

Lan Dong

Turning Japanese, Turning Japanese American

David Mura's *Memoirs of a Sansei*

This article examines the identity of the Sansei (third-generation Japanese Americans) as connected to their place of heritage – Japan. Focusing on David Mura's *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991), we shall explore how a Sansei writer gains further understanding and realization of his ethnic identity as a Japanese American in multi-ethnic America through the re-established connection between him and his place of cultural origin. Mura, born and raised in Midwest, recollects his experience in Japan supported by a US/Japan Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship in 1984. Mura's book ends with his realization that Japan allows him to see himself, America, and the world "from a perspective that was not white American." My argument considers his procedure of "turning Japanese" as simultaneously a process of turning Japanese American. Along the thesis of the Sansei's identity construction, the following questions will be addressed: (1) starting his trip as a self-identified American, how is Mura challenged and therefore forced to reconsider his identity during his one-year residence in Japan; (2) how does he pursue his connection with Japan that has been absent in his childhood; and (3) how does such reconnection profoundly influence his understanding of identity; namely to change his self-identification from an American to a Japanese American?

The Sansei, third-generation Japanese Americans, came of age during the 1960s, a decade of cultural and political turmoil as well as the emergence of the Asian American movement in the United States. According to Takahashi (1997), scholars' "efforts to explain the changes in political orientation and ethnic consciousness have largely focused on identity and culture."¹ What they have overlooked are the negotiations with which third generation Japanese Americans continually wrestle in forming their

1. Jere Takahashi, *Nisei/Sansei: Shifting Japanese American Identities and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), p. 156.

identities by means of the diverse input they have received from their Japanese ancestry along with American culture.

Jere Takahashi and Yasuko Takezawa's studies and discussions have addressed the identity of the Sansei, as it is particularly related to the redress movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Takahashi notes a different political orientation for the Sansei, compared to the Issei and Nisei (first- and second-generation Japanese Americans). "[P]ersonal problems became the focus of collective discussion and political interaction" as the Sansei's life paths "intersected with a variety of social movements."² Meanwhile, Takezawa's sociological fieldwork indicates that in relation to the internment, the majority of the Sansei "felt more anger than embarrassment, anger at the injustice of the government and the racism in American society."³ In order to reach a deeper understanding of the Sansei's involvement in the redress movement, one therefore should consider this group's pursuit for ethnic American identity as a process of negotiation between the "double messages" received from their Japanese heritage and from their American life. More recent research on identity of the Sansei highlights a tendency that "[t]he retention of 'Japaneseness' has been selective and new forms of ethnicity have emerged."⁴ Reconnection with Japan, their place of ancestry, appears to be one among several means in the Sansei's preserving or recovering Japaneseness during the course of constructing their multi-cultural, multi-ethnic identity in contemporary United States.

In order to explore in depth the Sansei's formation of their ethnic American identity as a balancing act between diverse Japanese and American cultures, we shall focus on a case in point – the writer David Mura and his book entitled *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991). To be more specific, this article will examine this Japanese American writer's struggle over identity construction when his relation to his place of cultural origin, Japan, is re-established. David Mura – a poet, creative nonfiction writer, essayist, critic, and screenwriter – is a Sansei, whose grandparents migrated from Japan to the United States in the early twentieth century and whose American-born parents were interned during World War II. Mura has made

2. Takahashi, p. 161.

3. Yasuko Takezawa, *Breaking the Silence: Redress and Japanese American Ethnicity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 159.

4. David J. O'Brien and Stephen S. Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 134. On this, also see: Sylvia Yanagisako, *Transforming the Past: Tradition and Kinship among Japanese Americans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985) and S. Frank Miyamoto, "Problems of Interpersonal Style among the Nisei," *Amerasia Journal* 13 (1986-1987) 29-45.

significant contributions to the growing field of Asian American poetry and has actively participated in representing issues concerning identity, ethnicity, and cultural relations in multi-ethnic American society in literature. In his memoir, winner of the 1991 Josephine Miles Book Award from the Oakland PEN and one of the *New York Times* Notable Books of the year, Mura chronicles his experiences and consequent reflections during his one-year residence in Japan, funded by a U.S./Japan Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship in 1984. In the process, Mura recollects his childhood removed from Japanese culture, his avoidance of any association with Japan, and his uneasiness about being an American of color.

