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Mona on the Phone: The Performative Body and Racial Identity in *Mona in the Promised Land*

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When the teenage title character in *Mona in the Promised Land* realizes

how in the popular conception Orientals are supposed to be exotically erotic, . . . all she'll want to say is, But what about my areolaless nubs? Not to say my sturdy short legs—have you ever seen a calf so hammy? And no billowy, Brillo-y bush, alas. How should she have one when she does not even need to shave her legs? This last a convenience of sorts. (75-76)

Not too surprisingly, Mona's adolescent angst takes the form of anxiety about her body, but what distinguishes this anxiety is its intimate relationship to issues of race:

this whole train of thought will one day prove not her own train at all, but a train set on track by racist sexist imperialists. She will one day discover that it is great to be nonhairy, and what's more that not all Asians are areolaless, just her and some others. Plus that she is yellow and beautiful—baby boobs, hammy calves, and all. She will ask for an extra print when people take her picture. She will come to recognize, with a little squinting, her goddess within. (76)

Throughout Gish Jen's book, moments like these that focus on the body are inextricably entwined with the novel's treatment of the politics of racial identity. *Mona in the Promised Land* is univer-

sally acclaimed as funny,¹ but the tongue-in-cheek irony of such passages complicates interpretation of the novel's racial politics. In this essay, I want to examine how the discourse of the racialized body is deconstructed through the device of Mona's telephone calls. When Mona works the temple hotline, the text explicitly calls into question the identity of her repeat caller. Is it Sherman Matsumoto, Mona's love interest from eighth grade, or is it one of her friends posing as Sherman? Mona's attempts to imagine a body for the disembodied voice are mapped onto discourses of racial identity. Judith Butler's notion of the performative body provides a useful context in which to explore the novel's rhetorical strategies and their effect on its politics of race.

In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler argues that there is no "prediscursive anatomical facticity" (*Gender Trouble* 8). Rather, she suggests, bodies only become intelligible as bodies through the repetition of utterances that form the body even as they describe it. It is this process of citation, this "process of materialization" that "stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (*Bodies That Matter* 9). Butler usefully suggests that the physical body cannot be imagined, cannot be understood, outside the realm of discourse, and that such discourses construct certain kinds of bodies as normative while marginalizing others. Although her discussion focuses primarily on gender, Butler's insights are particularly relevant for our purposes. Racial identity, like gender identity, is intimately inflected by—indeed, defined by—ideas about how the body signifies, and both operate in a contemporary social context that privileges certain kinds of bodies over others.

In *Mona in the Promised Land* Gish Jen repeatedly cites certain dominant tropes about race, but does she do so in a way that reinscribes normative notions or works against them? When Barbara has sex for the first time, Mona

finds that she does not see herself as old enough for sex.

How can this be? Mona was the first one in her entire grade to get her period. Plus she surmises by the population problems of the Far East that she is appropriately equipped. But she doesn't look like, say, Barbara. If her friend is a developed nation, Mona is, sure enough, the third world. Barbara's is the body Mona is still waiting to grow into:

Her breasts, for example, are veritable colonies of herself, with a distinct tendency toward independence. (75)

Jen's text focuses the reader's attention on the issue of teenage anxiety about sex. Is Mona ready for it? When did she get her period? Do her body's sexual functions operate properly? When Mona ponders her reproductive capabilities in relation to "the population problems of the Far East," Jen cites a racialized discourse without critiquing it. She does not, for example, suggest how such problems are the legacy of a history of colonialism, nor does she point out how discussions of such problems in the contemporary US context often serve to underpin discourses of racial elitism that result in the policing of the bodies of people of color. When Mona compares her body to Barbara's normative one, she finds herself wanting. However, when Jen describes Barbara as the "developed nation" with breasts that are "veritable colonies of herself" and Mona as the "third world," which is "waiting to grow into" the developed nation, Jen cites normative notions about race, but by using such incongruous and unexpected references to describe the processes of puberty, Jen draws attention to the very metaphors she is using. Rather than reiterating and reinscribing these notions in an uncritical way, she stretches racial discourse to the point of ludicrousness and applies it in an unconventional context. This rhetorical strategy is what makes the passage funny, but it also serves a more serious purpose.

