Yamada Eimi and the Value of *Trash*

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Yamada Eimi and the Value of Trash

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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This paper addresses the collusion with and contradiction to patriarchal power structures of race and femininity in Yamada Eimi’s Bedtime Eyes and Trash. In moments of Bedtime Eyes, particularly the final novella “Jesse,” and Trash, Yamada contradicts her irresponsible portrayals of Japanese female and black male identity often found in her fiction. This paper will discuss ideological shifts in Yamada’s narratives through a textual analysis of Bedtime Eyes and Trash, arguing that through changes in narrative that affect character development, “Jesse” and Trash begin to deconstruct some of the detrimental power structures that shape much Yamada’s fictional works.

Keywords: Yamada Eimi, Bedtime Eyes, Trash, Japanese female identity, patriarchal power, race
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Yamada Eimi is known for her enthrallingly lewd and often disturbing short stories in which her heroines unapologetically pursue pleasure through relationships with racialized black American men. One of her most representative books on this theme is *Bedtime Eyes* (2006), a collection of three novellas. The first two stories in the collection are similar, telling the voracious sexual tale of a young anarchic Japanese woman and her black American lover. The third story, “Jesse,” diverges, focusing on the relationship between a somewhat similar heroine and her boyfriend’s son, the eponymous Jesse. Yamada then wrote *Trash*, a novel based on the characters and narrative of “Jesse,” taking place two years after the time of that novella and further developing its relationships and themes. Yamada critics have argued that while her novels are potentially powerful in creating a voice for a brashly sexual Japanese female, the stories are plagued by the ubiquitously racist depictions of black men and exploitation of patriarchal gender and power roles. However, these studies often neglect to address the content in “Jesse” and its extension into the novel *Trash*. While I agree that Yamada relies on harmful patriarchal power structures in *Bedtime Eyes*, I think that critics dismiss some of the potential contradiction of the misuse of power in parts of *Bedtime Eyes* and even the subversion of power structures in both “Jesse” and *Trash*. Through changes in narrative that affect character development, “Jesse” and *Trash* begin to deconstruct some of the detrimental power structures that shape much of Yamada’s fictional works. In their negotiation of power, Yamada’s narratives are important in that they speak to the construction of female identity in contemporary Japanese culture.

In the following paragraphs I will briefly discuss the critical discourse on Yamada’s use of conventional gender structures, sexuality, and racialized images of black men, focusing on the work of Nina Cornyetz. I will then provide a short textual analysis of “Bedtime Eyes” that supports many critics’ conclusions before I illustrate, textually, where I think Yamada’s
narratives provide some contradictions to those conclusions. While I agree with critics that Yamada relies on racist and patriarchal power structures, I feel that they have neglected to recognize some of the contradictions to that reliance, particularly in the hyper violent conclusion of “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” the second of the three novellas in Bedtime Eyes. In its ultra violent finality, the scene stops the complacency with sadomasochistic reciprocation of violent control that goes on in those narratives. The scene disrupts the relationships of power and control in terms of “The Piano’s” fabula, but also metaphorically disrupts the patterns established in the first two stories of Bedtime Eyes as it is the transition scene between those two stories and the last novella in Bedtime Eyes, “Jesse,” a story that further subverts some of the patriarchal patterns in Yamada’s work. The last section of this paper will be a textual analysis that shows how “Jesse” and Trash depart from the patriarchally-structured narration and characterization of the first two stories in Bedtime Eyes, which is a development that has been neglected in much of the scholarship on Yamada’s work.

Within Yamada’s unrelentingly sexual texts, there are undeniable moments of power in which women begin to take control of their bodies. However, any reader will quickly recognize the problematic themes of race and female identity that follow the exploration of female sexuality within Yamada’s fiction. Nina Cornyetz argues that Yamada’s texts are potentially subversive in Yamada’s use of the libidinal not simply in terms of content, but as the primary catalyst for the movement of narrative, providing feminine structure to her primarily plotless texts, in “Power and Gender in the Narratives of Yamada Eimi.” However, Cornyetz and other critics, such as John Russell, have recognized the weakness inherent in the roles of Yamada’s seemingly powerful heroines. While the women in Yamada’s fiction appear resilient and defiant

1 “Desire propels the narratives directly, with little or no attention to plot.” (Ibid., 428).; “In Yamada’s work, an underlying instinctual (libidinal) drive clearly motivates the characters, and the work itself, through an interplay of desire and satiation.” (Ibid., 429).
to subjugating patriarchal power in their unapologetic sexuality, they often rely on racist and patriarchal hegemonic discourse to achieve their erotic power.

The problem with Yamada’s heroines’ sexual verve is that it stems from their fetishization of the black male Other, a practice that Cornyetz and Russell explain is part of much of Japan’s interaction with black culture.2 Yamada relies on stereotypes of black men that have been cultivated by colonialist discourse for centuries such as inferior intelligence, volatility, and most importantly to her fiction, hyper-sexuality and superior sexual performance (particularly in comparison to Japanese men).3 While the black Other is subjected to stereotypes of inferiority in mental and social power, he is often thought of and portrayed as sexually and physically superior to the Japanese male.4 As the position of the female in Japanese history has long been subjected to patriarchal hegemonies, her exploitation of the black male guarantees her access to fantasies of sexual and social rebellion from Japanese masculine hegemony.5 The black

2 Russell convincingly argues that the spectrum of loathing and fear to fetishization of blackness in Japan is the result of a long history of the “attempt to deal with their own ambiguous racio-cultural status in a Eurocentric world, where . . . hierarchies have been largely (and literally) conceived in terms of polarizations between black and white and in which Japanese as Asians have traditionally occupied a liminal state—a gray area—betwixt and between’ the ‘Civilized White’ and the ‘Barbarous Black’ Other.” John G. Russell, "Race and Reflexivity: The Black Other in Contemporary Japanese Mass Culture," Cultural Anthropology 6.1 (1991): 6.

3 Russell lays out the most commonly used stereotypes in Japanese literature, borrowed from ignominious Western traditions: “(1) infantilism, (2) primitivism, (3) hypersexuality, (4) bestiality, (5) natural athletic prowess or physical stamina, (6) mental inferiority, (7) psychological weakness, and (8) emotional volatility.” Ibid., 6.


5 Cornyetz explains that “Female rage lurks beneath the phenomenon: by choosing an African American lover, encoded with the text of phallic empowerment, and by rejecting the economic and social stability of a Japanese husband, the Japanese woman has availed herself of a passive-aggressive act of resistance.” Cornyetz, “Fetishized,” 127. Also see Karen Kelsky, “Intimate Ideologies: Transnational Theory and Japan’s ‘Yellow Cabs,’” Public Culture, no. 6,
men in Yamada’s books become entirely objectified, a means to her heroine’s pleasure-filled ends, and also a means to power. Just as patriarchal power is contingent upon the subjugation of the female, Yamada’s Japanese heroines participate in a reversal of a patriarchal power structure in which they subjugate the black male by reducing him to his phallus, using him as an object for desire, or what Cornyetz describes as a “transcendental signifier.” If this object of power is caught and exploited, it will grant Japanese women access to an authority from which they have often been excluded.

Cornyetz argues convincingly that nearly all of Yamada’s texts are replete with this reliance on patriarchal power structures—never fully rebelling from them as one would think stories of such confidently sexual females would, but exploiting them in patriarchal ways through the subjugation of hyper-sexualized and stereotyped black males. The black men in Yamada’s books are drug addicts, chaotic, violent, represented as quite mindless and always irresistibly erotic. The first two stories in Bedtime Eyes rely completely on such stereotypes of the black male, the first example of which is the opening novella, which borrows the name of the collection.

Yamada relies on the patriarchal power paradigm of exploitation and objectification in the content of her plots but also in her style of narration, which directly affects the character development in her stories. A brief but representative example of the reliance on racialist stereotypes and romanticization of the black Other described above is found at a moment of graphic but typical conflict in “Bedtime Eyes.” The story’s main characters are Kim, a young nightclub performer and the first-person narrator, and her lover Spoon, an AWOL American GI. Their relationship is almost entirely composed of sex along with whichever physical drive they

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6 Cornyetz, “Fetishized,” 125.
need fulfilled, and is intense but brief as Spoon is eventually arrested for attempting to sell military information. In a typical scene, Kim describes her justification for not exploring Spoon’s deeper thoughts and motivations when he comes home drunk, as he is wont to do, vomits, and allows Kim to clean up his mess. As Kim cleans up, Spoon calls out to her from the bedroom: “‘Kim, I wanna f*** you. I suppose you don’t want to do it tonight, huh?’ f***ing was all he knew. In his heart he must have been screaming, What do you want me to do? How can I make you feel better? What else is there besides f***ing?’” In this way, “Bedtime Eyes” and “The Piano Player’s Fingers” become almost entirely monologic narratives—the reader is not given access to the male protagonists’ deeper motivations and feelings, but vague illustrations of their reality are related through the essentializing lens of the female protagonists. The result is two-dimensional male figures, and as is the case in the quote above, “the really flat character can be expressed in one sentence,” as Forster defines it. “The sentence” is repeated in different ways in the quote, but the effect is the same and highly representative of Yamada’s stories, often narrated by a Japanese female.

