

2009

Oppression through Sexualization: The Use of Sexualization in “Going to Meet the Man” and “The Shoyu Kid”

Joe Gorman

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev



Part of the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gorman, Joe (2009). Oppression through Sexualization: The Use of Sexualization in “Going to Meet the Man” and “The Shoyu Kid”. *Undergraduate Review*, 5, 119-124.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol5/iss1/24

Oppression through Sexualization: The Use of Sexualization in “Going to Meet the Man” and “The Shoyu Kid”

JOE GORMAN

Joe is a senior majoring in English with a minor in Secondary Education. After his time at Bridgewater State College, he plans to attend graduate school and a career as an educator. Joe wrote the following piece under the mentorship of Dr. Kimberly Chabot- Davis in the senior seminar “Encountering Whiteness: Black and Ethnic American Writers and Filmmakers Return the Gaze”.

White supremacy is a fleshy ideology; it's very much about bodies.

-- Mason Stokes

In a world of differences and misunderstandings, disparities and distance, there is a seemingly endless myriad of modes by which human beings categorize, segregate, and immobilize each other. History is filled with repeated instances of groups asserting themselves through any necessary means in order to retain dominance and power. In a rather unnerving way, the human race can prove to be quite creative in its tenacity to oppress. Obviously, racism and cultural repression have proven to be weapons of choice time and again. Being of a perhaps more primal and misunderstood nature, sex has also been employed as a tool of oppression, alongside race and culture. Writers such as James Baldwin and Lonny Kaneko explore the idea of how whites use race, culture, and sex together as a means of suppressing the cultural identities of non-whites. . Baldwin's short story “Going to Meet the Man” brings to life a white man whose entire racist ideology is based upon a link between violence, sex, and his experiences with a Southern lynch mob. His own masculinity is defined by the connection between racism and sexual violence. Kaneko's short story “The Shoyu Kid” reaches into another instance in American history, by depicting a group of young Japanese boys whose ideas of masculinity and identity are splintered and clouded by a pedophilic internment camp guard. While the two writers draw upon quite different backgrounds and contexts, they both exemplify the way in which sex is used to devalue the cultural identities of non-whites. Through both the hypersexualization of the African American male and the emasculation of the Asian American male, Baldwin and Kaneko both explore how ethnic masculinity is attacked, white supremacy is imposed, and non-white cultural identity is eventually invalidated.

James Baldwin's short story “Going to Meet the Man” deals with the hypersexualization of the African American man, and ultimately how white masculinity and white supremacy are affirmed by the killing of a particular black male. The story opens with its white male narrator, Jesse, struggling to perform sexually with his wife after a day of law enforcement in the civil-rights-era Southern United States. In the first full paragraph of the piece, Baldwin writes of Jesse's sexual desires, alluding to Jesse's connection between African Americans and sex: “He could not ask her to do just a little thing for him, just to help him out, just for a little while, the way he could ask a nigger girl to do it” (255). Baldwin goes on to write “The image of the black

girl caused a distant excitement in him” (255), suggesting the sexualized nature Jesse applies to African Americans. As the scene continues on, there is an apparent sense of frustration with which Jesse is grappling. While he struggles with sudden impotency, he is also wrestling with his own sense of masculinity. Because he is not able to perform, Jesse’s sense of manhood appears to be slipping out of his reach. However, this notion of “silent, angry, helpless [ness]” (Baldwin 255) is remedied through the recollection of and repetition of sexualized violence.

In an attempt to somehow justify his failing efforts at sex with his wife, Jesse reviews the beating of a young black man in a prison cell after a protest. While the tale is initially about the beating, Jesse sexualizes both the situation and his victim. Even in Jesse’s first description of the young man, he notes “He was lying on the ground jerking and moaning” (Baldwin, 258). The writhing and moaning of the victim is reminiscent of some sort of sexual pleasure as Jesse hypersexualizes the black man, even as he is severely thrashed. Jesse alludes to a masculine potency possessed by his victim that acts as an origin for both fascination and rage. This undercurrent continues as Jesse proceeds to repeatedly stick the man with a cattle prod, drawing an analogy with the act of sexual intercourse. This image is further described, as Baldwin writes: “he kept prodding the boy, sweat pouring from beneath the helmet he had not yet taken off” (258). While Jesse is sexualizing his victim, he is also moving to reclaim his own sexual and racial dominance. In a sense, he, a white male, is raping the hypersexualized African American man, thereby establishing a defined and supreme role. Baldwin further equates sex with Jesse’s assertion of power and masculinity over the African American victim as the narrative shifts back from first person to a narrator who reveals “His mouth felt dry and his throat was rough as sandpaper; as he talked, he began to hurt all over with that peculiar excitement which refused to be released” (258). In recalling the manner in which he beat and sexualized the African American man into submission, Jesse begins to feel a sense of arousal.

