

Lafcadio Hearn: American Reflections from Japan

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Abstract

Before his journey to Japan, Lafcadio Hearn started his career as a journalist in Cincinnati, Ohio where he conducted in-depth studies of various ethnic and minority groups. Historically, this was a very turbulent period after the American Civil War when former African slaves were freed but found themselves on the fringes of a predominately white, racist society. His bitter experiences would lead him away from the United States and as the editor of the Kobe Chronicle he found the courage to speak out. His early journalism led to an appreciation and, more importantly, a desire to point out the distinctive elements of culture that his contemporaries would ignore. His unpublished articles clearly show that this journey started with his days as a reporter in Cincinnati, Ohio.

日本に旅する前に、ラフカディオ・ハーンは南北戦争後の再建で混乱した時期のアメリカで新聞記者をしていた。社会的問題を暴露し、都市の犯罪を報道し、アメリカの無視されているマイノリティを苦しめている社会悪に関して重要な示唆をしている。ハーンは日本で帰化し、神戸クロニクルの編集者となって、シンシナティ時代に、日々以来彼を悩ませていた問題にも取り組むことができた。日本人として、彼は意見を声に出すことに何の制約もなくなった。ハーンの全体的世界観、とりわけシンシナティにおける経験は、今まで本として出版されることがなかった新聞記事にも多くに見られた。

Lafcadio Hearn endeavored to educate his readers about the faults and vices of the western world. He would often involve his readers in moralistic dilemmas that have their roots in his exploration of the streets and alleys of Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1894, Hearn reminisces to Chamberlain of his idealistic, yet impossible rebellion that put him at the mercy of an intolerant society. In his correspondence from Kumamoto he writes “In those days being supremely an ass as well as a fly, I thought I could overturn the universe” (Hearn to Chamberlain, September 22, 1894). During the centennial of the founding of America’s young democracy, Hearn authors *A Case of Lunacy*. He writes about the delusions of a

drunken mulatto man who dreams of a place “wherein strangers from the four quarters of the earth might be quartered free of charge, and Civil Rights should be respected” (*The Cincinnati Commercial*, July 18 1876). At this time in history only a lunatic might imagine such a preposterous vision. Hearn’s illegal marriage to a mulatto woman would damage his reputation; forcing him to leave Cincinnati in 1877. It was from Japan, as editor of the Kobe Chronicle, that he could finally tackle issues that had bothered him since his days in Cincinnati.

American Society was plagued by rampant racism and Hearn’s avid pursuit of the plight of African Americans put his early career in jeopardy. Lafcadio Hearn started his career as a journalist in Cincinnati, Ohio where he conducted in-depth studies of various ethnic and minority groups. Historically, this was a very turbulent period after the American Civil War when former African slaves were freed but found themselves on the fringes of a predominately white, racist society. As a novice reporter at the young age of 22, Hearn clearly shows his respect for persecuted religions and cultures. Hearn highlights social and racial prejudice in *A Nasty Nest*. Perhaps he hopes this exposure might influence or educate his elite audience about the social ills of Cincinnati. In this article a young woman has a miscarriage in the slums. He takes the opportunity to describe the living conditions of the lower class citizens who suffer not only from poverty but social prejudice. Even though Hearn is fully aware of these circumstances he still marries Mattie, a mulatto woman, two years later.

Hearn makes a bold statement of purpose in *The Gentleman or the Scholar* on September 25, 1873. He hopes to be a preacher of the gospel of culture without bias. In November he makes a proposition that was sure to have been shocking or even taboo. In *Pagan Piety*, he states that Christian and Pagan values are one in the same. Hearn argues that Confucius was teaching the same doctrine of love and self-sacrifice five hundred years earlier than Jesus. Hearn questions the motives of missionaries as he would in Japan. On June 8, 1873, Hearn describes a terrible pestilence. In his article entitled *Epidemic in Embryo: The Plague Spots of Our Beautiful Community*, he goes to lengths to describe the inhumane and hazardous living conditions of African American workers in a Cincinnati.