Jen's text here enacts what Judith Butler describes as a *hyperbolic citation*. A hyperbolic citation reiterates a normative notion in an exaggerated way in order to simultaneously work against it. It exposes the assumptions that underlie that normative notion, assumptions that are mystified and naturalized in most citations of that notion. Drag, for example, is a hyperbolic citation when it "mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive convention that it also reverses" (*Bodies That Matter* 232): a man wearing an elaborate wig and clothes that are outrageously feminine cites the conventions of gender identity in a hyperbolic way that simultaneously exposes and reverses those conventions. Hyperbolic citation can be powerful because it exposes the process by which certain categories or concepts are naturalized while others are marginal-

ized. It promotes, in Marjorie Garber's terms, "the crisis of category itself" (17).

Hyperbolic citation appears throughout Jen's novel, but in Mona's phone calls with "Sherman" it takes a particularly interesting form. These passages operate as hyperbolic citation not only in terms of their rhetoric but also in terms of the relationship they trace out between voice and the body. When Mona receives her first mysterious phone call, she writes in her logbook:

Japanese (?) male calling for (is this prejudiced?) somewhat inscrutable but probably profound reasons. Although who knows, maybe also/just for language practice (English). . . . Given caller's depressed state of mind, probably ought also to have explored caller attitude toward hari-kari, even if that's a stereotype. (70)

The humor of this passage lies in the way it calls attention to its own citation of dominant racist discourses. If the speaker is an Asian male, then he must be "inscrutable" and yet "profound." He must need English practice, even though "his English pronunciation is now textbook clear" (69). He might commit hari-kari, "even if that's a stereotype." Indeed, such phrases as "even if that's a stereotype" both draw attention to and undermine the very stereotypes being cited. Moreover, by having the caller's voice be the only indication of his identity, Jen sets up a situation where the racialization of the body is foregrounded. Mona cannot see the caller, but his racial identity is crucial to her understanding of his intent.

Jen does not merely cite such assumptions, however; she denaturalizes these interpretive strategies by drawing attention to their constructedness. The second sentence in the passage, for example, resonates with the first. When Jen uses the phrase "is this prejudiced?" she stresses how problematic it is to describe the caller's reasons as "inscrutable but probably profound." The phrase "Although who knows" suggests that what follows will be different from what came before, that the second sentence will not cite a racist stereotype like the first. Mona's utterly prejudiced reference to "language practice," then, is unexpected and funny. It is precisely this dynamic—the surprise reversal—that foregrounds the underlying assumptions of this statement. The text emphasizes Mona's dependence on the racialized body in order to determine

her caller's intentions, and, in doing so, exposes the constructedness of both race as a concept *and* the racialized body.

When Barbara suspects that the caller is Andy Kaplan, the two girls attempt to verify her hypothesis by asking the caller a series of questions:

Ask him what professors wear in Japan, writes Barbara.

“What do professors wear in Japan?”

“What?”

Ask him what he's wearing right now.

“What are you wearing?” Mona asks. “Right now.”

“Me? What am I wearing?”

Ask him if he's wearing blue jeans.

“Are you wearing blue jeans?”

How could he not know what he is wearing?

“I am wearing blue jeans,” he says finally. (80)

This passage imagines clothing in specifically racialized terms. The identity of the speaker is linked to his racial/national identity through his ability to know what Japanese professors wear. Mona's question about “blue jeans” is simultaneously a reference to the most prototypically American garment and to the system of global capitalism that has made it so popular in other countries. The text here figures clothing as an extension of the racialized body while simultaneously highlighting both the girls' uncertainty about how the caller is actually dressed and how that clothing might signify race. Even while it cites normative notions about race, the novel exposes the racialized body as a performative construct. Indeed, at the end of the conversation, when Barbara jumps in and asks directly if the caller is Andy, the caller responds, “You will never be Japanese” (82). By repeating the real Sherman's original words, the text implies that the caller is in fact Sherman. By suggesting that the caller's inability to describe his physical reality doesn't necessarily correlate with his identity, Jen makes it clear that the caller's identity is performative, is constructed through speech via the citation of certain naturalized concepts about racial identity. It is not possible, she suggests, to think of bodies that do not have cultural meanings attached to them, and these culturally-inflected bodies are materialized only in and through practice.

