

This essay argues that Paul Beatty's *Tuff* does not simply employ or reverse stereotypes, but rather uses Afro-Asian connections to strategically alter stereotypes of urban black masculinity. In doing so, Beatty demonstrates the potential influences of polyculturalism on racial identification and affiliations.

Strategic Alterations and Afro-Asian Connections in Paul Beatty's *Tuff*

SAMI SCHALK

In *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*, Darryl Dickson-Carr writes that African American satirists use humour as a literary mode of critique to draw attention to and comment upon trends and stereotypes within black culture as well as within American racial politics as a whole. The satiric writing of Paul Beatty aligns with this trend by often critiquing expectations and stereotypes of black masculinity. Critical work on Beatty thus far has primarily focused on his first and most popular novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*. Very little critical work has been published on Beatty's second novel, *Tuff*, about a young black man named Winston who, with the help of an eclectic group of friends and mentors, embarks on an amusing and unconventional path to run for local political office. This essay lessens the gap in critical coverage of Beatty's writing and considers *Tuff* both as a stand-alone text deserving of close attention and in relationship to Beatty's overall body of work, as discussed by other literary critics. I argue that Beatty does not simply employ or reverse stereotypes in *Tuff*, but rather uses Afro-Asian connections to strategically alter stereotypes of

urban black masculinity. In doing so, Beatty employs polyculturalism to reveal the complexities of racial identification—how one personally identifies in terms of race—and racial affiliation—how one associates one’s self with a racial group or groups in terms of relationships and politics.

In *Tuff*, Beatty creates a central character, Winston “Tuffy” Foshay, whose self-definition and self-preservation in a racist society are facilitated not only by the influence of African or African American cultures, but also via disidentification with other cultures’ people, products, and traditions. I use disidentification here after José Esteban Muñoz and Roderick A. Ferguson, understanding it as a process through which minoritarian subjects can locate themselves within, take up, and (re)use representations not originally intended for them. Importantly, while Muñoz and Ferguson focus more upon minoritarian subjects engaging with majoritarian representations, I use disidentification as a process that also works across and between minoritarian groups—in this case disidentification among racial minorities.¹ I argue that racial disidentification with the cultural products of a racial group within which one does not identify can result in racial affiliations with that racial group via relationships and political commitments. In *Tuff*, Beatty shows that taking interest or investing in another culture is not necessarily a rejection of one’s culture of origin, but can instead be a disidentificatory practice of survival, one that produces new forms of cross-racial community and connection. Winston finds personal meaning in Asian/American cultural products in addition to African or African American cultural products. Beatty uses Winston’s disidentification with Asian/American cultural products to strategically alter his otherwise stereotypical characterization as a young black man in an urban setting, yet this resulting racial affiliation neither reduces nor negates his blackness or his commitment to his community of origin. The text thereby purposefully employs stereotypes in satire to suggest that black identity and anti-racist politics can be polycultural without negating black identity or affiliation.

There are three key concepts that I borrow from other scholarship to inform my reading of *Tuff* and to develop my concept of strategic alterations of stereotypes in satire. The first concept, *polyculturalism*, comes from the work of Vijay Prashad, who defines it as “a provisional concept grounded in antiracism rather than in diversity. Polyculturalism, unlike multiculturalism [which tends to understand groups as distinct and separate], assumes that people live coherent lives that are made up of a host of lineages—the task of the historian is not to carve out the lineages but to make sense of how people live culturally dynamic lives” (xii). I consider *Tuff* a text invested in polyculturalism because it acknowledges the multiple lineages of major characters,

refuses discrete racial/cultural boundaries, and “uncouples the notions of origins and authenticity from that of culture” (65). The second term I use throughout this essay is David Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American*, a term that “marks *both* the distinction installed between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement” between the two (1, *emph.* Palumbo-Liu’s). When I refer to Asian/American cultural products, therefore, I mean objects and events in the novel, such as a sumo wrestling exposition in Harlem, which are marked by this dynamic blend of Asian and American² due to both the geographic origin (or genealogy) of the product and the context of the product’s consumption. Asian/American cultural products in this novel are Asian/American by dint of their path of production and consumption, which includes both Asia and America as physically separate yet connected locations with separate yet connected residents. I therefore use a polycultural understanding of Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American* to claim that Winston’s interactions with films, literature, and cultural activities associated with Asia constitutes these cultural products as Asian/American. I then consider his relationships with Asian/American people, traditions, and cultural products to be examples of the third key concept: Afro-Asian connections.

