
Model M

Sam Thiersch

Course Design: Counterstory

Professor: Dr. Aja Martinez



Sam Thiersch is a Senior at UNT Majoring in English: Creative Writing and minoring in Theater.

Growing up in the democratic bastion of Seattle, Washington, you'd be surprised to find that Sam was radicalized by alt-right online groups in his teens. However, through many conversations with friends and family (especially with his older brother, Alex) he has since escaped further indoctrination. He now writes fantasy, essays, and counterstory that unpack why and how people fall for such hateful rhetoric. He hopes, even if it's just one person, that his writing can change the minds of those that were like him.

The following are personal logs from Dr. Enjin Sakamoto¹, recovered at a US Navy bunker in Port Angeles, Washington. These were some of the only salvageable documents in the facility from before the Economic Crisis of 2071, Tidal Crisis of 2075, and the Underclass Revolt of 2081² which forced Americans that lived in coastal states such as Delaware, Maryland, Florida, Louisiana, Washington, California, Oregon to move inland as the land was subsumed under water or taken by other forces.

I. HOUSE CALL

September 1, 2050,

Greetings, my name is Dr. Enjin Sakamoto, I have a PhD in Marine Biology and a Doctor of Medicine with a focus in Forensic Pathology. I have specialized in the decay of sea life and of people

if they happen to be in the ocean. My career has been unfortunately fruitful to say the least. With the rising tides, increase in violent weather patterns, and the sheer lack of forensic pathologists across the nation, there has been quite the market for my expertise. It seems, however, the US government had different plans for me.

Two agents dressed in navy fatigues knocked on my door and detained me. The agents informed me my private medical research practice was a "Threat to National Security."³ I had apparently worked on a Chinese Spy's body without the government's consent. While handcuffed and gagged in the back of their armored SUV, they gave me two choices:

1. Go to court against them—they assured me I'd lose.

Or

2. Work off my sentence by aiding the United States Navy for several years.

They assured me my labor would sustain my family's current lifestyle while I was gone. They then handed me a manila folder with photos of my family. My wife Yui, my son Kazuki, and my mother. An obvious threat if I've ever seen one.

"Is that all of them?" they asked.

I nodded, though I noticed my adopted son, Kevin,⁴ was missing from the line up. I figured it was better if they had less leverage.

"Then which will it be?" an agent asked.

1 The kanji I used for "Enjin" is 神. They are the kanji used in the phrase, "神を演じるために" which means "To play god." This is not an actual Japanese name, it will most likely sound odd to native Japanese speakers. To my knowledge I don't think this is an official word.

2 These are made up events in which the United States falls into an economic depression, environmental disaster, and a national workers revolt all in quick succession.

3 This event is based on Japanese internment in which FDR justified the internment of Japanese-Americans for, "protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material." (Roosevelt 1)

4 Kevin is Enjin's white adopted son. If there was another internment, he would most likely not be interned as he is not biologically of Asian descent.

Like that was even a question.

“Option 2.” I said.

The moment those words left my mouth, they pulled out of my driveway and out of Seattle. No gathering my things, no good-byes, just me and my pajamas. They placed a bag on my head before we’d driven very far. At some point they must have pulled off the road and onto a gravel trail, or at least that’s what it felt and sounded like. At last, they ripped off the bag. Through the windshield I saw what must have been miles upon miles of cleared-out forest. Surrounding the plot of land were makeshift watch towers and barbed-wire fences. I audibly gasped when I saw what was *inside* the enclosure. There were thousands of longhouses made of plywood and tin. I’d heard stories from my grandfather about places like this. It suddenly struck me, all the news of Chinese spies, mass incarceration of other Asian Americans even if they didn’t have any connection with our enemies abroad. This was an internment camp. I didn’t think they’d have them this far north...⁵

“Is that where you’re taking me?” I asked.

One of the agents smiled at the other, “No, Doctor Sock-a-mow-doe.⁶ As we said, we’ll be putting you to work.”

The SUV turned down a ramp into an underground tunnel. They drove for five or ten minutes when they put the car into park and forced me out. If not for the occasional fluorescent lamp on the ceiling, there wouldn’t have been any light.

“This way, Doctor.”

