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Black Bottom of Modernity: The Racial Imagination of Japanese Modernism in the 1930s

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APPROPRIATION OF THE PRIMITIVE

In 1930, the eminent Japanese literary critic of the day Soichi Oya summarized “modernism” in terms of its fascination with the element of the “primitive”:

Modernism starts with abolishing the traditional norms of various phases of life. Free and unrestricted from everything, and led by the most intense stimulus, it amplifies its own excitement; in this sense, modernism has much in common with primitivism. . . . It is jazz that flows with colorful artificial illumination to the pavements of the modern metropolis, bewitching pedestrians. Such bewitching exemplifies the surrender of civilizations to barbarism.¹

As Oya stated here, jazz was symbolized as something not merely primitive but also something indicating a modern taste for “barbarism.” Similar to the contemporaneous American author F. Scott Fitzgerald, who coined the term “the Jazz Age,”² Japanese intellectuals attempted to establish their own “modernized” status as consumers of art and culture defined as primitive. It

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is to this paradoxical imagination of Japanese modernism that I turn my attention in this article. I will particularly look at creational tendencies of a short-lived but once quite dominant literary circle in Japan in the early 1930s. The group known as Shinko geijyutsu-ha (the New Art school) frequently dramatized new cultural phenomena, including American jazz culture, and dealt with racial and ethnic themes to depict the quintessential scenes of the modern age.³ Their new literary strategy was obviously coincidental with the primitivist tendency of Western art, which was at once based on a powerful attraction to African and Oceanian folk cultures and a racial/geopolitical bias about its happily uncivilized and backward qualities.

The following argument by George Antheil (1900-1959) from the opening section of his essay that was included in Nancy Cunard's 1934 anthology, *Negro*, perhaps well exemplifies the typical tone and logic of primitivism. Antheil was an avant-garde trans-Atlantic American composer famous for his *Ballet Mécanique* (1923-26), as well as *A Jazz Symphony*, which was written in the year following the sensational premiere of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924). Art in post-World War I Europe, according to him, was ending its autonomous life and being revived by African vitality:

Europe began in the early twenties to assume the aesthetic of the desert camp; subconsciously it came within the plan of things to live upon the veldt. The great war had come and gone, we had been robbed and ransacked of everything: and we were on the march again. Therefore we welcomed this sunburnt and primitive feeling, we laid our blankets in the sun and it killed all of our civilised microbes. The Negro came naturally into this blazing light, and has remained there. The black man (the exact opposite color of ourselves!) has appeared to us suddenly like a true phenomenon. Like a photograph of ourselves he is the sole negative from which a positive may be drawn!⁴

“The Negro” that Antheil imagines here is a fresh source of artistic creativity providing the ruins of Europe with a brand-new sense of beginning. His use of a photographic metaphor, presumably inspired by his close connection with the Stieglitz circle, demonstrates the mode of association between Africa and the future, as well as the idea that a European self-portrait can be developed solely from “the Negro” as its negative.⁵ Or rather, Africa is, in this sense, a black box of appropriable signs for the future—if not an unproblematic alter ego—for self-critically monotonized postwar artists such as Antheil.

Japanese literary culture of the 1930s was certainly situated in such an economy of black figures. The literary motifs signifying Africanness, such as jazz, supplied Japanese authors with a new aesthetic, even an ethical inspiration in the sense that they began to represent social problems by simulating a stranger's subject position. The acquisition of such an inspiration was quite urgent for them, as they attempted to express their critical insights into modern civilization without being subsumed by proletarian propaganda, a dominant politico-artistic paradigm of the age. Since the destruction caused by the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, Tokyo had been rebuilt and transformed into a modern metropolis by way of international financial assistance, including tremendous donations from the American private sector.⁶ The restoration helped to introduce American popular cultural infrastructures—including movie theaters, stadiums, dance halls, and nightclubs. The New Art school gained timely resources for describing metropolitan lives and customs, which emerged as a result of the Americanized urban renewal.

Members of this movement were loosely connected by their anxiety about the artistic quality of the proletarian novel, which was then thriving in the Japanese literary scene. Their critical stance vis-à-vis proletarian literature was professed initially by the contributors to the little magazine *Kindai seikatsu* (Modern life). Murao Nakamura, a powerful critic, popular novelist, and editor of a mainstream cultural magazine, *Shincho*, supported the inauguration of this monthly magazine in 1929 and, in so doing, eventually encouraged the formation of the new circle. Nakamura and the contributors to *Kindai seikatsu* organized something called Jyusan-nin kurabu (the Club of Thirteen) as the body of their movement (fig. 1). Then, on April 13, 1930, the first conference of Shinko geijyutsu-ha kurabu (the New Art Club), an extended circle based on Jyusan-nin kurabu, was held after an appeal by a twenty-nine-year-old physician/novelist, Yu Ryutanji, who subsequently became one of its core members) (fig. 2). It was marvelously successful: most of the young prominent writers of the day, including thirty-one-year-old Yasunari Kawabata (who later became the first Japanese winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature), Tatsuo Hori (26), Masuji Ibuse (31), Tomoji Abe (27), Eisuke Yoshiyuki (24), Seiichi Funabashi (26), and Hideo Kobayashi (28) (who eventually became a representative critic after leading the national debates on literature and culture in the twentieth century) participated in the conference. The most notable characteristic of the group was the youth of the members. They were at that point rising authors who started their careers in a variety of little

magazines that had emerged as a trend in high schools and universities in the late 1920s. They soon came to be acknowledged in the mainstream print media. As these circumstances imply, the rise of the New Art school shared essential elements determining literary modernism with similar movements throughout the world in the same era. Because of their innovative motivations and critical attitude toward the limits of creativity of the literary establishment, such movements generally sprang up in small circles of



Fig. 1. Jyusan-nin kurabu (The Club of Thirteen), the original contributors to the magazine *Kindai seikatsu* (Modern life). Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Japanese Literature. Kawabata is fourth from left; Yoshiyuki is sixth from left.



