

blackness. There is, however, no recording of Ōe's 1963 speech and, according to my personal correspondence with the writer, Ōe himself has no documentation or recollection of what was said on that day.<sup>1</sup>

In lieu of “Negro American Literature and Modern Japanese Literature,” I propose that we begin by recalibrating our methodological approach to reading Ōe's literary creation of blackness. This recalibration should address the fact that Ōe writes not black literature, but black *literatures*, that is to say that the blackness in Ōe's texts comes in two modes. A considerable amount of research has been devoted to the representation of blackness in Ōe's fiction, on what I have called his use of the black Japanese literary mode; this chapter, which ponders the genesis of a kind of blackness in Ōe unrelated to issues of fictional representation, is indebted to the thorough scholarship by which it is preceded.<sup>2</sup> The scholarly fixation on the representation of blackness in Japanese literature, however, has caused myopia vis-à-vis both the presence of what I call black Japanese literature—a body of literature that engages dialogically with African American literature and stems from postwar Japanese authors' reading and incorporation of the tropes and techniques of black literature into their own literary endeavors—as well as the hermeneutical, literary historical and ideological impetuses and significance of Japanese authors' engagements with black literature.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ōe, ever the writer, communicates primarily by way of handwritten letter. I wrote to him in August of 2010 to inquire about “Negro American Literature and Modern Japanese Literature,” which is listed in a program for the 1963 symposium held by the Association for Negro Studies. Ōe replied on September 21, 2010. Although he has no recollection of the speech, in his letter he wrote that he “feverishly” (*nechū*) read the works of James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes in the early 1960s. My thanks to Professor Michael Bourdaghs for facilitating my correspondence with Ōe.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship that takes up the representation of blackness in Ōe's “Prize Stock” includes: Russell's “Taishū bungaku ni miru Nihonjin Kokujinkan (The Japanese View of Blacks as Seen in Popular Literature)” from *Nihonjin no kokujin kan* (The Japanese View of Black People) and “Race and Reflexivity,” Norma Field's “Neitibu to eirian, nanji to ware: Ōe Kenzaburō no shinwa, kindai, kyokō (Native and Alien, I and Thou: Ōe Kenzaburō's Myth, Modernity and Fiction), Tetsushi and Hiromi Furukawa's “Nihon no sengo shōsetsu ni okeru ‘kokujin’ (‘Blacks’ in postwar Japanese novels) from *Nihonjin to Afurika-kei Amerikajin* (The Japanese and African Americans), Ted Goossen's “Caged Beasts: Black Men in Modern Japanese Literature” and Michael Molasky's “A Darker Shade of Difference,” from *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory*.

Ōe's case is a fascinating one insofar as his oeuvre engages with both modes.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Ōe left an essayistic paper trail between the years of 1961 and 1968 documenting the rationale behind his attempt to transition from Japanese black literature to black Japanese literature. Take, for example, Ōe's justification for his first trip to America: "I wanted to show the interest that I have in the way in which black authors (*kokujin sakka*) have continued to write a literature of their own even under the deep influence of European literature."<sup>4</sup> By my count, Ōe has penned some seventeen essays, articles and speeches in which he attempts to recreate himself as a kind of "black Japanese" author by resituating his literary techniques and thematic concerns in close proximity to those of African American literature. This resituating exemplifies a fundamental shift in Ōe's engagement with black people, culture and literature; Ōe attempts to transition from gazing at black bodies—a view of blackness that previously characterized Ōe's Japanese black literature and, after Ōe resituates his writing, becomes associated with the "white"/"Western" gaze—to examining the world alongside black authors as a fellow "colored" (*yūshoku jinshu*) writer from post-Occupation Japan.

