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Resisting monoculturalism: Expatriate memoirs as sites of cultural dialogue in Japan

Abstract:
This article examines how contemporary expatriate memoirs set in Japan use narrative strategies to challenge essentialist representations of Japanese culture and identity. Focusing on *The View From Breast Pocket Mountain* by Karen Hill Anton (2020) and *The Only Gaijin in the Village* by Iain Maloney (2020), the article argues that these works exemplify a literary mode of intercultural life writing shaped by liminality. Rather than presenting the expatriate as a cultural translator or disaffected outsider, these memoirs employ tone, structure and narrative voice to depict belonging as an evolving and participatory process. The article situates these texts within a broader discursive context shaped by earlier Western commentators on Japan and draws on theoretical insights to frame liminality not merely as a thematic concern but as a creative principle. By attending to how narrative forms – including structure, tone and voice – shape and enact the content of intercultural experience, the article repositions expatriate memoir as a literary form in which cultural negotiation is performed on the page.

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Keywords:

Expatriate memoirs, monoculturalism, cultural resistance, Japan, liminality

Introduction

In recent years, a new generation of expatriate memoirs set in Japan has emerged, offering a departure from earlier accounts that positioned Japan as culturally impenetrable or mystically opaque. These memoirs narrate intercultural experience using strategies that reflect uncertainty and evolving forms of belonging. This article argues that such memoirs constitute a distinct form of intercultural life writing, shaped by the author's long-term immersion in Japanese society and their position within what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms the "in-between spaces" of cultural interaction (p. 1). The expatriate memoir, when viewed through this lens, is a creative exploration of narrative voice, cultural liminality and formal structure.

To situate this shift, the article first considers a discursive prehistory shaped by 20th century writers such as Donald Richie, Edward Seidensticker, and John Nathan. Richie and Seidensticker first visited Japan in the 1940s; in the 1960s Nathan became the first American to pass the entrance exams for the University of Tokyo. Collectively, these authors have written across many forms, including essays, columns and reviews; their memoirs and other autobiographical reflections have contributed to Western representations of Japanese cultural difference. These earlier expatriate writers often framed Japan as a problem to be solved through the lens of interpretive authority, with the writer positioned as either a cultural interpreter or a disappointed outsider. Structurally, these works tend to follow a broadly teleological arc: an initial phase of curiosity and immersion, followed by growing tension as the limits of belonging become apparent, culminating in a form of interpretive closure in which cultural difference is rendered as fixed and insurmountable. Liminality, in this model, is not sustained but resolved – a condition to be escaped rather than inhabited. By contrast, the memoirs of Karen Hill Anton (2020) and Iain Maloney (2020) depart from this trajectory. Their narrative strategy is to render cultural belonging as something enacted in everyday life rather than claimed.

This article traces the evolution of expatriate memoirs in Japan across three key dimensions: a shift in interpretive stance from cultural authority to self-reflexive engagement; evolving narrative structures from teleological arcs of curiosity, tension and closure towards cumulative models of cohabitation; and the recognition of liminality as an ethical mode of intercultural life. The key distinction is structural: earlier expatriate writing resolves liminality through narrative closure (most commonly with the expatriate returning home) while contemporary memoirs sustain liminality as an ongoing condition embedded in narrative form. Separating the "what" from the "how" in these memoirs is difficult, so our analysis moves between narrative content and the formal strategies of structure, voice and tone through which content is shaped. Liminality is not merely depicted, but is enacted on the page. Through close readings of five representative works, we argue that contemporary memoirs offer a renewed vision of presence, defined by humility and sustained engagement. Drawing on theoretical insights from Bhabha (1994) and the body of nihonjinron writing, the literature of Japanese exceptionalism, we analyse the memoirs of Anton and Maloney as case studies and find that the contemporary expatriate memoir models a mode of writing attuned to cultural cohabitation. This shift from interpreter to interlocutor is embedded in literary form. The narrative voice, structural openness

and tonal humility adopted by contemporary memoirists enact belonging as a process rather than a destination.

Defining expatriate memoir

To proceed with clarity, it is necessary to define the term "expatriate memoir" as used in this study. We refer to life narratives authored by individuals, typically from Western countries, who have resided for prolonged periods in Japan, learned the language and developed familiarity with local customs and systems of authority. While these texts may share elements with travel writing or ethnographic reportage, they differ fundamentally in duration, depth of cultural engagement and narrative intent. These works are typically written in English and published by Western presses, positioning them within global circuits of literary legitimacy that privilege Western linguistic and cultural norms.

