

The Yellow Negro

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THE YELLOW NEGRO

Joe Wood

As I unpacked my bags, I assigned the strange feeling in my head—a sense of isolation fastened on my brain like a lump of ice—to the unnatural ease of my passage. It had taken only thirteen hours to cross twelve time zones and thousands of miles of indiscernible land and water; according to the clocks, I arrived in Tokyo three hours after I had left New York.

Even finding a hotel room seemed unnaturally easy. My guidebooks explained that cheap Japanese hotels prefer not to deal with *gaijin* (foreigners), so I'd asked a friendly face at the airport tourism desk for assistance. The room she procured for me turned out to be smaller than a college dorm room, and about as well furnished. There was a bed and a tiny desk unit crowded into one tight corner; the television tinted everything a celestial blue. I took comfort in the vaguely familiar images: game shows and panel discussions, serious-faced newscasters, sumo wrestling tournaments. Out at Shinjuku Station, the nearest train stop, everyone had studi-

ously ignored me and my obvious struggle to figure out where I was going. In the room, I felt safe. Soon as I could, this foreigner slept a few hours.

When I awoke in the evening, the heavenly blue light of the television had turned cold; all traces of home were gone. My headache had subsided, and I realized with a certain smiling fear that I was now a dark American cipher in the Japanese empire of signs.

. . .

They say that Shinjuku, the largest precinct on Tokyo's west side, contains the most typical commercial district in the city. Lights and smiling billboards compete to outshine each other; a gallery of earnest advertisements for department stores, films, luxury foods, and sporting goods shouts down at crowds of rushing consumers on the street. Until very recently, some of the most popular icons on display in Shinjuku and across the country were Little Black Sambo and his liver-lipped cousins.



Shingo Wakagi



I had been worried about facing those Sambos. Boatloads of typeface have been devoted to Japan in recent years, and one of the more persistent themes has been the peculiar fact of Japanese racism: the Sambo iconography, the coldness toward *gaijin*, the occasional outrageous comment from a prominent politician. In 1990, for instance, then-Justice Minister Seiroku Kajiyama was cited in the *New York Times* as “compar[ing] prostitutes in Japan to black Americans who move into white neighborhoods and ‘ruin the atmosphere.’”

Kajiyama made this enlightened analogy after observing a nighttime raid of

brothels in Shinjuku, a pebble’s throw away from the sign-filled streets where I now stood, feeling like a ripple in some vast unrippled pond. Much has been written about the nation’s “island mentality” and insensitivity to foreigners. The Japanese have long perceived themselves, and been perceived by others, as one homogenous group, racially, ethnically, and culturally identical. The purported homogeneity has alternately been cited as the cause of the nation’s rapid economic growth, on the one hand, and its insularity, on the other.

Walking around Shinjuku, I thought I could detect an ugly fascination in the

eyes of the people around me. How bizarre that there should be such malevolence toward blacks in a country with almost no black people. There are, by some estimates, 50,000 African Americans in this country of 125 million people, and most of them are soldiers temporarily assigned to the area. While the infamous rape of a teenager in Okinawa by black servicemen in 1995 probably exacerbated Japanese attitudes toward blacks, the hostility predates that crime. I couldn't help but wonder whether the racism expressed by Seiroko Kajiyama was identical to that of a white landlord in Queens who refuses to rent to a black family.

I had not come to Japan to examine hostility toward blacks, however. On the contrary, I had been drawn by another much-noted facet of Japanese culture: its profound attraction to black music and style. Even as the Japanese have hung their Sambo signs, they have embraced jazz, rock 'n' roll, funk, and other forms of African American expression. In recent years, this fascination has widened to include Jes Grew's latest incarnation: hip-hop. And, like the children of that white landlord in Queens, many young Japanese closely imitate the styles of the rappers they see on the screens in their living rooms.

"Jiggers" come in several flavors. The most curious are undoubtedly the blackfacers, b-boys and girls who darken their skin with ultraviolet rays. When I first heard about them, years ago, I was bothered by the idea of young Japanese blacking up like the American minstrels of old. But when the opportunity arose

to go to Japan to study them, I couldn't resist. I hoped that they might surprise me.

In Tokyo, I was told that blackface Japanese are ordinary high school and college kids. Even their darkened skin doesn't particularly set them apart; surfers, another well-defined Japanese subculture, spend a lot of time in the tanning booth, too. What does separate the small sect of blackfacers from their peers—even their hip-hopping peers—is the ardor with which they pursue African American "blackness."

The blackfacers work it hard. While they bear an obvious resemblance to old-fashioned minstrels, their "performances" do not seem to be aimed at other Japanese. Blackfacers (especially the females) tend to party where natural blacks party, especially black American soldiers. Blackfacers are even proud of their assumed skin color. That, of course, is the strangest thing about them: they

"Cool" is everywhere in Japan. There are seemingly endless numbers of subcultures and sub-subcultures.

wear blackface in order to embrace black people. This is more baffling than anything white America has ever attempted; try to imagine Al Jolson or Sophie Tucker or even Bert Williams wearing their blackface with pride, going out on the town, trying to seduce black people. There's an old Creole proverb: "Show me who you love, and I'll show you who you are." Who were these Japanese who chose to wear my face?

• • •

Most people I talked to hadn't heard of the blackfacers. The ones who had thought I shouldn't be taking them so seriously. I interviewed Japanese professors, black American soldiers, entertainers, businessmen, teachers, and former clubgoers. They were sometimes amused, sometimes dismissive, but none of them seemed to think much of the blackfacers. Wherever I went, I encountered the ubiquitous wallpaper of black American music: Billie Holiday, Sly Stone, Cassandra Wilson, Ella Fitzgerald, Eric B. and Rakim, Ray Charles, De La Soul, Aretha Franklin, Al Green, Tammi Terrel, Nina Simone, Funkadelic, Sidney Bechet, James Brown, and KRS-One.

For a time, Japan enjoyed a brilliant stardom among the “darker peoples” of the world. Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey all considered Japan a model of “colored” progress.

