

**“MORE JAPANESE THAN JAPANESE”: SUBJECTIVATION IN THE AGE OF  
BRAND NATIONALISM AND THE INTERNET**

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Today, modern technologies and the rapid circulation of information across geographic boundaries are said to be making the nation-state less relevant to daily life. In contrast, this dissertation argues that national boundary maintenance is increasingly made more relevant not in spite of such technologies, but precisely because of them. Indeed, processes of circulation are themselves making and re-making such boundaries rather than erasing them, while states simultaneously react to contain the perceived threats of globalization and to capitalize on the sale of their “cultural” commodities through nation branding.

For American otaku, or Japan fans, internet technologies and the consumption of Japanese media like videogames and anime are quintessential global flows from within which they first articulate a desire for Japan. Increasingly, some make the very real decision to leave home and settle in Japan, although scholars have suggested otaku are unable to understand the “real” Japan. Once there, however, the Japanese state’s ongoing nation branding policies, along with immigration control and patterns of everyday interactions with Japanese citizens, marginalize even long-term residents as perpetual visitors. Building on the work of Foucault, I seek to understand how notions of national “of courseness,” which fix Japaneseness as naturally homogeneous and impenetrable, subjectivize American fans.

Drawing on 12 months of full time participant observation with otaku living in Tokyo, along with 18 months of part time follow-up research, diachronic interviews with Americans in the US and Japan, and extensive textual analysis of all things “Japanese,” this work contrasts the

purported deterritorializing promise of online communications and the withering of the relevance of the modern nation-state, with the national boundary making work that these otaku migrants participate in, both online and off. Once in Japan, otaku themselves actively support Japan's nation branding efforts by teaching English and producing the very cultural commodities that motivated their migration in the first place, as they increasingly codify what Japaneseness is for other “foreigners.” At the same time, otaku migrants further reproduce Japanese national identity through accepting and affirming their status as non-Japanese, and through the reinscription of these very boundaries onto other otaku.

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Though my husband was still a graduate student when I met him many years ago, he was already a dedicated anthropologist. The way he told it when we met, anthropology wasn't something you studied—it was a way of seeing the world differently. I wanted to see it too, just like he did. Since then, everything I've written has come from conversations and thoughts we've shared together (although, of course, I owe all the blame for the monstrous typos and unwieldy ideas that still linger here). I could never have had the intellectual focus or the time and space to write, or the motivation, without our "nation of two." Our daughter, Selphie, helps makes it all worthwhile.

## 1.0 OTAKU AND THE MEANING OF THE NATIONAL

*A Japanese abroad seldom forgets that he is Japanese, just as a foreigner in Japan is seldom allowed to forget that he is not Japanese. [Bellah 2003: 114]*

*The question still remains however, why do so many young Americans like to dress up as characters from a culture that is not their own? [Napier 2006: 164]*

It was a sweaty night, and I was crammed into the back room of a Tokyo bar, surrounded by “foreigners.” American, English, and Japanese salary workers, and I, were all sitting on the floor together drinking oolong-highs and draft beer to choruses of “kanpai!” I’d been chatting to Harold<sup>1</sup>, a 25-year-old video game programmer originally from Oregon, when through the din he casually offered me his business card. Immediately, there were loud cries of protest from others around us, which began a lengthy evaluation of his technique. “Your first mistake,” someone on my right told him, “is that you took it out of your back pocket.”

It's a small moment, but I found later it was a significant part of the negotiation of being a Westerner in Japan. The same kind of internal critiquing, as well as censure, continually marked the way Americans (who I spent the most time with) interacted with and imagined each other, and thereby worked out who they were, where they were, and what they were doing in Tokyo. While that process was always in conversation with local “Japanese” social life—including an often-exclusionary work and community environment—their negotiation of those experiences

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, that’s not his real name. All other names are pseudonyms as well.

emerged strikingly in their relationships with, and opinions of, each other; in particular, through an ever-evolving evaluation of their behavior, as non-Japanese, in Japan.

Interested in contemporary techno-mediated experiences of borders, I'd been trying to analyze the impact digital communication technologies were having on the way individuals performed the work of national boundary maintenance. More specifically I was interested in whether trans-national online fan communities, groups who banded together across time zones and linguistic barriers to share their interests in distinctly non-local media, were rewriting the meaning of the national. Of course, internet technologies are only the most recent form to provide audiences access to foreign images and narratives. But virtual spaces, from simple message boards to fully rendered worlds like Second Life, afford individuals the opportunity not just to watch, learn, and communicate about other people and places, but also to go so far as to perform aspects of those identities. Because internet technologies not only potentialize the collapse of geographic space, but also blur the distinctions of voice and body typically used to help categorize physical difference, this "trying on" I believe extends beyond nineteenth century French Japonists' penchant for wearing kimono.

This idea has already been well discussed in terms of gender, age or disability, where degrees of anonymity, or the mutability of physical presence allows users to craft versions of themselves that may appear to have little connection to their own "real" attributes (McIntosh 2010; Boellstorff 2009; Boyd 2007; Bernal 2005; Mazzarella 2004; see also Turkle 1997); "the now well documented flexibility for self-presentation enabled by virtual environments" (Ginsburg 2012: 103). Of course, unmasking these incongruous identities is not impossible (it

may even be intentional),<sup>2</sup> just as this process is not exactly new.<sup>3</sup> Yet, especially in avatar-driven worlds like Second Life, users may be entreated to play with, and remake, or even pluralize selves; indeed, through the alluring flexibility, and the deterritorialized promise of such virtual spaces, individuals are encouraged to connect to frameworks of identity uncontained by national borders.

If attributes like appearance, language and location are really less central or less open to regulation in online environments, then how might experiences and performances of nation and culture change as a result, particularly for those without a legitimized claim to those identities? Does the ability to consume and interact with diverse cultural symbols actually challenge the ontological salience of the nation in daily life, as increased consumption of “diversity” afforded by internet distribution provides the cultural globalization clichéd smorgasbord of “Bollywood movies, Swedish hip-hop, Brazilian soap operas, highlights from Congolese football matches” (Green 2012)? My focus has been on American fans of Japanese popular media (mostly male, mostly white, and all middle class) who appropriate the Japanese term *otaku* (オタク) to declare their interest in Japan. Although the relevant translation of *otaku* here is “geek” the term is embraced by American fans as a positive self-descriptor (simply meaning: a fan of Japanese popular media, or “serious anime fan” [Condry 2011: 264]) which purges, or at least enthusiastically attempts to rework its negative connotations in both languages. These communities of fans not only purchase and pirate Japanese media such as anime (cartoons) and manga (comics) and import Japanese commodities like character figurines, often they also study

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<sup>2</sup> As Lisa Nakamura points out (2002), virtual identities remain subject to social stereotypes and hegemonies.

<sup>3</sup> Erving Goffman’s ideas about the processes through which people, during face-to-face encounters, are continually presenting and representing themselves to interlocutors in order to fashion the most coherent self for that particular moment and context (1959) is not unlike our ability to craft “fantasized persona[s]” through technological acts such as cell phone texting (McIntosh 2010: 338).

Japanese history and culture, learn to speak Japanese, and even live and work in Japan. Driven by intense excitement, these enthusiasts use internet technology to connect to, imagine, comment on, and in many ways I believe, even participate in Japanese society from afar. For example, they may post their anime-inspired artwork to web communities, debate the quality of the newest Japanese TV dramas on message boards, contribute to fan-subbers,<sup>4</sup> read everything they can find about their favorite mangaka (comic artist), watch Youtube videos recommending places to go when they visit Tokyo, and communicate with other fans, even native Japanese speakers, living in Japan. Because of (what's viewed as) their excessive interest in Japan and its media exports, otaku are often perceived to be merely racist and shallow; indeed, some fans do adopt the affected cadence of anime characters or pepper their speech with simple Japanese phrases and social, even stereotypical references, as lampooned in the Saturday Night Live skit *J-Pop America Fun Time Now* (2011-2012)<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps for this reason, Western otaku continue to be relegated by scholars as mere consumers of “J-cool,” an empty brand signifier. As Anne Allison stated after the release of her book, *Millennial Monsters* (2006): “What I think Japan authenticates in the minds, fantasies, and tastes of US fans of J-cool is not so much Japan as a *real* place as much as a particular aesthetic” (Allison quoted in Jenkins 2007, my emphasis). Other researchers have argued that otaku are not interested in connecting to—are in fact, ultimately unable to understand—the “real” Japan. For example, one anthropologist writes: “Along with other scholars, I ask, however, whether it is really *Japan* that global fans of Japanese popular culture are interested in” (Lukacs 2010a: 418, emphasis in original). Koichi Iwabuchi has been especially critical of Western fan-interests in Japan, describing their

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<sup>4</sup> The unofficial translation and subtitling of television shows and movies by fans largely for illegal or pirated distribution on the internet.

<sup>5</sup> I discuss this more below.

yearnings as “inevitably illusory” (2004: 62; for a more nuanced discussion see Ito et al. 2012; Napier 2007; Eng 2006).

Yet as I learned, many American otaku make the very *real* decision to leave home and settle in Japan—extending their imaginative desire and, perhaps fetishistic excitement into the concrete and consequential. The more I felt that scholars were invested in describing these fans as “not interested in the real Japan,” the more I became intrigued by what was conceptualized in this very statement. What’s more, I wanted to understand what kind of passion drove some of them to migrate; was it really just to “indulge” (in the term most critics might employ) in continued media consumption? Were their desires really so empty or so misplaced, and was their interest in Japan really so superficial or illusory, that they could be relegated to the “not real?”

In order then to examine the way nation making is practiced in a time of internet technologies, often assumed to collapse the near and the far (said to be a hallmark of late capitalism in general, for classic examples see Bauman 2000; Giddens 1991; Harvey 1989), this dissertation examines what happens when American otaku, motivated by their enjoyment of Japanese media which they first cultivate online, move to Japan. Before I began this research, I theorized that otaku can experience actually being Japanese online even if they never migrate, and as a result must participate in redefining Japanese national cultural identity—perhaps as something increasingly malleable—both through their online fan activities and their post-migration lives in Japan.

What I observed however was something very different than what I had expected. In contrast to the purported deterritorializing promise of online communications (Shirky 2008; Weinberger 2007; Bernal 2005; Sassen 2001a; Castells 1998, 1996), coupled to a withering of the relevance of the modern nation-state (Frenk & Moon 2013; Ferme 2013; for more classic



examples see Appadurai 1996; Sassen 1996; Guehenno 1995; Ohmae 1995; Fukuyama 1992), American fans in Japan actively participate in reproducing normative notions of Japanese national identity through accepting and affirming their perpetual status as non-Japanese. Although fan internet activities seemed to offer them the allure of acculturation, the chance to take on and become Japanese (defined by the social life and “cultural” practices they first observed from afar), fans were constrained by the implicit knowledge that this was impossible, a mere fantasy; as one white American fan confessed to me, she dreamed of being accepted as a native in Japan, though she quickly qualified that she knew she never would be.

In the chapters that follow then, I seek to understand how common sense notions that fix “Japaneseness” as naturally homogeneous and impenetrable subjectivize American fans. I argue specifically that, as otaku are made into “non-Japanese” (NJ) once they arrive in Japan, they confront these normative—and normatizing— notions every day as they move through the concrete spaces of Japanese cities and towns. Despite the continued utopic perception of the internet as connecting users across—and thereby deemphasizing—borders of all kinds, otaku online Japan-related activities are similarly framed and constrained; indeed, this subjectivizing passes easily beyond the local, crafted borders of the nation-state to intersect with fan fantasies and their initial imaginations and fascinations of Japan in myriad ways, as indeed these non-Japanese in turn codify what Japaneseness is for other “foreigners.” For example, otaku might blog about the frustrations of opening a Japanese bank account, photograph and circulate “Japanese Only” signs from restaurants and *onsen* (hot springs), translate and discuss recent news from the Japanese press, and create how-to-videos about finding jobs in Japan. Increasingly, American otaku are also directly employed in the production of the very same “Japanese” media commodities that brought them to Japan in the first place. How then do

national cultural notions circulate and materialize, both on and offline, and how do they impact the everyday realities of fans living in Japan? If subjectivation is not a “matter of simple indoctrination,” as Tomas Matza writes, but “a situated process through which the pushes and pulls of the everyday are negotiated” (2012: 808), what opportunities, and through what methods and means, do non-Japanese have to play with, evoke or reject a Japaneseness, framed for them as a singular ethnic, linguistic and cultural-ness (*minzoku*, 民族)]<sup>6</sup> that perpetually excludes them?

I find these questions even more relevant today when Japan is making a nationally coordinated push to “globalize” through, for example, Monkasho<sup>7</sup> grants like Super Global University (aimed at cultivating global human resources [グローバル人材, *guroubaru jinzai*]), the redesign of Tokyo as a “tourist-friendly” city ahead of the 2020 Olympics<sup>8</sup> and the promotion of *yasashii nihongo* (やさしい日本語) for use when speaking to foreigners.<sup>9</sup> This is in addition to ongoing state attempts through nation branding to harness the global popularity of its mass media for economic benefit. These initiatives co-exist with the government's continued refusal to relax immigration restrictions and open the borders (legally) to foreign workers to buffer rapid population decline. Despite this resistance, the number of documented foreign residents continues to rise. According to Ministry of Justice statistics for 2015, there were 88,675

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<sup>6</sup> Defined simultaneously as: people, race, nation and ethnic group, the term *minzoku* emerged during the formation of the Japanese state (Morris-Suzuki 1998: 32-33). I discuss this term and its usage in more detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, *Monbukagakusho* (文部科学賞) or more simply MEXT, is also referred to as Monbusho, which was its title before it merged with the Science and Technology Agency in 2001, and is more recently shortened to Monkasho which I use throughout the text.

<sup>8</sup> These are agendas that prioritize western modes of imagining about, and responding to, globalisms that are often fixed to the quantifiable metric of improving English competence among citizens, particularly in my experience, for Monkasho grants awarded to universities where faculty, staff and student TOEFL or TOEIC scores are tracked and targeted for improvement.

<sup>9</sup> *Yasashii nihongo* means simple or accessible Japanese. Described in a recent television show on Kanafuru TV as necessitated by the growing number of people in the world who are studying Japanese, examples of *yasashii nihongo* include the use of simplified phrases and vocabulary, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=121&v=6bqzKIGNuOU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=121&v=6bqzKIGNuOU).

American foreign residents in Japan (up from 70,891 in 2012).<sup>10</sup> What role then does the Japanese state play in this subjectivizing process, particularly in light of the government's move to revitalize the economy through nation branding and the global promotion of Japanese popular culture, which otaku participate in as both producers and consumers? More specifically, how do these and other state agendas intersect with popular public perceptions in Japan about the national body, made visible in everyday encounters, to interpellate foreign residents as non- (and never-going-to-be-) Japanese?

These questions are also more broadly relevant in an age where circulation, both actual and virtual, of objects and people is said to have intensified and where scholars continue to debate the impact of globalizing imaginaries on the world economy and relationships between nation-states (Bayart 2007: 28; see also Canclini 2014; Tsing 2000). The internet is often heralded as THE metaphor for these “unfettered” processes, at least as they have been advertised (“global connectivity!”) and popularly imagined.<sup>11</sup> My own interests instead have been in the agents who work at boundary maintenance, in particular, between national cultural identity divides, as well as within spaces and with objects and ideas that they later project as free flowing (Carlson & Corliss 2011; Carlson 2009). Many of these channeling and decision-making practices, often created or newly expanded as a result of increased transnational circulations, are actively hidden or ignored in popular globalization rhetoric; just as some globalization scholarship, Appadurai’s five “-scapes” for example, has been criticized for overlooking or

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<sup>10</sup> The rates are rising even faster for immigrants from Asia, particularly China (683,452 in 2012 to 788,865 in 2015) and Vietnam (53,542 to 128,486 in 2015). Of the 2,249,720 total visa holders and permanent residents in Japan in 2015, 1,778,544 were from Asia.

<sup>11</sup> In summary of this tendency towards utopian and other liberatory views, Gabriella Coleman lists the common themes of internet research: “communicative interactivity, flexibility, social connectivity, user-generated content, and creativity” (Coleman 2010a: 489). She critiques Clay Shirky (2008) and David Weinberger (2007) for this specifically.

eliding the structuring “flows” of financial capital and political power (Heyman & Campbell 2009: 132; for an example of similar criticisms outside anthropology see Sim 2006).

Although premised on internet and fan activities, this dissertation is concerned very specifically with the daily lives of American otaku living in Japan, and the sense-making narratives they employ here.<sup>12</sup> In making my analysis, I draw on 12 months of full time ethnographic data collection (from May 2013 to May 2014) with American fans in Tokyo and other foreign residents, followed by 18 months of part-time continued and follow-up research, in addition to pre-dissertation interviews and online research which I conducted over a series of several years both before and after coming to Tokyo. While I collect and discuss internet conversations and activities such as blog posts, message board discussions, news articles, and videos, these materials are always considered in light of their emergence in the everyday. Certainly, internet activities are stitched as one fluid conversation across the virtual to the actual (to borrow Tom Boellstorff's use of these terms [2009]; used in other contexts see for example, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), and back, where they submerge and re-emerge again. This embeddedness, while hardly novel, is only made starker by the mobile connectivity of new devices, yet bears repeating considering the tendency for academic consideration to cleave the two (even Boellstorff's examination of *Second Life* excludes attention to the “offline” however, see Golub 2010 for a rebuttal of this, and also Coleman 2010b). I try to emphasize then, where and when those materials are integrated, directly commented on or incorporated in conversation and activities in daily life whenever possible. I consider these internet productions and activities to be only one node on a large constellation of methods through which otaku attempt to negotiate and resist, but always also reproduce, their subjectivation as non-Japanese.

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed analysis of American otaku fan activities and practices in the US, see Ito et al. 2012; Napier 2007; Eng 2006.

## 1.1 "MORE JAPANESE": A THEORETICAL AND CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Steven, a fan living in Tokyo, once said to me that he felt he had to be, and often was, “more Japanese than a Japanese person.” We were walking together through the narrow streets of Takadanobaba, on the way to one of his favorite curry restaurants. We had already been turned away from a small French place, because we didn't have a reservation. I'd only been in Tokyo for a few months and I barely followed the quick, but stilted conversation he'd had with the waiter although I could understand his pointing to the reservation book and the exchange of body language that suggested we were out of luck. When I asked, he told me his Japanese was “survival” level; that he could get by with the daily things he needed for living. He'd grown particularly adept at navigating *Yahoo! Auctions* in Japanese, he said, so he could purchase new Japanese video games and related merchandise, mostly for friends abroad. (I did find when we arrived at the other restaurant that he had a sophisticated command of curry-related vocabulary that I also completely lacked.)

Because Takadanobaba is close to Waseda University, the station is surrounded by cheaper apartments and eateries. In fact, as Steve later explained, he was in the process of apartment hunting in the area hoping to move closer to some of his favorite restaurants. “Plus,” he told me, “Takadanobaba has the best arcade in Tokyo.” I told him that I had never been there so he took me on a detour to see it.

It was in navigating these small lunchtime streets together, in a neighborhood already crowded with students and office workers, that he told me about being *more Japanese*. “Maybe it's a bit different now,” he said, “but when I first got here, I was so focused on not making

mistakes. You know, saying *suimassen* (すいません, excuse me)<sup>13</sup> at the right time, and in the right way, making sure to start with that surprised, Aa! And sticking to the up and down arrows on the stairs in the JR station, which you know, aren't even consistently left and right. Just everything.” I nodded, thinking about what my own experience in the last few months had been like and the intensity of attention I devoted to watching the behavior and actions of the hundreds of people I encountered everyday, in an attempt to “get it right.” Along with Harold's *meishi* (名刺) blunder and the cacophony of critique it created, I found this effort and attention to discover and obey social norms a compelling invocation of the boundary making practices that non-Japanese negotiated. I use Steven's term, “More Japanese than a Japanese person” then as a way to think about how subjectivizing frames the everyday realities of otaku living in Tokyo. When Harold was critiqued for his failure to follow good *meishi* protocol—rules that dictate the appropriate storing, transferring, and possession taking of another person's business card—others around him reconfirmed his status as non-Japanese. They also implicitly located his actions in a debate about what it means to be a “good” foreigner. As I later learned, good foreigners try to fit in, to mimic well the consciousness, sensitivities and behaviors of the “real” Japanese people around them. They are not disruptive, they don't rock the boat, or complain about inequality, microaggressions and xenophobia. Indeed, good foreigners try, in all contexts and social situations, to be “more Japanese.” In turn, they complain about those they feel take advantage of their position as a Westerner, or don't respect Japanese Culture and ways of doing things. Most of all, bad foreigners are said to have only a superficial attachment to Japan, and in many ways then, don't “deserve” to be here.

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<sup>13</sup> A shortened colloquial version of the longer, *sumimassen* (すみません).

As I will show in the chapters that follow, this censure emerged over and over again in American fans' writing and speaking about what it meant to be residents in Japan, in their concerns, behaviors and goals, and for some, in their eventual return to the US—a moment many of the people I talked to articulated as giving up (trying to fit in) or being fed up (with their exclusion). I argue then, that this frame of evaluation, from good foreigner to the bad and superficial, emerges as a negotiation of, and even resistance to, subjectivizing processes. In this dissertation then, I look to understand: 1. how discourse of Japanese national identity is circulated transnationally and modified across state institutions and individuals, as it is acted on in conversation and activity both online and off (chapters 1, 2, 3); 2. how this discourse constrains categories of thought, action and being for American otaku as, subjectivized as non-Japanese, they recognize their otherness, made visible (chapter 4, 5); 3. how these otaku create, negotiate and enforce a field of opportunities for themselves and others within the limitations of Japanese national identity (chapter 6); and 4. how this production contributes to ongoing nation making for Japanese citizens and the “others” it articulates (chapter 3, 7). Answering these questions involves interrogating knowledge and claims about a “real Japan,” whether figured as an actual people or place (Hokenson 2010), or as a collection of practices (Iwabuchi 2002a), or some inherent quality that undergirds social life (Hendry 1995), as this construct is directly invoked in these processes.

### **1.1.1 American otaku as Japanese subjects**

Parodied in Saturday Night Live's *J-Pop America Fun Time Now*, a college-access cable show with the same name, two Caucasian otaku hosts dance and sing to anime-esque theme

songs and mimic the katakana-ization of English words in their speech (katakana is the Japanese phonetic script marking foreign loan words); for example, the hosts pronounce the word humor as something like “huumaru” while guest sounds like “gesuturu.”<sup>14</sup> The hosts are white and college-educated, from cities in Ohio and Michigan, and like most of the otaku I interviewed and spent time with, clearly well off enough to purchase clothes, books, movies, music and other merchandise related to their media interests. One video short from the series starts with the two hosts explaining, “We’ve never been to Japan, but it is our dream.” Later, when their invited guest explains her cosplay<sup>15</sup> outfit is based on a Japanese anime-inspired character she created called “Cherry Cherry a Rock and a Roll,” (rolling her r’s in impersonation of Japanese speech) the male host responds enthusiastically, “Oh, how very Japanese,” while the other adds, “Certainly, you are the most Japanese.” After some nervous laughter, their guest decides to add, “You two are *nihonjin* which is Japanese for Japanese.” As they continue to giggle, their offscreen Japanese language professor insists, waving a newspaper, “None of you are Japanese, okay. Also, you are riding a fine line between homage and racism, kids” (October 15, 2011).<sup>16</sup> In another episode, in response to the declaration by their guest that they all “look so very Japanese,” their professor interrupts to exclaim, “You’re white people!” after which he adds, “And if there is, you know, such a thing as a loving version of racism, I think you found it” (December 10, 2011).<sup>17</sup>

The behavior of these onscreen “Japan fans,” which audiences are positioned to read along with their professor as profuse, indeed racist, cultural appropriation, reflects the popular

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<sup>14</sup> In an obvious poke at the host’s limited knowledge, neither of these accurately represent the pronunciation of these words in Japanese.

<sup>15</sup> Short for costume play (in Japanese, コスプレ), the act of dressing up like characters from anime, manga or videogames.

<sup>16</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYYHfqcQGUM>.

<sup>17</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DwpXmTSojA>.



stereotype of American otaku as inappropriately and excessively interested in Japan.<sup>18</sup> Even as the hosts explain at the start of each show that they are not Japanese, this awareness drifts away as they continue to sincerely mimic (comically from the audience's perspective) Japanese speech as well as sing and dance, until they claim an inclusion that is later denied by their more (obviously) self-aware professor. While this perception of excessiveness has likely shaped the dismissive attitude of some researchers towards otaku and their experiences, the behaviors of these two *J-Pop America Fun Time* hosts reflect a very modern play with, and desire for, cultural identity and its embodiment in transnationally circulating commodities.

In Arjun Appadurai's classic consideration of globalization in *Modernity at Large* (1996), he argued that the increased circulations of both people and things bring about:

a peculiar new force to the imagination in social life today. More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before. [53]

However, Appadurai's examples are of mobile media and populations coming into contact that occupy congruent social fields.

...as Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul through satellite feeds from Korea, and as Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran...moving images meet deterritorialized viewers. [4]

Something else is at stake then when the transnational connections that viewers make, the nostalgia or longing they feel, are not "appropriately" aligned, and lack legitimation by blood, language, ancestry, or approved national belonging. Increasingly however, the global circulation and accessibility of diverse media make the pairing of previously categorically different people and things part of mundane everyday experience. Despite the conventional dismissal of otaku for

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<sup>18</sup> This perception spawned the pejorative term "weeabo," a shortened form of the slang word "Wapanese" [Western + Japanese] which circulates on English-language websites.

lacking a sense of proportion, it is perhaps important to consider, at the same time, the lengths to which consumer culture at large so often goes to, by design, to stoke just such forms of excessive consumption today. Indeed, otaku are encouraged to consume other cultural identities just as they might purchase or embody (through adapting fashions, appearance and speech) media texts, image and characters themselves. While otaku desire, in Ulf Hannerz's terms, to "engage with the Other," as they show "an intellectual and esthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences" (1996: 103, 105), this desire is fraught with contradiction and denial from the beginning, as otaku confront the knowledge of being "not Japanese" (Bellah 2003: 114) before they arrive in Japan, or even ever choose to migrate.

While I gloss otaku as geek, or more specifically as "Japan fan" (someone who takes up specifically, not an interest in Japanese media texts alone but an imagined Japan itself), the term remains contested (Ito et al. 2012: xi) and flexible and analytically imprecise (Eng 2006: 13). In Japanese, technically the definition of o-taku (お宅) is "your house/home" where the "o" is the honorific marker of politeness. The term is also a moderately polite way to say "you" in contrast to *anata* (あなた) which tends to be reserved for very close relationships, for example as a term of endearment used by women to their husbands where it is then translated as "dear" (although Japanese sentences in daily conversation often lack the use of personal pronouns altogether). Although there are different theories about the origin and use of otaku in Japan to mean "obsessive fan"—said to have been popularized in a 1984 article by the journalist Akio Nakamori—they all reflect perceptions of excessiveness. Volker Grassmuck suggests otaku, as adopted within the anime/manga fan subculture and even first among media producers, "symbolized a human relationship for which the other forms of saying 'you' would be too intimate" (Koichi Yamazaki cited in Grassmuck 1990). The sense of social isolation is implicit,

evoking the image of “sociopathic shut-ins out of touch with reality” for some (Ito et al. 2012: xi), since these fans don’t know when they should stop using the more formal *otaku* in conversations with those they have become friends with—inappropriately so, as it suggests “distance and detachment” (Grassmuck 1990). However, in his essay, *The Origins of “Otaku”* (2003), Lawrence Eng argues that “many *otaku* began using the label for themselves in proud defiance and half-joking self-deprecation.”

As the term circulated outside Japan, speculation as to its contextual meanings and origin also spread; as one American fan blogger detailed for others, the term in Japanese was meant to describe “someone who is *so* infatuated with something (a hobby, for example) that they don't ever leave their own home” (VegettoEX 2003)<sup>19</sup>—thus *otaku*. Although the excessive nature of *otaku*-ness is present in the Japanese origin and use of the term, its signal as *Japanese*, is of course absent. In English, the term *otaku* cannot escape its reference to the Japanese language, or its use as marking an interest in Japan more broadly. While Lawrence Eng has given the example of an anime *otaku* as someone who “would know the name of every animator who worked on his favorite show, maintains a database cataloging every piece of merchandise associated with that show...his most prized possession being a rare unused animation cel smuggled out of a production studio” (2006: 13), I do not use *otaku* to catalogue the actual specific nature of fan activities. In fact, because it still evokes negative connotations, many people I spent time with would resist this label; in earlier interviews, after I explained my focus on *otaku*, I was told, one after another, that I should really be talking to “this other person,” a “friend of a friend” type far more excessive in their interests (fans also insisted that, of course, they were much less “into” Japanese media than they had been when they were younger). Instead, I use the term to talk

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<sup>19</sup> Source: [http://www.daizex.com/general/ask/archive/2003\\_11\\_08.shtml](http://www.daizex.com/general/ask/archive/2003_11_08.shtml).

about a position of desire to an imagined Japan which is variously configured by otaku themselves. While Mimi Ito has said that “the international appeal of otaku culture is grounded precisely in its ability to resist totalizing global narratives such as Nationalism” (2012: xviii), American otaku, as I show, are extremely invested in consuming and reproducing these nationalized narratives.

In this dissertation then, I argue that American otaku are subjectivized as non-Japanese through their consumption of, and desire for, (largely state-sanctioned) Japanese national cultural identity, and by the structural forces that both enable their migration and support their relative exclusion from social life once in Japan. This subjectivity becomes the central defining point against which their experience as migrants is lived in the everyday, as otaku attempt to become *more Japanese*, and as they reinscribe these very boundaries onto other otaku both online and off, in Japan and out. Below I outline the background literature and theoretical approach which guides my analysis.

### **1.1.2 Media, transnationalism and the nation**

Research on media transnationalism and the nation-state has been influenced by attention to nation making (Rai 2009; Foster 2002; Rajagopal 2001; Chatterjee 1996), or diaspora (Androutsopoulos 2006; Bernal 2006; Ewing 2006; Axel 2004; Falzon 2004; Karim 2003; Miller & Slater 2000; Yang 1997), while a smaller subset has focused on the way imagined social lives are themselves increasingly made and remade in transnational fields (Darling-Wolf 2015; Castro & González 2014; see also Tomlinson 1999; Castells 1996; Morley & Robins 1995; Giddens 1990). Yet, individuals the world over may increasingly be able to access, not just a wider set of “imagined social lives,” as Appadurai famously argued (1996: 53), but a wider set of *actual* lived

social lives, where people don't just dream about, but actually do, "live and work in places other than where they were born" (6). At the same time the experience of living and working in places is also being transformed, as digital technologies enable remote working, while access—to "places" online or off—are becoming increasingly inaccessible for some (Andresson 2014; Fassin 2011). Even transnational corporations, which profit from the affordances of digital communications like teleconferencing and intraweb services can transform "local" workspaces into "foreign" ones through, for example, free trade zones (Sassen 2001a; Borja & Castells 1997). Subsequent labor issues, in particular those that consciously span, or couple, national borders such as outsourcing, offshoring and seasonal migration, often provoke nationalist anxieties and questions.

The affordances of digital technologies, mobile and near instantaneous access to "being-there" (Gray 2016; Postill 2015), are commonly thought to disrupt the production and experience of locality and the nation as they allow access for various communities to participate in, and even create, parallel, "third space" (Bhabha 1994), or virtual national identities (Whitaker 2004). This has already been accepted as a social fact for diasporas, who straddle borders of ethnicity and nation (Gupta & Ferguson 1997a; Malikki 1995), and their online transnational experiences (Axel 2008, 2001; Bernal 2005). Some research has further demonstrated that a diaspora is not specifically a community but "a globally mobile category of identification" (Axel 2004: 27) premised less on shared ethnicity or displacement and more on a feeling of connection to others through shared media forms (Conner 2012; see also Tsagarousianou 2004). Increasingly, scholars look to merge studies of media and mobility in order to better understand the interconnected nature of global media flows and the motility, or capacity for movement, of populations across and around national borders (Schiller & Salazar 2013).

A major premise of this dissertation is that “new” technologies and their infrastructures, such as miles of fiber optic cables and a landscape of cellphone towers, *do* participate in crafting contemporary possibilities for similitude and difference (Boellstorff 2016: 393). But while emerging technologies, even simple transnational satellite television signals, are often believed to challenge “definitions of national-identity” (Thussu 1998: 5), or allow citizens to “‘decode’ or elude the state” (Yang 1997: 290),<sup>20</sup> I suggest that their impact is not always so straightforward and not always so counter-hegemonic. As Koichi Iwabuchi argues: “national outlook is becoming even stronger and more pervasive in people’s everyday lives” (2015: 11). Media, which Mayfair Mei-hui Yang argues “are crucial components of transnationalism,” may “provide ways for audiences to traverse great distances without physically moving from local sites,” (1997: 288) however, these crossings become more fraught, both symbolically and practically, precisely because they elude physical, containable dimensions. At the same time, I argue that even virtual/digital movements of people and things today remain largely subject to regulation as they are channeled through fixed arenas of border crossing (Tsing 2000), or “border zones” (Steiner 2001), which are symbiotically being remapped and reimagined in response.

For American otaku, internet communication and the consumption of (now) readily available Japanese digital/digitized media like anime are quintessential “global flows” from within which they first articulate a desire for Japan. Yet, as I discuss, the commodified images and narratives they access are rarely consumed outside the knowledge that these materials are, in some fundamental way, distinctly separate from them; in other words, they are recognized as discourse and read as markers of Japaneseness, as otaku take pleasure in consciously articulating

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<sup>20</sup> Although Yang argues her effort is to “distinguish between nation and state” since she finds academic research has tended to use the two terms interchangeably (1997: 290), I rely on approaches in anthropology that already foreground their co-constitutive relationship (for classic examples, see Kelly & Kaplan 2001; Appadurai 1990, 1996).

and engaging with the signs of difference they read in media texts. In fact, cultivating this awareness and other esoteric knowledge about Japan is one prerequisite for otaku fandom (Napier 2007; Eng 2006). Along with expectations in otaku “communities of sentiment” (Appadurai 1996, 1990), the media that fans consume assist in articulating otaku desire for Japan as a longing for something distant and mysterious. The promise of virtuality that may be denied in material and embodied ways once otaku arrive in Japan speaks to the always enmeshed, but at times contradictory, experiences afforded by virtual and actual social experience. How otaku craft their enchantment, and where and when this discourse is activated in daily life for fans even before they migrate, is a critical focus of chapter 2.

### 1.1.3 Lifestyle/labor migration and Japan

A good deal has been written about blue or pink-collar immigration *to* Japan (Ford & Kawashima 2014; Takenaka 2014; Liu-Farrer 2011; Faier 2009; Tsuda 2003; Roth 2002; Sato 2001; Douglass & Roberts 2000; Oka 1994)—for example, those coming to fill a shortage in the 3Ks (*kitsui*, *kitanai*, *kiken*, or demanding, dirty, dangerous) work—as well as lifestyle migration *out of* Japan (Nagatomo 2014; Ono 2009, 2014; Sooudi 2007; Ben-Ari 2003); the first tends to situate migration as motivated by a pursuit for economic advancement, while the other positions consumer choice, for example access to idealized leisure or hobby pursuits, as the more central defining factor.<sup>21</sup> Migration studies, Seth Holmes argues, have continued to support an enduring dichotomy between the “voluntary, economic, and migrant on the one hand and forced, political, and refugee on the other” (2013: 17). This has led to an overemphasis on individual choice and a

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, economic advancement and the pursuit of an idealized life are always interconnected.

lack of attention to social structures and power inequalities. The emphasis placed on commodity fetishism and superficial otaku interest in Japan by some researchers, has meant a similar lack of insight to the critical structural forces of ongoing nation-work and the circulation of cultural commodities, which inform otaku decision-making and channel their movement.

A focus on the lack of otaku *realness*, an inability to care for or appreciate “Japan,” which also positions their emotional suffering as equally unreal, is perhaps a knee jerk reaction to their relative privilege, as a community perceived of as largely white, middle class and male consumers.<sup>22</sup> Otaku frustration with exclusion from Japaneseness, in having to confront and internalize being so completely other for perhaps the first time, is at least in part a product of their global economic and cultural privilege. Under this specter of “white privilege,” they remain a somewhat controversial research group; as a result, it becomes more acceptable to suggest they aren’t also real migrants (as if sharing the status itself might some how devalue the plight and material suffering of others like Mexican labor migrants to the US). Yet, as I will show, an analysis of otaku as *merely* traveling for the purposes of consuming cultural Japanese lifestyles not only overlooks the economic and bureaucratic structuring forces which channel their movement, it also explicitly supports a system of erasure—a power invested in masking these very forces, which further participate in, as I will discuss, crafting otaku interest in Japan in the first place. Indeed, Benson and O’Reilly clarify that the term lifestyle migration, “does not preclude the possibility of economic factors; to demonstrate that relative privilege may coexist with precarity and vulnerability in ways that absolute understandings of wealth, privilege and affluence might render invisible” (2015: 21). Otaku migration to Japan may seem to have little to

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, my community was relatively diverse and almost equally divided between men and women. While that doesn’t discount their privilege, they were not necessarily so devoid of experiences of outsiderhood, though this assumption is still a common stereotype wielded by both academics and a broader public.



do with the volatile state of border control today, which racializes, criminalizes and excludes would-be migrants, submitting them to, often violent, state disciplining through deportation and detainment (Fassin 2011), yet it has a good deal to demonstrate about the workings of non-coercive state power today; as it is internalized in polite and essentially conciliatory ways, producing desire while limiting the ability to cross over, otaku subjectivation invokes one hegemonic bind of modern self-governing, as otaku learn to desire and inhabit, and then remake themselves from within these limitations.

Under continued economic recession, a good deal of scholarly attention has turned to part-time and unstable forms of work in Japan (for example, freeters, フリーター) brought on by neoliberal economic reform and a decline in lifetime employment (see for example, Goodman et al. 2012; Huiyan 2011; Driscoll 2007; Genda 2007; Smith 2006; Mori 2005; although Slater has critiqued the idea that this form of social stability was ever actually accessible for all, 2009) and the resulting reworking of sociality in Japan (Allison 2013). But less attention has been devoted to the rise of knowledge workers, or “immaterial laborers” (Lazzarato 1996) and the transnational nature of labor and production practices linking Japan intimately beyond the nation (Kumiko Kawashima’s recent look at Japanese IT workers staffing call centers in northeastern China is one important exception, 2017). Monica Heller explains that today, “work itself, and the wide variety of activities involved in sustaining the relationships on which the circulation of resources depends, now requires degrees and forms of literacy new to our era” (Heller 2010: 104). For otaku, this literacy is a desire for—and an ability to navigate across—cultures (to desire, and to desire to make in the image of, the other), along streams of media entertainment objects and production practices. Heller argues that this type of labor is in fact an extension of the “appropriating” and commodifying of “older nation-state ideologies of language, identity,

and culture” so visible in tourism and nation branding (Heller 2010: 105), as these practices move increasingly into the manipulation, creation, and in particular the marketing of media as *cultural* texts both new and old. In these endeavors, otaku interests and new state forms of nation making, under the rubric of branding, productively collide.

In fact, as language workers and consumers otaku are actively recruited by the Japanese state, and then structurally denied as residents under historical perceptions of Japan’s (racial, social, linguistic, even economic "mass-middle class") homogeneity (Befu 2001). The promise that Japan is not a society open to immigration, and therefore is implicitly also not multicultural, is repeated frequently by current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as he insists that Japanese women and robots should be the first solution to Japan’s “graying society.”<sup>23</sup> As Abe explained during a UN general assembly in 2015: “I would say that before accepting immigrants or refugees, we need to have more activities by women, elderly people and we must raise our birth rate. There are many things that we should do before accepting immigrants” (McCurry 2015). In pushing for a permanent seat on the UN council, Abe also argues that Japan’s contribution would be through the elimination of international forces such as war and poverty which produce refugees in the first place—implying they would still be unwelcome in Japan (McCurry 2015).

Yet, positioning Japan as already without immigrants and refugees involves, for example, ignoring portions of the archaeological record that demonstrate the intensive influx of migrants to the Japanese islands from the Asian mainland over millennia (Edwards 1997, 1983) and from Western and other continents beginning in the 16th century, while playing up and publicizing the depiction of a homogenous rice-cultivating predecessor who has always been culturally and racially Japanese (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994)—as Walter Edwards writes, supporting a “2,000-year

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<sup>23</sup> Japan is also notoriously reluctant to accept refugees, approving only 3 applicants out of a pool of about 8,500 in the first half of 2017 and accepting only 28 in total in 2016 (Usuda 2017).

legacy as a rice-growing nation” (1991: 22; see also Edwards 2003). Clare Fawcett has described how public recreations of the sites of Japan’s Yayoi ancestors (300 BC-300 AD) work precisely this way—emphasizing a connection between their cleanliness (distantly placed trash pits, or middens) to demonstrate the naturalness of this proclivity today (Fawcett 1995, 1996). As I will show, policies around visa and other regulations such as fixed term working contracts and relegating long-term residents to perpetual “visitor” status (even 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants such as the Korean *zainichi* population, originally settled by the government and later stripped of their resident status), reflect a distinctly modern post-war reinvention of history under the projection and protection of Japan’s “cohesion” (Usuda 2017; Coates 2013; Morris-Suzuki 2010).

Yet not all marginalized communities in Japan make the same reaction to their discursive separation, which is variously classed and raced. Joshua Roth and Takeyuki Tsuda both have shown the way some Brazilian *nikkeijin* (日系人, of Japanese ancestry) who migrate to Japan have responded to social marginalization by embracing their Brazilianness (Roth 2002: 117). As Tsuda writes: “they distance themselves from their previous transnational ethnic affiliation with the Japanese and assert a much stronger Brazilian counter-identity in opposition to Japanese society” (2003: 155). By dint of Japan’s political and historical connections to the US in the post-war period, many American otaku already occupy a rhetorically positive space in popular imagination, where white faces fill fashion magazines, grace train station advertisements for cosmetics or learning English, and even help to sell insurance, or warn about male pattern baldness.



**Figure 1.** A poster about male pattern baldness at the doctor's office (photo by author)

At the same time, migrants in general are excluded by state nation making and imagining projects, and atomized away from each other so as to remain, in fact, marginal. Though some might argue that their failure to enter Japanese society, such as joining a *nakama* (仲間, Joy Hendry translates this as “inside group” [2017: 42]), reflects their inability to appropriately acculturate, it is important to remember that their exclusion is structurally maintained; indeed, drawing the line between appropriate Japanese lifestyles and ways of living doesn't just privilege normative notions of homogeneity in Japan (neglecting vibrant forms of social, linguistic and ethnic diversity), it is itself an act of the boundary maintenance techniques I seek to analyze here.

Just as the state participates in discursively separating young American migrants from the “Japanese,” monographs in the field of Japan anthropology have tended to reflect and reproduce this division, rather than clearly articulate it as a working of power. Although classic anthropological attention to the production of Japanese national identity has detailed the incorporation, as counter point, of the image of the West (see for example Befu 2001; Ivy 1995;

Iwabuchi 1994; Harootunian 1993) they have rarely considered the transnational nature of this process or the role Westerners play in its practical production and maintenance. This has kept scholars from asking more directly about the impact of non-nationals, or otherwise marginalized or deviant communities, on the production of the Japanese "imagined nation" (Anderson 2001; for a critique of this tendency see Sooudi 2008; Margolis 2002, 2008). Indeed, anthropology itself has played a role in replicating nationalizing ideas, and as Karen Kelsky argues, has "tirelessly reproduced, normative constructs of 'Japanese Culture'" (Kelsky 2001: 28-29). Consider Joy Hendry's comment, in the second edition to her well known book *Understanding Japanese Society* (1995), that Japan has maintained "her own characteristics in spite of incursions of foreign ideas" (6) and that "a persistent sense of Japanese identity runs steadily through, rather like the imperial line" (18). Karen Kelsky argues this assertion of "domestication," (as the Japanese "transform foreign objects and concepts...into entirely Japanese, and hence benign, cultural forms"), "leaves intact the sanctity of the national/cultural border" (2001: 29-30). This is reflected in the protestation by scholars that otaku are not interested in the "real" Japan, and that they instead have only a fetishistic or superficial attachment to its signs and simulacra.

#### **1.1.4 Subjectivation, power and the state**

Throughout this dissertation, I use "nation" in the social constructivist sense: not a thing, entity, person or fixity, but an ongoing structuring device, a disciplining process of boundary maintenance through the continual rearticulation of, what Bourdieu called, a symbolic "field" (1993). I do this to continually call into question the notion that there is such a thing as a "real

Japan.” At the same time, however, I will show the way a real Japan is in fact instantiated, circulated and consumed transnationally in the everyday as discourse. As this discourse crosses boundaries of all kinds (geographic, institutional, industry, virtual) to frame commodities, rituals and narratives as Japanese, it in turn, creates possibilities for social relations among those who find they are divided by the very borders materialized in this process. As such, it has tangible consequences on the way individuals who come in contact with, and take up, its realness are subjectivized.

### **1.1.5 The state making the subject**

In making my analysis, I borrow from well established theories on the notion of subjectivation in order to demonstrate contemporary processes of national boundary maintenance (in particular, developed by Althusser 1971 and Butler 1997a, 1997b, 2004, but especially Foucault 1981, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1993, 2008). I examine this incarnation of subjectivizing in the intertwining of seemingly contradictory practices: online communications (crossing or even defying various borders) and nation branding (fixing the bounded nation as commodity for economic effect). I see this primarily reflected in the creation of a field of social relations (Japanese versus non-Japanese) and discourse (what it means to be Japanese), that I argue both constrain and frame individual choices and experiences—and in this example, shape the “possible field of actions” (Foucault 1982: 790) for those defined in this very process as peripheral to it.

As subjectivation is the realization of a self *in relation to others* (Racnière 1992: 60, my emphasis; Foucault 1982), it is hardly a new component of national boundary maintenance.

Migration itself, as a form of social experience, has already been well documented as a site where insider/outside categories are positional; continually evoked, contested and redrawn by both migrants and non-migrants (Grillo 2008; Ewing 2006; Sharp 1993) as well as agents of the state (Tuckett 2015; Fassin 2011; Fuglerud 2004). Foucault considers the state, in general form, as a primary structure defining the ways modern individuality is “shaped...and submitted to a set of very specific patterns” (1982: 783)<sup>24</sup> and in Althusser's famous example, the self is subjectivized by state ideological discourse (1971), which “has the function...of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects...[through] *interpellation* or hailing (Althusser 1971: 171, 174, emphasis in the original). Althusser and Foucault both argue that the state is motivated, as the Christian church was before it, to create an “inner view,” a subjectivity that normalizes state power (Habermas 1976), and the socio-economic contexts it creates (for Althusser, these contexts are the relations of production).<sup>25</sup>

Yet these views only implicitly articulate that subjectivizing—in the differentiation practices of nation-work (Surak 2013: 8)—also creates subjects out of those who seem to be (conspicuously) *not* hailed by the state or other authorizing body. And while the state is tasked with making culture and national belonging appear fixed and self-evident, to show the nation and state as coeval (Appadurai 1996: 39), this occurs often under substantial disjunctures and disparities (Gupta 2012; Rosaldo 2003; Kelly & Kaplan 2001; Tambiah 1996). Today, national identity is a frame that states may be invested in realizing precisely because of contemporary

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<sup>24</sup> In fact, Foucault argues that power relations in general are now largely subsumed under state control, where they are “elaborated, rationalized, and centralized in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions” (Foucault 1982: 793). For Foucault however, this does not mean that they also remain external from the individual or entirely under state purview, as I discuss below.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Foucault argues that it was through themes in Hebrew texts that “a strange technology of power treating the vast majority of men as a flock with a few shepherds” first began to evolve (Foucault 1988: 63).

experiences of rupture, often symbolized by the perceived pulls of globalizing processes (Foster 2002: 3-4): for example, multinational corporations which seem to erode nation-state sovereignty and power over decision-making, economies fluctuating on distant shockwaves and their outcomes (the 2008 financial crisis in Japan is called the Lehman Shock, リーマン・ショック), and populations moving more aggressively both online and off. Indeed, scholars have argued that national gatekeeping practices (even the practical means for increased surveillance and detention of moving bodies) have been reinvigorated as a result of contemporary global flows of people and things (Fassin 2011; Pratt 2005; Fuglerud 2004). Against the impression today that “borders, distances and regulations have less relevance” (Andreescu 2016: 145), these gatekeeping practices often expressly work to de-legitimize the claim of national belonging for groups such as immigrants and refugees (“border-crossers *of a certain kind*, James 2014: 209, emphasis in the original), and other minority or migratory communities fighting for political rights and recognition who push against the salience of the national (Holmes 2013; Rosaldo 2003; Foster 2002; Rouse 1991; in the case of Japan, see Hankins 2014; Tsuchiya 2014).

Although nation branding appears to target audiences outside local boundaries in direct conversation with (the market for) global flows (as national culture is made consumable, for example, to bolster tourism and grow economic “soft power” [Nye 2004]), it remains as much a discussion about, and modern articulation of, state sponsored nation-making. In chapter 3 then, I consider the framing of Japanese media exports as “culture for sale,” in the explicit branding efforts of the Japanese government. As a specific set of practices, culture made material to be leveraged for economic, political or social “amelioration” (Yúdice 2004), nation branding emerges in connection to post-millennial insecurities over eroding cohesion and control of the nation that is always in conversation with the histories of state development, bureaucracy



formation, language standardization and other specific nation-making projects such as migration control. In this chapter, I explore these histories with an ethnographic look at one recent Monkasho program designed to capitalize on the global popularity of Japanese media items. In order to understand the ideas being leveraged in such government projects, I consider the conscious and transformative process of producing the Japanese state and its national people during the height of the Meiji Reformation (1868-1912). Not only did this period involve deliberate and rapid modernizing tactics (in the creation of Western style infrastructure in railroads, post offices and other public works which has been well discussed, Hendry 1995), it also significantly reworked popular perceptions of history while forging new relevant and resonating myths (Gluck 1985). At the same time, it involved an equally conscious, though typically inconsistent, reworking of borders such as the locating of the Ainu and Ryukyu Island peoples in relation to the national(izing) center (Morris-Suzuki 1998; Batten 2003).<sup>26</sup> Today, these histories play a role in shaping the Japanese state's conscious and calculated move to globalize, articulated by some as a necessary move to curb inward looking nationalistic perspectives, but by others as a necessary response to the wave of globalization/Westernization (as these terms are often used synonymously) overtaking and perhaps threatening the nation today,<sup>27</sup> recently visualized in popular media and advertisements by confused foreign tourists arriving for the 2020 Olympics.

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<sup>26</sup> This kind of recasting occurred again drastically in the post-war period, as Japan's mythological system collapsed and the country was occupied by the US (Fawcett 1995, 1996; Hudson 2005, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> In my personal experience at a small national university, the first perspective is frequently presented as justification by faculty, while the latter is more commonly voiced by Japanese students. This is also reflected in descriptions of the purpose of Monkasho grants, such as The Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development ("a funding project that aims to overcome the Japanese younger generation's 'inward tendency'" [<http://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/highered/title02/detail02/sdetail02/1373895.htm>]), in addition to the Super Global University grant, known as Top Global University Project in English, which I mentioned above.

Entangled in these histories is a great deal of academic and journalist work in Japanese and English that perpetuates the image of Japan as inaccessible to “outsiders” and ultimately unknowable. These works achieve this in part through a discursive reification of a “real” Japan. Because this literature also—in addition to other forms of English-language mass media—participates as discourse about Japaneseness (and gets reincorporated like a funhouse mirror in projections of national uniqueness [Iwabuchi 1994]),<sup>28</sup> it is against these accessible narratives that fan engagements are framed as both superficial and *not real*. In fact, as I will show these very categories reemerge in otaku migrant evaluations of, and talk about, each other.

### 1.1.6 The subject making the subject

In his study of the impact of modern techniques of medicine on subjectivity, Nikolas Rose argued that personalized medicine (care tailored by individual genetic code) *may* “make human individuality the object of positive knowledge,” but it “is not,” he continues, “‘subjection’ in the sense of domination and the suppression of freedom—it is the *creation* of subjects that is at stake here” (Rose 2007: 110, emphasis in the original). Judith Butler has added that through “subjection” individuals enact their subject positions by taking up and internalizing behavioral social norms and “model[s] of obedience” (Butler 1997b: 85), which also work to produce and restrict desires and “circumscribe the domain of a livable sociality” (21). As Althusser first argued, a subject freely “accept[s]...subjection,” and in turn, makes “the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’” (Althusser 1971: 169). For Foucault, subjection is realized and

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<sup>28</sup> Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) is one significant example.

similarly regulated through self-governance [1982, 1993]—as power “pervades the interiority” of the subject (Butler 1997b: 89) it also becomes decoupled from “a centralized state apparatus” (Butler 1997b: 6).<sup>29</sup> However, Foucault’s theory of power also suggests that it:

is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized. [1982: 790]

Friedrich Kittler echoes Foucault, writing: “If power still commands anything at all, then in sheer paradoxicality: freedom” (2015: 31). In contrast to Rose’s suggestion then, it is precisely the *creation* of subjects that Foucauldian “subjection” takes up. While Butler presents a similar reading of Foucault’s “subjectivation of the prisoner,” clarifying that discourse doesn’t act *on* the body or pre-existing subject, but participates in forming it (Butler 1997b: 84, see also Althusser 1971: 164), just as power “*enacts* the subject into being” (13, emphasis in the original), she remains concerned over the central dilemma articulated by Rose: “How can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency?” (Butler 1997b: 10).<sup>30</sup>

Foucault, however, does not preclude agency on the part of subjects; in fact, he shows that agency, the ability for individuals to make decisions, act and in turn exert power over others, can only come to be from within subject relations that are constituted by and through subjectivizing processes—at the intersection of techniques of dominance and techniques of the self (1993: 203). Butler similarly acknowledges that power “produces modes of reflexivity *at the same time* as it limits forms of sociality” (1997b: 21, emphasis mine; see also Butler 1997b: 83-

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<sup>29</sup> Butler critiques Althusser’s primary focus on the state apparatus as a constraint on his analysis (1997b: 6).

<sup>30</sup> In fact, as she points out this dualism plagues modern theories of the subject and returns repeatedly to this question through her work *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b) in order to unravel it (for other attempts to overcome this dualism c.f. Bourdieu 1991, Touraine 1992).

84, 2004: 41); in this way subjects are “simultaneously erased and empowered” (Macgilchrist 2012: 435).<sup>31</sup> Subjectivation then doesn’t eliminate resistance, instead it engenders it along certain discursive lines or channels, for example through state-sanctioned categories, well-worn communicative events, performances and other embodied norms of thinking and acting.

Yet, social rules are “also enabling instruments of action” (Rebughini 2014: 4; c.f. Habermas 1987, Giddens 1991), and can be co-opted and even simply mis-recognized (Althusser 1971, Butler 1997b: 95). Foucault also argues that the creation of subjects is never complete, leaving possibilities for “margins of resistance” (Rebughini 2014: 8). What’s more, individuals do not internalize power relations “in mechanical or fully predictable ways” (Butler 1997b: 19), as subjects negotiate constraints using “imagination and creativity” (Rebughini 2014: 3). Many scholars after Foucault articulate the idea that “fields of possibilities” are containers for intimate action and decision from within which actors negotiate multiple and contingent subject hoods, and in turn, subjectivize, or name others (Youdell 2006: 518, also see Butler 1997a: 29). Tomas Matza echoes these points in his consideration of the subjectivizing work of psychotherapists in post-Soviet Russia when he argues that “one must navigate ways of knowing, being, and living that are overdetermined and may entail an unpalatable complicity but are, nonetheless, not dictated” (Matza 2012: 806). And in her analysis of Muslim youth in Australia (homogenized as “Muslim” by their predominantly white teachers), Deborah Youdell borrows Butler’s concept of “discursive agency” to similarly argue that these students “render themselves through the possibilities for practices of self...that subjectivation brings” (2006: 512). Both examples also

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<sup>31</sup> In Felicitas Macgilchrist’s ethnographic example, Holocaust education in Germany socializes students to normative notions of white, heterosexual families at the same time as it gives students from diverse backgrounds the tools to “claim their particular right to a better life in terms of universal rights” (Macgilchrist 2012: 434-435). It is though this simultaneity and tension then that, “A ‘minority subject’ is simultaneously erased and empowered” (Macgilchrist 2012: 435), although I extend this statement to acts of subjectivation in general.

show the way individuals are subjected by others in their communities during mundane interactions that are in conversation, but may not always be aligned, with state bureaucratic processes and the discursive practices of nation making.

