

Identity as “Lack”: On the Merit of Being Nothing

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Introduction

Tracy Gannon writes in her journal *Controversy as Context* that “As willing as she may be to accept the role ethnicity plays in her writing, Yü is not willing to allow readers' perceptions of her as Korean to define either her or her work ...”

In an interview with joint Akutagawa Prize winner Tsuji Hitonari in March 1997, Yu Miri states, “I want to write from a position neither Korean nor Japanese”

“I don't perceive myself at all as a zainichi Korean writer (zainichi kankokujin sakka),” she explained, continuing, “If I write about zainichi Koreans, I get pushed into the zainichi Korean literature box (waku). I hate that.” remarks Yu Miri to Hayashi Mariko in an interview for *Shukan Asahi*.

Yu Miri, a Zainichi Korean author born in Yokohama in 1968, finds herself in the compromising position of not having a sense of belonging to a specific identity group. In other words, she finds herself detached from her cultures, family, and state, and actively chooses to not specifically label herself, all while being constantly pushed by society to conform to one identity; either Korean or Japanese. In her purposeful and consistent self-alienation from what we often see as normal aspects of identity, Yu Miri conveys her thoughts on her own personal statelessness, and lack of acceptance from the identity groups she is often pushed into, through her writing as a means of justifying her choice to not place herself in the labeled boxes she actively avoids. Yu proclaims that her sense of self essentially stems from the reality that she lacks, mostly due to her cultural heritage and history of physical displacement, a foundation of culture that would have bound her to one state and way of living. Instead of this innate cultural foundation many of us have to be the basis of our person-hood, Yu has found herself in a kind of “cultural nothingness” or “lack”, in which it is her lack of strong cultural ties that has allowed her to construct her personage through an accumulation of life experience and the social/cultural exchange of behaviours, mannerisms and thoughts. It is with this idea of not

belonging that Yu Miri has found her own unique voice in literature, as her struggles with this “lacking existence” often bleed both into the characters’ identity in her novels, as well as the social environment in which they interact.

I therefore, through this essay, aim to define “lack” not only as one in the state of being deficient of something, but also as an identity in itself. Yu Miri of course lacks many things, but as she claims that her lack is what makes her who she is, I argue that “lacking” can be as much of a category of existence as the labels of Korean, Japanese, or American. Hence, the terms I will be using throughout this essay of *Cultural Lack*, *Familial Lack*, *Gendered Lack*, *Racial Lack*, etc. will stand in as subcategories of the general term that encompasses the many characters and people I will discuss.

In this essay I will be mainly utilizing Yu’s novel, *Gold Rush*, as a tool to further analyze and conceptualize this concept of the “lacking individual” that Yu Miri has established within herself. Though this novel does not contain any literal confrontation of her issues, Yu does tend to predicate the basis of her characters’ lives with the lack of some significant element of self. This lack is one that will ultimately negatively affect the characters’ happiness, social standing, or other important aspect of life and thus provokes profound inner conflict for the individual throughout the novel. Essentially, Yu Miri synthesizes her own conflicts with addressing her statelessness into the characters of *Gold Rush*, as to redefine her personal complexities within another individual’s narrative, and expand the range of what it means to “lack” or be “lacking”. As Yu Miri chooses to envelop her characters’ lives within their lack of familial love or cognitive function, it thus expands the concept of the “lacking individual” to a larger plain and gives room for people to have a better understanding of, and explore the possible values of lacking within

themselves. Instead of fixating solely on the kind of lacking she sees within herself, Yu Miri chooses to push the novel towards a more universal definition of “lack”; one that bridges the gap between those in different walks of life and her own struggles as a Zainichi Korean.

Historical Context of Zainichi Koreans

Zainichi Koreans are a population of people whose families have resided in Japan before the end of World War II. These ethnically Korean people were born and raised in Japan and are referred to in Japanese as either *zainichi cho-senjin* or *zainichi kankokujin*, and are registered officially as *cho-sen-seki* or *kankoku-seki*, respectively. Japan and Korea have had quite a complex relationship, whereas they are currently quite technologically advanced and influential countries, there was a period of time that has to be acknowledged in which Japan occupied Korea for around 35 years. During the occupation of Korea under Japanese rule, Koreans citizens both residing in Japan and on the peninsula suffered through racial discrimination, cultural erasure, and significantly lower wages compared to their ethnically Japanese co-workers. As many Koreans were working or studying for quite a while within Japan during the occupation, they started to build families on the island country and settle there. This led to many Korean-Japanese marriages and biracial children populating Japan. Essentially, these people were the origins of the Zainichi Koreans we see today, though at the time they were considered just Japanese.

Initially, Japan had wanted Korea to fully integrate into the Japanese way of life and had intended on assimilating the Koreans into their society as Japanese nationals, but following their loss of WWII began to spread the rhetoric of the Zainichi Korean, or literally “residing in Japan”. This clear distinction between Japanese people and ethnic Koreans simply residing

within the country, but not necessarily a part of the state, is one of the factors that drives Yu Miri's work. Moon, in her Stanford University SPICE article explains that this terminology gave off the idea that ethnic Koreans were only temporarily living in Japan and would later be moving back to their permanent residence in Korea. Following the rising use of this term, Japan began to set in place various laws that would strip Zainichi Koreans of their Japanese citizenship. By December of 1945 their voting rights were taken away; the Alien Registration Law of 1947 demoted Zainichi Koreans to "alien status"; the 1950 National Law stated that only children with Japanese fathers were allowed Japanese nationality, etc.

Although there were a significant amount of laws being introduced that prevented Zainichi Koreans from living normal lives as Japanese citizens, there was no large scale of repatriation back to Korea initially. Following WWII, Korea was also facing extreme social, economic, and political change. Over the course of several years, the peninsula of Korea was evolving into two separate countries with different political systems and rules in place. The division of Korea, following the signing of an Armistice treaty in 1953, was another cause of confusion in cultural identity as its lack of unification made it difficult for ethnic Japanese Koreans as they were now further divided into North or South Korean heritage (this identity is indicated currently on their passports). Efforts made by the pro-North Korean and pro-communist group Soren of establishing Zainichi Schools in Japan and allocating loans to ethnic businesses later caused over 70,000 Zainichi Koreans to repatriate to North Korea in hopes of being a part of the Communist paradise that the Soren promised to them. This hopefulness in the Zainichi population was later dissuaded as North Korea began to experience famine and poverty. Although South Korea had begun to offer benefits to Zainichi Koreans who

chose to repatriate to the country, many were not willing to do as Japan was in the middle of an economic boom which seemed like a much better option as opposed to South Korea and their current issues with the authoritarian Park Chung Hee regime. There was also the issue that Zainichi Koreans, although ethnically Korean, were influenced by Japanese culture. As many had either lived in Japan for a significant amount of time or were born and raised there, the ties that were once strongly linked to Korea were now no more than thin strings of acknowledgement of Korean heritage. With the chaos ensuing on the peninsula, mostly stemming from the division of the Korea's, Zainichi Koreans no longer found Korea to be the same homeland that they had left behind, or for some had never even called home in the first place. Individuals like Yu Miri are of the individuals who, though ethnically Korean, can neither speak the language nor find comfort in an association to the peninsula.

