

**Colliding Racial and Sexual Identities of Dis/Empowerment**  
**An Intersectional Analysis and Close Reading of Yamada Eimi's Novel, *Bedtime Eyes***

Alexander Dumas J Brickler IV  
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**Abstract**

In offering a close reading of Yamada's novel *Bedtime Eyes*, I endeavour to explore the interplay of the issues of race and sexuality as they work within the text and in a broader analysis of late twentieth century Japanese society. I examine the ways in which controlling images are woven into the fabric of Yamada's oeuvre. I also critique the ways in which Yamada asserts a form of agency on the part of her female Japanese protagonists (in this and other works), by framing them as subject and narrator of the encounter with this particular brand of Africanist presence, and question what is at stake in her fiction by racially and sexually objectifying Black masculinity.

Throughout the work, it seems as though the sole province of Black masculinity in her brand of literature is constructed in, articulated through, and restricted to the locus of the bedroom. Whilst this may be useful in recapturing a mode of Japanese female sexual empowerment, such a move is inevitably complicated by its necessity of rendering Blackness as abject and Black masculinity as something to be conquered and subdued. Moreover, even whilst Yamada professes—both in fiction and in biographic fact—to have an something of an aficionado's appreciation for elements of what she terms 'Black Culture', she nonetheless falls into the trap of situating her black characters according to the age-old tropes of hypersexuality and lasciviousness.

Through this project's focuses on race in this sort of international scope, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how this most persistent of social phenomena is commodified and so inextricably bound into a modernity that is steeped in Western, white supremacist ideologies.

## Introduction

Works by Japanese authors like Yamada Eimi pose a curiously complicated set of questions for the student of African American literary criticism. *Curious* in that we must immediately ask why an author from a locus so far removed from traditional conceptions of the African Diaspora as Japan would endeavour to write about sexual and romantic involvements between Japanese women and Black American men. *Complicated* in that the positioning of Black masculinity against Japanese femininity allows for a number of conflicting modes of oppression to come directly in contact with one another, still haunted by the omnipresent spectre of global white supremacist constructions of Black alterity

Through the course of what follows, I look to examine Blackness and Black masculinity as within the narrative of *Bedtime Eyes* (Japanese: *Beddotaimu Aizu*), the debut novel and most scholarly and critically recognised of Yamada's early works. The novel in question garnered

notoriety during the 1980s because of its flagrant and unabashed sexual content as executed by a Japanese woman upon the racialised and gendered ‘object’ of a Black man.<sup>1</sup> The act of demonstrating agency through the wilful and passionate pursuit of what is perceived as an abject form of racial alterity stands as a problematic critique that Yamada offers of the place of Japanese femininity within the constructed social realities of hegemonic patriarchy.

This territory is rife with symbolic significance, especially when we consider the ways in which stereotypes about Blackness have travelled and pervaded the literary scene in a place like Japan, so far removed from the traditionally recognised sites of the African Diaspora. Yamada’s texts stand as a reinterpretation of a matrix of oppression constructed by the intersection of race and gender. Traditional views of the trope of interracial intimacies are lifted and reinterpreted in the context of Japanese social dynamics; instead of the ‘flower of (white) femininity’ being beguiled by the mythic licentious and lascivious Black rapist, Yamada posits Japanese women who cast off their own stereotyped roles of demure and chaste, to dominate their Black paramours. The very act of sexual liberation on the part of Japanese womanhood is concomitant with the subjugation of Black masculinity to the controlling image of sexual lasciviousness. In order to achieve a meaningful analysis of the way in which such a phenomenon is played out, it is necessary to both historicise and contextualise the fact of race in a broader, international sense.

That said, although the necessary contextualisation of Japanese constructions of race will play a significant part of the project in the following pages, methodologically speaking, the central component of this discussion is a literary analysis: a close reading of Yamada Eimi’s

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<sup>1</sup> It must be said though, that depicting this sort of sexual agency on the part of a representation of femininity that was heretofore more often than not a *victim* of sexual repression and social oppression by modern Japan predicated upon the aforementioned substructure of ‘traditional’ patriarchal hegemony was not revolutionary in and of itself. There was a history of feminist assertions of sexual agency in Japan that predated Yamada by decades, marked by women writers seeking to undertake a similar manner of control over literary representations of their own sexual decisions. What made Yamada’s novels so much more scandalous to the sensibilities of mainstream readers at the time, was that her texts dealt with explicit (in both senses of the word) sexual agency on the part of Japanese women over Black men.

novel *Bedtime Eyes*. Moving beyond the text (Japanese and English language versions), though, the project will examine the ways in which Yamada's prose articulates and rearticulates the tropes and representational typologies of race as a product of the commodification of a Eurocentric model of racialisation.

Of course, the complicating factor is, of course, the nature of the Japanese aesthetic, phenotypic, and social reactions to racialising characteristics in an historical sense. Perceptions of skin pigmentation, of hair texture, and of other physiological manifestations of alterity, do not arise solely from the importation of undergirding factors of white supremacy as part and parcel of the modernisation/Westernisation practices that overtook the nation in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore imperative that my research contains an effectively problematised discussion of the genealogy of race in a Japanese sense as well as the breakdown of the kaleidoscopic manifestation of this particular brand of imperial encounter. Race here becomes a multilayered discussion of whiteness juxtaposed to 'Japanese-ness' (differentiated from a more generalised 'Asian-ness') juxtaposed to Blackness.

Complicating the matter yet further is the dynamic of gender. Herein—and especially as depicted in Yamada's novel—power is ambiguously distributed amongst the various players as a result of normative associations of it being so fundamentally upset. In the canon of Japanese fiction, the figure of the Japanese person is so very often centralised within narrative as the protagonist, the associative figure who vicariously represents a (admittedly demographically complex) Japanese audience. However, inserting a female figure into a position of narrative empowerment undermines the essentialised figuration of protagonist to masculinity.