It isn't only the Japanese state then (and its institutions) who plays a role in the symbolic revitalization of nation-ness, in framing media productions and daily practices as "Japanese," or in enforcing the borders of these seemingly common sense boundaries. In fact, the distributed nature of power, particularly in Foucault's analysis, articulates that the state, what it is and can be, is imagined by its citizens (and I argue, its others) and similarly constrained as subjectivizing processes don't flow from the top but are articulated across the individual and institution, linking the two. We can see subjectivation then as a distributed process, shared by many actors and elements, through a discourse that comes to be in everyday practice and action (Althusser 1971, Butler 1993, 1997b); and we can see discourse—in this case, of salient national identities—not just as a fixed index of materials, words or government projects<sup>32</sup> but a shifting and uneven process that comes to be from moment to moment, as individuals work to normalize what is (Foucault 1981). Indeed, Ernesto Laclau clarifies that discourse, "is not essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it" (2005: 68, emphasis in original). Subjectivizing emphasizes this diffuse working of power, implicated in both broadly categorizing nations in popular consciousness and in the minute daily decision makings and relationships formed in the actions of individuals as they first recognize these categories and relations (Foucault 1982: 781; Macgilchrist 2012: 420)

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<sup>32</sup> Butler argues that Foucault's concept of discourse emerges precisely in retaliation to Althusser's "sovereign model of interpellative speech" which does not account for subjectivation outside "its instantiation as the spoken word" (Butler 1997: 6).

and then undertake to maintain and reconfirm them in the face of significant ambivalence, confusion, disagreement and change. And as individuals constitute themselves against uncertainty, and against their “others,” they in turn exert power over them (Foucault 1988a: 39; Butler 1997a: 29, Youdell 2006: 518). Though the state may attempt to consciously and meticulously draw boundaries and police virtual and actual—and even moral (Tartoussieh 2011)—national borders and their representations (Axel 2002: 240), individuals often engage in reactionary and indirect, though no less effective, tactics for boundary maintenance. As a result, I am less interested in the way the Japanese state acts on otaku directly (although, of course, they do so very deliberately) and more interested in how state agendas intersect with public perceptions about the national body, in a process which frames the interactions of Japanese nationals and their others *as* the recognition and maintenance of (linguistic, racial and cultural) difference.

Throughout then, I examine the field of possibilities, for thought, action and being, that confronts American otaku living in Tokyo. Chapters 4 and 5 specifically present an ethnographic analysis of the commonsensical elements, words and actions that shape otaku daily experience. I triangulate the activation of discourse here in the everyday—the recycling and discursive application of common sense national tropes by individuals, in the creation of a self that is not-Japanese—through consideration of a variety of venues, experiences, outcomes and narratives. These manifest most commonly in mundane interactions and very public encounters with strangers, colleagues, neighbors, and also state and bureaucratic institutions and systems, and in the stories otaku later tell about these moments. It is these encounters that subjectivize most concretely, for they are articulated precisely this way by otaku themselves. Chapter 6 is focused on the inward turn this othering produces, as otaku and other non-Japanese create their own

fields of acceptable being for themselves and other foreigners they engage, or imagine, both online and off; in other words, otaku negotiate their exclusion through a continuum of critique fixed on the actions of other non-Japanese. I see this boundary maintenance as a necessary negotiation of, and resistance to, their symbolic (though not always actual) exclusion from Japaneseness. As I discuss in chapter 7, this process is amplified as otaku contribute directly to discourse production when they circulate narratives of Japanese “culture” (Youtube videos such as *25 Weird Things about Japan*), and especially when foreign residents also increasingly contribute to the production of *real* Japanese mass media such as videogames and anime from which otaku “read” Japan in the first place.

Despite the hegemony of the homogenous *minzoku*, as Japan’s low birthrate threatens future economic stability and immigration continues to rise, today the landscape of Japaneseness is being re-written along many trajectories. The 2015 selection of a half-Japanese-half-Black-American as the Japanese representative for the Miss Universe competition and the 2016 selection of a half-Indian-half-Japanese woman for Miss World both signal the increased presence of the notion of “us” as a question in public consciousness, if not yet in actual debate; an “us” who still, for now, largely remains not-black and not-half of something else. At the same time possibilities for discussion continue to be muted by legitimized classification schemes represented by terms like “half” (*haafu*, ハーフ), a lexical marker of purity as common sense and unquestionable. As one Twitter user noted in protest after the 2016 selection for Miss World Japan, “I don’t mean to discriminate against races or appearances, but are the ‘haafu’ people given preferential treatment in beauty contests these days?” (@cyokuri cited in *The Japan Times*, Sep 5, 2016). Non-Japanese experience is similarly marked by narratives of exclusion and impermanence, even for those who choose to settle permanently; this is reflected in the questions

that foreigners are almost always asked when they meet or are introduced to new Japanese acquaintances: “Where are you from?” “When did you come?” and “How long do you plan to stay?” Here, boundary maintenance materializes in everyday activities and conversations. I conclude in chapter 7 by considering the role otaku play as labor migrants in this process. As they harness their fan interests in service of “Japan-produced” export commodities, and as they find themselves in temporary and uncertain conditions in Japan brought on by state policies, I suggest their motilities may participate in reworking the content, if not the symbolic demarcation, of Japaneseness.

## **1.2 LOCATING THE FIELD**

In her analysis of public protests in Moscow throughout 2011 and 2012 while she was physically in Ireland, Patty A. Gray writes that she “followed” participation in street demonstrations through portals such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube (along with their Russian counterparts), which she kept “running simultaneously on multiple devices” (2016: 502). After describing the way this method gave her an opportunity to transcend the physical limitations of presence on the ground and to observe multiple demonstrations dispersed throughout the city simultaneously, Gray ultimately asks if the opportunity to “be then,” to be present in time if not actually “there” in the field, is “a legitimate form of participant observation;” “Can I do anthropology this way?” she wonders (502).

In challenging the limitations of the localized field site, virtual methods like Gray’s device-based following disrupt how anthropologists conceptualize what they do as “on the ground,” and the place-based assumptions, or the primacy, of being-there. Gray also argues that



these “being-then” methods push beyond Arjun Appadurai's query (2016: 502), where he argues that ethnography must “capture the impact of deterritorialization on the imaginative resources of lived, local experiences” (Appadurai 1991: 52). Since at least the 1990s, the relationship between “place” and ethnographic research has been at the forefront of thinking about the relevance of anthropological methods to such “new” forms of lived experience, particularly under conditions of globalization and virtualization (for classic examples see Fog Olwig & Hastrup 1997; Gupta & Ferguson 1997b; Stoller 1997; Appadurai 1991). For example, in his study of hip-hop in Japan, Ian Condry writes that complex global flows “can only be studied ethnographically through extended research in local sites” (2001: 384). As Condry insists that “One of the tenets of anthropological fieldwork is that you cannot understand a people without being there” (Condry 2006: 5), he wonders where, in the case of a globally circulating music genre, is the “there” (Condry 2001: 374). Condry’s dilemma reflects the concern over locating fieldwork in geographic places generally, and, as Gray’s questions also show, the continuing perception of ethnography as an inherently place-based method.

In Condry’s case, as “rappers, magazine writers, and record company people” insisted the “actual site” of the hip-hop genre was the local club (2001: 374), at least one “there” was gradually revealed to him. This revelation reflects one response to the challenges globalization poses to the anthropological fieldsite as traditionally imagined: a rhetorical shift from place-centered to more object- or practice-centered fieldwork. At the same time, anthropologists like Condry look to their subjects for an understanding of (the performance of) place and the local rather than assume them as given.<sup>33</sup> Gray after all, similarly argues that those participating in

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<sup>33</sup> In fact, Condry writes that, “My fieldwork assumes an ethnographic approach that is performative rather than place-based” (2006: 6).

Moscow were incorporating the same portals and devices in their experience of the tumultuous events of the protests, as they posted, shared and blogged about them together (2016: 504).

In the case of my own methods and analysis, whether of the virtual or the actual, no clear central locality emerged. I met and talked to people, and hung out with them on trains, in cafes and bars, convenience stores and malls, government offices and buildings, on the telephone and the chat room, and too many web pages to catalogue. There was no space, in the US or Japan or even online, that I could reliably return to or argue was a regular field site, just as there was no predictable location where otaku pointed to, unlike Condry's hip-hop performers and the nightclub (2006: 5), as "the place" that was necessary to understand what they did as fans, or what life was like for them in Tokyo. In the early phone and face-to-face interviews I conducted while still in the US, otaku were often laconic when talking about what they actually did online, and probably, being unfamiliar with what took shape there, I didn't know how to draw it from them. Initially, it seemed a topic unsuited to semi-structured interviewing where otaku always seemed more interested in explaining how it would be better for me to talk to some other fan, a classmate or an acquaintance they knew, who they would point out was a *real* (excessive) Japan fan-atic.

For the URL locations I did have, for the particular websites I heard repeated as online places to visit (for example, DeviantArt, Gaia, Crunchyroll), I could go and observe conversations archived from a sometimes recent past that also continued to evolve over time; as fans debated and performed, but also went away and learned things and then came back and shared their excitement. But initially, I was often lost to their significance and to the context of meaning, which supported otaku activities *across* various online spaces. As I found the otaku I interviewed reused certain terms or concepts, or shared among them similar stories and ideas

(but with often, I found, generational variations between older and younger otaku as I discuss in chapter 2), I realized it was more useful to follow particular “texts” based on these emergent themes, rather than endlessly troll the same online places.

The where of being-in-place once I got to Tokyo, however, was harder at first to determine. Although in Condry’s case the “there” was gradually revealed to him in practice and discussion, as he asked around about the place-based activities of the music scene and gradually became an insider, no similar central location seemed relevant to the questions I was asking, to what I wanted to learn about the everyday for otaku in Japan. Indeed, I struggled to conceptualize what that everyday was and where I could physically go to find it. Luckily, I got my start in research by attending a weekly *nomikai* (飲み会, drinking party, or get-together), for (mostly) foreigners working in the Japanese videogame industry, where attendees spent time talking, and sometimes arguing, about what life in Japan was like for them. But at first, the *nomikai* seemed exceptional, as did many of the people there; they appeared successful, most were established, they seemed to speak Japanese (some insisted to me that they were fluent speakers after only a year or two), they made a livable amount of money, and a few were even relatively famous in the world of videogames. Those at the *nomikai* tended to be older and counted Japanese videogames, rather than anime or manga, as the source of their interest in Japan; they seemed different from the other college-aged fans I had interviewed back home, who told me they were heading to Japan to teach English or do a study abroad program.

It was during my second job interview just a few weeks after getting to Tokyo that I made several important realizations about my methods, and the location of my “fieldsite.” I was interviewing for a small English language school owned by an Australian resident and his Japanese wife. There were three job hopefuls, including me, around a small table, in chairs better

fit for elementary students, in a back office cramped with textbooks. The owners of the school had us take turns explaining our work background and performing our various competencies. At one point, they tested our language skills, asking the others each in turn to give directions in Japanese from their home to the school, and me, to explain how to get back to the train station from the room we were in. The others seemed to relish this opportunity to show off their speaking skills and specialized knowledge about Japan. One candidate, an American, highlighted his love of anime and work as a freelance artist, while a British resident described her training to become a sake master and the part-time work she did taking tourists to sake tastings throughout the city.<sup>34</sup>

After this interview experience, I realized that in all the proposals I drafted before I arrived, I never predicted (despite my early interviews) that many of the people I would need to talk to were fans working at boutique English-language education schools known as *eikaiwa* (英会話, literally, English conversation). I also understood in this moment that, rather than any particular location, tracking otaku performances of expertise, competency, fandom and acculturation in the everyday (as I had done virtually) was key to shaping my participant observation; just as Condry described of his own methods, I would take a “performative rather than place-based” approach (2006: 6). In reflecting on multi-sited fieldwork, George Marcus has more recently argued that, “such research pushes beyond the situated subject of ethnography towards the system of relations which define them” (Marcus 2011: 19). It was precisely the relations between otaku themselves and their interactions with, and navigations of daily Japanese social life that I articulated I would need to “follow” across multiple sites. In order to make this

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<sup>34</sup> It isn't that unusual for non-Japanese applying to teach English, even for full-time positions, to have other part-time jobs. I discuss this in more detail in chapter 4.

manageable, I realized how my own trajectory, as I went through the same process of settling in and looking for work, could provide a critical frame for both thematic organization and access.

For better or worse my data collection—in the places I traveled and thoughts that I had and the people who I spent the most time with—was also profoundly shaped by my lack of funding for this research. In the end, I did what many young Americans (though I was no longer young) do when they get here: I taught English. Although it wasn't initially part of any intentional research design, I was later extremely grateful (after I'd found a job and knew I could stay in the field) that this experience had been thrust on me; it meant that I encountered people and situations that I would have had trouble accessing as a unemployed researcher. After this interview experience, I began to apply for as many teaching positions as I could in order to better understand, and participate with, the process of looking for work. I also met otaku throughout, in group interviews and in transit, or before and after, many who told me about new places where otaku gathered, such anime meet-ups and other community events which I joined. Those I met were almost always interested in talking at least casually about what they were doing in Japan, and very often kindly introduced me to others. When I started working, I met many more who were already teaching and had been here longer term. My interview questions turned as well to focus on work environments as I was meeting otaku through those spaces, and could share my own experiences as a participant. At each step, as I learned something new or wrestled with a new experience, for example finding an apartment, or extending my residency, I shaped my interview questions along that trajectory, and collected the stories and recollections from others about similar experiences. Because I wanted to see otaku acclimate and negotiate daily life, I participated in a tremendous variety of activities with unanticipated outcomes; in this process, public spaces where otaku interacted with Japanese strangers became a critical site of

observation. Although I followed ten otaku continually for more than a year,<sup>35</sup> (setting up semi-structured interviews and then staying in touch, meeting again for subsequent and more casual interviews every few months), I also shadowed otaku to institutions like banks, and spent time with them during their daily lives as much as was possible. While I defined otaku as anyone who claimed fandom for Japanese anime, manga and videogames as the motivating factor in their migration, I also met and talked to as many other non-Japanese as I could (casual Japan fans of fashion and cuisine and also others who often said they never intended to stay in Japan long-term, along with military and expat spouses who hadn't chosen to come to Japan in the first place), formally interviewing five non-otaku about their life in Japan in order to compare their experiences and interpretations. All in all, I spoke to over 50 otaku in a variety of settings and through different strategies (some casually, sometimes formally), and at different lengths (some for 20 minutes and others, as I mentioned, for repeated lengthy interviews).

In the end, the greatest insight always came from being together with other otaku, doing everyday things, wherever that happened to be. My own experience, as I learned it mirrored the often precarious travels of so many of the fans I met, also became an essential source of self-reflection for me—a lens for grasping the interior life of fans living in Tokyo. It helped me, for example, untangle what was bravado and “talk,” and what was more textured thinking and feeling about the nature of being foreign in Japan. It helped me decipher the subtext at work in phrases laden with critique of the *encounter* between Americans and “the Japanese ways of doing things”—for example, when blogger J.J. McCullough insisted during his time as an English teacher at a small *eikaiwa*, “I start work at 11, and I leave at 8. I don't have a lot of interest wasting time dicking around ‘helping’ either before or after work” (2011)—because I

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<sup>35</sup> One, Sophie, I interviewed before coming to Japan, but because she was not living in Tokyo, I had less contact with her, and so consider her experience in Japan less specifically.

had to make the very same decisions under similar work circumstances. In my case, full participation didn't necessarily grant me any greater degree of trust or acceptance, it was simply expected by all that I would be teaching English. But it did allow me to "more easily internaliz[e] and thus more easily document..." the daily life and difficulties that otaku foreigners encounter (Johnson et al. 2006: 113, citing Nelson 1969). My personal experience with the routines of *gaijin* fans, as hesitantly "one of them," has of course pushed my interpretation in some directions and blinded me to others, just as it helped me enter some locations while barring me from others. I insert it then as a conscious feature of analysis where relevant rather than relegate it to appendices or personal narratives to be told and read later.

## 2.0 THE DISCOURSE NETWORKS OF ENCHANTED ENCOUNTERS

*I was born after video games, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that I don't remember a time in my life without them. [Chris Kohler 2004: viii]*

The story of the arrival of Japanese woodblock prints to France in 1856 is neat and compact, though of course now partially fictionalized; an account of the etcher Felix Bracquemond opening a box of imported Japanese ceramics to find them wrapped in Hokusai woodblock prints (Hokenson 2004: 13). Bracquemond found the prints “dazzling”—asymmetric and full of flat, bright colors—and was so “astonished and exultant” at the discovery that he immediately shared the prints with painters Manet, Degas, Whistler and Pissarro (Hokenson 2004: 13-14). (Other accounts claim it took a year for Bracquemond to secure Hokusai’s work as his printer, who owned the box of ceramics, wouldn’t part with the discovery [Ives 1974: 12]). In Jan Hokenson’s analysis, these accidental prints “instantly created a widening wave of amazement, incredulity, and exhilaration” (2004: 13), as they rejected unquestioned techniques of perspective, symmetry, color, and realism in European painting and social convention. Enchantment for modes of Japanese art and consumables such as fashion quickly flowed from painters and their art galleries into department stores and the scenarios of novels, and as concrete objects that could be shipped from France through Europe and to the US (Hokenson 2004: 17; Sigur 2008: 9). In the wake of these items, many created by Europeans themselves in mimicry (Van Gogh’s “after Hiroshige” paintings are a quintessential example), Japan emerged as an



imaginative presence, a comment on—through exposure to difference—the complexity of modern experience and an exhilarating dissonant break with the past: as “disparate societies mingled in awkward tandem, each pursuing its ambitions and seeking to remake itself in the face of rapid radical change” (Sigur 2008: 9).

This turn of the century adoption of Japanese aesthetics, things and materials rather than *real* Japanese social life and Japanese people, or even actual *ukiyo-e* painterly techniques, has been largely disparaged. Susan Napier describes Japonisme as the use of Japanese “curios” for distracting delight, as “the rich hues and exotic designs of Japanese woodblock prints [provide] a marvelous escape from the gray Paris winter” and “the mundane and the miserable” (Napier 2006: 155). Even Claude Monet’s painting *La Japonaise* (1876), which depicts his brunette wife draped in an elaborately embroidered red kimono and blonde wig (“to emphasize her Western identity” [Museum of Fine Arts Boston]), is itself a critique of the popular and seemingly superficial incorporation of Japanese “affect.”

Hokenson is more direct, setting out the *depiction* of Japan in modern French literature, an admitted “imagined construction,” from the authentic: “French japonisme has always been...aesthetic from the first and remaining so, intense and continuous, and very often even overtly refusing any relation with the real Japan” (Hokenson 2004: 20).<sup>36</sup> In fact, “leading translators and interpreters of Japanese literature in French never traveled to Japan and, pointedly, rarely wished to do so” (2004: 20) while most “cared little, if at all, for learning about Japan” (21). In response to critics who argued that French writers such as Roland Barthes only saw Japan “in terms of ‘difference’ from the West,” did “not truly understanding Japanese

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<sup>36</sup> Hokenson specifically dissects Pierre Loti’s work *Madame Chrysanthème* (1897), writing, that Loti “makes little pretense of writing about the real Japan” (2004: 99). Loti’s work which also influenced Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly* is said to have heavily influenced Western thinking about and imagining of Japan (Reed 2010).

culture,” and therefore neglected the “real Japan” Hokenson explains that French writers themselves “insisted on the constructed, reflexive nature of their japonisme” (2004: 20).<sup>37</sup>

While the circulation of such objects and material items away from their point of “origin” has been used to mark perceived linguistic, cultural and other differences, their movement across geographic boundaries evokes, as the criticism of Barthes’ shows, a struggle over who has the authority and expertise to wield, or lay claim to, such signs. Yet, the “realness” of their representations, or the authenticity of the people and place for which they are said to index—that which can be inappropriately imagined or insufficiently cherished—is not in question within this debate. In contrast, as I show, the “cultural-ness” of texts and images are never static or even necessarily fixed within media forms themselves, but is fundamentally made and remade in the circulatory process and the production of discourse. Throughout this chapter then, I look to understand how national discourse—the presence of an unquestionably real Japan, existing outside human creation, as an object that can be bought and sold—is activated within the decision-making circuits of media production, distribution and consumption and in creation of a certain kind of (profitable) knowledge about Japan. In part, this activation works to fix media as having a definitive “origin” in the first place, evidenced in the details of media texts, even though these very circuits expressly and continually challenge the notion of location. As the nation only ever emerges in mediation, the global circulation of media marked as “national” then, as I will show, is intimately connected to acts of national boundary maintenance, and in this case, to the desire for, and production of, authenticity. Throughout, I use “Japan” and “Japanese” loosely (as story, image, label, sign), to evoke its nature as discourse along with the flexibility that

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<sup>37</sup> Here Hokenson is discussing the critique Roland Barthes received from Rolf J. Goebel (1993) on his book *Empire of Signs* (1982). However, from the very first page, Barthes makes reflexivity (the device of fictive “Japan” as a reflection on Western thought) his explicit aim.

characterizes otaku encounter with objects and ideas that are variously negotiated and labeled, for them and by them, as “Japan.”

## 2.1 DISCOVERING "JAPAN"

The same palpable vibrancy and delight triggered by the discovery of the Hokusai woodblock prints was a constant presence in my conversations with Japanese pop culture enthusiasts; each was eager to talk about their fascination and desire for an authentic Japan which included not just the objects of their media consumption like anime TV shows—and what they pieced together from those narratives and images—but something more ephemerally located. Douglas McGray first drew attention to the global rise of Japanese *mass* media<sup>38</sup> and other cultural-ized commodities, at the turn of the century, dubbing it “Japan's Gross National Cool” (2002). This “GNC” captured the attention of scholars and bureaucrats in Japan and abroad, who speculated (or in the case of bureaucrats, created programs hoping) that Japanese popular culture commodities, from anime to well-known characters like Hello Kitty, could recover Japan from its then decade long recession. Yet, the “arrival” of the Japanese mass commodity to the US market is hardly astonishing (as it is described for 1850s France) or evocative of exultation, or encapsulated in one decisive moment of discovery.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Japan's

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<sup>38</sup> McGray doesn't reference Japonisme and I use italics here to emphasize that his focus is on contemporary media/entertainment commodity forms (as opposed to domestic consumables and art), which may account for his foreshortening of the history of Japanese commodity circulation (which of course precedes even 1850's Japonisme).

<sup>39</sup> Certainly art works and other items arrived to the US on pace with Europe; the 1876 Centennial Exposition held in Philadelphia had “a lavish pavilion” organized by the Japanese government who were eager to promote trade [Hammel 1989, Sigur 2008]), and Japanese design sensibilities, aesthetic attentions and craft techniques later transformed American domestic objects—everything from “dining utensils, dishes, furnishings, and interior design” (Sigur 2008: 9). However, here I emphasize the modern post-war commodity form, which set the

penetration of the US car industry in the early 1980s came after two decades of gradual growth (Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A. was established in 1957 and Honda and other Japanese car companies entered the US in the 1960s). Along with car production, the 1980s saw a continued introduction of innovative Japanese-produced technologies as Japan's post-war economy hit its stride—or rather, grew its bubble—and sought to continue growth in overseas markets.

Koichi Iwabuchi has asserted that these mass-produced technological and utilitarian imports failed to pass any Japanese “cultural odor” on to US and other Western consumers (2002a).<sup>40</sup> Yet, if the “Japanese car” in and of itself might not have been viewed as evocative of some particular and peculiar Japanese-ness, the efficient and lean “just-in-time” corporate business practices that produced it certainly were; indeed, the quest to understand and adopt them spawned a generation of experts (along with their how-to books) who “translated” Toyotism to US production capabilities and company organizational structures (Ihara 2007; Ozawa 1988; Ishikawa 1985; Vogel 1980). What’s more, as these companies grew to command a 25% share of the market (Holweg & Oliver 2015: 18), their emerging dominance along with the opening of Japanese run auto “transplants” in the southern US<sup>41</sup> came to be framed as aggressive and menacing by popular American media; movies such as *Gung Ho!* [1986] and news coverage of the Japanese “threat” forcing the closure of automobile plants (as only one example, see Woutat 1990<sup>42</sup>). This threat was encapsulated colorfully by Edith Cresson, Prime Minister of

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stage for the kinds of consumption practices and imaginations American kids were able to access, beginning predominantly in the mid-1980s.

<sup>40</sup> Iwabuchi defines cultural odor as “the positive association of the “cultural features of a country of origin...in the consumption process” (2002a: 27).

<sup>41</sup> A strategy to avoid strict import restrictions (Levin 1989; Holweg & Oliver 2015: 18).

<sup>42</sup> The title of this November 1990 LA Times article was “‘Transplant’ Car Firms May Be Detroit’s Biggest Threat.”

France from 1991-1992, when she declared: “Japan is another universe, which wants to conquer...That’s the way they are” (LA Times 1991). She added that the Japanese are:

“little yellow men” who “stay up all night thinking about ways to screw the Americans and Europeans. They are our common enemy”. Most tellingly, Mme Cresson likened the Japanese to “ants”. Her fear was that those “ants” were colonising the world and taking possession of the future. [Morley & Robins 1995: 147]

According to du Gay et al.'s well-known cultural studies analysis, even the plastic and mass-produced Sony Walkman, introduced to the US in 1981, evoked a Japan that was, if not threatening, extremely “high-tech” and “modern.”

...[The Walkman] conjures up Japan's pre-eminence in advanced electronics, its highly effective global marketing of high-quality, precision consumer commodities produced with the latest technologies. It has associations with corporate firms like Sony, which are supposed to be run according to highly efficient new-style management principles. [du Gay et al. 1997: 16]

It is this conjuring of Japanese techno-modern precision against which William Gibson set his infamous account of cyberspace in *Neuromancer* (1984). Located in a dystopic, futuristic Chiba City, the book’s setting references tropes in contemporary cinema, films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), and other cyperepunk narratives which figured Japan, and specifically Tokyo, as the location of an apocalyptic, yet transformative future (often a time where man and machine would inevitably merge). This (vision of a) future that had already arrived in the far East reflects the “cultural imaginations” (Bestor 2001: 89-90) of the time and is a critical context from which to view the rising popularity of Japanese mass media productions, as it framed the kinds of engagements left open to American kids in the 1980s and early 1990s.

### 2.1.1 Framing Nintendo as odorous

It was also with seemingly odorless hardware that Japan eventually entered the “wreckage” of the American videogame market in 1985 (Sheff 1993: 129). Atari had dominated the industry, but was near bankrupt as a result of the oversaturation of what had been a burgeoning home console market just a few years previously. Of course, in reality, Japanese companies had been in the US market from the beginning. After all, it was Taito’s influential and widely popular arcade game *Space Invaders* (released in the US in 1978) that spawned the “golden age” of arcades in both countries (Kent 2001). As Japanese arcade games began to export as early as 1974, US produced games were also sent to Japan through a variety of distributors, through sometimes they “arrived” as direct clones produced in Japan without proper licensing (Picard 2013). Often these games were modified when they crossed national borders, in an attempt to frame the product as locally produced.<sup>43</sup> For videogames, this process of localization describes techniques for consciously modifying or erasing elements deemed to be inappropriate for “other” national audiences; elements such as violence, sexuality or religious symbols, or cultural markers that producers and marketers worry won’t be popular or communicate well and might hamper sales in new regional markets (Carlson & Corliss 2011).

Just as tricky as it was to specifically determine what made a car produced in the Southern US with American parts and labor “Japanese,” on close analysis, the line between what was strictly a Japanese game and what was American is muddied, as multiple partnerships

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<sup>43</sup> An infamous example of localization from the arcade era involves the transformation of Pakkuman (パックマン) into Pac-Man by its US distributor Midway who was worried about defacement—rowdy teenagers who might turn the Romanized Puckman from the Japanese cabinet into Fuckman (Kent 2001: 142).

developed across sectors of the industry.<sup>44</sup> For example, Japan's Nintendo was already producing peripherals for the American Odyssey home console in the early 1970s and new technology like central processing units and vector graphic displays, along with emerging concepts of game play like level clearing (Kohler 2004), quickly circulated across borders and into arcade machines everywhere.

Perhaps however, as Iwabuchi asserts, the 1985 Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) was initially quite odorless. Determined to revive the failing US home console game market Nintendo, backed by its new subsidiary Nintendo of America (NOA), began an aggressive marketing campaign. The Japanese playful-looking Famicom (short for Family Computer) was recrafted, placed in a sleek grey box to mimic contemporary US stereo equipment while the press materials specifically downplayed that it was a *game* console (Cunningham 2013).<sup>45</sup> Game historians have argued that Nintendo of America's ultimate success came directly as a result of this innovative marketing campaign which included reaching consumers through unique and vibrant in-store interactive displays where, "Anyone passing a Nintendo display could stop and try" the games (Sheff 1994: 174).

Perhaps nothing clearly tied this ordinary-looking grey box to Japan; it might be difficult in fact to identify in the NES any particular element that could be said to have eventually induced the intense global waves of excitement (and profit) for Japan that were to follow over the next 20 or 30 years. Anne Allison instead marks the emergence of the global marketability of Japanese media goods with the astonishingly successful franchise *Pokémon* that she found

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<sup>44</sup> This material reality, even of large Multinational Corporations, however can fail to disrupt the symbolic affixing of nationality to various products, as I discuss below.

<sup>45</sup> Instead, full-page advertisements emphasized that the NES was "video entertainment" with high-tech peripherals: a laser gun called "The Zapper" and "R.O.B." (Robotic Operating Buddy), "the world's first video robot" (Nintendo 1985).

“‘broke so many rules’ of American kids’ media” (released in the US throughout 1998 and 1999 as videogames, a television series, toy merchandise, card games and a movie; 2006: 241-2).

However, it was the NES and its classic games like *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), distributed 15 years before *Pokémon*, which were the introduction older enthusiasts I talked to remember most vividly, as the proverbial start of it all.<sup>46</sup> James, a 38-year old fan now living in New York, recalled his intense excitement when the NES was released:

You know, the first time I ever saw *Super Mario Bros.* over at a friend’s house, you know, just thinking, holy cow...just basically getting your mind blown. Because, again I mean, I had been playing video games...but then *Super Mario Bros.*, you knew instantly, was totally different.

In retrospect, the impact *Super Mario Bros.* had on consumers, and ultimately the future of the global videogame industry, is easier to see, but to understand how youth like James actually experienced that Bracquemond-like enchantment, at their very first moment of watching or playing, is harder to grasp. When I asked Will, a 39-year old videogame fan living in Tokyo, about why *Super Mario Bros.* made such an impact, he thought about it for a minute and then explained:

Well, remember, before this, everything had mostly been a port<sup>47</sup> of an arcade game, except that you didn’t have to feed it quarters. Nothing had ever really considered the fact that we were now playing at home. But *Super Mario Bros.* was really the first to show that games could be done in a very different way...

Charlie, a fan in Tokyo originally from the Netherlands and working in programming, talked similarly of the way even the art style and the color scheme of *Super Mario Bros.*, brighter and more crafted than anything he’d seen before, sparked his excitement. James’ description of

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<sup>46</sup> Although Allison does note that “Mario is more popular with kids today than Mickey Mouse” (2006: 10), she does not discuss the impact of the NES or consider generational differences among American fans.

<sup>47</sup> Here “port” (from the Latin *portare*, to carry) it is used to describe when a game software which originally appeared on one specific hardware (such as the NES) has been reprogrammed for use on another (such as the Sony Playstation); in this example, arcade games were reprogrammed so they could be played on home console systems such as the Atari 2600, but were otherwise unchanged.



“getting his mind blown,” so reminiscent of the moment Bracquemond found Hokusai’s prints nestled in a box of ceramics, describes his exhilaration at finding something so radically different from what had come before. But while Bracquemond’s crate was predictably marked as arriving from Japan, the NES and its software was seemingly unmarked as being *from* somewhere else. Was there then something inherently Japanese about these early Nintendo games which shaped young fans’ feeling of exhilaration? Or did they in some way sense that it was *cultural* difference producing these exciting new techniques and visions?

Again, Iwabuchi argues that certain, bland, mostly technological products (he emphasizes the distinction between “hard” and “soft” technology as Allison does [Iwabuchi 2004: 53-54, Allison 2006: 116]) don’t pass any scent of the location or culture from where they were made. He elaborates this distinction by contradicting du Gay et al.’s observation, cited above, regarding the Walkman:

Such Japanesenesses [miniaturization, technical sophistication, and high quality] are analytically important but not especially relevant to the Walkman's appeal at a consumer level. The use of the Walkman does not evoke images or ideas of a Japanese lifestyle, even if consumers know it is made in Japan and appreciate Japaneseness in terms of its sophisticated technology. [Iwabuchi 2002a: 258]

Mouer and Norris’ explanation of Iwabuchi's concept is all the more pointed: “any image [communicated by the Walkman] was a surface level association that did *not* convey a deeper Japanese lifestyle or cultural presence” (2009: 363; emphasis in the original). While Iwabuchi explains that this odor is not an inherent property of the item or media object itself, instead it is the “discursive construction” of the nation that confers such fragrance (2002a: 27-28), he dismisses the role the Walkman played in privatizing public space—creating “mobile

privatization” (Williams 1990: 26; cited in Iwabuchi 2002: 25; see also Allison 2006: 10)—in spite of the fact that it emerged in direct response to “Japanese lifestyles.”<sup>48</sup>

Whether the NES gave off any “cultural odor” or not, it came to carry a potent association with Japan and Japanese culture in the minds of American fans. Every time I met a new otaku, I would eventually turn our conversation to how they first got interested in Japan. I was expecting to find clearly delineated narratives about that moment of discovery; the moment of recognition that it was Japan itself (in whatever imaginative form fans first conjured up) that connected their interests across media formats and stories. But often, otaku didn’t remember specifically how or when or where they realized that the media objects they were interested in were produced in Japan; it seemed that they had instead made that leap almost seamlessly or intuitively, or as if they had stitched over the realization of it in their remembrances and had quickly moved on to vastly broader interests like learning how to speak Japanese. When I pressed James to explain how he eventually realized that *Super Mario Bros.* was a Japanese game, he recalled an old steamer trunk at his parent’s house full of videogame magazines he collected as a kid:

Well, I don’t want to say it was 1989 when I first realized it, but ‘89 is when Nintendo had its centennial and they sent out, you know, this Hundred Years of Nintendo History thing, so it’s actually reading that, wow...to get a sense of the history of the company...and you start to read about the games, you start to find out more about them and it starts to get really clear that they are from Japan.

Nintendo Power was another element of Nintendo of America’s successful marketing. Initially called the Fun Club Newsletter, (anyone who sent in a Nintendo warranty card was automatically enrolled in the Fun Club [Sheff 1993: 178]), Nintendo Power launched in 1988 as a color

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<sup>48</sup> For example, Allison explains in reference to cell phones that “the average Japanese urbanite spends far more time walking, biking, or commuting on trains than riding in cars” and so portability is a key necessity (2006: 17).

magazine about Nintendo products; it was full of feature stories about games and hardware, including tips for how to play games already on the market and articles about new games that were coming-soon. For example:

The Fun Club drew kids in by offering tips for more complicated games, especially ‘The Legend of Zelda,’ which had all kinds of hidden rooms, secret keys, and passageways...[while] the best games (or the ones Nintendo wanted most to sell) were covered in spread after glossy spread of maps, galleries of characters, and player tips. [Sheff 1993: 178, 180]

A full page from a 1990 issue of Nintendo Power (Figure 2) demonstrates the way such advertisement, disguised as insider articles, began to signal to readers that “Japan” was distinctly meaningful. It details the games that were “slated for release” the following year with descriptive details and screenshots of each in an effort to “hype” these games before they came to the market. *Earth Bound* (“released as ‘Mother’ in Japan” the text states) and the Super Famicom are notable examples, as both columns specifically reference that they were made in Japan and would be sold there first.<sup>49</sup> The Super Famicom column in particular depicts Tokyo/Japan (as these two places eventually become interchangeable) as *the* site of exciting and newly emerging game technology and forms of play. In referring to the NES and the licensee show by their Japanese names, Famicom and Shoshinkai (初心会),<sup>50</sup> and citing “Japan’s new generation of games” which were not yet available in the American market, the write-up clearly locates Japan

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<sup>49</sup> Although not all of Nintendo’s content was produced exclusively in Japan, the most well-known and well-remembered titles from the NES-era were made by Japanese developers (in addition to Nintendo, this includes Capcom, Konami and SquareEnix among others). For example, *SimCity*, the second game advertised here, was produced by American developer Maxis and the third game *StarTropics* was directed, designed and programmed by Japanese game makers working for Nintendo of America in the US. In 1990 alone Nintendo released *Final Fantasy*, *Super Mario Bros. 3* and *Punch-Out!!*, while Capcom released new games in their popular *Street Fighter* and *Mega Man* series and Konami put out *Castlevania 3*—all popular classic games that maintain a fan base today. Knowledge of these particular games, along with other knowledge about Nintendo history is often wielded as expert knowledge among game fans.

<sup>50</sup> Now called Nintendo Space World, this is a trade show put on by Nintendo in Japan to announce and advertise new products.

as an essential component and imaginative space for young American videogame fans outside its relevance as a mere location of production.

Like James, Tom is another Japanese videogame fan who recalled that Nintendo Power played a role in his recognition that “the culture of gaming” was Japanese.

I remember when Dragon Quest III came out they had this big full page article about how crazy Dragon Quest was in Japan and they had pictures of people waiting in line to pick it up because people would skip work or school or whatever to go wait in line. In that sense, Nintendo Power definitely, I mean they were never trying to hide the fact that they were from Japan but they actually did push the fact that they were Japanese products in some way with articles like that one and with the one about games in Japan that aren't coming to America. While they never really said, “This game you are playing right here is Japanese,” they did sort of cultivate an awareness that the culture of gaming was something that originated in Japan.

As part of this recognition, Tom also remembered the moment he decided to mail order a Japanese game, *Final Fantasy V*, that he had read about extensively in gaming magazines but that had never been released in the US:

There was basically a point that I was like, well you know that there's that game there and it ended up never coming to the US after years and years and I was like, well I could always just get it from Japan which at the point seemed like ordering something from Mars, but there were lovely advertisements in the back of your game magazine for mail order companies, this was all before the Internet, can you believe that?...So, I sent away for it and it was in this crazy squiggly language but I knew how to hit the buttons from the other games and make my people fight things and get stronger and that gave me a good feeling...I guess, that I was aware that games were from Japan for a while but it wasn't until the missing Final Fantasy game that I decided it was something that I wanted to try to engage myself with.

# NINTENDO HAS FUN IN 1991

## PAK WATCH

### SUPER FAMICON

Last August at the Shoshinkai licensee show in Tokyo, this Pak Watcher got his first peek at the Super Famicom and the awesome new Super Mario World from Nintendo. Both the game and the 16 bit system were all you'd expect, and a lot more! In the shots below you can see the great colors and detail, but you can't see the scrolling background screens that give the game a real feeling of depth and motion. Sound great? Yeah, it does that, too. The digital stereo effects and music added a whole new dimension to stomping Koopas. We'll give you more juicy details on Japan's new generation of games real soon.



Nintendo has some interesting games slated for release next year. Although all are set in the present day, each has a unique plot and play mode. Barring any last minute changes of plans, here's what to look for:

### EARTH BOUND

Due out in the Fall of 1991 is Earth Bound, an epic adventure with game play like Final Fantasy, but set in the modern world. Baseball bats and psychic (PSI) powers take the place of swords and sorcery. The main character, a kid with latent PSI talents, searches for the truth behind the legend about a mysterious ancestor. Many things

will hinder the lad's quest, including poltergeists, giant rats and crazy hippies. Earth Bound (which was released as "Mother" in Japan) features a giant world to explore and tons of puzzles to solve, all with a touch of humor.



### SIMCITY

Another of the games we hinted at last issue is the NES version of the home computer mega-hit SimCity, scheduled for Spring release. This city-building simulator is an engrossing strategy game that requires planning and brain power rather than quick reflexes to win. As the mayor of a growing city, you'll try to keep your citizens happy by zoning your city in a productive fashion. You also might find yourself rebuilding after a city crunching disaster such as a giant monster attack, tornado or earthquake. The early NES version we saw played a little different than the P.C. version, but it had all the same options. This is definitely one to check out, especially if you don't have the computer version. Although SimCity is completely different from games like Tetris and Dr. Mario, it has the same qualities that make people play it obsessively, and appeals even to those who don't usually enjoy video games.



### STARTROPICS

We jumped the gun just a little previewing StarTropics in our May/June issue (see that issue for details). However, it looks like this super island-hopping adventure will be kicking off the Nintendo line-up in early 1991. Join Mike as he searches for his missing uncle, Dr. Jones, with his Island Yo-yo and mini-sub, Sub-C. StarTropics is full of surprises, action and mysteries to solve.

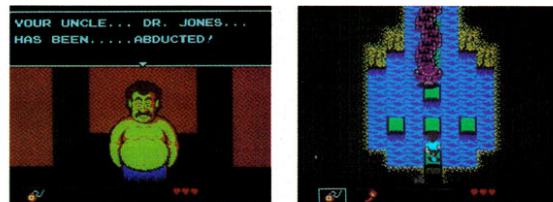


Figure 2. A page from the 1990 November/December issue (#19) of Nintendo Power

In addition to pointing out how Nintendo Power first directed his attention, Tom shows that the magazine also acted as a medium for practically connecting him to (distant) Japan by providing a way to buy games that had been advertised but never actually released in the US. This allowed him to bypass the common licensing and distribution routes (in fact, he had to physically modify the game cartridge to get it to play in his Super Nintendo console). Of course, Tom was acting on interest and desire cultivated by the magazine itself through the many articles he read in Nintendo Power, and other gaming magazines such as Electronic Gaming Monthly, about the various *Final Fantasy* games released in Japan over the years and their publicized, and then sometimes their confusingly retracted, release for the US. Photos like those of Japanese gamers eagerly waiting to buy the new Dragon Quest game, and articles about the unique and even strange Japanese games that would likely never be available to a US audience, do more than connect the concept of “Japan” to “videogames” in the minds of fans; they cultivate a desire for a place where it is acceptable to skip work and school out of excitement for a new release and where games are inherently more interesting, weird and distinctive—a place that becomes, over time, an authentically situated *Japan*.

Nintendo Power in this case specifically assisted in framing Nintendo games and technology as Japanese, in tandem with popular knowledge in the US about what Japan was (high-tech, modern, futuristic even if threateningly so) at the time. Nintendo, like other business enterprises, also used marketing practices to establish and create anticipation and demand in consumers, still a central practice for the company today. Eventually, because of Nintendo’s popularity and tremendous economic success, small in-store displays were turned into whole sections called “World of Nintendo.” David Sheff describes these displays as game-like: they were “elaborate...and at some locations, laser-light beams shot through the air. Silver-metallic

and fluorescent-yellow pipes and tubes snaked over and around girders. It was as if you were *inside* a Nintendo game” (175-176, emphasis in the original). In addition, Nintendo also utilized a common marketing rationale that fabricated scarcity in order to produce insatiable consumer demand.

Released cautiously, rationed so that demand outpaced availability, and then withdrawn from circulation as soon as interest began to wane. This rationing tactic, treating games like priceless objects, worked. After all the hype about a new game took hold, kids dragged their parents to stores, but outlets couldn’t keep the games in stock. [Sheff 1993: 193]

These practice served to create Nintendo games as desirable, yet unattainable, at the same time as they were being situated as *Japanese*. So while “authentic Japanese lifestyles” might not have been directly visible in the NES’ 8-bit microprocessor, its sleek packaging or even the texts of its games, these fans’ experiences demonstrate the way otaku still interpreted these items from within frames marketed, and so marked, as cultural difference.

## 2.2 TOONAMI AND CULTURE BY "OSMOSIS"

Of course, not all fans came to Japan though conspicuously marketed routes such as Nintendo Power. There were also clear differences in generational and personal travels. Tom’s recollection of importing *Final Fantasy V* reflects some of the differences that fans experienced over time, both as the Internet became the dominant form of communication and as Japanese popular media, especially anime, began to receive broader distribution in the US.

You didn’t have much choice though [about mail order], there was no eBay, there was no “drop a mail to your message board read by Japanese gaming buddies” or whatever asking them for someone to hook you up. If you lived in the continental United States and you weren’t in Boston or California which were the two main places that had Japanese popular culture enclaves, if you were anywhere else there was no anime market

to speak of. Like maybe blockbuster had a copy of Akira but that was about it basically. It was all very weird and distant seeming.

There were marked generational differences between the enthusiasts who became interested in Japan because of Nintendo and videogames in the mid-80s and the younger fans I met who cited the impact of a late 90s surge in anime and manga imports. Sophie, now 27, specifically recalls her formative middle-school interest in Toonami, a weekday afternoon block of mostly Japanese-produced anime TV shows. Premiering in 1997, Toonami was the Cartoon Network's answer to the growing market for Japanese media (the name is a portmanteau of cartoon and tsunami, suggesting an overwhelming wave of imported Japanese media); it was also the route most of the younger otaku I talked to recalled as their explicit introduction to anime. Like many others I interviewed, Sophie was embarrassed to admit her early interest in anime like *Dragonball Z* and *Inuyasha*. She tried to explain why her interest in Japanese media spilled over the bounds of afternoon television: "I guess, when I started watching anime and the dramas in particular, I got really attached to the culture...It's just that every facet of the culture interests me." She immediately clarified, "Okay, to put a disclaimer on this, I guess I'd have to say, every facet of their pop culture." When I pressed her for examples, she tried to be more specific:

I like the family interactions in particular...granted it's not the same for everything you watch, and I'm sure this is a real big generalization...but I just really liked their family structure. Like, even older generations are living with younger ones. And I like that it's formal, kind of. I don't know.

Sophie's leap was not unique, of course. Tom reflected more explicitly on the way he believes anime scenarios communicate Japanese lifestyles to American audiences:

That's the thing about anime and culture, or anime and games that I find interesting is that they have sort of through osmosis exposed a lot of ordinary Japanese life to an overseas audience. Things like, let's say you have an anime which is set in a high school



ceremony, and maybe the premise is an alien comes to earth who becomes a teacher and falls in love with a fourteen year old boy, or something crazy, that's the surface premise, or whatever, there's some crazy surface premise which is meant to grab the attention of people and does in Japan but in America there's also sort of the subtext of "oh, this is what a Japanese school is laid out like; oh, so this is how the Japanese educational system works in terms of how students relate to their teachers" and in the fact that everyone stays, for example in Japan, everyone stays in the same room and teachers go from room to room whereas in American high schools the students move from room to room and the teachers tend to stay in the same place...

Just all these little details which work their way into the corners of the media that Japan gives to foreign countries...I guess what I'm saying is that a foreign audience takes a different message from the media from the one which the creators intended for a Japanese audience because in addition to the surface intent they also get this cultural subtext which is implicit to the original creators and their audiences but it's explicit to an overseas audience.

J.J. McCullough, a Canadian writer and cartoonist cited above, similarly describes his interest in Japan as a conscious connection to thinking about the ways media can communicate ideas of other places:

I guess I've always been "interested" in Japan, whatever that means. I played a lot of video games when I was young — less so now — and I was always quite fascinated by the subtle cultural references they would contain. [McCullough 2010]

Most of the fans I talked to eventually told me specifically that they liked "Japanese culture," often, just as Sophie and Tom had, with a great deal of thoughtfulness (and sometimes embarrassment) about the mediated way they received this information—the leap they made in interpreting the relevance, meaning, or deeper symbolism of what they picked up from anime television shows. For example, Aaron, who was still a college student when I talked to him, noted the way he connected school activities, students taking off their shoes at the school's entrance and cleaning their classrooms, to an idea of *qualities* of Japanese social life such as self-responsibility and respect, just as Sophie had been drawn to the image of "formal" family structures. It was often in connecting to these perceived meanings, framed just as Sophie

described as “getting attached to the culture,” that otaku centered their motivation for seeking out more Japanese media, and in making the significant transition from fan of Japanese pop culture, to fan of a more broadly conceived “Japan.”

Throughout the 1990s, the growing mainstream popularity and attention to Japan as a media producer also had an impact on the distribution practices of US television networks and toy retailers and as a result, on contexts of reception. Before this, Allison suggests that “Japan’s national identity [was]...considered a deficit both in Asia...and in the West...[so] it tended to be effaced or deleted when goods (particularly cultural goods) left the country” (2006: 20). Allison details how the Japanese produced live-action television show *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* was “heavily Americanized” by its American distributors (16)<sup>51</sup> just as initially *Pokémon*’s rice balls were rotoscoped into donuts and Japanese text was “airbrush[ed] out” (2006: 246). Nintendo of America also regularly muted or erased religious, sexual and violent themes and images from Japanese games throughout the 1990s, in an effort to protect the “sensibilities” of American audiences (McCullough), but their efforts were less focused on hiding indications that the games had been produced in Japan. In fact, as we have seen, the opposite was true. American movie and television executives, on the other hand, believed that Japanese products, particularly those targeted to children, simply would not sell without modification (Allison 2006: 247).

Gradually, however, as Japanese franchises such as *Pokémon* proved (wildly) successful in American markets, many of these practices had shifted towards foreignization— “Retaining,

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<sup>51</sup> All the non-action scenes of the Japanese characters out of their masked hero costumes were reshot with American actors. At the same time, the new version had “the violence toned down and the moral message heightened” (Allison 2006: 120).

even purposely playing up, signs of cultural difference” (2006:20)<sup>52</sup>—by the time Allison conducted her research in the early 2000s. Allison’s examples demonstrate the complex and often competing ideas (and stereotypes) at play as companies and their representatives across Japan and the US negotiated for what they believed would sell in the current local market.<sup>53</sup> Changing trends in localization and translation of Japanese media goods also eventually indexed the presence of an original that was being effaced in mainstream US distribution channels, as audiences became more aware, even before encounter, that these media goods were in fact produced in Japan. Just as Tom decided to take action by importing the missing *Final Fantasy V* game, to engage himself with Japan as the site of his true interests, Sophie also began to act on broader interests when she realized, not that the television shows on Toonami were Japanese (she could already tell from their opening credits, she said), but that they had been dubbed into English and censored. For example, *Dragon Ball Z*, “was heavily edited for content as well as length, reducing the first 67 episodes into 53” while the distributor was forced by its parent company “to edit out all mentions of death (usually replacing it with the term ‘the next dimension’) and any overly violent moments (via the use of digital paint)” (Dragon Ball Wiki). When Sophie realized the plot of *Inuyasha* and *Dragon Ball Z* both had confusing omissions and then began to repeat episodes, as Toonami and other outlets were forced to recycle the limited episodes they had licensed for dubbing, she too chose to engage with this lack, and began to search out the originals online.

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<sup>52</sup> Gambier describes the translation of American science fiction into French in the 1950s, where translators felt it was their “task to import an exotic genre” and therefore explicitly “retained traces of foreignness” (Gambier 1995: 221). Of course, translators, like localizers, always balance foreignizing and domesticating tendencies.

<sup>53</sup> For an expanded discussion of localization between the American and Japanese videogame industries see Carlson & Corliss 2011.

For the older fans I talked to, it was the emerging medium of videogames, and their (made visible) connection to sites of production in distant Japan, that first fostered the belief that it was something about Japan specifically that generated these “enchanted commodities.”<sup>54</sup> Like Iwabuchi, Allison argues that “the marker of Japaneseness operates” not just in recognition of the commodity as made-in-Japan, but also in capturing “an aesthetic, expressive, or spiritual sensibility deeply linked, it is often thought, to what is culturally unique about Japan and its people” (2006: 20). In other words, games are felt to be not just marked as “from” Japan but of being “of” Japan. Yet, it is only because Nintendo serendipitously came to dominate the US videogame market that the narrative of the company’s success and innovative products, as determined by being “uniquely” Japanese, could be crafted. Even Japanese developers “used to boast...Only the Japanese could make innovative games like those” (Tabuchi 2010). In contrast, as the US television market became veritably flooded with anime—and as Japan didn’t feel as far away as Mars anymore—otaku came to see the messy deletion in watered down and abbreviated content as a sign of, what must be, the more desirable original.

As this discussion begins to show, articulating the moment a commodity becomes Japanese denies the complexity of cross-border media production, distribution and consumption. Obviously then, these “markings” or “odors” don’t exist in objects naturally, but emerge in process as actors at various stages negotiate and interpret their meaning and relevance. This

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<sup>54</sup> Allison calls Japanese media goods “enchanted commodities” and contrasts them with Weber’s prediction that Western capitalism would produce full-scale “disenchantment” (Allison 2006: 13, see Weber 1930). Instead, these commodities, Allison argues, are “(re)enchant[ed]” through “techno-animism”—“a tendency to see the world as animated by a variety of beings, both worldly and otherworldly” who suffuse modern Japanese material goods and consumer practices as a result of a particular social and religious context (12-13). I use enchantment instead to focus on practices of reception and consumption by fans, following Jane Bennett’s use of the term to replace commodity fetish. For her, enchantment equals: “a mood of lively and intense engagement with the world...a mixed bodily state of joy and disturbance, a transitory sensuous condition dense and intense enough to stop you in your tracks and toss you onto new terrain and to move you from the actual world to its virtual possibilities” (Bennett 2001: 111).

marking as “other” or as “other national,” even excitingly so, comes to be in conversation with contemporary politicized and profitized notions of culture and difference; in the case of localization today this is often eliding the requirements of national regulatory boards (removing blood or turning it green for games released in the German market) with national culture (Germans don’t like blood) (Chandler 2005: 42, 129). Advertising, localization, and distribution, then are all examples of the way media gets activated as discourse of Japaneseness, not necessarily coherently or consistently, but in relation to changing perceptions—of inherent national cultural differences, and of the potential to for those differences to produce or limit profit.

Media objects then are always embedded in discourse networks, “the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process *relevant data*” (Kittler 1990: 369, my emphasis). In this case, technologies and institutions might include marketing strategies and glossy advertisements, for example, along with other explicit framing techniques that mobilize objects as particular kinds of discourse for particular kinds of audiences; even items like videogame user manuals and box art released along with US versions can be used to self consciously frame the *content* as specifically Japanese—as long as what that Japaneseness is, is believed to be palatable to new audiences. For example, localizers worry that “American consumers might be enchanted by the perceived ‘Japanese-ness’ of a game’s animation, character design, or storytelling, but simultaneously affronted by the hypersexualization of the game’s adolescent protagonist” (Carlson & Corliss 2011: 73). These networks then help define relevance—*what should* be selected, stored and processed—as they assume, circulate and embed in daily practices:

...the rules according to which what a subject can say about certain things...under what conditions something can become an object for a possible knowledge, how it may have

been problematized as an object to be known, [and] to what selective procedure it may have been subjected... [Foucault 1998: 460]

Discourse networks make up routes to and through production, circulation and consumption, via “technologies and institutions,” that enable techniques for writing, reading and archiving texts along notions of “of-courseness” (Axel 2006);<sup>55</sup> for example, the divide between the local and the non-local, that media producers harness in decision-making (when to make images more colorful, or stories less violent, or more Japanese) when their products (threaten to) cross national-borders (Carlson & Corliss 2011). These networks also include the immaterial fields of perception and interpretation, and their own “internal procedures...which function rather as principles of classification, of ordering, of distribution” (Foucault 1981: 56); all these mark Japaneseness as an “object of knowledge” for American consumers. This process is invariably uneven; even practices as insidious as advertising or rationed distribution do not ensure that audiences will interact with media as knowledge of a certain kind, as discourses and truths overlap, compete with and contradict each other.

Foucault reminds us that processes of subjectivation are not separate from objectivation, instead: “From their mutual development and their interconnection, what could be called the ‘games of truth’ come into being...the question of true and false” (1998: 469). In other words, in becoming, subjects recognize and accept definitions of true and false along with established rules about non-subjects and the taken-for-grantedness of their division, which allow them to take up “a certain position, a certain gaze and a certain function” (Foucault 1981: 55). To be subjected then, otaku must first accept (and they do) the salience of something that can be categorized as truthfully “Japanese”—and in this example, specifically labeled as a Japanese media object—

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<sup>55</sup> I use of-courseness throughout instead of Gramsci’s well-known “common sense” (1992) because it suggests the action or activity of making common sense come into being.

even if that social life might not be present as an image, but as an affect or way of being in the world, which audiences (are told to) believe demonstrates Japan's uniqueness. It is discourse networks,<sup>56</sup> I argue, which help shape and then transmit the knowledge of these true/false and subject/object distinctions and support the obviousness of their existence, as already occurring out there. In other words, practices in the discourse network operate on Japaneseness as a real salient, bounded and primordial thing, embedded in texts, with substance that can be manipulated, played up or toned down, at the whims of (the) market (for) desire.