In the example above, Kim controls how Spoon is represented: primarily as an object for her obsession and pleasure. This pattern becomes a theme in “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” and in much of Yamada’s other fiction as well. E.M. Forster calls these characters “flat,” or, in short,

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8 Allen provides a succinct summary of the two Bakhtinian terms: “Like the tradition of the carnival, the polyphonic novel fights against any view of the world which would valorize one ‘official’ point-of-view, one ideological position, and thus one discourse, above all others. The novel, in this sense, presents to us a world which is literally dialogic. And yet it is important to note that dialogism does not concern simply the clash between different character-centered discourses; dialogism is also a central feature of each character’s own individual discourse. As Bakhtin states: ‘dialogic relationships can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically’ (1984: 184).” Graham Allen, Intertextuality, (London: Routledge, 2000), 24–25.
unchanging and serving a single purpose\textsuperscript{10} which, in this case, is the pleasure of their female counterparts. Forster makes the point that flat characters are useful if they are sustained by the vitality of the story.\textsuperscript{11} The problem with Yamada’s texts is that the characters that are flattened out into the representation of black hyper-sexuality \textit{are} the story, as Cornyetz explains. The heroines spend all of their time ruminating and describing how their lover fulfills their erotic needs, simply repeating the same phrases of desire in one way or another. The result is not a more complex understanding of the male characters, but an exhausting repetition of objectification of a figure that is meant to fuel Yamada’s erotic plots, but whose personal or “secret”\textsuperscript{12} thoughts the reader never hears. Such thoughts are the kind that would help him thrive, and help create a much more interesting plot that is, after all, driven by the heroine’s connection to him. As Cornyetz and many Yamada critics conclude, in the small and, in many ways, excentric subculture that Yamada often presents to readers, what seems like, and perhaps sometimes is, a text of rebellion is actually a reinstatement/reversal of patriarchal binaries of control and subjugation inflicted by Japanese women onto black men.\textsuperscript{13} This fact is illustrated in

\textsuperscript{10} “In their purest form, they [flat characters] are constructed round a single idea or quality.” Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{11} “Good but imperfect novelists, like Wells and Dickens, are very clever at transmitting force. The part of their novel that is alive galvanizes the part that is not [(i.e. flat characters)], and causes the characters to jump about and speak in a convincing way.” Ibid., 76–77.

\textsuperscript{12} On the basic notion of a fictional character, Forster writes, “They [fictional characters] are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible; we are people whose secret lives are invisible. And that is why novels, even when they are about wicked people, can solace us: they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power.” Ibid., 70.

\textsuperscript{13} Cornyetz writes, “Yamada inverts many phallocentric paradigms dominant in modern Japanese discourses of heterosexual relationships. Yamada’s primary project seems to be the representation of women independent and defiant of such common contemporary Japanese depictions as woman as mother, woman as passive (surrendered) object, and woman as male property. Simply writing sexual pleasure as a woman (suggesting the possibility of woman-as-subject) begins the process of inversion. Japanese narratives of sexual pleasure, most notably modern pornography, overwhelmingly portray women as the victims of rape (or at least as the reticent objects of male sexual desire) (see Terawaki). Standing in obvious contrast are the
the content of Yamada’s stories, but similarly in the use of univocal, first-person narration in which the female is given an authoritative role as the first-person narrator and the sole focalizor, dictating the character development, dialogue and descriptions of their black male counterparts. Certainly, not recognizing and problematizing the racialist objectification of the black characters in Yamada’s novels would make a reader a passive participant in that behavior.¹⁴

I have found, however, that there are some limitations to Cornyetz’s and other authors’ arguments. Critics have neglected to note some significant instances of exploitative patriarchal power in Bedtime Eyes, and some of the ways that Yamada subverts patriarchal power structures, particularly in “Jesse” and Trash. One of the most significant uses of such power structures in Yamada’s texts is the almost ubiquitous physical violence that the couples inflict on each other. Cornyetz chooses to focus primarily on Yamada’s collusion with conventional or patriarchal heterosexual gender roles, referencing the unfulfilled fantasies that Kim has about her mentor Maria (a Filipino performer/prostitute) in “Bedtime Eyes.” She argues that without exploring this relationship, Kim is a slave to her desire for ownership of the mythological black phallus. She writes that while Kim “temporarily displace[s] the centrality of the phallus” by being able to pleasure herself with or without men she is ultimately a slave to patriarchal structures of companionship and heterosexuality.¹⁵ While the lack of non-hetero relationships detracts from the seemingly sexually liberating nature of Yamada’s texts, the prevalence of rape and extreme

women of Yamada’s fictional world, women with overtly expressed and powerful sexual desire. Yet do these inversions rewrite the heroines as somehow differently gendered subjects? Do they truly differ from the dominant performance of gender in contemporary Japan?” (“Power” 429).


¹⁵ Cornyetz, “Power,” 431.
violence is a much more urgent detraction, and one that Cornyetz does not explore when explicating the problems in Yamada’s writing.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, while the lack of power of the vagina and the female\textsuperscript{17} is perhaps one of the most significant problems in such sexually driven texts, I think that Cornyetz dismisses some of the contradiction to that lack of power by focusing exclusively on patriarchal gender roles and ignoring the issue of patriarchal physical abuse and the way it shapes Yamada’s narratives. The example of physical violence that I will focus on here is the rape and murder at the end of “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” which is representative of the violence that occurs in much of Yamada’s fiction but also, in its relative weight and finality, an important contrast to her use of violent power dynamics.

Nearly all of the most important characters in Yamada’s books base their relationships on being complicit in violence. This is something that cannot and should not be ignored, even above a reliance on the phallus for pleasure. Perhaps even beyond the nightmarish insensitivity to and collusion with racist exploitation, the abuse that the characters are willing to both give and receive is one of the most blatant examples of reliance on traditional patriarchal power structures in which men are thought of as the physical and sexual overlords of women. What is important to note is that, as Cornyetz has concluded, the reliance on racialized images of the black Other and ambivalence to female sexual power are nuanced, providing moments of collusion with those ideologies and moments of resistance against them.\textsuperscript{18} But overall, those moments are brief and

\textsuperscript{16} Cornyetz even mentions how Yamada’s texts are surprisingly powerful given the subservient position of women in Japanese representations of sex. She notes that Japanese pornographic narratives often involve women being raped. Ibid., 429. But she does not talk about the rape scene in “The Piano Player’s Fingers” or Trash.

\textsuperscript{17} Cornyetz mentions that Yamada’s female characters are completely uninterested in the power of motherhood, the womb, and even in the vagina as its own sexual impetus. Ibid., 433.

\textsuperscript{18} Cornyetz writes: “In her afterword to Haremu warudo (Harem world; 1990; hereafter Harem), she writes, ‘I want men to read my works. You won’t lose anything by it. Really. And it will definitely improve your skills as lovers. And I want women to laugh. Laugh and laugh’ (198). I cannot comment on her qualifications as sex therapist for men, but she has successfully
overshadowed by the consistent reliance on racialized images of black men and often patriarchal images of women. However, while Yamada does not seem to be particularly aware of her reliance on gender and racial power structures, even if her texts have moments of resistance from them, her inclusion of physical violence seems to provide a moment of awareness in its extreme nature and placement in the final moments of the narrative in “The Piano Player’s Fingers.” Putting a scene that brings all violence at once to its height and to its end is conclusive in a way that Yamada’s ambivalent play with subjugating power structures of race and gender is not.

While Yamada’s use of hyperbolic and almost caricature-like black males is extremely harmful, it cannot be seen as entirely self-aware in that it is used consistently, without any significant moments of consequence or variation, at least in the first two stories of Bedtime Eyes. However, the death scene at the end of “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” in its abrupt and significant shift in tone can be seen as a moment of self-awareness regarding the complacency with violence and subjugation that has gone on in the book before it. In “Bedtime Eyes” and “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” the reader starts to expect, possibly even become comfortable with the ongoing tantrums, broken glass, bruises and blood throughout the story. The couples inflict pain on each other, hurt, and then always come back for more. As such, the abrupt and visceral consequences of the protagonists’ indulgent play with violence at the end of “The Piano” is unexpected, and the scene reframes the violence, domination and subjugation the couple has inflicted on each other for the entirety of the book.

