

## Looking at the United States from Two Dimensions of “Otherness”

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This paper will be divided into two seemingly disconnected parts. The first part concerns what I have been thinking about as an officer of the Japanese Association for American Studies, as I have faced the increasing internationalization or globalization of American Studies, while the latter half is connected with what I have been doing as a student of American literature and culture. Consequently, there will be an appallingly great gap in scale between the two parts, though I feel that they are connected at some deep level.

It seems that an explanation of why I decided to give this title to my paper is needed. I feel that many of you are thinking, “What an anachronistic title!” I do agree. When many Americanists in the United States speak of “American Studies” today, they often use “American” to include not only the United States but also all of the New World, both North and South America. Even when “American” is limited to the United States, the conditions of the country are described as “multiracial” and “multi-cultural.” Indeed, “Americas” are often spoken of, in the plural. To conceive of the United States as a unified and homogeneous country seems to be outdated—and hence something to be rejected. However, looking at the country from the outside, as most of us are doing, we cannot help regarding the country as a single unit, especially

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because the country is so overwhelmingly powerful in the world politically and financially as well as culturally. I myself cannot escape from the idea of one “America,” though I am well aware of the plurality of society in the United States.

The latter half of the title is “two dimensions of ‘otherness’.” This indicates the position from which I have been observing the United States for the past forty years or so. I am not an American, and that explains half of what I mean by the title. I am also a woman, a member of the “other group” in that patriarchal society which is based on the male/female dichotomy. This necessarily determines where I stand when looking at the United States and its culture, especially at women’s writings of nineteenth-century America. However, I must admit that my insistence on being a woman may seem to be dated. The fall issue of *American Literature* in 1998 carried a feature titled “No More Separate Spheres!” and critiques specifically the feminist criticism of nineteenth-century women’s literature based on the concept of separate spheres for males and females. The editor of the periodical, Cathy Davidson, insists in her introductory article for the issue that “the binary version of nineteenth-century American history is ultimately unsatisfactory.”<sup>1</sup> With the emergence of cultural studies and post-colonial criticism, and the consequent diversity of critical points of view, the paradigm of a binary division or dichotomy is no longer universally regarded as appropriate in discussing the literature of nineteenth-century America. If this phenomenon is indeed taking place in American Studies in the United States, we Japanese Americanists have to pay keen attention to it. At the same time, we have to consider seriously how, as Japanese scholars with a different linguistic and cultural background, we should face and respond to this new development—criticism of the male/female dichotomy—in American Studies in the United States.

In May, 2000, an international conference was held in Bellagio, Italy. The main purpose of the meeting was the establishment of the International American Studies Association, and its main topic was “American Forms, Global Forums.” After having come to dominate in the fields of economy and international politics, the idea of globalization has started to overwhelm the academic world as well and American Studies is no exception. It is, therefore, necessary for us to make clear where we stand. Even if globalization is generally synonymous with Americanization or the acceptance of American hegemony, the globalization of American

Studies does not mean the unquestioning acceptance of the ideas, theories and methodologies of American academe. The globalization or internationalization of American Studies should involve observing and examining America through the filters of different cultures; there should, therefore, be exchanges of views, theories and methodologies among scholars of the United States and scholars of other countries with different cultural backgrounds. Through this interaction, the existing paradigms applied to American society and its culture, which have been mainly devised by American scholars, will inevitably be revised.

This type of interaction has already been going on between Americanists of the United States and those of Europe and South America. As Rob Kroes, the Dutch scholar of American history, says in a recent issue of the *Journal of American History*, “there is always the sense that America is a stray member of a large family, a descendant from Europe. America belongs to the genus of Western civilization.”<sup>2</sup> Among scholars who share linguistic and cultural roots—namely, those who belong to the genus of Western civilization, smoother communication and easier understanding are possible.

However, the problems we face in Japan are more fundamental, and consequently not that easy to solve. While the cultural ties between the United States and European and South American countries can be compared to those within families, the relationships between the United States and Asian countries are far more complicated and diverse. The idea of an Asia-Pacific alliance, symbolized by the founding of APEC, is mainly political. One of the main topics of the recent APEC conference on education was even the globalization of English, which seems to me another form of colonization, though the importance of mastering the English language is undeniable under the existing conditions. The relationships between the United States and most Asian countries are vertical and not horizontal. It might be difficult for scholars of the United States to be flexible enough to accept the ideas offered by people with completely different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, especially when there exist some political and economic tensions between the United States and the countries concerned. Here I am speaking on the basis of the difficulties we have to consider in developing the discipline of American Studies in Japan in the face of the worldwide trend of the internationalization or globalization of American Studies. As I am stepping down from the office of the president of the JAAS today, let me say

that I do hope the examination of America from the viewpoint of otherness will make a fruitful contribution to the future development of American Studies.