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<sup>2</sup> Wagatsuma Hiroshi, 'The Social Perception of Skin Colour in Japan'. *Daedalus*. Vol 96. No. 2, The MIT Press, Spring 1967. 407.

To this is added the figure of the Black male, so marginalised by his race to the extent of possibly undermining his authority in a society in which patriarchy is traditionally normalised.

### **Historicising Japanese Conceptions of Race**

We see, then, the construction of a dual-layered mode of racialisation and construction of gendered behaviours. The dynamic interaction between these two methods of articulating alterity that exist in Yamada's work are rendered all the more complicated in that they are, by their very nature, formed by globalised forces of systemic white supremacy. The process whereby "Japanese-ness" is so readily equated to an ethnocentric mode of racial hegemony within the context of that nation's conceptions of what "race" means owes a considerable debt to Western eugenics traditions (though as we shall see, there was certainly elements of an indigenous tradition of privileging a Japanese physiognomy that was already--in many respects--in line with the construction of "whiteness" as extant during the nineteenth century).<sup>3</sup>

Historicising 'Race' in Japan is a provocative endeavour, and one that stands as a means of examining the genesis of a conception of alterity that has been historically parallel to and ultimately adaptive of such constructions as seen in the so-called Western world.

It would be Eurocentric to the extreme to discount the role of traditional Japanese conceptions of difference and to claim that the methods of Yamada and her contemporaries are only predicated upon an imported mode of Euro-American white supremacy. Moreover, to assume that such notions of difference were accepted unilaterally by Japanese sociologists and historians of the modern era would be an equally unsophisticated reading of the history of racialisation.

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<sup>3</sup> Wagatsuma 407

Historically, as Wagatsuma Hiroshi points out, a lightness of complexion was depicted as ideal for Japanese people, and women especially. His ‘The Social Perception of Skin Colour in Japan’ situates a discussion of idealised physical characteristics and their relative aesthetic value amongst Japanese as belonging to traditions that extend as far back in written records as the eighth century. At such time, the model of the imperial court was to privilege pale skin and straight black hair, for such were the markings of one who was clearly *not* working outside and getting darkened by exposure to the sun.<sup>4</sup> With varying degrees of vogue over the centuries, this widespread acceptance amongst the aristocratic and court elite became a foundational component of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities until well into the twentieth century.

However, elements fiction of Japan from the early modern period (1868-1912)<sup>5</sup>, from the period of colonial and imperial expansion (1926-1945), and from the relatively recent past (1980s-1990s) all bear out the facts of an insidious and ubiquitous presence of the global substrata of white supremacy, the existence of which, I would argue, stands at the foundation of what has come to be recognised as “modernity”. Japan here stands as a unique case study of a nonwhite, non-Western society that (some might say) against the odds, not only avoided the worst predations of nineteenth century imperialism and colonialism, but through rapid and systemic policies of conflated Westernisation and Modernisation, was able to become an imperialistic and colonising power herself.

Admittedly, the best tables for members of the Family of Nations were still marked by ‘whites only’ placards, but by the meteoric rise of Japan from her pre-1860s “closed country” isolationism to defeating not only China (1895) but Russia as well (1905) in large scale modern warfare, was more than enough to make even the most jaded and racially insensitive European

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<sup>4</sup> Wagatsuma 408

<sup>5</sup> The Meiji Period, marked by the transition from Japanese feudalism to the modern nation-state and its attendant form of constitutional monarchy.

powers sit up and take notice. The questions raised regarding the emergence of a nonwhite imperial power were discussed frequently amongst British, French, and Dutch intellectuals, all of whom had vested interest in maintaining a trading presence in the East and Southeast Asian regions. Figures such as Owen Rutter, a British trade envoy to the Japanese colony of Formosa (modern Taiwan) commented rather extensively on the differences inherent in Japanese approaches to a so-called “scientific colonialism,” whereby subjugated peoples were held in an ambiguous position of being Japanese imperial subjects without ever fully becoming Japanese.<sup>6</sup>

This methodology of enforced assimilation as enacted by the Japanese colonial administration speaks to some of the contradictions inherent in modern perceptions of race within the machinery of Japanese racialisation. Throughout the first half of the Showa period (the reign of Emperor Hirohito, 1926-1989) the predominant discourse of the expansionist military-industrial complex was that of the creation of a ‘Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere’ (*Dai to a Kyo-eiken*), wherein, the rhetoric stated, there would be a sense of Asia for the Asians.<sup>7</sup> Under the banner of such propaganda, the Japanese Empire--already at war with China for the better part of the 1930s--entered into the global maelstrom of World War II by launching attacks on European colonies throughout the Pacific Rim.

The pretty words of this rhetoric of anti-Western ‘liberation’ were a nice way to justify the expulsion of British, Dutch, French, and American imperial presences in Indonesia, New Guinea, ‘Indochina’, and numerous portions of China. However, the reality of the situation for many of the colonised people of these regions was that they had simply exchanged one form of overlordship for another.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rutter, Owen. ‘Taihoku: The Modern Capital’. *Through Formosa: An Account of Japan’s Island Colony*. Taipei: SCM Publishing Inc., 1923. 150.

