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A CRITICAL REVIEW OF ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON BLACKNESS IN JAPAN

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Corporate multiculturalism is giving the black body a makeover. We are witnessing a series of struggles over the meaning of that body, which intermittently emerges as a signifier of prestige, autonomy, transgression, and power in a supranational economy of signs that is not reducible to the old-style logics of white supremacy (Gilroy 2000: 270).

SCHOLARS HAVE ADDRESSED THE PROBLEMS black people can face in Japan, and these problems, which begin with stereotypical images imported from the States, have been fetishized in the media to the extent that American academics often leave unchallenged the view of rampant Japanese racism specifically targeting blacks. In addition, because most scholarship is primarily concerned with the triangular relationship between African American men and Japanese women and men, the experiences of black women are marginalized or neglected altogether. For these reasons, the authors focus on interpretations of their personal experiences and how they might diverge or stand outside the scope of the conventional wisdom.

In his 1996 essay on personal ethics and fieldwork, Walter Williams concludes: "My general approach to life is to accentuate the positive, [but] I find many academics so overwhelmingly pessimistic and critical that they unwittingly discourage others. I have presented my experiences not to glorify myself but in the hope that such knowledge may encourage others to accomplish better ethnography in the future" (Williams 1996: 84). It is in

this spirit the authors of this chapter share their stories. Mitzi Carter is biracial, Okinawan and African American. She taught English in rural Japan and also spent time reconnecting with her mother's family in Okinawa. Aina Hunter, on the other hand, came to Japan as a complete foreigner and spent a year first as a student, then as a teacher. Because of the differences in their backgrounds and the significant differences between big-city and small-island life, their experiences were occasionally at variance. They are often congruent, however, and what can be taken away from the discrepancies is proof that racial essentialism is no longer a useful tool for understanding the lives of black people in Japan.

This chapter is more a critique of existing scholarship and theories than a fully developed proposal on how to proceed correcting them. It is rather a topic of great personal interest for both authors and a call for alternative perspectives on these matters.

Aina—On Arriving

I left for Japan in the spring of 2000. Although I had previously visited Haruko, my high school best friend, twice at her father's home in Yokohama, and then years later on her farm in Hokkaido, I worried about my reception at Meiji Gakuin University. When I told an instructor about the National Security Education Program grant that made it possible for me to study abroad, she remarked, "You're going to Japan? They hate blacks, you know!" I didn't know quite how to respond.

And then there was the interview I endured before being officially admitted to the Berkeley program. The professor from the International Studies Department asked how I planned to deal with racism if it became an issue. I told the interviewer I had no reason to expect any problems. She shook her head at my naiveté and said Japanese people have a reputation for being racist, and that one should be prepared for that.

After the "interview" I recalled a disturbing passage in Edwin O. Reischauer's *The Japanese Today* in which he stated definitively that Japanese people "tend to look upon blacks with wonderment and revulsion" (1988: 397). I began to doubt myself, but I need not have worried. At the tail end of March I flew into Narita, took the trains into Shinjuku, and was immediately embraced by Emiko's family. Although it was only seven in the evening, Emiko's mother, father, aunt, and uncle insisted I take a bath and change clothes after my long flight. There was nothing to do but follow directions, so I bathed and reluctantly put on the square pajamas printed with *manga*. I sat at the table, self-conscious and humbled where the four of them sat, fully dressed, drinking beer and smoking. "Much better!" they exclaimed. You even look like Emiko now! Same-shaped head!" The sushi delivery arrived and, incredibly, I began to relax. Their warmth and

concern made me feel that I was a member of the family; albeit the most junior, pajama-wearing member. After dinner Emiko's uncle surprised me with a spontaneous offer of employment. "My wife," he said, "has an English tutor. A white guy." He made a face. "I want you to be her new teacher!"

I would experience this drawing in many times over, later at Meiji Gakuin and still later when I started work teaching *eikaiwa* (English conversation classes). In contradiction to the predictions of my Berkeley instructors, I was embraced by my classmates and students alike. When one girl (who later became a good friend) confessed that she found her teacher, who was tall and blond, intimidating, I began to suspect that my brown skin gave me an advantage, as far as being allowed into certain intimate spaces.

I came to understand that some students at Meiji saw me as more approachable because of my non-whiteness, in part because they viewed me as occupying marginal space in the US power structure, which they quite openly expressed distaste for. At any rate, I was permitted access to the back-regions of their lives; their inner thoughts, fears and other intimacies, whereas my two white friends from Berkeley were unable to access these psychological spaces.