The expatriate memoir is situated at the intersection of travelogue, autobiography and intercultural reflection. Unlike the travelogue, which reflects a transient encounter with difference, the expatriate memoir portrays an extended negotiation of belonging shaped by the writer's lived proximity to Japanese social life. Alternative terms such as "cross-cultural memoir" (McPherron & McIntosh, 2019, p. 196), "relocation narrative" (Mastellotto, 2018, p. 292) or "immersion memoir" (Besemeres, 2010, p. 224; Hemley, 2012, p. 11) reflect overlapping dimensions of this genre but lack the specificity of experience this article seeks to foreground, as we will explain in this section. Other labels, such as "geographies of life narrative" (Smith & Watson, 2024, p. 249), emphasise spatial experience, while terms like "immersion narrative" (Besemeres, 2005) highlight affective and temporal investment. Rather than describing geographic relocation alone, expatriate memoir explores how identity is reshaped through sustained engagement with another culture. Travel writers often depart after a brief immersion, but the expatriate memoirist remains, navigating obligations, routines and community entanglements over time. Their narratives are therefore distinguished by the relational complexity they develop and the cultural ambiguity they inhabit.

The term expatriate is itself ethically fraught. As several researchers have noted, it functions less as a neutral descriptor than as a category shaped by race, class and imperial legacies: Papayanis (2005) frames this as an "ethics of expatriation" (p. 1), while Fechter (2007) and Croucher (2012) show how expatriate identities are structured by privilege, mobility and social boundary making. Unlike the terms migrant or immigrant, which often connote economic necessity or marginality, the term expatriate implies choice, comfort and elite mobility. This linguistic distinction reveals a broader ideological asymmetry: Westerners moving abroad are framed as adventurous or cosmopolitan, while non-Westerners are often pathologised as threats or burdens. Maloney, for instance, reflects on its implicit hierarchies in his memoir: "they are immigrants: we are expats" (2020, p. 180). It is also the case that, as Fechter points out, many expatriates inhabit a bubble in their adopted country, one that is "structured by boundaries that they actively construct, maintain, and negotiate … primarily [through] race, nationality, class and gender" (2007, p. 35). Such bubbles, often rationalised as comfort or necessity, can function as self-imposed enclosures that limit genuine cultural immersion, allowing expatriates

to benefit from their host society without fully engaging with its social, linguistic or ethical demands. Acknowledging the structural asymmetries embedded in the term allows us to better understand the dynamics of power, access and cultural authority at play in expatriate writing.

Not all expatriate narratives conform to these patterns. Some writers directly confront the issues around expatriate identity and use the memoir form to subvert its privileges from within. Against this backdrop, the memoirs examined in this study stand out for their refusal to uphold the self-protective boundaries often associated with expatriate life. Rather than retreat into the social or ideological enclosures described by Fechter (2007), Croucher (2012) and others, writers like Karen Hill Anton (2020) and Iain Maloney (2020) deliberately narrate lives of sustained cultural entanglement, reciprocity and reflexive humility. As Conover (2016, p. 19) points out, the immersed narrator of this kind begins as an observer but becomes a participant. Expatriate memoirists often occupy what Merton (1972) terms an insider-outsider position, where proximity affords access to cultural knowledge even while full integration remains elusive. This liminal status is not a flaw to be overcome but a creative and epistemological resource. When combined with reflexivity – a willingness to interrogate one's own assumptions and position – it can yield insights unavailable to either the native-born insider or the transient visitor. These writers model a form of expatriate life writing that challenges the assumptions embedded in the term expatriate itself as they resist the privileges of cultural distance. In fact, Anton and Maloney make that resistance a formal, thematic and ethical concern of their memoirs. While numerically marginal, Western expatriate memoirs wield disproportionate cultural influence, particularly in English-language representations of Japan. Studying how these texts either reproduce or resist orientalist and essentialist tropes is therefore vital to understanding their cultural and discursive impact. We do not argue for these memoirs as inherently more insightful or authoritative than other forms of life writing. Rather, we highlight the opportunities and constraints afforded by long-term immersion: the capacity to observe continuity, build relationships and engage in reflexive recalibration over time.

Also at stake in this study is the way in which expatriate memoirs depict life in Japan. We propose that these texts be read as examples of a lived poetics – a narrative practice that arises from and gives shape to the writer's sustained negotiation of identity, place and cultural ambiguity. As Eakin (2008) argues, autobiographical acts are both retrospective accounts and constitutive practices, two methods in which individuals live out and make sense of their identities through narrative. Similarly, Smith and Watson (2024) describe life writing as an embodied act that engages memory, voice and situated knowledge to enact a relational self. In this sense the memoir becomes both an epistemological and aesthetic space, where cultural belonging is enacted and continuously revised. This approach reframes expatriate memoir as more than cultural testimony: it becomes a reflexive, affective and stylistic mode of dwelling in and with difference. Contemporary expatriate memoirs resist essentialist depictions of Japan by writing from within a liminal zone or a space of cultural ambiguity and negotiated identity (Bhabha, 1994; Turner, 1974). Rather than resolving cultural difference or performing mastery, these texts remain attentive to discomfort, reflexivity and the ethics of presence. As Behar (1996) and Bourdieu (1990) suggest in the context of ethnography, proximity to lived experience, whether through emotional vulnerability or embodied participation, offers a

pathway to ethical knowledge. Anton and Maloney adopt similar narrative strategies: yielding their interpretive authority, foregrounding the modesty required to participate in a new culture and structuring their memoirs through durational experience rather than dramatic revelation.