There is a significant body of literature on Afro-Asian connections, by which I mean the cultural and political interactions and exchanges between people of African and Asian descent, both in the United States and worldwide. These connections have been documented by several historical and literary scholars such as Bill V. Mullen, Fred Wei-han Ho, Julia H. Lee, Prashad, and Daniel Y. Kim. Much research on Afro-Asian connections tends to focus on specific historical moments, such as the political, cultural, and even biological³ connections between African slave and Asian “coolie” labour, between African Americans and the Dalit “Untouchables” of India, between Mao Zedong and Black Liberation groups such as the Black Panthers, and between 1960s and ’70s black and Asian American Civil Rights actions, especially on the West Coast and in the Third World movement. While the above examples of Afro-Asian connections are either positive interactions or shared experiences of oppression and marginalization, Ho and Mullen note that post-1970s accounts of black and Asian interactions in the United States tend to be profoundly negative and have been sensationalized by the media in a fashion that lets the socio-political context of “white supremacy off the hook” (9). In the introduction to their edited anthology *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*, Ho and Mullen contend that negative representations of Afro-Asian interactions such as 1990s news stories on black and Asian/American conflicts and discussions of the impact of affirmative action quotas on black versus Asian/American students have created a “narrowed and lowered” political consciousness, erasing the collective memory of pre-

vious positive Afro-Asian connections. In response, Ho and Mullen state that they compiled their anthology in order “to fight, counter, resist, and attack this condition [of lowered consciousness] by illuminating a tradition of creative political and cultural resistance grounded in Afro-Asian collaboration and connectivity” (14).

What is particularly useful about the *Afro Asia* anthology is its inclusion of scholarly work on post-1970s Afro-Asian connections and selections of Afro-Asian creative writing. These additions to the scholarly conversation on the history of African and Asian polycultural experiences are useful for understanding Afro-Asian connections in *Tuff*. Post-1970s discussions of Afro-Asian connections in the United States have primarily focused on African American reception of and participation in martial arts, Asian/American reception of and participation in hip hop culture, and cross-racial alliances among feminists of colour.⁴ Very little of this contemporary scholarship engages with late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Afro-Asian literature, with the exception of Crystal S. Anderson’s *Beyond the Chinese Connection: Contemporary Afro-Asian Cultural Production* and scholarly work on Ishmael Reed’s 1993 *Japanese by Spring*. It is especially important to discuss *Tuff*, first published in 2000, therefore, because the Afro-Asian connections in the novel include not only the well-discussed black interest in kung-fu films and martial arts, but also interactions with Asian/American people, literature, and films. I should note here that Beatty’s first novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, also includes many Afro-Asian references that similarly work to demonstrate the ambivalent racial (dis)identifications of the main character Gunnar. However, the effect of the Afro-Asian connections is distinctly different in each of these texts. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Gunnar is not a stereotype and Afro-Asian connections are used to further demonstrate the ways in which he does not quite fit in, whereas in *Tuff*, Winston is initially presented as a stereotype and the text’s Afro-Asian connections are used as a method of strategically altering that stereotypical representation through satire. Additionally, Beatty’s challenge to stereotypes of black masculinity and his complex representations of black racial identity and affiliations are intimately connected to what Bertram D. Ashe refers to the post-soul aesthetic—also referred to by others as the new black or post-black aesthetic, which explores the meanings and parameters of black identity in the post-Civil Rights era. Ashe argues that one central aspect of this aesthetic is the use of the cultural mulatto archetype and though he primarily focuses on this archetype in regard to the black/white racial binary, Beatty’s *Tuff* clearly represents Winston as a polycultural mulatto across multiple racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Beatty’s use of Afro-Asian connections as a means of strategically altering stereotypes of black masculinity, therefore, helps expand our understanding of the ways in which post-soul aesthetic authors are exploring the boundaries of blackness.

