Interview with Cynthia Kadohata

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Recently Cynthia Kadohata (1956- ) has achieved recognition in the field of children's literature for the novel Kira-Kira (2004), which won the 2005 Newbery Medal. A coming-of-age novel set in the 1950s, Kira-Kira portrays its protagonist-narrator Katie's growth from a naïve four-year-old into a teenager confronting an imperfect world of class differences, racism, and death. Yet the book's attentiveness to the Japanese American post-World War II experiences, the need for travel, and the sense of being uprooted harks back to early works by Kadohata for adults such as The Floating World (1989), In the Heart of the Valley of Love (1992), and The Glass Mountains (1995).

Early reviews and studies on Kadohata have focused on the unique style and content that she brings to Asian American literature.¹ The semi-autobiographical The Floating World has been noted for its "unconventional" Japanese American characters (such as the garrulous Obāsan, an Issei married three times and still falling in love at the age of 76) and a "hypnotic, sparse prose style" and "cinematic narrative structure" that derive not as much from Japanese American literary tradition as from the South American magic realist writers (Yogi 147). Kadohata's second novel, In the Heart of the Valley of Love, on the other hand, is set in 2052, with little direct reference to Japanese American immigrant history; the novel evolves around a half-Japanese, half-Chinese-black protagonist and, as Kadohata herself admits, does not take any specific ethnicity as its central concern (Pearlman 118). Instead it brings the issue of class to the front and delineates a futuristic Los Angeles divided between richtowns and the rest of the city. Kadohata's
experiments with alternative content and style continue in her third novel, *The Glass Mountains*. Taking her readers this time to a fictitious planet—Artekka—of warring tribes, Kadohata delineates the forced diaspora of her protagonist’s family among tribes of various cultures and beliefs. In place of issues of race and ethnicity, this novel introduces cultural and species differences that give rise both to power struggles and to intercultural and inter-species connections.

The following interview took place at Kadohata’s residence in Long Beach, California on November 3, 2004. Kadohata talks about the three types of writing she has undertaken: the semi-autobiographical, the futuristic, and youth literature. She also dwells on the thematic concerns permeating her writing as a whole: the formation of home and communities, the experience of travel, and the conflicts and communion between different groups of individuals in society.

**Hsiu-chuan Lee**: Your first novel, *The Floating World*, is usually spoken of as semi-autobiographical. A close reading of your other works also shows that you have been drawing from your life experiences in your writing, although not always explicitly. Readers might like to know which part of your writing is autobiographical and which part is fictional, and what you think is significant about your reconstruction of real life experiences through fiction. Could you please start by telling us about your family background and how you began to write?

**Cynthia Kadohata**: I was born in Chicago; both my parents are of Japanese descent but were born in the United States. My mother’s grandmother came from Japan, but her mother was born in the United States. My father’s mother came from Japan. When I was about two years old or maybe a little younger, I moved to Georgia, where I learned to talk. That was why I had a heavy southern accent when I grew up. Then I moved to Arkansas where my father worked as a chicken sexer. My parents got divorced when I was about nine. My mother, my sister, my brother, and I moved to Michigan for a short time before moving back to Chicago, then eventually to Los Angeles, where I went to college at USC,
majoring in journalism though I never worked in journalism. After that I moved to Boston because my sister lived there. Then I attended graduate school first in Pittsburgh and then in New York at Columbia University. Right before I started at Columbia I sold my first story to The New Yorker. I got an agent afterwards and sold more stories and then the novel. I moved back to Los Angeles in 1990.

HL: Apparently some interesting details in your work are indebted to your experiences while growing up; for example, Katie, the protagonist in Kira-Kira, moves to Georgia at four and acquires a southern accent, and Francie, the protagonist in In the Heart of the Valley of Love, lives in Chicago before moving to Los Angeles and studies journalism. Both The Floating World and Kira-Kira also present vividly Japanese Americans’ experiences as chicken sexers in Georgia and Arkansas in the post-World War II years. Did you ever work at a chicken hatchery, like Olivia does in The Floating World?

CK: No, but I did visit the hatchery and spent the night there a couple of times.

HL: This reminds me of Katie’s experience of visiting the hatchery in Kira-Kira. Thinking about the line between the real and the fictive in your writings, I am wondering whether you based the character Obāsan in The Floating World on a real person.