When we use the term "ethical" in this article, we draw on Papayanis's (2005) concept of the ethics of expatriation. She defines this as an orientation towards cross-cultural encounter characterised by the willingness to relinquish interpretive authority, attend to the other's terms and remain open to revision. This aligns with Appiah's (2008) notion of cosmopolitan ethics as "learning as well as teaching … listening as well as talking" (p. 93). Throughout the article, we focus on three ethical acts in which writers are participating: ethics of expatriation (from Papayanis, for the overall orientation), ethical listening (for the attentive, receptive stance towards the host culture), and ethical presence (for the commitment to sustained, embodied, non-masterful dwelling). We therefore propose expatriate memoir as a form in which intercultural ethics are both portrayed and formally enacted.

Our study has one very large proviso. The vast majority of non-Japanese residents in Japan are migrants from nearby Asian countries, particularly China, Korea (including ethnic Koreans forcibly brough to Japan as slave labour and their descendants, commonly known as Zainichi), Vietnam and the Philippines. Among these groups exists a substantial and diverse body of memoir and life writing which far exceeds the scale of Western expatriate memoirs and speaks to a distinct set of historical, linguistic and political conditions. This study focuses specifically on Western expatriate authors whose cultural frameworks, mobility and socio-economic positions differ significantly, but we fully recognise that memoirs by Zainichi Koreans and other migrant groups offer rich, critical insights into life in Japan. Our decision to concentrate on Western expatriate memoirs is therefore methodological rather than hierarchical**.** Comparative work across migrant literatures would require different analytical frameworks (and language competencies) than we are equipped to apply here.

Nihonjinron and expatriate memoir

Western writing about Japan has long circulated essentialist tropes, depicting the country as monolithic and culturally impenetrable. These representations did not emerge in isolation. They were shaped by a broader ideological framework known as nihonjinron – a body of discourse that asserts the uniqueness and cultural homogeneity of the Japanese people. Nihonjinron discourse depicts Japan as uniquely homogeneous, positioning outsiders as permanent strangers (Befu, 2001; Sugimoto, 1999). This narrative shaped earlier expatriate writing, where authors like Richie, Nathan, and Seidensticker often echoed these assumptions. The persistent view of Japan as culturally impermeable is therefore not simply a misunderstanding on the part of Western observers, but an internally produced narrative, widely disseminated through institutions, education and the media. Contemporary memoirists such as Anton and Maloney challenge this framework through craft, using voice, tone and everyday detail to depict belonging as negotiated rather than impossible.

Figures such as Richie, Seidensticker, and Nathan narrated long-term encounters with Japan through a lens of interpretive authority, often positioning themselves as cultural intermediaries. Yet despite their sophistication and depth, their work often reinforced tropes of exclusion, inscrutability, and cultural opacity, depicting Japan as a place that could be observed and admired but not fully entered. Richie noted in *The Inland Sea* that he lives in Japan "as the water-insect lives in the pond, skating across the surface, not so much unmindful as incapable of seeing the depths" (1971, p. 74). The metaphor is as polished as it is resigned. Richie reaches for a self-consciously literary simile (elegant, detached, composed from above) that reveals as much about his narrative posture as it does about his experience. This is a writer who processes displacement through aesthetic refinement, not through the messy, ground-level engagement that characterises later memoirists like Anton and Maloney. Elsewhere in the same work he reflects that "Japan is not a place strangers easily enter – no matter the charm of the islands, the grace of the people. There is no tradition of anything but a politely hidden suspicion of the unknown wanderer" (p. 155). The declarative, generalising register of "Japan is not a place" and "there is no tradition" reveals the voice of a narrator who speaks for Japan, pronouncing on its character as though from a position of final knowledge. This authoritative tone, at once elegant and unqualified, is a hallmark of Richie's prose and stands in sharp contrast to the tentative, self-qualifying voices of later memoirists. Seidensticker similarly observes in *Tokyo Central* that "there can be few places where a foreigner is more foreign" (2002, p. 108). Seidensticker's compressed, superlative phrasing of "few places" and "more foreign" closes down nuance, presenting foreignness as a fixed condition. The sentence's epigrammatic brevity is itself a rhetorical choice: it settles the matter, leaving no room for qualification. Nathan recounts in *Living Carelessly in Tokyo and Elsewhere* that he was "treated as an alien with no hope of understanding [his peers]" (2008, p. 52). Nathan's phrasing adopts the perspective of his Japanese classmates, reporting their assumed judgement rather than describing his own feelings. This habit of absorbing and voicing the host culture's gaze, instead of asserting his own, gives Nathan's prose its characteristic quality of passive exhaustion, a narrator who is perpetually seen rather than seeing.