Of course, there is more at play than just Nintendo's marketing rationale or even localization practices that create, and create demand for, Japanese "fragrance." As I've mentioned, broad popular perceptions about Japan participated as did the shared cultural stereotypes of both US and Japanese producers and business executives (as one Japanese videogame developer claimed, American gamers are naturally more competitive [Vestal 2005]), but so do consumption practices more generally. For example, the relationship between in store displays and commercial television viewing as a driver of purchases, as "kids dragged their parents to stores," and the use of supplementary texts like industry magazines and other fan-based materials, that help consumers take productive pleasure in media items (Jenkins 1992). This formation is also coupled to the modern call for all consumers to become fans-of-a-sort, to "seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (Jenkins 2006: 3), and to make identities through the borrowing and incorporation of mass images (Jenkins 1992: 23). Henry Jenkins views this as an active, productive and empowering form of consumption, where audiences "become active participants in the construction and circulation of

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<sup>56</sup> Although Kittler's emphasis is on the materiality of the network, I use this concept, which he extends from Foucault's attention to power in discourse, to include Foucault's interior and exterior workings of discourse systems (1981), and to collect materiality and immateriality of knowledge and truth, in one element.

textual meanings” (Jenkins 1992: 24). (Of course, no consumption, even the comparatively still and silent screening of a film, has ever been a truly passive activity; see for example, Spitulnik 1993). For some, the advent of the “media mix” was key in facilitating this sort of idealized and “conscious intertextuality.” Properties like *Pokémon*, for example, deploy the “media mix” as a dominant model of mass consumer engagement, with character goods spanning formats and modes of play, connecting imaginative space across diverse areas and elements (toys, apparel, household goods, computer and other screens) and a resulting fandom linked across varied domains (Ito 2007: 89, see also Allison 2006, Jenkins 2006). Consumers are even entreated to these kinds of activities by advertisers, to find themselves “defined by possession” as if the ownership or consumption of the “right” products are necessary to claim particularized social, or niché, identities (Dunn 2004: 91). At the same time “marketing strategies...are full of verbs that encourage the audience to *do* things: to participate, act, produce” (Humphreys 2008: 155, emphasis in the original). These activities collect modes of engaging with commodities as “things with distinctive meanings for the consumer” (Carrier 1999: 128-129), that compel them to actively connect meaning and enchantment, not merely in, but across individual texts; at the same time, these activities situate the “consuming subject” as one “who strains toward, without ever arriving at, a state of full satisfaction” (Hirschkind, et al. 2017: S4). This unachievable desire is echoed in the production of commodity-form nostalgia, which Fredric Jameson described as a “desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past...now refracted through the iron law of fashion change ” (1991: 19).

Often, the symbiotic relationship between advertising and productive fan activities like mail ordering a videogame from Japan or going online to pirate<sup>57</sup> the non-dubbed versions of a

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<sup>57</sup> The illegal download of digitized media files in avoidance of copyright restrictions.



TV show, along with other forms of framing (modification during distribution for example), are overlooked. Yet, all these are essential working parts of discourse networks; they help communicate to audiences what should be included as cultural odor in the first place (removing shoes, cleaning classrooms, living with older family members) and what should be ignored or filed away as something else (hypersexualized adolescent characters, for example), and indeed, how to recognize, process and store difference, feel it as an attractive pull to substances outside individual texts, and finally in turn, how to *act on* that desire in daily life.

### 2.3 BECOMING NOT-JAPANESE ONLINE

Mimi Ito has argued that for otaku, the materiality of their chosen media mix invokes identity swapping. Allison similarly co-opted Freud's "polymorphous perversity," to describe the "mutable identities" users fashion from Japanese media narratives; stories that continually highlight a morphing of characters and (body or mechanical) parts across platforms, as a magical transfiguration: a human becomes a monster, a normal girl morphs into a hero complete with spectacular costume change, or body parts transform into mechanical weapons (Allison 2006: 10-11, 157).<sup>58</sup> In replicating the active mix-and-match style of anime/manga characters, narratives and images, and swappable indexes in the creation of a cohesive imaginative space that stitches all these together, Ito argues that otaku are able to "downplay...the traditional modernist emphasis on 'original' and proprietary narrative constructs" (Ito 2012: xxii). The ideal form of fandom for otaku then is to be able to, on the one hand, navigate and engage across

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<sup>58</sup> Allison, following Ken Hillis (1999), argues this interchangeability is driven by information capital today, which also prioritizes such flexibility and mixing, where profitable, as capital transforms itself from the "relentless demand for ever more efficient ways to circulate capital in a global economy" (Allison 2006: 265).

platforms and domains in the building up of multiple forms expertise (in the example of the Sakura Quest anime series which I discuss below, fans must know about the “real” locations that appear in the show, the fact that the production company is located near these places, that the presence of a large number of local woodworking craft makers likely inspired the plot of one episode, the impact that such shows can have on bringing renewed interest and income to the rural towns of their location, and the navigation of Japanese-language websites in the search of this information). Then on the other hand, otaku must identify with or desire the hybrid character and narrative structures of media mixes which are said to form a storytelling generic mash, for example like the cult anime show *Urusei Yatsura* (1981),<sup>59</sup> which contains sci-fi, fantasy and Japanese folklore elements (Azuma 2009: 9).

Ito further directly connects this hybridity, or rather trans-morphability, taken from the “database of referents”<sup>60</sup> that make up contemporary media mixes, to fans’ “ability to resist totalizing global narratives such as nationalism” (Ito 2012: xviii).<sup>61</sup> But consider this statement in light of Napier’s description of the typical activities on offer at Japanese popular culture conventions (or “cons”) throughout the US:

Each con provides many opportunities to get to know Japanese culture on a deeper level. Besides Japanese language classes and panels such as “Learn About the Japanese Origins of Manga,” the cons also include programs for children, such as making and hanging koi (Japanese carp), making headbands using Japanese characters, paper making, origami, and making paper lanterns. Besides hands-on activities, some convention booklets include articles about Japanese culture. [Napier 2007: 158]

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<sup>59</sup> See footnote 57 for a brief description.

<sup>60</sup> As developed by Hiroki Azuma (2009), this morph-ability utilizes interchangeable pieces from various media formats and narratives.

<sup>61</sup> Hiroki Azuma argues “otaku culture” is not “a uniquely Japanese phenomenon” but instead is an outgrowth of “a worldwide postmodernization trend” (2009: 10).

In addition to these Japan-centric educational activities, fans who attend cons also cosplay (dress up in costumes as Japanese media characters such as Pikachu from the *Pokémon* franchise) and purchase hard to get Japanese consumer items. For example, eager convention-goers at the 2014 *Hyper Japan* in London could buy:

For refreshment there was sushi and sake, green tea and sweets, *okonomiyaki* and Japanese beer. For shoppers, all sorts of Japanese products were on sale, from collectable anime cells and original ukiyo-e woodblock prints to cast-iron *nambu-tekki* teapots and multi-colored plastic bento boxes. [McNicol 2014: 31]

Kanpai!Con, a yearly convention held in Omaha, Nebraska, is also a striking display of Japanese object-ified sentiment; the logo and top banner of their website is a version of the Imperial Japanese Army flag, with red disk in the center and rays of red shooting out across a white background. On their website under the heading “What should you expect?” the description reads: “Kanpai!Con will be a community-focused annual Japanese cultural appreciation convention, with a focus on anime, manga, and Japanese video gaming” (Kanpai!Con.com). American conventions then are sites where otaku converge precisely to celebrate, partake in, and also typically purchase narratives of Japanese nationalism. They are places and moments of giddy display, as Napier explains, “in regards to anime and manga fandom, knowledge of and experience with Japanese culture is an important component” (Napier 2007: 150); conventions then are premier locations where otaku can, together, both reveal and revel in their interests and expertise in Japan, as a critical showing of what makes them a fan.

Napier’s description in particular is a concise summary of the kinds of engaged educational activities that many otaku first take up,<sup>62</sup> particularly in online spaces, once they decide that the allure they feel is more than just for stories, for example, of aliens who come to

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<sup>62</sup> Crossing the threshold into this uptake is precisely what makes them otaku, and not merely a fan of (Japanese) media like videogames.

earth and fall in love with high school boys.<sup>63</sup> Sophie, along with most of the other fans I talked to both in the US and Japan, connected the extension of their interest *in* Japaneseness to their ability, via the internet, to easily connect *to* broader registers about Japan, in addition to accessing “authentic,” or non-localized media content (often pirated and sometimes available immediately after release in Japan). Many of these activities were motivated, fans told me, specifically as methods to overcome barriers in distribution, either from slowness (as media properties must be first picked up by US distributors and legally licensed, then translated and finally released into the American market months or years later, and sometimes never) or perceived poor quality localizations (American voice actors simply not taking their roles seriously enough) or in simple rejection of the English-language version as an intermediary, obstructing their access to the “original.”

Again, Sophie first turned to the Internet when Toonami started replaying episodes from *Inuyasha*:

They would show up to episode 34, and then restart it. And I was like, “Why aren’t they showing any more?”...So I just went online and I typed in Inuyasha and started downloading it like crazy. And now I can’t watch, I prefer the Japanese dubs so much more. I think the voices...are so much better suited to the characters...with a few exceptions obviously.

Sophie explained that she also got interested in watching Japanese live-action dramas purely on accident, driven by frustration at the way her access to Japanese media was limited by licensing and other methods for cross-border distribution:

I was looking for a particular manga but it was really slow at getting released and nobody would translate it because it was already licensed and just wasn’t released and I knew that

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<sup>63</sup> When Tom told me this, I thought he was making up a ridiculous anime plot just as an example, but later I learned accidentally that his story was similar to the plot of the popular 1981 anime series *Urusei Yatsura* (うる星やつら), mentioned above, about an alien named Lum who believes she is married to a 17 year-old high school student after he accidentally proposes to her during a race of tag with her which he had to compete in order to save the world from destruction.

dramas are rarely licensed in the US so they're really easy to find and I knew that there was a live action drama made of it [the manga] so I just watched it and I got really hooked... Yeah, it seems that always happens, I get impatient and then I just get interested in something better.

James described what it was like to be a fan of Japanese videogames before the Internet along similar lines of (inadequate) access:

It's not like nowadays where if you want to learn what gaming life was like in Japan you have things like blogs, you have websites, you can go to the Japanese website you can read the magazine, I mean back then there was two magazines every month and they had one page about things in Japan and it was like, Oh, my god.

Several of the older anime fans I met remembered the days when they would eagerly trade bootleg videotapes of popular shows, or gather together at a friend's house to enjoy a fuzzy VHS copy of some recent find. Today, otaku now readily move from such analog television signals to digital information exchange, using message boards and blogs to perform, and connect to others who share, their interests. For example, otaku may search actively for recommendations about what to watch next or read or "get into" from others, or then stumble onto something accidentally while browsing as Sophie did. Beth is another mid-twenties fan who told me she was exposed to anime through Toonami and was influenced by the Japanese art styles and costumes—"whatever looked good"—that she saw on her favorite shows.<sup>64</sup> She used to draw characters from her favorite Japanese shows and decided while she was still in middle school that she wanted to become an artist. Beth told me she gets interested in whatever "look just catches her eye" or she might "hear about things and check out the ones that sound good." I

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<sup>64</sup> She placed these in direct contrast with American-made options: Most American cartoons aren't made very well; there's just not a lot of money put into them because they're for kids. In particular, the quality of American cartoons in the 90's was pretty poor. But Japanese anime at that time just seemed to be made with greater care, with some attention to aesthetics, and the stories and humor were different than American ones.

asked for examples, (in this case, I also wanted to know what she meant by “hearing” in the context of online browsing):

Well, for example, I might be reading a journal on DeviantArt and I’ll just find recommendations that way. There’s a few blogs like that by people whose taste I trust and they’ve made good recommendations in the past, so I’ll just check that out. That’s how I found out about Saint Young Men.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to DeviantArt, a website devoted to artists posting their own creations, Beth also said she liked to go to Gaia Online,<sup>66</sup> a community focused on anime and manga topics. At Gaia, users create a customized avatar drawn in anime art-style, with swappable hair, clothes, pets and accessories which then appears next to their posts in the site’s forums, the text of their messages inside speech bubbles imitating stylized comic book dialogue.

Online access to content not released in the US, uploaded to peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing sites (and often even subtitled) by other fans,<sup>67</sup> might have been one hook for some to begin exploring Japanese media in more depth, yet in online tasks which privilege searching and making and sharing productive linkages on community sites like Gaia Online, fans seem to easily expand, or even simply fall, into new interests across multiple scales—moving from a specific artist or media franchise (manga, television dramas), to broader cultural commodities like J-pop, and often on to what they soon learn are more classical Japan-associated topics: samurai, geisha, tea, kanji and Tokyo. At the same time, fans told me they use these sites,

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<sup>65</sup> I had to admit to her that I had no idea what *Saint Young Men* was, outside that it had to be either an anime or manga. Beth, like other fans I talked to had the habit of dropping names (of Japanese artists or shows) without details or context.

<sup>66</sup> A description from the main page of Gaia Online:  
Founded in 2003, Gaia Online has grown into one of the biggest forum communities in the world. Today, Gaia is the best place on the web to discuss anime, games, comics, sci-fi, fantasy and anything else you can imagine. [gaiaonline.com]  
Gaia Online is of course only one example of a web community (self-contained sites which emphasize community participation and activities such as discussion forums) “where” fans may spend time while on the internet.

<sup>67</sup> As I mentioned above this is known as “fan-subbing.”

particularly online communities,<sup>68</sup> for reasons beyond talking and learning more about media properties (who made it, is it any good); for example, feeling a welcome connection to others they know share their interests, as well as taking pure pleasure in the forms of entertainment that some sites offer (for Beth, it was carefully choosing the best outfit and accessories for her avatar). Derek Liu, the founder of Gaia Online, highlighted the site’s aim to bring together fans with the same views and desires:

Today’s internet is a melting pot of different cultures, personalities, knowledge, and ideas. Users on Gaia are able to harness many aspects of which the internet provides because Gaia attracts other audiences of similar age and interests. The value of friendship and acceptance on your likes and hobbies from members in a community is priceless, and many of that community aspect is also what I grew up with. [Derek Liu interview, Gaia Online Anime Community]

Whether to distant media items, cultural-ized knowledge or new but dispersed friends with similar hobbies, “access” and “extension” are central metaphors fans use when they talk about what they do online.<sup>69</sup> Yet, consider the access that Liu invokes above: an easy clustering to similarity which online users can feel comfortable helps them navigate the “melting pot” of difference that is the Internet. The “affordances” of access (technological structures thought to enable particular actions, Nagy & Neff 2015), or this branching out that fans undertake enthusiastically, are said to emerge from the interactive communication practices that occur uniquely in digital spheres, that collapses distance and override the limitations of face-to-face interactions (for a critique of this, see Axel 2006). In addition, online users increasingly inhabit worlds of their creation, “tinkering” in their “user-generated content” (Coleman 2010a: 489)—in

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<sup>68</sup> Here I refer to sites that claim themselves they are online communities, and work to organize repeated involvement of users across a number of different possible activities contained in one website.

<sup>69</sup> The purpose here is to highlight how otaku *talk* about the what and the why of their Internet practices, and not examine what they do or do not actually engage in (also, these metaphors purposefully appear unmarked throughout my discussion above).

the webpages they assemble, or the videos they shoot and upload, or the code of free software that they edit. Of course, the internet has always inspired a certain speculative optimism among some: the uniquely transformative political potential of a network subject to distributed and unending revision by its own users, or its capacity to collapse geographies of inequality (Coleman 2010a, Hirschkind et al. 2017). Many of these foci suggest digital media afford increased agency, liberation and freedom of movement, like the perceived unmoored coming and goings of online activity,<sup>70</sup> as consumers are made actively into *users*. With such optimism Mimi Ito asks:

What does it mean when those previously constructed as “consumers”—nongenerative, passive audiences for professionally produced culture—are handed the means not only to distribute media through alternative peer-to-peer networks, but to remix, repackage, revalue, and produce media through amateur cultural production? [Ito 2007: 89]

For Ito, this means that otaku escape nationalism(s) precisely because they remix and revalue (Ito 2012: xviii, 2007: 89). For Hirschkind et al. as well, social media are often “idealized as a site of human agency and emancipation, grounded in relationships of unfettered, unregulated social and economic exchange...a domain of social engagement outside the sphere of state power” (2017: S4). Yet, as I’ve begun to show, otaku do not escape, or even desire to escape, Japan as a referent, instead it is specifically a *Japan*, although variously configured, that they “strain towards” (Hirschkind, et al. 2017: S4) and into, in search of enchantment.

“The internet” then may not be idealized, utilized or inhabited (at least in the case of these otaku) as the sort of techno-utopian statelessness often ascribed by “new media” scholars (Shirky 2008; Weinberger 2007). However, that doesn’t mean these potentials haven’t still played a fundamental or transformative role in providing otaku access to the very cross-border materials

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<sup>70</sup> Increasingly open to intense and constant corporate and state surveillance and scrutiny.




which they in turn reinscribe with enchanted statefulness. Even stock anime computer “wallpaper” and otaku-drawn artwork mimicking, or inspired by, anime texts, are always being re-contextualized in discourse networks; these aggressively reterritorialize seemingly “free floating” images as Japanese—even downloaded, duplicated and re-posted anonymously elsewhere—as we read them through the games of truth that mark them as uniquely and culturally, though not necessarily *actually*, Japanese. Indeed, the “actual” is always under negotiation, part of the reterritorializing that is essential to the performance of otaku expertise in online spaces.

Characteristic of message boards posts on web forums dedicated to Japanese popular media, Figure 3 illustrates the type of two-fold authentication often at play through these exchanges. In one respect, these fans are seeking an original behind the fiction (is there “a real town in Japan named Manoyama?”), looking to locate, and thereby authenticate, the imaginary in the “real.” At the same time, these two users, both with Japanese-related avatars (a anime-esque girl with overly large eyes and a fox statue from a famous Shinto shrine in Kyoto) along with the other posters, are rationing insider knowledge, performing, evaluating and legitimizing status and expertise.

**Where is the location of Sakura Quest in real-life Japan** + Post Reply

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**siberian7** ★  
22039 cr points  
Send Message: [envelope icon] [paper plane icon]  
● Offline

Posted 6/21/17 Permalink Reply Quote

I have been watching the anime Sakura Quest. The city in the anime is Manoyama. Does anyone know if there a real town in Japan named Manoyama? Or is this anime inspired by another real life location in Japan?. I am going to Japan in October and would like to see this area if it really exists.

[Report to Moderator](#) [warning icon] [speech bubble icon] [share icon]



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**namealreadytake**  
12772 cr points  
Send Message: [envelope icon] [paper plane icon]  
☆Land of sweets☆  
● Offline

Posted 6/21/17 Permalink Reply Quote

apparently there isn't. people **tried to track down the real life location of some places**. it lists 4, but only the first 2 is somewhat certain, while the latter two is shrouded in doubt and is possibly wrong.  
what is known, according to the site:  
manoyama's tourist information center is in reality an information center for Yuwaku hot springs located in Ishikawa prefecture.

[source](#)

the Manoyama train station shown in the series is actually Juhana train station, located in Nanto, Toyama prefecture.




Figure 3. A message board post from an anime-focused website, Crunchyroll.com<sup>71</sup>

In this example, Siberian7 frames his or her search for the “actual” places, if they exist, through a desire to go there and see them, in the flesh. Part of this desire emerges from the expectation that, even while otaku are largely audiences of *fiction*, those stories have some foundation in the everyday, as a reflection of verisimilitude upon which the fantasy is based. In fact, after learning that about the connection between the anime’s location and the city of Nanto, Siberian7 discovers that the area is famous for woodworking which he informs the others is a topic of one early episode in the *Sakura Quest* series.<sup>72</sup> For every otaku I talked to, in Japan or out, the desire to see Japan figured as a common refrain. They cited a need to go to the “Mecca of videogames, and anime and manga,” as more than one person described it, or the “wonderland of popular culture;” to be surrounded with a corporeal “realness” that they couldn’t achieve from home. Those I talked to who were planning vacations for example, or setting out for a study abroad program like Aaron, often imaged itineraries full of “traditional” spots like Shinto shrines, the real-life locations of favorite anime and manga, and shopping trips to Akihabara, or “Electric Town,” a district in Tokyo famous as the best place to buy all the latest media or related fan merchandise such as pins, posters, and figurines. (Though some fans have reported to me that Akihabara is overrated with very little quality anime-related goods for sale; instead, they insisted I go to Ikebukuro.) I had more than one person describe these trips felt like “stepping into an anime.” Indeed, scenes of daily life in Japan aren’t moments (yet) from their own lived experience, but familiar telecasts, a replaying, in *deja vu* fashion perhaps, of textual moments

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<sup>71</sup> Source: <http://www.crunchyroll.com/forumtopic-993683/where-is-the-location-of-sakura-quest-in-real-life-japan>.

<sup>72</sup> Namealreadytaken links to a Japanese-language blog titled, “Sakura Quest (anime) information blog.” (サクラクエスト(アニメ)情報ブログ, <http://sakuraquest.seesaa.net/>). Another user mentions an article they found about how such anime help to revitalize the small towns of their settings. And one mentions that a video about this might already be posted to the Japanese video sharing site *niconico*, while another user posts a link to their own website that documents their travel through the area, with side by side photos of stills from the anime and the locations which inspired them. This user sets his documenting trip apart from typical tourist views of Tokyo (<https://tokyozero.com/2017/08/12/my-own-sakura-quest-exploring-the-real-life-manoyama-part-1/>).

they know from their favorite shows and books: crowded train station platforms playing jingles to signals the closing of train doors, high school students in their sailor-style uniforms, a university campus on the day of club recruitment, or even someone actually using the word *kawaii* (cute) or making the peace sign while taking a picture; all common moments in anime/manga/game narratives. Sometimes, this was as simple as having access to the kinds of merchandise that are part of the enjoyment of being an otaku, in a space where these items are simply taken for granted by locals, and part of “daily life.” This could be as straightforward as finding something like the chocolate-covered biscuit snack Pocky in multiple and unusual flavors at every convenience store in Japan, rather than from the hard-to-find specialty Asian grocery store or the yearly fan convention. Or, for example, going to a cosplay clothes shop which has character costumes difficult to purchase in the US, while next door is a bookshop for *doujinshi* (self-published and in limited release) manga where if you look carefully, you might find an amateur comic about a favored J-pop band<sup>73</sup> (impossible to find in the US or even in online portals). Stuffed on shelves next to crackers and American style potato chips, in my observation, otaku items like Pocky rarely seemed to lose their magical appeal.

In some ways then, we can see “Japan” as simply another element in the “database of referents,” that make up the intertextual media mix which otaku (are urged to) stitch together. In contrast to Ito’s supposition that otaku “downplay...the traditional modernist emphasis on ‘original’ and proprietary narrative constructs” (Ito 2012: xxii), through all my observations and interviews I saw that, while fans may care little for concepts of “proprietary” like media ownership and property rights, they actively incorporate such referents across and outside of media texts/formats to locate and thereby re-construct an “original” Japan.

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<sup>73</sup> Short for Japanese pop music.

### 2.3.1 Imagining in electronic networks

Years before Sophie ever arrived in Japan, I asked her if she anticipated being disappointed at all once she finally got a chance to go. She responded: “Well, I feel like I built it up too much now that, that I can't imagine it being disappointing, which probably is a problem, though.” She continued: “like, especially when I meet the different senseis [in Japanese class]. They're all so cool...it only furthers my belief that Japan is awesome, that I must go there.” Other otaku I met repeatedly voiced the same essential sentiment during interviews and conversations; in particular, that they had carefully crafted an imagination of Japan, through a good deal of expert fan-work, like the research involved in finding the real city of “Manoyama.” James described it as “having built up the place in my mind,” and Scott, an otaku blogger living in Japan who was also teaching English, told me that he had imagined Tokyo might look a bit like the film *Blade Runner*, although he laughed at himself over this admission. Scott’s self-consciousness reflected a common awareness among otaku that their image of Japan was a media(ted)-construction. This construction, they knew, included the realization that whatever Japan was, no matter how many anime they watched, or tours of small towns they took, it was elusively separate from them. This was clear when Sophie articulated why she was studying Japanese:

I wanted to get to the point where I could be on the same, I guess I’ll never be on the same level because I’m a foreigner but...where I could have a good conversation with a native or even at some point go there and live and maintain a job and attempt to integrate myself into the culture.

After a moment of hesitation, she added, “See, okay, the problem is, I want to be Japanese. That's my problem.” After that she added, “This is embarrassing.”

These difficult to sort, confused and frustrated “desires” were expressed by many of my informants; an intersection that can be hard to parse, for example, when someone like Sophie has a desire that she is simultaneously self-conscious and even self-critical about, dismissive of but at the same time overwhelmed and enchanted by. While researchers have argued that these fans are merely invested in an “illusory” brand aesthetic (Iwabuchi 2004, Allison 2006), in particular those who have never been to Japan but still long to be a part of something they locate as Japanese, this positionality is not a natural product of the “liberated” spaces of the internet, or even global media circulation, which free access to cultural difference, and through extended contact, allow otaku to inhabit it. Instead, a critical component of this discourse network is the heightening of “Japan” as a modifiable object/sign, in the processing of a “hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1994), at the same time as it is activated as *difference*. Rather than merely trouble the line between “true” and “false” (1994: 3), in this instance the hyperreal extends an articulation of a subject/object distinction which encourage otaku “to select, store, and process” relevance (Kittler 1990: 369) as cultural difference in the first place, and to value it in particular ways. This value comes in part through the commodification of Japan, “substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 1994: 2), which can be bought and sold. But in this case, the “hyper” and “real” are also protracted, as otaku distinctly feel the distance between the sign-object, (the anime figurine, the J-pop video, the *Pokémon* film), and the imagined really *real*; an enchanted Japan that they cannot access—a boundary they cannot cross, a place where they will “never be on the same level” and where acculturation can only be attempted but never achieved.

We have seen the cultivation of “value added” when Japan-produced commodities cross geographic borders. Yet, these same ideas—cultural difference as desirable, yet unattainable—are equally reproduced, enhanced and indeed, monetized in the blogs, conversations and other

online formats such as video posts (known as jvlogging, Japan-related video blogging) that otaku use to seek out more information about Japan and perform the expertise that makes them a fan. Indeed, as fans transition from imagining Japan and Japanese daily life, to speculate and plan some concrete way to act on their imagings,<sup>74</sup> they often turn to the same fan blogs, websites and forums they already rely on in their other fandom activities. For example, the videogame message board *NeoGAF*<sup>75</sup> has a permanent post with advice about visiting Japan and there are literally hundreds of thousands of webpages, including YouTube videos like *25 Things To Do in Tokyo, Japan (Watch This Before You Go)*.<sup>76</sup> Many otaku eventually, in one online forum or another, post about their trips to Japan (or even the planning stage itself), uploading photos and suggestions for other fans about where to go and stay, offering general advice about traveling and ruminating on their experiences. One San Francisco-based computer programmer, who “grew up loving Japanese anime (cartoons), manga (comics), and video games,” ended his blog post about his travels through Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka by noting:

I am in love with Japan. Everything about it seems awesome. I think I could live there. I don't think I could survive working at a Japanese company, though working at a remote US company in Japan could be doable. [<https://thomashunter.name/blog/2016-my-trip-to-japan/>]

Even when not specifically focused on travel, as I've mentioned fan websites and Japan-focused posts like the one above play a role in helping to build excitement about travel and Japanese-things more generally, just as fan conventions facilitate cultural-appreciation through convening

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<sup>74</sup> In a small pre-dissertation survey I conducted among University of Pittsburgh students in the first and third year of the Japanese language program, 100% (N = 37) said they want to travel to Japan some day and 11 of those same students had already visited. 81% of these students answered “yes” to the question: “Do you consider yourself a fan of Japanese popular culture?”

<sup>75</sup> I give *NeoGAF* special mention because of it wields a certain degree of authority due to the high presence of industry professionals.

<sup>76</sup> List-oriented, or “listicle” articles and YouTube videos are a common genre. Example video titles include: *Tokyo: 21 Secrets*; *Top 15 Tokyo*; *22 Things to Do in Tokyo*; *Tokyo Japan Travel Tips and Hacks! Top 11 things to make your trip smoother!*, etc.

supplies of quintessential Japanese products (sake, sushi and Pocky) and activities (tea ceremonies, kimono wearing). For example, news blogs such as *SoraNews24*<sup>77</sup> regularly post articles translating (and deciphering) recent local Japanese news, opinion polls and social media trends (such as popularly discussed Japanese-language Twitter and Instagram feeds). With post titles such as *Test the depths of your knowledge of Japan with this snack pack*, *10 misconceptions Japanese people think foreigners have about Japan*, *This mooing chicken-headed eel in the supermarket has a lot to teach us about Japan*, and *10 awesome ice cream and popsicle brands to try when you're in Japan*, the site acts as a simultaneous cultural broker and cultivator of increased consumer demand, a common interpretative frame which shapes otaku imaginings.

Some of these sites are more commercially oriented than fan-produced, as tourism agencies, hotels, offers for package deals, and marketers all have various profit incentives, although this distinction is frequently, intentionally murky. For example, the blog *JW Web Magazine* posts suggestions about what to do when in Tokyo (*5 Things to Do in Tokyo When it Rains*), providing sample itineraries (*3 Days Itinerary: First Time in Tokyo*), reviews and best of lists (*Best Sushi Restaurants*). Run by a Tokyo based WiFi rental company called Japan-Wireless (the JW of the blog name), generating business for this rental service is likely as much a factor as the blog's stated purpose, "to spread useful travel tips and cool trends from Tokyo to all around the world!" (<https://jw-webmagazine.com/tagged/wifi>).

While the *Japan-Wireless* blog is obvious subterfuge, so often the intersection of a desire to travel, or to talk, or to "be" and the more profit-oriented motives of the marketplace (even

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<sup>77</sup> The Japanese subtitle, ソラニュース 24 lends the Tokyo-based site an aura of authenticity. The site's *About Us* page explains their aim:

Sora is the Japanese word for "sky," representing our commitment to bringing coverage of modern and traditional culture from Japan and Asia to people around the world, no matter which part of the sky we share that you happen to be living under. [<http://en.rocketnews24.com/about/>]



when we're self aware) confuse, often intentionally, the issue. In fact, fan produced sites may receive commercial rewards, or advertising revenue for their v/blogging (Youtube funding career vloggers, for example) although some may attempt to disguise the sponsored nature of their site. If cultivation of otaku interests through these pages emerges with Japan figured literally as a sought-after destination, in Sophie's terms, a "there" where she could go and try to "be a part of it," then the affordances of the market and the channeling of messages and structures suited to the production of capital, for example those designed to generate clicks, search returns or viral attention, is certainly implicated in this process.

One example is the blog *Japanese Rule of 7*, which attempts a comedic, at times acidic, take on life in Japan for a non-Japanese resident.<sup>78</sup> Written by an American living in Tokyo who goes by the name of Ken Seeroi, the blog has categories of content for posts like *Living in Japan* and *Learning Japanese*. Under *Working in Japan*, Ken's details his experiences teaching English at various Japanese schools, first an *eikaiwa* and later a public junior high and then university. In the posts Ken frames as advice for readers who want to find work in Japan, and not as suggestions for how to manage the day-to-day realities of working at a Japanese company, Ken's assumed audience is clear. Two of these posts are specifically, although not clearly, advertisements for job search databases. The first is explicitly a curated post titled *The Best Japanese Website* which gushingly describes the features and design of another website *GaijinPot*, which describes itself as "Your Entry to Japan: Everything you need for a successful life in Japan" (<https://gaijinpot.com>). Ken's write up even includes links to *GaijinPot*'s pages:

So if you knew the old GaijinPot site, then you'd know a lot's changed recently. Such improve. So design. Very Fuji. Wow. There are three buttons suitable for the visually impaired that take you to [Work in Japan](#), [Study in Japan](#), and [Travel in Japan](#). That pretty much covers about 90% of what you'd ever want Japan for. Work in Japan is

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<sup>78</sup> There are many blogs which could stand in for analysis here..

straightforward. Click the button and Poof! Six months later you're an English teacher. [Seeroi 2014]

The second, a more recent post titled *How to Get a Job in Japan*, seems less obviously motivated by monetization. Buried towards the end of the post, Ken includes a ranked list of the best job search sites. Number one is *Jobs in Japan* over which he enthuses:

Love this site. It's got a ton of position listings, and doesn't make you spend hours grinding out an online resume before applying. Just upload a PDF highlighting your best points, set alerts for jobs matching your interests, then sit back and wait for the offers to arrive. Online since 1998, and just keeps getting bigger and better. [Seeroi 2013a]

Like many contemporary blogs, *Rule of 7* has embedded advertisements to the right of each post's text column; directly above the QR code for "Buy Ken a Beer with Bitcoin" in the sidebar is a two-inch ad for the database site. While Ken never makes explicit here or in the *GaijinPot* post that his services have been paid for in these instances,<sup>79</sup> (in addition to "Buy Ken a Beer" there is a link at the bottom of each post which readers can use to charitably donate via Paypal), their commercial function is relatively obvious, in part, because the voice he cultivates in them is in great contrast with the sarcasm used throughout every other post and includes an abundance of advertising-specific details ("just upload a PDF"); however, the guest commenters to these particular posts never mention or critique the financial relationship between Ken and the websites he extols. In the very least, the presence of advertisements on *Rule of 7* demonstrate the commoditizing aspect of the site, which visitors participate in, however unwittingly (as revenue dollars from embedded advertisements are often tied to a site's number of unique visitors). In this way, otaku online networking, even something as innocuous as researching how to get a visa or apply for a job, becomes implicated in, as a driver of, monetization schemes.

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<sup>79</sup> The *Japanese Rule of 7* Facebook page, which re-posts all blog entries from the website, is categorized as a Travel Company.

Similarly, bloggers “sell” an idea of Japan to their audiences that is shaped by these same structures. For example, in *Rule of 7* Ken addresses an assumed audience of English-speakers living outside Japan who have interest in either learning about Japan or visiting. Although commenters are sometimes local residents (chiming in with their counter or corroborative experiences, or hoping to funnel readers to their own blogs), the majority live in other countries, and to them—identified implicitly as the site’s “you”—Ken projects himself as an insider. As Ken’s Facebook About page illustrates:

What's it really like to live in Japan? I ask myself that every day when I roll off my futon and gaze out the window at a Shinto shrine, sixty-two condominiums, and some dude walking down the street in a stuffed bear costume.

Insights about life in Japan, learning Japanese, and occasionally teaching English.<sup>80</sup>

Ken continually alludes to this positioning throughout his “insights,” developing his expert role as resident in Japan, and at times, purposefully provoking the envy of his readers, which works to generate traffic to his site.

I’ve had plenty of barbecues on the riverbanks, gone camping in the mountains, stayed in *ryokan* overlooking the ocean, taken snorkeling trips in Okinawa and skiing excursions in Hokkaido. Rode the shinkansen to Kyoto sipping wine, and cable cars over the Hakone hot springs snuggling with random girls. [Seeroi 2017]

Although Ken continues this particular post by describing the way life in Japan eventually becomes as mundane as “living at your mom’s house,” as would anywhere—a linear progression of breakfasts, showers, work and sleep—his intention is to disrupt the fantasizing of his readers, to, in essence, show them that the imagination they have of life in Japan isn’t *the reality*.

The Land of the Rising Sun isn’t for everyone. But like Sirens to a sailor, Japan exerts a pull on the naive to the point that any job, no matter how miserable, seems tolerable in exchange for a brief encounter. I was among that number. [Seeroi 2012]

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<sup>80</sup> Source: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/JapaneseRuleof7/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/JapaneseRuleof7/about/?ref=page_internal)

Here, Ken may connect himself to the their purported naivety, but he is clear that he has long outgrown the rose-colored glasses; in this twist then, he positions his readers as both envious of his his life in Japan and ultimately misguided in their desires. Posted under his post *Japan's a Scam*:

I know you love Japan, but if you can't also immediately name ten things you absolutely hate, then you don't have a clue about the country. [Seeroi 2016]

This projection of expertise versus naivety, as NJ bloggers and video makers address those outside Japan, is common across web forums from the Youtube videos of “jvloggers” to message board posts. This one, from *GaijinPot* discussion forums, starts a thread called *What is it like to work in Japan*:

Now I see there are still loads of posts by fresh-faced and hopeful foreigners about getting jobs in Japan, so I thought I'd write some stuff about how it has been for me here in the hope that some might see how things can be if you are overly optimistic... or maybe just plain stupid like me.<sup>81</sup>

Similarly, Mike, an American I interviewed who was working for a Japanese videogame company in Tokyo, used this same positioning in his blog post about the difficulties he encountered when getting to Japan:

...moving to Japan is not all roses. If you—like me—have often dreamed of living in Japan, thinking that it would give you nearly unlimited access to all things great and small about gaming culture (giant Gundam statues, manga shops, cosplay, vintage gaming shops, techno-toy megaplexes, limited edition gearz, and, er, maid cafes), know now that the road to geeky glory is littered with obstacles behind every corner. For the expats who might be reading this, you already know what I'm talking about, but for the uninitiated, consider this an early glimpse into the sort of illogical hassles you might face in your journey East.

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<sup>81</sup> Source: <https://forum.gaijinpot.com/forum/working-in-japan/career-discussion/88375-what-it-is-like-to-work-in-japan>

In this way, these online networks (blogs are only one voluminous example) maintain the impression that life in Japan is relatively unattainable for fans even, as Iwabuchi claimed, “illusory” (2004: 62), just as these “experts” help extend otaku desire into consumerist scarcity, a mechanism that positions Japan as a compellingly sought after but eternally elusive space.

Of course, Ken’s claim to expertise is negotiated and negated by otaku in other online spaces. While the commenters to Ken’s blog are continually positive and complementary, in message boards such as on the website Reddit, users critique, and even ridicule Ken’s portrayal of Japanese social life. In one thread under a subpage targeted towards non-Japanese residents (subtitled, “living in Japan before it was cool”), one user specifically complains about Ken’s continual depiction of his many Japanese girlfriends while another poster attaches a photo listing the *Rule of 7’s* top five organic keywords; four of the five which generated the greatest traffic are related to sex and Japanese women. The reddit user who posted the photo stated: “So, at least from SEO [search engine optimization] perspective he's hitting it right.”<sup>82</sup> Of course, these users all frame their criticism of Ken through their expert status as long-term foreign residents in Japan.

In consideration of the role that “design” plays in modern regimes of consumption, Juris Milestone argues that it disciplines:

individuals and populations toward subjectivities that are amenable to the socio-political perspectives of neo-liberalism...through qualitative notions like ‘cool’, ‘beauty’, ‘creativity’, ‘community’ and ‘place’...[and through] the process of adding value to objects, processes, spaces, etc., thereby making them more desirable. [Milestone 2007: 177, 176]

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<sup>82</sup> Source:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/japancirclejerk/comments/67211c/ken\\_seeroi\\_has\\_a\\_mid\\_japanlife\\_crisis/](https://www.reddit.com/r/japancirclejerk/comments/67211c/ken_seeroi_has_a_mid_japanlife_crisis/)

In the case of the discourse networks from within which otaku circulate, bloggers like Ken and Japanese-topic media outlets like *SoraNews24* add value by framing Japan with qualitative notions of “exotic,” “other,” “distant,” and “mysterious;” supporting and shaping otaku desire to consume, not just lifestyles—and their narratives—made objects, but *other* lifestyles. In other words, embedded in the “truths” of the discourse networks of which they are a part, blogs help to produce Japan as ontologically strange, unique, even magical, in need of tongue-in-cheek cultural translation for the uninitiated—yet ultimately, unknowable. Just as we might learn from *SoraNews24* that the “mooring chicken-headed eel” is only “pretend[ing] to be a cow (*ushi*) and eel (*unagi*) in hopes that people will buy it during this special season, because both begin with ‘u’ whereas ‘chicken’ (*niwatori*) does not” (Le Blanc & M 2017), we don’t actually understand. Instead, we are reminded that *Japaneseness* is (here produced as) a commodified destination that we can “strain towards” (Hirschkind, et al. 2017: S4) but never actually attain. These notions, buoyed by, and arranged through academic and popular media in Japanese and English, participate as a structuring backdrop to otaku fantasies, channeling their eventual decisions to migrate—and as a subjectivizing force, to their possibilities for acting and sense-making once they become residents.

### **2.3.2 "A culture that is not their own"**

Rather than answer Susan Napier’s question which started this dissertation, in this chapter I have attempted to show the work that goes into communicating to American audiences that their favored characters are “from a culture that is not their own,” and that they become favored precisely for this reason. The obviousness of Napier’s question, that this “culture” is

discreetly “other” and that this difference is naturally implicated in fan consumerist decisions and even in media objects themselves, overlooks the strategic use of “Japaneseness” in discourse networks, where it is solidified, acted on and manipulated by many actors along the way. As the network circulates “Japan” as an empty signifier (Laclau 1996: 44, see also Laclau & Mouffe 1985), endlessly recast and rearticulated, it maintains the credibility and authority of the network itself through a constant transformation of the signifying “rules;” rules which, whether of taste, trend, fashion, or as I explore in the next chapter *nation*, become *a priori* “Japan.”

Although new technologies may allow the decoupling of “originals,” in digital modes of reproduction and distribution, I found that otaku practice repeated and purposeful reinscription of Japaneseness—onto media texts and into conversations and travels, both online and off. Again, it is precisely this border crossing, or statelessness, that allows otaku to recursively claim such circulating content as authentically Japanese. In Edward Bruner’s classic ethnographic look at an historic museum, he critiques the notion of “authenticity” as essentially concerned with “origins and reproductions.” Instead he shows the way Lincoln’s New Salem, a living museum, helps to create an “attachment” to an imagined and enchanted past through the lens of the present (1994: 398). For all their media savvy, as they navigate expertise and the collection of insider knowledge, otaku also embrace the media stories they find fascinating as enchanted with something true about Japan. Although otaku may even self-critique and take the blame for their own consumerist fantasies, as I’ve shown above, discourse networks frame Japaneseness as an object to be consumed and mark it as a particular kind of “truth” from the start. This difference, which they accept inherently excludes them, is part of an ongoing practice of nation-work, which, as I discuss in the next chapter, connects the Japanese state to a history of boundary maintenance and attendant techniques of categorizing social realities in Japan (Surak 2013: 6)

that wield “tradition” and, indeed authenticity, as the symbolic dividing line between Japan and the rest.



### 3.0 "SOME MAGICAL PLACE": COMMODIFYING A COOL JAPAN

*Sometimes Japan seems like another country, sometimes like another planet.*  
[mpkopack, November 25, 2017]<sup>83</sup>

*"I think all of us understand that we don't understand anything about Japan."*  
[Anthony Bourdain, *Parts Unknown*, Tokyo Episode]

*...Japan is repeatedly described by internal commentators and outside observers alike as having undergone a unique form of modernization and hence of being quintessentially different.* [Lock 1997: 230]

Christine has come to David's house to see his neatly folded baby clothes. They sit together on the floor of his apartment in front a plastic dresser box containing tiny onesies, all carefully pressed and tightly folded in three sections. Christine asks, "So, are you the one who folded...?" but David quickly interjects, "Me?? No, no, no way." David's Japanese wife enters the room and a TV host brightly declares in voice-over, "That's right, the person who neatly folded them all was David's wife, Kaiyo." The camera cuts to a close-up of a small baby in Kaiyo's arms and the voice-over continues, "And here's the girl who wears them all, their daughter Sophie." Then sitting the four of them together, Sophie carefully tucked in a baby chair, Kaiyo demonstrates her folding technique and David explains, it's like "watching magic." They all laugh when Christine says she never folds her clothes. Kaiyo says, "Doesn't that put wrinkles in it?" but Christine replies, "I didn't know it would do that." Later in the show, Christine fails

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<sup>83</sup> Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/Bb5SI\\_IAIQk/?taken-by=nathanfillion](https://www.instagram.com/p/Bb5SI_IAIQk/?taken-by=nathanfillion).

the “Pack-a-suitcase challenge” because she isn’t able to stuff “the same amount as a Japanese person” into a small carry-on sized suitcase.

The show is NHK’s<sup>84</sup> *Cool Japan* which went on the air in 2006. Developed originally to target a domestic audience (Valaskivi 2016: 41), each episode tackles a different unique element of Japanese social life, from the mundane (trains, beer, bugs) to the quixotic (Boso in the summer, shoji manga, why don’t Japanese people scold?, monkeys) and begins with the same opening segment: “These days, Japanese culture is considered cool overseas. What could be the reason for this? Will foreigners in Japan be able to discover the next ‘Japanese Cool?’” The announcer continues in dubbed English<sup>85</sup> (the original Japanese is always slightly audible in the background), “As usual, for a heated debate, we’ve invited eight foreign guests.” Over a still frame of the foreign guests’ thumbnail-sized photos—labeled by country of origin and not name—the dubbed announcer continues, “They’ll examine Japan from their fresh point of view and introduce the new Japanese cool that they find.”

The theme of this particular episode, which aired on October 8th, 2011<sup>86</sup>, is *tatamu* (畳む), or folding. The show’s co-hosts introduce this focus in English (although they speak in Japanese for the remaining segments) during the pre-credit intro as one of them opens and closes a clamshell-style phone: “That’s it, what did you do right now? ...There you go. Today’s theme is about Japanese people who will fold almost anything. Actually the first foldable mobile phone

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<sup>84</sup> NHK (*nippon housou kyokai*), is a public broadcast company.

<sup>85</sup> This is the NHK World version which is the original domestic episode fully dubbed in English. The Japanese version, which airs on the channel BS1, includes subtitles for English-language segments such as the pre-credit opening and the eight foreign guests who use English exclusively.

<sup>86</sup> The NHK’s Cool Japan website only lists previous episodes up to 2012 in English, but the Japanese version of the site catalogues them up to 2008. The description and air date of this particular website is listed on the following page: <https://www6.nhk.or.jp/cooljapan/past/detail.html?pid=111008>. The episode is available online, uploaded by a individual user: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q790umhtgis>.

was designed by a Japanese manufacturer.”<sup>87</sup> The NHK’s *Cool Japan* Japanese-language website includes this description of the show’s theme: “Foreigners are amazed by Japanese people’s dexterity at folding laundry”<sup>88</sup> (日本人が洗濯物をたたむ器用さに外国人は驚く, NHK 2011).

After the eight foreigner guests are ushered into the TV studio, each wearing name tags with the flags of their countries prominently displayed (U.S.A., China, Slovakia, Indonesia, Uganda, Italy, New Zealand, Norway), the expert Japanese guest, Professor Yasuo Kobayashi from the University of Tokyo, enters and takes a seat. A co-host offers a more specific explanation of the show’s topic: “Alright, now as to the theme for today, we couldn’t come up with an accurate English translation so we’ll just use the Japanese verb *tatamu*, which means to fold.” In the background, everyone laughs knowingly at this statement while the camera focuses on a paper sign with the English word *Tatamu* written under the same in larger hiragana type, たたむ. The university Professor chimes in (again dubbed) to explain: “A major symbol of Japanese culture is the *tatami* mat. And originally it was something that was folded, *tatamu*.” (Although the kanji isn’t shown here, the word *tatami* [畳, floor covering made of woven soft rush] uses the root of the verb *tatamu* [畳む] which Japanese viewers would be well aware of). The Professor continues, “Yes, it’s for the floor so naturally it would be folded. *Tatamu* is our culture.” The other co-host, referring to the modern day version of *tatami* flooring which has woven mats stretched across a distinctly non-foldable wooden and padded frame (about 85 cm by 179 cm), asks, “But *tatami* mats are so thick, how could they fold them?” The Professor explains patiently, “Originally, they were straw mats,” to which the co-host exclaims, “Oh, really! I learn so much from this program.”

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<sup>87</sup> As far as I can tell, the first flip-style cell phone was actually the StarTAC designed by the American company Motorola and released to the US market in 1996 (Wellner 2016: 25).

<sup>88</sup> My translation.

As a method to examine the labor of contemporary Japanese nation-making, in this chapter I work to disentangle what is communicated, implicitly and explicitly, in the televisual exchange above. The *Cool Japan* TV scenario is a clear example of this work because, despite its brevity (the exchanges described above take place within only a few minutes of a 44-minute show), it extends national ideologies fortified during the Meiji Restoration and recrafts them under the banner of Cool Japan—part of an effort to manage millennial insecurities over “globalization” and increasing visible “multicultural” diversity in Japan (Iwabuchi 2015). The frame through which the notion of *tatamu* is presented in this show is also deeply connected to state policies and programs that have fostered Cool Japan, modeled after Cool Britannia,<sup>89</sup> as an economic and cultural diplomacy project since 2004, even while the show itself is said to be unrelated to government sponsored efforts (Valaskivi 2016: 41). These participate in integrating national identity as an object into the everyday which, while it can be consumed globally, is primarily imagined for and addressed to the “Japanese,” who are instructed, “this is our culture.”

As nation-making in practice then, the *tatamu* episode primarily works to persuade potential viewers—as well as to circumscribe shifting ideas—of the nation’s ethnic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries as they resonate in the early 21st century. This nation-making is primarily disciplining: communicating to viewing audiences *who* can appropriately be Japanese by demonstrating *how* to be appropriately Japanese. While these narratives may only incidentally address “foreigners” like the American otaku of this study, these messages reflect the dominant forms of “truth” which shape the channels and decision-making practices at work in these

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<sup>89</sup> The term refers to Prime Minister Tony Blair’s 1990s co-opting of the surge of global popularity for British youth popular culture, such as The Spice Girls, in an attempt to “spice up” Britain’s image and to cast national politics as hip and “modern” (Waxman 2016).

discourse networks. While Sophie may never have seen the *Cool Japan* show, her wistful statement, “I guess I’ll never be on the same level because I’m a foreigner,” reflects hegemonic narratives of the nation with which otaku interact directly when they consume (marketed, localized, and even pirated) “made-in-Japan” media, as I discussed above. These narratives also speak then to a global media field that remains fundamentally, although not always easily, dominated by the nation as a frame of meaning-making. As Iwabuchi has argued, what we often figure as deterritorialized circulations are “facilitated and structured in an international communicative arena [which]...further prompt a territorialized conception of the nation rather than dismantling it” (Iwabuchi 2015: 11). This is especially clear when looking at the actual routes and “hands” (Bestor 2004: 34) through which national media (the “cool” content) circulate, as I described in chapter 2. For example, practices of localization and translation which are said to be necessary to modify media narratives and images to suit perceived nationally (sometimes also linguistically)<sup>90</sup> contained humors, tastes and interests; practices which are enforced by rating boards and local producers who insist on protecting the sensibilities of their “national” audiences as a method to manage an unpredictable international marketplace; practices which require securing licensing rights, and the practical navigation of nationally owned television and publishing companies,<sup>91</sup> not to mention DRM (digital rights management) codes that restrict media viewing outside particular authorized regions; and finally, practices like fansubbing or the circulation of pirated online versions positioned by fans as a direct rejection of

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<sup>90</sup> For example, the decision by localizers to release two Spanish versions, one for Spain and one for Latin American markets, or to release only one in Castilian, projecting it “as a universal, neutral Spanish” (Carlson & Corliss 2011: 71).

<sup>91</sup> Casey Brienza argues that because American publishing companies influence “the creation of a manga text from the moment of its conception” then “manga will not be a vehicle to deliver Japanese soft power” (Brienza 2014: 395). However, this overlooks the transnational re-making of texts typical of media industries which increasingly rely on cross-border production practices, and also that Japanese soft power is less about the actual content and more about, as I point out, the symbolic marketing of media texts as Japanese.

these other efforts, validated by their investment in a more *authentic* Japanese text. As a result, national narratives, especially those of other places, remain a powerful subjectivizing force for global audiences.

In these examples, the nation becomes materialized in specific decision making practices, industry media habits, and other routinized forms which utilize national sentiment to justify certain ways of doing things (such as localizing a product). In these tracks, the nation then gets activated as “of-courseness” strategically, though at times accidentally, when it supports other goals, boundary negotiations, or habitual actions. For example, localizers may seek to reinforce concepts of national difference because it justifies their relevance; as Daniel Miller documented in the case of Trinidadian advertisers who insisted that locally produced commercials were necessary to appeal to “local” audiences, even while research showed the glossier international advertisements tended to be more successful (1995: 9).

...it is advertising including transnational agencies which have become the major investors in preserving and promoting images of local specificity, retaining if not creating the idea that Trinidad is different, and inculcating this belief within the population at large. [Miller 1995: 9]

In the practice of nation branding, as I discuss below, the state takes up identical marketing endeavors in an effort to profit both symbolically and economically. Just as Trinidad advertisers reinscribe the Trinidadianess of the local population as a defensive measure against international advertising agencies, state measures for national boundary maintenance emerge from the troubled and perceived weakening of state control over their boundaries today.

### 3.1 “JAPAN’S NEAT WAY OF FOLDING CLOTHES”: JAPAN AS BRAND

During the the closing ceremony of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, as part of the tradition of passing the Olympic flag to the next host city, the Japanese government put on a spectacular display of music, dance and video. The video in particular featured Japanese Olympic athletes against the nighttime Tokyo skyline inter-cut with well-known animated characters from videogames (Pac Man), TV and manga (Doraemon), and licensed merchandise (Hello Kitty), with little connection to competitive sport. Prime Minister Abe himself appeared in the video, and after transforming into a computer generated Mario (from Nintendo’s revered Super Mario Bros. games, see chapter 2), he emerged from a large green pipe, a hallmark of the videogames, inside the Rio stadium. As his costume quickly fell away, Abe lifted Mario’s iconic red hat in salute to the appreciative crowd.<sup>92</sup>

Capitalizing on pre-Olympic attention, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) declared in a recent press release: “As the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games approach, worldwide interest in Japan *appears* to be growing” (METI 2017, my emphasis). Describing a new METI concept book, *Wonder Nippon* (the Japanese title is 世界が驚くニッポン, or “The Japan that Surprises the World”<sup>93</sup>), the press release explains that the booklet aims “to convey Japan’s unique sensibilities and values to the rest of the world as the foundation of commodities and services provided under the Cool Japan Initiative” (METI 2017). On the surface, this Cool Initiative can be seen as state-sponsored co-opting of mass media characters and lifestyle-related products to further public diplomacy. Indeed, nation branding as a practice

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<sup>92</sup> The video along with NHK’s commentary is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sk6uU8gb8PA>.

<sup>93</sup> Notice here the reoccurrence of the verb 驚く, *odoroku*, to be surprised or astonished, which is also in the Cool Japan *tatamu* episode description.

is founded on evoking “profitable associations...that help attract tourists and capital investment while driving the sales of national products and boosting a country’s international image” (Volcic & Andrejevic 2011: 604). Yet, these projects do more than merely *evoke* these associations; the Cool Japan project simultaneously “legitimizes and relies on the marketization of culture,” (Iwabuchi 2015: 16, see also Yúdice 2003), just as it works to articulate and circulate a nationally coherent narrative to link all these (market, culture, affect). Consider a page from the *Wonder Nippon* booklet below (Figure 4). The Japanese title, 日本人の感性を表すキーワード (*nihonjin no kansei wo arawasu kiiwaado*), has been subtitled with its English translation, “Keywords that express the sensibilities of the Japanese.” Here the embodiment of “Japaneseness” in everyday objects and lifestyles is made explicit, through a narrative that frames them as “derived” from a natural, even primordial, Japanese proclivity for nature; as the translated text continues: “Keywords that express the sensibilities of the Japanese in relation to the tangible and intangible, and to lifestyle, derived from a unique view of nature. These keywords help in understanding the essence of the Japanese spirit” (METI 2017: 40).



## 日本人の感性を 表すキーワード

Keywords that express the sensibilities of the Japanese

日本人ならではの感性をキーワードとして選定された。日本人のノスタルジックな文化と生活習慣をキーワード「日本の感性」を「日本人の感性」をキーワードとして選定された。

Keywords that express the sensibilities of the Japanese in relation to the nostalgic atmosphere and lifestyle of the Japanese.



Figure 4. Keywords of Japaneseness and everyday goods from *Wonder Nippon*<sup>94</sup>

What *Wonder Nippon*'s press release describes as an incidental outcome of the coming Tokyo Olympic Games, and what the Rio closing ceremony seems merely to respond to—interest that “appears” to be growing—is perhaps better understood as the result of more than a decade of Japanese state policy making, and an even longer history of deliberate curation, the crafting of a distinctly marketable national-image. Of course, branding as a form of public diplomacy is hardly new, with roots extending even before World War-era propagandizing. In venues such as the 1851 “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations,” known as the first World’s Fair (Valaskivi 2013: 3, Nakamura 2013: 3), emerging nation-states vied for attention in a newly constructed global political arena that gradually routinized the nation-state (and their wares) as the only legitimate form of participation.<sup>95</sup> But it was in the early 2000s, as advertising companies and their consultants became attached to governmental planning and state

<sup>94</sup> Source: METI 2017: 40.

