

# ZAINICHI KOREANS, AFRICAN AMERICANS, AND THE RACIAL POLITICS OF COMPARISON

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### Abstract

*Zainichi* Koreans are the descendants of colonial subjects who migrated to Japan from 1910 to 1945, when Korea was part of the Japanese empire. In 1952, the Japanese state stripped them of their nationality status and left them stateless. Like racial minority groups in other societies, Korean descendants still face systemic discrimination in contemporary Japan. Although they were colonized by a non-European power and are not physically distinct from the dominant Japanese population, their situation is often compared to that of African Americans. Yet, for scholars who think that race is necessarily based on “phenotype,” anti-Korean oppression cannot qualify as an instance of racism in Japan and the comparison with Black Americans is misguided. This article explores the intellectual and political issues at stake in debates over the use of racial comparisons—what I call the “racial politics of comparison.” Examining the views of scholars and *Zainichi* Korean activists, I show how the latter have drawn inspiration from the Black liberation struggle and built alliances with African Americans in order to resist oppression. I argue that their unique situation forces us to revise the role attributed to phenotype in current definitions of race and racism.

**Keywords:** *Zainichi* Koreans, Japanese Colonialism, Racial Formation Theory, African Americans, Comparison

### INTRODUCTION

*Zainichi* Koreans are the descendants of colonial subjects who migrated to Japan from 1910 to 1945, when Korea was part of the Japanese empire. In 1952, the Japanese state stripped this group of migrants of the nationality status they had held as colonial subjects and left them stateless. After living in Japan for several generations, many of them are now classified as “special permanent residents,” which means that they enjoy the rights of residency but are deprived of citizenship and cannot vote or be elected in national elections. This status has placed them above most undocumented migrants but below members of the dominant population in Japan’s socioracial hierarchy (Shipper 2008).

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Long the largest “foreign” minority group in Japanese society, Korean descendants arguably occupy a unique position as the constitutive “others” of the nation. They face systemic discrimination and have recently been the prime targets of right-wing politicians and ultranationalist groups like Zaitokukai, the Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of the *Zainichi*. This shows that their subordinate status has carried over from the colonial era to the present (Robillard-Martel and Laurent, 2020). It also explains why comparisons with other racial minority groups are pervasive in the academic literature and public discourse about *Zainichi* Koreans.

This article explores the intellectual and political issues at stake in debates over the use of racial comparisons—what I call the “racial politics of comparison.” Scholars and activists have often drawn parallels with formerly colonized or enslaved groups to describe the position of *Zainichi* Koreans in Japanese society. The situation of African Americans, in particular, has served as a sort of benchmark for assessing whether anti-Korean oppression qualifies as an instance of racism in the Japanese context. Those who believe that this comparison is justified point toward shared experiences of colonialism, forced labor if not outright enslavement, and ongoing marginalization. They insist that Koreans have been imagined and treated by the Japanese majority as a distinct “racial” or “ethnic” group (the Japanese words are *jinsbu* and *minzoku*). By contrast, scholars who think that the comparison with Black Americans is misguided note that *Zainichi* Koreans are not visibly distinct from the dominant Japanese population. While the physical markers associated with Blackness set African descendants apart from other groups in the United States, *Zainichi* Koreans are not identifiable on the basis of visible bodily traits—so-called “phenotype.” Hence, some contend that they cannot experience racism in Japan (Befu 2001). This essay argues that those debates force us to revise current definitions of race and racism in the social sciences. As a minority group that was colonized by a non-European power and is not identified on the basis of phenotype, *Zainichi* Koreans present a unique case for the global and comparative study of racial formation.

## THE RACIAL POLITICS OF COMPARISON

Since at least the eighteenth century, racial classifications and hierarchies have been based in large part (although not exclusively) on visible physical characteristics, most notably skin color (Bernasconi and Lott, 2000). This approach reflected a tendency to biologize sociocultural differences and colonial relations of power. It was increasingly challenged in the second half of the twentieth century, when social scientists started defining race as a sociohistorical phenomenon rather than a biological fact. But the assumption that race is necessarily linked to “phenotype” persists to this day even in some of the most sophisticated sociological frameworks. For example, in their foundational work on racial formation theory, Michael Omi and Howard Winant ([1986] 2015) forcefully argue that race is a social construct whose meaning varies across space and changes over time. Yet, they write that “there is a crucial *corporeal* dimension to the race-concept. Race is *ocular* in an irreducible way” (p. 13). They define race as “a concept, a representation or signification of identity that refers to different types of human bodies, to the perceived corporeal and phenotypic markers of difference and the meanings and social practices that are ascribed to these differences” (p. 111). This definition implies that anatomical differences inevitably undergird racial oppression—the latter qualifies as “racial” only insofar as phenotype serves as a tool of classification. Thus, while they usually do not consider other forms of social inequality and hierarchy (e.g. class, religion, ethnicity, caste, nationality) to be based on visible physical differences, many social

scientists continue to attribute a central role to phenotype in their definitions of race and racism.