Arriving in Japan as a self-identified American, Mura is compelled to recover his connection with his family's homeland that had been missing during his midwestern childhood. The year in Tokyo thus challenges and forces him to reconsider his identity. As Mura himself admits, "Japan had forced me to confront certain questions of identity I'd long avoided."⁵ Such rethinking and re-understanding profoundly influence his perception of being American and lead to the change of his self-identification from an American to his embrace of the classification of Japanese American. The memoir ends with the author moving back to the United States with the awareness that Japan allowed him to see himself, America, and the world "from a perspective that was not white American" (368).⁶

We might argue that the development of "turning Japanese," the title of the memoir as well as its focus, is essentially a process of Mura's turning Japanese American with full consciousness. Such a critical journey deserves further examination so that one can uncover the intricate routes underlying Mura's coming to realize and contemplate his Japanese American identity, in which he tries "to open a certain space in American poetry, to increase in complexity the ways we consider our art form, and to make connections between poetry and the world around it that others might not see or want to admit."⁷ Through scrutinizing Mura's life story in Japan, we shall explore: (a) how Mura gains further understanding of himself as a third generation Japanese American writer in multi-cultural America through the insightful reconsideration of his Japaneseness; and (b) how his trip to Japan influences the

5. David Mura, *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality, and Identity* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), p. 7.

6. All parenthesized references are to this edition: David Mura, *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991).

7. David Mura, *Song for Uncle Tom, Tonto, and Mr. Moto: Poetry and Identity* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 2.

poet's development from trying to shed his skin color in order to be an equal to white poets to promoting a multi-ethnic field of American poetry.

Darrel Montero draws the conclusion from his sociology research on the changing patterns of ethnic affiliation over three Japanese American generations that:

[F]or almost every indicator of the maintenance of the Japanese American community, we have seen that the Sansei have moved further away from the ethnic community than the Nisei. Furthermore, this process is particularly accelerated among the exogamous Sansei. It seems likely that the Sansei have one foot in both cultures and may be fully accepted by neither. In this sense they would indeed be marginal members of either group.⁸

Thus, before Mura's one-year stay in Japan, his life had taken the common route for a Sansei. Long before his marriage to a Caucasian woman, he had become estranged from the "root" culture, from which his grandparents had emigrated. His Issei grandmothers had passed away; his grandfathers had moved back to Japan and disconnected from the younger generations. Moreover, his Nisei parents' generation had already become "all American." Outwardly for the convenience of pronunciation, Mura's father had changed his name from "Katsuji Uyemura" first to "Tom Katsuji Mura" and then to "Tom K. Mura"; his mother's name had also been altered from "Teruko" to a more American-sounding form: "Terry." According to Mura's recollection, his parents' life had been an exemplified American dream story: over the years the Muras had moved "from the lower-class neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago to the working-class area near Wrigley Field to the middle-class suburb of Morton Grove and then to the upper-middle-class suburbs of Northbrook and Vernon Hills" (311). No connection with Japanese culture seemed to be attributed to this rising path of a family's success, as far as the author remembers.

Certain Japanese food, served together with American cuisine at family gatherings on holidays, is probably the only indicator left that marks the Mura family's history and difference. Yet young Mura never associated such food with the actual locale where his forebears dwelled decades ago. His younger self did not consciously have a place for the country of Japan to be related to his present life in America. Nor did he enjoy Japanese pickles, *mochi* (rice cake), *futomaki* (vegetable sushi), *mazegohan* (vegetables with rice), and *teriyaki*. As a boy, Mura usually loaded his plate with fried chicken before he sat in front of the television and watched baseball games

8. Darrel Montero, *Japanese Americans: Changing Patterns of Ethnic Affiliation over Three Generations* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980), p. 75.

with his cousins. From the vantage point of adulthood, Mura realizes all he had noticed back then is that these foods were different from what he liked best – McDonald's, pizza, hot dogs, tuna-fish salad (8). Interestingly, the visual distinction between Mura's relatives and (white) people in school and neighborhood never entered his mind. In the end, it was the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Christmas that his family celebrated (8). Given such experiences of Mura's insistence on his Americanness while growing up, it is not surprising to note that at the time of winning the Artist Exchange Fellowship he does not feel the ecstasy of "an ardent pilgrim, longing to return to the land of his grandparents, but more like a contestant on a quiz show who finds himself winning a trip to Bali or the Bahamas" (9). With compelling frankness, Mura even confesses that he wished at that moment that the prize were for Paris instead of Tokyo.

