Feelings of Discomfort in Ōe's "Prize Stock"

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Abstract: This article examines the feelings of discomfort in the works of Nobel Prize winner Kenzaburo Ōe. Focusing on Ōe's first short story "Prize Stock", Shiiku (1957), the article discusses how the incredible event of a black pilot falling from the sky in the mountains near a small Japanese village during World War II refers to more general racial issues than those described. The discussion argues that Ōe's story, criticized as racist because of the treatment of the black airman, should be read in a broader view, thematising the problems of race and marginalisation in Japan and beyond.
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INTRODUCTION

In spite of having been awarded the Akutagawa prize, Japanese Nobel Prize winner Kenzaburo Ōe's first short story "Prize Stock" is one of his less discussed works, both nationally and internationally. According to Reiko Tachibana, this might be because "racial elements […] would not constitute a typical focus of interest for Japanese critics." (Tachibana, 2002: 37) In other words, Tachibana links reception of this short story and the lack of critical discussion to a general avoidance in dealing with racial issues in Japanese literary criticism. If this is the case, the event of a black pilot who falls from the sky in the mountains near a small Japanese village during World War II, rather than generating wonder, seems to have prevented people from actually discussing the broader racial and social implications of the story. This paper rephrases the problem of blackness using affect theory in order to better understand the purpose of the particular feelings of discomfort that Ōe's "Prize Stock" creates, in particular with regards to racial issues in postwar Japan.

The paper addresses questions such as: why is it a black soldier falling from the sky in a small Japanese village during the war in Ōe's "Price Stock"? as well as, Can we understand the complex of feelings, fear, pleasure, and discomfort that this black soldier's disturbing presence creates among the children and adults living in this village as an extension the discomfort the story creates in its readers? This paper

argues that the black man's disturbing presence reads as a sort of parable, referring not only to Japanese, but in a broader historical perspective, to world history.

The intradiegetic answer to the first question is easy enough. The story begins with an airplane crash in the nearby mountains of a village. This initiates an exciting interruption to its everyday life, particularly the village kids who discover that the airman has been taken prisoner and, with greater amazement, that the prisoner is black. Unlike the children who feel a mix of excitement and fear, the grown-ups in the village are first frightened and later indifferent to the presence of the foreigner. My hypothesis is that the discomfort of the enjoyment of the kids reads as a critical reflection on the Japanese self-image in relation to participation in the war and that, at the same time, it also reads as concern over racial issues.

The time and location of Ōe's story is never specified, leaving us with a mythical sense of time and place. Extradiegetic comments on Ōe's life, however, might give us a hint about the setting: presumably the rural Shikoku where Ōe grew up during World War II. More accurately, the historical background might be the end of the war, following Japanese war crimes in East Asia and the attack on Pearl Habor in the Pacific which led to massive American airplane bombings over Japan in 1945.

In relation to the reception of the story, the article analyses the particular feeling of 'discomfort', arguing that this un-comfortable feeling of enjoyment should be read not only as a critical comment to the mechanisms of war but also as a critique of continued social and racial issues in Japan and beyond.

TONE VERSUS NOISE

Affect theorist Sianne Ngai describes the importance of the 'tone' in literary works, defining it as something neither entirely objective nor subjective: "Tone is the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce" (Ngai, 2005: 30). Tone not only in the story (i.e. it does not belong to the characters), but it is an essential part of the experience of reading a literary text. To continue with aural metaphors, the tone of a literary work, may not be necessarily euphonic. Many times it might better characterized as "noise" or a disturbing atmosphere or feeling.

The feeling of discomfort Ōe's story creates is paramount to understanding why "Prize Stock" is not only about a young boy coming

of during the war, but also a social parable with much wider implications. That is not to say that the story contains a hidden message that we, as readers, cannot simply translate into unequivocal meaning. The noisy disturbing feeling points to a larger social meaning outside the story.

These concepts of tone and noise are interesting in relation to Ōe's work because they can help characterize a discomfort that is not objectively within the text, but produced when readers engage with it. In Ōe's story, for example, the I-narrator, is playing with his brother and some friends when he sees the airplane: "An unbelievable large airplane was crossing [the valley] at terrific speed. The roar churned the air into waves and briefly drowned us. Like insects trapped in oil we were unable to move in the sound" (Ōe, 1977: 115). One boy shouts "The enemy's here": The kids watch with "a mix of fear and excitement", and when they later hear the plane crash in the near mountains they cannot wait to see if there are any prisoners.

Ōe explained that the idea for the story came from his own schoolteacher reporting that an airplane had fallen down in Shikoku where he grew up. But as Reiko Tachibana argues, there were in fact no African-Americans flying in the Pacific, and only the Tuskegee Airmen flew over Europe. Is this a historical mistake or a deliberate anachronism on Ōe's part?