Fig. 2. Yu Ryutanji with his flapper wife Masa. Courtesy of ART-REBIRTH SOCIETY, <http://www7b.biglobe.ne.jp/~artreb/>.

people with the same intention. Numerous such circles throughout the world were motivated to manifest new artistic directions in self-produced and noncommercial periodicals with limited circulations.⁷

Despite such an eventful formation of the circle, however, the New Art Club faded away after only three years, even before their second conference, due to its slide into commercialism and members not sharing any specific vision regarding the development of “New Art.” Their avowed intention to seek alternative principles of expression to overcome proletarian politics appeared to be concrete. The promotional copy attached to the twenty-four-volume *Shinko geijyutsu-ha bungaku-shu* (New Art classics) published in 1930 celebrates its “variety of artistic individuality” that “dogmatic Marxist literature” never could produce. In addition, the supplements to the series by Ryutanji carry this passage that implied why they needed to stay away from proletarians:

Our New Art movement has completed almost all our planned tasks in the first half of 1929. In those months we published as much as two thousand pages of literary works and theories. Partly because of our predominance and partly because of oppression by the authorities, the proletarian literary movement was forced to give up its initial enterprise of completely reforming Japanese literary institutions and the establishment of modern literature.⁸

Ryutanji in this comment implies that contemporary writers need to explore original literary devices that are immune to authoritarian “oppression.” Nevertheless, a motivation to avoid oppression is so weak as a literary manifesto that this self-confident statement unavoidably signifies its faddish nature.

The proletarian literary movement in Japan that had taken shape in the 1910s started to attract popular attention after the earthquake due to an increase in the general awareness of the necessity of social reform after the disaster. The iconic novel of this movement was Takiji Kobayashi’s *The Crab Cannery Ship* (*Kani kosen*), which sensationally depicted the brutal exploitation of laborers in the crab fishing, meat processing, and packing industry.⁹ The work, which could be quite properly designated as a Japanese version of *The Jungle* (1906) by Upton Sinclair, was published in the same year as Ryutanji’s statement, that is, 1929, and the novel’s protest theme unquestionably represented the other aspect of modernism: political radicalism. However, the general proximity between the leftist literary front

and the Communist Party caused its practitioners to be persecuted by the government. As is widely known, Kobayashi was arrested and tortured to death in 1933 by the Tokyo Metropolitan Police (fig. 3).

In contrast with such proletarian writers, modernists, as represented by the New Art school, are often regarded as apolitical, decadent, or less serious.¹⁰ However, from an Americanist/comparativist perspective, modernists, designated as the New Art school, seem to have indirectly articulated a political interest in a viable modern literature. They entrusted their social criticism to the literary motifs inspired by Africa, the Negro, and jazz in a way that was less controversial and ideological than the Marxist manner. The connotations of their motifs that were dependent on primitivism were certainly controversial insofar as the primitivist perspective entails caricature and misrepresentation. Yet, the problem was not a contestation merely within the Japanese literary tradition. It was, rather, a local manifestation of a transnational situation, as Malcolm Cowley, representative of the Lost Generation, which is to say he was an early modernist in the United States, self-critically argued in 1934:

Indeed, it was in New York and other large cities that this escape into primitivism was carried farthest and assumed a dozen different forms. It was expressed, for example, in the enthusiasm of tired intellectuals for Negro dances and music, the spirituals, the blues, Black Bottom and *Emperor Jones*; time and again one was told that the Negroes had retained a direct virility that the whites had lost through being overeducated.¹¹

Situating the case in the broader structure of being merely an “escape” enables an evaluation of the practice of the New Art school. The evaluation, in addition, has to include an examination of the particular backdrop of their escape.



Fig. 3. Takiji Kobayashi at twenty-nine was killed while in custody of the police. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Japanese Literature.

THE GROTESQUE AS AN IMPERFECT SIGNIFIER

The New Art school has generally been defined in terms of its interest in the exotic, the bizarre or grotesque, and the foreign. The essential character of the movement is, however, more explicable by identifying race as its primary analytical concept. Probably due to the problematic insensitivity to racial prejudice in Japanese culture, race as a source of authorial inspiration has been inattentively translated to the more emotional term “grotesque.” The entry of the New Art school in an encyclopedia of modern Japanese literature critically summarizes its characteristics in accordance with the indiscreet selection of its materials:

The rise of print culture led to writers misreading its creative potential by going into a jazz frenzy and investing their interest in an ephemeral aestheticist modernism. This group’s most powerful representative, the New Art school, produced works that focused on modern urban life that were saturated with the erotic, the grotesque, and nonsense. Their preoccupation with these subjects led to commodification of literary quality.¹²

The triad of erotic, grotesque, and nonsense, or “ero, guro, nansensu,” has become a popular phrase to indicate what the general public excitedly consumed in their publications. Yet, at the same time, this signature triad enabled authors of this school to express both their pleasure and pain in their own expanding society in an age of cultural and demographic mobility.

