Asian, not Asian Americans:

Depiction of Japanese Characters in Post-Soul Black Literature

Post-soul, post-civil rights, post-segregation, post-liberated... however termed and however defined, this period in the history of African American culture raised many new questions for the black community. As described by Darryl Dickson-Carr in his book, *African American Satire*, "[o]ne result of the Civil Rights movement's aftermath… is that African Americans face the challenge of articulating a new meaning for the social category of 'race' and using this definition to determine the consequences of this new perception… upon black political and economic life." (166) This redefinition of race came with a gradual acknowledgement of the fact that the racial dynamic in America was more complex than just black and white, and that blackness needs to be defined not just in relation to whiteness, but also in the context of multiracial dynamics. This consciousness is reflected two examples of post-soul black literature that deals with Japanese characters: *Japanese by Spring* by Ishmael Reed and *White Boy Shuffle* by Paul Beatty.

Both these stories are set in California, which has historically had a diverse ethnic composition, especially since the Gold Rush in the 1840's during which waves of immigrants from China, Japan, the Philippines, and Mexico arrived. This trend continued, and especially since 1965, there has been a rapid increase in the Latino and Asian population in California (1, Cain). Specifically, much of the Japanese American population during this time was becoming increasingly integrated into previously predominantly white neighborhoods. Leland T. Saito offers a description of Japanese Americans in Monterey Park, Los Angeles:

> Leaving the camps after World War II, many Japanese Americans settled in low-income urban ethnic neighborhoods. In the 1950s Japanese Americans began entering Monterey Park…, then a predominantly white, middle-class suburban community considered a step up from their precious ethnic neighborhoods on the east side of Los Angeles… Japanese Americans became active in city events and struggled to integrate themselves into community affairs. Eventually, they were accepted, in the words of one Nisei, as "good neighbors and citizens," symbolized by the election of Geroge Ige, a Japanese American, to the city council in 1970. (7)

The tone and choice of wording in this excerpt offers us insight into some of the attitudes of the Japanese American community, in particular in relation to the other ethnic groups. While this excerpt represents Saito's interpretation of his interviews with Nisei (second generation) Japanese Americans – and therefore is not representative of the whole Japanese American community in any way – it must be acknowledged that there existed a certain Japanese American narrative that portrayed themselves as getting ahead of the other minority groups (especially African Americans and Latinos) and being "accepted" by the implied superior white community. Thus by using this white-black hierarchy and comparing themselves to whites, the Japanese American community itself was in some ways seeing themselves through a framework of the black-white binary despite the continually increasing multiculturalism (of which they were a part).

This black-white binary is a term used to describe racial discourse and dynamics that exclude Asian Americans and other ethnic/race groups, as illustrated by Juan F. Perea in his article, *The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race*:

> …the conception that race in American consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White... If one conceives of race as primarily of concern only to Blacks and Whites, and understands 'other people of color' only through some unclear analogy to the 'real' races, this just restates the binary paradigm with a slight concession to demographics (361)

In this context, Reed and Beatty demonstrate awareness of this multiracial demographic by introducing Japanese and Japanese American characters (among others). They both use satire to offer their commentaries on broader post-civil rights racial dynamics, but this paper will focus on the depiction of Japanese characters by these post-soul black writers. While they succeed to a certain extent in mocking the stereotypes held about the Japanese (and broader Asian) community, they reinforce others due to the their use of exaggeration and essentialization in their satirical commentaries. In both novels, the recently immigrated Japanese characters overshadow the Japanese American characters, which reinforces the portrayal of the Japanese community as foreigners. This allows for the exclusion of the Japanese community from the critique of racial relations in the US, and thus maintains the black-white binary. This assertion is made with the awareness that this discourse of the black-white binary is not only enforced by black writers; it is imposed by the dominant white system (as it is advantageous for the white system to be able to pit minorities against each other), and as seen in the excerpt above, it is internalized by certain sectors of the Japanese Americans themselves (as it is beneficial for them to portray themselves as close to whites and better than other minority groups).

