

American Literature on the Battle of Okinawa and the Continuing US Military Presence

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Introduction:

The several works of American literature set in Okinawa or about Okinawans include travel narratives, war diaries, memoirs, biography, fiction, drama, and musical theater. Perhaps the earliest, Francis L. Hawks's 1856 *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, is an account of Commodore Matthew C. Perry's gunboat diplomacy of 1853-1854 when he forced his demands on leaders of what was then the Ryukyu Kingdom, allowing Americans to land, travel, and trade there. Hawks also provides informative and colorful descriptions of the local residents, architecture, and natural environment.¹

A century later, Okinawa commanded all of America's attention in the spring of 1945 during the last and worst battle of the Pacific War. Two Okinawan immigrants to the United States published autobiographical accounts in English of mid-20th-century Okinawa, including the battle and its aftermath. In "My Story: A Schoolgirl in the Battle of Okinawa," Masako Robbins describes her long ordeal as the daughter in an impoverished family, sold by her father into prostitution, who barely survived the battle. Jo Nobuko Martin's novel *A Princess Lily of the Ryukyus* (1984) depicts the horrifying ordeal of the Princess Lily Student Corps of high school girls, the author among them, and their teachers, who were drafted as combat nurses during the Battle of Okinawa. 237 out of 240 died in the fighting, and several committed suicide, having been told by the Japanese military they would be raped if captured by U.S. soldiers. Writing from the

American side of the battle, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ernie Pyle accompanied U.S. forces as a war correspondent. His account in *The Story of Ernie Pyle* (1950) begins with American battleships' shelling of Okinawa and ends the day he was killed by a Japanese sniper on the offshore island of Iejima.

More than 12,500 Americans died in the Battle of Okinawa, which took the lives of approximately 94,000 Japanese soldiers and 160,000 Okinawan civilians, between one-quarter and one-third of the prefecture's population at the time. The widespread devastation left most residents homeless, destitute, or both. During the months that followed, the American military placed thousands in refugee camps, sometimes for more than a year, supplying food, shelter (mostly tents), and medical treatment for the wounded and ill. U.S. occupation personnel supervised the distribution of relief aid and the construction of homes and public buildings; they were also tasked with bringing "democracy" to Okinawa, which many Americans considered feudalistic.

The contradiction between American espousals of democracy and policies imposed top-down under U.S. military rule soon became obvious to Okinawans, and to at least some American military personnel. One of them, Vern Sneider, published a satirical novel, *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, in 1951. Later adapted into two plays and a film starring Marlon Brando as an Okinawan, it is probably the best-known work of American literature set in Okinawa. *Lucky Come Hawaii* (1965) by Jon Shirota depicts the

experience of Okinawans in Hawaii, focusing on the strained relations among resident ethnic groups following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was the first novel by an Asian American writer to become a bestseller. Among later postwar works, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: Japan at Century's End* by Norma Field (1993) provides retrospectives on the Battle of Okinawa. "Memorial" by Gary Snyder and *The Yokota Officers Club* (2001) by Sarah Bird depict effects of the grossly disproportionate military presence in Okinawa which continues to this day.

My Story: A Schoolgirl in the Battle of Okinawa

Masako Shinjo Summers Robbins wrote *My Story*² in English, which she learned after coming to the United States from Okinawa with her first American husband in 1952. Her account of life in prewar, wartime, and early postwar Okinawa compels the reader to experience the history of this tumultuous era from the perspective of a daughter in an impoverished family. As a child in the 1930s, she was sold by her father to a brothel in Naha, Okinawa's capital city. Drafted by the Japanese military as a combat medic during the Battle of Okinawa, she barely survived sheltering in a cave that collapsed around her from shelling. After spending several months in a refugee camp at the end of the battle, her family returned to their village to find their home destroyed. Her strength, resourcefulness, and resilience through these horrifying ordeals are nothing short of astounding.

Of her childhood at the family home in the Imadomari section of Nakijin Village on the Motobu Peninsula of northern Okinawa, she writes, "We were so poor that we didn't have a decent door to close when we all went to bed."³ Later, she describes her life after her father sells her to a woman managing what she calls "a house, not a home," and the fear and disgust she felt when the woman sold her

virginity to a wealthy businessman. After U.S. firebombing in October of 1944 destroyed most of Naha City, including the brothel where she worked, she felt relieved that "now [the woman] had no power over me."⁴

Six months after the bombing of Naha, U.S. forces invaded Okinawa Island on April 1, 1945. Masako watched from a cave shelter as U.S. Navy ships offshore fired cannon barrages. "The American ships were so close that, as we lay on the ground watching, we could see sailors moving about on deck, or in the distance a kamikaze attack."⁵ After U.S. forces occupied the central and northern regions in fighting that caused heavy casualties on both sides and among Okinawan civilians, Masako and the other women refugees were moved from shelter to shelter by the Japanese army in its long, chaotic retreat under fire to the southern portion of the island in which thousands more soldiers and civilians died. She tells how Japanese soldiers seized food from Okinawan homes, killing a family who tried to hide one cup of rice, and how they killed a baby inside a cave shelter whose crying, they said, might attract the attention of the enemy.