"Looking back on my student days," Ōe reminisces, "I realize now that my literary background existed on a delta surrounded by Sartre [and] Norman Mailer...I look back on those days and realize that, although I had thought that my songs were sung in my own voice, I was singing them only in Sartre's voice, like a grotesque, red-cheeked puppet that belonged to a

---

<sup>3</sup> Although I do not see the two modes as mutually exclusive, Ōe's 1957 "Shiiku" (Prize Stock) and 1958 "Kurai kawa, omoi kai" (Dark River, Heavy Oar) and "Tataikai no konnichi" (Today the Struggle) are closely aligned with what I call Japanese black literature insofar as these narratives are propelled primarily by the Japanese narrator's gaze and author's representation of the black male body. Some of Ōe's post-1961 works—primarily *Sakebigoe* (*Outcries*, 1963), but also moments in *Kojinteki na taiken* (*A Personal Matter*, 1964) and *Man'en gannen no futtobōru* (*The Silent Cry*, 1967) are informed by Ōe's reading of Wright, Baldwin and Ellison.

<sup>4</sup> Ōe Kenzaburō, "Amerika no yume" (American Dream), p.184. "American Dream," which Ōe penned before his inaugural journey to the U.S., is not to be confused with *Dreams of a Traveler in America* (*Amerika ryokōsha no yume*), a series of essays written in commemoration of his travels in America.

ventriloquist.”<sup>5</sup> Ōe also acknowledges, however, the debt that his early works owe to his readings in black literature circa 1961; it was “around the time when the Asia-Africa Writers Conference was held that I [Ōe] began to carry black literature (*kokujin bungaku*) and works concerning Africa with me and nothing else and read them like a man who had been washed onto a deserted island.”<sup>6</sup>

Ōe’s writing of racial identity in his early works is not composed on a delta, but on a rhizome: Twain, Sartre, and Mailer—Ōe’s “triumvirate of Western influences”—each made vexed attempts to discuss blackness literarily, attempts with which Ōe was intimately familiar; Ōe was an avid reader of Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, and Himes; Ōe has created both fictional and nonfictional accounts of American and Japanese race relations on numerous occasions. Rather than beginning with stereotypes and searching for their “reflections” in Ōe, here we will genealogically consider the creations and recreations of blackness that occur in Ōe’s essays written between 1961-1968, the years in which Ōe was markedly devoted to a project of constructing an analogical link between his own “Japanese literature” and “black literature,” and his fiction, namely the 1963 *Sakebigoe* (*Outcries*), in which Ōe translates the program set in his nonfictional works into fictional form. I begin with a consideration of Ōe’s debt to Twain and Sartre. Twain and Sartre provide Ōe with the fundamental building blocks—fear of the racialized Other and existential ontology—of Self-Other relations as it is witnessed in his Japanese black literary works such as “Shiiku.” Beginning in 1961, however, Ōe rechannels his writing of racial fear and existential ontology through his readings of black literature. The primary implication of this rechanneling: a change of allegiance in a game of racial politics—Ōe

---

<sup>5</sup> Ōe Kenzaburō, “Dai sanbu no tame no nōto,” from *Genshuku na tsunawatari*, pg.155, as cited in Yasuko Claremont’s *The Novels of Kenzaburo Ōe*.

<sup>6</sup> Ōe, “Ryūkeisha no dokusho” (The Readings of an Exile), p.2-3.

resituates himself within close proximity to fellow “minority” authors in a show of transpacific racial solidarity.

This resituating entails two gestures. Ōe begins with the dialectics of the racial gaze—a phrase that I borrow intentionally from Sartre studies to describe Ōe’s positing of an analogous existential dilemma experienced by postwar black and Japanese people living under the disciplinary power of the white gaze. The second gesture, in which Ōe stresses the pedagogical power of African American literature and its ability to assist all minor writers in overcoming the aforementioned existential dilemma, represents Ōe’s discovery of what he calls “the greatest hint in regard to [the solution of] not only the black problem (*kokujin mondai*), but to all of the problems surrounding Japanese people (*Nihonjin wo meguru subete no mondai*) as well” in African American letters.<sup>7</sup>

### **Ōe between Twain and Sartre**

#### **Ōe and Twain: Fear and Freedom**

To reiterate, by “Japanese black literature,” I mean a mode of writing blackness in Japanese literature in which the narrational gaze fixates on a black character, thereby making the representation of black characters a constitutive feature of the text. Works written in this mode assume that “real” black people exist in the extraliterary realm of the “real” world and that these black people can be represented, or re-presented, in literature. As such, one telltale prognostic of the onset of the Japanese black literary mode is when Japanese authors have “real” encounters

