

The Color of Desire: Interracial Romance and Racial Melancholia in Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings*

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's theory of racial melancholia, this essay investigates interracial romantic relationships in the context of racial abjection and Asian American identity in Adrian Tomine's graphic novel *Shortcomings*. The graphic novel depicts the two protagonists—Ben Tanaka and Miko Hayashi—as subjects of melancholia who attempt to engage in interracial relationships as a means of entering an imagined position in the white dominant American culture. However, Tomine understands the “shortcomings” of the Asian American-white romance by visually and verbally illustrating the legacy of racial, gender, and sexual power imbalances that have historically defined relationships between Asian and white Americans. Ben's and Miko's interracial relationships are rendered equally undesirable, for such relationships reveal the social basis of racial melancholia. To the extent that whiteness and racial melancholia permeate the interracial relationships in *Shortcomings*, Tomine shows that the egalitarian power of Alice's queer romance may offer opportunities for countering racial melancholia not through assimilating into white dominant culture but through the erotically charged yearnings for communal relationships with other Asians.

KEYWORDS: racial melancholia, interracial romance, Asian American masculinity, self-Orientalism, graphic novels, Adrian Tomine, *Shortcomings*

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Since its publication in 2007,¹ *Shortcomings*, a graphic novel by the acclaimed cartoonist and artist Adrian Tomine, has been widely and largely positively reviewed. Numerous critics in both the media and a number of scholarly works have praised Tomine's exquisite photo-realistic drawing style. For example, in "Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication in Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings*," Nicholas Ditto argues that Tomine's meticulous "illustrations of his characters' facial expressions and body positions" have a "photo-like quality" and this realistic drawing style helps facilitate visual and verbal storytelling. Similarly, Greice Schneider regards Tomine's drawing style in *Shortcomings* as "realistic in the sense that his characters are drawn with a clear concern for proportion and with clean precise lines" (64). Known for his artist work in the comic book series *Optic Nerve*, Tomine is an acclaimed Asian American cartoonist. Despite his ethnic background, Tomine has largely avoided the topic of Asian American identity in his work, perhaps as a refusal to be pigeonholed as an *Asian* American artist and writer.² In an interview with Terry Gross on National Public Radio's "Fresh Air," Tomine acknowledged his tendency to stay away from racial identity in his work, saying: "I think I was, you know, for many years, I'd been almost taken to task about sort of avoiding, almost as if I'd been *consciously tiptoeing around*, the issue of race in my work" ("Adrian Tomine"; emphasis added). Critics have also noticed the obvious absence of Asian American characters in Tomine's earlier work. Emma Oki writes that "Adrian Tomine avoided addressing issues of race and identity in his early work and drew many of his characters in a way that did not expose their ethnic and racial backgrounds" (230). However, in *Shortcomings*, his only graphic novel on the issue of Asian American racial identity to date, Tomine fearlessly examines the politics of interracial dating as it relates to race, gender and sexuality, perhaps as a gesture to refute criticism of his conscious effort to distance himself from an Asian American identity.

¹ Tomine's work has been widely reviewed and published by renowned media and newspapers such as *The New Yorker*, *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*, including several famous magazine covers. *Shortcomings* originally appeared in issues 9 through 11 of Tomine's famous comic book series *Optic Nerve* before it was released in book form in 2007. After its publication, *Shortcomings* was named on countless "best of" lists, including in *Entertainment Weekly*, *Publisher's Weekly*, the *New York Times*, *Amazon.com*, etc.

² Indeed, in many interviews, Tomine has constantly emphasized and insisted on being seen as an *American* artist rather than as an Asian American artist. For example, in an interview for *NBC News*, Tomine said: "I never really thought of myself as an Asian-American cartoonist, any more than I thought of myself as a cartoonist who wears glasses I was surprised that the topic of my background came up at all" ("Cartoonist Adrian Tomine").

Shortcomings takes a satirical but meditative look at the troubled relationship between the protagonist Ben Tanaka and his fellow Asian American girlfriend Miko Hayashi. Their troubled love story is fraught with issues of Asian American male emasculation and the ambivalent fantasy of Asian Americans for whiteness. Miko suspects that Ben has a wandering eye for blonde-haired, blue-eyed white women but is reluctantly settling for her, and she interprets this as a sign of Ben's rejection of her as well as of their shared Asian ethnic identity. Their declining romance seems to be the focus of *Shortcomings*; at the heart of the story, however, the deterioration of Miko and Ben's relationship brings up the important Asian American identity issues of anxiety, racial/sexual inadequacy, and interracial desire.

Set in contemporary Berkeley, California, *Shortcomings* features highly educated and socially affluent middle-class characters. Unlike immigrant characters in most Asian American literature, who are often caught between two cultures and struggle with their cultural identities, Ben and Miko seem to have shaken off the burden of the nostalgic immigrant narrative. In fact, *Shortcomings* purposefully dehistoricizes its Asian American characters by revealing very little about Ben and Miko's family backgrounds, shifting the focus from their historical and cultural heritage onto their individual positions. However, even in such a culturally diverse setting as California, *Shortcomings* portrays a cultural landscape where Asian Americans are still viewed through the lens of race and ethnicity.

Existing scholarship on *Shortcomings* has largely focused on the novel's portrayal of racial stereotypes and Asian American identity issues. In her essay "Lost in the Gutters: Ethnic Imaginings in Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings*," Hye Su Park argues that Tomine's effective use of verbal and visual narrative techniques leads readers to understand Ben's vexed relationship with his Asian American identity. Park writes: "Ben's embrace of individuality comes at the cost of a total rejection, not a revision, of his Asian-American-ness" (104). Arguing in a similar vein to Hye Su Park, Sandra Oh, in her essay "Sight Unseen: Adrian Tomine's *Optic Nerve* and the Politics of Recognition," examines the Asian American struggle with cultural identity in *Shortcomings*. Oh draws a correlation between character and author when she concludes that Tomine, like his character Ben Tanaka, is more or less "pessimistic about the possibility of escaping the limitations of socially inscribed identities" (149). In his essay "In Plain Sight: Reading the Racial Surfaces of Adrian Tomine's

Shortcomings,” Ralph E. Rodriguez uses *Shortcomings* to illustrate the theory of surface reading. Rodriguez advocates that we focus on the aesthetic forms of *Shortcomings* and refrain from reading too much “hidden depth” into the surface of the graphical novel (88). That is, we see what we see in *Shortcomings* and should resist the temptation to trace the causes of personal anxieties and problems to racial issues. As Rodriguez argues, we should “move beyond readings of race in literature that are predicated on moralizing, making a text correspond to critic’s politics” (103).

