

## Contemporary Japan

Challenges for a World Economic Power in Transition

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## Towards Critical Occidentalism Studies

Re-inventing the 'West' and 'Japan' in *Mangaesque*  
Popular Cultures

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**Abstract** This paper investigates the reproduction of the imagined geography of the 'West' in contemporary Japan by employing a relational, intersectional and positional approach in order to examine Occidentalism and its hegemonic identification and othering process. Particular attention will be paid to emerging Japanese subcultures enacting a parodic and sexualised re-invention of Westernness and Japaneseness within a globalising *mangaesque* media mix.

**Summary** 1. Introduction. – 2. Towards Critical Occidentalism Studies. – 3. Occidentalism, Orientalism, Self-Orientalism and 'Japan'. – 4. The Emergence of *Mangaesque* Pop Nationalism. – 5. Moe Nation Anthropomorphism. – 6. The Boom of *Axis Powers Hetalia*. – 7. Eurocentric Cartography and Gendered Whiteness. – 8. Sexualised Parody. – 9. Conclusion: (Un)doing Occidentalism.

### 1 Introduction

The main aim of this study<sup>1</sup> is to critically address the hegemonic range of Occidentalism in contemporary Japan, by referring to the re-negotiation and re-articulation of cultural identity in relation to the imagined geography of the 'West'. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Gramsci 1929-1935), this process will be firstly investigated by introducing a tentative theory on the relational, intersectional and positional dynamics between Occidentalism, Orientalism and self-Orientalism. Furthermore, in contrast to prevailing studies on power limited to the examination of institutionalised military, politics, economics, culture, etc., Gramsci's foundational project

<sup>1</sup> This study is part of a broader research project entitled *Beyond the 'West' and the 'East': Occidentalism, Orientalism and Self-Orientalism in Italy-Japan Relations* (BETWATE) conducted at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Miyake 2011-2013). It has been funded by the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme FP7-PEOPLE-2010-IIF under Grant Agreement no. PIFI-GA-2010-275025. Additional revisions to its first version presented at the international conference «Contemporary Japan» (25 October 2011) has been carried out within the research project entitled *Critical Occidentalism Studies* (CRITOC) funded by the Ca' Foscari Research Fellowship (2014-2015).

presented in his *Quaderni del Carcere* (1929-1935) aimed at investigating the «popular creative spirit». This has not only resulted in a more inclusive, complex and dynamic theory on hegemony; it has also contributed to the increasing recognition of investigating popular cultures as a strategic site for the re-production of any hegemony in modern and contemporary societies in order to understand hegemonic effectiveness as a dynamic balance of coercion and consent.

Accordingly, the second part of this study will explore new affective investment in Westernness and Japaneseness in the spheres of emerging mediascapes and youth subcultures, as exemplified by the so-called *moe* (a particular kind of ‘adorable’, ‘cute’) nation anthropomorphism: the parodic personification of entire nations as cute sexualised girls/boys, which has become highly popular in the last decade in both male-oriented *otaku* (fan of anime and manga) and female-oriented *fujoshi* (fan of male-male romance narrative) subcultures.

This paper suggests that the continuing fascination, or obsession, with the ‘West’ expressed in these urban subcultures, and their influence on the *mangaesque* aesthetic informing the wider trans-medial platform of manga, anime and videogames, plays a crucial role in the re-invention of ‘Japan’. The *mangaesque* convergence of the globalising Japanese media mix has not only become one of the main governmental resources of brand nationalism in the ‘Cool Japan’ policy but also the perceptual frame through which ‘Japan’ is popularised both internally as well as externally among international ‘J-culture’ fandom.

## 2 Towards Critical Occidentalism Studies

In the modern age Occidentalism as a cumulative constellation of discourses, emotions, practices, and institutions based upon the idea of the so-called ‘West’ has played a hegemonic role in the configuration of collective identity and alterity. The imagined geography of the ‘West’ opposed to the ‘East’, or the ‘Rest’, has been one of the most effective in inscribing the whole world and humanity along hierarchic and fluid lines of inclusion and exclusion, encompassing global relations of power in geopolitical contexts, and spatialising knowledge practices in geocultural spheres (Gramsci 1929-1935; Hall 1992; Coronil 1996).

Accordingly Occidentalism will be considered in this study as:

- 1) a collective identification and othering process within asymmetrical power relations on a global scale that was foundational to Eurocentric modernity and subjectivity, beginning with Europe’s colonial expansion in the late fifteenth century, and whose influence extended to the America-centric modernity of the twentieth century, (from a diachronic or historical perspective);

- 2) the whole network of signifying practices shaping the so-called 'West' in terms of identity and alterity. Every kind of discourse, emotion, practice or institution contributes to the idea of the existence of something as the 'West' opposed to the 'East', or something as 'Western' or 'Eastern', setting aside whether it is a pro-Western/pro-Eastern or anti-Western/anti-Eastern discourse, or a Euro-American or non-Euro-American discourse (from a synchronic or socio-cultural perspective).

Building upon point 1 and 2, Occidentalism is basically configured by the following key aspects:

- *colonialism*: the historical expansion of Euro-American countries across the whole world;
- *capitalism*: the political economy of this expansion;
- *modernity*: the socio-cultural mode of this expansion;
- *whiteness*: the racialised distinction of its main actors
- *West*: the civilisational identity or collective name given to the hegemonic institutions, actors and cultures of the whole process.

In contrast to the prevailing studies on Occidentalism in the last decades (Carrier 1995; Chen 2002; Buruma, Margalit 2004), this study is based on the assumption that Occidentalism is not limited to a simple inverted- or counter-Orientalism, used as anti-European or anti-American ideology by Islamist fundamentalists or Chinese and Japanese nationalists. Instead, Occidentalism is considered more radically as the condition enabling the very possibility of Orientalism and self-Orientalism (Coronil 1996; Bonnett 2004; Dietze et al. 2009; Miyake 2010, 2014). In spite of the pervasive impact of modern and contemporary Occidentalism on the global scale, paradoxically, there is still no unified field of systematic academic investigation into the 'West' as a concept (Heller 2007), creating a kind of blind spot in present day Humanities and Social Sciences. Occidentalism still continues to be examined through a body of unrelated works, and mainly relying on essentialist or substantialist assumptions. It is still methodological civilisationalism, nationalism and culturalism, that informs to a large extent the most widespread and influential publications on the 'West', such as the case of Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) or Niall Ferguson's *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011). This contributes to the mystifying and ongoing conflation, in some cases as a kind of fetish even in postcolonial theory as pointed out by Neil Lazarus (2004), between the 'West' as an ideal-type concept or a historical, ideological and cultural construct, on the one hand, and the West - referred to without inverted commas - as a civilisational essence or empirical entity bestowed with subjective agency, on the other.