An illustrated almanac of the time (1931) *Gendai ryoki sentan zukan* (Contemporary guidebook to bizarreness and the avant garde) testifies that the category of “guro,” or the grotesque, particularly refers to blackness and Africanness, as its advertisement portrays the black dancer Josephine Baker in a stage costume (fig. 4).¹³ “Bizarreness” (*ryoki*) is a word that is frequently applied to the representation of African and Polynesian cultures, which attracted the Japanese reading public in the 1930s. In response to this newly constituted mass taste, the low-end literary market of the period tried to sensationalize the “bizarreness” of indigenous customs as well as stereotyped features of African and Pacific people. At the same time, the uncommon accompaniment of “avant garde” with “bizarreness” in the book’s title—like Baker’s fame in the Negro revue at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris—implied that featuring unfamiliar foreign scenes equaled knowledge and thus culture in its original sense. The book expressed a quasi-anthropological objective by foregrounding academic comments on the subjects it illustrates. “*Gurotesuku*” or grotesque, a loan word introduced to Japanese print culture in 1928 and popularized in the 1930s, seems to have been an imperfect or overly entangled signifier. The racial representations animated by the term have thus ambiguous layers of signification to be



Fig. 4. Josephine Baker in an advertisement for *Gendai ryoki sentan zukan* [Contemporary guidebook to bizarreness and the avant garde]. Courtesy of Rikkyo University Library.

unpacked. Investigation of the professional discourse on jazz music opens a promising way to do this.

Jazz was undeniably the primary cultural figure considered to penetrate the melancholic inside of the people who were labeled as grotesque. We are now familiar with the theory asserting that the Jazz Age of Fitzgerald's coinage had in fact little to do with African American cultural autonomy.¹⁴ Jazz in this context was a product of the Roaring Twenties, which was intrinsically a white mainstream psychosocial event. Japanese popular cultural criticism in the 1930s, however, suggests that Japanese listeners in the period were trying to distinguish black jazz music from white big band swing jazz. Western cultural connoisseur Susei Matsui wrote at the time:

Jazz music certainly belongs to the Negro, though I have never blindly follow the current argument that the sole originator of the genre is the Negro. Still, I have never listened to jazz performed by others as impressive as that of Negro bands. Even though Negro jazz does not have the same splendor as the music of the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, the "king of jazz," it has something melancholic that incites our affect to world weariness. . . . Jazz music is a manifestation of the Negro's original creativity, to which contemporary American culture owes much. Negro jazz is not a creation under white influence.¹⁵

According to Matsui, African American jazz wields an affective power that awakens the audience's insight into the melancholic substructure of modernity. For Matsui, this quality is the supreme criterion of Negro jazz that its white counterpart can never equal.

Literary journalists of the period invented an unstable genre known as "jazz literature," which included a series entitled *Sekai daitokai sentan jazu bungaku* (The world metropolitan avant-garde jazz literature) (1930),¹⁶ as well as Yasunari Kawabata's, 1930, serialized *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (*Asakusa kurenai-dan*).¹⁷ Most of the jazz literature series pieces had no direct connection with jazz music, as the Jazz Age could refer to a wide range of popular cultural phenomena in addition to music. In any case, African American themes were the most controlling ones in Japanese literary culture at the time. It was exactly when American novels by black authors as well as those about African Americans were rapidly being translated into Japanese. One of the major theorists of modernism, Itaru Nii, contracted with the publisher Shun'yodo to translate Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*.¹⁸ Another popular collection, *Amerika sentan bungaku*

sosho (American avant-garde literature series), included abridged translations by the same translator of W. E. B. DuBois's *Dark Princess*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint* (fig. 5).¹⁹ These three were, needless to say, prominent Harlem Renaissance authors, and the translations of their works were done only two years after the original publications.

At the same time, Tsukiji sho-gekijyo (Tsukiji Small Theater), Japan's first permanent theater for modern dramas and the most influential avant-garde center, was established after the earthquake. In the late 1920s the group of playwrights who administered the theater produced only international works in translation as part of their revolt against the nation's literary establishment. In this context, both Eugene O'Neil's *Emperor Jones* and DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's *Porgy* were staged before 1930. Because of the theater's international reputation for integrity in dealing with the "Negro problem," Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes visited there when he stopped by Tokyo in 1933 on his way back from a trip to Soviet Russia. His visit was a very significant one: it resulted in a symbolic incident that highlighted the political connotations of the emergence of the Negro theme in Japan. Owing to their radical production policy, Tsukiji



Fig. 5. Itaru Nii, the modernist philosopher and translator (second from left). Reproduced from Wikimedia Commons on February 8, 2016.

Small Theater was already a primary target of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, and Hughes was detained by officers and forced to come to Tsukiji station to justify his reason for visiting Japan; this was the same station where Takiji Kobayashi was murdered earlier in that same year.

Translated works on racial themes ironically expressed a significant contradiction in Japanese modernists' attitude toward politics and literature. The modernist literary movement in Japan originally intended to avoid explicit politics in literature, as represented by the proletarian propagandists. They assumed, at least in the beginning, that they could deal with contemporary subject matter in a way that was purely artistic without the contamination of propagandistic politics. However, what they adopted as their new theme, in accordance with their artistic convictions, was the Negro. W. E. B. DuBois and Walter White, whom they translated, were civil rights activists. DuBois in his 1926 treatise "Criteria of Negro Art" literally declared: "All Art is propaganda and ever must be."²⁰ At the same time, Hughes, in his own record of his experience at the police headquarters in his second autobiography/travelogue *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), testified to the strange political preoccupation of Japanese police officers with Negro intellectuals as leftist activists:

The whole procedure [police interrogation] was most politely done with no one raising his voice, and no show of anger or impatience when my answers led nowhere. . . . [W]hy were the Japanese police interested to find out what American writers I might know at home? They even asked me about Floyd Dell. At that time I had not met any of the really famous American leftist writers. Carl Van Vechten, Julia Peterkin, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Green and Marc Connelly hardly fell into that category. John Dos Passos was just a name to me.

"Why are you so interested in American writers?" I asked.

"We wish to know more about them," said the bright young officer—who probably had read more of their work than I had. Then, changing the subject, he said, "Negroes in America must know that Japan is the strongest of the nations in the East, do they not?"²¹

Japanese authorities considered that Hughes, a black writer who had gone on an official trip to Soviet Russia and extended his journey to China and Tokyo, must be political. His itinerary made them suspect him of being a Communist spy, while they displayed their expectation of the poet's inclination to validate the power of the non-Western empire. Either through

anxiety or hope, black figures were politicized.