The latter half of my talk concerns two dimensions of “otherness”—being a woman and being a non-American, and how those two dimensions have affected me as a student of American literature. I think that my position, as a woman and as a non-American, has had a strong influence on my choice of research subjects. This is not the occasion to describe in detail my personal experiences as a woman in the academic world, but my awareness of the double otherness in American society has made me especially interested in the literature of women with hyphenated racial designations, such as African-American and Asian-American.

Today, I am going to discuss two writings by African-American women of the nineteenth century. Through an examination of the differences between these works and those by Anglo-American women of the same period, I hope I can at least modify the current discourse concerning American women’s writings in the nineteenth century. Indeed, my position could be considered as doubling “two dimensions of ‘otherness’”: reading literary works written by American women of minority groups from the point of view of a non-American woman.

The works I would like to discuss are two autobiographies by African-American women. One is Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl; Written by Herself* (1861), and the other is Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859). I have called these two works autobiographies, but one characteristic of both these writings is that it is difficult to fit them into one literary genre. Usually, Jacobs’ work is categorized as autobiography, while Wilson’s book is called fiction. However, in Jacobs’ narrative all the characters are called by fictional names, while the first three chapters of Wilson’s book are told by a first-person narrator and, according to the research of such scholars as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the incidents in the book coincide with Wilson’s actual experiences. Also, at the end of the book Wilson adds a section entitled “Testimony to the truth of her assertions,” and one of the testifiers in that section plainly calls the work “an Autobiography.” Gates, who wrote an introduction to the 1983 edition of the book, calls it “a fictional third-person autobiography.”<sup>3</sup> The use of fictional names and third-person narration in these autobiographies may be taken as reflecting the peculiar situation facing African-American women of the time,

the danger facing African-American women if they wrote about their experiences in the first person and using real names.

Compare these two writings with such Anglo-American women's autobiographies as Catharine Maria Sedgwick's, which Professor Mary Kelley edited and introduced under the title of *The Power of Her Sympathy* in 1993. We will immediately notice that Anglo-American women's concept of autobiography is essentially different from that of African-American women. In an article titled "Some Deep Old Desk or Capacious Hold-All," Suzanne Juhasz defines a typical autobiography by a man as a representation of "a life that has claims to the attention of the public world,"<sup>4</sup> namely, the assertion of individuality, while women's autobiographies are normally similar to diaries, "centered in the private moment and the private feeling."<sup>5</sup> Also, Estelle Jelinek says in her paper presented at the MLA convention in 1976 that it is characteristic of women's autobiographies, not to be "chronological and progressive but disconnected."<sup>6</sup> These points can be easily applied to Sedgwick's autobiography; it was written at the request of the husband of her favorite niece for his daughter. It tells much of her feelings about her parents and family members—and not much about herself as a distinguished writer of the time. Her status as a public figure is almost completely buried under her personal reminiscences of life in the Sedgwick family. Indeed, her life is conceived as something inseparable from the family. She herself says in a letter that her life has been "so woven into the fabric of others that [she] seem[s] to have had no separate, individual existence."<sup>7</sup> This concept of her own self fits well in the prevailing paradigm of Anglo-American women's autobiographies.

Such is not the case, however, with these "autobiographies" of African-American women. Harriet Jacobs, who was well aware of the sense of values of the white middle-class women who were the potential readers of her book, tried to tell the story of her life following the accepted rules of the time—in terms of family ties, loving mother-child relationships, and feelings of piety and fidelity. However, the story of her life could not be confined within such a framework. From the very beginning, her autobiography is full of stories of families broken by slavery and of betrayal by white people; she writes of sexual threats by the white master, of an illegal relationship with a white man in order to thwart the master's persistent desire, (an illegal relationship which eventually made her the unmarried mother of two children), of hiding in her grandmother's attic for seven years in order to escape the master's vile

attempt to drag her into an infamous relationship, of her escape to the North, of her subsequent miserable and anxious life as a fugitive slave in northern cities, and of how her freedom was bought by the kind and generous mistress of a family where she had been working as a maid. Even this final freedom was disappointing because it was bought by money, not given naturally as a human right. At the end of the book, Jacobs describes her present condition as follows:

. . . my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage. . . . The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. But God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side.<sup>8</sup>

This passage clearly delineates the irony of her being bound to Mrs. Bruce, who has paid money to buy Jacobs' freedom. Also, the usual ending of the domestic novels of the time—marriage and a happy family, closely united by love in a cozy home—remains out of reach for Jacobs' broken family.

