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Singing Japan's Heart and Soul: A Discourse on the Black *Enka* Singer Jero and Race Politics in Japan

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Abstract

This article analyses a discourse around the ascendancy of Jero, an 'African-American' male dressed in hip-hop attire singing *enka*, a genre of music that has been dubbed 'the heart and soul of Japan.' Since his debut in Japan in February 2008, Jero has attracted much media attention. This article analyses a prominent discourse, 'Jero is almost Japanese because he sings *enka* well.' While many argue that to challenge stereotypes and racism is to introduce alternative role models, we show that such alternative role models can also reinforce the existing regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other and perpetuate related racism. We suggest instead a need for various cultural arrangements to stop capitalizing on the difference between races and start noticing differences (and similarities) in other regimes of difference (e.g. taste, style) in order to challenge stereotypes.

Keywords

African-American, discourse, *enka,* Japan, media, music, race politics, regime of difference, stereotype

> When I listened to this [Jero's singing], a chill ran down my spine. He's
> American, but he's got Japan's heart & soul! (A comment on a YouTube video
> entitled "Black *Enka* Singer Jero 1")[1]

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Every time he took to the stage, the audience held its breath in shock, or laughed, or murmured words of astonishment. What they saw on stage was a young 'African-American'[2] male dressed in hip-hop attire singing *enka*, a genre of music that has been dubbed 'the heart and soul of Japan' (Yano, 2000: 60). Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to an African-American father and a Japanese/African-American mother, Jerome White, Jr., marketed as Jero, grew up listening to *enka* thanks to the influence of his Japanese grandmother. After graduating from the University of Pittsburgh, he traveled to Japan to become an *enka* singer.

This article examines the politics of difference by focusing on a discourse around the ascendancy of this new *enka* sensation, Jero, who debuted in Japan in February 2008. Jero attracted much media attention, being called a 'Black *enka* singer' from the United States and bringing a fresh breeze to a genre of music that traditionally draws mainly older fans. His first single, *Umiyuki* (*Ocean Snow*), ranked fourth on the Oricon[3] singles chart, the highest place ever achieved by a debut single by an *enka* singer, and subsequently he won the Best New Artist Award in the 50th Japan Record Awards on December 2008. Wearing hip-hop attire, Jero is said to be attracting those who 'may well be at the J pop concerts.'[4] Surrounding Jero's success are discussions about his 'Japaneseness,' on which this article focuses. Drawing on the media representation of Jero and the comments left at YouTube videos[5] of Jero's appearances on TV shows, this article examines dominant discourses about Jero's performances as they relate to Japaneseness.

This article argues that Jero's popularity reinforces the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other, despite appearing to offer subversion to such a regime of difference. A 'regime of difference' is a system of categories in which an item is defined in relation to the other item that it is contrasted to (for further discussion, see Doerr, 2009a). This is similar to what others have called the systems of categories (Althusser, 1971), chain of signification (Hall, 1985), schemata of classification (Bourdieu, 1989), or schemata of co-figuration (Sakai, 1997).

Louis Althusser (1971) argues that we experience the world through systems of categories. We are positioned or interpellated into such categories, which structure our practices. In turn, individuals' behavior and language articulate the perceived differences of people, thereby materializing ideology in concrete categories of people.[6] Which regime of difference should prevail is at the center of a power struggle, 'to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division' of the world (Bourdieu, 1989: 21). In examining such struggles, this article draws on Judith Butler's (1993) notion of performativity: by being cited as the norm, certain regimes of difference become naturalized and materialized as meaningful sets of categories to classify people.[7]

This framework of regimes of difference allows us to avoid possible confusions derived from various understandings of notions such as nationality, race, and ethnicity, which are all culturally constructed notions. For example, nationality in non-legal sense is a cultural construction, an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991). Also, although – as analytical terms – 'race' is often considered as biologically based and 'ethnicity' as culturally based, the notion of race itself is culturally constructed, rendering the above distinction somewhat meaningless. That is, being 'black' means different things depending on the group of people that the category of 'black' is contrasted against. For example, what 'black' means in the United States, Brazil, England and Martinique differs because

each place has a different regime of difference in which being 'black' is placed (see Hall, 1985); if it is a biologically based notion, the meaning of 'black' should stay the same. For convenience, however, the term 'race' will be used in this article to mean what are culturally constructed as 'Japanese' and 'African-American.'

In order to subvert old regimes of difference or create new regimes of difference, introducing new subject positions or alternative role models is often viewed as effective. bell hooks (1992: 4) argues that:

> the issue of race and representation is … about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad.