In *The English and the Anthropophagi* Hearn is disturbed by the invasion of indigenous native cultures by Western missionaries. Hearn is not anti-Christian but he is quite candid in his belief that the acts of missionaries are fruitless and he is clever to add a bit of humor as not to offend his predominately Christian readers. Hearn respects different value systems

and this can be seen as early attempts to convince readers that other cultures and societies must be respected and judging them with Western values creates bias and prejudice. Hearn even tackles the topic of bigamy in *Bismillah*. This article is about a Christian who adopts Islam. Public opinion is that he did so only to take a second wife. Hearn is quick to point out the hypocrisy and cruelty of Christian attackers. In the *Marquesan Incident*, Hearn clearly expresses his distaste for the use of religion as an excuse to violently suppress indigenous peoples. He laments over the inhumane use of “shot and shell” by the French to convert the people of the Marquesas.

In *Slow Starvation* Hearn takes on the exploitation of workers by big business. He undoubtedly angered many influential business leaders and, ultimately, the politicians they supported. His subtitle for this early social expose of 1874 reads “Beauty Beggary, Pants and Pistol-Pockets, The Women Who Sew, and the Men Who Pay (?) Them, The Story of “A Dime a Pair” Told by an Enquirer Reporter.” Hearn’s affinity for exploited workers echoes contemporary social ills in this century. In an age of rapid mechanization and mass production, Hearn ironically tells the reader “Truly, the introduction of the sewing-machine does not appear to have bettered the condition of the women who “stitch, stitch, stitch in poverty, hunger and dirt.” [. . .] situated in the most dilapidated suburbs of Cincinnati” (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 15, 1874).

Persecution, subjugation and the denial of human rights were topics of a man ahead of his time. Hearn should be praised for his desire to bring these issues out in the open at such an intolerant time in history. In New Orleans, Hearn’s Cincinnati past relationship with a mulatto woman hovered like a dark cloud when he writes “I see my way clear to a position here, - but then I feel sure some one will tell that story on me, sooner or later. Then I will have to go away” (Kuwabara 135). Hearn still ignored racial sentiments and maintained a close relationship with George Washington Cable who angered the southerners with his advocacy for granting freed slaves equal rights. Hearn, on the other hand, became more careful in expressing his ideas at this time. His friend Cable was threatened bodily harm by newspaper journalists and editors. As suggested from Hearn’s private letters to Watkin, Hearn was paranoid of his past catching up with him and ruining new career prospects. Edward Tinker careful explanation of Hearn’s relationship with a mulatto woman and his ties to George W. Cable is yet another example of the social climate even after Hearn’s death.

Hearn's perennial sympathy with the under dog and his past connection with Althea Foley made him a quick convert to Cable's point of view, although he knew enough not to discuss it openly[. . .] Both the angle from which it was told and the story itself must have pleased Cable tremendously and the fact that they were supporters of a minority theory. (Tinker 123)

Cable's essay *The Freedman's Case in Equity*, calling on the nation to admit the former slaves into full citizenship and urging the South to leave behind its racist "sentiments," and "plant society firmly upon universal justice and equity" made a great impression upon Hearn (*The Century Magazine*, January 1885).

Hearn's intentions and aspirations at this uneasy time can be found in *An Orange Christmas*. This letter of correspondence to Cincinnati has not been widely available as it remained in only private collections such as that of Tulane University. Professor Kenji Zenimoto was able to acquire the manuscript for his ongoing collection of Hearn materials during the Lafcadio Hearn Workshops at Tulane University in 2000. This letter is truly a culmination of Hearn's American experience till his arrival in New Orleans as it is the product of his eagerness for the preservation of old traditions that seem to be trampled with the continual progression of modern society. This essay starts off with his appreciation of Creole language, food, tobacco and customs during the Christmas season. He is very specific in his comparisons in all areas and including differences in the cost of living for his northern readership. At the close of this correspondence he starts to lament over the loss of a cultural heritage. This article was written only three months after his arrival in New Orleans. He breaks the mood of his pulsating impressions of the city with "I have spoken with enthusiasm of the beauty of New Orleans; I must speak with pain of her decay. The city is fading, molding, crumbling – slowly but certainly" (Zenimoto xviii). Then the Hearn known today for his stance on the preservation of lost traditions come through.

