



Article

The Magic Realist Unconscious: Twain, Yamashita and Jackson

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Abstract: The literary topic of Siamese twins is not unfamiliar. American literary history tells us of the genealogy from Mark Twain's pseudo-antebellum story *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson and the Comedy Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894), Karen Tei Yamashita's postmodern metafiction "Siamese Twins and Mongoloids: Cultural Appropriation and the Deconstruction of Stereotype via the Absurdity of Metaphor" (1999), down to Shelley Jackson's James Tiptree, Jr. award winner *Half-Life* (2006). Rereading these works, we are easily invited to notice the political unconscious hidden deep within each plot: Twain's selection of the Italian Siamese twins based upon Chang and Eng Bunker, antebellum stars of the Barnum Museum, cannot help but recall the ideal of the post-Civil War world uniting the North and the South; Yamashita's figure of the conjoined twins Heco and Okada derives from Hikoza Hamada, an antebellum Japanese who made every effort to empower the bond between Japan and the United States, and John Okada, the Japanese American writer well known for his masterpiece *No No Boy* (1957); and Jackson's characterization of the female conjoined twins Nora and Blanche Olney represents a new civil rights movement in the post-Cold War age in the near future, establishing a close friendship between the humans and the post-humans. This literary and cultural context should convince us that Yamashita's short story "Siamese Twins and Mongoloids" serves as a kind of singularity point between realist twins and magic realist twins. Influenced by Twain's twins, Yamashita paves the way for the re-figuration of the conjoined twins not only as tragi-comical freaks in the Gilded Age but also as representative men of magic realist America in our Multiculturalist Age. A Close reading of this metafiction composed in a way reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges, Stanislaw Lem and Bruce Sterling will enable us to rediscover not only the role conjoined twins played in cultural history, but also the reason why Yamashita had to feature them once again in her novel *I Hotel* (2010) whose plot centers around the Asian American civil rights movement between the 1960s and the 1970s. Accordingly, an Asian American magic realist perspective will clarify the way Yamashita positioned the figure of Siamese Twins as representing legal and political double standards, and the way the catachresis of Siamese Twins came to be naturalized, questioned and dismissed in American literary history from the 19th century through the 21st century.



Citation: Tatsumi, Takayuki. 2022. The Magic Realist Unconscious: Twain, Yamashita and Jackson. *Literature* 2: 257–264. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature2040021>

Academic Editor: Kumiko Saito

Received: 29 August 2022

Accepted: 8 October 2022

Published: 12 October 2022

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Keywords: nuclear imagination; planetarity; Black Humor; catachresis; LGBT

1. The Poetics of Nuclear Universalism

The 21st century has already seen transactions between the nuclear imagination and Black Humor. While George W. Bush's presidency nicknamed the very site of 9.11 terrorist attacks in 2001 as "Ground Zero", a perfect catachresis for erasing the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the 3.11 Eastern Japan Earthquake or what could well be renamed the Eastern Japan multiple disasters in 2011 conjured up a number of images already conceived and predicted in science fiction: Kurt Vonnegut's *Cats Cradle*, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and, especially, Sakyō Komatsu's *Virus*, which predicted the interaction between natural disasters and artificial disasters leading to an all-out nuclear war and the end of the world. Now that Black Humor has been naturalized in contemporary literature, how can we recuperate the original power of the subversive imagination?

The best place to start will be with the Yasusada Araki hoax storming, which rolled the world of American poetry. The mid-1990s saw a variety of splendid poems published