This study suggests that Occidentalism has been and still is a sort of epistemological unconscious, configuring the fundamental assumptions

for constructing collective identity and alterity. In this sense, insufficient understanding and a lack of critical examination regarding the complex processuality of modern Occidentalism is functional to the reproduction even today of the imagined geography of the 'West' and the 'East'. In other words, Occidentalism as an influential matrix of intelligibility, even in the absence or decrease of direct coercion, continues to be effective in articulating the ideas of both the 'West' and the 'East' as a widespread, self-evident and naturalised existence, and, therefore, reproducing Occidentalism as an almost invisible and unquestioned hegemony in different periods and in widely different regions and socio-cultural spheres.

### 3 Occidentalism, Orientalism, Self-Orientalism and 'Japan'

The critical approach adopted in this investigation builds partly upon Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism (Said 1978) but is mostly inspired by the notion of hegemony elaborated by Antonio Gramsci. Actually it is his *Quaderni del carcere* that stands out for the pioneering questioning of the very concept of the 'West' as an epistemological category, as well as for the revealing suggestion that Orientalism, and Japanese self-Orientalism in particular, is a consequence of modern Eurocentric hegemony (Gramsci 1929-1935, pp. 1419-1420). Although Gramsci only occasionally reflected upon the concept of a Eurocentric imagined geography, and never used the terms 'Occidentalism' or 'Orientalism', his indication becomes particularly useful in the context of this paper, integrating it with his more fully expressed notion of hegemony: a dynamic balance of material coercion and cultural consent by means of a historical and mutually articulated process enacted by different social groups. This implies, among others, that there can be no effective hegemony, without the active consent by the subaltern sides. By applying this perspective both to the global context of inter-national relations between nation-states, as well as to intra-national societal relations within nations, it becomes clear that Occidentalism, in order to become effective, is reducible neither to one-sided imperialist rule or ideology exercised by dominant actors within the broader capitalistic world order nor to unilateral repression suffered by those who are dominated against their own interests. Instead, Occidentalism as hegemony is the highly relational, and even complicit, process enacted jointly by the dominant and the subaltern sides and ultimately leads to its reproduction even without its imposition by force.<sup>2</sup>

The key to the effectiveness of this epochal hegemony is the mutual processuality of Occidentalism intermingling with both Orientalism and

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2 In contrast to substantialist theory, which considers individuals as self-subsistent actors capable of social interaction, relational theory focuses on the individual's transactional contexts and reciprocal relations (Emirbayer 1997).

self-Orientalism, which can be summed up as follows. In the modern age Occidentalism has been a self-definition as the 'West', first in Europe and then in the United States, that is articulated via intertwined paradigms aimed at defining its identity as modern: universalism, reason, science, progress, individualism, masculinity, the white race, adulthood, technology, etc. Like any kind of hegemonic identity, it is not limited to an isolated or homogeneous paradigm. Occidentalism relies on its ability to intersect very different axes of social-cultural identification regarding nation, class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.<sup>3</sup> On the intra-national level within societal relations, this cumulative intersectionality is what enables Occidentalism to mobilise and to be sustained at the same time by very different modes of representation, practice and emotion, cross-cutting institutionalised and highly formalised knowledge as well as popular and everyday common sense. This leads it to finally permeate every dimension of human existence, ultimately resulting in its most effective form: self-evidence, naturalisation and, eventually, invisibility.

As Said has shown, this Eurocentric self-definition has been configured within global asymmetrical power relations resulting in the hierarchic othering process known as Orientalism. Depending on context and period, the non Euro-American subaltern could be defined as the 'East', the 'Rest', 'Islam', 'Asia', 'Africa' or even a single nation-state and its people as 'Japan' and the 'Japanese'. It is Orientalism as a process of contrastive and explicit othering that has contributed in modern age to shape, by binary opposition, Euro-American identity, enabling the very idea of 'West' to remain in many cases implicit or unmarked as the universal norm. If we consider the principle of the binary construction of meaning, than the *marked particular* is what enables the *unmarked universal* to be defined as such (Iwabuchi 1994, italics by the Author). In other words, if unmarked identification with the 'West' relies basically on the idea, or desire, of being the exclusivist author and owner of a superior modernity and its constituting paradigms, then the construction of the subaltern 'oriental' or 'eastern' other will be, or must be, marked as a non-Western and non-modern other. In order to make sense of Euro-American identity as universal and modern, the non Euro-American other must be configured as a cumulative intersection of tradition inspiring paradigms, such as particularism, emotionality, stasis, groupism, femininity, coloured race, infancy, nature, etc.

Under modern imperialism and capitalism, non Euro-American regions, civilizations, cultures and people have been colonised, subordinated or simply influenced, becoming available to Euro-American projections about

3 Intersectionality has been theorised since the late 1980s by Afro-American feminist sociologists in the United States in order to highlight how the axes of identity are not limited to one single level, but instead interact on multiple and interdependent levels, contributing cumulatively to systematic social inequality and discrimination (Crenshaw 1991).

what is or should be other to the 'West', including the unconscious removal or nostalgic desire for native Euro-American traditions and its own non-modern past. The consequence is a constant generation of 'oriental' others functioning as identity mirrors: to be (re)discovered and explained (academic Orientalism), to be educated and reformed (paternalistic Orientalism), to be despised and hated (racist Orientalism), to be fantasised and desired (exoticistic Orientalism).

Japan too, as in the case of any kind of Orientalism, has been marked or configured as an 'oriental' other in contrast to the hegemonic notion of 'western' identity and the paradigms of its supposed distinctive and exclusivist modernity. Even if it has never been exposed to direct Euro-American colonialism, Japan's very origin and present existence as a modern nation-state has been established in historical conditions of limited or absent sovereignty induced by asymmetrical power relations. First, within the Unequal Treaties imposed in the second half of the nineteenth century by the United States, British Empire, Russian Empire, Kingdom of the Netherlands, French colonial empire, and Kingdom of Prussia; secondly, within the United States-led Allied occupation (1945-1952) after defeat in World War II, shaping present geopolitical dependence and subalternity to the US. However, an innovative specificity of this Orientalism is induced by the unexpected intrusion of Japan in world history not only as an Asian nation-state undergoing rapid modernisation, but also as the first to threaten the Euro-American monopoly of modernity, resulting in a specific double Orientalism of Japan.

