

*Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*  
3 (2012) 64-79.

# The Abjection of James Dean: Mixed Race / Mixed Media Performances in Ai's "James Dean"

By Catherine Irwin

"There is no identity for me 'out there,'" wrote the poet Ai in her 1978 autobiographical essay "On Being ½ Japanese, 1/8 Choctaw, ¼ Black and 1/16 Irish" (58). In this essay, Ai (who passed away in 2010) recalls her childhood experience as Florence Anthony and remembers being identified as Black by others and having to perform "blackness." At the same time, she faced rejection by Blacks for being other-than-Black. Attending college in the 1960s, Ai refused to join the Black Power Movement, a decision that led her to experiment with her own racial identity. Majoring in Oriental Studies, she constructed a self out of her own fantasy world that was fueled by her study of Japanese culture: "What I loved was a totally aesthetic atmosphere," Ai wrote, "fostered by the Oriental Studies faculty, by books, records, and my own fantasies. This was my identity" (58). A few years after college, at 26, Ai confronted her mother and learned that her natural father, who she never knew, was Japanese (58). During this time of self-discovery, Ai changed her name "Florence Anthony" to "Ai," a Japanese word that means "love" (Ai, "Movies," 241).

Ai's early experimentation with her racial identity not only reflects the different social and historical contexts that Asian Americans of mixed race heritage have had to negotiate in order to integrate a mixed racial identity, but it also reflects her creative process.<sup>1</sup> Her exploration in the 1960s and early 1970s with her own identity using cultural materials foreshadows the impact that media technology (film, digital, computers) will have on representations of the body in the 1990s. Just as she once read books, listened to music, and took note of her fantasies about Japanese culture, Ai's poems in her 1991 book *Fate* address racial and sexual formations of whiteness in similar fashion by interfacing textual and visual representations with poetic discourse in order to reinvent icons of white masculinity in the same fashion that digital representations can morph and retouch images. For example, the speaker in Ai's dramatic monologue "James Dean" morphs the iconic image of James Dean by exposing the abject nature and illusory substance of different media representations of this dead, white heterosexual male. This essay analyzes the speaker's performance in Ai's "James Dean" and explores the intersections where the poetic voice—the narrator or

---

<sup>1</sup> For more discussion on social context/influences on the identity formation process of Black-Japanese Americans, see Michael C. Thornton and Harold Gates' "Black, Japanese, and American: An Asian American Identity Yesterday and Today" in *The Sum of our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Ed. Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia Nakashima (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001): 93-105.

---

**Catherine Irwin** is an associate professor in the Department of Modern Languages at the University of La Verne in California.

subject speaking—*disidentifies* with the cinematic image of hetero-normative, white masculinity in order to integrate a sexuality usually abject or “outside” the domains of the ideal.<sup>2</sup> In the process, this paper argues that Ai’s mixed media, mixed race performance on the page creates an allegoric body, a site for a mediated identification with the iconic James Dean that recognizes the oppressive discourses of white, male hetero-normativity and the apparatuses that sustain such an ideal by making certain bodies and desires abject.

While there are books and anthologies that discuss the process of developing an Asian American mixed race identity, this essay contributes to mixed race studies by focusing on how the developmental process translates into a creative process for mixed race artists such as Ai and how this creative process can potentially destabilize the roles that whiteness and sexual desire play when negotiating identity.<sup>3</sup> Ai’s own process of developing her mixed race identity in the 1960s and early 1970s reflects some of the scholarship published in the 1990s on racial and identity formation. For example, in her work on mixed race, playwright Velina Hasu Houston has addressed the process that is part of developing a mixed race identity and conceived the term “no passing zone” in reference to an individual who illustrates “a state of being in which she embraces all her racial identities in a composite multi-racial identity”(161). Teresa Williams-Leon interpreted the “no passing zone” as “a space of resistance and empowerment in which Asian-descent multiracials define their composite identities, express their critical authorities, and mark their social existence”(1997; 64). Both Houston and Williams-Leon provide a critical/creative space for mixed race people to define themselves as subjects within a culture that is just starting to institutionalize a “check one or more” racial format on the Census (Thornton and Gates 93). At the same time, according to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, race is a product of “social conflicts and interests” that reflect hierarchical relationships of power that mark certain bodies as marginal or abject (55). Consequently, to make an impact on discourses and relationships of power, Karen Shimakawa argues that “simply offering up an alternative identity construction” for Asian Americans (and I include mixed race Asian Americans here) is not enough; instead, Shimakawa suggests a strategy of “critical mimesis” where one “‘deliberately’ assum(es) the abject position,” or one takes on the role of “mimicking the dominant subject position (i.e., white, male, heteronormative U.S. Americanness)” (376). Shimakawa’s argument suggests that the idea of a no

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the abject, see Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Julie Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982). While I use Kristeva’s psychoanalytical definition of abjection in one place in this paper because it seemed appropriate, this paper emphasizes Butler’s notion of the abject because of her emphasis on performance and discourse. In her work, Butler explains, “Abjection literally means to cast off, away, or out and, hence, proposes a domain of agency from which it is differentiated” (243). Butler argues, “In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside of the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject at its own founding repudiation” (3).