Also, in the field of intercultural communication (and multicultural education to a lesser degree), it is often said that in eradicating prejudice and racism, the first step is to challenge stereotypes ascribed to the group; introducing alternative role models is considered to be one way of doing just that (e.g. Banks, 1993; Bennett, 2004; Solorzano and Yosso, 2001).

For example, regarding the representation of African-Americans in Japan in particular, Yamashita (2006), in her study about the experience of an African-American male student in Japan, argues for the importance of being exposed to alternative role models in order to alter and go beyond stereotypes. Specifically regarding Jero, Yuya Kiuchi (2009) welcomes his providing of an alternative stereotype of African-American, which had predominantly been of hip-hop singers, super athletes, and criminals (also, see Yamashita, 2006). Jero's success, Kiuchi further argues, mainly comes from his ability to execute a convergence of his African-American appearance (i.e. physical features and clothes) and Japanese 'heritage' (i.e. appreciation of *enka* and good-old-days family values, and respect for the elders indexed by his relationship to his Japanese grandmother).

However, this article will show that such a subject position, while alternative to existing stereotypes, can also reinforce the existing regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other. The article does so by analysing a prominent discourse – 'Jero is almost Japanese because he sings *enka* well' – as a discourse that simultaneously and somewhat contradictorily both subverts and reinforces the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other.

In what follows, this article will describe race politics in Japan, and the genre of *enka* as a background to our discussion; it will then introduce the dominant discourse, analyse it, and explore possible ways in which Jero does not get marked as an Other in Japan.

'Race politics' in Japan

The effects of Jero's presence need to be thought in the context of how black people, especially African-Americans, have been positioned in Japan's racial landscape. Scholars such as Yukiko Koshiro (2006) trace how African-Americans have historically inspired Japanese people. When Japan sought to join the West in the late 19th century, at a time when the race hierarchy with white people at the top was 'common sense,' Japan's leaders viewed African-American elites as a model of non-white people being 'westernized.'

Also, there were different approaches within Japan. Although the Japanese government used African-Americans' struggle against white racism in the United States in a campaign against American white racism, Japanese leftists were inspired by African-Americans' struggles for equality in the context of their own struggles against Japanese government's imperialism (Koshiro, 2006). Later, at the height of the Cold War, Japanese leftists saw African-American struggles as a model for surviving entrenched US control of Japan. This was despite the Japanese government's efforts to seek an 'honorary white' nation status, thus distancing themselves from non-whites. Within Japan, oppressed minorities were inspired by the US civil rights movement (Kiuchi, 2009; Koshiro, 2006; Russell, 1998).

Although African-Americans' struggles for equality inspired Japanese people and there have been various alliances between African-American leaders and Japanese intellectuals throughout the 20th century, these relationships and alliances have been erased in official history and discourses. Koshiro (2006: 417) argues that such erasure was intentional not only because 'the unity of the "people of color,"' Japanese and African-Americans, posed a menace to Washington and also a threat to U.S.–Japanese friendship,' but also because the African-American–Japanese alliance was often based on a shared vision, such as Marxist revolution or anti-imperialism, that clashed with both governments' official discourses. This silence over historical alliances between African-Americans and Japanese meanwhile allowed negative images of Africans, especially African-Americans, to be imported into Japan from white America, John Russell (1998) argues: black male sexuality was generally associated with rape, primitivism, and hypersexuality (see also Lie, 2001).

The overtly negative stereotype of African-Americans began to change in the mid 1980s, when some Japanese female writers began to write about their sexual relationships with African-Americans, turning black sexuality into an object of female fantasy, empowerment, and self-transcendence. Also, a small but highly publicized trend of single young Japanese women seeking sexual relations with white and black men in and out of Japan has scandalized and enraged 'respectable' Japanese society, especially men (Kelsky, 1994, 1996, 2001; Russell, 1998). Karen Kelsky (1994) argues that the behavior of these women is a critique of Japanese men; foreign men (black and white) are the symbol through which the gender power relation in Japan is discussed. However:

> [w]hat is 'recreated' … is not a brave new world of female empowerment and international intimacy, but rather old racism in a new guise. Women transform the foreigner into a signifier whose primary purpose is to further their domestic agendas. Japanese men respond to the challenge by reinscribing inalienable boundaries of race and nation. And foreign males … relive ancient western male fantasies of sexual access to and manipulation of the Oriental woman. (Kelsky, 1996: 187)