Mitzi—On Arriving

A year before I went to Japan, a "blackanese" friend of mine, a male in his late twenties, wrote me a letter and in a mixture of good humor and unabashed candor said, "I don't know how long this is gonna last, so you'd better get your butt out here before your blackness goes out of style." I laughed and thought for some time about this comment. What happens if I do go out of style? Was he implying that I just won't be given the extra "super star" attention many young white foreigners sometimes get when they go to Japan or does that mean he is assuming that prior to this "fad," blacks were treated poorly and will again be treated poorly after the fascination with things black has been quickly discarded into the secondhand graveyard along with Pokémon, Digimon, and ankle-breaking platform shoes. I wrestled with these feelings before leaving for Japan, vacillating between feeling uneasy at being the object of exotification and feeling that perhaps it would be better than being ignored or treated with outright disdain as I had heard about in stories of Japanese racism towards blacks from various people. Echoing Aina's experience, the news I got from most people before heading to Japan seemed dismal, "Those Japanese are racists, you know." Other reactions included, "Those Japanese are so used to living in a homogenous land that they don't know how to react to different people—it's cultural racism." Academic literature on black people in Japan has not veered too far from these statements. Pick up any article or book

on black people in Japan and you will find within the first three paragraphs a statement on the racist comments made by Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro and Minister of Justice Kajiyama Seiroke in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This is used repeatedly as the leveraging point for the idea that Japanese are racists. In his book *Multiethnic Japan*, John Lie argues against this kind of thinking and cautions that "Japanese racism is far from being an essential Japanese characteristic" (2001: 177). We still tend to think of blacks as having no agency in Japan. We position them through our discourse as being stuck, entrapped in the quicksand of nonbelonging or forever floating on the edges of *uchi/soto* margins. And by positioning Japanese as racists who accept blackness only through consumption, we also privilege the state and corporations and give secondary consideration to the everyday practices and the ways that blackness is negotiated outside of these institutions.

John G. Russell, an African American professor teaching at Gifu University, has probably written the most on issues of this nature in Japan. As an anthropologist, Russell is concerned with looking at the micropractices in the consumption of blackness, the interpretations and translations of blackness, and how these practices take shape discursively, textually, and aesthetically. Russell asserts that particularly American forms of blackness are rearticulated in Japan. Although he says of course there is room for improvising after the media has served the masses blackness, he pays little attention to this kind of "wiggle" room. I do not disagree with the power and role of American media abroad but the increasing movement of Japanese abroad and the movement of blacks throughout Japan, whether in the military or as teachers, has started to whittle at marketed images of blackness. He mentions briefly in his article, "Consuming Passions: Spectacle, Self-transformation, and the Commodification of Blackness in Japan" (Russell 1998: 161), that black men have become associated with the US military and may therefore serve as a convenient scapegoat for feelings of national humiliation by white men, but he never develops this theory fully. This would then incite a different model for rethinking blackness in Japan and what kinds of signifiers are enabled and what work they do.

Russell's work is profound and adds much to our understanding of imaginings of blackness in Japan in the past, and to some degree the present, but he is still using the strictly essentialist positions on blackness. Russell's most argued point, and one that is the most contentious for me, is his idea that Japanese use commodified blackness as a tool for escape. By constructing his argument around this essentialized version of blackness, he is positioning Japanese as static and passive if not overt racists. Blackness becomes the mask that is tried on by Japanese women to escape their subservient positions. To perform blackness, he argues carefully, is to domesticate and control it. "As glossed in the transnational marketplace," he says, "'blackness' is first and foremost an overpowering physical presence,

an invitation to forbidden pleasures and sexual experimentation that offers the illusion of personal and racial transcendence" (Russell 1998: 127). We shouldn't assume "the Japanese" still think or have ever only thought of blackness as a mere site, as a place for touristic pleasures where Japanese women and rebellious youth can escape to some liminal destination and lose themselves or find a new, "unbound" self in this place of blackness where they can explore the Other only to reify their authentic Japanese identity once past this performance stage. It makes for an interesting and compelling argument but, if we are not careful, it may serve to harden stereotypes and benefit those who thrive on racist accounts of Japanese only to mystify their own xenophobia. It would be interesting to see a series of interviews done on this topic in different spaces—urban, rural, militarized zones, and transnational spaces in which certain actors might see themselves as more internationalized. It would also be useful to research how perceptions of blackness shift when black women are the primary subject. To argue that blackness is consumed as such with little emphasis on the consumption of whiteness, and other forms of racialized bodies, much is missed in teasing out issues of how these forms are negotiated and blackness therefore still remains a "thing" for "the Japanese" to manipulate.