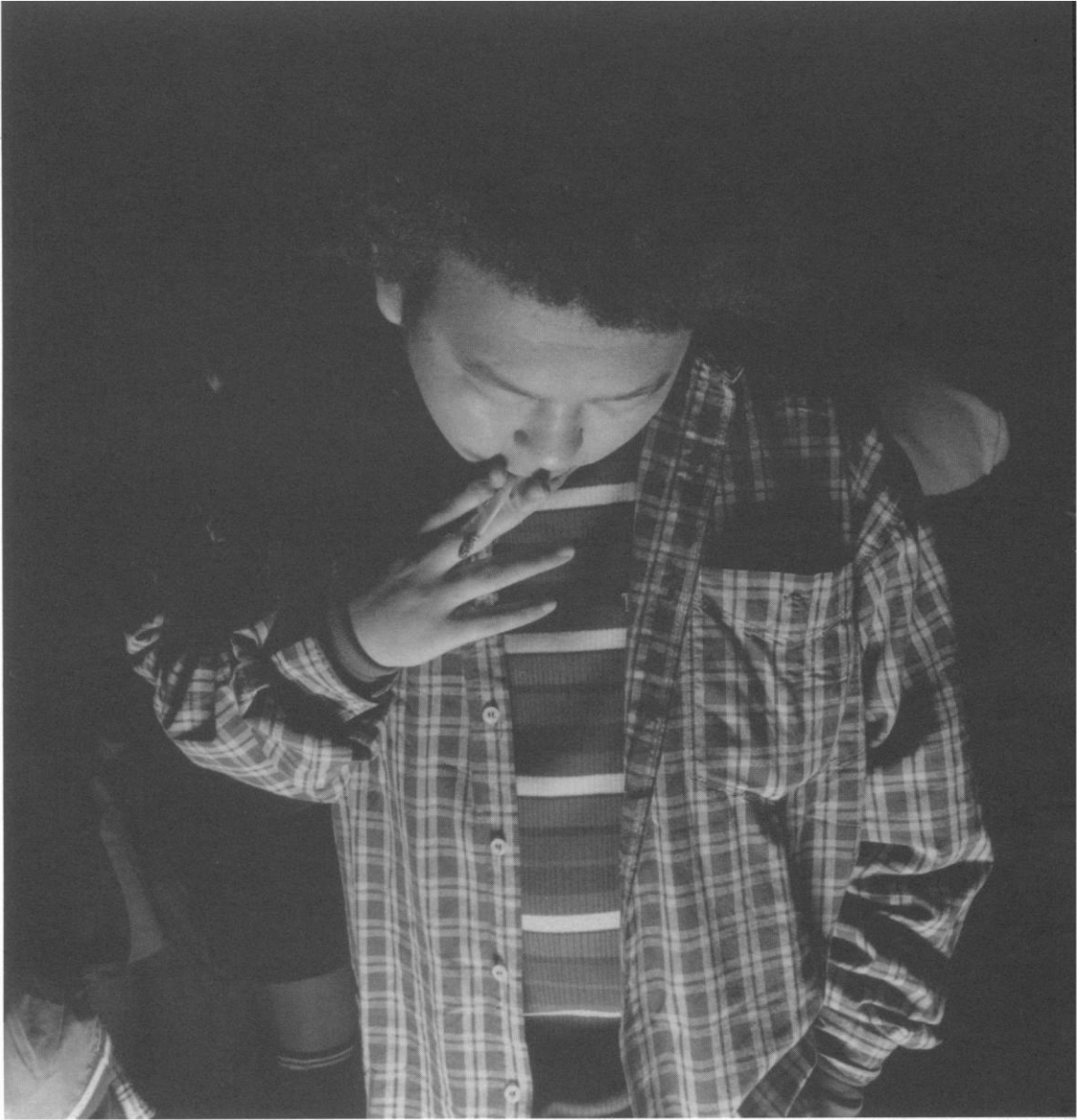
On a local black journalist's tip, I went to Kings, a nightclub frequented by *kokujin* (black foreigners) and their blackfaced admirers. When I asked him to come along, he demurred. “*They* like it there,” he said. I suppose I should be embarrassed to confess that my heart was actually racing when I saw my first one of *them*.

The blackface girl and her black boyfriend were one spot ahead of me in a line of about fifteen people, crammed into a small third-floor hallway. The club wasn't open yet; the Africans who ran the place were late. By the hallway's fluorescent lights, I examined the girl: her

crimped hair, her darkened skin, her figure swamped by an oversized shirt and a pair of Tommy Hilfiger jeans. She moved well, too, as did the other six or seven blackfacers, a couple of whom she seemed to know. The trio conversed in a body language that would not have seemed out of place on a New York subway: a kind of feinting in which the speakers lead with their shoulders, and then fade back, hands kept low but occasionally flying sharply upward to make a point stick. I recognized the b-girl adolescence, the combination of macho swagger and dancer's grace—just like home, almost, lacking only a little of the homegirl's street-level preparedness. But certainly the girls were more fluid than the men—black American soldiers and African partygoers—who stood like trees among their blackface partners.

I followed the girl and her companion, a well-muscled bush of a man. He sounded African. They stopped at the bar. I suddenly felt self-conscious. I got a drink and wandered over to see what the DJ was spinning. His records looked interesting: solid West Coast hip-hop, and a couple of rappers I'd only heard on New York college radio stations. There was a good crowd, but no one was dancing yet. Off-duty American soldiers stood at the edge of the square dance floor, poised like sprinters; women huddled in groups of two or three.

I waded my way through the thick waves of rhythm to the blackfaced girl at the bar. She was a young nineteen, beautiful and cheesy at the same time: her crinkly hair was pulled up and back, the curls sprouting from the top of her head; her lips were painted with dark, almost black, lipstick. She looked real: a



good fake. She could have been a Dominican schoolgirl in the Bronx. Her t-shirt announced that “Black Women Are the Salt of the Earth.” I could almost hear the laughter of the black women back home.

I managed to start a conversation with her in elementary English. Her name

was Miho. “Do the people in school think you look good?” I asked her.

“No,” she said. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Why do you choose to look like me?” I asked.

“You?” she asked. “Who?”

“Black,” I clarified. I pointed to myself and to her African boyfriend.

Shingo Wakagi



Shingo Wakagi

She turned to her companion. There was a shuffle of discussion in Japanese; the African spoke it effortlessly. “Because it’s cool,” the girl said, shrugging her shoulders.

. . .

“Cool” is everywhere in Japan. There are seemingly endless numbers of sub-cultures and sub-subcultures. I soon discovered that, for many young Japanese devotees of black culture, the blackfacers are decidedly uncool. In fact, they’re considered an embarrassment. These hardcore kids dismiss blackfacers as fools, or as not “real”—the worst thing one hip-hopper can say about another. According to the tan-free aficionados of black culture, the point is not to imitate black people’s skin tones but to participate in the graffiti-writing, break-dancing, loose-fitting-clothes culture of hip-hop.

But even as they put down black-

facers, tan-free hip-hoppers are still playing by similar rules. For both groups, black culture is worth being part of because it’s cool. This “black cool” is distinctly reminiscent of the subversive hip-ness Norman Mailer described in “The White Negro” (1957), an essay about white Americans of the Beatnik era. The hipster sets himself apart, Mailer writes, in order to

encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat.

The hipster heralded a new white generation which believed that purchasing a bit of black earth would lend their lives in Cold War America some badly needed vitality. “Hip,” Mailer goes on to suggest, “is the affirmation of the barbarian.”