CK: Physically, I was thinking a little bit of my dad’s mom, but her personality was completely made up. However, my mom’s mother thinks that the character was based on her, and she was very angry about that.

HL: How about Madeline, then? As Obāsan is the person who passes down the Japanese cultural heritage in The Floating World, Madeline, the old lady who owns a bead shop in In the Heart of the Valley of Love, is also a person who remembers the past.
CK: While Obasan is mostly made-up, Madeline is created out of a real person. There was a bead shop in New York I used to stop in pretty often when I first moved to New York. I was interested in making necklaces at that time. The bead shop was owned by an old woman based on whom I created Madeline.

HL: How did you come up with the idea of the skin disease, the black pearl, which turns out to be a very striking image at the beginning of In the Heart of the Valley of Love?

CK: That skin disease actually came from a real life image. When my sister was a teenager she developed some black thing on her skin. She broke it open and got a little black rock out of it. It only happened once but I was so struck by the image of the black rock that I made it into the black pearl in my novel.

HL: Skin, especially skin color, is always something ethnic people are concerned about. Did you have the issue of race in mind when you wrote about the skin disease?

CK: For me skin connects us to the world. It is something like a threshold that links up us and not-us. In a sense the world affects us by first affecting our skin since skin forms our bodily boundary. The skin disease is like the first warning to the world, and it symbolizes to us that something is going wrong.

HL: Another aspect of skin in In the Heart of the Valley of Love is “tattoo.” You wrote in the novel that “bare skin is money in the bank” (205). What do you mean by this, and how did you come up with this idea?

CK: That part derived from my conversation with a real-life tattooist. He told me about one of his customers who had so many tattoos on his body that there was almost no place to put a new tattoo. I was quoting from him when I wrote about the bare skin as money or the skin as one’s property.
HL: In *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, I also find the way you present the desert intriguing. Whereas the desert used to be the place Japanese Americans were relocated to during World War II, in this novel it provides a space where people find escape from authority.

CK: The image of the desert in my novel actually came from an article in the *Los Angeles Times* about crimes in the desert, which mentioned that the desert was so spread out that in some towns there was no police force. People thus could escape authority there. In a sense, anything could happen in the desert. People could be free in the desert because they could escape authority.

HL: Your negotiation between real life and the fictive is shown also in the fact that although you studied journalism at college, you became a creative writer. Significantly, Francie in *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* is not only a student of journalism but also takes a pretty positive view toward journalistic writing. Francie believes that whatever changes the world undergoes, she would find a place for herself since journalists are needed in whichever new world comes into being. In your view, what is the difference between journalistic writing and creative writing? Why did you choose to become a creative writer rather than a journalist?

CK: I chose to become a creative writer possibly because of the sense of freedom creative writing provides. When writing fiction, we are not as rooted in the facts as when doing journalistic writing, though I may like to write nonfiction someday. But to be honest, fiction just came naturally to me. I used to think that nonfiction is better than fiction but then I moved to Boston and started reading more fiction. It was then for the first time I realized that contemporary fiction could be important as well. In high school, we were usually assigned readings from books published decades or even centuries ago. I scarcely even realized the existence of contemporary fiction.
HL: You have mentioned that you tend to mix your memory and that of your characters. Are you implying a blurred line between your life and your creative writing?

CK: What I feel is that once something is written down, in a way it affects us and becomes similar to a memory, as if I have experienced it in real life.

HL: Could you say a bit more about your mother? It seems that mother figures, though not always present as in the cases of Olivia and Francie, are very influential in your novel. Do you construct these mother figures based on the images of your own mother or grandmothers?

CK: After the divorce of my parents, though we saw our father regularly, we lived with our mother, and it was she who raised us when my father stayed in Arkansas. My mother was very independent, though back then it was a little unusual for a woman to be that independent. She read a lot of books and encouraged us to develop our talent. In this aspect, she was very influential.

HL: Both *The Floating World* and *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* present makeshift families, that is, non-traditional families not built on patrilineage. In *The Floating World*, for example, Olivia’s mother married Charlie-O when she was already eight months pregnant with Olivia. The family of Olivia is made up of her mother, her maternal grandmother Obasan, her stepfather Charlie-O, and her half brothers. In *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, moreover, Francie stays with her Auntie Annie and Annie’s boyfriend Rohn. Was your intention to write about women-centered families?