In her essay, "Fetishized Blackness: Hip Hop and Racial Desire in Contemporary Japan," Nina Cornyetz offers a different reading of the signification of blackness in Japan. She suggests that the contemporary reproduction of blackness through style and consumption of hip-hop attire and skin darkening "signifies a potential transnational identity, supplementary to a previously interjected, Western imperialist black-white binary paradigm, revelatory of a desire and a propensity for racial identificatory slippage" (1994: 115). Like Russell, she says many images of African Americans and blackness and the seemingly enthusiastic celebration for this style, people, and look are imported via MTV and Hollywood movies and not internally generated in Japan. However, she argues that the widespread consumption of blackness as a style in Japan is reproduced and consumed differently than in a place like white suburban America where hip-hop has been marketed and consumed heavily. She notes, "In the Japanese reproduction, while many of the origins of hip hop are erased, they are erased differently; most notably, they are not 'whitened'" (1994: 119).

We are not dismissing all of what Russell and others with similar reasoning have to say. Just as the appropriation of urban forms of "blackness" adopted by many white, middle-class youth in rural spaces in the United States does not necessarily signal growing equality and acceptance of racialized people, the same can be applied in Japan. Russell asserts, "Both [the acceptance of black cultural forms and foreign loan words] function decoratively to bestow on the user a certain degree of prestige and fashionability, while insuring that the objects of imitation are excluded" (1999: 147). For Russell, blackness then becomes a neatly packaged *omiyage* (a gift

which symbolizes the place of its origin)—the site of its origin is clearly understood and the quasi-tourists can easily find these tokens of blackness, try them on, perform them, and make love to them. Cornyetz also critiques anthropologist Karen Kelsky for a similar analysis because she “blurs the distinctions between the Japanese processing of whiteness and blackness and thus is not attentive to the role of power informing the logic of a black-white antipodal paradigm and the resultant production of Japanese hybridity” (1994: 131). Cornyetz’s analysis allows for more theoretical movement by paying close attention to that which has been added to the older systems of racial Othering practices at work in Japan: “African Americans as signs are encoded with additional, new significations: the images of African Americans are not the same old thing but something *different*” (1994: 122); and she adds, “difference is affirmed through the surety that outfits and skin darkening do not erase their own Japaneseness” (1994: 132) and does not solely function to reaffirm “the Japanese self.”

Although Russell’s and Kelsky’s analyses may be appealing for many scholars in the United States because they work well in talking about certain meanings of African Americans in North America, they may narrow the academic room for defining blackness in Japan and particularly blackness deriving from the United States. Black women do not completely fit into this kind of consumed blackness. Russell argues, “The Japanese imaginary regards black women as less alluring and refined than white women ... she is seldom depicted as an object of romance or sensual desire” (1999: 152). But it is interesting that many black women who have written about their travel and work experiences in Japan do not relate to this statement. And it tends to disregard what Cornyetz argues is only a recent practice, affixing the positive term *akogareta* (to yearn for, desire) to African Americans.

And who is to say we want to be depicted as these sensual objects of desire?

Aina—On Black Beauty

I do, I do!

When I walked into the *gaijin tarento* agency, a photographer immediately approached me and said that my face was perfect for a liquor ad. He explained that a beverage company wanted a black model’s face rising from a moonlit pool of water. I was thrilled and immediately posed for headshots. A week later he told me that the company had chosen another model. He said they wanted a woman with “hard eyes.” When I saw the model ultimately chosen, I decided that the client probably wanted someone more definitively “black.” I could go further and think about John Russell’s symbols of blackness, and reflect on the fact that black models are rarely seen on ads for English conversation schools or for “wholesome”

products, but I don't really see the point in this kind of exercise. I just don't know how meaningful it is. For one thing, during my entire year in Tokyo I did not encounter a single demeaning image of an African or African American person. (There was, however, a fairly ubiquitous and not particularly attractive image of a black-skinned East Indian who serves as the mascot for a certain brand of curry.) I do not doubt that the absence I observed is due, in part, to efforts of writers like Russell who initiated critical discussion of stereotypical images in Japan ten years ago. Yet even before Russell there was an organization called the Japan African American Friendship Association (established in 1981), the predominately Japanese members of which discourage the proliferation of derogatory images.