<sup>95</sup> John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan mark the post-World War II establishment of the United Nations as key to this standardization (Kelly & Kaplan 2001: 9, see also Anderson 2001).

budgets, that public diplomacy became increasingly *articulated* as a marketing endeavor—the management of positive meta-images and commercialized impressions rather than of actual content (Volcic & Andrejevic 2011: 599, 604).

In 2004, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) explicitly adopted the term public diplomacy for the first time and structurally reorganized to facilitate “coordination of international public relations and cultural exchanges” under its newly created Public Diplomacy Department (Nakamura 2013: 4, Iwabuchi 2015: 29). This reorganization was justified in part by the international policy advantages sought, such as a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (Bluebook 2005: 6, cited in Nakamura 2013: 9), (for which Japan sells its “unique status as a non-nuclear-weapon State” [MOFA 2011]), and an improvement in Japan’s relationships with its Asian neighbors, which, still soured from wartime aggression, even Nye pointed out hinders Japan’s potential to take a leadership role in the region (Nye 2004: 87-88, cited in Nakamura 2013: 12; for an analysis of how nation branding has been used unsuccessfully by the Japanese government to heal those rifts, see Iwabuchi 2015: 35). The 2004 and 2005 MOFA Diplomatic Bluebook demonstrate the state’s explicit move to utilize *pop*-culture in this effort:

The promotion of policies to spread proactively Japan’s charms abroad under a branding strategy and improve Japan’s image is expected not only to attract more overseas people to Japan but also to lead to the revitalization of Japan’s economy, society, and culture through growth of investment and tourists from overseas. In particular, Japan’s so-called sub-culture, such as animation, movies, comics (manga) and Japanese cuisine, is becoming more and more popular in Europe, the US, and Asia. [MOFA 2005: 214, see also MOFA 2004: 211]

Kenjiro Monji, Director General of the Public Diplomacy department in 2008, saw “pop culture as having great potential to serve as a starting point to introduce Japanese culture to others” (Monji 2009: 44, cited in Nakamura 2013: 9). Pop-culture then, however loosely defined, is positioned here merely as an avenue to insinuate “real” national culture in the minds and hearts

of foreign nationals. A few of the programs developed during this time (2007-2008), described as “Pop-Culture Diplomacy” by MOFA, work to achieve this end: the Japan International MANGA Award which is given to “creators who contribute to the spread of MANGA culture overseas and international cultural exchange through MANGA;” the appointment of the animated character Doraemon as Anime Ambassador, “with the aim of increasing the interest of people overseas in Japan through Anime;” and the awarding of a Best Costume Player at the yearly World Cosplay Summit in Japan (MOFA 2017, see also Iwabuchi 2015: 29).

However, public diplomacy—insinuating positive images and connotations of the nation in regional and global media outlets in the hopes of influencing future (inter)national agendas—is only half of the nation brand. Products positioned by branding as “cultural” (and introduced to economic rationale like intellectual property rights<sup>96</sup>) such as handicrafts, arts, fashion, cuisine, new media formats and even lifestyles, language and ritual, are the foundation of these very diplomacy efforts. These branding efforts are then sustained by the very practical demand to increase the sale of such items and foster the local industries needed to support their creation; exporting profitable commodities along with positive, thematic affect. Of course this is complicated by the public and private relationships that need to be mobilized, along with contemporary circuits of production which at the very least, make locating the “made in” inside the nation-state more and more difficult.<sup>97</sup> To this end, the Creative Industries Promotion Office was established in 2010 by METI. The office works to support and expand the cultural industry’s (クリエイティブ産業, *kurieiteibu sangyou*) productive capabilities, “in the hopes that this sector

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<sup>96</sup> This also inculcates the view that the nation brand must be “controlled, monitored, and protected from misuse and counterfeiting” by the state (Del Percio 2016: S2).

<sup>97</sup> The Cool Japan Proposal from 2014 argues that the government should promote the use of the phrase “designed in Japan” on material goods (in addition to “made in X country”) which will “visualize...Japan as a country of creative people” (20). Coincidentally, I saw this very label on my daughter's new baseball glove just minutes before I read this report.

will help drive domestic economic growth” (Brienza 2014: 386). While MOFA insists “the purpose of the promotion of Japanese media culture should not be reduced to market profits only” (Iwabuchi 2015: 29), METI documents show this turn to economic amelioration—in the calculation of market share and profits to be achieved—is certainly motivated by practical economic strategies, perhaps in an attempt to overcome a prolonged recession.<sup>98</sup>

This element of branding, however, isn’t focused only on the marketing of media and lifestyle texts and techniques already in production as *culturally* unique, but investigating, funding and instigating the creation of new products and services that can serve the brand image; finding a way to “transform the appeal of Japanese culture and lifestyle...into added value,” or in other words, as METI’s Cool Japan Strategy further equates it, “create a mechanism to convert culture into industry” (METI 2012b). As George Yúdice describes: “culture is...used as...an inexhaustible kindling for new industries dependent on intellectual property” (Yúdice 2003: 3-4). Under METI’s broad Cool Japan Initiative, this has emerged as an imperative for the population to “create,” and for the communication and organizational structures of both government and business to adapt to the needs of a creativity-inducing environment. Indeed, the Cabinet Office’s 2014 Cool Japan Proposal suggests that, at the center, “Cool Japan is a national movement encouraging the Japanese people to fully exercise their voluntary creativity in the international community.” (Cool Japan Movement Promotion Council 2014: 2); in essence, “to identify state and economic imperatives as their own” (Volcic & Andrejevic 2011: 600). To do this, the proposal recommends that businesses remove barriers to creativity, in particular “hierarchical structures,” and instead use “flat” communication systems that operate outside the typical

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<sup>98</sup> This recession has been referred to, first, as the “lost decade” and, later as the “lost twenty years” (Ichimura 2012), even while economic commentators have questioned whether Japan is actually experiencing a recession, considering its low unemployment rate (O’Brien 2015).

vertical chains of organization (Cool Japan Movement Promotion Council 2014: 7, 15). Younger employees should also be recruited and allowed to “exploit their potential” to foster innovation and the necessary deregulation should occur in order to free up creativity, for example, regulations that might limit “fan fiction and street performance that may hamper the development of authentic products” (Cool Japan Movement Promotion Council 2014: 12, 13). The Cabinet’s proposal also specifically encourages government agencies to work together “based on creative cooperation” (7).

Yet, many of these dictates are difficult to implement widely across diverse industries and enterprises, and contradict the hierarchical, but family-like, principles that have long been utilized in, and seen as fundamental to, Japanese bureaucratic and corporate structures (Morris-Suzuki 1998, Kondo 1990, Rohlen 1974). In addition, state bureaucracy has wielded intense oversight in industry, exemplified by the tendency for retiring government officials to become business executives, in a horizontal move into the private sector known as *amakudari* (天降り) or “descent from heaven” (Sugimoto 2010a: 223). Although the ministry has indicated that past initiatives have failed to generate the economic impact anticipated (METI 2012a: 3), and an external review in June 2012 rated the Cool Japan Overseas Promotion Projects as “required drastic improvements” (METI 2012b: 3), METI’s Cool Japan Strategy still aims to acquire “8 to 11 trillion yen in the worldwide markets in creative industries, as of 2020” (METI 2012b: 3). These evaluations further demonstrate the bureaucratic and administrative difficulties that branding projects present: governmental agency collaboration, cross-industry cooperation, public-private partnerships and reliable metrics for evaluating the impact of branding (METI 2012a).

The Cabinet Office’s Cool Japan Promotion Council led by business experts, artists and media talent, in addition to ministry officials, similarly determined that, “the Cool Japan movement has not proven very effective in achieving its original purpose of winning the sympathy of other countries toward Japan” (Cool Japan Movement Promotion Council 2014: 2).<sup>99</sup> The Council’s report blamed this failure, in part, on the cacophony of the types of products and ideas included under the banner of “cool.” Although they reiterated that Cool Japan should be seen essentially, as “positive aspects of Japan of which they should be proud” (9), they also urged that a new slogan must be found to replace Cool Japan, “which tends to be perceived as being not cool for calling ourselves ‘cool’” (19). While the desired impact of Cool Japan and other nation branding techniques may be at best “dubious,” as Iwabuchi has argued and as the above examples show, branding efforts still take dramatic material form through institutional restructuring and policy, as well as in, of course, the allocation of government funding (2015: 30).<sup>100</sup>

Though it has very material consequences, the work of nation branding, like marketing more broadly, is a symbolic endeavor; an attempt to craft knowledge about what and who the nation is, in an effort to channel what it can and should be in the future. Envisioned as a state project by at least two separate ministries with often competing ambitions and needs (not to mention industry executives, entrepreneurs and celebrities crafting their own related brands), Cool Japan—along with nation branding more broadly and ultimately, the “nation” itself—is

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<sup>99</sup> Of course, this is difficult to measure using the metrics and milestones so fundamental to government programs, grants and their external review process; branding agents often rely on simple opinion polls to judge whether citizens in India, China and VietNam, for example, think Japan is a creative country (METI 2014).

<sup>100</sup> It also shapes local politics and the self-branding of public officials. For example, current Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike (elected in 2016) has claimed to want to make all of Tokyo an “anime-land” (アニメランド). While running for office, she campaigned that she wanted to help grow the anime and manga industry and spoke specifically about supporting the Comic Market, known as komike (コミケ) during a campaign speech in Akihabara, or Electric Town (Ashcraft 2016).

never secure. In fact, while the goal of nation branding seems straightforward, “winning the hearts and minds of young people around the world and encouraging them to become ‘Japan fans’” (Galbraith 2017: 109, citing Sugimoto 2013), the work of marketing the brand is a haphazard and uneven effort at best, as ministries try to calculate and predict the economic appeal of incalculable and unpredictable forms of affect. Indeed, scholars have argued that the explosive growth of global interest in and sales of media forms such as anime and manga took the Japanese government by surprise in the early 2000s (Kelts 2006: 7, cited in Ito 2012: xvii). Others have argued that it was in fact David McGary’s 2002 *Japan’s Gross National Cool* article published in *Foreign Policy* (and “quickly translated” [Iwabuchi 2015: 27]) that sparked the Japanese government’s turn towards harnessing its cultural industries in the development of a brand (Leheny 2006, Kelts 2006: 112– 113, cited in Ito 2012: xvii, Nakamura 2013, Iwabuchi 2015). For Allison, it was the fantastical overseas sales of the Pokémon franchise in the late 1990s that “was deemed a sign of Japan’s new *bunka pawā* (cultural power) at home” (2009: 93).

As much as “culture” and the “pop-” appendage appear as if taken-for-granted or unselfconsciously adopted by these state agendas, Cool Japan state projects reveal a continual working out and rearticulating of the very definition of the national on the part of the state— here, in relation to perceived marketability. These are agents who often compete with each other for control of potential meanings and attendant profit, and who must also meet quantifiable metrics to prove the success of their endeavors. This fluidity, and even insecurity, is reflected in the efforts of state-run programs to craft and circulate coherent national narratives, which also emerge, even indirectly, in collaboration with non-state actors such as media producers, as NHK’s *Cool Japan* demonstrates. Indeed, such media representations play a central role in

communicating, and helping to subjectivize global audiences to, the “imagined” nation (Anderson 2001).

### 3.2 “TATAMU IS OUR *CULTURE*”: DISCIPLINING THE NATION

Although any Japanese-English dictionary would provide a simple definition of 畳む (*tatamu*), “fold up” and also, “close; windup,” (Ishiyama 2012), the *Cool Japan* TV host insists that “we couldn’t come up with an accurate English translation.” It is “our culture” the guest-Professor simply insists. While the show doesn’t clearly state what might get lost in translation with use of the word “fold,” the discussion of the older form of tatami—as a thin floor mat which could easily be folded and stored away when not in use<sup>101</sup>—is crafted as a (tenuous) thread connecting Kaiyo’s rigorous folding of her baby clothes to a pre-modern Japanese household.<sup>102</sup> As viewers, we are invited to imagine how folding tatami mats, perhaps as part of a daily ritual, extends through to today in a natural proclivity for folding laundry neatly and compactly, as her husband exclaims, “like magic.” As Kaiyo demonstrates her folding technique, the voice-over explains: “The tatamu method Kaiyo came up with is to fold each side three times to make it as

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<sup>101</sup> This would have been after the Heian period, when tatami became common in all households (originally they were used only by nobility for sleeping and sitting) and “gradually became built in” (Hanley 1997: 203).

<sup>102</sup> Today, tatami is often relegated to one-room *washitsu* (和室, Japanese style rooms) or even replaced entirely by “flooring” in new home constructions, as notions of modern housing convenience, a lack of younger tatami-producers, and intensive home renewal and rebuilding projects (Lucienne 2014; see also Brasor & Tsubuku 2015), based on the understanding and appended building practices that all structures are “temporary and disposable” [Harding 2016]—to eventually be overtaken by “earthquakes and white-footed ants” [Harding 2015]—contribute to their decline.



small as possible.”<sup>103</sup> Specifically, Kaiyo first folds in the arms of the small onesie, then folds it in three lengthwise, and finally, in three widthwise. The result is a small rectangle of material.

Although the show attributes this particular folding method to Kaiyo herself and indeed to Kaiyo’s Japaneseness, it bears a striking resemblance to that developed, popularized and intensively marketed by Marie Kondo’s decluttering empire. The publication date of Kondo’s first book is listed officially as January 2011 (later translated to English as *The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, 2014),<sup>104</sup> however, to coincide with Kondo’s appearance on a Saturday morning TV show, the book was released early in December 2010; the publisher claims that the “book sold very well as a result of the TV publicity” (Marushima 2011). By mid-May of 2011, the book had sold 300,000 copies with the assistance of a “savvy Internet campaign” (Yourgrau 2015) along with advertisements in newspapers, on train lines, and in and around Tokyo (Marushima 2011). While it is merely speculative to connect the KonMari method,<sup>105</sup> as it is known, with both Kaiyo’s own folding practice and even possibly, the producer’s decision to develop the *tatamu* episode, Kondo’s book would have, at the very least, been well-known by late 2011 when this particular installment aired on NHK.

The argument that positions KonMari organization-style as uniquely, even “officially” Japanese, is popularized with “cultural pride” by her publishing company Sunmark and supported by the assumption that the “tight” size of “living spaces in Japan” *necessitate* they be

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<sup>103</sup> Again, this is the dubbed version, where *tatamu* is marked as incommensurable by its lack of translation into English.

<sup>104</sup> Notice the way the book gets marked as *Japanese* in its translated title. The original title is: *The Life-Changing, Pulsing Magic of Cleaning Up* (人生がときめく片づけの魔法).

<sup>105</sup> The book describes her method like this: first, “tuck the sleeves in to make a long rectangular shape...Next, pick up one short end of the rectangle and fold it toward the other short end. Then fold again, in the same manner, in halves or in thirds” (Kondo 2014: 75).

“tidy and orderly” (Yourgrau 2015). A profile of Kondo in *New York Magazine* suggests that, “In Japan more than anywhere else, tidiness is less a virtue than a philosophy of living” (Young 2015), while an article in the *New Yorker* offers a compelling alternative to this more “deodorized” depiction:

...not everyone agrees with this account of Japanese culture, or with these theories about the popularity of Kondo’s work. “She is a successor of the long tradition of ‘art of discarding’ starting around the 1990s,” the author and photographer Kyoichi Tsuzuki wrote to me over e-mail. “It looks to me that mood arose after the Japanese bubble economy’s crash. Until then, we were educated to buy more and more.” [Yourgrau 2015]

In his book *Tokyo: A Certain Style* (1999), Tsuzuki complains about the overabundance of “Glossy coffee-table books on the heights of the Japanese aesthetic tradition” (Tsuzuki 1999: 18). In an almost critique of nation branding, he argues: “Let’s put an end to this media trickery, giving poor ignorant foreigners only images of the most beautiful Japanese apartments to drool over” (19). Instead, Tsuzuki invites his readers to see another side of Tokyo, a city with an abundance of hoarders, chaos rising up in small but vibrant spaces.<sup>106</sup> Consider this abundance in contrast to *Wonder Nippon*’s insistence that, “Traditional Japanese aesthetic sensibilities are conditioned by a feeling of ‘openness,’ the product of a distinctive outlook on nature that strives for harmony by assimilating it with oneself” (METI 2017: 13). Although Tsuzuki manufactures his own mythology in the process—the “beauty in chaos” found in cramped and overflowing, even dirty, living spaces<sup>107</sup>—his images of the untidy, “hey, that’s the reality,” he says (Yourgrau 2015), challenge the “glossy” sanitization that is so central to the nation branding endeavor. In

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<sup>106</sup> In the *New Yorker* interview, Tsuzuki also explains that today, we are encased in a marketplace full of obsolescent generic goods. In contrast to Kondo’s dictate to keep only the things that “spark joy,” Tsuzuki argues that these mass-produced items, from the likes of Uniqlo, “are fine, but you really don’t need to love them” (Yourgrau 2015).

<sup>107</sup> Tsuzuki invokes turn-of-the-century “Japanese anarchist thinker” Sakae Osugi’s comment that, “beauty is to be found in disarray” (Tsuzuki 1999: 22).

fact, marketing popular made-in-Japan media under the Cool Japan rhetoric requires reframing those items as “positive aspects of Japan of which they should be proud” (Cool Japan Movement Promotion Council 2014: 9). This (often) means scrubbing them of all their dirt, excess, complexity, disobedience, humor and profanity.

Yet, a good deal of manga and anime explicitly play with the boundaries of decency, as creators often use these mass-mediated formats, and genre potential for fantastical elements and settings, to transgress the good and the normal. Anne Allison has argued that contemporary Japanese media<sup>108</sup> is tied up in extending “a fantasy of perpetual transformation...and desire across ever new zones/bodies/products...premiered on dislocation and flux” (2006: 277). Boy’s Love manga (also, BL, *yaoi*) which depict male homosexual relationships and are often drawn and read by women (in a genre of amateur manga production, *doujinshi*), or Lolicon media (*rorikon*, a contraction of Lolita complex) said to sexualize under-age animated female characters, are only two sensational examples (see for example McLelland et al. 2015, Galbraith 2017). The figure of the otaku itself, although perhaps a very obedient modern consumer, is ultimately perceived to be antithetical to the social, and in particular, to the national dictates of self-sacrifice for the common good (Condry 2011, Ivy 2010)—threatening the post-war virtues that are said to have helped create the country’s “economic miracle,” and the salarymen who *karoushi-ed*<sup>109</sup> themselves laboring to achieve it. Indeed, Marilyn Ivy argues that “the otaku-child figure, lost to normal sociality, sexuality, and national-cultural identification...is merely the most publicly available and capitalized-on object of national-cultural anxieties about youth and national futurity” (2010: 4). Post-bubble deterioration (of both the economy and the rigid

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<sup>108</sup> Although Allison says her primary focus is on toys, games and figures, the larger category of “media” is more useful for the discussion here.

<sup>109</sup> 過勞死 means “death from overwork.”

authoritarian structures that supported its fantastic growth up to the 1980s), seemed to signal “the waning power of a ‘mainstream consciousness’ to channel aspirations and effort” (Kelly & White 2006: 66). The ensuing “funk” was thought to “open up new space for diversity...alternative voices...that have implicitly been left out of traditional discourses about what Japanese culture is” (Leheny 2006: 219).<sup>110</sup> Yet, as Patrick Galbraith argues in relation to *rorikon*, “If the specter of weird Japan haunts cool Japan and threatens to possess it, then we can expect the government to bury the skeleton” (2017: 111).

In this way, we can see nation branding as a selective process; as it simultaneously attempts to author and endorse an idealized national culture and citizen in erasure of more unruly behaviors (sexual perversion, for example), it may be driven in part, as Ivy suggests, by the moral panics these behaviors incite. Parasite singles (*parasaito shinguru*)—classified by sociologist Masahiro Yamada as women (and sometimes men) who defer starting a family, and live “parasitically” off their parents squandering their income on luxurious consumption (1999)—are another good example of mainstream alarmist reactions to violations of the national order, where marriage and, in particular motherhood, “is a public project that betters society” (Pike & Borovoy 2004: 505).<sup>111</sup> Indeed, otaku were thrust into (fearful) public consciousness after the Saitama child-murderer Tsutomu Miyazaki was declared an otaku because of the immense, overflowing, collection of animated (and possibly pornographic, *rorikon*) media unearthed by the police at his home—along with the body parts and images of his young female

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<sup>110</sup> Japanese scholar Yoshio Sugimoto does argue that “The view that Japan is a monocultural society with little internal cultural divergence and stratification, which was once taken for granted, is now losing monopoly over the way Japanese society is portrayed” (Sugimoto 2010b: 1).

<sup>111</sup> While Yamada suggests he was particularly concerned with the impact these singles would have on the market for consumer durables such as housing (1999: 50), his thesis is also likely a reaction to the perception that a failure to marry and have children is a rejection of the “national agenda of building an administratively unified, modern nation-state and a shared national identity” through marriage which had been a public project since the Meiji era (Pike & Borovoy 2004: 504).

victims (Kinsella 2000: 126–38).<sup>112</sup> Since then, the word otaku has been defined as those “without basic human communication skills who often withdraw into their own world” (Yumiuri Weekly, cited in Azuma 2006: 4), and coupled in varying degrees “with pathology and violence” (Allison 2006: 85).

In contrast, cuteness, (*kawairashisa*, 可愛らしさ) appears to be the ideal “profitable association” for commodification by Cool Japan policies. A mutable aesthetic for fashion and accessories—and even speech, behavior and physical appearance—cuteness captures, for Sharon Kinsella, an idolized childlikeness that has saturated media and commodity goods and services from the 1980s (1995: 220, 240). For example, in 2004, Japan’s Self Defense Forces sent water trucks to Iraq to help with:

...reconstruction of the war-shattered nation. The trucks were marked not by the Japanese flag but by a national symbol deemed (rightly) more instantly recognizable abroad—manga and anime soccer hero Captain Tsubasa. [Hoffman 2013]

At the time, Prime Minister Taro Aso claimed that, “he hoped the ‘warm images’ associated with these cute characters would result in similarly warm feelings toward Japan and its foreign policy” (McLelland 2009). Mark McLelland however, points out the irony of adopting Captain Tsubasa as a cute ambassador, (in a region where homosexuality remains highly, even violently stigmatized), since unofficial but widely prevalent Boys Love comics used the popular manga series as a backdrop “to imagine homosexual liaisons between [Captain Tsubasa]...and his team mates” (McLelland 2009).

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<sup>112</sup> Some journalists speculated that the child-pornographic nature of Miyazaki’s manga and anime collection was vastly overstated, or even planted by the police to help ensure his conviction (Ichihashi 2003, Hicks 2012), but regardless the ensuing connection became a public forum for debating media effects and the nature of the “true” otaku (see for example Kinsella 1998, 2000, Otsuka 2004, Galbraith et. al 2015).

Kinsella has argued that cuteness was a deliberate embodiment of pre-socialized innocence and vulnerability that emerged in the late 1970s in explicit rejection of adult social relations and values; again those postwar ideologies of adulthood, which include above all else obligation and responsibility to, and self-sacrifice and loyalty for, the corporate-nation (1995: 220, 251). As such, cuteness is profoundly anti-social (251). In order for *kawairashisa* then to be “Capable of becoming all things to all people,” as McLelland describes Hello Kitty (McLelland 2009)—in fact, to communicate (political) harmlessness in a potentially volatile post-9/11 public—cuteness has to be (marketed as if it is) emptied of its local social uses and attendant resistive meanings.<sup>113</sup>

At the very least, nation branding attempts to market media forms and commodities so that they can be, hopefully, re-framed free from their contentious referents; the complexity of social life, the messiness, the multitude, the perverse. As part of this process, state projects look not only to promote pop-media and other commodifiable lifestyles as if always positive reflections (by ignoring their potential disorderly meanings), but to re-write them as a naturally occurring outgrowth of the traditional and the timeless. The *Wonder Nippon* booklet casts this thread for consumers to follow: “At the root of this concept is the idea of Japan’s traditional sensitivity and values, continuing on through the generations” (Wonder Nippon 2017: 1). Here, this state-authored document articulates a common rationale found in nation branding, indeed nation-making, as the “new” is collapsed into, or made to be a mere following from and continuous with, the “old.” In writing about the function of *washitsu* (Japanese style room) in the

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<sup>113</sup> Of course, the state often has incomplete control of the actual production of such narratives, or even of their circulation and reception; although laws can be created to declare certain messages or images, for example, pornographic in order to prohibit their wide availability, creators are always looking for ways to circumvent those laws (Allison 1996, Kinsella 2000). Online distribution only makes this a more tentative process, and therefore, at least figuratively, more threatening.

home today, in which tatami remain a significant and even costly element, Richard Ronald contradicts this central tenet of the Cool Japan message:

...there are two overlapping rhythms of consumption in Japan: the quicker driven by fast-changing fashion and the slower reflecting a consumption of tradition...the Japanese house embodies both ideals through its mix of modern and traditional elements, which are reinvented and posed against each other. [Ronald 2009: 564]

Discussing Walter Benjamin's work *The Arcades Project* (1999), Allison suggests such mixing is typical of a process "encasing contemporary change within traditional mythology," where "Technology, particularly in moments of radical change and transformation, become entangled in the mythology of the previous age" (Allison 2006: 28). However such entanglement, either as an element of the home or a function of technological development (the gradual relegation of tatami out of the primary rooms of the home to the solitary *washitsu*, for example), is not mere accommodation to the "modern." More importantly for this study, mapping out the unbroken line to the past, fixing that which "runs steadily through" (Hendry 1995: 18) as a dictate of the state, has already long been a feature of Japanese nation-making and institutionalizing projects (Ivy 1995)—indeed, of *all* nation-making by definition.<sup>114</sup> Although these projects are thought to have begun most aggressively with the Meiji Restoration<sup>115</sup> (the era officially lasted from 1868

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<sup>114</sup> As Eric R. Wolf points out, nations are born from ideologies which posit a "common substance" is "passed down the generations partly through biological transfers, 'descent,' and partly through the handing down of a valued, culturally learned 'tradition'" (Wolf 2001: 185). This mapped easily to the emperor system, as *tennou* ideology developed in connection with nationalizing projects beginning in the Meiji era (Gluck 1985); in fact, Robert Bellah writes that there is "no clearer assertion" of this "descent" than the image of the "the imperial line, unbroken for ages eternal" (Bellah 2003: 117).

<sup>115</sup> It is a relatively historically myopic to begin with the Meiji era, because although my focus is on the nation-state as an amalgam, what the nation and state could be (both separately and conjoined) has of course materialized from, and in conversation with, politics, practices and social ideals in previous eras. For example, in his history of the Tenmu dynasty (650-800), historian Herman Ooms (2009) explains the way mytho-historical texts, such as the *Nihon shoki*, Record of Japan (712 A.D.) and the *Kojiki*, Record of Ancient Matters (720 A.D.), like the co-current development of borders in the Nara period, helped to fashion the state, "the composition of its laws, its histories, and its ideologies" (2009: 6). These texts form Japan's oldest written record and the myths they contain are later called on to help craft modern Japanese identity into something historically cohesive, a singular line of development—or way of being Japanese—extending from these early historical records into the present.

to 1912), and the myth of Commodore Perry’s combative “opening” of Japan in 1853 by “commanding with their guns” (Palmer 2002: 153), the emergence of the Japanese nation was fundamentally a process of rearticulating (the meaning of) the past by the new centralized state government and its bureaucratic ministers: transforming “Japan” (as it came to be known) ideologically from a dynamic, diverse and interdependent entity, to an “isolated” island nation (*shimaguni*, 島国) that had been closed off for 200 years prior to the arrival of Perry’s “Black Ships” (Toby 1984; Totman 2000).<sup>116</sup> A very “modern” predicament of this process was materializing, authenticating and bureaucratizing ethnic, political, cultural and linguistic unity—in other words, inventing a “we Japanese” (Batten 2002: 93)—from a very messy social reality: “over 250 decentralized domains,” or *daimyou* (Sharp 2011: xix), indistinct and shifting political and geographic boundaries, at least two administratively separate groups, the Ainu and the Ryuukyuu Islanders, ongoing and intense social and political exchange with Asia and the West, and a diversity of community relations and daily practices (Toby 1984, Morris-Suzuki 1998, Batten 2002). In fact, when bureaucratic agents of the new state swarmed the countryside to spread ideas of the “national family,” Merry White explains they were “shocked” by the diversity they discovered (2011: 131).

As a political endeavor then, and a defensive foreign policy—“If we do unite them, then even a million formidable foes will be unable to harm us” (Inoue 1891: 66, cited in Gluck 1985: 130)—intellectuals and state agents looked to recast Japan’s historical trajectory as always already Japanese even while “the process of establishing a national ethos in a changed and

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<sup>116</sup> Ivy adds as that, “It is arguable that there was no discursively unified notion of the ‘Japanese’ before the eighteenth century, and that the articulation of a unified Japanese ethnos with the ‘nation’ to produce ‘Japanese culture’ is entirely modern” (Ivy 1995: 4). Toby, in particular, very eloquently details how the myth of *sakoku* (national isolation, 鎖国) was built in the Meiji era by intellectuals looking back to the Tokugawa era, through a prism of, in order to reorient towards, the West (1984).



changing social setting was a trial-and-error affair” (4). Of course, this looking back, or traditionalism, says more about each contemporary moment in which it is crafted, just as Cool Japan reveals the peculiarities and anxieties of today—for example, breathless panic over youth who are believed to be increasingly anti-social, unproductive, and non-reproductive, but dangerously promiscuous (Leheny 2006: 5), evidenced by the multitude of new terms and concepts which seek to capture the unraveling of “mass middle-class” social norms (Kelly 2004): NEET, freeters, *hikikomori*, parasite singles, otaku, *enjo kousai*, etc. (see for example, Slater 2010; Azuma 2009; Borovoy 2008; Genda 2007; Driscoll 2007; Kelly & White 2006; Leheny 2006; Matthews & White 2006; Mori 2005; Yamada 1999). As Gluck points out was the case for such projects in the late 19th century, “Meiji formulations were reinvoked and reinterpreted to meet whatever current crisis most concerned commentators in the government or the arbiters of the ‘public opinion of the people,’” (Gluck 1985: 279); just as folding and decluttering as a particular Japanese “virtue” emerges from post-Bubble insecurities and lack, when previously the nation had been enjoined to “buy more and more” (Yourgrau 2015).

In his study of a small neighborhood in 1980s urban Tokyo, Theodore Bestor offers this definition of traditionalism:

...the manipulation, invention, and recombination of cultural patterns, symbols, and motifs so as to legitimate contemporary social realities by imbuing them with a patina of venerable historicity. It is a study of often subtle and muted struggles between insiders and outsiders over those most ephemeral of the community’s resources, its identity and sense of autonomy, enacted in the seemingly insubstantial idioms of cultural tradition. [Bestor 1989: 2]

We can see this manipulation at work in METI’s *Wonder Nippon* which, again, suggests its purpose is to provide: “A Compilation of Traditional Japanese Value as the Foundation of

Commodities and Services under the Cool Japan Initiative” (2017).<sup>117</sup> In this configuration, pop culture and mass media are affixed to an essential foundation, as “quintessential aspects of Japanese culture” (Nakamura 2013: 3), and not at all troubling or disobedient. Kristin Surak has similarly described the way the tea ceremony has been encapsulated—but also in practice essentialized and simplified—by nationalistic messages about heritage and tradition (2013). This means, for example, finding ways to designate “manga as a traditional Japanese art” (Brienza 2014: 386),<sup>118</sup> or emphasizing “the strong ‘pictographic’ tradition in Japanese culture” (Napier 2011: 226). Iwabuchi adds that, “In explicating the global popularity of the animation and the *otaku* culture of Japan...it is often claimed that they inherited their national cultural essence from pre-modern Japan” (Iwabuchi 2015: 16). Although state activities, documents and bureaucrats certainly support this link, Hiroki Azuma details the role Japanese intellectuals and artists also played in positioning *otaku* sensibilities and consumption patterns as a natural outgrowth of traditional Japanese, or at least Edo era (1603-1868), culture (2006: 9). Of course, repackaging manga and anime as distinctly Japanese, means ignoring the cross-border synergies and influences (for example, the impact that Disney films had on Tezuka Osamu, the father of manga<sup>119</sup>) and the transnational industries, that characterize their production.

Traditionalism allows branding referents, positive cultural symbols, as Bestor argued, to be endlessly remixed and manipulated. Consider the following descriptions from two separate METI proposals:

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<sup>117</sup> This is the subtitle to METI’s press release announcing the booklet ([http://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2017/0308\\_001.html](http://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2017/0308_001.html)).

<sup>118</sup> Casey Brienza explains that this designation appeared in a 2000 Monokasho White Paper (2014: 386).

<sup>119</sup> For examples in videogames, see chapter 2.

Winning the world's sympathy may be related to the virtue of working for others that the Japanese people have inherently possessed since ancient times. [Cool Japan Proposal 2014: 5]

Nature is rooted at the foundation of Japanese people's sense of values. This distinctive sensitivity is what makes Japanese people unique. [Wonder Nippon 2017: 22]

Not only does this “inherent possession,” or foundation, differ between state agencies and agendas, it is taken as a matter-of-fact value or sensitivity that is always both forever and new, and flexibly substituted depending on the commodity to be marketed and the reciprocal “foreign” audience to be targeted (as METI imagines Akihabara will attract “otaku,” while Ginza is for “mature ladies,” and Kyoto for “luxury seeking people,” 2012b). In his analysis of nation branding in Japan, Iwabuchi argues that it “drives the search for the distinctive cultural assets of the nation and the redemarcation of a ‘core’ national culture” (2015: 16). Other scholars of nation branding similarly suggest that the “definition of the ‘core meaning’ of the brand is essential” (Anholt 2007: 6, cited in Valaskivi 2013: 6). However, the actual content that becomes this marketable nucleus is largely irrelevant, as the “traditional” (working for others or natural affinity with nature?), is harnessed to frame whatever content can be successfully and profitably (re)imagined in the moment.

Positioned as it is in the Cool Japan *tatamu* episode, once Kaiyo has demonstrated her folding method, viewers are encouraged to see it as representative; when an orderly packed carry-on suitcase is shown later (announced by, “Let’s compare how foreign people and Japanese people fold clothing!”), and all the clothes fit obediently and neatly inside, the audience is more likely to accept that it must be naturally—as presented—“Packed by a Japanese.” Through nation branding practice, the local everyday is saturated with common-sense notions which are generated, at times haphazardly—or really, organized and reinscribed in this example, by state

agencies.<sup>120</sup> Just as the KonMari method draws on the 1990s “art of discarding,” these ideas are not necessarily new, but reinvigorated, dusted off and made shiny, inserted as an essential component of the contemporary quotidian experience of those who are told they can be Japanese. Folding becomes *tatamu*, a word with the weight of history—it is not, then, a mere personal decision but a national imperative and a nationalizing activity, as “the self” is remade “as an object of government” (Matza 2009: 490); in this case, conjured from tradition (of nature/selflessness/cuteness), extended from cherished household items like *tatami*, and maintained with each minute crease of material.

Consider early mobile-phone practices in Japan as another example, described by Mimi Ito as “distinctive” (2005), and epitomized by *garakei*-style (ガラ携), or feature phones, that allowed users to send email well before the “smartphone” became available in the US. *Gara-kei* is actually a portmanteau of the shortened Galapagos Islands and *keitai* (or mobile phone, an already shortened version of *keitai denwa*, 携帯電話, where *keitai* means handheld) and is a direct reference to the perception that Japan develops its own unique technology (and by extension media) in isolation from other countries, just as Darwin described evolution on the islands (Tabuchi 2009). The very name then, used by consumers to describe their own personal phones, makes and remakes (as banal) the mythology of Japan’s isolation and uniqueness in everyday practice. As Cool Japan works to frame exports with these same narratives-made-mundane, and as they articulate a certain (fluid) set of values, American otaku incorporate these into their readings and desire for the “real” Japan, even as they may consume at the same time distinctively non-state approved or non-sanitized media like Boys Love manga or hentai (synonymous in

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<sup>120</sup> Of course, national narratives are not only crafted by state bureaucrats and their projects, but also through the work of scholars, journalists and popular media producers, and others who make their living negotiating and helping to produce “public opinion” (Gluck 1985: 9-10).

English for Japanese anime/manga-based pornography). In this way, we can see that although Japaneseness remains an ever “a contested mode of identity” (Doak 2007: 36)—through “differences in the forms of *elaboration*” (Foucault 1990: 27), (Tsuzuki’s sublime and chaotic untidiness, or Marie Kondo’s purged sparseness?)—the fact that it is indeed a *mode*, is absolute.

### 3.3 “TATAMU IS *OUR CULTURE*”: DISCIPLINING THE OTHER

While in Nagano for vacation, I once met a Japanese Christian whose entire family regularly used American English to communicate to each other, although they lived in Chiba, next to Tokyo. The father worked as a kind of cultural broker, although he didn’t use that term: his job, he told me, was to help American Christian missionaries learn about Japanese culture and customs after they arrived in Tokyo. When I asked what he does to help acclimate them, he told me he often gives them Ruth Benedict’s 1946 *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* to read. To my surprised reaction, he added, “It just gets so much right”—what Benedict wrote so long ago, he explained, just feels so familiar.

That it *is* familiar, even today, perhaps shouldn’t have been all that surprising. The book was enormously popular in Japan at the time, selling over 2 million copies and producing “large volumes of commentary” in Japanese (Kent 1999: 181; see also Lummis 2007: 3). It was also, many have argued, the origin point from which *nihonjinron* texts (literature about Japanese-ness) emerged in the prolonged postwar period (Yoshino 1992: 33, Lummis 2007: 5), and from which Japanese authors first drew, and continued to elaborate, on as “evidence for Japanese

uniqueness” (Ivy 1995: 11, see also Morris-Suzuki 1998: 127).<sup>121</sup> It is easy, of course, and necessary, to see Orientalism at work in Benedict’s armchair ethnography. Her seminal and enduringly popular work owes everything to its war-time legacy, and to the purpose that directed its creation: to decipher “the most alien enemy” for the US government, as Benedict writes in the first line of her introduction (2005: 1). In essence then, she had the “tendency to treat Japan as an absolute Other” (Lummis 2007: 3).<sup>122</sup> Describing Benedict’s tendency in text to essentialize other groups while matching their difference to the familiar, Clifford Geertz pinpointed Benedict’s “habit of contrasting an ‘as-we-know’ us with an ‘imagine-that’ them” (1988: 117); in this dichotomy, if “the Japanese are hierarchical...[then] we are, always, otherwise” (111). Douglas C. Lummis argues that along the way, Benedict mistook war-time national and state-sponsored identity for “culture” as if it were something that had “grown up naturally” (2007: 12).<sup>123</sup>

Japan’s penchant for “self-orientalizing” (Iwabuchi 1994), so evident in volumes of work on the “uniquely unique” characteristics (Mouer & Sugimoto 1986) and peculiarities of “the Japanese” (for a detailed critique of *nihonjinron* see for example Kawamura 1982, Dale 1986, Befu 1980, 1987, Yoshino 1992, Mouer & Sugimoto 1982, 1986), is not a unique faculty of Japanese nation-work, although Orientalism speaks to a particular framework of continued unequal power relations in the post-colonial era (Said 1978). The incorporation of the other into, or rather in exclusion from, the self—and holding fast to the line drawn between them in that

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<sup>121</sup> In Kosaku Yoshino’s analysis of the consumption of *nihonjinron* texts by educators and businessmen, he explains that *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (translated into Japanese in 1948) was read by a number of the people he spoke to, and it directly contributed to their thinking about Japaneseness (1992: 145, 148, 155, 191).

<sup>122</sup> Coincidentally or not, this is reflected in *nihonjinron* texts where Japaneseness is fixed as the “anti-image of foreignness and, as such, can only be affirmed by formulating the images of the Other” (Yoshino 1992: 11; but see also Ivy 1995 and Iwabuchi 1994); more generally, this is descriptive of boundary-making practices, national or otherwise.

<sup>123</sup> Of course, culture doesn’t “grow up” naturally either.

process—is always an ongoing component of boundary maintenance, as Fredrick Barth detailed in his early and influential book, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). As Iwabuchi analogously explains: “Purity cannot mark itself through itself. Only impurity marks purity” (1994).<sup>124</sup> Citing Gluck, Iwabuchi also describes how, in this discursive process, “The real West was irrelevant” (Gluck 1985: 137, cited in Iwabuchi 1994). Indeed, as I discussed above, the “matter” of whatever is defined as the “real Japan” in modern nation branding is similarly irrelevant. What does matter is that the Japanese and the foreign are resolutely shown to be *different*, in fact, to be in “diametrical opposition” (Ivy 1995: 11). Perhaps one of Benedict’s enduring contributions to Japan’s nation-work following the war was to help naturalize the “Us/Not-us” division as obvious (Geertz 1988: 120), rather than as a contested, uneven and symbolic process of (control over) meaning making. While the Meiji Reformation and war effort brought intense nationalizing to the daily life of individuals through “compulsory education, military conscription, institutional reorganization, and many other forms of indoctrination and force,” (Lummis 2007: 12), a shift occurred in the post war in how and where these messages were communicated, as nation-work moved into mass media, and indeed, advertising (Foster 2002). This also involved a turn to communicating Japaneseness not necessarily *to* the other, but *through* the other (in a global media arena), to speak to the national “self.” Cool Japan then is not only a reaction to insecurities wrought by increased circulations which threaten mass social values, or an attempt to overcome destabilizing economic recession, but is also an attempt to put nation-work to work in the hands of non-nationals through their consumption of state-approved

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<sup>124</sup> Authoring these unique characteristics in text allows them to be used as evidence for the, now, homogenous and unified Japanese language/race/culture. As Eric Wold explains: “this kind of ideology tends to fuse biology and socially acquired heritage, to establish each such entity as a monad, separate and distinctive from all other such monads, each possessing an essence that marks it off from others possessed of different essences” (Wolf 2001: 185).

symbols like cuteness. This was a fundamental component of *kokusaika* (国際化), or internationalization, which dominated nation-making in political policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Ivy 1995: 2). For example, under this paradigm national English education programs in Japan were promoted, not to create opportunities for Japanese citizens to encounter and engage with *difference*, but to ensure the spread of Japanese perspectives and ways of thinking outside Japan (Ivy 1995: 3, see also Iwabuchi 1994). In Anthony J. Liddicoat’s analysis of such decision making, *kokusai*-era programs were designed specifically to communicate “distinctively Japanese perspectives” to non-Japanese and to prevent misunderstanding about Japanese intentions, although this was directed specifically to “economically and politically dominant English-speaking nations” (Liddicoat 2007: 37, 36). Even 1990s government projects for “apology” over wartime aggression could be “appropriated as the pretext for national mobilization” (Koschmann 2006: 123), while the same is true for the promotion of government-funded Japanese language programs outside Japan. The Japanese Language School of Philadelphia (JLSP), a Monkasho-sponsored program with classes targeted at non-Japanese, reflects this aim in its school description (学校設立の趣旨, lit. purpose for school establishment):<sup>125</sup>

日本語の習得に力を注ぎ、日本及び日本語を理解できる国際人を育成する。言語、文化を通して日本・アメリカ両国の友好と理解を推進する。

To cultivate internationally-minded people who can appreciate Japan and the Japanese language. To promote friendship and understanding between Japan and America through language and culture.<sup>126</sup>

Nation-making in this context then is less dialogic than dialectic.

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<sup>125</sup> I attended this school from 2006 to 2008 and return to discuss it briefly in chapter 5. Although the school offered adult Japanese language classes, its programing was primarily directed towards supporting education in Japanese for children of Japanese nationals residing, often temporarily, in the US (<https://jlsphila.org/>).

<sup>126</sup> From [https://jlsp.us/?page\\_id=17](https://jlsp.us/?page_id=17); my translation.



### 3.3.1 Building a bridge?

In practical summary of nationalistic policy-making, Liddicoat argues that, “kokusaika is less about transcending cultural boundaries and more about protecting them” (2007: 37). The objectives of the Cabinet’s Cool Japan Proposal (2014), where the foreign is engaged to reflect back Japaneseness, make this explicit:

Adopting overseas perspectives to discover the essential attractiveness of Japan. [6]

Create sympathy of other countries with Japan by discussing Cool Japan with partners having an overseas perspective. [25]

These same objectives are reflected in the Japan Foundation’s youth exchange program *Takehashi Project: A Bridge for Tomorrow*. Started in 2013 and funded by MOFA, the program invites US universities, high schools and other organizations like the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) to send students to Japan for 10 days. In that time, students and their chaperones travel through different parts of Japan, sightseeing and visiting with businesses, government officials, and schools. The project emerges directly out of the Cool Japan promotion agenda, as reflected in the description of its purpose on the Japan Foundation website:

The KAKEHASHI Project aims to heighten potential interest in Japan and increase the number of overseas visitors to the country, as well as enhance international understanding of the “Japan brand,” or the nation’s strengths and attractiveness, such as Japanese-style values and “Cool Japan.” The project is also anticipated to revitalize and boost the Japanese economy.

The objective of this youth exchange project is to promote deeper mutual understanding among the people of Japan and the United States, enable future leaders of Japan-US exchanges to form networks, and help young people develop wider perspectives to encourage active roles at the global level in the future.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> This is from the Japan Foundation’s website, but the same text is repeated on all affiliated and partner websites, such as the MOFA.

The word *kakehashi* (架け橋) can be translated as “bridge” but has the added connotation of the labor involved in building the bridge in question, or in the distance to be spanned, a suspension bridge of sorts, due to the word bridge (*hashi*, 橋) being suffixed to *kakeru* (架ける) which means “to build, to suspend.” It has come to be used to reference erecting bridges of “understanding” or as a link between cultures and difference. “In Japanese, such persons who bridge cultures are metaphorically referred to as *Kakehashi*, a term that literally means, ‘bridge across’” (Noro & Suzuki 2016). A press release from the Japan International Cooperation Center’s website, a partner with the Japan Foundation in running the *Kakehashi Project*, describes simply that: “KAKEHASHI is a Japanese word meaning a bridge. A bridge connects people on both sides of the water” (2016). However, used as such, a metaphoric “connection” across distance—naturally divided by geography—this meaning has a distinctly outside-of-Japan origin; the connotation is attributed to a Japanese American *issei* (first generation) living in San Francisco, a newspaper publisher who looked to counter rising turn-of-the-century American fear of Japan through the development of “an education plan...called the *kakehashi*” (Regalado 2013: 60-61). Today, educators argue the term remains relevant and positive: “Given the globalization of business and current political realities, there is an urgent need for individuals with *Kakehashi*-like abilities” (Noro & Suzuki 2016).

In typical branding fashion, government policy-making today largely swaps the term globalization (*guroobarizeeshon*, グローバリゼーション) for *kokusaika* though many of the motivations and intentions remain the same. (Another element of branding then is the need to adapt to emerging trends in the shared global practice of marketing the nation.) Indeed, Iwabuchi argues that globalization continues to be positioned “not [as] an exchange but a one-way method for introducing Japanese culture to the world” (2015: 68). Rather than a metaphorical bridge

then, the *Kakehashi Project* was, as one informant similarly mentioned, more like a “one way street.” This directionality is reflected in the statement of a Japanese student who traveled “outbound” as part of the project, “The goal of this program is letting Americans know about Japan’s attractive points and building good relationships” (Otake 2016)—where “building good relationships” might again be better understood in terms of the somewhat less reciprocal end goal: sympathy and understanding for Japan’s uniqueness. One mechanism for communicating “Japan’s attractive points,” and to seed economic return, is the program’s emphasis on having students share (blog, talk, advertise) their experiences while on exchange. The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) summary describes the process this way:

Eager to share their experiences through Japan, many participants shared their experiences through digital and social media. Once back in the US, many made presentations and speeches about the Kakehashi Project at their universities and local community. [JACL 2014]

What this doesn’t detail, however, is that “sharing” is an explicit requirement for participation in the *Kakehashi Project*. Each inbound group is required to hold a formal “Reporting Session” for Japan Foundation (and even at times, MOFA and other government) representatives before departing Japan. During this presentation, students reflect (with PowerPoint slides) on their visit and outline their “Action Plan,” a detailed strategy for disseminating their positive experiences to US audiences once they return.<sup>128</sup> At the end of their presentation, students also complete a survey asking them to detail how their perspectives have changed and what they plan to do to

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<sup>128</sup> I attended several of these debriefings. One was for the JACL delegation; as their trip was equally framed by a “return,” to learn about their heritage as Japanese Americans, they presented a reflection very different from the other groups. I was frequently approached after these sessions by students hoping that I could provide guidance about jobs searches, visas and other methods for how to get back to Japan at a later date.

“bridge” the US and Japan after they return home.<sup>129</sup> A Japan Foundation Program Report

explains:

Through visiting ministries and think tanks, observation of historical sites and other Cultural experiences, the participants enjoyed a wide range of opportunities to improve their understanding of Japan and shared their individual interests and experiences through SNS. Based on their findings and learning in Japan, each group of participants made a presentation in the final session and reported on the action plans to be taken after returning to their home country. [Japan Foundation 2014a]

Examples of student plans for “sharing” presented in this session include:

Have conversations with members of our community about our experience, showing them photos and materials from our trip to show them the beauty of Japan.

We will each post 2-3 items on various social media accounts about what we learned and experienced during our trip. We will focus publications and outreach on the a continued US-Japan relationship in the upcoming term. [Japan Foundation 2014a]

The JACL participants even promised that they would promote “purchasing made-in-Japan products, and grow Japanese brand value in the U.S.” [Japan Foundation 2014b]. As these Action Plans all reflect, the use of social media for promotion was specifically highlighted and encouraged by the program. Most inbound groups created blogs, sometimes together under the affiliation of their university, to post comments, pictures, and videos of their experiences both during and after their trip.

MOFA assigns a great deal of its cultural diplomacy programing to the Japan Foundation, which it founded in 1972 (Nakamura 2013: 3-4). As MOFA shifted focus to “pop-cultural

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<sup>129</sup> The specific questions from the survey are:

1. Having participated in the KAKEHASHI Project, what do you think are Japan’s strengths and attractiveness?; 2. How do you change your perspective of Japan through the project?; 3. After returning to the U.S., what aspect(s) of Japan do you want to learn more?; 4. It is hoped that you will promote further mutual understanding between our two countries, serving as bridges in the Japan-U.S. relationship. What will you do to deepen understanding of Japan’s strengths and attractiveness?; Please freely describe your experience in the KAKEHASHI Project.”

This information, along with detailed reports are available online in English at the Japan Foundation’s website (<https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/project/intel/archive/youth/kakehashi/index.html>).

diplomacy” in the early 2000s, it also set a “new direction” for the Foundation, tasking it with incorporating popular culture into programming which had before been primarily centered on *noh*, *kabuki*, *bunraku*, *chanoyu*, and *ikebana* (Nakamura 2013: 3). In addition to harnessing the new, relatively untested and unfamiliar, world of social media for these ends, this also meant engaging youth who were avid fans of Japanese popular media.

My interview with the Japan Foundation director of the *Kakehashi Project* suggested, even as late as 2014, that the Foundation was still rather uncomfortable with this dictate and in particular, with the young otaku foreigners who were, under this directive, suddenly their target audience. In particular, otaku students’ immaturity and lack of social skills needed for handling cross-cultural exchange and international travel, was stressed to me. The director also suggested that these young students had an image of Japan that, as a result of their experience with Japanese popular culture, was fundamentally unbalanced. This came, he also suggested, from a shortage of information about Japanese traditions that were consumed by this particular audience. He saw then, the purpose of the project’s cultural diplomacy activities such as museum tours and visits to landmark shinto shrines such as Sensoji in Asakusa, as a way, not just to display Japanese attractiveness, but to give these youth the foundational context he thought was necessary for them to truly understand and appreciate Japan. The director pointed to the survey results (specifically for question 2: “How do you change your perspective of Japan through the project?”) to demonstrate that these students were returning to the US with a “more balanced,” or rather as he seemed to suggest, a “more appropriate,” perspective. One sample response reflects this position:

Although I had an idea of Japan would be like, there were many things that both shocked and surprised me. I didn’t realize how focused and devoted the local people were in just trying to make life better and comfortable. I learned that it was much more to Japan than just manga and anime. [Japan Foundation 2013]

Anime and manga then, are clearly embraced as an outreach strategy, a way to attract younger US students, not to become interested in Japan because they already are, but to recontextualize what were seen as their otherwise superficial and uninformed interests; to root them with more favorable, state-sanctioned meanings. Most often, this was framed as educating fans about the “real” Japan. The program’s itinerary itself was designed around this intention. Sandwiched between a small number of pop-culture related excursions, such as a trip to the Kyoto International Manga Museum or Harajuku<sup>130</sup> (where photos are labeled as “Learning about “Cool Japan””) were visits to local businesses, shrines, natural scenic spots and school exchanges. All inbound participants were also exposed to the more orderly and acceptable symbols of national “tradition,” “Cultural” events, as well as traditional crafts, food and arts like *rakugo* (a one-person comedy show) and *nihon buyo* (a style of dance associated with geisha) (Japan Foundation 2013). This was also clear in the director’s insistence that a pop-culture themed presentation organized by the program was run by a long-term American resident, who, the director explained, had lived in Japan long enough that he could provide the appropriate “cultural” context, and a detailed history of the roots of Japan’s popular mass media in history and tradition.

All these concerns, however, remained filtered through the ultimate economic benefit sought by the program. In his initial explanation of the aim of the *Kakehashi Project*, the director had elaborated most specifically on these economic gains, explaining that the intention was to stimulate the Japanese economy both directly, through things like the increased sale of airline

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<sup>130</sup> Harajuku is a shopping district in Tokyo, near the commercial district Shibuya, which is said to be the center of “street fashion” in Tokyo. The highlight is a *shoutengai* (shopping district) called Takeshita street, that for the distance of just a few blocks is full of kitschy clothes and accessories shops that is impossibly crowded, especially on weekends.

tickets, and indirectly, through positive tourist experiences which will work like a chain to bring additional tourists and more spending money later. In contrast to the hope that students would gain a balanced appreciation for the more real, or at least official version of Japan, the director told me he took the fact that students typically cited their shopping visit to Akihabara as their favorite part of the trip (known as the “Mecca” of games, manga and anime for its numerous stores selling related popular media goods), as a sign that this economic leveraging was a success.

### **3.3.2 "Christine Doesn't Fold Her Clothes!?"**

Watching Kaiyo’s folding demonstration, as the already small onesies get smaller and smaller, Christine admits, “It must be difficult for me, because I don’t fold my clothes.” A sound effect suggesting astonishment follows this moment, and the image of Christine freezes and turns black and white. The now familiar voice-over asks with a laugh, incredulous: “Really? Christine doesn’t fold her clothes?” In this moment, the audience is assumed to—drawn to—share the ludicrousness of this prospect. Not fold her clothes? The announcer’s incredulity begs the question: How could Christine even be a functioning, normal person? Whatever Christine is, we do understand implicitly through juxtaposition with Kaiyo’s diligence, that she could never, ever possibly be Japanese.

Later in the show, Christine is shamed again during the “Pack-a-suitcase challenge.” After the suitcase labeled “Packed by a Japanese” is fawned over by the hosts, one of them turns to another suitcase that is open and overflowing to say: “And this one? It doesn’t have everything in it yet, the lid doesn’t shut...who packed this one?” Christine admits from her chair, “Yeah, it’s mine.” She raises her hand as everyone in the studio laughs. The other co-host points to a pile of

clothes and reprimands, “You still have some left, Christine.” At the end of this segment, over a photo of the neat “Japanese” suitcase, the voice-over intones: “Although some people say it’s too much, the Japanese way of folding that saves storage space is cool!”

Although “foreigners” are consolidated as object-audiences for the branded nation, little explicit attention in government policy-making is given to the non-Japanese “other” or the diversity that might be lost in that encapsulation. Indeed, METI initiatives imagine the “Japan fan” only as a consumer “Coming to Japan in search of the ‘real thing’ and the ‘real place’” (METI 2012: 12), to be pumped for economic gain. This is similarly evident in NHK’s *Cool Japan* show, where foreigner residents are typified as national entities (wearing the flags of “their” countries regardless of length of residence in Japan), which taken together are used to reflect Japan’s uniqueness back to the domestic TV audience, a practice with a long history in Japanese television (Valaskivi 2016). As Iwabuchi discusses in relation to a similar program called KHN (*koko ga hen dayo nihonjin*, or This is strange, Japanese people!), which aired from 1998 to 2002, the show’s producer said he was “quite sure that ‘Japanese people would like to listen to how foreigners perceive their society and culture’ to confirm Japanese distinctiveness” (cited in Iwabuchi 2015: 64). In a similar way, *gaijin tarento* (foreigner media talent usually fluent in Japanese), who were a common fixture of TV shows in the 1990s, “subtly played their assigned role to satisfy the Japanese desire to be regarded as unique” (Iwabuchi 2015: 62). Part of this reconfirmation of distinctiveness comes from the invocation (in the Cool Japan show and other formats) for Japanese citizens to join in correcting foreigners’ misconceptions about Japanese culture; “...the increasing recognition that the Japanese people needed to refute foreigners (improper) views of Japan” (Iwabuchi 2015: 65). This in turn solidifies national cohesion and a feeling of belonging along the “proper” elements, codes and channels, and



reconfirms the primacy of the nation as the point of contact for “global encounter” (for the example of foreigners being chiding for miscorrectly speaking Japanese, see Armour 2011). This correction and redirection is also an effective way to socialize locals to “proper” Japanese-ness, as it allows for the reinforcing and refining of appropriate practices without (ironically) ever questioning their taken-for-grantedness, (because if the “Japanese” need to be *taught* how to be Japanese, then that imperative directly undermines the presumption of its naturalness).