---

<sup>7</sup> Ōe, “Fukashi ningen to tayōsei (Invisible Men and Diversity),” p.39. I use “minor” here in the manner suggested by Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. I argue in a subsequent section that Ōe and Sartre diverge in their interpretations of the “minority” of black literature—Sartre’s interpretation rooted in Hegelian dialectics, Ōe’s closer to that of Deleuze and Guattari.

with black people; with the presence of black Occupation soldiers, for example, comes the postwar literary trope of the *kokujinhei* (black soldier). Indeed, many postwar authors' desire to write Japanese black literature stems from their experiences with what Wayne Booth might call flesh-and-blood black soldiers. Ōe is no exception. In a nonfictional account of his first encounter with a black soldier, Ōe writes:

I can't forget the feeling of fear (*kyōfu*) and disgust, but in addition to those feelings the kind of reverence (*isshu no ikei*), that I felt the first time I saw a black soldier who represented the victorious army. The black soldier walked around my village. He looked at the girls, messed with the dogs and whistled as he walked. And I, just an elementary school student (*shōgakusei no boku*), broke out in a sweat all over my body as I watched him vigilantly.<sup>8</sup>

Under the reflectionist paradigm of Japanese black literature, Ōe's fictional representations of the relationship between an elementary school boy, who is, a la Ōe's nonfictional recount, identified only as Boku, and black soldiers in works such as "Prize Stock" and "Konnichi no tatakai" (The Struggle Today, 1958) would be considered a re-presentations of his "actual" encounter with blackness. The mundaneness of the simple sentence with which Ōe's description of the black soldier begins—"The black soldier walked around my village"—is a testament to the power of the mere presence of black soldiers in postwar Japan in generating narratives of blackness in postwar Japanese literature.

My intention here is not to argue that the Japanese black literary mode is not present in Ōe's early fiction. Rather, I am interested in what is effaced when we read Ōe's blackness solely as it is embodied in the representation of black soldiers. Of all the instantiations of cross-cultural encounter in "Prize Stock," my nomination for most revelatory moment is admittedly idiosyncratic; amidst the attempts to copulate with goats and deaths by hatchet, I inevitably return to the moment when the narrator describes the black soldier as "singing a song in a low,

---

<sup>8</sup> Ōe, "Sengo sedai no imēji" (Images from the Postwar Generation), from *Ōe Kenzaburō Dōjidai ronshū 1* (Ōe Kenzaburō, Collected Contemporary Essays, Vol. 1), p.16.

thick voice that mysteriously arrested us with its rawness, a song that tried to assail us with its lament and cry.”<sup>9</sup> I would argue that this line is parabolic, that Ōe is suggesting a method of conveying blackness that runs alongside and often up against the elevation of representation seen in the Japanese black mode. This second mode is akin to the Negro spiritual: its language is coded, it carries the weight of historical baggage, it is marked by interlocutory exchanges between speaker (writer) and listener (reader) and it is ultimately irreducible to the content that it represents. By focusing exclusively on the representation of the black body, a focus that is in many ways endorsed by Ōe’s early short stories with black characters, we deny ourselves even the opportunity to engage with this second mode. Reading for this second mode provides us with a kind of Negro spiritual sung throughout Ōe’s works from 1957 to 1968. What I find particularly interesting about this “spiritual” is the techniques and implications of its shift from codes and historical baggage indebted to Twain (fear) and Sartre (the gaze and existential ontology) to rechanneling those codes and baggage through black literature.

Let’s begin where Ōe begins, with Twain (1835 – 1910). One morning, when Ōe was nine and the Pacific War was in its penultimate year, Ōe’s mother woke at dawn, packed a kilogram of rice—precious cargo at the time—and left for the city through the forest of Ōe’s island home. She returned with a doll for Ōe’s sister, some cakes for his brother, and the two volumes of the 1941 Iwanami translation of *Huck Finn* for Ōe. Ōe, who was not an avid reader before *Huck Finn*, claims that Twain “opened the world of literature” up to him.”<sup>10</sup> *Huck Finn* would also serve as Ōe’s opening to the world of American race relations. Shelley Fisher Fishkin suggests that one of *Huck Finn*’s contributions to the conversation on American race relations is that it highlights “the role black voices and traditions played...in shaping all of

---

<sup>9</sup> Shiiku, p.120.

