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Expression of Self-Love: The Use of Humor in Mat Johnson's *Loving Day*

Although I am neither black nor white, but rather of Native Mexican descent from my father, and Ryukyuan/Japanese from my mother, along with identification as a Native of my birthplace of Hawaii, *Loving Day* was a very intimate story for me. Much like Warren, I often felt that I, along with my four siblings, were the only ones of our kind which, as unique as I felt for a while, became more of a hindrance than a blessing. I am always reminded how the Japanese were the second-worst villains in history, losing to American atomic bombs which were, as I am told, *completely necessary*. Mexicans, just as Trump has convinced conservatives, are a bunch of thuggish, rapists, drug attics who steal jobs while also somehow sleeping all day. My Okinawan side is lumped with the Japanese part and therefore forgotten—until *Karate Kid II* comes on television—just like the illegal usurp of the Hawaiian Kingdom. These are the apparent crimes of *my people*… which always puzzled me as many of my family members fought for the U.S. in every war since Korea. Similar to Warren, I coped with self-deprecating humor, laughing the loudest at the over-the-top reaction when others discover I can't speak Japanese or Spanish, and especially at my horrible grades which reinforce the negative stereotypes of Mexicans being lazy, while simultaneously disappointing my genetic Asian intelligence. As hypocritical as it may sound, I often find both harm in those memories as well as solace in deprecating humor,

something I believe Mat Johnson realizes as he projects much of his own feelings into his protagonist.

Loving Day incorporates humor, whether it is effectively amusing to the reader or not, throughout the narrative. Sometimes it is Warren describing an internal thought or assumption, someone making a race-based joke usually at the expense of black people or even more often at their mulatto counterparts, or just the scenario at hand being funny in itself, such as accidentally tasering your boss who you mistake for a crackhead who may or may not actually be a ghost. Even though there are many serious situations that should not warrant a laugh, the scenarios and conundrums Warren finds himself in warranted an evaluation of what a person, specifically a multiethnic minority, may perceive as humorous and why it matters. **Johnson uses satirical comedy as a device to critique tribalistic ideas of the black and white race relations in two distinct, but intertwining ways - by using dark humor to call out how biracial individuals often feel outcasted or othered in both white and black societies, and by incorporating self-deprecation as a means for Warren and other mulattos to help cope with the reality of their struggles to set up the central theme of "self-love."** *Loving Day* incorporates both overstated and understated comedy methods to rebuke the ancient idea of there being no such thing as being "mixed" between America's longest-lasting racial feud still occurring in the 21st century—

"People aren't social, they're tribal. Race doesn't exist, but tribes are fucking real." (Johnson 18) This line serves as a mantra for how all the characters in the novel interact with Warren and one another.

Warren's introduction to the reader is intense, just as the tragic mulatto figure is often displayed. He is completely down on his luck; he's back in the ghetto to take care of his dead father's *legacy* of a house in the neighborhood he grew up in, yet he is unwelcomed as he *looks* white despite identifying as black, the only saving grace he retains is, "My mother was black-that counts, no matter how pale and Irish my father was." On top of that, he's recently divorced and owes his lawyer ex Becks, who he admits he did not love the way he should have, a lot of money. Despite his massive 6'4, 225lbs build, he is terrified of the supposed ghosts, or crackheads that haunt his father's decaying mansion. His introduction of so many problems at once through an honest evaluation of his mental and physical state is done more so as a setup for the reader to comprehend the troubles Warren as a mixed man who identifies as a black man but looks like a white man, experiences. "Humor that is self-disparaging enhances speaker image … and will have a cushioning effect [on perceptions of the speaker] [...]self-disparaging humor in speeches has the potential to increase perceived levels of likeability, sense of humor, wittiness, kindness, and trustworthiness. Importantly, this same type of humor also has the potential to reduce feelings of anxiety among audience members while simultaneously increasing speaker credibility." (Borgella 116) This is done in Chapter 1 as a means to set up Warren as a likable, but potentially deeply disturbed individual whose racial identity has manifested into extreme anxiety.