<sup>7</sup> Dower, John W. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Dower, 7

Ironically, for the pomp and propagandistic pretence of ‘pan-Asianism,’ a significant portion of the academic discourse surrounding much of this imperialistic endeavour continued to take a much more conservative conception of the matter of racialisation and pandered quite readily to the extant racial hierarchies surrounding the populations being brought into the empire. Indeed, even the forces with boots ‘on the ground’ in the various Pacific islands sought to figuratively dissociate themselves from the subject peoples, many of whom were visually differentiated by their darker skins.<sup>9</sup> John Dower’s seminal treatise on race and the Pacific War, *War Without Mercy*, describes these methods of constructing Otherness as emblematic of a discourse not of “Yellow Supremacy,” but rather one that privileged being Japanese first, and Asian second.<sup>10</sup>

I find Dower’s take on the phenomena to be quite intriguing. It speaks specifically to a loose codification of an epistemology of Japanese exceptionalism amongst the peoples of Asia. One that was perhaps tautologically implied by virtue of the Japanese people’s ability to industrialise and thus progress faster than those other Asians and Pacific Islanders whom they were thereby able to simultaneously liberate and subjugate. The discourse of ‘progress’ and movement along a teleological trajectory of Westernisation, is itself compromised by the tension surrounding a conception of Japan’s place relative to the West. Were the people of the island empire to read their status in the global racial hierarchy as product of the discourse of Eurocentric eugenics? Or were they instead to view themselves as an ascendant ‘Yamato Race,’<sup>11</sup> as product of their own epistemological view of the racialised ‘Self’?

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 210

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 208

<sup>11</sup> A terminology with its roots in the Japanese mythic past. Alleging to designate a Yamato tribe of early peoples in Japan as the ones to effect the first political unification of those peoples in the heartland of the main island, it came into common parlance in more recent history as ethnic-Japanese came into contact with manifestations of the Other. (Dower 205)



The tension here was perhaps further complicated by Japan's alliance and cultural connections with Germany at this time. Clearly a match of convenience, the union of 'Aryan' and 'Yamato' peoples was an exercise in politics and warfare making for some very strange bedfellows. Yet, considering the fact that many of Hitler's inner-circle of so-called intellectuals acknowledged the Japanese as an exemplary model of ethnic purity, and that Japanese artists of the imperial project often appropriated elements of whiteness when representing soldiers as different from the 'coloured' subject peoples, we note that matters of constructing 'Japaneseness' at this time were quite complicated indeed.<sup>12</sup> Does such complicated association of 'Self' and 'Other' imply that imperialistic success is the sole province of the white race, and consequently, any who achieve such a feat could only be white by some stretch of the imagination? And what of the fact that, concurrently, some members of an intellectual fringe in Japan were seeking to prove the same Caucasian status?

Most curious indeed.

Yet, race in Japan was ever the slippery phenomenon. Prior to the modern era, discussions of what it meant to be 'racially' Japanese consisted of matters of heredity in what might be perceived as anticipating the eugenics movement of the Western world in the twentieth century. Such ostracism of an entire group of people as the *hisabetsu burakumin* (roughly translated as 'hamlet-dwelling people'), because of the construction of images of them as being hereditarily 'impure' is an example of the construction of something approximating racialisation even when, genetically, ethnically, and phenotypically speaking, these people were (and are) no different from the rest of the Japanese population.

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<sup>12</sup> Dower 207, 208

The discussions of ‘cleanliness’ and indeed, ‘purity’, have persisted throughout the history of Japanese racialisation and social categorisation.<sup>13</sup> Parallel--if antecedent--to similar discussions raised in Anne McClintock’s reading of Victorian era British imperialism.<sup>14</sup> However, whilst McClintock posits that the British were in some instances able to affect a transformation of subjugated peoples by the introduction of soap/civilisation to their society by the ‘benevolent’ arm of colonialism, there is scant evidence of such policies on the part of Japanese premodern modes of rendering alterity. Of course, as the Japanese colonisation strategy became ‘modernised’ itself, the discourse of cleanliness and civilisation was again brought up. We see in Wu Zhuoliu’s anti-colonialist novel, *Orphan of Asia*, representations of the Japanese colonial oppressors’ sense of superiority represented in conversations to the tune of ‘I bet you’ve never taken a bath in your whole life, Mr. Hu, people on this island just don’t.’<sup>15</sup>

As complicated as the entwined matters of racialisation and imperialism were during the early twentieth century, it is important to recall that gender concerns were a going (if socially subsumed) concern in both the Japanese metropole and the colonial periphery. The above reference to Wu’s novel speaks specifically to the tension between colonised males and colonising women in a manner that anticipates Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Mask* almost to the letter. Protagonist Hu Taiming, a member of the colonised population of Taiwan, early in the story falls madly in love with Naito Hisako, a coworker and ethnic Japanese colonial. Their relationship is one that is overtly and explicitly marked by the Difference of the colonial experience.<sup>16</sup> Hu desires Hisako, not only as a man desirous of romantic relationship with a woman, but, when read allegorically, his desire to have her becomes symbolic of his desire to

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<sup>13</sup> Dower 208

<sup>14</sup> McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Wu Zhuoliu. *Orphan of Asia*. Ioannis Mentzas, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 29-30

<sup>16</sup> Wu 29

have what she represents, the status and privilege of being Japanese. Hu's amorous pursuit of her is indicative of his desire to have the social and economic 'love' and acceptance that 'Japanese-ness' confers upon those blessed enough to have such status in the colonial world.

Of course, given that this is the work of a writer whose anti-colonial sentiments are readily seen elsewhere in his corpus, Wu Zhuoliu represents the relationship between Hu and Hisako as ultimately abortive. Hisako is unable to forego her privilege as a Japanese woman, and will not accept Hu Taiming as her lover because, as she explicitly states, 'you and I are different'.<sup>17</sup>

The theme is a recurrent one in the body of Japanese colonial literature, and similar examples can be found dealing with colonised populations in Okinawa, Korea, and even amongst internally subjugated minorities such as the hisabetsu burakumin. The figure of Japanese femininity in this sense is immediately recognisable as literally embodying the social construct of traditional and essentialised 'Japanese-ness'. It is ever the goal that the racial other must strive to attain, a way of validating his own status within the Japanese cultural/national matrix of identity.

