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STEPHEN A. AND SHOHEI OHTANI
A Case Study in Latent Orientalism

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes a controversy emerging from comments by sports commentator, Stephen A. Smith, about baseball superstar, Shohei Ohtani. Smith argued that Major League Baseball in the United States needs a hero figure to attract a new fan base, and Ohtani is not fit to play that role because he uses an interpreter for public speaking events. The essay uses Edward Said's notion of "latent Orientalism" to examine how Smith's commentary imagines and constructs Ohtani in ways that reflect the long history of ideological Orientalism in the United States, and argues that Smith's avowal that he did not intend to offend Asians and Asian Americans reflects the hidden role of latent Orientalism.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of "latent Orientalism" is an important one that has received a good deal of attention by scholars of Orientalism.¹ It claims that Orientalist ideologies are grounded in the hidden recesses of human thought where they collectively function as an all but unconscious "archive" of inherited attitudes and behaviors directed at Asians ("Orientals," so called). It is the purpose of this essay to recount and reflect on an unexpected instance of hidden Orientalism that broke out in the American sports media and brought these hidden prejudices to the surface in a particularly clear way. The event was a controversy over comments that Stephen A. Smith, a well-known American sports commentator, made about the Japanese baseball phenomenon, Shohei Ohtani.

"Stephen A.," as he is generally called, delivers his sports commentary with a rapid-fire, in-your-face style and is known for taking forthright stands on controversial issues. On the ESPN show, *First Take*, for Monday, 12 July 2021, Smith launched into a critique of Major League Baseball's (MLB) emerging superstar, Shohei Ohtani, who both pitches and hits for the Los Angeles Angels. While acknowledging that Ohtani is a generational phenomenon, Smith still claimed that his stardom is bad for MLB because he speaks publicly through an interpreter. Smith stated, "I understand that baseball is an international sport itself in terms of participation, but when you talk about an audience gravitating to the tube or to the ballpark, to actually watch you, I don't think it helps that the No. 1 face is a dude that needs an interpreter, so you can understand what the hell he's saying in this country."² As he explained in a Twitter follow-up, Smith's concern was with MLB's "marketability" and the "promotion of the sport," not the person of Ohtani himself, who Smith recognized to be "the second coming of Babe Ruth." He applauded the fact that baseball has become an international sport yet insisted, "But in the United States, all I was saying is that when you're a super star if you can speak the English

¹ See Herbert R. Swanson, "Almost Unconscious: Towards a History of Said's Notion of Latent Orientalism," 18 July 2021. At this website, *Orientalism Studies* (<https://www.orientalismstudies.com/eassay-notes>).

² Quoted in Rick Morrissey, "Quite frankly, Stephen A. Smith knew exactly what he was saying about Shohei Ohtani," 14 July 2021. At *The Chicago Sun-Times* (<https://chicago.suntimes.com>), accessed 17 July 2021. *Italics added.*

language then guess what that's going to make it that much easier and less challenging to promote the sport. That's all I was saying about anybody."³

Smith's critics all but scorched the airwaves with their reactions, which fall roughly into two categories: those who attacked his commentary and those that attacked him more personally. Among his critics was a colleague at ESPN, Joon Lee, who was invited to appear on *First Take* in the aftermath of Smith's original comments. Lee stated that Smith's commentary promoted the stereotype of Asians as always being foreigners who stand on the wrong side of a cultural gap that makes them unacceptable in America. As an Asian American, Lee felt the comments about not speaking English hit him with particular force and only served to promote the belief that no matter what Americans of Asian descent do they will never measure up and must always be the "model minority" that has to keep its head down. He said that this incident is further evidence that the American media, including ESPN, is not prepared to speak to the "authentic" Asian experience in the United States.⁴

Rick Morrissey, in a news media article, cited academics who argue that the language Smith used, "reflects deeper, insidious beliefs about who gets to represent America's historical pastime." The basic perception is that Asians playing baseball are still fundamentally seen to be foreign even if they are highly skilled players such as Ohtani. Morrissey quotes Stan Thangara, an anthropologist at the City College of New York, who stated that Smith's arguments regarding Ohtani's marketability are absurd and that Smith has "a really miscalculated historical understanding of Asian players and Asian American players and their impact not only in Asia but in the U.S. and how beloved they are." Thangara points out foreign players who have had a great deal of success in baseball although they used translators and argues that the issues raised by Smith really have to do with who "belongs" in America and with the cultural reality that Asians are portrayed as never being "American enough" to be authentic baseball players. Thangara also notes that the comparison of Ohtani to Babe Ruth reinforces the fact that "whiteness" is the standard of measure for understanding baseball. He also observes that focusing on marketability leaves the impression that only white fans matter as "real baseball consumers," which ends up making Ohtani "a scapegoat for decades of decline in baseball's popularity." Constancio Arnaldo Jr., an assistant professor of Asian and Asian American studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, states that Ohtani is "also challenging what is acceptable in terms of athletic performance, baseball skill, especially, that are speaking back to these longer legacies of baseball as being this American white pastime."⁵

