The year 1898 saw the United States transformed from a continental power into a Pacific and Asian empire. On May 1, just days after the U.S. government declared war on Spain, Admiral George Dewey launched an attack on Manila, and a full-scale invasion of the Philippines followed in July. In December, as a result of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Spanish-American War, the United States took over the overseas territories of the defeated Spanish empire. In addition to seizing Puerto Rico and imposing a protectorate over Cuba, Washington annexed Guam and occupied the Philippines—setting off another war with the Filipinos, who had risen to liberate their country. Meanwhile, in July, by means of a joint resolution of Congress, U.S. legislators pushed through the annexation of Hawai‘i, a takeover favored by the Islands’ ruling white oligarchy but against the expressed will of most of its people.

The primary goal of such expansion was to build a bridgehead to Asia. By controlling these territories, Americans provided themselves with a protected route by which to push their trade and influence into China (through the “open door” claimed by Secretary of State John Hay soon afterwards). They also sought to counter the growing power of Japan, which was itself building an Asian empire. In 1894 Tokyo successfully negotiated with Britain to abolish extraterritoriality, a provision of earlier unequal treaties that had been claimed by subjects of Western powers for more than three decades. In the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, Japan defeated China and took over Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, and the Liaodong Penin-
sula “in perpetuity” (although it soon had to give up the latter as a result of a Triple Intervention by the Germans, French, and Russians). A decade after that victory, Japan would again emerge triumphant in the Russo-Japanese War and gain recognition as one of the important powers of the world.

It was in this climate of international expansion and American interest in Asia, along with Japan’s emergence on the world scene, that a pioneering Asian-American memoir, Jenichiro Oyabe’s *A Japanese Robinson Crusoe*, made its appearance.¹ Oyabe’s text relates his spiritual autobiography: his boyhood in Japan; his adoption by Ainu (Japanese aborigines) in the northern island of Hokkaido; his conversion to Christianity; his journey to enlightenment in the West; his arrival in New York and his discovery there by General Samuel Armstrong, founder of Hampton Institute; his education at Hampton, Howard University, and Yale University; and his subsequent work as a missionary.

The work charms by its picturesque—and picaresque—account of the author’s adventures. Like a Victorian novelist, Oyabe spins a tale that mixes faith and exoticism, leavened with social analysis and humor. The author’s story of his encounter with a racist barber in New York, soon after his arrival in the country, displays a notably light touch (plus a fine ear for American speech):

After a few weeks I went into a barber shop to have my hair trimmed. “Aee, John, git out from here. Oi don’t cut a Chinaman’s hair!” I was scorned by the old barber. I told him that I was not such a man, but a Japanese. “Ou, ye Javanese, a country of lots coffee! All right; sit dan, my goot fellar.” (113)

Still, the chief fascination of Oyabe’s work lies in his narrative of his gradual development into a “Japanese Yankee,” a story that fuses classic American narratives of self-creation and the self-made man (as well, in certain cases, the American tradition of the tall tale) with the literature on immigrant assimila-
tion and belonging. Although Oyabe compares himself with Robinson Crusoe, that great castaway of English literature who discovers God in his forsaken state, Oyabe is hardly marooned and left to face local “savages.” Rather, he presents himself as a man who consciously chooses his destination, the United States, in search of salvation and the education that will make possible his future mission to the “savage” Ainu. Oyabe might thus be said to represent a combination of Robinson Crusoe and his faithful servant Friday, the Christianized man of color who begs to be enlightened into Western ways. Similarly, the author’s conversion and the pilgrimage of faith he makes to the United States are driven as much by a desire to absorb American culture and its middle-class values as the Christian religion, which he regards as inextricably intertwined. In this sense, Oyabe’s story can best be seen as a tale of an Asian taking on “whiteness,” that is, successfully claiming the status and rights of the dominant group based on various physical and cultural signifiers, including religious affiliation, class, and respectability.

The original book’s front pages sum up Oyabe’s mission of reconciling his Japanese and American selves. Opposite the title page (where “Robinson Crusoe” appears almost twice as large as “A Japanese”) appears a graphic expression of his double consciousness: A photograph of Oyabe shows him wearing haori and hakama (Japanese man’s coat and pants). Yet his pose, looking slightly to the left with a pen in his hand, and the props surrounding him in the image—the high-backed chair with elaborate finials and carved designs, and a large book on the table—are all reminiscent of European Old Masters portraits of men of status.

A counterpart of this double consciousness is Oyabe’s unstable identity. Like Woody Allen’s hero Leonard Zelig, he is a chameleon who continually reshapes himself to merge with his surroundings. According to Oyabe’s account, wherever he travels he succeeds in blending in and finding acceptance. When he comes into contact with Ainu people in rural Hok-
kaido, he ends up being adopted by a chief and offered a leadership role in the tribe. When he travels to study with Confucian philosophers in China, he notes, “I became a real Chinaman” (97). At Howard University, he is adopted by school President Jeremiah Rankin and renamed “Isaiah.” During the year he studies at Yale University, he enters the “brotherhood of men,” and happily joins campus activities; in a fascinating passage, he describes his joy in playing basketball—then a newly invented sport—and his pleasure at hearing a fellow student say. “That Jap plays like a regular tiger” (156).