Breaking the Eisenhower ice, we can all agree, was a very good thing. But the beatniks’ celebrations of a loose-limbed, vital “blackness” only succeeded in confirming their own whiteness. The line is straight and narrow between the beatnik’s fetishizations of Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk, and the rap-loving, phat-styling wigger children of today. Today’s white Negroes consume black culture with only a fantastically vague sense of what it might mean to do so, and no appreciation of the ironies involved. Whiteness rules their minds in stealth.

Japan in the eighties seemed a lot like America in the fifties. American white

Negroes and Japanese blackfacers had prosperity in common; like Mailer's pals, the *kokujin ni naritai wakamono* (one of the Japanese media's monikers for black-oriented subcultures in general) were middle-class kids rebelling against a conformist society—in their case, Japan, Inc. Beatniks had cheap apartments and low gasoline prices to fuel their road trips; Tokyo blackfacers, until recently, lived off the cushion of wealth that constitutes the Japanese miracle.

Even before I arrived, I had discovered other similarities. The white Negro loved the (black) Negro's music, Mailer wrote, because it "gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm." The "primitive passion about human nature," which Mailer described as the hallmark of beatnik culture, seemed to be at work in many of the most popular postwar Japanese novels. "Jackson shot heroin into the palm of Reiko's hand; maybe it hurt, her face twitched," wrote Ryu Murakami in *Almost Transparent Blue* (1976):

The black woman was already drunk on something. She put her hands under my armpits and made me stand up, then stood up herself and began to dance. . . . At the smell of the black woman, clinging to me with her sweat, I almost fell. The smell was fierce, as if she were fermenting inside. . . . Her smell completely enveloped me; I felt nauseated.

Similarly, Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe opened his famous *A Personal Matter* (1964) with an almost nauseating vision of Africa:

The continent itself resembled the skull of a man who had hung his head. . . . The miniature Africa indicating population distribution in a lower corner of the map was like a dead head beginning to decompose; another, veined with transportation routes, was a skinned head with the capillaries painfully exposed. Both these Africas suggested unnatural death, raw and violent.

The uneasy response to blackness and black culture—the combined attraction and repulsion, the "affirmation of the barbarian"—did seem to unite these disparate works, linking contemporary blackfacers to an earlier moment in Japanese culture, and to American white culture as well.

In the nineties, the Japanese miracle has been significantly demystified. Though the times are not austere, there is an increasing sense that Japan, Inc., isn't doing so well—especially since the collapse of the East Asian "miracle." Nevertheless, Japanese kids are still in a better position to purchase, say, the new Dr. Dre record than are middle-class teens in Liberia. This sort of power results in more Dr. Dre records and more photographs of kids in Newark demonstrating how to wear a hat backward with aplomb—so that Japanese kids can do the same at a club like Kings.

. . .

I forget who told me to telephone Mikako and Hiroshi. I met them about two weeks after I'd landed. I was ecstatic to find people I could really like. Mikako, a fresh-faced twenty-four-year-old, had an infectiously happy face. Hiroshi, twenty-six, had wiry and studious features; he reminded me of John

Lennon. They both had good jobs: Hiroshi was an editor at a big publishing company, and Mikako analyzed fashion trends in one of the company's marketing divisions.

They took me to a soba shop. Mikako described some of the research her office had conducted on *burapan* fashion, which is the name given to the fashion sensibilities of all black wannabes, including blackfacers. Fashion communi-

I couldn't shake the suspicion that the Japanese still secretly want to be white.

ties among teenagers in Tokyo are numberless and strict, she said. *Bodykasi* wear the casual clothes a European supermodel might put on in her free time, while the *bodykons* dress more slinkily. *Co-gals* are would-be *bodykons*, with bodies too young and linear to achieve slinkiness. *Femi-o* guys wear flare pants, platform shoes, and feminine shirts. *Burapan*, she said, is on a downswing, so the "cool" my friend at the nightclub aspired to wouldn't be "cool" for very long. By the time you publish your essay, she told me, blackface costumes will be dead, relegated to the backs of closets and the bottoms of drawers.

Toward the end of a delicious soba meal I asked Mikako and Hiroshi what Japanese people thought of black people.

Mikako wrinkled her face; what a huge, unanswerable question I had asked. I was trying to understand whether Japanese attitudes toward blacks were really analogous to American attitudes. Although I often felt slighted here, I couldn't say for certain that people were treating me badly because I was black. My feeling of isolation could have been

the loneliness any Western tourist might feel in Tokyo. Or I could simply have been taking personally the studied indifference I saw on the streets, a blankness that seemed to shut out everyone, including other Japanese. One of my interviewees had emphasized that the Japanese are a mask-wearing culture. "Think of *noh*, or *kabuki*," he had said. Everyone wears his mask in the office, on the subway, at the restaurant, and even at home.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more to it. I told Mikako how people ignored me when I first arrived, how I'd never felt this foreign in any other country. I was surprised by how angry I was getting as I talked, but I didn't think it showed. I heard myself say that most foreigners probably have the same complaints.

The blacks in the Roppongi section make people afraid, Mikako said. But usually Japanese people do not think anything about black people. They like Michael Jordan and black American music, yes. She smiled broadly.

"I know," I agreed. "It's wild to hear. I love how much of it is played here. It's almost like home. But why do you think blacks make people afraid? Is it because you've heard African Americans are violent? Or is it because soldiers keep getting into fights?"

"Yes," Mikako said, nodding vigorously.

I hoped she meant the latter. "All soldiers get into fights," I assured her.

I told her a story about how, late one evening, when I was walking back to my hotel, I noticed two elderly women riding bicycles. They did not flinch at the sight of my black face. I compared this



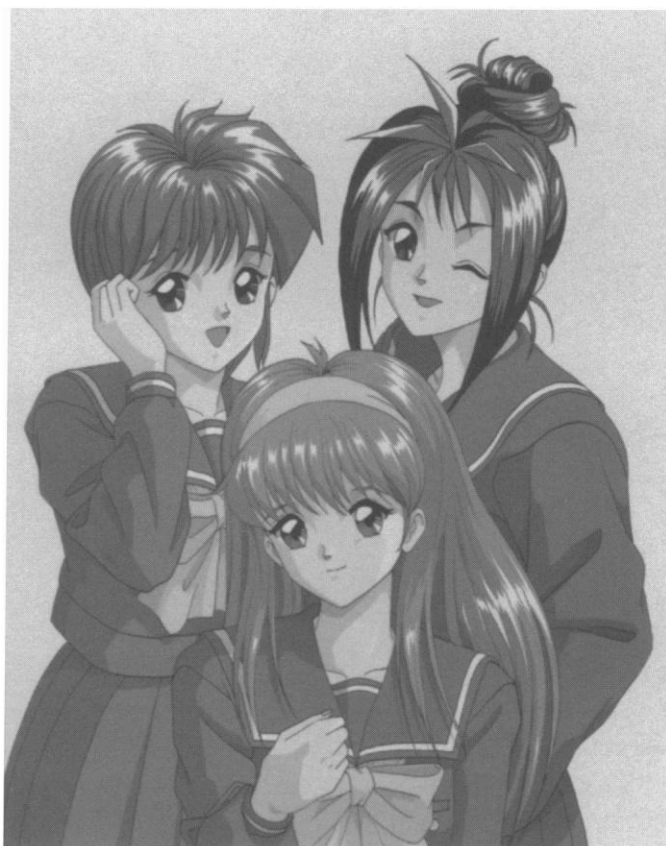
with the starchy fear on the white faces I routinely encountered in Park Slope, in Brooklyn, late at night, on the way home from the subway. I didn't tell Mikako that I was unsure what those elderly women were thinking. She didn't say what she thought they were thinking, either.

