

NEW OBSERVATIONS

107

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SUSHI DELUXE: STAR TREK, OEDIPUS AND THE NATIVE INFORMANT

It has been suggested that the Klingons, the enemy race in the original *Star Trek* series, were representative of African Americans. An assumption based primarily on their dark skin color. I think the Klingons are a broader composite based on American individual and national psychic fears. Within the demonology of racism, Africans are constituted as subhuman, while Asians are inhuman, the truly alien. The portrayal of the Klingons combined the Japanese samurai, the savage, dirt-colored, slanted-eyed hordes of Genghiz Khan and the more recent WW II propaganda depictions of the Japanese. They pose an archetypal threat from the unknown and the unknowable East, a threat against which Captain Kirk displayed an unusually violent hatred. His vitriolic outbursts advocating Klingon extermination would not be allowable or conceivable for the present consciousness-raised crew.

In *Star Trek VI*, Captain Kirk's outbursts parallel nuances of U.S. xenophobia: "Klingons will become the alien trash of the galaxy," referring to diaspora; "I've never trusted Klingons and I never will. I can never forgive them for the death of my boy," suggesting POW/MIA retributions. A conciliatory Spock, erasing any doubts that the subtext might be the mysterious East, explains why Kirk has been selected to make peace with the Klingons with "...a famous Vulcan saying, 'Only Nixon could go to China.'"

In an episode from *The Next Generation* series, we see a mixed-race boy, human and Klingon, being told stories of the Klingons, in a classic illustration of inter-generational and cultural conflict. But a further conflict is revealed; the boy and an adult Klingon are in fact the same person. The adult has come back from the future to try and make the boy choose the path of a Klingon warrior, rather than the path which he had taken, of becoming a humanized (effete) diplomat. He comes back from the future to teach the boy to fight, to become a true Klingon, one who can reclaim his masculinity before his emasculation by human culture. His inability to fight kept him from saving his father's life.

For television, it is an astonishingly complex scenario which extends the Freudian process of differentiation and identity formation beyond the sexual and into the racial and cultural.

My intention in referring to *Star Trek* is to illustrate the currency of subtextual debates around identity, orientalism and multiculturalism within popular culture. *Star Trek*, as the most successful science fiction program and consequently the most watched portrayal of a future society, offers the perfect exam-

ple of corporate and popular projections.

How do similar debates activate artistic practice and do they determine the positions taken by Asian American artists? Assuming a so-called hyphenated identity, (and I must stress that it is a provisional identity chosen to meet the demands of a particular situation,) is to stake a claim – in its fullest pioneering sense – to stake claim to a dual inheritance; a cultural inheritance based on race, but also mediated by class and gender. This inheritance is inflected by the gendering of the U.S. state and the country of origin, in this case Japan. The relationship of this gendering, into masculine feminine, paternal and maternal, of nations and their peoples is clearly one of power: economically, militarily, and culturally.

It is the inability to define themselves, to be always the object of the gaze, according to Laura Mulvey's elaboration of "looked-at-ness," that is both symptom and cause of the gender-subdued, feminized position of Asian countries in relation to the U.S.

Although every country within Asia has been specifically formulated and defined, Japan is unusual in that

it has an historical image of masculinity – demonstrated by the samurai tradition and Japan's own history as an imperial power; but its post-war image is that of the emasculated male; the delinquent, sadistic male who has been brought to his knees by the righteous power of the US.

Even though Japan is economically now a world power, its attainment of that status is seen to be achieved through the "feminine" traits of betrayal, subterfuge and inscrutability, and not through direct "masculine" engagement. Japanese success is the success of an uppity female who deserves punishment for her transgression.

How does one maintain an oppositional identity when identity as a political construction has already been institutionalized and marketed? When its discourse, as I have suggested, has been freely appropriated within popular culture?

Strategies of constructing identity continue to be necessary to provide collective visibility, as an articulation of presence, as an oppositional rallying point and as a form of celebration. But these purposes, no matter how desirable, nevertheless involve a simplification, a reduction of a complex and continually evolving process of identification.

Collective identification is premised on a sense of belonging, to an imagined or a constructed community, for example, the constructed community of Godzilla, the Asian-American artists' network. Faced with exclusion and denial, Asian-American artists have articulated the twin goals of visibility



STILL FROM STAR TREK THE NEXT GENERATION

and self-definition. These however are ongoing processes which have grown from a reaction against denial and self-effacement, and have therefore foregrounded a sense of Asianness, whether real or imaginary.

But how do we measure this Asianness? To some extent it is by the same criteria used by racists – the physical appearance of slanty eyes, and colored skin. We cannot claim a common geography or history – our experiences are too diverse for that. In our respective countries in Asia, leaving aside for a moment all those born here, we would have no sense of common identification. It is quite clearly America – even the construction of America as a racist, imperialist enemy – that unites us. These constructions – however much they are based on fact or fiction – have become unifying forces and it is these forces which we need to identify and acknowledge. We need to be clear what it is that brings us together, both in a proactive and in a reactive way.