These statements are not isolated reflections. The writing from each of these authors is replete with anecdotes and observations that demonstrate a broader narrative tendency within their work and one that, knowingly or not, often echoed the exclusionary assumptions of nihonjinron discourse. In their writing, this tendency takes recognisable forms: broad pronouncements about Japanese character, a narrator who prefers to explain than participate, and sentences that close off matters. These are more than mere stylistic habits: in fact, they reflect an essentialist view of Japan. Richie's habit of generalisation is most visible in his persistent use of "the Japanese" as a collective subject, a syntactic pattern that flattens individual variation into fixed national traits: "the Japanese is too pragmatic" (1971, p. 40), "the Japanese have little feeling for animals" (p. 169), "the Japanese dismisses the entire remainder of Asia" (p. 260). In *The Inland Sea* alone, Richie uses this collective designation over 150 times. This is essentialism enacted at the level of syntax and is precisely the kind of generalising move that contemporary memoirists are likely to avoid. Even as these authors sought to engage deeply with Japanese culture, their writing frequently fell back on tropes of cultural essentialism and difference, reinforcing the notion of Japan as a fundamentally closed or opaque society. In doing so, they

helped shape the conditions of narrative possibility for later writers, establishing a discursive framework in which Japan was represented less as a dynamic, relational space and more as a cultural monolith defined by its resistance to foreign understanding.

Contemporary expatriate memoirs, by contrast, respond to and revise this tradition. Acknowledging this historical and ideological context allows for a clearer understanding of the narrative and ethical shifts represented by writers such as Anton and Maloney, who reframe cultural belonging as a creative negotiation of identity within the liminal zone. Rather than reproducing narratives of inaccessibility, these authors render Japan as a lived environment negotiated through time, relationship and mutual presence. They do not discard the challenges of cross-cultural life but approach them with literary humility and structural openness – favouring reciprocal, embedded narrative modes over detached cultural interpretation.

Comparative analysis: Postwar and contemporary expatriate memoirs

The evolution of expatriate memoirs reflects a significant shift in how Western authors perceive and portray their experiences in Japan. Mid-20th century expatriate writers often depicted Japan as an exotic and culturally distinct society, emphasising behavioural differences and the challenges of integration. But their works also reflect a genuine effort to understand and immerse themselves in the cultural fabric of Japan, navigating the liminal zone with both curiosity and critical insight. Richie and Seidensticker both repeatedly demonstrate an openness to the liminal experience, exploring the nuanced complexities of living between cultures and engaging deeply with Japanese society. Although not memoirists in the strict literary sense, their autobiographical reflections shaped the representational frameworks through which later expatriate memoirs would be both written and read. Their influence is discursive, in that it defines the imaginative and ideological possibilities available to subsequent writers.

Building on this legacy, contemporary expatriate memoirs offer an even more diverse and nuanced perspective on life as residents in Japan. Writers of the 21st century such as Anton (2020), Maloney (2020), Rebecca Otowa (2010) or Leza Lowitz (2018) present dynamic views of their host society that acknowledge its evolving multicultural realities and growing acceptance of outsiders. They explore the interplay between different cultural identities in the liminal zone, emphasising the potential for belonging and integration in a country that is frequently perceived as closed off to outsiders. These contemporary narratives challenge the essentialist, nihonjinron view of Japan as a monocultural society by depicting it as a more inclusive and adaptable environment. While Richie and Seidensticker gestured towards liminality, they did not narratively inhabit it. Contemporary memoirists do. To understand this crucial shift towards the liminal experience in Japan, we must look in more detail at how mid-20th century expatriate memoirs depicted this complex process of cultural engagement.

These 20th century texts often follow a similar narrative trajectory: curiosity or wonder gives way to an increasing awareness of social exclusion, before the narrative arrives at an interpretive closure that presents cultural difference as fixed and ultimately irreconcilable.

Richie, a film critic and essayist, immersed himself in Japanese life from the late 1940s. While his work is full of admiration for Japan's art and traditions, he frequently critiqued the country's perceived insularity and his reflections often captured the perceived cultural binds that his liminal status imposed. In a 1947 journal entry, he observed: "another country, I am discovering, is another self. I am regarded as different, and so I become different – two people at once" (Richie, 2004, p. 25). Even at this early stage, Richie's writing reflects a phase of curiosity and openness, though already shaped by a desire for balance and composure: "another country … another self," or "regarded as different … become different". The prose is conspicuously composed even when describing confusion. This duality marks a growing tension in his writing, as curiosity gives way to a more sustained awareness of exclusion. A charged exchange with Seidensticker, who was a close friend, encapsulates this emotional tension, as Seidensticker tells Richie: "you will not allow yourself to be furious with these people. Yet, you know at heart you are" (Richie, 2004, p. 221). What is striking is how emotion is handled: anger is only acknowledged through Seidensticker's accusation, not through Richie's own self-reflection in his journals. Emotion surfaces through confrontation between two people rather than through private introspection.

