

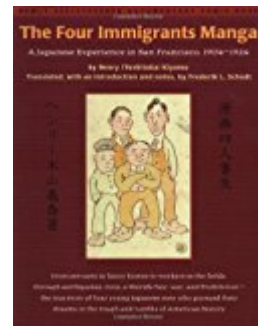
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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama. *The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924*. Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 1999. 152 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-880656-33-4.

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A Comic Book Account of Japanese Immigrants in America

Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga* is a wonderful primary-source document for anyone interested in gaining insight on the Japanese immigration experience in San Francisco near the beginning of the twentieth century. Originally published in 1931, it happens to be one of the first modern "comic books" produced in the United States (Manga—pronounced *mahn ga*—is Japanese for comics.) Though Kiyama was influenced by the classic gag-strip comic-book style published in American newspapers of the 1920s, his work is believed to be one of the first printed as a book with entirely new material.

In its original incarnation, *The Four Immigrants Manga* was bilingual, written in Japanese and English, but this newly reprinted version has been fully reproduced in English. The translator, Frederik L. Schodt, also provides an informative introduction as well as notes and commentary. As the author of three books relating to Japan, two specifically on Japanese comics, Schodt brings to the task a considerable degree of expertise. [1]

Kiyama's work is autobiographical, providing as a visual narrative a first-person account of the Japanese immigrant life in Southern California. At the same time, it offers an unusual historical glimpse of San Francisco, highlighting several well-known events: the 1906 earthquake, the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition,

World War I, the 1918 influenza epidemic, and the beginning of Prohibition in 1919.

Told in fifty-two panels, presumably because the artist intended to serialize them on a weekly basis in newspaper form, *The Four Immigrants Manga* opens with Henry and his three friends arriving by boat in San Francisco in 1904 (pp. 30-31). The first thing they do is give themselves American names: Henry, Charlie, Frank, and Fred. Each character comes to America to pursue a specific dream. Henry's reason is to become an artist. Frank wants to be a businessman and Fred a farmer, while Charlie simply desires to study American democracy. Thereafter, each episode provides the reader with antic adventures and life problems, as well as the inner thoughts of the characters. The book ends with Henry and Frank boarding a ship to return to Japan, the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 serving as a backdrop (pp. 132-33, 147).

According to Schodt, the historical setting for *The Four Immigrants Manga* is one in which the issue of race was a serious factor in the dynamics that unfolded. "European and Asian civilizations were for very different reasons both expanding, and in California they met head on and clashed," explains Schodt (p. 14). After Congress adopted the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Japanese began to replace the cheap labor pool in the American

West. While Japanese workers received better treatment than the Chinese, they were nonetheless discriminated against by Americans of European descent. Moreover, when Japan went to war against Russia in 1904 and proved militarily superior, the seeds for Western distrust of the Japanese were sown.

Henry and his pals encountered many instances of racial discrimination during their stay in San Francisco, as their arrival coincided with a growing intolerance toward Japanese. Mayor James D. Phelan, in fact, was agitating for their expulsion. Later, the Japanese Exclusion League was formed. For the observant artist Kiyama, there was the sense of “being made aware of... ‘outsider’ status, and... the rigid racial hierarchy that existed in the city, which was firmly controlled by European Americans (p. 15).” As an immigrant, Kiyama apparently felt a need to document his experience living in America. Perhaps this was a way to maintain his sense of self-identity and to overcome any feelings of inferiority due to societal marginalization. The humor he chose to employ may have also served as a psychological outlet, for the artist as well as the intended Japanese readers. In some respects, the book was a subversive work, in that it exposed in a satirical fashion the unfairness of the dominant culture.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Kiyama betrays his own prejudices, depicting other races in a less than flattering light. But Schodt offers this caution:

Certainly, in modern parlance, the drawings of Chinese and African Americans are by no means “politically correct.” In fact, the images of Chinese men with slant eyes and pigtailed and the big-lipped African Americans who appear once or twice in the story are rendered in styles pioneered by white cartoonists in the early part of the 20th century. Kiyama was merely imitating the cartoon styles that he would have found in any American newspaper at the time (pp. 15-16).