Since the story is obviously not a historical documentary, maybe let us rephrase the question: How important is the fact of that the American airman is a black? Let's pay attention to the description:

> "With the other children I […] saw a large black man surrounded by adults […] Surrounding the catch solemnly as they surrounded the wild boar they hunted in winter […] The catch, instead of a flying suit of burnt-ocher silk and black leather flying shoes, wore a khaki jacket and pants and […] ugly, heavy-looking boots" (Ōe, 1977: 123).

Obviously, the story, and its connotations, the nagging feeling and the noise produced, may have changed if the soldier had been white and not black. The specification of race is significant because it contributes to the tension and discomforting 'tone' between a child's invention and the real story: "his large, darkly glistening face was tilted up at the sky […] The iron chain of a boar trap was locked around his ankles, rattling as he moved." (1977: 123). As the children begin to wonder if the grown-ups will shoot him, one of them exclaims: "He's a black man, he's no enemy" (1977: 124).

Why does this text alarm the reader, injecting these feelings of discomfort mixed with childish excitement? As mentioned, my hypothesis is that Ōe's story frames injustice, not only as an abstract category, but as something that happens in a particular context and inflicts a permanent wound. The political emerges in the text as "whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it ... makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise" (Rancière, 2004: 30).

According to Tachibana, during the war, Japanese radio propaganda repeatedly emphasized the cruel treatment by the Allied Forces of black members of the American army. Implying a natural alliance among people of color, Japanese propaganda called upon blacks to help drive out the white devils from Asia, thus explaining the childish logic in the above exclamation. The soldier's blackness causes confusion to the villagers of the story, as well as to its readers, making him appear both an enemy and a friend. Thus, two of the boys ask their father what will done with the prisoner: "Until we know what the town thinks, rear him" "Rear him? Like an animal?" "He is the same as an animal," my father said gravely. "He stinks like an ox" (Ōe, 1977: 127)

Throughout the story, the black soldier is compared with animals. A former African-American soldier who read the story was particularly upset and wrote to Ōe to demand an explanation: "I wanted Ōe to know that I took exception to his prejudiced understanding of black people" (cited in Bracey, 2005: 79). Having entirely misunderstood the plot, making no distinction of the different levels of enunciation, Bracey is, however, conflating the fictional character with the author, etc., and therefore accusing Ōe of racism.

In the light of the world's historical treatment of black African slaves as animals, Ōe's descriptions in a world literature perspective signal to a much wider history than the local or national framing, creating different degrees of discomfort to different readers. Indeed, Ōe consciously pushes the limit by showing that the inhuman treatment of the soldier is perfectly acceptable within the community, thus making the grotesque injustice more conspicuous.

COMFORT ZONES

Affect theorist Sarah Ahmed has discussed multiculturalism in Britain and attempted to define the idea of 'comfort zones' define as sameness. The argument is simple: "being amongst people with whom you are alike

will cause happiness" (Ahmed, 2007: 121). This also includes racial sameness for "To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins […] White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit […] spaces that have already taken their shape." (Ahmed, 2007: 158) Thus, the intrusion of a black person in a given community would be experienced "in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty, and blockage […]" (Ahmed, 2007: 161).

Ōe's short story is particularly interesting in this regard because the arrival of the black soldier interrupts the comfort zone of the village community. Yet his presence causes both fear and confusion to the kids, and this complicates the description of what happens. The kids' excitement and enjoyment contrasts to the ambivalent feelings of discomfort for the way he is treated, as the title *shiiku* (translated as breeding) suggest, the black man is kept like an animal, a prize stock catch (*emono*).

When the children give the soldier some food, they are surprised to see that he communicates "like a person"[1]. As the village gets used to the stranger, the kids are even allowed to bring him outside to play, developing an emotional bond with the "almost 'human' creature, as described by the young I-narrator.

A MYTHIC BUT GROTESQUE NOSTALGIA

In *Escape from the Wasteland*, Susan Napier focuses on the scene where the village boys bring the soldier out to a local spring. Described as a "a happy dream" "an archaic day", the scene is nostalgic of a sort of childish innocence where the boys enjoy having the soldier copulate with a goat, molest the village girls, and mock younger boys. The development of the story strongly indicates that this idyllic scene is highly questionable and entirely dependent on perspective. Thus, in this sense, my reading is in discordance with Napier's who sees Ōe's story revitalizing a mythical past. Rather the story creates a counter-narrative of grotesque nostalgia. The archaic bathing scene reveals a sort of blindness in the children to the discomfort of the other (we thought we were all having fun, kind of feeling). In the story, the black soldier causes pleasure to the village children but their treatment of him leaves an (intended) feeling of discomfort with the readers.