One part of this Euro-American othering process is the classical and well-tested configuration of Japan as a place of 'oriental' or 'eastern tradition' antithetical to 'western modernity', generating a rich repertoire of popular icons: Shintō, Zen, samurai, geisha, tea ceremony, martial arts, mount Fuji, love for nature, bucolic community, etc. The more those icons are unilaterally selected for their potential to inspire ideas and emotions related to tradition, or even pushed far away towards an extreme and remote past, the more they become effective to affirm by contrastive and implicit dualism Euro-American identity as modern. The result is Japan as hyper-tradition: a place where selected features of archaism, classicism or feudalism tend to be so exaggerated that they seem out of time and out of space, evoking an ultimately decontextualised other, dispersed in some mythical and a-historical dimension.

The representation of past or present Japan as the quintessence of tradition becomes available for both nostalgic desire and paternalistic contempt, regardless of their apparent pro- or anti-Japanese intentions: a place of authentic, religious, aesthetic, intuitive and natural harmony, uncontaminated by the artificial contradictions of modernity, or on the contrary, a place of retarded progress and underdeveloped emancipation, eternally imprisoned by its atavistic dependence to the laws of nature, ritual formalism and mystic irrationality.

The other part of Euro-American Orientalism configuring Japan has been established as a more recent adaptation to the nation's modernisation. Japan's unexpected achievements in matters of science, technique, industry, economic prosperity throughout the late nineteenth and whole twentieth century, has brought during the peak of its economical and financial success in the 1980s, contending even US global economic primacy has brought a new form of Orientalism, known as techno-Orientalism (Morley, Robins 1995). A futuristic imagined geography shaping a place populated by robots, cyborgs, computers, nuclear devastation, *salarymen*, *yakuza*, *otaku*, cute idols, etc. This time, Japan as hyper-modernity, but pushed towards an extreme and far-away future. Techno or neo-Orientalism is a more recent othering process enacted to preserve exclusive monopoly of at least some of the most enduring and vital modern paradigms attributed to Euro-American identity, such as reason, individualism, freedom or progress. Japan as the 'eastern' or 'oriental' other, may be acknowledged as modern, or even as 'western', but only in terms of superficial, instrumental or inauthentic imitation, ultimately unaffacting a supposed deep, essential and innate otherness.

This is why within neo- or techno-Orientalism, contemporary Japan is mainly represented as a kind of dysfunctional or dystopic version of modernity or the 'West', displayed through an endless list of individual, national or ecological crises: reification of mankind to the machine (robots, cyborgs, *otaku*), urban or generational alienation (*hikikomori*, suicides, clochards), ritualised groupism and conformism to corporativism (*salarymen*), ultraviolent individualism (*yakuza*), cyber-apocalyptic religious terrorism (Aum Shinrikyō), capitalistic precarization of apathetic youth (*freeter*), infantile consumerism and perverse entertainment (*kawaii*, *hentai*), racism against ethnic minorities (right-wing nationalism), devastating effects of science, technology, industrialisation (Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Fukushima), etc.

In this case, the configuration of contemporary Japan as a symbol of futuristic, but dysfunctional, modernity causing every kind of imaginable crisis, becomes available for reassuring nostalgic Orientalists that the 'real spirit' of Japan is grounded on tradition as the only guarantee of an idealised harmony; or, for presenting to paternalistic Orientalists the opportunity to judge the intrinsic limits of Japan's modernity in terms of rationality, individualism and democracy; or, for offering to postmodern Orientalists a spectacularised version for nurturing cyberpunk and apocalyptic fantasies.

However, the othering effect of this double Orientalism of Japan may be further enhanced by its mutual combination. If the 'West' and its modernity ought to be grounded on reason and is therefore more or less intelligible to rational and logical investigation, then Japan as the Far Eastern or most extreme other, must not only be very different, irrational, intuitive or mysterious, but ultimately contradictory to reason itself. Contemporary Ori-

talism of Japan is mostly effective not so much as unilateral reduction to an archaic nativist spirit or to a high-tech virtual future, but as a combined articulation of these single oppositions to the 'West'. Hyper-tradition added to hyper-modernity resulting in an extreme and ambivalent contradiction: the myth of Japan as the country of every kind of imaginable and irreducible contrasts. In other words, present Orientalism of Japan is mostly effective by inducing fascination for Japan as a cultural paradox or oxymoron.

In contrast to common sense, the basic limit of classical, techno or neo-Orientalism is not that they may originate from ignorance, prejudice or discrimination, producing stereotypical, superficial or false knowledge about Japan. Every single icon of the orientalist imagined geography may exist empirically, may be appreciated or even loved, and could be investigated systematically and rigorously, producing very 'deep' or scientific knowledge, as has already been done for centuries by academic specialists of Japan. The most problematic limit of any kind of Orientalism is that in order to make sense of identity and alterity it relies on binary oppositions that induce distancing and ultimately dehumanising configuration of otherness.

Cross-cutting stereotypical common sense, mass media and academic discourse, 'Japan' and 'the Japanese' continue to be evoked as intrinsically different, alternatively in terms of excess or lack of Euro-American identity. Samurai, geisha, and urban youth cultures may be superiorised and admired respectively as symbols of authentic honour and martial arts, aestheticized femininity and eroticism, metrosexual and transmedial cool; or, they may be inferiorised and commiserated as symbols of *kamikaze* or *harakiri* fanaticism, passive submission to patriarchic male desire, or techno-virtual consumerism and infantilism. Within the imagined geography of past or neo-Orientalism, exoticism and racism are two sides of the same coin, ultimately precluding 'the Japanese' from anthropological citizenship as normal or universal humans. In other words, Occidentalism and the resulting idea of the 'West' as long as it builds upon a contrastive grammar of exclusivistic dualism, will intermingle with a kind of Orientalism that induces imagining, thinking, loving or hating the Japanese other as intrinsically alien to reason, individualism, freedom and progress.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of individual or conscious intentions of the individual Euro-American authors and actors that are to a large extent pre-determined by being embedded in this matrix of intelligibility, the fundamental paradigms assigned to 'Western' identity make no sense within Orientalism if attributed also to the subaltern other. As long as this matrix remains unaffected by epistemological hybridity, the existence in Japan of universal or rational

