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Author
Cheung, KK

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Editor’s Note
AALA  Album

AALA創立年  Elaine Kim氏を招いて
初期のAALA会員（1989/10）

Amy Ling氏来日講演会
神戸女子大学（1994/6/24）

AALA10周年記念フォーラム1日目
King・Kok Cheung氏基調講演（1999/10/11）

AALA10周年記念フォーラム2日目
Russell Leong氏を招いての日米フォーラム
（1999/10/12）

AALA 10th Anniversary Forum
Theme: Interracial Encounters

Date: Monday and Tuesday, October 11-12, 1999
Place: Hotel Sea Pal Suma (Oct. 11) & Kobe Women’s University (Oct. 12)

Forum Schedule:
The First Day
October 11 (Monday)
Place: Hotel Sea Pal Suma
1:30 - 2:00 Registration
2:00 - 2:15 Opening Speech: Teruyo Ueki (Kobe Women’s University)
SESSION
2:15 - 3:15 Keynote Lecture: “Interracial Encounters in Asian American and Other Ethnic Literatures”
Chair: Fukuko Kobayashi (Waseda University)
Speaker: King-Kok Cheung (UCLA)
3:15 - 3:30 Coffee Break
3:30 - 4:00 Comments
Commentators: Mizuho Murayama (Aichi Prefectural University)
Akitoshi Nagahata (Nagoya University)
4:00 - 5:00 Questions and Answers
5:00 - 7:00 AALA 10th Anniversary Party
Chairs: Chitoshi Motoyama (Kyoto University of Foreign Studies)
Mitsu Yoshida (Matsuyama University)
8:00 - 10:00 An Evening of Poetry and Images
Chair: Hideyuki Yamamoto (Kobe University)
Poetry Reading: Russell C. Leong (UCLA)

The Second Day
October 12 (Tuesday)
Place: Kobe Women’s University
8:00 Breakfast
9:00 - 9:30 Moving from Hotel Sea Pal to Kobe Women’s University
SESSION
Chair: Kyoko Nozaki (Kyoto Sangyo University)
Speakers: Russell C. Leong (UCLA)
Teruyo Ueki (Kobe Women’s University)
Commentator: King-Kok Cheung (UCLA)
11:30 - 12:30 General Meeting
Chair: Taeko Inagi (Kyoritsu Women’s University)
12:30 - 1:50 Luncheon
Chair: Yasuko Kawarazaki (Aoyama Gakuin University)
1:50 - 2:00 Closing Speech: Mie Hihara (Kyoto Women’s University)
Interracial Dynamics in Asian American and African American Fiction

King-Kok Cheung

Comparative American ethnic studies assumed a new significance in the wake of the Los Angeles uprising in April, 1992. In a period when we are bombarded by media images of interracial conflicts between Korean American and African American communities, the study of Asian American literature and African American literature together helps bring to light intergroup connections. I would like to divide this lecture into two parts. The first part discusses the empathy and tension between Asian Americans and African Americans as depicted in Asian American literature. Interracial empathy is often brought about by a recognition that both racial groups are second-class citizens in the United States. Interracial tension can arise because each group internalizes the racial prejudices and stereotypes of the dominant culture. The second part examines contrasting tendencies of African American and Asian American writers in dealing with themes of assimilation or integration into U.S. society. I argue that works by Asian American authors convey much greater hope and optimism than works by their African American counterparts, who are much more critical of American society and much less restrained when expressing anger and despair. I trace these differences to existing stereotypes (Asian model minority versus black rebels and hoodlums), expectations of the publishing marketplace, and the dissimilar social positions occupied by the two racial minorities. My discussion will move freely between literature and current events, partly because Asian American literature emerged from and is still a part of a social movement, and partly because some of the writers discussed are themselves recording actual events happening around them.

A sense of connection between Asian Americans and African Americans is often achieved when the writers or characters involved recognize their parallel subjugation in the United States. One example occurs in Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men. In the chapter titled “The Wild Man of the Green Swamp,” the narrator recalls a 1975 newspaper article about a Chinese man arrested in Florida after hiding for months in a mosquito-infested swamp. The police, with the help of a Chinese translator, learned that the wild man had worked on a Liberian freighter and that he resisted his shipmates’ attempt to confine him to an asylum by escaping into the swamp. When the U.S. Border
Patrol decided to send him back to Taiwan, he hanged himself in jail.