Unlike Zelig, however, Oyabe’s fashioning of his identity is a self-conscious, rather than an instinctive, process. As we shall see, Oyabe is not always truthful about himself. He carefully selects the information he offers to fit the interests and preoccupations of his readers, and he invents or overstates various achievements. Thus, in teasing out meanings from the text, the reader must pay particular attention to silences, for the author is as interesting for what he withholds as for what he says. To give the most striking example, although the two colleges where Oyabe received his education, Hampton Institute and Howard University, are predominantly black institutions, he nowhere discusses his experience with African Americans. Similarly, he is reticent about his individual connection with Native Americans, despite his claimed interest in their lives and education. Yet if Oyabe generally elides discussion of racial minorities, he repeatedly uses race as a yardstick to trace his own development. The story thus prefigures current-day debates over Asian-American identity: Are Asians “white” or “black”? How do they see themselves alongside other racial groups?

Before we examine Oyabe’s work more closely, it is useful to consider the audience he was addressing. A Japanese Robinson Crusoe was brought out by Pilgrim Press, the publishing arm of the Congregational Church. The old Puritan church became heavily invested in the late nineteenth century in evangelizing and missionary work among minority groups. Its chief
effort was the funding of the American Missionary Association, which opened five hundred schools for African Americans in the South during Reconstruction, and which operated Hampton Institute, Fisk University, and other black colleges. Pilgrim Press’s offerings reflected this interest. Within a year of Oyabe’s memoir, for instance, the press published William Deloss Love’s book *Samson Occum and the Christian Indians of New England*, Dleevan Leonard’s *The Story of Oberlin*, E. Theodora Crosby’s *With South Sea Folk: A Missionary Story*, and John C. Holbrook’s *Recollections*, which included his tale of “a mission to Great Britain in behalf of the southern freedmen.” *A Japanese Robinson Crusoe*’s prime audience, by inference, was thus northern white Americans interested in the role of the Christian mission among the weak and the needy in the United States and abroad. Although this readership held fairly enlightened racial views, at least by the standards of a period when lynching was at its height and racial segregation was law in the South, its members tended to be imbued with the superiority of Christian and middle-class culture.

In *A Japanese Robinson Crusoe* Oyabe consciously targets this audience. Throughout the book, he repeatedly stresses his attachment to Christianity, and he identifies white Christian men like Samuel Armstrong and Jeremiah Rankin as his mentors and heroes. Although Oyabe says he was “born a heathen,” he claims, rather doubtfully, that he was inspired from his early days by his “chief impulse to become an anti-idolater” (40). Furthermore, appealing to an audience interested in saving the “savage races” by introducing them to a higher civilization, Oyabe casts himself not only as a beneficiary of white goodwill but as a potential contributor to similar mission work in Japan. He likewise seeks approval from his readers by portraying himself, in classic American style, as a vigorously self-willed and independent man. The “impulse of my nature,” he writes, has always been “to do what I want[ed] to do, vehemently, and to complete it thoroughly from the beginning to the end” (153).
The only guides he relies on to make his decisions are Ezra Smiles’ *Self Help* and the “Father in heaven.” Every major decision and action described in the book—from saving the Ainu, leaving Japan for the United States, to deciding to study at Hampton and Howard—he attributes to God and to his own autonomous will.

Not only is the content of *A Japanese Robinson Crusoe* adapted to the specific audience Oyabe had in mind, it also reveals his intense desire to identify himself with that audience, to experience “whiteness.” He argues that anyone who knows “thoroughly the true American society would never forget its charming, modest, generous, patriotic, and friendly people” (113). “Little by little, my heart was converted to Americanism” while living in the United States (123). He considers America his adopted home and writes as if that home had willingly adopted him as well, noting that Samuel Armstrong called him “my son,” while Dr. and Mrs. Rankin called him “my boy, my Isaiah” (47, 151). He reports happily that at Yale University the students made no “distinction of race” and had “no idea of race prejudice in their minds” (122, 155). Yet Oyabe expresses his own share of prejudice. On the one hand, he praises the American melting pot and denounces racial discrimination. Skin color, he insists, is irrelevant. Instead, he declares, “The difference in mind and thought of each race chiefly depends on the religion in which they believe” (123). On the other hand, Oyabe identifies exclusively with American-born white Protestants and explicitly distances himself from other groups of people. He refers to lower-class people and recent immigrants from old Europe as representing “Darkest America.” Similarly, although his goal in coming to America is to obtain education in order to return to Japan and establish a school for the Ainu, the “aborigines in the Orient,” he disdains them as a good-natured but stupid people (159, 50), and desires to train them only for manual labor. Moreover, his interest in the aborigines of North America is limited, and he shares white paternalist views of their capacity, praising the
approach of the “Indian schools.” Even as he lauds America for giving citizenship rights to all (he refers only indirectly to the exclusion of Chinese, whom he calls an “isolated, independent race”), Oyabe condescendingly portrays the African Americans and Jews who claim such citizenship (117).

Oyabe’s desire for identification with the dominant white group and his disdain for minorities stand in notable contrast to the views of another Japanese, Kanzo Uchimura, who migrated from Hokkaido to seek enlightenment in America during the same period, and who produced a spiritual autobiography published a few years before Oyabe’s. It is likely, given their common trajectories, that Oyabe had read or knew of Uchimura’s work, and the two memoirs exhibit undeniable similarities. Like Oyabe, Uchimura describes how he began by idolizing America, based on his experience with missionaries abroad, as a thoroughly Christianized and saintly society (Uchimura referred to the nation’s universal “Hebraism”) and then became disillusioned following his arrival in the United States by his contact with pickpockets, cheats, and immoral activities. However, Oyabe concludes from his experience that the dishonest people he meets are not true Americans, but a low class of recent immigrants, who are comparable to blacks as a naturally slavish and depraved people. In contrast, Uchimura analyzed and denounced at length the racial prejudice he saw in New York and other places, especially toward Chinese immigrants.4