While Yamada does not seem aware of her own reliance on the objectifying nature of her use of racial romanticization of the black characters in her books, she does seem to reveal critical

made me laugh with her audacious assaults on constructions that empower men in patriarchal societies. Yet I have found Yamada’s narratives to be slippery ones; although she frames them in a deceptive simplicity, she exhibits a profound ambivalence toward her own (limited) reconstruction of gender, approaching moments of liberation only to ultimately retreat to familiar notions of difference.” Ibid., 429–30.
moments in reference to violence not just in the final scene of “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” but in other moments of narrative as well. As Kim reflects on the possibility of losing Spoon to her friend Maria she momentarily concludes: “I suddenly realized that all of the satisfaction I got from being dominated by Spoon was actually the satisfaction of owning him.”\textsuperscript{19} In a fleeting recognition, Kim summarizes the justification for physical and emotional abuse: if someone feels enough like an object to you, you feel that you can own and use them as you please. This is, very simply put, the way that Kim and Spoon, Ruiko and Leroy treat each other. The dynamic of objectification and exploitation is a pattern that underlies every problem in the first two stories of \textit{Bedtime Eyes}, be they racial or gender-related. And in Yamada’s primarily plotless texts, those problems are not resolved, but her characters and the stories they inhabit are primarily unchanging and even flat. But I think that the most salient example and contradiction of the relentless exploitation in Yamada’s narratives is the physical abuse in those stories, the primary example here being the rape and death scene at the end of “The Piano Player’s Fingers.” This scene also arguably reveals the author’s contradiction to and possible subversion of some of her own exploitation of power structures in much of \textit{Bedtime Eyes}.

The murder at the ending of “The Piano Player’s Fingers” disrupts some of the complacency in the abuse of power in the narrative that precedes and builds up to it in its ultra-violent finality. The scene contradicts the sadomasochistic dynamic of the relationships of “Bedtime Eyes” and “The Piano,” in which the couples endlessly reciprocate and delay the conclusion of pain through either infliction of or resistance to punishment.\textsuperscript{20} When considering

\textsuperscript{19} Yamada, “Bedtime Eyes,” 38.

\textsuperscript{20} As Chancer explains, “Within this hierarchical order [of sadist/masochist], the paradox arises that the sadist desires what I have called ‘resistance’ [from the masochist] within the sadomasochistic dynamic.” In S/M relationships, there is no finality to punishment and resistance. Lynn S. Chancer, \textit{Sadomasochism in Everyday Life: The Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness} (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 56.
the much more contemplative and responsible “Jesse” that follows “The Piano,” the conclusive death can be seen as a transition, providing an unavoidable contrast to the power dynamics in the first two stories of *Bedtime Eyes* and a change in narrative tone, preparing readers to reflect on how those dynamics change in the book’s final novella. The scene provides a moment in which Yamada seems to recognize the physically exploitative relationships of her first two stories, a recognition that is lacking in terms of the racial and gender exploitation in much of Yamada’s work. Cornyetz does not mention the ending of “The Piano” in her writing and misses some of the contradiction to Yamada’s dreadful reliance on patriarchal power structures that I think comes with its inclusion in the text.

The death at the conclusion of “The Piano Player’s Fingers” brings a finality to the ambivalence about the misuse of power in much of the first two stories in *Bedtime Eyes*. The couples in Yamada’s stories make something like S/M a part of much of their relationships. However, the pain inflicted in Yamada’s stories is more often than not something beyond a safe and structured use of violence for pleasure, and the characters are generally ambivalent to it. Roy Baumeister suggests that in “conventional” S/M relationships, “Pain is often sought, but injury is widely and carefully avoided.” However, the ambiguity of his conclusion (i.e. if pain is caused by some kind of harm or injury, when and how does one demarcate the differences between the two?) is seen in the relationships in Yamada’s books in which erotic S/M frequently slips into uncontrolled violence. For example, the first two stories of *Bedtime Eyes* are full of horrifying injuries, Kim mentioning at one point in the story off-hand that Spoon has knocked out a few of her teeth. “The Piano Player’s Fingers” is similarly full of chaotic and unrestrained emotion and anger and ends with a particularly disturbing scene of rape and murder. “The Piano” focuses on

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the drawn out, sado-masochistic relationship between Ruiko, a Japanese girl that has the pick of the men she wants, and Leroy, a jazz musician. When they first meet, Ruiko picks Leroy, an unlikely choice among other more suave men. But Ruiko enjoys Leroy’s vulnerability and proceeds to dominate him, keeping him as a kind of sexual pet. After Leroy returns to America for some time, he makes his way back to Japan, now a successful musician with more fame, style, and power. The dynamic between the two then changes, and Ruiko pursues the disinterested and vindictive Leroy with a vengeance.

In the penultimate scene of the novella, Leroy viciously rapes Ruiko. However, by the end of the story Ruiko has indulged in her obsessive valorization and thus objectification of a withdrawn Leroy to the point that she will take any and all connection with him. As such, she is not willing to demarcate the pain and pleasure that he gives her. However, after he is done raping her, she instinctually reaches to the bedside table, grabs a small metal object and hits him over the head with it, killing him. In the closest thing to narrative climax, the sad irony being that it happens at the end of a rape, the heroine finally defends herself, but almost without trying: “Their opinion was that my actions were simply self-defense, and I nodded in agreement. I guess you could say that it was self-defense. But I was protecting my sanity rather than my body.”

While almost unconsciously, Ruiko provides a definitive ending to the messy entanglement of her and Leroy’s mutual abuse, and for the first time consciously expresses her desire to end the cycle of violence that she and Leroy were indulging in. Similarly, Leroy’s narrative is stopped entirely; he hasn’t moved back to America or left Ruiko for another woman, but is dead. The ending, abrupt and full of the most violent acts one can think of—rape and murder—creates a

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shift in tone\textsuperscript{23} that is not present in “Bedtime Eyes” and its similar themes in “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” in which the men and women participate in endlessly reciprocated relationships of abuse without any serious consequences.

The numbness that accompanies Ruiko’s violent relationship with the man spanning several months is no longer something to brood over, at once hate and masochistically desire, but is definitively horrifying. While the couples in both “The Piano Player” and “Bedtime” have, in a way, gotten away with their objectification of each other and their self-driven obsession with each other’s bodies, the final scene brings an abrupt end to all of this. While it is not discussed in the textual analysis of this story in the most important scholarly work on Yamada’s fiction, this moment is certainly significant. While Yamada undoubtedly colludes with despicable stereotyping of the black Other in her fiction, this moment seems to reveal an awareness of the destructive nature of her female characters and their construction of people as objects of desire, albeit perhaps more in the way of human physical interaction than race. I wonder if by ignoring this ending in some of the discourse on “Bedtime Eyes,” critics mistake Yamada’s presentation of her dominatrix females as simply reveling in their abuse of power without recognizing the possibility that there are cautionary elements to her stories. Furthermore, that the story precedes “Jesse” seems to solidify this theory given the drastic tonal, thematic and even narrational shifts of the final novella in the collection.

A look at the narrational style of “Jesse” will reveal some of the thematic changes that occur in the transition from “Bedtime” and “The Piano” to the collection’s last novella. As the

\textsuperscript{23} The meaning of the word tone here can be found in Prince’s definition: “The narrator’s attitude toward the naratee and/or the situations and events presented, as implicitly or explicitly conveyed by his or her narration.” Gerald Prince, \textit{A Dictionary of Narratology}, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 100. Ruiko’s attitude does change toward herself here, but while it might have changed subtly toward Leroy, it hasn’t entirely, as she still thinks of his fingers as containing “special power to work miracles.” Yamada, “The Piano,” 140.
narration in “Jesse” moves from the first-person narration of the first two novellas in *Bedtime Eyes* to third person narration, some of the objectification of black males aided by the monologic perspective of the Japanese female begins to be deconstructed. The seemingly simple change in narrative style is significant as it reflects a change in the overall message of the novella. This isn’t a story about a man condensed to an object of desire (e.g. not “The Piano Player” but “The Piano Player’s Fingers”), but is a story about complex characters, the most important character being the young boy Jesse. It is quite appropriate then that the story is not told through the selfish desires and ruminations of one female, but is diversified to the needs and thoughts of several characters.

While the narrational style diverges from the first two *Bedtime* stories, “Jesse” still contains traces of their omnipotent narrator. Kim and Ruiko hold an omnipotent position in that everything in their fictional reality is narrated and focalized by them, and even basic dialogue with the characters they interact with is limited. So while these women are not omnipotent narrators in the traditional sense, their dominatrix narratorial positions allow them significant power and authority. The product of that is, as has been discussed, stereotypical and objectified characters. In “Jesse,” the female protagonist, Koko, is stripped of that omnipotent objectification, but while the narrator is heterodiegetic, it is ambiguously so. The focalization still remains almost exclusively in the hands of Koko. Much of the story is told in terms of Koko’s perspective, adopting free indirect discourse to describe her actions and feelings, and blurring the line of authority between that of the narrator and what has become the figure of authority in these stories: the Japanese female. Yet this change promotes what I will refer to as a more democratic narrative.\(^{24}\) It is a significant change from the narration in the novellas that

\(^{24}\) In describing several different types of focalization, Mieke Bal touches on what I am calling democratic narrative: Character-bound focalization. . . can vary, can shift from one
precede it as focalization is shared among several characters, calling to question the supreme, even sadistic, authority of the Japanese female narrator. The change in narration style that affects character development is evidence of a departure from subjugating perspectives that is more fully realized in *Trash*.