In this context, Japan saw in the 1990s a 'black boom.' African-American males were positioned as desired objects for sexual consumption. The stereotype of African-American males as athletic, primitive, and wild was emphasized as positive (Ogihara, 2003; Russell, 1998). Japan's youth copied black entertainers (seeing them as glamorous, decadent, hedonistic) and urban black youth (seeing them as fashionable rebels),

and engaged in a lifestyle at odds with mainstream Japanese values (Condry, 2007; Cornyetz, 2006). Some Japanese males copied cornrows and other African-American fashions, and even tanned their skin to take on the African-American look. This black boom appears similar to the White Negro phenomenon in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, and can be seen as a site of resistance against Japanese social and gender norms and white cultural hegemony (Russell, 1998). Joe Wood cautiously suggests that the black boom may be 'the first signs of a tidal wave in the unrippled pond' (2006: 481) of Japan's racial landscape. However, Russell (1998) argues that the black boom lacks critical subversive direction, as it decontextualizes and depoliticizes blackness by uncritically accepting American racial imagery, avoids meaningful dialogue with African-Americans, and ignores Japan's relationship to other Asians.

It is worth noting here an important aspect of Japan's race politics: the myth of 'the identification of Japanese race with the Japanese language' (Miller, 1982: 148) that is reminiscent of the one-nation, one-language ideology of the nation-states (Anderson, 1991) and is supported by *nihonjinron* (theories of the Japanese). The identification of race with language is a belief that '[t]o be a Japanese, at the same time it means being a member of the Japanese race, also means speaking the Japanese language' (Suzuki, 1978, cited in Miller, 1982: 144). This belief pervasively circulates in popular as well as academic circles. Consequently, some claim that the Japanese language is uniquely difficult and it is impossible to fully understand and speak the language unless one is of the Japanese race and born and raised in Japan[8] (for a review, see Kowner, 2002; see also Gottlieb, 2005).

Jero's ability to speak Japanese 'perfectly' was thus emphasized by the Japanese media and qualifies him to be 'almost Japanese,' although at the same time rendering him 'unusual.' Also, Jero projects a new kind of African-American subject position: while his attire points to hip-hop, his 'Japaneseness' is emphasized through speaking Japanese fluently and singing *enka*. However, *enka*, although called 'Japan's heart and soul,' has its own cultural politics, which will be reviewed next.

Enka

Enka is said to have existed in Japan for over a century, though its origins are not clear (Wilson, 1993). While the term '*enka*' first took on significance as '*en*zetsu no uta' or 'speech song' during the Meiji period (1868–1912), as a means of protesting against the government ban on public gatherings by political activists, modern *enka*, as developed in the postwar era, is often defined as '*en*jiru uta' or 'performance song,' a form of sentimental ballad music (Wilson, 1993).

While it is said that *enka* epitomizes a traditional, idealized, or romanticized aspect of Japanese culture (Wilson, 1993; Yano, 2000, 2002), it is actually a Japanese/'Western' hybrid. Christine Yano (2002: 3) describes how '*Enka* … combines Western instruments with Japanese scales, rhythms, vocal techniques, and poetic conventions in melodramatic songs of love, loss, and yearning.' *Enka* singers, who are predominantly women, perform in a *kimono* or in western evening dress.

Also, *enka* has an ambiguous status with regard to its position as representing Japan. On the one hand, *enka* has been associated with the core of Japaneseness. It is considered

as '*Nihon no uta* (song of Japan), as *dento no oto* (the sound of Japanese tradition),[9] and as an expression of *Nihonjin no kokoro* (the heart and soul of the Japanese)' (Yano, 2000: 60–1; see also Kiuchi, 2009; Kosakai, 2011; Okada, 1991). *Enka* epitomizes 'what it means to be Japanese' (Yano, 2000: 61). On the other hand, *enka* fans are thought to cluster around older, blue-collar, and rural groups. Jean Wilson (1993) argues that few Japanese are willing to admit that they like *enka* because of this perception, and because of outdated ethics and values in its lyrics, especially regarding women's position in romantic relationships. People who are willing to admit that they like *enka*, then, are 'people from the lower and upper strata of society, whose public reputation will not suffer by the revelation' (Wilson, 1993: 291). Yano (2000) argues that while the true demography of the *enka* fan is elusive, the discourse of '*enka* fans are blue-collar and rural' serves to allow for the coexistence of young, white-collar, urban, modern, and internationalized Japan (*enka* detractors) on the one hand and old, 'indigenous,' exotic, and old-fashioned Japanese culture (*enka* fans), on the other.

Yano (2000) also points out the duality of *enka*. On the one hand, *enka* is about mistresses and bar hostesses who are the counterpoint to the 'good wife, wise mother' model for women supported by the modern Japanese state. *Enka* also glorifies actions – such as illicit love affairs, fleeing from social norms – that run counter to idealizations of family, village, and nation. On the other hand, *enka* celebrates the virtues of 'respectful Japanese women' – sincerity, loyalty, and devotion. Yano understands this duality as balancing the contradiction of 'traditional' and 'modern' faces of Japan. However, in the discourse around Jero, this duality disappears for various reasons.