Whoever deserves credit, in the summer of 2000, my attention was constantly drawn to the arresting images of black women in the billboard-style ads and the black mannequins in Shibuya boutiques. There was also an enormous and popular ad campaign in progress featuring Naomi Campbell, nicknamed "*buraku biyûti*." In the summer of 2000 it seemed I could hardly turn a corner in the Shinjuku train station without meeting the haughty gaze of the British model.

Russell would hold that the popularity of black models does not mean that life is great for all black women in Japan, but racial essentialism fails to account for the many different variations on what he would call "the black experience." Russell's conclusions err on the side of cynicism: who could argue that the experiences of a black British model in Shibuya, an illegal immigrant from Ghana, an American banking executive in Tokyo, an American GI stationed in Yokohama, and an English teacher in rural Japan could ever share a similar "black experience"?

Mitzi—On Being Blackanese

This is only a beginning, an opening for looking at how current discourse positions Japanese as having fixed notions of blackness. This is not to say that blacks have not been and are not treated badly in Japan. I learned about this side of Japan from my mother and from other friends who have experienced direct and oppressive forms of racism. While in Japan or in situations when around Japanese people, my Okinawan mother still tries to pull me in to being more *uchi*. I was never allowed to play outside until the sun went down or else she warned me, "I would become more like my father's color" and therefore less Japanese. Perhaps many of her fears came from the uneasy times she spent with my older sister living in Korea, Thailand, and Japan in the 1960s and 1970s. She was constantly the object of harassment for having a "Sambo baby" and was called the nastiest names for betraying the nation with her sex. She was immediately associated with military domination, with prostitution, with misplaced allegiances. My mother had told me many stories about why she refused to

enroll my sister in a Japanese school and they all seemed to stem from the belief that it would be detrimental to her daughter's self-esteem. She would rather leave Japan than have my sister suffer from the kind of name-calling she received outside of school hours. My cousins who are half Okinawan and half white American had similar stories of buses passing them by and stories of bullying in school and how even later, signs on certain dance clubs in Koza City would not only say, "no Americans" or "no GIs" but also "no *hâfu*" allowed. The undercover Japanese have the potential to be the most threatening because our allegiances are hard to place. My friend Tatsu Yamato (whose father is Japanese and mother black) lived in Japan for years and was repeatedly frustrated that his name, which can be written in full *kanji*, was always changed to *katakana* so that he did not "trick" anyone into thinking he was "really" Japanese before meeting in person.

I am aware that being "*hâfu*" in Japan is different from being just "*gaijin*." In his documentary *Doubles* (1998), Reggie Life interviewed "*hâfu*" living in and outside of Japan and from varying generations. Their experiences varied from painfully unpleasant to very positive. What struck me was the way in which those who were half black living in Japan had experiences that were not too wholly different from those who were half white living there. If we look critically at marginal, hybridity, or borderland theories, we may be able to flesh out how biracial Japanese move between the spaces of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside), *omote* (front stage) and *ura* (back stage). These boundaries are more porous than we allow in academic literature. In his essay "On the Borderlines," James Valentine discusses these "third spaces" in reference to mixed race people in Japan: "An *ainoko* (child of mixed Japanese and foreign parentage) is more marginal, yet at the same time more rejected, than a 'pure' *gaijin*. Through such rejection s/he paradoxically becomes in some senses more outside than the complete outsider" (1990: 39). But this does not mean that *hâfu* are barred from having a foot inside either and are then more inside than the outsider, whether one parent is black or not. This brings to mind a personal experience of mine. When working in Sado Island, a fellow colleague from the United States who had been in Japan for much longer than I was a bit shocked when I told her that I was being asked to cut the persimmons and help serve tea in the mornings. She exclaimed, "I don't think I know any other *gaijin* teacher that's been asked to help out like that, regardless of how demeaning that may be as a woman and a newcomer. It means you're being pulled into a more *uchi* role and that the other teachers trust you." However, I had a feeling at times that I was on the border of disappointing everyone for not knowing better and on the edge of forgiveness because my blood has betrayed me from ever *really* becoming Japanese. However, never did the issue of me being half black ever come into those feelings of nonbelonging I may have felt, neither was that ever raised or insinuated in