In late June American soldiers captured Masako and a friend from her school days hiding in a sugar cane field. "We were quickly surrounded by what seemed like fifty American soldiers standing in the sugar cane. All had weapons and they were pointed at us."⁶



Civilian refugees in the Battle of Okinawa

Robbins describes the months that followed, most of which she spent in refugee camps where the internees, prohibited from returning to their villages, were fed and sheltered, but where some American soldiers raped young women and girls. Later, she is hired to work in the post-exchange at the Okuma Officers Rest Center in northern Okinawa. This was one of the many installations the U.S. military took over from the Japanese army, greatly expanding them and building vast new bases for their occupation (1945–1972), which lasted twenty years longer than the Allied occupation of mainland Japan. The grossly disproportionate U.S. military presence remains to this day.

Princess Lily of the Ryukyus by Jo Nobuko Martin

In December, 1941, the author was a teenage schoolgirl in Naha when the principal called all students and teachers into the auditorium for an emergency assembly.

"I have an official announcement from Imperial Headquarters," Mr. Masaoka began . . . He paused

about five seconds to prepare us for the news. "We have just declared war on Britain and the United States . . . Our mighty bombers have wiped out an entire unit of the American fleet at Pearl Harbor."⁷

Soon makeshift military training was added to the school curriculum.

We had no metal for weapons, but bamboo grew abundantly in backyards and in the countryside. Bamboo was light and supple, and made excellent spears; . . . straw dummies with the heads of Churchill or Roosevelt were fashioned.⁸

Six months after the October 10, 1944, air attack that destroyed the capital city of Naha, U.S. forces landed on the Keramas, just off the coast of Okinawa Main Island, in late March of 1945. Thus began the last and worst battle of the Pacific War, taking some 230,000 lives, more than half of them Okinawan civilians, and destroying most standing structures.

Nobuko, as one of the Himeyuri student medics, had made her way through an "iron tempest" of "falling . . . shells" to the underground field hospital where she'd been assigned.

Wounded men lay on bunk beds lining the walls. In addition to the usual musty odors associated with cave life, there was the stench of putrefying flesh, pus, and medicines. The air was thick with fluffy soot from the many kerosene lamps on the walls . . . In the operating room under a naked electric bulb two masked doctors

in white were bending over the operating table. A nurse stood by, holding a tray with gleaming instruments. Their patient groaned in pain. To eyes accustomed to the yellowish light from kerosene lamps, the white, glowing electric light was blinding, and the brightly illuminated operating room contrasted harshly with its shadowy surroundings. The scene reminded me of a horror movie I had once seen, in which a mad doctor was performing an operation on a screaming victim.⁹



American soldiers and Japanese POW's

In late June, Nobuko, her classmates, and other refugees heard a loudspeaker announcement in Japanese from a U.S. Navy ship off the coast of southern Okinawa Island. "The war is over. Come out. We won't hurt you."

We had been moving northward along the coral beach for fifteen minutes or so when, all of a sudden, there they were—fifty of them, at least—huge men with

rifles! . . .

I turned around. Someone took hold of my shoulder . . . "Where are you going?" he asked, in Japanese. It was bookish, heavily accented Japanese, but quite comprehensible.

. . . I stared up at him for a moment. He had blue eyes—blue eyes! . . .¹⁰

Later, much later, some of us learned a Japanese officer named Akamatsu had ordered the inhabitants of [Kerama] island to commit mass suicide to avoid being captured . . . Hand grenades were distributed. There was one grenade for twenty to thirty people—Not nearly enough for a clean, instant death for everybody. Those who did not die immediately used clubs, axes, grubbing hoes, razors or rocks to finish each other off.¹¹

In ordering their suicides, the Japanese military had told Okinawans that if they were captured, the Americans would torture them for information, then rape the women before killing all of them. In a dispatch dated April 23, 1945, less than one week before he was killed in the battle, American war correspondent Ernie Pyle described how some civilians reacted after realizing they'd been misled:

After a few days the grapevine carried the word to them that we were treating them well so they began to come out in droves and give themselves up. I heard one story about a hundred Okinawan civilians who had a [Japanese] soldier among them, and when

they realized the atrocity stories he had told them about the Americans were untrue, our MPs had to step in to keep them from beating him.¹²

The Story of Ernie Pyle

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ernie Pyle's writing about Okinawa, where he accompanied U.S. forces as a war correspondent, starts with a premonition of his own death there. As the American invasion force in navy ships headed for the island, he wrote, "Sometimes I get so mad and despairing I can hardly keep from crying . . . I worry so much about what might happen to me, I've even gotten to brooding about it and sometimes can't sleep."¹³ "On the last day we changed our money into newly manufactured 'invasion yen,' drew two days K-rations, took a last bath, and packed our kits before supper. We had a huge turkey dinner. 'Fattening us up for the kill,' the boys laughingly say."¹⁴ While the temporary calm prevailed, he recorded his impressions of Okinawa, praising the local scenery in a description reminiscent of Bayard Taylor's account of Perry's arrival in Ryukyu ninety-two years earlier. The landscape that had reminded Taylor of "the richest English scenery" impressed Pyle for "the similarity with the villages of Sicily."



Ernie Pyle

Since this island is the closest to Japan we've landed on we seem to feel this really is Japan, rather than just some far outpost . . . There are tropical-like trees . . . All through the country are narrow dirt lanes and now and then a fairly decent gravel road . . . We had read about what a worthless place Okinawa was, but I think most of us have been surprised about how pretty it is.¹⁵

Pyle gives his impressions of local residents:

Okinawan civilians we bring in are pitiful. The only ones left seem to be real old or real young. And they all are very, very poor . . . The people here dress as we see Japanese dressed in pictures: women in kimonos and old men in skin-tight pants . . . We found two who spoke a little English. They had once lived in Hawaii. One was an old man who had a son (Hawaiian-Japanese) somewhere in the American Army! . . .

They were obviously scared to death . . . After all the propaganda they've been fed about our tortures, it's going to be a befuddled bunch of Okinawans when they discover we brought right along with us, as part of the intricate invasion plan, enough supplies to feed them, too!¹⁶

He writes of American aircraft carriers barraging Okinawa with thousands of shells, and of planes launched from aircraft carries

dropping bombs armed with napalm. “The ghostly concussion set up vibrations in the air—a sort of flutter—which pained your ears and pounded upon you as though . . . with invisible drumsticks.”¹⁷ His description seems to mirror Masako Robbins’s account from the other side in the battle of “bombing and gunfire from offshore . . . The American ships were so close that, as we lay on the ground watching, we could see sailors moving about on deck.”¹⁸ Just before going ashore with Marines in a small landing craft, Pyle again contemplates the possibility that he will not survive the invasion. “There’s nothing romantic whatever in knowing that an hour from now you may be dead.”¹⁹

Pyle shared the Marines’ astonishment at the total absence of Japanese resistance to the regiment’s initial landing on the beaches of central Okinawa. “You wouldn’t believe it,” he wrote. “And we don’t either. It just can’t be true. And yet it is true. The regiment of Marines I am with landed this morning, on the beaches of Okinawa absolutely unopposed, which is indeed an odd experience for a Marine. Nobody among us dreamed of such a thing. We all thought there would be slaughter on the beaches . . . We don’t expect this to continue, of course.”²⁰ And he quotes the first words he heard spoken by a marine on Okinawa. “Hell, this is just like one of MacArthur’s landings!”²¹

Later, Pyle describes the capture of two Japanese soldiers: “They were real Japanese from Japan, not the Okinawan home guard . . . Fortunately, they happened to be the surrendering kind, rather than the fight-to-the-death kind, or they could have killed several of us.”²² His observation is important for countering the widespread impression of Japanese soldiers as monolithically committed to joyful “banzai” suicides honoring the emperor to avoid the shame of capture. In fact, although many fought until they were killed, and some strapped explosives on themselves to

attack tanks and bunkers, thousands also surrendered in Okinawa and were held in prisoner-of-war camps during and after the battle.