There are several changes in addition to narrative point of view, “Jesse” that start to disrupt the controlling master/slave narratives in the first two *Bedtime Eyes* stories. On a thematic level, the story changes in that the two main characters are not lovers but a platonic pairing of a male and a female, even a young boy and his temporary mother figure. The habits that are incessantly repeated start to deteriorate, and for the better. Jesse and Koko find themselves together when Koko decides to volunteer to move into her new boyfriend Rick’s house and watch the 11-year-old Jesse while he is out of town. While Jesse had shown some aggressive behavior before this time, he takes advantage of his father’s absence and wreaks havoc on the apartment and Koko, at one point shoving a hot frying pan to her face and searing her skin. Koko responds in kind. Koko is as happy to slip into the role of mother as she is the role of petulant child, and at several points in the story, one wonders whether they would be able to do differently given Jesse’s nightmarish behavior.

While terrible behavior is part of most of Yamada’s narratives, it is usually a part of the sadomasochistic exploration of sexual desire. In “Jesse,” the characters are still extremely bodily and unrestrained but outside of the context of sex. As such, Yamada presents a situation in which character to another, even if the narrator remains constant. In such cases, we may be given a good picture of the origins of a conflict. We are shown how differently the various characters view the same facts. This technique can result in neutrality towards all the characters. Nevertheless, there usually is not a doubt in our minds which character should receive most attention and sympathy. On the grounds of distribution, for instance the fact that a character focalizes the first and/or the last chapter, we label it the hero(ine) of the book.” As Bal explains, neutrality is not achieved perfectly, but allowing several diverse characters to focalize creates a more balanced or democratic perspective in *Trash*. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1997), 148.
communication becomes a little more likely, and in which objectification, which is so closely
knit with the sex of Yamada’s books, cannot easily thrive. Jesse cannot storm off when in a fight
but has to wake up for school every morning, eat the food that is provided him and then come
home again when school is finished to be similarly taken care of. Yamada forces her typical
female character type—still sexually experimental, open, and relatively free—to explore the
humanity of her male counterparts in much more interesting ways than they do in “Bedtime” and
“The Piano.” This can be seen in the way the men in “Jesse” are allowed more of a voice than
the previous two stories in Bedtime Eyes, due to its change in style and perspective of narration.

In “Jesse,” we get a more complex view of the male characters in the life of the main
character, Koko. Instead of simply repeating the well-established pattern of the first two stories
in Bedtime, the two main protagonists diverge in subtle but significant ways as their
characterization is developed, not simply through the first-person lens of the heroine, but through
moments of narrative focalization. The men in Koko’s life are still burdened with a slew of
stereotypes, but they are not simply the hypersexual objects of desire so often portrayed in
Japanese cultural representations of black men. The most obvious example of this is Jesse. When
Rick leaves Jesse with Koko for a few days while he is attending his father’s funeral services,
Jesse uses the opportunity to vent years of chaos and frustration on the foreign figure who has
recently stolen the attention of his father. After days of tortuously defiant behavior, with Koko
making attempts to be motherly but eventually admitting defeat and mimicking Jesse’s violent
tantrums, Jesse and Koko make a breakthrough. At the conclusion of the story and in hyper-
bodily Yamada fashion, Jesse is finally able to consider loving Koko during a climactic scene:
“I . . . I . . .” stammered Jesse, then he groaned and lurched forward, violently throwing up his lunch all over the carpet. . . after a few moments she noticed blood was pouring out of his nose, too. . . Blood, vomit, and bestial howling. Koko could not believe the scene that had unfolded before her. . . “I love Koko,” he spluttered. “If she loves me, I love her, too.”

While it is done through the focalization of the heroine, in a literal purging of resentment and anger, Jesse is finally able to voice his feelings to his father and to Koko.

Rick similarly provides moments of vulnerability that are not simply provoked by the objectifying gaze of the heroine. Rick is not a cool musician and “priapic paramour”. He is quite a bit older than Koko and a single father. The opening scenes of the story prepare the reader for the mood of this new place at the ending of Bedtime Eyes. The morning after their first night together, Koko awkwardly eats breakfast with Rick and Jesse. When Jesse goes to school, Koko returns to bed, assuming Rick will follow her there: “She posed herself seductively on the bed and waited for Rick, but Rick didn’t appear, and after a while she started to get a cramp in her leg because of the unnatural position she was in.” As she goes to look for Rick, she finds him at the washing machine, watching the clothes. When she asks him what he’s doing, Rick jumps in surprise and drops the glass he is holding: “Do you enjoy doing the laundry?” She asked, as she stopped to pick up the pieces of broken glass . . . ‘Sure, a-a-a little . . .’ Rick was stuck for words, and for some reason, he reached in the washing machine, pulled out his wet shirts, and started wringing them out by hand.” After Koko interrupts Rick’s quiet moment in the laundry room, she coaxes him into the usual erotic routine, but the mood has changed drastically from the first two stories, with the narrator granting access to Koko feeling a little ridiculous in her pose, leaving out some of the erotic magnetism of the portrayal of the heroines.

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27 Yamada, “Jesse,” 144.
28 Ibid., 145.
in “Bedtime” and “The Piano.” Similarly, As Rick is presented without the hyperbolic sexuality of the other love interests in *Bedtime Eyes*, the reader is able to see some of his humanity, further strengthened through his access to narrative voice.

The use of racist tropes to characterize the men in “Bedtime” and “The Piano” do not disappear entirely, though. In the scene just mentioned, the glass Rick is cradling is full of gin, and he has been drinking from it since waking up. We find out that Rick is an alcoholic, often abusive, and given many of the stereotypes that Yamada uses for her black characters. In the penultimate scene of conflict in which Jesse vomits, Rick has stepped in as a father with love and patience, explaining to Jesse that Koko has looked after him because she loves Rick, that Koko cannot replace his mother but that ultimately Jesse and Rick will be happier if they are willing to return Koko’s love. But this speech is made with gin on Rick’s breath. And the reality that Rick has avoided such basic discussions with his son until this point in his relationship with Koko is quite pitiful. While the moment is tender and even beautiful in contrast to what has gone on so far, it is still problematic. Despite his movement away from it, Rick is still plagued with much of the latent stereotyping in *Bedtime*. For example, in the conclusion of his discussion with Jesse, after Jesse vomits and then quickly runs off to bed, Rick says to Koko, “‘Well,’ . . . ‘I don’t want to clean that up!’ He motioned toward the stinking mess all over the carpet. Koko knew it would be up to her to take care of it and the idea made her feel sick.”

The story is undoubtedly ambivalent in its movement away from some of the miserable racist representations of black masculinity in the preceding novellas, but the movement is significant nonetheless.

Given such changes, “Jesse” is potentially powerful in a way that “Bedtime” and “The Piano” are not. The final scene in the short story is one of the most redeeming points in the collection in which Koko and Jesse connect after the messy relationship they have forged thus

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29 Ibid., 211.
far. After their explosive but hopeful conversation, things have calmed down. One evening, there is a raging fire in a nearby building and Jesse wakes Koko up to watch it with him (Rick is out). As the two look at the fire from their small apartment balcony, Jesse reassures Koko that he can protect her if she is scared. The narrator then explains how Jesse has transformed, relying on a personal focalization that is absent in “Bedtime” and “Piano”: “[Jesse] realized that Koko was in a difficult position and he knew that she might have to leave the man she loved if he didn’t do something to prevent it. He was beginning to understand his role as a man; that it was part of his job to protect the weak.”

Yamada relies here on a narration that is absent in “Bedtime” and “Piano,” in which “the reader [is able to watch] with the [male] character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision by that character,” or the product of character-specific focalization, as Bal explains. While the latter part of Jesse’s conclusion is somewhat problematic, the mutual dependence and empathy that he feels is something quite new at this point in Bedtime Eyes. Furthermore, it is a conclusion not simply made by the female of the story, but by a male and through his personal, character-driven focalization.