The agents lead me into a dark square box of a room. Isolated in the center sat an old-school surgery table with leather restraints. Several filing cabinets, and a couple refrigerators lined the walls. At a desk in the corner there was an old Mac computer, it looked to be about from the 2010s, and a blue plastic school chair in front of it. One of the Navy guys pulled the chain to illuminate the singular lightbulb, suspended just above the surgery table.

“This is where you will be staying for the next five years, Doctor Sock-a-mow-doe. Is there anything we can get you that’ll make you more comfortable?”

I was at a loss for words. Just hours ago, I was in my home, reading. And then there I was, trapped in some dark room. I wonder if my grandpa felt this way too. “What am I doing here? Am I going to be this facility’s doctor?”

The agents looked at each other chuckled, “Well not exactly. Just check the computer tomorrow morning for your first assignment. Now Doctor, is there anything we can get you?”

“A bed would be nice I suppose,” I said.

“It will be done.”

The agents left, shut the door, and I could hear several locks being secured.

As soon as they left, I scoured the room for pen and paper. I was taught by my folks that in times like these, you need to document what’s happening. Luckily for me there were a lot of old records, and plenty of pens thrown into the back of the filing cabinets.

So here I am. I am writing this down to make sure that I burn every detail in my head, every word they say, anything I can write down to log what is happening here. I know this isn’t right. I can feel it under every strand of hair, in every pore of my body. If nothing else, I will do my damndest to make sure my records survive!

To whomever this may concern, please spread my words!

-Dr. Enjin Sakamoto

II. GATHERING MATERIALS

September 5, 2050

My instructions came in today on the computer and I’m not sure if I quite understand them, so I will copy down the important bits of the message:

“Hello Doctor Sakamoto,

We are interested in the creation of intelligent life. Recently, our researchers have discovered that some marine life may be able to reach a similar if not higher intellectual and physical prowess

⁵ As seen in Ansel Adams, “Manzanar from Guard Tower, Summer Heat, View SW,” many internment camps were actual hovels, guarded on all sides by barbed wires and guard towers.

⁶ In my experience, this is how Americans would pronounce “Sakamoto.”

if they were to be combined into one being.⁷ I am sure you are aware of the labor shortage and the climate crisis. We intend to use these life forms to fill in any gaps where native born Americans will not work. ⁸Hopefully, cheaper labor will allow us to focus on tackling our dwindling ice reserves, and exponentially rising carbon emissions. We understand you have expertise in Marine Biology, Forensic Pathology, and general training as a surgeon. We implore you to use your abilities to craft this new form of life we have coined Model M.⁹ Here are the animals we would like to incorporate into this new life form:

1. Dolphins for their intelligence
2. Goldfish for their docility
3. Otters for their opposable thumbs
4. Turtles for their ability to adapt to sea or land.
5. Sharks for their physical prowess¹⁰

If you happen to come across any other Marine life that might aid the success of Model M, please let us know in this chat. We understand this task will not be easy, if there is anything you need, let us know. We will deliver tools and the organic materials within the next twelve hours.

We look forward to working with you,

-US

Are they insane? Not only is their idea of making a “hybrid creature” implausible, but all these creatures are different species. At least when we grow human organs, we grow them on other mammals. You can’t grow human organs on non-mammals. This has been proven, tested, and tested again. They’re just not compatible. The same goes for body parts. What makes them think they can just throw a hodgepodge of random animals together and create intelligent life? ¹¹

It’s not like I have a choice.

The same two agents, who I now knew were Naval officers rolled in five long crates and cracked them open. Inside each was one of the five animals they wished me to stitch together, only each was grown to the size of a human. Before the two men left, I asked them a question,

“Why are you interning those people up there?” I asked.

“It’s for the greater good of the American people,” they responded matter-of-factly, “I’m sure you’ll understand in time.”

“What do you plan to do with them?”

“Oh, we just gotta make sure none of them are spies for China.¹² And if they are, we’ll re-educate them.”

I held my tongue, thanked them for the materials, and they left. I shuddered at what ‘re-educate’ meant. But I wasn’t in any position to challenge them, I just kept my head down and worked. But just how am I going to create this ‘Model M?’

To whomever this may concern, I’m not sure if I will ever leave here.