Warren's anxiousness is readily apparent in the punch line at the comic convention when he, whose book takes place in the countryside and features virtually no black characters, is placed in the "Urban" section, *segregated* towards the "back by the exit." (Johnson 16) Not only does Warren must face this humiliation of being segregated away from the rich white artist, but he must anxiously prove his blackness throughout the entire panel while being the lightest colored

individual of the group of black artists. He consistently finds himself using his lower *black voice* and making sure others see his perfected handshakes. He regularly plays off his insecurities for laughs, such as when the "mandatory" joke at the expense of lighter-skinned black people is made he laughs the loudest, "Aha, those light-skinned folks, with their moderately less stigmatized lives." (Johnson 24) In some scenarios, according to Borgella, "racial minority group members may experience measurable anxiety both during and after interracial interactions." (110) Of course, Warren is black just like his fellow panelist and their friends, but because he is a "racial optical illusion" (Johnson 18) he is othered into an almost separated minority group within the group. His brewing anxiety and loneliness is apparent as he projects unknowingly to his daughter when asking her if she'd like a signature on her comic, "If I ever go nuts, try to blow up the Statue of Liberty or something, that would make it worth something." (Johnson 22) This foreshadowing of events, according to Warren, stems from his father's whiteness, a genetic part of Warren which he despises as it cements his status at the bottom of the black racial hierarchy, and, due to the hypodescent social rule of the "one drop" he will never be welcomed into the socially higher white society.

Warren's desire to burn down his father's legacy, that is the mansion, for insurance money which he will use to move far away from Philly to Washington state, is Warren's way of fighting against his white half, something he has already done when he moved to Wales where he "never felt blacker." (Johnson 44) Warren deals with an internal imposter syndrome based on his external looks. As Morgan points out, "[...]While whiteness is still assumed and normalized, blackness refuses to be made abject even as it works to announce itself within a racialized hierarchy. As a result, blackness is rendered performative but importantly it is here still only appropriately performative within the context of genetics." (3) This idea of Warren always

having to perform and prove he is a “swan” and not a “bleached ugly duckling” who is constantly putting on a facade in front of any sized audience of African Americans “Let me shake my tail feather. I’m a swan, yo!” (Johnson 24-25) He begins a process of change when he first meets Sunita for the first time at the “Urban panel.” As she asks him about his status as a “biracial artist” he wants to cry out for help to her, “What makes you see a stranger, just that flash of an image of their outer persona, and decide instantly that they can save you?” (Johnson 29) Yet, the continual pressure of fitting into the mold of black society has made his instant reaction in front of the black audience to win them over with laughter and “enunciated eloquently” language. This projection and resent towards the “b-word”, that is *biracial*, makes him lose hope as Sunita supposedly leaves his life immediately. He is left feeling nauseous and more of an outcast than ever, which follows a psychologist's view that self-deprecatory of oneself “is associated with depression and anxiety,” (Speer 806) until he formally meets Tal who serves as a glimmer of hope as he sees both his dad and mom in her face. So, if he was so relieved to find Sunita, his mix-raced long-lost twin, then why would he immediately turn the crowd against her through jovial humor and a straw man analysis? It is easy to point towards some form of stage fright or peer pressure but there is something more prevalent at hand.

Warren has past trauma from his light-skinned status, perhaps the most prevalent being his relationship with Tosha, which he partially believes she chose George over himself as he is a “pale fail of a Negro who would never be enough for a ‘Nubian Princess’” and that especially hurts Warren as he catalogs instance of her being embarrassed for being seen with a cracker or moments she utters her light-skinned jokes. (Johnson 43-44) These jokes have a detrimental effect on Warren, As Swim and Hyers found (qtd. Borgella) “racial minority group members are more concerned with being perceived through the lens of negative stereotypes and experiencing

bias. This concern often leads minority racial group members to monitor their own thoughts and behaviors in situations in which they believe they may be the targets of prejudice." (110) this explains why he overcompensates by laughing too hard at light-skinned jokes, and why he is too afraid to confront Tosha's prejudiced attitude towards light-skins.