One historical example that demonstrates the exclusion of these "otherized" Japanese immigrants from the conversation on race by the white dominated system is the Ozawa vs United States Court Case of 1922. At this time, one had to be either "[f]ree white persons" or "Aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent" in order to qualify for citizenship, under section 2169 of the Revised Statutes. Instead of challenging the constitutionality of this racial restriction, Ozawa thought that it may be more effective to assert that he was "white" based on his education, religion, language and character. As Don T. Nakanishi and James S. Lai describe, Ozawa was born in Japan but had resided in

the US for over twenty years, and "was a graduate of the Berkeley, California, high school, had been nearly three years a student in the University of California, had educated his children in American schools, his family had attended American churches and he had maintained the use of the English language in his home" (35). In previous cases, some 420 Japanese people had been naturalized before 1910 due to some ambiguity about who qualified as "white". However, in the Ozawa case, the Supreme Court ruled that to be of the Caucasian race was a necessary requirement to be considered a "white person". Therefore, Ozawa was forced into a situation where he had to identify as either white or black ("of African descent") in order to claim citizenship, but in the end was denied inclusion in this white-black binary.

Despite the fact that this binary is used against them by the white system, the minority groups have come to internalize the discourse to a certain extent. A very simplified explanation of this is that for African American communities, this discourse is advantageous in that it can exclude other minority groups from the discussion on race and thus focus on their continued struggle for an end to discrimination against blacks. For Asian American communities, this discourse is advantageous in that they can assert themselves as being closer to "white" than the other minority groups (as implied from the excerpt by Saito above). Lisa C. Ikemoto describes this as the "master narrative," imposed upon minority groups, or as "white supremacy's prescriptive, conflict-constructing power, which deploys exclusionary concepts of race and privilege in ways that maintain intergroup conflict" (1582). She offers the example of the 1992 LA Riots, to explain her theory: "During the early aftermath of the civil disorder… Korean Americans, African Americans, and those apparently outside the 'conflict' used concepts of race, identity, and entitlement in ways that described conflict as inevitable" (1581).

According to Ikemoto, the master narrative influences African Americans to see Asians as "Koreans who are merchants and crime victims… foreign intruders" (1583). On the other hand, the master narrative affects Asian Americans to see African Americans as "Blacks who are criminals who are poor" (1583). Thus, in Ikemoto's view, this master narrative is simply:

> …arrang[ing] the various racial identities so as to preserve the authority of whiteness… When African Americans made nativist charges [ie implying that Korean Americans are foreigners], they positioned themselves as whites relative to Asians. When Korean Americans responded by placing themselves within the American Dream [coming to the US to earn money] – a dream produced and distributed by the dominant society - they positioned themselves as white (1583).

This highlights that both Korean Americans and African Americans are using white supremacy as a reference point in racial dynamic considerations. Here, I argue that while the two examples of post-soul literature attempt to satirize certain stereotypes, they also exemplify the prescriptive nature of dominant white discourse surrounding race. These two African American authors mostly focus on "foreign" Japanese characters (and while they attempt to ridicule stereotypical portrayals of them, they do not include them in American racial dynamics in a way that promotes multiculturalism), but when they do mention Japanese American characters, they (regardless of whether they intended to or not) use whiteness as a reference point (ie stuck in the white-black binary framework). Thus I argue that in both these novels, the writers satirize the stereotypical portrayal of Japanese immigrants through exaggerated references to samurais, swords, kabuki plays and shogun movies. However, at the same time, they do not fully reject these stereotypes; instead, they use certain stereotypes as part of their plot, without exploring the implications of them in the context of US racial dynamics in this post-civil rights era.

