

## HERE COMES THE JUDGE

*The Dancing Ito and the Televisual Construction of the Enemy Asian Male*

◆ Brian Locke

If for nothing else, Lance Ito will be remembered as the presiding judge in the 1995 O. J. Simpson murder trial. This third-generation Japanese American son of WWII internees directed the proceedings of the most extensively covered criminal trial in U.S. history. Consequently, Ito seemed to be everywhere on television during the trial. Court TV and CNN devoted several hours of programming a day to its ongoing coverage. In addition, his figure, a stern face behind his glasses, mustache, and beard, surfaced in the program lineups of both news and entertainment television.

Like any celebrity in the news, Ito became the butt of countless topical jokes, especially on late-night talk shows. This humor suggested vaguely that Ito may have been hiding something beneath his robes; the jokes of guests and hosts expressed a desire to investigate and expose what hid underneath the black judicial wrapper. On one episode of NBC's *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, the host asked the African American comedian George Wallace to voice his opinion about Ito, and he responded

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with the punchline, "You know, he's really naked under there." *The Tonight Show's* late-night CBS rival, *The Late Show With David Letterman*, also participated. A "Top Ten List" from early February 1995, "Ways to Annoy Judge Ito," included the following two entries: "Pull robe over head. Spin. Push into street," and "Ask permission to have a television camera in his pants."

During the spring of 1995, *The Tonight Show* repeatedly televised its own fantasy of Ito, providing ample opportunity to peek underneath the judge's robes. In these skits, the show presented the Dancing Itos, a troupe of a half-dozen smiling men performing standard chorus-line routines. The dancers were marked as Judge Ito by their long black judicial robes, straight black hair parted on the side, glasses with thick lenses, and exaggerated black mustache and beard. In addition to these costumes, the Dancing Itos also impersonated well-known dancing groups such as the 1970s gay disco band, the Village People, and Parisienne can-can dancers.

Both of these impersonations relied on exposure for their comedic power. In their routine, "The Village Itos" lip-synch and dance to the tune of the band's signature pop song, "YMCA," here rewritten as "OJ LA." They begin the dance in a single-file line, then move into wedge formation with the lead dancer at the apex, nearest to the camera and the audience. At the climactic moment, the lead dancer reaches down to the hem of his robe and pulls it up over his head to reveal his crotch, gyrating his hips wildly. On a subsequent episode, "The Can-Can Itos" cartwheel onto the stage, then move into a single-file line, shoulder to shoulder. Their costumes resemble those of French chorus-line dancers except that their skirts are judicial-robe black. After doing the splits and rolling backwards *ensemble*, they bend over, flip up their skirts, and expose their rear ends to the audience.<sup>1</sup>

The Dancing Ito skits proved to be very popular. During the introductions to most performances, Leno mentioned the unusually high home audience response, once stating,

"We've gotten thousands of letters asking when they'd be back!" And in the studio, the audience response was clearly ecstatic. As the band played lively music, the cameras panned an audience clapping in rhythm. The finales of each routine pushed the audience to scream with satisfaction. Usually Leno appeared unable to contain his own laughter, hopping and twisting his body as he announced the night's guest and cut to commercials. During one appearance, the camera focused upon a young Asian man amidst the gaiety who, laughing and clapping with the rest of the audience, smiled and waved to the home viewer.

This [chapter] will analyze these and other representations of Lance Ito from several episodes of *The Tonight Show*. In doing so, it seeks to disrupt the black-and-white binary of contemporary racial discourse in the United States by showing how visual markers of "Asianness" play a central role in these representations. . . .

A visit by a *Tonight Show* guest in early April 1995 reveals the presumptions about race upon which the show relies. After a Dancing Itos routine, stand-up comedian Jack Cohen appears and tells a series of jokes dealing with sensitive topics: gun control, treatment of the elderly, the misogyny of divorced husbands, the Jeffrey Dahmer murder trial. The white comedian's material also explores issues of race in general and the Simpson trial in particular: black solidarity with Simpson, black people and criminality, racism in the Los Angeles Police Department and in the criminal justice system.

Despite the topicality of the material, neither Leno's monologue nor Cohen's routine included the biggest news at that time regarding race and the trial. Only a day before, the media had been abuzz with a story concerning Ito and Alphonse D'Amato, a Republican senator from New York and the chair of the Whitewater hearings. Two days prior to Cohen's appearance, D'Amato was interviewed by nationally syndicated radio talk show host Don Imus. During the live broadcast,

D'Amato had complained about the duration of the Simpson trial and its potentially disruptive impact on the hearings; he called Ito an egomaniac, dubbed his performance "a disgrace," and blamed him for dragging out the trial unnecessarily.<sup>2</sup> Whereas these comments were not particularly remarkable, the stereotypical "Oriental" accent he used to imitate the judge was. . . . The story of the senator's racial slur surfaced on the front pages of major newspapers the next morning.

