

# The social context of the book, the wash essay sample



While the early works spelled the beginning of success for Gotanda, it was his bittersweet drama about the dissolution of a nisei marriage, *The Wash* (1985) that placed him firmly in the public's eye as a playwright of standing. Originally, *The Wash* was workshopped at the Mark Taper Forum's New Theatre for Now Festival (1985). Two years later, the play had its world premiere at San Francisco's Eureka Theatre. It was filmed for American Playhouse (1990), with a powerful cast that included Mako as Nobu Matsumoto, a nisei husband consumed with anger and self-loathing; Nobu McCarthy as Masi, Nobu's wife who leaves him to seek a meaningful and independent life for herself; and Sab Shimono as Masi's lover Sadao. With its frank but tender and thoughtful treatment of the death of a marriage, Gotanda carved out a dramaturgical place for himself as the creator of distinctly nonstereotypical, realistic characterizations of Japanese Americans and their lives.

Philip Kan Gotanda is the creator of influential Asian American dramas that reflect the state of contemporary Asian American theater and, indeed, often influence the course of its development. As such, considered as a body of work, Gotanda's *The Wash* can be said to address a broad spectrum of Asian American, and specifically Japanese American, experiences, encompassing a variety of theatrical styles, including realism, surrealism, and the eclectic style of the American stage musical. Considered separately, each of Gotanda's works makes a distinct claim for the diversity of Japanese America.

Although they have been married forty-two years, the Japanese-American couple Nobu and Masi Matsumoto separate because of long-term differences.

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While Masi considered herself a new woman free from the Asian ideas of marriage, she still visits Nobu weekly to collect and drop off his laundry and to see how he is faring. Their two grown daughters have opposing opinions on the separation. Marsha believes in the tradition of the family and hopes for a reconciliation between the parents. Judy, who is estranged from Nobu since she married an African American, supports her mother and her newfound freedom. When Masi begins a relationship with widower Sadao, Nobu is more frustrated and confused than ever, rejecting his girlfriend Kiyoko and sinking into despair when Masi asks for a divorce. In the final scene Masi arrives with clean shirts for the last time, leaving the dirty shirts on the floor.

In the 1980s although Asian Americans shared many ideas, values, and religious beliefs, they were as culturally diverse among themselves as they were different from other Americans (Lee 123). The cultural diversity among Asian Americans originates from a variety of physical, environmental, and historical factors. Language and religion are just two such factors. Because of these pronounced differences, it is important for readers of the Wash to hold in respect the uniqueness of each individual experience profiled in this book.

The apparent isolation of small nuclear families and a related neglect of the elderly troubled many Asian immigrants. In talk and in articles in the ethnic press, immigrants expressed harsh judgments about American family life, comparing the “ Western nuclear family” and the “ Eastern extended family” and exhorting fellow community members to maintain traditional Asian family values. Misunderstandings abounded in this as in other areas of family

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life (Liu 58). There was an unmistakable correlation between material progress in societies and expanding opportunities for individuals (for women, this can mean divorce).

Asian-American women's political activism began in the wake of the civil rights movement of the early 1960s and the women's movement later decades. They began to organize formally and informally and to address issues, problems, and needs as women of color, striving for equality and improved conditions for themselves and their ethnic communities.

Awareness of sexism within their ethnic communities grew as some Asian-American women activists became more conscious of their multiple disadvantaged positions as women and as members of a racial minority and of the working class. They began to examine the structural sources of their social inequality based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, generation, nationality, and sexual orientation within their own Asian-American communities as well as in the larger U. S. society.

Despite occasional setbacks and frustrations, a growing number of Asian-American women have worked steadfastly to challenge oppression and inequality within their communities and in society. Through self-awareness, consciousness raising, community participation, feminism and other political activities, these women have begun to emerge from a culture of silence and invisibility. However, eradicating domination and inequality requires structural changes to solve systemic problems. Setting such eradication as their main goal, Asian-American women have empowered themselves from within through acts of resistance and mass political mobilization to elevate themselves out of their structural subjugation.