Those who attacked Smith personally argue that Smith had to have known what he was doing given how touchy race issues are in the United States today and given all the attention in the media to anti-Asian racism during the pandemic. Some critics go so far as to speculate that Smith purposefully said what he did to get attention and promote his show and himself. Some of them further claim that his so-called apology was bogus. They tend to blame ESPN for allowing Smith to go through with his attack on Ohtani, and they believe that neither Smith nor the network regret any of what happened because it was good for publicity.

Still, the fact is that Smith did apologize within a day. He first apologized in a posting on *Twitter* in which he wrote,

Let me apologize right now. As I'm watching things unfold, let me say that I never intended to offend ANY COMMUNITY, particularly the Asian Community – and especially SHOHEI OHTANI, himself. As an African American, keenly aware of the damage stereotyping has done to many in this country, it should've elevated my sensitivities even more. Based on my words, I failed in that regard and it's on me, and me alone! Ohtani is one of the

³ The Twitter video clip was seen at Jimmy Traina, "Plenty of Blame to Go Around in Stephen A. Smith—Shohei Ohtani Controversy," 13 July 2021. At *Sports Illustrated* (<https://www.si.com>), accessed 17 July 2021.

⁴ "Joon Lee shares perspective on Stephen A.'s comments about Shohei Ohtani," n.d. At *ESPN* (https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_/id/31811841), accessed 19 July 2021.

⁵ Morrissey, "Quite frankly," above.

brightest stars in all of sports. He is making a difference, as it pertains to inclusiveness and leadership. I should have embraced that in my comments. Instead, I screwed up. In this day and age, with all the violence being perpetrated against the Asian Community, my comments -- albeit unintentional -- were clearly insensitive and regrettable. There's simply no other way to put it. I'm sincerely sorry for any angst I've caused with my comments on *First Take* this morning. Again, I'm sorry. And I'll happily reiterate these words more extensively tomorrow morning, as well.⁶

Smith again apologized on Tuesday, July 22nd, saying that, "I am a Black man. I religiously go off about minorities being marginalized in this nation. I instantly go off, repeatedly bring up the fact that if you are a member of a community that feels disfranchised in any way that's something we need to battle, we need to fend off to the best of our ability as a nation." He acknowledged that many Asians and Asian Americans were offended by what he said, and again stated that, "That was not my intent at all." He continued, "I just want people to know this is where I stand: the second that I was informed about how hurt a group of people in this nation was off of what I said that matters to me because I do not intend to hurt people like that. That is not who I am; that's not who I've ever been." Referring to the hatred that Asian Americans have been subjected to in the recent past, he acknowledged, "I contributed to that yesterday, and that's inexcusable." He then one more time apologized to the Asian and Asian American communities as well as ESPN and its parent company, Walt Disney, and concluded with a personal apology to Ohtani and those close to him.⁷

First Take also invited two colleagues from ESPN to add texture to Smith's apologies including Joon Lee, whose comments are above, and Jeff Passan, who added two important insights into the larger issues involved. *First*, Ohtani left home to come to the United States in his pursuit of greatness, has achieved that greatness, and exemplifies "what this country is about," which makes him the kind of person Americans should embrace. Americans, therefore, should not be "trafficking in ignorance" or perpetuating false ideas that too many people believe. *Second*, Passan observed that, "It's not that Shohei Ohtani doesn't speak English publicly and that people don't embrace him. It's that if people don't embrace him because he doesn't speak English publicly they're the problem, not Shohei Ohtani."⁸