This pattern contrasts with the more open, first-person honesty of Anton and Maloney. Richie's prose often positions him as an interpretive authority on Japan, offering critiques that rest on an assumed cultural mastery developed through long-term immersion. He frequently critiqued Japan's national self-image, particularly its insularity. In *The Inland Sea*, Richie wrote that "anyone not Japanese is, naturally, in some way inferior," owing to what he perceived as a "very advanced superiority complex" on behalf of the Japanese (1971, p. 260). The sardonic "naturally" and ironic "very advanced" are typical of Richie's later register: the wry aside that claims authority through wit, positioning the narrator above both the culture described and the reader. This is precisely the kind of stance that Maloney's self-deprecating voice works to dismantle. Elsewhere in *The Inland Sea*, Richie's frustration tips into near-resignation, packaging the question of belonging as a settled verdict: "Japan is a land that repels empathy. I cannot know what it feels like to be Japanese, but I should guess that the feeling is very special;" and on the same page, "it is, I think, impossible for anyone but a Japanese to go Japanese" (1971, p. 74). Both statements close down the question of cross-cultural understanding with epigrammatic finality. At this later stage, Richie's prose begins to resolve what were once open questions into finished insights.

Over time, Richie's stance hardened as he began to feel he had learned everything he could learn about the country. A 1993 journal entry describes the response of his neighbours in a small Tokyo suburb to his Tokyo Metropolitan Cultural Award: "my winning the culture prize means something to those with whom I live … it is perhaps felt that I have the ear of the mayor" (2004, p. 299). Even in this moment of warmth, Richie's instinct is towards ironic distance: "it is perhaps felt" reports his neighbours' admiration as if from the outside, which is a telling contrast with Anton's direct descriptions of community life. This trajectory is visible in the prose itself. Richie's early journal entries are exploratory and open, marked by wonder and uncertainty, but his later writing narrows into compressed, sardonic pronouncements, as though the act of writing about Japan gradually hardened into settled judgement. The tonal range

contracts from curiosity to critique. The arc of disillusionment (from curiosity, through tension, and into this settled judgement) is enacted through style as much as through the events described.

Seidensticker, a scholar and translator, shared Richie's long-term engagement with Japan, translating works by renowned Japanese writers such as Yukio Mishima and Yasunari Kawabata, as well as creating the first complete English-language translation of Murasaki's 11th century work *The Tale of Genji* (1976), which is perhaps Japan's most important literary achievement. Like Richie, Seidensticker was shaped by contradictions: deep cultural insight coupled with a persistent sense of estrangement. His essays and memoirs often returned to the theme of Japan's cultural opacity. He also adopts a tone of ironic detachment, like Richie, positioning himself as a knowing critic whose authority rests in his refusal to sentimentalise cultural difference. In a 1962 column, he wrote that "the Japanese claim to impenetrable uniqueness … is several things simultaneously: cultural arrogance, a defense against insecurity, and a suspicion that the whole idea might be the sheerest nonsense" (Seidensticker, 1979, p. 243). The confident way in which he names three explanations in a single sweep is characteristic of Seidensticker's voice. It performs mastery of the authoritative voice: identifying, classifying and containing the complexity of Japanese self-conception in one neat rhetorical gesture. This is exactly the kind of assured cultural pronouncement that contemporary memoirists avoid. His war experiences and postwar residence in Tokyo made him wary of Japan's ambivalent welcome: "they are not like other people. They are infinitely more clannish, insular … one owes it to one's self-respect to preserve a feeling of outrage … So I am going home" (2002, p. 107). The passage builds through a series of sweeping claims before arriving at the blunt finality of "So I am going home". The prose itself enacts the withdrawal it describes: the short, decisive sentence terminates a longer sequence of observations, giving the passage the shape of a narrative ending. His disillusionment is performed on the page. His later writing confirms rather than complicates this settled stance. Decades after declaring himself "fed up with being a foreigner" (2002, p. 108), he frames the question of Japanese difference as a binary and places himself firmly on one side: "One of the most fundamental points in the debate has to do with whether the Japanese are like the rest of us. The revisionists hold that they are not … Clearly I was a revisionist ahead of my time a third of a century ago, and I still am" (2002, p. 107). The phrase "the rest of us" constructs a normative standard against which the Japanese are measured, while the closing declaration "I still am" shuts down any possibility that his views might continue to evolve. Even in retrospect, Seidensticker's prose moves towards closure.