Moments after Jesse’s conclusion, as if Koko is aware of his thoughts, she is finally able to communicate openly with Jesse. Koko says, honestly, “I don’t want to be your mother.” While the statement might seem combative, it is in fact incredibly sensitive and shows that Koko, too, is starting to let Jesse’s fears and insecurities not overwhelm her but help her better understand him, and understand how she can begin a healthy relationship with him. After the fire is extinguished, the two start to walk inside: “Koko put her hand on his back as she followed him

30 Ibid., 217.
31 In the full quote, Bal writes: ”If the focalizor coincides with the character, that character will have an advantage over the other characters. The reader watches with the character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character.” Bal, Narratology, 147.
32 Ibid., 217.
in from the balcony. He was so skinny that she could feel his ribs and each of the bones in his spine. No love. No layers of hate. Just bones.”

While Koko is the primary focalizor, in this scene we see her perspective not used to objectify her male counterpart, but to promote understanding and acceptance, which is a drastic change from the first-person narration of “Bedtime” and “Piano.” The relationships explored in the previous two stories of Bedtime, in which the characters are bruised and beaten, seem to put those figures in much more vulnerable situations than this simple scene at the end of “Jesse” (a more direct translation of the Japanese version being “Jesse’s Backbone”). However, it becomes clear more than it already had how those interactions were in many ways simply skin deep, so to speak. With “Jesse” the characters get down to the bones, and we begin to see true emotional vulnerability and openness, even the subversion of objectifying power structures, and a surprisingly intimate relationship between an unlikely pairing in the Yamada canon.

In Frantz Fanon’s hopeful conclusion of Black Skin, White Masks, he writes,

“Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?”

The thought is quite fitting for the conclusion of “Jesse” since Koko and Jesse have, at the end of the story, used their immense emotional and physical experiences not to exploit each other but to empathize with and better understand each other. The irony of the fleshiness of the ending of Jesse is its lack of the sexual, but its deep feeling of understanding and acceptance—something that sex would ideally help provide but, for the most part, doesn’t in the first two stories of Bedtime Eyes. In the final scenes of the novella, Koko is able to accept Jesse as a person just as she is, feeling the bones in his back and not isolating him to categories other than human.

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33 Ibid., 218.
In the first-person narratives of “Bedtime” and “The Piano” in which the fictional reality is controlled by the univocal focalization of the female protagonist, racist and sexist discourse is able to drive their stories of objectification and desire. In contrast, the third-person narrative voice in “Jesse” relinquishes some of the observational and narrational control of the female. As Koko is able to hear Jesse’s voice, Jesse begins to develop as a three-dimensional character. By moving away from the unrelenting univocal and first-person narratives of self-satisfaction in much of Bedtime Eyes, “Jesse” is able to represent a more complex view of the relationship between Japanese women and black men, and really men and women in general. Trash, the extension of “Jesse” into a novel length story, continues where Jesse leaves off but is able to subvert some of the patterns of objectification and exploitation of power structures in Bedtime Eyes in ways that “Jesse” is not able to do as effectively. While “Jesse” disrupts some of the objectifying gaze of the first two stories in Bedtime Eyes, it is still almost entirely focalized by Koko. However, in the following paragraphs I will discuss how Trash subverts some of the problematic characteristics of Bedtime Eyes discussed thus far in ways that “Jesse” is not quite able to, in part through the use of non-linear form but primarily through a more complex characterization via a democratized narrative.

Trash takes place a couple of years after Koko has moved in with Jesse and Rick. Jesse is a teenager, starting to date girls, and has developed into a thoughtful young man. Rick, in contrast, is starting to deteriorate into unrelenting alcoholism and Koko is becoming tired of his negligent and abusive behavior. In striking contrast to the first two stories of Bedtime Eyes, Trash allows these diverse characters to develop their perspectives and voices, and even explores themes of love. Trash is able to accomplish this in two ways. First, the book further disrupts patriarchal constructions of the story by creating a collage out of the continuing fabula, moments
from a scene that takes place in the middle of the fabula, and quotations from “Jesse.” The result is a plot that is disrupted by memories, interfering with the illusion of a mimetic fabula and flow of time. While parts of “Jesse” were inserted in the English translation and “with an American reader in mind,” possibly seen as simply used for ease of reading, their addition contributes to what makes Trash a particularly interesting piece of literature in Yamada’s oeuvre. Second, while Koko is still the primary focalizor, the narrative voice is divided and significantly democratized, “result[ing] in [a greater] neutrality towards all the characters,” as Bal describes it, and ultimately allowing several characters in the book to develop in ways they would not in “Bedtime” and “The Piano.”

Trash begins in medias res, with Koko’s thoughts of a bed: “A bed dedicated to sleeping. A real bed, the kind that made you think sometimes that sleeping is like dying.” We find out that such a bed feels appropriately out of reach because Koko is currently handcuffed to part of her and Rick’s well-worn headboard, sitting inches away from the comfort of her mattress. This isn’t a kinky game, but a painful confinement and metaphor of her relationship with Rick for the last several months. Rick has handcuffed her to the bed, and all she wants to do is sleep, being exhausted from her painfully cuffed wrist and her much more painful relationship. The pain in Trash along with the entire array of feelings and the narrative start to move from the sexual—certainly without leaving it altogether—to the ordinary, representing more than the momentary and selfish feelings that fill Bedtime Eyes.

Quotations from “Jesse” are used in the first part of Trash, between moments in which Koko is trying to resolve her and Rick’s problems and narrative jumps to her being handcuffed to

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36 Bal, Narratology, 148.
37 Yamada, Trash, 3.
a bed. The two disruptions serve the same purpose: they both distract from the linear temporality of the fabula. While the two stories in *Bedtime Eyes* do much of the same through the libidinal, *Trash*’s narrative interruptions can be seen as moments of contemplation on why the relationships within the story developed the way they have. The narrative interruptions of the bed scene start at the beginning of the book, and while starting a book *in medias res* "is by no means unusual," the bed scenes come up several more times as moments of what Bal labels "anticipation." Through this subtle disruption of linearity, the reader is given repeated reminders of the emotional change that the heroine is going through. The change in narrative can even represent the change the Yamada heroine type is going through in general in the new structure of *Trash*. The disruption of plot is not driven by exploitation and a selfish need to fulfill personal desires, but is driven by the well-developed connections between several characters in the book. Koko often reflects on love after these memories, as they reveal how remarkably her relationship with Jesse has grown into something kind and even full of mutual respect. They also reveal the painful memories of how Koko’s love for Rick has developed along with Koko’s conception of love in general.

The interruptions in plot with moments from “Jesse” are not a part of the Japanese edition of the book. The excerpts are inserted in the Kodansha English-language translation of *Trash* “in consultation with the author . . . with an American reader in mind,” but their addition is quite appropriate given the other changes in narrative style. The moments of “Jesse” in *Trash* are reminders that this story is not just a continuation of the fabula started in “Jesse,” but is also a

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38 Ibid., 84.
39 Bal writes that “A conventional construction of a novel is the beginning in medias res. . . From this point s/he is referred back to the past, and from then on the story carries on more or less chronologically through to the end” (Ibid., 84). Yamada deviates slightly from this in her use of “chronological deviation” (Ibid., 84).
40 Yamada, *Trash*, Translator’s Note.
continuation of the deeper human connections, and even subjugation of patriarchal power structures, that the characters experience in that story. *Trash* continues where “Jesse” leaves off, further deconstructing the traditional authority that Yamada is complicit in much of *Bedtime Eyes* in the novel’s change of narrative style and use of themes like love and empathy that do not thrive on the objectification of others found in *Bedtime Eyes*.

The most basic change in the book that similarly promotes the thoughtful and non-objectifying character development of *Trash* is its democratized narrative focalization. The change in narrative represents a shift in the characterization of Yamada’s writing, in which several characters develop into complex, human figures. As “Jesse” begins to do, the free indirect discourse of several different characters starts to become more democratic in *Trash*. “Jesse” moves from the first-person narration in the first two stories of *Bedtime Eyes* to a third person heterodiegetic narrator. But the narrator is partial to Koko. Moments of free indirect discourse that touch on the other characters’ (mainly Rick and Jesse’s) thoughts are brief. Usually their feelings are filtered through the focalization of Koko. However, in *Trash*, this changes significantly as several distinct characters are given time in the narrative to develop their individual voice, something that does not happen in much of *Bedtime Eyes*. In the following paragraphs, I will go through the ways in which Rick, Jesse, and Koko develop as three-dimensional characters through their focalization and dialogue through a textual analysis of important scenes for each of those characters in *Trash*.

*Trash* adopts a playful narrative in which focalization is shared amongst several characters in the book. For example, although stereotypically abusive and alcoholic, Rick is given the time and emphasis needed for the reader to understand him a little better—for his character to be fleshed out. We hear about his childhood, his feelings of confusion and guilt (or
the lack thereof) regarding his actions and treatment of his family, including Koko. While he is a victim of many stereotypical and racialist stereotypes of black males, he also becomes a much more complex character than the one presented in “Jesse” that disrupts the authority of the pure Japanese female focalizor/narrator. The story moves from a more “monologic” female/colonizer perspective to a “dialogic”\textsuperscript{41} presentation of the different realities that have to work together to forge meaningful relationships, as Koko does with Rick, Jesse, several other characters and even herself. As these characters become more three-dimensional, they begin to deconstruct the kind of patriarchal power structures found in \textit{Bedtime Eyes}. As the characters are fleshed out, they resist objectification, and things like empathy and self-love begin to flourish.

