

Katz, Marco. "From Cuzco to California: José Watanabe and Naomi Quiñones in the Nikkei Diaspora." National Association for Ethnic Studies Conference. San Francisco, California. March 30, 2006.

Naomi Quiñones does not necessarily identify as a Sansei Latina playwright and poet. From a variety of constructed identities, I have pasted these labels onto her: Sansei, Latina, playwright and poet. I might as easily and as accurately have chosen Hispanic, Andean, Peruvian, Colombian-born, Latin American, South American, Iberian-American, Japanese-American, American, Usonian, cross-cultural, borderlands, multi-lingual, Feminist, Californian performance artist. Any combination of these choices would alter my reading of and reporting on her work, thus creating from the outset a variety of stances from which I could legitimately locate her texts.

By reducing Naomi Quiñones with the labels Sansei, Latina, playwright and poet, I plan to relate her verses and theatrical presentations to the work of one of her contemporaries, Nisei Latino screenwriter and poet José Watanabe Varas. The differences between Quiñones and Watanabe, which abound in spite of the similarities imposed by my choice of labels, demonstrate how each fits into a Peruvian literary tradition that extends backward at least as far as El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and a tradition of political commentary that extends forward at least as far as tomorrow's headlines concerning Alberto Fujimori and the current Peruvian elections. These differences further serve to expand on the views of in-between spaces discussed by Homi Bhabha and the myriad microcosms found in the intellectual sphere Néstor García Canclini calls América—small l—latina. A consideration of texts produced by Quiñones and Watanabe demonstrates the ways in which América latina predates the imposition of the

label América as well as the numerous indications that América latina geographically extends to places well beyond its supposed political boundaries.

Having confined Naomi Quiñones with the terms *Sansei Latina*, I will point out the obvious fact that these two words hardly encompass her personal history, much less that of her family. Born to Peruvian parents in the Colombian city of Bogotá, Quiñones immigrated to the United States with her family, and grew up in Los Angeles, where Californians often identified her as Mexican or Chicana. In her theatrical works, *Strands* and *Left Holding Mangoes*, she explores a part of her identity that was taken away along with her Japanese grandfather, who was removed from Peru, held in concentration camps by the United States and deported—as an “illegal alien”—to Japan.

Toward the end of *Strands*, the voice of Naomi’s father poses a riddle: “Oro no es. Plata no es. Abre la cortina y verás lo que es.” The daughter tries to puzzle out the answer by translating each line into English. “It is not gold. It is not silver. Open the curtain to see what it is.”

“Not everything translates into English,” admonishes her father’s voice. “Think about it.”

Naomi then recites the lines in Spanish, and finds a possible double meaning in the second line, “Plátano es.” Although “plata no es” and “plátano es” sound alike, the latter signifies that it is a type of banana. “The answer is in the question,” Naomi realizes, but this hardly clears her frustration with the riddle. “I feel like I should know everything by now,” she cries. Whatever other messages this exchange offers to the work’s protagonist, viewers clearly see an instance of deception through translation, and the resulting impossibility of knowing.

The most powerful moments in Quiñones' work come out of her examinations of these irreconcilable moments, when she realizes that her best intentions will not cause others to understand and will not even lead to her own understanding. In *Left Holding Mangoes*, Naomi travels to Japan in an attempt to connect with an aunt, to whom she has brought a basket of mangoes. Instead of gratifying the old Okinawan lady, the mangoes cause her to spit out, "Foolish girls, bring me these when I grow them outside. What kind of a gift is that?" Naomi perceives that, in spite of the confusion and frustration she has suffered, her aunt sees "only spoiled American kids who brought her gifts that she grew in her back yard." None of her languages, she notes, will clear up this profound misunderstanding between generations and cultures.

Some historical background will help spectators appreciate Quiñones' work. Peruvian historian Amelia Morimoto describes the events following December 10, 1941, when Peruvian President Manuel Prado y Ugarteche froze the assets of Japanese societies and individuals. A few months later, the government began confiscating the property of immigrants. Peru broke diplomatic relations with the axis nations on January 24, 1942, and prohibited commercial and financial activity by citizens of those countries. By April of 1942, 141 immigrants decided to return to their country, but by then the orders to deport Peruvian-Japanese to the United States had already been given.

Most of those deported to the United States considered themselves Peruvians. "On average, they had been living in Peru for more than forty years, and none had a police record,"¹ writes Lima journalist Alejandro Sakuda. Even so, the United States government treated them as Japanese prisoners of war. In December 1945, adds Sakuda, eight hundred "Peruvian-Japanese voluntarily departed for Japan and in 1946, one hundred thirty more even though

many of them wished to return to Peru. The Peruvian government accepted only Peruvian citizens and those Japanese with Peruvian family members. In the end, only one hundred returned to Peru in October 1946.”²

Unlike Quiñones’ grandfather and so many others, Harumi Watanabe was not captured and imprisoned in the United States. His son, the contemporary Peruvian screenwriter and poet José Watanabe Varas, makes sparse references to Japanese origins in his works; when he does, however, it provides an effect far surpassing the volume of words expended. A salient example appears in his 1994 poem “Este olor, su otro,” which explains how the poet’s older sister chops parsley with an appearance of congenital ability; the smell of the fresh herb brings back other parsley that had once hung in a basket over the kitchen. “The parsley announced my father, Don Harumi,” continues Watanabe, “waiting for his frugal soup.