In telling her life story, Jacobs was especially sensitive about her relationship with a white man, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, who was later elected to the national House of Representatives. It is not clear how she came to know the man, except that he was a friend of her grandmother, who was well-known and well-liked in Edenton, North Carolina, for her skills in domestic services and for her respectable personality. There must have been a mutual affection between Jacobs and Sawyer, as is indicated by such words as "I felt grateful for his sympathy, and encouraged by his kind words," and "a more tender feeling crept into my heart."<sup>9</sup> However, Jacobs' words describing her relationship with him also indicate that she was well aware of how the moral standards of the white, middle-class women of the time, did not allow them to approve of extramarital relationships under any circumstances, and that she was afraid of their criticism. Her fear was not groundless. Lydia Maria Child, a staunch abolitionist who helped in the publication of the narrative and who wrote an introduction for it, was also afraid of being accused of indiscretion in helping the publication of a book which contains such an incident.<sup>10</sup> After telling that she bore Sawyer two children, Jacobs appeals to the reader:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave, to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the law reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another.<sup>11</sup>

However, following that appeal, she says, "I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others."<sup>12</sup> The use here of the generalized expression "the slave woman" can be regarded as Jacobs' assertion that a different reality exists for African-American women.

The story of Jacobs' life is thus not only the story of one slave woman. As Jacobs tells in the book, it is also the story of "the slave woman," just as the book is an indictment of the slavery itself. In that sense, this autobiography is a narrative not only of an individual person but also of the experiences of a whole ethnic group—African-American women—in the United States just before the Civil War.

Jacobs' autobiography is also significant in another way. As late as 1974, John Blassingame, the African-American scholar and critic, questioned the authenticity of Jacobs' sole authorship.<sup>13</sup> Pointing out the orderliness of her narrative, he suspected that Lydia Maria Child, who (as we have seen) helped in the publication of the book and wrote an introduction for it, must have had a great hand in the actual writing of this narrative. Blassingame's attitude shows that he strongly believes that no African-American woman who had risen out of slavery could write such good prose and such a coherent narrative. Only a few years later, his suspicion was proved unfounded by the discovery of letters Jacobs wrote just around the time of the publication of the book. However, this incident can serve as an example of the double "otherness" with which African-American women have been treated.

Compared to Jacobs' life and her narrative, Harriet Wilson's life and her book suffered much greater discrimination. Harriet Jacobs had, at least, loving relationships with her grandmother, her uncles, and her children, and the help of abolitionist friends. Also, her white lover took partial responsibility for their children's upbringing. Though born in New Hampshire as a free black, presumably the child of a white mother and a free black father, Wilson seemed to have had a far more miserable life than Jacobs.

After the death of her loving black father, Wilson was, at the age of six, deserted by her white mother, who called Wilson and her brother "black devils." Wilson became a ward of the village and later an indentured servant in the household of a well-known abolitionist family. There she suffered cruel treatment by the mistress of the house. The subtitle of her "autobiography" is "Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North, Showing Slavery's Shadows Fall Even

There.” This subtitle indicates that, even in the northern states, the house (a metaphor for society) was divided into two parts—white and black—with the latter on the lower floor. Wilson reveals the hypocrisy of the people of the North, and she spares no words in expressing her hatred of Mrs. Belmont, her abolitionist mistress, who has treated her as if she were a slave. Wilson states her motives for writing this book in her preface:

Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life. I would not from these motives even palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that, like many white women writers of the time, such as Susan Warner and Fanny Fern, Wilson wrote this book to earn money for her own sustenance and that of her child. However, what Wilson wrote in the book is quite different from what white women writers wrote, and though she shares her major message with Jacobs—the indictment of the discrimination against African-Americans—the tones and the developments of the two books are completely different. While Jacobs’ alter ego, Linda Brent, is always ingenious in devising means of escape from her harsh treatment by white people, Wilson’s Frado just stays confined in the first floor of the white house, there suffering loneliness and misery. Linda, a slave, travels from North Carolina to Philadelphia, then to New York, Boston and even to England, while Frado, a free black, remains in the small village of Milford, New Hampshire, until she lives out her indenture.