-Dr. Enjin Sakamoto

III. STITCHING TOGETHER

Note: There were ten to fifteen documents dated between this and the previous document (September 5, 2050) but the water damage done to them after the Tidal Crisis of 2075 rendered them indecipherable. April 6, 2052

I haven’t spoken to another human being in months. The only solace I have are these occasional journal entries. But I fear if I write too much, they might find my notes during their random room checks. I wonder what has happened to my family, were they brought to the camp just above my head? Are they just a short couple of miles away? Could I slip out and finally see them again? Wherever they are, I pray they are safe. Hopefully I will see them again soon.

7 This project they are making Dr. Enjin is a hyperbolized and externalized version of the model minority myth, in which the narrative is told that, “Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society including native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort” (Pettersen 180). Pettersen is making an essentialist argument, that this group is just naturally better than whites, and by implication everyone else. This is the type of narrative the model minority myth pushes onto people. Just as the US government in my story is trying to construct a higher intelligence race, the US in real life wanted people to believe Japanese Americans were naturally smarter. Race is constructed.

8 Importing cheaper labor has been used for centuries in the United States, first with indentured servitude and chattel slavery, then later with immigrant workers. Only the US is “constructing” this group.

9 A reference to the phrase “Model Minority.”

10 Making ‘Model M’ a fish being is a slight nod and subversion to the fish people in H.P. Lovecrafts, “The Shadow over Innsmouth.”

11 This is an allegory for how the term “Asian-American” combines a lot of different groups that have vastly different cultures and lived experiences.

12 Once again in Executive Order 9066, FDR claimed the Japanese were a threat to, “national defense.” (Roosevelt 1)

I still don't know specifically why I was chosen. Perhaps it is my expertise in Marine Biology. Perhaps it is my experience in Forensic Pathology. Perhaps it is because I am Asian. No one would blink if they took the Asian doctor away. He was probably a Chinese spy anyways. What has this nation come to? It seemed to me that progress in the United States was going so well up until 2028. Yes, that must have been the turning point. The President at the time, what was formerly the GOP, now the National Populist party, inflamed the trade war with China which eventually led to the Taiwanese War of 2035, which snowballed into countless other proxy wars in Indonesia, the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. It was the Cold War all over again.

I'll admit I thought I was safe in Seattle where the Asian population was prominent, and the whites were liberal.¹³ So, I averted my eyes from the political landscape. I never thought I'd be a victim of this kind of racism. Perhaps I was a fool to expect my misfortune to come from vigilante violence¹⁴ rather than the government itself. After all Slavery, and the WWII Japanese internment were brought about by the government through legal means.

I'm nearly done constructing this Chimera, this wretched thing. I've stitched together the animals they've asked me to; in the manner they've instructed me to. Physically speaking it has the head of a dolphin, the gills and body of a turtle, the arms of an alligator, the hands of an otter, and the nose and muscles of a shark. Mentally speaking, they had me surgically remove the dolphin's amygdala and replace it with a goldfish's. The amygdala is responsible for emotional processing, replacing it with a goldfish's version of the organ would severely hamper 'Model M's' ability to feel fear, anxiety, anger, etc.¹⁵ Perhaps since the end goal of this project is to create docile workers, that might be a good thing. Additionally, the brain of a dolphin is a bit larger than a human's brain—though they only have the intelligence of about a three-year old. I still don't know how they intend to overcome the intelligence hurdle. Perhaps they'll implant a chimpanzee brain, but even then, how exactly could they organize these creatures for complex tasks?

Those answers are currently beyond me. My first goal is to get 'Model M' conscious.

-Dr. Enjin Sakamoto

IV. EXPERIMENT LOGS

Note: The following are a collection of slightly damaged, though still somewhat legible notes recounting Dr. Sakamoto's experimentation on 'Model M.'

March 8, 2052

I have finished the physical construction of 'Model M.' Its body is quite a bit smaller than a human's, perhaps four and half to four feet tall. Its narrow slitted eyes protrude from its body, and the shark nose I've sewed to its dolphin head gives its face a flat appearance. They've instructed me to implant beaver teeth, and three stomachs so that it may consume cheaper, less refined foods. The final modification I've been instructed to make is to remove all reproductive organs from its body, though I doubt it would want to reproduce considering the mutilation of its other facilities.

