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A Comparative Study of Jack London and Tim O'Brien:

At the Figurative Crossroads between Humans and Animals*

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In his autobiographical novel *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), Tim O'Brien refers to Jack Londonic war stories:

I [O'Brien] would crusade against this war, and if, when I was released, I would find other wars, I would work to discover whether they were just and necessary, and if I found they were not, I would have another crusade. I wondered how writers such as Hemingway and Pyle and Jack London could write so accurately and movingly about war without also writing about the rightness of their wars. (97-98)

The comparison of Tim O'Brien and Jack London is a curious one. However, both of them participated in wars. O'Brien was drafted into the U.S. Army, and fought in Vietnam as a foot soldier in Alpha Company from 1969 to 1970. London, on the other hand, went to Japan as a war correspondent during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904.

It was not London's first visit to Japan. In 1893, at the age of seventeen, he landed in the Bonin Islands and Yokohama as a sailor on a seal-fishing boat. He turned his attention to the Pacific Ocean at the turn of the century, when the United States expanded its national boundaries toward the Pacific, leading to such events as the annexation of Hawaii, the Spanish-American War, and the

Philippine-American War. As Gretchen Murphy points out, the United States flexibly interpreted the discourse of the Monroe Doctrine, which was supposed to protect the Western Hemisphere, and “surpassed the limit of the Western Hemisphere” (*Hemispheric Imaginings* 22) by moving into the Pacific. This American transpacific strategy continued until the Vietnam War. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O’Brien makes the analogy of “no persuasive evidence” (65) between the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War. He questions the chaplain’s opinion that President McKinley “prayed to the Lord, asking for guidance, and the Lord finally told him to go to war” (65), and opposes it by saying to the chaplain, “We read different books” (65).

Both London and O’Brien were connected to wars across the Pacific Ocean. Although *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O’Brien’s first book, is less discussed than his other war stories of Vietnam, I would like to discuss the significance of this novel. This essay will focus on O’Brien’s views of race and animal metaphors in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, comparing them with London’s views of those subjects, and present O’Brien’s ambiguous boundaries as is noted in his representation of races and humans.

I

First, I will examine London’s views on race. London, having written a journal entitled “The Yellow Peril” (1904), is famous for favoring the segregation of Asian people. He viewed Asian people and places “through the lens of racist ethnography” (Eperjesi 108). Japanese expansionism at the turn of the century seemed especially threatening to him. He regarded Japan’s defeat of Russia as an important turning point because “it dramatically negated belief in the innate superiority of the white race” (Eperjesi 109). He feared the possibility that the yellow race might “swarm across the Pacific and turn America into an appendage of Asia” (Eperjesi 109). In addition, London traveled to the Marquesas Islands via Hawaii in 1907. When he witnessed “the admixture of Marquesan blood,” he

became worried about the intermingling of blood and about the idea of a “racial melting pot” (Phillips 89) in the United States.

This anxiety about race can be found in London’s Klondike stories, most of which were penned while London was sun-bathing and surfing in Hawaii. One example comes from the title of his short story, “Bâtard,” published in 1902. This title is the name of an evil dog, whose father is “a great gray timber wolf” (293). Bâtard also means bastard, or mongrel, in French. Moreover, in 1908, he published another Alaskan short story, “That Spot,” which depicts an extraordinary dog. The protagonist and his friend Stephen Mackaye join the Klondike Gold Rush. They have to buy dogs to pull their dogsled. One of them is the finest-looking dog that they have ever seen. Yet, they are never able to “make out his breed” because the color of the dog’s hair is a “mixed yellow-brown-red-and-dirty-white,” and there is a “spot of coal-black as big as a water-bucket” (331). The dog’s name, Spot, is derived from this feature. Bâtard’s mixed blood and Spot’s mixed breeding and colors reflect London’s dread that the purity of the white race was in danger. Therefore, these two Klondike short stories about bothersome dogs represent London’s fear of hybridity.

It is noteworthy that Spot’s black spot is emphasized, for the black spot reminds readers of the presence of African Americans in the meeting of races. Because of the U.S. holding in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines, the assimilation of other races was seen by London as a serious problem for America. At the same time, this racial prejudice was also applied to domestic groups such as Native Americans, Chinese immigrants, and African Americans. In the Spanish-American and Filipino-American Wars, blacks fought as regular soldiers. However, they were not included in the idea of the white man’s burden, and shadowed “an imperialist imaginary that identifies civilization with whiteness” (Murphy, *Shadowing the White Man’s Burden* 52).