<sup>3</sup> Notable books about mixed race development include *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as New Frontier*, ed. Maria P. P. Root (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996); *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996); *Intersecting Circles: the voices of hapa women in poetry and prose*, ed. Marie Hara and Nora Okja Keller (Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1999); *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*, ed. Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia L. Nakashima (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001), among others.

passing zone must consider not only the impact of ideals and norms on one's social existence, but it must also emphasize a strategy of critical mimesis that makes interventions through repeated performances.

Through dramatic monologues (or solo performances on the page) that blend print and media representations of iconic figures such as James Dean, Ai's creative process, in fact, is akin to a development process and offers sites to employ more than just the strategy of critical mimesis because her performances weave poetry with forms of visual technology, such as film. As a result, Ai's dramatic monologues become sites to examine what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun calls "race and/as technology" in order to understand technology's "relation to racism" and to "better respond to contemporary changes in the relationships between human and machine, human and animal, media and environment, mediation and embodiment, nature and culture, visibility and invisibility, privacy and publicity (39). Influenced by Heidegger's 1955 "The Question Concerning Technology," Chun grounds her claims using Heidegger's argument that technology is a "mode of revealing or 'enframing'" that "puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such" (Heidegger, qtd. in Chun 47). For Heidegger, this "enframing" has the effect of "endanger[ing] man by rendering man himself into a standing reserve" (Chun 47). According to Chun, Heidegger's conclusion suggests that whatever is concealed by technology and its "mode of revealing" or "enframing" is exposed by art, or what Heidegger calls *Poesis* (47). In other words, technology's role in the development of an identity can be revealed by exposing through art what has been made abject by a systematic or mediated mode of enframing. Examining Ai's work through the lenses of critical mimesis and race and/as technology raises the following questions: What types of interventions can mixed race artists perform in their work to expose what has been concealed by the "enframing" of technology? How can mixed race artists use the strategy of critical mimesis to play with ideals and norms in order to address social conflicts and envision new social relations between whites and racial others? For the mixed race poet Ai, one of the ways for her to claim subjectivity and mediate the borders of subject and abject realms is to rearticulate her position against whiteness through a performance of James Dean that recognizes his different sexualities and desires.

### *Playing James Dean Along the Border Realms*

Like Ai's other monologues of dead, white male icons, "James Dean" begins in fairy tale fashion, but immediately takes us to the scene of James Dean's car accident, where his body lay like a corpse, which Julia Kristeva considers is the quintessential representation of abjection because "refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (3). And yet Ai sustains James Dean through the process of art and cinema:

James Dean

Night after night,  
I danced on dynamite,  
as light of foot as Fred Astaire  
until I drove the road  
like the back of a black panther,

speckled with the gold  
 of the cold and distant stars  
 and the slam, bang, bam  
 of metal jammed against metal.  
 My head nearly tore from my neck,  
 my bones broke in fragments  
 like half-remembered sentences,  
 and my body,  
 as if it had been beaten  
 by a thousand fists,  
 bruised dark blue;  
 yet a breath entered my wide-open mouth  
 and the odor of sweet grass  
 filled my nose. I died,  
 but the cameras kept filming  
 some guy named James,  
 kept me stranded among the so-called living,  
 though if anybody'd let me,  
 I'd have proved  
 that I was made of nothing  
 but one long, sweet kiss  
 before I wasn't there. (29-30)

With the title referencing the speaker as James Dean, the speaker's opening lines construct his body through metonymy and metaphor, a body made of Fred Astaire, a black panther, and cold metal, a semiotics of marks and traces that remind the reader of the lithe, animal quality of James Dean and his violent end. As the rhyme and rhythm of the lines break down after the ninth line, so goes the body of the speaker, shattering with his "bones in fragments/like half-remembered sentences" (29). The speaker, however, keeps breathing, resurrected by the insertion of the cinematic after line twenty. Here, the speaker announces this crossing over into the cinematic, claiming, "I died, but the camera kept filming some guy named James, /kept me stranded among the so-called living . . ." (29). The first section ends here in the cinematic realm, where the speaker now "made of nothing" but image continues among the living.