Despite both Tosha and Warren being black, Warren's mulatto status renders him, at least in Philadelphia, to be a racial minority even below African Americans. He has trouble interacting with Tosha because she is biased, a short-term coping mechanism he uses is to outright avoid confrontation of race, including by not bringing up his Irish half for nearly twelve years, in which time the short-term relief transpired into a long-termed negative outcome. (Borgella 112-113) This is why he finds it easier to just laugh outwardly towards jokes at his expense, while inwardly brewing more anxiety and self-destruction. Ironically enough, this mindset emphasizes Warren's Irish side as well, as Irish sense of humor can be described as "[...] dry and self-deprecating and probably fairly bleak[...]" something that Johnson acknowledged while writing this story based on his own experiences (Tucker). Warren, by the end of the novel, begins defending his newfound mulatto status from Tosha, who never in the novel accepts his Irish half and why she won't accept his mulatto status as anything but black, "If these Oreos are trying to change things so that they're not really black, how does that help anyone besides themselves? We've got black boys being used for target practice by white cops out there, we've got a prison system overflowing with victims of white judgment. We have a crisis. Right now." (Johnson 239) Her continual mockery of whether looking African Americans stems from her belief that self-identifying mulattos like Warren are detrimental to *all* black people *everywhere*, a reflection of African American humor.

The basis for African American comedy focuses on "survivorship," a holistic attitude arranged by "pragmatism, sentiment, and spirituality" as the Black Experience is defined by suffering and struggle, which, by only through those means, can one experience *soul*, which can be described as "the essence of life; passion, [and] emotional depth" (Rahman 67) Part of this survival aspect for Warren comes from embracing his position on the bottom of the black social totem pole, characterized when he says that he is "[...]categorized as black, with an asterisk. The asterisk is my whole body." (Johnson 18) this, as he acknowledges after laughing at the light-skinned joke from earlier, is better than having no group or tribe at all, even if it means being placed at the bottom of the black social spectrum. Based on Tosha's worldview, Warren will survive by sticking to an exclusive black identification, thus fulfilling the *pragmatic* and experiencing the *sentiment* aspect of the black experience, and by doing so he will be supporting black people everywhere, but he will never reach any form of spiritual enlightenment if he never accepts his Irish half as he will always be rejecting something that defines his life struggles. This is reflected in the long-running joke through the narrative about whether the black man and white woman who roam around his property having sex are ghosts or crackheads.

By the closing chapter the ghosts, which have haunted Warren throughout the story, appear once more, but he no longer feels the need to repeatedly call the ghost couple intruders and now sees them for who they truly were, "Just lovers. Just people." (Johnson 286) As Dreisinger explains, "[...] the most tragic thing about the grand ghost that is racing in America: It denies human suffering its universality, confining it to the lens of color." (2) Warren deals with his own ghost in the form of reaching closure from missing his deceased mother who confirmed his status as a black man in a lonely world that outcasts him, and his father who served as baggage, both literally in the form of the house and figuratively for being Irish. Warren comes to

grips with his mulatto status despite the hundreds of years of negative labels including the Uncle Tom status by Tosha. Warren understands her anger at the thought of screwing over black people at the expense of making himself feel better for identifying as mixed, "[...] the essentializing of race is damaging in all its forms: the racial binary, an exclusionary idea of biracial or multiracial identity, or any hierarchy that presumes either/or in place of both/and." (Morgan 10) he knows this because he is *still* black despite his chosen biracial identity, and he will certainly continue to experience the tangible outcomes of being a black man, but it does not mean he will continue to refuse to recognize a vital part of his identity.

Warren and his daughter both recognize his growth in the final few pages as he finally acknowledges his mulatto deprecating humor, "'You know part of why you hate that guy [One Drop] is because you're projecting your own racial insecurities onto him, right?' 'I do, honey,' I say, but I didn't before." (Johnson 285) By the end, he finds peace within himself without compromising other black individuals—this is reflected as the miscegenated couple no longer scare him, instead, they mirror his own intermarriage parents whose legacy continues in his love for Sunita and Tal.

In short, Warren, despite being a failed comic book artist and husband, burning his body and almost dying because of it, going to prison, and going through legal hell transpired by his ineptitude as a light-skinned black man with empirical and metaphysical baggage of hundreds of years of institutionalize racism, manages to quite possibly be happier than he has even been in adulthood. This series of over-the-top and sometimes funny, in a tragicomic sort of fashion, scenarios allow readers of any background to understand a little better about what it means to be a human mismatched pair of socks in a world where race relations set up tribal boundaries. No doubt that Warren and Tal will face many more struggles including self-doubt and denigrating

humor as being nothing more than Oreos, but through their shared experience and in-jokes within their own little family, they will find a way to manage happiness just like the First Couple.

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