Most importantly, Oyabe’s wish to connect himself with the dominant white group causes him to reshape and conceal his actual history. Although the two years Oyabe spent at Hampton occupy only six pages of his book, he makes clear—both by what he says and does not say—his developing sense of whiteness. He is generous with praise for his teachers and for General Armstrong, whom Oyabe describes as caring for him and paying his tuition (the text refers to the General as Christlike, in tones that anticipate the paean to Armstrong by Oyabe’s Hampton predecessor, Booker T. Washington, in *Up From Slavery*, Robinson and Yaguchi
published three years later). Yet he fails to acknowledge the presence of the 521 African-American students at Hampton, even though he shared classes and worked alongside them on the school farm. For example, “Jas. H. Payne,” from Hinton, West Virginia, was Oyabe’s next-door neighbor in the dorm and was assigned the same tasks on the school farm under the same supervisor, so the two presumably worked closely together every day. Nevertheless, the only clue Oyabe gives as to the racial composition of the industrial school and his workmates comes in his account of working in the fields and being mistaken for a black farmer by visiting Japanese officials (129). Characteristically, Oyabe does not recognize that the mistake is rooted in their race-based assumptions about manual laborers, but trumpets it as a sign of his own assimilation to his surroundings.

Similarly, Oyabe obfuscates details of his life at Howard. As with Hampton, he speaks only of his professors and of President Jeremiah Rankin, a Congregational minister to whom he devotes an even more affectionate tribute than the one he offers to General Armstrong. He presents himself as the “Doctor’s pet,” Rankin’s companion and protégé: he recounts how Rankin took him along on his various travels, including to the White House, and how under Rankin’s sponsorship he was accepted for membership in an elite white church. Oyabe deliberately crafts his memoir to insinuate that he lived in the President’s house (139, 163) and in the book’s original edition even inserted a photograph of Rankin and his wife relaxing on what looks like the porch of their residence to buttress that impression. In reality, however, Rankin’s “pet” lived not with the president’s family but with the African-American students studying at Howard. According to a school record, Oyabe resided in the school’s Clark Hall for three years, rooming with an African-American student from South Carolina.

Oyabe is as reluctant to associate himself with Native Americans as he is with African Americans. Indeed, he offers backhanded praise to Europe over the United States because of its
freedom from the presence of both groups: “Tramping through England is wonderfully interesting and amusing. There are no negroes to insult, neither wild ‘Injuns’ to shoot as in the New World” (144). Furthermore, while he claims to be engaged in intensive study of Native Americans at Yale, he entirely suppresses the life experiences he shared with actual Native American students at Hampton. In 1889 when Oyabe arrived at Hampton Institute, 133 Indians were already studying there. Native Americans actively participated in various school events, although their living quarters were separate from those of the rest of the students. Some, including a group of Kill Crow Indians, worked on the same school farm as Oyabe under the same supervisor.9 Oyabe’s silence about Native American students at Hampton is clearly not accidental. Rather, he reveals in his autobiography that when applying to Howard University (itself a predominantly African-American institution, although one that did not share Hampton’s Native American student body), he wrote to President Rankin: “How can I learn Christian civilization among these wild Indians?” (132).

Meanwhile, at a time of endemic anti-Chinese prejudice and rising nativist antagonism toward Japanese immigrants on the West Coast, Oyabe shows little interest in identifying himself with his fellow Asians. He has nothing much positive to say about the Chinese he met in China or in New York’s Chinatown—the latter he treats in superficial and racist terms by recounting a visit to an opium den where white women mixed promiscuously with their Chinese boyfriends. Moreover, Oyabe never mentions that at Hampton he lived in Academy Hall, where he shared Room 37 with two other students from Japan, Seijiro Saito and Genta Sakamoto, and a Chinese student, Loo Kee Chung. Sakamoto and Saito’s later recollections about their time at Hampton suggest that all four Asian students were close. Yet Oyabe chooses not to refer to his roommates in his autobiography and presents himself as though he had been the only Japanese student then studying at Hampton.10 Nor does he men-
tion the Japanese or Korean students with whom he studied at Howard, even though they, too, were present in significant numbers. Even in recounting his time at Yale, Oyabe makes only a single glancing allusion to the presence of other Japanese, obscuring the presence, for example, of such figures as the future Japan Communist Party leader Sen Katayama, whom Oyabe met at the Divinity School.

Notwithstanding his efforts to construct himself as a sharer of white middle-class Christian values and to distance himself from the rest of the nonwhite population, Oyabe’s narrative equally testifies to his desire to retain his Japanese identity. This may have been something of a marketing decision; after all, Oyabe earned money over the summers during his college years by putting together various lectures in which he presented himself as Japanese. (According to contemporary newspaper accounts, Oyabe spoke on Buddhism and Japanese culture, or about Japan’s foreign policy and the Sino-Japanese War. He wore Japanese attire and used a magic lantern to show slides.) The popularity of his lectures suggests that it was the image of an Americanized Japanese man that most attracted his audiences. Still, Oyabe’s narrative suggests that his adherence to a Japanese identity was something more than a ploy. While he describes how his heart was “fixed upon” America as his adopted home, he also mentions the “Oriental mind” and “Eastern custom” (126) ingrained in him, and remains adamantly Japanese. Significantly, he dedicates his autobiography to his parents back in Japan, whom he terms his “first and best teachers” (33).