Hiroshi liked to chew his thoughts before speaking. Like many arts workers in his age group, he planned to come to America to study. He would study fashion, he said. He told me that the infamous "darky" trademarks had been discontinued because of local protests and the negative press they generated internationally. Today there is little evidence that Sambo ever gazed out from Japanese billboards or magazine covers, except for the occasional racist comic book

—and, of course, the blackface Japanese.

I asked Hiroshi if he'd ever heard the term *minstrel*. He hadn't. I told him about the cartoons I'd seen on the television in my hotel room, examples of *anime*, Japan's world-famous animation. Almost all of the characters appeared to be white. Though they spoke Japanese, the characters had upturned noses and large, round eyes, sometimes colored blue. Minstrelsy is imitation like that, I explained, except usually it's imitation of people you think are lower than you.

Hiroshi nodded. The animation used to be worse, he said. The scenarios used to take place in Paris or London, never Japan. The characters had names like Mary or Jane. "I would say it's changing," he said. "Young people don't feel inferior any more."



From Tokimeki-Memorial Official Illustration Book.
©Konami

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My next question was nearly as huge as the one about what Japanese thought about blacks. It turned out to be unanswerable. “Do you think Japanese people see a colored person when they look in the mirror?”

I knew it was absurd to ask them to take sides in a racial system born and bred in the United States, the most race-conscious country in the world. But perhaps not completely absurd. America has been exporting its race problem around the globe for at least a century, and the Japanese have taken sides—both sides, as it happens.

The Japanese encounter with modernity began in 1853, when Commodore Matthew Perry “re-opened” Japan. The Japanese encounter with blackface dates back to the same year: Perry brought a troop of minstrels along with him. After Perry’s visit, trade with Europe and the United States was established, and the country undertook a massive modernization drive. As with many modernizing countries, Japan’s drive to “catch up” with the world’s financial powers was accompanied by a powerful movement to preserve the country’s cultural traditions. To Westerners, however, Japan was just another Asiatic country—more mysterious, perhaps, for its centuries of isolation from colonial depredations, but still little more than what we would today call an “emerging market.”

In 1905, Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War: the West now had to take the island nation seriously. The rise of Japan was also celebrated in Asia as a sign that the time had come for other countries in the region, as well. Sun Yat-sen, the father of Chinese nationalism, wrote:

Since the rise of the Japanese, the Caucasians dare not look down upon other Asiatic peoples. Thus the power of Japan not only enables the Japanese to enjoy the privileges of a first-class nation, but enhances the international position of other Asiatic peoples. It used to be the general belief that the Asiatics could not do what the Europeans could do. Because the Japanese have learned so well from Europe, and because we know we Chinese can do as well as the Japanese, we see the possibility of doing as well as the Europeans.

• • •

For a time, the Japanese were considered “colored” (both inside and outside Japan), and the nation enjoyed a brilliant stardom among the “darker peoples” of the world.

In the United States, Negro race-men made the idea of an Afro-Asiatic people an abiding theme of early-twentieth-century racialist thought. Figures like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey all considered Japan a model of “colored” progress. Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad spent four years in prison for urging black Americans to evade the draft rather than fight the Japanese. More surprisingly, perhaps, Japanese nationals of various ideological stripes made contact with American blacks. Langston Hughes spent time with Japanese leftists before being deported from Japan in 1933. On the right, and much more visible, were ultranationalist figures like Satokata “Little Major” Takahashi, who founded several organizations in 1930s Detroit to stir up pro-Japanese sentiment among U.S. blacks. (Some of the most receptive were early members of the Nation of Islam.) Even as late as 1942, Japanese fascists tried to rally fellow “colored people” around the world to support their national cause.

At home, however, the fascists were more interested in promoting their version of the Shinto religion and the contention that the emperor was divine: *He descends from the sun goddess Ameraterasu Omikami, He is a living testament to the divine origins of the Japanese people.* A key component of ultranationalist ideology was a belief in the ethnic purity of the

nation. The superiority of the “Yamato race” (as the Japanese called themselves) was used to justify Japan’s brutal annexation of Korea in 1910, its massacres in China in 1937, and its terrorism of other Asian nations during World War II. After the Japanese surrender, the American occupation forces demanded an end to emperor worship. The Japanese complied and established a political democracy modeled on the American system.

What happened next is less clear. The horrific defeat of the nationalist cause in World War II, and the American occupation, scholars agree, was the source of Japan’s renewed “inferiority complex” vis-à-vis the West. This is where John Russell comes in. Russell, an African American scholar at Japan’s Gifu University, has done the most thorough work documenting the meaning of race

Almost all Japanimation characters appear to be white. Though they speak Japanese, the characters have upturned noses and large, round eyes, sometimes colored blue.

in postwar Japan. His writings fed my suspicion that the postwar explosion of negative depictions of blackness represented an attempt to soothe a Japanese inferiority complex. Russell contends that the appropriation of antiblack racism was a sign of identification with white Americans, a bid for equality. Or even superiority: by the eighties, as Japanese companies came to dominate the American automotive and electronics industries, America’s decline could be ascribed to American racial heterogeneity. As then-Prime Minister Yasuhiro

Nakasone argued in 1986, America's declining competitiveness was a consequence of the low intelligence of its black and Hispanic populations.

What has complicated this, of course, is the small but significant population of black people in Japan—most notably the black American soldiers who frequent the entertainment precinct of Roppongi. While the presence of these black soldiers undoubtedly plays some role in fanning Japanese stereotypes, it is also the context for the *vogue negre* among Japanese youth, especially among women. Russell sees the fashion for blackness typified by *kokujin ni naritai wakamono* as akin to white appropriations of black culture:

Just as the white minstrel/White Negro acted out his racial and sexual fantasies in a bid to transcend Whiteness, so the current Japanese obsession with blackness allows Japanese youth a freedom of expression they are unable to experience in their circumscribed social role as "Japanese." Additionally, it has allowed both to celebrate "non-whiteness" while remaining embedded in the political economy of "Westernness/Whiteness."

In a word, then, Hiroshi and Mikako's parents went white over black. In their Japan, there was no room for being "colored" anymore.

. . .