Japanese modernists, too, presumably understood the Negro to be a literary theme that had been politicized in the United States. In the preface to *Sentan tanpen-shu* [Avant-garde collection of short stories], volume 14 of the series *Amerika sentan bungaku sosho* (American avant-garde literature series), the editor, Jiro Hayasaka, wrote:

In a survey of contemporary American literature, it would be absolutely impermissible to neglect black American authors. The black population has now reached twelve million, and they have completely been Americanized. Nonetheless, they have been in the past exposed to incessant danger of lynching and social maltreatment, and in the present world dominated by capitalism, they still experience work oppression as severe as under slavery. It is black American authors who document their people's long tear-provoking submission and resistance.²²

Hayasaka in this passage analogized racial liberation from white oppression with proletarian liberation from capital. This was actually quite a common way of politicizing the racial issue.²³ This is also why Hughes was arrested in Japan. In addition, the African American texts that were translated into Japanese were ones that were compiled in the *Anthology of American Negro Literature*, which the American Marxist literary critic V. F. Calverton edited in 1929.

It is impossible to determine if these Japanese literary figures intentionally adopted the African American motif as a substitution for explicit leftist politics. Insofar as their frustration with the proletarian literary formula was sincere, their racial interest was not something camouflaging a political leftist interest. Rather, what they were facing when they scrutinized the modern metropolis was an element of art not accidentally found in ongoing human struggles for survival. It is no wonder that not a few Japanese modernists were fascinated with African American writers. They must have seemed to their Japanese counterparts to be much more articulate and skillful in expressing those struggles.

A cross-examination of American and Japanese sources contextualizing racial subjects of authors connected with the New Art movement clarifies the paradox of their aesthetics. What we can examine here is, so to speak, the return of the political to their new literary enterprise. They might have hoped that their urban subjectivity would allow them to proceed to a realm

of expression free from the intervention of politics. This aspiration seems to have stemmed specifically from the immaturity of their ideas about what it means for an artist to be political. Politics for literary authors and artists is different from sheer ideological struggles. It is about how to grasp and express human conditions, or how to sustain one's creative autonomy in the course of social participation by writing. Although the New Art school found their original literary motif in the Negro, they were unable to fully develop their ideas about what they were describing. They discovered race, but their enterprise did not allow them to progress beyond an "escape into primitivism"—the phrase that Cowley used when looking back at the problem of the Lost Generation. Many Japanese authors were similarly dazzled by the novelty and eccentricity of their urban milieu. To exercise an urban subjectivity is, however, to get involved with a promiscuous and indiscriminate flux of peoples and commodities. This certainly results in subversion of a familiar sense of the self. The return of the political in this situation was simply unavoidable, and this gives us a clue to as to what Japanese modernists desired and suppressed while they enjoyed unprecedented freedom of expression by using foreign literary motifs. To exemplify a literary imagination that the black subject matter unleashed, I will analyze Tomoji Abe's short story "Shinema no kokujin" (A black man in cinema) (1930).

REFLECTIONS ON BLACK SUBJECTIVITY

Tomoji Abe (1903-73), novelist, poet, translator, and professor of English literature, began to commit himself to the New Art school when he was twenty-seven because of his sense of crisis about the future of Japanese literature, not only because of the stagnated proletarian motifs but also because of the poverty of the traditional novelistic convention that concentrated on the author's private life (the I-novel) (fig. 6). His short stories, successively published in 1930, represent distinctive features of his early theme.²⁴ In those stories, he repeatedly portrayed the consciousness of minorities, not only of African Americans but also of Koreans in Japan and various racially hybrid subjects. For instance, "Omnibus" dramatizes a Korean-Japanese bus driver who becomes conscious of his ethnicity when he falls in love with a beautiful passenger; "Nihon no jipushii" (Japanese gypsy) describes the fears for and fascinations with those who are outside of modern civilization; "Heren Numa" (Helen Numa) is a monologue of a young multiracial woman; and "Koi to afurika" (Love and Africa) deals

with the imperialistic egoism of its male narrator.²⁵

In “Shinema no kokujin,” published in 1930, Abe deals with the subject of interracial marriage.²⁶ The protagonist of the story, Stepin Fetchit, is modeled on the actual Hollywood comedian Stepin Fetchit (real name: Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry). The real Fetchit started his career as a vaudevillian in Alabama. He is recognized as the first black actor to receive a screen credit. Fetchit’s movies *The Ghost Talks* and *Hearts in Dixie*, which Abe mentions in the story, were released in 1929 and distributed in Japan in the following year. No doubt Abe saw Fetchit on screen and attempted to dramatize the actor’s inner world through his modernist fiction.



Fig. 6. Tomoji Abe (left) with Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg and the delegation of Japanese writers in Moscow in 1958. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Japanese Literature.

The story opens with a young white poet, who is also an associate professor at the University of Missouri, Henry Brook, making a trip to Hollywood. Strolling along a boulevard, he coincidentally meets his former classmate John Barrington. Barrington, now a staff writer for a newspaper in Los Angeles, tells Brook a nuanced story about the black man in a stunning Cadillac who has just dashed up from behind and passed them as they walk on the sidewalk. It is the movie star Stepin Fetchit. While relating Fetchit’s success story, Barrington remarks mysteriously on a white woman named Anne Crawford. He says that she may know Brook much better than Barrington does. Later in the story, the narrator informs the reader that

Crawford is the woman with whom Henry Brook has fallen in love. The story concludes with a newspaper article reporting on Fetchit's marriage to Crawford. Brook finds the article. When he finishes reading it, he has a vision of the interracial couple in bridal costumes in the Cadillac he and Barrington saw receding into the distance.