Thanks to this country:

a Japanese that never forgave

the absence on the table of this local cooking secret!

I believe you perceived this secret in another larger one

in order to arrange the beauty of your household order

that joined

family and practices and tricks of this land.

While the children of Don Harumi have gained a great deal through their father’s immigration, Watanabe points out that some things have been lost, as well.

The children of his former surroundings

today we are merely fellow diners

and decimated

and we eat the dinner of the Day of the Dead
 sprinkling
 parsley in the soup. Now the herb is merely seasoning, aroma
 without power.³ (61).

With little difficulty, readers ascertain that José Watanabe neither claims nor desires a Japanese identity; like his father he has become an Other, but a different Other invested in multiple identities brimming with perils and possibilities. Watanabe the poet invests none of these identities with greater or lesser value, but instead moves beyond the pale relativism of multi-culturality to signify a cultural difference that, as Bhabha points out, employs differentiation and discrimination to authorize “the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity” (34). Employed in this manner, disparate elements of identity reveal, through differences that allow each to explicate the others, the process in which the entire person comes about.

Works by Morimoto, Sakuda and Watanabe continue a tradition begun by El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539-1616), arguably the first Peruvian writer. Like Sakuda, Garcilaso de la Vega struggles with issues of identity in his seminal work from 1609, *Comentarios reales de los incas* (Royal Observations of the Incas), in which he employs the language of Spanish conquerors, who included his father, to narrate the history of mother’s family. Several generations of Inca monarchs had developed the mythology related in Garcilaso’s observations, partly as a way to legitimize their own relatively recent conquest of the nation they ruled from Cuzco. “Through his writing,” observe Raquel Chang-Rodríguez and Malva Filer Garcilaso de la Vega, “continually between two cultures, knew how to present the best of the Incan past and

the colonial present, extolling both branches of his family tree, honoring Princess Chimpu Ocllo and Captain Garcilaso de la Vega”⁴ (69).

In an interview, Watanabe explains, “It turns out that interiorizing the concept of patriotism has proven difficult because I am biracial, as they say in the United States. My father is Japanese and my mother Peruvian, *peruana chola*, and thus I have lived in these two worlds. One easily states, ‘I am Peruvian,’ but in reality I have had to work at becoming Peruvian.”⁵

In an essay, Watanabe conjures up a Peruvian village that allowed Nisei to determine their own identities amidst “contradictions of a Peruvian nationality still under development” (219).⁶ Unlike businesses in the larger metropolises of Lima or Trujillo, Watanabe notes, shops owned by Japanese immigrants in Laredo had not been sacked during World War II. This attitude of relative tolerance, according to the essay, stemmed less from acceptance than a general feeling that the Japanese should be left to their own devices. Further, in this less populated environment, earlier residents could more easily ascertain how the operations of immigrants benefited the entire community. Whatever the motives of the non-Japanese residents of Laredo, the immigrants obviously felt encouraged to adapt to local cuisines, customs and even religious practices. “How much Japanese remained in them?,”⁷ asks Watanabe. Many Issei, he notes, adopted Catholicism, took up the Andean employment of coca leaves to help ease the burden of work and married into the already mixed-blooded society of their adopted land.

As in Watanabe’s poetry, El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega expresses hope that his royal observations will neither valorize nor harmonize, but instead create a space for the understanding the continual development, more recently described by Raymond Williams as simultaneously embodying the residual, dominant and emergent elements, of a culture already

viewed through the reifying lens of colonial narratives. “For which reason,” writes Garcilaso de la Vega, “impelled by a natural love of my homeland, I took on the work of writing these Commentaries, in which one will see clearly and distinctly how things were in the republic before the Spaniards” (70).⁸ Although I have posited El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega as the first Peruvian writer, he was obviously not the first writer in the Americas or even within the territory now known as Peru. Given the multiplicity of nations found in the Andes alone, Garcilaso cannot even be credited as the first author of mixed parentage. He writes, instead, as a Peruvian, residing in a country whose name and boundaries have been set by European rulers and, rather than set down words in his maternal American language, he authors works in his paternal European language. Without his mixed ancestry, Garcilaso might have been considered as another Spaniard writing about the New World or an Incan chronicler writing about the end of time for his people. But does his ancestry alone make him not only Peruvian but among the first Latin Americans? And how might readers fit his religion, military service, literary style and retirement to Iberia into his claims of indigenous identity?