Schodt further suggests that Kiyama’s work should be seen as “a subtle racial democracy... for there is something to offend nearly everyone—even the whites are often referred to in highly derogatory terms (p. 16).” However, a more accurate assessment might suggest that this is simply a case of “othering” by the one who has been “othered.” The real issue here is not to moralize against examples of racism we perceive, but to understand the meaning of ethnicity as it was understood in the context of the period under discussion.

One theme that becomes clear in the narrative is the

economic struggle of living in America. In humorous fashion the myth of streets paved with gold is exposed to bitter reality. As Frank notes in an early episode, “People say you can get rich in America without lifting a pinky. *What a joke!*” (p. 35). After a series of jobs working as domestic servants, two of our heroes go off to work on a farm, where because they are from the city they are paid twenty-five cents less in wages (p. 52). The Horatio Alger myth is also turned on its head. After gambling away a month’s pay in a single night in Chinatown, Charlie, now a field worker, complains to himself, “I can’t believe how unlucky I am! This is a classic example of how the capitalists get richer and richer, and the proletariat never have a chance...” (p. 64). But even more noble attempts to advance economically go wrong, such as when the Gold Gate Bank failed after our heroes invest their savings (pp. 90-91). A Japanese doctor, tired of making a “measly \$2.50” on house calls, invests \$50 in the rice fields of Colusa only to lose all when there is a dramatic drop in the market—but prior to that he had reasoned, “I can get rich while snoring away in my sleep (pp. 104-5).” It is easy to imagine that many Japanese living in San Francisco back then would have smiled and nodded appreciatively at these true-to-life tales of economic failings.

Portraying economic realities as they were could be seen as a didactic aspect of the cartoons. This could also extend to the whole problem of discrimination, as the artist offers insights on how to cope. After the 1906 earthquake, two of our heroes pick up their relief rations only to fear that a policeman might confiscate their goods, so they follow closely behind a white woman and pretend to be her domestic servants until they pass out of potential danger (pp. 72-73). That episode teaches the importance of using street wits in order to overcome potential problems. After a visiting Japanese seismologist is hit on the head with a rock, apparently thrown by a racist, a Japanese immigrant jokingly suggests that it was an act of God, the same explanation given for earthquakes (pp. 74-75). The lesson here is that there is nothing you can do about acts of racism, that like an earthquake they sometimes happen without warning. This is not exactly an idealistic solution, but for back then it was probably the best pragmatic observation that could be offered. After Charlie serves in the American army during World War I, he goes to the court and asks to be made a citizen, only to be informed by the judge, “Um! Not for Orientals yet.” Afterwards, his buddy Frank taunts him over his failed strategy (pp. 118-19). Again, here is a warning that life in America is unfair, that even heroism is unlikely to tri-

umph over institutionalized racism.

This translation of Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga* comes to us at a time when serious attention is being given to the question of what constitutes American literature. Werner Sollors, chair of the American-Civilization Program at Harvard University, is one who has been calling for a broader examination of American literature written in languages other than English. [2] His argument is that we cannot really know the "outlines of American literature" if we choose to narrow our focus on texts that were written only in English. With that in mind, Sollors has been advocating more readable translations of the "enormous, largely uncharted, and invisible body of literature that one editor termed 'non-English literature of the United States.'" By translating Kiyama's work, Schodt has provided a valuable contribution to the study of non-English American literature by making visible what would otherwise have remained invisible.

Although some people may reject a comic book as literature, in terms of understanding culture and attitudes it can be quite instructive. As a journalist commented in a 1931 edition of the San Francisco *Nichi Bei* (*The Japanese-American News*), in an article reviewing *The Four Immigrants Manga*: "It includes most of the major incidents and problems of the time, and has considerable value as

a profile of Japanese in America. It's far more interesting than reading some poorly written history book."

Notes

[1]. See the following books by Frederik L. Schodt: *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 1996); *America and the Four Japans: Friend, Foe, Model, Mirror* (Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 1993); *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1983).

[2]. See the following essays by Werner Sollors: "The Blind Spot of Multiculturalism: America's Invisible Literature," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 30 October 1998, B4-B5; "From 'English-Only' to 'English Plus' in American Studies," *American Studies Association Newsletter*, March 1998; "For a Multilingual Turn in American Studies," *American Studies Association Newsletter*, June 1997. Also, see Werner Sollors, ed., *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York University Press, 1998).

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