Approximately sixty years after the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars, another transpacific racist war, the Vietnam War, broke out. We

can find a similarity between this war and the earlier wars. In the Vietnam War, there was an “awareness of the white/ brown/ black color hierarchy perspective among the U.S. soldiers” (Raphael-Hernandez 115). In receiving the invitation to join in scorning and fighting the Vietnamese, black soldiers seemed to be receiving treatment like that of white soldiers. Yet, as many African Americans in the United States were involved in the civil rights movement at that time, they were afraid that the antiwar protest might hinder the fruits of the movement. The situation of blacks was very unstable during the period of the Vietnam War, as well as during the Spanish-American and Filipino-American Wars. The next section will discuss O’Brien’s views on race in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*.

II

In the Vietnam War, more African American soldiers served in combat units than did white soldiers. According to Heike Raphael-Hernandez, “in 1967, for example, 64 percent of eligible blacks were drafted in comparison with only 31 percent of eligible whites” (103). As we can see from this figure, there were disproportionately high numbers of black soldiers in the war. Jen Dunnaway questions why, despite this fact, the protagonist of the Vietnam War narrative is “so consistently white and middle class” (110), providing the example of Oliver Stone’s 1986 film *Platoon*. She is concerned that “racially coded speech and imagery help to structure representations” (111) of the war in Vietnam. How does O’Brien, then, describe African American soldiers in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*?

There are several black characters in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. At Fort Lewis in Washington, Drill Sergeant Blyton instructs O’Brien in basic training. He “struts his sleek, black, airborne body up and down the ranks” (48). After the training at Fort Lewis, O’Brien is assigned to Alpha Company. Chip, one of the other soldiers in the troop, is O’Brien’s “black buddy from Orlando” (125).

However, as Dunnaway points out, black soldiers in the novel are portrayed as “a mildly antagonistic social formation” (113) and “a marker of the (48)

dissolution of the boundary between friend and enemy” (114). On one hand, O’Brien represents Captain Johansen, a white man with blond hair, as a hero. The narrator tells us that “Captain Johansen was one of the nation’s pride. He was blond, meticulously fair, brave, tall, blue-eyed, and an officer” (148). O’Brien also idealizes Captain Johansen, repeating, “[h]eroes somehow are blond in the ideal” (144). On the other hand, African American soldiers in the novel are described as annoying.

For example, when Drill Sergeant Blyton sees O’Brien and his friend Erik polishing their boots and talking about courage, Blyton derides them, saying, “You’re a pussy, huh? You afraid to be in the war, a goddamn pussy, a goddamn lezzie? You know what we do with pussies, huh? We fuck ’em” (54). Another example of this pattern happens when Alpha Company is on the helipad one morning before dawn. The narrator explains the situation: “The black soldiers joked and were too loud for the early morning. They had their own piece of the helipad, and only officers would interrupt them” (112). After Captain Johansen leaves Alpha Company, a new captain named Smith arrives. In contrast to Captain Johansen, Smith always has his next promotion in mind. Even when one of his commands causes a huge loss of men in Alpha Company, Smith is mainly anxious about his position, grieving, “My career is in real jeopardy now” (155). Therefore, the rumor that someone is seeking to take Smith’s life spreads. O’Brien narrates that “[t]he black soldiers hated him, saying it was only a matter of time before someone chucked a grenade into his foxhole” (157). One day, Alpha Company is searching villages. One of the black soldiers shoots the first sergeant, who is “hated by the blacks” (171). After this incident, a black friend in the company tells O’Brien that “the shot was meant only to scare the top sergeant” but that “the blacks weren’t crying” (172). The black friend adds: “[T]hat’s how to treat whitey when it comes down to it” (172). Furthermore, there is a scene that white soldiers make fun of African American soldiers. When floor shows come to LZ Gator, Korean girls, Australian girls, Japanese girls,

and Philippine girls sing songs or perform teases. The narrator expounds that the black soldiers “arrive an hour before show time, cameras poised for a shot of flesh, taking the front-row seats” (179), but that the white soldiers do not like the black soldiers’ attitudes that much. Though the white soldiers arrive even earlier for the next floor show, the black soldiers are “ready and waiting two full hours before curtain-up” (179). As these citations demonstrate, African American soldiers are depicted as bothersome.