According to an interview with Beatty, *Tuff* was originally supposed to be called *Nigger Tuff*, but the publisher didn't like the proposed title, believing that the term was bashing or mislabeling a likeable character. Beatty, however, asserts that "the whole point is that calling him a 'nigger' isn't necessarily bad-mouthing him. It's about getting inside a character's self-perception, self-definition, analyzing the way in which they interact with the world around them" (qtd. in Neal 560). Beatty's original title gestures toward the ways in which Winston is supposed to be viewed as a stereotypical urban male: a thug and a "nigger"—or "nigga," as Mark Anthony Neal might argue. Winston is a 22-year-old unemployed high school dropout and father of one. He was essentially raised without a father himself and his mother abandoned him at age 13. He is tall, fat, dark-skinned, thick-lipped, and imposing. He sells drugs, has been to jail, and constantly uses words like "nigger" and "motherfucker." From all indications, Winston has never left New York City, hates cops, and generally dislikes—or at least distrusts—all white people. With this host of characteristics, Winston initially appears to align with many stereotypes of inner city young black men—stereotypes which have been repeatedly problematized and critiqued by critical race theorists from a variety of disciplines. In case readers do not pick up on the use of stereotypical characteristics, Winston explicitly acknowledges his adherence to a stereotype as well as his frustration with this adherence. In a scene set on the stoop—an urban social space marked by race and class—Winston's friend suggests that Winston can't be mad at white people asking him for drugs seemingly just because he's black when he *was* actually dealing drugs at the time. Winston exclaims, "That makes it all the worse. I *am* the stereotype, angry about being stereotyped" (*Tuff* 70, *emph.* Beatty's). This moment makes Beatty's use of stereotypes clear, yet to understand the purpose and effect of this self-aware stereotypical representation, we must read Winston in the context of the satire.

Dickson-Carr writes that one of the main mistakes critics make when analyzing satirical writing is confusing "the representation of an offensive stereotype with advocacy of that stereotype" (4). He contends that "as the literary genre whose primary purpose is to criticize through humor, irony, caricature, and parody, satire is nothing if it does not aggressively defy the status quo," producing complex and sometimes uncomfortable representations rather than providing singular, neat solutions (1). In an article on Beatty's work, Deidre L. Wheaton argues that Beatty "infuses his narratives of black masculinity with disturbingly satirical representations of minority-minority race relations which are saturated with both racial and sexual stereotypes" (102). Wheaton describes these representations as "literary reversals" in which some identity element of a stereotype is flipped or exchanged, such as a scene in *The White*

Boy Shuffle in which two black girls rape a black boy, thereby switching the gender in the stereotype of the black male rapist (109). Wheaton contends that while these literary reversals might deconstruct racial authenticity and “highlight the absurdity that racism breeds in American society” for black men (107), such inversions concomitantly dehumanize the figures upon which negative aspects of a stereotype are flipped—here the black female rapists (107-09). Dickson-Carr insists that the “entertainment [rather than laugh] factor” of satire “increases exponentially with increased knowledge” of the issues being satirized (30). The centrality of outside knowledge for obtaining entertainment and understanding in satire is both the potential payoff and the potential risk of the genre: it can end up reifying rather than defying the norm if certain readers’ knowledge of the object of satiric critique is missing. It is this dual potentiality of the use of stereotypes that is likely the source of Wheaton’s sense of disturb in her interpretation of Beatty’s work. As L.H. Stallings argues: “Beatty, in aligning himself with an African American satirical tradition, risks undoing any critique” he makes in his work (100).

Wheaton’s reading of Beatty suggests a failure to effectively challenge the status quo for anyone but black men. She encourages readers to ask themselves: “does Beatty’s satire veer into the problematic terrain of racist and sexist, Orientalist constructions of the Japanese characters and culture elements?” (116). While Wheaton’s question and her argument about literary reversals are primarily based upon analysis of *The White Boy Shuffle* rather than *Tuff*, I contend that in *Tuff* Beatty’s use of racialized and gender stereotypes are not literary reversals that flip the script onto female and Asian/American characters in a simplistic way, though the text’s representations of sexism and homophobia, which I do not explore here, warrant further analysis. Instead, Beatty’s use of stereotypes in this novel constitutes what I am calling *strategic alterations*, which disallow one-dimensionality in favour of complexity in characterization.