Many of the black people in Tokyo are soldiers. The soldiers are the blacks on the ground, so to speak, and treat the city with equal measures of fear and condescension. You never see soldiers on the subway until the weekend, when they train in from their suburban bases in

search of fun. Usually, they end up in places like Roppongi.

There are several types of black Americans in Roppongi. There are "refugees," out-of-work entertainers who spend what little money they have trying to pick up Japanese women, who lend them money to eat and go out. Sooner or later these guys get tired of the life, or they get deported. Then there are the "professionals," businesspeople, teachers, and students, only a small number of whom hit Roppongi on the weekends. And there are the servicemen, the largest black contingent in Roppongi. The black military men behave—well, like military men. They wear buzz cuts, they eat and party where other Americans do, they get into drunken fights. They spend a lot of time in the nightclubs.

I spent a lot of time in those clubs, too, trying to figure out their intricate sociology. Although most of the clubs are open to all races, and Japanese predominate everywhere, the kind of music played depends on the race of the next largest racial group. That is, all-Japanese clubs play Asian pop, with a little black pop music (à la Janet Jackson) for style; clubs patronized by whites feature dance pop and rock, with a little hip-hop for style; clubs frequented by blacks offer reggae and hip-hop, and nothing else. In the Japanese clubs, there is an even mix of Japanese men and women; in the white clubs, an even proportion of men to women, across racial lines. But in the black clubs, almost all the men are black, and almost all the women are Japanese.

The black scene in Tokyo is highly diverse. Besides the Americans, there is a sizable population of Africans, mostly



from Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria. You see them milling about outside the Roppongi subway station, passing out flyers for the most popular black clubs. The clubs are owned by Africans, although the businesses are recorded in their Japanese wives' names, in compliance with Japanese law. The Africans actually cause American blacks considerable discomfort, in part because they can "pass" for American. They walk around "head-to-toe in Karl Kani," one American complained to me. "Nobody who knows anything about hip-hop culture would go out looking like that. They don't know any better. And the Japanese girls can't tell the difference." This last point

hints at the real issue: the soldiers don't mind the blackface Japanese, whose tans they see as flattery or beauty or silliness, but they do mind the competition from the Africans. A couple years ago, a black crew from the battleship *Independence* nearly beat to death the son of a Ghanaian diplomat, allegedly over the attention of a Japanese woman. The group called themselves the G's, gangsta style, but no one believes they were real gangsters, or that they were only fighting for the woman's affections. The issue is authenticity. In Roppongi, where everybody consumes everybody, the real question is who gets to be an African American.



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One morning I boarded one of Japan's famous supertrains. I was going to speak with John Russell about his life and work, and to do that I had to get to his house in Gifu, way out in the country. Even after the supertrain ride to Nagoya, I had to take two or three local trains, and then a bus, to get to Gifu.

The entire neighborhood was roofed with those beautiful traditional tiles rarely seen in Tokyo. The small two-story building where the professor lived was full of Japanese books. He spoke Japanese with his Japanese wife, and even carried himself with a rather Japanese restraint. He was as Japanese as an outsider could get. Still, he told me, the nation had "been a disappointment."

Living in Japan, Russell explained, meant contending with "the Ellisonian invisible man syndrome." The cultural deluge from the West made it hard for Japanese to actually see black people. For

example, even though he wrote essays and books in Japanese, Russell's mastery of the language was sometimes greeted with disbelief. *Gaijin* familiarity with Japanese culture always seems to surprise the Japanese; apparently *kokujin* familiarity is even more astonishing. Russell's blackness marked him as somehow less weighty, and, for all his learnedness, his skin color put him in much the same category as the black boys who go to play in Roppongi.

I felt sorry for Russell. My own appreciation of his work undoubtedly had something to do with our shared experience of race, American style. Russell had hoped to leave behind America's strict racial categories on the voyage over. Alas, they trailed him well, those stupid categories.

I guess I wanted to know what race Hiroshi and Mikako considered themselves because I didn't really know how to place my new friends. As Asians, per-

haps, but “Asian” has taken a battering from this century’s many inter-Asian conflicts, and “Asian American” is a category under construction, at best, despite nearly two hundred years of yellow and brown faces on our shores. The act of designating oneself black or white is so basic to American culture that I found it hard to believe that Hiroshi and Mikako had not chosen sides, too.

I couldn’t shake the suspicion that the Japanese still secretly want to be white. When I asked Hiroshi about how Japanese see themselves, I already knew what I wanted him to say: “We hate black people. We love white people.” I wanted to hear him say, “We see ourselves as white.” Like Russell, I believed that the Japanese see themselves as white, even when they black up.

Reginald Kearney disagreed. Kearney was a long-time African American resident of Japan and a professor at the Kanda University of International Studies. Black people in Japan shouldn’t obsess about race, he insisted. “When we are referred to as *gaijin*,” he told me, “they don’t care what color you are.” Japanese prejudice against foreigners is undiscriminating, he assured me: “There are signs in Shinjuku that say ‘Japanese Only’ in other Asian languages: Korean, Chinese, Tagalog.” Still, it was possible to be accepted, he said, as long as one respected the Japanese. There was even a black sumo wrestler.

“I came from Virginia,” Kearney said. “I can remember the last time I was called a nigger. It was not in Japan.”

“I see,” I told the professor, remembering those unafraid elderly women on bicycles. But black sumo wrestlers notwithstanding, it wasn’t particularly reas-

suring. Still, I did have occasion to revisit his argument days later, after I got to know a couple of white people.

Let me tell you about my dinner at Anne and John’s house. Anne is a homemaker in a swank neighborhood; her husband John directs the Tokyo branch of a mammoth American bank. She invited me over for dinner because she thought I should meet her friend Lance Lee, a black American entrepreneur who has already been the subject of several “blacks in Japan” articles. “Lance Lee knows everybody,” she said. “He’s probably the type who would do well anywhere.”

While waiting for Lance, Anne and I sipped beer from tall glasses and discussed the local schools. John arrived. He had the boyish, blond confidence of

I had spent countless hours marveling at the range of features I had seen riding around Tokyo: the sizes of nose, the shapes of eyes, the coarseness of hair and darkness of skin.

a well-to-do surfer. He went to college in the United States but grew up in Japan. His family had been doing business here for generations. “You speak more Japanese than my father did,” he said, laughing, upon discovering my minimal proficiency. It seemed like a family joke.

When Lance Lee appeared, he shook everyone’s hands gracefully. He apologized for his lateness, explaining that he had wanted to make sure the hosts were home before he arrived. The caution fit his appearance. Lance had a tightly buttoned face with straight regimented teeth, and his hair was cut neat and close



to his head. His Japan story began when he came from California with the Air Force, after which he'd planted roots, and made a lot of money. "Money makes you more yourself," he said.

John nodded in agreement. "I'm an extreme optimist," he exclaimed. "Whatever happens, happens for the best!" I folded my arms. There was a certain confrontational quality to Lance's voice when he said, "I'm optimistic, too!"