That's the story. At the heart of it lies a puzzle: why did Smith allow himself to get involved in such an ideological quagmire? Shohei Ohtani, by all accounts, is a remarkably talented baseball player in virtually every phase of the game who is doing something that has not been done for many decades: he is an accomplished hitter and starting pitcher. The most common historical reference is to call him, "the next Babe Ruth," but several commentators have noted that he also recalls the skills of several players in the Negro Leagues, who both pitched and played other positions. Still, Ohtani is an outstanding ball player by any measure who has become very popular with fans in the United States. So why, in the face of Ohtani's baseball skills and record, did Smith chose to measure his role specifically in terms of Ohtani's presumably inferior English-language skills? Why assert that Ohtani is thus a danger to the MLB? It is as remarkable that Smith would make such a claim. He very clearly should have known better, something that he admits himself. His own personal experience as a Black American should have warned him off. The fact that various American media figures are constantly getting themselves in trouble for racist comments should have made him think at least twice. The reality of baseball as an international sport and the presence of large numbers of popular foreign players in the United State should have caused him to pause and reflect. And the fact that anti-Asian racism has constantly been in the news should have sensitized him to the issues facing Asians and Asian Americans in the United States. Indeed, Ohtani's clearly outstanding skills and obvious

⁶ Stephen A. Smith, "I'm sincerely sorry," 13 July 2021. At *Twitter.com* (<https://twitter.com/stephenasmith/status/1414711083252789248/photo/1>), accessed 21 July 2020.

⁷ "Stephen A. Smith apologizes for comments about Shohei Ohtani, n.d. At *ESPN.com* (https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_/id/31811657), accessed 22 July 2021.

⁸ "Jeff Passan responds to Stephen A.'s comments on Shohei Ohtani, n.d. At *ESPN.com* (https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_/id/31811682), accessed 22 July 2021.

popularity entirely undermined his arguments before he ever made them. So, again, why did he say what he said?

As we saw above, among the many voices criticizing Smith were those who answer this question with a simple, easy, straightforward assertion: this is typical of Stephen A. It turns out that a number of media commentators don't like him and seem to have enjoyed the chance to go after him, his style, and his evident (to them) ignorance of baseball.⁹ There may be something to this cynicism, but the way in which Smith apologized repeatedly and reasonably quickly as well as the fact that he listened on air to colleague's insights into why he was in the wrong suggest that it is too easy to write this episode off as his being merely intentionally provocative for the sake of ratings. Smith, furthermore, seems to have had some premonition that his words could be interpreted as racially biased and tried to shape his argument to avoid that accusation. He thus emphasized Ohtani's baseball skills and claimed that he was only concerned for the future of baseball in the United States, the implication being that Ohtani's race and nationality were not the issue.

Inevitably, a full answer to the question of Smith's motivation in this case involves a complex set of factors partially obscured by the likelihood that he himself wouldn't be able to offer a full explanation. In fact, for the most part he did not try to explain himself except to say he did not intend to offend any community of people, and while this plea of ignorance may sound facile and too convenient to many of his critics, it actually makes sense and offers us a way to understand at least one of the underlying issues and motivations involved in his words: Stephen A. Smith is a closet Orientalist, and his plea of ignorance can be taken to be not a lame excuse so much as a window into the way in which Orientalist ideologies and their stereotypes and prejudices silently, stealthily infect Western popular thinking about Asians. This is not to give Smith a free pass on his comments. They were ill considered, ill stated, and offensive—it's just that we don't have to play mind reader and imagine that his intentions were nefarious. They need not be ill intentioned, in fact, to be Orientalist.

Orientalism has a long history that stretches back into the 18th century, although traces of proto-versions can be discerned even in ancient Greece and Rome. In Orientalism's hey-day in the 19th century, European Orientalists collectively took something of a mixed attitude about "the Orient". On the one hand, it was sometimes seen through a romantic lens as being exotic and alluring, and Asian religions were now-and-again valued for their supposed wisdom and mystical spirituality. On the other hand and much more frequently, Western academics, political leaders and other public figures, and the general public viewed the Orient, including especially Arabs and Islam, as being essentially and unremittingly alien, degenerate, effeminate, heathen, immoral, violent, and dangerous. These views provided an important justification for the expansion of European colonialism and domination in Asia, and they became widespread in Western popular thinking including in the United States. In more recent times, the Orient has lost its exotic flavor, again particularly when it comes to Arabs and Muslims, and its main premise today is that all peoples who are perceived to be Asian share an essential, unchanging nature (an "is-ness") that is utterly different from and inferior to the West in terms of values and morals and therefore is unacceptable and dangerous. The United States has its own long history of Orientalism, epitomized historically by the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and, much more recently, by the rise in hate crimes against Asian-looking people during the Great Pandemic of 2020.