Oyabe’s curious passage into whiteness and his reflexive distancing of himself from other groups can perhaps be seen most clearly in his decision to go to Hawai‘i. Once he had graduated from Yale Divinity School and been ordained a Congregational minister, Oyabe relates, he tried to plan what to do next. He first read about Hawai‘i in a California newspaper (the Islands then made up an independent “republic” ruled by a small
oligarchy of whites who had deposed the native Hawaiian monarchy and undertaken a vigorous propaganda campaign to secure annexation by the United States). The article warned of the “threat” posed by the large numbers of Japanese plantation workers in Hawaii who were bringing “their idols and heathen customs to this country” (160). Unfamiliar with the endemic anti-Asian prejudice on the West Coast, Oyabe is clearly unable to grasp that the journalist, in denouncing the menace posed by the “heathen Japanese,” was actually using religion as a signifier for racial difference and targeting him, too, as undesirable. He immediately requests and receives a post in Hawai‘i, where he would be a missionary for Christianity among his countrymen and repel the threat that alternative religious views represent—as he says, his goal was to “defend my benefactress, America, from the dangers of Buddhism” (160). Almost as soon as his boat arrives in Hawai‘i, however, he realizes his error. He is chagrined to discover that Christianity is already widespread in the Islands, and that “Hawaii can defend America as a strong fortress without any assistance from a Japanese-blooded little Yankee like myself” (175).

Oyabe hardly mentions in his memoir the two years he in fact spent in Hawai‘i, as pastor of a Christian church in Paia, Maui. During this time, he bonded most closely with the Islands’ white population and became popular through his lectures on Japan. In contemporary letters, he expressed strong prejudices toward other groups. For example, in a note sent to his white supervisor, Oliver P. Emerson, in Honolulu, Oyabe claimed that, second only to Africans, the native Hawaiians were the world’s laziest people. He must have found connecting with the Japanese on the plantations little easier—although the elite Hawaiian Gazette noted at the time of his departure that Oyabe had been “most successful in his profession among his countrymen of Paia,” his memoir expresses nothing but disgust at seeing “low-class Chinese and Japanese” worshipping their idols (173) and remains tellingly silent
about the difficult and exploited condition of Asian plantation workers.¹⁷

* * *

A *Japanese Robinson Crusoe* appeared in print in June 1898. Ads trumpeted the book as by “a Japanese author; illustrated by a Japanese artist.” The book did not attract much in the way of sales or attention, however. Critics from the daily press largely ignored it, while mainstream and denominational weeklies offered mixed critiques. The *New York Independent*, combining praise with a note of skepticism, commented, “If this book’s contents are the record of truth, and we are assured they are, Mr. Oyabe, the author, is a very remarkable young man. It is long since we read a personal story of more immediate interest.”¹⁸ *The Outlook*’s reviewer noted that the book was an “interesting account” of the author’s life, but only partly bore out its “quite fascinating title.”¹⁹ *The Congregationalist*, praising the “pleasant little volume” for the stories it furnished on General Armstrong and Dr. Rankin, concluded, “It is an artless, graphic, and picturesque account of his career, thus far largely one of wandering and adventure, animated by the purpose to reach this country and acquire an education in order to be of use to his fellowmen. . . . His history shows that he possesses an unusual amount of enterprise, courage, and intelligence, and points to the probability of a future of great usefulness and possibly of distinction.”²⁰ *The Missionary Herald* added an orientalist note: “There are few books written by Japanese which more clearly portray the characteristics of that versatile, unstable, easily moved people. In many respects the life and experience of this young man represent Japanese life and character and method of thought.”²¹

Within six months of publishing his memoir, Oyabe decided to return to Japan. Before departing, he stopped off for a few weeks in the Seattle area, where he spoke to a *Tacoma Daily News* reporter who found him playing basketball: “He was
dressed in the dark blue sweater of ‘Old Eli’ and with his slender form and oriental features formed a quaint picture of an Americanized Japanese.” Curiously enough, the article made no mention of A Japanese Robinson Crusoe. Yet Oyabe’s comments, like the description of his appearance, nevertheless pointed to the multiple identities and self-fashioning that lay at the heart of his book: Oyabe told the reporter of his reluctance to leave America, where he felt at home, to go back to Japan, where he felt himself a stranger. Yet he spoke of his wish to be useful to his fellow Japanese, and he extolled the qualities of the Japanese in America. In an extended passage, he demonstrated his gift for self-invention, as well as self-aggrandizement:

He has made social science his chief study in America, taking both his degrees in that branch. His intention is to accept a professorship which has been offered him in one of the large Japanese universities, and will there expound the lessons of economics learned in far-off America. “Why did I leave home? Because I believe a student who studies in a foreign land will get a better and broader conception of the work he is doing and of life in general. There are many Japanese in America now attending the universities. At Yale there were 16. They all live separately in order to learn the English language. There is also a Japanese professor of psychology at Yale, and two Japanese professors at the Chicago University, so you see our people can teach the white man something.” After graduating in 1895, Mr. Oyabe went to Honolulu, where he taught in a Japanese and English school for one year. He was especially invited by the Hawaiian government to fill the position. With this practical knowledge of teaching he is now going to accept a more responsible position in Japan.

Revealingly, in addressing a secular newspaper audience Oyabe makes no mention of his schooling at Hampton or Howard, his ordination, or his interest in the Ainu. He care-
fully conceals both his theological studies and mission work in Hawai‘i. The fact that Oyabe had been brought to Hawai‘i by the Hawaiian Evangelical Association and apparently never taught school does not prevent him from making claims of official government sponsorship. His story of being invited to take up a professorship in Japan is equally undocumented and doubtless unfounded.