Paul Spickard, in his study on the formation and transformation of Japanese Americans as an ethnic group, addresses the estrangement of younger generations from Japanese culture. "Just as Nisei were more likely than Issei to live in non-Japanese neighborhoods and to interact socially with non-Japanese Americans, so Sansei were more likely than their parents to operate outside a Japanese American sphere."⁹ Mura is part of this trend. Consciously or unconsciously, ever since childhood he has shunned cultural connections with Japan. In school, young Mura's yearning was not to be singled out because of his skin color. He was proud that he did not speak Japanese, a language even his Nisei parents, aunts, and uncles had not used in their American life and had quite limited knowledge of as well. As Mura self-identifies in his memoirs, being raised in a primarily Jewish upper-middle-class suburb in Midwest, he knew more about Jewish than Japanese culture. When Mura was a teenager, Philip Roth was his favorite author.

Nonetheless Mura always found it difficult to fit into his surroundings. He, at the end, was not a Jew and probably more important not a Caucasian, which caused young Mura to feel awkward and socially backward. He never acquired confidence beyond the classroom, where he could present a top academic performance along with most Asian American youngsters. This growing otherness pushed him toward a desperate edge during adolescence. He could not get a date with girls in his Jewish high school. Most of these girls were not allowed to go out with "goyim," and Mura's appearance made it impossible for him to pass as a Jew. Frustrated at this time of puberty, Mura rebuked his Japanese American identity that, he felt, relegated him to

9. Paul R. Spickard, *Japanese Americans: The Formation and Transformations of An Ethnic Group* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 145.

secondary status, hindered his equality with other boys, and therefore ruined his attractiveness to girls (75). Being caught in the dilemma of being American but marked as less American by his skin color, Mura suffered anxiety throughout his adolescence and young adulthood. Such restlessness later developed into an obsession with and poetic imaginings over the obscure past of his ancestors, a past about which his grandparents migrated and about which his parents refused to talk.

The moment when Mura stepped into the terminal at Narita airport in Tokyo, he was exhausted by the fourteen-hour flight yet suddenly exhilarated, frightened, and astonished by all the faces at customs that looked like his; for the first time in his life his appearance comprised the visual majority (11, 148). Despite an intense language program as a preparation for his trip, Mura struggled to survive in Tokyo with his broken Japanese and in the process started to see his situation as a Japanese American in a different way. He came to realize that the Japanese viewed him differently from the way they saw his Caucasian wife, even though they were both American by nationality. To them he was not and would never be considered a *Hakujin* (white person) and hence not wholly American according to the common conception. At the same time, however, for Mrs. Hayashi, his Japanese tutor in Tokyo, Mura was “an odd version of a Japanese” (49), who had an Americanized Japanese family name and barely spoke Japanese except for some phrases and words he had rushed to learn before his trip. Mura’s discovery of his Japaneseness that had been absent for years along with his newly established connection with the surrounding Japanese culture turned into ways for Mura to see a new direction for his identity pursuit. For him, identity was not a given nor a fixed concept, but something he had to piece together from the past and the present, from both Japaneseness and Americanness.

Learning to enjoy Japanese food was perhaps the first thing Mura found that he needed to accomplish, simply for survival. At first, there was nostalgia for hot dogs and pizza. Nevertheless, after a while the varied and healthy diet of Japanese cuisine became his way of consuming Japanese culture with pleasure. If digging into the culinary culture was possible to accomplish via cumulative visits to various restaurants and through improving his knowledge of the Japanese language, then the search for a deeper understanding of Japanese social life and customs proved to be a much harder mission. Befriended by Japanese artists, writers, and union activists, Mura obtained certain insights into Japanese culture, both the traditional and the avant-garde. Fascinated by Japanese performing arts, Mura became a fan of Noh, the traditional performing arts, coming to love “its steady ritual slowness, its otherworldly chants, the way it took you into another consciousness” (135). He also turned into a disciple of Butoh, a frontier art form full of abstract gestures. He commuted

for hours and ran the risk of being lost in Tokyo's complicated train system in order to attend classes to learn Butoh and Noh under the instruction of the masters. In a way, this learning process became a ritual practice through which he internalized Japanese culture, as he later realizes.