Although the above three critics—Park, Oh and Rodriguez—take different approaches to *Shortcomings*, they all focus on the protagonist Ben Tanaka and address the novel’s racial identity politics. Jolie A. Sheffer’s study of interracial romance between men of color and white women is one of the few critical essays on *Shortcomings* that does not focus only on racial identity *per se*, although she also includes it in her discussion. In “The Optics of Interracial Sexuality in Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings* and Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*,” Sheffer argues that interracial desire between men of color and white women, although no longer illegal, still “remains transgressive” and is shaped by racial and sexual politics (120). Sheffer’s analysis focuses on how the power of popular film genres—especially the pornographic gaze through the lens of the male eye on beautiful (white) women—conditions Ben’s desire for white women. Traditionally, as Sheffer points out, “minority male protagonists view white women as a kind of social prize: as proof of sexual prowess, masculine power, and national identification” (119). Sheffer goes on to examine the way in which Ben regards white women as status symbols: “Ben’s erotic gaze underscores his thorough identification with whiteness and his longing for acceptance as a red-blooded, heterosexual, American man” (126). According to Sheffer’s reading, Sasha, the object of Ben’s desire, is reduced to being an object of Ben’s pornographic fantasies for white women, for Ben considers dating a blonde “as a status symbol, conveying his masculinity, heterosexual prowess, and successful assimilation” (130). Although Sheffer offers a different and important approach to *Shortcomings*, I would argue that Sasha, rather than being diminished by Ben’s male gaze, actually possesses power over Ben.

Most reviewers and critics of *Shortcomings* agree with Miko’s assessment of Ben’s personality characteristics—that is, Ben has “weird self-hatred issues” and “relentless negativity” (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 103)—and therefore

attribute the causes of Ben's failed love relationship with Miko to his own personal flaws.³ Indeed, Ben is presented as an unlikeable character—he seems to have a lot of anger, he is bitterly sarcastic and he is always quarreling with Miko. All these negative characteristics appear to be tied to personality problems, yet Ben's "relentless negativity," to borrow Miko's words, bears traces of unresolved historical grievances regarding Asian American identity, particularly the desexualization of Asian American men in US society. One of the distinguishing characteristics of a graphic novel is its special way of storytelling through a blend of words and images in which visual images are used to externalize characters' emotions that cannot be accurately conveyed through verbal communication. As Nicholas Ditto's reading of the functions of images in *Shortcomings* illustrates, "Ben's inability to precisely communicate his annoyances can be seen in his struggle to find the 'right words' to describe his problem." Ben's facial expressions—particularly his forever sullen and forlorn face—illustrate the race-related feelings of loss and depression in individuals who are racially othered in American culture. In other words, Ben's "relentless negativity" is visualized as a natural, albeit melancholic, response to the desire of Asian Americans to be assimilated into white America.

Whereas Ben has been described as an unlikable character, Miko is viewed more positively in that she seems to embrace her cultural heritage and promote Asian pride. A close reading of Ben and Miko reveals that, rather than being the opposite, Ben and Miko resemble each other in their attempts to use interracial romance as a means of assimilating to a white identity. While Ben is criticized for pursuing an interracial relationship with white women as a tool to assuage his anxiety over Asian manhood, critics tend to view Miko's interracial romance as being based on love and understanding. For example, Emma Oki argues that Miko chooses to date Leon because Leon "demonstrates a strong liking for Asian culture and even speaks Japanese. He allows her to embrace her roots and provides the support she needs" (235). Such a reading, however, ignores the issue of fetishization of Asian American women in the interracial relationship between Miko and her white boyfriend Leon Christopher.

In what follows, I will argue that both Ben and Miko's interracial sexual relationships with white partners are emblematic of their unresolved relations

³ Although it is impossible to list all the critics who read Ben as an unlikable character, it is worthwhile giving an example here. In his review essay of *Shortcomings*, Jim Windolf regards Ben as being "the not-so-lovable protagonist of 'Shortcomings.'" See Jim Windolf, "Asian Confusion."

with the dominant white America. Put in another way, interracial relationships in *Shortcomings* are manifestations of a specifically Asian American inheritance of loss characterized by “racial melancholia,” a term coined by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han to address Asian Americans’ ambivalent relationship with the dominant American culture. This essay will apply Eng and Han’s theory of racial melancholia to the literary and visual representations of Asian American subjectivity in Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings*, using the theory specifically to examine interracial relationship as a negotiation of, and response to, the desire of assimilating to the mainstream American culture. I propose that, in *Shortcomings*, Ben’s obsession with white women and Miko’s self-orientalization are exemplary of racial melancholia. Both Ben and Miko toy with Asian American-white pairings as a means of entering white dominant culture, but both experience interracial relationships less as a source of happiness and more as a source of conflict and struggle. Both Ben and Miko’s interracial romantic relationships are illustrated as symptoms of racialized lack and loss, which seems to imply Tomine’s disapproval of Asian Americans engaging with white partners as a route to whiteness. Tomine shows the difficulty of asserting equal interracial relationships between Asian Americans and whites in contemporary US culture. To counter the structural desexualization of Asian American males as well as the racial eroticization of Asian American women, Tomine suggests, through the figure of Ben’s gay friend Alice Kim—who is also Ben’s only and best friend in *Shortcomings*—that queer erotic unions may offer an alternative for love and desire. As such, Alice is an important figure through whom Tomine attempts to eroticize Asian culture and express an alternative ethical and erotic relationship, a relationship, as Jolie A. Sheffer has convincingly argued, “grounded in equality rather than domination and relatively free of the visual logic of racialization” (121).