Nathan's reflections offer a further dimension to the contradictions of expatriate life – the liminal cycles of immersion and withdrawal, belonging and estrangement. Although deeply engaged with Japanese culture through his work as a translator and academic, he recounts episodes of social and linguistic estrangement that underscore the emotional cost of life at the cultural margins.

> [My classmates] approached me with the certainty that I was an alien with no hope of understanding them. The discomfort this produced in them was general in Japan. I

> encountered it often enough among intellectuals in various corners of the society, and even in academics. (Nathan, 2008, p. 52)

Each clause extends the reach of exclusion, from classmates to intellectuals to academics, widening the scope sentence by sentence until rejection feels universal. The weary qualifiers "often enough" and "even in" do much of the work: they convey the dull fatigue of repetition. This rhythm of escalating generality is what gives Nathan's memoir its characteristic tone of outsider exhaustion. Nathan's compressed emotional register is equally visible in an earlier episode, when a Japanese professor dismisses his command of the language as usankusai – "bizarre to the point of being suspicious, of doubtful wholesomeness, tainted" (p. 52). Nathan's response is characteristically spare: "I felt excluded, and I was bitter" (p. 52). The two flat clauses, stripped of context or elaboration, convey a narrator worn down to the point where fuller expression is no longer available. It contrasts vividly with Richie's tendency to elaborate wounded feelings into literary metaphor. His memoir resists resolution yet still follows a structural rhythm of disillusionment – his sustained critique and sense of outsider fatigue lead to narrative closure.

These examples all highlight a key feature of postwar expatriate autobiographical writing: that liminality is treated as a source of discomfort and failure. It is a condition to be tolerated rather than embraced. Belonging remains elusive, and cultural difference is ultimately cast as a structural barrier. On the page, this stance shows up in shared formal habits: a preference for narrative closure – whether through departure (Seidensticker), settled critique (Richie), or cumulative weariness (Nathan). In each case, the narrator arrives at a settled position that effectively resolves the discomfort of being liminal. The uncertainty that liminality should entail is brought to an end by the prose itself. This is precisely the structural pattern that contemporary memoirists refuse. To narratively inhabit liminality, as we argue Anton and Maloney do, is to embed the condition of in-betweenness in the memoir's formal architecture – its structure, voice, and closure (or refusal of closure). In contrast to these mid-20th century writers, memoirists in the 21st century present a starkly different approach to navigating the liminal zone.

Case study: *The Only Gaijin in the Village* by Iain Maloney

Maloney's *The Only Gaijin in the Village* (2020) is a memoir by a Scottish writer living in rural Gifu Prefecture. Structured as a series of vignettes rooted in everyday life and organised around the four seasons, it resists nihonjinron tropes of Japan as exotic, impenetrable and aestheticised, instead privileging cyclical rhythms of repetition, continuity and gradual integration. By organising around recurring natural cycles rather than arrival and adaptation, Maloney builds a structure that circles back rather than pushes forward, enacting the idea that belonging has no endpoint. In Bhabha's (1994) terms, Maloney offers a kind of minor ethics – a writing strategy that prefers to dwell in difference rather than treating it as something to be overcome. A liminal expatriate memoir like *The Only Gaijin in the Village* invites the reader to witness the ethics of presence. This formal choice embodies Maloney's ethical view that cultural understanding is an ongoing process shaped by the quiet labour of coexistence.

Maloney's tone is understated and self-aware. His reflections rarely dramatise cultural friction; rather, they normalise difference, treating minor misunderstandings and community obligations as unremarkable facets of life. Central to this is Maloney's depiction of incremental belonging, as illustrated through scenes of neighbourly cooperation (pp. 20–22, 25–27, 97–99). He positions himself as a neighbour learning to fit in, rather than a cultural expert. These passages use short, matter-of-fact sentences describing physical tasks without cultural commentary, letting acts of cooperation speak for themselves.

> Some of us immigrants in Japan get awfully het up about fitting in … Yes, these things happen, and yes, they are annoying, but so fucking what. Life is annoying. People are annoying. It's not like life was perfect wherever we came from. We wouldn't have left if it was. (Maloney, 2020, p. 150)

The shift from measured understatement to the blunt "so fucking what" followed by clipped sentences strips cultural friction of its drama through compression – a register unavailable to earlier writers invested in the weight of their outsider status and interpretive authority. He rejects both the victimhood and exoticisation tropes that often characterise expatriate writing. Maloney also acknowledges the social trade-offs of his liminal position: "feeling hard done by because my neighbours treat me differently than they treat someone who has spent all their life in the village is just stupid" (p. 151). Here, difference is recognised without being pathologised and social distance is accepted as part of a community where trust and familiarity develop slowly.