The introduction of the camera by the speaker suggests a body constituted by both poetic discourse and the cinematic, a body mediated by apparatuses of re-inscription and reproduction. As the poem continues, this exchange between the poetic and the cinematic exposes a double activity in which the speaking subject continually summons up a desire to sustain and keep "James Dean" alive, while simultaneously emphasizing, in psychoanalytical terms, James Dean's desire or drive for death. More importantly, this opening montage signals a desire to put to death his fixed image of white, male hetero-normativity.

This desire to challenge or put to death his image of hetero-normative desire and white male superiority is illustrated in the second section of this monologue. For example, the speaker continually destabilizes Dean's cinematic image, an ideal that takes up space in cultural memory and the imagination, by juxtaposing images of the ideal James Dean with an image of sexual horror:

Still, I wear

my red jacket, blue jeans.  
 Sometimes I'm an empty space in line  
 at some Broadway cattle call,  
 or a shadow on a movie screen;  
 sometimes I caress a woman in her dreams,  
 kiss, undress her anyplace,  
 and make love to her  
 until she cries.  
 I cry out  
 as she squeezes me tight  
 between her thighs,  
 but when she grabs my hair,  
 my head comes off in her hands  
 And I take the grave again. (30)

This section of the poem begins with the image of James Dean in his signature red jacket and blue jeans, which he wore in *Rebel Without a Cause*, an image of 1950s masculine cool that has been continually reproduced as photograph stills and posters since the film screened in 1955; according to the speaker, it's an image that still haunts "Broadway cattle calls," as actors try to copy the original icon. And yet the movement into a woman's dream and the symbolic action of sex and decapitation strategically works on and against James Dean's signature pose and emphasizes a masculinity in crisis, a symbolic castration, that leads to an image of horror, abjection, the grave. That the head comes off in a lover's hand returns us back to the shattered white body in the first section of the poem, where the speaker's head was "nearly torn from (his) neck" (29).

The speaker here displays the difference between the cinematic image of white masculinity that incites desire and fantasies and the same body made abject through a poetic image of decapitation and a nightmare sexual encounter. The play between these two bodies leaves "James Dean" in a liminal state, or what Kurt Vanhoutte has called the "allegoric," which depicts a body "in ruins":

The allegoric explicitly recognizes that the knowledge it offers is illusory. This insight is due to its destructive, almost sadistic character: the allegoric wants to save the past, but only by destroying it. In its urge for dismemberment and disembodiment, it shows the body in ruins, the annihilation of the organic and the manipulation of the leftover meanings, that are being transformed into signs stripped of their sensuous dimension [. . .] Allegory is rooted in signs that point not to a hidden truth but to the collapse of idealized nature into historical reality. In other words, allegory does not cover up the split between sign and meaning, but stages it. (7-8)

This new allegoric that Vanhoutte describes is not a body we are used to when it comes to icons. In this poem, however, the speaker creates a James Dean "in ruins," in search of the "leftover meanings" of his body that require "the collapse" of his "idealized nature." In creating an allegoric body, the speaking subject in Ai's poem manipulates the iconic image of James Dean by staging the

split between fixed signs and meanings that dismantles the ideal of the straight, white male.

As a result, the meaning of “James Dean” as icon is continually redistributed and disturbed by the continual split between sign and meaning, by the collapse of the ideal, that leads to a desire to separate or disidentify from either hetero-normativity or, as the next section suggests, any type of normative sexual desire. While continuing to reflect on his sexual encounters, for example, the speaker’s negotiation of his body becomes a questioning of his sexual identity. In describing parts of his “real” life off-screen, the speaker’s speech acts clash and re-combine with the cinematic to further disidentify with James Dean’s iconic image of masculine (heterosexual) cool:

Maybe I never wanted a woman  
as much as that anyway,  
or even the spice of man on man  
that I encountered once or twice,  
the hole where I shoved myself,  
framed by an aureole of coarse hair.  
By that twilight in ‘55,  
I had devised a way  
of living in between  
the rules that other people make.  
The bongos, the dance classes with Eartha Kitt,  
and finally racing cars,  
I loved the incongruity of it. (30-1)