There seems to be a racialized and protective motive behind Jesse’s need to abuse the prisoner so virulently. In her essay “White Men as Performers in the Lynching Ritual,” Trudier Harris writes: “The white male’s function, ostensibly, was to protect his home and especially the white woman...The white man’s craving for power and mastery [are] indications of his ultimate superiority not only in assigning a place to his women, but especially in keeping black people, particularly black men, in the place he had assigned for them” (229-30). Jesse beats the African American prisoner with a fervor that is driven by a sense of establishing his role as the dominant male protector of white women and of his community. Harris further states

that a white man, like Jesse, “sees himself as savior, father, and keeper of the purity” (300). As Jesse beats and essentially rapes the prisoner, he is carrying out a self-proclaimed duty of providing a protection not merely for women, but for his own masculinity and white superiority.

The beating culminates with a verbal explosion from Jesse, berating the victim and claiming “You lucky we pump some white blood into you every once in a while--your women” (Baldwin 260). This claim further asserts Jesse’s dominance, both in terms of whiteness and masculinity, over the black victim. In claiming to be forcing “white blood” into the African American community, he moves to render white masculinity more virile than that of his black victim. As Jesse’s rage boils over, he “felt himself violently stiffen—with no warning at all” (Baldwin 260), subconsciously equating his own sense of appropriated stature with sexual arousal and supremacy. While Baldwin comments upon white males hypersexualizing and then beating down African American males to assert their own dominance in the first half of “Going to Meet the Man,” the latter half reveals the way in which the white male community strips the African American man of his entire male and cultural identity.

In the wake of Jesse’s heightening sexual excitement, Baldwin seamlessly shifts the narrative to that of Jesse’s childhood experience with a mob lynching. Lynch mobs in and of themselves are often associated with a sexualized ritual of togetherness in the white male community. While the victim of a mob is often being tortured for a supposed act of sexual deviance, historian Grace Hale explains “by the end of the nineteenth century, however, [the African American man] could be stripped and killed, becoming a sexual victim himself” (Hale 231). As the white males of the lynch mob attack their victim, they also sexualize him as a means of further demonizing him. In his book *The Color of Sex*, Mason Stokes notes that “[lynching] was a crime directed specifically at black male bodies,” and that the mob’s motives are sexualized. As the lynch mob puts the victim on display, it was often common practice within the torture to mutilate and dismember the bodies in a particularly sexualized manner, to provide bizarre souvenirs of the brutalization. Such an act serves as a blossoming for Jesse’s psyche in “Going to Meet the Man,” as he witnesses the sexual fascination with and castration of the lynch mob victim.

As the father and son pair is thrust into beholding the lynching of the African American man, Jesse begins to describe the horrific acts taking place before the mob. He immediately begins to note the physicality of the victim, applying animalistic qualities to the suffering man. Jesse notes “he was...black as an African jungle Cat, and naked” (Baldwin 270), and further

describes the terror in the man's screams. However, it is as the apparent leader of the lynch mob reveals a knife that Jesse begins to take careful notice of the sexualized nature of the mob. As the leader, a friend of Jesse's father, takes out the blade, Jesse states he "wished he had been that man. It was a long, bright knife and the sun seemed to catch it, to play with it, to caress it—it was brighter than the fire" (Baldwin 271). The knife, in the hands of the white man, acts as a phallic symbol with which the lynch mob, primarily the males, will eventually overtake the hypersexualized victim. The sexual fascination is heavily exemplified as the knife-wielding leader approaches the victim and Jesse explains:

[He] took the nigger's privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing them. In the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger's private seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and huge, huge, huge, much bigger than his father's, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest. The white hand stretched them, cradled them, caressed them. (271)

To examine this instance of sexual fascination, I turn to the work of Trudier Harris who explains that "the white men involved in the lynchings and burnings spent an inordinate amount of time examining the genitals of the black men whom they were about to kill...there was a suggestion of fondling, of envious caress" (302), affirming the sexual connotations of the mob. In Jesse's description, the hypersexualization and masculinization of the African American victim is blatantly stated, notably in the phrase "much bigger than his father's" (271). While the labeling has been completed, the subsequent actions of castration and burning move to assert the dominance and superiority of the white male's cultural and racial identity.