any context. I do not take my experiences to be universal but I think there is still a hole in academic literature in regards to this issue. The project still needing attention is that which addresses the racial meanings of blackness in terms of spatial differences in Japan—the militarized zones around Yokohama and Okinawa, urban spaces where alterity is highly celebrated, and rural villages where encounters with “live” African Americans is still rare. For examples of shifting identity and perspectives on race in a militarized zone, see Masamichi Inoue’s (2007) discussion of a quickly formed alliance between African American soldiers in Koza City and Okinawan anti-base citizens in the 1960s. Although this may have been a temporary moment of solidarity where race and difference were highlighted, in a later historical modality of Okinawan identity, images of blackness, especially in relation to the rapists of a schoolgirl in 1995, were suppressed and erased in Okinawan media images of the US military to construct a monolithic, homogenous military system which to oppose. I believe there is a sharp distinction between the many Africans living in Japan and African Americans, but more ethnographic work needs to be done on how and why and what that means for meanings of blackness and its consumption. Doing so helps to create a rupture in the understandings that imaginings of blackness are wholly imported from the United States and that they still operate on a similar plane of racial ordering.

The important question for us then, is who benefits from these tacit understandings that Japanese are racist against blacks?

Aina—On Using “Japanese Racism” to Conceal White Racism

A black friend of ours applied for a job at an Australian-owned *eikaiwa* school in Japan. Based upon his resume, he was invited for an interview. Upon his arrival, he was told because the Japanese are such racists, they would prefer to hire a white teacher because, “the Japanese would be able to ‘deal with it’ better.” But I know of many black English teachers who had very positive experiences, so who benefits by the perpetuation of this myth?

Black Americans live in a country with recent histories of hangings, cross-burning terrorism, and car draggings, so one should consider carefully before crying “racism” when speaking about well-publicized Japanese biases. Just as we now find it ill-considered to use the word “holocaust” for anything less than genocide, we shouldn’t substitute the word “racism” for naive or xenophobia. This leads to another quibble with Russell. In “Consuming Passions” (1998), he uses the word *kurombo*, insisting that the best translation is the notorious “N” word. He does not state how he arrived at this interpretation, but I am not convinced that that particular word could ever be directly translated into a culture that does not have the particularly hateful history of the United States towards African

Americans. I find his interpretation unnecessarily inflammatory. I fear that it reinforces the suspicions of black Americans who suspect that foreign countries are particularly unwelcoming and secondly it feeds into an Anglo American belief that bigotry is not an American problem, or even a white problem, but rather a cross-cultural difficulty that stems from some inherent quality of blackness.

Mitzi—On Critiquing Russell

Our focus and critique of Russell's work in particular is not to suggest we run gleefully into the pluralistic positions that can shelter power that exist in less defined forms, those nonessentialist positions that scholars like Paul Gilroy (2000) and Liz Bondi (1993) argue leaves constructions like "blackness" floating around, waiting to be signified at any given moment. There is no doubt the invisible geographies of power that Russell is very conscious of exist and to ignore those is precarious. On the other hand, to also not give credence to the changing images of blackness is just as dangerous. If we have for so long said blacks do not have the means to their representation in Japan, but then dismiss the growing collection of narratives of blacks who have had positive experiences either as tourists, temporary workers, or now living permanently in Japan, is to commit the same error that we accuse Japanese of doing—that is, dismissing any blacks as anomalies who or when they speak against the grain of the current models of blackness in Japan. Furthermore academics should pay more attention to the nonacademic work produced by African Americans about being black in Japan, which can offer valuable narratives until fuller ethnographic work is completed in this field. For instance, Regge Life (1993) produced a film that documents the experiences of several different African Americans living in Japan. Kathryn Leary (1991) wrote an essay in the popular-culture African American magazine *Essence* about her experiences in the early 1990s as an African American woman in Tokyo. Both Life's and Leary's work offer good examples of African Americans, and especially African American women, who understand that being interpreted as black in Japan is different from in the United States. Historical works that focus on racial relations between African Americans and Japanese, and ideas of blackness in Japan such as those from Yukiko Koshiro (2003), in conjunction with emerging work from academics involved in the Japan Black Studies Association and narratives from Japanese and blacks inside and outside of Japan can help open up discussion of Japanese perceptions of blackness, which have often been perceived as static by previous writers.

What academics need to further emphasize is that not all Japanese accept black people as appendages—chopped up, packaged, and ready to be consumed. To bring over to Japan these arguments that may rightly describe racialized bodies as targets of the actions of government in the United

States is a tenuous project and one which may produce more harm than good in attempting to analyze how to deal with the very real and lived social injustices and marginality that exist in other forms.

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