In suggesting that James Dean lived “in between the rules,” the speaker exposes the precarious nature of the ideal when the cinematic is reproduced to integrate the abject; what had been sacrificed in the production process of constructing the on-screen “James Dean” is incorporated by questioning meanings attached to white masculinity and the mandates of hetero- and homosexual desire that are discursively constructed and controlled by dominant cultural ideologies. At the same time, through his questioning, the speaker disassembles James Dean’s white, hetero-normative, masculine position that had been constructed against positions of otherness. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, for example, other men are positioned as female—his father in an apron, his admiring friend “Plato”—in relationship to James Dean’s straight character, Jim Stark. In contrast, in Ai’s poem, by combining the cinematic with poetic discourse, what was always implied but never acted out in his films—his bisexual or ambivalent sexual identity—is incorporated and combined with the cinematic. As a result, when the speaker says, “I had devised a way / of living in between / the rules that other people make,” what is acknowledged is his “in between” state constructed by the red jacket, blue jeans, and signature pose that makes James Dean’s body the visual image of young, cool masculinity as well as the James Dean, who played bongos, explored his bisexuality, studied with Eartha Kitt, and raced cars, found in the pages of biography.<sup>4</sup> The speaker’s

<sup>4</sup> The countless biographies on James Dean include Donald Spoto’s *Rebel: The Life and Legend of James Dean* (New York: Harpercollins, 1996), Joe and Jay Hyams’ *James Dean: Little Boy Lost* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), George Perry’s *James Dean* (London: DK Publishing, 2005), David

desire to separate from his cinematic image signals a desire to disidentify from white, male hetero-normativity and move towards a liminal and more fluid space of “incongruity,” opening up a space here for a straight James Dean, a bisexual James Dean, and a mixed race James Dean.<sup>5</sup>

By incorporating film, a different signifying system, into her dramatic monologue, Ai exposes the impact of film and media technology on the white male body, as these representational apparatuses “enframe” a desirable image of white masculinity through fantasy, visual images and print media that results in an illusory body without origins. At the same time, by using the poetic to expose what has been concealed by technology’s mode of revealing, Ai reinvents James Dean, so that there is more fluidity between subject and abject realms, between self and other. In other words, Ai’s creative process has the elements of what Jose Esteban Munoz calls a “migrant status” that he “characterize(s) by its need to move back and forth, to occupy at least two spaces at once” (32). The contradictory elements of James Dean’s sexual identity are reworked by Ai’s speaker in “James Dean,” which allows him to occupy multiple spaces and to challenge normative mandates of desire disseminated and sustained by the technology of representational / reproductive apparatuses.

In the last section of “James Dean,” Ai emphasizes not only how much “James Dean” is in fact a product of these representational apparatuses, but also how alternative performative or repetitive acts can reproduce James Dean with a difference. In the last twenty-eight lines of “James Dean,” for example, the speaker points out how his performance on the page *is* “James Dean,” by reminding us, “I gave performances” and “I did not *do* method; I did James Dean” (31). The last ten lines of the poem underscore this point:

Since then the posters, photographs, biographies  
keep me unbetraysed by age or fashion,  
and as many shows a night as it’s requested,  
I reenact my passion play  
for anyone who’s interested,  
and when my Porsche  
slams into that Ford,  
I’m doing one hundred eighty-thousand  
miles a second,  
but I never leave the stage. (31-2)

Exposing how the reproductions of “posters, photographs, and biographies” keep “James Dean” alive, Ai plays with the borders of death and life by creating an allegoric body for James Dean that betrays the ideal, yet keeps him alive. This recovery of “James Dean” through a visual media, poetry, and fantasy forces us to think about the effects of technology on the body and how bodies can be

---

Dalton’s *James Dean: The Mutant King* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), William Bast’s *Surviving James Dean* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2006), Venable Herndon’s *James Dean: A Short Life* (NY: Doubleday, 1974), John Howlett’s *James Dean: A Biography* (London: Plexus, 1997), Ronald Martinetti’s *The James Dean Story* (NY: Pinnacle Books, 1975) and Paul Alexander’s *Boulevard of Broken Dreams: The Life, Times, and Legend of James Dean* (NY: Plume, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> By 2003, Ruth La Ferla of *The New York Times* reported that “[t]o marketers, the multiracial face of youth is the new American beauty” (sec. 9:1).

reinvented through a reiterative, mimetic process that disidentifies with the norms and ideals that shape what we think and who we desire.

***Print and Media Identities: Working with Technology and Abjection***

That Ai decided to perform James Dean and other iconic straight, white males in *Fate* seems to have been an appropriate mimetic strategy in the early 1990s given the deliberate attempts by the mainstream to make mixed race bodies disappear. In 1993, for example, *Time* magazine featured a mixed race cover girl created by cyber-geneticists that *Time* editors sadly pronounced “didn’t exist,” thus suggesting that the mixed race body was a mere “morph” of the imagination. Subsequently, however, mixed race “Eve” as she was called was succeeded by a production process in the mid- to late-1990s that resulted in print anthologies, books, and visual media on the mixed race body/identity that worked to recuperate the mixed race body.<sup>6</sup> These different material productions reflect the “scenes of empowerment” that were “conflations of racial and technological empowerment that argued that technology would eradicate racial difference” (Chun 50).