Beginning with Said himself, students and scholars of Orientalism have long recognized that Orientalist prejudices have a covert quality about them so that most Orientalists most of the time are not aware that they have any prejudices at all. Said called this phenomenon, "latent Orientalism," which term has gained wide currency and is also known under several other names that include, for example, "hidden Orientalism" and "covert Orientalism." Stripped down to its simplest, "latent Orientalism" refers to a set of stereotypes concerning Asians that are widely shared in the West but

⁹ See, for example, Bob Raissman, "This is who Stephen A. Smith is," 17 July 2021. At *Daily News* (<https://www.nydailynews.com/sports/baseball/ny-stephen-a-ohtani-raissman-20210717-3odfnrupezehxcc3l36ony6sc4-story.html>), accessed 25 July 2021.

are not recognized as stereotypes by those who hold them.¹⁰ Orientalists think of their attitudes and behaviors towards Asians, when they think about them at all, as being nothing more than obvious and common sensical: *they* are like that and “everybody” knows that’s the way *they* are. Smith, based on his own words, falls into the category of those Americans who are ignorant of the fact that they look at Asians through the lens of Orientalist ideological stereotypes as being “the Other”.

A fundamental premise of ideological Orientalism is that all Asians share a common, essential, and unchanging identity that makes it relatively easy to describe who and what they are. Overtly, Smith says nothing like this, but as Lee pointed out to Smith (above), his commentary on Ohtani promoted the stereotype of Asians as always being foreigners who live outside the mainstream of American culture. Ohtani is, thus, an incredibly skilled and popular ball player who Smith still measured and judged to be wanting based on a key American cultural skill, the ability to speak English. If we take Smith at his word, he did not intend to assert that Ohtani was essentially unacceptable or inferior because he was a foreigner, and if we isolate his words from their larger American cultural context, we do not notice that he was actually making such an assertion. In that context, however, his commentary reflects a history of ideological prejudices against Asians that goes back to the very founding of the American republic,¹¹ which in this case lies embedded in the arguments Smith thought he was actually making and, in fact, contradict those arguments and render them false. The real-world fact of Ohtani’s popularity undermined his whole premise, which collapsed around him like a house of cards within hours of his initial show. Such is the impact of latent Orientalism.

Another important premise in the study of Orientalism is that Orientalist ideologies have to do with power. At first glance, Smith’s commentary does not appear to be about power; his concern, as he framed it, was with saving a declining MLB, which seems to be a noble motivation, even if he expressed it in a wrongheaded fashion. Still, Smith takes it upon himself to be a spokesperson for the MLB based on his authority as a well-known sports commentator for a major sports news organization. He then used the power inherent in his status to pronounce a judgment concerning Ohtani’s acceptability as a superstar based on the very narrow measure of Ohtani’s public use of an interpreter and broadcast this judgment to a national audience. Smith, furthermore, imagined Ohtani to be a danger to the MLB, which is a classic power move in the Orientalist ideological repertoire. He implicitly sought to deny Ohtani a leading, influential role in the American-dominated MLB and to reserve that role for someone who is more like Smith himself: an American and native-born speaker of English. While recognizing the large contingent of foreign players in the MLB and baseball’s international fan base, Smith still prioritized nationalistic American concerns which effectively serves to promote native-born, sports-loving America’s cultural dominance over American professional baseball. In the process, he used his power to define the role that Ohtani, as a superstar, should play, namely savior of the MLB. Such, again, is the impact of latent Orientalism.

Still another important mark of latent Orientalism is that it is a potent, cognitive artifact of culture, in this case white American culture, which is communicated across generations with an impressive consistency that goes unchallenged generation after generation precisely because it is latent—hidden, covert, and all but unconscious. It infects scholars who claim to be Asian specialists, it infects politicians, and it infects the everyday citizen who may not even be able to locate Asia on a world map. Still more to the point, this essentially white racial prejudice infects others who fall within the white American cultural orbit, including Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, and Asian-Americans themselves as well.

¹⁰ See Edward A. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). And see Herbert R. Swanson, “Almost Unconscious: Towards a History of Said’s Notion of Latent Orientalism,” 18 July 2021. At *Orientalism Studies.com* on this website; and Herbert R. Swanson, “Glossary of Orientalisms,” entries for “Covert Orientalism,” “Hidden Orientalism,” “Latent Orientalism,” and “Unconscious Orientalism”. At *Orientalism Studies.com* on this website.