in poetry journals by a Japanese poet and Hiroshima survivor named Yasusada Araki. However, in 1997, this poet was revealed to be a complete fake. Kent Johnson, who submitted the poems to the journals, disclosed that Araki's poems were actually written by one of his translators "Tosa Motokiyu", itself a pseudonym of a person whose national or ethnic identity still remains unknown. Although American literary history has cultivated a heritage of passing narratives, this Araki hoax, which Brian McHale designated a typical "mock hoax", is exceptional, for the author tried to pass not only for Yellow but also for an atomic bomb survivor. Of course, this kind of passing must have disgusted Japanese survivors of Hiroshima. Whether the real author is racially Mongoloid or not, however, the Black Humor of the Araki hoax, as Yunte Huang pointed out, leads us less into the problem of empathy than into the problem of "nuclear universalism": As such, the Yasusada case is less one of empathy than it is one of "nuclear universalism", which Lisa Yoneyama defines as "the idea that Hiroshima's disaster ought to be remembered from the transcendent and anonymous position of humanity, and that the remembering of Hiroshima's tragedy should invoke natural and commonly shared human thoughts, sentiments, and moral attitudes not limited by cultural boundaries" (Huang 2008, p. 149). At this point, I would like to rephrase the term "nuclear universalism" as "nuclear planetarity", through which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are likely to be replicated anywhere on the planet on a more devastating scale. In the same way that what happened to the American South in the Reconstruction era coincides with what happened to Japan during the Occupation period, the experience of defeat cannot help but ignite the magic realist imagination as represented by William Faulkner and Kenzaburo Oe, to take examples who happen to both be Nobel Laureates in Literature. This is the genesis of a magic realist history of "ground zero".

2. From Lincoln to Twain: A "House Divided" to Bodies Conjoined

This perspective will give us a chance to re-interpret the Asian American feminist magic realist Karen Tei Yamashita, especially her metafictional piece "Siamese Twins and Mongoloids: Cultural Appropriation and the Deconstruction of Stereotype via the Absurdity of Metaphor" (Ling 1999, pp. 126–35). Yamashita's story is based upon the famous Siamese Twins Chang and Eng Bunker, who were born in 1811 in Meklong in the country then known as Siam, and who were brought to America and Europe as a circus attraction and briefly hired by P. T. Barnum, one of the greatest entrepreneurs in Victorian America. Yamashita recreates Mark Twain's story of "Those Extraordinary Twins" with a story of Asian American Siamese Twins named "Heco" and "Okada"—after Hikozo Hamada, the first Japanese to become an American citizen, and John Okada, author of the great Asian American novel *No-No Boy*. Although these kinds of ethnic freaks have recently been considered post-nuclear monsters or mutants, Yamashita deconstructs the Black Humor stereotypes of such "freaks" and depicts them as perfect boys endowed with exceptional talents. Very successful in the field of business, Heco and Okada wind up marrying two sisters: "Heco married a strangely beautiful Eurasian with green eyes and perfect hair", while "Okada's sister was one-quarter Cherokee, one-quarter African, and one-eighth Palestinian and three-eighths Micronesian" (134). Just as the original Siamese Twins used to signify the close bond between the North and the South, these Asian American Twins disclose the catachretic limit of "Siamese Twins" and stand for the multiethnic unity of the whole planet. Hence, Yamashita's Twins succeed in transcending the boundary of conventional racism.

Now, let me more closely compare Twain's *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson and those Extraordinary Twins* (1894) and Yamashita's "Siamese Twins and Mongoloids" (Yamashita 1999). Given that Twain's diptych attempts to reconstruct 1830s Antebellum America, from the Postbellum perspective nearly 30 years after the Civil War, we cannot ignore the setting of Dawson's Landing, Missouri, a typical border state that belongs to the North but which had not yet abolished slavery. Thus, the state of Missouri offers us a perfect allegory of the South, which cannot detach itself from the North, despite a number of differences and contradictions between them. Remember the reason why the protagonist was to be

nicknamed “Pudd’nhead”, and you will immediately come up with another allegory of indivisibility. For Wilson once said, watching a dog barking: “I wish I owned half of that dog. . . . Because I would kill my half” (24). Hearing this ridiculous statement, Wilson’s neighbors believed him to be a complete “pudd’nhead”: “Said he wished he owned half of the dog, the idiot, . . . What did he reckon would become of the other half if he killed his half? Do you reckon he thought it would live?” (Twain 1996, p. 24).