As molders and crumbles some quaint pleasure –house in the midst of weed-grown gardens once luxuriantly romantic as those which form a background for the warm pictures of Decameron, so molders this fair, quaint city in the midst of ruined paradise of Louisiana. So, also, are moldering all the old cities of the South, for their prosperity had its root of nourishment in the enormous wealth of the planters of

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cotton and rice and sugar and that wealth is gone.

I suppose that when the hatreds of the war have burnt themselves out; when the descendants of the ruined planter remember the family misfortunes only as traditions are remembered; when a new social system shall have arisen from the ashes of the old, like the new world of the Scandinavian Edda from the fires of Ragnarock –then shall the old plantations be again made fertile, and the cotton wood cleared away, and the life of these old Southern cities be resurrected. But the new south shall never be as the old. Those once grand residences that are being devoured by mossy decay can never be rebuilt; the old plantations which extended over whole parishes will be parceled out to a hundred farmers from States that are not Southern; and the foreign beauties of New Orleans will never be restored. It is the picturesqueness of the South, the poetry, the traditions, the legends, the superstitions, the quaint faiths, the family prides, the luxuriousness, the splendid indolence and the splendid sins of the old social system which has passed, or which is now passing away forever. It is all this which is dead or dying in New Orleans, and which can hope for no trumpet-call to resurrection. The new South may, perhaps, become far richer than the old South; but there will be no aristocracy, no lives of unbridled luxury, no reckless splendors of hospitality, no mad pursuit of costliest pleasures. The old Southern hospitality has been starved to death, and leaves no trace of its former being save the thin ghost of romance. The new South will be less magnificent, though wealthier; less generous, though more self-denying; less poetical, though more cultured. The new cities will be, probably, more prosperous and less picturesque than the old. They will have plain streets and plain faced houses; they will have cheaper balconies and commonplace facades; they will not delight an artistic eye or suggest curious ghostly fancies to an artistic mind; they will be quite practical and quite unromantic. This period of decay seems to me the close of the romantic era of Southern history. (*The Cincinnati Commercial*, January 5, 1878)

While Hearn was sure the reconstruction of the south would improve the plight of African Americans, this perspective is quite reminiscent of things to come as Hearn was always an advocate of “Old Japan” but emphasized to his students that they should learn western

civilization and science for the sake of “New Japan.” Another essay from New Orleans once again demonstrates Hearn’s cultural worldview; obviously a product of his time in Cincinnati where he always championed minority cultures. In his essay *Phenomenon of Civilized Progress* for the *Item* of December 14, 1878 we once again see his anxiousness over the gradual disappearance of cultural uniqueness.

The dominant European Culture absorbs everything. In this allusion to dress Hearn believes that “the whole male world in the year 2000 would be dressed in white, black and gray; with coats, vests and pantaloons, elastic-side shoes, felt hats, knit undershirts, etc.” (*The Item*, December 14, 1878) Hearn sees the progress of western civilization as the dulling of the rest of the world that falls under its influence. His mention of dress in Japan probably results from his meeting of Hattori, the head of the Japanese delegation for the New Orleans World Exhibition. It is Hearn’s American experience that starts in Cincinnati that realizes his vision of a world at the brink of cultural decimation. As a young man he was consumed with his philosophy of standing up for the victims of western domination.