* * *

The story of Oyabe’s life after A Japanese Robinson Crusoe forms an odd counterpoint to his narrative. Upon returning to Japan in early 1899, Oyabe was offered the position of minister at Yokohama Congregational Church, where he remained until 1901. He married Kikuyo Ishikawa, and they had a son, Masayoshi (a.k.a. Seigi) and a daughter, Isako. Around the same time, he took up lecturing with an Ainu aid society to raise money for education of the Ainu. Oyabe’s American experience, especially one of the techniques he had learned at Hampton Institute and later used in his lectures, came in handy in his work: the use of photographs—especially “before-and-after” images—to sell a product. When he gave a speech in Tokyo in 1900 to attract financial support for his plan to establish an industrial school for the Ainu, he discussed the technique of photographing Native Americans before and after their education, and indicated that such visual evidence proved that the education was effective for the natives.24

In 1901 Oyabe served as translator and guide to the American anthropologist Hiram Hiller on Hiller’s research trip among the Ainu.25 After Hiller departed, Oyabe built a model Ainu village and school in Abuta, Hokkaido, which he attempted to operate on the model of the manual and agricultural education featured at Hampton.26 Despite sponsorship by many prominent Japanese, including members of the imperial family, Oyabe found that realizing his dream project was not easy. The school was beset with problems from the start. Local Japanese residents
were skeptical about the prospect of “educating” the Ainu, and Ainu parents were reluctant to entrust their children to Oyabe, whose school they regarded as an outgrowth of Japan’s colonialist policies in Hokkaido.

Oyabe’s own self-righteous demeanor and elitist prejudices did little to build a relationship between the school and the community. In a 1903 open letter to friends at Hampton, he revealed, “In my young heart I thought that the Hampton School came out as easily as the asparagus from its root. But now I understand that the price of the Institute is the price of the heart and blood of that old soldier [General Armstrong]. If he were living, I wonder what he would say to me, for I am doing the same line of work as the general did. I am trying to save and educate the helpless race in this country.”

In 1909 Oyabe suddenly gave up his Ainu school and returned to Tokyo, where he took a job teaching history and English language at the Koten Kokyujo (Imperial Classical Literary College), a seminary for Shinto priests. Around the same time, he assembled a collection of Ainu riddles, with the Ainu language transliterated alongside the Japanese, which he called *Ainu Nazo Shu*. The book was not published until 1911, when it appeared with an introduction in English by the American anthropologist Frederick Starr. Some years later, after taking the national exams for English translators, Oyabe became a professional translator and served in that capacity with the Japanese Army’s expeditionary force in Siberia in 1919–1920. He was awarded the Medal of Honor by the Emperor for his service.

Meanwhile, he moved from orthodox Christianity to advocacy of a Christian-Shinto syncretism.

Around this same time, Oyabe switched to historical writing, and his unorthodox interpretations caused minor sensations in Japan. The first of the flamboyant theses he “proved” to the Japanese public was that the great Mongolian warrior Genghis Khan was in fact the Japanese *samurai* Yoshitsune Minamoto, who had fled Japan in the late twelfth century to
escape an assassination attempt by his older brother, the first Minamato Shogun.\textsuperscript{30} Oyabe’s book on the subject became a best-seller in Japan, in part due to an endorsement by Prince Tokugawa, heir to the deposed shogunate. \textit{The Christian Science Monitor} nevertheless reported that Oyabe (who it asserted had “travelled extensively in Russia, Mongolia, Manchuria, and Europe” over many years amassing evidence) had created an absurd fantasy in arguing that Genghis Khan was actually Japanese. “The proof he advances is rather flimsy, and leads to the belief that nationalistic pride is the principal motive actuating the Japanese author.”\textsuperscript{31}

The same nationalistic strain was also evident in Oyabe’s next full-length book, the 1929 study \textit{Nihon Oyobi Nihon Kokumin no Kigen} (Origin of Japan and Japanese). This work allegedly grew out of a visit to Shanghai that Oyabe made on behalf of the Japanese Army. Assigned to evaluate the sources of Western influence on Japan, Oyabe focused on the contribution of the ancient Hebrews to the development of Japanese civilization. He principally argued that the various religious customs and the names of several towns in Japan showed that the Japanese were descended from one of the lost Jewish tribes. In one of the essays, for example, he contended that traditional Japanese wrestling (\textit{sumo}) “sprang from the great ancestor Israel who wrestled with the Angel” and that the reference in Genesis 30:8 to Rachel wrestling with her sister and prevailing corresponded with the ancient Japanese practice of women’s wrestling.\textsuperscript{32} One contemporary Japanese scholar described his theories as simple-minded, and they have been widely ridiculed by later scholars.\textsuperscript{33}

Despite Oyabe’s praise for America and his description of himself as a Yankee, he seems never to have revisited the country once he moved back to Japan. Ironically, his son Masayoshi Oyabe moved to the United States in 1920 to study (taking the name “Joe”) and remained the rest of his life—according to family legend, father and son had a falling out, which may have dissuaded the elder Oyabe from returning. His increasingly nation-
alist outlook, combined with feelings of resentment over the hostile treatment of Japanese immigrants in the United States, may also have influenced his views. A postcard Oyabe wrote to one of his former teachers at Hampton more than twenty years after he left the United States suggests his sentiments. At the time, white nativists throughout the United States were declaring Japanese immigrants immutably foreign and racially unassimilable, and calling for a complete halt to Japanese immigration (one which would be enacted in 1924). The card Oyabe sent was a photo of the Japanese battleship *Mutsu*, one of the largest and most powerful battleships in the world upon its completion in 1921. Above the photo, Oyabe wrote proudly, “Such ships are all made by our own Japanese people.” Then he followed, rather abruptly and aggressively, “Do you think that we are also an inferior race?”