\textit{Trash} takes place two years after Koko has started living with Rick and Jesse. The story is set in New York City, the three living in a humble apartment, Koko working at a gallery in the Village and trying to keep both her relationship with Rick and their unconventional family together. Jesse is a teenager and has grown into quite a wise and loving young man, increasingly resentful of his father’s alcoholism. When Koko meets the much younger Randy, a twenty-something who starts giving her attention, she begins to grow tired of Rick’s erratic and abusive behavior, too. As the handcuffs reveal, Rick has something to say about the state of things and has more opportunity in \textit{Trash} to do so than he does in “Jesse,” being absent for much of that story until his appearance and speech toward the end.

A look at some moments in the text in which Rick is given a voice through dialogue and focalization will reveal how his character adheres to and diverges from some of the typical black male characterizations in Yamada’s books. Rick is a storehouse of conflict—not only the conflict that is typical between the Yamada heroine and her lover, but the conflict that hopefully every reader will feel when presented with a potently stereotypical character. Rick is an alcoholic. He

\textsuperscript{41} See footnote 5.
is away at his father’s funeral in “Jesse,” while in *Trash* he has simply become absent both physically and emotionally, as he consciously falls into the routine of his own father, another male figure poised for categorization in black stereotypes. However, that mention of Rick’s father is made at all in *Trash* is something to be noted. About halfway through the book, when the reader has sat with Koko and her frustration with the ever-absent and intoxicated Rick for some time, we get a short but vivid image of Rick’s fears and self-loathing, or what fuels his behavior:

What’s with her? Rick thought a couple of times. But he never attempted to make her explain herself. . . Rick believed that something had snapped inside her, just as in himself. To rouse himself out of his black funks, he’d been drinking hard again. He couldn’t get through the day anymore, either physically or mentally, without liquor. . . Sometimes Rick would remember his father, who’d left his mother years ago to live in North Carolina. Since he was small, Rick had lived in dread of becoming like him: always drunk, hitting his mother. Even now, Rick still despised him.42

After succumbing to his, albeit passively, acknowledged vulnerabilities, Rick deteriorates into constant drunkenness and eventually dies in a car crash with the woman he sees after Koko leaves him. In contrast to Spoon and Leroy, the two men of “Bedtime Eyes” and “The Piano” respectively, the reader is granted access to not only Rick’s past, what drives his behavior, but also his past related through his own voice.

Far from a univocal narrative structure, the excerpt quoted above is an important example of the multi-vocal narrative structuring of *Trash*. Immediately before and after Rick’s free indirect discourse, Koko is similarly given free indirect discourse to describe her feelings of regret and confusion about their relationship. The feeling is drastically different from *Bedtime Eyes*, while not free of some of that book’s downfalls. In a scathing review, Richard Okada argues that Yamada is complacent with monologic representations of gender and othered

peoples:

Yamada’s narrators... occasionally adopt a male voice, but we must remember that subject position is not primarily a question of narrative persona... Her narrators’ interests certainly do not extend to the ways men and women are excluded and exploited in the locales where she sets her stories. Discrimination, whether sexual, social, or economic, is treated as a given and not problematized.43

Much of *Bedtime Eyes* falls under this description. Racial discrimination is touched on lightly in *Trash*, for example, but is not thoroughly addressed. However, while *Bedtime Eyes* is completely indifferent to the exploitation it both attempts to rebel from and colludes with, I feel that Okada underestimates some of the potential subversion of exploitative relationships of power, particularly in the characterization of a figure like Rick in *Trash*.

The most horrifyingly memorable scene of Rick’s flawed humanity is one in which he rapes Koko. Rick has spent most of his time at a bar or other such place in *Trash*, drinking as much as he needs to avoid confronting his feelings. While still staying with Jesse at their apartment, Koko has started seeing Randy. When Koko gathers up the courage to not only tell Rick but begin to let him go, and let him take responsibility for his damaging habits, a nightmarish scene ensues. The fight is what lands Koko uncomfortably handcuffed to the headboard of her and Rick’s bed. At the beginning of the book, the frightening situation has a touch of the comic, but at this point, Rick’s complete despair and desperation are anything but laughable.

After Rick pointlessly tries to convince Koko that she is making a mistake, he resorts to using what he might feel like is his only superior quality: his strength. He hits Koko in the face, knocks her around and eventually handcuffs her to their bed. Without justifying his behavior, his motivations and conflicting feelings are laid bare in the deplorable rape scene:

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Why in hell’s name am I doing this? He asked himself. . . I’ve already hurt her so much, why add this to it now? I want to hate her, that’s why; I want to spit on her, and I’ll lose my last shred of dignity doing it. . . she lay there like an animal sacrifice. Even though he felt like spitting on himself, Rick kept at it. Koko lay beneath him, her eyes empty. It was strange, but she didn’t hate him. In her heart was an overwhelming sadness for the pathetic helplessness of people. . . Though she lay beneath him now, she was gone, and Rick had no way of showing her, proving to her, how important she was to him, how much he loved her. This was how she must have felt, he thought suddenly. This cup of bitter pain that I’m tasting now, she must have been drinking from every day these last two years.  

Rape is one of the most violent demonstrations of unjust power. However, Rick is given the chance to demonstrate the conflicting feelings that surround his actions. Koko’s response is either chillingly complacent or profoundly forgiving, but the latter possibility is not something that we see in the rape scene at the end of “The Piano Player’s Fingers.” Much as the reader begins to understand Rick’s thoughts and drives, Koko is able to consider what kind of suffering might drive Rick to inflict such pain.

In stark contrast to Koko’s response to Rick’s violence, Ruiko of “The Piano Player’s Fingers” sees Leroy’s rape as affirmation of his magic and appeal. For Ruiko, Leroy’s overwhelming sexual and physical authority is connected to his mythical talent as a musician, or really the mythical ability of his fingers, or the phallic symbol that he is reduced too. She first realizes this when he plays the piano for her and then has sex with her without her consent, essentially raping her. The two actions are connected, his mythical talent as a musician justifying his entrancing music as much as his mythical sexual draw justifies his sexual dominance of her whenever and in whichever way he pleases. While Leroy’s actions are essentially rape, his domineering and subjugating sexual position is a mirror of the position that Ruiko has had in their relationship up until that point of the story. Because of this, his actions are a kind of justification of Ruiko’s actions and while the dynamic has shifted—Leroy has become the sadist

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and the one in control—it has not really changed. Cornyetz has explained that this dynamic is representative of all of the relationships in Yamada’s fiction, a product of Yamada’s heroines colluding in traditional and patriarchal structures of power and gender. This is certainly the case, but arguably begins to change when Ruiko kills Leroy, ushering in the changes in “Jesse” and *Trash*.

In the rape scene in *Trash*, as at other points in the story, Koko does not use the dynamic of abuse and objectification to justify Rick’s behavior, but instead works to deconstruct such ideologies of control. The free indirect discourse of the two characters is frequently intermingled and even indistinguishable, which becomes a poignant representation of the characters’ attempt to both communicate with and understand each other. As Rick concludes that “I can’t let you leave like this. I just can’t; not now,” leaving her cuffed to the bed, the two focalizors’ voices become intermingled: “Koko closed her eyes in despair. *Rick stood up and went to the kitchen.* He took a bottle of vodka from the refrigerator and drank deeply from it, then sputtered and coughed. The bottle was cold against his teeth, but he finished it off in one long pull. He had to start by forgetting everything; that was the only way.” While still relying on a single, heterodiegetic narrator, it becomes ambiguous who is focalizing the italicized phrase. The passage above blurs the designation of primary focalizor, and the univocal style of the other stories, representative of this and other kinds of abuse, has become something quite different.

Jesse is, in many ways, the primary catalyst for the beginnings of the dialogically deconstructed power structure in the eponymous novella. He is present more often than the other male characters in Yamada’s books, and his presence is prominent enough to justify or

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45 “Although Yamada thus threatens the absolute construction of male as dominant, in control of a gaze that carries power, her methodology merely inverts a (maintained) structure.” Cornyetz, “Power,” 433.
47 Ibid., 252 italics added.
necessitate a move from first to third person narration. He plays a less significant but still similarly essential role in *Trash*. Koko and Jesse are often left waiting for Rick, the miserable sadness of Koko more prominent as she remains the primary narrator of the book. Jesse too, though, voices his fears of not just his father’s volatility and chaos but of being a teenager with a girlfriend and going through puberty. In *Trash*, the extension of the novella, Jesse is more equipped to express himself as an increasingly independent young man given the shift toward a more democratic narrative voicing in the book. While Rick eventually dies in a car crash, and Koko is raped by him, those scenes are not particularly climactic. *Trash* relies on the multi-voiced narratives of many characters for its structure and movement and Jesse becomes one of the most important voices in the book.