In the first section of this essay, I will look at how Ben mobilizes interracial sexuality to satisfy his “short-of-comings” in which his struggle with the issue of Asian manhood is mocked through Tomine’s artistic techniques of visual presentation. The second section of this essay explores how Miko’s relationship with her white boyfriend, Leon Christopher, is meant to be viewed as a mirror image of Ben’s white girl envy. In such a reading, Miko acts as Ben’s double instead of as a foil character to Ben. Finally, this essay shows how the symmetrical power of Alice’s queer romance offers opportunities for countering racial melancholia, not through assimilating into white dominant

culture, but through erotically charged yearnings for communal relationships with other Asians.

I. Racial Melancholia and Desire for the White Woman

Before I discuss Ben's attempt to alleviate racial melancholia through romantic relationships with white women, it is necessary to conceptualize David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's theory of racial melancholia. In their article "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," Eng and Han adopt Freud's concept of melancholia to describe the immigrant's wish to reach for, and then lose, the ideal of whiteness in the face of racial ideology in the US. Eng and Han argue that

[i]n the United States today, assimilation into mainstream culture for people of color still means adopting a set of dominant norms and ideals—whiteness, heterosexuality, middle-class family values—often foreclosed to them. The loss of these norms—the reiterated loss of whiteness as an ideal, for example—establishes one melancholic framework for delineating assimilation and racialization processes in the United States precisely as a series of failed and unresolved integrations. (670)

In other words, the racialized other is forced to address the complexities of immigration and assimilation to the extent that they are constantly struggling with an ambivalent identification with their heritage culture and with the new culture. Whereas Freud theorizes melancholia as a pathological response to the loss of a loved object in that the subject refuses to let go of the lost love object and instead incorporates the lost object into the self, Eng and Han identify melancholia "as a depathologized structure of feeling . . . melancholia might be thought of as underpinning our everyday conflicts and struggles with experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization" (669). In their attempt to depathologize "racial melancholia," Eng and Han theorize racial melancholia as the psychological effect of racialized loss experienced by minority subjects in their everyday lives in the US, where minorities and migrant subjects are expected to fit into mainstream American culture while at the same time feeling unable to attain the white racial identity.

Eng and Han further point out that, for Asian Americans and other minority groups, racial melancholia arises when minority groups can never fully assimilate into the mainstream culture, namely whiteness. Since whiteness remains elusive and unreachable for Asian Americans, “processes of assimilation are suspended, conflicted, and unresolved” (Eng and Han 671). As Eng and Han put it, “[t]his suspended assimilation—this inability to blend into the ‘melting pot’ of America—suggests that, for Asian Americans, ideals of whiteness are continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal” (671). Racial melancholia, therefore, provides a public language for Asian Americans to articulate the pain and experience of living in a society that expects them to be assimilated into the dominant white culture but where they are also “continually perceived as eccentric to the nation” (671). Racial melancholia identifies the responses of Asian Americans to losses, not as personal losses, but as cultural losses of cherished identities devalued by the mainstream white American culture. According to Eng and Han, to resist the need to assimilate, the melancholic individual should refuse to abandon his or her cultural heritage completely to attain the ideal whiteness.

From the very beginning of *Shortcomings*, Tomine depicts the forced nature of melancholic racial politics that affects Asian Americans in everyday life. Ben experiences the condition of racial melancholia in the face of race and male sexuality. Ben’s anxiety over his manhood is embodied in a joke which he overhears in a conversation between two white women commenting on Asian manhood: “What’s the difference between Asian and Caucasian men? The cauc!” (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 57). This tendentious joke on the (lack of) Asian American masculinity undeniably points to the identity split—that is, “Asian” and “man” are seen as mutually exclusive signifiers in America. As such, the tag—the *cauc*—is both “funny and deeply uncomfortable” (Zushi), for it implies that Asian American male is regarded as subject of lack. Having conflated the (lack of) “cauc/cock” with Asians, the joke seems to insinuate that Asian American masculinity is structured in terms of lack and desire and that the only way for Asian American men to become truly *Caucasian* is to possess the master signifier of whiteness—in this case, the phallus is white. As Franz Fanon has analyzed in his famous book *Black Skin, White Masks*, marginalized men of color can have access to caucasianness by possessing the body of white women. Fanon maps out the route to recovering his wounded masculinity

through interracial sexuality when he writes: “I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*. Now—and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged—who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man” (45). As discussed by Fanon, white women are regarded as symbols of colonial ideals of western culture and civilization. As such, white women embody Black man’s dreams of assimilating to white society. Since Black man is thwarted by the inability to assimilate to white culture because of his race, romantic relationships with white women provide a proxy for whiteness. As Fanon points out, by possessing white female bodies, marginalized men of color see themselves as temporarily merging with the center. In a move similar to that outlined by Fanon, Ben also seeks to overcome his *short of comings* to which the graphic novel’s title alludes by engaging in interracial romance. However, rather than facilitating an empowered rite of passage into mainstream white culture, interracial desire is portrayed as a painful struggle for Ben as he seeks to reach the elusive symbol of whiteness. To put it another way, indulging in a fantasy of white women as an attempted entry into *caucasianness*, Ben shows symptoms of racial melancholia when he fosters negative feelings toward himself and toward the Asian community, which is illustrated at the beginning of *Shortcomings*.