In fact, by the 1920s *A Japanese Robinson Crusoe* and its author were all but forgotten in the United States. The book never established itself inside Japanese-American communities, and it was unknown in Japan (the first Japanese edition was not published until 1991, in a version translated by Toshihiko Ikuta, the husband of Oyabe’s granddaughter). In a final irony, just months after Oyabe’s passing in 1941, the hopes he had expressed in the book for peace and goodwill among the nations were dashed, as war broke out between the two countries he called home. The Christian nation the author had so praised for its dedication to brotherhood and lack of color prejudice confined his son and his grandchildren in camps on account of their race.

* * *

What are readers to make of *A Japanese Robinson Crusoe* now, more than a hundred years after its publication? More than an individual’s adventure, it is an evocation of a distant era. Middle-class Americans in 1898 were intrigued by Japan, then still a little-known country to most, and by its “plucky and attractive little people” (as the young Eleanor Roosevelt...
described the Japanese shortly thereafter.\textsuperscript{35} The “japonist” descriptions of Lafcadio Hearn caused a sensation in American literary circles and ushered in a series of popular exotic (and feminine) representations of Japanese by Asian American writers, notably Yone Noguchi’s pseudonymous novel \textit{The American Diary of a Japanese Girl} (1903) and the works of Winifred Eaton, who passed for Japanese and wrote novels under the pen name Onoto Watanna. Meanwhile, as American military dominion extended over the Pacific and the nation’s social and political elites responded to Rudyard Kipling’s call to “take up the white man’s burden,” the story of an Oriental coming to the United States and absorbing Western Christian ways reinforced the comfortable belief in a universalistic mission and the role of the United States as a beacon of enlightenment to Asia.

At the same time, Oyabe’s memoir represents an important primary text for understanding the significance of race in Japanese history, most notably in the author’s discussion of life in Meiji-era Hokkaido. Although the Japanese had long claimed and informally controlled that northern island, full-scale colonization did not begin until the establishment of a Colonization Commission (Kaitakushi) in 1869. In the years that followed, the newly restored imperial government actively pursued policies meant to transform “Japan’s northern frontier,” renamed Hokkaido, by opening up land for agriculture, building infrastructure such as roads, ports, and railroads, and encouraging immigration. As a result, the ethnic Japanese population, initially confined mostly to the southern part of the island, grew from about 63,000 in 1854 to more than a million island-wide by 1903.\textsuperscript{36} The indigenous Ainu suffered greatly under the rapid and massive expropriation of their land by these colonizers. The Japanese viewed them as a backward race whose language, culture, and social organization all had to be replaced with the more “civilized” Japanese system. The policy of forcible assimilation imposed during the latter half of the nineteenth century
resulted in displacement and poverty for many Ainu, the impact of which remains tangible to this day.\textsuperscript{37}

Oyabe’s interest in the Ainu paralleled Japan’s efforts to colonize and rapidly develop the northern island. In an age of Social Darwinism, he believed that the Ainu were fated to die out; his interest in Ainu archaeology derived in part from his belief that once the Ainu were gone these relics would become extremely valuable. Nevertheless, he argued that it was the responsibility of a civilized and stronger race to try to the extent possible to halt the demise of the weak and helpless race. Just as Samuel Armstrong of Hampton Institute, for example, had argued that his mission was to provide education for not only African Americans and Native Americans but also all those “who need [the school’s] help,” Oyabe attempted to use what he had learned from his white teachers and friends in the United States to “help” and “civilize” the Ainu through education.\textsuperscript{38}

*\textit{A Japanese Robinson Crusoe*} thus offers insights into how various educated (and presumably enlightened) Japanese coped with the prevailing racial paradigms of the late nineteenth century, a time when fixed conceptions of racial hierarchy positioned whites as the most advanced and powerful race, while Asians were supposed to be of lesser quality. In their quest to become as civilized and responsible as their white counterparts, the Japanese discovered their own native tribes and devised their own version of the “white man’s burden,” a racial paradigm that allowed them to position themselves at the top through paternalistic benevolence, but at the expense of considering what the indigenous population truly needed. While Oyabe, for his part, seems to have been sincerely concerned about the fate of the Ainu, it is important to note that he also had a vested interest in helping them, because their image as “savage” and “stupid” aborigines in need of help allowed him to project himself as a “civilized” savior. Oyabe wrote numerous letters to his teachers and friends at Hampton, explaining how he had modeled his Ainu school in Hokkaido on their program and was attempting to do
the “same line of work” as they were. A racialized Ainu even provided Oyabe a means to assert a positive racial identity against the Americans. In a letter he wrote to the anthropologist Hiram Hiller, Oyabe argued that the Ainu “are the degraded sons of the Caucasian race, just as American Indians are the origin of Orientals.” Thus, just as the Americans were helping their native people who had an “oriental” origin, Oyabe, who emphasized his “oriental-ness” in his autobiography, could argue that, in turn, he was helping indigenous people who shared the same ancestry as his white teachers.

Finally and most importantly, *A Japanese Robinson Crusoe* forms the first chapter of a continuing Asian-American narrative—the presentation of Asian immigrants as the “model minority,” people of color who accept the subordinate social role allotted to them, do not openly challenge the racial status quo, struggle quietly to better themselves through hard work, and assimilate voluntarily into mainstream American culture. We have suggested how Oyabe is complicit in fashioning this image. Throughout the text, he underlines his remarkable adaptability and talent for assimilation. Ironically, at the outset of his memoir he is open to Asian culture and outraged at racial prejudice, but as he progresses down his path, this talent leads him to identify with the dominant white group and in the process, he takes on an increasingly supremacist and bigoted view of “civilization,” and embraces conventional Victorian social attitudes; this emerges most starkly in his assertion of women’s inferiority and his opposition to women’s education.