Rather than eradicate difference, however, these subsequent productions of cultural materials about mixed race people in America seemed to be situated in a field of competing representations and discourses: the same print productions and digital technology that were used to retouch and “enframe” images and turn marginal “real bodies” into mere morphs also had the ability to recuperate and reveal abject bodies, bodies that have been deemed outside the subject realm. In addition, as a counter-practice, artists and activists of color also morphed dominant images of whiteness in a way that exposed the abject nature and illusory substance of the ideal. This mode of revealing—through art—offered these artists and activists a way to exercise disidentification, a strategy that, according to Jose Esteban Munoz, “neither opts to assimilate within such a structure of dominant ideology nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (19). As a result, disidentification, Munoz suggests, leads to a “reformatting of self within the social” (97).

By resisting pressure to categorize herself solely as Black in order to explore other aspects of her racial identity, for example, Ai, in her own developmental process, used the strategy of disidentification as a way of redefining or “reformatting” herself, of deconstructing her body, and discovering her hybrid genealogy. Appropriating dominant Orientalist discourses of

---

<sup>6</sup> These publications include, among others, the following: *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*, edited by Carol Camper (Toronto: Sister Vision, 1994), *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity*, edited by Naomi Zack (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), Kathlyn Gay’s *I am Who I am: Speaking Out about Multiracial Identity* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1995), Lise Funderburg’s *Black, White Other: Biracial Americans Talk about Race and Identity* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994), Naomi Zack’s *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), Velina Hasu Houston and Teresa Kay Williams’ “No Passing Zone: The Artistic and Discursive Voices of Asian-Descent Multi-Racials” (*Amerasia Journal* 23.1(1997): vii-xii), Shirlee Taylor Haizlip’s *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), Lisa Jones’s *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), Sigrid Nunez’s *A Feather on the Breath of God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), Lisa See’s *On Gold Mountain* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995) and Gregory Williams’ *Life on the Colored Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He was Black* (New York: Dutton, 1995). See also footnote 3.



“Japaneseness,” Ai explored the constructed borders of her body by taking up discourses that mediate social notions of what is Japanese. In other words, like most mixed race people and like the costume model that she once was (Halpern 486), she “tried on” different racial identities. In developing her mixed race identity, Ai was exposed to essentializing racial aesthetics (especially of “Blackness” and “Japaneseness”), which allowed her to explore the ways that racial representations of the body are defined and coded against each other, as well as against Western fictions of beauty and exoticism. In appropriating a Japanese aesthetic and disidentifying with monoracial categories, Ai problematized dominant racial discourses that conceal what is always already inside the subject by exposing what has been made abject, or thrown out, as a result of fixed, mono-racial categories.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar fashion to the work she did in exploring and developing her own mixed race identity, Ai combines the textual, the cinematic image and the poetic voice as a vehicle to morph the 1950s’ ideal of white masculinity in her dramatic monologue “James Dean,” a poem published in her 1991 book of poems *Fate*. Her Japanese-Choctaw-Black-Irish American image on the cover of this book guides us into reading her monologues of dead white icons (that include James Dean, Elvis, J. Edgar Hoover, and Ted Kennedy) not only against the dominant images of these dead white men, but also against her mixed race body, which suggests an implicit reverse Black/yellowface or what Joseph Roach calls “reversed ventriloquism”—thereby raising questions of who is speaking, of interracial blending and exchange, of playing with cultural interventions that empty “Whiteness,” “Asianness” and “Blackness” of substance and exposing such categories as performative acts (60). These questions imply the impact that this reversal has on relationships of power. By placing herself on the front cover of her book in which she then performs white males on the page, for example, Ai and her editors/publishers create bodies with racial and gendered markers that trouble the binary between subject and abject.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, as a result of the abjection of Blacks and Asian Americans,<sup>9</sup> Ai’s reversed ventriloquism depends