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The greatest tension and dislocation in Asian-American households and families was the sudden relaxation of old norms in the conduct of everyday life. In the 1980s freedom and a market economy have had a variable impact on Asian-American women. Different agencies have been established to assist Asian American women. One that retains a grassroots character is the New York Asian Women's Center, which, in spite of its name, has no connection to the Los Angeles Asian Women's Center. It began as a hotline in 1984 and is the first project on the East Coast designed to address the problem of battering in Asian American communities, an issue that has been part of the European American women's movement for quite a while. Its direct services consist of multilingual hotline counseling for battered women, advocacy, and a network of safe homes. Its community education program includes presentations and workshops that address the economic and cultural realities faced by Asian American women, especially working-class women, who constitute the vast majority of its clients. Because of the tremendous demand for its services, in 1987 it moved to institutionalize itself – a difficult feat in New York City's precarious fiscal situation.

The impact of the early groups and projects was limited to the personal and political development of a few Asian American women. The rap sessions and study groups raised participants' self-esteem and self-confidence and helped them understand the social roots of racism, sexism, and class conflict. The community projects gave them opportunities to overcome feelings of powerlessness, fight things that have traditionally oppressed them, acquire leadership skills through practice, and affirm their identities as whole, equal persons (Lee 215).

Gotanda's work focuses on the long-term effects of the camp experience on the Japanese American psyche in the aftermath of the war. Gotanda's treatment of the camp experience ranges from the overt and immediate to the implicit and far reaching, as in his *The Wash*. In *The Wash*, Gotanda positions the camp experience as the central force behind the dramatic action. " Acutely aware of how this theme had been brought to the public's attention in popular film and novel form, I had taken great pains to insure that the telling was not only as impactful and dramatic as the story inherently demanded, but that it be told through forms of behavior and communication that I knew to be authentic, i. e., ' as it was lived', which I felt were ignored in those popularized forms" (Gotanda, Letter).

The psychological internalization of the camp experience—an effect Gotanda has described as similar to that of abused child syndrome—runs through Gotanda's earlier plays. In this group of works, the dramatic action transpires years after World War II but clearly references internment as a watershed for Japanese Americans. Omi notes Gotanda's progressive depiction of racism through his " family dramas". Moving through *The Wash*, Gotanda portrays the psychological effects of racism as cutting deeper and deeper into the Japanese American community, beginning with forces outside individuals that act upon them and moving to individuals who internalize racism to the point of participating in their own victimization (Omi xxi).

In *The Wash*, which traces Masi Matsumoto's liberating journey from emotionally neglected wife to independent woman, the camps loom large in the nisei characters' psychology. Here the dramatic action occurs some forty years after World War II. The characters do not openly refer to the physical, <https://assignbuster.com/the-social-context-of-the-book-the-wash-essay-sample/>

emotional, and financial deprivations of the experience, referring instead to camp sock hops and old friends. Nevertheless, the experience has had a profound impact on the characters' behaviors. For Nobu, Masi's emotionally withholding husband, it has been one of the defining elements of his manhood. He is incapable of scaling the internment's psychological walls, and his accompanying emotions of guilt and inadequacy cause him to act out his feelings on Masi. She is ultimately left to choose between allowing Nobu to abuse her or salvaging what is left of her life. Unlike many nisei women who sacrificed themselves in the name of husband and family, Masi chooses to save herself.

Another characteristic of Gotanda's dramatic treatment of racism fearlessly goes to the heart of the Japanese American community itself. While the camp experience demonstrates the victimization of Japanese Americans by forces outside the community, Gotanda also turns the magnifying glass on racism within the community. In *The Wash*, Nobu's refusal to tolerate racial difference goes beyond his mere muttering about kurochan ("blacks") and Mexicans moving into his neighborhood. His younger daughter Judy is married to an African American and is the mother of a baby boy. Nobu refuses to recognize the marriage or see Timothy, who is his only grandchild: "Japanese marry other Japanese, their kids are Yonsei [fourth generation Japanese American]—not these damned ainoko [biracial people]" (*The Wash*, in *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays* 182). Only Timothy, the personification of the future, has the power to crack Nobu's isolation. In a powerful moment of transracial, transgenerational love and acceptance, Judy offers Timothy to Nobu to hold in his arms for the first time. As Nobu holds the infant to his

chest, he softly sings a lullaby to this new face, so familiar and yet so strange to him.