Anne had mostly been listening, but now she had something important to get off her chest. Warning Lance and me not to take it the wrong way, Anne explained that she never understood why black people on the street in, say, Queens, where she grew up, would pass her enraged. Occasionally she would encounter a man grumbling something to the effect of, "I hate white people," and it would always bother her.

But Tokyo was making her sympathetic, Anne said. She was endlessly frustrated by her interactions with the Japanese. Her social circle consisted largely of Japanese women—other bankers' wives—from whom she felt estranged. Some of this was positioning: as the boss's wife, she had to be boss to all the

wives; as a higher-up in a very hierarchical system, she could never be considered an equal. But the women also excluded her, she thought, because she was white. They were awed by her and they disliked her because of her race. They never talked to her and it was driving her crazy; she was terribly lonely. For the first time in her life, she concluded with angry penitence, she knew how black people must feel.

A week later Lance told me that he wanted to tell Anne she could never understand how a black person felt. "The reason a black person is cursing at white people is that he's a victim of his American system. White people come over here, and for the first time in [their] lives [they] aren't running things." I agreed that Anne's analogy was faulty, and I was also glad, in a way, that one white person had felt some racial pain. But the more time I spent in Japan, talking to dozens of people, the more I realized that Anne did have a point, and that it was simpatico with the one Kearney had been making. Anne could never be accepted in Japan because she is a *gaijin*, and therefore not Japanese—which means that the color of a Japanese face could not possibly be white.

. . .

Because my dinner with Hiroshi and Mikako had broken down when I attempted to broach the race question, I decided to try another tack. Hiroshi became quite engaging when the subject turned to Japanese culture. The fact that I had read Japanese writers appeared to surprise him.

"You like Oe?" Hiroshi asked.

"Very much. I want to interview

him," I said. Kenzaburo Oe writes autobiographical fiction. *A Personal Matter*, his most famous book, is based on the unwelcome birth of his autistic son. "Oe's self-absorption strikes me as similar to Southern American modernism," I said, trying to be generous. "Black American writers tend to be extremely self-absorbed, too. To extremes."

"Some people think he writes about himself and his son because he wants to have something to write about. I think it is hard for the Japanese writer. He has to find some problem to write about," Hiroshi said.

"You mean because there aren't too many problems in Japan?"

"I think so." He considered his words

carefully. "In my opinion, the Japanese people are not interested in ethnicity, for example, because they feel the same."

"But the sameness is not at all real, is it?" I asked.

"No."

"Look at all the different faces on the subway," I said. I had spent countless hours marveling at the range of features I had seen riding around Tokyo: the sizes of nose, the shapes of eyes, the coarseness of hair and darkness of skin. "People from the north as light as Russians. People from the southern isles as dark as me. Almost."

He smiled. "I think," he said patiently, "that this might be true."

I had done my homework and wanted



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my dinner companions to know. We talked about the different dialects spoken in Japan, and how difficult it is for some Japanese to understand each other, literally. We talked about the Ainu of the North, and about the Okinawans and others from the South: all Japanese with distinct cultural traditions. I mentioned the plight of the Koreans in Japan, and brought up the *burakumin*, a class of Japanese historically excluded from Japanese society because of their association with occupations considered unclean (for example, leatherwork and the disposal of dead oxen and cattle). Until the beginning of this century, *burakumin* lived in specially designated areas.

"Yes," said Hiroshi. "There are some problems with *burakumin* people."

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Where Hiroshi grew up, in Osaka, he explained, *burakumin* were a vocal political force. A *buraku* friend of his used to complain about discrimination endlessly. After a while the complaining started to get on Hiroshi's nerves, because he himself hadn't discriminated against anybody.

I've heard that before, I thought to myself.

"The Japanese people don't want to upset each other," he told me, "by thinking about other people deeply. Japanese people are good at assimilating other cultures."

I broke the quail egg over my last few soba noodles. "Do you worry that thinking about others less superficially will force Japanese to think about themselves too much?" I asked.

Hiroshi thought a long time before he answered. "I think so."

. . .

A few days later I interviewed Yoshimoto Sakemoto, the head of the Buraku Liberation League. I asked him whether there were any *buraku* in Tokyo. He told me I'd probably seen many *burakumin*. No one knows how many there are in Japan. There may be three million; by some estimates, everyone in Japan is in fact descended from a *buraku*. "What we're doing is waking up the sleeping babes," said Sakemoto. "It requires courage to openly state you are a *buraku*, not to conceal your identity."

I laughed, and told him that some members of my family in South Carolina had left home and disappeared into the white world. Genes travel farthest in the secrecy of night, but most people don't like to think about it. Few white

Southerners want to talk about the black genes in their bodies, or the black words in their mouths. And many blacks prefer to let sleeping dogs lie.

The situation is not very good for *buraku*, Sakemoto continued. The income gap between *buraku* and non-*buraku* is about one million yen (almost 8,000 dollars). While there has been some public assistance for *burakumin* over the last few decades—for housing and education, primarily—Sakemoto suspects that the government is planning to discontinue it, using the current economic recession as an excuse.

Buraku are still stigmatized, he told me. Japan has yet to overcome the feudal association of *burakumin* and uncleanness. Families still investigate the histories of potential marriage partners to screen out *buraku*, even though almost everybody has some, somewhere. The point is you wouldn't know, because *buraku* never acknowledge their identities in public. Some of Japan's most famous politicians, businessmen, and artists are *buraku*, Sakemoto said. But *buraku* faces look Japanese enough, and it is easiest to pretend away the difference.

• • •

My next trip was to Kawasaki, just south of Tokyo, to visit the Reverend Lee Inha. We met in his small church off one of the main avenues in Kawasaki, where Lee is a leader of the large Korean community.

There are approximately a million Koreans in Japan. Though a large percentage of them have lived in Japan for generations, they are still required to carry alien registration cards, and they haven't yet won the right to vote in na-

tional elections. The Japanese government only recently acknowledged that many Korean women were forced to serve as prostitutes for Japanese soldiers during World War II. Although few Koreans are middle class, they had been barred from receiving welfare, health care, and other social benefits until 1982.

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"Socially speaking," Lee told me, "black fate in the States and ours are almost the same." Koreans are denied access to the tightly knit world of Japanese business, and after the Kobe earthquake, Korean refugees were segregated from Japanese in refugee camps. Most Koreans look nearly the same as Japanese, so many try to pass. After the war, Japan offered to naturalize its Korean population, a process that involved adopting a Japanese name. Although most Koreans didn't accept the deal, a sizable number did try to protect their children from discrimination by sending them to school with Japanese names. As a result, some young Koreans don't even know their true background.