<sup>7</sup> For more on the abject, see Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> In his book on blackface and minstrel shows, Eric Lott defines blackface as “an affair of copies and originals, theft and love” (40). According to Lott, this cultural robbery or what he calls “expropriation” played an important part in the formation of a self-consciously white working class” (8). As a sign of absence, whiteness was constructed as everything that “blackface” was not. In his own study of whiteness in film, Richard Dyer argues that this difficulty in “seeing” whiteness secures power for whites” (46). At the same time, Dyer suggests that white domination is “materially dependent on black people” (48) Dyer concludes that “what is called for is a demonstration of the virtues of Whiteness that would justify continued domination, but this is a problem if Whiteness is also invisible and nothing” (48). By making visible the dependence of whiteness on racial difference and interrogating justifications for domination, film and other artistic mediums potentially have the power to interrogate not just racial and sexual differences, but also the borders between, where migration between black and white and other is both fixed and fluid with potential for border crossing and transgressions. See also Michael Peterson’s *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the abjection of Asian Americans, see Karen Shimakawa’s *National Abjection: the Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002). For a discussion of the abjection of Black female sexuality, see bell hooks’ *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), hooks’ *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989) and Sander Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art” in *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 204-242.

on whiteness, and she uses “James Dean” as a “temporary surrogate” in order to destabilize racial, gender and sexual norms by performing James Dean as sexually abject rather than as heterosexually normative and desirable.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, while one could read this type of expropriation or interracial surrogation as a form of passing, Ai—rather than focus on racial passing or the Black-white divide—reinvisions James Dean by inhabiting the role of James Dean in order to play at the sites of racial and gender representations where white male heterosexuality is overly-determined and produced. While race remains invisible because this performance of James Dean is done on the page, thinking of race as another form of technology provides the opportunity to focus on what Chun calls “modes of recognition and relation, rather than being” (39). In other words, by focusing on representations of James Dean that remain in circulation and reframing these images, readers of Ai get a glimpse of how relationships of power remain intact or shift and change. Performance critic Jill Dolan emphasizes the importance of sexuality in a critical mimesis of straight, white male representations when she states, “to construct and identify men as heterosexual, they must perceive women as objects of desire. Can men extricate themselves from this process to look clearly at sexual difference? Might they be willing to give up their privileged subjectivity to consider women’s desires or lesbians as the subject of representation?” (7).<sup>11</sup> Through her dramatic monologue that addresses alternative sexual desires, Ai provides space to explore Dolan’s questions, to imagine self and other in alliance with each other in order to shift and expand the realm and limits of subjectivity. And by creating a bisexual James Dean, Ai breaks down some of the binary stereotypes that equate the white male body with dominance and desirability as well as the body of women of color with hyper-sexuality. By her interracial performance of James Dean that blends these stereotypes, Ai exposes white male iconic identity as arbitrary and discursively constructed.

---

<sup>10</sup> David Roman uses the term “temporary surrogate” to describe how solo performance artist Michael Kearns “uses his body as a temporary surrogate for others with AIDS who for specific reasons are rendered abject within the gay cultural imaginary. Kearns exploits the privilege of his race and gender to serve as an entrance for white gay men to begin to identify with others unlike them” (*Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998. 131).

Joseph Roach also defines the term “surrogation” as “the theatrical principle of substitution of one persona for another” (53). Roach defines “surrogation” as a kind of “doubling” and suggests a kind of “ventriloquism” that leads to the inevitable disappearance of the racialized body. In the instance of blackface minstrelsy, Roach suggests, “the doubled African American remains ventriloquized” (65). Roach concludes that the “Anglo-American self-definition occurs in performances that feature the obligatory disappearance or captive presence of circum-Atlantic cohabitants” (54). Later in his essay, Roach will suggest that different forms of “reversed ventriloquism” is “most ubiquitous” in American pop culture today: Through their continuous improvisations, impersonators allow memory to take precedent over official history, as such acts becomes “an art of recreation as well as restoration” (61). What is restored is not just the body being impersonated, but potentially the bodies found in the margins.

<sup>11</sup> In a new conclusion that was added (in the 1990s) to her article just quoted, Dolan stressed that white heterosexual men needed to look at racial and ethnic desire as the subject of representation in theater as well, so that “reinhabiting images can be circulated in a hostile cultural environment with an eye toward teaching people about difference and promoting social change” (8).

*Conclusion: Critiquing Cross-Racial, Allegoric Bodies in Performance*

Ai's performance of James Dean exposes what has been left outside the ideal image of white male heterosexuality and provides an alternative representation to other monologues that, through its discursive constructions, maintain the status quo with regards to race, gender and sexuality. Ai's work reflects what performance scholar Jill Dolan argues is the nature of performance and theater, as Dolan likens "the stage" to be "a laboratory in which to construct new, nongendered identities. And in the process, we can change the nature of theatre itself" (8). Dolan stresses the need for "reinhabiting images [that] can be circulated in a hostile cultural environment with an eye toward teaching people about difference and promoting social change" (8). Through her cross-racial, cross-gender performance, Ai re-inhabits (or perhaps rehabilitates?) an image of James Dean and exposes the representation/reproductive apparatuses that maintain and disseminate heterosexual, white male icons by offering readers a James Dean who questions both his hetero- and homosexual desires.