My goal in this article is not to argue that corporeal features play an insignificant part in racial formation processes. Colorism and other bodily hierarchies tied to global White supremacy and anti-Blackness clearly attest to the contrary. Rather, I contend that racism does not necessarily imply a reference to phenotype. If this were the case, anti-Korean oppression in Japan could not qualify as a form of racism, even though it is rooted in colonial domination and sustained by racialized discourses and practices. The history of Japanese colonialism and *Zainichi* Korean activism will show that social scientists should revise the role attributed to somatic features in current definitions of race. It will demonstrate that racism can rely on any markers that suggest belonging to a racially defined group, whether or not those markers are visible anatomical traits. In short, references to phenotype cannot serve to define “race” in a universal or transhistorical way.

To explore these issues, I attend to the racial politics of comparison. Specialists of racial politics in Japan have called for more comparative research on race, pointing toward latent U.S.-centrism and other limitations in the field of racial and ethnic studies (Hanchard and Chung, 2004; Suzuki 2017). While I am sympathetic to their call, I do not aim here to offer a systematic comparison of *Zainichi* Koreans and other minority groups like African Americans. Instead, I focus on the theoretical and political issues at stake in how scholars and activists compare racial minority groups. Comparisons between Japan and other colonial powers, or between *Zainichi* Koreans and other groups, are not purely intellectual exercises. They play a key role in debates about racial justice because of their concrete political implications. Different comparisons imply different choices as to which parallels to draw and which differences to highlight. These choices are in turn tied to conflicting views of what counts as racial domination and how best to resist it. As Ann Stoler (2001) points out with regard to colonial history, “depending on how ‘the colonial’ is defined, both the possible terms of comparison and the issues are different” (p. 839). The same goes for how “the racial” is defined, whether it is located on the surface of the body or in less visible configurations of power that stem from modern colonialism and enslavement.

The approach I adopt here emphasizes both the perils and rewards associated with the practice of comparison (Felski and Friedman, 2013; Hong and Ferguson, 2011). The tendency to use Blackness as a metaphor for all sorts of oppression is a problematic one, which can serve to deny the unique experiences attached to racial slavery and its legacies. Arguing that *Zainichi* Koreans are “like” Black Americans or, worse, that they are the “Black people of Japan,” risks obscuring distinctive aspects of these two groups’ respective experiences, as well as erasing the presence of African descendants within Japanese society. The point therefore is not to equate anti-Korean racism in Japan with anti-Blackness, nor to posit that the experiences of *Zainichi* Koreans and African Americans are perfectly commensurable, but to reflect on the purposes for which comparisons between these two groups have been made. These concerns stem from a “relational” understanding of racial formation which not only draws parallels between different cases but is also attentive to the ways in which these cases are connected to one another (Goldberg 2009; Molina et al., 2019). As Shu-Mei Shih (2008) puts it, different “instances of racialization” exist within “a totality produced by the colonial turn,” and the history of modern colonialism “reveals potential and concrete relations” between each one of those instances (p. 1349; see also Shih 2013). Racial formation is best understood as a global historical process with distinct yet interconnected local manifestations.

My argument is divided into three parts. The first section addresses the history of Japanese colonialism. In the late nineteenth century, Japan created its own colonial empire based on European models. While some African American activists and intellectuals saw the Japanese empire as an ally in the fight against White supremacy, others recognized that colonial subjects like Koreans were bearing the brunt of Japanese domination. I trace this history while examining how historians have used race as a category of analysis to study Japanese colonialism. The second section discusses how scholars have interpreted the legacy of anti-Korean racism in postwar Japan. While most have likened the status of *Zainichi* Koreans to that of African Americans, some have used Korean Americans as an alternative point of comparison to emphasize the decline of anti-Korean racism in Japan. I examine how these debates relate to the racial politics of comparison. Finally, the third section explores the political effects of racial comparisons. I show how perceived similarities with Black Americans have shaped *Zainichi* Korean resistance and fostered political alliances between members of the two groups. While it does not suggest perfect commensurability, the capacity of certain comparisons to generate such alliances reveals tangible affinities. Ultimately, my analysis challenges definitions of race that are based on phenotype.

## RACE AND JAPANESE COLONIALISM

Before discussing how *Zainichi* Koreans have been compared to other minority groups, it is important to situate Japanese colonialism in its historical context. In the early 1600s, the government of the Tokugawa implemented strict isolationist policies to limit the encroachment of European empires on Japanese sovereignty. These measures were effective at preventing the colonization of Japan. The country only had scarce contact with Western powers until 1853, when the United States sent warships that forced Japan to sign “unequal treaties” and to open its ports to international trade (Auslin 2004). The U.S. intervention triggered a period of political instability which led to the fall of the shogunate and to the Meiji restoration in 1868. While creating the structures of the new imperial state, Meiji leaders drew inspiration from European legal, political, and economic institutions. They established a capitalist industrial economy, set up a modern army, and adopted a constitution. Most importantly, they put Japan on the path toward developing its own colonial empire (Beasley 1987).