Seeing as the relationship between ethnic Koreans and the Japanese government were extremely tense, it becomes more apparent that Yu Miri stance of not wanting to write from a Zainichi Korean, Korean, or Japanese viewpoint might also have come about due to this complex history. To this day, Zainichi Koreans are still highly discriminated against in Japan, especially by the far right Anti-Korean hate group, the *Zaitokukai*. The Civil Association against Privileges for Resident Koreans (*Zainichi tokken wo yurusanai shimin no kai*, hereafter known as *the Zaitokukai*), was founded in 2007 and had approximately 13,900 members, 1900 being women, as of June 2013. With Anti-Korean elaborate protests, shouting racial slurs and hate speech, the *Zaitokukai* aim to get their message across that Japanese citizens rights are being

“violated” as ethnic Koreans are given too much privilege in their country. These privileges the Zaitokukai speak of are as follows¹:

- Resident Koreans legally enjoy special permanent residency that is not allowed to other foreign nationals.
- Local authorities subsidize resident (North) Korean schools, even though in theory the schools do not qualify for subsidies, and they provide an “anti-Japanese” education.
- Foreigners receive public welfare assistance, and the numbers of resident Koreans benefitting are disproportionately high.
- Resident Koreans are allowed to use aliases (Japanese names) in daily life, and “this allows them to hide their real identities in mass media reports when they commit crimes.

Yu has had many instances in which she had to deal with the Zaitokukai verbally abusing her and trying to silence her voice as a Zainichi Korean. Though these occurrences have not dissuaded her from continuing to write and share her stories, there have been a number of disturbing occasions in which the Zaitokukai threatened her life. A significant incident occurred in February 1997 where multiple calls were made with various threats to intimidate Yu Miri as to not appear for book signing events. These include but are not limited to threats of bombings and the use of tear gas in bookstores. Leading to the cancellation of her book signings as well as an international outcry for Zainichi Korean rights, the Zaitokukai’s issues with Yu Miri, and all others like her, were being publicized on a massive scale. Thus indicating how mistreatment of this minority with Japan is still quite present.

¹ Shibuichi, *Zaitokukai and the Problem with Hate Groups in Japan* (2015)

Through this history we then begin to understand further the complexities of the inner conflict that Zainichi Koreans like Yu Miri face. With such a complex history having been the foundation for their identities, cultural ties and belonging are rendered inaccessible and vague. Whereas the society in which people are born and grow up often ignite this sense of belonging within the individual, this complicated and racially discriminatory past keeps many Zainichi Koreans from fully registering both Japan and Korea as their own. Yu Miri, and the many Zainichi Koreans like her, are thus positioned into an identity limbo where they are neither here nor there in terms of their place in the world. This “lacking existence”, however, is not solely indicative of one kind of people.

Historical Context of Coolie Labor

In my conceptualization of Yu Miri’s established “lacking existence” I aim to also ignite a conversation of Yu Miri’s concerns with her identity echoing those of various background. MY primary example for this essay will be the exploitation of *Coolie Laborers* and the expropriation from their culture by European people following the abolishment of black slavery. Whereas Yu Miri’s statelessness and “lack” are an extension of a long and complicated history of warring nations in which she has no control over, so can be said for the many Chinese people who were utilized for their manpower by white oppressors in their quest for slave labor.

During the 19th century there were many significant efforts being made towards the abolishment of the enslavement of African people. These events occurred most prominently within the United States and British Empire, but anti-slavery rhetoric also flourished throughout Jamaica (1831-2), Haiti (1792), and the Barbados (1816) through multiple slave rebellions and uprisings meant to eliminate this inhumane institution. After abolishing slavery through the

Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, almost 30 years prior to the Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation that ended the practice in the United States, the British Empire, as well as many other European countries and Australia, were in great need of laborers to help drive their “labor-driven production system²”. What was hurting this system the most was that former African slaves were unwilling to return to the plantations that had originally enslaved them. (Rightfully so, I might add) It was due to this shortage of manpower, that the British Empire had to look elsewhere for their laborers, resulting in the influx of indentured servitude of Hakka Chinese and South Asian people, which led to the introduction of *Coolie Laborers* and the coolie contracts. The British Empire had a significant influence on trade between both East Asia and Southeast Asia at the time, causing this newly found market for Asian labor to both flourish and quickly spread internationally. “By 1838, some 25,000 East Indians had been exported to the new British East African colony of Mauritius. While Indian coolies were mainly transported inside British colonies, 250,000 to 500,000 Chinese coolies were imported from 1847-1874 to various British, French, Dutch and Spanish colonies in the Americas, Africa and Southeast Asia³”: The extent of the coolie labor trade was massive as hundreds of thousands of East and Southeast Asian people were sold and shipped off to new countries to supplement the labor shortage.

To understand this influx of Chinese Hakka coolie labor further, it is important to also mention its origins through the social and political context of China during the 19th century. The rise of the Hakka Chinese labor trade, featured in Powell’s *The Pagoda*, can be mostly attributed to several wars that had taken place during the 19th and early 20th century: the First

² Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*, 1992

³ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*, 1992

Opium War (1839-1842), the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864), and the Hakka-Punti Clan Wars(1855-1867)⁴. Though the Hakka Chinese people do have a long history of migration throughout the geographical boundaries of China, these wars stand out the most in their relation to coolie labor because they establish both the historical framework of the enforcement of trade with foreign powers (i.e. Great Britain) and the social and political issues of the Hakka Chinese people that cemented their fate as laborers for trade.

Upon realizing that China was benefiting significantly more from their exportation of tea to the British Empire, the British decided to fix the trade imbalance through the trade of opium. The result of this opium trade was a significant increase in profit for the British Empire, but also a significant increase in Chinese opium addicts, and in 1840 when the Qing court decided to end the import of opium, the British retaliated by initiating the Opium War; which they eventually won. This victory resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing which forced China to open five exports of trade for foreign benefit, and lifted the ban that prevented Chinese citizens from traveling outside the country for work; citizens like the Hakka Chinese. A little less than a decade following the end of the war was the Taiping Uprising, led by Hakka Chinese Christian Hong Xiuquan, which opposed Britain's unequal treaty with China, while also advocating for social issues like gender equality. This uprising went on for a little over a decade until they were silenced by the French and British, and as most leaders of the revolution were of Hakka descent a significant amount of Hakka Chinese families were slaughtered. Concurrently taking place in the middle of these uprisings were the Hakka-Punti Clan Wars in which two Chinese clans fought over limited resources and land. "During the mid-19th century, a combination of

⁴ Asiasociety.org Defining Hakka Identity, History, Culture, and Cuisine

overpopulation, land shortage, increasing rural poverty, natural disasters, and unemployment in Guangdong brought the tensions to a head⁵": Over 1 million people had died in this battle, and as they were severely outnumbered most of the deceased were of the Hakka Clan. With this loss, many of the Hakka Chinese people were kept as war prisoners and sold as some of the first coolie laborers.