Which is perhaps all the more surprising when read against the position that Japanese women have within that society. Though a nation which prides itself on the accomplishments of ancient female writers--Murasaki Shikibu, author of the oldest novel in global literary canon, *The Tale of Genji*, and her court rival Sei Shonagon whose *Pillow Book* also stands as testament to women writers--the eleventh century was, to put it mildly, quite a long time ago, and the status of Japanese women since then has been affected by lingering issues of repressive

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 50.

social, political, and economic patriarchy.<sup>18</sup> Women in Japan both before and since the onset of modernity have been isolated by patriarchal authority and often found themselves at the receiving end of de facto and de jure policies designed to keep them marginalised within society. Disfranchisement, disparities in income, and even social norms that necessitated a woman to forsake career ambitions for the sake of rearing the family's children were all part and parcel of what it meant to be a Japanese woman from the 1860s to just prior to the end of the Second World War.

### **Gendered Literature: Discussing Japanese Women Writers**

Thus, in many respects, the Japanese woman becomes read as victim of some of the same marginalising practices that were deployed to control minority populations. The 'minoritisation' of this portion of the population led many to search for outlets to express themselves against the repressive policies of the male, Japanese-supremacist patriarchy.

One of the chosen outlets for social criticism was, of course, literature.<sup>19</sup>

It is true that writing against patriarchy was a potentially risky manoeuvre for the Japanese woman. We may even go so far as to say that it was something of a revolutionary act of taking a form of agency and using it as a means of critique and self-expression. Works of this sort have origins as far back as the outset of modernity, and were, many times, the province of women who had figuratively and literally been sequestered to the back of the house (Keishu sakka literally translated is 'women writers' of the back room).<sup>20</sup> These critiques were often scathing, but the pushback against them was even harsher, as the Japanese literary establishment struggled to remain the province of male literati well into the twentieth century.

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<sup>18</sup> Copeland, Rebecca L. 'Introduction: Meiji Women Writers'. *The Modern Murasaki: Writing by Women of Meiji Japan*. Rebecca L. Copeland and Melek Ortobasi, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 18

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 20

What is particularly noteworthy about the manner in which Japanese woman writers approached their craft in the postwar era was through the method of recapturing agency in representations of sexuality, and in recapturing representations of sexual agency. The two are not necessarily the one and the same: the former expresses the ability for women writers to treat with the subject of sexuality in the first place (something their male critics derided as base), and the latter expresses the ability for them to represent scenes wherein the female character is depicted as having choices in whom she engages in intercourse with and how many partners she has.

A particularly noteworthy example of the latter instance is Tomioka Taiko's short story, 'Straw Dogs', wherein a middle-age female Japanese character unabashedly recounts her list of paramours in every condescending detail about the ways in which they failed to satisfy her. More striking to a Japanese audience than the blatant derision of the quality of the lovers, was perhaps the quantity that such a woman should look to take on. The flagrant flaunting of traditional precepts of female demureness and social 'propriety' would become a hallmark of Tomioka's works as she endeavoured to provide a consistent vocalisation of the inherent double standards of what a Japanese woman should do and how.

**Mythmaking:  
The Artifice of a Monoethnic, Mono-racial Japan**

The discussion of issues of gender, and the attendant concerns of the place of female writers within the canon of Japanese literature has taken us beyond the end of the war. The question of race, however, was left at the point of wartime colonial policies of marginalising the Other--male and female--and the premium placed on assimilation within this context. Unfortunately, for all the rhetoric and propagandising a Japanese 'melting pot' wherein all cultures are melted down into an emulative sense of being Japanese, culturally if not ethnically, here too was an impossible

set of standards for the marginalised to face. For no matter how well one was able to speak, dress, or think like a Japanese, the factor of becoming made the task as interminable as chasing the horizon.

The racial and social hierarchy was ever stacked against the colonised people of the empire. Heredity was the indomitable adversary that made the task so tragically futile.

However, the ending of the war saw the complete dismantling of 'Greater Japan' and the stripping of her colonies. Leo Ching writes that Japanese colonialism's end was so abrupt, in this fashion, so final, that there was not much of an opportunity for a protracted period of decolonisation to develop, not in Taiwan, not in Korea, and certainly not in any of the other territories conquered strictly for strategic purposes and 'liberation' of the indigenous peoples from European oppression.<sup>21</sup> As quickly as the Japanese empire was crafted, its decay was even faster, historically speaking.

This final separation of coloniser from colonised undermined the administrative efforts towards transforming the native populations into good Japanese subjects. As a result, generations of people who had been living their lives either actively against or actively participating in the policies of assimilation suddenly found out that they were no longer Japanese (though the question of if they ever had been was certainly one that was up for debate).

Revelatory information for both sides of the colonisation dynamic, this allowed for, and indeed necessitated, a revisitation of what it meant to be 'Japanese' in the first place.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most intriguing of this reassessment was the relatively swift (historically speaking), movement from 'Japanese-ness' as a quality that could conceivably be conferred, to a quality that was now overtly understood as being innate. Social policy makers and conservative nationalists alike

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<sup>21</sup> Ching, Leo T. S. *Becoming 'Japanese': Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. 42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 45

began to perpetuate a line of discourse stating that Japan, historically and culturally, had always been a monoethnic nation-state. Leaving aside the problematical assertion of a primordialist construction of 'nationality', what was perhaps more disturbing about this discourse was that it elided and excluded the various peoples on the periphery of what being 'Japanese' meant, from the history of their nation. More striking still, in light of the population movements of the late war, the Japanese metropole was still home to hundreds of thousands of clearly non-Japanese former colonials. Even historical facts as recent as this were massaged to allow for the perpetuation of the myth of a monoethnic Japan.