I still don't know how they will achieve sentience in this creature. Perhaps they'll remotely control them via electrical pulses? I may be able to aid in that process, but it is not my field of expertise. But then again, neither is creating life. I only deal in death it seems.¹⁶

Note: The rest of the letter is illegible from the water damage.

March 11, 2052

Today was my fifth attempt at bringing the creature to life. It involved a blood transfusion while pumping its heart. It did not work considering 'Model M' is composed of several different species, cold and warm blooded.¹⁷ "US" is getting impatient. They've demanded that I get this creature up and walking by the end of the month or I will "be replaced." A scary thought to say the least. I wonder how many other doctors came before me, and when this all started.

I miss my family. Yui, if you're reading this I lov—

¹³ Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue area is about "13.3%" (Shao 2017) which is about double the national average.

¹⁴ "In the minds of the private actors, who are nothing more than lawless vigilantes, self-appointed enforcers of true Americanism, their victims are immigrants or foreigners even though they may in fact be citizens by birth or through naturalization." (Hing 444)

¹⁵ Oftentimes Asian Americans are more likely to be seen as, "docile, law-abiding, and non-threatening." (Balurun 220) I chose to externalize this false narrative through altering the brains of these 'Model Ms.'

¹⁶ As seen in the poster "Jappy So-O-O Happy When This Happens to You" by Charles Jesse Thorndike, Japanese Americans were portrayed as ugly, small eyed, buck toothed, flat faced, monsters. While this is before the model minority myth came to be, this perception of Asian men as ugly served to make Asian men seem undesirable. Which compounds with the choice to have the 'Model M's' reproductive organs removed, which is to show how "Asian American males are viewed as effeminate, asexual and passive" (Park 5).

¹⁷ I am not asserting that different Asian identities are biologically different. But the "Asian American" identity stitches together so many different cultures into one group that it ends up only capturing pieces of each culture. Just as the creation of 'Model M' has more portions of its body from certain animals, some cultures are considered "more " Asian than others, "Brown Asians" (e.g.m South Asians, Southeast Asians) experience marginalization within the pan-ethnic Asian label because they are often perceived as "not Asian enough" (Baluran 223).

Note: The ink on the paper is too smudged to read the rest.

March 23, 2052

I have one more hypothesis on how to bring this creature to life. It may be insane, but what if I electrocuted it? A risky, and possibly fatal mistake for the project, but I've tried everything else I can think of. I will ask for approval from "US" before I make the attempt.

March 25, 2052

'Model M's' heart is beating, and it is breathing. I've also confirmed that their dolphin eyes respond to light. But it seems it either cannot move, it does not want to move, or it is in too much pain to move. Unfortunately, I think this may have to do with the removal of the dolphin's amygdala. Perhaps removing it has reduced its emotional and temporal capacity to such a degree that it no longer feels motivated to do anything but sit and breathe. I reported the successful trial to "US" who told me,

"You have six more days to get it walking. Get to work."

I fear that the damage to 'Model Ms' brain may be too great to fix by March 31st. In times like these I like to repeat a phrase my grandfather said while he was interned.

我慢

Gaman! It means to endure the seemingly unbearable with dignity.

我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢 我慢—

Note: There seems to be several pages of this same phrase though the pen's ink has been smeared and washed away in sections.

March 31, 2052

I haven't slept more than a couple of hours since my previous entry. I had to completely scrap the first body and stitch a new one together. This time, however, instead of removing the dolphin's amygdala and replacing it with a goldfish's, I wired copper in its brain. I then hooked each wire to a button on my keyboard so that each button sends an electrical signal to the brain which in turn sends signals to different muscle groups. I know this isn't what they asked for, but it was the best thing I could come up with.

It's almost over now, in one way or another.

April 1, 2052

It seems they were satisfied enough with my results to give me an extension. They gave me another two weeks to come up with a solution. I have a theory that if I were to remove the amygdala from a human brain, and transplant it into the dolphin's cranial cavity, I might be able to create the results they're looking for...

April 13, 2052

振り向くな、振り向くな、後ろには夢がない

Note: Translation "Don't look back, don't look back, there is no dream in the back." A Japanese mantra.