The reverend said nothing about the bombs—but certainly he knew that most of the non-Japanese victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were Koreans. Tens of thousands of Koreans died in those unnecessary attacks, which means that Korean nationals in Japan, some of whom were enslaved by the Japanese for

the war effort, were victims of both Japanese masters and American liberators, a terrible irony. In much the same way, black American soldiers are walking ironies. African American soldiers enforce the policies of a nation that does not like black people very much. In Japan, a nation that could conceivably offer them a blank slate, they are instead handed back an imperfect version of American racism.

When the reverend and I met, we recognized what we had in common: we had both suffered at the hands of an oppressive majority. We were both outsiders. Each saw himself in the other: Reverend Lee saw the Korean in my face, and I saw the black in his. We realized we shared a job description.

"Japan needs us," Lee said, because otherwise it will remain an island nation with no regard for others. The Japanese believe that they are one big family, but the Koreans make the Japanese respectful of differences. "That can make a good contribution to the Japanese society. One day they will be surprised to wake up and find out the name of the prime minister is Mr. Kim." The reverend laughed. "That is a joke, of course!"

My forty-five minutes were up. "I wish I had known you were African American," he told me in parting. "We could have had more time."

. . .

The next time I saw Hiroshi and Mikako, we had a French meal and repaired to a tiny jazz bar, underground. We sat on high chairs and talked about Hiroshi's plans to get out of Japan for graduate school.

The couple inquired about my pre-

vious travels. I described a trip I took to New Orleans and the Creoles I had met there. I explained what light-skin privilege means to black Americans, and how it is a legacy of slavery. Both my new friends seemed baffled, even though light skin and feminine beauty are to some extent equated in Japan.

"Koreans," Hiroshi said, "are rumored to be more beautiful than the Japanese." Many people say that they are the most beautiful actresses. Groups of businessmen are known to take sex tours of Seoul, he told me.

"But I thought you can't tell the difference," I said. "At least that's what I've been told."

"There is a rumor," Hiroshi confided, "that Japanese eyes turn down, while the eyes of Koreans and other Asians turn upward."

"That's a joke, right?"

"It's the rumor," said Hiroshi.

"Like my eyes," said Mikako, pointing. I couldn't really tell; if anything, I thought they pointed down a little. "They are up, maybe?" she said.

"I see," I said, not seeing at all.

Mikako nodded her head.

"Do people think you're Korean?" I asked.

"Oh, but I am Japanese," Mikako said, her happy face bleached with a startling sincerity—almost strong enough to wash away the variety of Japanese features in this restaurant, on the train, everywhere in Tokyo. No wonder the young black-facer in that "Black Women" t-shirt felt shunned in school; no wonder none of my other correspondents wanted to talk about the phenomenon. The source of Mikako's sincerity, her perfect belief in the mask of Japanese homogeneity, had



to be the very thing blackfacers were poking fun at with their silly getups.

. . .

A couple of nights before I was scheduled to leave Japan, I paid my way into one more Tokyo club. The brooding music of Dr. Dre and several other Los Angeles rappers filled the tight basement room; the music hugged everyone with its familiar warmth. I was waiting by the DJ booth, all alone, when the owner brought me and the other black man in the place a can of beer each, gratis.

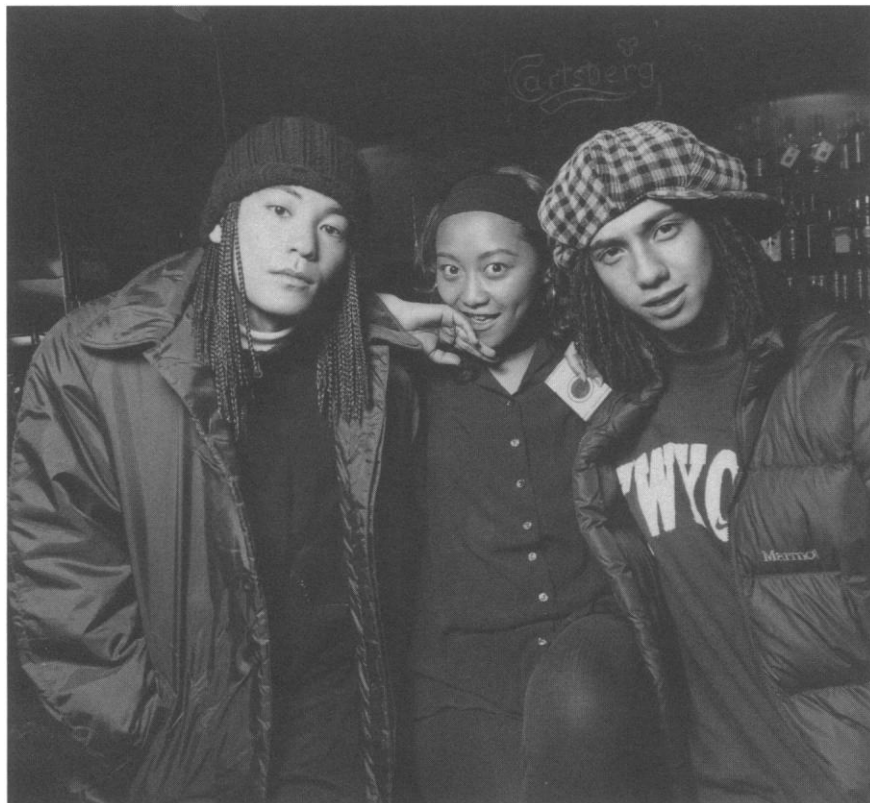
We hadn't met before, but I was happy

to find another black American in an all-Japanese club, especially in Shinjuku. I stood for a minute before I said empty, "Feels like we're the entertainment."

The other guy grunted inconclusively. I thought maybe he hadn't heard me. But perhaps he didn't find it funny because he had in fact come to Japan to entertain. He called himself J.J., and he was trying to be a rap star. He said he'd been flown here by a Japanese businessman to play, in effect, himself.

We spent half an hour looking at the dancers on the floor. Boys and girls were hunched in separate bundles, hurling

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small sharp eyes at each other. Those few who did dance were pretty much alone, dressed in brand new hip-hop gear, working out the spacious clothing heartily, and being teenagers.

I drank my free drink and noted with a little unease that an indiscriminating eye might see more blackness in J.J. than in me. My new pal told me about being raised in Arkansas, slinging guns and whatnot, then traveling out to L.A., and slinging guns and whatnot. J.J. was an authentic member of the Crips, and he had spent time in an authentic California prison: he was as real a ghetto gangsta as any hip-hopper could wish to be. But the way J.J. told his story made poverty sound boring, not like in the movies. The narrative produced a squall

of bourgeois nervousness and shame; I could remember being younger and wishing I could act more like J.J. Back then, I didn't see that I could be him much more easily than he could be me.

We went outside to get some air. A Japanese teenager followed us out, tanned with processed curls, nattily dressed in *burapan* apparel. At first, I thought he had come outside to cool off, too, but soon realized he was watching us. I raised my eyebrows and bobbed my head. He did the same.