CK: I wrote non-traditional families possibly because we did not grow up with our father and so we did not have a traditional family, though today in America there are a lot of divorces. In *Kira-Kira*, however, I wrote about a quite traditional family. If women became the center in my book, I probably just came up with that naturally, as we grew up with our mother.
HL: In addition to the depiction of makeshift families, another thing very interesting in your writings is the construction of—may I call it—"the community on the road." One obvious example is the community developing out of the car accident in *The Floating World.* In *The Glass Mountains,* the dispersal of Mariska's family due to the war also makes possible her building up communities with people outside her tribe. It seems that there is a kind of "magic on the road," to use your words in *The Floating World,* that brings people who don't know each other together. Could these communities be substitutes for traditional families?

CK: Yes, that was one thing I thought about when I wrote. When people travel, they may go to a restaurant and interact with people. They do form another community; it is temporary, though; but it is always something that I love the most about traveling, something I love to write about, and something I will probably write more about. But I don't think these communities are substitutes for traditional families. I'd prefer to say that they exist in addition to traditional families, which I consider still important.

HL: Although travel and moving around in your stories is usually inevitable and could bring about a sense of homelessness, both Olivia and Francie find in travel some positive experiences. Could you talk about your ideas about travel?

CK: I don't know why, but for some reason it is very inspiring for me to travel. In a way traveling makes my imagination more fertile. I travel and then I feel that I can write a story, whereas if I stay in one place I find it harder to find inspirations. Sometimes I can also find inspirations from music. What is important is to put my mind into a certain zone, and for some reason travel helps me achieve that. Some athletes also say that their mind has to be put in a similar kind of zone before they can compete at their highest level. Travel helps me go into that zone.

HL: Have you ever traveled in order to write?
CK: Well, it used to be that, though it sounds a bit weird, I had to travel somewhere, getting on the bus and traveling somewhere so that I felt that I could write. When I was going to Columbia, there was a time when I thought I needed to go somewhere and then I did go to West Virginia for a weekend. And sometimes it was music, and a long time ago I used a little vial of perfume that I wore when I wrote. The smell of it transported me to a different time and place. Today there is a sense of professionalism that can balance out these feelings of instinct and hunger. Now I can come up with ideas even without traveling, though some are bad ideas. . . . But of course there were also bad ideas from traveling.

HL: For those deprived of a traditional home, the communities on the road seem to offer a sense of home beyond their family experience. The close relationship Francie has built up with her journalist friends after her parents died and Uncle Rohn disappeared does make her feel at home in Los Angeles.

CK: Yes. Francie’s experience as a student of journalism is largely based on my experience at college. I went to Los Angeles City College before I went to USC. There my friends and I used to make newspapers and we had to work together, stay there all night, write stories, and finish editing. I think when people work under those conditions they would develop a sort of comradeship and form a community.

HL: I have the feeling that families and communities are important in your works because they are the sources of safety. As your protagonists are usually caught in the process of traveling and movement, they all desperately need to secure their sense of safety. The search for safety seems to be a theme running through your writings.

CK: Yes, that’s true. In fact, I have started to tell myself not to write about safety again in my next book. It is interesting that I just realized recently that I had been dealing with that issue in every book. I don’t know why I kept mentioning safety. One of the reasons might be that I did not feel rooted when I was growing up.
For me, safety could only be found in movement, or in a small moving community, whereas most people may find safety in being rooted.

**HL:** You portray in *The Glass Mountains* a small, almost self-enclosed, community where the protagonist finds safety before the eruption of wars that not only push the characters into movement but also imbue them with the impulse to recover their lost sense of safety.

**CK:** Yes, they all have that yearning to be rooted and regain the sense of safety. Also, in *Kira-Kira*, the idea of safety is tied to the possession of rice. The protagonist Katie says that the more bags of rice she has, the safer she feels.

**HL:** And sometimes the sense of safety comes from the protagonists’ confirmation that their parents love each other. Olivia, for example, is very concerned about whether her mother loves Charlie-O, and Katie in *Kira-Kira* feels safe whenever she ascertains that her parents care for each other. The disappearance of people close to one, such as the disappearance of Uncle Rohn in *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, Mariska’s separation from her brother and parents in *The Glass Mountains*, and the death of Lynn—Katie’s elder sister—in *Kira-Kira*, thus becomes the cause of trauma.