"[Coolie] was the bureaucratic term the British used to describe indentured laborers,' Bahadur recently told NPR's Tell Me More. 'But it became a highly charged slur': The word *Coolie* to Asian people, encompassing both Chinese and Indian immigrant laborers, is quite similar to that of the derogatory word *Nigger* for Black people as they both carry the weight of dehumanization as well as enforcement into servitude by white power. Coolie laborers, like African slaves, were thought of as less than white workers and often treated, to an extent, like their black counterparts in regard to the conditions of their working environment. Many of these laborers "signed contracts after having been drugged, misled, scammed, or even abducted", so although these contracts attempted to differentiate coolie labor from the image of traditional slavery, the tactics used to acquire this labor were mostly unaltered from the original procedure, thus obscuring the desired distinction. Some of the biggest differences of treatment between the two were the allotment of various social privileges to Chinese laborers that were prohibited from black people, as well as the notably less hostile reception received from white people as opposed to that of coloured people. Chinese immigrants appeared to have both volunteered and been coerced to assimilate to the white authority because of this rationing of privilege, and in an effort to maintain it rejected, through protest, connection to

⁵ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kungfu Fighting*, 1992.

their own heritage. By adopting a form of self inflicted racism from a white dominated society, as well as the role of the *model minority*, Chinese men were thus able to gain entry, albeit limited, into spaces predominantly held by whites such as all-white schools and suburban neighborhoods. Though these privileges may have appeared advantageous to Chinese people, the shadow of white supremacy still consistently loomed over their every move as the white-led government's opinions on these people were often subject to change (e.g. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882)⁶. No matter how much privilege Chinese immigrants had as compared to black people, however, it was still white people who remained in control and monitored the dosage of luxury allowed to the laborers that lie in between this racial dynamic.

Patricia Powell in her novel *The Pagoda* aims to highlight some of the racial, gendered, and cultural "lack" that these Hakka Chinese laborers experienced as a result of white oppression. Using this historical background as the jumping off point for her novel, Powell is able to construct a narrative that expands on the fundamental issues of statelessness and separation of culture from self. The "lack" that is portrayed in this novel echoes what is conveyed in Yu Miri's *Gold Rush*, and through a close reading and analysis of both, the gap that stands between these seemingly unrelated narratives thus become united through Yu Miri's concept of the "lacking existence".

Section 1: Yu Miri's Gold Rush and the Conceptualization of "Lack"

For this section I aim to briefly introduce the origins and concept of identity as "lack" that Yu Miri promotes throughout her life, as well as provide an in-depth analysis of the many ways she injects her ideas on "lack" in the characters of her novel *Gold Rush*. It is in a 2018

⁶ The **Chinese Exclusion Act** was an immigration law passed in 1882 that prevented **Chinese** laborers from immigrating to the United States. The **Chinese Exclusion Act** was the first immigration law that excluded an entire ethnic group.

lecture at Wesleyan University, that Yu Miri explains how her “identity is predicated on lack”. Meaning that the person she is today comes from a foundation of essential nothingness. In this Freeman lecture, Yu Miri further expounds on this foundational “lacking” through the retelling of familial instability, lack of education, and identity issues she dealt with in Japanese society. Having grown up with a violent father who gambled away his wages on horses, getting expelled from school at the age of sixteen, and being constantly made aware of her otherness in Japanese society due to the label of Zainichi Korean, Yu Miri finds that her existence is more encompassed in the have not than they have. Or rather, as she puts it, her identity is the opposite of ある(Aru), which is the Japanese terminology to indicate that things, concepts, or events exist.

Although utilizing the terminology of “lack”, “nothingness”, or “opposite of ある(Aru)” can be read with a tinge of nihilism, it is important to understand that Yu Miri's view on life is not meant to be observed as negative. The concept of “lack” or to be “lacking”, in the case of Yu Miri's life, is an acknowledgement to the foundation of her current existence as a person and storyteller, as well as her ability to connect to others who are also “nothing”. Whereas we often see people building solidarity between those who share the same foundation of “something” — “something” in this case being the opposite of lack, or the existence of tangible and structured cultural ties, families, education, etc. — Yu Miri finds that those who stem from nothing are also able to build off of themselves from what they lack. She further states in her lecture that “the building of connections on the presumption of lack is something that is very rich because in this world there are a number of people who share this condition of lacking, of being in between somewhere and another...”. To believe that “lacking” is beneficial, rather

than something to be repaired or supplemented, shows off the benefits of “lack” and its ability to provide belonging to the variety of people who simply do not. Therefore, it is in her novel *Gold Rush* that Yu Miri explores this variety of “lacking” narratives by implementing various subcategories of lacking as foundational aspects of existence in her character’s lives. Through this diversification of the definition of “lack”, Yu Miri challenges the notion that “lacking” is solely detrimental. She instead argues that “lack” is only disadvantageous to an individual when they cannot recognize its outstanding influence in their lives and choose to supplement for their deficiency with materialistic and manufactured things.

Yu Miri’s Gold Rush: Consequences as a Result of the Denial of Lack

Yu Miri’s *Gold Rush* tells the tale of a teenage boy with severe emotional poverty who, due to his disdain for what he lacks, murders his father in an attempt to gain stability in a life where he feels small and powerless. Taking place within a crime ridden port city of Yokohama called Kogane-cho, 14-year-old Kazuki is a character who is incessantly haunted by the many ways in which he lacks. Coming from an unstable and materialistic family, Kazuki is depicted as an individual both smothered in and tormented by his “lack”. Unable to accept that he is simply one whose existence is predicated on “lack”, he continues throughout the novel to supplement his “lacking existence” with fabricated versions of familial love, authority, and happiness in an attempt to extirpate what he believes is the source of his loneliness and anger. Kazuki’s “lacking existence” thus acts as an extension of Yu Miri’s own issues with her “lack”, as he represents the most hyperbolic outcome of one who cannot come to terms with the reality of their nature. Kazuki’s actions, therefore, are meant to provoke the thought that remedying lack, instead of embracing it as foundation of self, only causes one to lose sight of who they are and damages

their relationships to themselves and others. It is the miserable outcome of Kazuki's life, as he attempts to supplement his familial and emotional lack, that causes Gold Rush readers to then question: Is it not more beneficial to simply accept one's lack as a reality of life rather, than to deal with the burden of living within a fabricated existence? It is in Gold Rush that we find Yu Miri's answer to this question.

Throughout the novel, Yu Miri makes sure the reader is aware of the exorbitant amount of wealth that Kazuki has available to him. Being the son of a wealthy pachinko parlor owner, 14-year-old Kazuki never suffers from any kind of financial poverty and uses this economic stability often to gain power in his various relationships. This emphasis on materialism, however, is equally rivaled with his emotional poverty and familial instability. "The watch, a Rolex, was a present from his father when he had turned 14 the month before": Though this seems initially like an insignificant aspect of the story, it does set up Kazuki's character as one that is based primarily on materialism and, rather than emotional support, presents from his father (pg. 9). Introducing Kazuki through not only his expensive Rolex watch, but also placing him in the setting of drug and prostitution riddled Kogane-cho, pushes the idea further that this young boy lacks guidance and care. Though it may appear that the Rolex could be standing in for somewhat of a fatherly presence for Kazuki, it is due to the gaudy nature of a Rolex watch that materialism appears much more present in this novel than any fatherly love.

As stated earlier that Yu Miri tends to predicate her character's lives with some form of "lack", we can already start to see the familial lack shining through in the first few pages of the novel. As this is the first introduction to the main character that we are given, it becomes clear to the reader that something is inherently lacking in this child's life. We begin to question: Why

is he here? and If his father has enough money to buy him a Rolex, but not protect him from a place unbefitting a fourteen-year-old, what does that say about his family dynamic? Essentially, Yu Miri utilizes Kazuki's "lack" as the starting off point for this novel, for, similar to Yu Miri's "lack", his "lack" will be the foundation of his character from this point on.