As is often noted, Japan is the only non-European country that both avoided being colonized by Europe and created its own colonial empire (Peattie 1984). The formation of the Japanese empire resulted from a deliberate imitation of European colonialism (Tierney 2010). Japan first annexed the islands of Hokkaido and Okinawa during the 1870s in a process that amounted to settler colonialism. It then gained control of Taiwan in 1895, established a protectorate over Korea in 1905, and turned the latter into a colony in 1910. The colonization of Korea was directly inspired by European methods of conquest. In 1876, in a move that recalled the U.S. intervention of 1853, Japan used the threat of naval warfare to force Korea to sign unequal treaties and open its ports to trade. When it officially annexed the peninsula, the Japanese empire employed methods of political and economic subjugation similar to those of Western powers (Duus 1995). It relied on international law to justify the legitimacy of its conquest (Dudden 2005) and developed strategies of cultural domination akin to those employed by other empires (Kal 2005; Lee 2011). It is in this context that the Japanese started to use racialized discourses and practices in their relations with Koreans and other conquered peoples.

Scholars have noted that the notion of race was virtually nonexistent in Japan before the second half of the nineteenth century, when contacts with Europe intensified (Duus

1995; Kowner 2016). Modern racism started spreading in Japanese thought and culture at that point in time, especially in the form of social Darwinism (Kawai 2015; Morris-Suzuki 1998; Weiner 1997). Yet the extent to which Japan relied on racial ideology to justify its rule in Korea is a matter of debate. For those who think that racial classifications are necessarily based on phenotype, Japanese colonialism cannot be described as a racist enterprise (Zachmann 2011). The situation is further complicated by the fact that in the early twentieth century, the Japanese state had to contend with Western dominance on the international scene. Because they were classified as “Asians” in the White supremacist imagination, the Japanese were perceived as inferior to “Europeans.” In contrast to other colonial empires, in which Europeans ruled over people belonging to purportedly different racial groups, from a Western point of view the Japanese empire placed Asians in a position of power over members of the same racial category (Itagaki et al., 2012). Aware of their ambiguous position in the international system, Japanese politicians and intellectuals sometimes tried to turn this situation to their advantage. They used pan-Asianism—the notion that “Asia” forms a single geographical, cultural, and racial entity—as an ideological justification for imperial domination. They thus stressed their cultural and racial proximity to Koreans and other East Asian peoples in order to portray their conquests as benevolent enterprises (Chae 2013; Ching 1998). After World War I, at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Japan even pretended to champion the cause of racial equality against European colonialism (Shimazu 1998). Depending on the political imperatives of the moment, the Japanese could either assert their racial superiority over other Asians or fashion themselves as proponents of pan-Asian unity in the face of Western dominance (Oguma 2002). This unique situation defined the “triangle structure” of Japanese colonialism (Tierney 2010, p. 21; see also Horne 2003).

These dynamics help explain why, at the beginning of the twentieth century, many African Americans saw Japan as a counterforce to Western powers and as the “champion of the darker races” (Gallichio 2000). Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905), which opened the door to the colonization of Korea, was hailed by many Black Americans as a success for all peoples of color against White supremacy. In the following decades, Black intellectuals and activists frequently took part in “pro-Japan provocation,” cheering Japan’s victories in order to criticize the U.S. government (Onishi 2013, p. 21). W. E. B. Du Bois himself became one of imperial Japan’s most ardent supporters. After touring Japanese-occupied Manchuria in 1936, he made what has been described as “the most egregious, if temporary, political misjudgement” of his career when he expressed support for Japan’s colonial expansion in East Asia, failing to see through the Japanese state’s “racial propaganda” (Mullen 2004, p. 24; Onishi 2013, p. 73). At the time, Du Bois and others accepted the notion that Japan’s annexation of Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria was a benevolent enterprise geared toward pan-Asian unity. As George Lipsitz ([1998] 2018) explains: “The African American encounter with Japan has been especially fraught with contradictions. In their zeal to identify with a non-white nation whose successes might rebuke Eurocentric claims about white supremacy, Blacks have often overlooked, condoned, and even embraced elements of Japanese fascism and imperialism” (p. 203). The problem with this support for Japan was of course that it ignored the plight of colonial subjects like Koreans, who bore the brunt of Japanese domination.