After the spectacle of fascination and sexualization, the leader violently removes the genitals of the victim, and the mob mutilates and scorches the body. In employing the phallic symbol of the knife in removing the African American man's physical manhood, the white attacker asserts his own masculinity. While masculinity is stripped from the black man, his identity is also attacked. In the aftermath of the mob's carnage, Jesse cannot even recognize exactly what he is seeing. In explaining the victim's body, Jesse notes "But one had to look carefully to realize this, for it was, now, merely a black charred object on the black charred ground. He lay spread-eagled with what had been a wound between what had been his legs" (Baldwin 272). Not only is Jesse having trouble identifying the body as a now desexualized male, he cannot even distinguish

it as human. He equates the charring of the body with that of the ground, and explains the care with which one must look in order to realize the remnants of an African American. The mob does more than assert dominance through sexualization. The mob strips away the black man's cultural identity, reduces him only to blackness, and erases his status as a human. The act of the white community collectively brutalizing the victim denotes a domination of the African American identity. Harris comments on lynching and castration: "the black man is stripped of his prowess, but the very act of stripping brings symbolic power to the white man" (303), further affirming the imposed supremacy Jesse witnesses. In the wake of the post-lynching celebration, whiteness and racial supremacy are made a joyous occasion as the hypersexualized victim lays a mere smoldering trace of black identity.

While Baldwin's story deals with one extreme end of a broad sexualized spectrum, Lonny Kaneko's short story "The Shoyu Kid" presents a contrast to the previously examined mode of sexualization. Kaneko shows how whiteness feminizes and emasculates the Japanese male as a means of establishing white dominance. The piece centers on a group of three Japanese American boys in a World War II internment camp attempting to torment a younger boy nicknamed the "Shoyu Kid". Throughout the course of the story, the group is immersed in a continual hunt for the boy and his desirable prized chocolate bars. However, as one of the boys witnesses the molestation of the Shoyu Kid by a white guard, the notions of Japanese masculinity and cultural identity are challenged, and eventually abandoned by the boys, resulting in their adoption of white cultural attitudes and norms.

Kaneko creates an atmosphere of dissipating Japanese American male identity early in the text through the apparent lack of Japanese male figures and the characters' own attempts to emulate white male icons. The three boys whom the narrative follows all denounce their Japanese names in an apparent attempt to adopt white culture. The story's instigator, Hiroshi, detests his birth name and prefers to be called "Jackson." The narrator notes "Jackson hated to be called Hiroshi and would make a face or thumb his nose as soon as [the women] turned their backs" (Kaneko 2), revealing his disapproval of Japanese culture. In his article "The Minority Self as Other," David Palumbo-Liu writes that in "The Shoyu Kid," "Japanese names are avoided as tokens of weakness" (92), thereby explaining the way in which white culture has infected the young Japanese boys' psyches. Palumbo-Liu further comments on another boy's shift from "Ichiro" to "Itchy" as a means of Americanizing his Japanese name (92). In a similar fashion, the narrator's description of his friends also brings forth a sense of overbearing white masculinity. The text is perforated by allusions to white

male images and marked by the absence of Japanese male figures. The narrator states that Jackson “then went into a cowboy pose, his thumbs hooked into his pockets” (Kaneko 3), exemplifying the boys’ efforts to simulate white American iconography. In a more profound instance, the narrator notes “Jackson smiled his John Wayne smile and took the Kid by the overall straps” (Kaneko 7). In comparison, the only boy who does not emulate images of white males, The Kid, is represented in a feminized manner. The narrator comments “I couldn’t see his eyes, but I knew they were watery. They always were. The Kid was always on the verge of crying” (1), alluding to the weaker child’s feminine nature. When matched against the John Wayne bravado of Jackson, The Kid’s feminized character is frowned upon and his Japanese male identity is questioned. Given the shortage of any Japanese male figures, the boys latch onto images of powerful white males in order to find their own sense of masculinity, and further distance themselves from embracing their Japanese heritage. Consequently, there is an implied emasculation of the Japanese male through the adoption of white masculinity. This is evident in the scene of the elderly Japanese grandfather in the gardens.