Discourse of 'Jero is almost Japanese because he sings *enka* well'

Jero was often described as being 'almost Japanese.' In a YouTube video entitled 'Jero's Talk Channel'[10] that shows a broadcast TV program, the TV narrator comments on Jero's singing: 'his velvety and sweet voice seems nothing but that of a Japanese person.'[11] On the screen, a caption reads '[Jero's] sweet singing voice is almost Japanese [picture of Japanese flag].' A comment left at a YouTube video entitled 'Hot Sensation (*wadai futtou*)! New *Enka* Singer Jero Part 2/2'[12] describes Jero as 'someone who has the Japanese heart (*nihon no kokoro*).' Another person comments on the same video stating 'His mannerism is so Japanese, let alone the language.' A comment to a YouTube video entitled 'Jero – *Enka* Singer,'[13] which shows a clip from the TV show *Future Report 2007, Japan, New Hero Legend* (*Mirai Hoodoo 2007, Nippon, Shin-HERO Densetsu*) states that '[Jero is] very good at singing!! If you hear just the voice, he is nothing but a Japanese person!!'

There is also a sense of surprise and shock when watching his 'Japaneseness.' As introduced at the beginning of this article, one comment left to a YouTube video described it as 'a chill running down the spine.' Similar comments are found at another YouTube video:[14] 'This is amazing. My brain is like refusing to accept this …' 'OMG, he's really Japanese. Can't believe; someone must be singing instead of him …' 'Amazing!!!! The audience can't believe their ears either. A black man singing perfect Japanese. Wow! A VERY BIG MILESTONE. Congratulations JERO!'

Some argue that Jero sings *enka* or uses the Japanese language better than the Japanese people. For example, in the YouTube video entitled 'Jero – Back Ground'[15] that shows a broadcast clip from a TV program *Night/Have to Speak in English* (*Eigo de shabera naito*), a man who appeared to be in his early sixties comments that: 'He [Jero] is much more confident (*kimottama ga suwatte*) and better [at singing *enka*] than young Japanese singers nowadays who are frivolous (*charachara sita*).' The program showed Jero on the road before his debut, singing at a main street with passers-by as the audience. The man commenting on Jero is one such passer-by who happened to hear Jero sing. A comment on the YouTube video called 'Jero-*Enka* Singer,'[16] states that 'pathetic other *enka* singers would be blown away.' A comment on a YouTube video about Jero entitled 'Black *Enka* Singer Jero (1/6 part) Talk,'[17] states that 'Jero is good at honorific language and can use more proper Japanese than regular Japanese people.'[18]

Kiuchi argues that fans see Jero as transcending 'his African American appearance and being recognized as a producer and distributor of Japanese popular culture [to the Japanese public]' (Kiuchi, 2009: 517). Moreover, Jero's singing for his late Japanese grandmother (e.g. see Bando and Kuze, 2008) is highlighted as a reflection of 'a good-old-days sentiment about family values and respect of the elders that the older generation in Japan reminisces about but feels the youth have lost. Jero's history has successfully convinced the elders that he might be able to remind today's Japanese youth about the forgotten values of the Japanese culture' (Kiuchi, 2009: 527). As such, Jero is presented as not only reintroducing *enka*, but also reviving and reinforcing some of the traditional Japanese cultural values.

Yano (2000, 2002) argues that a taste for *enka* serves as a proof of experience of life's hardships and sorrow as well as 'innate Japaneseness' (2000: 61). The large part of *enka* fans being the older generations is explained as (1) life experiences allow one to appreciate the complexity and deep sadness of the *enka* songs, and (2) the older one gets, the more one turns to things Japanese, including *enka*. Yano (2000: 61) argues that this explanation suggests that 'those Japanese who do not like *enka* are either insufficiently experienced, particularly in life's hardships and sorrow, or not true to their innate Japaneseness.' In turn, the ability for which Jero is hailed – not only to like but also be good at singing *enka* – puts him into the position of 'almost Japanese' or even 'better than Japanese.' His lack of hardships and living experience in Japan is compensated for, Masaki Kosakai (2011) argues, by the hardship of discrimination experienced by his grandmother and mother in Japan and the United States.

While this discourse – that Jero can sing *enka* well and, to a lesser extent, speak Japanese well – suggests Jero's Japaneseness, this article argues that this discourse, along with the sensationalism around it, reinforces the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other in five ways, as discussed below.

Authentification

The discourse of Jero's Japaneseness points to the power politics inherent in the act of authenticating something – in this case, Jero's Japaneseness – because '"authenticity" implies that someone has the power or authority to "authenticate" a representation; the concept of authenticity thus privileges one voice as more legitimate than another'[19]

(Atkins, 2000: 32). An important question here is who can and who cannot authenticate Jero's Japaneseness.