One presence that could not be explained away by the magic of reinterpretative history, however, was that of the American occupational forces, a foreign presence that was highly visible in Japan until the mid-1950s when the occupation formally concluded. Yet, even with the formal end of the American Occupation of Japan, the US maintained a presence in the country in the form of military bases that has continued to the present day. It was these bastions of America in Japan that led to some of the most fascinating forms of intersectional collisions of race and gender that the nation had seen in quite some time.

### **Military Base Towns Where Race and Gender Collide in Postwar Japan**

The locus of the 'Military Base' is one that looms large in the literary imagination of several postwar fictionists. As a borderland between the cultures and political realities of Japanese and American social and legal landscapes, the base and the town that grew up around it were areas of exchange as well as separation. And indeed, on occasion, they were sites of the exchange of ideas about separation.

Whilst the discourse of the ambivalent place of Japanese people in the global racial hierarchy remained intact after the end of the war (arguably exacerbated by the mythology of the

ethnically homogenous nation-state), the proximity of representatives of populations at the extreme ends of that hierarchy after the way created a space for the appropriation and adaptation of the brand of American apartheid associated with American racialisation.<sup>23</sup> In Okinawa especially, where an already tense racial situation existed between ethnic Japanese and native Okinawans, the establishing of an American military base with ranks of Black and white soldiers created a situation of highly ambiguous racial interaction amongst the four participating groups. Add gender to the matrix, through the de facto segregation of brothels, and other sites of interracial/interethnic sexual and romantic rendezvous, and the intersectional approach to reading these historical realities is really the only viable approach that the researcher has.

The conquering American military becomes read as having two faces: a white one, racialised as hierarchically superior, and a Black one, racialised as hierarchically inferior. Nonetheless, even in this capacity, the Face of Empire--for what is occupation but a manifestation of foreign military dominance enforcing submission of the local populace; colonialism, version 1.5--is a Black one.

Base towns in the Japanese mainland were often every bit as much of a potential racialised/gendered powderkeg. Evidence abounds of Black GIs leaving the base, both AWOL and legitimately, to find romantic and sexual companionship amongst the 'native' population. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, Black-owned American newspapers, such as *The Chicago Defender*, carried stories about these sorts of involvements. The question of why? was the recurrent point of discussion as Black journalists questioned the rationale and stability of these postwar relationships and the potential difficulties participants and their offspring faced in Japanese society.

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<sup>23</sup> *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature From Okinawa*. Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson, ed. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000. 97



The subject was tackled by Japanese writers as well, journalists and fictionists alike, and it is from here that the enquiry into the writings of Yamada Eimi can now effectively begin.

**‘Once You Go Black...’  
Contextualising the Fiction of Yamada Eimi**

Born in 1959, Yamada Eimi was a product of the base town lifestyle.<sup>24</sup> Living in such close physical and social proximity to Americans, she nonetheless gravitated towards Black GIs as she caroused the local bar scenes. From this infatuation with the idea of Blackness, she is known to have claimed a desire to immerse herself in ‘Black culture’, reading fiction by Black authors, listening to music by Black musicians, and otherwise partaking in a protracted period of consumption of commodified material trappings of Blackness.

An interest in Blackness in the abstract also had manifestations in the concrete as well, as she proceeded to date Black men and ultimately married one as well. Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of a cultural embrace.

In 1985, Yamada published her landmark text, *Bedtime Eyes* (beddotaimu aizu), a short novel that detailed the torrid drug- and music-suffused tryst between Japanese protagonist Kim and her lover, a Black navy man nicknamed Spoon. The text exploded against the Japanese literary canon with the force of a bomb (indeed, it sparked a succession of similarly interracial tales of sexual escapades called the *kokujin bomu* or, ‘Black Boom’) for a number of reasons.<sup>25</sup>

Foremost amongst them were its unabashedly frank discussions of female sexuality. Again, prior to this moment, popular female literature was relatively obfuscatory in regards to its portrayal of both the act of intercourse and the discussion of that act. Yamada not only brought the privacy of intimacy all the way under the centre-stage spotlight, but did so in graphic--

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<sup>24</sup> Yamada Eimi. ‘Kneel Down and Lick My Feet.’ *Monkey Brain Sushi*. Alfred Birnbaum, ed. New York: Kodansha International Ltd., 1991. 203

<sup>25</sup> Russell John. G. ‘Consuming Passions: Spectacle, Self-Transformation, and the Commodification of Blackness in Japan.’ *Positions*, no. 1: 113. *EBSCO MegaFILE*, EBSCOhost, 1998 (accessed 31 March, 2010). 142

sometimes borderline pornographic--detail. Detail laced with English-language expletives as well, also a new approach.

But more than simply addressing the unaddressed, and making the private public, Yamada's work was landmark in that it did so by employing Black alterity to do so.<sup>26</sup> What greater critique, what more flagrant refutation of the power of Japanese male hegemony, than to publicly undermine it through the embrace of the Black Other? Stooping to conquer, Yamada posits a Black male object--a presence that is at once utterly repugnant and inexplicably, inescapably desirable--as the epitome of sexual proclivity.

And yet at its core, the work is essentially an exercise in damning with faint praise.