However, not all African Americans thought that the Japanese empire had the best interests of its subjects at heart. In the late 1930s, Black members of the U.S. Communist Party like Cyril Biggs and Harry Haywood questioned the benevolence of Japanese imperialists in their pamphlet, “Is Japan the Champion of the Colored Races?” (Gallichio 2000). The poet and playwright Langston Hughes, who traveled to Japan

in 1933, also criticized Japanese state propaganda, remarking that the portrayal of Koreans in the local press was similar to the treatment of Black Americans in U.S. newspapers. In his autobiography, Hughes (1993) wrote: “It seemed that the Korean subjects of Japan were in somewhat the same position as Negroes in the United States in relation to newspaper coverage. Seldom was anything good about Koreans mentioned, but if one committed a crime, it was headlined with a racial identification tag included” (p. 276). For these critics, the experience of Koreans under Japanese rule pointed toward similarities with African Americans. These resemblances belied the fantasy of Japanese colonialism as a humane enterprise unburdened by racism.

In *Race and Migration in Imperial Japan*, historian Michael Weiner (1994) makes a strong case for using race as a category of analysis to describe Japanese colonialism. For him, race is a sociohistorical construct that only took hold in Japan after the Meiji restoration. Inspired by the work of racial theorist Robert Miles (1982), Weiner describes racism as “a supportive ideology, which is the product of specific sets of unequal economic and political relationships, and which serves to explain and justify the continued existence of those relationships” (Weiner 1994, p. 10). From 1910 to 1945, the status of Korean migrants in Japan was shaped by colonial state policies and by their subordinate integration into the Japanese labor market. Since Korean migrants were subjected to harsher policing and exploitation than members of the dominant Japanese population, it is safe to say that they experienced a unique form of oppression. Whether this oppression was “racial” or not, however, depends on how one defines race itself. Scholars who attach the meaning of race to the appearance of the body prefer indefinite terms like “discrimination” to describe anti-Korean oppression in imperial Japan (Bayliss 2013). But those who insist on the racialized nature of Japanese colonialism recognize that racism can rely on other markers than visible anatomical differences. The Japanese drew inspiration from European racial thought as they used terms like “race” and “ethnicity” (*jinsbu* and *minzoku*) to distinguish themselves from their imperial subjects (Weiner 1994). This suggests that anti-Korean oppression can be seen as an instance of racism in Japan.

At first, the migration of Koreans to Japan was triggered by colonial policies that displaced them from their lands and limited their economic opportunities. By imposing a capitalist monetary economy, implementing new taxes and cadastral surveys, and seizing lands for the benefit of settlers, the Japanese state deprived many Korean peasants of their means of subsistence. Meanwhile, the industrialization of the Japanese economy created a demand for labor which only increased with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the start of the war with China in 1937, and Japan’s entry in the Asia-Pacific War in 1941. As Weiner (1994) makes clear, the working and living conditions of Korean migrants in Japan were not the same as those of even the most impoverished Japanese workers:

Relatively few Koreans were employed as *shokkō* (permanent factory operatives), and those that were tended to be excluded from large and medium-sized firms. This meant that Korean workers were disproportionately represented in factories where working conditions were the poorest, and where housing and other facilities were either minimal or non-existent. Since Japanese landlords were reluctant to rent property to Koreans, whom they regarded as unreliable, noisy and unhygienic tenants, most immigrant workers were restricted to living in tenements and flop-houses adjacent to the factories which employed them [...]. In terms of housing, as in most other aspects of daily life, the immigrant Korean worker was placed well outside the confines of ‘normal’ society” (pp. 49–50).

Koreans who lived in Japan were also subjected to a “racially determined system of wage differentials,” being paid on average a third less than Japanese workers in the same occupations (Weiner 1994, p. 57). They served as a reserve army of labor in sectors such as mining, construction, and munition factories (Weiner 1994; see also Kawashima 2009).

Throughout the colonial era, the exploitation of Korean workers was compounded with political control, repression, and policing. In times of social instability, like in the aftermath of the Great Kanto earthquake that ravaged Tokyo in 1923, migrants from Korea were scapegoated and hunted down by Japanese soldiers, policemen, and vigilantes who massacred more than six thousand of them (Weiner 1994). While Koreans were far from passive in the face of oppression, their resistance was met with strong repression. From 1939 to 1945, the Japanese government implemented a system of labor conscription that forced colonial subjects to participate in the war effort. Korean workers were sometimes brutalized by their supervisors, their strikes were broken down by the military police, and they were often deprived of their wages (Weiner 1994; see also Hisako 2005). Many Korean women were also coerced into sexual slavery in military brothels throughout the empire. In short, Koreans endured conditions of forced labor reserved for colonial subjects. For Weiner, their plight resembles that of “other immigrant groups” exploited on the basis of their nationality, race, or ethnicity (Weiner 1994, p. 211). They experienced every hardship commonly associated with modern forms of imperialism and racial oppression, except for being identified on the basis of visible anatomical features. Whether one uses race as a category of analysis to compare Koreans in Japan with minority groups in other societies therefore depends on what role one attributes to phenotype in definitions of race and racism.