The calm that initially greeted Pyle and the Marines soon ended, and the counterattack began, as it had earlier at Iwo Jima, by Japanese soldiers firing from fortified caves and bunkers. According to the official history of operations in Okinawa, the Seventy-Seventh Marine Division, which had fought on Guam and Leyte in the Philippines, “was to meet the stiffest opposition in its experience.” Pyle biographer Lee Graham Miller quotes a marine officer’s description of the enemy on Iejima Island just off the coast of northern Okinawa: “He killed until he was killed. He remained hidden until our troops passed him, and then he fired at their backs. He came out of hiding at night, every night, to kill as many Americans as he could before he was cut down; he made a living bomb of himself and threw himself under tanks and into foxholes against groups of GIs.”²³ In the six days of fighting on Iejima, the Seventy-Seventh lost 172 killed and 902 wounded. Almost five thousand Japanese died. On April 18, 1945, Ernie Pyle was traveling with four Marines in a jeep. Coming under machine gun fire, they jumped out to take cover in a ditch by the roadside, where he was struck by a sniper’s bullet in the left temple and died instantly.²⁴ A monument stands there today honoring perhaps the best-known American correspondent of World War II.

At This Spot

The 77th Infantry Division

Lost a Buddy

ERNIE PYLE

18 April 1945

The Teahouse of the August Moon

Ernie Pyle was one of more than 12,500 Americans to die in the Battle of Okinawa. It took the lives of approximately 94,000 Japanese soldiers and 160,000 Okinawan civilians, between one-quarter and one-third of the prefecture's resident population at the time. The widespread devastation left most residents homeless, destitute, or both. During the months that followed, the American military placed thousands in refugee camps, sometimes for more than a year. As Pyle noted, the U.S. invasion force had prepared for this chaotic aftermath, supplying food, shelter (mostly tents), and medical treatment for the wounded and ill. Starting in 1946, the U.S. Congress voted funds for GARIOA, Government Aid and Relief in Occupied Areas, which not only delivered food supplies and materials to rebuild destroyed communities but later provided college scholarships for Okinawans to study in the U.S. However, GARIOA failed to address the hundreds of serious crimes, especially rape, committed by U.S. soldiers, the military's forcible seizures of farmers' lands for construction and expansion of American bases, and the daily violations of human rights under U.S. military occupation.

U.S. occupation personnel supervised the distribution of relief aid and the construction of homes and public buildings, but they were also tasked, as in mainland Japan, with "reforming" Okinawan society, considered by many Americans to be backward and "feudal." This was to be accomplished by implementing American conceptions of democracy, or "demokurashii," a word invoked so often in Japanese that it became a punchline for jokes about the occupiers. The contradiction between American espousals of democracy and policies imposed top-down under U.S. military rule soon became obvious to Okinawans, and to at least some American military personnel. One of them, Vern Sneider, was assigned as commander of Tobaru, a village of five thousand in central Okinawa. Based on this experience, he published a satirical novel, *The*

Teahouse of the August Moon,²⁵ in 1951, adapted in 1953 by John Patrick for a Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play,²⁶ in 1956 for a film starring Marlon Brando in the role of the commander's Okinawan interpreter,²⁷ and in 1970 for a Broadway musical, "Lovely Ladies, Kind Gentlemen."²⁸ The *Teahouse of the August Moon*, in its four incarnations, is probably the best-known work of American literature set in Okinawa.



Marlon Brando as Okinawan interpreter in film of "Teahouse of the August Moon"

The curtain opens on Patrick's play with a monologue by the interpreter Sakini giving the audience a history lesson in a stereotypical "oriental" patois. From the perspective of today's sensitivities, it must be remembered that *Teahouse* is a satire of American images and attitudes and of Okinawan responses to them.

Lovely ladies, kind gentlemen:
Please to introduce myself. Sakini
by name. Interpreter by profession.
Education by ancient dictionary.
Okinawan by whim of gods. History
of Okinawa reveal distinguished
record of conquerors. We have
honor to be subjugated in
fourteenth century by Chinese
pirates. In sixteenth century by

English missionaries. In eighteenth century by Japanese war lords. And in twentieth century by American Marines. Okinawa very fortunate. Culture brought to us . . . Not have to leave home for it. Learn many things. Most important that the rest of the world not like Okinawa. World filled with delightful variation. In Okinawa . . . no locks on doors. Bad manners not to trust neighbors. In America . . . lock and key big industry. Conclusion? Bad manners good business. In Okinawa . . . wash self in public bath with nude lady quite proper. Picture of nude lady in private home . . . quite improper. In America . . . statue of nude lady in park win prize. But nude lady in flesh in park win penalty. Conclusion? Pornography question of geography. But Okinawans most eager to be educated by conquerors. Deep desire to improve friction. Not easy to learn. Sometimes painful.²⁹

Yet the “painful” cultural “friction” in Teahouse is felt much more by the occupying Americans than by the occupied Okinawans. At one point, Colonel Wainwright Purdy, the commander of the central island region, who is hoping for a promotion to brigadier general, says in frustration, “My job is to teach these natives the meaning of democracy, and they’re going to learn democracy if I have to shoot every one of them.”³⁰

In one major misunderstanding early on, Captain Jeff Fisby, commander of Tobiki Village and a central character in the story, has unwittingly given permission to Mr. Motomura, a wealthy man from Awasi Village, to reside in Tobiki. Only later does he learn that Mr. Motomura had been expelled from Awasi for

corrupt activities. They involved two geisha, whom he now presents to Captain Fisby as a “gift of gratitude” for permission to live in the village.