For in spite of the revolutionary take on sexuality in this globalised context, Yamada's work carries with it all the subtexts of Black inferiority. The evocation of Black male sexuality as a critique of Japanese male hegemony remains fundamentally an act rooted in the portrayal of Blackness as fundamentally foreign and unassimilable. What is desired throughout the corpus of Yamada's oeuvre is not the love of a Black man, but rather, the love of a Black man. The difference is vital to the understanding of the fundamentally problematical nature of this appropriation of Black male sexuality for the utilitarian ends of Japanese female social empowerment.<sup>27</sup>

### **Entangled Oppressions Race and Gender in Bedtime Eyes**

Bedtime Eyes was written in 1985, and details the sexploits of its central couple, but does so without ever giving the audience much in the way of narrative arc or characterisation. This, for all the critical and social acclaim that the work received, is perhaps the biggest fundamental irony about it. The protagonist, Kim, is not even a particularly empowering female character,

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<sup>26</sup> Russell, 125

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 128

dependant as she is on routine sexual gratification from her lover. Such ‘power’ that she does have is largely the result of the dominant portrayal of Spoon as even less agential in his actions. He is the kept Black buck, capable of nothing in the eyes of Kim’s first-person narration save pleasing her or not pleasing her.

Indeed, for Yamada’s pretence of being versed in ‘Black culture’, the fact that she should fall to the deployment of so many tired stereotypes of Black masculinity is as contradictory as it is damaging. Spoon’s characterisation, aside from the generally-submissive-but-potentially-violent buck, is a laundry list of problematical depictions of Blackness that borders on caricature: he raps, he swears, he does cocaine, he has insatiable sexual desires, he is a borderline alcoholic, he eats BBQ ribs. All of these, and each of them individually, are expanded upon as something unique and Otherizing, ultimately creating a kaleidoscopic depiction of Blackness as the epitome of things not-Japanese. Yet, Kim is powerless without him; she needs him to function as a person and as a character.

The rendering of Spoon as abjectly Black goes further than the representation of his personality. Yamada evokes an imagery that functions on various sensory levels to further represent his abject alterity. Aurally, Spoon speaks--in the Japanese language original as well as in the English translation--in a flurry of expletives. One of the more ‘colourful’ examples of his speech is ‘Oh! Shit! Gimme some goddam motherfuckin’ soda, bitch!’<sup>28</sup> but most incidences of his speech do fall back on some manner of profanity.<sup>29</sup>

There is also, as mentioned above, the musical element associated, both to his verbal cadence and to his mood. Yamada has Kim tell her audience of an instance in which Spoon,

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<sup>28</sup> From the original Japanese: 「Oh! Shit! そのガッデムマザーファッキンソーダをくれよ」 or: Oh! Shit! Sono gaddemu mazaafakkin soda o kure yo. This is in turn followed up by a discussion of the English word ‘bitch’ and its meaning. (Yamada Eimi, *ベッドタイムアイズ*. Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1987. 33)

<sup>29</sup> Yamada Eimi. *Bedtime Eyes*. Yumi Gunji and Marc Jardine, trans. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006. 16.

‘began babbling to a beat, his words a cross between a song and a wordy monologue. He told me it was real New York rap and that he’d been the number one rapper where he came from. Then he told me a sad, sad story, but the rhythm he rapped it to was a happy, lively beat.’<sup>30</sup> The representation of the alleged musical proclivities of Black men and women had become accepted in Japan as a result of exposure to Black musicians throughout the 50s, 60s, 70s and beyond.<sup>31</sup> There are frequent allusions to Black jazz musicians in Japanese literature (even by such internationally recognisable figures as Nobel contender Murakami Haruki). Here, though, the work expands upon the musical association of Blackness and extemporaneous lyricism as a means of complicating and undermining a representational motif of coping with a pervasive existential sorrow of being poor and Black. The consumption and incorporation of the hip-hop component of Yamada’s perception of ‘Black culture’ should not be overlooked.

Discussion of the methods by which Blackness is represented as being aurally distinct from normative Japanese behaviour is but one facet of Yamada’s approach to rendering Blackness as quintessentially Different. Depictions of Blackness as having qualities of a particular smell are equally important to the task. Historically, Eurocentric modalities of representing Blackness as less than human have often hinged upon an association of racial alterity with characteristics associated with the subhuman. I’ve previously mentioned the matter of uncleanness as an example of such a marker, but it warrants repeating in the light of a discussion of ‘smell’ as contingent upon being ‘unclean’. On more than one occasion in *Bedtime Eyes*, Yamada has Kim pick up on a quality of scent as associated with Spoon, especially when he returns home from an evening of hard drinking. He ‘reek[s] of cheap gin and absinthe,’ he

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Russell 122-123

‘stinks,’ and, he ‘smell[s] like a loser.’<sup>32</sup> The implied toxicity of his body’s colour is restated in its toxic qualities of its odour.

Yet, whilst the smell is represented as one that is undeniably bad, on occasion, Kim notes how the smell is uniquely Spoon’s. That the smell is at once off-putting, and a potent turn-on. It is every bit as potent a marker of difference as the visual cues she also describes.