<sup>10</sup> Ōe, “Toni Morrison to *Hakkuruberī Fin no bōken* (Toni Morrison and the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn).”

American culture” and “underline[s]...the importance of changing the stories we tell about who we are to reflect the realities of what we’ve been.”<sup>11</sup> Ōe seconds Fishkin: “I was really taken by the phrase ‘light out’ that wraps up *Huck Finn*, a phrase that, now that I think about it, seems like something a black person would say (*kokujin ga hanashi sō na*). And I thought: Okay. I’ll light out for a new territory too.”<sup>12</sup>

If Twain does indeed tap “into the zeitgeist of his time and ours in ways we are still uncovering,” Ōe excavates Twain by recasting *Huck Finn*’s depiction of race relations as a battle between fear and freedom onto 1960s black/Japanese-white race relations.<sup>13</sup> As Ōe’s “representative American hero,” Huck becomes Ōe’s exemplar of the fear and courage required to encounter and overcome the normative, disciplinary power of white America.<sup>14</sup> In an essay in which Ōe rehearses Huck’s decision to “steal Jim out of slavery,” for example, Ōe quotes at length from the sixteenth and thirty-first chapters of *Huck Finn* in order to dramatize the fear-freedom dilemma. In the sixteenth chapter, Huck’s conscience begins to “pinch” him due to Jim’s jubilation as he approaches freedom: “Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he *was* most free—and who was to blame for it? Why, *me*.”<sup>15</sup> Huck’s fear and trembling in the face of freedom is evoked by his conscience decision to free Jim *contra ius commune*, represented here by Miss Watson: “Conscience says to me, ‘What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word?’”<sup>16</sup> In the thirty-first chapter, Huck resolves himself to

<sup>11</sup> Shelley Fishkin, “Foreword,” *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p.xxvi.

<sup>12</sup> Ōe, “Toni Morrison to *Hakkuruberī Fin no bōken* (Toni Morrison and the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn).”

<sup>13</sup> Shelley Fishkin, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ōe, “*Hakkuruberī Fin to hīrō no mondai* (Huckleberry Finn and the Problem of the Hero),” p.354.

<sup>15</sup> Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p.123.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

his fearful predicament, eternal damnation, in order to ensure both Jim's freedom and his own. Here too Huck is "trembling" and "most dropped in my tracks I was so scared" because he "got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it."<sup>17</sup> The desire to free Jim, however, overpowers the fear:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell"...It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go for the whole hog."<sup>18</sup>

Huck's moral fortitude—Huck is, to highlight Twain's pun, "in for good"—in the face of fear is captured by the Iwanami translation that Ōe cites; Nakamura Tameji, translator of the Iwanami edition of *Huck Finn* that Ōe received as a child, renders Huck's "awful thoughts, and awful words" as "*sore wa osoroshii kangae de ari, osoroshii kotoba de atta.*"<sup>19</sup> Huck becomes a paradigmatic figure for Ōe: "In comparison to Tom Sawyer, who is within the bounds of societal order, Huck Finn is out of bounds as he freely chooses a hell all his own. As such, it was possible for us—children of Japan in the age of...fear and animosity toward America—to see Huck as a free hero who wasn't collusively fixed to America."<sup>20</sup> Huck's fearless decision to "go to Hell" and "light out for the Territory" becomes a blueprint to the road to freedom from fear for Jim, Huck, and, as Ōe extrapolates, postwar Japanese people who are just as bound to American order as Tom Sawyer. As Ōe begins his Nobel Prize lecture, "The whole world was then [WWII] engulfed by waves of horror. By reading *Huckleberry Finn* I felt I was able to justify

<sup>17</sup> Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p.270, 271.

<sup>18</sup> Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p.272.