At the same time, there is always the question of whether reconstructing or reinhabiting representations is enough. Anthropologist Dorinne Kondo, in a paper that focuses on the cross-racial and cross-gender performances of Anna Deveare Smith and Culture Class, warns that the "critique of essentialism fails unless it goes beyond invocations of difference, and instead takes account of the continuous, persistent, and insidious workings of power along the axes we label race, gender and sexuality" (99-100). Kondo, here, suggests that new representations need to address and expose unequal relationships of power. And while Dolan emphasizes a quest for "new, non-gendered identities," Kondo is very skeptical of what she calls the "utopian third term" that breaks down different binaries of power:

More disturbingly, in this age of Proposition 187 and 209 in California, the continuing attack on affirmative action, and a legacy of racial violence, this desire for a third, borderland space provokes suspicion. Unwittingly, it (the utopian third term) may become a theoretically conventional way to elide a significance of continuing, daily racial oppression, becoming a handmaiden to the very anti-progressive, power-evasive discourses that the authors might consciously deplore. Destabilizing the signifier is not enough. (101)

Kondo's concern here, that transcending race and gender may be part of the "anti-progressive, power-evasive discourses," suggests that the intervention of destabilizing signs from their meanings may not be enough to create social change. Instead, Kondo stresses how, although cross-racial performance has a problematic history in Black minstrel shows and blackface, performers of color who cross racial and gender lines must create work that "mount(s) a theoretical critique that sharpens our understanding of the historical and political landscape and creat(es) new kinds of formations to combat hegemonic forces" (105). She believes that cross-racial, cross-gender performances can do the work of "de-essentializing identity, a shifting that throws into relief the shaping of identity through historically specific bodily disciplines that we label race, gender, and so on. These disciplines and the attributes they ostensibly index are thus exposed as phantasmatic, arbitrary, and performative" (Kondo 96).

By performing James Dean and other white male icons, Ai indeed crosses racial and gender lines and illustrates how performances on the page and stage can offer sites of resistance and intervention that challenge representations of the status quo and that wrestle with racism, sexism, and homophobia by emphasizing the abject outside of the ideal. Her use of temporary surrogates reflects the potential of cross-racial, cross-gender alliances, as she crosses the border into white, heterosexual male privilege and uses this site of privileged subjectivity to deconstruct its very norms and images. Ai's performances expose the ideal as a product of technological apparatuses and discourses, and the attributes of race, class, and gender as, in Kondo's words, "phantasmatic, arbitrary, and performative" (96). By inviting readers to identify with James Dean's disidentification with his white, male hetero-normativity, the speaker in "James Dean" asks readers to challenge or at least question white, male hetero-normativity and to think of identity as fluid rather than stable.

The speaker in Ai's "James Dean" makes audiences aware at the end of the dramatic monologue how the continual reproduction of James Dean's image will sustain white, heterosexual masculinity as ideal through dominant discourses and representational apparatuses that disseminate posters, films, photographs, and biographies. These various texts will keep him "unbetrayed by age or fashion" because, even though dead, James Dean will "never leave the stage" (31-32). This ending to her monologue suggests that Ai seems very realistic about the interventions she can make to dominant representations of the ideal, but the poem in its entirety also stresses the need to disidentify with norms and desire in order to open up space for new meanings.

Pedagogically, studying Ai's work with students provides them with rich materials to explore the impact of technology on identity and to situate Ai's work during a historical period in which the advancement of media technology rose alongside a crucial period in identity politics. Reinventing James Dean may not necessarily be a huge challenge to matrices of power and the racial imaginary, but at the time, in the 1990s, the idea that the identity of a historical subject could continually shift and change was new, and perhaps allowed for the emerging interest in cross-racial, cross-gender, mixed-media performance alliances and the hope that racial difference would disappear through technology. By challenging the inflexibility of hetero-normativity that projects abject sexuality onto people of color, the speaker's performance in "James Dean" contributes to the demanding work of addressing the racial and gender oppression that has the potential to erase certain bodies out of existence. And by questioning his sexuality, the speaker in "James Dean" suggests that hetero- and homosexuality are positions in a fluid spectrum of sexual identities, thereby exposing spaces where gay, lesbian, and female desires have been disavowed or projected onto the abject in order to give power to hetero-normativity—and perhaps monoracial-normativity as well. By disidentifying with the mass public's desire for James Dean the ideal, Ai's solo performance creates a space for a mediated identification with the icon that recognizes the oppressive and normalizing discourses of dominant ideology and calls for different productions of masculinity, so that others may live.