This issue of this familial lack is also addressed in Kazuki's relationship to his mother. Following the introduction of a neglectful father as an aspect of Kazuki's "lack" the reader is provided with information regarding Kazuki's mother abandoning him. "And from that time on, she had left her daughter, Miho, and the boy in the care of the housekeeper and devoted herself to Koki": It is at this point that the reader is made aware not only that Kazuki's father is neglectful, but that his mother had abandoned him and his sister, physically and emotionally, from an early age (pg. 10). Though the reader may be getting a better picture of his full family, we are also informed of how empty the household actually is from an emotional standpoint. From just the first two pages of the novel, Yu Miri has set up the character of Kazuki as one who is engulfed by his lack of familial love, as he comes from a severely broken home in which emotional connection is obstructed by estranged parents, and transactional relationships. By not only introducing Kazuki through his immense familial wealth but also through significant familial lack, the foundation of his character and struggles become pronounced, and the defining elements of Kazuki's existence can be read as quite complex. Whereas Yu Miri explains how her own "identity starts as lack" so does Kazuki's life, but the way in which he chooses to deal with this lack proves harmful.

Unlike Yu Miri who accepts her "lacking" as her identity, Kazuki attempts to escape this familial lack by manufacturing relationships through monetary transactions. Supplementing for

the “lack” that he believes is ruining his chances at happiness and fulfillment, Kazuki surrounds himself with people that he either compensates for companionship or sees as a suitable replacement for those who have abandoned him in his life. “The euphoria faded, leaving a hollow place that was the only proof the happiness ever existed. Then the darkness, gathering in around him, filled the hole”: In this section of the novel Kazuki is seen socializing with his “friends” while snorting cocaine in the upstairs of Grampa Sada’s ramen shop (pg. 32). Previously it was these same “friends” who were sexually assaulting a young schoolgirl while Kazuki watched on, unable to join in. As there is no real indication that these companions of Kazuki are emotionally attached to him, this relationship appears as completely transactional, where Kazuki is the supplier of drugs and money while the boys supplement Kazuki’s lack of friendship. Whereas Kazuki chooses to ditch school regularly, these boys stand as the only same-age relationship that he has in his life. And whether they are bad influences or not, all Kazuki cares about is that he has found a sense of belonging.

In Henri Tajfel and John Turner’s conceptualization of Social Identity Theory, they state that “part of a person’s concept of self comes from the groups to which that person belongs.” It is clear in this section of the novel that Kazuki is looking within this group of “friends” for a concept of self, and a place to belong, as he cannot find it in his “lacking existence”. The acts of violence, heavy drug use, and sexual assault of women mean nothing to Kazuki in the moment because these friends provide for him the temporary fulfillment of belonging to a group. It is Yu Miri’s concept of lack, however, that ensures Kazuki’s actions are not beneficial to his well-being. As his high comes down and the euphoria fades, he reverts back to the darkness that overcomes him; the emptiness he feels from his “lack”. His attempt for connection and

love from people who do not truly care for him brings upon him simply more sadness and hopelessness than what he had before getting high on the possibility of acceptance. Yu Miri's inclusion of these illegal drugs and deplorable company in Kazuki's life as temporary fulfillment for his "lack" thus emphasize this issue of rejecting one's own deficiencies and looking to repair "lack". Kazuki is not achieving true fulfillment from these supplements, and the darkness that engulfs him after experiencing a short high showcase how useless it is to try and fill oneself up with something that they simply cannot have.

Another significant section in the novel in which Kazuki attempts to remedy his lack and take on a life that is not complementary to the way in which he exists, is where he murders his father, Hidetomo. Hidetomo, a deplorable and neglectful father, stands as one of the most influential people in Kazuki's life. Though they do lack any indication of familial love, Hidetomo does recognize Kazuki as the sole heir to his company, and often expects him to act in a manner befitting of one. This leads Kazuki to experience a significant amount of pressure in regard to his father's expectations of him, and as Hidetomo consistently expresses to his son how much of a disappointment he is, there comes a point where Kazuki cannot cope with this lack of love and encouragement.

"The sweetly familiar taste of blood melted in his mouth, filling him with a feeling of calm and comfort. And from deep within him, he could feel new blood, new power surging up into his head": Not only is this disturbing, as it depicts the scene following Kazuki murdering his father as one of bloodlust and fulfillment, but it also shows how much Kazuki feels the need to supplement for what he lacks (pg. 136). As previously discussed in this section, Kazuki equally lacks familial stability and love as much as he desires for them to be in his life. As someone who

cannot deal with this “lack”, Kazuki has brought it upon himself to diverge from his true lacking self in the most violent way possible. The murder of his father is not solely a physically violent act against a negative force in his life, but also symbolizes Kazuki’s desire to completely eradicate his “lack”. Hidetomo, for Kazuki, is a physical embodiment of his “lacking” and in murdering him, he hopes to abolish that aspect of himself. Murdering Hidetomo is essentially eradicating the lack of family structure he has in his life. The act of tasting his blood voluntarily acts a grotesque depiction of another supplement to his “lack”. Consuming the blood of his father, Kazuki consumes the role of the father. Taking on a new fatherly role by consuming the essence of Hidetomo, Kazuki thinks he can reinvent his life and manufacture a new one that goes against the foundation of his being: his lack.

As the novel progresses, this consumption of the “source” of his nothingness starts to bleed into the other relationships he has built in Kogane-cho. “Guess I’ll have to take care of everybody, he thought, and an ecstatic smile crept over his face”: As stated previously, like Yu Miri, Kazuki has an unstable home life with a severe lack of love and guidance, but it is because of his disdain towards his lack that he has this irrational desire to supplement it by gaining authority and power (pg. 143). Lacking so much in terms of his familial stability, Kazuki tends to attach himself quickly to those who show him any form of human kindness and care, and with that he also enjoys the idea of providing for and taking care of them. One of the most significant relationships in which this strong attachment is apparent is with Grampa Sada, who runs a ramen shop in Kogane-cho, and his sickly wife Granny Shige. Kazuki develops an irrational attachment to these characters almost immediately, due to his abandonment issues from his mother and neglectful father, so much so that when Granny Shige passes away he

feels obligated to pay for various funeral matters. After trying to buy a plethora of spiritual items for Granny Shige's altar, Kazuki starts to think about who will be there to pray at her altar when Grampa Sada is gone. This "ecstatic smile" that spreads over his face is very indicative of someone who loves the idea of being depended on, like a filial grandson. Whereas he did not have the chance to be devoted to his mother and father in such a manner, he now attaches himself to Grampa Sada and Granny Shige as a way to compensate for what he lacks.

In this instance, he seems to relish in the idea that people will be relying on him as a caregiver. He relishes in an opportunity to lead in an environment where he would commonly lack the age and authority to do so. Essentially, Kazuki, through the consumption of Hidetomo's blood, feels that he can be both the true provider of the family and a responsible figure that he never had. However, as Kazuki attempts to take on this role, the belonging he originally held within his relationship as a lacking individual, now begins to crumble. In his efforts to force himself into an identity that he never belonged to, the filial grandson, Kazuki destroys the dynamic of his relationships, and compromises his state of belonging that he originally possessed as someone who lacks. Before this consumption of supplements for his lack, Grampa Sada loved and accepted Kazuki, for they were unified by their established lack. But as Kazuki grew hungry for more fulfillment, while Grampa Sada was content with his "lacking" life, their bond ultimately deteriorated. As Kazuki is a product of the environment he was raised in, the lack that stems from his development in a transactional family is an integral aspect of his character that he cannot alter. His desire to change the core of his personage is ultimately rendered futile for without his lack, he is not Kazuki. And as he takes on a persona that is not Kazuki, Grampa Sada no longer feels love for him. As Kazuki attempts to suffice for his lack, the

lack of fulfillment he will experience is inevitable, thus proving that even someone with riches beyond one's imagination is still subject to lack and must eventually deal with the consequences of rejecting the self as lack.

