

Critique

James's autobiography touches on a wide area, dealing mainly with the hidden undercurrent that exists within his family. Two major themes are present in his work: the idea of fragmentation bound through silence and the idea of being cast as the "exotic other."

James's past is bound in silence. In his story, "Arrowhead Bits," James attempts to make some sense of his life by assembling the memories of his long disowned half-brother into some semblance of a coherent story. Through this process, James reveals he is "bequeathed fragments, brief bits of the past, and nothing more. There are no unbroken threads, no fully developed talks or histories." (Mura 293). Through assembling these pieces, James mirrors Mura who found that "[his] identity, the most intimate of feelings about [his] own body, were directly tied to...the internment of the Japanese American community" (Mura 289). For James, he finds that his identity and his self-doubt stems from the silence in his family.

However, when trying to make some sense of his past, James can only remember "those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end" (Tran 6). In order to shed more light on the matter, he turns to his family only to find that "[his] parents would never tell me what happened to him" (Tran 6), and that "[his cousins] talk with him sometimes; but they never talk about him to [James]. They tell [him] facts, but never stories" (Tran 7). For James, "there are no unbroken threads, no fully developed talks or histories. There are too many secrets and oclusions...too many reasons to forget the past. And there are forces which do not want [him] to remember, do not want [him] to take those fragments and complete them, to restore them to some fuller life" (Mura 293). James encounters what Mirikitani recognizes as a Prison of Silence.

“The strongest prisons are built/ with walls of silence” (Mirikitani 5). To “soar from these walls of silence” would surely help James resolve his own past, but in the process he would upset his family stability and unearth, perhaps, the shame that is so deeply entrenched in his brother’s disownment (Mirikitani 9). Unable to break these shackles of silence, “[he] gave up. In the end, [he] had lost my brother. Not just the person, but his memory, his story” (Tran 6).

In the face of fragmentation, James also finds himself in a position to heed Matsuda’s rallying cry, “We will not be used,” a cry she uses in the hopes of liberating all Asian Americans from what she labels the racial bourgeoisie, the wannabes of society, the model minority. It is as this model minority that James finds himself being used many different ways, both through being casted into racial stereotypes to being casted as the exotic “other.”

In her poem, “America Geisha,” Mirikitani recognizes that despite the many achievements Asian Americans have academically, socially, and economically, they will never truly be able to integrate into white society. Asian Americans are often asked, “Where are you from?/ Lodi/ Minneapolis/ Chicago/ Gilroy/ South Bend/ Tule Lake/ San Francisco/ New York/ L.A./ They persist and/ ask again/ Compliment/ our command of the/ English language” (Mirikitani 21). Even though a person can be raised in America for their whole life, on the basis of their skin alone they will be judged: if you are yellow, you cannot speak English; you do not come from this country; America is not your home. There is a distinct racial divide which is created through stereotypes and social expectations. It is this same racial divide which James touches on in three separate stories. The first instance occurs in the story, “Voice,” where on the basis of his skin alone, he is perceived as having an accent despite having been raised in Utah his entire life. The second instance occurs when he grapples with the idea of being categorized as “totally azn” because he decides to become a doctor. Upon telling his friend he is taking the

MCAT, James is immediately cast into the light of a stereotypical Asian: a hard working person who becomes a doctor because of his parents. While James does try to disprove his Asian stereotype, he still allows himself to be used by permitting others to cast him into that racial stereotype.

In the third and final instance, James finds himself in the face of exoticization in the story “Stalker.” Alisha finds everything James to be awesome: his hair, his religion, the way he takes off his shoes when he enters a house, the very fact that he is Asian. When asking him to go cosplay with her, she says, “You just have to show up in a tuxedo. You already look the part” (Tran 3). Not only is James casted as a social other, but he is comically objectified into a play thing. Despite the awkwardness of it all, James allows himself to be used and exoticized until the situation escalates to the point where outside intervention from his friends is required.

James’s fragmentation is bound through silence. And in his silence, James allows himself to be used as a racial minority, as a social other. His autobiography touches on more than just racial stereotypes and fragmentation, however. It deals with lost culture, broken friendships, and everything that has remained unspoken in his life. While there is no reconciliation here, James recognizes the burden of not only guilt, but also race he has carried and must now carry.

Works Cited

Matsuda, Mari J. "We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian-Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie." Where Is Your Body? And other essays on race, gender, and the law. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. 149-159.

Mirikitani, Janice. Shedding Silence. Berkley: Celestial Arts, 1987.

Mura, David. "The Internment of Desire." Under Western Eyes. Ed. Garrett Hongo. Ney York: Anchor Books, 1995. 159-293.