[He] turned to Sakini. “But I can’t own geishas,” he protested.

Sakini scratched his head. “Don’t understand, boss. A very honorable profession.”

Fisby groped for words, tried to think. Then he smiled. “Well, it’s just not allowed, Sakini. You see, once there was a great man in our country. We called him the Great Emancipator.”

“The great who?”

“Emancipator. And he said that people can’t own other people, so—” Fisby shrugged and eased himself back into the swivel chair, pleased with his explanation.

Sakini considered carefully. “Boss, did the Great Emancipator say you can’t own geishas?”

In self-defense, Fisby edged forward on the chair. “Well, not exactly. In the first place, I don’t think he knew about geishas.”

Sakini nodded slyly. “Everything all right then, boss. You own.”³¹

The two geisha, who, it turns out had been the cause of the breakdown in social order at Awasi, have the same effect in Tobiki. They distract the men from their assigned reconstruction tasks, sow jealousy among the women, and sabotage Captain Fisby’s pet project of constructing a school with U.S.-aid-funded materials and labor, which the villagers

vote unanimously must be used instead to build a teahouse for the geisha to entertain. Unable to resist their demands for “democracy,” Fisby resigns himself to arrest and court martial with the visit to Tobiki of Colonel Purdy along with a congressional committee monitoring the expenditure of U.S. aid funds and the progress of occupation policies. Instead, the story ends happily as the congressmen are deeply impressed by the entrepreneurial spirit in Tobiki and “American get-up-and-go in the recovery program.” Besides the success of the teahouse, the villagers are running a lucrative business brewing potato brandy in home distilleries. “The Pentagon is boasting. Congress is crowing. We’re all over the papers,” exults Colonel Purdy.³²

Risa Nakayama compares the novel, play, and film versions of “Teahouse” in her article “Perverted Okinawa: De-Okinawanization in the Adaptation of The Teahouse of the August Moon.”³³

Because Vern Sneider, the author of the novel, stayed in Okinawa during and after World War II, the way he describes Okinawa and Okinawans is more or less realistic . . . On the other hand the film, and the play adapted by John Patrick, apply a form of slapstick comedy, using stereotyped characters.³⁴

Nakayama notes that the play’s director, Robert Lewis, had initially wanted an Asian actor in the role of Sakini but had settled on David Wayne in “yellow face.” For the film, Brando was chosen over others for his box-office draw (Mickey Rooney was also considered for the role) at a time when it was common for white actors to play Asians in Hollywood films, sacrificing verisimilitude in favor of star power. Nakayama also notes the “juvenilization” of Okinawan characters as one aspect of what today would be called

“Orientalism.”³⁵

Author James D. Houston also writes of the “child-like” characters in the play version of Teahouse, but calls it an early breakthrough for literary and dramatic portrayals of Asians by American writers:

In a way it’s a miracle that in 1952 such a play was produced at all: a bilingual production with dialogue in both English and Japanese, with an Asian character in a leading role, an Asian we are actually allowed to like, rather than encouraged to mistrust which had been the norm, in film and fiction, from the days of the Gold Rush onward.³⁶

Lucky Come Hawaii by Jon Shirota

Jon Shirota was born on Maui in 1928, the son of immigrants from Okinawa. His writing depicts the Okinawan immigrant experience in Hawaii, focusing on the strained relations among resident ethnic groups—Caucasian, mainland Japanese, Okinawan, Chinese, Filipino, Portuguese, and Native Hawaiian. “Shirota gives his Okinawan characters cultural and ethnic traits that distinguish them from other Japanese,” explains Katsunori Yamazato.