Whereas Kazuki's story is of one who suffers due to rejecting his own "lack", Yu Miri uses his older brother Koki as a depiction of someone who benefits from accepting a "lacking existence". Acting as the example for one whose life is predicated in "lack" but is still able to acquire kinship and love because of it, Koki's role in *Gold Rush* is to act as Kazuki's foil. Although Koki has been brought up in the same unfortunate circumstances as Kazuki, the one significant difference in their upbringing is that Koki has William's Syndrome. "He didn't know the name for the older boy's condition and he assumed it was a form of retardation, but he was also sure that if you could strip away the egotism from a human being and give him an extra measure of sociability, you'd come up with someone like Koki": Koki has William's syndrome, which affects his physical appearance, heightens his social skills and produces mild developmental challenges (pg. 82). Although this would appear to many as a life with significant "lack" in terms of cognitive function, maturity, and social standing, Yu Miri often refers to Koki as quite loveable and charming in the thoughts of various characters. Unlike Kazuki, though Koki's existence is also predicated with "lack", it is not drenched in the desire to combat it. It is in Koki's acceptance of himself and the way he goes about his life, that he is ultimately meant to be happier than Kazuki. He does not dwell on what he does not have and instead embraces what he lacks because there isn't much to do about it, as Yu Miri claims in her own life.

What is most interesting in the relationship between Koki and Kazuki is that Yu Miri places both brothers in the same situation of familial lack and excess materialism. These boys

are placed in very similar situations and yet because one is able to overcome his lack, while the other is desperate to fill it up with temporary supplements, we are shown two different qualities of life. Whereas Kazuki is violent, angry, emotionally unstable and hypersexual, Koki receives unconditional love and is emotionally available. Looking at Williams syndrome, though many might think it to be a disability that inhibits one from living a normal life, it is a form of genetic disorder that enhances communication and language skills as well as increases friendliness and empathy for others. Though at first such a syndrome that causes certain phobias, ADD, and health issues would seem disadvantageous to those who look at Koki, the notion that so much good and happiness can come from what he lacks, speaks great volumes to how Yu Miri thinks of the “lacking existence” of people and how to become better from our shortcomings. It is Koki, ultimately, that gains the kind of happiness and love that Kazuki desires so much, for as Yu Miri puts it, “the position of having an identity built on lack may seem like nothing, but nothing also provides more room for richness”. Koki’s “lacking existence” is rich, for by simply living and thriving in his “lack”, rather than attempting to fix it, he is in a position where he has the power to belong anywhere.

By introducing one character who is ruined from dwelling too much on their “lack”, and one who accepts its merits, Gold Rush establishes an explicit connection to the realization of self and embracing “lack”. Whereas Kazuki becomes murderous, lost, and depressed from dwelling too much on what he is not, Koki is allowed to live a life built on lack that is fulfilling and happy. This idea that lack is something to be acknowledged as an aspect of self and can be built upon as a foundation of one’s character, is something that speaks volumes to a wide range of people and circumstances, as it does in this novel. It is with this

conceptualization of “lack” set in place by Yu Miri, we can start attaching it to other groups of people and their own struggles, in an attempt to understand how “lack” transcends the limitations of Zainichi Korean struggles. Yu Miri, continuing on the topic of nothingness and belonging, also states in her 2018 Wesleyan lecture that in accepting one’s own “lack”, “there are many more opportunities for connection and solidarity”. Perhaps, it is Yu Miri’s concept of “lack” that can act as universal unifier for the many who struggle with belonging across our world.

As to emphasize the transcendent nature of “lack” I would like to reference the issue of identity and statelessness that is quite apparent within the Coolie labor trade of the 19th century. Mirroring many of the issues that Yu Miri herself has to deal with, the concept of “lack” fits quite well into the struggles of Hakka Chinese laborers and the expungement of their personhood.

Section 2: Attributing the Concept of Lack to Coolie Laborers

This section will include both a brief review of the social and political environment that ignited the demand of *Coolie* laborers, more specifically those of Hakka Chinese descent⁷, as well as provide an analysis of the novel *The Pagoda*, by Patricia Powell, and the personification of her “lack” through the main character, Mr. Lowe. Within this novel is the discussion of the social, cultural, and in this case gendered implications of *Coolie Labor* life that led many to supplement their lack of autonomy through both white supremacist behavioral assimilation, and mindful neglect of their own culture, all told within the specific narrative of the main protagonist. Having had their language, culture, and social standing initially stripped from them

⁷ The term *Coolie* encompasses both East Asian Hakka Chinese and South Asian Indian people, but for this paper there will be a greater emphasis on the Hakka Chinese labor trade

through their journey of indentured servitude, Hakka Chinese people who had immigrated, often by force, out of China dealt with the nuances of the black-white social binary through conforming with the most beneficial side, whiteness. This choice to fill up their “lack” with whiteness, which was analogous to power and wealth, especially in this time period, acted solely as a superficial supplement to gain upward social mobility. Concurrently, however, this allotted no actual fulfillment as their range of privilege was ultimately determined by the white majority. This essentially alludes to Yu Miri’s overall argument of whether “lack” is something to be supplemented or if it is to be understood as a reality of one’s own existence. In other words, is “lack” meant to be accepted as an invariant aspect of life itself and to be expanded on as a character trait? If even in their attempts to assimilate there is still racial dominance and discrimination performed on them through white supremacy, is it possible instead that the acceptance of “lack” would construct a significantly more beneficial existence? To be more concise, does one truly need to belong in order to gain a sense of personhood?

Patricia Powell and The Pagoda: On the Issue of Supplements for the “Lacking Individual”

Patricia Powell, throughout her novel *The Pagoda*, places a specific lens on the social, racial, and cultural “lack” that breathes into the life of coolie laborers living in Jamaica during the 1890s, most likely in relation to the struggles with “lack” and cultural othering that she has experienced in her own life. Again, by cultural “lack” I mean to call attention to an individual’s absence of cultural substance due to the disconnection from one’s heritage or roots, most often brought upon by either geographical displacement, purposeful erasure, or outside coercion by a more powerful party. To be “lacking” in culture is to essentially lack a sense of belonging to a community who share certain customs embedded into their lifestyle, thus

causing one to feel both isolated from the group and internally isolated from their heritage. In regard to social “lack” I define this term as an invisibility within the social hierarchy, where one is either low or has no place within the social order. It is often that these people who lack both socially and culturally find themselves. These subcategories of lack thus make up one’s reality. in the position to adapt to the more influential power as a supplement for their lack of belonging. It is through Powell’s life story that we see a representation of both these ideas of “lack”, as she is seen struggling from both the impermanence of what she can call “home” as well as the consistent presence of racially hierarchical societies. This is something that we see reflected in the work of Yu Miri and her life as a Zainichi Korean as well.