In *Japanese by Spring*, Reed satirizes various aspects of society, two of which are stereotypes of Asians and Western imperialism. He ridicules the first through exaggeratedly describing Dr. Yamato, a Japanese immigrant, through references to stereotypes of old Japan: for example, Reed writes that Yamato was born sixty-eight years ago in Fukuoka, a hotbed of extreme nationalistic activity, plots, conspiracies, assassination attempts and secret societies... a gathering place for down-and-out samurai" (176). While the book is set in the early 1990's, references to Yamato are traced back to almost a hundred years ago, as the last samurai era had declined by around 1870's (106, Perkins). Furthermore, Yamato is described to have decorated his office with paintings of "The Battle of Sekigahara, 1600" (84). Reed continues to make historical references to pre-industrial Japan, such as Puttbutt reading the "Manyoshu" (162), a poetry collection compiled around 780 AD. Puttbutt's professor also shows him his Japanese "golden lacquer-emblazoned sword that dated from the 1330s" and samurai sword parts such as "[a] tsuba, a kozuka and a tachi" (161). It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of satire, as the writers' intentions may differ from the readers' reception. For example, Tsunehiko Kato observes that that "All this seems to be only lip service to the Japanese... Reed's knowledge of Japan, I am afraid, is still rooted in stereotypes of old Japan..." (127), implying that Reed's satire may simply be reinforcing the stereotypes.

Another critique of Reed's satire is that his focus on describing Dr. Yamato through exaggerations comes at the cost of not offering alternative portrayals of experiences in modern day Japan or in the US as a recent immigrant. Furthermore, Dr. Yamato's character overshadows that of a second-generation Japanese American character, Muzukashii. Reed rejects any connection that Muzukashii may have with his Japanese heritage as an American of Japanese decent. Instead, he portrays Muzukashii as

being a model minority who tries to integrate and assimilate into the white system. For example, Reed writes that this "Nikkei-jin smart aleck" is "always dressed like a Swiss mountain climber... looking to Bass Jr. [a white student]... for a reward when he made an especially nasty crack to Puttbutt [the African American main character]" (18). Here, Reed implies that there are only two extreme categories: exotic Japanese immigrants (considered foreigners) and white-assimilated not-so-Japanese Americans. Furthermore, Reed illustrates how Muzukashii tries to earn recognition by the white students at the expense of a black character. From Puttbutt's perspective, it seems that Muzukashii's desire to be accepted by white society is manipulated by these white students to further denigrate blacks such as himself. However, Reed fails to further explore this tension between African Americans and those considered the model minority. Thus, he limits the characters within the racial framework imposed by the white dominated society that only acknowledges Asians as part of the American racial dynamics when they can be pitted against blacks.

In addition, Reed attempts to demonstrate how the Eurocentrics get a taste of their own medicine under the new Japanese regime, and thus illustrates Yamato as a Japanocentric character who takes over Jack London College and forces all professors and students to learn Japanese. However, because of Reed's objectification of Japanese history and culture, Patrick McGee points out that it becomes "almost impossible to decide whether the work criticizes xenophobia of contemporary American culture or merely reproduces it" (138). In addition, Crystal S. Anderson writes, "By eliding Japanese and Japanese Americans and then using the Japanese as pawns in his exposition of black-white race relations, Reed reinforces erroneous ideas about Asian American groups in the US" (393). Here, the implication is that Reed's foundation framework is

still within the black-white binary, and that he is simply replacing white cultural imperialism with Japanese imperialism, without taking into account that there are different connotations, histories and power relations that come along with bringing in Japanese characters into a story that discusses racial dynamics. This shortcoming is largely due to the nature of his satire, which Dickson-Carr describes as "*reductio ad absurdum*," a form that "functions in both straight polemic and satirical discourse to show the foolishness of a concept or idea by taking it to its apparent logical - and most outrageous - conclusion..." (26). Because Reed essentializes Dr. Yamato as Japanocentric and equivalent to the previous white supremacist powers, he is unable to offer a more nuanced illustration of how race plays out between the white, black and Japanese communities at Jack London College.

In *White Boy Shuffle*, there are similarly two main Japanese characters, the first of which is Coach Shimimoto, a survivor of the internment camps. To a certain degree, Beatty does make some attempt to explore Asian American experiences, and offers a more nuanced exploration of racial dynamics than Reed. For example, he makes subtle references to the effects of the Second World War on Asian Americans. Coach Shimimoto tells the main character, Gunner, about "how the GIs had taught him to play ball in the internment camp" and the prize for the "Internment Youth Championships" was "a Caesar salad made with lettuce picked from his family's repossessed farm" (115). Here, Beatty uses satire to point to the ridiculousness of the painfully recent discrimination that Japanese Americans suffered, as experienced through the eyes of a young boy. In addition, walking through the hallway of his junior high school, Gunner notices that while the photograph of the graduating class of '41 had a "smattering of Asian faces," the class of '42 (after Pearl Harbor) had "no Asian students" (59).