One of the most curious phenomena in the progress of modern civilization is the disappearance of national outward peculiarities – the old national distinctions of costume and style of art, and mannerism in speech seem to be vanishing with extraordinary rapidity. The dialects of shires and provinces are yielding to the new and rapid system of intercommunication established in Europe; . . . Society is becoming somewhat monochromatic. The Oriental dress is struggling in Eastern cities against Frankish costumes; the Japanese costume is yielding to plain Western fashions. This all-absorbing civilization of Europe seems like a vast dyehouse which invests garments of a thousand forms, and hues with a uniform neutral tint. (*The Item*, December 14, 1878)

In this letter of 1877, Hearn is excited about his new life in the “Old South.” The beauty of his new lodging in an “old Creole home” enamors him. He tells Krehbiel that the building (which is still standing in New Orleans today) was built by “old princes of the South” with “an enormous space of ground, with broad wings, courtyards, and slave quarters from a bygone era.

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It is vast enough for a Carnival ball. Five windows and glass doors open flush with the floor and rise to the ceilings. They open on two sides upon the piazza, whence I have a far view of tropical gardens and masses of building, half-ruined but still magnificent. (*Life and Letters* 161)

However, while in high spirits from the “picturesqueness” of his new surrounding, he still laments for the black freedman, a hero whose name is always forgotten.

He later moves to the *Times-Democrat* in 1882 when the *Democrat* merges with the *Times*. His works from this period are widely available in publication by various authors who collected his writings for anthologies. He matures into well-known and accomplished journalist in New Orleans for his exploration of Creole Culture until 1887. Amazingly with the use of only one eye he even drew his own artwork to go with his articles. During this period he wrote approximately 700 pieces for publication. Hearn also starts to publish literary works in book form such as a translation of *One of Cleopatra's Nights* by Gautier (1882), *Stray Leaves from Strange Literature* (1884) and *Some Chinese Ghosts* (1887). When he becomes an editor for the *Item* he even writes an article that details his duties. In *Our Waste Basket*, Hearn tells the readership that denunciations of religion, free thought, and “attacks upon sects of races” are all “equally condemned” and ignored by his editorial staff. According to Hearn’s ideals, a product of his Cincinnati experiences,

. . . . whatever an editor may be in his private life, in his sanctum he has no specific religious ideas, no freethinking aggressiveness, no sectarian prejudices, no humanitarian theories, no vegetarian or carnivorous proclivities, no political preferences not in good accord with the tone and sentiment of the community which he furnished with the news of the day. (*The Item*, May 1881)

In one of his editorials, Hearn approached the subject of miscegenation in his favorable reviews of a novel by Alice Morris Buckner. This author, who kept her name anonymous at the time probably because of the subject matter, was a native of New Orleans. She published *Towards the Gulf: A Romance of Louisiana* in 1887. He shows nothing but praise for this book in his review that appeared in the *Times-Democrat* on January 30, 1887. He declares that this novel has “Immense strength of conception, a fine harmony of purpose, and a power of pathos

that takes one by surprise” and that “The book lives! It has a soul!” He then goes on to tell his readers that,

. . . The subject of miscegenation is one very difficult to manage at once delicately and chastely; but our anonymous writer has handled it in both particulars with surprising success, and with an art approaching exquisiteness. (*Times-Democrat*, January 30, 1887)

With more than ten years passing since his break-up with Mattie, this review does suggest a bit more openness on this subject matter. Perhaps the passing of time has healed some of his wounds. Hearn has already built up a reputation in New Orleans as an accomplished editor and writer. Thus, he probably is not as greatly concerned about the “scandal” from Cincinnati becoming public knowledge. With the underlying subject of miscegenation, still considered a crime in most states, Hearn’s allusion to the title with its double meaning of those separated (the races) coming closer together, he is once again trying to open the minds of readers “to social questions” as he did as an idealistic young reporter in Cincinnati.