Works Cited

- Ai. "On Being ½ Japanese, 1/8 Choctaw, ¼ Black, and 1/16 Irish." *Ms.* 6.11 (1978): 58. Print.
- . "Movies, Mom, Poetry, Sex, and Death: A Self-Interview." *On the Bus.* 4:8-9 (1991): 240-8. Print
- . *Fate.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1991. Print.
- Alexander, Paul. *Boulevard of Broken Dreams: The Life, Times, and Legend of James Dean.* New York: Plume, 1994. Print.
- Bast, William. *Surviving James Dean.* Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2006. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter.* New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Camper, Carol, ed. *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women.* Toronto: Sister Vision, 1994. Print.
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Race and/as Technology or How to Do Things to Race." *Race After the Internet.* Ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Dalton, David. *James Dean: The Mutant King.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Print.
- Dolan, Jill. "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles." Ed. Laurence Senelick. *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts.* Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1992. 3-13. Print.
- Dyer, Richard. "Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-Up." *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality.* Ed. Mandy Merck. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Funderburg, Lisa. *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk about Race and Identity.* New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994. Print.
- Gay, Kathlyn. "I am Who I am": *Speaking Out about Multiracial Identity.* New York: Franklin Watts, 1995. Print.
- Haizlip, Shirley Taylor. *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993. Print.
- Hara, Marie and Nora Okja Keller, eds. *Intersecting Circles: the voices of hapa women in poetry and prose.* Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1999. Print.

Herndon, Venable. *James Dean: A Short Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1974. Print.

Houston, Velina Hasu and Teresa Kay Williams. "No Passing Zone: The Artistic and Discursive Voices of Asian-Descent Multi-Racials." *Amerasia Journal* 23.1 (1997): vii-xii. Print.

Howlett, John. *James Dean: A Biography*. London: Plexus, 1997. Print.

Hyams, Joe and Jay Hyams. *James Dean: Little Boy Lost*. New York: Warner Books, 1992. Print.

Jones, Lisa. *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair*. New York: Doubleday, 1994. Print.

Kondo, Dorinne. "(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre." *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 81-107. Print.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.

La Ferla, Ruth. "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous." *New York Times* 28 Dec 2003: sec. 9: 1. Print.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.

Martinetti, Ronald. *The James Dean Story*. New York: Pinnacle Books, 1975. Print.

Munoz, Jose Esteban. *Disidentifications: queers of color and the performance of politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.

Nakashima, Cynthia and Teresa Williams-Leon, ed. *The Sum of our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. Print.

Nunez, Sigrid. *A Feather on the Breath of God*. New York: Harpercollins, 1995. Print.

Omi, Michael and Harold Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Perry, George. *James Dean*. London: DK Publishing, 2005. Print.

Peterson, Michael. *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997. Print.

- Roach, Joseph. "Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World." *Performativity and Performance*. Ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Roman, David. *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998. Print.
- Root, Maria P.P., ed. *Racially Mixed People in America*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992. Print.
- . *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996. Print.
- See, Lisa. *On Gold Mountain*. New York: St. Martin's, 1995. Print.
- Shimakawa, Karen. "Swallowing the Tempest: Asian American Women on Stage." *Theatre Journal* 47.3(1995): 367-380. Print.
- . *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. Print.
- "Special Issue: The New Face of America." *Time* (Fall 1993): n. pag. Print.
- Spoto, Donald. *Rebel: The Life and Legend of James Dean*. New York: Harpercollins, 1996. Print.
- Thornton, Michael C. and Harold Gates, "Black, Japanese, and American: An Asian American Identity Yesterday and Today." *The Sum of our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Ed. Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia L. Nakashima. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. Print.
- Vanhoutte, Kurt. "Theatrical Mimesis and Technology: Allegorising the Body." *Degres: Revue de Synthèse a Orientation Semiologique* 28.1 (Spring 2000): 1-8. Print.
- Williams, Gregory. *Life on the Colored Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He was Black*. New York: Dutton, 1995. Print.
- Williams, Teresa Kay. "Race-ing and Being Raced: The Critical Interrogation of 'Passing.'" *Amerasia Journal* 23.1 (1997): 61-65. Print.
- Williams, Teresa Kay and Velina Hasu Houston. "No Passing Zone: The Artistic and Discursive Voices of Asian-Descent Multi-Racials." *Amerasia Journal* 23.1 (1997): vii-xii. Print.
- Williams-Leon, Teresa and Cynthia Nakashima, ed. *The Sum of our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. Print.

Zack, Naomi, ed. *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995. Print.

---. *Race and Mixed Race*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993. Print.