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Rereading Hisaye Yamamoto and Ty Pak after Black Lives Matter

ROBERT KYRIAKOS SMITH AND KING-KOK CHEUNG

Abstract: This essay is a co-authored retrospective reflection on two essays by King-Kok Cheung, written shortly after the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, on Hisaye Yamamoto's "A Fire in Fontana" and Ty Pak's "The Court Interpreter." Cheung's work focused on how Yamamoto and Pak represent African American-Asian American relations in terms of their mutual oppression under white supremacy. The present essay suggests that in rereading "A Fire in Fontana" and "The Court Interpreter" in the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement, we gain new insights into what Yamamoto's and Pak's texts uncover about the intersection between the myth of the model minority and anti-Black racism.

Keywords: anti-Blackness, LA uprising, Black Lives Matter, Hisaye Yamamoto, Ty Pak

King-Kok Cheung: "Why must it take Black death and the *lex talionis* of mass rebellion to provide non-Blacks the epiphany that Black lives matter?" asks Robert Kyriakos Smith (hereafter RKS), the African American co-author of these retrospective reflections on two essays by King-Kok Cheung (hereafter KKC), written in the wake of the Los Angeles uprising, on Hisaye Yamamoto's "A Fire in Fontana" and Ty Pak's "The Court Interpreter." These essays by KKC, an immigrant from Hong Kong, are about Black-Asian relations, whether agonistic or empathetic. Both essays were first published soon after the 1992 Los Angeles riots; nearly thirty years later, KKC can now see many

of her former blind spots and seeks to make amends with RKS's post-Black Lives Matter movement analysis. The racism experienced by people of color, including Asian Americans, prevented KKC from recognizing the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness. Before RKS begins the essay proper, KKC will venture several answers to his opening question, by way of zeroing in on the three words "Black Lives Matter."

As a humanist and a nitpicking English Professor, the slogan would strike KKC as redundant: all human lives matter regardless of color. As an Asian and ethnic Americanist who owed her job to the Affirmative Action fought and won by the civil rights movement spearheaded by preeminent leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X, she and most of her American born colleagues in Asian American studies look up to African Americans as role models. Yet for the supremacists in the dominant culture, the more effective Black leaders are in contesting the status quo, the more vehement the anti-Blackness, and the more tempted racists are to pit Asian Americans who were/are typecast as docile "model minorities" (a stereotype to which many Asian immigrants do conform to some extent) against the "trouble-making" African Americans.

Whether immigrants or American born, most Americans of Asian descent know about the history of Chinese/Asian Exclusion, the Japanese American internment during World War II, and particularly the 1982 killing in Detroit, Michigan, of twenty-seven-year-old Vincent Chin, a Chinese American mistaken for being Japanese at a time of gas shortages and massive unemployment in the auto industry and when everyone found a common enemy in the Japanese for "producing fuel-efficient cars" displacing "Detroit's gas guzzlers" (Zia). Chin was bludgeoned to death with baseball bats by two white men who "never spent a full day in jail" (Zia). But Chin's murder triggered a multiracial civil rights campaign, the slogan of which could have been "Yellow Lives Matter." Yet there is a telling difference between the murders of Vincent Chin and George Floyd. Chin was mistaken for being Japanese and killed by two Detroit residents; Floyd was killed for being Black by the police—that is, state agents. Even though, in the United States, Asians of all nationalities encounter racism to some degree, the discrimination is often targeted at a particular nationality rather than at Asians at large. Hence anti-yellowness never measures up to the intensity and prevalence of anti-Blackness, of which other people of color (as the two pieces by Yamamoto and Pak demonstrate) are also guilty. KKC's blind spot earlier consisted in implying that peoples of color are equally, albeit variously, oppressed and that visceral empathy and coalition among Blacks and Asians is possible without first divulging and eradicating the anti-Blackness within communities of color. She is grateful to RKS for agreeing to look at the two literary pieces and her analysis through a different lens.

Robert Kyriakos Smith: “A Fire in Fontana,” by Japanese American writer Hisaye Yamamoto, is an autobiographical essay whose title references the racist murder, by arson, of a Black family in 1945. “The Court Interpreter,” a short story by Korean American writer Ty Pak, fictionalizes the 1992 trial of Soon Ja Du, the Korean immigrant store owner who shot and killed African American teenager Latasha Harlins. To read “A Fire in Fontana” and “The Court Interpreter” today is to enter the wormhole created by America’s unrelenting racism that connects the years 1945, 1992, and 2020.