Born in 1966 in Spanish Town, Jamaica, Powell lived most of her childhood in Great Britain. That is until 1982 when she and her family immigrated to the United States where she currently resides. Coincidentally, these countries that Powell is associated with were some of the most significant beneficiaries of coolie labor in the 19th century, following the emancipation of African slaves. Throughout her writing career, Powell “often weaves gender, race and sexuality into her work” and it is in her novel *The Pagoda* that she strings these themes together in a way that pushes the narrative of lack which saturates all aspects of her characters’ lives, as it does her own.

In an interview with MIT news, Powell explains how it is through her own life experiences as a consistent foreigner, having immigrated to various different countries in her lifetime, that she is able to empathize and relate to those who are often placed into society as *others* and need to assimilate to gain acceptance and upward social mobility. In this interview she states. “Very quickly I had to figure out how I was going to make my way, how I was going

to establish friendships and community, how I was going to carve out a place for myself in this new world. I had to put on masks, shifting my identity and my persona to fit each new situation. I didn't feel as if I could be my own person, whatever that looked like.”: The idea of putting on a mask and shifting one’s identity to fit new surroundings further implies this recurring theme of an unnecessary supplementation of “lack” in an attempt to simplify oneself and conform to the new society. It is in this kind of performance of a new persona that one is unable to be their authentic self and in that quest for conformity loses themselves and their ability to see the world from their own unique vantage point outside of the established social and racial binary. As Powell has dealt with displacement into new surroundings all throughout her life, and as a result had become a “lacking” individual in terms of both social standing and the ability to live life sans persona shifting masks, her struggle with nothingness, similar to what occurs in Yu’s *Gold Rush*, essentially bleeds into her stories, as her characters become an extension of her “lack” and portray the inner battles with self that she had dealt with.

Taking place in Jamaica during the 1890’s *The Pagoda* is a novel that chooses to explore an uncommon gendered narrative within the coolie labor dialectic. The main protagonist, Mister Lowe, is a complex character whom Powell defines through his cultural, gendered, and social “lack” both as a foreign worker in Jamaica, and as a biological woman in both his home country of China and the political constraints of Chinese female immigration. Having not only been groomed as a child to present as male by his father to deter the social limitations placed on women in China at the time, both involuntarily and voluntarily distancing himself from his people, and being physically and mentally raped by white supremacy, Lowe’s entire being is essentially smothered in “lack”. And from this “lack”, within Lowe, is a fierce desire to

assimilate as a means of coping with his nothingness in regards to his social standing and self identity. To counter this “lack” that Lowe believes to be, similarly to Kazuki, *haunting* him in his life, he not only conforms to the behavior and physical presentation of white western manhood to flee from his “lacking reality” but also, upon losing the shop given to him by white benefactor and rapist Cecil, starts to visualize The Pagoda, a sanctuary for Chinese cultural preservation and longevity, to supplement for a culture he can no longer connect with. In this visualization of a Chinese sanctuary, Lowe fabricates an exceptionally romanticized idea of a culture that, due to his active assimilation, he no longer belongs to, which only causes him further hopelessness and pain as the vision never truly becomes a reality. In having Lowe experience both the physical and metaphorical rape of his body and culture, while also concurrently making him eager to integrate into the same western male authoritative aesthetic that dominates him, Patricia Powell aims to create a character that explores a complicated narrative within the milieu of coolie labor; one that not only critiques the use of complete assimilation as a means of supplementing “lack”, but also, through the juxtaposition of how two characters choose to approach their “lacking realities”, emphasizes the idea that “lack” should not be explained solely by approaching it in the negative sense. In making Lowe such a “lacking” individual who ultimately drowns himself in his own self pity and goes insane, Powell emphasizes, quite hyperbolically, the consequences of constantly feeling the need to wear a mask to assimilate into new environments. Powell sets up Lowe as an example of one who cannot cope with their own “lacking reality” and looks for acceptance and worth through the eyes and perceptions of other individuals and the expectations of society, ultimately conforming to the majority and setting himself up for his own demise.

Throughout the novel, Powell weaves in the common motif of Lowe's thick, fake mustache that is affixed onto his upper lip as a staple of his masculine costume. Albeit a quite comical image when mentioned throughout the novel, as he is constantly fixing it or hoping it doesn't fall off, the recurring emphasis on its presence both on his lip and in his life makes it anything but insignificant. From a superficial lens, one would just assume that this tuft of false hair on his face only acts as the costume meant to hide his biological womanhood, however, it is in this mustache that Powell implies not only that Lowe is consistently sufficing for his "lack" in an attempt to challenge the feminized Asian male image, but that he is also wearing a literal symbol of white supremacy's hold on his voice and identity through a thick mustache that covers his mouth, almost as if to silence him in assimilation of a western male aesthetic. This gag on his mouth is never truly removed within the novel, even after he takes the mustache off and dresses more like a woman.

This is most likely a commentary by Powell on the continuous admiration of whiteness by the Asian community even after experiencing immense racism and trauma from their actions. In an article written by Susan Koshy she states "Choosing whiteness enabled them to live more comfortably with whites and to live more comfortably as Americans by shedding some of the burden of being perennial foreigners, aliens by race⁸". By then Koshy is referring to Asian Americans, or in our case Hakka Chinese people, and the benefits of putting on a socially white mask. In this quote she not only indicates that succumbing to whiteness acted as a means of gaining social comfortability, but also helped make up for the statelessness that comes from being labeled as a "perennial foreigner". Powell not only uses Lowe's mustache as an explicit

⁸ Must be noted that this article is talking about a time a couple decades after the time placement of the novel, but it still fits the narrative well so I will include it

rejection of his own femininity, but also as a tool to indicate Lowe's complete assimilation into the western male guise, both voluntarily and involuntarily as to be more respected within society. "One day he opened his eyes and found his queue chopped off and lying flat on the floor...the sides of which his hair had been evenly trimmed, a deep part in the middle of his forehead. He too saw that his clothes, the padded jacket and half trousers, had been replaced with Cecil's khaki trousers, his striped shirt and white merino and woolen cardigan...": In this scene we see that Lowe's transformation into a western passing Chinese man can be mainly credited to his white captor Cecil. Stripping away the remnants of culture that he kept on to clothe his body, Lowe is involuntarily westernized and forced to convert to the western lifestyle by the whiteness that holds power over him. This is once again pushing heavily on the notion of a lack of autonomy due to Lowe's gender and social status, or of the "lack" coolie laborers have in general. As a Chinese woman who is not even allowed to immigrate into most countries, Lowe has no other choice than to submit to the whims of Cecil, even if it means wearing a ridiculous fake mustache to supplement his lack of a powerful white male body and escape punishment.

This kind of erasure of both culture and self by white supremacy that Lowe experiences is indicative of how coolie laborers dealt with the overt racism and scrutiny of their culture during this era. One of the biggest issues Lowe is faced with in his life after leaving China is that, due to his active assimilation, he no longer feels fully connected to the culture and language that make him Hakka Chinese. "Then he was silent, aghast, for he had no authentic word for his grandson; nothing to prove he was indeed Hakka, he had so successfully erased his language. He had so successfully forgotten. Was that possible? For if language was the carrier of culture,

then he'd erased his culture too, and so now what was a person without language and without culture?": Mister Lowe is seen having a full existential crisis, one in which he begins to question who he is as a person without a culture to call his own (pg 186). Unfortunately, at this point, Lowe realizes that from living in Jamaica all of these years, and in intentionally neglecting his culture to assimilate to whiteness, he has nothing to share with his grandson about his heritage. This is devastating to Lowe as he begins to realize that his fixation on assimilation as a means to supplement his "lack" cost him the roots he had to his heritage, as well as destroying any chance of passing down heritage and traditions to his daughter and grandchild.