The issue of authenticity often comes up in discussions about musicians who are viewed as 'border-crossing' the genres of 'ethnic music.' Such studies seek to understand the relations between ethnicity/race of the performer and the culture the particular genre of music is believed (or claimed) to be embodying. The following questions are often asked: 'Can Japanese play 'real' jazz?' (Atkins, 2000); 'Can foreigners really learn to play the *shakuhachi* (a Japanese oboe)?' (Mathews, 2004); 'Which could be more 'real': a Japanese hip-hop artist who represents himself with African-American stereotypical image (with a gun, do-rags, platinum chains, and prison walls) or another with *samurai* imagery?' (Condry, 2006, 2007); and 'Could non-Japanese appreciate *enka*?' (Yano, 2000). What they do not necessarily examine is *who gets to answer these questions*.

Questions and comments about such relations – both affirmative and negative – are abundant around Jero as well. As seen earlier, the comments in and left on YouTube videos affirm Jero's 'authenticity.' However, there are also comments, though much fewer in number, that negate it and raise concerns about the integrity of *enka*: 'It's a pity … quite a worry for the Japanese traditional singing, it will be led to a subculture …'[20] (Hot sensation! New *enka* singer, Jero, part 1/2).

So, who has the power or authority to authenticate Jero? The mere fact that there exist discussions on 'authenticity' about Jero and his singing *enka* ultimately puts Jero in the position of being authenticated; thus without the 'authority to authenticate' himself. Like Japanese jazz and blues singers, Japanese hip-hop artists, Japanese rock musicians and American *shakuhachi* and *koto* players, in Atkins', Condry's, and Mathews' studies, respectively, Jero is subjected to a judgment by the people who are regarded as having collective ownership of the particular music genre. In the case of Jero, that is not only Japanese music critics and authority figures but also the ordinary people, including the youth who had not even listened to *enka* before. Their sense of entitlement to 'authenticate' derives from and, at the same time, reinscribes their secure sense of Japaneseness. Thus, the regime of difference of Japanese (who can authenticate Jero's Japaneseness) vs. the Other (who cannot do so) is highlighted through the act of authenticating Jero's Japaneseness.

Homogenization

The regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other is emphasized by the discourse's flattening of diversity within Japan, presented as a homogeneous unit. As mentioned earlier, *enka* contains the duality of being 'Japan's heart and soul' and being considered blue-collar, old, and rural, thus not representing the Japanese as a whole as it is despised by urban intellectuals (Wilson, 1993; Yano, 2000, 2002). In the discourse around Jero, who draws *enka*'s detractors – young and urban fans – and destabilizes this duality, representation of *enka* becomes more opaquely '*Japan's* heart and soul.' This tendency also appears in some literature about Jero. For example, when Kiuchi (2009) attributes the reasons for Jero's success to his ability to converge his African-American and Japanese 'heritages,' the duality of *enka* is erased: there is no mention of Jero's understanding the emotion of blue-collar workers or the rural population.

Yano (2002: 23) argues that 'in Japan, through an internal exoticization, *taishu bunka* [mass/popular culture] has become a version of national culture that keeps *enka* simultaneously at the margins and in the center of national-cultural identity.' In this light, the Jero phenomenon provides a moment in which the balance is tipped. The Jero sensation is an instance that transforms ambiguous *enka* into a representation of 'Japan's heart and soul.' This is what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006) calls 'heritage practice,' practices that transform the relationship between individuals and what they do, awakening a meta-cultural awareness about their daily acts as 'heritage.' In the case of Jero, media hype that highlights the mismatch between Jero's African-American appearance and *enka* is such heritage practice as it de-emphasizes *enka*'s connection to a blue-collar, older, and regional population and re-emphasizes *enka*'s status as Japan's heritage. This homogenization is a necessary condition for the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other.

Transcendence and reinforcement of the boundary

When people commented that Jero is almost Japanese with surprise and delight, it highlights Jero's Otherness, which makes the transgression fascinating. Kiuchi (2009) suggests that the way Jero seeks to appreciate Japanese culture is through 'covering' instead of 'copying.' That is, Jero sings *enka* with his own singing style and attire; he draws on soul, jazz, and hip-hop music that are often associated with African-Americans (also, see Jero's own comments on this in Jero, 2008a, 2008b). However, many comments left both in mainstream media (TV, newspapers, etc.) and internet-based social media (YouTube, blogs, etc.) focus on his being 'almost like a Japanese,' suggesting Jero is copying *enka* singing style. An exception is the comment: 'It [Jero's singing] exemplifies the soulfulness of *enka* music that is not incompatible with Black soul, Gospel and Blues … Soulful (Jero-*Enka* singer).'[21]