In “A Fire in Fontana,” the murder of a Black family, consumed in a blaze set by white bigots, serves as the crucible through which Yamamoto’s racial consciousness is forged. Of course, prior to this event, incidents of anti-Black racism smoldered in the background of the author’s cognizance as a Japanese American woman in the United States during the twentieth century. For example, while on a cross-country bus trip shortly after World War II, she encounters for the first time segregated public toilets. She recalls that the “toilets were a new experience ... labeled either Colored or White. I dared to try White first, and no one challenged me, so I continued this presumptuous practice at all the way stations of Texas” (Yamamoto 2001, 151). Significantly here, Yamamoto makes explicit that she experiences white privilege as the absence of a “challenge.” Later in the essay, her disinclination to presume a “colored” position manifests in her work as a reporter for the *Los Angeles Tribune* when an African American man named Short entreats the newspaper to publicize the “several threats of get-out-or-else” he had received upon moving his family to the then predominantly white city of Fontana (153). Rather than take Short’s side unequivocally, Yamamoto writes “a calm, impartial story, using ‘alleged’ and ‘claimed’ and other cautious journalese. Anyone noticing the story about the unwanted family in Fontana would have taken it with a grain of salt” (154). Within weeks of making his petition, the Black man was dead, and police concluded that it was likely Short who poured gasoline around his home and set the fire that killed him, his wife, and their two children. The story that Yamamoto reported in the *Tribune* lent credence to that dubious theory. Twenty years later, the author’s memory of casting doubt on Short’s appeal haunts her during the 1965 Watts Riots.

An exorcism of sorts occurs after another twenty years when, in 1985, she retells the Short story in a new genre—memoir—and thereby rectifies her earlier effort to make the deniability of racism plausible. In her memoir, free from the constraints of “cautious journalese,” the burning of the Black family’s house can now function appositely as a metaphor for the effects of *structural* racism on Black lives. It also serves as a symbol for Yamamoto’s understanding of American white supremacy as state-sanctioned *domestic* terrorism against non-white American citizens. This understanding is unsurprising given her internment camp experience as an American of Japanese descent during World War II.

KKC writes of Yamamoto's memoir that it "disputes the police version of what happened [to the Short family] and opens the audience's eyes to a flagrant violation of civil rights" (Cheung 1995, 127). At first glance, such a statement may appear to exonerate the beneficiaries of white supremacy, for it enables them to claim not to have known the scale of the problem. That defense should not be credible in the face of anti-Black racism's long history, which has been well documented over hundreds of years. This documentation has taken many forms: cell phone and police bodycam footage; photographs of lynchings; cicatrices on, and other mutilations of, the bodies of the enslaved. However, documentation of systemic anti-Blackness is not always accepted as verification of its existence. For example, KKC has also written about the "antithetical responses" by people of various races to the video recording of Soon Ja Du's killing of Latasha Harlins, which, she argues, should "make us wonder whether judgment can be independent of race and group allegiances" (Cheung 2005, 16).

The impairment of personal judgment by one's race and group allegiance is the crux of Ty Pak's "The Court Interpreter," a fictional retelling of the death of Latasha Harlins at the hands of Soon Ja Du. At the beginning of this story, the titular narrator is approached by the defense attorney for a "Mrs. Moonja Joo, [a] Korean grocer, accused of shooting to death a Black teenager for stealing a bottle of orange juice" (Pak 1999, 89). Like Du, her historical counterpart, Mrs. Joo is in need of a translator; her inability to speak English well puts her at a disadvantage in an American court of law. Her lawyer identifies the story's unnamed narrator as "a decent Korean interpreter," which not only signifies his competence at translating the Korean language but also recognizes him as a man of decency. And yet it is partly the narrator's racial animus that motivates him to take the case: "We had to exonerate the accused, who had by now become a folk hero, especially among our small business owners, continually plagued by Black shoplifters and other predators" (92). The recent pandemics of AIDS and COVID-19 should definitively make the narrator's comparison of Black people to a "plague" untenable—though history suggests that it won't. His dehumanization of African Americans evinces how anti-Black racism infects even people who, like the Korean interpreter, are purportedly "decent."

Pak's fictionalization of the killing of Latasha Harlins revises history as it rewrites it. In Pak's story, Harlins is victimized again, for she scarcely resembles her stand-in, the character of Natasha Brooks, who, unlike Harlins, "was the mother of two children already, and had been living with her current boyfriend. Instead of pity for her orphaned children, she evoked with her enormous weight of 250 pounds orgiastic images of eating, mating, and breeding destined to unbalance global ecology" (92). The narrator's example of racialized misogyny feeds into the myth of impending white genocide even as it recalls slave plantocracy's dependence on the "breeding" of Black women. The gross discrepancy between Pak's fictional "Natasha Brooks" and the historical Latasha Harlins may be

explained by the longstanding fungibility of Black women in American culture that makes one Black woman indistinguishable from another. As such, the story offers another illustration of the facile (character) assassinations to which Latasha Harlins and African American women en masse are vulnerable.