I define *strategic alterations* as a series of purposefully selected changes made to otherwise stereotypical characters. Strategic alterations must be multiple rather than a single change, such as the previously mentioned switch in the expected gender of the rapists in *The White Boy Shuffle*. Singular switches, or what Wheaton refers to as literary reversals, draw our attention to that one difference and often displace negative aspect(s) of the switched or reversed stereotype onto someone else, leaving at least one character still relatively flat and predictable. Strategic alterations, however, require multiple shifts that cannot necessarily be prioritized over another. Strategic alterations result in representations that still make use of the *stereotypical*—the collection of cultural tropes to which many readers have easy intellectual access—while ultimately refusing the *stereotype*—the one-dimensional, fixed, and predictable figure.

Strategic alterations might be understood, then, as a mode of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls Signifyin(g) because “Repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g)” and because satire more generally is included in Gates’s understanding of Signification (56). I argue that the concept of strategic alterations is ultimately a better framework for understanding the use of stereotypes in *Tuff* and may be useful in interpreting stereotypes in other satirical texts as well.

As already mentioned, Winston has many of the stereotypical characteristics associated with young urban black men. He is first introduced awakening in an apartment after a drug-deal-related shooting, but this set-up is almost immediately strategically altered as readers learn not about Winston’s propensity for violence and crime, but about his fears and capacity for intimacy. We learn that Winston is afraid of guns and has a close, interdependent relationship with his long-time best friend, Fariq. Fariq is disabled with a number of impairments and uses crutches to walk. The intimacy between Winston and Fariq is a strategic alteration of the expected lack of physical intimacy between two young heterosexual black men.⁵ Early in the novel several moments of intimacy occur: Winston carries Fariq down a set of stairs; he is non-plussed by Fariq having a bowel movement on the bus; and, later, Winston holds up a beer to Fariq’s mouth to drink, even wiping away the suds, so they can both walk and drink at the same time. Throughout the novel, strategic alterations in Winston’s representation allow for a level of complexity and interiority not granted to stereotypes. While examples of these changes are numerous—recall that strategic alterations must be multiple in order to be effective—some of the most prominent and revealing strategic alterations to Winston’s character involve the influence of Asian/American people, traditions, and cultural products. It is ultimately through these Afro-Asian connections that Beatty is most effective in strategically altering Winston’s character in order to reveal the complexities of racial identification and racial affiliation. In what follows, I will provide close readings of several key moments where strategic alterations occur through Afro-Asian connections.

From the very start of the text there is a suggestion of the influence of Asian/American cultures, such as when the apartment after the shooting is described as being filled with “Zen silence” (*Tuff* 4). The centrality of Afro-Asian connections as a mode of strategic alteration does not become explicit, however, until the introduction of Inez Nomura. Ms. Nomura, as Winston calls her, is a Japanese-American woman living in Harlem. She is a former Black Panther and radical activist who worked with Malcolm X. Inez’s character is clearly a nod to Yuri Kochiyama, the Japanese-American activist who was photographed cradling Malcolm X’s head after he was

shot.⁶ After being disillusioned by Malcolm's death and having her children taken away by her former husband who disapproved of her radical activities, Inez settled down alone in Harlem to run a community centre out of which she hopes to find the next Malcolm (*Tuff* 140, 66-68). While Winston is the focus of this essay, it's important to note that this major secondary character is also strategically altered via her own Afro-Asian connections.

Inez's cross-racial allegiances and her past activities are known to Winston, with whom she has the following exchange when he continues to politely call her Ms. Nomura:

"When are you going to call me Inez?"

"Inez? What kind of name is that for a nigger?"

"I'm not a nigger," she said.

"You used to be." (68)

Here Winston disidentifies Inez racially not only because of her past political commitments, but also because she is Winston's othermother,⁷ an "unofficial guardian" or "auntie" who looked after him during his teenage years after his mother left (37). The text's brief but important mention of cross-racial Afro-Asian parenting, particularly non-biological parenting, is just one way in which *Tuff* gestures toward the possibilities of polycultural racial (dis)identification.

The moment Winston disidentifies Inez racially is also important because it shows how Winston's strategic alterations through Afro-Asian connections do not rely on a literary reversal, which would require Inez to take on the stereotype of the native informant or some pure embodiment of Japanese or Asian cultures. Instead, Inez too is, though less so than Winston, strategically altered because she is polycultural in her personal and political life. This is particularly evident when Inez feels "age and psychological distance" from the group of black, Latino, and white youth on the stoop, but notably not distance due to her racial identity because of, I argue, her clear racial affiliations and disidentification with black people (*Tuff* 63). As a result of this depiction of Inez, while it is primarily through her that Winston is exposed to Asian/American cultural products, the novel's strategic alterations reduce neither Inez nor Winston to one-dimensionality at the expense of the other. Furthermore, Inez is not the only conduit of Asian/American cultures for Winston and the introduction of Asian/American cultural products is not the only purpose she serves in the text. In fact, it is because of Inez that the crux of the plot unfolds: Winston decides to run for city council at her encouragement and his campaign is funded by Inez's family's internment camp reparations cheque, which she had previously refused to cash.