The beginning of the graphic novel immediately sets the stage for Ben’s attempt to adopt, to borrow a term from Brian Bethel, an “aesthetic of avoidance” to dis-identify himself with the Asian community. The first pages of the graphic novel illustrate Ben with Asians in the audience at a film festival organized by his girlfriend Miko. The Asian audience is seen to be rapt at the happy ending of the story, with Ben alone showing disapproval, apparently deriding the clichéd narrative of embracing Asian American cultural heritage. The scene shows him refusing to clap with rest of the Asian audience for the film. Subsequent images feature him standing apart from a group of Asian moviegoers who are congratulating Miko on her success in organizing the Asian digital film festival. Later, in his quarrels with Miko, Ben accuses the film’s creator of failing to make a good film and of falling into the familiar trap of Asian narratives about racial identity. Ben finds fault with the film for making “some big statement about race” (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 13). Whether or not the alluded film is esthetically good is debatable. What seems more

important is Ben's anger at a film about Asian American identity—about, in his own terms, the big word “race.”

Ben's annoyance at the quality of the Asian American film has less to do with his concern about Asian American moviegoers' lack of aesthetic taste and more to do with his reluctance to be associated with Asian culture. In other words, Ben's “aesthetic of avoidance” (Bethel) indicates a form of racial melancholia that occurs when a racial minority attempts to erase any connection with their ethnic identity, adopting instead aspects of the dominate culture. As Eng and Han explain, melancholia “might be said to trace a trajectory from love to hate of the lost object. This hate is subsequently transformed into self-hate in the course of moving from the outside world into the internalized domain of the psyche” (683).

Ben's attempts to downplay his ethnic identity can be viewed as a means of blending into normal American society. Similar to his “esthetics of avoidance” in detaching himself from Asian heritage, Ben also denies his desire for white women. A case in point is his particular porn collection. Near the end of chapter 1 in *Shortcomings*, Miko points out that all the porn films Ben owns are about white, blonde women, suggesting that Ben's sexual fantasies do not include Asian women and that he therefore does not like Asian women. While Ben's porn DVD collection may seem too casual and too mundane to bear serious discussion, critics have convincingly argued that pornography reveals quite a lot about our society's beliefs and desires. In an essay “Understanding the Asian Fetish through the Colonial Logic of Pornography,” Hai Dao explains how pornography, as a marginalized industry, “is free to express and exploit the darker repressed beliefs, urges, and desires that fuel the industry's ubiquity and immense profitability.” As Dao further explains, fetishization of Asian women in Western culture therefore often comes through pornography and through historical representations and colonial opinions. In other words, porn categories are often organized based on the racial identity of the woman, and not surprisingly, white women still represent the gold standard in attractiveness which is tailored to the gaze of the man.⁴ White women become the object of all men's fantasy. In short, even in pornography, desire is *racialized*. The fact

⁴ The identity of the viewer of pornography featuring two women has been a topic for scholarly debate but is beyond the scope of this essay. For the issue of lesbian pornography, see Fiona Scorgie, “The Politics of Lesbian Pornography.”

that Ben's DVD porn collection is all about white women shows his anxiety about his Asian American manhood, an anxiety only white women can appease.

Ben's fantasy about white women renders him unable to recognize the sexual desirability of his fellow Asian American women. In a frequently discussed series of images of Miko, Ben is shown unresponsive to Miko's provocative eroticism. Posing sexily in a transparent top and panties revealing her nipples and her navel, Miko, even in her half nudity, cannot arouse Ben's desire for her. That Ben would rather pass up an immediate promise of sex to watch white lesbian pornography displays the damaging effect of sexual and racial stereotypes on him. The implication is clear: racial fantasy feeds sexual fantasy. As Jolie A. Sheffer points out, "for Ben, without fantasy, particularly racial fantasy, there is no sexual desire" (126). As such, whiteness legitimately becomes the color of desire. Desiring white women is Ben's way of overcoming his falling short of the ideal American masculinity. His interracial desire for white women is fraught with mimicry and abjection, however. As discussed earlier in this essay, the sexual desire of minority men for the white woman is essentially an act of imitating the white men, an attempt to be "loved like a white man" (Fanon 63). For example, in his first attempt to pursue a white woman—Autumn, who works as a theater ticket clerk for Ben—Ben embodies all the infamous Asian American characteristics such as passiveness and lack of racial pride. After he has gone on a couple of dates with Autumn and still hesitates to take things further, Alice warns him about stereotypes of Asian American men: "If you hang out with Autumn one more time and don't make a move, be prepared to be banished to 'Neutered Asian Friend' territory forever!" (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 46). Later, when Ben does take action but is rejected by Autumn, he complains to Alice about the humiliation of being rejected by a woman whose artistic performance he condescends to embrace in exchange for getting a date. And when Alice asks him for an explanation about his choice of Autumn, Ben's answer—"my superficiality could've overpowered my snobbery" (50)—shows he is fully aware of the error of desiring whiteness at the cost of his self-esteem.

Ben's white girl obsession is seen less as a means of bridging cultural loss and more as an inability to mourn for the racial grief. *Shortcomings* takes a poignant (though sometimes funny) look at Ben's desire for white manhood by showing him condescending to date a white bisexual woman, Sasha Lenz, whom Ben meets at a gay party Alice brings him to. In a dialogue with Alice

over Sasha's sexual orientation, he expresses excitement when he hears that Sasha is a "fence-sitter," which refers to Sasha's identity as a bisexual person (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 56). Ben considers Sasha's bisexuality as an advantage to him, as he tells Alice in his pathetic and insecure voice: "Maybe it's a good thing if she's a lesbian . . . she wouldn't be so size conscious" (56). Whereas a white lesbian would not be considered a paradigm trophy prize for Asian American men to prove their masculinity, Ben is desperate to date any white woman, for romantic relationships with white women are Ben's means of escape from stereotypes of Asian American males as asexual. Therefore, he unconsciously sees Sasha as a goddess who descends from a higher place to save him. That explains why the moment Sasha enters the story, she is illustrated walking slowly and gracefully down the stairs. Her slow walks as well as the flower-patterned skirt combine to create the mood that she is seen as a long-awaited goddess who has finally arrived to save Ben from his male identity crisis. In short, the atmosphere surrounding the introduction of Sasha into the graphic novel is emblematic of a religious ceremony welcoming the arrival of a goddess.