Though the Natasha Brooks character unfaithfully represents Latasha Harlins, in another respect she effectively functions in the story as a cipher for all African Americans, just as the burden of representing every Korean in America falls on the character of Moonja Joo. In “The Court Interpreter,” Pak shows us that, in the case of the *People of the State of California v. Soon Ja Du*, what is litigated is the contest between Blacks and Koreans; but what is not questioned is the state’s history of white supremacy and anti-Blackness, personified by the presiding judge. In lieu of interrogating the logic of white supremacy that opposes the resourceless Black patron to the immigrant Korean proprietor, the narrator can only ask about his client, “how [can one] explain her shooting someone in the back?” (107). The fact that this question remains unanswered renders Moonja Joo’s claim to have feared for her life inexplicable but not (legally) indefensible. Indeed, on the witness stand, the accused’s account of the event elides the fact that the victim’s back was turned to her shooter. On the other hand, the light punishment given to Moonja Joo, and to her real-life analog, demonstrates that even suspect reasons for the assault of Black women (like Latasha Harlins and Breonna Taylor) are effective in exculpating perpetrators in America’s criminal “justice” system.²

When the narrator describes Moonja Joo’s conviction for manslaughter and sentence of time-served as a “slap in the face of Black pride” (113), he suggests that not only is the Korean woman’s punishment displaced upon Blacks, but their penalty is also disproportionate in comparison to the slap on the wrist meted out to his client.³ This suggestion mitigates Black people’s refusal to turn the other cheek when, subsequently in the story, the trial of the LAPD officers who beat Rodney King results in acquittal. This injustice the narrator describes as “one verdict too many, demeaning Black life and dignity” (114). In the uprising that follows, the narrator’s brother-in-law is shot in the head as he attempts to protect his place of employ in Koreatown, which has been left undefended by the police. Consequently we see how Pak’s story, for all the license Pak takes with the facts, can still be read as a truly American allegory of the deadly violence that circulates between people of color when racist white hegemony, here embodied in the LAPD, escapes reprisal.

Not coincidentally, then, both Yamamoto’s and Pak’s texts end with depictions of rioting: the Watts Riots of 1965 and the Los Angeles uprising of 1992. In Yamamoto’s memoir the author metaphorizes the Watts Riots as a “gratifying next chapter” in which she can collapse the distance between what she wrote for the *Los Angeles Tribune* and the truth of a fire in Fontana (Yamamoto 2001, 157). In “The Court Interpreter,” the uprising forces the

narrator to consider belatedly whether the Korean shopkeeper, who shot in the back and killed an unarmed Black teenager, should “have gone to prison, even to the gas chamber, condemned and undefended, for everybody’s good, even her own” (Pak 1999, 117). As we have seen, these two texts turn race riots into flashpoints of revelation. Both “A Fire in Fontana” and “The Court Interpreter” involve what Yamamoto describes elsewhere as a “grave sin of omission” (Yamamoto 2001, 34). Both Yamamoto the journalist and Pak’s court interpreter failed to take an active part in combatting racism toward Blacks. Their inaction may be compared with the killings of Latasha Harlins and George Floyd in which there are sins of *commission* by Soon Ja Du and Tou Thao, the Hmong American accomplice of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who placed his knee on Floyd’s neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. Given the aftermath of Floyd’s death, Pak’s story is particularly instructive in demonstrating that Asian Americans cannot claim solidarity with African Americans against mutual oppression without also accounting for the anti-Blackness in their own ethnic communities. The paroxysm of guilt and pain that the Korean interpreter suffers after the police leave a member of his family—someone who shares his skin color—to fend for himself in the riots brings home to him the truism that “All lives won’t matter until Black lives matter.”

Robert Kyriakos Smith received his PhD in English from UCLA in 2020. He is an assistant professor in the Department of English at California State University, San Bernardino, where he teaches courses in global anglophone literature. He can be reached at robertkyriakos.smith@csusb.edu

King-Kok Cheung is professor of English at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); author of *Articulate Silences* (1993) and *Chinese American Literature without Borders* (2017); editor of *Words Matter, Seventeen Syllables, An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, and *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography*; and coeditor of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. With Richard Yarborough and Kimberlé Crenshaw, Cheung spearheaded an interdisciplinary cluster course in 1997 titled “Interracial Dynamics in American History, Literature, and Law.” In 2014, Cheung and Robert Kyriakos Smith collaborated with six other faculty and graduate students to design a new upper division course (funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) titled “Ways of Reading Race.” She can be reached at cheung@humnet.ucla.edu

NOTES

1. We must also note the mounting hate crimes against Asian Americans, some of which have been perpetrated by African Americans, in the era of COVID-19—this despite the disproportionate number of Asians, Blacks, and other people of color who have died from the pandemic.
2. After Soon Ja Du's conviction for manslaughter, the jury's recommended prison sentence was reduced by Joyce Karlin, the trial judge, to time-served, probation, community service, and a small fine.
In 2020, three officers of the Louisville Metro Police Department fatally shot Breonna Taylor while erroneously executing a no-knock warrant. As of this writing, none of the officers involved in killing Taylor faces criminal charges for her death.
3. Perhaps in the narrator's tone is a hint of glee as he reduces to a metaphorical slap a flagrant mockery of justice.

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