## ANTI-KOREAN RACISM IN POSTWAR JAPAN

After their military victory, U.S. forces occupied Japan for seven years (1945–1952). They imposed changes in the political and legal structure of the country, notably by adopting a new constitution and setting up a parliamentary system. They also oversaw the dismantling of the Japanese empire. While the settler colonies of Hokkaido and Okinawa remained integral parts of Japan, the country lost control over Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria and other territories. The Korean peninsula was placed under the shared supervision of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Most Koreans who had been forced to migrate to Japan returned to the peninsula, but out of almost two and a half million migrants who had left Korea before 1945, about six hundred thousand stayed in Japan. In the context of the Cold War, the split between North and South Korea had a strong impact even on those who stayed within the former imperial metropole, as political tensions led to factionalism in the local Korean community. After the Korean War (1950–1953), most Koreans in Japan aligned themselves with one of two competing organizations, Chongryon and Mindan, which respectively supported North and South Korea. The strongest of the two, Chongryon, maintained ties with Pyongyang and operated its own school system for Koreans in Japan (Ryang 1997). It acted more or less as a buffer against the discriminatory policies of the state, which did not recognize former colonial subjects as citizens with equal rights.

Since bodily differences could not serve to distinguish Koreans from the dominant population within Japanese society, other markers had to be used for discriminatory purposes. In the postwar era, citizenship policies became “the principal institutional device employed to sever Koreans from the Japanese body politic and quarantine them from potentially contaminating Japanese society and culture” (Chung 2010, pp. 80–81).

The state created a system of political and legal control that set Koreans apart from the rest of the population. Following the San Francisco Peace Treaty which put an end to the U.S. occupation, in 1952 Japan stripped its former colonial subjects of their nationality status and left them stateless. It became the only former colonial power whose citizenship policies are based on a strict principle of *jus sanguinis*, meaning that birthright citizenship is not recognized and the only path to citizenship—even for so-called “foreigners” born in the country—is to apply for naturalization (Chung 2010). After 1952, Korean descendants were also subjected to the Alien Registration Law, which required them to register periodically with the authorities and to carry a special certificate of identification at all times. They became referred to as *Zainichi*, a word which connotes their “resident” status. With these policies, the Japanese state effectively equated nationality with racial and ethnic identity. By excluding former colonial subjects from the body politic, the country could portray itself as a culturally and racially homogenous nation (Befu 2001; Oguma 2002; Yoshino 1992).

These changes point toward important social and political transformations in the postwar era. Japan went from being an expansionist empire built on a notion of “pan-Asianism” to being an exclusionary nation-state cherishing its purported homogeneity. Korean migrants also went from being colonial subjects recognized as Japanese nationals to being stateless “residents” of Japan (Chee 1982). Despite these changes, there were clear continuities in the status of Korean migrants and their descendants. Being relegated to less prestigious economic sectors, living in substandard housing conditions, and being subjected to intense policing were ongoing realities for *Zainichi* Koreans. Contemporary observers noted how little “race relations” had changed after the war (Wagner 1951). For many, this situation invited comparisons with African Americans. Scholars involved in the early development of Black Studies in Japan emphasized similarities between the two groups (Onishi 2013), as did U.S. specialists of Japanese society (De Vos 1992; De Vos and Wetherall, 1974; Lee and De Vos, 1981; De Vos 1992). As I explain below, *Zainichi* Koreans also likened their status to that of Blacks Americans to advance their struggle for liberation. Yet, the experience of Korean Americans has provided an alternative point of comparison to interpret the legacy of anti-Korean racism in postwar Japan.

The situation of Korean Americans has usually served as a foil for specialists of *Zainichi* Korean history. It has been used to highlight the divergent paths taken by people coming from the same country of origin in different host societies. Compared with *Zainichi* Koreans who are perceived as having “done so poorly” in Japan, Korean Americans are often said to have performed “extremely well” in U.S. society (De Vos 1992, p. 179; see also De Vos and Kim 1993). The latter have historically been one of the only minority groups “whose academic achievement surpasses that of the majority whites” in the United States (Lee 1991, p. 131). Their socioeconomic position has been similar to that of Japanese Americans, with “much higher achievement levels than those of blacks” (Lee 1991, p. 162; see also De Vos 1992). In Japan, by contrast, the gap between Koreans and Japanese has been more pronounced, with Korean achievement levels being “surprisingly similar to those of blacks in the United States” (Lee 1991, p. 162). Put this way, the description of Korean Americans risks falling into the trap of the “model minority” stereotype. It is crucial to remember that Asian Americans are also the targets of discrimination in the United States, making it harder for them than it is for Whites to transform academic credentials into economic and political power. But it is still relevant to recognize differences in status between Koreans in the United States and in Japan. *Zainichi* Koreans are descendants of colonial subjects who were forced to migrate to Japan, whereas most Korean Americans migrated voluntarily to the United States (Lee 1991). The two groups have been subjected to different citizenship policies,



with Koreans in Japan being made stateless in 1952 and Korean Americans being given access to U.S. citizenship from 1952 onward (Chung 2009). These facts suggest that Korean descendants occupy a lower position in Japanese society than they do in the United States.