The singular instance of a Japanese male other than the boys in the text comes in the form of a humorous chase scene. As the boys watch an elderly Japanese man attempt to catch some sort of scurrying animal, there is a sense of mockery evident from the narrator’s description. The crowd surrounding the spectacle laughs at the man’s struggles, and his body movements are described as “[an] old man whose feet seemed to be moving in two directions at once while his body was heading in a third. His arms...seemed to be confused about moving in a fourth direction” (Kaneko 5-6). Being the only adult Japanese male in the story, the old man exudes a weakened representation of masculinity, lacking strength or virility. The awkward man represents a feeble ideal for the younger Japanese boys to aspire towards. In examining the failed male presence, Palumbo-Liu writes, “This comic figure presents itself doubly: it represents the elder generation of Japanese-American males, formerly figures of authority and power, now dissembled, fragmented, and ultimately impotent” (94). Palumbo-Liu goes on to explain that within the internment camps, men like the elderly Japanese character in “The Shoyu Kid” were emasculated and feminized by their surroundings. Given that Japanese culture is a patriarchal culture, the Japanese man’s ability to provide for a family and protect that family was essentially rendered useless by the forced camp living. The elderly man in the story has no real sense of power; he is reduced to a mere joke by those who once respected his position. Because the duties and role of being a man have been removed, the Japanese identity is lost (95). As the white American troops lock down the

Japanese- American men, they also lock out their masculinity and eventually any pride in their racial identity.

While the omni-presence of white male images and a displaced sense of Japanese-American masculinity is evident in “The Shoyu Kid,” the molestation and interrogation of the Kid further feminizes and, in turn, strips away the Japanese identity. While the actual act of the white guard molesting The Kid is not directly shown, the ensuing confrontation among the boys proves to be far more telling in terms of its overall consequence. However, to understand the implications of the boys’ harassment of The Kid, it is important to understand their concept of masculinity as it relates to heterosexuality. In coming across a naked young girl, Jackson attempts to point out the qualifications of being a heterosexual, thus establishing his own sense of masculinity:

- “Did you see Joyce?” Itchy was changing the subject.
 “Little girls are sure funny to look at aren’t they?”
 “Itchy, you act like you ain’t never seen a naked girl before.”
 “Well, have you? I mean really seen one, Jackson? Seen what kind of prick they have?”
 “They don’t have one.”
 “That’s what I mean. Do you know what to do with it?”
 “Everyone knows. You get this hard on, see, and...”
 “Jackson, you got a hard on?” Itchy’s face was tight.
 “Yeah, don’t you? You’re supposed to.”
 “N-no.”
 “What are you, Itchy, some kind of queer or something. Don’t you know you’re supposed to have a hard on when you see a naked girl?” (Kaneko 3-4)

In explaining to Itchy what, in essence, it means to be a man, Jackson moves to affirm his masculinity. Puzzlingly, the only indication of where such notions would come from point towards the seemingly omnipresent white male status. In his book *Racial Castration*, David Eng argues that Jackson’s failure to manifest his claims of manhood in a physical manner signifies his own misguided sense of heterosexuality and identity (127). Another interpretation lies with the fact that the instance also proves to be a bonding experience for all the boys except The Kid. The three boys who identify themselves with white notions of masculinity all move towards confirming their heterosexual identities together, thus bonding in their male identity. Essentially, Jackson, Itchy, and the narrator move to equate masculinity and heterosexuality with whiteness

and, furthermore, what they idealize. In their discovery of The Kid's secret, what is left of the Japanese-American male identity is scrutinized and abandoned.

As the group takes The Kid behind a barracks, Jackson unleashes a barrage of questions forcing his victim into a teary submission. It is only as the young boy is pushed to his breaking point that he reveals the truth behind his abuse. As Jackson begins to strip The Kid's pants away, the sobbing victim states "I didn't do anything. I just played with his chimpo like he asked" (Kaneko 8), referring to the white guard. Jackson is outraged at the admission, exclaiming "You what? You whore! Queer! Queer! Queer!" (Kaneko 8) and further yelling "You played with the sonofabitch soldier? Goddamn queer!" (Kaneko 8). As he berates The Kid, Jackson also grabs at the young boys genitals in a fit of rage. Much like Baldwin's character asserting himself over his prison victim, Jackson molests The Kid in an overpowering and demeaning manner. In fact, Jackson takes to the abuse in such a way and with such authority that the narrator describes him as being like "the cavalry colonel threatening a turncoat Indian scout; he was a police interrogator breaking a burglar; he was an army intelligence officer ripping into a prisoner of war. His face was impassive. Perfect" (Kaneko 7). Every image conjured by the narrator in describing Jackson during the assault of The Kid mirrors a form of a white male figure. Each image is reminiscent of the boys' notions of white masculine dominance. In the face of the crying and abused child, the other Japanese American boys fall back onto their only sense of male identity.