The troubled relations between Okinawa and the rest of Japan have continued since 1879, when the Ryukyu Kingdom was annexed by the rising East Asian empire of [Japan]. Even after Okinawans settled in Hawai’i and the United States, they must struggle for an identity of their own, Japanese and yet undeniably Okinawan.³⁷

Lucky Come Hawaii, originally published by Bantam Books in 1965 and reissued by University of Hawai'i Press in 2010, was the first novel by an Asian American writer to become a bestseller. Shiota adapted the story as one of a series of plays produced in Honolulu, Los Angeles, New York, and Tokyo. It is set during and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. That day Kama Gusuda, an Okinawan immigrant and the central character, is delivering one of the pigs he raises to a Chinese restaurant in Honolulu. The elderly proprietor Lin Wo suddenly informs a stunned Gusuda, "God-tem Jap-anee! Kill 'em lotsa 'Melican sailah and soldiah, Pear's Har-bah! . . . You no heah radio, Gusuda?" . . . God-tem Jap-anee! . . . Al'time kill, kill. Kill 'em lotsa Chineee in China. Now kill 'em lotsa 'Melican soldiah and sailah."³⁸

Shiota portrays reactions to the attack among characters of the various ethnicities, focusing on a split between first- and second-generation Okinawans. Gusuda and other immigrants are proud of Japan's military successes and expect to benefit from an anticipated Japanese conquest of Hawaii. However, the younger Okinawans born and raised there worry about rising anti-Japanese sentiment and the U.S. government's interrogations and detentions of local residents wrongly suspected of planning sabotage. Young men soon feel pressures to join the U.S. military in order to prove their loyalty. Another of the older immigrants, Mr. Higa, paints a rising sun flag on his roof so that Japanese planes in the successful invasion he anticipates won't bomb his house.

"Japanese soldiers are too brave for the Americans," he explains. "Whenever the 'Merican soldiers come across the Japanese soldiers they're sure to run." But, hearing about the interrogations, he hurriedly washes off the flag. Gusuda's second-generation

daughter Kimiko wonders, "How foolish can people be? . . . Those superstitious fools, starting a war! Wanting to die for the Emperor because he was supposed to be a God—a descendant of the Sun."³⁹

Through the characters' recollections, Shiota portrays the immigrant experience and mainland Japanese prejudice against Okinawans in Hawaii. "The Naichis [mainland Japanese] are always looking down on us, [but] they're no better . . . Like us, they had to come to Hawaii because they were poor back in Japan."⁶⁷ Shiota writes that Gusuda recalls "the hardships he himself had gone through back in Ginoza Village in Okinawa. Everyone had always been so poor and hungry there."⁴⁰

He arrived in Waipahu, Oahu, near Pearl Harbor in 1905. He had never worked so hard in his life: cutting sugar cane with a heavy bolo knife under the scorching tropical heat . . . six days a week . . . After living in Waipahu for two years, convinced he could never return to Okinawa a wealthy man, he paid a local marriage broker . . . to have a picture bride sent from Okinawa.⁴¹

Lucky Come Hawaii concludes with MPs, guns drawn, bursting into the home of a Japanese American family falsely reported to possess a short-wave radio, which turns out to be a phonograph playing children's songs.

Get your hands up!" the Sergeant bellowed, stabbing his automatic at the frail-looking, middle-aged Japanese man in sleeping kimono, and two pajama-clad girls, about eight and ten . . . A small

phonograph on the floor kept on playing soft Japanese music . . . "Peterson, search the house for that radio set," the Sergeant ordered. "And I don't give a damn if you wreck the joint finding it." . . .

"Hey, Sarge," the driver said . . . "[T]here ain't no radio set in this heah house. I've searched everywhere." . . . The Sergeant said, "These people ain't got no business listening to Jap music." He picked up the record off the phonograph and crushed it over his knee, [then] bent down to grab a handful of other records.⁴²

Among the two thousand men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry arrested, detained, and interned in Hawaii, no evidence of espionage or sabotage was found, and no charges were ever filed.

The author of two other novels, Shiota adapted *Lucky Come Hawaii* as a play produced in Los Angeles, Hawaii, and New York in the early 1990s. His 1999 play *Leilani's Hibiscus*⁴³ was produced in Los Angeles, Hawaii, and New York and, in a Japanese translation by Katsunori Yamazato, in Tokyo and Okinawa. Set in Hawaii during the early postwar period, it features seven characters, two of whom are speaking posthumously at their grave site, who reminisce about their lives filled with hardship as immigrants working on the plantations, as soldiers serving in Okinawa, and as members of a minority facing discrimination.