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4 Actually, according to the World Values Survey, Japan has been in the last two decades (1996-2015) always ranked as the first country in the world for 'secular-rational values' that are defined in contrast to 'traditional values' based on religion, traditional family values and authority (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp?CMSID=Findings>).



thought, individualism, democracy and so forth becomes not only insignificant or irritating to the hegemonic Euro-American gaze, even if they may be sometimes acknowledged as undeniable exceptions which confirm the general rule that Japan is fundamentally different; what may be even more problematic is that every kind of basic isomorphism with the 'West' becomes almost invisible when thinking, imagining, loving or hating the Japanese other. For the epistemological unconscious of Euro-American Orientalism in modern age, the marked construction of a pure, authentic and innate alterity in order to evoke a kind of *Homo Japonicus*, or of any *Homo Orientalis*, has been a reassuring guarantee to preserve the unmarked hegemony of a supposed *Homo Occidentalis*.

The crucial point to be made is that the employment of this identification and othering process in order to become hegemonic implies more than a one-sided exercise of exoticising fantasies or a unilateral imposition on the passive, mute and subaltern other sustained by military, political or economic power. The effectiveness of hegemony relies upon the hegemony's acceptance, interiorisation and active reproduction by the subaltern itself. This applies to the other-definition of the 'West' as the universal other (other-Occidentalism) as well as to self-definition as the more or less subaltern 'East' (self-Orientalism). In other words, Occidentalism becomes completely hegemonic only through the interaction with the non-Euro-American subaltern, and, mostly important, only when the latter accepts the imagined geography of the 'West' as a looking-glass self in order to make sense of themselves/herself/himself as well as others, thus mobilising a similar internal process of intersecting discourses, practices and emotions. The result is a mutually constitutive and intersubjective process, a sort of mirror game in which specular identity and alterity representations enforce one another, reproducing the 'West' as the ultimate and universal point of reference.

This is particularly evident in the case of modern and contemporary Japan. Since the 1980s, critical investigation on cultural nationalism in postwar Japan, specifically regarding the immensely popular *nihonjinron* (lit. 'theories on the Japanese') discourse, has pointed out the complicity between the most influential Euro-American specialists of Japan and Japanese culturalists, in jointly establishing the dominant idea of a homogeneous, particularistic and unique 'Japan' antithetical to a generalized and universal 'West' (Mouer, Sugimoto 1986; Dale 1988; Iwabuchi 1994; Befu 2001).

what gives the majority of Japanese the characteristic image of Japanese culture, is still its distinction from the so-called West. [...] the loss of the distinction between the West and Japan would result in the loss of Japanese identity in general (Sakai 2002, pp. 564-565).

However, this kind of cultural self-orientalism or cultural self-colonisation, despite Japan never having been politically colonised, would not have been possible without its own strategic advantages. Sakai Naoki has illustrated how the modern *schema of co-figuration* between a universalistic 'West' contrasted to a particularistic 'Japan' has been very effective since the nineteenth century in evoking an ethno-linguistic and cultural entity known as 'Japan' (Sakai 1997). More specifically, Iwabuchi Kōichi has convincingly suggested that national identity in modern Japan has been shaped through a triadic scheme, by strategically positioning itself between two essentialized poles of the 'West' and the 'East' (Iwabuchi 1994, 2002). The resulting nationalistic discourses configured by this double othering process, other-Occidentalism of Europe/USA and other-Orientalism of Asia, have offered strategical or positional advantages. They have been proven to be extremely functional both internally, in order to mobilise social cohesion and consent, as well as externally in occidentalist discourses to affirm cultural exclusivity of Japan in regards to the Euro-American 'West', and in orientalist discourses to advocate colonial superiority over the Asian 'East'.

Nevertheless, Occidentalism, like any hegemony, is neither a static structure nor a closed system of abstract and self-referential binary oppositions; rather, it is embedded in a historical process whereby negotiation and disjunctions are always at stake. Following changes in geopolitical, economical and material asymmetries, its effectiveness relies upon how the imitation, interiorisation, negotiation and reproduction of its intersecting discourses, practices and emotions contribute to the corroboration of the sameness of discursive identity and alterity, or, on the contrary, are able to introduce some ambiguity, slippages or even subversive disruptions. Even if rarely acknowledged, hegemony is an intrinsically polyphonic process. Thus, the ambivalent status of Japan, as a modern nation-state both orientalised by the hegemonic Euro-American side and, at the same time, orientalising the subaltern Asian side (Iwabuchi 1994; Sakai 1997), reveals how Occidentalism is not only a mutually constituted process shaped by a generic centre/periphery structure; it is instead an asymmetrical network of relations articulated through multiple, nuanced and fluid positions of dominance and subalternity.

This preliminary discussion of the relational and intersectional processuality of hegemony has focused on the broader geocultural frame of modern Occidentalism. However, it is the additional focus on positionality in the discussion that follows, which will provide a more specific perspective suited to the case of contemporary Japan, in general, and to its emergent popular cultures, in particular. Positionality will be considered as a time and space contingent as well as an ambivalent site where discourses, practices, actors and institutions are both differentially configured by Occidentalism as well as potentially open to change. It is in this regard that Japanese popular cultures deserve particular attention not only as a stra-

tegic site for the negotiation and reproduction of any hegemony, but also because they have become, in the last three decades, the driving force for stimulating global interest in Japan among younger generations.

Particularly compelling is that while Japanese cultural expressions have been mainly selected and appreciated in the past by Euro-American audiences for their potential to evoke non-‘western’ ‘Japaneseness’ framed by the imagined geography of Orientalism, the international boom of Japanese popular cultures instead has been established to a large extent without relying on this hegemonic othering process. Defying conventional boundaries of high/low literature, Yoshimoto Banana and Murakami Haruki have become the most read Japanese writers worldwide, because most of the international audience have been attracted not necessarily by their ‘oriental’, Japanese and particularistic otherness, but primarily by their fresh, intimate or visionary narratives that have been able to stimulate deep connections with shared or isomorphic conditions of living in a late capitalist, postmodern and affluent society. This applies even to a much larger extent to the global success of the Japanese cultural industry. Videogames, manga, anime, character goods, etc. have become one of the main ingredients of inculturation for last Euro-American generations since their early childhood, so much that they are not even acknowledged anymore as made in Japan.