However, not all scholars agree with this contradistinction. In *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan): Diasporic Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity*, sociologist John Lie (2008) argues that *Zainichi* Koreans and Korean Americans are more alike than scholars usually admit. He writes that “considerable convergences” characterize the experiences of the two groups (p. 190). For him, “*Zainichi* historiography exaggerates the involuntary character of Korean immigration to Japan” (Lie 2008, p. 190). The author insists on the gradual reconciliation of *Zainichi* Koreans with the dominant Japanese population, as he stresses their ideological, political, and socioeconomic resemblances with Korean Americans. Interestingly, Lie’s views about comparisons are compounded with a historical account that posits “the decline of colonial racism and its legacy” (2008, pp. 146–147). He writes that “the status of an ethnic group is correlated with the standing of its home country,” and that the situation of *Zainichi* Koreans has improved along with that of South Korea since the 1960s (Lie 2008, p. 149). Therefore, he downplays the persistence anti-Korean oppression in postwar Japan and even claims that in some cases, *Zainichi* Korean identity has been transformed from a “stigmatized status” to a “privileged position” (Lie 2008, p. 151). He also diagnoses the integration of Korean descendants into the Japanese economy despite admitting that most of them are self-employed or working for other *Zainichi* Koreans. In another book, Lie argues that the concept of systemic racism does not apply to Japanese society, where isolated individuals may be racist, but institutions are not (Lie 2001). These arguments contrast with his work on U.S. society, where he recognizes the reality of systemic racism against both African Americans and Korean Americans (Abelmann and Lie, 1995). When it comes to Koreans in Japan, however, the author adopts an optimistic view of historical progress that stresses ruptures with the colonial past.

By contrast, in *Divided Fates: The State, Race, and Korean Immigrants’ Adaptation in Japan and the United States*, sociologist Kazuko Suzuki (2016) draws a clear distinction between *Zainichi* Koreans and Korean Americans, as she examines how different contexts of reception have shaped the experiences of these two populations. As she states in her introduction, “the more I study about American racial/ethnic relations, the more analogies I find between the social position of *Zainichi* Koreans and that of African Americans, rather than with Korean Americans in the United States” (Suzuki 2016, p. xx). Drawing on the work of Robert Blauner ([1972] 2001), who distinguished the forms of oppression affecting colonized groups and other migrants, Suzuki insists that Koreans are a “colonized migrant group” in Japan, whereas they are “typical voluntary immigrants” in the United States (Suzuki 2016, p. xxvii). Their different “modes of incorporation” have given them a different position in the socioracial hierarchies of each country (Suzuki 2016, p. xxix). While the author recognizes the extent of *Zainichi* Korean economic mobility, she refrains from adopting a linear narrative of integration into Japanese society. Instead, she shows that upward class mobility has taken place amidst ongoing marginalization. She contends that the enrichment of some Korean descendants is an effect of their relegation to economic sectors that can be lucrative but are also disreputable, like the slot machine (*pachinko*) industry, barbecue (*yakimiku*) restaurants, and parts of the sex industry. Hence, economic capital does not translate as easily into prestige for *Zainichi* Koreans as it does for members of the dominant Japanese population (Suzuki 2016). Together, Lie’s and Suzuki’s books illustrate what I call the racial politics of comparison. They show how different comparative strategies can be tied to conflicting interpretations of racial domination in the work of scholars.

The following section addresses the political implications of racial comparisons by examining connections between *Zainichi* Korean activism and the Black liberation struggle.

## ZAINICHI KOREANS AND BLACK LIBERATION

Since their postwar disenfranchisement, *Zainichi* Koreans have used various means of resistance to defend their rights and protect themselves from abuse. As previously mentioned, they have formed associations like Chongryon that offered services to the community. Hiding their ancestry has been another common survival strategy. In a context where there are no clear bodily differences separating descendants of colonial subjects from the dominant population, opportunities for “racial passing” are increased (Chung 2010). Since *Zainichi* Koreans speak Japanese fluently and often use Japanese aliases in public to avoid revealing their ancestry, their nationality status is one of the only markers that sets them apart from the Japanese population. In this context, applying for naturalization may provide an avenue for integration, but it is a costly and cumbersome process involving lengthy investigations and a great deal of discretion on the part of state authorities (Chung 2010; Suzuki 2016). It is indeed a “racialized process” that opens the door to various forms of discrimination (Arudou 2015, p. 83).