Fifty-year-old Yasuichi Gusuda immigrated to Hawaii in the 1930s but chose to return to Okinawa in 1941 just before the start of the Pacific War. "Bad timing," he says.⁷⁴ He recalls his uncle, who asks, "What happened to her family?" "They all jumped off the cliff: her father, mother, two older sisters and a baby

brother," answers Ichiro, who then reveals for the first time that the girl he rescued is his wife, Mayumi.⁴⁶

Shiota's play "Voices from Okinawa" takes place more recently, at the time of the Iraq War.⁴⁷ As during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the U.S. military used its bases in Okinawa to train troops and store weapons for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The central character, Kama Hutchins, lives in Hawaii and is in Okinawa to trace his family's roots as part of his PhD thesis on immigration. "I'm one-quarter Okinawan, three-quarters American . . . My grandmother married an American, and her daughter, my mother, married an American."⁴⁸

Most of the play addresses the ubiquitous effects of the U.S. postwar occupation and military presence in Okinawa. Kama explains one of its effects to his Okinawan student, Yasunobu Hokama:

Did you know that millions of American military have come and gone through Okinawa since 1945 . . . leaving behind offspring with tall noses and round eyes? The influence of Americans is everywhere today: music, language, clothing.⁴⁹

Yasunobu explains why he is learning English:

I am barber. My barbershop near Kadena Air Base. Most of my customers GIs. GIs sure talk funny. Always say, "Gotcha." What they got, I don't know. Even when speaking to just-a-one man, they say "Y'all." I come to Naha English School so I can speak like 'Mericans in 'Merica; not on'y like GIs in Okinawa.⁵⁰

Much of the play's dialogues are filled with such humor, but when Kama meets his relatives, he learns about the devastating consequences of the sixty-year military presence. His great-aunt tells him how she has been offered "millions of yen" to lease her land for a military base, but that she is determined to stay in the home where she has lived all her life. The woman who is the principal of the English school where he teaches supports her decision. "Lease, sell—what's the difference? More army camps, more abused young girls." Referring to the 1995 rape of an elementary schoolgirl by three American servicemen, the principal adds, "She was just twelve years old!"⁵¹ In act 2 Kama's great-aunt tells him a U.S. Army interpreter, a Japanese American soldier, came and threatened to burn her house and sugar cane field if she refused to sign a lease and move out.

"A Monument on Okinawa"

The work of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gary Snyder reflects an immersion in Buddhist spirituality and a devotion to environmental preservation. He lived in Japan for several years and translated Japanese poetry. His 1958 poem "A Monument in Okinawa" on the shrine dedicated to the Himeyuri student nurses (discussed in the section above, *Princess Lilies of the Ryukyus* by Jo Nobuko Martin) evokes their compulsory suicides during the Battle of Okinawa and shows how militarization of the island has continued.⁸⁴ The families of farmers whose land was seized by U.S. occupation forces for base expansion and construction in the 1950s, as well as many others, were forced in the devastated local economy to find gainful employment in the "military service" sector.

"One hundred twenty schoolgirls
Committed suicide together here."

Dead now thirteen years,

Those knot-hearted little
adolescents

In their fool purity

Died with a perverse sort of grace;

Their sisters who live

Can be seen in the bars—

The agreeable hustlers of peace.⁵²

Devoid of the sentimentality and nationalistic overtones in Japanese films and manga on the Himeyuri schoolgirls, this poem radiates a tone of bitter irony in describing their "fool purity" and the "perverse grace" in their deaths. The irony seems to turn cold when Snyder depicts women, many compelled to work in GI bars by economic circumstances in Okinawa under U.S. military occupation, as "agreeable hustlers." They might smile agreeably for their customers but could hardly be said to enjoy their work. Perhaps the poem's ultimate irony is Snyder's reference to the "peace" in Okinawa, a bastion of weapons, troops, and warplanes for America's wars in Korea and Vietnam, and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Yokota Officers Club

The daughter of an Air Force officer stationed at Kadena Air Base during the Cold War, Sarah Bird has written two novels set in Okinawa. *The Yokota Officers Club* features tumultuously comic scenes of a military family's life on base and their visits to the adjacent base town (in both senses of the word) Her novel reveals the rigid hierarchy among American officers' wives that results in bullying of the younger women among them. The story concludes with tense drama when the main character's father, an air force pilot, narrowly escapes death in a dangerous reconnaissance mission over the Soviet Union.

Returning to the airbase one afternoon shortly

after arriving in Okinawa, the family encounters a protest demonstration against B-52s in Okinawa that were flying bombing missions to Southeast Asia.

Back at Kadena, the knot of demonstrators at Gate Three has swollen by several hundred. The new protesters are not the polite suit-jacketed crowd that was there the other day. A Japanese man in Trotsky glasses, his hair in a spiky brush-cut, marches back and forth in front of the demonstrators, yelling into a bullhorn, and beating his fist in the air in time with his message. Like many of the other new demonstrators, he has a look of pasty-faced fanaticism that I recognize from the ringleaders of the protest movement in college. This time many signs are in English.

NUCLEAR NO! U.S. BASE GO!
DISMISS B52S FROM OKINAWA.