Although it is not unusual that Cohen's practiced routine would fail to mention D'Amato's slur, it seems very unusual that Leno would fail to mention the day's hot political story. Prior to coming to *The Tonight Show*, Leno had made a name for himself as a political comedian. Furthermore, the show relies consistently on topical news like the Simpson trial for much of its comedic content, especially for the introductory monologue. This particular episode was no exception; nearly half of the jokes in a nine-minute monologue revolved around the trial, including several about Ito. Clearly, D'Amato's slur was somehow too fraught for the show.

In Leno's postperformance chat with Cohen, the reason behind this structuring absence becomes clear. When Leno asks his first question, "Do you ever worry about hurting anybody's feelings?" Cohen responds, "I don't worry about it much because we're comics. . . . It's not like we're . . . senators." Immediately, Cohen's brief reference to D'Amato's racial slur disrupts the show. As Leno leans back in his chair and replies monosyllabically, Cohen retorts, "How stupid! Did you see that?" pushing Leno to explain the reference to the audience. Leno improvises awkwardly, "Oh . . . D'Amato . . . He did his . . . Alphonse D'Amato, he did his . . . impression of Judge Ito . . . the most racist thing."

Cohen's unexpected reference to D'Amato and Leno's shaky response illuminate an insoluble contradiction. The show wants to include the popular Dancing Itos, yet the naked racial aggression of

D'Amato's recent slur makes such an inclusion a very tricky matter. Had Leno mentioned the slur, the juxtaposition of the slur and the Dancing Itos skit would have threatened to expose *The Tonight Show's* own televisual "impression of Judge Ito" as equivalent to D'Amato's "most racist thing"—a point not lost on Cohen. Laughing at Leno's efforts to contain the damage, Cohen responds, "Yeah. Too bad he didn't have a robe and was dancing. He would have been all right." Once again, Leno flounders; the band plays its punchline tag; the audience starts to clap and hoot. . . .

Cohen's surprise jokes about D'Amato question the innocence of the Dancing Itos and translate the show's discourse into terms that are explicitly racial. This translation, in turn, provides insights into the structure of contemporary racial discourse of which the D'Amato event and *The Tonight Show* are symptomatic. In the political atmosphere of the mid-1990s, D'Amato would surely not have characterized an African American on national radio in such terms. Such a slur would have hailed our commonsense notion of what counts as race, and therefore as racism, in a much more familiar way. In turn, the polarized black-and-white structure of racial discourse renders the status of any position that is neither "black" nor "white" more uncertain, or at times even invisible, as a racial position. The structure of racial discourse thus creates a space in which *The Tonight Show* can deploy a racist parody without invoking the vexing issue of race or provoking charges of racism. . . .

When forced to describe the racial aspects of the Dancing Itos, . . . one runs into a paradox. If the figures somehow convey Ito's status as a person of Japanese ancestry, then one would expect to find scrutable markers of Asianness. But at first glance, one is hard-pressed to find any; it is not immediately clear how the representations deploy race. Nearly every part of the body is covered, most notably the face. Indeed, the costuming hides a key facial

detail, for the viewer cannot see the shape of the dancers' eyes. Because the glasses reflect the glare of the stage lights, two bouncing circles of brightness usually fill the spaces where the eyes should be. The eyewear overshadows the one physiognomic aspect that most typically serves as a foundation for the stereotypical visual establishment of Asianness: eyes with epicanthic folds.

The costuming gives the overall impression that the Ito's hide themselves deliberately, make themselves inscrutable: the eyeglasses, the thick black mustache, and beard look like a mask. This easily recognizable mask corresponds to the show's interest in exposing. The Dancing Ito's become flashers, lifting their robes to wild applause. But what is the link between Ito's representation, inscrutability, and the fascination with exposure? Initially, it is difficult to make the case that race plays a significant role in *The Tonight Show's* representation of Ito because the Dancing Ito's costumes tend to obscure visual markers of race. But, as John Fiske explains, in a culture that purports to be color-blind, racial signifieds are often expressed through signifiers that, at first glance, seem to have no connection to issues of race.<sup>3</sup> . . . Rather than accepting Ito's inscrutability as a marker of the impossibility of reading race into the representations, we must instead *read* that inscrutability as a racial signifier.

In fact, the signifier has a long history. Asians have been coded in U.S. popular culture as a threat, a people who keep their motives and means well hidden. Bret Harte's 1870 poem "That Heathen Chinese" represents an earlier version of this view.<sup>4</sup> Characterizing "Chinese cheap labor" as possessing "dark ways" that hide "vain tricks," the poem is a thinly veiled warning to Americans about a Yellow Peril overwhelming the nation via our western shores. Similarly, the figure of Dr. Fu Manchu, the evil genius and namesake of Sax Rohmer's popular series of dime-store novels of the 1930s, evokes the inscrutable Asian; the difficulty of fighting the doctor

stems from the inability of any Westerner to fathom his brilliant, but twisted, Chinese mind.

