawai’i, must deal with the complex social and cultural structure that governs relationships in her island, in its manifestations in school and her neighborhood. The author’s choice of theme illustrates Sumida’s observation that “the childhood idyll seems to be favored more usually by writers in the beginning stages of planting their claim on Hawaii’s cultural history.”²⁴ The literary use of pidgin – strongly associated with childhood in Hawai’i – acquires heightened significance in a narrative that aims to present the creation of identity. The authenticity of her voice springs precisely from the struggle to make sense of the conflicting forces that shape her existence in her place: the land and ethnicity, familial history, popular culture, and current demands of society. As such, the child becomes a protagonist to both the drama of the changes in society and a celebration of self and place.

In the highly symbolic “Lovey’s Homemade Singer Sewing Class Patchwork Denim Hiphuggers,” Yamanaka alternates the account of

²⁴ Sumida, *And the View from the Shore*, 108.

how she learns how to sew with hunting stories, and describes the process of making leather, stressing her connection with the land. Helping her father make a vest out of the hide and learning how a garment carries meaning and strength, Lovey chooses to imaginatively appropriate for her vest all the animals that had played a part in her life as an act of affirmation and acceptance. Fashioning the vest from her experiences shows her awareness of the land and her past as constituent parts of herself, necessary to face the demands of the present. On a more domestic level, the hipuggers she and Calhoon sew unite scraps from her family members's cast-off clothing, creating a testimony to her determination. Through these two metaphors, she pulls the diverse elements of her experience together: the love of the land and her family, alleviating somewhat her struggle with language and artistic expression. The significance she attributes to the naming of the parts of the whole stresses her consciousness of the process of self-formation. She understands and accepts that she is part of all she has lived and all around her: her land and her family. The act of sewing, creating a whole out of separate pieces, becomes a means of empowerment for the child, signalling the moment she takes control of her world.

But Lovey's true epiphany comes in the last story, "The Burning," the denouement of many of her secret fears, and the revelation of her hidden strength and possibilities. When her father tragically loses his sight, she will come to terms with the meaning of family. She also begins to understand the link between land and family, the reasons why her father is so attached to the place of his boyhood. She realizes what she must do for her father – give him "Homemade sight ... to look deep into the valley. Treasures he can't see" (269). Lovey then goes to Haupu Mountain to bring for her father, in a Ziploc bag, dirt and stones from his birthplace. When she brings them to him, she says "You said you gonna see heaven on earth, remember? And be home again. You going know you home" (275). Her present to her father signals her affirmation of belonging to a land, a history, a people and the determination to preserve that tradition: "I going mix the two bags together so you can be in two places at the same time. Then I put it under your bed and unwrap it when you die. Then, Daddy, you be home" (276). At the conclusion of this story, Lovey finally achieves her wish, enunciated in the very first story: to have a happy ending "real happy, so someone watching can cry too" (3). By bringing her father home, she completes the cycle for herself as well. Because the form echoes the progression of the subject, this final story confirms and deepens the appropriation of the form of the cycle for

Lovey's *Bildungsroman*. Where Lovey once saw only a shrinking place, life is now represented in the form of widening spaces, exploring boundaries and mapping out the passage to adolescence.

These three short story cycles, centering on the creation of place and love of the land as starting-point to the negotiation of Hawai'i identity and community, points to the need to re-evaluate the touchstones of these themes in Asian American literature. The manner in which Hongo fuses discovery of the land with the unravelling of family history and the development of his self-awareness opens up possibilities for forms of life writing. Watanabe's engagement with place, time, and evolving community relationships foregrounds the importance of belonging. Yamanaka's cycle individualizes the process of self-formation of her protagonist as she blends it with the character's growing appreciation of the land and its culture-specific forms of art and life. The manner in which Hongo, Watanabe, and Yamanaka have appropriated the short story cycle as a metaphor for the fragmentation and plurality of Hawai'i lives articulates both the between-world position and the complex process toward self-identification. The resulting narratives, which expand the possibilities of the genre, provide enriching glimpses of communities and selves in the process of transformation and growth.