**CK:** Well, I wrote about the disappearance of close people probably due to the divorce of my parents, especially due to my father’s not living with us after that. We sometimes had to sneak out to see him when he and my mother weren’t getting along. I was very close to him. And I think it is true that love does give rise to the sense of safety. A relationship can give people a type of safety that environment won’t be able to give. Safety is produced through making human connections. This is maybe the whole point I’d like to make in my writings.
HL: Could this emphasis on love explain why you create characters like Obasan, who has a lot of love affairs and falls in love even at the age of 76?

CK: I believe that love is an important aspect of hopefulness, and everyone should be able to fall in love in some circumstance.

HL: Could we also say that it is the love between Francie and her friends that transforms Los Angeles from a dangerous city into a place Francie can claim as her home? Although Los Angeles as it is portrayed in *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* has its dark side, I somehow feel that, through the eyes of Francie, the novel has the intention to romanticize Los Angeles from time to time. Is this how you meant to present Los Angeles?

CK: When I wrote the novel, I read Raymond Carver, the mystery writer. He wrote about Los Angeles. Even though the city is grim in his writing, there is still something romantic about it. I was possibly influenced by him.

HL: Francie tends to romanticize Los Angeles whenever she feels desperate about her life in the city. Can we say that the more she becomes desperate, the more she has to make herself (as well as the city) hopeful? Did you intend to make Francie optimistic in some ways?

CK: Oh, yes, absolutely. One needs to have hope in order to keep going. This is a kind of survival mechanism. One has to turn to his/her own hope when the environment does not feed him/her with any hope. I don’t want to write my characters into victims. There could be some kind of optimism in the novel, but it does not refer to any naïve belief that everything will end well. Actually, I’d prefer to use the word “hopeful” rather than “optimistic” to describe Francie or the novel as a whole. But I agree with you that it’s a very romantic book. I think it is by far my most romantic book, though it may not seem that way on first read.
HL: *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* is also interesting because it shows the power individual’s have to change the world. Here is a quote from one of Francie’s friends: “... some people weren’t just symptoms, they caused things, and that’s what made them special” (152). Is this what you think about subjectivity—that a person should not be passive in the world but should be able to make things happen? Is Francie or Olivia this kind of person?

CK: I was thinking that a person with the power to be a leader can change the world. We all can change the world in some way, but there are some people who seem to be born with more power to change the world. Maybe Francie has more of this kind of power than Olivia. Francie insists on staying in Los Angeles and making a stand instead of running from the world. Olivia is still searching. She seeks a place where she can go to discover what she yearns for. She still does not know exactly what she wants. Also, Francie is older than Olivia. But the fact is that both girls are growing up and it is hard to say what the future has in store for them.

HL: In fact, instead of writing about the power of those already in power you have been writing about the power of the seemingly marginalized figures.

CK: My idea is that people can live their daily life and still achieve greatness. Just by going about with his/her everyday life a person can still be an important person in some way. What I mean to say is that there is power right in an individual’s life even if the life seems small. I also believe that the so-called marginalized people have a great deal of under-utilized power.

HL: It struck me that this sense of being marginalized and uprooted shown in your writings derives sometimes not simply from your characters’ moving around but also from the different time frames your narratives employ. While *The Floating World* and *Kira-Kira* are set in the 1950s and 1960s, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* takes place in the mid-twenty-first century and *The Glass Mountains* takes us to an extraterrestrial place and a time in the future. Could you please talk about your choice of the future as the
background of *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*? Did you pick the year 2052 for any specific reason?

**CK:** When I started to write the book, I set the time of the story in the present, maybe in the 1980s or 1990s. I wrote half of the book and showed it to my editor and she said fine. And then I went home and, not knowing exactly why, changed it all to the future. I did that maybe because I felt the story was not quite working in the present. I did not feel free to say what I'd like to say in the present. Putting the story into the future somehow gave me more freedom. As for the year 2052, I chose that year because I read an article that said by the year 2052 white people would become a minority in the United States.

**HL:** But many problems you deal with in *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, as observed by reviewers of the book, are already there in 1980s or 1990s Los Angeles.

**CK:** People tend to expect to read something about spaceships in a book that happens in the future. I did not want to do that because I was less optimistic, thinking that in the future, instead of advancing, the world may actually be deteriorating. That was the message I would like to get across.

**HL:** It seems that instead of writing about a future that is torn away in time from the present, you are trying to make the future, the present, and the past talk to each other. I am curious, though, about which is more important to you—to write about the past or to write about the future?