Sasha, however, still views Ben through the lens of stereotyping Asian American men as effeminate. A case in point is her exaggerated surprise at the softness of Ben's hands. The panel shows Sasha's mouth forming a big *O* of shock when she holds up Ben's hands under scrutiny. Delicate and soft hands in a man are here an unmistakable euphemism for the lack of male sexual prowess. Ben's pursuit of Sasha Lenz, therefore, only leads him to be emasculated sexually and racially.

Tomine further turns Ben's dream of entering white American culture into a source of melancholia. When Ben is about to fulfill his sexual fantasy for the white woman, he acts awkwardly as if ready to retreat from his long desired dream. He is presented as a pathetically dwindling figure in front of a naked Sasha. The Asian American male body appears small, insignificant and vulnerable. The contrast of lightness (represented by Sasha) and darkness (represented by Ben) reinforces the power imbalance, with whiteness coded as purity and illumination and Asianness as weakness and obscurity. In addition, the image toys with gender role reversal: Sasha appears to be a calm, mature and experienced woman, while Ben acts like a child, quivering all over as if he were about to be raped by Sasha. In this setting, rather than satisfying his desire for white women, Ben—the Asian American male body—becomes the object

of white female gaze. Sasha's gaze *objectifies* the Asian American male body—a point overlooked by most scholars. For example, as discussed in the earlier part of this essay, Jolie A. Sheffer has convincingly argued that Tomine appropriates the pornographic gaze in looking at the interracial intimacy between white women and men of color, but Sheffer reduces the white female physicality of Sasha only to the object of Ben's pornographic fantasies (130). I want to argue that, in this interracial romance, Ben does not gain the patriarchal victory and male ownership of Sasha. Sasha's gaze goes beyond the terrain of power relationship under patriarchy. In fact, Sasha echoes the long history of power imbalance in the interracial romance between the colonizer and the colonized. As numerous critics have pointed out, white women, while often cast as powerless and submissive in traditional romantic relationships, also take the position of white male subject and overpower their lover in interracial relationships.⁵ For example, in her article "The Ambivalences of Colonial Desire in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*," Karen Ruddy argues that the young French girl's love affair with a Chinese man is "'perverse' because such sexual relations between white women and Asian men were forbidden in the French colonies—is rooted in the power that she has over him due to her racial privilege" (78). In this interracial desire, the French girl feminizes the Chinese man by holding both sexual power and racial power over him. Ruddy points out that the girl "forces her lover to mime the feminized image of Asian masculinity in the white colonial imagination, an image that constructs Asian men as weak, submissive, subordinate, and at times asexual" (91). Ruddy's analysis of imbalanced power relationships in interracial romance in colonial settings can be applied to Ben's romance with Sasha.

In their interracial relationship, it is Sasha, not Ben, that takes the *male* subject position by asserting her sexual and racial power over Ben. Therefore, when Ben finds himself in bed with Sasha, he does not feel the ecstasy of achieving his dream. Rather, in the intimately close-up images of Ben and Sasha in bed, Ben feels he is losing his racial virginity for the first time: "It's just . . . This is the first time I've ever been with . . ." (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 64; ellipses in original). Ben's pauses in speech illustrate his uncertainty about a dream coming true, as he is so overwhelmed and terrified of fulfilling his sexual desire with a white woman. In these panels, Ben appears as though he is

⁵ For white women's racial privilege over men of color see also Arlene R. Keizer, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*.

going through an experience that is “more *painful* than exciting” (Park 109; emphasis added). Sasha’s response is even more interesting: “This’ll be a *first* for me, too” (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 64; emphasis added). This answer shows that Sasha is the agency of power. While the body of Sasha is the site of Ben’s male gaze, she is not a victim of patriarchal relations of power. Put another way, Sasha is not objectified as women often are in a patriarchal sexual relationship. In fact, in this interracial romance, Sasha takes the initiative and dictates the pace of her relationship with Ben. She is the one who makes the first move, the one who seduces Ben and gets him into bed. In his relationship with Sasha, Ben is actually being *doubly* emasculated. At the moment of his long-anticipated sexual encounter with the white woman, Ben kisses Sasha with his eyes partly open while Sasha closes hers, suggesting her reluctance to return his gaze. In addition, the spacial arrangement positioning Sasha below Ben seems to suggest Ben’s dominance over Sasha, but the contrast in body language—a panic-stricken Ben with beads of perspiration all over his face and a calm and reassured Sasha—demonstrates that Sasha holds power over Ben. Not only does she literally silence Ben by “shhing him up” but she also refuses to engage in reciprocal eye gazing (65). In her physical body and in her language, Sasha makes it clear that the interracial sexual romance with Ben is not based on mutual love. Likewise, Ben does not view his relationship with Sasha based on love and understanding. Rather, for Ben, Sasha represents a symbol of whiteness. A picture of Sasha’s blonde hair on Ben’s flower pillow is presented as an indication of their consummation and becomes a metonymy for Ben’s dream of reaching for whiteness. After achieving his dream, Ben proudly announces to Alice: “The eagle has landed,” suggesting that he sees Caucasian women as a trophy to attain (65).