García Canclini observes the incessant functioning of peoples as “different-integrated, unequal-participants, and connected-disconnected. In a globalized world,” he writes, “we are not only different or only unequal or only disconnected. The three modalities of existence are complementary”⁹ (79). While this sustained tension offers less immediate comfort than theories that tie everything and everyone together, the results sometimes prove interesting; in the twenty-first century, for example, Peru retains the unique distinction of having elected presidents of both Japanese and Incan ancestry. Most importantly, narratives of liminal identity developed by Garcilaso de la Vega and José Watanabe allow for literary views of difference clouded by fewer preconceptions. “The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as

often be consensual as conflictual,” writes Bhabha, “they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress” (2).

Just as my reading of Watanabe demonstrates how his texts push their way past temporal expectations of identity, locating an ongoing *mestizaje* that does not commence with European conquest, my reading of Quiñones shows how her texts push past the expected borders of Latin American spaces. Quiñones combines in one protagonist a Peruvian immigrant to the United States, a Japanese-American citizen of the United States and a descendant of a Peruvian kidnapped by the United States. García Canclini gives two examples of cultural aspects that go beyond geographic limits: 37 million Spanish-speakers from the Americas currently living in the United States and hundreds of thousands of Spanish-speaking descendants of Spaniards who have recently acquired the nationality of their ancestors and now live in Spain or other European countries.¹⁰ Other writers discuss the *dekasegui* phenomenon that includes some forty thousand Peruvians who have immigrated to Japan, a country whose language and customs remain unknown to most of them in spite of their whole or partial Japanese ancestry, brings a part of America that is Latin to that unexpected quarter of the Earth.

Considered with other labels, or even the label that claims an absence of labels, the works of Naomi Quiñones could leave her spectators and readers with other impressions. But as a Sansei Latina playwright and poet, as I have chosen to consider her today, she speaks to us from a history that refuses to reify and a location unexpectedly peripatetic.

¹ “En promedio, se encontraban residiendo en el Perú más de 40 años y ninguno tenía antecedentes policiales.”

² “peruano-japoneses partieron voluntariamente al Japón y en 1946, ciento treinta más, a pesar de que muchos de ellos deseaban regresar al Perú. El gobierno peruano, por su lado, aceptaba el

retorno de los alemanes, pero no de los japoneses en un inicio; posteriormente, aceptó sólo el retorno de los ciudadanos peruanos y de aquellos japoneses emparentados con peruanos. Finalmente, sólo cien regresaron al Perú en octubre de 1946.”

³ El perejil anunciaba a mi padre, Don Harumi, esperando su sopa frugal.

Gracias de este país:
un japonés que no perdonaba
la ausencia en la mesa de ese secreto local de cocina!
Creo que usted adentraba ese secreto en otro más grande
para componer la belleza de su orden casero
que ligaba
familia y usos y trucos de esta tierra.
Los hijos de su antiguo alrededor
hoy somos comensales solos
y diezmados
y comemos la cena del Día de los Difuntos
esparciendo
perejil en la sopa. Ya la yerba sólo es sazón, aroma
sin poder.

Nuestras casa, Don Harumi, están caídas.

⁴ “A través de la escritura, el Inca, siempre entre dos culturas, supo darle sentido a lo mejor del pasado incario y del presente colonial, enaltecer sus dos estirpes. honrar a la princesa Chimu Ocllo y al capitán Garcilaso de la Vega.”

⁵ “Lo que pasa es que para mí ha sido difícil conseguir interiorizar el concepto de patria, porque soy birracial, como dicen ahora en Estados Unidos. Mi padre es japonés y mi madre peruana, peruana chola, entonces yo he vivido en estos dos mundos. Claro y uno dice ‘soy peruano’, pero en realidad yo tuve que conseguir ser peruano.”

⁶ “las contradicciones de una nacionalidad peruana que aún está en formación”

⁷ “¿Cuánto quedaba en ellos de japonés?”

⁸ “Por lo cual, forzado del amor natural a la patria, me ofrecí al trabajo de escribir estos Comentarios, donde clara y distintamente se verán las cosas que en aquella república había antes de los españoles . . .”

⁹ “diferentes-integrados, desiguales-participantes y conectados-desconectados. En un mundo globalizado no somos solo diferentes o solo desiguales o solo desconectados. Las tres modalidades de existencia son complementarias.”

¹⁰ “Daré dos ejemplos de cómo los aspectos culturales desbordan la delimitación geográfica: ¿De qué manera ubicar a los 37 millones de hispanohablantes procedentes de América latina que viven en los Estados Unidos? ¿Cómo tratar a los centenares de miles de latinoamericanos descendientes de españoles que en años recientes adquirieron la nacionalidad de sus antepasados y viven ahora en España u otros países europeos?” (García 133).