Once introduced to Inez, readers are quickly given more examples of Winston's Afro-Asian connections. The first connection occurs through Winston's interest in kung fu films. Twice, Winston and his friends act out aspects of these films with one another using slow-motion moves and mock accents; in another instance, they also discuss kung fu magazines. The comedic and potentially even troubling nature of these moments is part of the complexity of the Afro-Asian connections in the text because Winston's Afro-Asian connections throughout the novel occur in both the more "straight" and more comedic moments. This creates a degree of uncertainty about the Afro-Asian connections—are we supposed to take them seriously or read them as part of the satire's joke(s)? While these early Afro-Asian connections in the book could be dismissed as problematic uses of stereotypes, we ought to take them as genuine or sincere, although still amusing.

Research on African American interest in kung fu films and martial arts reveals that this interest—and thus these moments of Afro-Asian connections in *Tuff*—cannot be understood as simple enjoyment of predictable violence and action-driven plots. In regard to kung fu films in particular, Amy Abugo Ongiri argues that the appeal among African Americans stems from the fact that the films generally "focus narratively on either the triumph of the 'little guy' or 'underdog' or the nobility of the struggle to recognize humanity and virtue in all people, or some combination of both" (35). In the 1970s in particular, these films "offered an alternative to the 'Fighting and Fuckin' SuperNegro' of blaxploitation because kung fu's heroes relied as much on intellectual capabilities and inner virtue as they did on pure physical strength to achieve their goals" (36). In addition, Kim Hewitt argues "that there are some similarities between African American cultural aesthetics and [. . .] training philosophies in the martial arts [. . .] that might account for the appeal of martial arts to African Americans, especially young lower-class black men" (265). Hewitt notes in particular the parallels between the martial arts concepts of mind/body harmony, chi, and the value of improvisation and certain ideals within African American culture such as the cool pose and improvisation in dance and jazz.

Considering Ongiri's and Hewitt's arguments, Winston's mimicking of kung fu films cannot be reduced to a problematic use of racial stereotypes. Instead, reading Winston's imitation of kung fu films as an instance of strategic alterations through Afro-Asian connections enables a more generative interpretation of these scenes. The early references to kung fu films are important because it is Winston's enjoyment of these mainstream films that accidentally leads him to begin seeing foreign art films. When Fariq asks Winston how he got "interested in them foreign shits anyway," Winston replies: "Playing hooky in the Village one day. Walked past a marquee on this

little place that said *400 Blows*. My ignorant ass thought *400 Blows* was one of them kung fu joints, so I was like ‘One adult. Where the popcorn and soda at?’ Ready for some drunken-monkey style” (60). Winston’s penchant for kung fu films leads him to inadvertently pay to see a classic French film—ironically about a boy who skips school and sneaks into movie theatres—with a kung-fu-sounding title translation, a film which he ultimately enjoys, thus beginning his investment in classic and art cinema. In addition to *The 400 Blows*, a 1959 French film, the only other films mentioned by name are both Japanese: Yasujiro Ozu’s 1942 *There was a Father* and Akira Kurosawa’s 1949 *Stray Dog*. The novel also references *Musashi*, a Japanese book about a samurai warrior, which Winston claims is the only book out of the many Inez gave him that he actually read and remembered anything about later.