In a similar vein, Maloney describes a moment of tentative belonging when passing a villager who barely acknowledges his foreign friend Steve:

> We passed Sasaki coming the other way and he stopped to chat … I was known, I was familiar … Steve was something new, an outsider, unfamiliar, how I'd once been to him. Progress, measurable in increments but only anecdotally. (Maloney, 2020, p. 152)

The writing here is deliberately understated, matching its subject. The short, flat clauses register belonging as plain observation rather than emotional breakthrough. The final fragment, "Progress, measurable in increments but only anecdotally," withholds the resolution of a complete sentence. This formal modesty is central to Maloney's craft. The memoir rejects definitive arrival narratives and instead explores moments like this one, where Maloney's narrative form aligns with Turner's concept of liminality as a transitional and ambiguous condition. This reflects the broader argument of our article: that contemporary expatriate memoirs embody liminality through narrative structure. Maloney's memoir unfolds through brief, episodic vignettes – passing people in the street, fire drills, seasonal chores, PTA meetings – that grant everyday life a kind of narrative weight as the terrain of belonging. Cultural knowledge is enacted through these moments, underscoring that integration is a slow, ongoing process.

Maloney reflects on the unavoidable consequences of this kind of cultural participation in a passage later in the memoir. His acknowledgment captures the ethical and existential ambiguity at the heart of the liminal expatriate condition:

> They understand if you have a proper reason to miss something, but if not, you need to be prepared to be a gaijin in the full meaning of the word, and never quite accepted … Opt in, or opt out. Both choices have consequences. (Maloney, 2020, p. 201)

The tension he describes, the navigation between inclusion and exclusion, proximity and distance, underscores the active agency required in this negotiation. Neither choice guarantees comfort or certainty. The balanced, unweighted phrasing, declining to recommend either choice and ending with a flat statement, formally enacts the irresolution it describes. It situates the memoir within the liminal zone described by Turner (1974) and Bhabha (1994) where identity is provisional, relational, and marked by flux. Formally, the memoir avoids the teleological arc of cultural assimilation or redemption common in earlier expatriate narratives. Maloney's memoir thus offers a model of expatriate life writing in which belonging is never total or final but negotiated through minor, cumulative acts of coexistence.

Case study: *The View From Breast Pocket Mountain* by Karen Hill Anton

Anton's *The View From Breast Pocket Mountain* (2020) extends this model of life writing by grounding it in what we term ethical listening: a sustained, embodied attentiveness to others that emerges through participation rather than interpretation. As an African American writer who has lived in rural Shizuoka Prefecture for decades, Anton situates her narrative within domestic, civic and relational life, depicting expatriate experience not as a problem to be solved but as the ongoing practice of sustaining a shared world. Like Maloney, she enacts liminality through tone and episodic structure rather than claiming cultural authority, but her emphasis falls less on structural experimentation and more on the ethical conditions of attention, care and responsiveness that make such a life possible.

Where earlier memoirs move from curiosity, through tension, to closure, Anton's narrative refuses this trajectory by subordinating it to an ethics of presence. Her memoir gathers meaning through the repetition of ordinary acts – navigating bureaucracy (pp. 254–55), raising children (pp. 236–46), repairing a home (pp. 195–96) and supporting neighbours (pp. 219–23) – rendered in unhurried prose that lingers on procedural detail. This pacing is more than mere aesthetics: it reflects a commitment to remaining within the temporal and relational demands of everyday life. In this way, Anton allows understanding to emerge through sustained attention. The result is a narrative mode in which knowledge is accumulated through participation.

This kind of ethical presence, where the writer remains embedded in daily life rather than standing back to interpret it, is the key feature of Anton's work. The linear narrative becomes a formal expression of her refusal to instrumentalise Japan as a stage for personal transformation. Instead, she reports on a shared life over time, offering a model of intercultural writing grounded in a description of the commitment needed to navigate the liminal zone

between cultures. The memoir's brief epilogue finds Anton describing herself as an "un-New Yorker" (p. 280) whose Japanese mannerisms now mark her out as different in her home country, connected to Japan by a "golden thread" (p. 283). Where earlier memoirs typically close with departure or disillusionment, Anton's epilogue inverts the pattern: her homecoming reveals a new kind of foreignness. The memoir ends by widening rather than closing the space of in-betweenness, structurally refusing the closure that defined the earlier tradition. It is this commitment to ethical listening that grounds Anton's intercultural presence. Instead of positioning herself as an interpreter or translator of Japan, she foregrounds her own fallibility and describes how she learns by accepting its demands.