In addition to individual strategies of resistance, *Zainichi* Koreans have confronted systemic discrimination head-on through activism and protest. As they tried to make sense of their condition and enlist the support of allies, members of the community often drew parallels between their situation and that of other minority groups. An example of how *Zainichi* Koreans have identified with global anticolonial struggles is found in an interview with author and activist Pak Sunam (1970): “I have a copy of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* here with me and I find that what he says is exactly what we have been saying about ourselves. We feel that Fanon is a brother. He speaks the same language as we do, especially when he refers to violence and the question of national culture and ethnic consciousness” (p. 49). Reflecting on similarities between *Zainichi* Koreans and other colonized peoples, the interviewee noted the effects that systemic discrimination and cultural assimilation were having on the formation of Korean identity in Japan. Her observations prompted her to recognize Frantz Fanon, a Black Martinican man who fought for the Algerian Revolution, as the “brother” of Koreans in Japan. Imagining political kinships of this kind allowed *Zainichi* Korean activists to break their relative isolation and connect themselves to a global community of struggle.

In many instances, transnational solidarities took on concrete forms. In *Reinventing Citizenship: Black Los Angeles, Korean Kawasaki, and Community Participation*, American Studies scholar Kazuyo Tsuchiya (2014) gives an account of the intellectual and political ties that have connected *Zainichi* Koreans to the U.S. Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Her work offers a comparison of welfare activism among *Zainichi* Koreans in Kawasaki and African Americans in Los Angeles throughout the 1960s and 1970s. While she recognizes the specific experiences that these two groups have had with different states and welfare policies, Tsuchiya also highlights crucial resemblances. For example, she remarks that Black liberation theology has provided a “language” for *Zainichi* Koreans to address their marginalization (Tsuchiya 2014, p. 2). This shared language served as a basis to establish contacts with religious leaders involved in the Black liberation struggle. During the Cold War, when the *Zainichi* Korean community was sharply divided along ideological lines, the Korean Christian Church in Japan provided a vehicle for grassroots activism and “inter-racial cooperation” (Tsuchiya

2014, p. 122). Reverend Lee In Ha, the leader of the Kawasaki Church, was at the forefront of struggles for welfare, education, and civil rights. Reverend Lee is sometimes referred to as the “Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Korean civil rights movement” in Japan (Chung 2010, p. 99). One of the services provided by his church was an “ethnic nursery” aimed at promoting political consciousness and countering the sense of cultural alienation among young *Zainichi* Koreans. Lee was also the director of the Research-Action Institute for Koreans in Japan (RAIK), which conducted surveys and studies on the situation of Korean descendants (RAIK 1975, 1990).

Reverend Lee’s endeavors were inspired by the teachings of James H. Cone, whose publications made a major impact on Black liberation theology at the turn of the 1970s (Cone 1969, 1970). In his work, Cone adopted a broad conception of Blackness, which he defined as an “ontological symbol and a visible reality” attached to certain experiences of oppression, rather than an essential property of African descendants (quoted in Tsuchiya 2014, p. 127). This definition was appealing for *Zainichi* Korean activists, who drew inspiration from the Black liberation struggle even if they did not bear visible markers of racial difference on their bodies. In 1975, Lee made arrangements to receive Cone in Japan. According to Tsuchiya, who interviewed Cone in 2010, during his travel the theologian “came to realize that what black people had gone through in the U.S. was actually quite similar to what *zainichi* Koreans had endured” (Tsuchiya 2014, p. 127). Lee and Cone also strove to unite *Zainichi* Korean theology, known as “sojourner theology,” and Black liberation theology into a “common antiracist cause” (Tsuchiya 2014, p. 128).

Further parallels between the struggles of *Zainichi* Koreans and African Americans emerged in the course of political action. In 1970, the Hitachi employment discrimination trial marked the beginning of a new era of antiracist activism in Japan (Chung 2010; Tsuchiya 2014). The case involved a young *Zainichi* Korean man who had obtained a job at Hitachi until the firm learned of his nationality status and canceled his employment. The man filed a lawsuit for discrimination and his case quickly became a rallying cause for Koreans in Japan. A committee was formed to assist him in his legal battle and over the course of a few years, he received the support of thousands of activists as well as national and international church organizations. The events would not have unfolded this way if, like most African Americans, *Zainichi* Koreans had been identifiable on the basis of phenotype. It is likely that the young man would never have been hired by Hitachi if the firm had been aware of his Korean ancestry in the first place. But Reverend Lee and other activists involved in the trial drew analogies between their campaign and the fight against racial segregation in the United States, comparing the Hitachi case to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. According to Tsuchiya, Lee was instrumental in “translating” the Hitachi case into the language of struggles for “racial and ethnic equality on a supranational scale” (2014, p. 132). His position as a vice chairperson for the World Council of Churches’ Program to Combat Racism put him in direct contact with U.S. Civil Rights leaders such as Andrew Young. In his conversations with African American activists, he argued that racism was not strictly a matter of discrimination on the basis of skin color, since Korean descendants were also the targets of racial oppression in Japan. When Hitachi lost the trial in 1974, young *Zainichi* Koreans seized the momentum to create Mintoren, a civil rights organization dedicated to fighting racial and ethnic discrimination. The trial had provided Kawasaki activists with “a framework for voicing alternative visions of citizenship” (Tsuchiya 2014, p. 140). Taking advantage of a progressive municipal administration, they expanded the ethnic nursery program to create what became known as the “Kawasaki system” of welfare. *Zainichi* Korean women were also at the forefront of efforts to secure education services for children of the community (Tsuchiya 2014). Hence, the

struggles of the 1970s pushed many Korean descendants to redefine their position within Japanese society.