Collectively these Afro-Asian connections, through engagement with cultural products, create strategic alterations in *Tuff* because they impact how Winston sees and understands himself and his life in stereotype-resisting ways. For example, after deciding to run for city council, Winston purposefully gets arrested so he can get the men in jail to sign his petition to be on the ballot. When some gang members form a “disjointed circle around him,” Winston imagines “the ghost of Musashi Miyamoto, stick in hand, filling in its gaps,” an internal thought that echoes Winston’s earlier recounting of the novel’s central metaphor of a circle symbolizing unity with the universe (181). As Ongiri suggests about kung fu films and African Americans, the appeal of these products for Winston is notably not about simple pleasure. While speaking to his mentor about the things he often dislikes about classic films, Winston explains why he continues to go back, saying: “I go for the disappointment, I guess. I’m used to being disappointed, and I know I’ll find it in the movie theater” (98). Later still, the narrative voice explains: “There is nothing darker than a Chinatown movie theater, and for a moment the gloom fooled Winston into thinking he was dead” (131). As the above quotes indicate, Winston’s interest in these Asian/American cultural products cannot be explained as fascination with the exotic or a self-denying racial escapism. His Afro-Asian connections stem from the combination of both pleasure and pain that he experiences while engaging with these products and the resulting self-reflection exhibited by the above quotes aids in the strategic alteration of his character. Importantly, Beatty calls upon both stereotypical and less ubiquitous Asian/American cultural products to strategically alter Winston’s character. While Winston’s replaying of kung fu films perhaps may not shift his stereotypical representation as a young black urban man, his interest in and ability to connect with Japanese art films and literature is an Afro-Asian connection that presents a more complex character than the stereotype initially suggested at the start of the novel.

Afro-Asian connections as means of strategic alteration in the novel become even more prominent in the last third of the book: first, in the chapter about the sumo wrestling exposition and, second, in the final scenes of the novel.

In Chapter 15, entitled “Yori-Kiri,” the name of a sumo wrestling technique, Inez, Winston, and his friends attend a sumo wrestling expo in the park where they hope to obtain more signatures to get Winston’s name on the ballot. This chapter is a dense locus of Afro-Asian connections and contains an important moment of strategic alteration of Winston through his affinity for and ability in sumo wrestling. As a result, this chapter warrants an extended close reading. The chapter’s Afro-Asian connections start to emerge as Inez and Winston watch the wrestling begin. Confused by the skin and hair of the wrestlers, Winston asks Inez if they are black. She says, “No, I think they’re both from Hawaii,” to which he replies, “Hawaiians always looked kind of black to me. Big noses, grass skirts, and shit. They seem real African but more laid back.” As the expo continues, Winston begins to enjoy himself and says: “Man, I likes this. May the best and biggest motherfucker win. [. . .] Ms. Nomura, why you never told me you like this stuff?” (195). Inez replies, “It’s embarrassing. So old-fashioned. So feudal. You know how you get crazy whenever somebody mentions slavery? ‘Why you have to bring that up? That was in the past.’ Sumo makes me feel that way. Makes my insides itchy, but sometimes when nobody’s around I scratch the itch and watch it” (195). The conversation between Inez and Winston reveals two major Afro-Asian connections, first Winston’s disidentification of/with the Hawaiian wrestlers and, second, Inez’s comparison of her feelings toward displays of sumo wrestling with Winston’s feelings toward discussions of slavery. It’s important to emphasize that Inez does not compare sumo and slavery but rather relates her feelings toward what she considers to be an outdated and embarrassing part of Japan’s past to Winston’s feelings toward what he considers to be an outdated and embarrassing part of America’s past. This keenly moves away—at least in part—from the problem of oppression analogies or simplistic comparisons between marginalized groups.⁸

The Afro-Asian connections during the sumo expo become even more prominent when Winston is drawn from the crowd to participate in a wrestling match. He is introduced as Kuroyama, which Inez later translates for him as “Black Mountain,” and he unexpectedly wins the match. Afterwards, Oyakata Hitomi Kinboshi congratulates him, saying, via translator, that he wishes Winston could play professionally, but “there is a loosely enforced ban on foreign wrestlers entering Japanese sumo right now. The Sumo Kyokai is afraid of big black men dominating the sport” (201). The Oyakata says that if Inez would sign an affidavit swearing she was Winston’s mother, he could potentially get Winston admitted. When both Winston and the Oyakata realize the impossibility of