On the one hand, Japanese popular cultures are primarily appreciated for their extraordinary capacity to entertain, but also for stimulating self-discovery, new social relations and transmedial literacy. On the other, this does not mean that they are immune to being orientalised in a second phase, in particular when it comes to promoting them as cultural capital grounded on essentialised ‘Japaneseness’. However, it is the constitutive hybrid nature of Japanese popular cultures, both as implemented Euro-American media technology in Japan, as well as transmedial aesthetic cross-cutting high/low art dichotomies, that may offer a potential still to be explored for re-imagining Japan exonerated from the hegemonic intermingling of Occidentalism, Orientalism and self-Orientalism.

#### 4 The Emergence of *Mangaesque* Pop Nationalism

Following the editorial success of revisionist manga series such as *Sensōron* (On War) by Kobayashi Yoshinori, popular cultures have become the object of widespread attention in Japanese public opinion that overlaps with heated debates on history, nationalism and new generations (Sakamoto 2008). In contrast to ideological, political or essentialised interpretations of the nation’s past and present, some commentators have pinpointed to the radical change among new generations regarding the way they experience themselves in relation to the nation as an ‘imagined political commu-

nity'. In fact, this post-ideological or post-modern experience has become increasingly detached from or indifferent to the previous dialectics of true vs. false or good vs. evil, which continues to inform the evaluational horizon of revisionist, progressivist or institutional discourses (Honda 2007).

At the same time, the globalised diffusion of Japanese popular cultures has inspired politics and bureaucrats since the Koizumi government in 2003 to start the 'Cool Japan' campaign: an ambitious programme of soft power employing manga, anime, videogames, and youth subcultures in order to improve Japan's image in the world, to promote cultural industry as a solution to economic stagnation, and to encourage a renewed sense of pride in the Japanese national culture (Daliot-Bul 2009). In other words, over the past decade, Japanese popular cultures have become an increasingly strategical and contested site for the negotiation and re-articulation of Japaneseness or 'Japanese national culture', ranging from governmental and corporate brand nationalism to emergent subcultural data-consumption and collaborative creativity (Iwabuchi 2008; Azuma 2009; Condry 2013): a fluid intersection between new forms of hegemony, both from above and below, disseminated and reconfigured through the circuits of its *mangaesque* media mix (Steinberg 2012).

*Mangaesque* aesthetics does not only attest to the historical primacy of manga media in influencing other media texts, like anime, videogames, character design, etc. Some of the defining aspects of manga are relevant in favouring its increasing media convergence or cross-over with other media texts and practices such as networking potential through manga-specific mediality, postcritical ascertainment, hobbification, visual artificiality/virtualisation, and hybrid identities (Berndt 2012).

In this scenario, increasing academic attention has been paid to the emergent role of urban subcultures, not only as a source of post-modern acculturation and literacy within Japan, but also as nurturing a new generation of *pro-sumers* (producers and consumers) who are establishing themselves as actors of a wider paradigm shift within an increasingly globalised and convergent mediascape

from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture (Jenkins 2006, p. 243).

## 5 Moe Nation Anthropomorphism

So, how is the relational process between Westernness and Japaneseness re-articulated in the emergent spheres of *mangaesque* pop nationalism? What kind of different levels of discourse, practice or emotion may be mobilised and may intersect within bottom-up participatory culture in the reproduction of Occidentalism in contemporary Japan? How are positional contingencies affected by Occidentalism? Or are they able to introduce some kind of slippage or disruption?

One of the most popular forms underlying the renewed actuality of the 'national' or 'nationness' in the Japanese media mix is *moe* nation anthropomorphism: the *mangaesque* personification of entire nations as cute sexualised girl or boy characters, which is a major expression of emergent subcultures and their defining hobbies. *Moe* is a popularised slang term indicating a strong interest, feeling or passion for particular types of young, cute, and sexy characters. It has been described as a conflation of child-like innocence and adult desire, an ambivalent and polymorphous stimulation of pure, protecting and nurturing feelings for cute and helpless characters as well as stimulation of desire for eroticised young fictional characters (Galbraith 2009). While emerging originally from male-oriented *otaku* subcultures, hardcore fans of manga, anime, videogames, and figurines, it has also been widely appropriated by female-oriented subcultures, such as *fujoshi* (lit. 'rotten women'): a self-deprecatory term used among teenagers and young women who are readers or writers of the Boys' Love genre, centered on male homosexual intimacy and romance, and especially of the *yaoi* (homoerotic romantic or sexual genre of fiction) sub-genre (Galbraith 2011). *Yaoi* refers to more sexually explicit and ironic works, also featuring male homosexual related fantasies but differing from the more commercialised Boys' Love (hereafter BL) stories in that they are mostly plotless adaptations and amateur parodies of original works taken from mainstream manga and anime.

*Moe* inspired fans to use online discussions forums, such as 2channel, *dōjinshi* (the huge world of amateur manga), and *cosplay* (the costume role-plays) to develop an even purer expression of cuteness known as *moe* anthropomorphism: the representation of inanimate objects or concepts as cute girls or boys. Operating systems (*Os-tan*), voice-generating softwares (*Hatsune Miku*), war machines (*mechamusume*), household appliances, confectionery, philosophy, history, the Constitution, and everything imaginable, from tangible things to abstract theories, has been rearticulated as *moe* and transfigured as beautiful cute girls/boys. *Moe* anthropomorphism has also been widely extended to nations, resulting in commercialised popular works dedicated to a single nation, like *Nihon-chan* or *Aghanis-tan*. In other words, the whole world has been exposed to *moefication* as can be seen in the infinite series of *mangaesque* dictionaries teaching readers about the world and its nations personified by cute eroticised girls or boys (Thompson 2009).

## 6 The Boom of Axis Powers *Hetalia*

By far and away the most popular transmedial platform for *moe* nation anthropomorphism, both in Japan and internationally, is the one originated by the web manga *Axis Powers Hetalia* (\*2006).<sup>5</sup> *Axis Powers Hetalia* (hereafter APH) is a gag comic and animation series depicting historical and military relations between more than 40 nations, anthropomorphised as cute looking and incompetent boys and kids.<sup>6</sup> These male characters personify broadstroke national, ethnic and linguistic stereotypes, and international relations are transfigured as intimate and childish quarrels mainly between the trio of the historic Axis Powers (Italy, Germany, and Japan) and between the characters of the Allied Forces (USA, UK, France, Russia, and China). There is no general and linear narrative providing a unifying frame to the mostly four-panel manga format and five-minute anime episodes. In other words, it is basically a plotless, loosely connected series about national characters, centred on short and silly gags set against the background of World War I and II as well as including episodes from ancient and medieval history and reaching to present-day geopolitics.