This “half of the dog” episode in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* implies that it was difficult for the United States to divide their organic whole in two, killing off one half and keeping the other half intact. Likewise, the Italian Siamese Twins in *Those Extraordinary Twins* clarifies the ideological difference between the brothers and their biological indivisibility at once: “The Luigi faction carried its strength into the Democratic party, the Angelo faction entered into a combination with the Whigs. The Democrats nominated Luigi for alderman under the new city government, and the Whigs put up Angelo against him” (Twain 1996, p. 425). While Luigi and Angelo allegorize the Civil War, their very story *Those Extraordinary Twins and Pudd’nhead Wilson* turns out to be the textual Siamese Twin of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. What is more, these narratives give us not so much a tasty cocktail of tragedy and comedy as what Paul de Man would have designated the revolving door-like predicament of reading. I assume that Twain must have come up with the idea of writing this diptych, likely inspired by the famous “divided house” metaphor created by the 16th president of the United States Abraham Lincoln, who he had admired very deeply. In his speech on June 16th, 1858, Lincoln stated:

“A house divided against itself cannot stand”.

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.

I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become all one thing, or all the other. (Lincoln 1989a, p. 426)

The metaphor of a divided house derives from Mark 3:24–25: “If a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand/And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand”. Further elaborating his rhetoric, Abraham Lincoln ends with the first Inauguration Address in 1961:

One section of our country believes slavery is right, and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong, and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute. . . . Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence, and beyond the reach of each other; but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face; and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. (Lincoln 1989b, pp. 221–22)

A careful rereading will convince us that President Lincoln did not conceive a simple unity of the North and the South. Rather he proposes that despite ideological antagonisms and contradictions, it is geological and geographical conditions that invite both regions to allow for the differences; without this tolerance both regions will collapse immediately. This logic reminds me not only of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare 2022), in which the Jewish debt-collector Shylock confronts the difficulty of cutting a pound of human flesh off the body without shedding “one drop of Christian blood”, but also of the “One Drop Rule” as featured in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* declaring that a single drop of “black blood” will make a person black, however pale he or she looks on the surface. In order to express this racial-political predicament, Twain selected the half-dog and Siamese Twins as symbolic figures, perhaps as provocative as Lincoln’s allegory of a divided house. If putting up with the contradictions during the Civil War transforms one into a freak, Siamese Twins could well represent the spirit of the times. It is not that freaks ignite war, but that any war reveals differences within a nation.

3. Karen Tei Yamashita's *Freaks or the Paradox of "Nothing Whole"*

While Antebellum America inspired Twain to reconsider the role of Siamese Twins in the *Pudd'nhead Wilson/These Extraordinary Twins* Diptych as closely intertwined with the logic of the Civil War, Yamashita's meta-review of an imaginary novel entitled "Siamese Twins and Mongoloids" starts with a biography of Chang and Eng Bunker who were born conjoined twins in Thailand in 1811 and who, with the help of P. T. Barnum, made a fortune as a circus attraction from the 1830s through the 1860s, and recreates them as Japanese American freaks Heko and Okada, who were very active during the Cold War. At this point, please recall that, as I already mentioned earlier, Heko is named after Hikozo Hamada, also known as Joseph-Hiko, the first Japanese who obtained American citizenship in the 1850s, cultivating the early Japan-US diplomatic relationship, whereas Okada is named after John Okada, the Japanese American author well-known for his masterpiece *No-No Boy* (Okada 2014). Although 20th century freaks have very often been represented as mutants caused by radiation, for example, here, Yamashita deconstructs the very stereotypes and renovates them by featuring the heroes as amazingly talented and economically successful boys, who wind up by getting married to multinational twins, if not Siamese.

At this point, let me note that Yamashita prefers the term "conjoined twins" to "Siamese Twins".

In the mid-sixties two healthy twin boys were born to a Sansei couple in Gardena, California . . . Indeed, the two boys grew to be men unlike any others—mentally astute, politically correct, sensitive, visionary, artistic, and physically exquisite. The only imperfection—a word denied by the boys and their parents—was the inconvenience of being bound to each other near the hip by a thick fleshy ligament much like an arm, five to six inches long and about eight inches in circumference. Since words like Oriental and Siam were considered passe, the boys were simply referred to as Asian American twins". (Yamashita 1999, pp. 127–28)