This short story describes Fetchit's consciousness about his stardom, together with some background episodes seemingly influenced by racial stereotypes. Even though Fetchit is now a millionaire, he has a kleptomaniac tendency and steals small change even from a poor extra. He fears and regrets his uncontrollable propensity because it may someday disclose his sinful past and cause his downfall. (When he was still an obscure vaudevillian, he and his partner made a living by theft.) While worrying about his illicit tendency, he feels the contemptuous gaze of his secretary, who is a white woman:

Step is now aware of an insult from his employee. White and black: he remembers an event that made him perceive the difference for the first time. It happened in his hometown in Florida. He was three or four. As he was hanging out with a white friend, he attempted to go into the friend's house. At that moment, however, his friend's father came out and suddenly kicked him. He has never forgotten his feeling then. It was as if he had been doused head to foot with cold water on that hot summer day in Florida.²⁷

Fetchit in his childhood was already forced to suffer the mortification of being black. By introducing the episode in which he articulates the character's kleptomaniac tendency and racially traumatic experience, Abe in this passage dismantles the stereotypical articulation between blacks and crime. Being aware of his complicity with the stereotype, furthermore, Abe added an endnote to the story: "This story was inspired by Stepin Fetchit, 20th Century Fox star; however, needless to say, most of the biographical information presented in the story is a fiction. I hope my story will not injure our Stepin's reputation."²⁸

At this point, let us recall the return of the political to the New Art authors' treatment of racial matters. Abe's explicit disclosure of his story's fictitiousness is understood to be a tactic for conveying the political significance of his subject. In addition, the author here clearly illuminates his design by introducing episodes based on American subject matter: miscegenation. The gravity of the subject is apparent given that white fear

of miscegenation had been used to justify the lynching of black men. Although Abe uses the motif in a happy ending, in an earlier section of the story, he inserts a quite graphic corresponding scene in which Fetchit recalls a past experience of witnessing a lynching.

Comparable to Jean Toomer in *Cane* (1923), who elaborated on his lynching episodes by adopting some real cases that the NAACP made public during their antilynching campaign,²⁹ Abe represents an American terror internationally known in the 1920s and 1930s. He contrives a black man's racial frustrations and their appeasement in the form of an interracial marriage that takes place not in the South but in a quite exceptional, yet still plausible, urban setting in Hollywood. This plot is a typical instance of New Art authors' flat treatment of the ethical content. In contrast with his contemporary black American authors, Abe might have not been able to accommodate himself to the black character so comfortably. His self-consciousness, instead, made him treat the racial anguish rather remotely as alterity, which he could not uncritically appropriate.

As a literary critic, Abe published several theoretical works such as *Shuchi-teki bungaku-ron* (An intellectual theory of literature) (1930).³⁰ In reference to this book, his authorial stance can be summarized as a resistance to the cult of the personal as well as to the generalization of individual experience to a "conventional sentimentality."³¹ Accordingly, he criticized the dominant and traditional novelistic device of Japan, the I-novel (*shishosetsu*). Indeed, in opposition to its practitioners' belief, he claimed that the status of "I" is not necessarily unique or singular. As a literary subject, it is generalizable or replaceable for any other arbitrary "I." In contrast, Stepin Fetchit is a character based on a real-life model and seems to be familiar; however, Stepin Fetchit is in fact an actor, that is, a black actor portraying a black character on screen, in other words, a simulacrum of a black man in cinema, with whose actual life neither the author nor reader can easily identify.

To avoid the "conventional sentimentality, or literary cliché of the streets,"³² Abe thought a black character should be simultaneously flat and impenetrable, resisting an infusion of self-serving melodramatic sentiments. In this connection, we can find another interesting passage in the story. One day, Brook and Barrington are invited by Fetchit to the premiere of his new film, but strangely they cannot find him in the theater. The two men wonder why the star has skipped out on his own event. After the show, however, he appears. He tells them that he has actually been there from the beginning but just wanted to enjoy the movie from a Jim Crow back-row seat.

Astounded by the explanation of Fetchit's subservient behavior, the friends discuss his interior state:

"He is so pragmatic, and smart, too," Barrington whispered to Brook. Yet Brook was feeling something close to resentment. "It's true, he's had success. But that success is not human. He's not that different from dogs and horses that are trained to act. The same as Rin Tin Tin or Wonder Horse Tony—he's a tool."

"You mean you sympathize with him, sympathize with Negroes oppressed all over the country. I know you have been a humanitarian since you were young. But, you know, he was possibly pretending to conform. He shrewdly acted like a servile creature in order to win public favor."

"Come on, that's quite a malicious interpretation."

"Since you're a poet, you must know that black poet who was a friend of Chaplin."

"Right. I forget his name. But anyway, he only wrote rebellious pieces."

"Unlike this poet, our Step never has had an interest in getting involved in such a problem. Who knows how much he is pragmatic."³³

The point of this discussion is to explore the intentionality of the submissive behavior of the African American character Stepin Fetchit portrayed. Brook, a poet and secret rival of Fetchit, sees him as a subhuman to be pitied, one who is innocently and willingly utilized by the culture industry while remaining ignorant of his own right to dignity. Barrington, however, interprets a tacit political stance underlying Fetchit's spontaneous docility. By contrasting Fetchit's pragmatic obedience with a straightforwardly rebellious black poet, he calls our attention to the variety of political strategies available and ultimately to Fetchit's intelligence. Nonetheless, insofar as the narrator suspends judgment, the reader cannot know whether or not the black man's humanity is warranted under the morality of this fiction. Fetchit remains impenetrable, and the only thing the story addresses is the power of a black character that is not confined to the reader's customary imagination about racial justice.