Shortly after he settled down in Tokyo, Mura was overwhelmed by unfamiliarity, the sharp contrast between cultures, and by the uproar of his feelings. In reaction to these factors, he turned fervently to taking notes and making diary entries. These acts of documentation reassured him that his earlier impressions and emotions would not be covered nor erased by later ones when he was confronted with diverse aspects of Japanese society or when he reflected and responded to things differently as time passed by. Mura's journals turned out to be the source material upon which his memoirs were built and crystallized. Although these pieces seem to be disparate bits and pieces from Mura's Japanese life, they do, however, share common themes: the author's predicament of being both Japanese and American but paradoxically not fitting into either group along with his personal literary exploration for a resolution to this quandary.

If before 1984 the author could at least enjoy the coziness of being home in America (though with his anxiety and confusion), the accumulated exposure to Japanese culture dispelled Mura's notion of an American home and hence aggravated his homelessness. At the time of his stay in Japan, Mura had not fully realized how much Japan was pulling him back into his past, and how far he was drifting from the certainties of his American life (115). Nearly half way through the exchange program, Mura became aware, however, that America seemed distant, distasteful, no longer his home (180). His landlocked Midwest could not console his homeless feeling any longer. The nostalgic longing for a home no longer had a physical location upon which to cast his yearning. Instead, he apprehended "a sense of severing," as if he could hear the ties to his old life breaking and something was coming apart in the process (180). At this point, this Sansei of letters experienced more and more a strong loss of balance, "a floating, as if I were adrift at sea, out of sight of land for so long that the sight of land, once thought to be so reassuring, so absorbing, seems frightening and strange, an impossibility" (180).

On the other hand, Mura could not find any niche in Japan into which he would truly fit and feel comfortable (225). Ultimately, he had to confess; "[e]ither I was American or I was one of the homeless, one of the searchers for what John Berger calls a world culture. But I was not Japanese" (370). The reconnection with Japan did not designate a replacement or an abandonment of Mura's American consciousness. After all, Japaneseness and Americanness was not a choice of "either or." For a Sansei writer like Mura, he wanted to have both. Gaining the recognition that for people with a dual cultural heritage "identity is a political and economic matter, not just a personal mat-

ter,” he contends, “I do not feel as bound now by my national identity, do not feel that being an American somehow separates me from the rest of the world” (370, 368). He needed to continue his literary journey in search of a multi-ethnic identity for himself, for the Sansei, and for contemporary American poetry through uncovering complexities concerning race in a multi-cultural United States.

Parental silence about experiences in the internment camps is by no means isolated to the Nisei. David O’Brien and Stephen Fugita’s sociological study shows that the majority of the Sansei interviewees “had to piece together bits of stories and fragmented behaviors to get a picture of their parents’ experience. Usually, it was spoken about only among family and Japanese friends.”¹⁰ Likewise, on the account of the internment, David Mura’s “mother says she was too young to remember the camps,” while his father tells him nothing but “he had to work in his father’s nursery in L.A. before the war, when they got to the camps, he could go out and play baseball after school.”¹¹ Due to his second-generation Japanese American parents’ silence about the past, Mura was haunted by feelings of being disconnected from history.