However, O’Brien also points out black soldiers’ miserable circumstances on the battlefield: “Blacks and spics get wasted” (78). Moreover, almost all the infantry wanted to get rear jobs in order to save their lives. African American soldiers had difficulty obtaining them, whereas many white soldiers were assigned to the rear:

For the soul brothers, that route is not easy. To begin with, the officer corps is dominated by white men; the corps of foot soldiers, common grunts, is disproportionately black. On top of that are all the old elements of racial tension—fears, hates, suspicions. . . . With either the hunch or the reality that white officers favour white grunts in handing out the rear jobs, many blacks react as any sane man would. They sulk. They talk back, get angry, leaf, play sick, smoke dope. They group together and laugh and say shit to the system. (170-71)

O’Brien analyzes the disproportionate number of black combat soldiers. He adds that this condition causes racial tension between the white and the black troops, and that “the whole cycle goes for another round, getting worse” (171).

In this way, O’Brien does not neglect black soldiers, and presents the difficult circumstances that they faced. However, we should be aware that O’Brien does not always distinguish African Americans from the Vietnamese in the novel. In other words, he unconsciously projects the image of the black onto

the Vietnamese, though he does not intend to do so. One day, Alpha Company decides to stay in an old Vietnamese man's village. His work in the paddies has bent his spine. In addition, he is blind. While the blind man is showering the soldiers of Alpha Company, one of the members attacks him suddenly:

A blustery and stupid soldier, blond hair and big belly, picked up a carton of milk and from fifteen feet away hurled it, for no reason, aiming at the old man and striking him flush in the face. The carton burst, milk spraying on the old man's temples and into his cataracts. He hunched forward, rocking precariously and searching for balance. (105)

Without any reason, the foolish American aims at the old Vietnamese man. This image mirrors the civil rights campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. On May 3, 1963, black youth marched near Sixteenth Street Church to protest the unequal treatment of African Americans in Birmingham. Bull Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety for the city of Birmingham, "ordered the firemen to open the hoses on both marchers and the large crowd of onlookers who had gathered in the park" (*We Changed the World* 126). Both the foolish American soldier in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and the white firemen in Birmingham attacked people of a different race for no reason.

Raphael-Hernandez also indicates such an illusion, that is to say, the unconscious projection of the image of the black onto the Vietnamese. She deals with a scene in Anthony Grooms' 2001 novel *Bombingham*, in which the protagonist, a soldier in the Vietnam War, identifies himself with the white firemen in Birmingham. She insists that the protagonist should be haunted "by the image that he turned into the same white firefighter who sprayed water at the marchers in Birmingham" (120) when he aims at an old Vietnamese man for no obvious reason. Moreover, while discussing "[t]he dramatic images of uniformed police officers wielding fire hoses" (5) printed in a special issue of *Life*, Davi Johnson

points out that the firemen “appear as soldiers straining in formation to train their weapon on its targets,” and that they “turn their weapons against defenseless citizens” (10). His opinion suggests a similarity between the foolish American soldier in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and the white firemen in Birmingham, both of whom deliberately target defenseless people of other races.

Taking such confusion into consideration, there exists the possibility of a blurring of the lines between the identities of blacks and the Vietnamese in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. In fact, the novel implies the vague boundary between each race: “[I]t was impossible to make out the colour in their faces” (15). Interestingly, the novel shows the indistinguishability of humans as well as races. The final section will demonstrate the ambiguous boundary of the description of humans.

III

In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O’Brien compares himself to a slave. During his basic training, he bears hardship. He remembers how he and his friend Erik “stumbled like galley slaves through the first months of army life” (40). On the battlefield, he recollects a dream he had as a kid. In the dream, he was in a prison, and “swarthy-faced moustached captors worked us like slaves in a coal mines” (93). Judging from only above-mentioned quotations, we cannot confirm that these slaves are meant to be black. Yet, taking into account the unclear boundaries between races in the novel, it is curious that O’Brien likens himself to a slave.

When Donna J. Haraway defines “companion species,” she refers to the “discursive tie between the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen, and the animal” (*When Species Meet* 18). Haraway clarifies the mantras of companion species: “The partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with” (*When Species Meet* 17). This concept of companion species can be applied to the representations of the animals in “Bâtard” and “That Spot” by London. As both Bâtard and Spot are sled dogs, they live with their masters.

According to Haraway, “[c]ompanion comes from the Latin *cum panis*, ‘with bread’” (italics original; *When Species Meet* 17). Literally, they share board and room with their masters. This is especially true in “Bâtard,” in which the scene of a duel reveals that the dog fights with his master equally. “It was a primordial setting and a primordial scene” and “in the centre two beasts, locked in combat, snapping and snarling, raging madly about, panting, sobbing, cursing, straining, wild with passion, in a fury of murder, . . .” (298). Each of them is independent, and there is no difference between the two. London depicts these dogs as companion species. Then, how does O’Brien represent animals in *If I Die in Combat Zone*?