<sup>19</sup> As cited in Ōe's "Jigoku ni yuku Hakkuruberī Fin," p.240

<sup>20</sup> Ōe, "Jigoku ni yuku Hakkuruberī Fin," p.240.



my act of going into the mountainous forest at night and sleeping among the trees with a sense of security which I could never find indoors.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Ōe and Sartre: The Language of Existential Race Relations**

As a segue from Ōe’s conversations with Twain to those with Sartre, I would like to consider Ōe’s reading of *Huck Finn* against Toni Morrison’s. Morrison, like Ōe, reads a significant amount of fear into Huck’s dilemma. Her introduction to *Huck Finn* begins: “Fear and alarm are what I remember most about my first encounter with Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.”<sup>22</sup> This fear becomes the “leading question” for Morrison as she reads *Huck Finn* to determine “what does Huck need to live without terror, melancholy and suicidal thoughts?”<sup>23</sup> Morrison’s answer: Jim. Insofar as “there will be no ‘adventures’ without Jim,” Jim becomes a kind of plaything for Huck (and especially Tom), an “ill-made clown suit that cannot hide the man within” to be “dismissed without explanation at some point.”<sup>24</sup> In Morrison’s reading, then, the “freeing” of Jim is more along the lines of a dismissal. The dismissive component of Jim’s freedom is exacerbated by Tom’s “perverse” silence concerning the fact that Jim is already free. Jim is thus “unnecessarily freed,” and Huck’s subsequent exodus to the Territory (current-day Oklahoma) is a kind of false escape that signifies Huck’s “engagement with (rather than escape from) a racist society.”<sup>25</sup>

In spite of their affinities—the prominence of fear, the emphasis on Huck’s decision to go to Hell and its implications—we see a crucial difference in Ōe and Morrison’s respective readings. The absurd, or in Morrison’s words, “unnecessary” nature of Jim’s freedom in turn

<sup>21</sup> Ōe, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures*, p.107.

<sup>22</sup> Toni Morrison, “Introduction,” from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p.xxxi.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.xxxiv.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.xxxix, p.xxxv.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.xli.

Matson, R. Lynn. "'Phillis Wheatley--Soul Sister?'" Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture (1972): 222-230.

Matsuda, Ryōichi. Yamada Eimi: Ai no sekai (Yamada Eimi: The World of Love). Tokyo: Tokyo shoseki, 1999.

Morikawa, Suzuko. "The Significance of Afrocentricity for Non-Africans: Examination of the Relationship between African Americans and the Japanese." Journal of Black Studies (2001): 423-436.

Morrison, Toni. Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Murphy-Shigematsu, Stephen and David Willis, Transcultural Japan: At the Borderlands of Race, Gender, and Identity. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Nakagami, Kenji. Nihongo nitsuite (On Japanese). 1968.

Nero, Charles. "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic." African American Literary Theory: A Reader. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Noguchi, Michihiko. "Diasupora to shite no Nakagami Kenji: Kyokō no "roji" to genjitsu no hisabetsuburaku (Nakagami Kenji as Diaspora: The Fictional "Alley" and the Actual Buraku)." Jinken mondai kenkyū (2001): 39-54.

Ochiai, Akiko. "Nihon ni okeru "Chibikuro sanbo" ronsō no tenkai: Bei-ei to no hikaku kara saguru jinshu mondai to nihonjin (The Development of the "Little Black Sambo" Debate in Japan: Investigating the Race Problem in Japan through Comparison with England and America)." Jinbun ronshū (2004): 117-148.

Ōe, Kenzaburo. Shiiku (Prize Stock). 1958.

Okada, Richard. "Positioning Subjects Globally: A Reading of Yamada Eimi." U.S.-Japan Women's Journal (1995): 111-126.

Orbaugh, Sharalyn. Japanese Fiction of the Allied Occupation: Vision, Embodiment, Identity. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007.

Phelan, James. "Reading across Identity Borders: A Rhetorical Analysis of John Edgar Wideman's "Doc's Story"." Reading Sites. Ed. Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocino Schweikart. New York: MLA Publications, 2004. 39-59.

Russell, John. "Consuming Passions: Spectacle, Self-Transformation and the Commodification of Blackness in Japan." Positions (1998).