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[Book Review]

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*Voices from Okinawa: Featuring three plays by Jon Shirota*.  
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The shifting critical paradigm from modernism to postmodernism and postcolonialism redefines the meaning of Okinawa in a global context. Once called the “Keystone of the Pacific,” Okinawa served a function of postwar strategic importance for the U.S. military. Today, however, the “keystone” has an alternative implication in terms of Okinawa’s new role as an intellectual center responding to the research interests of the postcolonial scholars inside and outside Okinawa.

It should be noted, however, that flourishing “Okinawan Studies” constantly face the danger of orientalism, by which Okinawa and Okinawans are viewed and treated as an exotic and yet intriguing Other. In orientalist gaze and interpretation, Okinawa and Okinawan culture are subject to romanticization, which may eventually lead to either negative or positive stereotypes. Whereas we, Okinawan scholars, have been resisting the negative stereotypes of the Okinawan people and culture, we tend to remain less critical about the positive stereotypes. Nevertheless, this is a process of self-orientalization or self-colonization in which Okinawans remain unaware that we are appreciated, preferred, and accepted only because of our uncritical compliance to colonizers’ institutions rather than claiming our agency. One of the problematic assumptions consciously or unconsciously held by Okinawan Studies scholars is that the Other, Okinawa, is eventually part of them, the Self, and is supposed to *belong to* the Self, playing the role of the object of their studies in their attempt to *discover* the Other within themselves.

At this moment, one question arises in terms of my own situation as a scholar who lives and feels responsible for the future of Okinawa: whose studies are Okinawan Studies? In other words, how do we speak of what it means to be Okinawan today when globalization allows more and more people—indigenous and non-indigenous, part- or full-Okinawan, those located inside or outside the Ryukyu Islands—to participate in this interpretative process of an emerging academic practice? What kind of “license” is required in order to speak of one’s concern and interest in Okinawa, and how can we get it, or is such “license” necessary at all? This kind of dilemma occurs in any situation where indigenous people and cultures are exposed to contact with those outside of indigenous communities. How do we develop our approaches to studying Okinawa while assisting Okinawa to become a decolonizing subject rather than to remain an object of a colonizing orientalist gaze?

It seems to me *Voices from Okinawa* offers its readers a potential answer to those questions. Published as a biannual series of the volumes of the acclaimed journal from the University of Hawai'i, *Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, *Voices from Okinawa* is doubtless a groundbreaking publication. It is the first literary anthology of Okinawan American literature,

attesting to the fact that Okinawan voices have always existed in the U.S. but have only been unheard. While Japanese American writers were recognized as a part of Asian American literature and gained their position in the field of American literature as early as the 1970s, Okinawan American writers and their literary heritage have remained underrepresented or worse yet, invisible, in the shadow of the American literary mainstream. Katsunori Yamazato, one of the editors of *Voices from Okinawa* and a critic who has recognized the significance of Jon Shiota for more than three decades, points out in his preface to this volume that “Okinawan writers have been seen as a small group within the larger category of Japanese American literature” (viii). Yamazato further states that being thus marginalized even within the category of Japanese American literature, “these [Okinawan American] writers have generally been overlooked by scholars and editors” (viii).

Featuring three works and one essay by Jon Shiota, one of the most outstanding but underrated voices in American literature, *Voices from Okinawa* finally enables Okinawan American writers to make an initial step toward becoming an agent in articulating their voices to the English-speaking audience. Besides Shiota’s featured three plays—*Lucky Come Hawaii*, *Leilani’s Hibiscus*, and *Voices from Okinawa*—the volume also includes other Okinawan voices that are following Shiota’s creative works. The second half of the volume contains the autobiographical and non-fictional narrative voices of five prominent “Uchinanchu (Okinawans)”: Mitsugu Sakihara, Seiyei Wakugawa, June Hiroko Arakawa, Jon Shiota, and Philip K. Ige. One of the editorial efforts of *Voices from Okinawa* is found in this multivocality, embracing diverse voices while being aware of the differences among those voices. In his Afterword, Frank Stewart, another editor of the volume, refers to the “heterophonic” and “polyphonic” nature of Okinawan folk music and concludes: “In Okinawan American literature such as Jon Shiota’s, folk music and dance are integral to the polyphonic spirit,” that is, “a lively ‘mixing’ both literally and metaphorically, of many voices” (207).