On copying, Michael Taussig (1993: xiii) discusses how the copy draws on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power. However, there are 'mimetic mysteries where, in imitating, we will find distance from the imitated': '[the] more you see the phenomenon … as 'like us,' the greater you make the alterity, and vice versa' (Taussig, 1993: 174). Similarly, Russell (1998) argues about Japanese youth that, by mimicking the Body (outward form; trying to look African-American), the Soul is thought to follow, as Self is transcended and becomes the Other. However, while such appearances seem to suggest a transcending of racial boundaries, they actually reinscribe the Self–Other boundary by ritualistically retracing the boundaries of difference (Russell, 1998).

In the case of Jero, this boundary is further emphasized: the Body is that of African-American in terms of physical appearance and attire, while what he sings is the genre that represents 'Japan's heart and soul.' Note that what Jero presents is not a Japanese soul trapped in African-American skin – African-Americanness is shown by his attire as well, a conscious choice in how he presents himself. It is the contrast between African-Americanness and Japaneseness that made transgression of the boundary unusual and fascinating, as the comments of amazement quoted earlier show. In this way, the regime of difference of the Japanese vs. the Other is highlighted.

Sensationalism

The reception of Jero's presence – i.e. sensationalism – also enforced the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other, by marking the aberration of his subject position. Laura Miller's (1995) study on the '*gaijin tarento* (foreign celebrity)' in Japan suggests that the *gaijin tarento* does not need to have any extraordinary talent or special entertainment value apart from simply being able to speak Japanese. The folk belief that correlates language with race (e.g. Suzuki, 1975) promotes a view that individuals who are not racially Japanese are not able to speak Japanese properly, as already mentioned. As a consequence, foreigners who do learn to speak Japanese become '*henna gaijin* (weird foreigner),' whose ability to speak Japanese alone qualifies him/her to join the status of celebrity (Miller, 1995; see also Iwabuchi, 2005; Ogihara, 2003). Miller (1995: 196) goes on to say that 'by inexplicably defying all rules for the normal, expected operation of the worlds, those foreigners [who speak Japanese] elicit wonderment such as that evoked by the 'believe it or not' variety of phenomena.' Jero is a special kind of *gaijin tarento* who can not only speak Japanese well but also sing *enka*.

Although Jero has been hailed as a rare 'foreign *enka* singer,' in fact, he is neither the first nor the only 'foreign' *enka* singer who has become famous and successful in the Japanese music scene. Making ironic the *enka*'s status as the site of 'Japan's heart and soul,' there have been many *enka* singers from Korea and Taiwan (Tansman, 1996; Yano, 2002). Historically, as the Japanese music industry has been exporting *enka* to other Asian countries, it has also been importing singers from these countries, including Teresa Ten and OuYang FeiFei, both from Taiwan, and Cho Yong-pil, Kye Unsook, and Kim Yonja, all from South Korea (Yano, 2002). Unlike Jero, these singers' 'foreign' status was not intensely marked in the media, nor was the issue of 'Japaneseness' ever raised.

In order to be sensationalized and celebrated as *gaijin tarento* (or foreign *enka* singer), one needs to fit the stereotype of the Other, who is racially, culturally, and linguistically different from Japanese. Thus, those individuals with Asian background are excluded from *gaijin tarento* candidacy because they are simply considered as 'fellow Asians' (note that they are not necessarily considered Japanese, either, pointing to the ambiguous position non-Japanese Asians occupy) (Iwabuchi, 2005; Miller, 1995). Thus, the fact that Jero is a 'sensation' marks Jero's status as the Other, highlighting the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other. What is seen here is not so much the simple 'racial' difference of Jero but complex interconnections between what is considered as 'cultural' and 'racial' in folk terms – his physical appearance, fashion, his up-bringing in the United States, Jero's being 'native' English speaker, and so on – that together produce the specific 'otherness' of Jero.

Domestication

Sensationalism around Jero also domesticates the Other, keeping intact the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other. Putting Jero on display as a spectacle exoticizes and domesticates his assumed threat to the assumption that only 'Japanese' persons can master Japanese culture. It also undermines the ideology of cultural purism of Japan that asserts that African-Americanness and Japaneseness cannot coexist. Exoticism, a

framework of spectatorship, displays persons and their performances as spectacles. According to Coco Fusco (1995), the origin of cultural performances in the 'West' was the display of people from the 'non-West' in zoos, museums, and circuses, which reached its height of popularity in the 19th century. Such exhibitions were living expressions of colonial fantasies, fears, and desires, and they helped to forge a special place for non-white peoples and their cultures in the Euro-American imagination (Fusco, 1995).