APH started as a web manga drawn by an amateur manga artist, Himaruya Hidekaz (\*1985), and posted on his personal website *Kitayume* in 2006 (<http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/hetaria/index.html>), while he was a student at a New York art school. In the following months the online diffusion gradually acquired a sort of cult status among female net surfers, prompting Japanese publisher Gentōsha Comics to release two printed volumes of APH's vignettes in 2008. After selling a million copies by late 2009, they were followed by the release of a third volume in 2010, a fourth one in 2011, a fifth one in 2012, and a sixth one in 2013. At present the estimated total sales amount to about 2 million copies. Meanwhile, in 2009, Studio Deen in Tokyo began working on an adaptation of the first series of short animation episodes (*Hetalia Axis Powers*) directed by Bob Shirohata, and released online by Animate.tv, which is now in its sixth season; this was followed by a feature-length animated film in 2010 (*Paint it, White!*). As usual for successful Japanese manga or anime, everything imaginable has been merchandised, in a virtually infinite media mix: CD character songs, drama CDs, videogames, cute figurines, vending machines with APH drinks, photo

5 Fieldwork on *Axis Power Hetalia-inspired fandom* was conducted in Japan from May to October 2010, and in Italy from October 2010 to January 2011. For a complete study on *Axis Powers Hetalia*, please refer to Miyake 2013.

6 The word 'Hetalia' in the title is a contraction of the Japanese slang term '*hetare*', meaning 'incompetent, useless, pathetic' and of the term 'Italia', which stands for Italy. Some of the minor characters are female personifications (Belarus, Belgium, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Seychelles, Taiwan, Ukraine). For a detailed description in English of all characters throughout the different media platforms ([http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List\\_of\\_Axis\\_Powers\\_Hetalia\\_characters](http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_Axis_Powers_Hetalia_characters)).

sticker booths (*purikura*), and, of course, hundreds of stationary gadgets.

If we consider that APH was originally the work of an amateur without any evident aesthetic or graphic sophistication, and without any narrative consistency, then its extraordinary popularity among *dōjinshi* (fanzines, amateur manga, novels, poems, illustrations, etc.) is even more remarkable than its commercial success. Thousands of different amateur-produced titles, ranging from manga to light novels have been exhibited for sale in the many manga and *cosplay* conventions dedicated to the APH world. StudioYou has organised hundreds of *Hetalia Only Events* in major Japanese cities, from the all-inclusive *World Series* to more segmented *Kyara Only Events* limited to specific nation characters and couple combinations. Besides *Komiketto* in Tokyo, the biggest amateur manga/anime event in the world, attendance of events observed during June-October 2010 ranged from 150 author/fan circles (ca 1,500 visitors) to 450 circles (ca 10,000 visitors). Excluding some of the organisers, most of these events had a 100% female attendance. At the summer 2010 *Komiketto 78*, the 1,586 attending APH circles ranked second in number only behind the more male-oriented shooting game *Tōhō Project* circles.<sup>7</sup> Starting from 2009 and lasting until late 2011, APH became by far the most frequently adapted work among female-oriented *dōjinshi* in Japan.<sup>8</sup>

The infinite chain of derivative works, parodies, and spin-offs of the original is not limited to Japanese versions but has since spread to almost every language used on the internet. Through the web, and thanks to intensive scanlation and fansubbing, APH has had a dramatic impact around the whole world, especially among female fans of Japanese comics and animations, even before being officially translated into English or other main languages.<sup>9</sup> Since 2009, an Axis Powers Hetalia Day is celebrated on 24 October by the international fandom – especially by English-speaking fans in the USA, United Kingdom and Canada – who assemble, *cosplay* APH

7 *Komiketto 78* (Summer 2010): 1. *Tōhō Project* (2,416 fan/author circles); 2. *Hetalia* (1,586); 3. *Reborn* (822); 4. *Sengoku Basara* (575); 5. *Gin Tama* (532). See Nyūsu 2 channeru, <http://news020.blog13.fc2.com/blog-entry-788.html>. Online survey on visitors of the *Komiketto 78* have confirmed APH inspired works as the most desired items for purchase among female *otaku*: 1. *Hetalia*; 2. *Reborn*; 3. *Durarara!!*; 10. *Tōhō Project*. See *Otalab*, [http://otalab.net/news/detail.php?news\\_id=1024](http://otalab.net/news/detail.php?news_id=1024).

8 At the *Komiketto 80* (Summer 2011), APH circles diminished, but still ranked second: 1. *Tōhō Project* (2,808 circles); 2. *Hetalia* (1,302); 3. *Sengoku Basara* (880); 4. *Reborn* (572); 5. *Vocaloid* (558). See *Moe ota nyūsu sokuho*, <http://otanews.livedoor.biz/archives/51807832.html>. YahooAuctionsJapan online lists 8,443 Japanese APH *dōjinshi* related titles and 2,565 *cosplay* related items. See *Yahuoku*, [http://auctions.search.yahoo.co.jp/search?p=%A5%D8%A5%BF%A5%EA%A5%A2&auccat=0&tab\\_ex=commerce&ei=euc-jp](http://auctions.search.yahoo.co.jp/search?p=%A5%D8%A5%BF%A5%EA%A5%A2&auccat=0&tab_ex=commerce&ei=euc-jp).

9 In Italy, which according to Pellitteri is the Euro-American nation with the highest number of Japanese animation series broadcast on television since 1978 (Pellitteri 2010, p. 556), APH has become, since 2009, the most popular work among the hardcore female fandom of *cosplay* and fanfiction, even before being translated officially into Italian.

characters, exhibit huge national flags, and discuss coupling combinations. In 2010, APH Day was celebrated in 35 countries, with 160 registered meetups (*Hetalia Day*, <http://hetalia-day.com/>). Finally, in that same year, the first two manga volumes were published in English by Tokyopo for the North American market, topping both *The New York Times* manga best seller list, and entering a more commercialised stage of their global diffusion.