Now Yamashita insightfully points out the catachresis of "Siam", replacing it with a politically correct term "Asian American". By the same token, she also dreams of a multicultural unity of the planet. In fact, these conjoined twins get married respectively to multicultural sisters, if not twins; Heco's wife, "the result of artificial insemination", is a strangely beautiful Eurasian Fox TV broadcaster with green eyes and perfect hair, whereas Okada's wife is a multiracial artist and spiritual healer, who is "one quarter Cherokee, one quarter African, and one-eighth Palestinian and three-eighths Micronesian" (134). Being typical American citizens now, these multinational, multiracial and multicultural sisters would have also been despised as freaks back in the 1960s, the heyday of racial discrimination. The magic realist figuration of conjoined twins, also known as Siamese twins, is not limited to the life of minorities but essential to the reality of Multicultural America itself. This book review-like story concludes with the conclusion of the imaginary novel, which narrates their wedding night. "Bodies entangled upon bodies, the great union of Asian America with all women, with all America—mind, body, and spirit—the great gift. Amen" (135). While a distinguished cultural historian of science Donna Haraway once asserted that "We are all cyborgs" in her 1985 essay, "The Cyborg Manifesto", here Yamashita, more than a decade later, convinces us that we are all freaks.

Yamashita ends up developing this motif into another novel, which is entitled *I Hotel*, not "Siamese Twins and Mongoloids: Cultural Appropriation and the Deconstruction of Stereotype via the Absurdity of Metaphor". While this short story featured Los Angeles, *I Hotel* (Yamashita 2010) represents an actual hotel built in 1906 at the edge of Chinatown, San Francisco, which served as a shelter for a variety of outlaws, outsiders and freaks, and which played the central role in the civil rights movement for Asian Americans from 1968 through 1974. These outlaws and outsiders included old workers, young political radicals and biological freaks, who questioned not only the Vietnam War but also the essence of American Democracy. This novel excitingly narrates the way they were to be repressed, and the way the very hotel as their barricade was to be demolished, revealing a failure of civil disobedience. Accordingly, it is notable that the biological freaks of this novel included

not only typical Siamese Twins modeled upon the Bunker brothers in Antebellum America but also female conjoined twins, the daughters of Chiquita Banana and an Asian Don Juan. The novel highlights the following freak show, which reminds us of the paradox between a part and the whole, that is, the minority and majority:

That might be a director's nightmare, but the playwright insists on the visual possibilities of the circus—an Asian American freak show. As I always say, it's best to use your imagination.

But use your imagination to what end? What's the point of this circus of Siamese twins fathered by a hapless outlaw? Come to America, and your children all come out hyphenated. Half this—half that. Nothing whole. Everything half-assed. (Yamashita 2010, p. 231)

Back in the 17th century, Puritan Utopianism was so strict about the pure unity of the colony that the proto-WASP political unconscious ended with domestic terrorism as represented by the Salem witch hunt in 1692. Now that we are living in the multicultural 21st century, it is so difficult to maintain any form of unity that we have to allow for differences and contradictions. While Puritan Utopianism wanted to establish perfect purity by repressing radical differences within, contemporary Americanism has established a paradoxical strategy for survival based upon trans-nationalism. In this respect, Yamashita's description of the hotel is deeply intriguing:

So even if hotels depended on our constant occupancy, we were not considered permanent or stable members of society. We did not own our homes. We may have had families, but hotels were suspect places to raise children, and so we were suspect families . . . By the time we got the red alert to place our bodies in a human barricade around an old hotel that held seventy years of our city's plan to impose a particular meaning of home and a particular meaning of nation.

And in time we may remember, collecting every little memory, all the bits and pieces, into a larger memory, rebuilding a great layered and labyrinthine, now imagined, international hotel of many rooms, the urban experiment of a homeless community built to house the needs of temporary lives. (Yamashita 2010, pp. 590, 605)

It is true that the concept of a hotel community sounds suspicious. Nonetheless, if we note the logic of the traditional family as a minimum unit of the nation that brought about world wars twice, it is hard to ignore the rise of a brand-new community and its tactics for historical remembrance. Here, Yamashita carefully describes her hotel community in order to question the very complicity between the family and the nation-state.