Winston actually moving to Japan to become a professional sumo wrestler, the Oyakata gives Winston a book called *The Science of Sumo: The Seventy Techniques Diagrammed and Explained in Great Detail* and departs. On his way back home with his friends, Winston says to them, “Don’t call me Tuffy no more. I want y’all to call me Kuroyama,” indicating that the sumo win was a personally influential moment for him. His request, however, is immediately shut down by Fariq, who exclaims, “What, son? ‘Kuroyama’? What the fuck that mean, ‘Fat Bastard’ in Japanese?” (202). This response causes the group to laugh, including Winston eventually, and the name does not appear in the text again. Later, though, after his first political speech and debate, Winston walks off to be alone in the park where he reads his sumo book and falls asleep dreaming “of rough and tumble sumo matches fought inside the rings of Saturn” (239-40). Winston is clearly impacted by the sumo expo and his winning participation in a match, but his Afro-Asian connection is challenged here both by the rules of Japanese administrators who ban black men and by his friends who laugh at the idea that Winston would want to be called by a Japanese nickname. In essence, they reject Afro-Asian connections as a sincere mode of self-definition for a young black man. None of these things deter Winston, however, and in the final scenes of the novel, Afro-Asian connections are re-prioritized.

The penultimate scene of *Tuff* is the last scene that includes Winston. It begins with Winston, his wife, Yolanda, and their toddler son, Jordy, in “the back row of a small art-house theater, sipping herbal teas and watching an Ozu film [*There was a Father*]” (253). Winston is trying to explain the symbolic significance of an extended silent scene to Yolanda. She responds with disgust to a woman sobbing on screen, saying: “This movie is a trip. Japanese people must cry at the drop of a hat. They could never live in the ghetto. They’d be a fucking wreck,” to which Winston responds: “Ms. Nomura live on the block, and she do all right” (254).⁹ The movie ends and Yolanda suggests they move up closer to the screen, but Winston states he has to sit behind “his” seat. When Yolanda inquires as to what he means, Winston reveals that he spent two thousand dollars to become an official sponsor of the theatre so now the seat in front of them has a plaque on it which reads: “WINSTON FOSHAY—PATRON OF THE THEATER FOR CLASSIC CINEMA” (255). In this final scene with Winston, this young black man is featured as a patron of an art house theatre, sipping tea with his family as they watch a classic black-and-white Japanese film and discuss the possibility of Asian/American survival in the black ghetto. Through the influence of various Asian/American cultural products throughout the text, Winston is brought to a final space of Afro-Asian connection, now including his wife and son.

In the end, Winston is not a completely different person from the one standing in a bullet-ridden apartment at the beginning of the novel, the one who refers to himself as “one bold-ass, foul, don’t-give-a-fuck nigger” (70). He is not a literary reversal whose negative characteristics are flipped onto another character. He is also not a redeemed thug turned race man. Instead, Winston is a young black man with a blend of stereotypical and unexpected characteristics. This blend is the end result of what I call strategic alterations of stereotypes in satire. Strategic alterations play with and adapt multiple stereotypical characteristics in order to produce complex characters whose adherence to and difference from a particular stereotype allow an author to comment upon that very trope. In the case of *Tuff*, Beatty uses the polyculturalism of Afro-Asian connections to strategically alter and thereby comment upon and challenge the stereotype of urban black masculinity. This novel suggests that Winston’s racial affiliations are with both black and Asian/American populations and yet this does not change his racial identity, nor does it negate or lessen his blackness. In his obscenity-laced election speech, Winston makes claims of being the most real candidate who is most connected to the community, while also critiquing another candidate’s post-racial, colour-blind rhetoric. This scene makes particularly evident that Winston does not doubt his black racial identity and affiliations while still fully embracing his racial disidentification with Asian/American cultural products because after the speech he heads to the park to read his sumo book and dream of wrestling matches.

Despite her cautioned analysis of his work, Wheaton argues that Beatty’s “acknowledgment of a shared—though certainly not the same—experience of ‘otherness’ signals [...] awareness of an important scholarly and theoretical shift away from black/white binaries into a realm of thinking about American race and racism rooted in multiple ethnic-American histories, cultural perspectives, and experiences of race and racism” (102). I believe *Tuff* particularly exemplifies this point about Beatty’s work collectively. As I have demonstrated, *Tuff* explores the impact of polyculturalism on racial identification and racial affiliations through the strategic alterations of stereotypes via Afro-Asian connections. Throughout the novel Beatty does not use stereotypes uncritically or just for comedic effect; rather, he uses them in a strategically altered fashion in order to draw our attention to the absurdity and oppressiveness of these gendered racial stereotypes. By using Afro-Asian connections as the means to strategically alter Winston’s character, Beatty depicts the complex relationship between racial identification and affiliations. *Tuff* uses strategic alterations of stereotypes through Afro-Asian connections to critique the dominant culture’s images of black men while also pushing the boundaries of racial identification and disidentification by making Afro-Asian connections significant influences upon Winston. It is both the