## 7 Eurocentric Cartography and Gendered Whiteness

The imagined geography displayed in the APH world maps included in the original printed manga volumes are a striking example of Eurocentric cartography (Himaruya 2008-2013, vol. 3, pp. 10-11). Apart from Japan, almost all the main characters in the original manga and anime versions are cute and attractive white male Caucasians: Axis Powers Italy and Germany, together with Allied forces USA, England, France, Russia, and the 'Five Nordic Nations' (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Denmark). Most of the episodes are inspired by events that occurred between World War I and II, and centre on intimate quarrels between European characters, the American character and Japan. But if we consider Japan's international relations in this period, we find that most of the real historical and military events actually involved very dramatic and tragic engagements between Imperial Japan and its Asian neighbours. However, the series only includes a few Asian characters, of which the most important one is China, in some isolated episodes, followed by the character of Korea in the web manga; while Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Vietnam appear mainly as sketch characters in Himaruya's webpage and blog.

In addition to the textual and visual level, the modern cultural history of national identity regarding 'Japan' vs. the 'West' is confirmed by readers' preference for white Caucasian characters. A poll carried out by APH publisher Gentōsha investigating readers' most loved characters resembles a kind of *gaijin akogare* (fascination for western foreigners) ranking. In fact the 19 most popular characters after top-ranking Japan are England, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Greece, USA, Sweden, with China as the only character from the 'Rest' of the world voted in 17th place ([http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index\\_02.html](http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index_02.html)).

This kind of *mangaesque* attraction for the 'white male' is also confirmed by the *dōjinshi* amateur scene. Maps of APH conventions show how the distribution of tables and fan circles are completely framed according to the BL or *yaoi* code of male-to-male pairings: *seme* (active, stronger, 'penetrating' character) paired to a *uke* (passive, weaker, 'receiving' character). The most popular is the America (*seme*)/England (*uke*) pairing, followed by the England (*seme*)/Japan (*uke*) pairing, the Prussia (*uke*) corner, the France



(*seme*)/England (*uke*) pairing and the Scandinavian characters corner.<sup>10</sup> Japan is not only the most popular character among general readers of the original, but also very popular as a completely feminised or infantilised male *uke* character on the *dōjinshi* scene. Exhibition layouts of APH conventions centred exclusively on Japan as a *uke* character show that the most popular *seme* partners are all white Caucasians: firstly England, followed by the USA, France, Prussia, Italy, and Russia.<sup>11</sup>

As regards the relational processuality of Occidentalism, I suggest that the interiorisation of a Eurocentric cartography plays a prominent role in the popularity of APH not only in Japan, but also worldwide, especially in Euro-American contexts. Eurocentrism and whiteness contribute to the immediate familiarity and direct appropriation of the APH world and characters by Euro-American readers, without any need for complex mediation imposed by displacing difference or otherness. This familiarity is further enhanced by the specific stereotyping of characters according to modern clichés of the so-called national characters, adopted by the author Himaruya in response to mostly ethnic jokes diffused among his American friends, while he was studying in New York. For instance, Japan is shy, well-mannered, loves the changes of seasons, and technological gadgets but is clumsy in communicating his feelings and thoughts. On the contrary, Italy is a light-hearted idler, and pizza-pasta-music loving coward. America is an energetic, self-confident, perpetually hamburger-eating character who loves to play hero, but is superstitious and afraid of supernatural beings.

## 8 Sexualised Parody

In addition to its wider Eurocentric cartography and fascination for whiteness, it is also important to pay attention to more positionally specific differences introduced by APH's re-contextualisation of Occidentalism, and to acknowledge other intersections related to more ambivalent spheres of identification and nuanced modes of appropriation. According to the aforementioned Gentōsha survey, 'nation' is the second most appreciated aspect among general readers (<http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index.html>). Nations are anthropomorphised as *shōnen* (cute boys) characters, and, in the absence of a supporting narrative and graphic sophistication, are condensed as the exclusive focus of the short episodes. This means that, on the one hand, Eurocentrism, whiteness,

10 See catalogues of *Hetalia Only Events* (Sekai Kaigi Series) organised by StadioYou in Osaka (Index Osaka, 19 September 2010, p. 1) and Nagoya (Sangyō Rōdō Center, 12 September 2010, p. 8).

11 See catalogue of *Hetalia Nihon Uke Only Event: Sekai no Honda 2* organised by StadioYou in Tokyo (Ryūtsū Center, 5 September 2010, p. 1).

and geopolitical asymmetry are clarified and essentialised, considering the wide use of stereotypes related to nation, ethnicity, and language, and that characters, at least in the original, are only known by nation names ('Japan', 'Italy', 'Germany', etc.).<sup>12</sup> Entire nations are personified through a unified human body, personality and name, contributing to the erasure of internal diversities and historical complexities. For instance, Occidentalism is enhanced by personifying the USA, Russia or Germany as strong, blond-haired, active characters, while self-Orientalism is reaffirmed by Japan as a shy, passive, insecure and feminised boy or kid.

But, on the other hand, it is the very anthropomorphic and caricatural incarnation of modern nationness, as seen in the insistence upon their childish and intimate male-to-male relations, that introduces a fundamental ironic slippage to conventional images of world history, international relations, and national politics. This contributes to very exhilarating effects, and stimulates a polymorphous range of symbolic associations and emotions, both of which have been crucial in mobilising such widespread readings of the original manga and so many parodies among amateur *pro-sumers*.

As far as the pleasure of parodying APH is concerned, it is important to stress that the original is not a mere personification of Euro-American nations or of Japan, but already a parody of them: a pastiche, which may oscillate between a homage to Eurocentric history and fascination for whiteness, and a mocking caricature of their national stereotypes and their infantile behaviour. In this regard, Occidentalism functions in the original as a kind of discursive hypotext. The hegemonic *grand narrative*, so familiar in both Euro-American and Japanese contexts, is transfigured by resorting to an effective bricolage of highly popular icons, borrowed strategically by both male-oriented *otaku* and female-oriented *fujoshi* subcultures.<sup>13</sup>

BL and *yaoi* fantasies, on the other hand, are dominant in *dōjinshi* works, displaying in many cases a male homoerotic and very sexually explicit, often pornographic version of Occidentalism. On the one hand, anthropomorphised Eurocentrism and geopolitical hierarchy may be further enhanced due to the *yaoi* code of *seme* and *uke*, focussing on a far more restricted relation and narrative than in the original. This makes the hierarchic and dualistic dialectic of identity and alterity even more evident. As Nagaike Kazumi has highlighted in her study on the racialised textuality of BL magazines, this hierarchic dialectic mostly presents the 'masculine' superiorisa-

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12 In contrast to the original manga and anime series, personal names suggested by Himaruya himself are widely used in *dōjinshi* adaptations (Italy = Feliciano Vargas; Germany = Ludwig; Japan = Kiku Honda; USA = Alfred F. Jones, etc.).