When the body of Sherman seems to materialize in a literal sense, we assume that anomalies in earlier conversations were simply that, that the correlation between voice and the body is indeed one-to-one, that the caller was indeed Sherman himself:

Eloise finally stands and excuses herself—only to have her red-laced, Vibram-soled hiking boots replaced by the blue-laced, Vibram-soled hiking boots of someone who bears a distinct resemblance to Sherman Matsumoto.

“Sherman!” Mona says, looking up.

“Mona?”

Sherman is so changed that Mona is not sure how she recognized him. . . it is his face most of all that has changed. Gone the baby-fat upholstery, and the poky pink flush. His face is kite-shaped, a bit pale, distinctly planar—a face that bespeaks testosterone. As for the old hole in his left eyebrow, that has grown over without a trace; his eyebrows are veritable slashes now. (226-27)

Seeing Sherman actualized in *a* body, we readers assume, as Mona does, that this is in fact *the* body. This understanding of the body carries over into how Mona understands “Sherman’s” voice: “Mona finds that being able to picture Sherman makes for a whole different listening experience. How much sexier he sounds—how much more like someone on whose account she would have to take eighty showers” (227). The irony is, of course, one that the reader does not pick up on until later: the voice belongs to Seth, whom Mona has already had sex with and who was the cause of the original so-called eighty showers that Barbara took (75). If the body is materialized through speech in the earlier chapters, here the *sound* of the voice—the “embodied” part of speech as opposed to its power of verbal signification—is materialized through the body. In other words, how we understand the voice, and its corollary identity, is affected by how we understand the body; seeing a racialized body that is clearly Asian, male, and physically mature, the identity we assign to the quality of the voice itself is, we assume, a function of that.

Gish Jen’s coup is to make the reader believe what Mona believes, only to reveal later that this voice was Seth’s and that the voice in the earlier chapters was in fact Andy Kaplan’s. The statements Mona makes that are based on a racialized understand-

ing of the body, of the body as signifier of identity, are undermined. The whole notion that “Sherman’s English is so greatly improved that his voice itself seems somehow to have improved along with it” (227) becomes humorous because both the ostensible Sherman’s English and his voice really have nothing to do with the racialized body of the “Sherman” that Mona sees in the school hallway, the boy who is later revealed to be a Hawaiian exchange student hired by Seth to fool Mona. Mona’s assumption that this change in the ostensible Sherman’s speech is a result of “immersion in another culture” (227) is a further irony because, of course, Seth *is* immersed in American culture but that culture is not to him “another” culture: it is simply the one he has always known. Jen’s comic elements also point to larger and more serious issues: these very racialized understandings of the relationship between culture and body have been exemplified in attitudes that paint Asian Americans as foreign others who may be immersed in “American” culture but are never an inherent part of it. This irony, this humor, operates as a hyperbolic citation because it draws attention to assumptions about the body as racial signifier that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In a way similar to Mona’s phone calls with Sherman/Andy/Seth, the use of voice in Chapter 13, “Mona’s Life as Callie,” also breaks down the one-to-one correlation of body and identity. However, here it does so not as much in terms of racial identity as in terms of personal identity, with, as we shall see, important implications for the Epilogue. When Mona goes to stay with her sister and their mother unexpectedly calls, Mona ends up pretending she is Callie. By having Mona’s mother say “Since when do you have such a big mouth too?” (264), Jen calls attention to the discrepancy in identities, that it is Mona on the phone with her mother, not Callie. Such a move highlights the constructedness of the body by suggesting that the performative enactment of personal identity, not just racial identity, happens through speech, that the construction of an identity as attached to a certain body is mediated, not transparent. By having Mona take over Callie’s daily routine (walking around her campus, attending her classes, sleeping in her dorm room), Jen suggests the interchangeability of bodies/identities: “Which daughter is the good daughter now, which one the bad? And what would Helen think if she realized

that Mona is no longer missing—that the one unaccounted for is her very own Harvard matriculate?” (265).

This connection between the way bodies signify racial identity and the way bodies signify personal identity comes together in the Epilogue when Mona marries Seth. The nuptial conclusion seems perfunctory, more for the sake of poetic justice than anything else. But by having Mona marry Seth, the plot line makes Sherman and Seth even more interchangeable: the engagement at the age of thirteen does hold true; Mona does, in fact, get married to “Sherman” after all. In doing so, however, the novel undermines a notion of personal identity as fixed in a stable, racially unitary body. Bodies and identities—and races, it seems—are interchangeable. The rhetorical force of having Mona and Seth marry each other outweighs the imperative of realism.