**CK:** I think both are important. I like to write about the past and the future. It could be harder for me to write about the present though, because it is hard for us to see what's going on when we are still in the middle of it. It is difficult for me to get a vision about today in the same way as I would have for the past and the future. I may like to write about the future in order to comment on the present. I didn't want *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* to be about rockets or technology; I wanted it to be a comment on the
present and maybe also on the past. But I also wanted the freedom to say whatever I wanted to say. I think that was why I put the story in the future. Also, I was having very strong dreams about the future, and I believed very strongly, and continue to believe, that we must change our way or face a rocky future.

**HL:** Do you mean that in order to figure out a better way to face the future, it is also crucial for us to know about the past? In *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, Madeline is important because she is the person who knows about the twentieth century. Likewise, Obāsan is indispensable in *The Floating World* because she is the only one who is able to pass on to Olivia her Japanese heritage. Both Madeline and Obāsan link the present to the past and history.

**CK:** Yes. Obāsan helps Olivia to find out her history. Even though Olivia does not like her grandmother, she is still deeply connected to Obāsan. Obāsan was in a sense the embodiment of Olivia’s history, and she is the one who tells Olivia the history. Otherwise Olivia won’t even know who she is.

**HL:** But why did you begin *The Floating World* with Obāsan’s death?

**CK:** I intended to make her death only physical. She remains influential even after her death. In this sense, she remains alive through the novel. In addition, if she was alive, perhaps she would have developed into a comical character.

**HL:** And as Madeline and Obāsan provide the indispensable links to the past, *The Glass Mountains* is also about the characters’ long journey to talk to some of the oldest people of their tribe and seek their advice on life.

**CK:** That is true. In fact I once had the idea of interviewing elderly people. I thought of writing a book of interviews with elderly people of all ancestries to find out their ways of looking at America. But I never did this book, although I did interview some people. One interesting thing I remember from the interviews is
that for those who had grown up during the time of economic depression in the 1930s, they thought their life then was easier than it is today for young people.

HL: This shows again that human life is not advancing linearly into a better future.

CK: Exactly.

HL: I am curious about how you look at your identity and your Japanese ancestry. Do you consider yourself an American, an Asian American, or a Japanese American?

CK: It depends. I feel that I am American; but sometimes I feel specifically Asian American, and sometimes I feel Japanese American. Especially when I am with other Japanese Americans I feel like a part of a smaller group inside America. But my most fundamental feeling is being an American. Japanese Americans have their own history that makes them unique in this country. Still, they remain a part of the larger nation. They form a separate community within a larger national collective.

HL: Do you consider yourself a Japanese American writer? How does being a Japanese American influence your writing and your career? Is identity a “real” issue?

CK: My editor and I sometimes talk about this. Some of my books, like *Kira-Kira*, are Japanese-oriented because at that time, with a few exceptions, it was mostly Japanese who worked as chicken sexers. But some people seem to see the book as being about racism. In fact, it is a book about family and the depth of family attachments. My next book, which is going to be a historical novel on the internment camps, is of course very Japanese-oriented. After that, I will publish a book about the Vietnam War with no characters of Japanese ancestry. As for the book I am planning to write after that, I’ll have a Japanese American girl as the main character, but it does not really deal with the issue of identity. In a way, I have to think about the issue of identity every
time I write a book. On the one hand, I don’t want to be pigeonholed; on the other hand, I think it is important to write from my own experience.

**HL:** You created Francie as a mixed-race character in *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*. Did you intend to create characters who are not “purely” Japanese Americans?

**CK:** Yes. Back then people expected me to write about being Japanese, but I couldn’t keep writing about the identity issue in every book. The problem is that some people don’t want you to write something different, yet other people do. I think the key point is to write what you want.

**HL:** Your intention to write something different is also clear in *The Glass Mountains*, which is set in a place very different from ours, in fact on another planet.

**CK:** Yes. Sometimes I just want to try something different. But sometimes I do like to write about Japanese. Why cannot Japanese American writers be like, say, Irish writers, who have the freedom to choose between writing and not writing about their Irish heritage?

**HL:** Do you write to express whatever you feel like saying or do you write with a certain sense of responsibility for your community or for a larger cause in mind?