**Figure 5.** Tokyo Metro Manner poster; the white onlooker declares that stepping out of the way of exiting passengers is "Amazing!" (photo by author)

What’s more, the possibility that these foreigners in some way “belong” to Japan is eliminated in this process, just as they are settled by the TV format as “in but not of” (Iwabuchi 2015: 67). As Iwabuchi goes on to explain, in relation to the KHN show:

It was an attempt to control the implosion of difference within an imagined community by replacing it with a multinational situation that consisted of a mob of temporary residents who will never be full members of the nation. They were allowed to express their difference in public only as long as they wore national flags that emphasized the division between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ [Iwabuchi 2015: 67]

Simon Harrison has suggested that “discourses of cultural pollution” are one way to construct cultural identity—as identity represents itself as “threatened by invasion and replacement by others,” it creates internal coherence (Harrison 1999: 13, cited in Napier 2006: 302). Gluck describes this process in the development of *tennou* (emperor) ideology during the Meiji era:

In the process of demarcation, *minkan* [among the people] ideologues formed a phalanx of defensive nationalism and attacked what was foreign as a means of staking out the home ground of what was Japanese. [Gluck 1985: 128]

Yoshino also describes cultural nationalism as the act of reviving or strengthening a national community’s collective image of itself by creating or in some way preserving that group’s cultural identity, particularly when it is felt to be threatened (1992: 1). Of course, perceived threats can be stoked against an influx of immigrants, or leveraged to revive a sinking economy. Through nation branding, states work increasingly to combat threatening flows of people and things by harnessing the creative labor of its citizens (disembodied from the very global flows that shape and drive so much cultural commodity production today), and rearticulating these as the natural by-product of inherent national characteristics. Indeed, David Leheny suggests that nation branding is a way for states to “cope emotionally and intellectually with national decline by believing that virtues they see in their own nation are validated overseas” (Leheny 2006: 212). In this light, branding can be seen as a reaction to the insecurity prompted by the cross-border movement of people as well as their images, and an effort to manage diversity through containing it as something other than the national.

Writing in the late 1990s, Morris-Suzuki already spoke to the tensions emerging alongside advances in transport and communication technologies, advances which threatened “to undermine conventionally accepted images of ‘national culture’...The desire to define and mobilize cultural tradition seems to be at least as much a response to these internal uncertainties”

(Morris-Suzuki 1998: 61). Allison similarly notes how flows of finance capital and inequalities of global distribution can aggravate insecurities over national borders (Allison 2012: 359). The resulting symbolic heightening of “cultural tradition” to demarcate these threatened borders has of course very material consequences, at times sparking anxiety-fueled violence (Allison 2012: 359, citing Appadurai 2006, see also Tambiah 1996). The formal policing of national borders is perhaps the most conspicuous illustration today, as states exercise direct and indirect control over migrant bodies with a growing reliance on state-of-the-art technologies (Pratt 2005; Fassin 2011). Consider for example, Jason De León’s description of the “hostile and oppressive environment” many migrants must face in even authorized encounters with US border control:

The rampant unofficial racial profiling of Latinos, the impenetrable fencing surrounding ports of entry, the surveillance technologies (e.g., motion sensors), and the desert itself... [De León 2012: 480]

Chiding Christine on public television for her failure to neatly pack a suitcase seems inconsequential against the backdrop of 21st century reactionary violence and hostility to minority and migratory populations, or the rise of nationalistic and anti-immigrant sentiment in the US and Europe (Stankiewicz 2017). Unlike the seemingly intensely coordinated techniques which produce the suffering of South American border-crossers in De León’s example, Cool Japan policies and field trips are presented (and most often experienced) as pleasantly positive, an act of bridging across the divide of natural cultural and national differences, for “understanding” and “acceptance.” As I have argued in this chapter, however, Cool Japan and its predecessor *kokusaika* do not actually target the forging of mutual understanding and respect. They work instead, through economic and ideological motivations, to reinvigorate the “of-courseness” of the national. In this polite and quiet disciplining, Christine’s exclusion is

reconfirmed as absolute and her potential for “crossing” is made inconceivable; the hegemony of her otherness is harder to rail against, disparage, challenge or indeed, even recognize.

As I discuss in the following chapters, such state practices impact the way Japanese citizens discern and imagine the “other” as a product of, naturally threatening, cultural and national differences. This is echoed in other bureaucratic processes such as Japan’s national census which records nationality and not ethnicity, effectively erasing the existence of intra-national diversity. What happens when nation branding policies unintentionally compel fans—imagined in government documents as temporary tourist-consumers “seeking authenticity” (Cool Japan Proposal 2014, METI)<sup>131</sup> or targeted for cultivation by programs like the *Kakehashi Project*—to become migrants? As I investigate in the remaining chapters, we will see how the symbolic and practical reintegration of state control over the (image of the) nation, helps to frame the everyday lives of otaku who live and work in Tokyo.

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<sup>131</sup> Note the continued incorporation of the real/authentic marker in state publicity documents.

#### 4.0 TO "LIVE IN THE LAND OF ANIME"

*Migrants face the contradiction between how they perceive their own identities...and how others perceive them. [Sharp 1993: 81]*

Martin grew up in Los Angeles but his family migrated from Mexico generations ago. They still live, he told me, not in the Latino enclave of East Los Angeles or the ostentatious Bel-Air strip, but in a normal, typical, everyday suburb. I met Martin about four months after coming to Tokyo, when he was training me how to teach English to Japanese elementary school kids at the *eikaiwa* we both worked for (a medium-sized but growing Tokyo chain focused on English immersion preschool and afterschool programs). He had a commanding voice and a stern but playful attitude that I tried hard to copy, though never very successfully.

My favorite thing about hanging out with Martin was riding the train together afterwork. The first time we headed home together, I told him about what I was doing in Japan, and tried to respond to his incredulous, "Why the hell are you working here?" When I explained my focus on videogame and anime fans, he jumped in, "Yeah, I loved that stuff too, as a kid," but he shrugged when I asked him to tell me more. "You know," he said. Then he looked up and,

realizing we were already at his stop, gave me a wave and said, “Shonen Jump<sup>132</sup> was the shit,” while stepping through the closing train doors.

Martin has a Japanese wife and a three-year-old daughter at the time, and they live with his in-laws in a small house in South West Tokyo, a 45 minute train ride from the school. He told me he came to Japan almost 15 years ago. He'd been a police officer in LA, and he had the squat, stocky build of someone I could imagine in such a uniform (but not of manga fans as I knew and imagined them). It explained his commanding voice and the way even the naughtiest nine-year-old jumped to attention when he barked, “Get to the yellow line.” For me, they merely wandered over slowly, if at all, when it was time to review vocabulary flashcards. Martin would laugh and tell me my voice just couldn't go deep enough.

Later, he told me that he'd always been interested in Japan, because of manga, but aside from his Shonen Jump comment I could never get him to elaborate much. He only explained that it had always been in the back of his mind, that he wanted to see Japan someday. Then he got hurt on the job, a back injury he said, and left the force; I think that he couldn't have been more than twenty-five at the time but I never asked him his age. On a bit of money he'd saved, he came to Tokyo to visit a friend stationed at Yokosuka Navy base, and then he met his wife. A year later, he moved in with her family and they got married soon after. He made that part of it all sound relatively simple.

One day at lunch, Martin and I were at the *konbini* (the katakana-ized form of *convenience store*) around the corner from our school. He showed me his California driver's license

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<sup>132</sup> *Shonen Jump* is a popular weekly anthology of manga targeted to a younger audience (少年, しょうねん literally means “young boy”). An English language version began distribution in the US in 2003 (in digital form as *Weekly Shonen Jump* in 2013) but is modified for content and curated for manga series that are both already popular in the US and for those that are deemed by its publishers, Viz Media, to be accessible to an American audience (Brienza 2014: 390). Because of his age, Martin was more likely referring to the original Japanese anthology (published since 1956).

while we were in line to pay. I was surprised that it took center stage in his wallet, behind the slot covered with clear plastic for IDs. “It's expired,” he said, but he still carries it with him everywhere. His *zairyuu* card (resident card, 在留カード) was tucked in the back of the billfold behind random store point cards and *meishi*. He carries the license, he told me, to feel like an American. Otherwise, he said, “It would be too much,” not being Japanese, not exactly fitting in; “It would just get to me,” he said. “Also, I like to throw it in the face of immigrations,” when he returns to Japan, and he explained that he always hands over his driver’s license before his passport or residence card. He said this chuckling, as he was called over by the cashier to pay.

Like the censure I'd observed over Harold's *meishi* technique at the bar, Martin's expired driver's license struck me as significant. Martin was both resigned and frustrated by what he described as being “not Japanese.” He later qualified this experience by stating that even though he has a Japanese wife and only gets back to LA to see his family about every five years, he still doesn't feel accepted in Japan. He left a number of things unspoken with this statement, for example, the implicit question about why these qualifications don't seem to matter to others, when to him they showed an important level of commitment to his life and family here. He also didn't explain what he meant by “not fitting in,” as if this experience should be so obvious to me.

Martin’s driver’s license was one early example that turned my attention to the way those I met negotiated being other in the everyday. It suggested there was a shared understanding about what that “otherness” was or could be, which was etched to some implicit but ever present notion of what it must mean, in turn, to be Japanese. Over and over again, I saw this understanding emerge in sometimes small but visible, even material, ways; as in Martin's example, his response to exclusion was to hang onto this concrete depiction of his difference—and also keep his hair slicked back “like a *cholo*,” he told me.

I also began to see how this shared otherness shaped the way the otaku I met approach daily interactions with “real” Japanese, whether at work or in the community. As they framed social awkwardness and miscommunication in defensive and at times antagonistic terms, these moments worked to reconfirm their apartness. Indeed, it is through such everyday encounters that otaku learn the common sense operation of Japaneseness, as it is both acted on them, and enacted by them. Although both (acting and enacting) are part of the same experience, for analysis, I deal with them separately below. Across chapters 5 and 6 then I separate, first, stories about daily life and not fitting in—as otaku are interpellated as *gaijin* (外人)<sup>133</sup>—and second, reactions or coping mechanisms, like Martin's, that I see as an essential recursive component of Japanese nation-making. While I tackle these two elements chronologically or consecutively (as in, otaku have to first experience “not fitting in,” in order to develop a reaction), as I have discussed, otaku arrive in Japan with an already relatively formed sense of their foreignness, with a contradictory desire to fit in or to belong anyway, and with perhaps, a simultaneous pleasure in, or at least fascination with, the perceived impossibility of this. Again, as Sophie told me before she got to Japan:

I think part of the trouble with the Japanese thing though is, I want to go there and like, be a part of it you know? But, they're not like, they will never treat me as a Japanese person, and so, it's so frustrating.

The subjectivation of otaku as non-Japanese doesn't begin on their arrival to Japan; instead, as I have discussed in previous chapters, is woven into discourse networks which facilitate otaku consumption of Japanese media, and media about Japan, from the start. As I discuss more specifically in chapter 6, some otaku devote a hyper-awareness to small daily transactions like walking on the proper side of the street or responding appropriately when bumping into someone

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<sup>133</sup> Literally “outside person,” *gaijin* is the shortened slang version of the word *gaikokujin* (外国人, person from an outside country), foreigner.



in the train station, a common occurrence in the overcrowded cityscapes of Tokyo. Yet, otaku have cultivated an awareness of these social practices first through viewing Japanese media; in fact, as I've mentioned, fandom for some is founded on gathering and embodying knowledge about social customs and related minutiae about Japanese "culture" and history, often to better detect and appreciate their presence in media narratives (for example, the significance of woodworking for local livelihoods in the anime *Sakura Quest*).

In this chapter and the next, I follow the experiences of otaku as they try, like Sophie explained, to "go there" and "be a part of it." When I can, I contrast their expectations and hopes to assimilate before arrival, with the stories of disorientation, and sometimes disappointment, that they craft once in Tokyo. These discordances occur at different scales and degrees for each, but emerge in part I believe through a tension between the allure of their imaginative desire to belong, which they first cultivate in online networks, and their actual experiences as resident foreigners where they collide with multiple and repetitive exclusionary experiences. My emphasis here then is not solely on the subjectivizing force of microinteractions (Youdell examines one day at a school fair [2006] while Axel explores one "instance of discourse" [2004, citing Benveniste 1971: 219]<sup>134</sup>), but the ongoing, recursive of-courseness of being (made into) non-Japanese, that they experience over time as long-term residents in Japan. This is a subjectivizing that solidifies otherness in its very ubiquity and repetition. Consider in comparison, Daston and Galison's description of the building up of academic scientists as "objective" actors: "reinforced—through concrete acts, repeated thousands of times in a myriad of fields in which observers struggled to act, record, draw, trace, and photograph their way to minimize the impact of their will" (Daston & Galison 2008:38). In this example, in order to

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<sup>134</sup> A poem written in response to a photo circulating online.

embody the role of objective observers of the world out there, scientists are further subjectivized by their own self-imposed and intensive working out of this ideal in habitual transactions and practices; indeed, in learning to self-govern. In chapter 4 and 5 then, I outline the familiar “concrete acts” which make and simultaneously reinforce otaku fields of possibilities; again these emerge from encounters that are continually framed by actors as the collision of cultural, racial and linguistic difference. In chapter 6, I consider more specifically how otaku take up and pleurably measure their success inside the limits of these particular (and often self-imposed) repetitive actions to be(come) “good foreigners” against the ever present specter of the “real” Japanese subject.

#### 4.1 “LIFE WOULD JUST... BE ORDINARY”

In Lesley Sharp’s classic 1993 ethnography on intra-Madagascar migration, she notes the way *vahiny* (guests) are dependent on networks of relationships to facilitate their settlement in the northern city of Ambanja:

For newly arrived migrants, having contacts in the community is essential if they are to succeed in finding lodging and employment. They must establish new networks, seeking out kin and, sometimes, friends, who come from the same region of the county and who can help ease their transition into town life. [Sharp 1993 :81]

As with many migrant communities now, for otaku today these networks are more dispersed and often coalesce on web forums and through other online sites, where strategies and resources for getting to Japan are researched and exchanged. The new networks they establish span various electronic means, from Facebook pages to message boards and blogs and email, but are frequently unrelated to contacts they may have among more immediate, and local, family and

friends. Instead, otaku described for me the way they, for example, sought out and found an informative blog post by an English-speaker living in Japan that provided them with needed guidance about navigating job searches and preparations to move; they posted follow-up questions in the comment sections of blogs, sometimes outlining their qualifications, or posing some visa trouble they are having, asking the blogger (often themselves writing from limited personal experience) or other commenters for advice, opinions or direct assistance; one otaku even admitted they posted, “please help me find a job.”<sup>135</sup> Of course, otaku pull on whatever opportunities they might have, whether these are anonymous online networks or more traditional friend-of-a-friend avenues, as they leverage all of these simultaneously in an effort to get to Japan.<sup>136</sup> While (Madagascan) kinship extends beyond any specific transaction, for otaku the connections are more often temporary, functional, anonymous, and even monetized. For otaku, this can make navigating the migration process feel overall more daunting and impenetrable, as they are continually reminded by those already in Japan that their image of a “fantastic life” here is an illusion. As one user stated in the Rule of 7’s comments section, he was likely wrapped up in a mere *fantasy* of life in Japan—the reality he knew, as Ken himself suggested, would simply be “ordinary,” and therefore (inevitably) disappointing.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Many more otaku described in more disparaging terms those they saw begging for help and advice online.

<sup>136</sup> For example, some otaku told me they were influenced by the experiences of people they knew, some who they connected to first online, or routes described by friends-of-friends; this could be a Japanese language teacher offering advice about applying for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, or a friend of their mom’s friend who lived in Japan years back, or a chance contact with a potential Japanese employer (rare, but more likely for those already working in IT or videogame development).

<sup>137</sup> In taking the blame for his frustrated desires, the commenter explains: “The problem isn’t Japan. It’s people, including me, who are attracted to Japan in this irrational way that we gravitate to these blogs and podcasts and YouTube channels (<http://japaneseruleof7.com/moving-to-japan/>). Of course, Ken himself participates, as I’ve discussed, in framing “life in Japan” as both magical and as equally disappointing and inaccessible.

### 4.1.1 Getting to Japan

Although they may circulate only in electronic circuits for years first, perhaps fretting about desire like the commenter above, many otaku do go; they work to find jobs, visas, housing, and attempt to settle down, in a juggling of bureaucratic papers and mundane, practical concerns, and excitement and fears.<sup>138</sup> While otaku blogging may involve the negotiation of expertise and status among variously positioned fans, narratives of inaccessibility also reflect the limitations that foreigners encounter *in process*, as they attempt to make migrating to Japan a reality. Indeed, the barriers they face to entry are directly shaped by systematized bureaucratic methods that inhibit immigration and long-term settlement in Japan;<sup>139</sup> in other words, these processes are made purposely difficult for foreigners to navigate, as the Japanese state vacillates between responding to the labor needs of various industries and protecting the perception that Japan is a “unified,” “cohesive,” “homogenous”—and specifically, a non-migrant—nation. This has emerged in part as a bureaucratic distinction between skilled and unskilled labor, as avenues are opened for those perceived to be educated “specialists” (thought to contribute to the state while demanding little in return), and seemingly closed off for the manual worker, even while more recently it is precisely more “unskilled” or semi-skilled industries like construction and part-time service work that are struggling to fill openings.<sup>140</sup>

In fact, it is not a coincidence that the most predictable, and most traveled, route to Japan for a native English speaker is to find a job teaching English—even though most otaku I talked

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<sup>138</sup> Often, I didn't see anything that clearly delineated some qualitative difference between those who really wanted to move but stayed and those who picked up and went; sometimes resolve and access to particular resources such as “start-up” funds, but luck and breaking into the right network, also seemed to play a role.

<sup>139</sup> As I discuss in more detail below and in chapter 5, in these practices foreigners who do manage to clear the necessary immigration hurdles are still contained as permanent “guests.”

<sup>140</sup> I discuss this in more detail in chapter 7.

to positioned this as a temporary solution; a strategy to get a visa, to first get to Japan. In the largely legal form that their migration patterns take, the initial limiting factor foreigners encounter is the attainment of a visa; arguably the most accessible is the “Specialist in Humanities” visa, which requires a bachelor’s degree or at least ten years of proven work experience, verifiable with supporting paperwork (for example, a diploma or letters from previous employers). This is the first filter that helps assure that only otaku with at least the ability to receive a college education or establish a lengthy and consistent work history make it to Japan. At the same time, a job teaching English, generally authorized by the “Specialist in Humanities” visa, appears to be readily accessible because the entry-level qualifications are relatively low—often the only skills and experience required are a bachelor’s degree and “native” speaker status (even prior teaching or other work experience is rarely necessary<sup>141</sup>)—while the number of schools looking for teachers remains notably high.<sup>142</sup>

One resource first used by many otaku I knew when job hunting from the US was the website *O-Hayo Sensei*, “The Newsletter of (Teaching) Jobs in Japan;”<sup>143</sup> a typical bi-weekly edition lists over one hundred jobs, more than half located in Tokyo. Most employers, however, require another, steeper hurdle as they also advertise, “APPLICANT MUST CURRENTLY

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<sup>141</sup> In fact “basic Japanese” is listed as an additional qualification in these job postings far more often than any experience teaching, or working with children.

<sup>142</sup> The Japanese job market is generally at its peak in the spring, particularly for white-collar jobs, as hiring coincides with the start of the school and fiscal years, in April. New university graduates and others begin job hunting in the fall and winter, and often enter employment after graduating in March. Teaching positions are also obviously tied to the start of the academic year in the spring, when there are typically more jobs on offer, but many of these will already be filled by the previous November or December. The younger otaku I talked tended to arrive in Japan, or to begin the job hunt from home, during the end of the US academic year in late spring and into summer. This made them more desperate off-season applicants. This mismatch has material implications on both applicants who might be more likely to take a job they wouldn’t otherwise and current foreign labor, who can be replaced more easily by readily available foreign job-seekers.

<sup>143</sup> <https://www.ohayosensei.com/>

RESIDE IN JAPAN.”<sup>144</sup> At times, schools may additionally specify the preferred region (Kanto, Kansai), prefecture, city, or even commuting distance within which job seekers should already reside before making an application. Several interviewees who had been in Japan and teaching English for a long time told me that hiring from outside Japan used to be more common especially among the “Big Eikaiwa” (larger companies such as Interac, Nova, AEON and Gaba), and that today there are fewer reliable ways to secure a job while still overseas. Although these large companies still hire from, and hold recruitment sessions in, English speaking countries, most of their current positions are typically in small towns where small English conversation schools have trouble attracting native speakers from the even smaller pool of potential foreigners already living in the local area.<sup>145</sup> For those I interviewed who were able to take this route, it often involved a series of Skype interviews with a promise, if hired, that the school would arrange for all the visa paperwork as well as housing which is frequently provided, at cost, and which gets handed over to new recruits when the current teacher inevitably leaves. For some, this process was also rather intimidating as it requires trusting a stranger to manage those key life-changing details. Sophie in fact had managed to find a job from *O-Hayo Sensei* while still in the US and moved to Osaka prefecture (around 400 km to the south-west of Tokyo) a few months before I left for Japan. She told me the most nerve-wracking part of the process had been in deciding between the three different schools who had offered her work after only short online discussions with each potential employer. In the end, she’d chosen, not by ideal location, but by

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<sup>144</sup> For *O-Hayo Sensei*, this regularly makes up more than 90% of job listings. This residency requirement is typically written in this distinctly conspicuous style, all capital letters. For those few schools who do advertise the opposite, “Applicant NOT REQUIRED to reside in Japan,” the consistent use of NOT REQUIRED in the text likely makes it easier for potential applicants to quickly locate these sparse listings (*O-Hayo Sensei* is not a database but a text file that can even be emailed).

<sup>145</sup> In Japan, cram schools, or *juku* (塾), are very common and essentially compulsory, or built into the exam-based education system; this kind of “boutique education” extends to just about any interest or skill, including a wide range of English language options.

the *eikaiwa* owner who seemed to her the most “normal” and, hopefully, reliable. But Sophie’s experience was rare among the otaku I interviewed in Tokyo.<sup>146</sup> In fact, everyone I talked to agreed it was much easier to find work after arriving, but combined with the fact that a long term visa also requires proof of employment,<sup>147</sup> the prerequisite for residency severely limits otaku options for even getting to Japan in the first place. The majority of the people I met, as a result, described a relatively precarious arrival and often developed a variety of creative methods for navigating these limitations.

A number of people I met first entered Japan as tourists on a 90 day visa (of course, they had to show immigration on arrival that they had a return plane ticket dated within the 90 day period and then received a seal of “landing permission”).<sup>148</sup> In this limited time frame, a great deal of time-consuming work has to be accomplished: searching and applying for job openings and interviewing, which even for a single position can possibly stretch out over several weeks through a second or third round before the company finally makes a hiring decision. These interviews take a variety of formats, from group interviews where job hopefuls compete with each other for attention, to sample lessons or on-site classroom observation where applicants can be observed interacting with the students.<sup>149</sup> Finally, if lucky enough to get hired, most have to

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<sup>146</sup> In my case, before I left the US, I used *O-Hayo* to locate job contacts, too. Although I sent out resumes to every “NOT REQUIRED to reside in Japan” Tokyo-area job (only six met this criteria), I had only one reply email which never turned into an actual interview. The other leads I tracked down at that time also didn’t pan out. Although I had a year-long dependent visa under my husband’s visiting research status, like other otaku who come without a contract already in place, I picked up the job hunt right after I arrived.

<sup>147</sup> Verified with documents completed by the potential employer indicating the type of job, length of contract and salary to be paid; these requirements are described on the Immigration Bureau of Japan website, <http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/english/tetuduki/kanri/shyorui/Table3-1.html>.

<sup>148</sup> I also met a number of Australian and British otaku who were on a year long “working holiday” visa, but this isn’t an option for Americans.

<sup>149</sup> Based on my observations and the questions I was repeatedly asked during interviews, this lengthy process often seemed to concern demonstrating whether job candidates were reliable, and whether they would actually stay for the full contract term if hired, rather than about teaching skills.

wait at least a month for immigration to process and approve their visa application. For some, 90 days simply isn't enough time to accomplish all of this.<sup>150</sup>

Peter is an otaku who had come to Japan a few years before by way of an English teaching position in a rural prefecture. When I interviewed him, though, he was working in Tokyo for a reality company targeting foreign nationals. He said that it was always the “tourist visas” who were the most likely to miss a rent payment. This was because, he told me, it was extremely easy to “blow through all your money in just a couple of months here.” His comment highlights the fact that coming to Japan without secured employment also requires the necessary capital to support daily life (rent, food, travel—train fares accumulate quickly when crossing the metropolitan area for interviews) and for a relatively indeterminate period, up to the 90 days. Some who aren't able to find a job in this short window, might attempt a risky “visa run”—a day trip to neighboring Korea and back, for example—after which a new 90-day permission status might be applied on re-entry. However, re-entry may always be denied at the discretion of an airport immigration agent, and several interviewees warned that the practice may have been more widespread in the past, but has been increasingly less reliable in recent years.<sup>151</sup>

The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET), run primarily by Monokasho, is another avenue new university graduates try, as they often have support for this process from their US universities and Japanese language teachers. However, the program is notoriously competitive—I knew many classmates in the US who applied, and very few were accepted. Most

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<sup>150</sup> I wouldn't have made the 90 day cut-off; I started job searching in mid-May but didn't begin working until I had completed the hiring and visa process at the beginning of September. Also, for most businesses I interacted with during the interview process and later as an employee, having only a 90 visa was not necessarily considered by the hiring school to be ideal, but was also not a “deal breaker,” as one otaku described it.

<sup>151</sup> One interviewee related a cautionary story about an otaku who, after encountering problems with his visa, attempted a “visa run.” (He was working as an independent contractor, a *haken* [派遣] or *ukeoi* [請負]) which requires a more difficult visa application). But he wasn't allowed back into Japan upon return, and instead had to ask a friend to take care of his apartment and arrange for all his belongs to be sent back to him in the States.



JET participants are as assigned positions as Assistant Language Teachers (or ALTs) working in a Japanese public school (elementary, junior or high school) in collaboration with, or under the supervision of, a Japanese teacher.<sup>152</sup> Those I knew who came via the JET program tended to describe a more reassuring process since they were part of a large government-sponsored system. However, one recent university grad I met who was sent to Nagano prefecture, told me she'd been required by her school to pay upfront for apartment and utility fees and purchase a refrigerator; having used her entire savings just to cover these bills, she spent a very desperate first few weeks living off of instant ramen soup and fearing for a time she might have to go home.<sup>153</sup> I met a number of younger college grads with the JET program (although I met many more who applied but weren't accepted and had secured alternative routes to Japan) but I met them only briefly as they were always passing through Tokyo on their way to somewhere else, or here to see the big city as a tourist, since the program tended to place them in distant prefectures. Several otaku I interviewed who were living in Tokyo and teaching English had been with JET previously, but even more had been working as non-JET ALTs for companies such as Interac, also in more rural prefectures, and moved to Tokyo to look for work when their contracts expired. Because they could start the job search from Japan after they already had, or were finishing, valid employment and visa status (a new employer might simply have to help extend

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<sup>152</sup> The term ALT was coined by the government and the position is not exclusive to the JET program, which provides only about 25% of public school ALTs. The rest are supplied by other outsourcing companies, including Interac, or hired directly by local boards of education (McCrostie 2017).

<sup>153</sup> There are many other stories of similar troubles posted online, in particular for those working with the larger *eikaiwa* companies or staying with host families, but not as many among those I talked to in-depth. But of course, those who might have run into serious difficulties were more likely to be back in the US, like the otaku who lost his "visa run," and then existed only as stories told by other otaku.

their residency status), they described a comparatively easier transition than those who came with little guarantee that they would be able to stay.<sup>154</sup>

Securing a student visa is another method that otaku use, but it requires enrolling in an often expensive private Japanese language school,<sup>155</sup> or getting accepted to universities like Waseda or Sophia that have (often graduate) programs in English targeting international students, or sometimes.<sup>156</sup> I also met a number of younger people who first came to Tokyo as an exchange student for a semester, and then often did what they could to return after graduating back home. By law, foreign national students are allowed to work part-time up to 28 hours per week, and many use the visa as a way to simply stay on in Japan until something more permanent can be found, building up networks and job experience as a *baito*, バイト, or part-time worker.<sup>157</sup> For example, I met Charlie in the summer of 2010 when I was taking a summer language class at a small school during pre-dissertation research. Charlie was a self-professed otaku from the Netherlands and came to Japan three years before to live with his girlfriend. At the time, he was having trouble finding a job so he enrolled for a semester in the language school (which are easy, though expensive, to find and enter) specifically to qualify for a student visa so he had time to keep job hunting. Along with Gracia Liu-Farrer (2011), Jamie Coates has shown

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<sup>154</sup> The visa application process is also relatively uncertain for employers, who provide proof of employment paperwork but cannot guarantee that their new hire won't run into complications if the immigration bureau finds something amiss about their visa application. I had one potential employer tell me they would only hire me if I paid out-of-pocket to hire a lawyer to process my visa paperwork on my behalf, as they were pressed for time and wary after difficulties they'd encountered during the hire of an earlier teacher. They offered to let me "borrow" the funds as an advance on my first paycheck.

<sup>155</sup> Prices range, but the school I attended in the summer of 2013 is currently about \$8000 USD for a full academic term and \$3000 for a summer course.

<sup>156</sup> I didn't know anyone who had gone from the US directly into a regular (not English, not Japanese-learning) university program, or anyone who had gone to language school and then passed the rigorous university entrance exams in Japanese, but of course it is possible. For most of the otaku I talked to, without some kind of scholarship, a year of language school before entering university, was really the least affordable option.

<sup>157</sup> This is an abbreviation of the Japanese loan word *arubaito* (アルバイト) from the German, *arbeit*, or work, which got introduced as "side job" (Houseman & Osawa 1995). I've also seen *paato* (パート), or part(-time/タイム) used.

the way student visas in particular facilitate the often pragmatic migration of Chinese youth to Tokyo. Unlike my American otaku, these students tend to choose Japan under pressure from their families, with a feeling that there were few options in their local area for them, and with little of the same excitement for Japan and popular media as a motivating factor (Coates 2013).

Many otaku further dream of helping produce the same anime, manga and videogames which they consume so passionately as fans, yet these jobs are positioned as even more inaccessible by those already in Japan and working in the industry. The otaku who did manage to make it into production tended to leverage networks of friends and co-workers who they knew both online and off before coming to Japan. In particular, game journalists, who by dint of their role *as* journalists, could call on the many contacts they made during interviews, on-site visits and other press events. For example, Tom who had imported *FFV* when he was younger, came to Japan originally to freelance as the Japanese-based correspondent for a major videogame magazine; he took a job initially as an ALT in order to help get to Japan and support himself beyond the small remuneration he received for his once-a-month Japan column. Tom later moved to Tokyo to work for a translation company started by an American friend who had also been a journalist for a US publication and who circulated in the same online forums like the message board *NeoGaf*.<sup>158</sup> Another example is Mike who, as a journalist for a major magazine, made friends with Japanese developers over the years when he traveled to Japan to report on the yearly Tokyo Game Show and conduct other interviews and reviews of games. Mike told me that he eventually felt like he had advanced as far as he could after becoming editor-in-chief of one

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<sup>158</sup> In fact, geographically dispersed videogame journalists who communicate online in communities like *NeoGaf* regularly arrange meet-ups with each other at yearly game-related events like E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) and the Tokyo Game Show (TGS). In the case of Tom's friend, he had been sent to Tokyo by a videogame news website he wrote for, also as the Japanese games industry specialist, but the company collapsed in the dot-com crash two months after he arrived in Japan. He then found a job working in videogame translation and later started his own localization company with a Japanese partner.

magazine, and feeling stagnant, decided to take a job he was offered by a videogame developer based in Tokyo.

Harold never worked as a journalist, but had a similar story. He had just landed his dream job at a small videogame company in Maryland and they sent him to attend the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. During one panel, a Japanese independent game developer in the audience asked a panelist who had stated that early Nintendo games like Mario Bros. were a big influence on him, “What do you think about recent Japanese games?” The American game developer responded icily, in this very public forum, “They suck.” After the panel, Harold approached a few Japanese developers and told them how strongly he disagreed with that statement. One took a liking to Harold and offered him a job in Tokyo a few months later. Harold’s game company was just starting work on a new title, but the job offer, and really, he said, the chance to go and live in Japan, was too tempting to turn down. Like others, he explained that, “I just knew when I was young that I wanted to come to Japan.”

Looking back however, Harold told me he wasn’t sure why he’d left such a promising new job. In Tokyo, he ended up working on small, social media and cell phone games, which he didn’t really enjoy. We were having lunch together when he first outlined his story for me, and he sat in a booth over a big bowl of *shirasu-boshi*, seeming to deflate a bit as he described his move to Japan two years earlier. But at least for him, the finding part had been easy.

#### **4.1.2 Finding work in Tokyo**

The western Tokyo apartment building my family and I stayed in after arriving in Tokyo had three one-room apartments on the first floor and a share house with six rooms above us. As we gradually got to know everyone—most drawn to talk to us by way of our outgoing

daughter—I learned they were all foreigners, and most of them, in a similar situation.<sup>159</sup> One fifty-year-old from England taught at a British *eikaiwa*, and another American who was divorced from his Japanese wife taught at an immersion-style English school and would later become, coincidentally, a co-worker (working for the same company but at a different location). One younger woman, who quizzed my anime knowledge after I told her about my research, had just been hired as an ALT by a large outsourcing company and was told that she would find out where she would be located, or more likely where she would be rotated around to (whatever school needed her at the moment), after she’d completed her training. A fresh college graduate from Germany who moved in after us was on the “real” job circuit; his Japanese language skills put him in the market for a job at a Japanese company and he was waiting for the hiring season to start in the fall. He had a nice new suit and impressive manners and told me he was interviewing at banks and other financial institutions.<sup>160</sup>

After two weeks in Tokyo struggling to find the best source for job openings, I began using *GaijinPot* because it had returned at the top of an internet search; it was only later that I learned it is used almost ubiquitously by other English-speakers also searching for work. Scanning through the listings sent to my inbox every day, I realized quickly that despite my educational and work history, I really had few options. Though the daily notices often include

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<sup>159</sup> This is not a coincidence. As I discuss in chapter 5, finding lodging can be complicated for foreigners in general, but in a temporary situation when travelers may have an uncertain future and cannot afford the large sum of money that typically has to be paid upfront to a landlord (2 or 3 times more than what is expected in the US), getting an apartment for 90 days can be nearly impossible. The nature of this company made it particularly amenable to foreigners, especially those newly arrived. In fact, this particular company does not accept renters of Japanese nationality and a foreign passport has to be presented at check-in. Although I viewed the furnished housing as a temporary situation, having arrived with few belongings, several people I met, including my American co-worker, had lived in buildings leased from the same company for many years. They told me it was just easier in the long run, as renting from a Japanese reality company was intimidating and ultimately for them, inaccessible.

<sup>160</sup> Because teaching English is such a common means of getting to Japan (in addition to all of the other insecurity associated with the job), it is often marked with a bit of embarrassment, as in, “I’m *just* an English teacher.” This was especially true for those I met in their late 20s and above, who told me there was a presumed sense of failure, and even shame, around the fact that they were still “just teaching English” at that late stage.

over forty unique job posts, around 90% are for English teaching. Most, if full-time, offer about 250,000 yen a month in salary (about \$2300 depending on the fluctuations of the exchange rate), barely enough to cover rent and necessities for a small family, though more manageable for a young single person (to give some context, the share house above where I lived was furnished, and included all utilities, for about 95,000 yen monthly per tenant). Other jobs typically advertised include a range of service industry (kitchen staff, sales, telephone customer service) and IT (software development, web designer, illustrator) positions, however, these frequently require business level or fluent Japanese. Although many otaku I interviewed had studied Japanese, either in college or on their own, many still lacked such advanced language skills when they first arrived.

Between the beginning of June and the middle of August, I submitted 23 job applications and in the end I had 6 interviews. I didn't have a suit or even anything remotely resembling business attire, and on the eve of my first interview I desperately scoured second-hand clothing stores (recycle shops, リサイクルショップ) only to come away with an ill fitting short-sleeve blouse, skirt, and a pair of shoes that were at least two sizes too small for me. It was during that first interview, in part because of the clothes, that I realized I was unprepared for the process of finding a job. I communicated via email in English with the employer after they contacted me through *GaijinPot*, and went to Tsukiji station with a hand-drawn map of the distance between the subway exit and the company's building. I'd already had to stop at 7/11 to buy moleskin for my heels, and I stepped painfully off the elevator into a lobby that was all intimidating opaque glass doors and a beige interphone which I didn't dare to use.

Perhaps technically, I got a job, and it was my very first interview. The man in charge started off in Japanese but switched to English when he saw me struggling. He "hired" me,

conditionally, to help design a new series of English language workshops for his company. It sounded ideal, not just teaching but creating something, but what unfolded over the next two months while I continued my job search for something more stable, was a lot of planning meetings and events without pay, in the promise that it would turn into “something.”

After several of these, I was invited to the company’s fireworks viewing party in July. From their 10th floor office space, there was a clear view of the *hanabi* (花火, fireworks) over the Sumidagawa, and a spread of sushi and beer along with at least twenty other Japanese employees. I brought my husband and daughter, an affable 4-year-old who helped as usual to deflect and alleviate awkward moments, and was introduced to the girl who had actually, I eventually realized, been given the job that I had interviewed for. Her name was Alice and she was from Los Angeles and had just graduated from Waseda. She was dressed in a summer kimono (a *yukata*, 浴衣) and *geta* (下駄) (it is common to hear the distinctive clacking of these wooden sandals in the summer), and was accompanied by her Japanese boyfriend. The head of the company, the man who had hired us, asked us to give a self-introduction along with the other employees, who one by one were exchanging a microphone to say “*onegai-shimasu*” (お願いします).<sup>161</sup>

Alice went first and I was impressed by her Japanese; competent I thought, much better than mine. (All I could nervously manage was probably something along the lines of, “Hi. My name is Rebecca. I came from America. I am looking forward to it...,” failing to specify even what “it” was.) But when Alice finished and put the microphone down, she was crying and went over to her boyfriend. I couldn’t fathom why someone who basically nailed it, in my opinion,

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<sup>161</sup> A polite utility term with a wide range of meanings, but in this instance used to communicate something like, “Since we are in this together, let’s take care of each other.”

was so upset. Later she told me, that she had just been so nervous to get up and speak in front of everyone and was really worried that her accent hadn't been good enough. This was another piece of evidence, of such a marked desiring to get it right, that I later filed away along with Harold's *meishi* snafu. This kind of moment was also, I began to realize, what sets otaku apart from other non-Japanese—the intense desire to fit in and a keen fear of rejection.

After that, Alice and I were thrown together more and more and when she literally squealed as we got into an elevator with walls covered in life-sized character art from the *One Piece* manga and anime sensation, I discovered she was also an otaku. Alice is African-American, was in her early 20s and from an affluent neighborhood in LA; both her parents work in the television industry. She was fashionable, I always thought, and unmarked by the blue dyed hair, badges and licensed characters that marked so many of the fans I knew back in Pittsburgh. Anime, and *One Piece* in particular, she said, was the reason she chose to study Japanese as a second language in high school, and why she chose to come to Waseda for her undergraduate degree, and maybe why she'd ended up with a Japanese boyfriend, but she laughed when she said this. She'd never worked a full-time job before and was nervous in her new position; nervous to be working for a Japanese company and under, we both gradually realized, a boss who in typical business-style, demanded a lot of her time outside of working hours. She studied education at Waseda and imagined she would stay in Japan long term although she didn't really want to work as an English teacher. She was thinking of grad school or some other way to build her Japanese skills and, like a lot of others, was studying for the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) which could be the key she needed to do something else.<sup>162</sup> She told me she had friends working for the “big companies” like Nova and it sounded painfully boring to her and that she had been

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<sup>162</sup> Companies hiring foreigners into a Japanese-language business environment often require employees to have passed particular JLPT levels, as a demonstration of competency.



drawn to the position for the same reason I was, because it sounded like something different from the usual *eikaiwa*. She also said that her parents had never understood the whole “Japan-thing” but they'd supported her financially in school and still, as she was waiting for her first paychecks to get her going.

#### 4.1.3 Working for the "brand"

Younger otaku like Alice often came to Japan just out of school and had little previous work experience, relevant resume bullet points or technical skills. The only work reliably available is teaching English; as I've mentioned, having a BA degree and being a “native” speaker are often the only requirements (however, “native” is often fixed to specific “racial” markers, as I discuss in chapter 5). As otaku navigate the challenges of migration, the *eikaiwa* business and other English teaching venues in fact emerge as a migrant feeder stream, and it was often described exactly this way to me: get a one-year teaching contract wherever and then find a better job once in Japan, in a big city like Osaka or Tokyo, even if it means breaking your contract.<sup>163</sup> In fact, work situations in the large English schools who hire large volumes of native teachers are designed around (low wages, lack of benefits, no chance for advancement) expected, or really reciprocally enforced, attrition.<sup>164</sup> And for those who need to supplement their income,

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<sup>163</sup> The majority of people I met during my job search, for example during group interviews or while waiting, had been in Japan a year or more and were interviewing either because their school had let them go (there had been a downturn in attendance at the upscale English-language international schools they told me, which they attributed to the 2011 earthquake) or they were looking for a better position (closer to home, higher pay, more rewarding work they said).

<sup>164</sup> I discuss this in more detail below.

there is always the lively market for under-the-table private English tutoring, accessible by networking with other natives, or for example, via the *Hello-Sensei.com* website.<sup>165</sup>

This trajectory positions the many otaku who work at *eikaiwa* in a liminal space in Japanese society as their experiences are functionally tied to its labor conditions (lack of advancement or raises, and sometimes part-time, or flexibly contractual work) and language requirements (no need for business level Japanese!) that tend to restrict these foreigners from other jobs and social experiences, and of course make it harder to collectively organize for change. Big companies like Nova, Gaba and Interac have been accused of fixing working hours for teachers at 29.5 per week to keep them positioned legally as part-timers, and out of the social insurance program (*shakai hoken*, 社会保険, social insurance including healthcare and pension), where the company would be responsible for half of their premiums (Currie-Robson 2016). The lack of job security is also associated with the practice of unpaid “working” hours. I knew many teachers who explained, and complained, about lack of pay for canceled one-on-one appointments, or compulsory prep and clean-up time, or time in-between lessons while waiting for the next appointment (sometimes a several hour wait), or sick leave. In fact, one otaku who has worked in this environment for many years told me that for the most part, companies who contract teachers and pay by lesson never have to fire anyone; with economic downturn and loss of clients, teachers simply don’t get lessons, don’t get paid, and eventually leave the company of their own accord. While this system creates “on-demand” teachers, typical of flexible labor regimes, it enables unstable and potentially abusive working conditions. These and other forms

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<sup>165</sup> On this site teachers can post a profile (with photo!) and advertise for free, but interested students have to pay to get teacher contact information. The student version of the site, in Japanese, positions *Hello-Sensei*’s services as a cheaper option than a typical *eikaiwa* which might require an entrance fee, in addition to payments per lesson (英会話スクールなどで高額な入会金や年会費を支払うことに疑問を感じる方, *eikaiwa suku-ru nado de kougaku na nyukaikin ya nenkaihi wo shiharau koto ni gimon wo kanjiru hou*, <https://hello-sensei.com/>).

of exploitation have been loudly criticized, but remain largely in place. For example, when the government mandated companies with over 500 employees enroll all those working at least 20 hours per week in the *shakai hoken*, the Big Eikaiwa reacted by reorganizing their corporate structures: Interac split their company into smaller holdings in response and Gaba continues to hire teachers on only as subcontractors so they remain, *de jure*, non-employees (Currie-Robson 2016).

On the surface, *eikaiwa* teachers and media translators or producers, even bloggers like Ken Seeroi, may seem very different from each other. For example, those who come to work in IT or the videogame industry frequently need specific technical skills like 3D modeling or C++ programming or at least some knowledge of videogames and computers;<sup>166</sup> many of them like Harold had built resumes of relevant experience before coming to Japan and also tend to be a bit older than the English teachers I met who were fresh out of college. But those working in areas such as media translation or art design are also frequently kept from full-time employment or integrating into specific companies, sometimes receiving only temporary contractor positions tied to individual projects and dependent on often unpredictable durations, volume of work and ultimately, pay.<sup>167</sup> This makes their visa requests more uncertain since applicants are required to submit proof of regular steady income past a certain level which is exactly what these contractors may struggle to prove; on top of that, visa extensions are often only granted one year at a time, requiring yearly reapplication and the attendant regathering of proof of employment and income. Many otaku I spoke to, including those teaching at universities shared similar frustrations about

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<sup>166</sup> Game journalists for example might leverage their “expert knowledge” of the US market (what sells, what gamers like and don't like) to get work in a Japanese games industry eager to improve overseas sales.

<sup>167</sup> I met a number of people who owned their own translation companies but had to turn to part-time teaching more recently to stay financially solvent. For example, one told me that there had been a high demand for translation work immediately following the 2011 earthquake but most of that work had dropped off by 2015 or so. This was even with the coming 2020 Olympics generating a greater demand for “globalization” activities in Tokyo.

the long-term career insecurities and limitations they experienced—and often experienced *as* intentional.

While otaku may not articulate these routes of migration as distinctly uncertain or unstable, they are not particularly freeing, as Coates mentions in relation to Aihwa Ong’s notion of “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999 cited in Coates 2013).<sup>168</sup> In fact, being a “fan” often helped otaku accept their marginalization and liminality once in Japan, as they felt they were, or should at least believe they were, living a fantasy in the Mecca of popular culture; many then saw the uncertainty they experienced as freely chosen, another necessary part of the work of being a fan. Yet, the channeling of otaku and other foreigners into part-time, temporary, contract-based, under-the-table and other unstable forms of work, reflects the enactment of state-level policies based on the commonly professed assumption (and almost fervent promise to citizens) that Japan is not a nation of immigrants and that it will not become one in the future.

For a number of reasons I was especially focused on professionals in the games industry when I began my research in Tokyo and in my first few months they were the people I sought out and talked to most, collecting a stack of *meishi* from Americans working at big name companies like Konami, Square Enix, and Disney along the way. But meeting Alice, and her visceral reaction to that elevator artwork and her tears after her self-introduction, made me see things in a way I hadn’t before. First, I started to understand the pleasure that could come for a fan from such an encounter, from the sheer material presence of licensed artwork in the cityscape alone. These were the enchanted images of beloved characters and art that graced everything from vending machines to semi-trucks; mundane encounters I realized would never happen

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<sup>168</sup> Many like Harold grew disillusioned or frustrated, but that typically came later. In their descriptions of arrival, or their navigation of visa regulations and the job market which clearly required degrees of skill and persistence, and often upfront financing, most didn’t complain of “precarity” or the unpredictability they were forced to navigate.

“back home” that also authorized the sheer acceptability of a fan’s interests and access to increased consumerist contact, the kind otaku blog and speak about. Even I remember being struck by a photo of grown-ups standing in a line that stretched down a city block and away behind a skyscraper, waiting patiently, I imagined, for their turn to buy the new Dragon Quest game.<sup>169</sup> This image gave me the exciting impression that it was acceptable to be a game fan in Japan in a way that it just wasn’t in the US. But I could never exactly connect before to the kind of glee that compelled Alice and others like her that I saw in her giddy reaction to the *One Piece* images. At the same time, I began to see and appreciate the intensity fans devoted to trying to “get it right;” their sheer investment in fitting in and adhering to social norms which they often, as I’ve discussed, first learned about, or learned to appreciate, from media and online interactions with other fans.

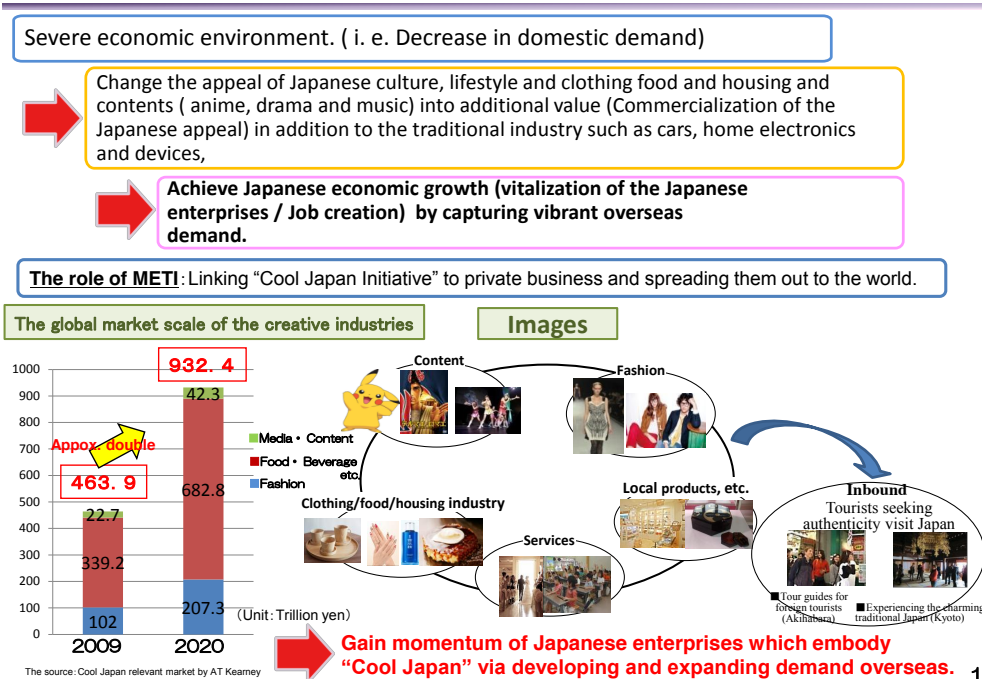
Second, as I continued to have job interviews and interview a variety of fans working, or looking for work too, I started to see the critical role that the cultural industries and English schools *both* play in otaku migration. In fact, the demand for otaku labor and their fan-oriented skills, as “language workers” (Heller 2010: 105), emerges directly out of the export of Japanese media items and the quest by Japanese companies to profit in large overseas English-language markets like the US and UK—just as these are the media items that excite otaku interest in Japan in the first place. Both of these labor trajectories emerge in relation to Japan’s leveraging of its “brand” overseas, articulated in state documents as an economic symbiosis between the export of cultural products and the creative and productive labor of its “Japanese” citizens. This demands the supplemental cultivation of English-speaking human resources (*jinzai*, 人材) who can capitalize on the global marketplace of circulating Japanese goods, in turn, requiring “native”

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<sup>169</sup> This is likely a photo similar to the one Tom remembered from Nintendo Power when he was younger.

teachers to staff the burgeoning market for boutique English language schools (due to notoriously poor English education in public schools). While policy documents conceive of fan-foreigners as those who will always only be tourists, providing economic stimulus in “seeking authenticity” (METI 2014: 2),<sup>170</sup> this directly overlooks their participation as teachers, translators, marketers, trend-setters, and even game designers and manga artists, in the creation of, and creation *as*, Japanese cultural goods.

### Cool Japan Initiative



**Figure 6.** A page from METI's *Cool Japan Initiative* which envisions foreigner as tourists coming "Inbound" to purchase local products (2014)

At the same time as the government fails to articulate (at least publicly) the critical role Japan-fans play in the success of the Japan brand, they work systematically to limit their long-term settlement. Mirroring the internalization of uncertainty so common in post-Fordist labor regimes (Kalleberg 2013; Standing 2011), it is precisely because of their fandom that these

<sup>170</sup> Note the continued incorporation of the real/authentic marker in state publicity documents.

young Americans, not only accept their precarious, marginalized and always temporary position in Japanese society, but in some ways even embrace it as a sign of their expert fan status and their achievement of competency. After all, they are living their dream. As I discuss in the next two chapters, these contexts help create possibilities for otaku social mobility, community integration and future trajectories once in Japan.

## 5.0 "THE NEIGHBOR WHO SHUTS HIS DOOR WHEN I GO BY"

One damp, rainy evening just a few months after I arrived in Japan, an otaku friend named Charlie and I were on the way home after a late night out, when we decided to cut through my local park, an unusually large area of green trees, grassy fields and playgrounds. The slide and swings were wet and empty and everything had a green cast, a glow from incandescent street lights filtered through fog. We hadn't gotten very far when a police officer on a bike rode up right next to us and stopped. He looked at us. The officer didn't say anything, he merely continued to look at us and in nervousness I blurted in Japanese, "We're going home now" (今、帰ります, *ima, kaerimasu*). He nodded to that and then rode off without a word. I thought it was a strange interaction but I was immensely relieved. I told Charlie that because I hadn't wanted to carry my wallet with me that night, I didn't have my *zairyuu* card even though I knew I was required by law to have that, or my passport, with me at all times in Japan. Charlie recounted a similar experience he'd had a few years back. It was another late night and he was coming home after being out with friends. Just a few steps after exiting his local train station, two police officers stopped him on the sidewalk. They asked to see his passport. He explained cheekily that he had a resident card, so they asked to see that instead.<sup>171</sup> Charlie told them that he had left it at home that day by mistake, but that they could go together and get it. His apartment was nearby,

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<sup>171</sup> He recounted the story to me in English so I cannot speak to the specific Japanese language of the interaction.



he told them. The police officers looked irritated—he thought so anyway—but they waved him on. His Japanese hadn't been as good then, he told me, and he was amazed he had managed the conversation at all with only the simple vocabulary words and short phrases that he had mastered before coming to Japan.

## 5.1 THE BUREAUCRACY OF SETTLEMENT AND EXCLUSION

Although otaku are continually engaging with and reproducing state-sponsored forms of Japanese national-identity before they migrate (as I discussed in chapter 2 and 3), I argue that otaku, along with other foreign migrants, become non-Japanese (NJ) explicitly when they begin to interact directly with the state as part of processing visas, residency, health insurance (which is nationalized) and even work applications, housing, bank accounts and other services at both the national and local level. These are interactions with “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980) whose practices, and their attendant documentation, serve to categorize and manage foreigners as eternal non-national others, even in mundane and minute everyday ways. The presence of Martin’s California driver’s licence in many ways is in direct conversation with his *zairyuu* card—even though it is tucked out of sight in the back of his wallet—because it must always be present. Carrying a passport then, or in the case of “mid- to long-term residents” a *zairyuu* card,<sup>172</sup> with the potential of being stopped by the police on the street at any moment with a demand to present it, is a daily reminder of foreignness. Although it actually happens to *most*

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<sup>172</sup> This was formerly known as an ARC (外国人登録証明書, literally Alien Registration Certificate), colloquially, a “*gaijin* card” until it was replaced with the foreign resident registration system from 2012. I explain more about this change to the immigration system below.

foreigners infrequently, they still trade these stories as common occurrences.<sup>173</sup> In fact, this was something that struck me early in my fieldwork; when together, otaku spend a good deal of time discussing not just “Japanese Ways of Doing Things,” but the experience of other otaku and foreign residents which they hear about or read about online. At the same time, they frequently share those stories which reflect feelings of isolation or otherness, or are used as evidence of discrimination, such as in bureaucratic practices or other everyday experiences, as I discuss in more detail below; although these experiences are rarely as aggressive or coercive in the way immigrants in other nations have been violently managed, for example Latin American migrants to the US (Romero 2006, De Leon 2012, Holmes 2013), still they remain pervasively otherizing.