Toward the end of the story, after Koko has told Rick about Randy and Rick responds so violently, Koko returns to their apartment for closure. The meeting is tense but peaceful, after some alcohol, and Koko’s fondness for Rick returns. As Koko and Rick begin to be able to share their true feelings with each other—“‘Did I make you sad, Rick?’ ‘No. I made myself sad.’”—Jesse looks out at them from a crack in his door, worrying a little about the end of one of the most stable things in his life. At several points in the story, Koko concludes that Jesse only really connects with her out of desperation: if she is gone, he will be completely hopeless as Rick is never home or completely drunk when he is. Jesse says as much himself. However, in this scene, Jesse is able to see how invaluable genuine and reciprocated human connection is, not just the objectifying use of someone as a means to an end, but the reciprocated love that he starts to see between Koko and his father and between Koko and himself:

> He knew these two, who looked like they liked each other so much, would probably not be seeing each other again. The premonition disturbed him. . . But maybe if he could get them to promise to get together once a month, the three of

\[48\] Ibid., 306.
them. . . ? The thought shocked him. . . What was this all about? What was Koko to him anyway? He remembered there’d been times when she’d leaned on him, when she’d looked to him, Jesse, for help. She was the first woman who’d taught him the happiness of being depended upon. He felt he had to say something. He was just about to burst into the room when he saw them embrace. Shit, he thought, can’t go and butt in on them now.49

In typical colloquial style, Yamada inserts an unusual character to mediate narratologically what Koko, Rick and certainly Jesse are all going through. The result of that is a more nuanced presentation of all of those characters as their character development is not dependent on one uni-vocal and authoritative voice.

Jesse reminds us of the interdependency of those we interact with, especially those we live with and create families with, and the need to recognize such invaluable connections without attempting to control others in whichever way we please. As he starts to do in “Jesse,” narrative focalization and dialogue the uncommon Yamada character continues to break down some of the seemingly concrete icons of black racialist imagery, images of masculinity, and the power structures common to Yamada’s writing in Trash. Jesse not only resists the stereotypes in Bedtime Eyes described earlier in this paper, but he actively inspires human understanding, empathy and love in other characters in the book as well.

While Jesse helps to promote the deconstruction of power structures in Trash, the character with the most important role in that process is Koko. Koko is the primary focalizor in Trash. However, Koko’s focalization does not dictate the image of other characters in the book as the female protagonists/narrators of the first two stories in Bedtime do. In Trash, Koko has love on her mind. “What the hell is love, anyway?” she asks in one of the handcuff vignettes.50 But much like the unusual use of a bed at the beginning of the book, this love is quite different from the kind explored in the first two novellas of Bedtime. Towards the end of the opening

49 Ibid., 307.
50 Ibid., 82.
scene of *Trash*, in which Koko is handcuffed to her bed, her thoughts turn to Jesse. While she is hoping he will have the key to the cuffs, she is not simply thinking of him because he might help momentarily free her: “Jesse’s eyes will probably be full of sympathy when he frees me. The thought made her feel it might be better to stay cuffed. No matter how mature he’d become, it was still too early for him to see all this. Love was OK, but not hate.”

Yamada’s heroines often happily fall into either an infantile co-dependent or an obligatory pseudo-motherly role with their male counterparts. Both of those roles are particularly difficult to swallow in that they distort and exploit the fact that the conventional form of those roles has long been the exclusive opportunity for women to express their power in Japan, the significant role of mother and wife often being viewed as justification for their lack of power in other social spheres. In contrast, Koko starts to explore her role as a mother figure for Jesse in a context outside of masochistic subjection to patriarchal hierarchies of power, and similarly begins to insist on more egalitarian relationships with her romantic male partners as well.

In “Jesse” and *Trash*, it is important to note that Koko does not immediately transform into a heroine willing to reject patriarchal images of the female. Koko often adopts much of the behavior of the heroines in “Bedtime Eyes” and “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” but without the dominatrix role of those heroines. She eagerly falls into the submissive, childish inferior position under her overbearing man in much of “Jesse” and in a good portion of *Trash*. In fact, in “Jesse,” this is generally the case until the very end of the story. She is unhappy with Jesse’s behavior in part because it is simply tiresome, but also because she cannot adopt the position of the child: “A

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51 Ibid., 4–5.

52 "Japanese society is also organized in terms of age and sex, and the sexual segregation system cannot simply be called ‘repressive’ of women, for, while excluding women from men’s world, it also provides them with a secure shelter through their own autonomy and resources.” Ueno Chizuko, "The Position of Japanese Women Reconsidered," *Current Anthropology* 28.4 (1987): S76.
baby. That’s what she was. She wondered how much difference there was between a real baby
and the way she acted when she was with Rick.” There is a chilling moment in “Jesse” when
Koko and Jesse have stopped openly fighting, but adopt each other’s roles to get Rick’s
attention, “[glaring] at [each other] behind Rick’s back.” When Jesse asks Rick to buy him a
gift and take him out to do something special,

Koko just stood there. There was nothing strange about a kid trying to get his dad to pamper him, but Jesse was flirting with Rick like a woman would. She didn’t know whether to pity or despise him. She felt a cold shiver running down her spine. Koko bit her lip and left the room in defeat. Was she really jealous of Jesse? . . . Jesse was a little devil, and it no longer mattered to her that he was just an eleven-year-old kid. He had challenged her, and now was the enemy.

The heroines of “Bedtime” and “Piano fluctuate between positions of domination in which they adopt traditionally and patriarchally masculine gender roles, and submission in which they collude with patriarchally-imagined feminine positions. In much of “Jesse,” Koko seems to primarily adopt the latter characterization of the Yamada heroine. However, she is willing to depart from the irresponsible and detrimental power structures of the heroines in “Bedtime” and “The Piano” rather quickly, in terms of her relationship with Jesse. Koko doesn’t keep Jesse as her “enemy” for very long. She soon is able to see him as what he is: a child that has gone through much more than any child should ever have to. Koko is able to stop thinking of Jesse as an obstacle to her desires and begins to love him.

After a toxic interaction with Rick’s ex-wife in “Jesse,” Koko is able to better understand Jesse. Jesse’s mother cares little for her son, and when she does interact with him or Rick she is explosively confrontational—revealing a thinly veiled insecurity about her neglect and inability to take care of her son. After all that she has gone through with Jesse, his kicking her in the back,

54 Ibid., 194.
55 Ibid., 194.
scarring her face with a hot pan, Koko thinks

Since he was very small, Jesse had been brought up in an atmosphere of pure hatred and he had been powerless to object. That hatred had formed layers around him, enveloping his whole body, but it wasn’t his hatred. It was his parents’ hatred for each other. Koko wondered if she could strip off those layers. Or maybe she could smash them with a single blow.56

Koko makes an effort to think of Jesse as a complex being, despite his age and his inability to satisfy her needs and even his ability to keep her from satisfying her needs. While their relationship is not fully developed in “Jesse,” it is in Trash, and it is representative of the relationship that Koko has with several other characters in the book: her gay friend Buckey, and her young boyfriend Randy. Through the characterization of such men and the movement from a monologic narrative to a more open narration, Trash provides an array of male characters that present contradictory visions of masculinity and multiple faces of love.

The way that Koko is able to explore different avenues of love, reciprocated and without the abuse that qualified the brand of love in much of Bedtime Eyes, has much to do with these men in her life but even more to do with how Koko begins to love herself. “Bedtime Eyes” and “The Piano Player’s Fingers” seem to be about self-love, if nothing else. But the self-love of those stories is problematic for a number of reasons. Cornyetz notes how ostensibly empowering, but in reality problematic the desire-fuelled inertia of Yamada’s plots are:

The body, thus written, gives birth to appetites that emanate from the body in rapid succession: sex is followed by eating, and eating is followed by sex, which may be followed by sleeping, or more eating, or drinking, or more sex. . . . These varied instinctual appetites, which dominate the lives of Yamada’s women with a tactile urgency, can be described as conventionally female in their representation of women as creatures of nature and of sexual appetite that turns insatiable once it has been unleashed.57

This image of women is dependent upon a complacency in culture/nature binaries, and

56 Ibid., 204.
subjugating, romanticized images of women and the black Other that have been proliferated in Japan for centuries, as explained at the beginning of this paper. Furthermore, it is often dependent on a masochistic violence that, after pages of indulgence in whatever urge the characters have, seems quite fitting. But this changes in Trash. Koko forms relationships in which she begins to expect safety, respect and love through diversified relationships with characters like Jesse.