While Fusco (1995) claims that this legacy of colonialism is still alive and well in the West, Doerr has argued elsewhere that there have developed new forms and effects of exoticism, in which the performers are considered to be economically more powerful than the spectators (e.g. wealthy immigrants performing in their new homeland in front of less wealthy audiences). In such contexts, the new exoticism serves to distance certain countries and domesticates the economically powerful (yet culturally holds the legacy of the colonized Other) by assigning them to the 'exotic' slot (Doerr, 2008, 2009a). In the new exoticism, performers are active accomplices in their own exoticization, as in Jero's case and as was also the case, to a lesser degree, during colonial times (see McClintock, 1995).

In other words, despite the changing power dynamics in the world since the 19th century, exoticism continues to exist in the framework of spectacle. The framework of the spectacle assumes, and at the same time perpetuates, an asymmetrical relationship between the displayed and the spectators: the spectacle distances and normalizes the spectators, while articulating the anomalous status of the displayed (Berger, 1980; hooks, 1992; Mulvey, 1975; Stewart, 1984). Exoticized dance embodies the audience's anxieties about the cultural other, while also affirming the spectators' mastery over the cultural other (Koritz, 1997). Brian Moeran (1990) explains the objectification of *gaijin* as a 'Japanese attempt to set themselves apart from, restructure, and thus gain authority over, the West' (cited in Miller, 1995: 199).

There is a twist, however, when the play of mimesis gets involved. Taussig (1993: 78) uses the terms 'space between' for the space with a tension of mimesis and alterity, in which it is far from easy to say who is the imitator and who is the imitated. There is an 'unstoppable circulation of mimetic and alteric impulses along a sympathetic chain in which each moment of arrest stimulates further impulsion' (1993: 76). Taussig (1993) argues that such 'space between' is a colonial space through which the 'West' has not only taken pleasure in viewing the Other – and derived its selfhood from measuring its own difference through its reflection in the Other – but also in copying the Other themselves. The 'space between' is the space of cultural contact, loaded with power relations.

In the case of Japan, after over a century of copying the 'West,' Japanese derive pleasure in watching 'westerners' copying Japanese. *Gaijin tarento* is an embodiment of such a 'space between.' The Jero sensation, in the wake of the black boom, in which Japanese youth copied African-American fashion and style, is also an instantiation of the 'space between,' in which Japan, the spectator to be entertained, takes pleasure in its image in Jero singing 'Japan's heart and soul' in the attire some Japanese youth had copied. Comments left on YouTube, such as: 'He really understands Japanese traditional songs. I am wondering how many Japanese hip-hop singers understand its background…,'[22] comparing Japanese copying hip-hop singers and Jero's copying *enka* singers indexes such a 'space between.' In this play of mimesis, the Japanese draw pleasure from watching Jero copy Japanese, at the same time creating 'who Japanese are' by watching Jero

(see also Doerr and Kumagai, 2012). The regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other serves as an axis around which this play of domestication is performed.

Implications for practice: beyond the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other

As an African-American in hip-hop attire singing *enka*, Jero created a sensation in Japan. In contrast to the Otherness of African-Americans that scandalized Japan's media and Japan's youth admired during the black boom, Jero capitalized on his 'mismatch' – African-American outlook and his sameness to Japanese, being 'more Japanese than the Japanese,' and his apparent (and probably commercially calculated) support of Japan's 'old value system.' Some argue that Jero's success has brought about a positive shift in Japanese people's perception of African-American by introducing an alternative image or role model (e.g. Kiuchi, 2009).

Our analysis of the discourse around the Jero sensation, however, showed that the old regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other was paradoxically reinscribed by the way people responded to Jero's performance (for its effects on the notion of heritage language learner, see Doerr and Kumagai, forthcoming). Jero's transgression of the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other ironically enhanced the regime by sensationalizing this mismatch. The laughter, surprise, exoticization all support the regime of difference Jero sought to transgress, because Jero's attraction lies in the very act of transgression – without the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other to transgress, Jero's attraction fades. When people praised Jero as 'almost Japanese,' the discourse (1) established their authority as the authenticator or judge of Jero's Japaneseness, (2) ignored the division between *enka* lovers and *enka* detractors in Japan and presented *enka* as the representative of homogenized Japanese culture, (3) contrasted his 'Japaneseness' to his 'African-Americanness,' (4) marked the aberration of Jero's subject position, and (5) domesticated Jero's suggestion of an alternative way to be Japanese by making it a spectacle. By doing these, the discourse that 'Jero is almost like Japanese' performatively *cited* (Butler, 1993), and thus reinforced the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other.