Kingston inserts clues in her retelling of the story to make the reader wonder whether the man was indeed crazy. Before his capture the residents reported that “he made strange noises as in a foreign language” when other human beings approached him (222). But the need for a translator implies that the man was indeed speaking a foreign language—Chinese—“strange” though it sounded to the residents. Other details further call into question the official assessments about his madness. The narrator concludes the episode with a parallel case closer to home:

There was a Wild Man in our slough too, only he was a black man…. The newspaper said he was crazy; it said the police had been on the lookout for him for a long time, but we had seen him every day. (223)

The juxtaposition of these two men of color, both of whom appear rather harmless to the narrator and the reader, suggests that insanity may be a matter of interpretation and that skin color may well play a part in the official judgment.

Kingston’s chapter comes to mind when reading another newspaper story (Snyder 1997) in which a Taiwanese national named Kuan Chung Kao was shot to death by a policeman after wielding a broomstick in front of his own home. The policeman said that Kao, who was drunk, advanced upon him “in a martial arts” manner, but Kao’s wife later revealed that her husband had no martial arts training and told how officers prevented her—a nurse—from helping her dying spouse.

Kingston simply draws a connection between two men of color who are similarly perceived as deviant, while Hisaye Yamamoto expresses interracial empathy openly in “A Fire in Fontana” — a memoir about her experience during and shortly after WWII. On her bus journey back from Chicago to the internment camp in Arizona she was sitting next to a blonde woman who gloated upon seeing an African American man being denied a drink at a restaurant south of Springfield (367). The narrator instinctively links her “seatmate’s joy with her own banishment to ‘that hot and windblown place’ of barracks” (367). She knows the prejudice that prevents blacks and whites from dining at the same restaurant is similar to the prejudice that singles out Japanese Americans (rather than Italian Americans and German Americans) for incarceration during the war. But the most haunting incident described in “A Fire in Fontana” is the murder of a black family in a white neighborhood. The black family, who had just moved into Fontana—a white suburb in Los Angeles—received threatening letters from their white neighbors telling them to move out. A few days later their house went up in flames, killing the black couple and their two children. The police dismissed the fire as an accident. The narrator—sure that the black family was murdered by their white neighbors—feels so incensed that she claims her own consciousness to be “burnt black” by this conflagration.
What is so disconcerting about this incident is not just the crime itself, which is sickening enough, but the indifference of the police and the failure of the criminal justice system. Such failure was all too common. In 1955 fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was tortured to death by two white men after "talking fresh" to a white woman in Money, Mississippi; an all-white jury found the two murderers not guilty and they were acquitted. Another "not guilty" verdict, given in the original trial of police officers charged with the beating of Rodney King, was a catalyst for the Los Angeles uprising in April 1992.

African Americans are not, however, the only victims of hate crimes and judicial injustice; many Asian Americans have also been affected. The most notorious case is the killing of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who was mistaken for Japanese and who was bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat by two unemployed white autoworkers in 1982. Ten years later, in 1992, a 16-year-old Japanese exchange student named Yoshihiro Hattori, on his way to a Halloween party in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, happened to press the wrong door bell and was shot to death. The white man who did it claimed that his wife, who had opened the door, was frightened by the Japanese boy and he came to her rescue with a gun. Like the murderers of Till, the killers of Chin and Hattori were judged not guilty. Like the murderers of Till, the two men who killed Chin were completely impenitent. Like the murderers of Till, the killer of Yoshihiro Hattori justified his fatal act in the name of defending white womanhood.

Recognition of parallel subjugation by the dominant culture does often bring about empathy between Asian Americans and African Americans. Too often, however, different racial minorities discriminate against one another rather than forging alliances against the common oppression. Such interracial hostility can be caused by the internalization of the dominant culture's racial prejudice, though many Asian immigrants have also brought with them stereotypes from Asian cultures. When Ichiro in John Okada's *No-No Boy* returns to Seattle after the war, he sees "a bunch of Negroes in front of a pool parlor" who shower him with racist slurs:

"Jap... Go back to Tokyo, boy." Persecution in the drawl of the persecuted.
The white teeth and brown-black leers picked up the cue and jigged to the
rhythmical chanting of "Jap-boy, To-ki-yo; Jap-boy, To-ki-yo ..." (5)

It is important to note that the black people jeer at Ichiro not because he is a no-no boy, but simply because he is of Japanese ancestry. Their ridicule evokes a simmering reaction in Ichiro:

Friggin' niggers, he uttered savagely to himself and, from the same place deep
down inside where tolerance for the Negroes and the Jews and the Mexicans and
the Chinese and the too short and too fat and too ugly abided because he was
Japanese and knew what it was like better than did those who were white and
average and middle class and good Democrats or liberal Republicans, the hate which was unrelenting and terrifying seethed up. (5-6)

Ichiro also witnesses Asian rejection of blacks. At Club Oriental the Chinese American owner throws out a Japanese customer for trying to bring in two black friends, saying, “That crazy Jap boy... tried to get in with two niggers” (133). A Japanese customer chimes in: “Them ignorant cotton pickers make me sick. You let one in and before you know it, the place is as black as night” (133-34). Okada suggests that those who are victims of various prejudices should empathize with one another. He is especially critical of the mutual discrimination between people of color. He points out that those who are subjected racism often ape their oppressors by discriminating against members of other racial minorities and that this is a very common phenomenon in the United States.