Note 2: There seems to be larger and larger time jumps between entries from this point forward. The details included are either deeply personal, do not discuss the experiments, are repeated mantra's such as "振り向くな、振り向くな、後ろには夢がない" or "我慢。," or are completely incoherent.

January 1st 2054

We've done it. 'Model M' is viable. It took months of trial and error, but experiment #442¹⁸ succeeded. It passed every cognitive and physical test, has an IQ of 180, can perform basic labor for twenty hours at a time before resting, its reproductive organs lay dormant, and its emotional reactions are stifled to a minimum.¹⁹

The next step is to make more of them. But they don't need me anymore. They have my research notes, my instructions. Hopefully now they will release me to my family.

I am currently debating whether to rip up my old journal entries. I kept telling myself, "Once I get out, I'll expose everything that's happening here." But it seems I am complicit in the crimes here. They will not tell me where they got the human brains for my trials, nor do I want to know anymore. I just want to see my family.

It's been a week since I've slept. I think I need to go to bed. Maybe in the morning I can negotiate my way out of here.

V. POST EXPERIMENT

Note: The handwriting in this passage is far messier than in previous passages.

¹⁸ A reference to the 442nd Infantry Regiment.

¹⁹ Once again, I am referencing how the model minority myth spins the narrative that asian americans are somehow naturally smarter, harder working, more docile.

January 3, 2054²⁰

I awoke in a haze. I felt neither tired, nor keen, nor angry, nor sad. But, when I reached my hands up, I saw they were furry and small. Grabbing up at my face, I felt a flat nose and beaver teeth. It felt like I had a backpack on, and someone was pulling me to the ground from the straps. But when I fell onto my back, there was a crack and I rolled. A shell was on my back. I stumbled over to the mirror above the sink in my room; I had become a 'Model M.' Though I intellectually understood that this was supposed to be terrifying, I did not feel fear. I felt ambivalent about it all. I barely even remember why I'm writing these journal entries. Why was I so keen on writing these again? Why did I care?

I felt ambivalent still when they brought in a nice-looking Chinese man, told me to extract his brain and put it in a 'Model M.' Ambivalent still when I did the same to the Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, Indian, and Filipino people they brought to me from the camps.²¹ Ambivalent still when they brought in Yui.

Work Cited

- Adams, Ansel. *Manzanar from Guard Tower, Summer Heat, View SW, Manzanar Relocation Center*. Manzanar, 1943.
- Baluran, Darwin A. "Differential racialization and police interactions among young Adults of Asian descent." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 9.2 (2023): 220-234.
- Franklin D. Roosevelt, Executive Order. No. 9066, 1942, p. All.
- Hing, Bill Ong. "Vigilante racism: The de-Americanization of immigrant America." *Mich. J. Race & L.* 7 (2001): 441.
- Martinez, Aja Y. *Counterstory the Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2020.
- Park, Michael. "Asian American masculinity eclipsed: A legal and historical perspective of emasculation through US immigration practices." *Mod. Am.* 8 (2012): 5.
- Pettersen, William. "Success Story, Japanese-American Style." *New York Times*, 9 Jan. 1966, p. pg. 180-pg. 180.
- Shao, Sunny. "Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA Metro Area." *Census and Beyond: Mapping the Geography and Diversity of AAPIs*, censusmaps.aapidata.com/pages/seattle. Accessed 11 May 2023.
- Thorndike, Charles J. *Jappy SO-O-O Happy When This Happens to You*. U.S. Navy, 1939, National Archives.

²⁰ "Bell's theory of interest convergence argues that 'white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for [people of color] only when such advances also promote white self-interest'" (Martinez 11) In this case Enjin's "racial advantage" was him not being interned and turned into a 'Model M' which was taken away from him as soon as he lost his knowledge leverage over the U.S. Navy.

²¹ "CRT's fourth tenet, "race as social construct," overlaps with an is informed by another racial theory—most prominently, Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of racial formation. Although biologists, geneticists, anthropologists, and sociologists agree that race is not a biological determinant, humans nonetheless have taxonomize and continue to taxonomize human bodies racially (Ladson-Billings, "Critical Race Theory" 38)" (Martinez 12). Just as all of these people from different identities are being crammed into this 'Model M' unit, the Asian American identity and the Model Minority Myth cram Asian-Americans into a sharply defined box.