Tomoji Abe, in his days as part of the New Art school, frequently dealt with race, ethnicity, and eccentricity to upset the current dependence on the novelistic monologue of a loosely subjective "I." In so doing, he attempted to secure both individuality and to mark the distinction between fiction and

life. The protagonist Henry Brook, whose decoding mediates the character formation of Stepin Fetchit, seems to self-reflexively signify Abe's poetics, which aims at defamiliarizing a prescribed understanding of life through his literary plots. The background of Brook, a scholar-poet from St. Louis, furthermore, cannot help but bring to mind T. S. Eliot, a representative modernist. If this association is possible, the story is more reasonably read as an indicator of the artistic interest of Abe, who is a self-consciously modern author trained in the field of literature in English. I am inclined to read this story as an allegory of the unfolding of authorial subjectivity. Abe could illustrate this concern through the story of a young gifted poet's peculiar encounter with an impenetrably unique stranger, who is in fact his rival, competing for the same object of desire. How can one represent such a stranger? This is a categorically political question in light of Japanese modernists' general emulation of Western primitivism. Abe is a typical author who might have stuck to this dimension of politics.

As one of the trailblazers in Japanese Herman Melville scholarship and the first translator of *Moby-Dick*, Abe knew well the vulnerability of the romantic assumption of both readability and representability of strangers. His critical biography of Melville, published in 1933, suggests one crucial reason for his devotion to the author:

We should deliberately learn that Melville did not write his novels about the South Seas in order to entertain his readers' curiosity. Curiosity about the primitive brought about critical consequences besides a harmless incitation of romantic longing. What he has registered in his works is the gloomy consequences. Melville in real life physically investigated the destruction of indigenous life and natural order resulting from the invasion of civilization. Missionary activities meant the annihilation of local beliefs, and economic incorporation meant nothing but exploitation. Melville examined those disasters.³⁴

In introducing colonized characters into his own stories and being engaged with them as a part of an aesthetically challenging project, Abe relied on his understanding of the postcolonial significance of Melville's works and the ethical burdens related to primitivism. Yet, unlike Melville, who actually ventured out into the estranging seas, Abe, at this point in his career, could only approach the problem theoretically.

In November 1941, however, Abe was drafted by the Japanese military

regime as a civilian staff member of the army intelligence corps. Dispatched, in the following year, to the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali, which were under Japanese colonial rule, he fortunately—or ironically—witnessed similar disasters in his own “South Seas.”³⁵ Because of his status as a propaganda agent—that is, he was supposed to be producing pro-Japanese materials in English through analysis of local culture and civilization and studying the work of Dutch scholars—his representation of the war was primarily as a “war on culture.”³⁶ He saw Indonesian culture as an accumulation of its native people and natural cycles that was about to be destroyed by imperial powers including Japan. According to Kazuaki Kimura, Abe, in a variety of media—both the mainland’s and the territory’s—frankly warned “Japanese troops” not to tread on the local “intellectual institutions.”³⁷ As befitted a literary critic who advocated “intellectualism,” his attempt to protect intellectual freedom extended to Dutch scholars who were his national “enemies” and placed under Japanese surveillance. As a civilian recruit, Abe may have been exercising his personal integrity in this activity to protect, so to speak, alien humanity.³⁸ Nevertheless, such a cosmopolitan attempt of his—by that time not merely a literary gesture—did not impress Japanese military headquarters. In a newspaper interview in 1942 he asserted: “As just a literary author, I lack political power.”³⁹

As soon as the war was over, Abe started to dramatize his experiences in Indonesia and Shanghai, where he was likewise dispatched (twice) just before the defeat (1943-45), in more than ten stories, including “Shi no hana” (The flower of death) (1946).⁴⁰ In giving birth to uniquely rational characters who aspire to be independent of their nation in its territories,⁴¹ he established himself as a postwar intellectual noted for his comments on the cultural superiority of Japan’s former colonies. In the foreword to a seven-volume collection of studies in Japanese arts and crafts, he mentions Korea as a significant source of influence on the crystallization of Japanese artistic creativity.⁴² Several scholars refer to the deployment of his postwar career as his “leftist conversion” and argue that his inconsistent course makes the evaluation of his authorial quality difficult to assess.⁴³ Such a view might be aroused when one is preoccupied with his discontent with proletarian protest novels in his earlier career. However, the author’s choice of black and African subjects in his early days testifies that the seeds of politics were present from the beginning in his literature. They just took further shape when his encounter with the stranger was actualized as a historical experience embedded in the process of both cognitive and military colonization of Africa, Asia, and Oceania. It is true that as an author he

sought the grotesque to expand his expressional possibilities. All along, however, he kept tasting the bitterness of his own subjectivity and quietly reproached himself for limiting his literary insight to the framework of the grotesque and primitive.⁴⁴

NOTES

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the following conferences and institutions: The 82nd Annual Conference of the English Literary Society of Japan at Kobe University (May 30, 2010); Association for Cultural Studies, Crossroads 2010 at Lingnan University, Hong Kong (June 18, 2010); College of William and Mary, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Program (November 5, 2013); and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Department of English (March 24, 2014).

¹ Oya Soichi, *Modan-so to modan-so* [Modern strata, modern phases] (Tokyo: Taihokaku, 1930), 27. All translations of Japanese texts in this article are mine unless otherwise noted.