¹¹ See John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture 1776-1882* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Naomi Rosenblatt, “Orientalism in American Popular Culture.” *Penn History Review* 16. 2 (Spring 2009): 51-63.

So it is that we find an articulate, influential Black sports commentator defending a white-dominated sports culture from the imagined predation of an Oriental.

It is thus a fundamental consequence of its hidden, covert nature that latent Orientalism infects American thinking and behavior in complicated and unexpected ways, which impact can be seen by the role that race plays in this case. Once he apologized, Smith admitted that as a Black American he should have known better because he cares about matters of race and racial profiling. Yet, by his own admission, he offended the racial sensibilities of Asians and Asian Americans with his comments about Ohtani. Some of Smith's critics have argued that he was promoting the "whiteness" of American baseball, especially when he portrays Ohtani as "the second coming of Babe Ruth." As we saw above, some of these critics have also pointed to various star players in the historical Negro Leagues who are equally appropriate and more racially inclusive comparisons—as if comparing Ohtani to Black baseball players corrects the inherent racism in comparing him to the Babe. It doesn't. It looks like it does and feels like it does, but Ohtani is still left standing "outside the ballpark," the quintessential Other. American (Orientalist) prejudices against Asians are buried so deeply that most Americans, Black or white, have almost no conscious sense of them and thus do not see their attitudes and behaviors towards Asians and Asian-Americans as being in any sense prejudicial. In this case, even when Americans seek to be racially inclusive somehow Asians are still not included. Ohtani, the "Oriental," is still being measured by the skills and abilities of players of another race, still looked on as inherently an Other in a way that even the Black players of yesteryear were not—even though those players were the victims of a blatant racism that prevented them from playing in "the big leagues." His Orientalist prejudices were so deeply hidden, in sum, that Smith as a self-aware Black American simply did not perceive the complex, inherent, and self-contradictory Orientalism in his commentary concerning an Asian baseball figure.

This is latent Orientalism, pure and simple. It is a particular kind of prejudice that in given circumstances can be expressed in terms of race, of gender, or of ethnicity in every possible combination of these factors. It habitually imagines and constructs Asians to be essentially, irredeemably foreign, therefore unable to measure up, therefore ultimately unacceptable, and therefore either actually or potentially dangerous. Orientalist ideologies, stereotypes, and prejudices have little or nothing to do with the real lives of the incredibly diverse peoples who actually live in Asia or are of Asian descent. They are based, rather, on Orientalism's own imaginative, fanciful tradition, which sees Asia and "Asian-ness" as one collective thing shared by all of those who look "Oriental".

Prejudices directed at Asians and Asian-Americans is as American as apple pie. It is stitched into the very cultural and cognitive fabric of the nation. It has remained identifiably the same for something like ten or eleven generations: sometimes more intense, sometimes less; sometimes more blatant, sometimes less; sometimes more violent, sometimes less.

And yet. There is another side to this story, which deserves not only mention but careful consideration. However cynical we may want to be about his motivations, it is important to recall what Smith did with his racially insensitive rhetoric. Within 24 hours, he accepted the fact that it was wrongheaded, apologized repeatedly for it, and perhaps most importantly invited guests on his show that criticized him for what he said. In the process, he handed the power of his media presence over to an Asian American who called him out in reasonably direct language, explaining to him and to his audience the pain he had caused. On a Monday, that is, he carried water for latent ideological Orientalism, and on Tuesday he turned his microphone over to his victims.

Smith listened to his critics, learned from them, and then used his position of power to educate his viewers as he had been educated. Let's not overstate the significance of all of this. In the history of Orientalist prejudice, this is a tiny, minor, miniscule moment, which in and of itself is not going to change much of anything. And yet, Smith's reaction does point to the way in which prejudice can be addressed and healing can take place through dialogue. And, beyond the moment itself, it is heartening that so many others immediately objected to his attack on Shohei Ohtani and that all of this happened out in the real world beyond the walls of academia and the scholarly study of Orientalism. In that moment, a bit of light was shined into the deep, dark, and hidden recesses of

American racial prejudices against the Asian Other, and the Other was given the chance to name the prejudice: Orientalism. In that moment, it was no longer latent. It was bigotry named and exposed.

If we are going to criticize Stephen A. for his insensitivity to peoples of Asian descent, then we do well to give him credit also for what he did to heal the hurt he caused. Amen.