### 5.1.1 Managed by documents and spaces

Tokyo, at least in American popular media, is typically described as a large urban city when in fact it functions much more like a state (technically a metropolis/prefecture) that governs 23 special wards (特別区, *tokubetsu-ku*, simply referred to in English as cities), and many other municipalities under its jurisdiction. Most otaku I met live within these 23 wards, part of the original City of Tokyo that was subsumed under the Tokyo-fu (東京府), or urban prefecture, in 1943 to become Tokyo-to (東京都, Tokyo Metropolis) (Bestor 1989: 103). Each of these wards, which have less self-governing control than cities in other prefectures (Bestor 1989: 104), has a *kuyakusho* (区役所), or ward office<sup>174</sup> which oversees local residents through maintaining

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<sup>173</sup> Of course, only infrequently if you have the right skin color. Bayes McNeil interviewed one African American resident who claims to have been stopped and frisked an average of five times a year since coming to Japan (McNeil 2017). I talk about race as part of the NJ experience in more detail below, but among the (mostly white) otaku I studied, the average is closer to one stop by police every three years.

<sup>174</sup> Called a *shiyakusho* (市役所) for cities and municipalities. The only place where there are *ku* and *kuyakusho* are in the 23 special wards in Tokyo.

records of residence—proof of current address and family members residing together—used to provide such things as public services and to collect taxes and census data (recorded in the *juuminhyou*, 住民票, or certificate of residence).<sup>175</sup>

When entering Japan with a valid visa, foreigners have their *zairyuu* card printed immediately at the airport immigration checkpoint after arrival—their photo and fingerprints (index fingers only) recorded by a machine. But new residents, soon after landing in Japan, are also required to go and register at the city hall in their local area of residence.

The first time we went to our local ward office, I was still a bit intimidated to look up train routes or feel confident enough about finding my way from subway stations and so we walked over an hour in the rain to get there, only to be sent home when they found I hadn't brought any legal documents aside from our soggy passports. At the time, I had no idea that registering with the city involved proving the legal status of my family and our relationships through birth and marriage certificates. When we returned the following day with the right paperwork (feeling grateful that I had even brought it to Japan with me) we were not only “registered” with the city but enrolled in National Health Insurance (*kokumin kenkou hoken*, 国民健康保険) and child care allowance (a small monthly allowance for having a child, approximately \$100 USD)—all by visiting various counters on different floors throughout the ward office.

This experience was extremely stressful for me and disorienting; for example, after registering with the “Foreign Resident Registration” section, the official told me to go next to the

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<sup>175</sup> Before 2012, foreign residents were not allowed to have a *juuminhyou*. Instead, the ARC was an entirely separate filing system. The *juuminhyou* is different from the *koseki* (戸籍) or family registry that is the legal record of birth, marriage, death and even citizenship (filed under one, usually paternal, head of household). Unlike the *juuminhyou* that is always kept with one's current city or town of residence (in fact, you have to register with your new town immediately whenever you move), the *koseki* stays filed in the city or ward office in the *honseki* (本籍), or legal domicile; often the family's or head of household's hometown or ancestral seat. Even though this term is generally meaningless for most foreigners, I've often seen this information requested on bureaucratic documents translated to English.

8th floor although I couldn't understand why. Once there, I took a ticket number for a section that I found was not actually where I needed to be, and when asked what I wanted, had to try and explain, "someone told me to come here but I'm not sure why." I was eventually handed over to the right person, who finished filling out all of the paperwork for the child allowance before she had said enough vocabulary words that I knew and could finally understand what we were doing. There was no one in my ward office who spoke to me in English and none of the signs or forms I had to fill out were translated or had *furigana* over the kanji text.<sup>176</sup> However, the bored man who helped us apply for National Health Insurance had a handy bilingual booklet that he pointed to with a pencil when it was time for me to read about the next step in the application process.

In all, when it was over I was relieved that despite my lack of comprehension the ward officials had shuttled me professionally, and for the most part patiently, from one necessary counter to another while completing paperwork for me and coaxing from me the documents they needed, sometimes taking them out of my hands when I looked blankly at them. At the same time, I felt like a small helpless child.

This experience is in many ways very personal, as it relates a pervading anxiety I felt and still feel about my struggle to speak and understand Japanese; part of a more general fear I have for showing others that I don't know what I am doing in any given situation, which crystallizes acutely in moments of linguistic incomprehension and the awkward silence that follows. But my visit also spoke to the transition that I later learned many otaku and other foreigners make in this process, as they go from feeling like functioning adults to disoriented children and as they begin to encounter the bureaucratic means through which they are made sense of by the Japanese state.

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<sup>176</sup> *Furigana* (ふりがな) is the kana, or syllabic script, placed in small type over words so that they can be read by those who do not yet know how to read kanji (which are ideographic). It is a significant parallel, then, that this script is generally reserved for elementary school children, and foreigners.

For this reason, I began to accompany anyone who would let me (and not everyone was comfortable with me tagging along), whenever they had to go to their ward office, the immigration bureau, and other institutions, like banks, realtors, or even SoftBank to arrange internet or mobile phone service. It was hardest to find new residents in the midst of this process for the first time, so I also collected recollections of these visits. The majority of otaku I knew and talked to had been in Japan already for over a year and they always seemed genuinely shocked when I first numbered in weeks or months the time since I had arrived.

I was lucky to meet Jack at an anime meet-up. He had arrived only a few weeks earlier and said he came to the event looking to make friends but also to get some advice on how to settle in the city. Jack was 25 and worked part-time as an editor of an online anime magazine targeted towards American otaku but had just started working on a masters degree at Sophia University. During his fourth week in Tokyo, I went with Jack when he had to register at his local ward office. He hadn't been yet; he told me he had procrastinated, and fretted about it, putting it off until it was beyond the two week recommended time period, which caused him even more anxiety. He had a picture of the city map on his cellphone with the ward office marked by a red icon taken off his computer screen since he didn't have cell service yet, but we still wandered around outside the large complex for several minutes looking for the main entrance. We eventually got inside by cutting through a parking lot and going in what I later realized was a small back entrance. There were no signs or clear directions so we wandered tentatively deeper, down a grey carpeted hallway, until we emerged in a large lobby, open two or three stories high with windows facing the street. Together, we started looking for directions, some clue about how to complete his registration. From my own experience, I had a sense that there would be a "right" place to go and there was a large placard in the lobby listing the

different departments (this much we could tell) but nothing was in English. To the right of the sign was an intimidating-looking counter that looked like an information table, which he instinctively avoided and instead we kept searching for some indication of where to go and what to do. He told me later that he had studied Japanese in college and could get through most of the dialogue in his favorite anime shows without subtitles but that since arriving in Tokyo it had felt more like, to his extreme frustration, he had never studied at all. This was a surprisingly common experience, even among students who I had personally observed as exceptionally competent in Japanese class and highly confident before getting here. The majority of otaku I interviewed, who had studied Japanese either at university or independently, also reported similar frustrations.

In the back of the lobby there were rows and rows of chairs facing a long bank of counters with city workers behind them at their desks, along with what I was learning is the ubiquitous number ticket dispensing machine that positions you “in line” in these institutional spaces. Over the row of counters was another sign in Japanese, which neither of us could read. I followed Jack to a hidden row of elevators he found, and again to more signs listing the departments by floor. Jack squinted at one, and said “Finally!” He pointed to small text on the sign listing “Foreign Resident Registration” in English, next to the floor number—though it wasn’t listed in English on the same sign inside the elevator. We went up to the floor, to a partitioned area deserted of patrons, with more counters and desks. To our relief, the sign hanging from the ceiling listed the English name in neat letters under the kanji, also in Chinese and Korean, along with a relatively vague note to, “Please take a slip.” Jack got the idea, took a number from the dispensing machine and was immediately called over when the bell rang and his number lighted up. The fashionable public servant who helped him barely spoke, only asking

in Japanese for his *zairyuu* card when he worked out what Jack wanted, then completed the requisite form in silence.

As part of what has become my yearly pilgrimage to the Tokyo Regional Immigration Bureau in Shinagawa to renew my resident card for yet another year, I'd learned to internalize this process and all its concomitant obstacles. I know now the lines I need to stand in (even that they will change slightly year to year), the hours it will take me, and what I'll need to bring with me, though I still inevitably make some small mistake with my application that gets flagged and highlighted and circled: I forgot to sign for my daughter on her application; I forgot to photocopy my marriage certificate; I was applying too early; my glasses obscured my eyes in the photo I'd paid \$8 to take; the photo was too old (I tried to save money and use the one from the year before); I didn't have a police document stating that I'd lost my *zairyuu* card (because I didn't file a report). I also know now as a result that it is possible to make small negotiations with officials outside the strict rules they typically lay down. But it wasn't until I followed Jack around there after his first 10 months in Tokyo when he needed to extend his visa, that I began to feel the sheer obfuscation, even in the very space of its physical arrangement, that was the organizing logic of this particular arm of the state.

The purpose of the Immigration Bureau is to process the large volume<sup>177</sup> of requests for extensions to stay, changes to status, permanent residences, lost *zairyuu* cards and the multitude of other immigration regulatory needs of the foreign population in Tokyo. And yet, when arriving for the very first time as Jack was, I realized that the signage for directing visitors through the process was severely limited. The overhead directions signs are all in Japanese

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<sup>177</sup> Approximately 700 people during a typical March day just before the school year begins when I am usually there. This is an estimate based on my most recent experience when I was at the Bureau till the end of the day when they stopped taking applications, promptly at 5pm, and 720 people, at least numbered tickets since families are grouped together, had been processed or were still waiting.

exclusively, and the floor plan maps include English in small text, but there are rarely signs with other languages despite the overwhelming majority of Asian residents. Of course, there are colorful lines on the floor that guide you to sections A, B, C and D which are all color coded to match, but nothing before you get through the nearly empty lobby and up to the second floor. There is an information counter on the first floor but it's tucked back behind the stairs, out of sight and I didn't even notice it was there the first two or three times I went.

Jack headed to B (red), to process his "Application for Extension of Period of Stay" but was completely confused about what to do when he arrived in the section. He knew from experience at banks and the post office that he should find a number machine but there wasn't one. Instead he was met with hundreds of chairs full of bored-looking people, a bank of red counters with only three or four people being helped, flashing screens of numbers, periodic announcements in Japanese calling new numbers added to the board and a long snaking line through a maze of ropes that clogged the entrance to the section. He looked bewildered and asked me, "Am I supposed to get in this line? How do I get a number?" I nodded. Of course, after many visits I knew what he had to do, but then I looked around myself for some indication, some sign or evidence that getting in this very long, time consuming line was the required first step. He had to wait there with his completed documents which would be checked carefully with a highlighter by an immigration official at the first counter and only then would he be given a number. After that he would have to wait for hours until his number was called and only then would he actually submit his documents and deal with any additional problems, mustering as much Japanese as he could to get through the encounter, and fill out a postcard with his address that would be mailed to him three to five weeks later when, and if, it was time to come back and pick up his new resident card.



But I couldn't see anything that outlined these steps or guided newcomers through this literal bureaucratic maze. I wandered around for a long time while he waited, looking. There were four or five easily visible signs exclaiming, "No Photos" (撮影禁止, more literally, photography prohibited). I found a sign I had never seen before over a station with pens for filling out application forms that said in English, "counter of an application form." Eventually, tucked in a back corner behind the enormous line I found a small silver bookcase full of booklets in various languages advising about Japanese social norms, giving advice on things like bike safety: wear a helmet (no one ever does) and do not ride on the sidewalk (everyone does). Taped to this bookcase was an A4-size laminated sign that said simply 番号札 (*bango satsu*) with the English translation "number ticket" written above it. There was also a gold star taped to the corner of the sign. I interpreted this as a description of the line Jack was waiting in (because the reward at the the end was indeed a numbered ticket and a chance to sit down), but found it to be frustratingly located and overtly vague for anyone who was new to this space and would have no idea what to do. (When I returned a few weeks later, this sign was taped to a small chest-height rolling whiteboard and placed at the front of the line, which was honestly only a slight improvement, and the year after, several more gold laminated stars were taped to posts in the middle of that first queue which had been moved to face a new set of counters). As Jack was waiting later for his number to appear on the magical board of other numbers, he told me that he felt this as a very visceral and entirely intentional obstruction to his presence in Japan, reading it as a clear message of the, really obvious lack of, attention and care that was afforded to foreign residents. "Are they hoping we get so confused and fed up that we just leave the country?" He

reminded me how hard it had been to find the foreigner registration counter months ago; “It’s just like the ward office, except worse.”<sup>178</sup>

### 5.1.2 Foreigners not allowed

I include these experiences to begin to illustrate the way state-authored “graphic artifacts” (Hull 2003: 291-292) like laminated *zairyuu* cards and printed *juuminhyou*, along with confusing or absent signs and institutionally ordered, yet exclusionary spaces communicate otherness to foreigners and work to subjectivize them as non-Japanese. These materials are embedded in the repetitive and routinized daily practices and decision-making of bureaucrats (Feldman 2008), such as whether to translate forms, whether to produce professional signs, whether to staff offices with bilingual speakers, whether to make processes clear and accessible, that position foreigners in relation to, and outside, the national body. Indeed, these materials and practices authorize, legally through resident cards which must always be carried and symbolically through confusion and deterrence in dealings with bureaucrats, *who* can appropriately belong.

In practical terms, bureaucracy is the “administrative apparatus” of the state (Bernstein & Mertz 2011), a mechanism for organizing, through the coordination of behavior (Weber 1978), individual action towards a collective end (Hull 2003). More importantly, bureaucracy is, according to Weber, “fundamentally domination through knowledge” (Weber 1978:225),

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<sup>178</sup> Other otaku promised me that this experience was an improvement from the past. Before 2012 when Japan changed its *Alien* Registration system to *Resident* Registration, foreigners who wanted to travel outside of Japan had to come to the Immigration Bureau in advance, wait a very long time, and pay to receive a reentry permit; without it, they wouldn’t have been allowed back in the country. This meant non-Japanese visited the Bureau much more frequently and in more bouts of frustration. For efficiency’s sake, this change also centralized the processing of foreigners at the national level, taking it out of the oversight of local cities and municipalities. As part of this change, I saw the special “Foreigner Resident Registration” counter at my ward office disappear during my second year. Feeling confident that time, I went straight to the right floor and counter only to find there was nothing there. I had to locate and join the activities at the main administrative counter. At that point also, although the forms were still in Japanese, they had posted samples in other languages for reference.

specifically through the management, and often, suppression of knowledge in its dealings with the public (Mathews 2008; Hoag 2010; Hull 2012). While created and utilized by state bureaucracies to “make a society legible” (Scott 1998: 2 cited in Hull 2008: 503), their technologies also often result in “illegibility and opacity” (Hull 2008: 503; see also Hoag 2010). In fact Colin Hoag described bureaucracies as “profoundly ironic” (Hoag 2011) and in this case, illegible bureaucratic methods play a role in conversely maintaining the legibility of the *kokumin* (国民), the nation’s people.

I observed this kind symbolic barrier manifested in documents and the layout of offices, over and over again across local and national, public and private, institutions. However, many of these are more generally common in the modern operation of bureaucracy in practice. While the linguistic obstacles most otaku faced in these moments certainly exacerbated their experiences and abilities to competently navigate such situations (again, even having studied Japanese extensively does not typically prepare them to read complicated legalized kanji on the many forms of state and city paperwork they encounter<sup>179</sup>), even Japanese native speakers have complained to me about the general opaqueness of bureaucratic processes in Japan, and in particular those related to foreign residents. One Japanese spouse of an American otaku detailed for me her frustration with the barriers she found throughout the paperwork for her husband’s extension of stay application, along with the lack of clear information available, and the lack of any centralized or accessible, or in any way reliable official resource to answer questions about the vague requirements listed on the documents. Yet, whether state spaces and practices are *actually* made more inaccessible for foreign residents is less important than the fact that otaku I spoke to continually interpreted them as purposefully obscure and complicated.

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<sup>179</sup> These forms often use abbreviated kanji (for example, the first and last kanji of a word with the middle characters removed) that cannot be found in a dictionary.

In fact, otaku I interviewed were always distinctly sensitive to the motivation to *separate* that they read in the ways they were managed by the state and other institutions. Their previous exclusion from the *juuminhyou* prior to centralization in 2012, and continued absence from the *koseki* of their families (for those who marry) where they “appear [only] as marginal notations” (Jones 2016b), was another routinized practice of exclusion<sup>180</sup> which Debito Arudou,<sup>181</sup> a Japanese citizen and controversial human right activist, has argued made foreigners “legally invisible” (1997).

These divisions are reflected in the actions of private institutions with which NJ interact, from post offices to cell phone retailers and movie rental stores, where their legal status as *foreign* residents is made conspicuously relevant. I’ve heard countless stories from otaku who claim they were treated differently from Japanese citizens (and sometimes from each other) when signing up for various accounts, more harshly and with more “unreasonable” restrictions. For example, one otaku named Janet whose friend recommended that she open a bank account at a “foreigner” friendly bank (known for its English speaking staff at some of their larger locations and also English online banking services), was refused an account because, she was told, she didn’t have a landline (fixed home phone number); her cellphone and work number were insufficient. When she told her friend about the refusal, he declared in confusion that he didn’t

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<sup>180</sup> Many longer term residents I talked to, especially those married to Japanese citizens, felt like some of their rights as residents were finally being acknowledged, in particular, as they were finally allowed a *juuminhyou*. Prior to this change, even when foreigners married citizens, their names could not be included on their spouse’s *juuminhyou*, in essence leaving them with very little legal proof that they were indeed married. This was especially problematic since it is the *juuminhyou* that is systematically used by other institutions in various transactions such as opening a bank account or applying for a loan. Sometimes, if the foreign spouse was the technical head of household, their name could be added in the “comments” section but this portion of the *juuminhyou* was not automatically printed when a copy was requested, giving the impression of a single-parent household (<http://www.debito.org/juuminhyouupdate.html>). However, since the *koseiki* is birth, death and citizenship certificate rolled into one for an entire nuclear family (parents and their children), foreigners who marry Japanese citizens still can not be officially registered, only similarly appended to a “comments” section (Jones 2011).

<sup>181</sup> I talk more about Debito Arudou and his work in chapter 6.

have one either but it hadn't been a problem when he opened his account at the same branch with only a cell phone number.

Janet let me go with her when she decided to try instead at Japan Post Bank. Frustrated by the first experience, she'd done what she could to prepare for the process ahead of time, using blog posts from other foreigners living in Japan to get information and writing down the translations she's found on one site for all the boxes she'd have to fill out on the application form. She'd brought her *zairyuu* card with her and her NHI card but when she explained in relatively simple Japanese that she wanted to open an account (口座開設をしたいです, *kouza kaisetsu shitai desu*, she told me she got this phrase from Google Translate and wrote it down so she would remember) and showed her identification, the post office employee who had called her number gave her an emphatic “batsu”<sup>182</sup> by crossing his hands in front of his chest to make an x. I was growing overly familiar with this gesture from being told to use it when teaching English to children; although economical, I felt it could also be rather aggressive and paternalistic. She was confused by his silent refusal, and then the rapid explanation he gave after—until he finally said, *pasupo-to*, the katakana-ization of passport (パスポート) (which I've heard used in contrast to *ryoken*, 旅券). “Couldn't he had just said, you know, you need a passport rather than giving me the big x?” she asked me later in embarrassed frustration.

Mike, the former gaming magazine editor, recounted similar frustrations with everything he went through when moving to Japan in 2010, which he described as “an endless series of Catch-22s.” We met at a mall near his house in Yokohama and spent the day with our families in

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<sup>182</sup> *Batsu* (バツ) is an x-mark like those used on tests to indicate a wrong answer. It is also used as a physical gesture by crossing the arms or even fingers, to communicate, no, wrong or bad (in the case of using with children, often accompanied by the sound “buu-bu” styled after a game show buzzer).

the child friendly stores and restaurants, laughing over some of the English<sup>183</sup> kid t-shirts we found for sale. (When we first met at the train station, he told me excitedly, “This place has baby seats in the bathroom stalls and free strollers!”) When I asked him to tell me about the troubles he’d had in more detail, he told me to check out his blog where he wrote about the bureaucratic red-tape of settling in—what felt to him like endless paperwork and “illogical hurdles.” In particular, he detailed the process of trying to open a bank account before he had received his official ARC. When he registered at the ward office he had been given a piece of stamped paper, certified by the city officials who reassured him it would act as a temporary ARC until he received his laminated card in the mail.<sup>184</sup> He needed a bank account quickly, he told me, because he was trying to sign the rental contract on a house and he was also tired of carrying around a stack of cash with him. After one local bank flatly refused to open him an account with only his temporary ARC, he turned to a larger national bank for assistance.

Once there, despite having triple-checked with a rep on the phone about my ability to open an account come Tuesday morning, and ensured that I had brought all the necessary documents, the clerk who was helping us gave the situation a skeptical look, and gave a laundry list of reasons why she thought she might not be able to help me open an account. It was at this point that I realized that almost everyone in Japan is automatically inclined to err on the negative rather than try and help accommodate me in my efforts. As a legal alien, I was astounded at how hard it was to achieve even the most basic of goals.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> “English” (the term is a reference to the fact that r and l do not exist as distinct sounds in Japanese) is a pejorative term for the class of English-language spelling errors or nonsensical meanings, and sometimes taboo curse words, that are commonly inscribed on clothes and other types of accessories like lunch boxes, and even signs throughout Japan.

<sup>184</sup> At that time, it was still necessary to apply for an ARC at the correct ward office after establishing a residence, which was extremely difficult to do since most landlords first required an ARC. Mike also wrote about this contradiction: “in order to get an Alien Registration Card you need a residence, because the ARC basically establishes which prefecture (town) that you live in. SO, you need an ARC in order to get a residence, but you need a residence in order to get an ARC. Insert ‘WTF’ at your leisure.”

<sup>185</sup> This is text from Mike’s blog where he described his experiences. Rather than go into detail in person when we met, he referred me to it, saying maybe it would help give me examples for my research. Because Mike is a pseudonym, and this blog is no longer accessible by search, I don’t cite its location here.

The expectation that the answer will always be “no,” regardless of the actual question asked or the service needed, or the paperwork and evidence provided, was a complaint I heard frequently along with the belief that these refusals were purposeful—intentional obstacles to keep NJ from achieving even the “basic goals” needed to establish a life in Japan: a bank account, a cellphone, a place to live. All of these are tied to first, getting bureaucratic acceptance through registering with the ward or city office (if you have a valid visa) and second, to having the ARC or *zairyuu* card with you as legal evidence of that residence. However, registration with the national government on arrival, and later with the local city, doesn’t guarantee that other services which depend on this “proof” will be accessible to foreigners. One American games journalist, Brian Ashcraft, makes this clear in his response to the 2012 changes to the ARC system. Reflecting on the barriers he’d encountered as a foreign resident in Osaka since 2001, he writes:

These are things like paying higher prices to rent apartments—or not even being able to rent apartments for [the landlords] fear that I might suddenly leave Japan and not pay my rent. It was particularly depressing to be told that I could [not] sign or co-sign for an apartment and that my wife, who was pregnant and not working at the time, would have to sign. Foreigners were apparently no good. I remember a real estate agent—who was a super nice guy—telling me, “Japan is an island country” and apologizing for the way things were run at his company.

Other gripes have been video stores that would not rent videos to you, even if you had a *gaijin* card. Instead, many used to demand that you have a home phone number, which is something that many foreigners do not have. Cell phones did not suffice. Then, there was the matter of getting said cell phone as some cell phone carriers used to illegally require an alien registration card. [Ashcraft 2012a]

Of course, in some cases these experiences may have had little to do with their status as non-Japanese (they could even be misguided attempts to accommodate); some anecdotes are likely exaggerated, and some of these stories tend to snowball as otaku get together and try to one-up each other with their most egregious stories. The performative, and even bonding, element of these make them less reliable as “facts” (for example, perhaps you really do need a landline to

open a bank account), though not as stories or narratives for making sense of experience. Ashcraft in particular is sharing his experiences as part of his “expert on Japan” blog on the videogame website, *Kotaku*, where he might post about how Halloween has become a Japanese holiday or the new Godzilla statue in Tokyo. The value to these stories then is their volume and the patterns that emerge in their telling.

In contrast, discrimination is more clearly a routine part of the housing market. In the case of renting apartments, foreigners at times receive a *nyuukyo kyohi* (入居拒否) or “move in denial” from prospective landlords. One otaku told me during apartment hunting that waiting while the realty company contacted the landlord to see if they would rent to foreigners felt like waiting to hear if pets were accepted. “I wondered if I would need a special foreigner deposit!” she told me. A Japan Times article recounts a similar moment:

“Would the landlord mind having a foreign tenant?” the agent asks, and after a brief conversation, he looks across at the house-hunter, frowns sympathetically and crosses his fingers to form an X before hanging up. “*Gaikokujin dame*” (“No foreigners”),<sup>186</sup> he explains, is the reason for the denial. [Osumi 2017]

The comparison between the rejection of foreigners and of pets is not a metaphor but a reflection of the actual way these requirements are advertised by owners and rental agencies. In listings under the category “conditions” (*jyouken*, 条件) a landlord may include “no foreigners” (*gaikokujin fuka*, 外国人不可, more literally “foreigners not allowed”) along with “no pets” (*petto fuka*, ペット不可). One listing goes as far as to include in English, “Must have Japanese citizenship” (Osumi 2017).

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<sup>186</sup> The word *dame* (だめ) means more literally bad, wrong, not good, useless. It is the kind of word that gets used by parents as a single emphatic phrase (with voice raised), to mean, “stop that (it’s bad).” I think translating this as “no foreigners” loses the negative meaning, and feeling of rejection, this word evokes.



In the case of those teaching English in particular, housing can be particularly challenging and uncertain. As I mentioned in chapter 4, teaching jobs in essence are designed to both elicit and respond to the high rate of turnover; this is clearly reflected in the process of renting out apartments, by schools, to their teachers. While the provision of housing might be, especially initially, attractive to workers who then do not have to navigate a complicated, typically all-in-Japanese, rental process that is also exorbitantly expensive, schools can also more easily evict and insert new tenants, while avoiding the long, costly conventional avenue of a rental arrangement. However, if a school decides to fire a teacher, or if a teacher attempts to leave their contract, foreigners can suddenly lack basic infrastructure, which destabilizes their ability to fight against termination or look for new work.

A landmark 2016 survey of foreign residents commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (published in 2017 as Foreign Residents Survey Report, *gaikokujin jyuumin chousahoukoku sho*, 外国人住民調査報告書) showed that, “Rent application denials, Japanese-only recruitment and racist taunts are among the most rampant forms of discrimination faced by foreign residents in Japan” (Osaki 2017). Of the 4252 valid responses returned,<sup>187</sup> more than a third (39.3%) of those who looked for housing within in the last five years (N= 2,044) said “they were refused entry for being foreign” (Arudou 2017; see also Osaki 2017). To the question, “For those who answered yes (have you looked for housing in the last five years), have you experienced any of the following?” the possible survey responses included:

外国人であることを理由に入居を断られた  
Refused rental for being a foreigner

日本人の保証人がいないことを理由に入居を断られた

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<sup>187</sup> The majority of respondents are foreign residents from China (中国: 1382, 32.5%) and South Korea (韓国: 941, 22.1%). Only 2.6% were from the US (アメリカ: 111), (外国人住民調査報告書, <http://www.moj.go.jp/content/001226182.pdf>).

## Refused rental for lack of a Japanese guarantor

『外国人お断り』と書かれた物件を見たので、あきらめた  
Give up after seeing “foreigners not allowed” listings  
[Foreign Resident Survey Report 2017]

The survey also included comments from respondents related to the question of discrimination in the housing market. One 20-year-old woman from South Korea, stated:

不動産のことで相談をする時、外国人ということを知り急に態度が冷たくなるとか、不誠実に相談に応じることが多かったです。日本人の保証人がなくとも家を探すことができる他の方法や対策が整備されたらいいです。(女性/20歳代/韓国)

When consulting about real estate, there were many times when their attitude immediately became cold when they learned I was a foreigner and they responded insincerely. It would be good if there were some other measure or method put in place to find a house even without a Japanese guarantor. (Female/ 20 years old/ Korean). [Foreigner Resident Survey Report 2017]<sup>188</sup>

This widespread discrimination is often justified by property owners as a result of the inherent communication problems they say come from dealing with foreigners (though, 52.5% of survey respondents reported that they speak fluent or business level Japanese). Masao Ogino, a property manager who also consults on providing “know-how” (*nouhau*, ノウハウ) to others about renting to foreigners, explains that communication problems<sup>189</sup> is the number one concern landlords typically cite (Ogino 2016). But Ogino also adds that owners believe, “depending on national character, there can be various [other] problems” (*okunigara ni yotte, toraburu no naiyou mo samazama da*, お国柄によって、トラブルの内容も様々だ。)

「たとえば韓国人は、キムチの保管や処分の仕方が問題になることがあります。日本に来て間もない韓国人だと、どうしても自国と同じように扱いがちです。キムチを処分したゴミ袋やトランクルームから漏れるキムチの臭いがトラブルの元になったりします。

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<sup>188</sup> My translation.

<sup>189</sup> 外国人とのコミュニケーションが上手くとれないこと, *gaikokujin to no komyunikeeshon ga umaku torenai koto*, “Can not communicate well with foreigners” (Ogino 2016).

For example with Korean people, there can be trouble with the way they store and dispose of kimchi. Koreans who have recently come to Japan tend to treat it as if it were their home country. The smell of kimchi coming from leaky garbage bags and storage rooms are a cause of trouble.

ブラジル人は友人を呼んでパーティーをするのが大好きです。ベランダや駐車場でバーベキューをやって騒音のトラブルになったというケースも過去にありました。近年、特にトラブルが増えているのがベトナム人とネパール人です。経済的な理由や利便性から、管理会社の許可をとらずに友達と同居する人がいます。そうすると、当然、ここでも騒音などトラブルが起きるわけです。」

Brazilians love to call their friends and have a party. In the past, there have been cases of barbecues on verandas or in parking lots causing noise problems. Recently, trouble has particularly been increasing with Vietnamese and Nepalese. There are people who for economic reasons and convenience, live with their friends without getting permission from the management company. Naturally, for that reason, there are also problems with noise. [Ogino 2016, quoting property owners]<sup>190</sup>

Ogino suggests however, that most of these problems could be solved if the realty company or owner simply tells potential foreigner renters the rules, such as those related to garbage disposal and noise, before signing the contract (2016).

These concerns over “national character,” cultural differences which cause poor social manners such as maintaining proper noise-levels and disposal of garbage, reflect bureaucratic practices and government policies of exclusion; systems of law which “constantly reinforce a narrative that a ‘foreigner’ is a matter of physical appearance and bloodline. And anyone who looks, acts or in any way seems ‘different’ from ‘Japanese’ is not to be trusted or treated the same as ‘Japanese’” (Arudou 2017). As Arudou explains, these bureaucratic policies include:

...police racial profiling and random street checks of “*gaijin* cards,” diffident treatment at Hello Work unemployment agencies, lack of official assistance with unequal labor contracts for foreign workers, arbitrary visa amendment/cancellations at Immigration without the right of appeal, or fruitless consultations with the MOJ’s Potemkin Bureau of Human Rights. [Arudou 2017]

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<sup>190</sup> My translation.

The notion of a visible, inherently and eternally *non*-Japanese subject is also codified in law and legal terminology, in particular, through the use of *kokumin*. Arudou argues this is apparent in the Japanese-language, and legally applicable, version of the Constitution’s Article 14 which translates the “people” in “All of the people are equal under the law” from the original English version, to *kokumin*” (2013a: 63).<sup>191</sup> Such distinctions continue to legally support unequal treatment of non-citizens, such as the denial of welfare benefits, and in employment through term limit contracts, “Japanese only” job postings, and lack of access to managerial positions in the public sector. This filters to the daily, repetitive actions of government bureaucrats, even police officers, who Arudou argues learn directly and indirectly to see “rights for ‘foreigners’ as optional” (Arudou 2015a: 161). Yet, at the same time otaku may continue to refute this state-level exclusion, as Ashcraft writes: “my experiences with immigration have been pleasant and helpful—and more importantly, welcoming. What have been problematic are things outside of the government and, largely, out of the daily interactions with people” (Ashcraft 2012a); or look to cultural histories and traditionalisms to explain apparent irrationality, as Mike did when warning other fans who might be considering a move to Japan:

The challenges I am about to describe—as random as they may seem—aren't just a collection of incompatible whims on the part of the Japanese government. These issues are deeply engrained cultural sensibilities that often stem from Feudal-era mentalities, and are unlikely to change any time in the near future, for better or for worse. At least that's how I see it.<sup>192</sup>

Yet, state systems for making society legible—in this case, through court room decisions, legal terms, exclusionary policies and the documents and spaces of differentiation and deterrence that I have already mentioned—all in turn, as Arudou reiterates, justify “the mindset that ‘foreigners’

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<sup>191</sup> In particular, Arudou points out that Japan’s National Health Insurance program, discussed above, which is *kokumin kenkou hoken* in Japanese, did not allow foreign residents to join until 1982 (2013a).

<sup>192</sup> In interviews I heard both opinions expressed repeatedly, sometimes even in the same interview.

will not only be treated differently in a legal sense, but also ought to be treated differently in a normative sense” (Arudou 2013a: 161). This mindset is cultivated in legal practice which coordinate to produce an efficient, rational and seemingly unmediated ideal (Hoag 2011: 82)—the claim that Japan “contains ‘ethnically pure people’ (tan’itsu minzoku)” (Arudou 2015: 161). Along with other national ideals discussed in chapter 3, the *tanitsu minzoku* (単一民族, racially homogenous) is a pervading, yet very modern, creation that obscures Japan’s ethnic and social diversity. For example, as I mentioned in chapter 3, Japan’s national census collects only individual nationality (Japanese or non-Japanese), making it impossible to document the ethnic diversity of citizens. In this way, the *tanitsu minzoku* is instantiated in concrete material form and externalized (as in, detached from the imagination), making it appear self-evident.<sup>193</sup> In this process, state bureaucracy helps to erase the ambiguity of mediation, or the fact that the homogenous nation isn’t “always already there.” In turn, this helps to create the “appearance of an ontological separation between form and content...[which] makes possible the apparently impartial authority that modern institutions rely on” (Mazzarella 2004: 357), what William Mazzarella has also called “the politics of immediation” (2006). Indeed, bureaucratic technologies are often utilized by states to help to actively settle the nation, as really real, into daily life in ways similar to ubiquitous computing; the goal of which scholars describe as disappearance, as technologies and interfaces work to recede themselves into the background (Hope et al. 2006).

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<sup>193</sup> I’ve heard public health researchers explain to an English-speaking audience that Japan is a homogenous nation, when their topic of research is economic and social inequality in Japanese society and its impact on differential health outcomes.

## 5.2 THE POLITICS OF RACE AND LANGUAGE

### 5.2.1 "Why did YOU come to Japan?"

In the whispered voice of an investigative reporter breaking a big story, a TV personality stands on an everyday-looking sidewalk and says into a microphone: "I'm in residential Saitama. There are foreigners walking here. What is it they're doing?"<sup>194</sup> The oblivious foreigners approach up the street without looking at the camera, a threesome of, we later learn, Italians who have come to Saitama to see bonsai. One of them says in English dubbed over by Japanese but still audible, "I like bonsai...so I came here to have a look." Earlier in the video, these same three foreigners are watched from across the street as a handheld camera follows their movements. When they stop to peer through a fence into a small yard, a voice behind the camera says to the watching audience, not without some humor, "You're peeking into someone's garden, aren't you."<sup>195</sup>

The title of this video roughly translates as *The Japanese thing that captivates foreigners*,<sup>196</sup> and follows several different groups of Westerners in a piecemeal disclosure of what they are doing in Japan. Just like the Cool Japan show, nationality and country flags are always posted in the right corner of the screen during interviews; in addition to Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the US are all represented. When one couple from Spain are stopped on the street in Saitama, they explain they are traveling for their honeymoon. As the couple moves away from the camera, a studio announcer wonders incredulously in voice over: "A

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<sup>194</sup> Quotes from videos are all my translation. (*Saitamashi no juutaku wa ita n desu ga. Gaikokujin no kata ga aruiteimasu ne. Nani wo shiteru n deshau ka*).

<sup>195</sup> The quote is: *hito no ie no niwa wo nozoitemasu ne*.

<sup>196</sup> 外国人がハマる日本の“アレ”, *gaikokujin ga hamaru nihon no are*. The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjLcMxJHybk>

honeymoon trip to *Saitama*???”<sup>197</sup> Before that, caucasian foreigners spied walking down the street are juxtaposed with the announcer saying, “Huh, there’s a foreigner?” And over another unsuspecting Western-looking passerby, “What, another foreigner? Why are there so many foreigners like that?”<sup>198</sup> Large colorful subtitles (a common feature in many Japanese TV shows) stamped on these images simply declare: 外国人.

Gradually, the video reveals what all these *tourists* are doing: going to view bonsai, to learn how to fold origami, to buy Hokusai t-shirts, to visit a woodblock print museum. These are things which Japanese citizens state for the camera that they find tedious (*unzari*), or don’t know about or aren’t really all that interested in, although some laugh a bit in embarrassment for their lack of knowledge. Inserted as cut-aways, sandwiched between foreigners, they say things like, “Woodblock prints? No, I don’t really know that much about them.” These are activities that, as the video makes clear with an earlier caption are, “For Japanese people, ‘natural;’ For foreigners, ‘fresh.’”<sup>199</sup>

This video is part of a popular and long-running genre of (reality-style) television shows focused on following *white* foreigners around while they are *visiting* Japan. Like this one, such shows are typically concerned with capturing the “foreign tourist” point of view, which is questioned, exclaimed, and marveled over—and then presented as counterpoint to the native opinion. For example, when the Italian man interested in bonsai stops to snap a cell phone photo, the announcer exclaims, “What the heck (are you doing)?”<sup>200</sup> These narratives work

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<sup>197</sup> The interviewer asks: *shinkonryokou de saitama ni?* A prefecture on the western border of Tokyo, Saitama’s nickname in Japanese is *dasai-tama* (*dasai*, ダサイ, meaning uncool).

<sup>198</sup> The first quote is, *un, gaikokujin wa hitori*, and the second, *aa, mata hitori, dou shite konna ni gaikokujin ga.*

<sup>199</sup> The video text reads: 日本人には「当たり前」外国人には「新鮮」, *nihonjin ni wa “atarimae;” gaikokujin ni wa “shinsen.”*

<sup>200</sup> The announcer says: *ittai nani wo.*

simultaneously on several levels to produce a consumable Western, always white, foreigner who is non-threatening but misguided, interested in cliché Japanese traditions, and most importantly, *just visiting*.<sup>201</sup> As I discussed in chapter 3, they also, along with the Cool Japan show, work fundamentally to educate the Japanese public about what interests and values they should have as Japanese, reflected (à la Benedict) by the white foreigners who are thought to desire the “true” Japan.

### 5.2.2 The longest intestines

In 1988, Tsutomu Hata, Japan’s Minister of Trade told US politicians, who were demanding that Japan drop all quotas against US beef and oranges, that Japan simply couldn't accept more American beef imports because Japanese people have longer intestines and therefore aren't equipped to digest so much red meat. As a New York Times article from the time describes: “One Japanese negotiator, Tsutomu Hata, raised hackles in Washington recently by asserting that the Japanese capacity for imported beef was limited because their intestines supposedly are longer than those of other people” (Haberma 1988). Two years earlier in 1986, Fortune Magazine reported a similar story (with opposite intestine sizes), drawing attention to the obvious economic and protectionist motives:

One of the cleverest ways the Japanese have found to keep foreign manufacturers out of their domestic market is to plead “uniqueness.” Japanese skin is different, the government argues, so foreign cosmetics companies must test their products in Japan before selling

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<sup>201</sup> Several other popular reality shows help craft the image of a temporary foreigner visiting for consumption: YOUは何しに日本へ, *Why did YOU come to Japan?* (<http://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/youhananishini/>), which stops foreigners arriving at Narita airport to ask them the eponymous question, and 世界、日本に行きたい外国人応援団, or *Cheering foreigners who want to go to Japan* (<http://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/nipponikitaihito/>), which finds Japanophiles around the world and sends them to Japan to partake in whatever fashion or tradition fascinates them. Both are from the television station, TV Tokyo.



there. The Japanese say their stomachs are small and have room for only the mikan, the local tangerine, so imports of U.S. oranges are limited. Now the Japanese have come up with what may be the flakiest argument yet: Their snow is different, so ski equipment should be too. [Rogers et al. 1986]

This is a claim for (racial) difference linked for decades to negotiating political flows; what can come into or go out of the nation-state has to be first categorized in relation to the *minzoku*, however currently defined and economically relevant. This difference is hinged to “evidence,” or really to commonly traded, yet shifting, myths of the ancient Japanese past: a people with an agricultural tradition and plant-based diet that developed uniquely in reference to the *nation*'s<sup>202</sup> (naturally isolating) geography (Ashcraft's “super nice” real estate agent, who said, “‘Japan is an island country’ and apologiz[ed] for the way things were run at his company” [Ashcraft 2012a]).

Andy Raskin is a marketing professional in California who has blogged about his 30-year quest to uncover the veracity of the “longer intestines” assertion. While studying Japanese at a Tokyo university in the 1980s, Raskin translated Hata's statement from the daily newspaper as a class assignment. After seeing the reaction of his Japanese teacher, who was confused that foreigners didn't already know this obvious point, Raskin asked other Japanese students on campus if they had heard the claim (65% had, and accepted it as fact, Raskin 2015). One student offered this explanation:

“We Japanese were traditionally an agricultural people,”... “Our ancestors didn't eat much meat, so we evolved a longer intestine to digest the vegetables. You know, like how cows need multiple stomachs to digest roughage. [Raskin 2015]

Despite the questionable evolutionary biology invoked in this statement, which has been debunked by scientific research in English and Japanese (Saunders, et al. 1995, Nagata et al.

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<sup>202</sup> As I discussed in chapter 3, this notion of a singular Japanese people and nation is often stretched tenuously back to prehistory and supported by the myth of Tokugawa era “isolationism.”

2013),<sup>203</sup> once it was inserted into the common lexicon after the “Beef and Orange Trade Problem” (Raskin 2015) the myth of longer (better?) intestines holds fast today; a commonly professed matter-of-fact notion, like Japan’s natural, geological “isolation.”<sup>204</sup> Indeed, ideas about Japan’s unique food culture and its symbiotic connection to the genetic disposition of the Japanese “race” crop up in both patient and doctor explanatory models of type 2 diabetes today where Western food is seen as the ultimate cause of a spike in insulin resistance in the 21st century (Armstrong-Hough 2011).

Japan’s uniqueness is positioned in relation to a fictive other-ized YOU; the white visitor (in media, rarely non-white and never a resident)<sup>205</sup> who takes pleasure from Japan’s very quixoticity—yet is fundamentally, biological, inherently *different*. It is the institutionalized notion of the *tanitsu minzoku*, as it “establishes, legally enforces, and constantly reaffirms ‘Japaneseness’ through a systematized process of differentiation, ‘othering’, and subordination” (Arudou 2013: 161), that continues to organize many of the locally consumed images, jokes and narratives of others. Shared opinions voiced aloud by politicians and government representatives, and then normalized when reported on by TV stations and newspapers (however controversial)—ideas like “whites, Asians, and blacks should live separately”<sup>206</sup> (Ayako Sono, Education

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<sup>203</sup> And publicized on Japanese language blogs like this post: 「日本人の腸が欧米人よりも長い」というデマはなぜ広まり、誰がトクをしたのか?, Why has the misinformation spread that Japanese people’s intestines are longer than Westerners, and who benefits? (Mahoroba 2014).

<sup>204</sup> Anecdotally, many of my university students believe this is true, as did an MD I worked with until, after we discussed it, was surprised to find research in Japanese disproving the idea.

<sup>205</sup> NHK’s *Cool Japan* TV show, which I discussed in chapter 3 is an exception. Foreigners—on the show called “our foreign guests”—are more clearly *residents* (we see the inside of one guest’s house and met his Japanese wife) but they are still indexed by their nationality (with the requisite flag on their name tags and country name over their thumbnail photos during introductions at the start of the show). The show also reflects the greater diversity of actual residents in Japan; guest come from Uganda, Mexico, Slovakia, Indonesia, China, Brazil and South Korea rather than just from Western countries.

<sup>206</sup> Sono’s bases her argument on a post-apartheid era, previously white-only, apartment building where Black South Africans lived with many families together. Because there were so many people living in such a small place, The Japan Times summarizes, Sono argued that “the water quickly ran out and the white people were forced to leave” (Johnston & Osaki 2015).

Reform Panel [Johnston & Osaki 2015]) and Japanese “do not like or desire foreigners” (Nariaki Nakayama, Minister of Tourism [Fukada 2008])—help legitimize the subtitle *gaikokujin* on the image of unsuspected foreigners. They also help to explain why the most common form of discrimination (経験した差別, *keiken shita sabetsu*) experienced by *visibly* foreign residents according to the Resident Survey was “being stared at” (「知らない人からジロジロ見られた」, *shiranai hito kara jirojiro mirareta*) (Ministry of Justice 2017)<sup>207</sup>—a clear reflection of the televisual gaze. More importantly, otaku themselves engage with these narratives, and trade stories about them online and in blog posts, and use them as a frame of interpretation for their everyday experiences.

### 5.2.3 Visibly different

In December of my first year in Tokyo, I was walking with Charlie to our local train station. Charlie learned to speak English watching American movies as a kid in the 1990s. He also grew up playing Japanese videogames. He’s never called himself a “Nintendo Fanboy” but that is essentially the only thing he plays extensively, all the old-school side-scrollers like Super Mario Bros., often on his train commute to work. He’s a computer programmer for a “non-traditional” Japanese company, he tells me (so of course he’s hacked his Nintendo 3DS to get it to do things it isn’t legally supposed to do), and he moved to Japan in 2008 to be with his girlfriend who he met while they were both on student exchange in Norway.

That day, it was cold out and I remember Charlie had a crazy colored scarf on. We stopped for a minute in front of the station entrance, he was going north and I was heading home

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<sup>207</sup> 31.7% of residents surveyed stated they had either been stared at “often” (「よくある」, *yoku aru*, 8.1%) or “occasionally” (「たまにある」, *tama ni aru*, 23.6%) (Ministry of Justice 2017).

south, and while we were saying goodbye, a mom and her two young daughters stopped nearby. They caught my eye, because children always do now that I am a mom, and I saw one of the girls, maybe five, stare wide-eyed up at us and then pull urgently on the sleeve of her mom's coat. She said loudly, "Mama, different people!" (ママ、違う人!, *mama, chigau hito!*). Charlie, who speaks decent Japanese, turned to the family and began telling them that he had just flown by in Santa's sleigh and thought this place looked nice, so he jumped off and decided to stay. The girls started giggling and Charlie threw his arms around, smiling and making big gestures, playing to his audience.

This interaction between Charlie and the little girls, even their mom eventually smiled at his antics, is possible only because whiteness is framed as a particular kind of non-threatening and non-violent, yet again a popularly imagined and consumed, otherness; a context under which it is entirely acceptable to discriminate, call out, mark and otherwise label as different in public spaces and within the hearing of all. The construction in media, policy and common imagination of a white English-speaking foreigner, friendly but a bit bumbling (probably a kind teacher!; or a fan of bonsai!), exists alongside a foreigner, who is probably non-white, and also then likely a gang member, criminal, or more likely in today's context, a terrorist.

Over the last twenty years, the Japanese government, and specifically the National Police Agency, have participated in regularly reviving and escalating fear over foreigner-committed crime; manufacturing "the illusion of a 'foreign crime wave,' depicting non-Japanese (NJ) as a threat to Japan's public safety" (Arudou 2013b). This has included inaccurately reporting, manipulating or generally inflating statistics; for example, discussing a rise in only one kind of crime while ignoring a total decline overall, or not mentioning that although foreign crime had risen as the foreign population itself had sharply increased ("including visa violations, which

Japanese cannot by definition commit”) foreign residents are still less likely on average to commit a crime than a Japanese citizen (Arudou 2013b). And a more recent turn to focusing on the alleged rise in “crime infrastructure” (犯罪インフラ, *hanzai infura*) which, due to its underground, global spread, can’t be quantified or related in statistics (Kyodo News and Mainichi Shimbun, July 23, 2010, cited in Arudou 2013b).

These scare tactics are typically accompanied by the distribution of materials like posters which warn against *gaikokujin* “bag snatchers” and the bad foreigners who have come to Japan (来日不良外国人, *rainichi furyou gaikokujin*), or flyers which encourage reporting anyone heard speaking Chinese, and handbooks warning shop owners about “characteristic” foreigner crime (Arudou 2002). In the late 2000s, police posters in Ibaraki prefecture showed officers in riot gear subduing a foreign suspect with text underneath declaring: “Defend and protect before it’s too late,” (水際で防ぐ、守る, *mizugiwa de fusegu, mamoru*) (Arudou 2016, translation mine). Additional bold text on the poster adds: “Please cooperate with preventing foreigner illegal entry and overstaying” (外国人の密入国・不法滞在防止にご協力ください, *gaikokujin no mitsunyuuokoku fuhoutazai boushi ni gokyouryoku kudasai*). This is in spite of the fact that the foreign resident population in Ibaraki is very low (Arudou 2016). The phrase, common I was told for public service messages in schools, police stations and airports to indicate protecting against dangerous situations like a car crash or a crime—to protect at a critical moment—is a play on the word *mizugiwa* (水際) which literally means “coastline” or water’s edge, but is a synonym for the word *girigiri*, barely or at the last moment, and in this case can also mean “prevent from landing.” A Japanese friend also told me the phrase in this context evokes people coming illegally in “small,

dirty boats” from China and Korea. “Of course,” he said, “white people who are here have papers.”<sup>208</sup>

These examples help highlight the ways “race,” as constructed in Japan, is variously configured. Just as citizens were urged by pamphlets to report anyone speaking Chinese, criminality and illegality as well as dirtiness is frequently associated with Japan’s former colonies, their Asian neighbors to the West. Public officials participate in this fearmongering over visible or audible others, such as in 2000 when then Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, “urged the Nerima Self Defense Forces, in the event of an earthquake, to round up illegal foreigners in case they riot” and also argued that genetics give the Chinese “criminal tendencies” (Arudou 2002). An ad campaign around the same time for locks latched onto these alarmist tones, explaining that, “The damage by foreign theft gangs is increasing swiftly now” (cited in French 1999). A New York Times article goes on to explain:

The ad campaign, which brought a burst of interest in Miwa locks, offers a window on a deep streak in Japanese society to look askance at most things foreign, especially fellow Asians. Company officials deny that their advertisements reflect racism. A spokesman said what the police confirm: that crime by foreigners in general, and that crime by Chinese in particular is on the increase. [French 1999]

With preparations for the 2020 Olympics, fear over (potential) foreign crime is being reinvigorated, as media reports speculate on the increase in foreign-perpetrated criminal activities that will naturally come with the rise of foreigner tourists and visitors for the games, including acts of terrorism (cutely shortened in katakana to テロ, *tero*).<sup>209</sup> In 2016, the Shibuya-

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<sup>208</sup> Another long-term white Canadian, but non-otaku living in Tokyo told me, when describing his interaction with visa applications and other work-related bureaucracy, “If you’re white, it’s no problem.” He was shocked to hear I have to personal return every year to immigrations, and pay out of pocket (about \$80 USD per person) to apply for a residence extension since his work manages that paperwork on his behalf.

<sup>209</sup> Whenever my students are given the chance to brainstorm about challenges Tokyo might face with the coming Olympics and to innovate for solutions, almost all of them focus on the anticipated increase in crime brought by foreign visitors.

ku police department distributed a poster to owners of *minpaku* (民泊), or guest lodgings, that asked their cooperation in vigilantly collecting information about renters in order to prevent terrorism with the coming Olympics (Hatachi 2016). The poster included eight foreign looking faces with a mix of phenotypes (none, however, East Asian-looking), seeming to equate tourists with acts of terrorism. As a Japanese BuzzFeed News article describes: “Shibuya police poster arbitrarily decides tourists are terrorists” (「渋谷署がつくったポスターが、観光客をテロリストと決めつけているのでは」, *shibuyasho ga tsukutta posutaa ga, kankoukyaku wo terrorisuto to kimetsukete iru no dewa*);<sup>210</sup> 73% of readers of the article (N = 2586) voted that this poster is likely to invite misunderstandings (誤解を招きそう, *gokai wo manekisou*) (Hatachi 2016). This poster plays on a popular perception that the renters of *minpaku* are “bad people,” as a friend explained. Since *minpaku* tend to be cheap and can be accessible to those who do not have a bank account, credit card or address—those living on the fringe of society such as day laborers or the unemployed (Gill 2001, Margolis 2002 )—they are also commonly associated with a potential criminal element.

In her analysis of Latino-targeted border control practices in Arizona, such as stop and searches and immigration raids, Mary Romero shows the way legalized and racialized methods of surveillance and control of this population “function as a policing practice to maintain and reinforce subordinated status” (Romero 2006: 450). These tactics have very real and psychic consequences on the daily lives of Latino-looking residents and their neighborhoods: “sometimes

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<sup>210</sup> When BuzzFeed News reporter Kota Hatachi inquired with the Shibuya police department about their intention in equating terrorism with foreign-looking faces, they responded: 「民泊サービスにかかる、各種犯罪の未然防止により、外国人の方々も、安心して滞在していただく趣旨で、外国人風のイラストを用いたもの」, *minpaku saabisu ni kakaru, kakushu hansai no mizen boushi ni yori, gaikokujin no katagata mo, anshin shite taizai shite itadaku shushi de, gaikokujin fuu no irasuto wo mochiita mono*, “We used foreigner-type illustrations to help prevent various kinds of crimes related to minpaku services, which will allow foreigners to also use these services with peace of mind” (Hatachi 2016).

in the form of hate crimes or the decrease of government funding and services to their communities” (Romero 2006: 450). Most otaku I talked to, in general, don’t feel they interact with policing and surveillance on a daily basis, despite the fact that they are legally mandated to carry their *zairyuu* card with them. Yet, these popularly circulated (but of course not totalizing) narratives of the “foreigner” do translate into and participate in framing, if not instigating, encounters of discrimination (差別, *sabetsu*) in daily life. More telling, they structure the interpretation that NJ make of these encounters, whether as part of interactions with neighbors and co-workers or strangers and bureaucrats. These are experiences of distancing, of overt objectifying: “like when people ride past on their bike, and then whip around to stare,” an otaku told me and then added while laughing, “one guy almost fell over once.” These are stories I heard repeated over and over, and in fact I realized the shared discussion of these othering experiences is a common communicative genre. Some of these stories demonstrate the way NJ perceived they are thought to be strange “attractions,” or curiosities. For example, one otaku told me about how she had been swarmed by ten or so elementary school kids when sitting on bench, “literally surrounded” she told me, while waiting for the bus, the students calling out to her, *haro*, “hello.” Another told me about how he had been also been stopped by some elementary students at the Ueno zoo who asked him in English what his favorite animal was and where he was from. He told me they wrote his answer down on a worksheet and it seemed to be a kind of school homework assignment; after that they asked to take a picture with him. In my own experience, I’ve had more than one public servant stare nervously at me, for example, the librarians at my local public library laughed and pointed at me when I came in but did it politely with their hands covering their mouths. My daughter and I have been gawked at by kids in the locker room of our local city pool as we changed into our swimsuits and my husband and



daughter had a high school-aged girl record a video of them eating dinner at McDonald's, holding her cellphone a few inches from their faces. Other stories reflected more a negative reaction of anxiety or even suspicion, as one coworker told me how, one day when she was taking out the trash in a neighborhood where she has lived for almost twenty years, an older lady who saw her approaching started backing away slowly in fright. And another otaku told me about how every time he leaves his building (he's been there for 7 years) and is forced to pass his neighbor's apartment, the old man who lives there slams the door shut. Another time, he told me he had tripped someone who was harassing his Japanese wife for being married to a *gaijin*. These are all actions and reactions, from curiosity and nervousness (and the ever constant staring) to outright fear, that are normalized as encounters with "difference."

Most otaku who have been in Tokyo for a while vividly remember, or remember someone telling them about, an infamous ATM poster of a blonde-headed thief stealing money out of an old Japanese lady's purse. It was often mentioned to me as an example of normalized discrimination along with the *gaijin* party costume: a blonde wig and fake nose, (one example called "Hello, Gaijin-san Party Joke" substitutes blue eyes in place of the wig [Kotaku Ashcraft 2012b]) along with periodic commercials from major businesses like Toshiba where Japanese actors don the wig and nose and pretend to be a white foreigner—speaking in badly accented Japanese, with their words subtitled in katakana, a marker of foreign loan words, and by extension foreignness itself. This costume reveals a surprising slippage where in many cases *gaijin* has in fact come to stand (in) for white, even more specifically North American, foreigners; and where white faces are used to sell everything from makeup and shoes to English lessons, or the globalization of this-or-that university, and other cosmopolitan goods and services. Otaku I knew working at *eikaiwai* used to joke about the images regularly used for

advertising their schools in newspapers, pamphlets and posters. Ads that, they said, usually depicted a “whiter than white” fake teacher, an actor who was always very blonde and pale. “What is she, Russian?” one teacher said to me when examining his school's new flyer. In another example, I applied for once to teach at a kindergarten and met their Vietnamese-Australian English teacher who had been with the school for over four years as well as the white-American teacher who had been there for eight months but who I was going to replace, before her contract had even ended. In all the promotional material I saw for the school, from pamphlets to posters and flyers, it was only the face of the new, and now temporary, white woman who was prominently featured.