In this sense *A Japanese Robinson Crusoe* can best be understood as forerunner to the writings of the “cosmopolitan Issei,” that is, members of the disparate group of Japanese immigrant intellectuals who arrived in North America (often as students) at the turn of the century, lived outside ethnic communities, and prided themselves on their connection to white Americans. In the decades following the appearance of Oyabe’s memoir, even as nativist pressure to exclude Japanese immigrants...
peaked on the West Coast and spread throughout the nation, westernized writers such as Masuji Miyakawa, Kiyoshi Karl Kawakami, Macaomi Yoshitomi, Toyokichi Ieyenaga and Yamato Ichihashi published books and articles in English (and, more rarely, French) that touched on “the Japanese question.” In these works, directed at an elite white audience, the authors simultaneously defended Japanese immigrants and put themselves forward as equal players in public dialogues about race and citizenship.

Although none of these writers referred to Oyabe or his book, the positions they took were reminiscent of A Japanese Robinson Crusoe. They deplored the simplistic race-based classification of Japanese as inferior and praised Japanese immigrants and their capacity for citizenship, even as they expressed occasional disdain for white ethnic immigrants, Chinese, and blacks. For instance, Masuji Miyakawa, the first ethnic Japanese attorney admitted to the U.S. bar, praised democracy as a bridge between disparate classes, yet qualified his support along elitist and racist lines:

In America, one in any profession receives credit for what he does. If he is dishonest, and has a tendency to revert to his ancestral life in the top of a tree the moment the employer is out of sight... or in any way to appear antagonistic to the customs of society, he must suffer the consequences, be he Negro or Chinese. 40

The journalist and publicist Kiyoshi Karl Kawakami even surpassed Oyabe in proclaiming himself a Japanese Yankee. In his 1914 book, Asia at the Door, he spoke as an American and echoed nativist thought. Thus, he maintained that immigration restriction is “one of our sovereign rights,” referred to immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe as racially inferior to old-stock Americans, and disparaged Chinese as “ideal servants,” “hatchet men,” and gamblers. Conversely, he insisted that Japanese were “a civilized and progressive nation.”
and for that reason should not be singled out for discrimination, but included among admissible races. He extolled Japanese immigrants’ capacity to become quickly Americanized, and pointed with pride to the offspring of white-Japanese intermarriages as appearing white.41

These writers likewise built on Oyabe in proposing that social distinctions—and fitness for citizenship—should be based on levels of “civilization,” rather than on biological factors. However, instead of urging Asians to convert to Christianity, like Oyabe did, as a visible sign of civilization, they championed “modernity” and invited their white audience to embrace a more democratic and cosmopolitan vision of American culture. In light of the era’s dominant Jim Crow thinking, this position had progressive implications. Indeed, despite their elitist prejudices against African Americans (and Chinese), in their rejection of race-based hierarchies, the Issei writers bore a certain resemblance to the African-American intellectuals of the period whom W. E. B. DuBois dubbed “the talented tenth.” As early as 1898, the same year that Oyabe’s work appeared, editor K. Sano of the San Francisco journal Japanese American Voice (a.k.a. The Chrysanthemum) declared that Japanese immigrants should be allowed to naturalize on the grounds that Japan had “modernized its ancient civilization . . . demonstrated her progressiveness as a people,” and was opening its territory to foreigners.42 Masuji Miyakawa declared that the road to full citizenship for Japanese (and by extension any other) immigrants lay not in their ethnic origin but in being more modern—more cultured and respectable—than Americans:

An individual Japanese . . . cannot be called great and respectable simply because his nation is great and respectable. . . . [W]hen he leaves that great country of Japan and lands in this country . . . [h]e must here prove the very greatness of Japanese individuality to the people of the civilized universe, that he can speak the English language better than
others, that he is more law-abiding than the others, more enlightened in idea and his conception of things American than the others, and that he is educationally, intellectually, morally, and industriously much stronger than the others.⁴³

Even Kawakami, who recommended that entry into the United States be limited to only the “better type” of immigrants from both Europe and Asia, insisted that the acceptability of individuals be based in part on democratic thinking: “No man is worth while who does not respect himself and the race of which he is a member. Neither is he a desirable member of the democracy who cherishes prejudice against other races.”⁴⁴

In sum, Jenichiro Oyabe’s work is many-sided, like the man himself. Although it encapsulates the particular moment of its creation, it foreshadows many future works, and not just those by Japanese immigrants. Oyabe’s gift was to express, in idiosyncratic but readable fashion, the problem of modern life—how to adapt to rapid large-scale changes in one’s surroundings and reconcile the various contradictory strands of individual identity. Oyabe himself, it seems, was not altogether successful in achieving his goal of becoming a Japanese Yankee. He closed his book without any clear idea of his future and sailed back to Japan soon after its publication, never to return. Perhaps it is the very incompleteness of his work and its lack of a neat resolution that give the book such a contemporary and accessible feel and impel a new reading of it.

* * *

We conclude by thanking some of the people who have played a vital part in helping us discover Jenichiro Oyabe and bring his voice back into print. We both owe particular gratitude to Eiichiro Azuma, who literally brought us together, knowing of our common interest in Oyabe, and provided incisive suggestions and criticism. We also offer thanks to Masako Ikeda of University of Hawai’i Press, who shared our enthusiasm for this
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NOTES

(1895) is a critical study. Kanzo Uchimura’s 1895 memoir, published concurrently in New York as The Diary of a Japanese Convert and in Tokyo as How I Became a Christian, is largely about Japan but includes some discussion of the author’s years in America.