The sense of heterophony and polyphony that is central to Shiota’s theatrical stages is shared by other voices in *Voices from Okinawa*. Though the autobiographical stories in the second half of the volume may seem to play the role of providing background information for understanding Shiota’s plays, they should not be regarded merely in that context. Those non-fictional discourses are texts as well, as they are narratives that tell us the diverse life experiences of Okinawans as vigorously as Shiota’s plays do. Every author in this book tells what it means to be Okinawan American through their own story or their ancestors’ stories, e.g., the stories of coming to the U.S. from Okinawa to become farm workers or students, of being in the U.S. as a prisoner of war from the Battle of Okinawa, and of being born in the U.S. as children of Okinawan immigrants and moved between two nations as *kibei*. The polyphonic voices of five Okinawans tell us that Okinawan identity is not monolithic but diverse and multifaceted even though they are all based in Hawaii.

Having immigrated all over the world, Okinawans have a long history of diaspora. Some Okinawans came home, others found their new homes to be rooted, and there are those still migrating. No matter where they move, however, there is a shared sense of heritage and communal consciousness that can connect the diverse and polyphonic voices of Okinawans. A new Okinawan story is

told in each new location, and the collection of those stories forms an Okinawan tradition in a new place. The “Tinsagu nu hana,” an emblematic Okinawan folk song about the profoundness of parents’ love and wisdom, for example, is as poignant to diasporic Okinawans as to Okinawans at home. In other words, “Tinsagu nu hana” connects Okinawans all over the world emotionally. Wesley Ueunten’s translation of this song on the opening page of *Voices from Okinawa*, therefore, is thematically critical for this book, and the meaning of its lyrics becomes even more compelling as readers go on reading and realize the message that this book is trying to transmit: a bond exists between different generations and among Okinawan communities. This emotional understanding is thus distilled into the words in the song: “Dye the teaching of your parents / Onto your heart” (Ueunten).

Shirota’s plays, too, express the playwright’s appreciation for Okinawans who came before him. It is this sense of desire to make ancestral voices heard that provides the foundation of Shirota’s narrative. Kama Gusuda, an iconic Okinawan character both in *Lucky Come Hawaii* and *Leilani’s Hibiscus*, for instance, represents Shirota’s appreciation of the ancestral voices in Okinawan traditions. Kama’s life stories as the “number one pig farmer in all Maui” (2) and an immigrant father become quintessential to Shirota’s imagination as an Okinawa American storyteller. Shirota is primarily an empathetic listener who creates voices based on his sympathetic understanding of the voices of his parents’ generation. His imagination essentially comes from his respect for the voices of the generations of Okinawan immigrants, including Shirota’s parents, whose “teaching” he had “dyed onto his heart.” Locating his own voice and sense of who he is in connection with Okinawan traditions is significant for Shirota in coming up with an Okinawan American tradition, a tradition to which he belongs.

The non-fictional autobiographical accounts of other writers in this book can also be read as their acts of creating an Okinawan American tradition. They attempt to pass on their “teaching” to later generations, in their cases, by speaking in their own words. Their essays convey a similar sense of urgency to Shirota’s that the understanding of younger generations will be crucial for the continuation of an Okinawan American heritage. Wakukawa’s life story, told in form of a letter to his son, and other autobiographical writings by Sakihara, Ige, and Shirota as well come from their hope to pass on the stories of their life experiences to future generations of Okinawan American communities. As precisely put in the title of Arakawa’s life story, as told to Kinuko Yamazato, a young Okinawan scholar, just before Arakawa passed away, these writings are indeed “gifts” to be passed on for the survival of the cultural and spiritual traditions of Okinawan American people and communities.