"Do you think they mean
'remove'?" [my sister] asks."⁵⁴

Bird pointedly contrasts the Okinawan world of crowded streets and cramped living conditions with the wide-open spaces and comfortable living quarters for American military personnel and their dependents on base.

On base, we move from a chaotic, congested world crowded with small vehicles and small people into a world where armored personnel carriers and broad-beamed six-footers roam an orderly, expansive landscape of boulevards, runways, and fields, most of them ringed with white-

painted rocks.

Among the most expansive of the many rolling spaces on-base is a parade ground.⁵⁵

Bird describes what the family sees driving through Koza, Okinawa's most notorious base town, just outside the largest air force and army bases on the island.

Koza is like a low-rent tropical Bourbon Street populated by roving groups of GIs. The white boys are unmistakable in their newly plucked haircuts, JC Penney Dacron shirts and trousers, and the twitchy air that comes from their effort to channel homesickness and vulnerability into swaggering machismo.

Pawnshops, tattoo parlors, tailor shops, and optical, electronics, and T-shirt shops are scattered among the bars: Ace High, Okay Joe, New Pussycat No. 3, Gentilemans Club, Stateside Bar. Promises of SEXY FLORR SHOW! or GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS! or GO-GO SHOW! are illustrated with posters of dark-haired girls—either totally naked or encumbered only with go-go boots, pink baby dolls, and a whip—thrusting out perfect breasts . . . Bar girls flood out of [a] club. My father watches the girls tug the men inside.

"There's your American fighting man. There's your sentinel of liberty."⁵⁶



Koza, Okinawa, 1960s

Above the East China Sea

Based on her extensive research in Okinawan history and culture, Bird's *Above the East China Sea* juxtaposes the horrifying ordeal of Tamiko, an Okinawan high school girl drafted to serve in 1945 as a combat medic during the Battle of Okinawa, with the story of Luz, an American military dependent sent with her family some sixty years later to the vast complex of bases in Okinawa. Both teenagers contemplate suicide. Tamiko is told by Japanese forces to leap from high cliffs to her death in the ocean to avoid capture by the Americans. "The soldiers, either Japanese or American, will kill us as soon as the sun rises."⁵⁷ Luz is overcome with grief for her sister Codie, the person she is closest to. In a troubled relationship with her mother, Luz feels abandoned when Codie enlists in the air force. On her first deployment, she is killed by mortar fire at an air base in Afghanistan. Luz peers "a hundred feet straight down at the base of the cliffs . . . That's where I'd land. Death would be instantaneous."⁵⁸

The loss of family members in war and Okinawan rituals for communicating with spirits of the dead connect these two narratives that take place in disparate times and cultures, but in the same lush environment of this subtropical island subjected to the continuing violence of militarization by Japan and the United States.

This article is excerpted and adapted from "Okinawa in American Literature" in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2017).

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Related articles

- Steve Rabson, [Perry's Black Ships in Japan and Ryukyu: The Whitewash of History](#)
- Masako Shinjo Summers Robins and Steve Rabson, [My Story: A daughter recalls the battle of Okinawa](#)
- The Ryukyu Shimpo, Ota Masahide, Mark Ealey and Alastair McLauchlan, [Descent Into Hell: The Battle of Okinawa](#)
- Michael Bradley, ["Banzai!" The Compulsory Mass Suicide of Kerama Islanders in the Battle of Okinawa](#)
- Sarah Bird with Steve Rabson, [Above the East China Sea: Okinawa During the Battle and Today](#)
- Yoshiko Sakumoto Crandell, [Surviving the Battle of Okinawa: Memories of a Schoolgirl](#)
- Aniya Masaaki, [Compulsory Mass Suicide, the Battle of Okinawa, and Japan's Textbook Controversy](#)

Steve Rabson was stationed as a U.S. Army draftee at the 137th Ordnance Company (SW) in Henoko, Okinawa from July, 1967 to June, 1968. He is professor emeritus of East Asian studies at Brown University and has published books and articles about Okinawa, and translations of Okinawan literature. His books are [Okinawa: Two Postwar Novellas](#) (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1989, reprinted 1996), [Righteous](#)

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Notes

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¹⁵ Miller, *Story of Ernie Pyle*, 413-414.

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¹⁷ Ibid., 415

¹⁸ See Note 2.

¹⁹ Miller, *Story of Ernie Pyle*, 415.

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- ²⁸ *Lovely Ladies, Kind Gentlemen* was a musical based on John Patrick's play and screenplay. After three previews, the Broadway production opened on December 28, 1970, at the Majestic Theatre, where it ran for only nineteen performances.
- ²⁹ Patrick, *Teahouse of the August Moon*, 8.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.
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