2. Oyabe’s mentor at Hampton, Samuel Armstrong, would have vigorously opposed the decision to wear haori and hakama. A strong proponent of assimilation policy, Armstrong believed in the importance of a thorough adoption of white American customs by his Native American and African-American students. This meant living exactly like the white teachers—sharing the same language, religion, marital relationships, education, conceptions of labor, housing, hairstyle, and clothing. For an overview of the education of Native American children by white Christians in the nineteenth century, see Francis Paul Prucha, American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865–1900 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), pp. 265–291.

3. This was apparently a not uncommon trope among Christian converts, no doubt in response to Protestant stereotypes about heathens. For example, Tel Sono states, “My good father never worshipped idols, neither would he allow me to do so.” “The Japanese Reformer,” p. 2.


6. Hampton Institute Discipline Record 1889–1890.

7. Oyabe was able to parlay his membership into a close connection with an elite circle of local ministers. A newspaper article of the period, recounting the stellar cast of clergy who took part in the dedication of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union mission in the interracial slum of Willow Tree Alley, mentioned that “one of the most interesting talks was given by Isiah Koyabe [sic], a Japanese student of the Howard university.” A second article, recounting a lecture by Tel Sono, who was returning to Japan to found a school, noted that Koyabe [sic] had presented the church with portraits of Dr. Rankin and of Tel Sono. “Redeeming the Alleys,” Washington Post, May 28, 1892, p. 4; “Madame Tel Sono’s
Farewell,” *Washington Post*, January 2, 1893, p. 2. These are presumably some of the “crayons” Oyabe mentions in his book.

8. *Howard University Catalog of the Officers and Students*, Howard University Library. See the years for 1891, 1892, and 1893.

9. *Southern Workman*, August 1889, p. 88. The name of the supervisor for each student is listed in *Hampton Institute Discipline Record 1889–1890*, Hampton University archives.

10. Letter, Seijiro Saito to Rev. H. B. Frissel, January 18, 1904, Hampton University Archives. The room of each student is indicated in *Hampton Institute Discipline Record, 1889–1890*.


12. On Katayama, see Hyman Kublin, *Asian Revolutionary: The Life of Sen Katayama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964). A comparison of the life trajectories of Katayama with that of Oyabe is intriguing. Both men converted to Christianity and sought education in the West, finishing their studies at Yale (where they are both pictured in a surviving class photograph). Both ended up returning to Japan and working as missionaries with marginalized groups, but Katayama embraced revolutionary internationalism while Oyabe, as discussed in this introduction, was attracted by nationalism.


14. The one secondary source available on Oyabe in Japanese, Zenjiro Doi’s biography, *Yoshitsune Densetsu wo Tsukutta Otoko* [The Man Who Created the Yoshitsune Legend] (Tokyo: Kojinsha, 2005), states that Oyabe’s father was Zennosuke Oyabe (1841–1896), a judge/prosecutor. Apparently after the deaths of his mother and grandmother in 1879, Oyabe first went to Tokyo to join his father and studied at a private school called Genyo Gijuku (pp. 38–48).

15. Oyabe’s resolution must indeed have been speedy. On June 3, 1895, at the time of his Yale graduation, Oyabe was listed as “undecided” as to how he wished to spend his next year. “Caps, Gowns, and Hoods,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1895, p. 9. Yet,
an article that appeared in The Congregationalist barely two weeks later mentioned that Oyabe had already left for “The Sandwich Islands” via the Hawaiian Evangelisation Association to work with Japanese there. See “The South,” The Congregationalist, June 20, 1895, p. 975.

16. Letter, Jenichiro Oyabe to Oliver P. Emerson, October 9, 1895. Oyabe file, Hawaii Mission House Museum Archives, Honolulu, HI.


23. Ibid. In the interview, Oyabe proffered an analysis of Japanese-American trade which proved prescient in at least one regard. “I believe there is going to be a great trade between America and my country,” continued Mr. Oyabe. ‘We need many things that you have. Japan is progressing and will progress much faster in the future... I wish Americans would learn to like Japanese green tea. It is very expensive, but it is ever so much better than any of these ordinary brands.”


26. Richard Siddle, Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 84. Oyabe continued to overstate his achievements. In 1905 he introduced himself to a visitor as “Chief of the Education Society for Hokkaido Aborigines and


30 Jenichiro Oyabe, Chingis Han wa Minamoto no Yoshitsune Nari [Genghis Khan was Minamoto no Yoshitsune] (Tokyo: Toyama Shobo, 1924). Curiously, Oyabe mentions in A Japanese Robinson Crusoe (45) his reading of an earlier book that presents the same thesis.


34. Jenichiro Oyabe to M. J. Sherman, July 12, 1892, Hamp-
ton University Archives. (The ascribed year obviously is a mistake because the Mutsu was not completed until 1921.)


38. Armstrong argued that “nothing in the charter or original thought” had limited the target of the school’s work to “one race.” Rather, he argued that the school existed “for those who need its help; chiefly therefore, at first and at present, for the Negro of the South. But from the earliest years, other races and lands have been now and then represented here.” *Southern Workman*, August 1889, p. 88.


in Protest Against a Threatened Persecution” (Montreal: Montreal Gazette Press, 1897).

43. Masuji Miyakawa, Powers of the American People, p. 251.
44. Kiyoshi Karl Kawakami, Asia at the Door, p. 84.

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