However, throughout the volume of *Voices from Okinawa*, it is suggested that there is also a challenge in handing down the spirit of “Tinsagu nu Hana.” The geographical distance between Okinawa and the Okinawan American communities, the different social environments, and the language barrier make it difficult for Okinawan Americans to be connected with their ancestral homeland. Okinawan American people and communities face adversity in fully appreciating their ancestral heritage. Shirota’s plays manifest this challenge through his presentation of conflicting values between Okinawan Issei and Nisei generations, e.g., Kimiko’s ambivalence about her ethnic identity in *Lucky Come Hawaii* and Yasuichi’s romantic involvement with Leilani, an indige-

nous Hawaiian woman, in *Leilani's Hibiscus*. The uncompromising values among Okinawan Americans complicate the process of cultural communication between different generations.

Nevertheless, this is a moment of heterophony among the voices of the Okianwan American people. Shirota's other challenge as an Okinawan American writer is in his exploration of further polyphony by expressing a new Okinawan voice that even he may not have heard in his life. In his essay also published in this volume, "The Dawning of an Okinawan," Shirota addresses to his father how contemporary Okinawa has changed from what it used to be. His most recent play, *Voices from Okinawa*, exemplifies Shirota's challenge of expressing the new awareness that mediates voices that he listened to during his stay in Okinawa in 2005. According to LiAnn Ishizuka's article, "Guests in Okinawa," Shirota was "inspired to write a play about the relationship between Okinawans and the American GIs that are stationed there [in Okinawa]." Presenting Kama Hutchins, a great-grandson of Kama Gusuda, Shirota in this play attempts to go beyond the traditional image of Okinawa held by Hawaiian or Okinawan communities in the U.S. In so doing, he creates Kama Hutchins as an Okinawan American learner of the contemporary culture and society of Okinawa.

Creating characters that resist common stereotypes is another strategy of Shirota's expressing new Okinawan voices. Kama's Caucasian-Okinawan mixed heritage, for instance, works successfully in representing a new type of Okinawan American character in which racial implications make audiences' perceptions of Okinawan identity more complex. Another character in the play, Keiko Oshiro, an educated young Okinawan woman principal of the "Naha English School" where Hutchins teaches, also projects Shirota's resistance against long held negative stereotypes of Okinawan women as the exotic objects of American GIs' sexual interest. Along with Namiye Matsuda, another Okinawan woman who is found to be a rape victim toward the end of the play, Shirota compassionately listened to voices he had never heard before and expressed his new understanding of Okinawa through the creation of new types of characters.

While I understand that these Okinawan characters came out of the playwright's good intentions to "speak for" Okinawans in Okinawa and to bring the American audience a cross-cultural perspective on what it is like to live in Okinawa, I do, however, have to raise a question in terms of whether or not Shirota's description of Okinawan women was perfectly appropriate. I would argue that creating a dramatic moment by implying a romance for Keiko, a professional woman, whose attitude could be perceived as "bossy" by Kama (106), is not necessary, since it casts a reflection on Keiko's presumed non-stereotypical representation as an Okinawan woman by confining it within the traditional gender role in the matrimonial institution governed by heterosexism and patriarchy. Likewise, Namiye's revealing of her past experience—being raped by an American GI—in a speech to an English classroom seems awkward and unlikely in reality because rape victims are usually known to refuse to describe or even remember the horrifying moment of the sexual assault. The rape case is not merely a politically but also emotionally sensitive issue for Okinawan women, and it thus requires a careful dramatic process that can justify Namiye's determination to make a confession about the most traumatic experience in her life *in class*.

The play *Voices from Okinawa* is nonetheless an ambitious work that informs American audiences of the base-related issues in contemporary Okinawa and makes them, as Americans, aware

of their responsibility for the involvement of the U.S. in what is going on around the world. As this new work demonstrates, Shirota's imagination and creativity continue to explore further heterophony in Okinawan voices. Meanwhile, his classic 1965 novel *Lucky Come Hawaii* was also reprinted by University of Hawai'i Press in 2009 as another volume from the *Mānoa* series, and this signals that Shirota's literature is now going through a new phase of evaluation, especially in a new critical paradigm that the editors of this volume propose: Okinawan American literature. *Voices from Okinawa*, the first anthology of Okinawan American literature, is a model outcome of Okinawan Studies. It presents "teaching" in which Okinawans and Okinawan Americans are required to speak out as agents as well as listen earnestly to the voices of Okinawans all over the world.

### References

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