"See that?" I said to my companion.

"Yeah," said J.J.

"What do you think about the black-face," I said. "I guess he wants to look like me and you. Yellow Negroes."

"Yeah," said J.J., uninterested.

. . .

When we went back downstairs, I was rethinking my resentment toward the blackfacers. Give them some space, I told myself. Which attitude is preferable: theirs or Mikako's? Japan incorporated Chinese characters into its alphabet; sushi supposedly comes from Korea; the word *arigato* comes from *obrigado*, the Portuguese word for *thank you*—but the average Japanese still doesn't think of his or her culture as creolized. Hiroshi had said that the Japanese were good at assimilating other cultures superficially; maybe that was fine. Everyone at this club shared a desire to shift, change, morph, copycat, *and* stay the same. Hell, one of the CDs being played was by a black American group that calls itself the Wu-Tang Clan, in homage to a posse of film gangsters from Hong Kong. Maybe this kind of shifty identity is the nature of things in a global economy: pop culture moving in strange ways, its wonders to perform.

I was wondering, then, whether the existence of *kokujin ni naritai wakamono* might even be a good thing: whether we *kokujin* might consider their celebration of black culture a progressive stance, especially in a country where Sambo was the norm just a few years ago. Maybe Japanese who act black are ten years ahead of their time, proof that Japan is changing, that the mask of Japanese sameness is being shown up for what it is: an illusion. Maybe the sooty faces of the blackfacers are the first signs of a tidal wave in the unrippled pond. Maybe, I thought, we "blacks" *are* ruining the atmosphere. For good.

. . .

"I'd guess those misguided Yellow Negroes are foolish childish consumers just like any other foolish childish consumers," one drunken Marxist had suggested back in the States, by phone, before I left for Japan. "Buy shit. Buy more shit. Buy better shit. More efficient multinational corporations, more continental coalescings of nations, more transnational bodies ignoring borders and helping corporations use cheap labor to make more shit to sell. Somebody gets those jazz records to the Japanese. The triumph has a black American face, but the triumph isn't black or American. It's capital." His argument was that race

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was obsolescent: "Black is one more solid that melts into air; so will every other minority in the world. In time everybody must exist to be a consumer. Even Japan, Inc., and the American empire are eroding at the edges. The question is what big, mean capitalist beast will rise from the ashes and eat us all up. Because everybody is being encouraged to chew, chew, chew." I heard the tinkling of ice in a glass. "Which circle of Hell is the one where people feed on each other?" my friend had asked.

As I sat with J.J., I thought of my friend's diatribe. Maybe he was right. Maybe we're all minstrels now, the opening act on an emerging global stage.

But my Marxist friend didn't quite have it right. See, I know that when that wild "transnational" world finally arrives, race is still going to matter. There will still be plenty of sufferers, probably many of the same people who are suffering now. I wanted to ask J.J. what he thought we would take from the Japanese if we wanted to imitate them. But then I realized that I was asking the wrong questions. I should have been asking whether we *could* ever emulate

I knew, for our cool. The implications were disturbing: if American blacks could be appropriated by the Japanese, could Japan's own minorities be far behind? Look ahead to a fashion sense that imitates Japan's own *internal* outsiders—Korean chic, or *burakumin* cool. The sad, exhausted feeling I'd had when I first heard about Japanese kids wearing blackface came back to me in a rush.

. . .

Then, on my last day in Japan, I found solace in Hell.

I walked through a small entryway, put my boots in a locker, and entered a large hallway. I paid the attendant. I removed my clothes, careful to step on the cold wood of the floor with the outsides of my feet. I pulled a towel and soap from my bag. I closed the door of a second locker, pulled the elastic band of its key around my wrist, and passed through the sliding doors of the bathing area.

Sentos, public baths, are segregated by gender. The practice of going to them is losing ground to showers at home and the comforts of private health clubs, but sentos are publicly subsidized out of respect for tradition. The washing process is simple: you scrub under faucets before entering a hot pool of water. The water softens the dead skin, which you then scrub off, repeating the process until you are clean.

One of my interviewees, a man named Curtis, went to a sento in Osaka once. He said when he got into the water everyone got out: *Gaijin! Kokujin!* He said he never went back. I wasn't deterred, though, because I had paid thousands of dollars to experience the real Japan.

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them. Consider where J.J. had come from. How many items of Japanese pop culture can a black ghetto kid buy? How expensive would Japface be, assuming that kid could figure out how to wear it?

Tanning oneself in emulation of black people or wearing black hipster's clothing needn't mean anything; Mikako and Hiroshi, two young, thoughtful, open-minded people, showed no sign of feeling strained by the existence of black-facers. And the sexualized "cool" that Japanese attribute to blackness doesn't leave much space for black humanity. They know very little about us. The clubowner gave me and J.J. our drinks,



There was no black music in this Shinjuku sento, no music at all. There was a row of green stools by the sliding doors, and a set of yellow plastic basins. I picked up one of each and placed them in front of the wall of faucets. The faucets were set in pairs, two feet above

the tile floor. On my left, there was a naked man scrubbing. Behind him was a pool of hot water; above it was a clock and some dials for telling the water's temperature. The pool looked hot.

I turned to my faucets and scrubbed. I washed my face first, and then my

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neck, my shoulders, my back, chest, and stomach. I filled the basin and made a lather; suds slipped toward the wall, inching down the sloping tile to the drain by the door. I washed my arms and hands, my thighs and my backside, my genitals and my knees. I washed my legs and the tops of my feet, then between the toes, and then the white undersides. Everything except my hair.

The man entered the pool and stayed in for a minute or so. He emerged enervated: he was a beet red yellow man. I made my way into the pool. It was hot. After a few minutes, I started to feel dizzy. I thought of the way Africans are said to be more resistant to heat, how science says our skins were made for heat, how they said we were made for working in the sun.

The other man was chatting to himself in silence: *He is a kokujin. His skin is dark dark dark.* I could tell—I saw my skin in his eyes and I knew that look and what it meant. I knew! I hated him until the heat in the hot bath settled things. For a second I forgot what my dark skin meant. *It is black. It is dirty like the jungle. It is American.* I forgot that I am not Japanese like he is, and that he is not black like me.

I nearly passed out. With effort I rose, went to the faucets, scrubbed my body once more. I washed hard, cleaned everything again, including my hair this time. The other man left. I went back to the tub. My skin felt raw and good. I let my muscles go and submitted to the hold of weightlessness. My head began to pulse once more, a good warm pulsing. *So warm are the ashes of burning empires.* I got out and repeated the process

several times. With a new car owner's pride I celebrated my small triumphs: how I'd brought myself to Japan, how I'd found this truly Japanese sento, how I felt right at home. *This is the cleanest I've been since my mother let me out of her belly,* I thought, as I eyed the blackfaced Japanese in the mirror.