4. Shelley Jackson's *Mutants*: "Ground Zero" Displaced

Finally, let me conclude the paper with a reading of Shelley Jackson's post-nuclear magic realist novel *Half Life* (Jackson 2006), which intrigued me so much that I nominated it for the Tiptree Award in 2007. This highly intricate and superbly hypertextual novel provides us with an incredibly intertextual space inhabited by a number of literary and cultural figures such as Edgar Allan Poe, P. T. Barnum, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Leslie Fiedler, Katherine Dunn, and Allen Kurzweil. The author contrasts the "twofers" in the story, that is, the Siamese Twins naturalized in the post-apocalyptic age and their contemporary "singletons" who are dying to have a couple of heads just like the twofers. It sounds weird enough to recall the grotesque garden of freaks represented in *The Obscene Bird of Night*, the magnum opus by the major Latin American magic realist Jose Donoso. Re-appropriating a post-Twain and post-Vonnegut Black Humor in her own nuclear fiction, Shelley Jackson skillfully compares the rise of twofers to the rise of ethnic or sexual minority groups involved with the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, what attracted me most is not only the idea but also the narrative, in which the heroine Nora Olney, who succeeded in erasing her twin sister Blanche, becomes unable to distinguish between her waking world and Blanche's dream one. Moreover, just as the title of the novel refers to both the double life of the Siamese Twins and the amount

of time that a radioactive substance takes to lose half its radioactivity, the name of the heroine's sister metafictionally connotes the "carte blanche" Nora abuses and the "blank pages" she fills up by scribbling away at her autobiography. The author's speculation on Hiroshima and Nagasaki makes the novel more philosophical, inviting us to consider what will happen to sexuality and ethnicity in the post-nuclear future.

In 1951, saddened by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and recognizing the need for a national activity of penance, a despondent American government commenced organized hostilities against itself. For three years, they hammered a sparsely populated part of the Nevada desert with the most powerful bombs in existence. The cratered sand turned to glass. In it Uncle Sam could see his own, still grief-stricken face. Stronger measures were called for.

In 1954, a hastily constructed house was obliterated by a bomb named Doubt, and officers in attendance reported a slight lightening of the heart. For the next four years of Operation Dollhouse, bombs were dropped upon ever more perfect semblances of American houses, built on roads that went nowhere, across bridges over no water

In 1961, life-sized manikins were introduced into the houses. The female dolls were named Lisa and Patricia and given beehive hairdos and bouffant dresses, and before the bombing, were feted in parties where their partners danced the Twist. (Jackson 2006, p. 225)

This novel narrates the way a number of doll victims gave birth to a lot of conjoined twins as typical post-nuclear freaks. Note that while Yamashita's *I Hotel* depicted the civil rights movement for Asian Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, Shelley Jackson dramatized the explosion of these freaks in the midst of Castro Street of near future San Francisco, that is, the birthplace of the queer renaissance:

The flags lining Market Street from Church to Castro flexed and snapped, showing sometimes one, sometimes two linked rings. The stop signs shuddered on their spines.

The sidewalk was already thronged with out-of-towners, already dressed for Pride in brand-new T-shirts with rubbery silk-screened slogans, "One's Company" and "22", and "Yesiamese". They were strolling in twos and threes and fours of varying molecular structure, exchanging glances of appraisal and nervous pleasure. (Jackson 2006, pp. 5–6)

It is obvious that the mutants' parade serves as a radial parody of "Pride" as a parade of LGBT people inhabiting and developing the culture of contemporary Castro Street. Moreover, we cannot miss the moment when the heroine Nora witnesses the revival of the Lincoln-esque figure of "Divided House" in a minister's sermon empowering the twofers as the ideal form of the Atomic Age:

He [minister] leaned forward with pursed lips as if stretching for a kiss, and pressed his words into the air. Whenever he paused, he grinned again. "We're blessed to have a lesson set before us by God of how a divided people can live in harmony, or on the other hand not. 'If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand. Matthew 3/25'" Consider Nora and Blanche Olney. They carry on almost normal lives, under conditions that would try all of our patience, because they have learned to live in harmony. We who chafe against our neighbors because of petty differences, let us aspire to the example set by Nora and Blanche, who learn from them, who are here with us and with God for the first time" (Jackson 2006, p. 213)

Of course, the metaphor of a divided house is employed here in a completely different context. However, as it worked as a figure of national harmony back in the Civil War era, the divided house metaphor once again starts representing a kind of human harmony. Hence, Nora and Blanche obtain the status of saints.