In the piece *Racist Love*, written by Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan they state "Without a language of his own, he no longer is a man but a ventriloquist's dummy at worst and at best a parrot." Lowe, like many other Hakka laborers, through assimilation, became a ventriloquist dummy to white supremacy in both his presentation of himself as well as his voluntary decisions to disregard his culture in an effort to "succeed". In keeping up the charade of a westernized Chinese man, or rather ventriloquist dummy that speaks for white supremacy, Lowe once again continues to cement himself in the pattern of augmenting his "lack". Considering how much Chinese people were discriminated against during this time period, especially due to the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Lowe's desire to acclimate to white standards could thus be seen as a representation of the various choices real Hakka laborers made to ensure their social and economic stability within their foreign country. What Powell established in the novel with this kind of reflection by Lowe on his neglected culture are the real implications of being encompassed by one's social "lack". This disconnection to one's culture is essentially a byproduct of supplementing one's Asianness in a

society where whiteness is preferred. As being Asian in this society is not beneficial for social mobility, many are ultimately faced with the choice of either preserving their culture or surviving. Often these people chose the latter.

“The fate now, in the middle of all this tragedy, was handing him the reins to his own life. He could rethink again those reasons that had brought him to the island and try to live out some of his dreams. He longed to unburden himself. He longed to walk free, without hampers saddling his shoulders thwarting his pace”: As Cecil’s position within Lowe’s life was of authority and racial superiority, it was through his death that Lowe felt he was finally able to rid himself of his social “lack” and live life on his own terms (pg 32). As Cecil had essentially orchestrated Lowe’s entire life from when he was captured on the ship up until this point, his death, along with the shop burning down, gave Lowe a slight glimpse into a world sans constraint of an explicit presence of racial and social hierarchy. In the short period of time where Lowe is free of Cecil’s authority, he gains a new viewpoint and approach to life, in that he can now do whatever he pleases without restraints of a direct white power. This newfound freedom, however, is short lived as Lowe once again falls into the trap of wanting to augment his “lacking existence”, this time in regard to his cultural “lack”. Powell, throughout the novel, gives Lowe a plethora of moments of reflection on his choices of assimilation over cultural preservation as to showcase the inner struggle and guilt he feels for leaving behind his rich culture. In one scene of the novel, Lowe is found in a state of regret of this auto-erasure of culture as he proclaims that “there was his daughter, a grown woman, who didn’t speak one word of Hakka, who didn’t understand him or know anything at all about his life, his past. Of course, all of it was his fault, for he’d wanted so badly to fit in, for the two of them to succeed” (pg 52). Explicitly stating that

the erasure of culture was both his own fault and that he is the sole reason for his fragmented relationship with his daughter, Lowe appears both more aware and distraught over his lack of cultural awareness, for him and his daughter. It is in this period of reflection, and many more within the story, that Lowe realizes the consequences of neglecting culture and, upon the alleviation of direct racial and social authority through Cecil's death, is now able to take a better look at his decisions and issues with his voluntary and involuntary nothingness. It is partly in the hopes to alleviate this guilt that Lowe suggests a Chinese school to be built over the burned remains of his store, meant for Chinese children born on the island to be educated as well as work as "a meetinghouse where they could hold weddings and celebrate festivals" (pg.40). This idea of a school for Chinese children does sound good in theory as there were no such places solely built for Chinese people on the island, but it is when Lowe begins to visualize this project in greater detail that we see its production is no more than another supplement for Lowe's "lack" and never truly becomes a tangible building.

"In the yard he wanted a fountain surrounded by stone benches, pruned trees, plots of grass and rings of flowers. He wanted tiny streams pushing clear water over smooth stones, little footpaths bordered by chipped rocks, and he wanted just to sit in the courtyard, mesmerized by the murmuring, spraying fountain and the bellowing children rehearsing poems in Mandarin and practicing their calligraphy. He was barely 50, but he wanted to relive his childhood in that hot small place on top of the hill overlooking the district": In this vision that he calls The Pagoda, one of the main indicators that this cultural preservation sanctuary is more for Lowe's fulfillment of "lack" rather than the benefit of the community is Lowe's claim that he wants the sanctuary to help him relive his childhood (pg. 52). From Powell's context clues it can

be inferred that Lowe was still in China from the 1930's up until the late 1960's. Throughout this time China was experiencing The Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion, and the Hakka-Punti Clan Wars almost back to back; which are all events that would have directly affected Lowe's childhood environment and would probably have prevented such a beautiful scene to be available for Lowe's leisure. Lowe also claims that his childhood entailed singing in Mandarin and learning calligraphy with other school children, however, it was his father who taught him all of these things as Lowe had never had the chance to attend school. "... unlike his brothers, he had not been sent to school and had to learn the brush strokes of his calligraphy under his father's tutelage, sitting in the unfinished coffins under the yellow glare of oil lamps before the first streaks of dawn appeared, when the mist still covered half the world, and in the dead of night, when the shop was bolted": Not only is Lowe fabricating a superfluous narrative of Chinese school life that he had never experienced, but he is also deliberately neglecting the bleakness of his own educational environment as if to put on another mask(pg.25). Whereas Lowe purposely disregards all of the negative aspects of his childhood education, he then concocts his own idea of Chinese culture that is foreign to him. This allows him to create the most fantastical and orientalized version of a Chinese sanctuary that he could possibly imagine as to both fulfill his lack of structured schooling and "gain back" his lost culture.

The unfortunate issue with building this kind of sanctuary is that Lowe is not well versed in his culture enough to truly make this building a genuine representation of it. Once again he finds himself fabricating a mask for himself and putting on a person, but this time a mask of someone deeply connected to China. Lowe has not only been far away from home for several decades, but he also resides in an area that is far away from his coolie labor community. He is

most often surrounded solely by his two black workers as well as his “porcelain skinned” wife, and if he chooses to visit his fellow Hakka people it is a trip of almost 3 days by donkey. Having almost no ties to anything remotely Chinese, the idea of Lowe advocating for a cultural preservation center for all Chinese people seems disingenuous to say the least. “They were just the two alone in the shop, and the China of which she spoke sounded distant and far away from him. Another country altogether”: The vision of this Pagoda is so far away from the reality of China that it appears more as a cry for culture lost than a desire to bring together the community as he can’t even recognize the state of his own country (232). Once again, Lowe appears to be over-compensating for his cultural nothingness and ignorance on current events by supplementing it with false recollections of his childhood. Though Lowe did experience a moment of clarity after Cecil’s death where he appeared to understand and want to work from his “lack” instead of augmenting it, these fabricated images of a romanticized China completely deterred him from this seemingly advantageous viewpoint. Powell indicates once more that this kind of supplementation is not beneficial to his “lack” as Lowe’s dreams of the Pagoda never become tangible. Instead, it is left unfinished as Lowe appears to give up on his dream and the pieces of the foundation crumble away.

What Powell highlights most in Lowe’s desperate attempt to reunite with his culture is that he once again has put on a mask of someone who is fully connected to China. As many people who immigrated from China in these times were in a similar situation to Lowe, where they had often adopted the culture of the majority, they too were quite distanced from China and its varied cultures both mentally and physically. Though Powell places Lowe in the most exaggerated form of wanting to connect back to a culture, she also emphasizes coolie laborers

in society that dealt with their cultural “lack” by sharing real stories of their youth within the Chinese community in their neighborhood. This juxtaposition between the way Lowe and the Chinese community deal with “lack” is meant to expose a healthier and more productive form of reconnecting to culture that does not require putting up a false persona.