Orientalism as a system of power and knowledge has been used, like its ally primitivism, to create a psychic “Other” to the Euro-American subject; a system to disempower and reduce “us,” however “us” might be constructed. But we are now, historically, in a position of power and knowledge – even relatively speaking – to turn around these orientalist and orientaling forces.

Orientalism, of course, is not about Asia, it is about the Euro-American gaze. It becomes then a system of knowledge by which the colonized may know the colonizer – his disciplines of learning, his modes of practice, as well as his dreams, fantasies, fears and desires. What if ... we turn our gaze away from ourselves, continually trying to assert and validate ourselves; what if... we acknowledge that, yes, we do speak from a position of being orientalized; but what if... we turn our gaze on the forces of orientalism, towards what it means to be white, as that is where the orientaling of Asia begins.

I said earlier that Asia is constituted as unknown and unknowable, but that is not altogether true. There is a simultaneous dialogue by which Asia is already known and every new manifestation is slotted into that system of pre-knowledge. As Gayatri Spivak has said, we can't help but be anthropological clichés. Everything that we say or do has already been framed to fit into a stereotype; therefore there is no possibility of erasing a stereotype and substituting “a positive image.” All you end up with are two stereotypes.

To make ourselves visible as practitioners we are forced to prove that we exist; as artists, we are forced to validate our work through an authenticity of experience; and because we specify the position we speak from, as Asian Americans, we feel forced to validate and authenticate the Asian half of the equation, as that is the side which is threatened with invisibility.

One of the responses has been autobiography. As a form, it served to oppose marginalization. But its limitation was that it was required to perform the necessary tasks of promoting community through an “authentic” and “positive” image. Conversely it was used by market forces to validate a simplistic frame of ethnicity in ways which again marginalize artists.

When institutions are required to fulfill a multicultural agenda, if artists do not use some form of autobiography, even if only to stylistically reference their countries of origin, they

face the accusation of not being “Asian” enough. Autobiography becomes another form of orientalizing, its function being to authenticate an Asian experience which has already been constructed within an orientalist discourse. This is like trying to validate ourselves when the frame of invalidation in which we operate is already in place. Only through this authenticity are artists allowed to speak; they become confined to the demoted position of the native informant.

Given this depressing scenario, what are the possibilities for artists of color? Narrative, didacticism and autobiography continue to be necessary, but artists need to be clear about how and why they use these forms. They are not automatic, natural, or necessarily truthful means; but are as learned and as mediated by social forces as any other forms of practice.

Attempting to reinscribe the (marginalized) author, finding an individuated voice while avoiding the burden of representing a people, Kobena Mercer proposes a “traveling theory,” developed through “displacement and movement across boundaries and barriers, whether imaginary, symbolic, or real.”

The crossing of such borders is an act often entailing a degree of violence and trauma. I do not refer to the tourist or dilettante who is more often than not cocooned by material luxury and the knowledge that their (temporary) crossings are undertaken by choice. I refer more to the migrant, the refugee, and the victim of assault or subjugation; those whose views of life have changed due to threats to their own, those for whom life has become precious or overburdened by the awareness or proximity of difference and/or mortality.

One of the strategies increasingly used to articulate and explore these crossings is fiction; equally valid within visual languages as well as in literary applications. By exposing its ability to create seamless illusion, fiction is able to push us beyond the authority of that illusion, and into expanded and expansive forms of critical practice.

Fiction – imagination, invention, fabrication, counter-memory; telling stories, telling lies – is moreover, a necessary tool for informants who wish to rebalance the scales away from information dissipation to a more equitable exchange. Presumably articulate, informants often occupy a middle space as negotiators, entrepreneurs and cavalry between “natives” on one hand and ethnographers and tourists on the other. The informants are themselves likely travelers, not only physically but through the channels of television and commerce. They observe the ethnographers in the ethnographers' own habitats. Their stories become, to paraphrase Mercer, “traveling fiction,” tales of loss and desire, naming and un-naming.

Crossing a frontier, any frontier, makes vision more complex as one retains the memory of vision from the other side. Fiction offers possibilities to grasp these multiviews, and occupy multiple spaces; offering a means to prevent the simplification of a complex experience. Fiction allows us to narrow focus and wide scan. By crossing its own borders, fiction activates our border crossing visions to territories beyond prescription and authenticity.

+ I am indebted to Gaytri Gopinath for pointing out the violence inherent in such border crossings.

* Revised from a paper presented at a panel, “Orientalizing Asia: Japanese American Identity in Art,” Whitney Museum of American Art,