> There was a lot I didn't understand about Japan and its culture when I first came here … Still, I did see early on that there were cues, and that I could learn by showing a measure of humility and paying attention, that I'd benefit by being a self-reflective and careful observer. (Anton, 2020, p. 273)

Anton's syntax enacts what it describes: the sentence accumulates conditions for learning in a rhythm of ongoing effort and humility. Contrast this with the aphoristic finality of Richie's and Seidensticker's prose which emphasises interpretive mastery and eventual alienation. Anton carefully resists both over-identification and critique. She neither seeks to become Japanese nor to explain Japan to outsiders. In other words, her memoir reveals a willingness to remain inside the liminal zone. It reflects Bhabha's (1994) idea of hybridity where new forms of identity are produced through negotiated cohabitation. Anton's stance reframes expatriate memoir as a genre of ethical listening and sustained presence that seeks to describe the liminal experience and embed it in the narrative structure.

Part of Anton's approach to ethical listening and presence is to reject the familiar position that belonging is conditional upon the performance of cultural deference. In one anecdote from a public talk, she recalls being challenged by a Japanese woman who interpreted her criticism of Japan as a sign of dislike. Anton responds: "I never said I didn't like Japan … I'd probably have something critical to say about any country where I lived". She then adds pointedly: "I might like it more than you because I live here purely as a matter of choice," to which the woman replies: "I guess you're right about that" (p. 248). In this exchange, Anton's stance resists the double bind imposed on foreigners, where to remain welcome one must adopt the position of grateful guest. Anton narrates the exchange using direct, unembellished dialogue without authorial commentary – a restraint that mirrors the directness she models in the conversation. Her interaction with the woman reflects a deeper commitment to reflexivity and discomfort as necessary components of intercultural life. The encounter avoids becoming a standoff and results in a shared moment of clarification for the two women. Here, Anton depicts the benefits of being culturally liminal, as her position as an outsider-by-choice allows her to maintain ethical clarity and speak honestly.

While earlier expatriate writers like Richie and Seidensticker often rendered liminality as a psychological tension or cultural bind, Anton reconfigures it as an ethical stance and a narrative practice. Like Maloney, she writes about her attention to the community and the daily moments

that reflect the kind of humility needed for sustained cohabitation as a cultural outsider. She adopts specific narrative strategies to achieve this, such as a linear temporal structure that mirrors the slow accrual of trust and meaning, an emphasis on domestic, civic and relational detail over dramatic cross-cultural revelation, and a poetics of ethical engagement rather than identity assertion. In practice, this means a narrator who describes her participation in cultural life rather than diagnosing it – so the reader learns about Japanese community through Anton's actions, not her commentary. Her work also deepens the genre's engagement with liminality as its central concern.

Across their differences in style and setting, Anton and Maloney share a set of narrative strategies that mark a decisive break from earlier expatriate memoirs. Both refuse the teleological movement from curiosity, through tension, to closure, instead sustaining liminality as an ongoing condition. In Anton's case, this is achieved through an ethics of listening grounded in care, participation, and relational attention; in Maloney's, through cyclical and episodic structures that mirror the rhythms of everyday life. In both, domestic and communal detail is granted narrative weight and voice remains restrained and self-reflexive. Dialogue is used sparingly to register shifts in recognition, and ambiguity is preserved rather than resolved. These techniques collectively enact liminality on the page, offering a model of memoir in which belonging is not achieved but continuously practised.

Conclusion

In tracing the evolution of expatriate memoirs set in Japan, this article has argued that the genre has undergone a marked shift from earlier models defined by interpretive mastery, narrative arcs of disillusionment, and a view of liminality as a failure of belonging. Writers such as Richie, Seidensticker, and Nathan, while offering valuable insights into postwar and late-20th century Japan, often adopted a stance of distanced critique and struggled to reconcile the position of the outsider with enduring forms of relational life. Their memoirs are shaped by arcs of cultural confrontation and eventual estrangement or return. In contrast, contemporary writers such as Maloney and Anton present a new model of expatriate life writing that embraces a lived poetics, rejects totalising authority and frames liminality as an ethical and ongoing mode of being in place.

It is important to note that writing from a liminal position does not entirely neutralise the dynamics of privilege embedded in expatriate life. The memoirists examined here retain mobility, linguistic agency, and often structural advantage. However, their narrative stance offers a clear recalibration: a shift away from the interpreter's gaze towards a mode of writing grounded in relational attention. In these works, liminality is a generative space in which the memoirist relinquishes interpretive mastery and constructs meaning collaboratively through voice, structure, and the careful articulation of everyday life. We believe that expatriate memoirs are increasingly concerned with this slow labour, the hard work of intercultural cohabitation. These texts shift attention away from Japan as an impenetrable, opaque society that demands the interpretive fluency of the expatriate. The Japan we witness in these texts is frequently open to the radical practice of shared life. Contemporary texts foreground durational

practices such as civic engagement and the ethics of presence and in doing so, they transform the memoir into a site of cultural dialogue on the potential of the liminal zone as a site where new relationalities are made.

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