When China became an ally of the United States with the advent of WWII, anti-Japanese sentiment blossomed and required a reconsideration of the signifiers of Asianness. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, federal authorities began drawing up plans to intern every person of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast, regardless of the specifics of citizenship, nativity, or status as resident aliens prohibited by law from U.S. naturalization. Despite the fact that the Axis alliance included other countries, persons with ancestral ties to Germany and Italy were never seriously considered for federal relocation, forced or not. America feared sabotage by the loyal subjects of the Emperor of Japan. Even if U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry behaved as if they were loyal to the United States, many assumed that such loyalty was merely a cover for sinister motives.<sup>5</sup>

The new political culture dictated a rehabilitation of the Chinese character. Two weeks after Pearl Harbor in December 1941, stories appeared in two national newsmagazines, *Time* and *Life*, about the need to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese people, between friend and enemy Asians. These articles reveal that the signs of Japaneseness, the connection between certain visual signifiers and the signifieds of inscrutability and threat, have remained remarkably stable over the years, despite vastly different historical contexts. Both articles conflate nationality and race, and they rely on physical anthropology's central premise that different national/racial groups can be distinguished by examining the body for unique physical signifiers. The articles state that precise knowledge of these signifiers equips one to distinguish between individual foes and allies.

Both articles deploy physiognomy as a key strategy for finding the truth of national/racial identity.<sup>6</sup> *Time's* "How to Tell Your Friends From the Japs" asserts that "those who know them best often rely on facial

expression to tell them apart" and tells us exactly what to look for: "the Chinese expression is likely to be more . . . open" than the Japanese, implying that the latter hide their intentions by hiding their faces. Facial hair figures prominently as well. The *Time* article holds that the "Chinese, not as hairy as the Japanese, seldom grow an impressive mustache."<sup>7</sup> The *Life* article asserts that Chinese exhibit a "scant beard," whereas a "heavy beard" marks one as Japanese.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the articles emphasize the eyes. If one can examine only the face, *Time* states, then the only scrutable marker for Japanese identity is the "almond-eye[s]."<sup>9</sup> The article notes their importance: "some aristocratic Japanese have thin, aquiline noses, narrow faces and, except for their eyes, look like Caucasians." Furthermore, *Time* claims that "most Chinese avoid horn-rimmed glasses."<sup>10</sup> To reinforce this point, the *Life* article includes a photograph of the Japanese premier and general Hideki Tojo wearing horn-rimmed glasses, whereas the Chinese man in the photo directly above does not.<sup>11</sup>

Taken together, the articles warn that the enemy Japanese will try to hide their racial otherness and identity by hiding their eyes. Indeed, were it not for the eyes, these "aristocratic Japanese," posing as U.S. citizens, would be racially indistinguishable from whites. They would be able to infiltrate the United States without detection—an invisible, inscrutable enemy within.

Growing out of this history, the masks in the Dancing Itos skits signify the inscrutability of Japanese men. The Dancing Itos seem to have no scrutable racial signifiers due to their costumes. They prevent the possibility of examining the person behind them and thus of making a "racial" determination, the eyes hidden by the glare of the television lights. Furthermore, there are no buck teeth, Orientalized accents, Charlie Chan fortune cookie syntax. Yet the history of representations of Japanese men makes it clear that such inscrutability, coupled with a lack of direct racial markers, constitutes

a hidden racial threat. In a manner that recalls the WWII-era articles, the show codes the Dancing Itos as Japanese figures who hide their own unique racial signifier and thus render themselves inscrutable. . . .

## Notes ♦

1. I leave much unsaid here. The staging of the Dancing Itos as the Village People and French can-can dancers requires analysis about how drag and camp figure into these representations. I hope this [chapter] will serve as an aid to such a critique, especially one that addresses how issues of gender and sexuality articulate with racial construction.

2. Lawrence Van Gelder, "D'Amato Mocks Ito and Sets Off Furor," *New York Times*, 6 April 1995, B1.

3. John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 37-38.

4. Bret Harte, *Selected Western Stories and Poems* (New York: Walter J. Black, 1932), 255-257.

5. For a concise historical account of the Japanese American community in Seattle, Washington, and the Pacific Northwest throughout the WWII years, see David Takami, *Executive Order 9066: Fifty Years Before and Fifty Years After* (Seattle: Wing Luke Asian Museum, 1992). Along more literary lines, see John Okada, *No No Boy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979). For a video account, see Lise Yasui, *A Family Gathering* (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1990).

6. Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 281, n. 1.

7. "How to Tell Your Friends From the Japs," *Time*, 22 December 1941, 33.

8. "How to Tell Japs From the Chinese," *Life*, 22 December 1941, 81.

9. "How to Tell Your Friends," 33.

10. *Ibid.*

11. "How to Tell Japs," 81.