The ubiquity of those visual cues--perhaps the most unsubtle approaches to identifying Spoon’s racialisation, is almost desensitising. Spoon is never mentioned to be anything less than black (kuroi), and on occasion, this unequivocal depiction of phenotypical darkness is depicted as being a fetishised exoticisation: ‘[the colour of his skin] was the saddest colour in the world, and yet it was the most beautiful colour I had ever seen.’<sup>33</sup>

Representing Spoon’s alterity in these ways is an effective--if somewhat off-putting--means of articulating his status as fundamentally not-Japanese. The sensorial approach defines him as being utterly abject and yet, to Kim, he is an indispensable component to her existence. To the point that she, portrayed as having a history of strictly sexual relations with numerous men (white, Japanese, and Black), finds him to be someone worth crying over.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Measure of the Man: Meditations on Somatic Representation of Black Male Hypersexuality**

Beyond all other representations of Spoon’s alterity, though, the element that most truly and explicitly renders him as Other, is the decision to render him as having the stereotypically massive Black phallus.<sup>35</sup>

This should come as no surprise given Yamada’s preoccupation with the bedroom as the centre of her narrative universe. The bedroom, and the acts that transpire therein, dominate all

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<sup>32</sup> Yamada Eimi, *Bedtime Eyes*. 2006. 27-28

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 23

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 12

<sup>35</sup> Russell 124

other settings in terms of significance to the progression of plot. Of course, it could be argued that ‘plot’ is a somewhat generous term for the loosely connected episodes of sexually explicit domination that Kim endeavours to enact, but the significance of this locus is difficult to overstate.

Thus, the acts that occur in the bedroom have a certain primacy in the novel, and with a discussion of that intimacy comes Yamada’s apparent methodological necessity to give detailed and explicit discussion of the various elements of the sexual act. Of these, characterisation of Kim’s fascination with Spoon’s penis<sup>36</sup> is deserving of commentary, given its perhaps unintentional engagement with a history of stereotyping associated with that particular part of the Black male body.

During Kim and Spoon’s first sexual encounter, the Japanese woman describes the member with a thoroughness somewhere between physiological assessment and amazed anticipation:

His dick wasn’t the kind of disgusting, red cock that white men have, nor was it the pathetic, infantile thing of Japanese men, the kind that doesn’t do a thing for you until it’s inside you. With Japanese men, anyway, I always worry that I’m going to get myself tangled up in their pubic hair because it looks so much like seaweed floating on the surface of the ocean.<sup>37</sup>

And she continues:

With Spoon, maybe it was just that his pubic hair was the same colour as his skin, but I was totally in awe of his dick. It was gorgeous, like a big chocolate bar, and as I stared at it excitedly, I couldn’t stop my mouth from watering.<sup>38</sup>

The somatic of realities of Spoon’s phallus are compounded in Kim’s ‘heat-of-the-moment’ desire to consume it. Factoring in the sensorial equation of the member with a sweetly satisfying

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<sup>36</sup> Identified in Romanized Japanese as *ディック* (*dikku*). (Yamada Eimi. *ベッドタイムアイズ* 1987, 14)

<sup>37</sup> Yamada Eimi. *Bedtime Eyes*. 2006. 5. It should be noted that throughout this exchange in the original Japanese-language text, Yamada frequently uses Romanized versions—direct Japanese transliterations of English words—of the various parts of male and female anatomy, effecting a brash sense of colloquial familiarity with the crasser aspects of English and assuming a sense of globalised, cosmopolitan vulgarity.

<sup>38</sup> Yamada. *Bedtime Eyes*. 6

chocolate bar<sup>39</sup>, and the literal desire to orally ingest what she seeks to vaginally subsume, and the phallus becomes a site of the figurative consumption of Blackness.

Which is of course odd in light of the traditional imagining of the phallus as penetrator and conqueror. Here it is the consumption of the ‘big Black dick’ that enables the empowerment of the Japanese female. All the more so when viewed in comparison of the relative size and implied power of this hieroglyph of Black masculinity as seen in contrast to those of white and Japanese masculinity. Yamada here not only engages in the translation of stereotypes of Black virility, but in so doing, effects a school-yard taunting sort of critique on the relative impotence of the Japanese patriarchal hegemony that has historically dominated Japanese women such as herself.

The situation of this critique in terms of challenging the size and shape of the psychoanalytical iconography of male ‘power’ between Blackness and ‘Japanese-ness’ is quite fascinating because of the ironical castration of both that such a critique implies. In spite of the assertion of power within the racialisation that equates Blackness and somatic virility as a way of situating it above ‘Japanese maleness’, the fact does remain that ‘Japanese female-ness’ is still the sole site of agency in the interaction. Kim is represented through her first-person voice as having the decision and relative power over not only ‘infantile’ Japanese penises, but even over the ‘awe’-inspiring Black ones as well.

So this appropriation of the mythology of the well-endowed Black male with voracious sexual appetites is both sexually and racially disempowering to the character of Spoon. He is a figuration of an aberrant Black male sexuality that is a product of white supremacist discourse that sought to take the language of virility and through the process of reading hypersexuality and concomitant hypermasculinity as a product of a retrogressive and animalistic quality endemic to

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<sup>39</sup> Literally transliterated: チョコレートバー (*Chokoreeto Baa*) (Yamada, ベッドタイムアイズ, 1987, 14)

this mode of gendering and racialising. What is most troubling, then, is the ease with which this image was translated into a Japanese social construction of racial identity.

The instrumentality of this myth of the rapacious Black male serves the ends of Yamada's methods of effecting a gendered critique of Japanese society. But in so doing, she sacrifices a depiction of a Black character as a fully characterised figure within the narrative for the sake of presenting an image of Japanese female sexual agency. The fundamental irony inherent in this travesty of interracial intimacy, is that even though the iconography of Blackness is reduced to a replication of the abject, the embrace of which is designed to empower the aforementioned female figure, Kim still remains a character whose existence is contingent upon maleness. Her desperate need to be satisfied sexually, to the point that she will endure physical and mental abuse at the hands of her Black lover, undermines any and all effects of the objectification and domination of the Black masculine abject.

Characterization remains a problem, however, for even though Spoon is read as a constellation of sensual imagery surrounding substance abuse and a reproduction of a stereotypic phallus, Kim is somehow even less defined as a character. There are no attempts made to describe her physically, only the vaguest attempts to define her outside of her sexual history and current occupation. The only time she is described is in relation to her emotions and feelings for the other characters, Spoon and her friend and mentor, Maria, a Filipina stripper.