In his popular take on casting discrimination in the entertainment industry, Gotanda presents Japanese Americans who struggle with identity issues and self loathing. Gotanda is unusual for his redefinition of Japanese American gender issues in a culture that does not allow Asian American people to define these in meaningful, dignified ways. In *The Wash*, Gotanda extends his examination of gender concerns to issues of sexual preference (Tajima 55).

Gotanda's honest and dignified treatment of Asian American sexuality, in fact, runs throughout his work and is especially remarkable in *The Wash*. The depiction of sexual behavior in older characters that is not lampooned as ugly at worst or inappropriate at best is rare indeed in American popular culture, which typically reserves portrayals of erotic desire for the young and physically beautiful. Gotanda's sensitivity toward this aspect of nisei life is all the more remarkable because of his own age; at the time of writing *The Wash*, for example, he had not yet turned forty.

Though the stage version of *The Wash* does not feature the lovemaking scene between Masi and Nobu, as does Michael Uno's film adaptation, erotic desire between characters is clear without being explicit. The scene where Masi massages Nobu's back demonstrates a true, albeit unspoken, intimacy between a man and a woman who have shared their lives:

NOBU: Just breakfast. Then in the morning when we get up you can go back to your place. (Masi stops, realizing he is asking her to spend the night. Masi  
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does not move. Nobu stares ahead. More silence. Then, tentatively, she moves her hands forward and begins to massage him. A faint smile appears on Nobu's face. Dim to darkness.) (The Wash, in *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays* 180–81)

From the action of the play it is clear that Masi also has a sexual relationship with Sadao Nakasato. Though her elder daughter Marsha's inadvertent "morning after" intrusion on Masi and Sadao arouses predictable laughter, the amusement derives from Gotanda's turning the tables generationally, not from demeaning older characters engaged in inappropriate behavior.

Besides Masi, sexuality extends to other nisei women in the play. Nobu's female companion Kiyoko talks to her friend Chiyo openly about the loss of her husband and its impact on her life:

It's not easy for me, Chiyo. (Silence.) When Harry died ... I started taking the bus to work. I had a car. I could drive. It was easier to drive. I took the bus. For twenty-five years you go to sleep with him, wake up next to him, he shaves while you shower, comes in from the yard all sweaty. Then he's gone. No more Harry in bed. No more smell of aftershave on the towel you're drying off with. No more sweaty Harry coming up and hugging me.... I missed the smell of men. Every morning I would get up and walk to the corner to take the bus. It would be full of all these men going to work. And it would be full of all these men coming home from work. I would sit there pretending to read my magazine ... (Inhales. Discovering the different smells.) Soap ... just washed skin ... aftershave lotion ... sweat. (The Wash, in *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays* 189–90)

Gotanda's writing demonstrates his remarkable understanding of nisei women acculturated to render their own needs invisible before those of their children and husbands. It is also worth noting that Gotanda's depiction of nisei men as objects of feminine desire has otherwise been unheard of in American culture, which relegates sexual depictions of Asian American men of any age to sexually neutered eunuchs or hyperhormonal predators.

Gotanda is using a culturally specific scenario which is also widespread beyond Japanese America. The husband, Nobu, exemplifies all of the attributes of the hegemonic male ideal. He is domineering, aggressive, noncommunicative, and always gets his way by exerting his socially accepted authority over his family. There is nothing exclusively Japanese American about this, and in fact Gotanda goes to great lengths to establish Nobu as American, as well as Japanese, in his attitudes and views. He tells us that Nobu is Nisei, American-born, and that he was interned as a young man during the war.

Neil Gotanda explained the significance of viewing race as a biological matter in the United States: "The nineteenth-century racial scientist hoped to prove that the African race was inherently inferior. The modern tradition links racial categories to science to show that race is a neutral and apolitical term without social content. Both traditions support racial subordination" (32). Gotanda's treatments of the nisei generation, Asian American sexuality and gender-related concerns, the positioning of the internment and post-World War II racism in relation to the Japanese American community, and the dynamics that configure Japanese American families all provide worthy opportunities for future critical analyses. Further studies examining Philip <https://assignbuster.com/the-social-context-of-the-book-the-wash-essay-sample/>

Kan Gotanda's plays are warranted indeed and would shed much-needed light on both Gotanda's interpretations of the Asian American experience and his practice of theater.

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