In this novel, O’Brien looks upon himself as an animal, using many animal metaphors. At Fort Lewis, O’Brien and Erik, who have suffered as a result of basic training, form a coalition to resist the army’s education. They stand against the system, “jabbing in the lance, drawing a trickle of army blood, running like rabbits” (42-43). However, they rarely show their stances openly. When they try to do so, they are “massacred like mice” (43) by Blyton. The narrator O’Brien recalls the anxiety he felt regarding the nights in Vietnam. He expresses “the fear of getting lost, of becoming detached from the others, of spending the night alone in that frightening and haunted countryside” (92). The foot soldiers of Alpha Company follow the men who walk at the front “like a blind man after his dog” (92). While the helicopter is landing in one of the villages of My Khe, members of the company prepare to receive enemy fire. They pile out “like frantic rats” (114) and tremble over the paddy. During the war, O’Brien thinks about courage again and again. He wonders if it was right that he decided to participate in a war that he considers wrong. He is concerned about his father’s reaction to his decision. He says to himself, “Was his son a fool, enduring like a sheep being stripped of the wool that is his by right?” (139) The metaphors of animals embody O’Brien’s crises.

As O’Brien employs animal metaphors throughout the novel, the bound-

ary between humans and animals gradually disappears. At Fort Lewis, the barracks turns into “a cattle pen” (52). While they are sleeping, the soldiers snore loudly. The narrator says that “the men are animals” (52). O’Brien tries not to sleep, because sleep puts him “with the rest of them, the great, public, hopeless zoo” (52). Yet, he succumbs to his drowsiness. In Alpha Company, there is a beligerent member named Mad Mark. He is “the platoon leader, a first lieutenant and a Green Beret” (85). He does not hate battles. He believes that “making war is a necessary and natural profession” (87). He equates humans with animals. He elucidates his theory that “hunting might be practised—not only against wild animals, but also against human beings who are intended by nature to be ruled by others and refuse to obey that intention” (87). In mid-July, Alpha Company is ordered to attack a burning village. Captain Smith and three others fire at something inside the perimeter. They think that they have shot the enemy, but the next morning they find “a dead pig” (159) instead. In the middle of the novel, there is an episode that further blurs the boundary between humans and animals. The chapter, entitled *Mori*, describes a beautiful North Vietnamese Army nurse who is shot to death. The narrator gives a full detailing of that hot day when she dies: “Her face lay on some dirt. Flies were all over her, feeding on her blood, buzzing like an army of sexually aroused cannibals. There was no shade. It was mid-afternoon of a hot day” (116). This depiction makes readers vividly imagine the situation.

O’Brien’s use of the noun “cannibals” is crucial, for this word refers to a person or an animal that eats the flesh of its own species. By employing this word, O’Brien treats the North Vietnamese girl and the flies as equals, making no clear distinction between the human and the animals. O’Brien also uses the verb “feeding” in the passage. Eating is related to the collapse of the hierarchy. Taking the example of Victor Hugo, Mikhail Bakhtin indicates the connection between eating and laughter (126). Laughter releases us from dogmatism (49). Similarly, carnival feasting, the carnival-grotesque, seeks to “liberate from the

(54)

prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (34).¹ As Haraway speculates on “the culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism” (*When Species Meet* 11), the use of “cannibals” and “feeding” in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* overturns the hierarchy considered to be naturalized.

The novel contains another scene of the subversion of the hierarchy between humans and animals. One day, Alpha Company is lying in ambush. While he is waiting for the Viet Cong, O’Brien comes up with an idea. He supposes that the members of Alpha Company have “suddenly become the objects of this night’s hunt” and that they are fooling themselves in thinking that they “remained the hunters” (95). He relates that they are totally defenseless, “as if the war gods had it arranged that the Viet Cong should trot down . . . like drugged turkeys” (95). Then, O’Brien employs another metaphor, identifying the Viet Cong with Daffy Duck:

I [O’Brien] remembered an old Daffy Duck cartoon. A well-equipped hunter—red cap, ten-gauge shotgun, sacked lunch—lies in wait behind an elaborate blind, chortling at the cleverness of his concealment. And all the while ol’ Daffy is prancing up from behind the doomed fellow, sledgehammer and sticks of red dynamite at the ready. A whole theatre full of preadolescent sadists ripped into piercing, shrill laughter when Daffy sent the incompetent, gaping hunter to Never-Never Land abroad a gratifying, deafening shock wave. I led the laughter. I’d always favoured the quarry over the hunter. It seemed only fair. (95-96)