As Jackson calls The Kid "queer" and "whore," he is equating what is Japanese with homosexuality and femininity. If, to the other three boys, whiteness equates with masculinity and power, then being Japanese-American now equates with homosexuality and weakness. In effect, the Japanese-American male identity is stripped. Much like the elderly man being emasculated and left without a sense of racial purpose, the emasculated Kid is left with no sense of racial or cultural purpose, and no identity. His betrayal of masculinity in offering himself up to the guard leaves him completely feminized and sterilized on both a sexual and racial level. David Eng theorizes that "together, whiteness and heterosexuality regulate who can or cannot have access to a loveable bodily ego and a coherent sense of self" (130), therefore revealing the nature of The Kid's dilemma. Being a now emasculated, feminine Japanese-American boy, The Kid has no sense of self or identity. Even the other three boys that harassed and sexualized The Kid have unknowingly lost their Japanese-American identities. Jackson's rage stems from his hatred of what he now sees as what it means to be a Japanese-American rather than a white American. Since he is the only one who does not work to emulate white male icons, the Kid becomes

a symbol of queer Japanese-America, which Jackson does not consider a legitimate identity. In light of this dichotomy of American whiteness versus Japanese-Americaness, David Eng writes:

In "The Shoyu Kid", the heterosexual stability of the patriotic white American male icon emerges only in contrast to the resolute linking of queerness with Japaneseness. In this manner, normative masculine self-representation constitutively depends upon the sexual "perversion" and pathologizing of the racialized masculine subject (136)

It is through the imposed white American ideal of masculinity that the characters of "The Shoyu Kid" lose their Japanese-American identities. It is not merely the singular victim of the molestation, but all four of the boys that suffer the consequences of the emasculation of the Japanese male.

In initially comparing "Going to Meet the Man" and "The Shoyu Kid," one may be hard pressed to find any apparent or blatant means by which to draw up parallels. The stories' narrators represent opposing sides of their respective conflicts. Historical context provides differing social situations. However, both texts exemplify the way in which non-white masculinity is attacked, whiteness is imposed, and non-white cultural identity is invalidated. The comparison lies in the means by which this is achieved. In Baldwin's work, the white male identity must first trump the hypersexualized black male identity in order to eventually assert whiteness. Conversely, Kaneko's piece illustrates how by imposing upon, subduing, and feminizing the Japanese-American identity, whiteness is also eventually asserted. The routes are different, but the result appears universal. The victims of both stories are not only stripped of their masculinity, but of the sense of any positive racial identity on the whole. Both writers take on different moments of history, different ethnic groups, and quite different racialized and sexualized situations, yet still arrive at the same unnerving end. While the stories place the racial identities of African American and Japanese American males on opposite ends of a sexualized spectrum, both suffer from erasure and are torn down by the white male identity. Whether it is the wildly exaggerated sexual nature presented by Baldwin, or the sterilized and muted sexuality written about by Kaneko, both are conquered by an all-powerful whiteness. What is it about the idea of race and the enigma of sexuality that provides an ongoing base for oppression? Perhaps it is a perverse curiosity that creates the outlet, or maybe it is just a deep-seated fear of the uncontrollable. Regardless of the scenario, writers such as James Baldwin and Lonny Kaneko show how two of the most fundamental bases of human beings are continually twisted into weapons to ensure non-white cultural identity's deletion.

Works Cited

Eng, David. *Racial Castration*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001.

Hale, Grace. *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998.

Palumbo-Liu, David. "The Minority Self as Other: Problematics of Representation in Asian American Literature". *Cultural Critique*. 28 (Fall 1994):75-102. MLAInternational Bibliography. BSC Library, Bridgewater, Ma. 10 December 2008. <https://bridgew.illiad.oclc.org/illiad/>>

Stokes, Mason. *The Color of Sex*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

Trudier, Harris. "White Men as Performers in the Lynching Ritual," *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*. Ed. David R. Roediger. New York. Schocken Books, 1998, 299-304.