So when does the presence of a person like Jero become a more fundamental subversion to the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other? This article suggests that it will probably happen when he becomes not a 'surprise' or 'spectacle,' when he is associated with certain groups of people within Japan, such as blue-collar workers or the rural population who appreciate *enka*, rather than Japanese as a homogeneous unit, or when he is introduced on a TV program as merely 'Jero' just like other *enka* singers, without the label 'black *enka* singer.' Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne (1995) argue that cultural arrangements push us to notice certain differences, not others, and make that difference consequential. If the cultural arrangement in Japan, including media representations, stop highlighting and capitalizing on the racial difference and start noticing difference (and similarity) in other things – such as taste, style, etc. – individuals may begin to be seen beyond the regime of difference of Japanese vs. the Other.

There are some areas that this is happening. *Sumo*, which is described as 'both in its ideology and organization … tradition-bound' (Oinuma, 1994) and identified as a 'national sport' (Lie, 2001), currently has more than 50 'foreign' wrestlers from 22

countries, including Russia, Bulgaria, Estonia, the United States. Yet the Japanese media do not focus on these wrestlers' being non-Japanese as significant. Rather, they highlight their style and technique of wrestling and their winning scores. Similarly, *gaijin tarento* with diverse race backgrounds are increasing in numbers on TV shows. Their race is not marked as their essential trait; each *tarento* markets themself by highlighting their unique (and commercially calculated) personalities. These examples show the power of media's framing to change people's perceptions of the normative relationship between race and culture/language.

Four years after his debut, the media began to frame Jero differently, as it introduces him less and less as a 'black' *enka* singer. As this article on the initial reactions to Jero is being written, the change is beginning to happen. Yet, the hope of this article is that this analysis serves as warning for future cases: an alternative model would not suffice to shatter racialized thinking as it could still result in reinforcing the difference between Japanese and the Other; what is needed is a questioning of the regimes of difference that it evokes.

Funding statement

Notes

1 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkMOtFXilMA (accessed 26 April 2009).
2 This article uses a common description of Jero as African-American for convenience. It is not to assume his racial identification because his very racial identification is at the core of the discussion about Jero. For readability, quotation marks are not used for the rest of the article.
3 The Oricon Inc. supplies statistics and information on music and the music industry in Japan.
4 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nZpm8TcIhI (accessed 25 April, 2009).
5 YouTube is one of the most popular and widely accessed participatory media sites in the contemporary online environment and is said to be transforming ideas about cultural production and consumption by distributing videos (both commercially produced and user-created) on a global scale (Burgess and Green, 2009).
6 While Althusser views that individuals are *always already* subjects, others argue that subjects are constituted and traversed by contradictory interpellations throughout their life (thus its multiplicity) and that individuals with diverse histories are interpellated differently by the same ideology (Smith, 1988).
7 Butler (1993: 2) uses performativity "not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains."
8 There is a variety of *nihonjinron* that claims the *shared* uniqueness of Japanese and Israelis, which was written by an author who claims to be an Israeli himself, under the pen-name Isaiah Ben-Dasan, although he is actually a Japanese, Shichihei Yamamoto (see Ben-Dasan, 1970). Marvin Sterling (2010) connects this variety to the Japanese Rastafari followers who use it to claim that they are descendants of the ancient lost tribe of Israel, just like Rastafarians.

9   Yano (2000, 2002) explains that, although its current form emerged only in early 20th century, *enka* indexes "oldness" via the specific sentiments it seeks to evoke in the listeners.
10 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfmiUap9nYI (accessed 25 April 2009).
11 Unless otherwise stated, all quotes in the data were in Japanese translated by the authors.
12 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOUcF7vCiXw (accessed 28 April 2009).
13 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqtgJ5TJi8M (accessed 26 April 2009).
14 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqtgJ5TJi8M (accessed 26 April 2009).
15 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Akaj7ce6hR8 (accessed 25 April 2009).
16 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqtgJ5TJi8M (accessed 26 April 2009).
17 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmHctzjO43o (accessed 25 April 2009).
18 Jero's ability to speak Japanese was also mentioned often in terms of his being "almost Japanese." This is the reverse argument of the "native speaker" ideology (see Doerr, 2009b) – "if you speak Japanese like 'native speakers,' you are almost Japanese."
19 Taylor Atkins (2000: 32) defines the concept of "authenticity" as "verisimilitude, credibility, originality (as opposed to imitation), or authoritativeness."
20 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0WcTEr8XJg (accessed 26 April 2009).
21 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqtgJ5TJi8M (accessed 26 April 2009).
22 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqtgJ5TJi8M (accessed 26 April 2009).

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