On the contrary, Powell chooses to portray Lowe’s daughter as someone who is essentially thriving in nothingness — in a similar manner to that of Yu Miri’s own cultural nothingness and statelessness — throughout the novel as she appears rather accepting of her severely “lacking life”. Though not a prominent character in the novel, the role of Cecil and Lowe’s daughter Elizabeth is important as it provides a compelling juxtaposition to the contrasting approach to “lacking” presented by her father. Whereas Lowe is constantly looking for ways to fill up his “lack”, whether that be his cultural, racial or gendered “lack”, Elizabeth, on the other hand, lives a rather complacent “lacking life”. As Powell rarely places Elizabeth within the story, there is a lot of information and character development of Lowe that she is missing. She knows nothing about the circumstances of her copulation, birth, or even the biological gender of her father. And without that knowledge, one could say that she is disadvantaged as her history has essentially been erased in this well orchestrated cover up of Lowe’s biological gender. Throughout the novel she remains blissfully unaware of all her father’s issues with family, statelessness, and gender presentation because she is simply not present and Powell uses this absence as a means of exploring a narrative that is fully accepting of “lack”. ““She don’t talk much bout you,” the husband said. ‘In fact she don’t talk about you at all ’””: Elizabeth makes almost no effort at all to communicate with her father as she seems to already have come to an understanding of the nature of their relationship. Instead of forcing

herself into a relationship with her father that was never there, and trying to remedy a kind of emotional “lack” towards her father, she simply accepts this “lack” as the reality of their relationship and moves on to people who openly love her. Though this may sound harsh for a child to be so blatantly unresponsive to her father, the fact that she simply does not try to supplement this “lack” with a new relationship implies that Elizabeth is secure in that she is a “lacking individual”. She never talks about feeling disconnected from her Hakka Chinese roots because she never had them in the first place and due to that chooses to not label herself as something she is not connected to. Unlike Lowe, she seems to just accept this “lack” as an aspect of herself and does not try to supplement it. Because of this she is allowed to lead a more simple and life in which her own actions define her personhood. Powell’s use of a character like this in contrast to the main character is interesting because it provides to the story two extremes of a “lacking” narrative that when put in conversation with each other make a rather complex argument for the “correct way” in which to pursue “lack”. Or rather, if there even is a correct way to approach it.

Lowe’s personal issues regarding living out a “compilation of fiction”, essentially orchestrated by white power, can be seen as an umbrella statement that encompasses all coolie laborers who are subject to the domination of white supremacy. These struggles with gender, racial and social hierarchy, as well as the cultural erasure that saturate the pages of Lowe’s life are actually just a summation of all the trials and tribulations that Chinese immigrants were forced to face within the era of coolie labor trade. Through Lowe’s narrative of assimilation, the reader is given a glimpse, albeit a hyperbolic one, of how many hurdles coolie laborers had to fully integrate into a racialized western society as well as the

consequences that come about from complete assimilation. With such a complex character like Lowe, Powell is able to emplace all of the social implications surrounding coolie labor into one body and use it as a vessel to bring to light the greater issues of “lacking” that enwreathed these people’s lives, and the many who also deal with issues of nothingness and “lack” when encountering new spaces.

Powell ultimately pushes the notion that placing oneself in a box conforming to social and cultural expectations of a race of people, is inherently negative for the wellbeing of a person. In placing labels on himself to fit into what is expected of him as a person of Chinese descent in a western world, Lowe ultimately destroys his personhood as the weight of the labels crush any sense of self left inside him. Whereas these contrived aspects of self once embodied his entire character, his realization that he holds no genuine characteristics of self, ultimately leads to him reverting to a codependent person with a lack of understanding of who he truly is. This novel thus speaks on a greater scale to those who develop their character solely on aspects of a culture or current state that they do not necessarily belong to. Though biologically and geographically one may be connected to a certain way of life, there is no benefit in pledging allegiance to either if neither truly resonate with who one is as a person. Instead of relying solely on these small ties to certain cultures, it appears much more beneficial to formulate personhood on one’s experiences and decisions.

Conclusion

Upon reading Yu Miri’s novel and seeing her share her life story in person, I could not help but be attracted to the idea of accepting life as a “lacking individual”, for I believe I have been subconsciously looking for that kind of assurance in my being for my entire life. Her

persistent issue of living in a space where she does not belong, I found, not only intrigued me because of my interest in East Asian culture and the nuances of its cultural availability to those who seek it out, but because so much of what she has gone through relates to my own life and issues with my personal identity.

There are many who might question as to how a 21-year-old Black woman living in the United States could possibly feel such a sense of sameness and closeness to a 51-year-old Zainichi Korean, and with that I would go back to the terms of diaspora, displacement, minority, and Patricia Powell. Being a Zainichi Korean, Yu was not allowed an innate tangible identity to build off from in her life. She was born into an already frayed identity that has no grounding because of a long and complex history of racial superiority, distinction, discrimination, and separation. The life she was born into as a minority, plagued by the history of war, colonialism, and geographical displacement, is what cemented her being a “lacking individual”, and in that I both see myself and the plethora of people who must also deal with these persistent issues in life.

Growing up in the United States as any minority is quite difficult, and in my own experience as a Black woman I have found that I do stem from a form of cultural nothingness that I and the rest of the Black community have built ourselves up from. In my personal comparison to Yu Miri, I find that where she is an ethnic Korean residing in Japan separated from her Korean heritage, I am a person mix of African and European heritage who often feels I have both no business being here in America and no connection to my racial heritage. Like Yu, I speak the language and indulge in the culture of the state that I was born and raised in, but my heritage, more importantly my racially defined features, are ones that are unappreciated and

often disparaged in a country that favors those with complexions more fair and hair less textured.

As I found myself going down the rabbit hole of Yu Miri's life I began to understand the similarities of our lives that destroy any cultural or language barrier we might face, and that is that we are both experiencing statelessness in the states that house us, and lack belonging in a place that we were meant to call home. My lack of cultural and linguistic knowledge of whichever African country my ancestors were stolen and sold from, and whichever European country my ancestors emigrated from, though special to me, are not necessarily "me". I did not grow up with significant cultural ties to either heritages, so instead I found myself forced to seek a foundation in the culture I was born into. Yet, in a somewhat similar manner to how Yu does not feel accepted into this homeland, due to the many hate groups who continue to vituperate her and wish her harm, the hate groups against Black people like the KKK have a similar effect on me and how I see myself in American society. As those in my home country make it clear that I am not someone who belongs, my being is ultimately left in a stateless limbo where I am meant to claim origin in a country that truly does not care for me.

Those who lack are those who are legally allowed to reside in our home countries, but are never given the right to truly belong within its boundaries. We survive on the outskirts of this belonging where we are meant to constantly question ourselves and our right to claim our home. These people and characters, like Patricia Powell, Mister Lowe, Koki, Kazuki, and Yu Miri all deal with this kind of lack that is often out of their own control. But it is with this "lack" that we also gain a different sense of belonging than one that would come from us not "lacking". Yu Miri's wisdom on the acceptance of our shortcomings offers the world another standard of

being. No longer is it shameful to come from nothing, for the nothing that we are is what makes us whole and can bring us together.

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