Arguably, this vacuous space left open in place of true characterisation of Kim was an intentional act by Yamada as a means of allowing her audience to empathetically project themselves into the character's shoes as they read. Such an engagement with the text could allow for a sense of connection with the writer's problematic agenda of empowering Japanese femininity vis-à-vis a restrictive and gender-policed literary canon.



**‘Eff the Police’:  
Potential Conservatism and the End of *Bedtime Eyes***

The end of the novel is perhaps the most perplexing thing about it, as it takes the above problematical engagements with race and gender, and further undercuts the efficacy of any sort of ‘greater message’ the author may have been trying to convey.

On the upshot, Spoon is revealed to be somewhat more than a Black penis with rap skills and a propensity towards alcoholism. Initially introduced as a deserter from the American Navy, he is revealed to be selling secret documents smuggled out of the base. A wrinkle in the representational cloth, yes, and one that hints at an intelligence to his character that Yamada fails to fully represent. But, it is one that presents him in an even less sympathetic light than he might have otherwise had. Naïveté and dereliction of duty could be read as bad qualities, true; treason, however, presents a far less redeemable quality (though one that might be complicated by prevailing negative views by the Japanese towards the lingering American military presence within their country).

More telling than that, though, would be the moment of Spoon’s arrest. Living a life of interracial sexual hedonism with Kim and his vices, Spoon is ultimately tracked down by a combined force of American and Japanese authorities who capture him and take him away. The force consists of, ‘a dark-skinned foreign woman’, two older Japanese men, and two young Americans.<sup>40</sup> A motley crew, to be sure, but simultaneously emblematic of the forces of normalcy that ‘police’ the boundaries that criss-cross the story. Thus, what might have been read as a story of interracial intimacy that (albeit faultily) attempts to defy socially accepted/constructed norms of Japanese and American gender and racial standards, is undercut by the very forces it has until these final pages been thumbing its nose at. Japanese masculinity

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<sup>40</sup> Yamada Eimi. *Bedtime Eyes*. 2006. 54

and American authority figures swoop down upon the hapless couple and sunder the physical attachments that define their bond.

Without the physical presence of her lover, Kim is set adrift on a sea of romanticised memories, listless and rather pathetic. To take the pathos of her musings as somehow indicative of a strength of character, or of empowered femininity is to miss the point. Whilst endeavouring to craft an image of a woman in control of her own sexual destiny, the work is hamstrung by the cop-out ending wherein an attempt to raise the narrative stakes of an otherwise meandering meditation on sex to something approaching a climax, the forces of conservative social and sexual politics remove the abject radical from the equation. The end result is a lonely Japanese girl victimised by at least as much by her own false consciousness of matters both racial and sexual as she is by reactionary forces typified by this scene of policing the Black body.

### **Conclusions**

A product of a nation that has traditionally grappled with issues of race and their representation, Yamada Eimi as a writer must be looked at in context. Her novel *Bedtime Eyes* and similar works of her oeuvre such as *The Piano Player's Fingers*, *Jesse's Backbone*, and *Trash* treat with the subject of interracial intimacy and sexual relations, but do so by trading heavily in many of the same faulty Controlling Images of Black masculinity that have served the ends of European and American discourse of white supremacy.

The figuration of Blackness as a 'flawed' and abject somatic embodiment of alterity, is one that is deeply rooted in the construction of whiteness itself. As whiteness was normalised during the expansionist phase of European colonialism and global conquest, the one-to-one equation of being white to being 'modern' made for a remarkably seductive and pathologically contagious way of reading the teleology of 'development' of a nation-state.

Japanese intellectuals and policymakers had an ambivalent relationship with this brand of modernity. On the one hand, many were covetous of its benefits and desirous of the protection it afforded from the predations of European and American nations. On the other hand, completely embracing the rhetoric of such a policy would mean undermining the value inherent in maintaining an identity as ‘Japanese’ (and the fact that Europe and America might not be willing to accept people who were not white as full members of their exclusive Family of Nations paradigm).

Occurring at the same time as Japan sought to modernise and create an international image as representative of these aspirations towards modernity (and white-like behaviour and privilege), there was some form of resistance and pushback against traditionally repressive gender dynamics. Japanese women began to work within the extant social systems to achieve a limited form of agency and voice, often expressed through literature.

Matters of race and gender found themselves colliding in the literature of the Japanese colonial era, a time in which writers, both colonised and colonial pondered the meaning of interracial and interethnic unions. Even after the collapse of the formal empire, and during the occupation of Japan (a time in which the nation herself became an effective colonial of the American military) discussions and allegorical representations of these sorts of dominating relationships continued to flow from the pens of Japanese writers. The occupation period and the social proximity to different forms of racial alterity tapped veins of latent hierarchal views of racialisation and played upon the ambivalent roles of Japanese—and even more ambivalent roles of Japanese *women*—in coping with this new racial order.

Yamada Eimi, and those who would follow her through the gimmicky period of the so-called ‘Black Boom’ in Japanese fiction, sought to use a white supremacy inspired brand of

racialisation to construct Black masculinity as abject. In doing so, and in going so far as to represent in their work and *embrace* of the abject, they sought to critique the hegemonic patriarchy of Japanese society. This literary mobilisation of a social critique met with varying degrees of success; certainly its commercial success made Japanese men pay attention, but the critical acclaim awarded to Yamada for breaking the silence of Japanese men was perhaps even more visible. Even if achieving such a voice could only be attained itself through the literary gagging of Black masculinity.

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