**CK:** I think one can do it either way. For me, if you always think about your responsibility for other people, it would be hard to write a great story. Yet if you write a great story, it is already responsible. I don’t think the two ways are incompatible. You can do both. But when you are writing, I don’t think you have to think about the responsibility. Otherwise the book would come out too controlled. Something my Mom always said is that “the more personal, the more universal.” If you write true to your feelings, the writing will definitely reach out to other people.
HL: A lot of people may be curious about what you feel is your responsibility as a Japanese American author. For example, some reviewers criticized *The Floating World* because they thought the book does not reflect the reality of Japanese Americans or does not attest to the so-called "Japanese American sensibility."

CK: Well, when the book first came out, there was one extremely hostile interviewer who criticized the book that way. But to me, if he felt that way, he was responsible to write a novel himself. Also, if there is a Japanese sensibility, it must be added up from the different kinds of writing undertaken by different writers. The Japanese sensibility should not be something prescriptive. One would produce only bad writings by following rules. I am a Japanese American, and what I write certainly reflects my sensibilities.

HL: In addition to your writing, does your Japanese heritage affect your everyday life in any way?

CK: Well, maybe in little ways. Sometimes when I tried to interview somebody for my writing project, I would be afraid that people might not be willing to talk to me because of my Japanese ancestry. This never happened in my real life, but the feeling was like a ghost in my head. Another thing is that the internment happened once, and I somehow believe that it could happen again. That thought would put a different awareness in my mind about my Japanese heritage. In a sense, I don't feel a hundred percent secure.

HL: Did you have a lot of Japanese American friends when you grew up?

CK: In Georgia and Arkansas, there were small Japanese American communities. My parents' friends were mostly Japanese Americans but at the school I went to there was no other Japanese American. It was only a very small group of Japanese Americans living in Arkansas and Georgia. We did have Japanese American
friends, but they did not go to my school. But today, my boyfriend is Japanese American, although my former husband was white.

HL: Did your parents intend to have you grow up in a white community?

CK: My father probably did, though he speaks better Japanese than my mother and is actually more Japanese-oriented than my mother. In comparison, my mother has been more Americanized, partly because my maternal grandmother was also born in America. She is the third generation while my father is the second generation. She does not speak Japanese as well as my father, but I don’t know whether she tried to seclude us from Japanese American communities. There were only a few Japanese Americans living here and there in the places I grew up. If you just moved anywhere randomly, you probably would not meet many Japanese Americans. You really had to seek Japanese Americans out.

HL: Was this due to the relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II and to the dispersal of the community after the War as well?

CK: Certainly. But there were more Japanese American communities around California.

HL: Did you feel anxiety about being Japanese American when you grew up?

CK: Not really. I was never afraid of making Japanese American friends. I used to have a Japanese friend at school in Chicago. But during the eighties when Japanese cars started selling very well, I could tell that people were angry at the Japanese. There was a phase of Japan-bashing.

HL: What kinds of books do you usually read? Do you read Asian American authors?
CK: I used to read more Asian American books but now to tell the truth I read mostly children’s books. The first Asian American book I read at college was Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. It is an important book to me. It never occurred to me that a person could publish a book if he/she was an Asian American. It was thus very inspiring to see that Maxine Hong Kingston had published a book and done well with it. *The Woman Warrior* thus becomes in a certain way the most important Asian American book I have read so far because it made me see the possibility for me to be a writer. Other authors I read include Garrett Hongo.

HL: What are some of the new subjects Asian American writers might cultivate?

CK: A lot of writers nowadays would like to get away from the identity issue, though I think one still needs to have that sense of rootedness in one’s ethnicity. I hope that the writers can spread out to write whatever they like to write but, to me, the sense of history remains important. As for new subject matter, the experiences of new immigrants will certainly be worth writing about. Indeed the subjects of concern could be very diverse in view of the large numbers of intermarriage and the growing mixed-race population. The Asian American population is growing more and more diverse.

HL: As the Asian American population is growing diverse, is the category “Asian American” still appropriate to cover all Americans of Asian origin? Or do you think it has become a label that fails to address the increasing heterogeneity of people of Asian ancestry?

CK: If you asked me this question ten years ago, I might want to rid myself of that label. But now I take it mostly as something positive. It may sound funny but the fact is that when everyone liked the category I hated it; but now I think the category is OK not simply because people have started to question it but because I feel it is necessary for one to feel rooted in some community. A similar case can be found in the African American community. Although the category “African American” is made up of people from
different countries, they still identify themselves with an “African
American” community. I think people from Asia do share some-
thing special in this country and I’ll be sad if people no longer
identify themselves as “Asian Americans.”