After his male ego has been boosted by finally conquering a white woman, Ben sees himself evolving from an emasculated subject into a figure of power. He takes Sasha to an Asian area, strutting like a proud cock by showing off his trophy prize, and insists that some Asian American youth who are hanging out together in the Asian plaza are looking at them in “white-girl envy” (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 68). Ben explains further to Sasha: “Now if *he* had been with a white girl too, we would’ve given each other the sign . . . kind of like a covert ‘high five’” (68; ellipsis in original). Ben’s blonde fetish is mocked by his Asian peers, however. Tomine draws a panel of fellow Asian American men on the street staring at Ben and Sasha as they walk past together. The image of two

Asian American men wearing expressions of disapproval suggests that we should not take the “white-girl envy” seriously. Despite the lack of verbal communication in the panel, the two young men’s facial expressions, as well as the symbols on their shirts—a “got rice” slogan and a Rockets 11 basketball T-shirt—send out a clear message: they disapprove of the AMWF (Asian Male, White Female) relationship. While the “got rice” black T-shirt is loaded with meaning and is clearly associated with the Asian Pride movement, the Rockets 11 basketball T-shirt carries a more subtle message about Asian pride. The basketball T-shirt refers to the famous Chinese basketball player for the Houston Rockets, Yao Ming, whose basketball number is 11. Nicknamed the Emperor of the Houston Rockets, Yao Ming is also regarded as a symbol of Asian pride and Asian masculinity too. By including Asian American young men who take pride in their Asian American identity, Tomine points out the fallacy of Ben’s using white female physicality as a means of empowering his masculine identity. Tomine closes the first chapter with examples of an alternative response to racial melancholia by including images of Asian American young men who seem to share communal bonds and are at ease with their fellow Asian Americans.

The joke of white-girl envy further reveals Ben’s ambivalence toward interracial relationships. Whereas before he has been marked by disidentifying with his Asian American heritage, the interracial relationship with Sasha paradoxically brings his Asian identity crisis into the light. *Shortcomings* indicates that, for Ben, interracial relationships with white women are not a solution to racial melancholia because his pursuit of white women fails to solve his Asian American male sexuality. Worse, Ben eventually gets rejected by Sasha, so his romantic relationship with Sasha ends with him being doubly humiliated.

If Tomine satirizes Ben’s blonde fetish, he takes equal delight in mocking white men with Asian fetishes. There is neatness in the structure of *Shortcomings* in which chapter 3 not only echoes but also reverses all the positions of the previous two chapters. In chapter 3, Miko is shown as a complete reversal of her previous self. Not only is she dating a white man; she is also blind to her own double standard toward the Asian Female, White Male (AFWM) pairing.

II. Interracial Romance and Asian Fever

In chapter 1 of *Shortcomings*, Miko is presented as more proactive in promoting Asian pride, so she is meant to be a foil character to Ben to show the fallacy of avoiding one's cultural identity for the sake of integrating into the mainstream culture. As the story progresses, Miko, rather than being the opposite of Ben, acts more like his double, for she also attempts to use interracial romance to counter racial abjection. In this respect, I agree with Rebecca Suter's reading of Miko. Suter also sees Miko and Ben as performing a complete reversal of their positions in relation to each other; Suter writes, "Ben becomes the positive hero, and Miko acquires the role of villain" (116).⁶ When Ben tracks Miko down in New York and finds out that Miko has left him for a Caucasian man instead of working as an intern at an Asian American Independent Film Institute, Miko's action reveals a kind of double betrayal: of Ben and of her own identity politics. The interracial relationship between Miko and her white boyfriend Leon Christopher can be regarded as a parody of Ben's white fever.

In US popular culture, Asian American women have long been *imaginized* through the lens of Orientalism as both erotic and exotic. Many critics have argued that popular media helps perpetuate images of Asian American women as seductive and pleasing. In particular, Minjeong Kim and Angie Y. Chung argue that the increasing visibility of Asian American women in today's consumer culture industries does not liberate Asian American women from the "time-old themes of Oriental feminine exoticism" (80). Instead, presentations of Asian American women in the media continue to objectify and exotify Asian American women as sexy and subservient, a visual practice that "resurrects traditional hierarchies of American Orientalism" (67). This visual construction of the Asian American female based on Orientalist assumptions is relevant to my study of the interracial romantic relationship between Miko and Leon, for even when Miko's racial melancholia is portrayed in a less overt manner than Ben's, it is obvious that her dating a white man resembles Ben's way of dealing with racial melancholia through interracial romance with a white partner.

⁶ Although I share Suter's assessment of Miko, I would not go as far as Suter in claiming that Ben redeems himself in chapter 3. See Rebecca Suter, "Japan/America, Man/Woman: Gender and Identity Politics in Adrian Tomine and Yoshihiro Tatsumi."

The interracial romance between Miko and Leon is replete with images of Asian fever. It is significant that chapter 3 begins with a series of wordless images featuring an erotically provocative Miko. The page following the six panels reveals that the images are presented through the camera lens of Leon Christopher, who puts Miko's photos in the window display to advertise his clothes shop. There is an incongruity between the purpose of Miko's photo images for the windows of Leon's fashion shop and the implications of those photo shots. Rather than modelling for a clothes catalog, the sexy portraits evoke all the racialized and gendered stereotypical images of Asian American women as exotic, sexy, and subservient in American mainstream media. Leon's camera focuses more on Miko's body as the camera surveys her breasts, hair, and face. The camera gaze therefore evokes an image of the male's visual pleasure, to borrow Laura Mulvey's terms. In her influential study on the filmic gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey notes that, in most mainstream films, the camera always positions women as objects of the male gaze:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (8)

The camera, according to Mulvey, features the female body as object of the male erotic fantasy. In *Shortcomings*, since Leon is a male photographer and Leon *happens* to be white, the camera is not only male but is also racialized.⁷ The tendency to sexualize and orientalize Asian American women ultimately reflects a form of Asian fetishism.