Juxtaposing Daffy Duck with the Viet Cong, O’Brien comically describes the way that human beings are outwitted by animals. In this scene, he deconstructs the hierarchy between humans and animals. The narratives of animals that deceive others are also to be found in the traditions of folklore in cultural an-

thropology. When he “explores the relation of the black vernacular tradition to the Afro-American literary tradition” (xix), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. refers to two trickster figures, Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey. He explicates the unique definition of Signifyin(g) in black discourse, mentioning the Signifying Monkey tales. In the Monkey tales, there are three characters—the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant. The Monkey, “a trickster figure, like Esu, who is full of guile, who tells lies, and who is a rhetorical genius” (56), intends to cheat the Lion into tangling with the Elephant and thus to demystify the Lion’s status as King of the Jungle. The Monkey reverses the Lion’s status by repeating a series of insults, and becomes “ecstatic at the success of his deception” (56). In other words, Signifyin(g), in the Afro-American rhetorical strategy, implies duping. In this way, animals like Daffy Duck, who outwit others, exist in the traditions of folklore in cultural anthropology.²

Both O’Brien and London present the indetermination between humans and animals in each animal representation. However, there is a key point of difference between O’Brien and London. Unlike London, O’Brien also suggests the ambiguous boundary between humans and machines. During his basic training, O’Brien hates the people at Fort Lewis because they are “boors” (40) and brutal. He says that in “that jungle of robots there could be no hope of finding friendship” (40). Trainees, drill sergeants, and officers at Fort Lewis are so savage that he regards them as robots.

Haraway claims that the boundary between humans and machines is breached. At first, she asserts that “nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal” (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 152). Relating to the leaky distinction between humans and animals, she maintains that cyborgs do not signal “a walling off of people from other living beings” but that they “signal disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling” (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 152). As H. Bruce Franklin points out, “America’s war in Indochina cannot be dissociated from American SF, which shaped and was reshaped by the nation’s (56)

encounter with Vietnam” (341). Therefore, in contrast to London, the nature of the era made O’Brien represent the relationships among humans, animals, and machines. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O’Brien tries to separate himself from the people at Fort Lewis who are like robots, emphasizing that he and his friend Erik are “not cattle or machines” (43). Yet, O’Brien cannot tell himself from an animal. In addition, he behaves as if he were a robot at Fort Lewis, however strongly he resists it. When the colonel asks whether they have any problems or any needs, trainees have to say, “No, sir.” When he asks if there is enough food or if they get enough sleep, they have to say, “Yes, sir” (52). Such a mechanical response recalls Alan Turing’s Turing test. In this test, while asking a series of questions and judging player’s responses, the interrogator tries to differentiate computers from human beings. Barbara Johnson actually deals with the instance of the Turing test (153) in *Persons and Things*, which discloses everywhere “the blurring of the boundary between life and non-life” (157).³ Under any circumstances at Fort Lewis, O’Brien repeats words automatically, like a machine by rule.

Both Tim O’Brien and Jack London were associated with transpacific racist wars. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O’Brien presents unclear boundaries in his descriptions of races and humans. By means of many animal metaphors, he problematizes the boundary between humans and animals. Furthermore, he even overturns the hierarchy between them, which had been thought to be natural. O’Brien eventually makes the boundary among humans, animals, and machines ambiguous.

As Dunnaway points out, O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990), which is another Vietnam War novel narrated by the protagonist O’Brien, is silent on race (113). Moreover, O’Brien’s racial concern came to turn toward American Indians. Mentions of the Battle of the Little Bighorn are often found in his works, such as *The Nuclear Age* (1985), *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), and

July, July (2002). Therefore, though it is rarely discussed, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is a remarkable text that deals with the issues of the blacks. This novel reveals not only the racial indetermination but also the difficulty of defining human beings in the post-Cold War era.

Notes

- * I am deeply grateful to Professor Takayuki Tatsumi, of Keio University, for providing me with invaluable suggestions.
- 1 In *Beyond Literary Chinatown*, Jeffery F. L. Partridge also relates “the carnivalesque eating central to Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*” to the deconstruction of “the prevailing hierarchical power structure” (97) in his discussion of Li-Yong Lee’s poem “The Cleaving.”
- 2 Joel Chandler Harris, a member of the American Folklore Society, related the animal fable in *Uncle Remus* (1881). This African-American folktale also has a trickster figure, Br’er Rabbit.
- 3 Giving the example of the rhythms of assembly-line production in Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, Barbara Johnson points out “the human being functions like a machine” (154-55).

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