² Fitzgerald coined the term “the Jazz Age” in the title of his second collection of short stories, *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), and ten years later he emphasized the era’s ephemeral nature rather cynically: “Yet the present writer already looks back to it with nostalgia. It bore him up, flattered him and gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War.” F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 90, no. 5 (November 1931), 459. While the American jazz frenzy could not help but end in 1929 with the stock market crash, the Japanese version faded slowly until the full-scale rise of totalitarianism and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

³ Not a few American scholars of Japanese literature have explored the literary and cultural circumstances of the 1930s, and some have remarked on this notable movement as the “New Art” school. The following books extensively cover this modernist movement in Japan. Joel R. Cohn, *Studies in the Comic Spirit in Modern Japanese Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) provides a fine outline of the New Art school, in particular Ryutanji’s concept of modern literature in the chapter on Masuji Ibuse. William O. Gardner, *Advertising Tower: Japanese Modernism and Modernity in the 1920s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) discusses the work of Kyojiro Hagiwara and Fumiko Hayashi as representative authors of the early phase of Japanese modernism. Miriam Silverberg’s *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

2008) has a brilliant analysis of gender issues with regard to “ero, guro, nansensu,” despite containing no reference to the New Art school itself. She provides a fascinating explanation of cultural works of African Americans by analogizing Japanese barmaids with American female blues singers. Her investigation of antiethnic hate crimes in the context of modern Japan is also extremely incisive.

⁴ George Antheil, “The Negro on the Spiral, or, a Method of Negro Music,” in *Negro*, ed. Nancy Cunard (London: Wishart, 1934), 29.

⁵ The Stieglitz circle was a permutable group of modernist artists and thinkers supported by the first recognized American pictorial photographer, Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), and his New York-based gallery, 291. The group affiliated a number of avant-gardists including Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, Georgia O’Keeffe, and William Carlos Williams, while having inspired a movement called New York Dada after the Armory Show of 1913. Stieglitz’s knowledge of and connection with the European artistic vanguard influenced the stylistic experiments of the American literary modernists in terms of their representation of the visual.

⁶ “Beikoku kyugo sagyo” [US rescue operation], *Taisho 12 nen kobun biko* [Supplements to official papers of 1923], vol. 161, *Tensai, Saigai* [Natural disasters and disturbances]. National Archives of Japan, digital archive, reference code C08050982700, <http://www.jacar.go.jp/DAS/meta/MetaOutServlet> (accessed June 8, 2010). Regarding the political and cultural environment of the urban restoration in the aftermath of the Great Kantō Earthquake, see Kiyotada Tsutsui, *Teito fukko no jidai* [The age of the restoration of the imperial capital] (Tokyo: Chuokoron-shinsha, 2011).

⁷ American instances of such modernist little magazines include *The Masses* (1911-17), a socialist magazine famous for its introduction of Sherwood Anderson; *The Double Dealer* (1921-26), one of the most prestigious modernist publications and particularly remembered for contributions of Southern writers including William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren; *The Little Review* (1914-29), which serialized James Joyce’s *Ulysses*; and *The Crisis* (1910-) and *Opportunity* (1923-42), African American magazines sponsored by the NAACP and the National Urban League, respectively.

⁸ Yu Ryutanji, “Nenpu” [Chronology], in *Shinko geijyutsu-ha bungaku-shu* [New Art classics] (Tokyo: Kaizosha, 1931), 606.

⁹ The University of Hawai’i Press published a new English edition of this book in 2013. According to the translator, Tzeljko Cipris, a “partial English translation of *Kani kosen*, based on a heavily censored edition and done by an anonymous translator—who turned out to be a young New Zealander named Bickerton—had appeared as early as 1933, and the first to produce a complete translation (along with another work by Takiji) was Professor Frank Motofuji of [the] University of California at Berkeley, in 1973,” xii. See Takiji Kobayashi, *The Crab Cannery Ship*, trans. Tzeljko Cipris (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013).

¹⁰ In the field of modern Japanese literature, the New Art school has been a relatively marginal research topic. Yet, scholars in the Geijyutu-shijyoshugi bunnngaku-kai [Association for Aestheticist Literature] have produced works that specialize in the school; for instance, see volume 7 of their journal *Shinko geijyutsu-ha no saikentou* [Reconsidering the New Art school] (1981). I am greatly indebted to the authors of this volume, particularly Masafumi Moriyasu, Kenzaburo Mawatari, and Kiyomi Takeuchi, for helping my understanding of the movement's chronology and basic principles.

¹¹ Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Viking, 1976), 237.

¹² Sen'ichi Hisamatsu, Osamu Kimata, Masakatsu Naruse, eds., "Shinko geijyutsu-ha," in *Gendai nihon bungaku dai-jiten* [Encyclopedia of modern Japanese literature] (Tokyo: Meijishoin, 1972), 566.

¹³ Giryō Sato, ed., *Gendai ryōki sentan zukan* [Contemporary guidebook to bizarreness and the avant garde] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1931).

¹⁴ As an instance of such works, see Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Susei Matsui, "Jazu to revu-kai" [Jazz and the world of the revue], in *Gendai ryōki sentan zukan* [Contemporary guidebook to bizarreness and the avant garde], ed. Giryō Sato (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1931), 37. Matsui was a popular cultural figure who established his career as a verbal performer attached to silent film showings. Such a performer, called a "benshi," was peculiar to the Japanese cinema industry in the silent era and played a combined role of MC, narrator, and commentator on a movie by talking simultaneously as it was running. Having majored in English at Waseda University in Tokyo, he was a favorite of highbrow audiences because of his extensive knowledge and astute opinions about Western popular culture. In 1930, he appeared in the Japanese-language version of *Paramount on Parade* as a guide for the Japanese audience.

¹⁶ Shun'yodo in Tokyo serially published the fifteen volumes of *Sekai daitokai sentan jazu bungaku* (International metropolitan avant-garde jazz literature) in 1930. Each volume recognized its own translator, but the general editor of the series is unknown. It described itself as a collection of contemporary international stories in translation, although it is difficult to locate all of the originals today. Ben Hecht's collection of his *Chicago Daily News* columns in the early 1920s is included in the collection. See the following reprinted edition: Ben Hecht, *1001 Afternoons in Chicago*, intro. Bill Savage (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Yasunari Kawabata, *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, trans. Alisa Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁸ A reprint of the original text (1926) is available: Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999). Itaru Nii's translation of *Nigger Heaven*, entitled *Kokujin tengoku*, was extensively publicized but never published.