In the scene in which Koko returns to the apartment after the rape, and after Rick knows she is moving on, Koko has an epiphany. The feelings she expresses are particularly revealing to the reader frustrated by her grasping at so many futile forms of human connection. While in the beginning Koko still lazily concludes that she can’t resist Rick, she is finally able to let him go:

Koko watched him, cheek in hand. She gazed at his large hands with nostalgia. His fingers were very long and his knuckles prominent. Koko knew now that her dream could never have come true: those hands belonged to Rick and, as such, weren’t anything Koko could own. A man’s body, she realized, was not like a child’s plaything, something you could get if you threw a hard enough tantrum. Koko gazed at Rick’s hands intently, without longing.58

In contrast to the indulgently infantile voice of Koko in “Jesse,” this quote is perhaps a little childlike but certainly hopeful and even profound in its simplicity, as children can sometimes be.

As Koko is able to look at Rick as not just a lover but also a man and another human being, she is able to capture some of her own humanity and some long overdue independence. One can again recall Ruiko from “The Piano,” who is in many ways antithetical to Koko. Koko finds Rick’s humanity at the end of their relationship, and her contemplation of his hands is completely different from Ruiko’s fetishization of Leroy’s fingers. Even after Ruiko murders Leroy, his mythical nature still lingers, as she compares her boyfriend’s normal fingers with

58 Yamada, Trash, 299.
Leroy’s that contain a “special power to work miracles.” While the death scene at the end of “The Piano” provides a narratological shift, Yamada’s heroine does not fully change in the ideological power structures that define her and Kim in most of Bedtime Eyes. In contrast, in the ending of Rick and Koko’s relationship, and in the scene in which she looks at his hands, Koko realizes that Rick’s hands are not what allow her to objectify him but are a reminder that Rick is a whole and separate human being. Rick is not complete or unchanging in his wholeness, but Koko refuses to dwindle him down to an object that she can use for her pleasure and abuse.

Koko is not entirely unbound by the objectifying gaze of many of the Yamada heroine-types. As she mourns her deteriorating relationship with Rick in the beginning of Trash, she refers to Rick like a drug, something that she needs and cannot live without; “she [would have] to bury her love,” as if burying herself when it would eventually become old and tired. But at the end of Trash, Koko is no longer clinging to Rick or any other man, but willing to accept Rick’s separateness, responsibility and worthiness of love. This can only mean to Koko that she is similarly separate and worthy of the kind of love that Rick cannot give her. When Rick is in the hospital after his car crash, Koko thinks about her relationship with Rick and now with Randy: “It didn’t occur to her that what she had wasn’t a matter of chance; rather, it was something she’d struggled and suffered for.” This concept is completely foreign to the justificatory narratives of Bedtime Eyes in which the heroines take from their lovers as if they are a fix for a bad addiction. By finding strength in her separateness from Rick, Koko similarly begins to break down some of the patriarchal images of women that inflict many of Yamada’s heroines and she becomes a much more compelling character than the women in the first two Bedtime Eyes stories. In such changes, Koko and her fellow characters start to learn a little about

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60 Yamada, Trash, 82.
61 Ibid., 320.
the possibilities of love as they don’t simply take but give, listen and love, and in their story the
Yamada narrative has some significant moments of redemption.

The men and women represented in Yamada’s fiction, as eccentric and experimental as
they can be, are representative of several societal and cultural struggles in Japan for Japanese
women and Othered groups. The relationship between women and black men in Japan is an
interesting and complex one, the two groups being Other to the pure Japanese male, but distinct
in their Otherness. While women have had moments of power in Japanese history, they have
long been subjugated by patriarchal hegemony, familially and socially. In the infamous Onna
Daigaku, women are pictured as stupid, erratic, and evil—in short, subhuman creatures to their
husbands and rulers. Similarly, the black male has most often been pictured in Japan in much

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62 Ueno writes about the power of the shufu (head of the house) in the pre-modern rural
Japanese household and how critics of Japanese culture cannot underestimate her economic and
familial (and, in some ways, thus social) influence (S77). While people often quote the Onna
Daigaku as representative of the way women were thought of and treated, its influence was, in
reality, negligible in pre-modern periods (S75). In the modern period, 90% of women are given
their husband’s entire income to manage, and women have almost all the control of their

63 Sugano explains that Hokudo Hirahara’s book New Onna Daigaku, a treatise on the
need to restore many of the values in Onna Daigaku, was republished in September of 1941, a
little more than a month after it was published the first time in August of 1941. Along with the
proof of Hirahara’s ability to sell books, the apparent influence of his theories on Japanese
society is valid evidence of the impact of Onna Daigaku on a modern Japan, despite Ueno’s
important explication of a different reality for pre-modern Japanese women. Sugano Noriko.
“Gender, Modern Japan, and the Reception of Confucianism.” April 6th, 2005 speech from The
Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, 253–258.

64 Uno explains that while hosting seemingly dissident philosophies on women, the
perennial influence of ryosai kenbo (“good wife, wise mother”), an immensely influential
philosophy, seems to reflect some of the patriarchal traditions of Onna Daigaku, mainly the
supreme authority of the male (i.e. women are not good women if not wives to men and mothers
to their children). The philosophy of ryosai kenbo was propagated at the end of the 19th century
and held influence at least until the 1980s, as seen in tax incentives for women to avoid full-time
work and home-economics courses being required for girls until the 1980s. Kathleen S. Uno,
(Berkeley: University of California press, 1993), Chapter 11.

65 One of the most widely used references to the unfortunate position of the Japanese
female is Ekken’s Kaibara’s Confucianist text Onna Daigaku or The Greater Learning for
the same way he has been portrayed over the centuries in the West—bestial, volatile, with questionable intelligence and critical abilities and always as a potent symbol of the erotic. While thought of as inferior to Japanese people in many ways, one of the most significant contradictions to that is his mythical sexual superiority to the Japanese male. 66 Without recognizing the mythologizing of the black Other, many Japanese women have relied on the image of black men as being superior to Japanese males sexually, exploiting romantic relationships with them as symbols of resistance to Japanese male hegemony. 67

A Japanese woman dating a black man is not just uncommon, it is an open affront to ideas of Japanese superiority to Othered groups within Eurocentric hierarchies of power, and Japanese male dominance of the pure Japanese female. Yamada’s books fall into this trap of exploitative power, despite her efforts to produce rebellious texts. However, in Trash, the paradigm of exploitation and power begins to deteriorate. Koko has moved from Japan, she is not on the brief escapades that many young part-time working Japanese women go on, hoping to

Women. The following is one of the most notorious excerpts: “The five worst infirmities that afflict women are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and [stupidity]. Without any doubt, these five infirmities are found in seven or eight of every ten women, and it is they that cause women to be inferior to men. . . . Such is the stupidity of her character that it is incumbent on her, in every detail, to distrust herself and obey her husband” (266–67). Ekken Kaibara. “Onna daigaku,” From Sources of Japanese Tradition, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur L. Tiedemann, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 263–271.

66 To reiterate what was discussed briefly at the beginning of this essay, one can refer to Kelsky: “The gaijin lover is a useful tool which allows them not only to flaunt convention and gain status among their peers, but also to engage in scathing although indirect critique against Japanese male behaviors, values, and expectations. By persistently and pointedly contrasting the charms—sexual and otherwise—of the foreigner, with the alleged lack of charm in the Japanese male, these Japanese women are explicitly exercising a form of power and autonomy within the gender hierarchies of Japanese society.” Kelsky, “Intimate Ideologies,” 473. Also see Cornyetz “Power” and “Fetishize,” and Russell “Race.”

67 See note 30.
experiment for a week or two with an exotic man only to return to the safety of tradition. Koko is with the men she is with because she cares for them, and in Trash, the reader is presented with black men that are capable of caring for her in the same way. Through the democratized narrative of Trash, Koko and each of her fellow characters resist simplified objectification, and the text deconstructs some of the monologic images of Japanese females and their black counterparts that are so conducive to exploitation in Bedtime Eyes and many of the images of the black Other in Japanese cultural history. In Trash, images of Japanese females as inferior to males and black men as romanticized sexual objects are left behind and Yamada’s characters simply work on being human.

68 While Kelsky explains that most young Japanese women that experiment with foreign men return to Japanese notions of purity and tradition, (Kelsky, “Intimate Ideologies,” 473–474, 476) Cornyetz responds to her argument, writing that “The very new popularity of black lovers among young Japanese women (not Okinawans but Tokyoites) constitutes a further site of resistance to Japanese myths of homogeneity: interracial coupling challenges Japanese male ownership of Japanese women and threatens to defile ‘pure’ blood lineage (the essence of Japanese superiority). Although, as Kelsky claims, most of these young women neither marry their African American lovers nor birth babies of mixed heritage, some do (as has Yamada), and others will.” Cornyetz, “Fetishized,” 132.
Bibliography