Another political protest that invited analogies with the Black liberation struggle was the anti-fingerprinting movement that gained steam in the 1980s. As mentioned above, the Japanese 1952 Alien Registration Law had required disenfranchised Koreans to register periodically with the authorities and carry a special identification at all times. From 1952 to 1982, all “foreigners” over fourteen years old had to submit their fingerprints to the police every three years. In 1982, the age requirement was raised to sixteen years old and the renewal period extended to five years (Chung 2010). *Zainichi* Koreans strongly resented and resisted these forms of control. Interestingly, their participation in the anti-fingerprinting movement overlapped with the fight against apartheid in South Africa. *Zainichi* Korean activists and foreign scholars sympathetic to their cause pointed toward similarities between Japan’s Alien Registration Law and South Africa’s apartheid system to describe the situation of Koreans in Japan as a “hidden” or “subtle” apartheid (Hicks 1997; RAIK 1990). For instance, they remarked that *Zainichi* Koreans’ certificates of identification had the same size and shape as the passbooks carried by Black South Africans. Like *Zainichi* Koreans, the latter were also fingerprinted from the age of sixteen onward. Indeed, the main discriminatory laws of the two countries had been adopted and revised at the same time, suggesting that the Japanese and South African states were drawing inspiration from one another (RAIK 1990). To make sense of their situation, *Zainichi* Koreans employed the sociological framework of “internal colonialism,” which was being used both by African Americans and Black South Africans (RAIK 1990; see also Blauner [1972] 2001; Gutiérrez 2004; Wolpe 1975). They also enlisted the support of Black American political leaders such as Jesse Jackson, who visited Osaka in 1986 (RAIK 1990). As Tsuchiya (2014) writes, “Black liberation struggles and the *zainichi* pursuit of citizenship were not only parallel movements from which a comparison could be drawn, but they were also linked with each other” (p. 169). Perceived similarities generated concrete dialogues and alliances between minority groups in spite of linguistic differences, geographic distance, and the fact that *Zainichi* Koreans who were deprived of a passport had limited transnational mobility.

## CONCLUSION

In the early 1990s, after decades of activism, *Zainichi* Koreans became “special permanent residents” of Japan, a legal status that extended to them some of the civil rights afforded to citizens. At the same time, the fingerprinting requirements were abolished for permanent residents. Today, while they are still barred from voting or being elected in national elections, most descendants of colonial subjects can access Japanese welfare and education services, be employed in public and private institutions, and obtain a re-entry permit if they wish to travel abroad. These legal changes have reduced the extent of their marginalization, but they have not put an end to systemic discrimination, socio-economic inequalities, and political persecutions. Like racial minority groups in other societies, *Zainichi* Koreans still carry a subordinate status in Japanese society. As I have argued throughout this essay, their history presents a unique case for the study of racial formation.

First, I have examined how the history of Japanese colonialism justifies the use of race as a category of analysis to describe anti-Korean oppression. Second, I have explored how scholars have used different comparative strategies to give conflicting interpretations of anti-Korean racism in postwar Japan. Third, I have shown that

*Zainichi* Korean activists established tangible alliances with African Americans by drawing inspiration from the Black liberation struggle. Together, these three sets of observations illustrate what I have called the “racial politics of comparison.” They reveal how different comparisons between colonial powers and racial minority groups are tied to competing intellectual and political agendas. By likening their status to that of Black Americans, for instance, *Zainichi* Koreans have been able to more effectively resist anti-Korean oppression in Japan. This does not suggest that Blackness should be used as a metaphor for all sorts of oppression—a move which might easily obscure the legacies of racial slavery and the unique experiences of African descendants. Rather, it signals the relevance of a “relational” approach that is attentive to the political implications of racial comparisons.

Finally, my analysis puts into question the notion that racism is necessarily tied to visible physical markers—so-called “phenotype.” Racial formation theorists have given a central role to phenotype in their definition of race, and a number of scholars have relied on that definition to deny the existence of anti-Korean racism in Japan. The history of Japanese colonialism, anti-Korean racism, and *Zainichi* Korean activism challenges this common-sense idea. It shows that when no corporeal features differentiate descendants of colonial subjects from members of a dominant population, less visible configurations of power can still sustain racial domination. In short, although perceived bodily traits have often been used to establish modern racial classifications and hierarchies, phenotype should not be seen as a definitional element of race and racism.

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