When the main character, believing he has found a friend, wants to warn the black airman that he will be sent to the city, the black airman

takes him prisoner, using the boy as a shield to protect himself against the men. In the end, the father of the protagonist smashes an axe through the hand of the kid. He kills the black prisoner, but also mutilates his own son. The feeling that something is not right, that injustice is performed for the protection of the community, undoubtedly reacting out fear, becomes apparent to the protagonist, a psychic wound that finally finds a place on his own body. The exploitation of the soldier is turned against the child protagonist himself when, reversing the situation, the black man turns the boy into the victimised prisoner.

Ōe's story causes discomfort on many levels: the black soldier summons an ambivalent feeling that marks his presence with uncertainty: is he a friend and or the enemy? As Tachibana writes: "Though the Japanese term for black people is *hokujin*, in the story Ōe also uses, deliberately, the derogatory term *kuronbotō* to demonstrate the villagers' power over the soldier and their contempt for him" (Tachibana 2002: 39). Ambiguity is also present in the behaviour of the village children, scared and excited about his presence. In their childish curiosity, they treat him with a carelessness which is inhuman but does not register as unjust. The young narrator blindly believes that the grown-ups will sort things out but, as it turns out, that is not the case. The adults in the village leave all juridical responsibility to authorities in the far away town and, thus, out of their own hands. It is indeed a very bleak story. The village is cut off from the town, a black soldier is killed, a child is mutilated.

BEYOND THE VILLAGE. LOCAL AND GLOBAL INJUSTICE

"Prize Stock" seems to be a parable of Japan both as victim and perpetrator during World War II. It is also a critique to the small village mentality, the shunning of responsibility, the neglect of the Japanese treatment of Koreans and Chinese, as well as of continued racial prejudices in Japan, and beyond. More generally, "Prize Stock" is a reflection on community feelings of comfort and discomfort, and on exclusion mechanisms. Tachibana writes: "the Japanese could point out the need for 'justice' for blacks in the US since it was not their problem, but someone else's" (2002: 47).

If *Shiiku* makes it evident that fear and hostility toward racial difference are, indeed, Japanese problems, the presentation of the soldier as black also implies sociohistorical contexts beyond Japan. The exploitation of the black soldier points to a much larger world story of exploitation of

the racial other. From American literature Ōe's story borrows the slave narrative as a historical genre: "the American literary convention of using the Black Other as a means of introducing an adolescent non-black protagonist to an unjust world of adults" (2002: 47). In this way it also recalling coming of age narratives such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or William Faulkner's novels. Indeed, Ōe has often mentioned these influences upon his writings. Thus the alter ego of one of his most recent novel *The Changeling* (*Torikae ko*, 2000) describes how he as a young writer would find his style abroad.

Inspired also by François Rabelais, the grotesque realist style of Ōe's narrative celebrates the body as well as the laughter of the populace, in a taboo-transgressing sense. At the end of the story, when the main character of *Shiiku* has his hand cut off by his own father, all ideas of a nostalgic comfort zone are grotesquely shattered.

Even if the village/society reveals itself as unjust, Ōe's coming of age story does not carry a romantic view on children, and it is not about their inauguration to an unjust world of adults. The story reads as a critical comment to the very idea of innocence, including village marginalisation and its nostalgic pastoral connotations. Thus, the specification of race has a double function: it is a critique of the idea of the peaceful homogeneity of the local village and, by extension, it points to the global problems of racialisation.

CONCLUSIONS

In response to Napier's comparison of "Prize Stock" to T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland,* Tachibana explains that although the mythic pastoral levels are significant, the focus of the story is a study of the paths through which power circulates, and that the handling of race should be understood in this context.

I would like to add that Ōe uses this grotesque style of nostalgia in order to re-create in his readers the feeling of discomfort described above. Thus, the village is "a figurative place for revitalizing the past" (Auestad, 2014: 75) and the story reads as a social critique of the shunning of social responsibility, including the question of race, in the postwar period, in Japan and beyond. The continued marginalisation of the racial other, explicit in the story through words such as *gaijins*, *haafu*, etc. along with the abundance of historical allusions, points to a much broader picture of global injustice. With Ōe's interest in the works of

Edward Said in mind, I would take it as far as suggesting that "Prize Stock" signals global histories of exclusion, exoticisation, and exploitation and appeals to global responsibility in the solution of world conflicts.

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Note

[1] Catching the discomfort of the scene with great accuracy, the director Nagisa Oshima adapted the story to a film in 1961: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GSOgEKrWrM

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