I would argue that Leon, albeit unconsciously, orientalizes Miko as an object of fantasy and sexual desire. This reading departs from most critical views that regard Leon's love for Miko as genuine and real, therefore immune

⁷ Although Mulvey's theory of film gaze is not the topic of this essay, it is interesting to note that Mulvey has been criticized for overlooking the issue of race in her argument. For example, bell hooks faults white feminist film critics such as Mulvey for failing to acknowledge the Black/colored female spectatorship. See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*.

from racial stereotypes about the AFWM interracial romance. For example, Jolie A. Sheffer thinks “Miko’s relationship with Leon [is] based in shared interests (visual arts, Japanese language, and Asian cultural forms) and intimacy” (133). Rather than a love born from genuine mutual affection, the romantic relationship between Miko and Leon is thematically reminiscent of colonial white man’s triumph over Asian women, the forbidden pleasures of the illicit encounter. For example, the six panels of Miko point to Leon’s dominant power over Miko, evidenced in the higher position Leon takes in the photo shoot. The camera angles of the photos of Miko are shot from above, with Miko lying either on the floor or in bed under Leon’s controlling gaze, which is an Orientalist’s gaze that turns Miko into an object of fantasy.

Adding to the issue of Orientalism in the WMAW interracial romance is Asian fetishism. Leon has all the characteristics of the classic Asian fetishist, exemplified in his learning martial arts, his ridiculous insistence on speaking Japanese while everyone around him speaks English and, finally, in his choice of Asian American Miko as his girlfriend. In the dramatic and climatic love-triangle confrontation between Ben, Miko and Leon, Ben accuses Leon of having sex with Miko in his own bed in Oakland, and Miko of lying and cheating on him. When Leon tries to protect Miko by dropping into a kung fu pose to face-off with Ben, the image of Leon in a martial arts pose with his mouth forming an *O* is unmistakably reminiscent of the greatest icon of martial arts—Bruce Lee.⁸ Leon’s imitation of Bruce Lee’s trademark move embarrasses Miko; she turns her head aside with her arms across her chest, clueless about how to handle the awkward situation, while Ben stands composedly, looking calmly at Leon in his ridiculous pose. In the history of comic art, ridicule and caricature are two of the most damaging and racist cartoon languages used to depict people of color—e.g., blackface minstrelsy and stereotypical portrayal of buck-toothed Asian/Chinese people. Caricature, then, has been a key component in disseminating racist discourse and ideas. In *Shortcomings*, Tomine restrains from using caricature to portray characters, emphatically calling the reader’s attention to his detailed and lifelike drawing style. Yet, in this confrontation scene, Tomine relies on caricature in portraying Leon’s funny parody of Bruce Lee. Caricature is used here to mock Leon’s Asian fever, which Leon demonstrates in adopting the idea of Asianness.

⁸ I got the idea of Leon imitating Bruce Lee from Professor Dave Ball’s blog. See his “The Way of Asianization.”

Leon's Asian fever carries symbolic significance in *Shortcomings*. In addition, Leon's apartment becomes a visual representation of his Asian fetish. When Miko brings Ben to her and Leon's apartment in New York and Ben is interrogating Miko about her cheating on him, the background visual image features an artificial cherry blossom tree and Japanese calligraphy on the wall. The image creates an exaggerated effect of imaginary Asianness, thereby mocking Leon's ridiculous Orientalist discourse about Asia and Asian women. Leon's world represents a classic Orientalism. His apartment overflows with Asian-style decorations, which Ben derisively calls "his oriental accessories" and in which Miko is just an added item in his Oriental collections (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 97).

The question arises: why does Miko fall for an Asian fetishist—a "rice king" as Ben calls Leon (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 91)? Whereas before Miko is presented as an Asian American woman who prioritizes Asian pride and solidity, Miko seems willing to turn a blind eye to the obvious implications embedded in her AFWM paring with Leon. Thus, her earlier version of Asian pride is called into question and is subject to re-examination. While Ben seems to take a colorblind approach to racial identity, Miko reverses the version of colorblindness by playing along with western men's fantasy about Asian women. It turns out that Miko is as desperate as Ben in her attempts to gain access to mainstream American white culture by dating Leon to the extent that she internalizes the stereotypical image of the exotic Other by helping Leon fulfill his fetishistic desire. When facing Ben's charge that she has cheated on him with a white man, Miko further shows her hypocrisy in a perverse attempt to move Leon outside of the category of whiteness by claiming that Leon is "half Jewish, half Native American" (101). At this point, readers cannot help but laugh with Ben when Ben scoffs at Miko's faulty logic of racial categorization: "That's hilarious! Is that what he put on his college application?" (101). Whether Leon is white (as Ben suggests he is) or a fellow ethnic minority (as Miko insists he is half Jewish, half Native American) is subject to debate. Given the storyline of *Shortcomings*, which addresses the issue of interracial romantic relationships between whites and Asian Americans in the US, and given the sudden transformation of Miko in chapter 3 where she is dating a classic Asian fetishist, it may be fair to say that Leon belongs more to the category of whiteness than to that of an ethnic minority identity. Viewing Leon as white also conforms to the plot development of *Shortcomings* in which both

Ben and Miko attempt to dissociate their romantic desire from racial scripts. In this respect, Miko's perverse defense against the charges of Leon's whiteness is an attempt on her part to evade the racial dynamics of the relationship she has found herself in. This aspect of evasion is also interesting because it reveals a double standard with the racial implications in terms of AFWM pairings.

In a climactic moment, Ben accidentally sees Miko arm in arm with Leon walking on a New York street in which an Oriental-like Miko baffles Ben and renders him speechless. Whereas in chapter 1 Miko always puts her hair up in a ponytail when in public and dresses like a career woman in suit pants most of the time, we see a more *feminine* Miko in chapter 3 who lets her hair down and her wardrobe choice tends to be Asian style—she is seen wearing a cheongsam top with a long skirt when she is walking with Leon. Further, a panel of Miko and Leon in a subway car shows Miko holding Leon's waist and literally *looking up to* him while the two talk to each other in Japanese. Both the language and dress code choices are symbolic of female Asianness, simultaneously pointing to the ridiculousness of Miko's transformation. In other words, Miko's Asian-like dress style is not a matter of personal style; instead, it is suggestive of Miko's subscription to Leon's deep Asian fetishism, which is obvious to the reader but to which Miko is oblivious. As Ben later complains to Alice and her new girlfriend Meredith at a bar, "it has certain . . . connotations" in an AFWM romantic relationship (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 91; ellipsis in original). Although Ben's complaint has been criticized for his double standard toward White-Asian romance, Ben does have a point here, for Leon has deep Asian fever.