Yet another instance of racial discord occurs in Chang-rae Lee’s Native Speaker, which raises the issue, among many others, of the tension between Korean grocers and black customers—the tension that erupted in the Los Angeles “riots” of 1992. Lee acknowledges there is certainly black hostility against Korean grocers. The protagonist’s father, a grocer, is badly wounded by some black men who rob his store (56-57). But Lee also satirizes the way Korean Americans internalize the stereotypes of Asians as the Model Minority and blacks as deadly criminals:

We believed in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground. (53)

Lee implies that being a model minority involves not only pleasing the white majority (by being impeccable, hardworking, and uncomplaining), but also sharing the dominant culture’s prejudice against African Americans. Such prejudice surely had something to do with the killing, over a quarrel about a bottle of orange juice, of a black teenage girl—Latasha Harlins—by Soon Ja Du, a Korean grocer in Los Angeles. Like the murderers of Vincent Chin and Yoshihiro Hattori, Du also got away with killing. This incident, together with the Rodney King beating by white police officers and the subsequent “not guilty” verdict, helped fuel the 1992 Los Angeles uprising.

At this point, the myth of the Asian model minority should be examined. It arose in the 1970s in the wake of the civil rights movements, during which African Americans were pressing for political and social reforms. A corollary of the myth was embraced by white conservatives: if Asian Americans can do so well despite the fact that they too have been victims of racist practices such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Japanese American internment, why cannot African Americans also succeed? Why should the government do anything to help racial minorities? All the other minorities
can just follow the Asian American example (see for example Bell).

There are several problems associated with such reasoning. First, most recent Asian immigrants have brought with them considerable economic and cultural capital, unlike African Americans who suffered centuries of slavery and attendant poverty and illiteracy. Second, just because Asian Americans do not seek welfare or medical aid from the government does not mean they have no need of such help: they simply lack the wherewithal (such as fluency in English and knowledge about the U.S. social system) to seek it. Third, the myth of the model minority homogenizes all Asian Americans, when many Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and Cambodians still live below the poverty level.

Unfortunately, Asian American literature, despite its variety, tends to support the myth that Asian Americans are not set back by institutional racism, that they have only themselves and their cultures to blame if they cannot attain the American Dream. In this regard, Asian American literature differs sharply from African American literature, which often criticizes American society. I will illustrate this difference by contrasting two pairs of texts: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*; John Okada's *No-No Boy* and Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*.

The narrators in both *The Woman Warrior* and *The Bluest Eye* are acutely aware of their difference as girls of color growing up in the United States. Both Maxine and Claudia suffer from an inferiority complex vis-à-vis white girls. However, the ways in which they respond to their situations are strikingly different, as evident in two parallel scenes: Claudia's treatment of white dolls and Maxine's treatment of a silent Chinese girl. Claudia reacts against her sense of inferiority and the unequal treatment of white and black girls by society by lashing out against "white baby dolls" (22). Knowing that she can never measure up to the white norms of female beauty, she resents those who epitomize that beauty: white dolls and blonde girls.

But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horrors. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, 'Awwwwww,' but not for me? (22)

Claudia turns her anger outward. The narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, by contrast, turns her anger inward. In a harrowing scene, she tortures a quiet classmate — another Chinese girl, her alter ego — trying to force her to speak. She pulls her hair, twists her nose and ears, punches her cheeks, and needles her with words: "Do you want to be like this, dumb... your whole life?... You've got to let people know you have a personality
and a brain” (180). The other girl cries but refuses to speak, inciting Maxine to even greater desperation and violence. Maxine’s valorization of speech indicates her unquestioning acceptance of the American norm. Speech in this context has a valence similar to “the bluest eye” in Morrison’s novel. Maxine’s savagery toward the “mute” girl, which pointedly takes place in an “American” school, is reminiscent of the psychological violence suffered by the very dark-skinned Pecola in The Bluest Eye. What Maxine so vehemently detests in her classmate is not just her refusal to speak, but “her China doll haircut” (173), her “straight hair turning with her head, not swinging side to side like the pretty girls” (176). Even more startling is the following disclosure: “If she had had little bound feet, the toes twisted under the balls, I would have jumped up and landed on them—crunch!—stomped on them with my iron shoes” (178). The cruelty can be understood only in terms of Maxine’s virulent self-contempt at being Chinese. The very words used to lure the girl to speech (“Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompon girl?” [180]) bespeak the narrator’s aspiration to be a member of a white sorority.