The suture between expectations of white appearance and being a “native-san” (ネイティブさん), who then by extension has automatically obtained the primary qualification for, and must also be actually teaching English, has a direct impact on the employability of native English speakers from all parts of the world. Job applicants from the Philippines and Singapore who I met while interviewing regularly complained about how difficult it was to get hired in Tokyo. And how hard they had to work during interviews, especially group ones which tended to be common, when they were the only darker face present. One African-American interviewee for an online video titled *Black in Japan* told the BBC in an interview that: “It would be careless of me to say racism/xenophobia in Japan does not exist... You do get impolite stares, that is for sure, but most things that have happened to me were minor” (Wendling 2015). Yet, these are routine discriminations that are more consequential than stares on the street, or shoppers in the neighborhood grocery store fascinated by my daughter’s red hair.

NJ do report vastly different experiences, and differences dependent on skin color, as “blackness” can register reactions of overt fear in public spaces. Another African-American

interviewed in *Black in Japan*, states to the camera: “Catcalling gets really specific when you're black...I get called Beyonce, or Whitney Houston, who I look nothing like” (cited in Wendling 2015). Another African-American long-term resident recently posted on Facebook: “Am I the only one who gets frisked five times a year?” Baye McNeil, a blogger and columnist for The Japan Times, explained that the post, from Jesse Freeman, went on to relate “the systematic and apparently racially motivated harassment [Jesse’s] received at the hands of Tokyo’s finest over the course of his 10 years here” (McNeil 2017). In McNeil’s interview with him, Freeman elaborated on his experiences:

“I mean, here it’s like, you’re Japanese or you’re not,” he said. “And that’s kind of the end of it. But, after I gave them my ID card, which says that I’m not a dangerous person, that I’m legit, I’m employed, I’m a taxpayer, and they saw everything was in order, I thought that would be enough. But it wasn’t.”

“The worst thing for me, though, is the humiliation,” Freeman adds. “I’m here trying to break whatever preconception America has given them of us, trying hard to do some good here, and these random stupid little incidents undermine that. They always seem to happen close to my job, or close to my home, where people know my face. And when Japanese people see a black person with a cop, I know they’re thinking ‘*Yappari!*’ (‘Just as I thought!’), because a stereotype is being reinforced.” [McNeil 2017]

McNeil himself regularly blogs about what it is like to be an African-American in Japan, and is frequently interviewed by other jv/bloggers about his thoughts on racism here. To the question, “What does being African-American in Japan mean to you?” McNeil responded:

It means that instead of the humanity you have in common with all humans being readily accepted and acknowledged as the matter of fact that it is, it must be somehow verified or testified to. It means being the object of fear, at varying levels, wherever you go. [McNeil interviewed by The Japan Guy 2013]

I raise the experience of African-American residents here as another example of the ways foreigners are variously racialized in Japan. Of course, this has a complex history and manifestation in social experience which I don’t have space to do justice to here. At the same time, few of the people I spoke to ever directly referred to the way their daily life may have been

structured by these differences; preconceptions which may equate to very divergent public expectations about their legality (as the “defend at the coast” poster attests to), their inability to accommodate local social mores (taking care of garbage and keeping quiet, which of course “real” Japanese people also fail to do), or their potential to infect this peaceful society with crime and terrorism. Yet all are often seen as, in one way or another, inherently disconcerting or threatening.

### 5.3 “BUT WE’RE SPEAKING JAPANESE”

*As many Japanese people are not used to communicating with foreigners, they may feel shy about making the first step. Please try to take the first step when you have the opportunity.* [Living Information for Foreign Residents of Itabashi City 2017]

In his documentary about the persistence of radiation in Fukushima prefecture one year after the nuclear meltdown at the Daiichi power plant, filmmaker Ian Thomas Ash visits an elementary school “In the Zone.” After talking with the school’s principal about how the radiation readings in the schoolyard had dropped since last year (6 cm of topsoil had been removed and then buried in the schoolyard under sand), the principal explains to some students that the filmmaker is an American and that he wanted to meet them all. They are excited and curious to see the camera and start waving. Ian calls out from behind the camera, *minasama, genki desu ka?*, “Everyone, how are you?” (皆さま、元気ですか?). The respond in chorus, *genki desu!*, “We’re great!” (元気です, lit. healthy) automatically, trained from years at school to vocalize immediately to this familiar call and response. This is quickly followed by one boy’s incredulous, “Hey, you speak Japanese!?!” (へえ、日本語 喋れる!, *hee, nihongo shabereru*).

The boy standing next to him gives him a quick slap on the arm as if in reprimand, as if to say, that's rude! The filmmaker responds, "Yeah, I speak Japanese" (はい、分かりますよ, *hai, wakarimau yo*). "No way!" (嘘, うそ, lit. That's a lie) the same skeptical student replies; a few moments later he shadow boxes the camera a couple of times, and follows Ian down the hallway as he leaves (Ash 2012).

Otaku I've met are always talking about what happens to them when they open their mouths and speak Japanese in public. It typically goes either one of two ways. If the exchange is of little consequence, neither speaker is dependent on communicating a reliably clear message or making an accurate reply, then using Japanese usually generates a pleasantly surprised reaction from whoever is on the receiving end of the utterance (or nearby), and almost always the foreigner gets told, "Your Japanese is great!" (日本語が上手です, *nihongo ga jouzu desu*). This rote response is legendary. I was told that this never feels like an off-hand complement, or genuine praise, because it is prompted by the most miniscule of speech acts, like "Please go ahead" (先にどうぞ, *saki ni douzo*) while in line at the *konbini*, or like that time a stranger at Starbucks told me I had great Japanese even though all I said to him was "ah, excuse me" (ああ、すみません, *aa, sumimasen*) because he was standing in the way of the milk. After several years of living in Japan, this scripted interaction (I say, "A tall coffee to go please" and they say, "Great Japanese!") otaku say can become a frustrating reminder—not only that you are viewed as a tourist—but that the ubiquitous expectation from the citizens around you is that you couldn't ever possibly, actually be able to speak Japanese. In fact, on more than one occasion, I've had someone talk about me in Japanese, while standing only a few feet away and looking right at me. Once, after I helped a mother and daughter figure out in Japanese which direction to head in the train station, on the escalator only one-step ahead of me they expressed their surprise that I could

speak Japanese. This assumption of course does not occur naturally but is built up over time in conversation with ongoing “nation-work” and the positioning of “outsiders”—outside the national frame (see chapter 3).

The second outcome is what some otaku I met called “the breakdown.” “It’s like they’re robots,” an otaku named Stan, who’s neighbor shuts his door, said, “and they just break when I try to talk to them in Japanese.” Rather than platitudes, foreigners are met with stuttering, half mutterings, or silence, (I once had a shopkeeper say some muttered half syllables and rather than tell me the total of my purchase, try to take the coins she needed out of my hand instead) which can interrupt and waylay daily service transactions in convenience stores, coffee shops, shopping plazas and restaurants. Stan elaborated that like robots, shopkeepers are only programmed for rote repetitions and set phrases and that’s why they grind to a halt when confronted with an NJ speaking Japanese, a description I heard repeated frequently by others. Attention in English cultural guides to notions like *kata* (型), or ways of doing things like forms of movement in martial arts, are presented as evidence by Westerners (in regurgitating the state-sponsored post-WWII turn to “tradition” and the Cool Japan brand), that the behavior of Japanese people replicates “little ‘non-thinking’ ants” (Garcia 2010: 43). The notion that those working in service oriented sectors are incapable of deviating from some mysterious set script of phrases and customer interactions, again call and repeat, is an explanation that gets continually recycled.

To elaborate, Will told me about a recent experience he had at the donut shop, Mister Donut. He knew, he told me, that he wanted their savory puff pastry with a hot dog in it, but when he got to the counter, he couldn’t remember what this snack was called and there was no menu in sight. He remembered it had “pie” (パイ, *pai*) in the name, so when it was his turn, he asked for a “hotdog pie.” Technically, the katakana-ized ホットドッグ (*hottdoggu*) isn’t used as

often as weiner (ウイナー) on packages and in menus, but the word hotdog does exist (the pie is actually called a frank pie, as in frankfurter, a German influence like weiner). Will explained what happened next: “Instead of helping me out at all, you know, give me even a little bit of assistance—they only have, like two pies!—the lady behind the counter just stared silently at me with a face that said, ‘Dude, I have no fucking idea what you are talking about.’” When I told Will’s story to an American who has been in Japan for over 20 years, he immediately launched into the script explanation, saying something like, “Well, you know, she probably only has the 52 exact menu items memorized.”<sup>211</sup> In this way, service encounters are marked as linguistic zones of incongruity where for example, the “space” of the donut shop, store or restaurant itself becomes a “metapragmatic frame” (Brown 2014: 36) that excludes NJ by default from public space and the possibility of communicative exchange. Although the majority of these occur between strangers, NJ also reported similar ongoing, though at times less overt, exclusion in their workplaces. For example, I knew one otaku who described how he had been excluded from an important meeting with another company about a videogame he had produced. As those in attendance couldn’t answer most of the questions they’d been asked, his Japanese co-workers had to send him the company’s questions via text message while he was alone in his office.

### **5.3.1 The most difficult language**

Our first week in Japan, we went for a long walk to a distant shopping plaza. We didn’t have a smartphone, so we had to chart a haphazard map from memory and vague pencil

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<sup>211</sup> Ironically, a month later Mister Donut introduced a short-lived special menu item called a “hotdog set” (ホットドッグセット).

scratches on paper meant to indicate possible intersections and turns.<sup>212</sup> In Tokyo, addresses and locations are positioned within neighborhood names, which are further segmented into numbered *chome* (丁目),<sup>213</sup> or small districts relating to city blocks, an ordering system introduced by the national government in the 1960s [Bestor 1989: 290]; Bestor translates *chome* as “blocks used for addresses” [111]). (Some adjacent houses, like mine, literally share the exact same address, in which case, having a family name on your mailbox, or a nameplate on the gate to your house, is both essential and ubiquitous). This means many streets are technically unnamed and take representational presence only in reference to their location within the *chome*, which can make navigating city streets and neighborhoods a daunting task, even for native residents.<sup>214</sup>

After walking for over thirty minutes, physically and spatially disoriented, born also from jet lag and our protesting four-year-old daughter who had rarely trekked through a cityscape for this length of time (we had to train her over the first six months to accept walking long distances as a normal part of our new everyday life), we finally arrived at a *shoutengai* (商店街), or shopping street, densely crowded with stores on each side. As we moved down the street spilling into the way of cars and bikes, readjusting<sup>215</sup> to the lack of sidewalks and the crowd, we saw a variety store up ahead with its goods stacked out front on the sidewalk. As we approached, I noticed an older man sitting on a small folding chair next to boxes of laundry detergent and green tea. He was calling out loudly to passersby with a deep scratchy voice, in an accent of the

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<sup>212</sup> I examined a Google map for close to an hour before we left the apartment attempting to commit as much to memory as possible while deciphering the seemingly nonsensical directions the search engine returned to my query: head north, 450m; turn left, 250m; turn left, 900m; turn right, 180m; turn left, 30m; walk for 90m.

<sup>213</sup> A Bestor’s ethnography of a local Tokyo neighborhood in the early 1980s points out the the ward designated *chome* at times do not correspond to the way neighborhoods and neighborhood associations themselves group and divide their community (1989: 111, 302-303).

<sup>214</sup> It is still very common to see door-to-door delivery or sales people intently referring to printed maps of the area, even while riding a bike and in pouring rain when it is then covered in plastic.

<sup>215</sup> Again, we had been in Tokyo from June to August of 2010 for pre-dissertation research and language study.



kind I assume is associated with men from the countryside, from far outside Tokyo, simply because it's still indecipherable to me. I wasn't really paying attention to what he was saying, and might not have understood in detail anyway, but I imagined he was drawing the attention of shoppers to his reasonably priced goods. When he locked eyes with us, a tall Caucasian family of three, he interrupted his own sales pitch mid-stream to yell over at us, "Ah, you don't understand anyway" (ああ、やっぱり分からないね). But this, in fact, I did understand.

To give some context to this moment, it's important to be clear about my Japanese language studies because they mirror the path of many of the otaku I met (and in many ways served as the impetus for this research). My husband and I began studying Japanese while at Temple University through a Saturday adult language class; part of the Japanese Language School of Philadelphia (JLSP), which is funded by Monkasho.<sup>216</sup> At the time, I was immediately struck by the number of students who claimed Japanese popular culture as their motivation for wanting to learn Japanese. On our first day of class, a white high school student in his self-introduction hurriedly enthused, "I watch way too many anime and read way too many manga." A professional African-American married couple nodded their head vigorously in understanding to this, as did several other students. The instructor had asked members of the class to share why they wanted to learn Japanese. Three other high school aged youth declared that they eventually want to work in the videogame industry, four adults said that they were fans of Japanese popular culture, and Noah, who was 65, explained that he wanted to be able to watch to his favorite Japanese shows undubbed and without subtitles. To emphasize his fandom, Noah showed us the ball of keychain anime characters that he had dangling from his belt.

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<sup>216</sup> JLSP is recognized as a non-profit in the US and the school principal is appointed by the Japanese government (<https://jlsp.us/>). One of the school's stated goals is to encourage understanding and friendship between Japan and the US through the promotion of Japanese language and culture ([https://jlsp.us/?page\\_id=17](https://jlsp.us/?page_id=17)), (see chapter 3).

When I started studying Japanese, I didn't imagine it was going to be very easy because it was once a week for only a few early morning hours on Saturday and I had little time to study in preparation or do any homework. But from the moment I started class, I repeatedly encountered the common-sense notion that Japanese is a VERY HARD language for English speakers to learn. Ken's Rule of 7 blog reconfirms this popular notion:

But on a scale of 1 to Hot-Tub-at-the-Playboy-Mansion, learning Japanese slots in somewhere between soldering together your own black-and-white TV and copying the Bible by hand while wearing a Medieval monk outfit. Plus, it takes a long time. [Seeroi 2013b]

Resources for language teachers cite the unique difficulty, when compared to other languages, that Japanese presents to English speakers; for example, according to the Foreign Services Institute Language Difficulty Ranking, Japanese is the *most* difficult based on the number of classroom hours needed to achieve general professional proficiency (included in the hardest category, Japanese is marked as even more challenging than Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin and Korean).<sup>217</sup> The idea that Japanese is both unique and uniquely complex is communicated from native Japanese teachers to English-speaking students and embedded in much of the talk about, if not directly evident in, the pedagogy and materials used for teaching.<sup>218</sup> For example, in a post titled *Strength and Mysteriousness of Japanese*, part of JLSP's sponsored blog SMILE, a teacher reveals this implicit notion when reflecting on the relationship between written and spoken Japanese:

...if you hear “katei no mondai” in Japanese, you must guess “katei” 『家庭(family)』 『課程(process)』 『仮定(Assumption)』 by hearing the other word in the sentence. We must hear the context in order to derive meaning. It is normal for us, but it is also weird. In most other languages, we can get meaning just by hearing the sentences. In Japanese,

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<sup>217</sup> From, <http://www.effectivelanguagelearning.com/language-guide/language-difficulty>. A Japanese language university teacher whose courses are targeted to international students told me this table is often cited as evidence of the language's difficulty.

<sup>218</sup> The relationship between language education and nation-making is discussed in chapter 3.

we need to get the meaning of Kanji to understand the each kanji character's meaning. Maybe this is the tough part of learning Japanese, but it is also a good hint for how one must learn it. [Kobayashi 2017]

Here, this JLSP teacher demonstrates how her concept of the unique relationship between kanji as an index of meaning, and its vocal “reading” translates into her thinking about the necessary process of learning and teaching Japanese; imagining that needing the context of a spoken sentence to understand or de-code the meaning of individual words which may sound alike, isn't “normal” for English speakers. The title of the SMILE post is equally revealing; it, and other more relevant and formalized “language-in-education planning,” such as those found in *kokusai-era* policy decisions, not only reaffirm the natural division between Japanese (speakers) and non-natives, but validating the popularly consumed characteristics (mysterious and strong) of Japaneseness.

Although “linguists agree that spoken Japanese is relatively easy to master compared with other languages” (Yoshida 2008), I continued to encounter the notion of its difficulty throughout my language education. Pronunciation may be simpler, after all there are “only five vowels and 13 consonants” compared to English which “has twelve vowels and 24 consonants” (Yoshida 2008), but the unique difficulties of Japanese was continually stressed in and out of the classroom—if it wasn't kanji (it's even difficult for Japanese people!, as I'm always told when I successfully fill out an application from at the post office or library) and the other two written texts hiragana and katakana, then it was the impossibility for outsiders to navigate status in daily conversation due to the dizzying number of verb conjugation and sentence endings, not to mention alternative honorific verbs, that have to be negotiated based on a speaker's status in relation to their listener.

The Japanese language in fact is said to “possesses a characteristic spirit or soul that other languages do not enjoy, and that it is more difficult for everyone, foreigner and native speaker alike, than any other language on earth” (Miller 1982: 51, cited in Liddicoat 2007: 35).

Government policy often reflects and supports the naturalness of this linguistic uniqueness. For example, METI’s *Wonder Nippon* booklet connects the peculiarities of the Japanese language to extra-ordinary biological abilities which allow a unique communion with nature:

By speaking Japanese, which has no peers when it comes to using a plethora of vowel sounds, Japanese people have come to achieve a brain structure that processes natural sounds as if they were human language. [Wonder Nippon, METI, 2017]

Similarly, as Marilyn Ivy explains in regard to *nihonjinron*, these texts “assert, for example, that the Japanese language is the most difficult in the world, that the Japanese are not logical, that Japanese selves are sheerly ‘relational,’ and that the Japanese are a homogeneous race” (Ivy 1995: 4). This imagined national cohesiveness, as well as the collapse of language and culture in this instance (Liddicoat 2007: 35; see also Yoshino 1992: 17), is tied to the incommensurability of any attempt to communicate cross-culturally. This situates the protestation of landlords that they couldn’t possibly accept foreign tenants due to the communication difficulties (regardless of whether both parties speak English or Japanese), within routinized and accepted forms of speaking about the incommensurabilities of “talking” to foreigners.

### 5.3.2 "You don't understand anyway"

Holding a fish in his left hand, and a bag of peanuts in his right, David Neptune begs in Japanese: “Please, somehow, hear our Japanese” (ですからどうかお願いします僕らは日本語を聞いてください, *desu kara dou ka onegai shimasu bokura wa nihongo wo kiite kudasai*). He entreats the Japanese waitress who is watching him nervously, hoping to get a drink order:

“I realize that we may not look like we can speak Japanese. But it's the 21st century. It's time to accept that physical appearance is not necessarily a reflection of one's cultural identity!” Instead of answering him, the waitress mumbles and turns to the only Asian looking woman at the table and whispers to her, “Ah, have you decided on something to drink?” (あの、お飲物の方決まりですか, *ano, onomimono no hou kimari desu ka*).

Although the video is fictional, created by a group of filmmakers living in Los Angeles, Neptune grew up in Japan and, along with the video's co-creator David Ury, speaks Japanese. The video starts with Ury crying out *sumimasen* in the typical style for catching a server's attention, and as a “Japanese” waitress approaches, the camera focuses shakily on the many non-Asian faces at the table as if from the waitress' perspective. Titled *But We're Speaking Japanese* (2014), this video is another piece of lore (every NJ I've asked about it has seen it) that gets swapped accompanied by stories of the time “that really happened to me.” I had many otaku tell me that the best part of the video, because of its *familiarity*, is the moment Ury asks the waitress in Japanese if she has any specials, and the waitress responds in embarrassment, and with a little wave of her hand used to mean an unspoken (and therefore softer) no, “I'm sorry, I don't speak English” (すみません、英語ちょっと分からないんで, *sumimasen, eigo choto wakaranain de*).

Otaku told me that having the assumption of their absence of linguistic ability a precursor to any exchange—as their speech from the first moment will be called into question and quired and eventually examined and remarked upon no matter how well intentioned—is tiring. At the best, otaku told me, it gets in the way of living. Alice once explained after we had ordered some coffee together:

Maybe I'm imagining it, but it's like everyone goes quiet suddenly, exactly when it is my turn to order. And my voice seems really loud but the cashier still scrunches her face up real tight in concentration and leans forward like I'm whispering. If I have to stop at all to

think, I have this feeling that they just assume I don't know how to speak at all, rather than that I just need to decide what size coffee I want.

At the worst, otaku feel it as a continual act to *separate* and subordinate. It is more than a question of competence, it is an assumption of a lack stitched through to all kinds of other assumptions encountered in almost every daily exchange: like when a waitress marvels over your ability to use chopsticks, or asks if you can read the menu, or maybe even refuses you service.

Ken Seeroi gets at this with his post, *Avoiding Meltdown in Japan*:

Okay, so one person called me a foreigner, so what? I'll just drink a beer and forget about it. Or, so they handed me the English menu that only contains six items, no big deal. Guess I'll have another beer. Or, the guy at the convenience store didn't offer me a bag for my beer because he thought I wouldn't understand him. Oh, that's another beer for sure. [Seeroi 2015]

In my case, I felt that moment on the sidewalk—when the shopkeeper yelled out at me, not to encourage me to come and buy something from him, not to interact with me as any salesman might, but instead to mark me and my family—as a deep shock. I'm sure we cringed and then laughed about it at the time, but it was the first moment I remember feeling both so glaringly present in the public eye and invisible (the novelty of this of course, also says a great deal about the privilege I experienced in the US as a white, middle-class women). Indeed, he wasn't calling out to me, but was yelling *about* me for the benefit of every Japanese person in the area—marking me only to erase my importance. I wasn't clearly an “object of fear” as McNeil describes his own experiences (2013), but an object nonetheless.

It is important to remember that context for these social moments always plays a role in their structuring. Of course, details about where these exchanges take place (prominent tourist areas where staff are chosen for their English ability and used to regularly dealing with non-speakers; small towns with a small foreign resident population), and in fact the actual Japanese

ability of individual otaku and their expectations about their right to be accommodated (which, despite their almost universal interest in learning Japanese, varies widely), all influence the social, linguistic exchange. But these are the *stories* that otaku share and recycle most frequently with each other and they exceed the categorical discriminatory experience of “being stared at” (ジロジロ見られた) recorded by the recent national Resident Survey. Like the way my daughter’s classmates gasp and giggle when they hear us speak English; or strangers whisper and laugh when, after staring at me for a prolonged moment, I acknowledge the stare and say *konnichiwa*; or the way my own university students (usually when new to my courses) laugh nervously when they hear me speaking Japanese. This last experience is so frequent, and for me so frustrating, that I once spent the start of a semester asking gigglers why they were laughing. From the variety of explanations I received, I understood that the inherent disjuncture they observed between my non-Japanese appearance and my use of *their* language, was so uncomfortable and so unexpected for them, indeed so discordant, that their responses were involuntary bodily reactions. In the same way people often tell me, “If I wasn’t looking at your daughter, I’d think she was Japanese,” this discordance works as a reinscription of who can appropriately be Japanese. Ken Seeroi suggests the response is defensive rather than a structural process of ongoing boundary maintenance:

Lots of people can use chopsticks. Anyone can change into little slippers. But the language—that’s the one thing that sets them apart. If a bunch of “foreigners” can do it just as well, then what do they have left? [Seeroi 2014]

Although much remains (even literally) unspoken in these moments, they resonate with otaku and other NJ as powerful evidence of their exclusion. Yet, otaku never come to a potential speech act free of subjectivizing forces; these have molded the possibilities they have for communicating and the interpretative frame they can utilize (the ideas and stories they bring with

them, into the encounter) for picking apart the undercurrents in that moment. Many otaku I talked to feel it keenly as a rejection precisely because of their desire to fit in, shaped first from meanings and desires developed in response to the discourse networks of Japanese popular media. Indeed, as I've discussed above, otaku expend a great deal of effort to learn Japanese history, customs and language as a necessary part of being a fan and in turn, fan-tasizing about Japan; the ultimate goal for many is to find belonging once they arrive. Yet, their subjectivation is reinforced by their positionality as *gaijin* residents, reflected in comments in the *Living Information for Foreign Residents of Itabashi City Manual*, quoted above: "As many Japanese people are not used to communicating with foreigners, they may feel shy about making the first step. Please try to take the first step when you have the opportunity" (Itabashi City 2017). This advice shifts the sole responsibility to non-Japanese for that communicative moment, as it instantiates a myth of the involuntary lack of exposure to foreigners in Japanese society (and their natural, inherent division), rather than a systematized and routinized racial, cultural and linguistic barrier placed between the "us" and the "them" that limits and shapes the ability (on both sides) to hear the other.<sup>219</sup> Indeed, moments when a Japanese-speaking foreigner may, in essence, not be *heard* (as in the video) are legitimized by the continual and unquestioned fixing of non-Japanese residents as also both non-listeners and non-speakers. As I've argued in this chapter, these experiences, as subtle or polite as they may seem, subjectivize otaku to eternal outsider/objectified status. Will described these feelings for me once, when he recounted how,

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<sup>219</sup> A new advice book argues that there are psychological characteristics which keep Japanese people from (comfortably) speaking English. (実は、外国人を見て緊張しているようでは英語を話せるようにはならないでしょう...; "Actually, if seeing a foreigner makes you nervous, you won't be able to speak English..."). In the advertisement for the book, (*naze watashitachi wa 3 kagetsu de eigo ga hanaseru you ni natta no ka*, なぜ私たちは3ヶ月で英語が話せるようになったのか, "How did we learn to speak English in 3 months") the author claims: "This is why Japanese do not speak English even though they can."  
[http://www.eqenglish.jp/ad/heqd/free/index\\_adw.php?gclid=EA1aIQobChMI5cP2z9zO2AIVECEqCh1Fawc3EAEYASAAEgLUhPD\\_BwE](http://www.eqenglish.jp/ad/heqd/free/index_adw.php?gclid=EA1aIQobChMI5cP2z9zO2AIVECEqCh1Fawc3EAEYASAAEgLUhPD_BwE)



soon after he had arrived in Tokyo, he was at a local city park and noticed a list of rules in both English and Japanese; like many others, he'd studied Japanese at university and was able to read most of what was written there. In Japanese, he told me, the sign said, "Dogs must be on leash" but, in English it said, "No dogs."

This positioning affixes itself to otaku daily life, and their interpretation of the (possible) actions of others around them. As Will later told me, he once got on a train car that he worried was the "women's only" car, but despite the presence of other Japanese-looking men, he was certain that he was the only one who would be reprimanded for his mistake. Will has also told me that he is pretty positive that people don't sit next to him on the train because he is a foreigner. Later, I saw him use this very category and critique against other NJ, when passing a bag of trash on the ground in the subway station, he said to me jokingly, "must be some *gaijin*."

In these ways, sociality in Tokyo is wedded to everyday routine practices as I've discussed which communicate to foreign residents that diversity, indeed difference, is inherently and also reasonably threatening. For example, whenever students at my university are asked what Japan needs to do to prepare for the 2020 Olympics, their first response is always something along the lines of "increase security," to prepare for the inevitable rise in crime that will come, as a wave, with foreign visitors.<sup>220</sup> Similarly, an otaku once told me one of his university students who, during an English discussion test on the topic of overcoming challenges, told the class about how she was so scared of the Indian woman panhandling near her house that she threw some money on the ground and then ran away and now walks an entirely different route to get to the train station every morning. Not only does this story reveal xenophobia as manifested in daily practical encounters (at least in the case of middle and upper-class university

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<sup>220</sup> Other NJ working at universities, for example, tell me that they hear similar concerns voiced by students whenever the topic of the Olympics comes up in the classroom.

students) it's unselfconscious telling, without fear of reprisal or embarrassment, points to the expectation of its very mundaneness. In the face of a Monka-sho-led government push to globalize and pave the way for a profitable Olympic influx, these assumptions, rather than challenged, are in many ways reincorporated at the level of policy and attendant media representations and reinforced as natural for both Japanese citizens and NJ residents alike.

## 6.0 "MORE JAPANESE THAN A JAPANESE PERSON": RECURSIVE SUBJECTIVATION

*Some migrants join ethnic associations, which help to maintain ethnic distinctions...Others attempt to become integrated into the Sakalava community by marrying Tera-Tanya, or by changing their behavior, dress, and dialect. [Sharp 1993: 81]*

*Some, for example, are so enamored with Japanese culture they intend to totally integrate. I can confidently tell you that this is absolutely impossible! You may speak Japanese fluently, you may know six thousand kanji, you may have lived here over half your life and acquired the Japanese nationality, but by mere virtue of your skin colour you will never be accepted as Japanese. [Barnett 2007]*

Like many otaku I met outside of the *eikaiwa* business, Steven works for a software company. It isn't really what he wants to be doing, he told me, but coding is something that he's good at, and it was easy. The company that hired him made him live within one kilometer from the office, and because it was close to Yoyogi Koen (a sprawling city park that sits next to Meiji Jingu Shrine, both popular tourist destinations), it didn't leave him many options about where to find an apartment. He loved coming to Takadanobaba, he told me, because of all the great cheap food and the awesome arcade and was in the process of getting his company to accept his request to move outside the bizarre limited residence zone requirement they had given him.<sup>221</sup> We often

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<sup>221</sup> I never heard of anyone else having this kind of requirement.

met near the station, and although it was really close to Ikebukuro (two stations away) where I spent a lot of time, I was always lost in the mazes of small streets in that area.

Of all the otaku I met, Steven was one of the most upfront with me about the complicated reasons he had for choosing to move to Japan. Most were comfortable, and thoughtful, talking about Japanese media and their interests, but when I asked them what exactly they liked about Japan specifically, or why they decided to move, they often didn't elaborate much beyond comments like, as Peter stated: "Well, Japanese culture is nice, and people are polite and generous here," and "They care about the environment."<sup>222</sup> Many also suggested that they simply felt more comfortable, or found the "culture" appealed to their personal sensibilities more; as Will explained, he felt he was finally in a place where it was "normal" to be hyper-concerned about troubling others around him. One otaku I met named Scott stressed that cultural "niceness" was a pretty flimsy motive for such a move (he positioned his own decision as motivated by the creative community of artists and filmmakers that he could more easily access in Tokyo), but these answers reflected more how those I asked tried to articulate the "why" for me when they may not have already thought it through in concrete terms themselves. If I pressed for more details, they often thought for a bit but often didn't really come up with much else. I often felt like it was looking for answers that they didn't know how to give me (at least, not in an interview).<sup>223</sup> Sometimes they'd even contradict those nice "cultural" ideas a bit, maybe later when they got comfortable enough to share their frustrations with what it was like living in Tokyo (for example, Will later complained about riding trains and shopping in grocery stores, asking: "Are people actually polite, or do they just completely ignore the fact that there are, like,

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<sup>222</sup> The initial thoughts and responses I gathered often reflected, as in these examples, state-authored approved national topics, see chapter 3.

<sup>223</sup> Even Steven gave me an explanation at first about how nice the culture is here, but over time he revealed, like some others, the contradictions and complexities that shaped his decision to migrate.

a million other people around them all the time?”). But from the beginning, Steven told me that he had hated the US, and never felt like he fit in there, and that was one reason he chose to leave.

But it wasn't, he clarified, the reason he chose Japan. Just like others in his generation, he'd grown up playing Japanese videogames like Super Mario Bros. and Japan seemed like a magical place to him when he was younger. Then one day, when he was in elementary school, a Japanese business associate of his father's had stopped by the house for dinner and given Steven a small *omiyage*, or souvenir, just some small Japanese-esque knick-knack. For whatever reason, that moment had really stuck with him, though he couldn't clearly remember the object anymore; perhaps, he speculated, it had made the mystical space seem like a real place that he could actually go to someday. From then, he set out to study Japanese and learn about Japan. Like most middle-class white kids living in California, he'd gone on to college, but first to junior college. After that, he'd also worked as a programmer, but he hadn't been very happy, still feeling out of place. He knew some friends from online amateur coding websites who lived in Japan, and one of them offered him a futon to sleep on while he looked for a job. So, he put all his stuff in storage (he really missed some of his stuff, he told me), picked up and moved to Japan.

One day, over Vietnamese *bhan mi* sandwiches, and a bit out of the blue (we had been talking about his struggle with depression), Steven told me that he hated Debito Aurdou. I had to stop him and ask, “Who?,” but the name sounded familiar.<sup>224</sup> *Debito*, Steven said with emphasis, is David Aldwinckle, an American with Japanese citizenship who writes about microaggressions.<sup>225</sup> “He just makes it difficult for the rest of us,” Steven eventually concluded.

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<sup>224</sup> I realized later that I had recently stumbled upon Arudou's blog where I had been reading about the limits to working contracts imposed on foreign residents.

<sup>225</sup> Here I am summarizing what was probably at least a ten minute conversation of Steven explaining who Arudou was, which concluded with his two points about microaggressions and the link he made from there to “making it difficult for the rest of us.”

For whatever reason, I'd never spent much time thinking about "microaggressions" before (probably because I was privileged enough to have never confronted them directly in the US), but I began to notice that the topic was a regular refrain, and most of the time controversially so, in conversations with the longer term residents that I met. Along with Steven's insistence that he had to be "more Japanese," this observation that Arudou "makes it difficult for the rest of us" seemed incredibly revealing. First, it pointed out to me that for many otaku, just as for other marginalized communities, there was an implied "us," even though it remained nebulous enough, as I think Steven was using it here, to reference a general, yet indeterminate, collection of foreigners in Japan. "Us" I learned however, did not include expats. Otaku in particular spent a good deal of time explaining to me how they were absolutely NOT expats. Expats, they said, are "rich guys working for investment firms, living in Roppongi" (an expensive district in Tokyo), and "sending their kids to international school."<sup>226</sup> It was always described in this way with a great deal of disdain: expats lived in a bubble and didn't have any "real"<sup>227</sup> interest" in Japan; they didn't speak Japanese, were just here temporarily for work and would fly off somewhere else in a year or two.<sup>228</sup> Yet, "us" was always used relatively opportunistically, expanding or contracting depending on the topic of conversation: "us" *eikaiwa*

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<sup>226</sup> I'd even had a US academic question the validity of my research topic by explaining to me that foreign residents in Tokyo all lived in Hiroo (another well-to-do neighborhood not that far from Roppongi that is notoriously full of wealthy Western residents) and weren't really interested in Japan at all. The term expat has of course, a great deal of academic research and debate contextualizing it (in the context of migration from Japan to the US, see Kurotani 2005), but here I am interested in otaku conceptions and exclusions.

<sup>227</sup> Note the reappropriation of the concept of the "real" in this instance; I discuss this more below.

<sup>228</sup> I unintentionally came in to contact with a number of US military wives who self-described to me that they lived in a bubble, though those I met always tried to qualify that, unlike others, they really preferred it "in town," as in, "I like to shop in town" meaning not on the base. However, most otaku I talked to hadn't met people from the base and didn't conceptualize them in Us/Not-us distinction.

teachers, “us” American wives, “us” guys<sup>229</sup> in videogame development, and “us,” as in all of us (but definitely never expats).

But this categorization, I soon realized, has a finer grain indicated by Steven’s criticism of Arudou, who seemed to be excluded somehow from “the rest of us.” There was something then unique and troubling about Arudou at least in Steven’s opinion, which at the time, I didn’t understand. Later I came to see this as part of the boundary maintenance that mirrored their own social exclusion, a categorization which I came later to see as the “us, the good foreigners” and “them, the bad ones;” expats were definitely in the bad category, and the speaker was always good, that was unanimous, but who else fit into these slots, and what qualified as the behavior that established someone as one or the other was of course amorphous and context specific, continually changing shape.

It also stuck me that I had arrived in the middle of an ongoing conversation that Steven had been having somewhere else. When Steven told me he hated Arudou, he was touching on only a mountain top of information and debate that reached down into exchanges and materials he’d been tracking online which he also assumed I would be familiar with; in fact, his point of contact from which he formed his opinion, because he’d never met Arudou, was all internet message board posts, blog discussions and videos. Even though Steven explained a bit of the background that day about why Arudou was such a controversial figure for him and others, the fact that the miasma of this debate stretched out as subtext around justifications and other implicit conversations about, and references to, the nature of being foreign in Japan, wasn’t really clear to me until much later.

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<sup>229</sup> It was predominantly white-male.

## 6.1 “YOU’RE NOT DOING IT THE JAPANESE WAY”

On the train riding home from Chiba one day, two Caucasian men stepped onto the same train car and stood next to me. This isn’t by itself that unusual, but they made an unlikely pair: one of them had on a nice dark suit and the other was dressed in T-shirt and shorts, with visible tattoos on his arms.<sup>230</sup> The t-shirted man was talking loudly in English, which *is* remarkable enough at that time of day,<sup>231</sup> and I looked up from whatever book I was reading to watch them. The man in the t-shirt was asking for advice about how to get around and it was clear that he didn’t live in Japan. The other man in the suit made some reply to him which I couldn’t hear; the t-shirt man apparently couldn’t either because he leaned his upper body closer, one hand on the strap overhead to steady himself as the train swayed, and said even louder, “I can’t hear you.” The man in the suit replied, clearly embarrassed, and still so softly that even I had to lean in to hear him, “Sorry, it’s just that we tend to lower our voices on the train.”

Like Harold’s *meishi* exchange—as the other foreigners around him insisted that taking his business card out of his back pocket was a very serious social blunder—critiquing others’ ability to get it right, or to correct them when they weren’t adhering to proper social norms, was common practice. The suited man on the train said “*we* tend to lower *our* voices” to the man who was clearly attracting attention to himself through his tourist-like appearance and brazenly loud attitude, and in doing so drew a symbolic boundary line between them. The rest of their conversation, which I overheard, revealed that they were both missionaries who bemoaned the

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<sup>230</sup> Visible tattoos as still relatively rare, in part as a result of intense disciplining and discrimination against having them, such as being required to cover any tattoos at work or not being allowed into a *senjo*, or public bath, at all if you have any tattoos anywhere on your body.

<sup>231</sup> Trains during the day are notoriously quiet as most people keep their heads down and either play on their phones or nap. However, as the evening commute stretches into the last train, it gets loud as more and more people ride home with friends and colleagues, chatting and laughing, and sometimes drinking alcohol openly (or darting from the train quickly to vomit).



lack of a “Christian mentality here” and were otherwise aligned in their task to “share the gospel.” But that didn’t stop the suited man from cringing every time the other opened his mouth.

Madagascar migrants in the 1990s, Sharp details, had two avenues for trying to settle the question of who they would be(come) once they arrived in the north town of Ambanja.

Practically, they first had to decide whether they planned eventually to return “home.” Then, migrants could look to embrace their distinction, their difference, by joining local “ethnic associations” or they could attempt to integrate deeper into the social world around them, by marrying locals or changing their appearance and behavior (Sharp 1993: 81-82). However, even for those who sought enculturation, from the indigenous locals’ “point of view” these acts of outward transformation did not impact the bounds of their ethnicity; “all people regardless of their length of stay in or their sentimental ties to” the area are believed to be “forever...*vahiny*... ‘guests’ to the region” (81, 84). Yet, ultimately Sharp’s ethnography shows the way this label can be porous in practice, if not in speech, as the negotiation of the label “guest” is an ongoing process, as migrants lay claim to “competing statuses of insider and outsider” that become blurred over time and for future generations (8, 93).<sup>232</sup>

In the case of American otaku in Tokyo, their non-Japanese status is communicated as fixed—“establish[ed]...in the nature of things” (Wolf 2001: 185)—a long time before they ever (or even if they never do) arrive, or formulate a desire to go. In the discourse networks and commodity circuits and in the media practices through which they first come to understand Japan, “this commonsensical view of the nature of things is placed in the service of claims to

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<sup>232</sup> Migrants may also have to negotiate legal and illegal status in a direct competition with the state for legitimization; in the US, this is complicated by the pinning of (non-white) race to “illegal” status (Romero 2006).

exclusiveness and priority, monopoly, and precedence” (Wolf 2001: 185), but only, they know, for those who can count on being really Japanese.

Unlike the Madagascar migrants of Sharps study, non-Asian Americans’<sup>233</sup> physical appearance marks them persistently, in every new encounter, as both non-speakers and non-citizens, with no apparent possible claim (now or in the future) to the appropriate history, foundation, ties or affinities. The weight of the state processes and daily encounters that enforce this division (for example, the blank states and nervous tics of service industry professionals), work powerfully to subjectivize them to the commonsensical and unequivocal nature of their exclusion.

However, being non-Japanese is an experience of negation or absence—of being not-*called*—which becomes a form of “self-work;” as subjectivation moves away from, sometimes contradictory and tentative, top-down government-generated projects (as Matza suggests we need to attend to in “the capitalist present” [2012: 812]), and into an embodied and productive field from within which their actions are both constrained and engendered, as perpetuated “others.” As I discuss below, in this self-work dwells several contradictions and dissonances, which otaku wield against—in recursive subjectivation of—other foreigners around them.

Otaku are eager to competently embrace difference, in seemingly true cosmopolitan fashion; they have “a willingness to engage with the Other...an intellectual and esthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (Hannerz 1996: 103). This productively produces a sensitivity, an awareness and a desire to conform to the words, bodies and signals in motion around them. Again, as Hannerz’s describes cosmopolitanism:

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<sup>233</sup> For Asian-Americans like Harold and Mike, frustrations emerge when they can’t live up to social expectations for them to act and speak like a local.

There is the aspect of a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting, and reflecting... They want to be participants, or at least do not want to be too readily identifiable within a crowd of participants, that is, of locals. [Hannerz 1996: 103, 105]

Yet, as I have tried to show, it is crucial to attend to the way otaku, first, do not become enamored with “difference” outside of economic rationale which commodifies, modifies and essentializes “cultural” lifestyles for their purchase and enjoyment; and second, do not individually chose to act on such urges, “to make their way,” outside of social structures and fields of power, not to mention consumption-driven forms of meaning-making. As Allison argues, citing Benjamin, marketing and consumption practices frame products as an “enchanted ‘fairy scene’ in which commodities are sold as fantasies and myths...a mythic trope that serves the interests of capital” (Allison 2006: 127). And as we have seen in the case of Cool Japan and the politics of Japanese nation-making which embed themselves in media circuits and daily encounters, “boundaries as internal social categorizations are tightly related in a process in which immigrants are racialized and ethnic minorities are reminded of their foreign origin” (Fassin 2011: 214).

In Foucault's analysis of the way the discipline of medicine gradually turned to a concern over, the management of, population health (under the dominion of the state), he argues that it had to:

Embrace a knowledge of *healthy man*, that is, a study of *non-sick man* and a definition of the *model man*. In the ordering of human existence, it assumes a normative posture, which authorizes it not only to distribute advices as to healthy life, but also to dictate the standards for physical and moral relations of the individual and the society in which he lives. [Foucault 1989: 40, emphasis in the original]

For non-Japanese, this normative knowledge authors the standards and relations in the Japanese culture-ized sphere within which they can move, act, speak and be. It is a system of knowing or

practice, which does not, like cargo systems, level class differences or redistribute resources (Wolf 1986: 327), it is the creation of productive distinctions, beyond those merely based on aesthetic “taste” or “connoisseurship,” as some researchers read Bourdieu in light of “lifestyle migrants”—those who migrate in seek of a particular form of imagined living (see for example Benson 2013; O’Reilly & Benson 2009; Sooudi 2008).<sup>234</sup> In other words, distinction here is maintained through the social drive to belong, as fantasized; while the move may be motivated by the desire for the real, in practice otaku strive to embody and perfect social norms in order to become more real than the “real” (Baudrillard 1994).

When Steven told me that he sometimes feels he has to be “more Japanese than a Japanese person” he spoke to the feeling that, as a foreigner, he has to rigidly adhere to (often unspoken or unarticulated) social rules and customs in a way that the Japanese person does not. This reflects both his willingness to *try* to get it right, (to stand in the right line, to know where to go, to make the right kind of hand gesture, like slicing through water, after bumping into someone in the station), and the impression that he is sanctioned more than others for making mistakes, as social actors around him communicate that he is “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966).

He once gave me an illustration. In a crowded train station one afternoon, he moved to stand against the wall to get out of the way of other passerby. As he stood there waiting for his train, and shifted his weight, he kicked a glass bottle that was underneath the legs of an older woman seated on a bench next to him. The bottle rolled noisily away from them both. The old

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<sup>234</sup> Studies of life-style migrants, such as Benson’s look at Britons moving to the South of France (2013) or Sooudi’s study of Japanese artists in New York (2008), often focus on those privileged and cosmopolitan enough to “choose” to migrate. However, the idea of going in motion in the hopes of achieving a new and better life(style) is a common narrative that shapes many kinds of migration patterns, even those marked by more political or economic desperation.

women glared up at him and said something to him, and then looked down at the ground. He thought he understood something about “better pick it up” so, chastised, he went in search of the glass bottle, looking through the legs of others on the bench, to retrieve it. He was confused, he said, since he’d never observed in public places that others were required to pick up another person’s trash. In fact, he’d ridden plenty of trains where beer cans or bottles rolled around at everyone’s feet and as annoying as the metallically rhythmic noise was, as the can went up and down an aisle or around and around in a circle by the door, no one ever took the offensive object. But he had a feeling after that interchange, that if he came into physical contact with trash of any kind, that everyone around him would expect it, implicitly, to become his.

One day, Jack gave me another example. Since he’d recently completed his Master’s degree he was interviewing for a teaching position at a small university in central Tokyo. He told me how he’d been met at the main gate by a Japanese professor, who’d given him a very firm “American-style handshake,” introduced herself in English and then lead him to her faculty office. When they arrived at the front of her door, a Western-looking faculty member was there waiting to meet them. The female Japanese professor called out to the second, “I thought you had a key,” to which the non-Japanese professor responded, “Oh, I do.” Jack told me that they awkwardly jostled at the door as the male faculty member tried to let the Japanese professor enter the room first, but then she turned and offered for Jack to go. They had Jack take a seat, and Jack and the male professor both sat down, but then he immediately stood up again to hand over his business card, forcing Jack to awkwardly stand up right away to receive it. The non-Japanese professor gave his introduction in Japanese, to which Jack didn’t really respond, and then held out his *meishi* with both hands and bowed, completing, as Jack described it, “a perfect execution of Japanese business protocol.” Jack told me he took the *meishi* and looked at it in the

way he knew he was supposed to, but then apologized that he didn't have a card with him to exchange. During this process, Jack told me, "No only did the Japanese professor *not* participate in this distinctly Japanese exchange, she actually wedged between us, in this super awkward moment, to get to her seat." "Who was he performing for?" Jack asked me.

Many other otaku spoke of similar impressions, interpretations they used to explain such confusing or disorienting moments. Will, who worked at a medium sized *eikaiwa*, told me that he felt he could never make the decision about whether to stay late at work outside of his status as a foreigner. He said that if he went home "on time," even if leaving after others had already gone home, that it would be read as the act of a *gaijin* who doesn't understand the social obligations and the responsibilities of a Japanese business. And if he stayed late, after everyone had gone, it would somehow similarly be read as a lack of understanding on his part. In some ways then, the agency individuals have "back home" over decisions to ignore, bend or flout custom, is felt to be lost. Fear over perceived or actual sanctioning, ("I get told to do 'junban,'<sup>235</sup> but everyone else kept cutting in front of me," Alice once told me) compels otaku to carefully, not just copy the behaviors of others around them, but to find the ideal way of acting in any given situation. The fact that otaku migrants, at first, aren't likely to know the deeper context behind a certain social practice, and therefore cannot easily negotiate its performance or know precisely when certain rules they have learned are expected to be broken, is an additional quandary. Otaku, in particular as I observed them, attempt diligently to embody—though that mimetic faculty—such gestures and rituals (waving your hand in front of your face to silently

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<sup>235</sup> *Junban* (順番), literally means turn, or order. In line at the bank for example, this term wouldn't necessarily be used by service professionals, and definitely not as a single utterance. This is more an expression that parents give to their children, to say, "wait your turn" but can also just be a directive to line up. Alice's use of it here reflects the incorporation of Japanese into English-language discussions among NJ to reference situations unique to their experience as foreigners in Japan.

say no, but is it only used by women?) in their daily performance of “cultural competence” and the expert navigation of the spaces and expectations of the city. In my own example, during service exchanges like buying groceries, I’ve similarly adopted all kinds of little phrases to try to signal, “Hey, I’m present here,” in this linguistic exchange. But the locals I’ve observed more often than not don’t even say “hello,” or “thank you” to the cashier, or give those little *hais* (yes) that work so well in other situations, that can say, “I’m listening,” that I’ve so carefully adopted. Ironically perhaps in this way, in an effort to appear more local—as I contend everytime with the expectation of my *non-localness*—and to demonstrate that I understand what is being said to me (in essence, to communicate that I am not a tourist), I’ve had to adopt very unlocal behavior. In this instance than, mimetic work alone does not produce an allowable entry into the field of habitus (Bourdieu 1977), or into the normative world of the *healthy man*; as Will explained, regardless of the decisions he makes or the care to which he attempts to adapt his behavior, mindset and desires, he feels he will always be (reminded he is) a *gaijin*.

## **6.2 “THANKS FOR MAKING LIFE HARDER FOR THE REST OF US”**

Before moving to Japan, Mike used to work for a major videogame magazine, but he told me that eventually, he felt bored with what he was doing. As a journalist, he was also required to blog about games in his personal time and he often wrote about his passion for Japanese figurines and collectables, and as a celebrity in the games journalism world, had a bit of an online following. When I contacted him out of the blue via Facebook, he told me later he was hesitant to reply, but that I seemed genuine enough, so he thought, why not. He and I met several times over the course of my first summer and we always brought our families along. His wife

was Japanese and they were married back in San Francisco several years before. They moved to Japan because Mike had been offered a chance to work for a Japanese game developer and it was the chance for him to finally make videogames rather than just write about them, which he admitted to me he had always wanted to do.

The first time we met, Mike was wearing a t-shirt advertising a documentary critical of dolphin hunting in Japan, and told me, smiling, that he bet it made people around him a bit uncomfortable. He told me most of his career history as we waited in line to get into a restaurant and he talked a little about what it was like to work for a Japanese game developer. When I asked him about the workload,<sup>236</sup> he insisted, “I don’t do service over time.”<sup>237</sup> I leave at 5pm, everyday, no matter what.” After a bit, his wife wandered away with their daughter to find a restroom while we kept chatting, and when it was our turn to get a table, the waiter approached Mike. As the waiter babbled away (it sounded like babble because I wasn’t really following the conversation), it took me a moment to realize that Mike had started to act strangely. I wasn’t sure why at first, but then I heard him mutter in Japanese, a bit stilted, that his wife would be right back (meaning she’d be the one who could answer your question). As the waiter left in a huff, I realized that Mike’s Japanese was not very good, and that more than anything, he had been embarrassed that I had observed him in such a vulnerable position.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> The games industry in the US is notorious for its crunch time at the end of a development cycle and I wondered how this matched up with the intense overtime so common for most white-collar workers here.

<sup>237</sup> Service overtime is the standard in most companies, it means staying for over time without getting paid. Service (サービス) is also used to mean “on the house” in restaurants.

<sup>238</sup> I had assumed that he spoke Japanese well, and I was extremely empathetic. I was still new to Tokyo and despite having studied Japanese for several years before arriving, felt even small daily conversations to be very painful and embarrassing due to my lack of comprehension. In the first few weeks, I once went around in circles with a grocery store clerk asking for milk in the katakana-ization form, *miruku*. I asked, “do you have milk?” (*miruku ga arimasu ka*), pretty simple I thought, and she would say, *gyuunyuu* (牛乳) and I would say, *miruku*. This went on longer than it should have, until she took me over to the dairy case and I realized frustratingly that I had never learned the actual word for milk before.



Mike's embarrassment was a mark of the space of subjectivation and self-work that foreigners construct and negotiate together. On the one hand, he was proud to admit that he leaves work at 5pm, and even acknowledged that no one criticizes him for it because he's a foreigner, behavior that countless other otaku have criticized; but on the other hand, he was intensely embarrassed about revealing he didn't really speak much Japanese (but not about wearing a t-shirt that might offend others around him), as if his claim to expert status, in my eyes, was shaken a bit in that discovery. Expertise like the ability to speak or navigate everyday peculiarities, I realized, were continually at risk of being questioned by other otaku. (As Scott asked me, "aren't you always evaluating other people's Japanese?") In this moment, I began to understand how, while distinction is a critical component of the performance of cultural competency for otaku, it is largely directed at the small discursive realm of "us foreigners."

Take another example, this one from a New York Times Magazine article about a British woman living in Kyoto and teaching English, who was arrested for "stealing" a bike. She had been told by another foreigner that the old abandoned bicycles lying in a heap at the train station could be taken and used freely by anyone; her friend, "intimated to me that it wasn't quite legal, but everyone seemed to do it, including the Japanese, so I thought it was fine" (Lewis & Jones 2015: 29). She opens the article like this:

I've been living in Japan for two years, and I pretty much know all the rules. Laws, customs, etiquette, that kind of thing. I never blow my nose in public, and I always remember to take off my shoes, though at first I would forget. That felt really embarrassing, so I learned quickly. [Lewis & Jones 2015: 29]

The American NJ who gave me this article to read, introduced it by saying, "This girl admits she doesn't even speak Japanese, so how am I supposed to believe that she knows *all the rules!*"

What struck me first was the author's insistence that she *never* blows her nose in public.

According to “good manners,” as foreigners learn, it is rude to blow your nose in public spaces. I knew this too and like others, couldn’t really point to how I learned it,<sup>239</sup> but I avoided doing it as much as possible, sniffing away with everyone else on the train during flu season. But I had definitely seen any number of Japanese people blowing their noses, on street corners, in train cars, going up stairs, in classrooms. In fact, over the years, I’ve seen people regularly do all of the things on the “top ten things never to do in Japan” lists that seem to multiply so easily on English travel and other news websites (even accidentally wear shoes across the symbolic inside/outside marker). Then I was struck by my friend’s incredulity over the possibility that this woman in Kyoto could possibly know everything there was to know about Japan (at least for laws and etiquette), especially since she didn’t speak Japanese. In this way, my friend was herself separating the author out from those who are allowed to say that they “know what they are doing.” And importantly, the tone of the article, the insistence of her competency, when the remainder of the article demonstrates precisely why interpreting social norms which are regularly inconsistent, contextual and negotiable can be so tricky, is another reflection the way the performance of expertise is directed largely at other foreigners. In the end, in perhaps a powerful demonstration of the lasting impact of Benedict’s work, the author remembers that she “had read that Japan was a shame culture, rather than a guilt culture” and in her interactions with the

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<sup>239</sup> It is almost always an entry on the ubiquitous Internet list, like “20 Things You should Not Do when Visiting Japan” (<https://www.kyuhoshi.com/2016/02/03/20-things-you-should-not-do-when-visiting-japan/>) or 12 Things You Should Never Do in Japan (<https://www.oyster.com/articles/60903-12-things-you-should-never-do-in-japan/>). These always insist, as the titles show, the things that you NEVER, EVER DO. Yet, Japanese people do these things all the time. The lists of course don’t reflect actual behavior but the ideal expectations which even Japanese citizens are continually reminded and reprimanded for, in particular when it comes to the concept of being *meiwaku*, or being a burden on others. The Tokyo Metro for example is nearly always running some kind of manner (マナー) campaign, intoning, don’t run for the train, don’t listen to you music loudly, don’t stare at your cellphone while walking, etc.

police, as she tried to explain that she hadn't exactly stolen the bike, "Humiliation seemed to be the point here" (Lewis & Jones 2015: 30).

Like Foucault's attention to the systematic rules and forms of knowledge that come to be and come to author and define "truth" in the social moment, Bourdieu looks to the role of experts who gain power by understanding those rules and relations so well that they know when they can be bent and manipulated (Bourdieu 1977). For NJ, however, regardless of how skillful they become at navigating social expectations and relations, the entire realm of habitus in which their lives are embedded is de facto closed off to them symbolically (this gets complicated and requires even more attentive legal management when communities are physically indistinguishable from "the Japanese," such as third or fourth generation Koreans, or *zainichi*,<sup>240</sup> [see Morris-Suzuki 2010]).<sup>241</sup> While NJ do become practically and deeply connected in their daily lives to local communities, families and co-workers, under this hegemony of exclusion NJ will never have the same power, flexibility, or leverage in Japanese society as those in the *minzoku*. I see this in contrast to Michael Taussig's attention to the way the mimetic faculty of the colonized has the ability to transfer, and imbue the copier and the copy with some "power of the original" (1993: xiii). Instead, NJ turn to each other, to the non-Japanese "us," and mimetically construct a habitus within which they work to reproduce the social rules of Japanese society, yet they gain none of the power of the copied. Instead, their expertise is in conversation with or against other *gaijin*, and in accepting their exclusion, they continue to reproduce it.