Why, then, do people assume that this book is autobiographical? The reviewer for the *Washington Post* remarks that this text “fairly trumpets its origins in the author’s own experience” (Yardley). Jen is frequently asked if she’s Jewish (see, for example, Gilbert). But, as the *Chicago Sun-Times* article notes:

Despite some surface similarities between herself and Mona—at the most basic, both were the daughters of Chinese immigrants, growing up in primarily Jewish neighborhoods—Jen, 40, says the book is far from autobiographical.

“My very oldest friend from Scarsdale just called me yesterday, and said people just would never understand—I mean, she completely knows that none of it happened,” Jen says, laughing. “It’s all made up. I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s true.” (Hanis)

It seems that the imperative to identify Asian American authors with their Asian American characters overrides the tendencies within the text itself that work against naturalism and against naturalizing the relationship between the body and identity, both personal and racial. Jen’s own body, we might say, cannot avoid being materialized as Asian American. Her “voice” as an author becomes implicated by and in the body that signifies race.

Such tendencies are not only indicative of the “burden of representation” so often placed on Asian American writers. They also signal the ways in which an Asian American poetics employing hyperbolic citation is always in danger of being misread or

appropriated. *Hyperbolic* citations meant to expose and undermine normative assumptions can come to seem like *citations* of those very ideas. Book reviews of *Mona in the Promised Land*, for example, often try to mitigate the politically progressive work performed by the novel. They see Jen's text as humorously reconciling racial differences under a "multicultural" umbrella. The *LA Times* reviewer says, for instance:

In a kind of joyful irony which, among other things, makes "Mona" a shining example of a multicultural message delivered with the wit and bite of art, it is Scarshill's Jewish families that represent for the Chinese girl the American Dream. (Eder)

Eder seems to imply that only a multicultural message (whatever that's supposed to mean) that is expressed positively (with "joyful" irony) can be considered to have achieved the status of "art." Such focus on the "multicultural" presents race relations as a matter of cultural exchange, not institutional power and the distribution of material resources. Reviewers also celebrate Jen's "political incorrectness," a stance they see as integral to her humor. Sharan Gibson, writing for *The Houston Chronicle*, quotes Jen as saying "I don't know if there is a PC way to write about all the different groups reacting to each other and intermingling. . . . It would have to be like the U.N. Very boring." Matthew Gilbert, for *The Boston Globe*, describes America as the place where "politically correct writers tiptoe on eggshells while the rest tell it like it is, the rest being irrepressible literary voices like that of Gish Jen."

But in describing the relationship between her novel and social activism, Jen herself presents a more complicated argument than her reviewers: "Is this book un-p.c.? Yes. Is it anti-p.c.? Not exactly. The truth of the matter is, I think in some quarters it's gone too far, but in some quarters it hasn't gone far enough" (Hanis). The fact that reviewers appropriate Jen's work in such problematic ways foregrounds an important question: how do we talk about race in a way that does not naturalize race as a category but is still culturally intelligible? Indeed, it seems that, when we talk about race at all, we *must* cite because there is no discursive practice that does not include citation. In that citing, we *do* reinforce normative notions—we cannot avoid doing so—but we also circulate notions of identity because "[t]hat this reiteration is

necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 2).

By pointing out that it is impossible to see the body in a culturally neutral way, by suggesting that the body is always already immersed in culturally constructed meanings, Jen denaturalizes at least one of the assumptions on which racist discourses are founded. While Jen's text has in so many ways been massaged into alignment with the rhetoric of "assimilation" and "multiculturalism," her use of hyperbolic citation in the device of Mona's phone calls foregrounds the body as non-unitary, as materializable and not "naturally" given. In doing so, this novel at least opens the door to thinking about the relationship between the body and racial identity as performative, a tendency which "classical realist" texts (Belsey 67) work against. A new Asian American poetics would do well to follow Jen's lead.

Notes

1. Reviewers repeatedly emphasize this aspect of the book. To note just a few of the many examples, Gibson considers it "undoubtedly one of the funniest books out this summer." Goldberg describes it as "very amusing." Eder characterizes the book as "witty" and thinks Mona is "terribly funny."

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