**HL:** Please tell us about your recent writing project for young
readers.

**CK:** Well, since *Kira-Kira*, I have been doing several books for
children. The last one is a historical novel about the internment
camps. Though the book is categorized as literature for youth, my
target readers are actually from nine to ninety. The book is about
how the lives of two marginalized peoples—Japanese Americans
and Native Americans—intersected during World War II and
changed the futures of both.

**HL:** What made you start to write for children, and how many
books for youth are you planning to write?

**CK:** I started to write for young readers because the roommate I
had when I attended graduate school in Pittsburgh went on to be an
editor of children’s books. She has been one of my best friends,
and it was she who wanted me to write for children. I never took
the idea seriously until a few years ago. She is a really great editor,
and I like having the chance to write for young readers. Writing for
young readers actually came naturally because even in my books
for grown-ups my narrators are all pretty young.

**HL:** That is true. Olivia is in her teens, and Francie is turning from
nineteen to twenty. Though Mariska is twenty-four, among people
who usually live up to around two hundred years she is indeed
pretty young. Moreover, Olivia in *The Floating World* is in a way
afraid of getting old.

**CK:** Not exactly so. Olivia is not afraid of getting old. I think she
looks at her mother and realizes that her mother’s life did not turn
out well and she is afraid of that. But in the end, she wants to face
the future. I guess what is good about being young is that it makes
one hopeful. A young person believes that he/she can do anything. But I did not intend to write from the perspective of young narrators. For me it again came naturally, although my editor sometimes would ask me to change something because they feel that a young person won’t think this or that way.

**HL:** You have written a screenplay of *The Floating World*. Do you have plans to adapt the novel into a film?

**CK:** Actually a director from Japan, Katsuhide Motoki, who has directed comedies in Japan and works for the film company Shochiku, is working on this project. He is at the beginning stage of his work and just came here two weeks ago so we could talk. He hopes to film the story here but as a Japanese release, so there would be a lot of sections speaking Japanese. The book was previously optioned by the Japanese American director Kayo Hatta, who did not carry out the project because of some problems in fund-raising.

**HL:** How do you think your work will be relevant to people in Japan or more generally to those in Asia?

**CK:** It is for certain that Asian Americans are historically related to Asians. People from Asia might be interested in the stories of Asian Americans because these stories would have been theirs if they or their family had immigrated to America. There is quite a subtle relationship between Asians and Asian Americans, not necessarily the genetic relationship but that sense of historical connections and alliances. Also, if Motoki-san is successful in making the film, the Japanese can see how America treated Japanese Americans from the eyes of a Japanese American. There is a reversal of perspective involved: it is no longer how Americans write about Asians or Asian Americans but how an Asian represents Asian Americans in America.

**HL:** Thank you very much for this interview. We look forward to the release of the film version of *The Floating World* and the publication of your new books.
Notes

I appreciate Cynthia Kadohata’s patience in reading and correcting this interview. Special thanks go to Prof. King-Kok Cheung for offering her collection of Kadohata’s short stories and early reviews on Kadohata’s writings. I am also grateful to the MELUS reviewers and editors for their constructive comments and suggestions. An earlier version of this interview appears in Chinese in Zhongwai wenxue (Chung Wai Literary Monthly) 35.1 (2006): 137-54.

1. See Abe, O’Hehir, Kakutani, D’Aguiar, Yogi, and Woo for articles and reviews that discuss Kadohata’s writing style and content. Sarkar and Usui deal with her treatment of post-war Japanese American experiences. Wong discusses the politics of mobility in her writing, while Cutter and Lee discuss her idea of home.


3. The novel is entitled Weedflower, published by Atheneum Books in 2006. “Weedflower,” as noted by Kadohata in an email correspondence with the interviewer, is English for “kusabana,” which is what Japanese American farmers before World War II called the flowers they grew in the open field. The main character in the novel comes from a family of flower farmers.


5. Born in Hawaii, Kayo Hatta is an independent filmmaker noted for her 1995 film Picture Bride. She died in a swimming accident in the San Diego area in July 2005.

Books by Cynthia Kadohata


Works Cited and Selected Secondary Criticism


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