The AFWM interracial pairing in life, as well as in America's popular media, appears to be more common and thus more *acceptable* than the reverse, which reflects society's double standard toward interracial relationship between Asian American women and white men.⁹ In *Shortcomings*, the double standard toward the AFWM romantic relationship literally becomes an argument between Ben and Meredith Lee, Alice's new girlfriend in New York. When Ben insists there is an undercurrent of fetishism between the AFWM pairing, Meredith turns the accusation back on Ben, asking him whether his fetish for white women is "a sublimated form of assimilation" (Tomine, *Shortcomings*

⁹ The interracial dating disparity is a well-documented cultural phenomenon. For example, a survey by *OkCupid* shows that the odds are against Asian males romantically. According to *OkCupid*, white females are 38% more likely to respond to a white male than to an Asian male ("How Your Race"). Also see a follow-up study "Race and Attraction."

92). While this example has been used against Ben because he is equally suspect of a kind of white girl fetish, I want to argue that chapter 3 has consistently encouraged us to read Miko as the double of Ben, for both aspire to enter the white dominant culture through the means of interracial relationships.

After presenting Ben's humiliation and insecurity over his manhood in his relationships with white women and Miko's racialized erotic relationship with Leon, suggesting both interracial romances as undesirable ways of dealing with racial melancholia, Tomine includes Alice's queer love as a more just and alternative means of responding to the racial grief of Asian Americans in contemporary US society. Jolie A. Sheffer also argues that the relationship between Alice and Meredith "suggests a shift away from dominate, toward equality and mutual respect," a relationship not "defined by the dominant culture's (white, patriarchal, and heterosexual) values" (139). Although I also regard the interracial relationship between Alice and Meredith as different from Ben and Miko's, I differ from Sheffer in that Sheffer focuses on how heterosexual interracial relationships are "overdetermined by the particular visual codes of racial stereotype, erotic fantasy, and film genre," suggesting that queer love is not conditioned by history and race (121). I would not go so far as to claim that queer love is not conditioned by historical struggle and racial stereotypes. What we do see in the Alice-Meredith interracial romance is that their mutual love and respect presents an alternative way of ending racial melancholia. In this way, Tomine draws a physically more relaxed Alice. In addition, by presenting Alice as the only figure able to enjoy and fulfill sexual desire literally in *Shortcomings*, the graphic novel suggests that Alice is *not* "short of *comings*" in a novel where sexuality is repeatedly associated with a racialized lack of sexual desire.

In stark contrast to Ben's physical tenseness, Alice is often visually presented in a relaxed body posture. I want to read this relaxed body language as a sign of Alice's ability to cross over the strict racial and sexual borders. The panel of a restaurant named "Crepe Expectations" brings Alice's relaxed body language more into focus (Tomine, *Shortcomings* 15). The visual imagery of the Crepe Expectations restaurant where Ben meets with Alice for lunch presents a good opportunity for readers to see the impact of a troubled racial identity on the body. All the conversations that occur in the restaurant center on Ben's struggle with his Asian heritage, with the drawings depicting Ben sitting straight and following dining etiquette: using a knife and fork, his elbows off

the table and a cloth napkin on his knees. In contrast, Alice ignores all table manners, sitting casually with her ankles crossed and elbows resting on the table. This neglect of table dining decorum does not denote a lack of politeness and culture in Alice. In fact, graphic novels rely on visual imagery and physical expressions to convey meaning. In other words, the restaurant's name is symbolic of Ben's creeping desire to follow the terrible expectations of assimilating to the white dominant American society. Yet, it is the more relaxed and flexible Alice who seems untroubled by her racial identity but who is able to fulfill Ben's longtime life dream of dating white women when the restaurant scene shows Alice flirting with the white waitress and eventually securing a date with her.

Tomine uses Alice's queer identity to illustrate the possibility of adopting flexible political strategies that refrain from either resisting, or accommodating, the mainstream white culture. Significantly, Alice and Meredith are the only romantic couple in *Shortcomings* who are allowed to achieve visual and physical sexual pleasure when they are shown kissing each other on scene and are able to consummate their relationship. In a humorous and hilarious scene toward the end of the novel, Tomine portrays Ben trying to prevent himself hearing the loud sounds of Alice and Meredith's happy love moans by covering his ears with his pillow. Their loud love moans carry symbolic significance: for one thing, the moans announce they are the only couple who are *not* short of comings in the novel where being *short of* sexual pleasure is repeatedly tied with racial identity, as "coming" is synonymous with "orgasm." For another, the consummation of their relationship happily and loudly declares the possibility of countering racial melancholic by establishing a romantic relationship able to defy white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic culture other.

III. Conclusion

Shortcomings ends with a series of six textless panels depicting Ben seated alone on an airplane heading back to Berkeley, California, looking out of the window onto a vast expanse of whiteness. The visual presentation of stillness and silence indicates a sense of ambivalence, which is a fitting ending to *Shortcomings*, for the ambivalence reflects his unresolved struggle to be assimilated into the dominant white society by way of interracial relationships.

Shortcomings depicts both Ben and Miko as subjects of melancholia who attempt to engage in interracial relationships as a means to enter the imagined position of the dominant white. However, Tomine understands the *shortcomings* of the Asian American-white romance by visually and verbally illustrating the legacy of racial, gender, and sexual power imbalance that has historically defined relationships between Asian Americans and whites. Ben and Miko's interracial relationships are rendered equally undesirable, for such relationships reveal the social basis of racial melancholia. To the extent that whiteness and racial melancholia permeate the interracial relationships in the graphic novel, Tomine suggests that Asian American queer love may be one of the possible ways to re-think ethnic and multicultural identity and to re-imagine new interracial dynamics that are not conditioned by racial stereotypes of Asian American masculinity and femininity.

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