Now let me grasp an opportunity to reconsider the abuse of the term “ground zero” in the context of 9.11 terrorist attacks I mentioned earlier. It is the catachresis of “ground zero” that provided the United States with a pretext for starting the Iraq War as a pseudo-nuclear war, where Depleted Uranium weaponry was used for the first time in the history of recent wars. According to Dr. Souad N. Al Azawwi, “The magnitude of the complications and damage related to the use of such radioactive and toxic weapons on the environment and the human population mostly results from the intended concealment, denial and misleading information released by the Pentagon about the quantities, characteristics and the areas in Iraq, in which these weapons have been used” (Al-Azzawi 2006). There is no doubt that Shelley Jackson beautifully created a post-nuclear and post-apocalyptic hagiography of Nora and Blanche by noting the serious impacts of the Iraq War as another nuclear war in the wake of Hiroshima-Nagasaki. Here, let us return to the etymology of the term “ground zero”. Deriving from the first explosion of Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima-Nagasaki in August 1945, this term was first used in journalism in 1946. Since the United States long classified as top secret the point where they would drop the bomb, it was called “zero”. According to *Bytes Daily*, in 1946 the *Syracuse Herald Journal*, 1 July 1946 quoted from the Strategic Bombing Survey, the first use of the term “ground zero” was first used in public print.

There is reason to believe that, if the effects of blast and fire had been entirely absent from the bombing, the number of deaths among people within a radius of one-half mile from ground zero (the point on the ground directly under the bomb’s explosion in the air) would have been almost as great as the actual figures. (quoted in *Bytes Daily* 2012)

In the wake of 9.11 terrorist attacks, it is the site where the twin towers of the World Trade Center previously stood that has been popularized as a “ground zero”, depriving the etymology of nuclear implications. This is the way the figure of “ground zero” came to serve as a 21st century catachresis by repressing the memory of Hiroshima-Nagasaki.

By the same token, however, we should not forget that before the rise of the post-9.11 catachresis of “ground zero”, we have already been familiar with another abuse of the same figure in the cultural politics of Castro Street, San Francisco, that is, the civil rights movement for LGBT people. Gay Travel.Com redefines this neighborhood as follows:

The Castro neighborhood is ground zero of SF’s gay epicenter. Here you’ll find bars and restaurants of every variety, suiting all sorts of patrons. There’s also the iconic Castro Theatre which features gay cinema and sing-a-long musical nights among other entertaining things. (*Gay San Francisco* 2022)

It is evident that insofar as the queer civil rights movement is concerned, the figure of ground zero has been not so much abused as naturalized as a cultural epicenter. Featuring the double life of the twofers, this post-nuclear magic realist novel *Half Life* grapples with the future of race, class and gender in general. However, we should also be aware of the twin life not only of Nora and Blanche but also of the literal ground zero and the figurative ground zero. Any form or figure is destined to be abused, disfigured and naturalized. Nonetheless, we are unable to avoid the rhetorical paradox that without catachresis it is difficult to comprehend the twin life of figuration itself. Thus, Shelley Jackson’s *Half-Life* succeeds in updating the literary historical heritage of Siamese Twins ranging from Mark Twain through Karen Tei Yamashita, giving us a magic realist way to reinvestigate—now from a planetary viewpoint—the after-life of the human race, the double life of post-humans and the twin life of transpacific literary and cultural rhetoric as such.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The earlier version of the paper was first delivered at a symposium “American literature in an Atomic Context” of the 59th annual conference of Kyushu American Literature Society held at Siebold University of Nagasaki on 11 May 2013. I would like to express the deep gratitude to my fellow panelists who game me insightful comments: Mariko Watanabe (moderator) and Kyoko Matsunaga and Koko Tabuki.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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