In another previously unpublished piece, “La Raza Latina and the Yankees,” as editor of the *Item*, Hearn foresees a pluralistic society of the future. He tells his readers,

There is no typical American race to-day. A vast concourse of races, a veritable Capharnaum to create a future nation: but at present this cosmopolite people is merely the great magic caldron in which the elements of future national individuality are seething in a slow process of crystallization. (*The Item*, October 9, 1979)

Hearn’s ideals and experiences forged during his stint as a young journalist in the United States would significantly influence his Japan experience. Just as his boyhood experiences set his sights towards a kind of pluralistic spirituality, his time in Cincinnati had shaped his vision of a modern world of pluralistic cultures and beliefs that were being forgotten and even obliterated by the progress of modern, westernized civilization. This would shape his outlook on world events from Japan where, no longer confined by the social sentiments of American society, he would acquire a new freedom to write about his true beliefs and concerns at the

Kobe Chronicle.

Hearn continued to tackle issues such as racial prejudice from Japan. As the editor of the Kobe Chronicle, Hearn voiced his opinions on racial tensions in the United States in 1894. In an editorial of October 20, 1894 he establishes his unique perspective to readers of the Kobe Chronicle in that “by long residence in the Southern States of America” he was “familiar with the abnormal social conditions there existing. . . . Rarely can one open an American newspaper without reading of lynchings and killings of negroes; It would be impossible to contradict that conditions in certain parts of the South are not the conditions of civilization” (*Kobe Chronicle*, October 20, 1894).

He would continue his focus on American racial tensions in another editorial in November. This time he gives the South credit for trying to improve political conditions but is still genuinely concerned about the situation of African Americans.

. . . . The Southerner has long ceased to believe in the principles for which he fought; and recognizes as fully as his antagonists ever did the necessity and the value of national union. But the social necessities which compelled him to control the black vote remain and grow; and his politics are influenced by the necessity of self-preservation. His views are far more liberal than those of his fathers, and his spirit more progressive He is doing all that is possible to develop educational opportunities for blacks and whites alike; and would welcome heartily any constitutional amendments which could aid in the solution of the race question. (*Kobe Chronicle*, November 13, 1894)

Just before his dismissal from the Enquirer in 1875, Hearn writes, “the idealist, is the man that contributes to the culture, the elevation of mankind” (*The Cincinnati Enquirer* April 27, 1875). The fact that Hearn would continue to be concerned about the plight of African Americans clearly demonstrates the profound nature of his ideals developed as a young journalist for the Enquirer. The fact that he was forced to fend for himself in such an intolerant society was a turning point in that it focused his attention towards those very things that late nineteenth century society ignored.

In Hearn’s *Kokoro* a zealous and highly spirited samurai youth enthusiastically pursues what Hearn describes as the superior force of Western civilization. He becomes a devoted

student of western science and even goes abroad to follow this higher knowledge as his patriotic duty. This student comes to realize the necessity of foreign knowledge to ensure the security of Japan, but he also comes to see the superior beauty and worth of his own, native civilization. The late nineteenth century was a time of the overshadowing and marginalization of minority cultures by a process of rapid modernization. In *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields* Hearn confidently states in his essay "In Osaka," that the ethics that this young samurai discovers are still present, contrary to outward appearances. Hearn believes "It is not true that Old Japan is rapidly disappearing. It cannot disappear within at least another hundred years; perhaps it will never entirely disappear." Modern civilization is encroaching on the Japanese but "Old Japan survives in art, in faith, in customs and habits, in the hearts and the homes of the people: it may be found everywhere by those who know how to look for it" (Gleanings 152).

Hearn's experiences as an outcast during his time in Cincinnati thrust him into a cruel, modern world and could have completely swallowed him up. Ironically, it was these environments that lead him to those on the outskirts of acceptable society to find the faults, vices, and prejudices of American society. These experiences eventually led him away from the unforgiving, racial sentiments of the United States. But in his flight from modern society he gained a respect for other cultures that he brought with him to Japan. He gained an appreciation and, more importantly, a desire to point out the distinctive elements of culture that his contemporaries would ignore. His journey started with his days as a reporter in Cincinnati, Ohio.

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