Also, contrary to Jacobs, who writes her book with white women in mind as her readers, Wilson regards black males as the potential readers of her book. She says, “I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage, hoping they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite, but rally around me as faithful supporters and defenders.”<sup>15</sup> From these words, we can draw several inferences. There was quite a high percentage of literacy among free black people in the North, so that a commercial success could be expected out of their readership. On the other hand, just like white middle-class men, black men did not like black women to be authors—or even to be literate. Facts about Wilson’s life revealed by recent research show that her hope of being helped and supported by black men was not fulfilled; three years after the publication of the book and one year after the death of her only son,

she was listed among “county paupers” in the township of Milford. And there the official record of her life ends; nothing is known about her later life.<sup>16</sup>

Through reading these African-American women’s “autobiographies,” we may call into question several accepted concepts about autobiography, especially about woman’s autobiography. As I have mentioned earlier, neither of these two works can be simply categorized in terms of literary genre. Jacobs’ book, though told by a first-person narrator, gives fictional names to everyone in the book, including the narrator. Wilson’s narrative takes even a more elaborate form: the first three chapters, which tell of Frado’s parents and of her life up to the time she became a servant in a white family, are told by a first-person narrator, but then the narration switches to third-person in describing her cruel treatment by the abolitionist family and her miserable sufferings there.

This seeming disparity in literary form is obviously intended. In the cases of both autobiographies, the combination of fact and fiction is a political strategy to attract the interest of the readers, while thwarting any threats from the white people concerned. Here, the boundary between autobiography and fiction blurs. Usually, autobiography by men is considered as an expression of individuality, with a sense of satisfaction in their accomplishments, while women’s and minorities’ autobiography is defined as “relational,” an expression of group identity with the sense of connectedness with others. However, an examination of these two autobiographies shows that neither of them exactly fits into the existing paradigms. A new definition of the genre must be invented to include such works as these two. We must recognize that only through this new form of autobiography could the deep persecution and suffering of black women be truly brought to light.<sup>17</sup>

Autobiography is a comparatively new literary genre, only clearly defined and legitimized in literary history at the end of the eighteenth century. Its basic form is the self-satisfied reminiscence of a successful public figure, a typical example of which is the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. However, the recent discoveries of such personal narratives by minority women, such as African-Americans, Native Americans and Asian-Americans in the United States not only bring out new realities of the country, but also demand revisions of literary history and critical theory.

Here, I have come back to where I started, with a very minor example of a possible modification in American literary history made through

an influence of “other” point of view. We have been, still are, and will be, looking at the United States and its society through the prisms of our own experiences and backgrounds. We cannot escape the influence of the various impacts we have experienced in our encounters with America. Inevitably, we look at the United States subjectively. However, these deflected views might bring out so-far-undiscovered aspects of the United States.

I cannot predict what the future of the American Studies in Japan will be like, but I sincerely do hope that American Studies, as a discipline or as an inter-discipline, will become more challenging through the interaction of various points of view. That would produce the true internationalization of American Studies.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cathy N. Davidson, “Preface: No More Separate Spheres!” *American Literature* 77, no.3 (1998), 445.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Kroes, “America and European Sense of History,” *Journal of American History*, A Special Issue (December, 1999), 1135.

<sup>3</sup> Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), xxxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, “Some Deep Old Desk of Capacious Hold-All: Form and Women’s Autobiography,” *College English*, 39, no.6 (1978), 666.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> This paper is later included in Estelle C. Jelinek, *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *The Power of Her Sympathy: The Autobiography and Journal of Catharine Maria Sedgwick*, ed. Mary Kelley (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1993), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 202.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 373.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Barbara A. White, “‘Our Nig’ and the She Devil: New Information about Harriet Wilson and the ‘Bellmont’ Family,” *American Literature*, 65, no.1 (1993), 19–52.

<sup>17</sup> For the further discussion of the point, see Hiroko Sato, “Autobiography of African-American Women: Telling of One’s Self Behind a Mask,” *Women’s Autobiography: Mainly in the 19th Century Japan, Great Britain and the United States*, Research Monograph 18 (Tokyo: Center for Women’s Studies, Tokyo Woman’s Christian University, 1998), 21–41.