¹⁹ Jiro Hayasaka, ed., “Kokujin bungaku-shu” [Collected stories by black writers], in *Sentan tanpen-shu* [Avant-garde collection of short stories], vol. 14 of *Amerika sentan bungaku sosho* [American avant-garde literature series] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1931).

²⁰ W. E. B. DuBois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” in *The Crisis Reader*, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 323.

²¹ Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 268.

²² Jiro Hayasaka, ed., “Henjya no kotoba,” preface to *Sentan tanpen-shu* [Avant-garde collection of short fiction], vol. 14 of *Amerika sentan bungaku sosho* [American avant-garde literature series], 8.

²³ The way of introducing Claude MacKay to Japanese readers demonstrates this pattern of understanding. His “If I Must Die” (1919) was included in *Amerika puroretaria shishu* [A collection of American proletarian poems] in a translation by Jyuzaburo Ono (Tokyo: Dandosha, 1931). The Jamaican-born Harlem Renaissance poet was never a member of the Communist Party.

²⁴ Most of them are included in his two anthologies, *Koi to afurika* [Love and Africa] and *Umi no aibu* [Caresses of the sea]. Both books were published as the part of *Shinko geijyutu-ha sosho* [The collected volumes of the New Art school] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1930).

²⁵ “Omnibus” and “Heren Numa” are in *Umi no aibu*, and “Nihon no jipushii” and “Koi to afurika” are in *Koi to afurika*.

²⁶ Tomoji Abe, “Shinema no kokujin” [A black man in cinema], in *Koi to afurika* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1930). There is an English translation of this short story under the title “A Negro in Cinema” in *Modanizumu: Modernist Fiction from Japan, 1913-1938*, ed. William J. Tyler, trans. Ayanna B. Hobbs (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008): 255-69. All the translated passages from this story are, however, mine, because the translation of this story is quite imprecise. The book as a whole, however, is superb; it collects twenty-five short stories from Japanese modernism with wonderful introductions by Tyler.

²⁷ Abe, “Shinema no kokujin,” 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁹ Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Liveright, 1994). Regarding the source of Toomer’s depictions of lynching, see Barbara Foley, “‘In the Land of Cotton’: Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” *African American Review* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 181-98.

³⁰ Tomoji Abe, *Shuchi-teki bungaku-ron* [An intellectual theory of literature] (Tokyo: Koseikaku, 1930).

³¹ As a general explanation of Abe’s intellectualism in terms of his understanding of Japanese literary tradition, see Yoshiaki Takematsu, *Abe Tomoji-ron: “Shuchi” no kobo*

[*Studies in Tomoji Abe: Illumination from "Intellect"* (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 2006), 139, 167-73.

³² Ibid., 139.

³³ Abe, "Shinema no kokujin," 34-35.

³⁴ Tomoji Abe, *Eibei bungaku hyoden sosho: Meruviru* [Critical biographies of English and American authors: Melville] (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1980), 36.

³⁵ In 1944, Abe published his memoir, *Hi no shima* [Islands of fire], in which he reflected on his psychohistorical experiences during his ten-month military service. The book is reprinted as *Abe Tomoji 1*, vol. 4 of *Nanpo choyo sakka sosho* [Collected works of writers drafted for the southern front during the Pacific War], ed. and intro. Kazuaki Kimura (Tokyo: Ryukeishosha, 1996).

³⁶ The original phrase in Japanese is "bunka no tatakai." Abe used this expression for the first time in 1942 in his war reportage that appeared in the *Asahi* in a five-part serial. See Kazuaki Kimura, "Abe Tomoji to indonesia taiken (1): Sono jijitsu wo megutte" [Tomoji Abe and his experiences in Indonesia (1): A study based on the facts], *Ritsumeikan gengo-bunka kenkyu* 3, no. 3 (1992), 57-58.

³⁷ Ibid., 59.

³⁸ A similar interpretation is found in *ibid.*, 60.

³⁹ Cited in *ibid.* According to Kimura, the article is available only as a newspaper clipping, and thus details of the source are unknown.

⁴⁰ "Shi no hana" is the first of his series of works dealing with Indonesia, later classified as "the Java sequence" in his large oeuvre. Reprinted in *Abe Tomoji Zenshu* [The complete works of Tomoji Abe], vol. 5 (Tokyo: Kawadeshobo-shinsha, 1975).

⁴¹ The protagonist Hie in "Tsumi no hi" [The day of crime] (1947) designates himself as an "eibei jiyu-ha" (Anglo-liberal). The story, the second piece in his Java sequence, involves Hie's internal conflict between that self-image and his status as a colonial officer. Takematsu reads "the relentless sense of atonement for the author's own wartime incompetence" as at the core of the stories in the sequence. Takematsu, *Abe Tomoji-ron*, 127.

⁴² Tomoji Abe, ed., *Kouza gendai geijyutsu 1: Geijyutsu to ha nani-ka* [A course on modern art 1: What is art?] (Tokyo: Keisoshobo, 1958). Abe was the general editor of the collection.

⁴³ See, e.g., Isao Mizukami, "Abe Tomoji ni okeru sengo: 'Jyojyo to hyogen' kara 'gendai no bungaku' he" [Tomoji Abe's postwar period: From "lyricism and expression" to "literature of the present"] *Doshisha kokubungaku* 42 (1995): 260-72.

⁴⁴ Jun Takami, novelist and critic and Abe's contemporary, described this common dilemma of modernists as "fudan no shitsuu" ("a constant toothache"). Jun Takami, *Showa bungaku seisui-shi* [A history of the rise and fall of Showa literature] (Tokyo: Bungei shunjuusha, 1987). Takami, one of the delegation of Japanese writers who visited

Moscow in 1958, happens to appear in figure 6 with Abe: he is the second person from the right.