Furthermore, Beatty introduces Ms. Kim, a half-Korean store owner "[f]athered by a black GI... [and] adopted by a black family" (99). Beatty later portrays Ms. Kim burning down her own store in support of the 1992 LA riots, in which the back community expressed their rage against the deaths of Latasha Harlins and Rodney King, and the consequent court verdicts. This would have been a great opportunity for Beatty to explore black-Asian relations at the time, especially with regards to how minorities have been pitted against each other. However, without doing so, he soon moves on to focus on exotifying and sexualizing Yoshiko, "a mail-ordered bride through the services of Hot Mama-sans of the Orient," freshly arrived to the US after a "transpacific trip" (165) from the motherland. Yoshiko's character comes to overshadow Ms Kim and Coach Shimimoto, reinforcing the "otherization" of the Japanese community in the US.

While Beatty's portrayal of Yoshiko defies certain stereotypes of a submissive Japanese woman, at the same time, Yoshiko reinforces others, especially in the historical context. The reference to a Japanese bride makes an immediate historical connection to the influx of war brides from Japan to the US after the Second World War. Many of these brides had married white American GIs who were stationed in Japan, and were permitted to immigrate to the US with the passage of the War Bride Act in 1945 (51). The portrayal of these Japanese war brides was manipulated by white dominant society to achieve its interests. For example, the brides were initially seen as "opportunistic and ignorant alien[s] seeking to penetrate the suburban affluence of white America" (49); however, they gradually came to be portrayed by white society as the model minority, because it was most convenient for white America to use these war brides as an example of their triumph in racial integration. According to Chung Simpson:

> The celebration of Japanese war brides'… only thinly veiled the broader failures… [which] included both the widespread reluctance to grant African Americans fundamental freedoms and the continuing ignorance and neglect of the economic and psychological struggles Japanese Americans faced in their efforts to find a sense of belonging in the post-internment years. (50)

Thus by portraying these Japanese brides to have successfully integrated into America, the white society could assert that it was making progress in racial issues, without being accountable to the demands of the African American Civil Rights Movement or the Japanese American internment camp survivors. Selectively accepting these war brides was attractive for white society especially because they were "unfettered by the disturbing public history of internment" (49). Furthermore, it was easier to welcome them because white American soldiers could be "depicted as 'husbanding' the Japanese woman's emancipation from the formerly oppressive Japanese patriarchy." (52) This narrative is reflected in *White Boy Shuffle*, a couple decades later, in which Yoshiko is accepted by Gunnar's mother on the basis that Yoshiko "got spirit, escaping from a repressive society to seek her fortune in a strange world". (168, Beatty) This demonstrates that this dominant white perception, concocted to pit minority groups against each other, is reflected in the discourse of these very marginalized communities.

Furthermore, Yoshiko is portrayed as not too white, but at the same time not black enough, thus framed in a white-black racial binary. For example, Gunnar describes how "dating exclusively white was, for a black person, the equivalent of multiplying a lifetime of accomplishments by zero." (184) The implication is that because of her Japanese heritage, dating Yoshiko did not reduce Gunnar to "zilch stature," but even then, Gunnar "sometimes wilted under the evil stares, cowering behind Yoshiko's back" (184) when walking around with her. This restricts the analysis of Gunnar's relationship with Yoshiko in the framework of the black-white binary.

In conclusion, this paper raised more questions than it answered, including: Why did Reed portray the Japanese characters as he did despite his commitment to the idea of multiculturalism? What was the intention behind focusing more on Dr. Yamato and Yoshiko instead of on the Japanese American characters? What would it look like to write about race outside of a discourse of the black-white binary? How effective is satire in ridiculing stereotypes if it does not offer adequate opportunity to offer alternatives? These are all questions that I would love to get feedback on from those attending the conference.

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