Horrible as Claudia’s acts of mutilating white dolls are, they are less self-debilitating than Maxine’s confrontation with the mute girl, which plays out her acute self-hatred. A parallel contrast occurs in If He Hollers Let Him Go and No-No Boy. Himes’s novel is set during WWII; Okada’s novel takes place right after the war. Both protagonists feel the intense prejudice of white society toward them owing to their difference as men of color. In the case of Bob Jones, Himes’s protagonist, white racism engenders in him a deep hatred toward white people: “I’ll tell you... about the way I feel toward white people, why I resent them so goddamned much—resent the things they can do when all they got is colour” (96).

In the case of Ichiro, as in Maxine’s case, racism results in self-hatred. Ichiro seems to hate anything and everyone Japanese—including his own parents (see also Sato). Each protagonist has a girlfriend—Alice for Bob and Emi for Ichiro—who urges him to assimilate by accepting his subordinate position in the U.S. Alice tells Bob:

“...You need some definite aim, a goal that you can attain within the segregated pattern in which we live... We are Negroes and we can't change that. But as Negroes, we can accomplish many things... It is simply a form of self-preservation.” (168)

Emi tells Ichiro, who wants to know the root of his “sickness”:

“It’s because we’re American and because we’re Japanese and sometimes the two don’t mix... As things turned out, it wasn’t all right to be Japanese and American. You had to be one or the other.” (91)

She suggests to Ichiro a solution:

“Admit your mistake and do something about it... This is a big country with a
big heart. There's room here for all kinds of people. Maybe what you've done doesn't make you one of the better ones but you're not among the worst either.”

(95)

Alice, who does not “want to be pulled down by a person who can’t adjust himself to the limitations of his race” (97), urges Bob to accept a segregated society; Emi urges Ichiro to embrace America and acknowledge his guilt. Both women ask the protagonists to accommodate themselves to the existing racist hierarchy. In Himes' novel Alice is a problematic character who represents a compromising position that Bob Jones must resist. Emi in Okada's novel is presented as a positive figure who extricates Ichiro from despair. Yet her position is equally dubious (see Ling 44-48). It is hard to imagine people whose rights as American citizens were arbitrarily suspended feeling pride rather than anger at the thought of the national anthem, but Emi exhorts:

“Make believe you're singing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ and see the color guard march out on the stage and say the pledge of allegiance with all the other boys and girls. You'll get that feeling flooding into your chest and making you want to shout with glory.” (96)

Bob has quite the opposite reaction when he watches Japanese Americans singing patriotic songs:

Little Rikki Oyana singing ‘God Bless America’ and going to Santa Anita with his parents next day. It was taking a man up by the roots and locking him up without a chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me, Robert Jones, Mrs. Jones's dark son, that started me to getting scared. (3-4)

The patriotism of Japanese Americans, Bob wryly notes, does not prevent their incarceration. Emi, in her unquestioning allegiance to the United States, seems blind to the irony of her solution.

I use the examples of these four texts to illustrate a general difference between Asian American and African American literature. Asian American writers tend to attribute their difficulties in assimilation to their ethnic or cultural difference, whereas African American writers tend to ascribe such difficulties to the structural inequality in American society, especially as represented by white racism.

What accounts for such differences? My conclusion can only be sketched here. I believe the myth of the model minority, white publishers' expectations, and the unequal material positions of Asian Americans and African Americans each play a role. Asian American writers may have so internalized the myth of the model minority that they blame themselves—their ethnicity, their culture, or Asian patriarchy—rather than American society for their marginal status. Mainstream publishers, in turn, may be more open to works by Asian American writers that do not challenge white racism.
(Frank Chin, for instance, is likely to be rejected by mainstream publishers.) The myth of the model minority is so pervasive that the reading public seems to feel that Asian Americans have no right to protest against racism. As a result, Asian American writers seldom challenge the status quo of American society and are therefore much less threatening than African American writers. David Palumbo-Liu aptly describes Asian American literature as "model minority discourse" (395). Finally, it is also undeniable that Asian Americans, not hobbled by a history of slavery and enforced illiteracy, have been able to make much greater socioeconomic advances than have African Americans who, even today, must still overcome many obstacles.

The optimism so pervasive in Asian American literature is indicative, apparently, of the relative acceptance of Asian Americans at present. The hate crimes against Vincent Chin, Yoshihiro Hattori, Kuan Chung Kao, and others, indicate that racism against Asian Americans is nevertheless still alive and real. Self-contempt and cultural amnesia, not to mention friction with other racial minorities, are high prices to pay to bolster the myth of the model minority.

(UCLA)

[Works Cited]


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