more formal element of strategic alterations of stereotypes in satire as well as the thematic element of Afro-Asian connections that make this novel important for scholarly conversations about Beatty's body of work, contemporary satire, and multicultural literature. Strategic alterations through Afro-Asian connections in *Tuff* encourage us to ask questions such as: What is the productive role of engagement with stereotypes in literature, particularly satire? What is the role of other racial minorities in the development of black literature? How does interaction with Asian/America in particular shift our understandings of racial authenticity among African Americans and vice versa?

To underscore once more the importance of Afro-Asian connections in *Tuff*, I close with a brief reading of the final scene of the novel. In this scene, Inez goes to where the votes are being counted so she can ensure no fraud occurs. Importantly, it is not Winston, the title black male character, who closes the text, but Inez, the Japanese-American activist who worked with Malcolm X. When she arrives, Winston is behind in the polls, but then a number of absentee ballots are pulled out of an envelope marked "Rikers Island." Remembering Winston's purposeful arrest to get in to see prisoners and gain their support in the election, Inez smiles as the votes are read aloud with Winston's name. She reflects: "For a grassroots campaign in a community with no grass, Team Tuffy had done well. Now all that had to be done was to make sure Tuffy would live to see his twenty-third summer" (259). In this final moment, despite the fact that Winston is not physically present, both Afro-Asian connections and strategic alterations play a central role. Winston is elected—something he didn't necessarily want or think he could do—because he purposefully got arrested in order to take absentee voting registration forms to the inmates. He is strategically altered here by being stereotypically in jail for possession of a weapon and violence toward police, yet Winston also non-stereotypically has extensive knowledge of voting laws thanks to his Asian/American othermother Inez, who obtained her knowledge of the laws through her black Civil Rights activism. Recognizing that keeping a young black former drug-runner turned politician alive is no easy task, Inez pulls a bottle of rum from her purse and takes a sip, speaking the final words of the novel, a concluding, hopeful Afro-Asian connection: "*Gambate*, Winston Foshay, *gambate*," which, roughly translated from Japanese, means "Go for it" or "Do your best," Winston (259).

NOTES

1/ For more on disidentification as a process between and across minoritarian groups, see Sami Schalk.

2/ My use of *America* and *American* throughout this essay, for the purposes of discussing *Tuff*, refers specifically to the United States of America; however, the term *Asian/American* might be used in another context to refer to North and South America more broadly.

3/ Prashad notes that some scholars, especially Afrocentric ones, have attempted to create political alliances by making arguments about biological connections between African Americans and Southeast Asians in particular. Prashad argues that the emphasis on biological notions of race to unite minoritized peoples is ultimately wrongly focused and works against antiracist struggles because it relies on racist understandings of race as primarily biological and physiological.

4/ See, for example, Kim Hewitt; Amy Abugo Ongiri; Thien-bao Thuc Phi; Anthony Fung; and Cheryl Hihashida.

5/ Stallings notes that a similar strategic alteration also occurs in *The White Boy Shuffle* through intimacy between two young men who “can move beyond cool-posing with each other” (112).

6/ For more on Kochiyama, see Diane Carol Fujino.

7/ For an explanation of othermothering in black communities, see Chapter 8 of Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.

8/ Oppression analogies, while often an attempt to create connections between different marginalized groups, often end up collapsing material differences between groups and erasing the experiences of multiply marginalized people. For example, in *Women, Race, & Class*, Angela Y. Davis critiques white suffragists’ comparison of the situation of white women in marriage to slavery (33).

9/ Note that this is not the only time in the text in which Winston corrects others in regard to Asian/American people. Twice in the book he corrects someone who refers to Inez as “Oriental” by saying “Asian” in response (37, 54).

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SAMI SCHALK is Assistant Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Her research focuses on the representation of disability, race, and gender in contemporary American literature and culture, especially African American literature and women's literature. Sami's work has appeared in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, the *Journal of Modern Literature*, the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, the *Journal of Popular Culture*, and elsewhere. Her first book, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, is forthcoming from Duke University Press in Spring 2018.