It is through poetry that Mura explores the obscure past and reconstructs the migratory experience of his grandparents and the internment of his parents. Driven by his yearning for the truth, the truth of the past, he seeks a link connecting different generations in his poem “Grandfather and Grandmother in Love”:

Now I will ask for one true word beyond
Betrayal, that creaks and buoys like the bedsprings
Used by the bodies that begot the bodies that begot me.¹²

In another poem, titled “Issei: Song of the First Years in America,” Mura envisions his grandmother’s voyage across the Pacific – a point of departure for the Mura family’s long journey as immigrants:

Our hair in chignons, we crowd down the planks,
Our legs still wobbly from weeks at sea.
I do not expect him to be
handsome as the photo
but this is not even the same man.¹³

10. O’Brien and Fugita, p. 77.

11. Mura, *Where Body Meets Memory*, p. 6.

12. David Mura, *After We Lost Our Way* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), p. 3.

13. David Mura, *The Colors of Desire* (New York and London: Anchor Books, 1995), p. 15.

An attempt to challenge his parents' silence, Mura imagines his mother's voice talking to her son in his poem, titled "An Argument: On 1942":

– No, no, no, she tells me. Why bring it back?
The camps are over. (Also overly dramatic.)
Forget *shoyu*-stained *furoshiki*, *mochi* on a stick:
You're like a terrier, David, gnawing a bone, an old, old trick. . .

David, it was so long ago – how useless it seems. . .¹⁴

The mother's constant denial and evasion of the past intensifies the son's uneasiness about the erased history and his strong urge to recover it. Writing about his Issei grandparents and Nisei parents in poetry is Mura's means of filling in the gaps through research and imagination. Driven to anxiety, his first collection of poetry – *After We Lost Our Way* (1989) – pieces together odds and bits of what he heard from his relatives to create a landscape for his ancestors and to pursue a balance between the past and the present, belonging and not belonging. Nevertheless, his ancestry seems to exist only in his poetry. The grandfather in his early poems is "a dashing, invented character who probably had more to do with the gamblers, with Westerns and [his] yearning for a romantic past than anything Japanese" (50).

It is thus Mura's trip to Japan that helped to illuminate the journey of his identity construction within his newly gained awareness and contemplation. "Japan helped me balance a conversation which had been taking place before I was born, a conversation in my grandparents' heads, in my parents' heads, which, by my generation, had become very one-sided, so that the Japanese side was virtually silenced" (370). In one of his articles that is particularly concerned with identity, Mura contends:

In our postmodern, multicultural, global world, our identities are multiple, are conditioned by our historical circumstances, are something we have been given and something we choose, are always changing, are subject to political and cultural forces beyond our control, are a continuous creation. As a Japanese-American, as an Asian American, as a person of color, as an American, as a member of the middle class, as a heterosexual, as a male – all these define me and, at the same time, do not limit me, do not define me.¹⁵

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14. Mura, *After We Lost Our Way*, p. 10.

15. David Mura, "No-No Boys: Re-X-Amining Japanese Americans," *New England Review* 15.3 (Summer 1993) 143-65, p. 157.

David Mura's definition of the complex Japanese American identity and his search for it in his poetry as well as in his prose writing thus illustrate a modification of the concepts of a singular ethnic identity. In his second collection of poetry, *The Colors of Desire* (1995), Mura addresses the complications of rage and reconciliation in a world marked by racial and cultural differences. The multiple voices of his poems investigate the connection between ethnicity and sexuality, history and identity. The inseparability between collective history and personal desire indicated in his poems calls for further thinking. The tendency towards a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic identity pursuit does not only appear in his poetry, but also in his prose and critical essays.

In conclusion, Mura's accomplishments and potential as a poet prior to 1984 earned him his one-year visit to Japan, and the resulting journey into his Japanese heritage. Xiaojing Zhou has summarized the significance of Mura's poetry as "its capacity for revealing the processes and effects of racial and sexual identity formation in connection to power relations" as well as "his experiment with new modes of signification in seeking to portray the complexity and ambivalence in the experiences of the Japanese-Americans and those who are discriminated against."¹⁶ The discussion above has shown the necessity, however, to go beyond the critical paradigm that reads Mura's works through the lens of Asian American literature. One needs to go further and examine his reconnection with Japan as well as its influence on his identity formation and his writing, both of which illuminate this particular Sansei poet's growth: from shunning his Japanese ancestry to embracing the multi-cultural elements to form his ethnic identity; from striving to assimilate into the mainstream to enriching the American literary field with multiple voices.

16. Xiaojing Zhou, "David Mura's Poetics of Identity," *MELUS* 23.3 (Autumn 1998) 145-166, p. 148.