

*Your Best American Girl* and the Impossibility of a Post-Racial America

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HISTORY 255D: Racial Identity in the American Imagination

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*"You watch movies where the couple loves each other so much but can't be together because of their fate or whatever, and when I was younger I thought that was so stupid. I just thought, 'They love each other, why can't they be together? This is ridiculous.'"*

*–Mitski Miyawaki, 2016*

These are the words of Mitski Miyawaki, more famously known as Mitski, speaking with NPR about the origins of her indie rock hit, *Your Best American Girl*, which dropped in 2016 on her record, *Puberty 2*. With sturdy confidence and powerfully vulnerable lyrics, *Your Best American Girl* pleads for understanding and the comfort of shared experience. As an artist that wishes to "be for the populace," Mitski achieves universality in her autobiographical tracks through straightforward language. However, despite her vulnerability, she manages to obscure and abstract herself away from her work through heavy instrumental mixes, nonspecific (not to be mistaken for generic) lyrics, and a mystery surrounding her personal life. These characteristics do not limit the earnestness of her confessions within *Your Best American Girl*. Without ever explicitly interrogating her specific racial or ethnic identity, *Your Best American Girl* clearly illustrates the impossibility of a post-racial America, through her lyrics, her unique experience as a Japanese American artist, and the ways in which the track exists and interacts between Mitski and her audience.

In another interview with NPR, Mitski states that the song comes from, "the feeling of loving someone so much, and yet being from completely different backgrounds and not being able to do anything about it." Lyrics such as, "Don't wait for me, I can't come," and, "...you have so much to do/And I have nothing ahead of me," communicates this irreparable separation between the two and their predetermined, diverging futures. Furthermore, the chorus illuminates

her tumult, revealing that their distinct cultural backgrounds are the reason for their inability to eventually converge and relate to one another:

*Your mother wouldn't approve of how my mother raised me,  
But I do, I think I do.  
And you're an all-American boy.  
I guess I couldn't help trying to be your best American girl.*

Her uncertainty in using the phrase, "I think I do," suggests her confusion as she comes to realize that this experiential divide must be irreconcilable, since her cultural identity and the American identity seem to be mutually exclusive. The line augments into acceptance of her unique cultural background in the second chorus to, "I finally do." She states in another NPR interview that she sings of, "wanting so badly to fit into this very American person's life, and simply not being able to." "Fundamentally being from a different place," Mitski felt, "like [she] would just get in the way of their progression in their life."

This narrative is rooted in Mitski's identity and presentation as a Japanese American woman and amplified by it as well. Despite thriving in a predominantly white indie pop rock genre, this song, in particular, belongs to those who share this unique experience with her. Whether these listeners are also mixed race or were raised outside of the U.S., like Mitski, or these listeners are immigrants or raised in immigrant households with customs that do not align with the typical all-American values, customs, and aesthetic— *Your Best American Girl* is hardly universal. This track only truly relates to those who believe their identity, their ethnicity, and their cultural background is an impediment on a loved one's way of life. To push this even further, this track only truly relates to those who have ever considered assimilation to be the only viable solution to be loved, understood, and valid to an all-American person. Mitski suggests this

idolisation of the American identity when she calls her all-American boy "the sun" that has "never seen the night," while "she's not the moon" or "even a star."

This track illustrates the impossibility of a post-racial America, not solely in its lyrics, but in the way Mitski, the listener, and the song interact with one another. Race is a visual construct. Race is assigned to someone based on the way people perceive an individual, and the way Mitski is able to suspend that visual interaction, by communicating her message instead through music, allows her to withhold the core implications of the track to a certain extent. Once the listener confronts her phenotypic presentation, her personal familial history, or her ethnicity— as an Asian-presenting, half-Japanese, half-Caucasian American woman who was born in Japan and raised all over the world— the meaning of the song can evolve instantaneously.

One may argue that this interaction is unimportant. Mitski's longing to adopt American culture, or longing for her lover to uniquely understand her own, could possibly be a step in the direction towards a post-racial society and *Your Best American Girl* must be a poetic interrogation of upbringing and cultural background that is not unique to race. She could sing this to anyone who was simply raised differently, especially in light of the fact that her American identity was developed so separately from the country itself. Mitski herself "refuses binary categories," she tells WestWord, as she evades explicit descriptors of her identity, as well as her genre of music.

This reading may be correct; rejections of categories would give space for the acknowledgement of more fluid identities, however this does not guarantee a post-racial America. A post-racial America is one where racial preference, prejudice, and discrimination does not exist. If Mitski was born white-passing, with more Caucasian phenotypic traits, her

racial identity as half-American would have been dramatically different as she navigated her childhood experiences in Japan, Malaysia, China, Turkey, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and, of course, the U.S.. Her relationship with whiteness as an American, while still uncomfortable, might have felt more familiar— perhaps a similar dysphoria that people of color feel in America regarding their countries of ethnicity. Race exists purely visually and dramatically influences the ways that society interacts with an individual, and therefore the way the individual interacts with society. The entanglement of race in the human experience is simply too complex to overcome. Human nature precludes the disentanglement of these three facets of an individual's identity due to the natural urge to "other" that which they do not understand. *Your Best American Girl* may fit a number of narratives as it stands alone, however Mitski's unique positionality as the musician behind it radicalizes it.

Regardless of Mitski's agenda behind *Your Best American Girl*, her candor and vulnerability dissected the complexities of relationships in such a divisive political and cultural moment. Her unique experience as biracial, multicultural woman distanced her from the American half of her identity, stating that she only "discovered [she] was an Asian American when [she] arrived in the U.S.," and that she didn't identify with that title until she came to America and people started calling her that and treating her a certain way. This exposes America's fixation on race— a need to understand someone's racial or ethnic identity in order to better understand how to interact with them. Perhaps Mitski, herself, possesses the power to transcend these categories and labels as an individual, and that is where her power lies. She does not promise a post-racial America; she offers a voice to those seeking to liberate themselves from it.

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