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<sup>240</sup> While the word *zainichi* (在日) refers to a foreign "staying in Japan," as in temporarily, it is used almost exclusively to refer to Koreans who came Japan before 1945 and settled here.

<sup>241</sup> Harold, who was Asian-American, said sometimes he thought it was more difficult for him since everyone expects that he can speak Japanese. When they find out that he can't, he said, "It's pretty embarrassing." Mike is also Asian-American but he never talked about how that might have impacted his experiences in Tokyo; I did always wonder however, if that waiter might have approached him a bit differently if hadn't looked Japanese.

A number of these points are reflected in the controversy surrounding Debito Arudou, as his image and work is circulated, dissected and sometimes heatedly debated both online and off by English speakers around the world. Steven's intense dislike of Arudou, shared by many others I interviewed (some did defend him, however), and the forms within which that dislike takes shape and is expressed, illustrates the way hegemony limits otaku forms of expression, as they fracture other foreigners into a dichotomy of the good, or "deserving," and bad, "they should go home."

Moving to Japan in the early 1990s, Arudou worked for many years as a faculty member at a university in Hokkaido, and received his Japanese citizenship in 2000 (French 2000). A New York Times article explains that Arudou, who had already begun to engage in activism over discrimination against non-Japanese, "took on the arduous challenge of becoming a naturalized Japanese citizen" because he was "Convinced that fairness would elude him as long as he was a foreigner here" (French 2000). Along with several others, in 2001, Arudou brought a lawsuit against the city of Otaru and a local *onsen* (hot spring) that had a "Japanese Only" sign, in protest against racial discrimination. Arudou and the others had been refused entry for their foreign appearance, even after Arudou showed he had Japanese citizenship. The lawsuit argued that Japan was not upholding the Japanese Constitution (Article 14) and the UN Convention Against Racial Discrimination which it had ratified in 1996. The *onsen* owners argued in turn that the presence of "foreigners" (of Arudou's daughters, one who looked more characteristically Japanese was allowed to enter while the other with more Western features was not) would drive away their clientele (Arudou 2004). The *onsen* owners, Arudou reported, gave a variety of reasons for their refused entry:

"you foreigners can't understand Japan's unique bath customs", "our customers demand

foreigner-free tubs”, “our management can't tell you apart from the sailors”, and “we can't just refuse Russians; that would be blatant discrimination, so we refuse all foreigners out of fairness.” [Arudou 2004]

Although the plaintiffs were awarded damages, the court ruled that the onsen had only committed “unrational discrimination” and not of a racial nature, and the city government was “absolved of any responsibility for not making racial discrimination an illegal practice” (Arudou 2004). Arudou has argued that the purpose of the lawsuit was to draw attention to the fact that while the Japanese constitution says it protects against racial discrimination, there is no clear law which actually supports and upholds this right (Arudou 2002).

The lawsuit and its news coverage brought domestic and international attention to Arudou and as a result of continued activism and organized protests along with a blog and column in the Japan Times which he uses as a platform, sometimes biting<sup>242</sup> to raise awareness and call attention to discrimination against NJ,<sup>243</sup> he has earned a reputation for being controversial and aggressive. In 2008, a user living outside Japan posted in Yahoo! Answers to ask:

What do Japanese and foreigners think of Debito Arudou?

I want to know what the Japanese community or the foreigners LIVING in Japan think of this guy. Do you believe him to be a good representation of your rights as foreigners in Japan? Is he right that it is extremely racist in Japan?

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<sup>242</sup>This excerpt from his column is a good example of the tone of some of his posts, which may be intended specifically to troll, or upset, readers enough to spark debates in the comments section and raise readership numbers:

No doubt people will decry this column. Look, I “get” that too, for it’s a natural part of illusion maintenance. People trapped in their bubbles will fight to their last breath to avoid having them burst. Facing the reality of their perpetual second-class caste status would force them to admit that they made a mistake by submitting to Japan’s default subordination processes — that they traded their entire life for something that they ultimately found no stake in. Criticize away if that makes you feel better. [Arudou 2013c]

<sup>243</sup> I borrow the term NJ from Arudou.

The answer chosen as the “best response” by users on the site frames the typical anti-Arudou reaction.

Personally, I think he is an idiot. He manages to get citizenship for Japan, a very rare thing indeed and then goes about pissing off the Japanese people and government.

Thanks for making life harder for the rest of us...

I don't consider strange looks, or question like ‘Can you use chopsticks?’ as racism. I don't even mind them stopping me to ask me for my foreigner's card. No one has ever called me bad names, or degraded me for being a foreigner. I personally have found the Japanese to be kind and incredibly willing to go out of their way to help me, particularly if I am failing to understand something.

Source(s):

3 years living in Japan, with a 2 month old daughter born here. [Yahoo! Answers 2008]

In other websites and spaces, individuals defensively protest that Japanese people are kind and that they have never experienced any form of discrimination. As the reply above seeks to clarify, strange looks and inane questions do not actually count as discrimination anyway. Statements like, “you are ruining it for the rest of us,” are also commonly repeated, just as Steven declared; when online posters resort to name calling—“he is an idiot” or “he’s simply not a nice human being” (below)—it indicates that Arudou’s message is (probably intentionally) volatile.

These sentiments have been echoed by the author Alex Kerr, who is considered to be an expert on Japanese society. Kerr argues that Arudou is:

not doing it the Japanese way. He's being very gaijin in his openly combative attitude, and usually in Japan that approach fails. I fear that his activities might tend to just confirm conservative Japanese in their belief that gaijin are difficult to deal with.

[McNicol 2005]

Finally, one longtime resident in Japan spells out the remaining key points of the debate as they frequently re-emerge and were expressed to me by the otaku I talked to:

That sentiment that society needs to change is, in itself, not a particularly Japanese one...Should they open their doors to all customers? Yes. But I’m not particularly clear how trying to impose on these Japanese people Western ideas of nation-state citizenship when their idea of “Japanese” is cultural and ethnic is really going to solve the problem.

From my limited interactions with him [Arudou], I've had to conclude that he's simply not a nice human being, nor a happy person. Even when he does have a legitimate complaint, his approach typically only reinforces whatever negative stereotypes he's complaining about. [Arudou 2015]

Ultimately it is argued, as these comments and writings suggest, that Arudou is insensitive to the Japanese way of doing things; culture, in this case condensed as kindness or helpfulness and in opposition to western ideas of the “nation-state,” is continually activated here as somehow outside the social experience of discrimination. In fact, many of those who object to Arudou's writings evoke Japanese culture as something both homogenous and timeless. While Kerr, for example, says he is “glad that there is a whistle-blower out there,” he positions Arudou's *gaijin* “combative attitude” (McNicol 2005) as antithetical to Japaneseness. In these arguments, national identity is reified and the complexity of actual social life is dissolved as NJ participate in reproducing an authentic “Japan” they cannot access, and in turn, communicating these boundaries to others (even those living outside Japan discuss and form opinions about Arudou and by extension Japan, as the Yahoo! Answers post above demonstrates). The debate over microaggressions then, whether it is racist to be asked if you can use chopsticks or eat natto, becomes a lightning rod around which the good/bad foreigner dichotomy collects itself. When I asked Sophie about this, she responded more neutrally, “Of course I've experienced xenophobia and condescension, but most of the time it was just normal living for me.” Arudou's critics position themselves as experts on the way things are actually done, and thereby “good foreigners,” and also what counts and doesn't count as Japanese sentiment, ultimately protesting that (the *style* of) his activism is simply going to reinforce stereotypes about foreigners, making things more difficult for NJ in the long run. In response, Arudou has called this position guestism—the protest by his critics that “We chose to come to Japan. If you don't like it, leave!”

(Arudou 2012b)—“as in, ‘Japan is for the Japanese, so I can’t tell them what to do.’ However, Guestists also assume anyone who appears to be foreign are also ‘guests’ and should likewise shut up” (Arudou 2012a).

In this debate and criticism, we can see clear echos of bureaucratically enforced state-making, as NJ help to reproduce legibility, “abstract ‘naturalness’ out of inherent incoherence” (Iwabuchi 1994). Such discursiveness helps to disappear the “dialectic between the ideological construction of ‘Japaneseness’ and people’s diverse readings of and resistance against it is always at play” (Iwabuchi 1994), and in turn subjectivizes NJ to that very commodified and essentialized “naturalness.” It also in turn, limits the possibilities for productive debate and resistance.

### 6.3 “IF YOU DON’T LIKE IT, LEAVE!”

In the wake of the 2011 Great Japan East Earthquake and Tsunami, a new word *flyjin* (fly + *gaijin*, or foreigner) emerged. Coined in a Twitter post by an American NJ living in Japan, *flyjin* was immediately adopted by media outlets and bloggers to describe (in many cases, pejoratively), non-Japanese who left Japan following the disaster (see for example Budmar 2012; Cotterill 2011; Hadfield 2011; Helmke 2011; Sanchanta 2011). Initially, *flyjin* emerged within the English-speaking NJ community at the center of, what became, a heated debate over the nature of being foreign in Japan. Evoking the image of long-term foreign residents fearfully deserting their jobs and adopted communities in a time of national crisis, *flyjin* agitated a broader tension over the position of foreigners in Japanese society that crossed linguistic and national boundaries.



As the situation at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant continued to destabilize after March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, alarming news reports appeared in the non-Japanese press that often contradicted the calmer national media reports (Sanchanta 2011). “To judge from foreign-news segments in the days after the disaster, all of Japan was a radioactive hell-scape” (Ferrari 2011).<sup>244</sup> Panicked families overseas urged their loved ones to return home immediately, and foreign governments, like the UK and France, began chartering planes for those who wanted to leave Japan (BBC News, Asia-Pacific Mar. 18, 2011). The US ordered the departure of “600 dependents of diplomatic and commercial staff” (BBC News Asia-Pacific, Mar. 18, 2011) and some American universities like the University of Pittsburgh canceled their spring study abroad programs, also urging students to leave Japan (Sanchanta 2011a; Friedenberger 2011). Media attention turned to the number of foreigners who were said to be fleeing the country, and news outlets ran headlines such as “Radiation Fears Spark Japan Exodus” (Goldman 2011), “Thousands Swamp Immigration” (Aoki 2011), and “Crisis Triggers an Exodus from Tokyo” (Sanchanta 2011a).

Frustrated with “panicky foreigners...people [who] were leaving without assessing the information,” Paul Y-M created *flyjin* on March 17, 2011 (hoofin.wordpress.com, April 1, 2011). His original Tweet read: “I’m going to try to coin the term ‘flyjin’ for these deserters.”<sup>245</sup> The term was re-Tweeted and by March 23<sup>rd</sup>, it appeared in the Wall Street Journal and Time Out Tokyo. The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) article, “Expatriates Tiptoe Back to Work” (Sanchanta

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<sup>244</sup> I heard stories of foreigners living in Tokyo who put tape on the cracks of their windows and doors and only ventured outside with scarves or masks around their faces.

<sup>245</sup> The original Twitter post has been removed but it is archived at: <http://hoofin.wordpress.com/2011/03/30/will-this-graph-show-the-flyjin-phenomenon-in-a-couple-months/#comment-1967>. In the same post, Paul Y-M wrote that he never intended the term “to create any sort of new slur or slang...I was much more fed up with the foreign headlines than I was with anyone escaping” (hoofin.wordpress.com, April 1, 2011).

2011b), in particular, helped to catapult *flyjin* into English (and some Japanese) online discussions. The same day, posters in the Japanese 2channel (*ni channeru*) textboard dedicated to international news discussed the meaning of the word (<http://desktop2ch.tv/news5plus>). The thread included a translation of the WSJ article as customary for that section of 2ch, and gained over 200 posts. One poster remarked, “I bet the guy who wrote the article came up with that,” to which someone replied, “It’s obviously trying to be international” (March 23, 2011, my translation). On the 24<sup>th</sup>, English-language blogs with bilingual members were already discussing the 2ch thread and the WSJ article, also wondering where the term had come from. Soon after, the website *flyjin.com* emerged. An English-language blog dedicated to presenting NJ stories of post-tsunami departures, *flyjin.com* poked fun at the overall concept; its top banner depicted Caucasians dressed as European peasants fleeing a boiling nuclear reactor. The site defined *flyjin* as: “A foreigner or expat in Japan (*gaijin*) who heads for Narita (or Kansai) at the first sign of a nuclear holocaust. Not a Japanese word and not familiar to or used by Japanese, *flyjin* was coined by English-speaking Twitter users.”

Most early English language media reports focused on the impact these departures were having, both real and imagined, on Japanese businesses (Gondor 2011). Tokyo’s financial sector was said to “empty out” in the days after the disaster (Ryall & Moore 2011), and a handful of foreign firms evacuated their staff or temporarily moved their offices to places like Hong Kong or Singapore (Sanchanta 2011b). As Simon Cotterill wrote in his blog post for The Independent: “Much of the criticism of the so-called *flyjin* has come from Japanese workers at companies in Tokyo...their jobs have become impossible because their foreign colleagues, customers, and clients have left” (2011). One Japanese-language NHK article (from September 2012, a year and a half after 3/11), claimed the departure of two foreign supervisors immediately following the

explosion at the Daiichi power plant resulted in one Japanese office worker's overwork—and perhaps his resulting death (*karoushi*).<sup>246</sup> Mariko Sanchanta's initial WSJ *flyjin* article also focused on the impact those foreigners who chose to leave Tokyo, even for a few days, were having on their Japanese colleagues; co-workers who, Sanchanta writes, didn't have the option of running away. Although Sanchanta admits that, "Some Japanese, of course, also left Tokyo, though mainly women and children going home to their families in other parts of Japan, while their husbands stay behind to work" (2011b), her flippancy suggests the point isn't newsworthy.<sup>247</sup> Similarly, few English or Japanese journalists were critical of—or even noted—the many Japanese nationals who fled south to Kansai or overseas, as the fear of nuclear radiation escalated ([fukuishimbun.co.jp](http://fukuishimbun.co.jp), March 19, 2011), although the point was often raised by NJ online.<sup>248</sup>

As *flyjin* became an established term in late March and early April, English-speakers living in Japan and abroad continued to use the term on sites like Twitter, and in the comments section of online news articles, to criticize those who were leaving Japan. But, what may have begun as a small "isolated" Twitter post was never simply located in the NJ English-speaking community, or fixed as a non-Japanese phenomenon. Just as the 2ch thread demonstrates, *flyjin* circulated from English language websites immediately into Japanese blogs and Twitter posts. In the same way the term itself merged English and Japanese,<sup>249</sup> websites in both languages

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<sup>246</sup> The article has been removed from NHK's site but remains archived at: <http://narouren.jugem.jp/?eid=7905>. The article didn't use the term *flyjin*, instead it identified the supervisors as "Foreign bosses who abruptly returned home."

<sup>247</sup> Sanchanta's pre-*flyjin* article "Crisis Triggers an Exodus from Tokyo" (2011a) gave more attention to Japanese nationals who were also leaving Tokyo.

<sup>248</sup> I know many Japanese citizens who left Tokyo at the same time, retreating to family homes in the south such as Hiroshima and Kumamoto.

<sup>249</sup> Paul Y-M explained he "was using the word 'fly' in the Japanese sense of 'flying' meaning to jump the gun," (<http://hoofin.wordpress.com/2011/03/30/will-this-graph-show-the-flyjin-phenomenon-in-a-couple-months/#comment-1967>).

constantly referred back to one another, and bilingual posters regularly kept their audiences updated on what was happening in the other language's press. Many early Japanese blog posts referenced, and linked to, English-language sites, or commented on conversations with foreigners, as part of defining the term; one Japanese blog even contained a screenshot of flyjin.com's main page. While *flyjin* continued to spread through Japanese-language blogs and messages boards, the term remained absent from mainstream national media in Japan.<sup>250</sup> Though it may never have become a common phrase *in* Japanese, stories circulated by NJ claiming that they had been called *flyjin* by their Japanese co-workers upon their departure from, or return to, work.<sup>251</sup>

If Western workers left their Japanese counterparts in the lurch, Sanchanta's initial WSJ article attributes the resulting tensions—the need for foreigners to “tiptoe back” upon return—to enduring cultural differences heightened by the crisis:

The expat employees' decision to leave is a sensitive cultural issue in a country known for its legions of “salarymen”: loyal Japanese employees whose lives revolve around the office, who regularly work overtime and who have strong, emotional ties to their corporations and their colleagues. [Sanchanta 2011b]

*Flyjin* fit neatly into this conceptual categorizing, fixing to ongoing perceptions about the enduring otherness of foreigners living and working in Japan—those who could always “go home” in the face of a national crisis. In the English-language press, this sentiment was attributed to “the Japanese,” and was expressed strikingly in an article for The Telegraph. Stating

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<sup>250</sup> Tabloid articles described foreigners who were “running away,” or “abruptly returning,” but didn't use the term (for example, an article in the magazine *Nikkan Gendai* was titled “*gaikokujin wa minna nihon kara nigeta*” [All foreigners have fled Japan], April 11, 2011).

<sup>251</sup> I found anecdotally, that no Japanese national I asked had ever heard of *flyjin*, but every foreigner had. The owner of a new Japanese bistro named *Flyjin* in Montreal told me he chose the name after learning about it from a friend who had lived in Japan and who had been called a *flyjin* after he eventually, “long after the initial incident,” decided to leave the country (Alexandre Brosseau, personal communication, June 24, 2013).

that, “The sudden flight [of foreigners] has dismayed the Japanese” (Ryall & Moore 2011), the authors cited a Japanese woman’s opinion of the so-called “exodus” as evidence:

I think this has reinforced the impression amongst Japanese that a lot of foreigners only look at Japan as a place to work for a few years, earn a lot of money and then they go again... They're not really interested in the society or the country. This isn't their real home. These disasters have really just shown how true that is. [Ryall & Moore 2011]<sup>252</sup>

Consider the similarity to a New York Magazine article that, unintentionally, outlines the terms of the debate as it developed within the English-language NJ community (and those watching, reading, and trolling from the sidelines):

Foreigners in Japan are sometimes given a ‘gaijin pass’ upon trampling one of the country’s social codes, but if you want to fit in, that’s not a privilege you exploit. To now abandon Japan for a former, safer home—to take the escape hatch not available to Japanese friends—would be a betrayal, both of your hosts and of the expat identity you’d carefully cultivated. [Ferrari 2011]

The decision to stay or leave then, under the potential threat of radiation exposure, became framed for foreigners by notions of loyalty and betrayal. Departing, under concern for personal safety or at the pleading of far-off family members, was “desertion” and for those who left or merely considered leaving, they were forced by the debate to consider “where their allegiances lie” (Sanchanta 2011b). Like the commentators to the online version of Paige Ferrari’s article cited above, English speakers both inside and outside Japan—including English speaking Japanese nationals—began hurling insults at those who left, or reactively defending their decision. One American blogger who participated in the JET program in the early 1990s, wrote:

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<sup>252</sup> For course, Ryall and Moore also claimed in their article that “almost all Chinese and Korean residents in Japan have now left the country,” which was a gross inaccuracy (2011).

“To say that I’m ashamed of and embarrassed by them puts it mildly. In fact, I find their actions reprehensible and contemptible” (Newton 2011).

The claim that foreigners lack a depth of attachment—that they view Japan only as a place to make money (as mentioned in The Telegraph interview above), and that leaving is an exploitation of “outsider-ness” (Ferrari’s “gaijin pass”)—is a constant refrain in *flyjin* discussions. Those who stayed in return claimed, or justified their “goodness,” a connection and commitment to Japan, for example, as a result of Japanese spouses and in-laws, or property ownership (some calling themselves *stayjins*). One Tokyo manager explained: “I cannot turn my back on my staff. This is my home” (Sanchanta 2011a). NJ then found it increasingly necessary to counter the assumption of their insincerity, more specifically separating themselves out from “those other” fair-weather foreigners. One Japanese blogger recounted how she learned about *flyjin* from an English acquaintance; this person, who didn't evacuate, claimed that, “the foreigners who are still in Tokyo now are people who truly care about Japan. Because these types of foreigners are the ones who always carefully pay their taxes and social insurance fees,<sup>253</sup> they should be treasured”<sup>254</sup> (Ume-Mats Diary, April 11, 2011; my translation).

A foreigner’s superficial engagement or connection to Japan is taken for granted precisely because it is understood that Japaneseness is impenetrable by outsiders; this is supported, for example, by the perpetual separation of “immigrants” from “natives,” in part, institutionalized in bureaucratic regulations like the family registry system (*koseki*) (Morris-Suzuki 2010). Amy Borovoy also points out the way that Japanese institutions, as I’ve discussed in relation to Cool Japan, help to carve the “shared narrative” of homogeneity for its citizens

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<sup>253</sup> In Japan, “social insurance” is accessible through employers and includes health insurance, nursing insurance (care for individuals over 65), and pension (it can also include at the discretion of the employer a small cash benefit for those with children).

<sup>254</sup> <http://umemats.cocolog-nifty.com/blog/2011/04/post-80fe.html>

(2010: 61). *Flyjin* blog entries and news reports alike traded on this barrier—the assumption that there are inherent, essential divisions between Japanese nationals and non-Japanese. This “split” (of allegiances) was attributed to such narratives as the “salaryman” (mentioned above), a point Sanchanta supports through an NJ business owner who explains: “In Japan, the company and family are almost one and the same, whereas foreigners place family first and company second” (Sanchanta 2011b). Foreigners also facilitated the vending of ideas about “the Japanese;” for example, recounting the strength and composure of Japanese in the aftermath of the disaster (Budmar 2012), and their fortitude, their “shiran kao shiteiru, making know-nothing faces,” as foreign co-workers departed (Cotterill 2011).<sup>255</sup>

#### 6.4 THE SUPERFICIAL REFRAIN OF BEING NOT-JAPANESE

It is striking that this refrain of “superficiality” of belonging to and care for Japanese society (and its defensive counter in the form of *stayjin*) reemerges across topics, media platforms, audiences, and languages, as it is both used and resisted by otaku. When scholars similarly suggest that fans of Japanese popular culture, or Roland Barthes for that matter, can only be superficially interested in Japan—indicating that they are misguided by the consumption and branding of “J-cool,” and mistake media representations for “real” Japanese social life—difference gets reconfirmed as natural, supported as an inherent separateness, rather than a discourse that is daily maintained, negotiated, and contested across various borders, and by a

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<sup>255</sup> When I arrived in Tokyo in May of 2013, thoughts of the nuclear disaster were still common, and the topic came up in conversations (“I still check to make sure the vegetables I buy are not from Fukushima,” “I was heading home from work when the earthquake happened”), and in some of the unintended trajectories that had recently buffeted their lives. One NJ told me they had “escaped” to a friend’s house in Fukuoka in the south, and another otaku came to Japan right after the disaster in order to make a documentary about the experience.

multitude of agents. Consider the criticism measured against other anthropologists attempting to research at the margins of Japanese society:

My desires to find less-Japanese Japanese dovetailed with some of the assumptions underlying Japan anthropology. I was frequently asked by scholars if my project was “really about Japan,” given that Japanese in NY are different from most Japanese, and more importantly perhaps, removed from Japan. If Japan can only be studied in Japan, and using terms and categories familiar in Japanese society, then the imperative is to demonstrate how migrants are Japanese, rather than how distant they might be from their home society. Otherwise, this project, the logic went, could not be representative of, or speak to other studies of Japan. [Sooudi 2008: 16]

The *real* Japan then is recursively manufactured, not just by the Japanese state and its citizens, or by nation branding projects, but also by non-Japanese-language academics, journalists, historians and as we have seen, non-Japanese living in Japan. The otaku NJ I encountered—though frequently marginalized within and away from daily social life in Japan—actively participate in reproducing the norms of Japanese society. As Abby Margolis explains of homeless individuals living in Ueno Park, their “resistance to social marginalization rested not in a rejection of cultural and traditional norms but in the very desire for and recovery of them” (Margolis 2002: 8). NJ similarly engage with the normalization of their own marginalization and exclusion from “Japaneseness,” through a reinvigoration of what it meant for them to be “good foreigners” within this limited field of possibilities. Margolis also points out the way this group “cited nationally sanctioned symbols of Japaneseness and used them to distinguish themselves from other homeless who, like those who lined up in soup lines, they judged to be less determined, less sociable, and, by extension, less Japanese. In other words...[they] legitimated their own doing homelessness through the partial exclusion of others” (Margolis 2002: 38).

“Globalization” is often advertised as a collection of mechanisms that allow individuals to escape particular borders like that of the nation, yet ironically those very mechanisms are used



in turn to reinforce such boundaries. For example, Americans in Japan use “national culture” opportunistically to take advantage of, and help create, a space for themselves in the Japanese labor market, becoming necessary cultural brokers as Japanese business look to export media to the western market. This is coupled to, as I’ve mentioned, the Japanese government’s explicit move to grow its export of “soft” commodities in the wake of the continued economic recession. As I’ve also discussed, the limited employment otaku find often involves the negotiation of accepted and codified cultural and linguistic differences (English teaching, software localization); as cultural brokers they contribute to the common sense notion of *a priori* differences—in fact, their financial saliency depends on their support and manipulation of these very ideas and symbols.

I argue in this chapter then, that otaku participate, as the development of the term *flyjin* demonstrates, in helping to craft taken-for-granted ideas of what it means to be Japanese, even while it emerges as a process of accepting, and therefore carving themselves out of, those notions. In this negotiation of their subjectivation, they in turn limit the field of acceptable being for other foreigners around them, legitimating themselves through the “the partial exclusion of others” (Margolis 2002: 38). In doing so, they adopt the very same notions of authenticity and expertise which we have seen embedded in the discourse networks that frame global media circulations and national gatekeeping, which these otaku first encounter as fans. While such global flows of labor and commodities do trouble the dominant structuring control of national boundaries, these become more critical to uphold as “natural;” cultural and national divides then become reinvested with symbolic significance, precisely because they are being disrupted.

## 7.0 DISCOURSE NETWORKS AND THE REAL JAPAN

*So you have a sort of 'endless postponement' (cf. Body-without-Organs in A Thousand Plateaus) rather than a defined avenue of development; you travel in continuously changing 'orbits,' you 'undulate,' you find yourself switching jobs and careers and positionalities. [Spinuzzi 2004 citing Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 180]*

*Everybody is aware of such banal facts. But that they are banal does not mean they don't exist. What we have to do with banal facts is to discover, to try to discover, which specific and perhaps original problems are connected with them. [Foucault 2001: 173]*

In the last days of my field work, in the sweltering heat of August, I meet Teddy and Aoi in Harujuku. A mutual friend introduced us a few weeks earlier, and I learned that the couple were soon moving “back” to Texas. Teddy’s family lives close to Austin and he thought he could get a job there easily with the recent upswing of the American economy. We walked into and out of air conditioned curio and overpriced clothes stores as we talked that day and at some point hovered for a long time chatting next to a rack of expensive jeans no one had any intention of buying, annoying the young fashionable sales clerk. They told me their story, from the beginning. They met at UT Austin when Aoi was an exchange student there. Teddy had been what he called a “huge geek for manga” and had started studying Japanese as a freshman so he could read his favorites in the original. They'd met at a party and, after laughing together over his Japanese pronunciations as he tried to impress her, had discovered they loved many of the same mangaka, especially the great Tezuka Osamu, creator of *Astro Boy*.

They'd been together in Tokyo for six years, living in a small two room apartment close to Shinjuku. He wrote copy for a local English-language lifestyle magazine and she worked from home as a translator. They had loved every minute of living in Tokyo they told me (except for the summer weather and the high cost and some other things, they had also quickly qualified), until two years ago when they'd had a baby. Their daughter had tottered around most of that particular day we were together, under clothes racks, and through crowds of passersby, my six-year-old giving chase. Once they had their daughter, they told me, their feelings about living in Japan began to change, too. Suddenly, they had to seriously consider her future and what living in Japan might be like for her, as *haafu*. What would they do about her education? English-language or Japanese? International school or public? International school, the common path for rich "expats" living in Roppongi and other upscale neighborhoods, was really out of their reach financially. But public school, where they knew she wouldn't receive quality English instruction and might face more bullying from peers, seemed uncertain to them. At some point that day, as we were strolling through crowds of shoppers, Teddy turned to me and said, "There's just no future here for us, you know. We'll never really belong." I only nodded, thinking about my own daughter, as we stopped to watch the girls play together under a sidewalk rack of trendy second-hand T-shirts.

## **7.1 THE PREMATURE DEMISE OF THE NATION-STATE**

One of the harder things Alice had to face, she told me, was the fixed and unquestioned temporary-ness of life in Japan. For all the public conversations on first or superficial meetings that make it past, "Wow! You can speak Japanese!" she reminded me that it isn't that far in until

you're asked, "Where are you from?" and "How long do you plan to stay?" Ken Seeroi participates in supporting this assumption of impermanence when he writes:

Everyone who can leave Japan eventually does—it's a constant, like the speed of light. There's an arc—move to the country fresh-faced and excited, travel around taking pictures and trying to speak Japanese, then reach an apex where you realize why there're so many stray cats, then begin the descent into Japanese marriage and a punishing job, or packing up and leaving. [Seeroi 2016]

Seeroi shapes the decision to leave as a rejection of taking on and living in Japanese social norms, which he casts as uniquely untenable, as if punishing jobs weren't common in other places, (although his post reflects the role Tokyo plays as a large urban city, drawing people to make their fortune, where things accumulate and get left behind, like cats, when everyone eventually moves on). Yet, otaku and other NJ who "live" and "work" in Japan<sup>256</sup> do integrate into their communities and contribute to its vibrancy and reproduction in a multitude of ways. They buy things like oranges from the last farmer in the neighborhood, get sick and go to the doctor, pay taxes, work and contribute to national industry and education, while their children, if they have them, go to school. They also carry the *mikoshi* (御輿, portable shrine) during summer *matsumi* (祭, festival) (even when they don't want to), go to the shrine for *hatsumoude* (初詣) to give thanks and pray for health and happiness in the coming New Year (all common community activities), join the PTA and ferry their sons and daughters to their ice hockey games. In fact, citizens and non-citizens, resident and non-residents, equally draw on ideas of tradition and appropriate cultural, and even marketed or essentialized, concepts and use them in daily life to make sense of themselves and their relationships with others around them. Aren't otaku then,

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<sup>256</sup> Bloggers, translators and others working in the creative industries may not actually live in Japan but still contribute to its economic production and branding, while those living in Japan may work for international or multinational companies.

Japanese after all? Even expats? Yet, to ask and even attempt to answer such a question is impossible outside the realm of hegemonic discourse which positions them as perpetual others.

However variously articulated and experienced, American otaku who are first generation are faced with the decision over whether to return “home,” just as migrants to Ambanja in 1980s Madagascar, had to “eventually choose their burial location” (Sharp 1993: 83). While Sharp explains that *vahiny* settlers have their decision “determined by, essentially, their emotional ties to a particular place or to certain kin” (83), many of the older otaku I spoke to similarly made this decision, or for some really confronted it for the first time, after they started a family. In fact, for the NJ that I knew who were raising children, many of the concerns and fears they had over the differential treatment they received as foreign residents played out for them, with heightened consequences and fears, in the lives of their children.

Younger otaku who talked about leaving often articulated it as being done with in-betweenness, tired of feeling lost somewhere in the middle of a career and other life trajectories. In James’ case, he lived in Kyoto for two years after graduating with his undergrad degree, but didn’t stay past his initial tenure as he’d imagined he would. He stayed long enough to qualify as an expert on the Japanese videogame industry (improving his Japanese and making connections in the industry) but found he couldn’t accept the day-to-day differences anymore.

Culture shock kind of affects different people different ways but, I mean the first sort of reaction to culture shock in Japan is that you’re goddamn in love with the whole thing. And then after a while, you’re in love with it and you start to look at all the different similarities between this culture and your culture but then after a while all you see are the differences and it’s possible to get really frustrated with the differences. Like that was a big thing with me, like I, even more so than the people, than other Americans that I knew in Japan would get frustrated with certain aspects of Japanese society that I perceived myself as continually bumping up against.

The younger otaku, who were lonely or felt disillusioned like James and Harold, some in too much conflict with Japanese “ways of doing things,” often articulated their return to me as a career decision. This perspective was most common for those working outside the *eikaiwa* track, in IT or media production jobs where their overseas experience could actually be reasonably leveraged for advancement. But those teaching English, or working in translation, often found themselves stuck; they lacked the ability for social mobility in Japan and a return to the US would mean going back with little skills and marketable features that could qualify them for something other than teaching English, which many didn’t want to do (where such jobs are also comparatively harder to come by). Returning “home” then is complicated for some, as Takeyuki Tsuda describes is the case of Brazilian *nikkeijin* (日系人, having Japanese ancestry) in Japan, who “find that their employment and income situation back home has been worsened rather than improved by migration” (2003: 242). But staying in Japan meant equally few career options and little likelihood of advancement in the future, meaning continued low salaries, unstable and temporary employment and inconsistent access to certain social services,<sup>257</sup> especially for those who do not attain business level Japanese. Gaining those linguistic skills could also be equally difficult when working for an *eikaiwa* or teaching English in another capacity, even at a university<sup>258</sup> which help encase NJ in an all-English working environment.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Since Japan has universal health care, access to health insurance is often still possible even for those who do not qualify due to part-time or independent contractor labor contracts. They pay a monthly fee calculated on their income.

<sup>258</sup> This is a common route for older NJ that I met who had been in Japan long term. They were hired as part-time teachers at universities for perhaps one or two English-language classes, and would often have to string together several such positions, rotating even in one day across Tokyo to different universities, in order to make a livable wage. Although these kinds of positions tended to pay more per hour, the hours were fewer altogether, and the contracts were also typically only one year at a time. Other otaku tended to rotate from one job to the next, for a variety of reasons, some between different *eikaiwa*, looking for a raise or variety in the work, or to escape a difficult working situation perhaps due to interpersonal problems with a boss or co-workers, and some between different kinds of jobs, looking for a way to forge a future. In Peter’s example, who came to Japan via the JET program and worked initially in a small prefecture, he went next to work for a large real estate company in Tokyo, then to a small

### 7.1.1 Otaku as labor migrants

In its branding efforts the Japanese government is increasingly turning to social media to publicize the positive qualities of Japan and, as we saw in the case of the *Kakehashi Project*, harnessing the free-labor of exchange students and other tourists to achieve their cultural diplomacy and economic goals. At the same time, we have seen the monetization of intellectual labor and the performance of expertise, such as English language bloggers like Ken Seeroi who trade on narratives of Japan's distinctiveness and draw their audiences from otaku and others receptive to Cool Japan affect. Otaku then are "language workers" (Heller 2010: 105), who broker cultural objects as Japanese and facilitate their rise in the global marketplace; they are driven to participate in its promotion, often without pay, because of passion and enchantment for an authentically imagined Japan. These very regimes of consumption and expertise, which many experience and express as fans online, help to imprint an acceptance of the vulnerable situations they often endure; the "undulating" and "orbiting" of modern life (Spinuzzi 2004 citing Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 180).

As I have shown, the circulation of cultural-ized commodities and national ideologies convene in discourse networks—practices, "technologies and institutions (Kittler 1990: 369) that communicate, materialize and make relevant national of-courseness. It is through these networks that otaku first engage with Japan, yet they also work to channel otaku into particular forms of labor once they arrive in Tokyo. Just as we can understand the way commodity enchantment is a

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hotel near a ski resort in the North of Japan, and finally to an MBA program; along the way he started his own translation company, which is a route others I knew had taken as well.

<sup>259</sup> Even those working in IT or game development for Japanese companies said that, although meetings might be in Japanese, they communicate largely with their co-workers in English, and often through email.

particular kind of fantasizing that is uniquely productive for capitalist labor regimes (Allison 2006), it is important to see otaku as more than “lifestyle migrants,” or mere fetishistic consumers who are moving to purchase more, or escape to idealized, authentically situated ways of living (Benson 2013, O’Reilly & Benson 2009, Sooudi 2008). Rather, otaku are also labor migrants who wield the literacy skills described by Heller, and the necessary mobility to capitalize on them. The range of conceivable choices alone that otaku consider gives a good indication of the realm of privilege and disposable income from which many, but not all, of these fans emerge; that they *can* choose to purchase and import Japan-related commodities, or pay to study Japanese at a local Saturday language school, or contemplate and embark (for some repeatedly) on trans-Pacific travel, or undertake a precarious move across continents, to a country that is more expensive than most. Ironically, however, precisely when otaku seem most mobile, moving a great distance geographically and culturally, they become stuck socially—once in Japan they are in many ways, conspicuously Western, marginalized and excluded from mainstream society both legally and socially.

As Seth Holmes describes of circulatory migration from Mexico to Central California, these “systems of migrant labor are characterized by a physical and temporal separation of the processes of reproduction of the labor force and the production from the labor force” (Holmes 2013: 12). For example, Mexican migrants cross to the US as “primarily healthy young men and women...after being raised and educated in Oaxaca...[and they] often return to their hometown when they are unable to work due to old age, sickness, or injury” (Holmes 2013: 13). Similarly, most American otaku receive their education in the US (again, Japanese immigration law makes an undergraduate degree, or a minimum of ten years documented working experience, a



precondition of many of the relevant visas), come to work for a few years in Japan, and then some, but not all, return home to follow careers or have families.

This is in fact not simply, as Sharp described, a question of considering “emotional ties to a particular place or to certain kin” (1993: 83), or even ultimately a question of whether otaku can adapt to the differences and similarities of Japanese society, after they stop being so “goddamn in love.” As we have seen, particularly for *eikaiwa* teachers who might face express exploitation, this split (contributing only the prime economic productive years to Japan) is also the result of “a set of political and legal mechanisms that presuppose that the migrant is without citizenship rights and has only limited power in the state of employment,” as these limit their ability to settle permanently (Holmes 2013: 13). In the case of Japan, this is supported by the ideological circumscription of “foreigners” from the national polity (and belonging) that has very real consequences on their ability to negotiate for better wages, improved working conditions, or connect to other non-citizen residents to collectively advocate for these concerns; in fact, those categorized as “non-Japanese” by the state are excluded from, not just the nation, but from other protections as well, as their human rights as non-citizens may not be legally protected. As we saw with the case of Debito Arudou’s critics and the *flyjin* debate, NJ are encouraged to accept that such social bargaining is simply “not the Japanese way.” Indeed, focusing on microaggressions or drawing attention to inequality, is seen by many as a failure to adapt to Japanese society that “ruins it” for the other NJ who are just trying to fit in quietly and get along. In this way, otaku turn to the maintenance of their otherness as they subjectivize the “foreigners” they come in contact with, both online and off. I saw this was repeated over and over, in the daily interactions I observed and in the stories I heard, as NJ simply “responded” to the perceived naturalness of a *tanitsu minzoku*. For example, NJ participated in “correcting” social mistakes,

which as I've discussed, emerged primarily through direct and indirect reprimanding of others for their failure to follow social norms such as those for etiquette and public manners. This also included, for example, criticizing the Japanese speaking abilities and "annoying" American accents of others, usually through gossip, and correcting each other over confusion about social identities, asking, "But isn't he half?" or explaining to another, "He's not Japanese. He just has a Japanese name because he's a refugee." In these daily practices, otaku invoke, call on and inhabit their own subjectivation as *others*, largely through the reinscription of categories of (dis)belonging onto others. In this process, otaku in particular strived to—more than mimic those around them—become better than; a more perfect, yet ultimately unachievable, Japanese subject.

As Holmes points out, this boundary maintenance supports state goals (immigrants go "home" when they are sick or old and can no longer contribute to the work force), and is expressly implicated in the routine practices of bureaucracy. In the case of immigration, the Japanese government has increasingly modified procedures to ensure migrants meet temporary and unsustainable situations once in Japan (see for example, Douglass & Roberts 2000). This was the case for Brazilian *nikkeijin*, many whose families had initially immigrated to Brazil during the 1950s with loans provided by MOFA (Shipper 2008: 40)—who were invited to "return" to Japan in the 1990s on special "long-term visa status" (Sasaki 2008: 53). Although the express purpose was to fill shortages of unskilled labor such as in manufacturing, ministry officials publicly suggested that, as ethnic Japanese, they should naturally be allowed to return; these same bureaucrats argued that *nikkeijin*'s essential heritage or Japanese blood would help preserve social homogeneity (Tsuda 2010: 625, 627-628).<sup>260</sup> Once in Japan however, *nikkeijin*

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<sup>260</sup> In fact, as one Ministry of Justice bureaucrat claimed: "We didn't see ourselves as accepting the *nikkeijin* because of political pressures from the labour shortage, but as a matter of principle because they are of the same blood as Japanese. Shutting them out could not be tolerated" (cited in Tsuda 2010: 628).

found themselves “ethnically excluded and socially marginalized as foreigners” (Tsuda 2003: 126), encountering, for example, segregated eating and bathing facilities in worker dormitories and rejection by neighbors (Tsuda 2003: 161, 163; Roth 2002: 38). And as we have seen from landlord complaints, the notoriety Brazilian immigrants gained for gathering many friends together and having loud *meiwaku* (迷惑, annoying) parties supports the belief that they cannot be good tenants or neighbors and therefore, are certainly NOT Japanese. With later economic downturn, *nikkeijin* were asked to please return “home,” with a cash payment from the state to facilitate their departure (Tsuda 2010: 630).

Today, Japan continues to face a tremendous labor shortage, but the state remains unwilling to publicly adapt or reform what seems to be an untenable immigration policy, making sweeping assurances that policy changes will not impact domestic employment, or orderly social cohesion, while limiting the ability for immigrants to settle in the long-term. For example, the government has more recently organized and funded the “Technical Intern Training Program” to import unskilled and semi-skilled workers from countries in South Asia such as China, Vietnam and the Philippines,<sup>261</sup> especially for more blue-collar jobs like construction or in nursing care where the health industry is struggling to accommodate Japan’s inverted population pyramid.<sup>262</sup> In truth, these are temporary positions (with term limits recently increased to five years from three in 2016), many which have been found to be highly exploitative, that are advertised as philanthropic assistance for developing countries; enabling overseas workers to learn technical skills that will transfer to their home country on their return (The Japan Times 2017).<sup>263</sup> The

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<sup>261</sup> Similarly, the “Entertainer Visa,” seen as something of an “open secret,” helps to place women from Southeast Asia in jobs as companions and hostesses, and other adult entertainment work (Faier 2009: 16).

<sup>262</sup> Low birth rate combined with a large number of aged.

<sup>263</sup> In fact, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare found that in 2015, many of the companies engaged in these programs were overworking their trainees under, often, dangerous working conditions (Iwamoto 2106).

*nikkeijin* visa allowance was similarly disguised as “benevolence”—publicized as the reconnection of *nikkeijin* with Japanese culture and their “ethnic heritage,” as bureaucrats publicized that their labor was only incidentally necessary to help finance their “visit” (Tsuda 2010: 637). Going home, in these worker training programs is necessitated by their very structure; if they offer a chance to stay on legally in Japan at all, it is only through passing near impossible hurdles, like the completion of a difficult nursing licensing exam in Japanese, when trainees are rarely afforded the opportunity, or indeed, the necessary free time to study (The Japan Times 2017).<sup>264</sup> In a continued effort to preserve perceived homogeneity and unity, as I’ve mentioned the Japanese government is more recently turning to robotics and research and development around AI applications to fill labor shortages, such as in elderly care (Emont 2017). Prime Minister Abe has also called for more Japanese women to enter, and stay in the workforce even after giving birth, although systematic discrimination against working mothers, along with a lack of childcare facilities and other constraints, are still in place. These are examples of ways “that civil servants and politicians reflect, draw on, or manipulate popular notions of national versus alien culture to develop policies and manage state institutions” (Vertovec 2011: 242). Indeed, such state actions also reinscribe these ideologies in very practical and public ways, helping to codify the division as “obvious.”

Under conditions of globalization, the nation may seem less relevant to the everyday, as technologies allow consumers to “participate in the imagined realities of other cultures as part of their daily lives” (Larkin 1997: 407), yet along with others, I shown the way national boundaries are being symbolically reinvigorated in response. In this way, we can see the particularizing and

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<sup>264</sup> The passing rate for this exam in 2013 was less than 10% (Japan Times 2013). However, some of this is set to change with reforms implemented in 2017, and a new ministry “Organization for Technical Intern Training...watchdog” (The Japan Times 2017).

homogenizing poles of globalization—as it is seen to be carved from “a single and ostensibly self-contradictory binarism: extreme fragmentation and connectivity” (Appelbaum 2000: 258)—not as a natural outgrowth of independently functioning or disembedded global economies and markets which incidentally push commodities and people into motion, or keep them transnationally tied to “home” communities (see for example Basch, et al. 1994), but as an intentional, yet uneven, process of manipulation; a conscious move with inconsistent results over when to emphasize and what to frame as foreign and domestic, or different and similar. Routinizing these divisions in “rites, classifications and hierarchies” helps to produce and reproduce “the specific authority of the state, based on its hegemonic location at the centre of society” (Fuglerud 2004: 25, discussing Bourdieu 1999). Such divisions centered on branding, and even increasingly immigration and detention, also create new productive economies for state and corporate profit (Andresson 2014: 806).

Nation branding is also an acting on the obviousness the “national” in daily practice, reflected in the decisions of “street-level” bureaucrats over, for example, whether to make immigration forms and processes accessible or legible—as they make and remake these documents and practices, and respond and react to the individual citizens they help manage from within their own expectations, experiences and subjectivities (Tuckett 2015; Hoag 2010). This is an “of courseness” which the state, in fact, does not author alone, yet it supports the methods and means for state institutions to reproduce themselves. The maintenance of the “nation” is not matter of fact or given, but a leveraging—by multiple, geographically dispersed institutions and social actors—of the contemporary signs, concerns and imaginations that are at play within the constraints and affordances of systems of knowledge. For states, this *may* emerge today in reaction to such things as the growth of non-state actors who “wield power in processes of global

governance independently of their home-country governments” (Frenk & Moon 2013: 939) and legal arenas where “the state’s margins are increasingly porous, and can only be drawn in contingent and uneven ways” (Ferme 2013: 958), but often the presumption of such new permeability is tied to a fiction of prior state coherence and control.

Cool Japan branding projects which frame otaku as “tourists,” consumers of the *real*, act on the assumption of the naturalness, and the desirability, of the *minzoku*. They simultaneously work to reproduce such notions, creating relatively *real* homogeneity, as immigration and other governing policies keep diversity out or effectively hide its presence from public view. As such, can Cool Japan be considered successful? Across policies and economic incentivizing, MOFA and METI have failed to limit the success of “unsanitary” media, for example, BL or *yaoi* manga, or control diverse readings of media texts (foreign fans who prefer the perverse or embarrassing, or refuse to be re-educated to Japan’s acceptable traditions). Similarly, other common sense negative cultural imaginaries remain in circulation, supported in part by Western news outlets (Japan as weird, sexless, and infantile). However, even hardcore hentai fans,<sup>265</sup> despite the perceived perversity of their media interests, still take up Japan as a site of desire and enchantment, as well as interact with and accept state-marketed “coolness.”

In addition, Japan’s ministries have avoided direct consideration of the consequences of the Cool Brand on inbound migration. Indeed, most government materials and programs do not depict, or even conceive of, the presence of foreign residents and the critical role they play in the rise of Japan’s coolness; as teachers of English, and their necessary participation in the production and circulation of Japanese cultural commodities—where they may help game

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<sup>265</sup> Hentai, meaning perversion but often with a sexual connotation (shortened from *hentai seiyoku*, 変態性欲), has entered English as a broad reference to a genre of manga or anime pornography, although it is typically, as it is in Japanese, associated with perverted sex acts (McLelland 2006).

developers target the “tastes” of Western audiences; adapt Japanese art designs and humors; contribute to marketing and branding of Japan and its “stuff” as exotically desirable in magazines, websites and blogs; negotiate the boundaries of legal distribution, copyright protection and region restrictions—and then, participate as consumers.

## 7.2 POSSIBILITIES FOR RESISTANCE

Throughout this dissertation I have relentlessly italicized, scare quoted and otherwise done what I could to continually call into question the notion that there is such a thing as a “real Japan.” At the same time, however, I have shown the way a real Japan is in fact instantiated, circulated and consumed transnationally in the everyday as discourse. As I’ve demonstrated is the case for American otaku, they reproduce their exclusion through subjecting the “others” around them to this discourse. Although this performance of expertise and social distinction is not necessarily unique, it is important to chart these activities in order to reassert the role power continues to play in these processes—against the assumption of otaku as superficial consumers who utopically defy borders, and therefore participate in, or reflect, the inevitable decline of the nation-state under conditions of globalization. I also draw attention to systems of power which work toward erasure, which support the disappearance of those ideological, bureaucratic and economic forces which craft, and constrain, otaku capacity for social and physical movement. The internalization of these boundaries as a form of desire by otaku, as they learn to self-govern, further contributes to the movement of historically and politically conditioned acts of imaging and producing subjected relations, into the background.

In Mary Louise Pratt's terms, "contact zones" are points where differences meet to "clash, and grapple with each other" under "asymmetrical" power relations (1992: 4). These zones, however, do not emerge on their own. Instead, they are made from the knowledge that circulates in discourse networks; knowledge that communicates what difference is and can be, and where and how it can be "encountered" (see for example, Faier 2009). Rather than functioning for and through an "all-powerful state," the parts of the discourse network—the technologies and techniques, institutions and practices—are "differently situated" and therefore, "cut across, reinforce, and disrupt teach other" (Faier & Rofel 2014: 370). For example, poor quality localization may motivate otaku to seek out original pirated versions of anime online, while both act on the presumption of the object's inherent Japaneseness. Yet, national identity in this case remains impenetrable for otaku as it authorizes only a singular and homogenous Japanese *minzoku*. Discourse then establishes not only distinct nodes of knowledge, what Japaneseness is and is not, but the communicative field through which this knowledge can be read, consumed and appreciated. A focus on discourse networks helps us to avoid a myopic analysis of "texts," or a disregard of "writing as a channel of information and those institutions...that connect books with people" (Kittler 1990: 370). Indeed, the routes of discourse networks do more than spread narratives of an imagined national community (Anderson 1991), they constitute them as distinctive and habitual acts of coding, storing, and transferring those very images as knowledge of a certain kind. For example, in the network:

hardware connects abstract meanings to real, tangible bodies, and bodies to regimes of power, information channels, and institutions. Discourse and information hardware filter out some signals as "noise" and process others as meaningful. [Suárez 2001: 747]

Made tangible in these networks, narratives of Japaneseness are powerful precisely because they are both systemic—functioning as procedures with rules and habitual decision making practices,



in institutions, techniques and ways of thinking and doing, that continue to reinforce and support each other—and are simultaneously symbolic. These signs remain flexible, modifiable, and adaptable; for example, cute Lolita fashions<sup>266</sup> are in turn sexy and oppressive, or transformative and defiant, or Western, or distinctively Japanese. At the same time, such signs are, as Brian Axel describes of media forms more generally, “the means by which individuals gain access to each other;...[and] also an instrument by which individuals control each other and all social forms” (Axel 2006: 358). Once otaku normalize their lack of mobility in Japan (whether virtual or actual), and reinscribe this “stuckedness” onto others, as we have seen they often turn to a “celebration of...[their] capacity to stick it out rather than calling for change” (Hage 2009: 97). As I asked at beginning, what opportunities then, and through what means, do otaku have for resisting their subjectivation as never-going-to-be-Japanese? Martin’s insistence on carrying his expired California driver’s license or wearing his hair “like a *cholo*,” and Mike’s documentary t-shirt critical of dolphin hunting and refusal to stay at work for “service overtime” are all embodied forms of resistance which are intended to be very public; yet, their very ability to “speak,” to communicate and express that resistance, is often muted, constrained as much by other otaku—as they might criticize these actions for their perceived lack of sensitivity to Japanese culture—as it is by legitimized Japanese citizens. Resistance, of course, is “never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Ong-Van-Cung 2011: 155, discussing Foucault 1997b: 28). Acknowledging this, Youdell argues that Foucault still offers a model for resistance, it:

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<sup>266</sup> Lolita (from Nobokov’s 1955 book of the same name) fashion mixes the “cute” aesthetic of Japanese street fashion trends with Gothic Victorian-era inspired dresses (see for example Monden 2013).

...is not a struggle for the liberation, or self-determination, of the subject; but struggles played out through the persistent potential for resistances in the circulation of counter- and subjugated discourses. [Youdell 2006: 526, discussing Foucault 1988]

These narrow limitations and specifications that frame the possible—that subjectivize—grant avenues for freedom and resistance, but along recognizable and commensurate “leaps”

(Chomsky & Foucault 2006: 24). We can understand then attempts to become *more Japanese* as direct resistance to symbolic exclusion from Japaneseness, which is nevertheless constrained by the acceptance of non-Japanese status. As Saba Mahmood similarly details, such agency:

can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms. [2005: 15]

At the same time, the power for (social, economic, cultural, political, geographic) movement is always being rewritten, as rules defining who can move and in which direction are tied to shifting, politicized definitions of similarity and difference—just as the inside and the outside, the us and the them, are reimagined at different junctures and with different names. For example, while the Ainu were forcibly incorporated as *Japanese* at the turn of the century and made by bureaucrats to wear Japanese style clothes as materialized proof (Morris-Suzuki 1998: 21), they were later recognized as a distinct indigenous ethnicity by the state in 2008. At the same time, these boundaries are creatively and variously remade by differently positioned subjects: in contrast to American otaku, Brazilian *nikkeijin* in Japan focused renewed attention on their Brazilian-ness in the face of social exclusion and discrimination (Tsuda 2004), while Burakumin, historically associated with pollution, attempted to become indistinguishable (Hankins 2014) and Korean *zainichi* sought more visibility as a method to claim rights and recognition as residents, if not citizens (Tsuchiya 2014). It is often at the local, community level—where “ambiguities and discrepancies in meanings...[are] tolerated,” managed and dealt

with in reaction to everyday practical concerns (Stewart & Strathern 2004: 3)—that change and adaptation first sometimes appear (Sooudi 2017: 808). Perhaps in conversation with the rise of globalization rhetoric and the coming 2020 Olympics, local communities in Japan will increasingly negotiate and even accommodate certain diverse populations *made visible*; while of course, others will be simultaneously kept invisible, or made to disappear.

### 7.2.1 On leaving, to finally belong?

Sophie and her husband, who grew up in Mie Prefecture, were married last year in Hawaii, halfway between home and home. Right after, he was transferred to Indonesia for a three year stint working in the company sales office there, a common occurrence for a Japanese business. She lives in an apartment complex with many other Japanese families who have been sent for work, temporarily. She tutors a number of them in English and does some translation for a Japanese NGO on the side. On the weekends, Sophie and her husband like to hike with a group of Japanese salarymen, and they always finish the day by drinking and eating together. She told me she speaks almost exclusively in Japanese. When I asked her recently how she was adjusting, Sophie wrote to me to say:

I feel like I've reached "peak Japanese-ness." I know that sounds pretentious and super dumb, but I don't mean it in that way. I mean that when you quoted me before, you quoted me as saying something (ridiculous) like, "consuming Japanese media makes me want to be Japanese." And I think if I were ever to reach a point where that could be remotely a thing (it's not a thing), now would be the time, because being here as a "Japanese wife" puts me into a Japanese community that I couldn't usually easily enter in Japan...or we can forget I ever said it too because although I can acknowledge it as kind of true, saying it makes me feel shame - \_\_\_\_\_ -

In leaving Japan, Sophie has in some ways escaped the structural boundaries that kept her non-Japanese. Some of these were very practical, as she described how hard it can be to enter a

community that has long-term roots and relationships, where “everyone has their groups of friends from college and from work.”<sup>267</sup> In Indonesia, in a space where Sophie and her Japanese neighbors are all equally foreign, the differences she might represent are less relevant against the differences, confusions and isolations of a city and language new to them all. In a consideration of the possibilities for belonging, Sophie’s relative achievement of acceptance as a “Japanese wife,” in integrating with a international and mobile Japanese community, represents the way possibilities for resistance and change emerge in conversation with the structuring influence of discourse as it flows through networks, as it is variously incorporated and articulated in daily life. When she comes home to Japan in another few years, I wonder what forms of Japaneseness might be here to greet her.

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<sup>267</sup> Here she is referring to the *nakama*, see chapter 1. This is in contrast to Allison’s description of contemporary Japan as a “relationless society,” which she adopts from an NHK television broadcast (Allison 2015).

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