13 The sexualised and male homoerotic overtones of Himaruya's APH characters remain mostly implicit, allowing for appreciation by a wider readership, who are not interested or even detest *yaoi* inspired homoerotic and sexually explicit representations.

tion of the Euro-American other as *seme*, and the ‘feminine’ inferiorisation of the Japanese self as *uke*, as well as the exotic orientalisation or erasure of the ‘Rest’ of the world (Nagaike 2009).

On the other hand, unlike commercial BL works, these *dōjinshi* are amateur works, parodies of the original APH. So if Himaruya’s work is already itself a parody of the hegemonic hypotext of Occidentalism, then these *dōjinshi* are a parody of a parody. Due to the different positionality of the mostly female *dōjinshi* authors living in Japan, the discursive distance concerning Occidentalism as well as Euro-American material referentiality is therefore further enhanced and diluted. When Himaruya composed APH, he was living in New York, and he was mostly inspired by Euro-American friends and students in modelling his manga characters. *Dōjinshi* authors, on the other hand, live in Japan, and therefore re-contextualisation is shaped both by different gendered positions as well as by referentiality to different people, and to different material, social, and institutional conditions. Interviews show that most *dōjinshi* readers and authors are actually not very fond of Euro-American history and nations, whiteness, the original work and its author, or male homosexuality.<sup>14</sup> What matters is mostly their very specific and concrete need as teenagers or young women in relation to the gendered and sexualised norms informing their external relation with other teenagers, men and adults in contemporary Japan, as well as their internal relations with the *dōjinshi* or wider APH fandom.

## 9 Conclusion: (Un)doing Occidentalism

The West becomes not so much a source of critical comparative perspective (which can be evaluated for its ‘accuracy’, for example) as an imaginative simulacrum infinitely available for the production of discourses that motivate and explain resistance or accommodation (Kelsky 2001, p. 28).

Karen Kelsky’s account of women’s internationalist narratives and practices in late 1990s Japan, also perfectly apply to the APH world. But if the ‘West’ as a simulacrum is everywhere, like the air we are breathing, does it make sense to criticise it? Or should we instead focus more on its strategic uses in order to highlight «resistance or accomodation» in specific contexts, groups, and single life-courses?

<sup>14</sup> Many amateur authors and cosplayers are not necessarily interested in world history or European nations *per se*, but on how to use that setting or context in an effective way for their personal adaptation. Much time may be invested in studying the context in its most minute detail, and the ‘serious’ knowledge thus acquired may be employed in regards to ‘non-fans’ to legitimate an apparently ‘embarrassing’ hobby (Miyake 2013).

On the one hand, this study suggests that the APH world, in spite of its cosmopolitan intentions (nations falling in love and having sex with each other) and liberating pleasures, does not necessarily erase the founding hypotext or pretext rooted in the imagined geography of the 'West', making it magically ineffective. The cumulative intersectionality of Occidentalism is instead further enhanced through nation anthropomorphism and sexualised parody. This allows a biopolitical extension, mobilising more emotional, spontaneous, and physical dimensions. Parody, *moe* inspiring affect, and asymmetrical relationships framed by the *seme/uke* code of BL and *yaoi* narrative, contribute to inducing euphoric and humorous responses, ultimately re-enforcing Occidentalism through highly emotional and polymorphous projections in terms of gender and sexuality. This contributes to a process of further naturalisation of the 'West'. Finally, transnational popularity re-activates the relational reproduction of Occidentalism, and is ultimately evidence of its globalised effectiveness as a version of a 'Cool Japan'.

On the other hand, in contrast to an overreading of a mostly female-oriented subculture, it is the very parodic aspect of APH that confers upon its *mangaesque* media mix such an ambivalent status, a kind of paradoxical and double-bind relation as regards the hegemonic hypotext of Occidentalism in terms of repetitive confirmation or critical subversion; and this also applies to all subcultures in the world concerning their relations with the wider society. What is at stake in this critical reading of APH is not only the hegemonic reproduction from below of Occidentalism, but also of its intersecting paradigms. Academic investigation has Academic investigation in the last decades, has so far been able to mark most of the socio-cultural categories ('nation', 'class', 'race/ethnicity', 'gender', 'sexual orientation', 'youth', 'disability', etc.) involved in the construction of modern identity and alterity, making them visible and available to systematic or critical examination. However, the underlying assumptions, paradigms and categories cumulatively intersecting and configuring Occidentalism are still, to a large extent, unmarked or have been addressed 'separately'. This study suggests that Occidentalism as a kind of blind spot in the Humanities and Social Sciences contributes to the ongoing conflation of the idea of the 'West' with notions of the 'modern', 'postmodern', 'capitalism', 'globalization', 'cosmopolitization', etc. The lack of systematic and critical examination into Occidentalism as a hegemonic matrix of intelligibility enhances the naturalising and transfiguring effect of the 'West' into an unmarked existence that continues to define the universal standard or norm, against which to measure everything else.

Are the intersecting notions of the 'West', 'Race', 'Nation', or 'Love', as established in the modern age, and arguably reproduced as postmodern simulacra, really like the air we inevitably have to breathe? Is it possible to imagine texts and images, or to practice alternative ways of geopoliti-

cal, societal, and personal interactions without relying on this hegemonic network of collective identification and othering?

As the postwar finally ‘ends’, the task in Japan and elsewhere is therefore to reconceive the modern, which is less an idea than an episteme, less a concept than a condition [...]. We all seem to suffer from a kind of conceptual insufficiency, in that we are facing the twenty-first century armed with the notions of the nineteenth. We are still moderns, which explain our obsession with ‘ends’ and the caesura of 1989, but ours is a ‘nontopia’: we are without a vision of the future. The millennial challenge therefore is less a question of ends or of overcoming the modern than to avoid being overcome *by* the modern and drifting visionless into the next millennium. And this problem is not Japan’s alone, but all of ours (Gluck 2003, p. 312).

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